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World in flames: why are protests raging around the globe?

21/10/2019



Protests and demonstrations have rocked every corner of the world in recent days, with tax hikes, corruption and supposed environmental injustice all raising public anger. But why have they spread?

Watching the news over the last week, one would be convinced that the world has devolved into a series of flashpoints, with corrupt governments across the political spectrum facing the wrath of their enraged citizens. To be fair, that's not far from the truth.

Four continents have seen anti-government demonstrations over the last week, many of them sparked by seemingly innocuous taxes or changes to the law. In Lebanon, protesters have set Beirut [ablaze](#) in response to a proposed fee of 20 cents per day on internet voice calls, dubbed the "*WhatsApp tax*." Chileans set metro stations on [fire](#) following a \$1.17 increase in public transport fares, and the streets of Ecuador are filled with rubble after a planned removal of fuel subsidies triggered mass [unrest](#).

@dalalmawad Another video from today's protest in Beirut . Really unbelievable [#Lebanon](#)  
[#LebanonProtests](#)

Elsewhere, perennial corruption has the West African nation of Liberia in a state of near-constant protest; a change to presidential term limits in Guinea caused deadly riots; Mexicans are demonstrating against corruption and drug cartel violence; and masked rioters in Hong Kong are still rallying against their government, months after the withdrawal of the Chinese

extradition bill that sparked their anger.

Europe, meanwhile, has seen a general strike and mass [marches](#) in Barcelona following the jailing of Catalanian independence leaders on Monday. Dutch farmers have also [shut down](#) the country's motorways after the government introduced new emissions regulations; and in France, already rocked by almost a year of 'Yellow Vests' demonstrations, thousands of firefighters have [marched](#) for more funding and better working conditions.

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Protests can break out over a relatively minor issue, before spiralling into national crises. French President Emmanuel Macron learned this the hard way last November, when demonstrations over a fuel tax hike turned into a nationwide rejection of his corporate-friendly policies. Likewise, Lebanon's "WhatsApp tax" was simply the final straw for protesters, who have now called for *"the downfall of the regime,"* following years of perceived government ineptitude.

And, while Chilean students kicked off the fare-hike protests earlier this month, violent anti-government riots have since broken out, with at least eight people [killed](#) in arson and looting attacks, and the military were called out to enforce a curfew.

[Mayhem in Chile as violent protests prompt state of emergency...](#)

It's contagious

So why has unrest seemingly erupted all over the world at once? According to a University of Arizona [study](#), protest is contagious. The study's authors found that *"violent domestic conflicts spread between countries via spillover effects and the desire to emulate events abroad."* Non-violent movements too spread across borders in a similar fashion, with the researchers noting that *"observation of collective action abroad"* inspires would-be protesters at home.

The Chinese government has pointed the finger squarely at Hong Kong for inspiring similar protests elsewhere. An [editorial](#) in the state-run Global Times on Sunday accused the Hong Kong demonstrators of *"exporting revolution to the world,"* while former Chinese diplomat Wang Zhen wrote in the Beijing News that *"the disastrous impact of a 'chaotic Hong Kong' has begun to influence the Western world."*

@HongKongFP The moment a Molotov cocktail hit the riot police frontlines from above on Sunday. [#hongkong](#) [#hongkongprotests](#) [#antiELAB](#) [#china](#) Vid: HKFP.

Though the Chinese government has its own political reasons to publish articles condemning the Hong Kong movement, the accusation that the protesters there are *"exporting revolution"* is spot-on, at least if the University of Arizona study is to be believed.

A minefield

Dealing with mass unrest is a minefield for governments. Though the respective governments of Lebanon, Chile, Ecuador and Hong Kong have all canceled the measures that angered the public in the first place, protests have only intensified. This presents decision-makers with a dilemma: signal weakness by doing nothing, or inflame tensions further with a police crackdown.

[Chile: New curfew announced amid clashes and looting in Santiago...](#)

Former Madison, Wisconsin Police Chief David Couper literally wrote the book on handling protests. In 'Arrested Development,' Couper wrote that he would instruct his officers to *"get in close, talk, stay in contact"* with demonstrators, as he found that *"the further the police positioned themselves from people in the crowd, the greater the chance the crowd would depersonalize them."*

Similarly, former Washington DC Police Chief Jerry Wilson [told](#) author Radley Balko that he would hide his riot-control teams away on buses until needed, as the mere presence of heavily-armed cops *"didn't prevent confrontation, it invited it."*

This cautious approach has not been taken by Chile, whose president Sebastian Pinera declared *"We are at war against a powerful enemy, who is willing to use violence without any limits,"* and summoned up thousands of troops to patrol the streets. Nor has it been taken by Ecuador's Lenin Moreno, who announced the *"militarization"* of the capital, Quito, and authorized *"the use of public force"* to clear the streets of protesters.

[\\_Also on rt.com Don't fall for beleaguered government's line: Crisis in Ecuador is just getting started...](#)

While the state cannot allow destruction and looting, a heavy-handed crackdown can backfire, as happened in France when images of wounded and [maimed](#) protesters gave the Yellow Vests a new issue to rally around, and mired the government and police forces in legal action.

Moreover, giving in to the protesters' demands is one thing, but it's another when rival groups of demonstrators demand clashing measures. While Dutch farmers are fuming at being labeled a climate change threat and punished with new nitrogen emissions regulations, Extinction Rebellion eco-activists took to the streets of more than 70 cities worldwide - including Amsterdam - to demand more of precisely the same kind of regulations, up to a complete abolition of livestock farming.

Contagious, difficult to control, and often contradictory, the season of unrest gripping much of the world presents governments - even those that acquiesce to their citizens' demands - with few easy solutions.

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