

Self-immolation and asylum in Australia: ‘This is how tired we are’ | openDemocracy

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The slow violence inflicted upon the [28,621 individuals](#) seeking refuge in Australia waiting on bridging visas to hear whether they can remain, can be seen as a form of state sanctioned “letting die.”



Four Darks in Red, Mark Rothko (1958)

On 27 April 2016, Iranian Omid Masoumali set himself on fire on Nauru in front of visiting representatives of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Nauru, a small country in Micronesia with a population of just 10,000, is the location of one of Australia’s two offshore “regional processing centres,” the other being on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. All those who arrive in Australia by boat and claim asylum are transferred to one of these two detention facilities. The Australian Government does not run either regional processing centre, instead the Governments of Nauru and Papua New Guinea manage each centre under their own law, and receive funding from the Australian Government. The [Papua New Guinea Supreme Court](#) recently ruled that the detention of asylum seekers was illegal and in breach of the country’s constitution. According to [government records](#), as of 31 March 2016 there are currently 1,373 people being detained on Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Those that are found to have valid claims for refugee status are able to settle on Nauru or in Papua New Guinea. The Australian government maintains a policy that no one held in its offshore detention facilities will be given protection and allowed to settle in Australia.

Omid, who was 23, suffered third degree burns and died in hospital in Australia several days later, after waiting over 24 hours for the medical airlift team from Australia to arrive. In reading about the actions of Omid my thoughts turned to Leorsin Seemanpillai. I wrote about Seemanpillai in my PhD research, being drawn to his story because self-immolation is a rare event in Australia. Seemanpillai was a 29 year old Sri Lankan. His family escaped violence against Tamils in Sri Lanka and had lived in India as refugees since 1990. Seemanpillai arrived by boat in early 2013, prior to the Government’s move to transfer all maritime arrivals offshore, and was

living in the community on a temporary bridging visa while awaiting the outcome of his claim for asylum. He had the right to work, share a house, and travel within the country. Seemanpillai was an active member of his local church, volunteered at an aged care facility, acted as a translator for other Tamils, and regularly gave blood. And yet something happened to mean he decided on 31 May 2014 to set himself on fire in the front yard of his house in Geelong, just outside of Melbourne. He did not make a public declaration. Seemanpillai died from his burns the following day.

At the time Seemanpillai's self-immolation was reported as an isolated incident. It was [described](#) by the then Australian Immigration Minister Scott Morrison as a "terrible and tragic accident," and Morrison informed the media that "I frankly don't think anyone is in any position - to draw any conclusions about what is in a person's mind in this situation." Seemanpillai was the second Sri Lankan in the space of several months to self-immolate in Australia in 2014. His act was followed by another incident on 20 June 2014 by an unnamed man, and the self-immolation of Khodayar Amini on 18 October 2015, a Hazara Afghan who was also on a bridging visa awaiting his claim for asylum.

Omid was a recognised refugee, whose claims of persecution in Iran were found to be valid. Omid and his wife were living in the community within the Nibok settlement on Nauru. While previously those seeking asylum were held in closed detention until their claims were determined, in October 2015 the government of Nauru allowed all asylum seekers held at Australian detention centre facilities to move freely around the island, with the camps run as "[open centres](#)." The Australian government began to release people into the community in 2014 after their claims were met, and the threats to personal safety and violence faced by women, often unaccompanied by family members, [led to some to plead](#): "Let me stay in the camp, because the camp at least is better than outside."

Several days after Omid's self-immolation, a young Somali woman, Hodan Yasin, set herself alight on Nauru, causing burns to 70 percent of her body. Yasin was flown to a Brisbane hospital where her condition is listed as critical. There are no further updates readily available from media as to whether Yasin is recovering. She had been returned to Nauru recently after receiving medical treatment in Australia. Media reports state that in between these two events, at least six other acts of self-harm or suicide occurred on Nauru.

While we are drawn to the spectacle of a person setting their body on fire, the self-immolations of Omid, Yasin and Seemanpillai, while occurring under different conditions, suggest there might be a connection between these cases. Omid and Yasin faced the uncertainty of many more years spent living on Nauru and without any hope of settling in Australia. Seemanpillai had not been informed of the status of his claim for asylum, had not attended an interview, and did not know how long the process would take. Between October 2012 and September 2014, which was during the time that he was living in country, the Australian government [deported](#) approximately 1,300 Sri Lankan asylum seekers back to Sri Lanka. Seemanpillai had witnessed friends and members of his community having their asylum cases rejected.

It was reported that before Omid set himself on fire, [he cried out](#) "This is how tired we are, this action will prove how exhausted we are. I cannot take it anymore." Why are individuals setting themselves on fire on Nauru, and while living in Australia? What are the modes of exhaustion that impact upon those individuals detained by Australia's immigration policies?

It is tempting to speculate as to the cause of self-immolation. In her [work on hunger strikes](#) among political prisoners in Turkey, Politics Professor Banu Bargu's uses the term "weaponization of life" to designate political struggles undertaken through non-lethal actions and those more likely to lead to fatalities. After being tortured in prison, one participant in Bargu's [research](#) stated, "We did not have any other means of resistance than our bodies at hand. Either our bodies would be transformed into weapons against us, through torture, or we would use those bodies as means of resistance against the state." Sociologist Michael Biggs suggests the [definition of self-immolation](#) as a protest pivots on a particular "declared intent to advance a collective cause." As an act of protest it is "intended to be public." However, does this mean that suicide or forms of self-harm performed within the home or within the yard, which are more frequently undertaken by women in this location (the [highest reported rates](#) of self-immolation occur in India, Egypt Iran and Sri Lanka), and occur without declared intention, are not political statements? Self-immolation in public declares the person as having political agency, and yet

Seemanpillai's actions confound the ease of attaching such forms of intention to those who set themselves on fire in public. It leads to questioning whether the self-immolations occurring by those seeking asylum can be singularly understood as political acts.

The Australian government has its own interpretation. While Seemanpillai's act was an "isolated incident," current Immigration Minister Peter Dutton claims that the recent self-immolations were not about the conditions on Nauru but because of economic frustrations in not reaching Australia after paying people smugglers. Refugee advocates in contact with those on Nauru have also been [blamed](#) for encouraging political action, and for providing "false hope" to those living on Nauru. In each case, the government has taken a lead role in determining the intention of each person, and giving meaning to self-immolation.

Anthropologist [Elizabeth Povinelli](#), who has lived and worked with Indigenous communities in the far north of Australia for over 30 years, describes a particular form of violence that occurs under liberal governments who try to govern and control social and cultural difference through social policy and legislation. Povinelli describes this governmental violence as "the violence of enervation, the weakening of the will rather than the killing of life." The resulting feeling of exhaustion or fatigue is mirrored in the words spoken by Omid. In her work Povinelli explores the differences between certain spectacular acts of "state killing" and those that involve barely perceptible, or unspectacular acts of "letting die." These forms of letting die can be camouflaged as modes of giving life.

Povinelli has written more directly on the exhaustion of Indigenous populations in Australia, however it is not possible to ignore the similarities in the treatment of those seeking refuge and those who are Indigenous in both being told they do not belong. For example, these modes of giving life can include enabling those awaiting decisions on their temporary protection visas to remain in the community. However, with long processing waiting times and without access to public funds, this uncertain situation, rather than offering protection, inflicts other forms of violence upon those who are vulnerable. Seemanpillai's roommate [said at the time](#), "Leo was always talking about the fear of being deported back. That fear is in everyone." In describing the psychological trauma of being in a period of waiting, a close friend of Seemanpillai's and an advocate at Rural Australians for Refugees, Cathie Bond, [stated](#), "Such is the terror of being sent back ... they know they will be picked up within days. They're totally vulnerable."

Therefore time plays a crucial role in how self-immolation might be understood in particular contexts and under conditions of vulnerability, beyond the heightened catastrophe and media focus on the political nature of the act. While it appears that events in Nauru have escalated rapidly, there can be slow decomposition behind the spectacular event of self-immolation. Omid and Yasin lived in detention for three years before setting themselves on fire. Prior to his self-immolation Omid was allegedly informed he would need to remain on Nauru for 10 years. Seemanpillai waited 18 months without any indication of whether his claim for protection would be accepted, and had been living as a refugee since the age of six. These timings are not suggestive of heated actions or quick flare ups. Looking at self-immolation over a longer period of time suggests it that there is seldom a single point that leads to the acute response. It means it is highly unlikely, despite what Dutton has suggested, that refugee advocates were able to convince those on Nauru to self-immolate.

In Povinelli's work, "quasi-events" are the means by which the dispersed sufferings that can occur in attempting to sustain and keep on living, register beneath the surface. For those seeking refuge, the anxiety of uncertainty and the sheer effort involved in waiting might be thought of as imperceptible quasi-events that involve their own forms of endurance. These quasi-events exist alongside the spectacular media events of deprived conditions and detention centres. These are not so easily measured within metrics of vulnerability when assessed by healthcare workers, or when visitors arrive from the UNHCR. As Seemanpillai and Omid's cases seems to attest, the violence of immigration detention extends beyond the government's careful narratives that seek to contain the issue within financial transactions and tragic accidents.

While self-immolation draws attention to the immediate act of violence, it can distract attention away from the "[slow violence](#)" of immigration detention. Writing in the context of the environment, Rob Nixon describes slow violence being incremental and accretive, where government and media appear only to react to the catastrophic time of natural disasters and ignore chronic and slow moving forms of deterioration. Here it is possible to see how slow violence can occur through living in conditions of uncertainty, and the forms of endurance required to

maintain lives under conditions where nowhere seems to offer protection.

In the current coverage and debate over Australia's policy of offshore detention, there appears little room for stories of the slow violence inflicted upon the [28,621 individuals](#) currently waiting on bridging visas within the country, without any certainty as to whether they will be allowed to remain, if only on temporary protection visas, or be deported back to the violence or poverty they were trying to escape. While people are exhausted on Nauru and Manus Island, these forms of exhaustion and tiredness can be seen across those seeking refuge in Australia. In the deaths of both Omid and Seemanpillai it is possible to see how waiting in uncertainty becomes a form of state sanctioned "letting die."

Read more research-based articles on oD 50.50's [People on the Move](#) platform showcasing the voices and analyses that are marginalised in the public debate on migration.