



The Global Revolts from the Margins

Paul Rogers and Alasdair McKay

30 October 2019

Summary

During the past nine months, there have been major episodes of civil unrest in several countries across the globe. Focusing mainly on the recent mass protests in Iraq, Lebanon and Chile, this briefing draws on the concept of “revolts from the margins” to explain these events.

Introduction

From late 2001 through to early 2006, Oxford Research Group responded to the “war on terror” and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq with a series of analyses that all pointed to the futility of seeing the response to the 9/11 attacks as essentially military. The studies argued that this response, dubbed the ‘control paradigm’, failed to address the underlying circumstances that enabled violent paramilitary movements with their extreme leadership such as al-Qaida to thrive, even when facing substantial Western forces backed up by the latest advanced military technologies.

While this was a substantial thread of ORG’s work, and remains so to this day, the organisation was endeavouring to develop a more holistic approach to international security that examined the main long-term drivers of global conflict and how they might be contained and reversed. The result was an approach to global security that was aptly named the “sustainable security paradigm”. It departs significantly from the “control paradigm” because, rather than simply “attacking the symptoms”, it aims to cooperatively resolve the root causes of threats using the most effective means available and ‘cure the disease’. The main research output was *Global Responses to Global Threats:*

Latest

An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme

Chances for Peace in the Third Decade

A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham

A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind

Related

Chances for Peace in the Third Decade

Marib: A Yemeni Government Stronghold Increasingly Vulnerable to Houthi Advances

Sustainable Security for the 21st Century, published in June 2006. The report argued that there would be several main drivers to insecurity.

Firstly, the neoliberal economic model that had come in 25 years previously was failing, a likely consequence of this being a rising anger, especially among younger people, that would lead to increasing unrest and outbreaks of violence – what might be termed 'revolts from the margins'. Within the "control paradigm", the following response to marginalisation and subsequent unrest from “the margins” is often employed:

“ Problems of poverty and socio-economic divisions are largely ignored as a security issue. But when immediate threats to the ‘homeland’ are perceived, the usual response is heavy societal control in an attempt ‘keep the lid on’ civil discontent, which only makes matters worse in the long term, and a belief is promoted that the free market will enable people to work their way out of poverty. ”

Two years after publication the 2008 financial crisis offered an early warning of the reality of the “revolts from the margins”, but this had little effect on curbing the excesses of the system.

**Looking Back to Look Forward:
The Value of ORG’s Approach
to Conflict**

**COVID-19: The Dangers of
Securitisation**

Most read

**The Role of Youth in
Peacebuilding: Challenges and
Opportunities**

**Making Bad Economies: The
Poverty of Mexican Drug
Cartels**

ORG's Vision

**Remote Warfare: Lessons
Learned from Contemporary
Theatres**

The **second** driver was the onset of environmental limits to growth, primarily through climate change and resource depletion, not least in increasing shortages of water resources and food supplies. Initially, “climate change” and “competition over resources” were presented as separate, though certainly interconnected, drivers. But given the close connection between the two, it is more conceptually sound to fuse them together as one driver.

The **third** driver was the persistence of a system that maintained international security through an over-dependence on the vigorous use of military force.

The failures of the war on terror and the current recognition of the greatly increased awareness of the risk of climate disruption both support the original *Global Responses to Global Threats* analysis. This briefing looks at the other element, and particularly the concept of revolts from the margins, in light of considerable unrest in a substantial number of countries across the world.

Recent global civil unrest

During the past nine months, there have been substantial yet unexpected instances of major civil unrest frequently leading to repression and violence. Two of them, [Catalonia](#) and [Hong Kong](#), have complex and deeply embedded causes but others such as Ecuador, Chile, Iraq and Lebanon, are all characterised by frustration and anger at the levels of economic marginalisation, elite corruption, and deeply uncertain futures, especially for younger people.

Iraq Thousands have [taken to the streets](#) of Iraq in October to participate in some of the largest demonstrations witnessed in the country’s recent history. Some Iraqi elites have attempted to link the protests to the Ba’ath Party and

even the Islamic State. But the persistent outbreaks of unrest in Baghdad and several other population centres in Iraq have had little to do with inter-confessional tensions or extremist movements. Instead, they have much more to do with anger among educated and knowledgeable young people who have become deeply resentful at levels of unemployment and wages when there has also been rampant corruption and the existence of elite sectors of society that have prospered in a country that is basically rich in exportable fossil fuels.

According to the [World Bank](#), 22.5% of the Iraqi population is currently below the poverty line. [Last year](#), the country's unemployment rate was 7.9%, which is an improvement on previous years, but [youth unemployment](#) is at around 17% and university graduates stand little chance of finding a job. In terms of corruption, Transparency International [rank](#) Iraq the 12th most-corrupt country in the world.

As *Al Jazeera's* Natasha Ghoneim [has reported](#) on the situation:

“ People are very upset about the ongoing lack of economic opportunities, basic services - such as water and electricity - and what they perceive to be a dysfunctional government that is looting the country of its money. ”

So far, there have been two waves of mass protests in October, which have seen protestors calling for the removal of the current Iraqi government from power. The first phase of the unrest, which developed in early October, resulted in 149 protesters killed and over 3,000 wounded. Further demonstrations broke out towards the end of the month with a further 67 deaths and hundreds of injuries. As these figures suggest, the Iraqi government has adopted a heavy-handed response. The Iraqi army and the police were deployed to resolve matters, and in-country accounts suggest live fire, tear gas and rubber-coated steel bullets were used on protestors. The country's Counter-Terrorism Service has recently been deployed to Baghdad and elsewhere, reportedly with orders to "use all necessary measures" to quell the protesting. But the crackdowns and the recently imposed curfew seem to have done little to deter protestors from gathering in large numbers.

Lebanon The West Asian state has recently witnessed its largest public demonstrations since the Cedar Revolution 14 years ago. The sustained protests which broke out in Beirut on 17 October have involved up to a million people in a country of five million. They occurred following what seemed to be a minor government proposal to tax WhatsApp messages at \$6 per month. In practice, the conventional telecommunications system in Lebanon is both inefficient and very costly, WhatsApp has provided a much-valued alternative. The new tax was therefore the last straw in a country deeply mired in political stagnation and experiencing power shortages, poor infrastructure and numerous environmental problems.

Furthermore, all this has been against a background of considerable corruption and the further rise of a wealthy elite that thrives in spite of the difficulties faced by most people. Income inequality in the country is one of the highest in

the Middle East with the top 1% receiving nearly 25% of GDP and the top 0.1% **having the same share** of national income as the bottom half. Lebanese journalist Rami J. Khouri **has described** “The pauperisation and marginalisation of a majority of Lebanese” which he explains “is clearly key to the intensity of the current "revolution", as most protesters refer to it”.

In response to what some protestors are now calling the “October Revolution”, the Lebanese government, led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, agreed to undertake a several major socio-economic reforms that it feels address the population’s grievances. But despite these moves, demonstrations have continued. On 27 October, tens of thousands of Lebanese protestors successfully joined hands to form a **human chain** spanning across the country’s coastline from Tripoli (north) to Tyre (south). According to the anti-government organisers, the chain was intended to act as a symbol of national unity.

Chile The spark for the urban unrest in Chile, which has been largely youth-led, was an increase in metro fares, **rising** from 800 Chilean Pesos to 830 (the equivalent of \$1.15 USD to 1.17), but this also came with a more general sense of injustice.

Chile, with its history as an “experiment of neoliberalism”, is often depicted as a success story for Latin American socio-economic development. While the state has relatively higher standards of living compared to other countries in the region and **falling poverty levels**, it also has one of the highest levels of inequality for an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development member. Indeed, the **GINI Index** ranks Chile as the most unequal country within a group the world's 30 most affluent nations. There has also been growing **frustration amongst the population** with the increasing cost of living, low wages, pensions, education rights, water access, and the public health system.

Chile's unrest has been framed as a response to both the failed promises of neoliberalism and the inequality that neoliberal policies have arguably created in the country. As Patricio Navia, a Chilean sociologist, has commented:

“ In fact, many of those protesting *do* oppose the neoliberal economic policies championed by both left-wing and right-wing governments in Chile over the past 30 years, and there might be activists committed to derailing the most stable moderate right-wing government in the region. But the real reasons behind the rage lie in the frustration of a population that was promised access to the promised land of middle-class status, but that has been denied such access at the gate due to an unlevel playing field characterized by an abusive elite, an unresponsive government and an unkept promise of meritocracy and equal opportunity. ”

The right-wing government of President Sebastián Piñera reacted by imposing a state of emergency and curfew. The authorities then responded with an

extensive deployment of police and army personnel – around 10,000 soldiers were sent into Santiago, the nation's capital.

The clashes between security forces and demonstrators have left 17 dead and more than 200 injured after four days of unrest. A general strike followed, with the government promising reforms but little sign this would be enough, even though a million people protested in Santiago on 25 October.

Elsewhere in Latin America there have been disturbances in Ecuador and Bolivia, and Haiti has been wracked with civil unrest for many weeks.

The Global Picture

In addition to Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Haiti, Lebanon and Iraq, there have been weeks of unrest in Algeria linked to a stultifying presidency, long-term unrest in Venezuela, the yellow vest protests in France and demonstrations in Russia, Albania, Ukraine and Serbia. As mentioned, in some countries the authorities have moved fast to suppress dissent, with Egypt responding to rare anti-government protests by detaining many hundreds of people.

In most cases there are specific factors which push unease and resentment over into demonstrations often followed by repression and violence. A few may have little to do with rising inequality and diminishing life prospects but for the majority these are very much part of the wider social and political context.

Over the past six decades there have been periods of civil disturbance across regions such as Western Europe in the late 1960s, Eastern Europe in the 1990s as the Soviet system imploded and the many examples of dissent and protest across the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s. What sets the current wave of demonstrations apart is that they stretch across much of

the world and do not appear to be related to any one movement or ideology. This indicates that there really is an evolving crisis and that it relates to the persistent failure of the neoliberal economic model to improve equality and emancipation.

Conclusion

ORG's *Global Responses* study argued that the widening socio-economic divide was one of the dominant trends likely to lead to a more fractious and unstable world. But it integrated this with concern over environmental limitations and critique of an approach to security that prioritises the maintenance of the status quo, and essentially attempts to “keep a lid” on issues, rather than addressing deeper factors contributing to insecurity.

Most of the current experiences of unrest and revolt do not have much to do with climate breakdown. But unless such breakdown is prevented then it will add greatly to the anger and bitterness currently directed at a failing economic paradigm, as weaker elements of society bear the brunt of the problems with richer elites maintaining their security. This will be further exacerbated because of the approach to security rooted in maintaining control by all means necessary.

Perhaps the most important issue to recognise is the very use of the phrase “revolts from the margins” since this presumes that those rebelling against their predicaments are in the minority. The reality is that with most wealth concentrated in around a fifth of the world's population, the “margins” are in the majority. For that reason alone, but especially in light of the current experience of widespread unrest, it is helpful to return to the conclusion of the 2006 study:

“ The issues analysed in this report are those that are likely to dominate the international security environment over the next 30 years. Unless urgent action is taken in the next five to ten years, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to avoid a highly unstable global system by the middle years of the century. Governments, NGOs and concerned citizens must work together and recognise that they now have an urgent responsibility to embrace a sustainable approach to global security. ”

Thirteen years later there is a wider recognition of the problems of the neoliberal economic system and there has been genuine progress in recognising the urgent need to respond to climate breakdown. Yet security is still not being critically rethought beyond the current approach so that it actually addresses the underlying drivers of insecurity. The current wave of social unrest therefore makes it even more imperative to rethink security and move to a far more sustainable approach.

Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.

About the Authors

Paul Rogers is Oxford Research Group's Senior Fellow in international security and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford.

Alasdair McKay is ORG's Senior Editor.

ORG's content is circulated free of charge for non-profit use. If you would like to support our work, please consider making a donation.

[£5](#)[£10](#)[£20](#)[Other amount](#)[Donate](#)

Share this page



Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Follow us



Registered with
**FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR**

Useful links

[Login](#)
[Contact us](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[Accessibility](#)
[Terms & Conditions](#)

Email us

[Privacy policy](#)

020 3559 6745