

The world is entering a decade of rage, unrest, and shifting geopolitical sands. Security leaders need to understand the factors behind mass protests to accurately predict them and mitigate their effects.

“We are living in an age of mass protest,” the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) said in a March report looking back at 2019.

With at least 37 countries experiencing mass protests, these movements globally surged in 25 percent of countries throughout 2019, intensifying toward the year’s end in Hong Kong, Chile, Nigeria, Sudan, Haiti, and Lebanon. Virtual uprisings

SEEDS OF DISRUPTION

joined physical unrest, and Internet shutdowns were increasingly common, with India, Pakistan, Syria, and Turkey leading the world in this regard.

Historically unprecedented levels of unrest continued to increase in early 2020, then simmered in the background during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns. Mass protests in the United States surged by 186 percent from April to May, largely catalyzed by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. By June, the country fell into the high-risk category of Verisk Maplecroft’s *Civil Unrest Index*, an assessment of the risk of disruption to businesses due to mobilized social disruptions as a reaction to economic, social, or political issues. Similar spikes occurred in the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Sweden, and France, while mass protests continued in Hong Kong and Lebanon.

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The economic fallout of mass protests and their potential impact on corporate operations cannot be overstated, as civil unrest triggered losses of billions of dollars for businesses, national economies, and investments worldwide. Though recent mass protests appeared to start quickly, multiple long-unaddressed issues provided protesters with a fuel reserve of frustration.

THE BACKDROP

“Mass protest” is a complex term, taking on different meanings depending on the environment. It does not equal violent protest; however, the potential for morphing quickly into violence is real. Understanding how a mass protest may manifest in a certain environment will greatly improve resilience planning.

The media attention to mass protests around the world implies they come on suddenly, without warning. Yet, as illustrated in CSIS’s *The Age of Mass Protests: Understanding an Escalating Global Trend*, civil unrest and mass protests are the result of years’ worth of issues affecting large population centers in each region of the world. The 2020 surge in protests is not surprising given that, over the previous decade, anti-government protests increased by nearly one-third in 114 countries. From at least as far back as the Arab Spring, the issues that underpin many recent uprisings—including the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, anti-government movements, and economic outrage—remain unaddressed and are compounded by present frustrations, including COVID-19 conspiracy theories and anti-lockdown sentiments.

Both developing and advanced economies have had their share of reasons that stoked unrest. Civilian anti-government protests grew at a faster rate in Europe and North America than the global average. Between 20 January 2017 and 1 January 2020, nearly 11.5 million Americans participated in 16,000 protests across the country, including the five largest demonstrations in U.S. history, according to the CSIS.

Thousands protested across France as part of the Yellow Vest movement. During one of France’s most important holiday periods, more than 800,000 people participated in weeks of mass demonstrations in Paris.

From 2019 to 2020, the number of countries rated as an extreme risk—making them some of the riskiest locations in the world—in the *Civil Unrest Index* jumped up by 66.7 percent. These latest additions include Ethiopia, India, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe. Meanwhile, Sudan has overtaken Yemen as the country with the highest risk globally.

Though mass demonstrations in 2020 were initially dampened by the COVID-19 pandemic, this is unlikely to change the overall trend. Mob violence has increased since the World Health Organization (WHO) categorized the novel coronavirus as a pandemic in March 2020, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). Approximately 1,100 protest events were recorded in about 90 countries. Bulgaria, Greece, and Germany saw protests fueled by unfounded conspiracy theories blaming various targets—including 5G networks, George Soros, and Bill Gates—for the pandemic.

Mass protests will very likely continue, if not increase, over the next few years if the root causes remain unaddressed. In fact, the CSIS predicts that the 2020s will become the “decade of rage, unrest, and shifting geopolitical sands.”

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DRIVERS OF CIVIL UNREST

The rage that boiled over into street protests this past year caught many governments by surprise. Authorities generally reacted to such disruptions with limited concessions and a clamp-down by security forces, leaving the underlying causes unaddressed. Even if governments committed to managing the issues frustrating protesters, solutions to the complex challenges that precipitated the unrest are not quickly or easily available.

Globally, companies and investors will have to adapt to mass protests as a “new normal” for the foreseeable future, according to *Political Risk Outlook 2020*. Although corporations often turn to CSOs to explain mass protests—usually after the fact—security leaders can better serve their organizations by improving forecasting of a mass disruption and its impact based on its cultural context.

There is no crystal ball foretelling when and how a mass protest may begin. Looking more broadly at geopolitical, regional, and internal issues—and the connections between them—helps build the picture over time. No single source of information will predict a mass protest. There are, however, various economic and societal indicators that can provide foresight into how the situation will likely evolve.

Economic hardship and significant fluctuations are often the most important drivers of a mass protest. Unaddressed economic stressors eventually result in hardship and discontent throughout a population.

Overall, economic stress arises from shifts in the pattern of economic behavior. Growth may continue, but a dramatic slowdown can have significant consequences, affecting social structures and political stability.

A forecast by Geopolitical Futures predicted a global economic slowdown for 2020, partly due to a cyclical downturn. Normally this would not trigger major social, political, and international crises; however, other factors



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will exacerbate the impact of this slowdown, generating substantially more non-economic consequences than normally anticipated.

For example, some nations did not successfully adapt to the changes necessitated by the 2008 global financial crisis, and the economic disparities experienced by citizens in those countries remain unaddressed.

International issues further stressed populations and systems, specifically food shortages aggravated by a horde of migrating locusts and the COVID-19 pandemic—the latter triggering forced and prolonged shutdowns of businesses worldwide. The shuttering of economies globally resulted in the worst economic downturn in 300 years, according to the Bank of England. George Freeman, founder of Geopolitical Futures, estimated that the unemployment rate is expected to reach 20 percent in the United States, with the greatest impacts hitting the disadvantaged.

Economic stress indicators alone will not paint a full picture, though, for those looking at how an area’s residents may behave or react in the future. Understanding a region’s culture, characteristics, and unique societal structure can help form a better gauge and

Thousands of demonstrators in Madrid, Spain, protested for social justice on 7 June 2020.

a more informed response to potential mass reactions.

When looking at CSIS data analysis related to mass protests since 2009, these events have increased around the world by 15 percent. A broad view shows that events such as the Arab Spring were not isolated phenomena, but rather acute manifestations of global trends. One root cause of discontent was the rollback of civil and human rights, which began as far back as 1997, according to CSIS’s *The Age of Mass Protests*.

Environments with poor human rights records—such as high rates of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests or detentions, and torture—should be monitored to determine their long-term ability to offer businesses a viable market. The research firm Verisk Maplecroft’s *Security Forces and Human Rights Index* rates 36 countries as extreme risk, including emerging markets where corporations or investors may be seeking to do business.

Human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and the use of indiscriminate violence against peaceful mass protests, pose a risk to both

demonstrators and any company staff in the vicinity of ongoing unrest. The use of violence eventually radicalizes protesters, provokes violent responses, and ultimately fuels further unrest, according to *The Political Risk Outlook 2020*.

Systemic corruption levels also contribute to expressions of societal frustrations and mass protest. Transparency International monitors corruption levels globally and advocates for change. On Transparency International’s 100-point scale, where 100 is the “cleanest,” two-thirds of countries measured fell below 50, and the average of all nations was only 43.

In its *CPI 2019 Global Highlights* analysis, Transparency International further argues that the influence of large money in political campaigns in developed democracies fuels the increasing division between opposition groups, often resulting in mass protests.

POTENTIAL FALLOUT

Along with broader economic and infrastructure costs, a mass protest prevents business operations in and around the area of protest. It hinders and blocks the ability for personnel, supplies, products, and customers to travel to, from, or through impacted areas. In the short

term, mass protests reduce tourism, which many smaller businesses rely on.

As detailed in Verisk Maplecroft's *Political Risk Outlook 2020*, a seemingly minor issue of a 30 peso (\$0.04 USD) increase in metro fares in Chile triggered mass protests in October 2019. The first month of demonstrations cost the economy and infrastructure billions of dollars—not solely from the interruption of regular economic activity and destruction of resources, but also because of revenue sources that avoided the country. The 2019 United Nations Climate Change Conference was moved from Chile to Spain, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum was canceled.

In extreme instances, mass protests directed at corporate facilities can result in injury to personnel, significant repair costs, and loss of productivity. Blocking off operations in one country can have downstream effects on supply chain movement. Additionally, from a trade or supply chain perspective, mass protests create uncertainty capable of leading corporations and investors to postpone plans while awaiting outcomes. As seen in the Chilean protests, this can inhibit inbound foreign investment; if potential investors are nervous about a country's political stability, they will postpone critical investment decisions—which could have a devastating impact on global markets. Mass protests can also result in corporations' deciding to relocate their facilities or, even worse, forcing them to go out of business.

This impact is amplified when investors and corporations inside a country

seek to move assets to safer locations, according to William Reinsch, a senior adviser and Scholl Chair in international business at CSIS and co-host of *The Trade Guys* podcast. This double hit to the local economy often results in greater instability and increased unemployment, boosting the existing frustrations that likely catalyzed the initial unrest.

Although the C-suite often looks to its CSO to mitigate mass protests with measures like forecasting and planning appropriate responses to disruptions, few corporations support methods that enable resilience. The majority of CSOs are highly competent in ensuring facilities' physical security, yet when it comes to mass protests, there are additional factors that account for successfully mitigating risk.

It is critical that CSOs and the C-suite understand cultural impacts and how mass protests manifest in individual environments. A \$0.25 per gallon gasoline price hike in the United States may be aggravating but will go unnoticed by most. However, a reduction in fuel subsidies and a resulting \$0.10 per liter price increase in another country can bring tens of thousands to protest in anger in the street.

Broad-based situational awareness leverages political instability and mass demonstration forecasting to successfully prepare an organization and develop an appropriate response. Improving a corporation's understanding of the geopolitical and local context enables operational preparedness rather than allowing for operational interruptions in response to mass protests. There are numerous corporate subscription services that provide forecasting information, ranging from smaller options to enterprise subscriptions with direct access to analysts, as well as nonprofit analyses available at no cost.

Although analysis and forecasting can better connect and prepare an organization, this does not imply that the responsibility of a successful response falls entirely on the shoulders of the CSO. An integrated and collaborative C-suite can bring additional

resources to bear, appropriately sharing information within an organization. Collaborative discussions across investment, operations, finance, security, and executive departments help better divide subject matter into more manageable components. Establishing these tools and improving collaboration enable the CSO to better advise the organization.

METHODS AND MOBILIZATION

Though mass protests are nothing new, recent years show an evolution of sympathetic groups connecting across the globe through the use of the Internet. Sympathizers share tactics and information, sometimes creating additional protests in other countries to show support on a given issue.

In 2008, during the height of the global financial crisis and prior to the Arab Spring, former U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski identified a "global political awakening." Brzezinski argued that a new era of global activism had dawned.

"For the first time in history, almost all of humanity is politically activated, politically conscious, and politically interactive," he wrote.

The BLM, white nationalism, and environmental protests across multiple continents in 2020 illustrate Brzezinski's point. Activism is on the rise, and the Internet has connected groups across borders.

Whether blocking city centers or targeting infrastructure, modern mass protestors have learned new tactics, as well as logistics to counter security force moves. In Hong Kong in 2019, activists developed an entire supply line to ensure the availability of materials to demonstrators. These supplies included umbrellas to use as shields, laser pointers to blind cameras, scissors, and Allen wrenches used to dismantle police barricades. Protesters even repurposed police barricades to create their own defensive lines. These tactics were shared over social media with other protest movements.

Solutions to the complex challenges that precipitated the unrest are not quickly or easily available.

Throughout multiple areas in Spain during 2018, millions of residents protested peacefully in support of different causes. Although they were nonviolent, hundreds of thousands of supporters of Catalonia separatism protested in Barcelona over multiple days, tying up the city center. During the same period in Madrid, approximately 1 million protestors staged a peaceful counter-protest to Catalonia separatism.

Learning from the Hong Kong protest groups, Catalonians changed their peaceful tactics in 2019 and forcibly occupied an airport, disrupting flights. Protestors also blocked major highways, significantly delaying the movement of goods around the area.

This evolution prepares protest groups to withstand security force interventions for longer periods, prolonging the impact on a region's businesses.

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In more extreme cases, mass protests can turn violent, directly targeting businesses and government infrastructure. Vietnam is a country with very few protests, and those that do occur are typically small and peaceful. However, in 2014, what started out as mass protests against a Chinese oil rig in the South China Sea quickly turned into anti-

Chinese business riots, resulting in millions of dollars in damage and 29 deaths.

Throughout much of the second quarter of 2020, mass protests and violent riots occurred in multiple U.S. cities, sparked by the killing of George Floyd. Long-unaddressed systemic racism issues in the United States provided a fuel reserve for the protests. U.S. National Guard units were called in to several areas to support local police as businesses, police stations, and cars were looted and burned, in addition to the killing of police and civilians during the riots. Police used tear gas and rubber bullets, resulting in serious injuries.

Though the bulk of these mass protests centered around the BLM theme, the violence in these instances resulted from a growing patchwork of participants piggybacking onto the mass protests. In a May 2020

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New York Times article, Brian Levin, director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University and a former New York City police officer, said: “We’re going to see a diversity of fringe malefactors. We know for a fact there have been far-right agitators both online and at these rallies, as well as far-left.”

RESILIENCE

Investors and corporations will continue seeking opportunities in the global market. Continuous situational awareness and security trends are as important as a robust business plan for protecting investments in new environments.

As illustrated in this article, there are many global resources available to help

in this endeavor for both nonprofit and for-profit organizations. Additionally, ensuring that the C-suite collaborates with finance, investment, planning, and security departments can provide analysis and insights.

Organizations investing further in non-traditional security forecasting abilities will improve their resilience and ensure continued operations in the face of mass disruptions. Traditional physical security will certainly help in protecting facilities and assets. However, analysis and forecasting will better enable an organi-

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zation’s lasting success. Understanding and forecasting evolutions and upheavals in an environment improves the ability to proactively change behavior and practices, instead of reactively slowing or interrupting business operations during mass protests. ■

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