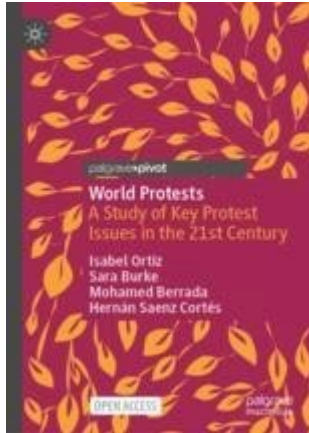


World Protests: A Summary of Key Issues in the 21st Century

By Isabel Ortiz, Sara Burke, Mohamed Berrada and Hernán Saenz Cortés¹

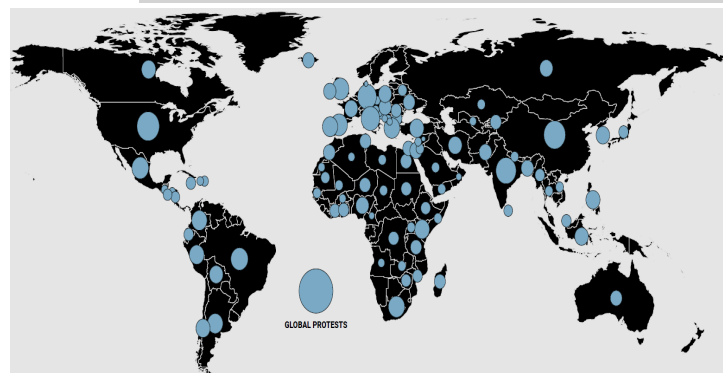


The publication “[World Protests: A study of key protest issues in the 21st century](https://worldprotests.org/)” (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) analyzes 2,809 protests that occurred between 2006 and 2020 in 101 countries covering over 93 per cent of the world population.² It focuses on: (i) major grievances driving world protests, (ii) who was demonstrating, (iii) what protest methods they used, (iv) who the protestors opposed, (v) what was achieved, (vi) repression in terms of arrests, injuries, and deaths, and (vii) trends such as the rise of women’s and radical right protests, and the Arab and the Latin American Springs. An annex presents 250 methods of non-violent protest. This research shows that global political instability is increasing in parallel with rising inequality. The demands of people around the world have much in common: most of them are in full accordance with Human Rights and internationally agreed UN development goals. The study calls for policymakers to listen and act on the demands of protestors, whether their messages are fully articulated or communicated only through frustration and even violence.

In recent years the world has been shaken by protests, from the Arab Spring to the “yellow vests,” from the Occupy movement to the social uprising in Chile and Latin America. There have been periods in history when large numbers of people rebelled against the way things were, demanding change, such as in 1848, 1917, and 1968; today we are experiencing another period of rising outrage and discontent, and some of the largest protests in world history.

Beginning in 2006, there was a steady rise in overall protests each year up to 2020. As the global financial crisis began to unfold in 2007-08, we observe a first jump in the number of protests. Demonstrations intensified with the adoption of austerity cuts/reforms worldwide after 2010. Discontent with the workings of governments peaked in 2012-13, when

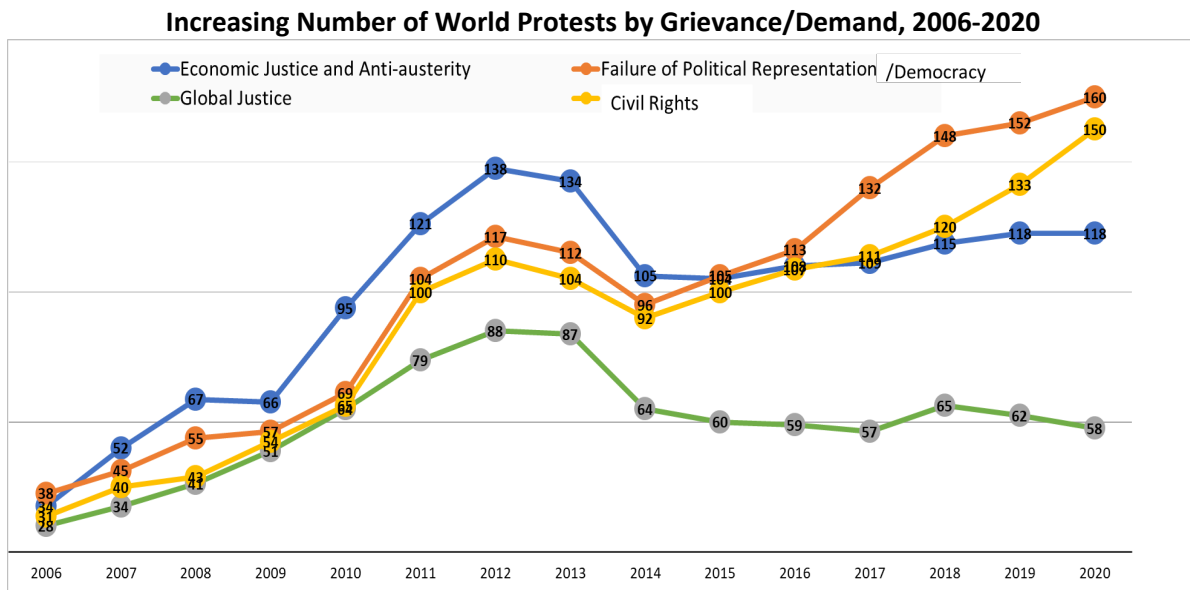
World Protests 2006-2020 <https://worldprotests.org/>



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² The research compiles data from 15 years of news reports available online, mainly in six languages (Arabic, English, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish); see the companion website: <https://worldprotests.org/>

people were protesting against a lack of real democracy and the low accountability of decision-makers to the people. Since 2016, protests have escalated again — often becoming “omnibus protests” (protesting on multiple issues) against the political and economic system. Polls worldwide reflect dissatisfaction with democracies and lack of trust in governments. Decades of neoliberal policies have generated large inequalities and eroded the incomes and the welfare of both lower and middle classes, fueling feelings of injustice, disappointment with malfunctioning democracies, and frustration with failures of economic and social development. In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic accentuated social unrest.



Source: Ortiz, Burke, Berrada and Saenz Cortes, 2022: [World Protests: A Study of Key Protest Issues in the 21st Century](#)

Protests have increased in all world regions. The study found a greater prevalence of protests in middle-income countries (1,327 events) and high-income countries (1,122 protests) than in low-income countries (121 events). Interestingly, the period 2006-2020 reflects an increasing number of global protests (239 events), organized across regions.

These protests were not random, unorganized riots; the majority of world protests were planned, and their demands were articulated. The main grievances and causes of outrage were:

- **Failure of Political Representation/Democracy:** 1,503 protests were related to the lack of real democracy; corruption; failure to receive justice from the legal system; sovereignty and patriotic issues; transparency and accountability; the perceived power of a deep government or oligarchy; anti-war or against the military-industrial complex; the surveillance of citizens; and anti-socialism and anti-communism.
- **Economic Justice and Anti-Austerity:** 1,484 protests on issues related to jobs, wages and/or labor conditions; the reform of public services; corporate influence, deregulation, and privatization; inequality; tax and fiscal justice; low living standards; agrarian/land reform; high fuel and energy prices; pension reform; housing; and high food prices.
- **Civil Rights:** 1,360 protests on ethnic/indigenous/racial rights; right to the commons (internet, land, cultural, atmospheric); freedom of assembly, speech, and press; women’s and girls’ rights;

labor rights; LGBT and sexual rights; immigrants' rights; personal freedoms; prisoners' rights and religious issues. In this category have been added those radical right protests that sought to deny rights or reject equal rights for a group (e.g., against minorities).

- **Global Justice:** 897 protests were for environmental and climate justice; against the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the European Union/European Central Bank; against imperialism (United States, China); against free trade; in defense of the global commons; and against the G20.

A profile of demonstrators reveals not only traditional protesters (e.g. activists, NGOs/CSOs, trade unions); on the contrary, middle classes, women, students and youth, pensioners, indigenous, ethnic and racial groups, as well as other grassroots citizens were actively protesting in most countries. These citizens do not consider themselves activists and yet they protest because they are disillusioned with official processes, political parties and the other usual political actors associated with them. Mass middle-class involvement in protests indicates a new dynamic: A pre-existing solidarity of the middle classes with elites has been replaced in many countries by a lack of trust and awareness that the prevailing economic system is not producing positive outcomes for them.

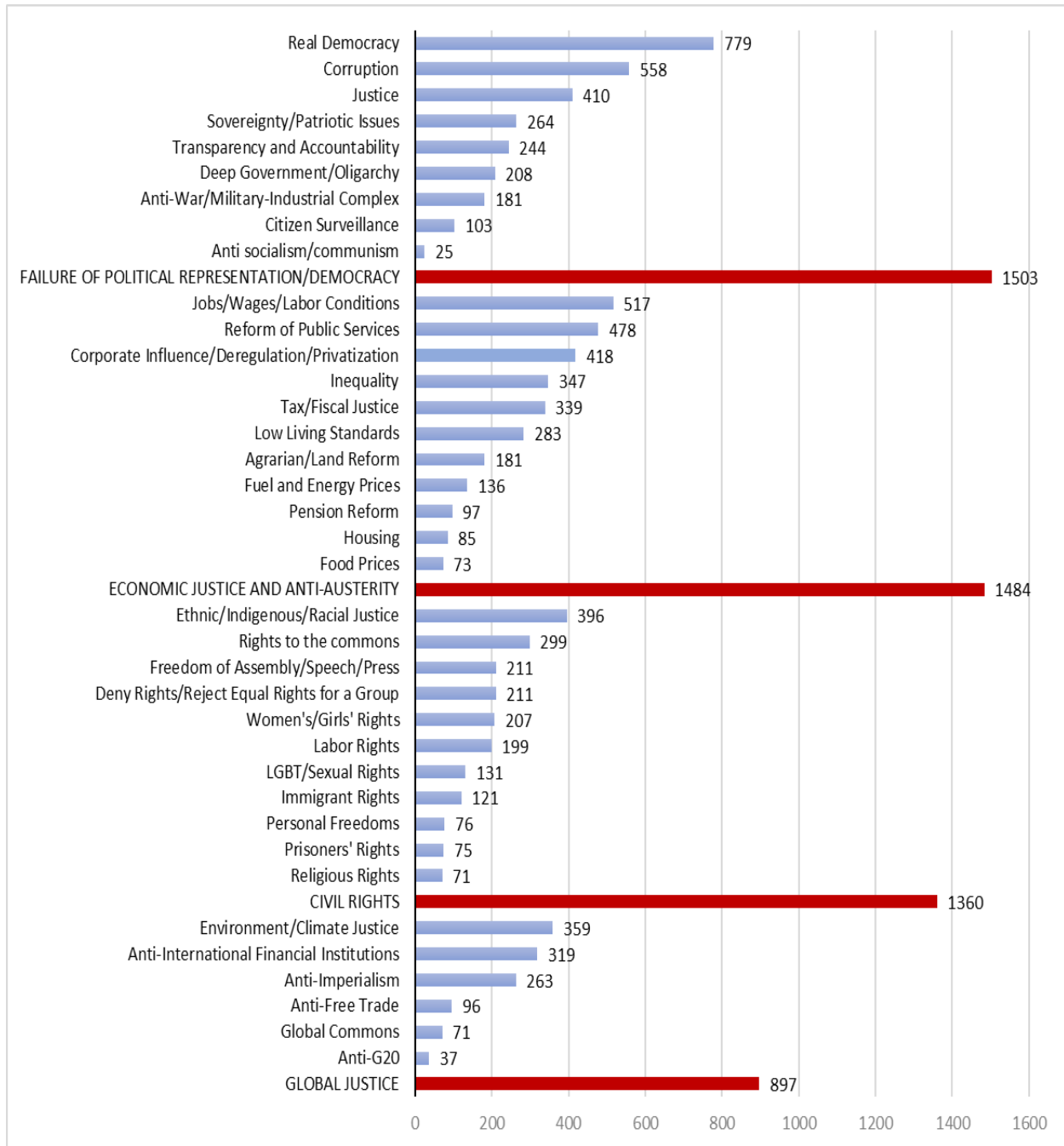
Not only has the number of protests been increasing, but so also has the number of protesters. Crowd estimates suggest that at least 52 events had one million or more protesters. The period 2006-2020 has experienced some of the largest protests in world history; the largest recorded was the 2020 strike in India against the government's plan to liberalize farming and labor, estimated to have involved 250 million protesters. While the overwhelming majority of large protests were related to progressive issues, such as more and better jobs, wages and pensions; investments in health, education and public services; protection of farmers; action on climate change; racial justice; women and civil rights; against austerity cuts, corruption and inequality; a number of protests were led by radical right groups such as the QAnon protests in 2020 in the United States and globally; opposition to Muslims, migrants, and refugees in Germany; or the protests against the Workers Party in Brazil in 2013 and 2015.

Protestors used a wide range of methods. This study has identified 250 methods of non-violent protest, presented in an annex of the book, updating Sharp's (1973) "198 methods of nonviolent action." Our research found that marches and protest assemblies (or rallies), blockades, strikes and occupations, as well as internet activism, were the most common methods of protest. The period 2006-2020 also captures the advent of a new era of civil disobedience/direct action carried out by computer hackers and whistleblowers who "leaked" massive amounts of government and corporate data, and by lawyers who launched lawsuits/litigation to advance social and environmental progress. Contrary to public perceptions, riots and protests involving violence and vandalism/looting represent only 20 per cent of the total. Though only used by a few, 5 per cent of protests record desperate methods such as hunger strikes and self-inflicted violence (e.g. self-immolation, protesters sewing their own lips).

Who do protesters oppose? The most frequent target for protesters, by a wide margin, is their own national government—as the legitimate policy-making institution responsible to citizens. Nearly 80 per cent of all protests demand that governments take responsibility for economic, social, and environmental policies so that they benefit all, instead of the few. Protestors further oppose distant and unaccountable systems/institutions such as the political and economic system (30 per cent), corporations/employers (23

per cent), the European Union/European Central Bank (16 per cent), elites (14 per cent), political parties/groups (14 per cent), military/police (14 per cent), the IMF (10 per cent - and the World Bank 1 per cent), the financial sector (9 per cent), free trade (3 per cent), the G20 (nearly 3 per cent), as well as the United States of America (6 per cent) and China’s imperialism (3 per cent).

Number of Protests by Grievance/Demand Topics, 2006-2020



Source: Authors 'analysis of world protests in media sources 2006-2020, see: <https://worldprotests.org/>

What did protesters achieve? Historically, protests have been a means to achieve fundamental rights at the national and international level. Our research shows that 42 per cent of protests resulted in some kind of demonstrable achievement, generally a partial success. Success is rarely the result of one protest event alone, but the result of many years of protests focusing on the same grievance/demand. These outcomes are not necessarily negative, since many of the protests are engaged with long-term structural issues that may yield results in time; incremental or short-term achievements may prove to be precursors to more comprehensive change. Concrete demands (e.g., a rise in wages, the reinstatement of subsidies, such as for food and fuel, or the halting of infrastructure construction) have more chances of success than protests that aim at structural change. The more structural the issue is (e.g., inequality, free trade, imperialism) and the more distant the opponents (e.g. the G20, the financial sector, the IMF, military alliances), the lower the rates of achievements. Protests targeting governments (both national and local), religious authorities, employers, and local corporations have higher rates of success.

Repression is documented in more than 60 per cent of the protest episodes analyzed in the study, taking the form of arrests, injuries and deaths due to state-organized violence. Other reported methods of repression include teargas, surveillance, retaliatory laws, harassment, lawsuits, missing people, displaced people, gunshots, torture, internet restrictions, expulsion, and deportation. According to media reports, the protests that generated the most arrests in the period 2006-2020 were in Hong Kong (China), Egypt, France, Iran, United Kingdom, Russia, Sudan, Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, the United States, Canada, and Cameroon, with 10,000 to 1,000 arrests per protest. The protests that resulted in the largest numbers of reported injuries were in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, as well as in Egypt, Chile, Thailand, Ecuador, Lebanon, Algeria, Hungary, and Indonesia. In terms of deaths, the worst countries are Kyrgyzstan, Egypt, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Kenya, Iran, Ethiopia, and Sudan. It must be noted that while arrests and surveillance are directly linked to government-led repression, a number of the injuries and deaths may be the result of violent clashes between different groups.

In recent years, there has been a shift from anti-authoritarian left-wing populist protests to generally authoritarian, far right populist protests across the world. Some common traits of radical right protests include the condemnation of political systems with allegations of corruption and insinuations that dark forces in a “deep state” are conspiring to deny economic security to the middle classes. This is the profile that led to the QAnon movement and the assault on the United States Capitol, as well as to “deep European/foreign powers” conspiracies in the case of Hungary, Poland, the United Kingdom and Turkey. While the anger behind these protests may be a rational response to political systems that have failed for years to deliver on people’s economic needs, the most unsettling characteristic of this populist wave is how many protesters demand not only their own rights, but to deny rights and equal status to groups they think threaten their jobs or status, such as immigrants (e.g. Germany’s Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident or PEGIDA; the “leave the European Union” movement in the United Kingdom; and a number of the “yellow vests” protests in France, Ireland, and Canada). Other traits include cries for personal freedoms (to carry a gun, not to wear a mask, not to be quarantined), nationalism, patriotism and the promotion of traditional values. Such is the case with the “cow vigilantes” in Modi’s India, Erdogan’s Muslim nationalism in Turkey, and the “Bullets, Bible and Beef” caucus in Brazil’s Congress which aimed to overturn the democratically-elected Workers Party. Many national and foreign

groups are also fostering animosity and weakening democracies to advance their interests, by weaponizing misinformation and disinformation in social media.

Thus, in the period 2006-2020 we have seen protests being used by political factions to reach power, often encouraging violence. To counter radical right populism, societies will need to expose the contradictions of far-right politics, so that people can see for themselves. Societies also will need to pursue fair economic policies to reduce inequalities and offer opportunity and better living standards to all. The world will not see a reversal of the trend towards authoritarian nationalist movements unless significant efforts are mounted to fight polarization, inequality, and dis/misinformation.

Our research corroborates a positive relation between higher levels of inequality and protests in high-income and middle-income countries; however, this is not the case in low-income countries. To further explore the issue, we looked at the relationship between protests and increases/decreases in inequality Gini coefficients (after tax and benefits); showing that there are more protests in countries with increasing inequality, and vice versa, fewer protests in countries in which inequality is being reduced. Data analysis also shows a correlation between the percentage of people who believe that governments serve the few, and the number of protests per country.

Another important trend is the increasing importance of women's and girls' rights protests both at national and global levels. The global #MeToo movement (2017-) that denounced sexual harassment and unequal pay and opportunities in the workplace; #NiUnaMas in Chile (2018-) and Spanish-speaking countries; or more local protests such as Saudi Arabia's to allow women to vote and drive (2006-17) and #BringBackOurGirls after the kidnappings of Nigerian girls (2014), are recent examples of protests fighting for women's rights.

The set of policies needed at the national and global levels to address the grievances described in this book cross over virtually every area of public policy, from jobs, public services, and social protection to good governance, lack of corruption, fair taxation, and civil rights. Governments need to listen to the messages coming from protesters. Most demands are in full accordance with Human Rights and internationally agreed UN development goals. Leaders and policymakers will only invite further unrest if they fail to listen and act on the main demands of protesters.

Reference:

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