



Are Calgary police favouring some protests over others?

Social justice organizers say anti-maskers are getting off easy.

BY JEREMY APPEL

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During Israel's May bombardment of the Gaza Strip, which resulted in the deaths of 256 Palestinians, as well as 13 Israelis from indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza, demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinians sprang up in cities across the world.

That month, Calgarians organized a series of convoys to protest the Israeli assault as well as the ongoing evictions of Palestinians from East Jerusalem and the occupation of the West Bank. Organizers of a May 16 pro-Palestine convoy had expected 200 vehicles, but ended up with five times that number, which caused the convoy to significantly deviate from its planned route.

A few days later Calgary Police Service (CPS) announced that officers had issued 100 tickets for traffic infractions from the event and made two arrests—one for mischief and another for an unspecified altercation.

The pile of tickets raised questions about when police choose to enforce laws—and when they don't.

According to Calgary police data, officers have handed out 700 tickets to those who have violated the city's mask bylaw and provincial Public Health Act between Aug. 1, 2020, when the bylaw took effect, and June 1, 2021.

While it took the CPS 10 months to issue 700 tickets to anti-maskers, it took them just one day to issue 100 tickets to Palestine solidarity protesters. Organizers of pro-Palestine, Indian farmer and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in Calgary over the past year say this treatment is part of a broader pattern, where police strictly enforce the law against people of colour while treating anti-maskers, whose white supremacist ties are extensively documented, with kid gloves by comparison.

Asked about this apparent disparity after the May police commission meeting, police Chief Mark Neufeld told *The Sprawl* that the May 16 pro-Palestine protest was “not well-organized.” The traffic violations from the convoy were a “recipe for some serious injuries,” he added, with people driving on the wrong side of the road, running red lights, riding motorcycles without helmets and kids standing through vehicle sunroofs. He also criticized the protesters for draining police resources from elsewhere in the city.

However, the chief did not address how the force’s handling of the convoy compares to its handling of demonstrations protesting and flouting public health restrictions.

‘People want to be heard’

Saima Jamal, a Palestine solidarity organizer in Calgary, says she and her fellow organizers have been working with police “every step of the way” to ensure their rallies were safe and lawful. She says organizers would have appreciated leniency on May 16, such as stern warnings instead of tickets, since participants used vehicles to practice social distancing, and the protest was harder to control given the unexpected turnout.

“People want to be heard,” Jamal says. “Now is their time to say, ‘Hey, I exist. The Palestinian people exist. See us.’ ”

The news release announcing the tickets emphasized that police aren’t attempting “to paint all those that participated in the rally with the same brush,” acknowledging that “it can be difficult for organizers of these events to fully anticipate the number of attendees and convey all of the agreed upon rules of engagement to all participants.”

Jamal says organizers stopped planning convoys after the mass ticketing and resorted to foot marches where participants attempt to remain as physically distant as possible while chanting and waving Palestinian flags.

A lot of people came up to me and said, ‘Saima, this ticket is nothing compared to what the people of Palestine are going through.’

Saima Jamal, Palestine solidarity organizer

But, she says, the tickets shouldn’t serve as a distraction from the issue at hand—Israel’s 73-year-long displacement of the Palestinians to create a Jewish state that Human Rights Watch, as well as Israeli human rights organization B’tselem, this year described as practicing apartheid. “A lot of people came up to me and said, ‘Saima, this ticket is nothing compared to what the people of Palestine are going through,’ ” Jamal adds.

The ticketing did, however, have the effect of amplifying the protest, which wasn’t covered by the *Calgary Herald* until police announced the fines.

Jamal contrasts the police’s traffic enforcement for the Palestine rally with their more co-operative approach towards anti-maskers, citing Chief Neufeld’s admission in March that police had removed barriers at Prince’s Island Park to accommodate a larger-than-expected and unauthorized gathering of anti-maskers. Neufeld described those organizers as “reasonable to work with.”

This is the epitome of white privilege, Jamal says. The police appear to be accommodating anti-maskers while holding people of colour to the letter of the law.

But there’s a qualitative difference between the anti-maskers and social justice protesters that goes beyond how police treat these groups, Jamal says.

“We’re protesting real oppression,” she says, calling the anti-maskers grievances about not being able to go to their favourite restaurant or having to don masks while shopping “stupid First World problems.”

She also pointed to the naked anti-Semitism of the anti-mask movement, which has compared mild public health restrictions to the Holocaust, thereby cheapening the memory of the atrocity. However, the right-leaning Jewish advocacy group B’nai Brith Canada flagged a couple of videos captured in Calgary on May 16, where pro-Palestine protesters appear to be reciting an anti-Semitic chant that references the expulsion of Jewish tribes from the Arabian Peninsula.

Indian farmer convoy faced similar issues

Between October 2020 and February 2021, Calgary saw protest convoys in solidarity with Indian farmers demonstrating against their government’s removal of agricultural subsidies, forcing small farmers to compete with big agri-business on the open market. The Calgary convoys were specifically responding to the Indian government’s violent suppression of the farmer protests, which killed 248 people as of March.

According to Gurpartap Baidwan, who organized a later convoy in December, the biggest convoy had about 3,000 or 4,000 vehicles in October.

These are issues that people are very passionate about and they have this need to express it in some way.

Gurpartap Baidwan, Indian farmers convoy organizer

That same month, Baidwan says, participants received \$4,000 to \$5,000 worth of fines, which he likened to the mass ticketing of participants in the pro-Palestine convoy. In both cases, police knew the rallies were taking place.

“If the police are apprised of the protest and they’re aware of the situation, then of course they should be a little more lenient,” Baidwan says. “These

are issues that people are very passionate about and they have this need to express it in some way.”

He characterized the mass ticketing as a “cash grab,” but says that the bulk of tickets from October’s convoy were thrown out in court.

Baidwan, who spoke at one of the recent Palestine solidarity rallies, shares Jamal’s view that there’s a “stark contrast” between how police treat anti-mask rallies and these convoys that were organized to abide by public health orders.

It’s this model minority myth, where people who are immigrants need to prove that they’re worthy of being Canadian, and that’s garbage.

Adora Nwofor, Black Lives Matter organizer

“You see police officers inside Chinook Mall walking alongside anti-maskers and having conversations with them, giving them a hug and handshake,” he says, referring to video footage that was widely circulated online in February.

However, Baidwan says the specific CPS officers he worked with when organizing a convoy were “super responsive, super respectful (and) genuinely cared about the issues that we were protesting about.”

The CPS did not respond to request for data on how many traffic tickets were distributed for the 2019 United We Roll convoy, which, like the anti-mask rallies, overlapped with white supremacist movements.

The myth of the model minority

A crucial distinction between this year’s Palestine convoys and the Black Lives Matter protests last summer is that with the convoys, there was a desire to be in good standing with the police, Jamal says.

She says that while last year’s series of BLM rallies were organized by people who are from Calgary and have experienced brutality at the hands of the CPS, many of the Palestine solidarity organizers are immigrants who don’t want to be perceived as causing trouble. “BLM was fearless,” she observed.

BLM Calgary organizer Adora Nwofor, who attended some of the May Palestine solidarity protests, suggests it's naive for people of colour to expect cops to reciprocate their good will.

"It's this model minority myth, where people who are immigrants need to prove that they're worthy of being Canadian, and that's garbage," she says, adding that many immigrants erroneously perceive Canadian police as being less oppressive than the authorities in the country they're from. "The police need to stop grooming folks into submission."

Nwofor, who has a policy of not engaging with police, says that during last year's BLM events, organizers brought in their own security volunteer group, who would speak to the cops if necessary.

BLM organizers were especially stringent in their abiding by public health measures, with medics on site to ensure the health and safety of attendees, she says. "It's not about police, it's about deference to the community," says Nwofor, who has been organizing protests since 2017. To reduce reliance on police, Nwofor adds, event organizers used a security team trained to de-escalate conflict.

Regardless of their respective circumstances, these social justice movements are part of the same fight against militarism and oppression, and for justice and dignity, says Baidwan. "It's all intertwined," he says. "These are human rights issues at the end of the day, and human rights is something that everyone should stand for together."

Jeremy Appel is the municipal politics reporter for The Sprawl.