

Covid-19 and popular protests

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Summary: *The wave of popular protests seen in 2019 has largely subsided in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. New restrictions on movement and assembly are limiting large-scale gatherings, while opinion polls suggest that people in some affected countries are “rallying ‘round the flag”, as concerns about the impact of the crisis likely overtake long-standing grievances. But as the immediate health crisis morphs into a long-term economic and social crisis with huge human costs, it has the potential to exacerbate past grievances, further undermining social cohesion and trust in institutions. Policies that ensure a more equitable, inclusive and less uncertain future are essential to avoid a return of widespread mass protests.*

In the 2010s, mass protests flared in developed and developing countries alike. One estimate found that the incidence of mass protests increased by 12 per cent per year between 2009 and 2019, culminating in significant demonstrations in 114 countries by 2019 (Brannen, Haig and Schmidt, 2020).¹ Many of these protests were fueled by – among other things – high and rising inequalities, insecure employment and lack of economic opportunities, inadequate public services and government corruption, as well as environmental degradation.

During the first quarter of 2020, the number of mass protests declined drastically due to the Covid-19 crisis. As the pandemic has spread, Governments across the world have significantly restricted movement and gatherings. At their height in mid-April, “lockdowns” covered more than one third of the global population (Business Insider, 2020). In many countries, large-scale demonstrations and protests have become almost impossible. Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, for example, shows that protests in April 2020 were down 40 per cent from the same period in 2019.²

Lockdowns notwithstanding, it is likely that concerns over the impact of the health crisis have overtaken, at least for now, longer-term grievances. Research from the United States suggests that, at least in the short-term, desire for political upheaval tends to decrease and support for incumbent leaders and governments increases in the face of international crises of this magnitude – an effect known as “rallying ‘round the flag”.³ This may be the case now. In a sample of ten developed and developing countries affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, most leaders received a boost in approval ratings of between 10 to 20 percentage points in opinion polls conducted between mid-March and late April (Morning Consult, 2020).

Protests persist, in different forms

Different forms of protest are still taking place in some countries. Even in the first phase of the crisis, essential workers participated in strikes and walk-outs to protest health and safety conditions, including in Colombia and the United States. In Brazil, there has been intense dissatisfaction with the Government’s handling of the crisis, resulting in several mass demonstrations. In countries including Israel and Lebanon, long-standing grievances have continued to mobilize people to protest, in some cases with protesters deploying “social distancing” techniques.⁴ Even before the crisis, modes of protest were shifting away from mass physical demonstrations and towards other peaceful forms of resistance, including boycotts and online activism. It is likely that current events will accelerate this shift.

As the pandemic morphs into a longer-term economic and social crisis, Governments can expect mass protests in various forms to increase, even where public health responses have been adequate. The initial surge in support

¹ These included large-scale demonstrations in 2019 in Lebanon, Chile, Spain, Haiti, Iraq, Sudan, Russia, Egypt, Uganda, Indonesia, Ukraine, Peru, Hong Kong (SAR of China), Zimbabwe, Colombia, France, Turkey, Venezuela, the Netherlands, Ethiopia, Brazil, Malawi, Algeria and Ecuador, among other countries.

² Author’s calculations based on the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) database, available at: <https://acleddata.com/data-export-tool/>.

³ See for example, Mueller (1970); Oneal and Bryan (1995); and Baker and Oneal (2001).

⁴ See the ACLED Covid-19 Disorder Tracker for descriptions of these and other recent protests. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/analysis/covid-19-disorder-tracker/#1585775314361-2ee40e97-5aec>.





for some Governments is already waning, as countries grapple with the need to both protect public health and maintain livelihoods.⁵ Lockdowns and other restrictive measures have already resulted in mass unemployment across countries. ILO (2020) estimates that global working hours in the second quarter of 2020 are expected to be 10.5 per cent lower than in the last pre-crisis quarter; equivalent to 305 million full-time jobs. In the United States for instance, new claims processed for unemployment benefits in the months of March and April 2020 reached 30 million, though due to issues with processing all claims, the total number of people who lost their jobs is likely far higher (Economic Policy Institute, 2020). Meanwhile small-scale protests have occurred in various places across the US, ostensibly against the economic burden of the lockdowns to jobs and livelihoods.

As developed and developing countries alike undergo unprecedented economic contractions, un- and under-employment will continue to surge.⁶ As labour incomes decrease and skills and experience are lost, a vicious cycle of decreased consumption and productive capacity is likely to suppress aggregate demand and supply and increase poverty. Crucially, just like the initial health impacts of the pandemic, the longer-term social and economic consequences will not be felt equally. They risk increasing existing inequalities between individuals and groups, placing extra burdens on women, as well as older persons, migrants, young people and other disadvantaged groups, further undermining social cohesion.

Continued restrictions on civil liberties such as freedoms of movement and assembly, curbs on migration, increased surveillance of citizens and postponement of elections are also likely to exacerbate discontent. Long-standing grievances and declining trust in institutions combined with growing economic insecurity and uncertainty about the future may prompt a new wave of protests.

Strengthening social cohesion in the wake of Covid-19

Demands for a fairer, more inclusive and less precarious future have been heard from protests in developed and developing countries alike for many years. These demands

may intensify as a result of the current health and economic crises. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, agreed by all countries in 2015, includes commitments to eradicate poverty, combat inequality and build more peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies. Reaffirming this vision now, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, can help to strengthen social cohesion and rebuild trust in institutions for the coming decade.

Many of the recent protests have been triggered by people's dissatisfaction with public services (often the inadequacy thereof). The universal provision of quality public services such as health care, education, and sanitation is indeed essential to build more inclusive societies (United Nations, 2020). The importance of these services has only been reinforced in the wake of the current crisis, where barriers to access—such as inability to pay, discrimination and stigma—partly help to explain the pandemic's unequal impacts. Comprehensive social protection systems also play a critical role in reducing vulnerability and economic insecurity and in solidifying resilience and social cohesion. Similarly, economic policies that focus on a sustainable, human-centered and job-rich recovery may help to address many of the grievances related to the absence of decent work for all.

Beyond complementary social and economic policies, levelling the playing field in the wake of the pandemic and regaining trust will require strong and inclusive institutions. This includes, among other things, economic institutions that empower workers, political and legal institutions that protect the most vulnerable, support social movements and greater citizen participation, as well as cultural and social institutions that promote equal recognition and challenge discrimination.

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⁵ In France, for instance, after an initial boost one recent poll showed confidence in the government's management of the crisis declining steadily to 39 percent from 55 percent in the past month (IFOP, 2020).

⁶ For latest estimates of the economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis, see the United Nations Monthly Briefings of the World Economic Situation and Prospects. Available at: www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/document_gem/global-economic-monitoring-unit/monthly-briefing-on-the-world-economic-situation-and-prospects/.



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