

THE COMPLEXITIES OF GLOBAL PROTESTS

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Major protests have occurred around the world with increasing frequency since the second half of the 2000s. Given the superficial resemblance of such events to each other—especially the dramatic images of masses of people in the streets—the temptation exists to reach for sweeping, general conclusions about what is happening. Yet it is in fact the heterogeneity of this current wave of protests that is its defining characteristic. The spike in global protests is becoming a major trend in international politics, but care is needed in ascertaining the precise nature and impact of the phenomenon.

Characteristics of the Current Wave of Protests

Diversity of places. Unlike the last major global wave of protests that was associated with the spread of democracy in the 1980s and 1990s, protests are increasing now in every region of the world and in every type of political context.

Local triggers. The current wave of protests is triggered primarily by economic concerns or political decisions, not by transnational issues like globalization that animated some previous protests.

Long-term enabling causes. New information and communication technologies, troubled democratic transitions and democratic regression, economic change, and the growth of civil society organizations have created a global environment conducive to protests.

Not a new form of politics. The forms, methods, and aims of the current wave of protests do not overall represent a new form of politics, as some analysts have suggested. The idea of rebels without a cause does not apply very extensively across the array of recent protests; most demonstrations have specific grievances and aims.

Mixed Results

Limited democratization effects. Many nondemocratic governments faced with protests have been able to defeat them without making significant political concessions, yet the exceptions to this, like the experiences in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, are of notable importance.

Variable results when moving from protest to power. Although some protests have failed to translate protest energy into sustainable institution building or political contestation, others have led to the creation of new political parties or markedly affected subsequent electoral contests.

Blaming the foreigners. A striking element of the responses to recent protests is the frequency and regularity with which leaders now blame foreigners for the protests. This reflects, among other factors, leaders' inability to believe that there exists in their countries genuine civic sectors with legitimate, independent voices.

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