



Anti-government demonstration in central Beirut, Lebanon, in October 2019. Credit: Sam Tarling/Getty Images

# PART 2

STATE OF CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT 2020

COLLECTIVE ACTION TRIGGERED BY ECONOMIC INJUSTICE



## COLLECTIVE ACTION TRIGGERED BY ECONOMIC INJUSTICE

PROTESTS IN CHILE, COLOMBIA, CUBA, ECUADOR, EGYPT, HAITI, IRAN, IRAQ, LEBANON AND ZIMBABWE



A protester dressed as a clown takes part in a demonstration against the government in Bogotá, Colombia. Credit: Ovidio González/Getty Images

2019 was a year of sustained mass protest in country after country. Many protests made demands for fundamental change and democratic freedoms, such as the mass mobilisations that shook the system in Hong Kong and Sudan – as discussed in this report’s chapter on demands for democracy – and those in Chile and Lebanon, covered below. But one of the striking aspects of many of the protests of 2019 was how often they had similar triggers: a relatively small change in a government economic or social policy produced a huge and angry response because it impacted disproportionately on people who were already poor or excluded or saw themselves at the wrong end of highly visible economic inequality, and their sense of insecurity was greatly increased as a result.

The tipping point that made people take to the streets in Chile was a small increase in the cost of an already expensive transport system. In Lebanon, the trigger was a suggestion to levy a tax on the use of WhatsApp. Across a swathe of countries, including Ecuador, Haiti and Zimbabwe, an increase in the cost of fuel sparked outrage; this was also the initial trigger of the 2019 protests that ousted a long-established dictator in Sudan. Anger at blatant and ongoing corruption – including in Colombia, Egypt and Haiti – was another powerful motivation.

Several of the protests of 2019 expressed a rejection of neoliberal economic policies – such as those pursued in Chile for three decades and pushed as the international model by their proponents – and anger at their impact. For many people, these policies – which often entail privatisation of public services, cutbacks to state spending and subsidies, restrictions of labour rights and regressive taxation – are evidently failing them. Neoliberal economic policies have placed many people in conditions of economic inequality and insecurity, leaving them vulnerable to even small shocks, such as increases in the prices of essential goods, including food, fuel and transport. Economic shocks can quickly drive people into protest because people feel they have little left to lose, they see few alternatives to protest, and they need to try to do something to secure the economic essentials that are under threat.

An increase in fuel costs has become perhaps the most predictable trigger of protests because its effect is fundamental and regressive: everyone

is affected, but the most economically vulnerable are impacted upon disproportionately. Because it is such a common concern – everyone needs fuel or the goods it takes fuel to produce, and fuel cost increases drive up the prices of other essential goods, such as food and medicine – anger at increases can have the effect of bringing together disparate groups who might otherwise feel they have little in common.

Anywhere fuel prices increase sharply, protests can be expected, but those protests will become profound and far-reaching in countries that have underlying economic and political dysfunction, tapping into and expanding anger about these. When there are few other channels for voice – when democracy does not run deep and the space for civil society is repressed – protests will be angry and perhaps violent. Anger is intensified when fuel price increases come in countries that are major oil and gas exporters, as people see themselves as having to pay highly for an abundant local resource, and can usually contrast their situation with that of an insulated and often corrupt elite that is wealthy as a result of its control of the fossil fuel industry.

This can happen even when there are good reasons to reduce fuel subsidy, notably as part of action on climate change – as the government of France attempted in 2018, triggering the *gilets jaunes* backlash. However, this did not generally seem the motivation in 2019; for instance, Ecuador’s government, at the same time as announcing the removal of fuel subsidies, also declared its intention to increase oil production, indicating that it was not acting out of climate concern. But regardless of what motivated economic policy changes, the key problem for many was that they were often introduced without apparent consideration of their high impacts on many people, or any measures to help soften those impacts by making social support schemes available. Attempts to expand state taxation bases, for example, often entailed increasing indirect taxation, which disproportionately impacts on the poorest people, rather than attempts to tax directly the incomes and riches of wealthy elites.

Sometimes, the anger resulted from neoliberal economic austerity policies, demanding deep public spending cuts, imposed by international financial institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Despite





Indigenous women call for the police to behave peacefully during protests against the economic measures imposed by the Ecuadoran government in October 2019. Credit: Franklin Jacome/Agencia Press South/Getty Images

the widespread rejection of these by protesting masses, international financial institutions seem as wedded as ever to economic neoliberal policies and austerity packages, pushing them on states – including Ecuador and Haiti – in return for granting financial support. Austerity policies are being foisted on countries of the global south even though they and the theories behind them have been tested in Europe and elsewhere and have become **discredited** and been **rejected** by states and citizens in countries in which they have been applied.

For these reasons, protest anger often quickly turned into a more

fundamental questioning of the economic and political system; in many cases, discontent had been building for some time and it found its tipping point. In Chile, people demanded an end to neoliberal economic policies, and the vast inequality that has been created, alongside a thorough reform of the political system. In Lebanon, people wanted to tear down the existing political structure and the politics of sectarianism that have deadlocked hopes of change, and put new, non-sectarian structures in their place. The demands in Iraq were similar. In many different contexts, people turned on political decision-makers as remote and isolated from their needs, making economic choices without paying heed to the consequences for many

people. People showed that they don't want a trade-off between having food on the table or a political voice: they want both, and want a deepening of democratic processes to bring fundamental changes in economic and social policies.

In many cases, young people played a leading role in movements for change. They demanded that their voices be heard on decisions that affect their livelihoods – with youth unemployment often very high – and their futures; young people were prepared to question accepted wisdom and established models, and saw a generational divide between themselves and those making decisions that made their lives harder. Women were at the forefront (*see section*) insisting that protests make demands for equality, including for women's rights and equal representation. Even in socially conservative settings, women challenged their customary exclusion from debate and the calculus of state decision-making.

Women's leadership of protests helped make protests successful in part because it showed how broad-reaching protest movements were and how they brought together a diversity of people. People of different classes and identities came together in mass movements that were broad and decentralised. In Chile, students and trade unionists found common ground. In Lebanon, Iran and Iraq, people defied the sectarian divisions that normally keep them apart and cause different groups to compete with each other, demanding instead change that benefits everyone. People consciously borrowed protest approaches from other contexts: a **wave of protests** in Latin America saw people in different countries identify themselves as engaged in common struggles.

This made for protest movements that were bold, creative and often festive and celebratory, and protest tactics that often involved roadblocks, occupation of key spaces and other non-violent direct action and civil disobedience tactics; people showed that they were prepared to challenge unjust laws that restrict public dissent.

Because people often broke restrictive laws, and also because their demands were far-reaching, seeking fundamental changes to the distribution of economic and political power, protests generally met

with heavy repression. Governments were quick to curtail fundamental freedoms, imposing curfews and states of emergency. Everywhere, there were fatalities as security forces used clearly excessive and lethal force; even when protests turned violent, people throwing rocks and starting fires were unjustifiably met with live ammunition. In Iran and Iraq, the slaughter was on an industrial scale, but even in countries where civic and democratic freedoms are generally less restricted, such as Chile, rights violations were committed on a daily basis. Jails filled with thousands of detained people, and in several contexts, security force violence was gendered, clearly seeking to deter women from participating in protests through sexual abuse and threats against their families. In several countries, journalists were targeted and mobile phone and internet networks were shut down.

In many contexts, violence against protests only helped recruit further protest support and fuel protest anger, pushing protesters to ask the bigger questions about the validity of the state's use of its coercive power and adding accountability and redress for protest violations to their demands.

In almost all cases, protests achieved impacts, as proposed changes that triggered mobilisations were quickly dropped. But protests continued, because their demands grew into calls for more radical change. In some contexts, bigger shifts resulted or were promised – such as a process for constitutional reform in Chile, or a change of government in Lebanon – offering new opportunities around which civil society could engage and protests could be focused. In many cases, protests continued into 2020, being halted only by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are no quick fixes to the fundamental economic and political questions people have asked, and the anger and demands for change will remain.

## CHILE: 30 YEARS, NOT 30 PESOS

In mid-October the price of a metro ticket in Chile's capital, Santiago, rose by 30 Chilean pesos. While this might have seemed a relatively small increase – of around US\$0.04 – it came on top of what were already some of Latin America's highest transport fees. In a country recognised as one of the most economically **unequal** in Latin America – and the most unequal

among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) members – and where **70 per cent** of people earn the minimum wage of barely US\$700 a month, the fare rise proved a tipping point. Immediately after the rise was announced, students began a campaign of mass fare evasion. The **suggestion** by the then-Minister of the Economy, Juan Andrés Fontaine, that those affected by the increase should simply get up earlier to avoid paying peak fares merely added fuel to the fire.

Rather than listen to the anger, the government's immediate reaction was to crack down, hard. When a large-scale and spontaneous **protest** took to the streets of Santiago on 18 October, people put up barricades and some metro stations were set on fire; the police's response was to teargas the crowds. The government then ratcheted up the repression, declaring a **state of emergency** and deploying military forces on the streets. The following day, 19 October, President Sebastián Piñera suspended the fare hike, but also imposed a nationwide **curfew**: the first since the end of the Pinochet military dictatorship 29 years before.

Although the fare increase had been suspended, protests **continued**, as did state violence against them. Protests continued because the initial discontent about the metro fare became a catalyst for wider anger, which quickly came to assimilate and articulate other concerns, including over electricity and fuel prices, the costs of education and healthcare, and low pay and pensions. Anger focused on the policies of economic neoliberalism that have been applied in Chile for decades. First **imposed by force** under Pinochet's dictatorship, essentially those same policies have been maintained, with minor variations, by subsequent elected governments of various political hues. Many people have not benefited and have instead continued to struggle. Protesters demanded the end of Chile's so-called '**economic miracle**', denouncing it as a failed model and arguing back against decades of one-sided analysis that had positioned Chile as a prescription for emerging economies to follow.

Public dissent is nothing new in Chile, which has seen several large-scale protests, many led by students, in the past decade. **Soledad Fátima Muñoz** of **Current Symposium**, a mentoring programme and feminist festival, is keen to locate the 2019 protests within those broader currents of protest and dissent:<sup>1</sup>

*This was not caused just by an increase in the price of the metro ticket, nor is it an isolated protest. Mobilisations against the abuses derived from the neoliberal system have been a constant occurrence in Chile over the years. Among these were **mass protests** against the privatised pension system, against the **Trans-Pacific Economic Cooperation Agreement** and against the **Fisheries Law**, **feminist protests** and protests by the movement promoted under the slogan '**Ni Una Menos**' (not one less), mobilisations about the **historic debt** owed to teachers, the **student protests** held in 2006 and 2011, and the more recent mobilisations by students against the so-called **Safe Classroom Law**.*

*Combined with a generation-long dissatisfaction with the impunity granted to those responsible for the torture, disappearances and killings of thousands of people under the dictatorship led by Pinochet, this produced an environment conducive to a citizen awakening of historical proportions. After years of abuse, the Chilean people woke up and want a new constitution, since the current one was drafted under the dictatorship and was designed to promote social inequality.*

The 2019 protests were on a still greater scale than those before. The initial actions of the students were followed by the largest protests in Chile's recent history, with hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets, backed by social movements and civil society organisations (CSOs). After decades of democracy, the protests could be seen to offer the first-ever serious challenge to the dictatorship's enduring legacy. This was reflected in the powerful rallying cries that galvanised the protests: 'Chile has woken up' and 'it is not about 30 pesos – it's about 30 years'.

**Nicole Romo** of the **Community of Solidarity Organisations**, a network of over 200 Chilean CSOs, is similarly keen to emphasise the long roots and deep focus of the protests:

*The social outbreak in Chile came after decades of the promotion of a development model that focused on creating wealth, which for years was distributed with no fairness or justice. Individualistic, short-*

<sup>1</sup>All interviews quoted in this report are edited extracts. Full versions of interviews can be found on our website at <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-center/news/interviews>.



“THE NATIONAL STATE OF MOBILISATION HAS CLEARLY SHOWN THAT TWO CHILES COEXIST WITHIN THE SAME TERRITORY – TWO CHILES THAT DO NOT KNOW EACH OTHER AND DO NOT INTERSECT... THOSE WHO HAVE PRIVILEGES AND THOSE WHO DON'T.”

NICOLE ROMO



*term and assistance-based social policies that deeply damaged social cohesion and the community and collective sense of wellbeing were implemented. Alongside this there were housing policies that segregated Chileans into 'rich' and 'poor' territories where access to goods and services was distributed in the same way, a pension system that impoverishes senior citizens, lack of access to healthcare in a timely manner and with adequate quality standards, and an education system that also segregates and grants diametrically opposed opportunities to the rich and the poor.*

*In this context, the motto 'it is not about 30 pesos, it is about 30 years', which was heard a lot during the protests, expresses quite well the feeling that prevailed among the citizenry. Although this social movement began with students massively evading payment of public transportation fares, after a rise of 30 Chilean pesos in the cost of a metro ticket, deep-seated malaise has been accumulating for over 30 years. There have been several protests to advance various social demands over the years, but this profound discontent had never been heard or even made visible. The social eruption of 18 October was the result of the accumulation of radical discontent with the government and the way the country has been ruled for several decades.*

*The national state of mobilisation that we experienced has clearly shown that two Chiles coexist within the same territory – two Chiles that do not know each other and do not intersect. This division is the brutal expression of the difference in the quality of life between those who have privileges and those who don't.*

This meant, as Soledad relates, that the protests encompassed numerous demands for fundamental change, both economic and political:

*The protests are not centrally organised and are not guided by a single political motto; there are many independent initiatives calling for people to gather and demonstrate, through social media or through various independent information channels. Some of the most widespread demands call for a constituent assembly to write a new constitution. Frequently demanded are the nationalisation of basic services and natural resources, including copper, lithium and water. There are also demands for direct democracy and binding referendums, the prosecution of political and economic corruption, respect for Indigenous peoples and plurinational sovereignty, and for health, education and decent pensions. On top of these there are also more specific demands, such as raising the minimum monthly wage to 500,000 Chilean pesos (approx. US\$650), reducing legislators' salaries and raising taxes on the richest.*

*One of the most subversive things that citizens are doing is rejecting the right/left binarism that has so severely affected Latin American societies and that has been used by neoliberal governments as*

*an excuse to repress working people. The prevalence of citizen politics that do not identify with any dogmatic position on the right/left spectrum meant that the government could not identify an ideological enemy and ended up declaring war on its own people.*

The radical agenda of the protests in part explains the brutal response from the state. Since it could not countenance the fundamental changes in the distribution of power the protesters demanded, the state detained people by the thousands and mobilised violence against protesters. Within a few days of the protests beginning, **over 2,100 people** had been detained and at least 15 people had died. There was looting and rioting, but the brutal security force violence and mistreatment of detainees drew comparisons with the dictatorship era. Nicole outlines the scale of the violence and repression:

*Since the protests broke out in Chile, numerous human rights violations have been committed by state security agents. These violations have been denounced by national and international organisations, but the state has tended to downplay them.*

*Data from the National Institute of Human Rights indicate that in 48 per cent of the observed cases of detention, detainees were protesting peacefully, regardless of whether or not they were occupying roads. In 60 per cent of the cases observed, force was not used in a graduated way, and was instead applied without prior notice and in the absence of any kind of dialogue. There was also a series of human rights violations against people detained and held in police stations. The most frequent of these was the excessive use of force during detention, with 751 cases. Overall, 190 cases of sexual harassment or sexual violence were recorded, 171 of them being cases in which detainees were stripped naked.*

*The government handled this conflict in a quite regrettable way, by mainly emphasising its security agenda, criminalising protests and furthering a legislative agenda focused on punishing protesters, which reveals their lack of understanding of the nature of the protests, their demands and their urgency.*

President Piñera was criticised for his slow reaction to the protests, and a photo of him dining in an upmarket restaurant while protests took place nearby went **viral**, summing up for many the disconnect between the elite and the masses. He **apologised** on national TV and announced a package of concessions, including pension increases, electricity price freezes, changes to medical costs and higher taxes for the rich. Protesters criticised these measures as coming nowhere near their demands; Nicole sets out some of the key criticisms:

*The social agenda proposed by the government is quite weak. It does not seek to make radical changes to existing structures that deepen inequality and does not guarantee the rights of all people. The changes and the contents of the social agenda led by the government are not up to the protesters' demands and their urgency. Its numerous initiatives and measures involve limited improvements, which are necessary but will not affect the structures that reproduce unfairness in our country; therefore, they only duplicate the same old short-term public policies that are not based on a rights approach and focus on the individual rather than on the needs of the thousands of families in vulnerable conditions.*

Accordingly the protests went on, accompanied by repression. Disturbingly, **anti-rights groups** also took the opportunity to join the fray, as Soledad relates:

*On top of repression by the security forces, there is a group of citizens who call themselves 'yellow vests' and say their mission is to maintain civic order and protect the work of the police, but in reality they are a violent far-right group. Among its members is **John Cobin**, who fired a firearm at a protester in broad daylight. He belongs to the League of the South, a white supremacist organisation from California, USA.*

The government claimed that those who died were rioters and looters, and reported that 110 supermarkets had been looted and 13 buildings set ablaze. While the scale of violence was undoubtedly unprecedented, the government's initial response of positioning all protesters, including the many protesting peacefully, as violent and criminal only served to



antagonise people further. Chilean civil society provided evidence that most deaths were caused by police brutality. Research **indicated** that not only was the state's violence excessive and disproportionate, but it was also part of a deliberate strategy to try to deter others from protesting. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) **condemned** the use of excessive force, while Childhood Advocacy and UNICEF Chile **urged** the government to comply with national law and international standards to protect the rights of children and teenagers under the state of emergency.

As Nicole suggests, in contrast to the government's early reactions, people were quite capable of condemning violence while still backing protest demands:

*Data from various surveys show a high rate of approval of social demands among citizens. On the other hand, people are more divided when it comes to violence, and especially the forms of violence that have resulted in damage to public and private infrastructure, such as looting, the destruction of stores and the burning of commercial premises and other types of services, as well as regarding violence by state agents, who have been responsible for numerous human rights violations.*

25 October accordingly saw the largest protest in Chile's democratic history, as an estimated 1.2 million people – over six per cent of Chile's population – marched peacefully in Santiago to demand social justice, with many people calling for President Piñera's resignation. Soon afterwards, President Piñera **dismissed** eight cabinet ministers, among them Juan Andrés Fontaine. The cabinet reshuffle did not abate the anger, and protests and violence **continued**. On 12 November, over 70 organisations came together to call for a **general strike**. Indigenous Mapuche protesters in southern Chile also **attacked emblems** of Spanish colonial rule and distant central government, as symbols of their own exclusion, bringing down and decapitating statues and replacing them with Indigenous emblems.

Another protest demand became that of accountability and redress for the deaths and injuries. On 1 November people **marched** across the country to demand justice for those killed. There were some moves

towards accountability over security force actions in response, although they fell short of protesters' demands. In early November, a police major was **arrested** and charged with illegally discharging his shotgun in a public school, after shooting two students at a school protest. Twelve other officers were investigated for beating and sexual harassment. But this was not enough, and thousands of people took part in a **silent march** in January 2020 to denounce state violence towards the protests, covering one eye to call attention to the hundreds of people who experienced **eye injuries** as a result of security force violence; people with eye injuries had marched the month before to demand **redress**.

The impact of the protests and violence was felt on an international scale. On 30 October, President Piñera **announced** that Chile would be unable to host the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation trade summit scheduled for November and the United Nations (UN) Climate Change Conference (COP 25) due in December. COP 25, initially slated to take place in Brazil before the climate-denying government of President Jair Bolsonaro handed it back, would now be held in the third-choice country of Spain ([see section](#)). The same political dysfunction and economic failings that are preventing urgent action on the climate emergency were now making it hard even to hold a meeting on the subject. Chile was losing its international reputation for stability, which ought to prompt questioning about what stability really means and to whom, and what price stability, as understood by international elites, comes at.

The domestic and international connected implicitly in the context of discontent in Chile, because its neoliberal economic policies have been touted as the international model, and because international investments have underpinned structural economic injustice in Chile, as Soledad relates:

*What is happening in Chile is structurally international, since it derives from the austerity measures perpetrated by neoliberalism. Chile's current socio-economic system is rooted in European colonialism and was enshrined by Pinochet's coup d'état in 1973. Specifically, it came from a group of students belonging to Chilean elites who studied in the USA in the mid-1950s, who served as finance and economics ministers under the dictatorship and introduced extreme privatisation*



A demonstrator holds a banner that reads 'Ideals are bulletproof' as he stands in front of a riot police barricade during the fifth day of anti-government protests in Santiago, Chile in October 2019. Credit: Marcelo Hernández/Getty Images

*measures. These measures were accepted and naturalised by a citizenry that was in a state of shock and repression.*

*The consequences of this privatisation translate into abuses perpetrated by multinational corporations that are enabled by governments around the world. In Chile, a good example of this is the case **uncovered** by journalist Meera Karunanathan, who explains that the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan is the largest investor in Aguas del Valle, Essbio and Esval, which control 41 per cent of the water and sanitation system in Chile. This is possible because the*

*constitution allows for the private ownership of water, which has left entire communities in a drought situation and unprotected by the law. However, in 2010 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution **recognising** access to water and sanitation as a human right. This means that in Chile human rights are violated not only through police repression but also through the maintenance of an unfair and abusive economic system.*

*This example is just one in the great chain of international abuses perpetrated by corporations, including by the Canadian company*

*Barrick Gold and the Norwegian state company Statkraft, which continue to abuse the policies of the Chilean subsidiary state and threaten our planet. That is why we must raise awareness at an international level so that the decisions of the Chilean people are respected and protection is provided to Indigenous peoples, without blockages or political interventions protecting foreign capital and perpetuating the destruction of our environment.*

Chilean civil society also internationalised its message. Chilean musicians and sportspeople became increasingly **outspoken** in support of the protests, calling global attention to the repression that was taking place. A musical **performance** by the feminist group Las Tesis, 'A rapist in your path', travelled around the world and was replicated and adapted in dozens of countries and a variety of languages ([see section](#)).

Alongside these efforts, civil society groups played an essential role in documenting and monitoring protest violence and rights violations by security forces, and coming up with alternatives to beat the deadlock, as Nicole describes:

*We have responded without fear. Entire cities shouted fearlessly in protest at the human rights violations that occurred during the past months. Many people compiled testimonial material to make visible the level of exposure and violence they experienced during the protests.*

*It is essential for us to reiterate that at all times unrestricted respect for human rights must prevail, and that each case of violation must be investigated, resulting in punishment for the perpetrators and reparation for the victims. Civil society is key in monitoring and watching over these processes, to ensure that they remain transparent and foster accountability of the state.*

*Since day one of the protests we voiced the need for unrestricted respect for human rights. We believe that this outbreak revealed how urgent it is to restructure the police forces. As civil society we will support from our field of work all actions aimed at bringing reparation for the rights violated during the protests.*

*Generally speaking, all organisations have called for non-violence and the establishment of new spaces for dialogue leading to the strengthening of a society based on social justice and fairness. Without a doubt, CSOs have played a prominent role, promoting the establishment of meeting spaces and helping present the demands of the citizenry. This was done through the creation of a large network of networks called the New Social Pact, which brings together more than 600 CSOs that have worked tirelessly to search for real solutions to substantial demands.*

“WE MUST RAISE AWARENESS AT AN INTERNATIONAL LEVEL SO THAT THE DECISIONS OF THE CHILEAN PEOPLE ARE RESPECTED AND PROTECTION IS PROVIDED TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, WITHOUT BLOCKAGES OR POLITICAL INTERVENTIONS PROTECTING FOREIGN CAPITAL AND PERPETUATING THE DESTRUCTION OF OUR ENVIRONMENT.”

SOLEDAD FÁTIMA MUÑOZ







A demonstrator holds a sign that reads 'Students teach us to be brave' during the anti-government protests in Chile. Credit: Claudio Santana/Getty Images

The Community of Solidary Organisations **called for** a new social contract to be achieved through democratic dialogue, and as the protests wore on, attention turned to demands for fundamental constitutional reform. The pressure from civil society paid off. By mid-November, all major political parties had **agreed** to a referendum to trigger a process to replace the Pinochet-era constitution, which entrenches many of the policies that fuel inequality. Although President Piñera initially proposed that Congress would take charge of the process, further pressure forced him to give the public a clear role. In a **referendum**, initially scheduled for April 2020 but **postponed** due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people will be able to vote on whether they want a new constitution and, if so, whether they want it to be drafted by a mixed citizen-legislator convention or by one entirely made up of elected citizens, in the citizen assembly model practised successfully elsewhere, notably **Ireland**.

Protests continued even after the referendum had been promised. In January 2020, **student protests** about inequality in the education system caused university entrance exams to be suspended in many locations, and a protest against police violence **flared up** after a police vehicle struck and killed a person. The background to continuing protest was one of some **division** between those welcoming the referendum and those criticising it.

While many hold hopes that the process will lead to the greater recognition of rights, others worried that many details were left undefined and too much power would remain in the hands of the politicians who had failed them in the past. People questioned the timeline, arguing that the long run-up to the referendum would sap protest momentum and open up space for disinformation and the manipulation of public opinion. There were also concerns about the age limits for participation, given the vital role played

by young people in the protests, and the adequacy of the representation of excluded groups, such as women and Indigenous people; in March 2020, some of these concerns were assuaged when the first reading of a bill to establish gender parity throughout the process was **approved**. More radically, some viewed constitutional reform processes as a diversion, given the urgency of their economic demands. There were also mixed messages from the state: at the same time that it was proceeding towards the referendum, it controversially introduced new punishments. In January 2020 a new '**anti-looting law**' was passed, bringing in harsher penalties for offences including vandalism and creating barriers.

Many will remain vigilant and continue to demand that the constitutional reform process delivers on high expectations, given the level of violence and repression protesters have endured: by mid-January 2020, **at least 27 people** had died, 3,649 had been severely injured, 412 people had reported being tortured, 191 had reported sexual harassment by the security forces and 405 people had experienced eye injuries, while some 10,253 people had been arrested. The National Institute for Human Rights **reported** that it was compiling 384 legal cases against the police and armed forces, including six cases of homicide.

According to polls at the time of writing, more than 80 per cent of Chileans favour a new constitution. If the referendum succeeds, elections to the constitutional convention would take place soon afterwards, and the convention would have a year to draft a new constitution, pass it with a two-thirds Congress majority and submit it for ratification in another nationwide referendum. Until the COVID-19 crisis struck, people were busy organising grassroots assemblies and neighbourhood discussion groups to talk about the kind of constitution they wanted. The demand is there, not just for a new constitution, but for a culture shift.

For the sake of all those killed, injured and abused during the protests, civil society will continue to mobilise, participate and urge real progress; further mass protests can be expected if the government falls short on people's high expectations.



Members of Indigenous communities protest in Quito, Ecuador, against the end of fuel subsidies. Credit: Jorge Ivan Castaneira Jaramillo/Getty Images

## ECUADOR: PROTESTS DEFEAT AUSTERITY MEASURES

Economic neoliberal policies were met with mass protest action in Ecuador too. President Lenín Moreno has earned international praise for **opening up** space for civil society, **reintroducing** presidential term limits and recognising LGBTQI+ rights since taking over from former President Rafael Correa in 2017. But in 2019, his government's handling of economic problems provoked a sustained backlash.

In March, the government signed a deal with the IMF, which made a US\$4.2 billion loan to help address Ecuador's deficit, but at a heavy price. Predictably, conditions included the privatisation of public companies,

the discontinuation of some public education and healthcare services and mass redundancies in the public sector. The following month, hundreds **marched** in the capital, Quito, to protest against the deal. Some of those protesting were groups associated with former President Correa, who is now fiercely opposed to his one-time ally Moreno, but non-partisan groups also marched. As the protest march came close to the presidential palace, it was met with a heavy-handed response, with police using teargas and batons, causing several injuries.

In July a five-day **national strike** was called by the National Citizens Assembly coalition, involving social groups and unions, to further protest against the package of austerity measures. The government set up a national dialogue process to try to develop consensus on key economic, social and political issues, but some groups, including those associated with Correa, refused to participate.

The announcement of a further set of neoliberal economic austerity measures on 1 October then produced a sustained protest response. This time the package included a 20 per cent public sector pay cut and the removal of fuel subsidies. As the price of petrol more than doubled there were mass protests, led by major trade unions, including transport unions, the university student federations and Indigenous groups. These represented some of the population groups most affected by the fuel price hike and least able to pay more. On 3 October students and transport unions led a national strike and protesters set up roadblocks and burnt tyres, bringing Quito and another major city, Guayaquil, to a standstill. On the second day of protests the government, in a similar tactic to Chile's, declared a 60-day **state of emergency**. Around **370 people** were reported to have been arrested in the first two days of protest.

President Moreno seemed in little mood to compromise, stating that the government would not negotiate with 'criminals'. He accused protesters of trying to break the constitutional and democratic order. He alleged that former President Correa was trying to stage a coup and accused him and Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro of **funding** the protests. He made clear that he had no intention of stepping down. Both President Moreno's accusations and the protest situation threatened to spiral out of control.

The national strike and protests continued, with instances of violence and looting, although in contrast, thousands of people also took part in a '**peace march**' in Guayaquil, calling for an end to the violence. After two days of action, transport unions stood down from protests, but **Indigenous** groups **intensified** their mostly peaceful activity, blocking roads across the country. Three oil production facilities were **occupied** by groups of protesters, while Indigenous groups seized control of a major oil pipeline. Indigenous protesters also **detained** a group of police officers and journalists at a cultural centre in Quito, as a way of protesting about excessive police force; they blamed excessive force for the death of Indigenous protester Inocencio Tucumbí, who was reported to have died after being hit by a teargas cannister. There were other **cases** of protesters turning the tables and detaining police officers.

Attacks on journalists, both by security forces and protesters, were reported, with around 50 journalists said to have experienced **aggression** while covering protests. On 8 October, police **raided** the office of radio station Pichincha Universal, accusing it of inciting discord.

Protest disruption further drove up food and fuel prices, and in a signal of the scale of the unrest, on 8 October the government temporarily **relocated** from Quito to Guayaquil. Protesters attempted to **storm** the parliament building and briefly broke through a police cordon, before security forces drove them back with teargas. Other government buildings were said to have been damaged. In response, on 9 October President Moreno imposed a night-time curfew.

The situation deteriorated further. Alongside legitimate protests there was violent criminal activity. Following attacks by masked protesters against a TV station, a newspaper and the national auditor's office, President Moreno **ordered** the army onto the streets of Quito. Their lethality was predictable. The initial count was that four people were killed, along with around 650 people detained. However, the UN, which sent a team of experts to Ecuador between 21 October and 8 November, received **reports** that during the protests at least nine people had been killed, 1,507 wounded – including 435 members of the security forces – and 1,382 detained. The IACHR also **expressed** concern about the excessive use of force against protesters,



including the indiscriminate use of teargas. Indigenous people appeared to be particularly **targeted** by the security forces.

Thankfully, after two weeks of protest, violence and chaos, people on both sides saw the need to compromise. A negotiation between the government and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), mediated by the UN and the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference, led to the government agreeing to do the very thing President Moreno had insisted it would not: **restore** the fuel subsidies and reverse the cuts. The government also agreed to create a new **commission** with civil society groups and Indigenous leaders to come up with alternative measures to address the country's economic difficulties. Indigenous groups called off their protest, and protesters who had occupied spaces in Quito started to **clean up** their protest sites before leaving.

The compromise suggested that alternatives to IMF orthodoxy are possible, but they can take patient dialogue and a willingness to reach out and listen to the voices of those who are most affected by austerity measures; the poorest and most vulnerable people should not be treated as collateral damage in economic restructuring. The price paid before the agreement was reached – in deaths and detentions, as well as disruption and its

economic costs – was a high one that could have been avoided.

It also seemed against the spirit of compromise that the government continued to pursue the arrest of opposition politicians who had supported the protests and opened an **investigation** into CONAIE head Jamie Vargas. A better focus might be on promoting reconciliation, combined with a clear determination to provide redress for human rights violations; the Ombudsman, Freddy Carrión, **announced** the creation of a special commission to investigate rights abuses committed during the protests. Without a focus on rebuilding relationships and redress for violations, Ecuador may be just a hair trigger away from further protests.

Many in civil society will continue to call for alternatives to economic neoliberalism and externally imposed austerity. On 16 October, in the context of the World Bank and IMF annual meetings, 35 CSOs from around the world **signed** a declaration against IMF-backed austerity policies, pointing to the upheaval caused in Ecuador and Haiti (see below), among others, and asserting the need to respect human rights and ensure the participation of civil society and the groups most affected by economic changes. Without such changes, the disruption seen in Ecuador can be expected to be repeated elsewhere.



Indigenous protesters, including many women, demonstrate outside the National Assembly in Quito, Ecuador. Credit: Jonatan Rosas/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

## COLOMBIA: PENSION AND PAY-CUT PLANS AMONG PROTEST CAUSES

Many of those protesting in Colombia in 2019 consciously took inspiration from protests in Chile and Ecuador, positioning themselves as part of a **broader continental** protest movement by carrying those countries' flags and holding banners reading 'South America woke up'.

Colombian protests made headlines when labour unions organised a **12-hour national strike** on 21 November. They did not stand alone, with a wide range of different groups taking part in protest actions, including Indigenous, student and anti-corruption activists. Participation was wide: while estimates of numbers varied greatly, at least several hundred thousand people, and possibly a million, took part in **protests** that spanned the country on 21 November. Protests continued over the following days.

There were several sources for the dissent on show. Many people were mobilised in response to reports that the government was planning to introduce economic austerity measures. People protested against **economic inequality**. There was anger at rife corruption. People had also been troubled by an airstrike on a guerrilla camp in August that killed at least eight children, and the government's initial attempts to cover up these casualties.

Alexandra González Zapata of the **Campaign to Defend Freedom** points out how protests tapped into discontent that had been building gradually:

*From 2013 onwards, social mobilisation in Colombia has been on the rise. In 2013 there was an agricultural strike that lasted for more than 20 days and managed to keep several major national roads closed. Then came the agricultural strikes of 2015 and 2016, and marches and protests of tens of thousands of Indigenous peoples, and the student strikes of 2018 and 2019.*

*Outrage has been building up little by little in Colombia. Even as it was inaugurated in August 2018, President Iván Duque's government did not enjoy wide margins of legitimacy and support. The electoral*

*results showed that a broad segment of the citizenry rejected traditional power and all that it represented: policies in favour of war, privatisation and indebtedness. This discontent, including among those who had voted for Duque, increased as the government announced a series of policy measures.*

*The government's proposals were aimed at eliminating the state pension fund Colpensiones, raising the retirement age and lowering the salary for young people to 75 per cent of the minimum wage, among other measures. A widespread atmosphere of indignation emerged as a result, yielding a unified call for mobilisation on 21 November.*

There was also concern about the lack of progress on the 2016 **peace deal** between the government and the main guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); President Duque won the 2018 election after a campaign opposing the deal and has been accused of doing little to uphold it since. Many people live with the consequences of a faltering peace process, such as high levels of violence in rural areas. Much more needs to be done to protect the right of those who express dissent, and to challenge the impunity that prevails for attacks: shockingly, **106 human rights defenders** were killed in Colombia in 2019, most of them in rural areas and many of them **Indigenous people**. Protests **earlier in 2019** had called out high levels of violence against rights defenders and community leaders, and demanded better protection, while students had marched in September to **protest against corruption**, in demonstrations that were characterised by violence.

The November protests were mostly peaceful, although there were some instances of looting, as well as vandalism of stations on the TransMilenio rapid transport system in the capital, Bogotá. However, the government took a hard line, leading to violent clashes. Its immediate response to the protests was to close its borders and **deploy** a staggering 170,000 security personnel onto the streets. On the evening of 21 November some groups tried to storm the National Congress, while clashes broke out near Bogotá's international airport and at the National University of Bogotá. Social media videos showed violent actions by the riot police, who **released teargas**, shot people at point-blank range with teargas canisters and kicked people

in the head. Overnight curfews were imposed in Bogotá and the city of Cali.

In defiance of the curfews and in repudiation of repression, spontaneous pot-banging (cacerolazos) protests took place in Bogotá and several other cities. People set up roadblocks. More groups joined protests, including women's rights groups demanding gender equality and environmental groups urging greater environmental protection and a ban on fracking. As Alexandra relates, the continuing protest response offered a riposte to the government's attempts to characterise the mobilisations as straightforward lawlessness:

*What few expected was that the mobilisation would continue after 21 November. On that day some acts of vandalism were committed, which the national government tried to use as an excuse to criminalise social protest and adopt measures to restrict freedoms, including a curfew. In response to this, citizens went out to demonstrate freely. We really do not know which was the first neighbourhood or the first block to start banging pots and pans on 22 November, but what we do know is that this dynamic expanded throughout Bogotá as well as other cities around Colombia, shifting the narrative that had prevailed in the media, which was all about vandalism, towards a public discourse that highlighted citizen outrage and social demands.*

However, the state's heavy-handed response continued. The numbers of **detentions** soared, almost all of them on questionable grounds and under an obscure part of the police code, and there were reports of ill treatment of people in detention, alongside violent policing of protests. None of this was any accident, as Alexandra describes:

*On 15 November, six days before the first protest was scheduled to take place, the national government made the decision to involve the army in control and security operations in Bogotá. Nine Brigade XIII contingents were deployed and more than 350 soldiers took part in monitoring, patrolling and security controls in Bogotá. This militarisation still persists in the city. The presence of a 'riot squad' of the national army, according to information released by the authorities, is particularly concerning.*

*Starting at 6am on 19 November, 37 raids were carried out at the residences and workplaces of media professionals throughout Colombia. To date, 21 of those raids have been declared illegal after undergoing judicial scrutiny, because they did not comply with legally established requirements, including being based on reasonable suspicion. According to information provided by the authorities, the raids involved people who were thought to be prone to committing acts of vandalism during the protest. However, it was mainly people linked to artistic groups, alternative media and social movements. Among the items seized were posters, brushes and paintings.*

“WE REALLY DO NOT KNOW WHICH WAS THE FIRST NEIGHBOURHOOD OR THE FIRST BLOCK TO START BANGING POTS AND PANS, BUT WHAT WE DO KNOW IS THAT THIS DYNAMIC EXPANDED, SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE THAT HAD PREVAILED IN THE MEDIA, TOWARDS A PUBLIC DISCOURSE THAT HIGHLIGHTED CITIZEN OUTRAGE AND SOCIAL DEMANDS.”

ALEXANDRA GONZÁLEZ ZAPATA





Throughout the protests, the authorities made an improper and disproportionate use of force. On 23 November, **Dilan Cruz** was killed as a result of an unjustified intervention by Mobile Anti-Riot Squadron (ESMAD) during a peaceful mobilisation. Although the weapon used was among those authorised, the ammunition fired by ESMAD caused the death of this young man because of improper use, since according to international standards this type of weapon can only be fired at a distance greater than 60 metres, and only against lower extremities; otherwise, it is deemed to entail lethal risk. Strikingly, on a video recorded live by the Defend Freedom Campaign, an ESMAD agent can be heard encouraging another one to shoot.

During the protests more than 300 people were injured, including 12 who had eye injuries. Some young people were injured by firearms shot by the police, including **Duvan Villegas**, who might remain paralysed as a result of a bullet hitting him in the back. Another young man in Bogotá lost his right eye after being hit by a rubber bullet fired by ESMAD, and two other people could face the loss of their legs due to the impact of teargas canisters thrown by the police from close range.

Overall, there were 1,514 arrests during the protests, 1,109 of them in Bogotá. Out of 914 people who were arrested, 103 (6.8 per cent) were prosecuted for allegedly being caught in the act of committing violence against a public official; however, arrest procedures were declared illegal in a high number of cases, both because there were not enough grounds for conducting them and because they were accompanied by physical violence against detainees.

The rest of the people who were detained (93.2 per cent) were transferred for protection or by police procedure. According to the law, detention in these cases is justified when the life or integrity of the person or a third party is at risk or danger. However, an abusive use of this power was made, since these were mostly administrative detentions, used as a mechanism of intimidation and punishment against citizens who were exercising their right to protest. Therefore, these were mostly arbitrary detentions.

In some of these cases, cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment was documented during detention. Cases came to our attention of people who were forced to undress, others who received electric shocks through electrical control devices and some who had broken bones in their hands as a result of baton charges or being kicked.

Additionally, in Bogotá, more than 620 people who were transferred to the Protection Transfer Centre were punished with police appearance orders, in many cases for the crime of disruption, for having obstructed transport. This mechanism, which results in fines amounting to around 200,000 Colombian pesos (approx. US\$60), was used indiscriminately and has affected the exercise of social protest.

Trade unions and student groups organised a second national strike in protest at Dilan Cruz's death. In a seemingly conciliatory response, President Duque promised to open a 'national conversation', while the defence minister said that 11 investigations into 'alleged misconduct' by security force members had been initiated.

However, what was on offer was still far short of what people were demanding, and it was little surprise that protests continued during December, when a third **national strike** was held, with people also now demanding accountability for violence against protests. Alexandra sets out some of the immediate demands about the policing of protests, as well as the essential issues on which protesters sought real dialogue:

*The government should immediately suspend the use of 12-calibre shotguns by ESMAD members, due to their high impact on people's physical integrity and life. It should refrain from pursuing stigmatisation and criminalisation campaigns against those who engage in social protest. The government should initiate a negotiation process with the National Strike Committee to address its demands. And in response to the substantive demands made by the National Strike Committee, the government should start by withdrawing its proposals for labour and pension reform that are due for congressional debate, and initiate a broad and participatory process towards the formulation of new laws concerning those issues.*

*The National Strike Committee has submitted a list of petitions around 13 major issues: guarantees for the exercise of the right to social protest; social rights; economic rights; anti-corruption; peace; human*

*rights; the rights of Mother Earth; political rights and guarantees; agricultural and fishery issues; compliance with agreements between government and social organisations; withdrawal of legislation; the repeal of specific laws; and reform of the law-making process.*



Students hold makeshift shields as they shout slogans during anti-government protests on 4 December 2019 in Bogotá, Colombia. Credit: Guillermo Legaria/Getty Images





Members of Indigenous communities carry a giant Whipala flag during an anti-government protest in Bogotá, Colombia, in November 2019.

Credit: Diego Cuevas/Vizzor Image/Getty Images

*Protesters demand an end to labour subcontracting, the establishment of an interest rate for mortgage loans that is fair and correlated to people's real incomes and the repeal of the tax that is currently used to finance the electricity company.*

*Protesters urge the government to dismantle ESMAD and refrain from establishing any other similar force. They demand that those responsible for the death of Dilan Cruz be brought to justice and held accountable.*

The two sides remained far apart, and further outrage was sparked in December when a young woman who was taking part in the protests was **snatched** by riot police and driven away in an unmarked car; she was only set free because others gave chase. In a country where memories of the forced disappearances of recent decades run deep, this represented a disturbing development. People will continue to urge that the government takes their grievances seriously and investigates abuses during protests properly.



## CUBA: EVERYDAY HARDSHIPS SPARK PROTESTS IN A REGIME OF TOTAL CONTROL

Even in the context of a regime based on total control, characterised by a complete closure of civic space, dissent can break out. The everyday hardships that most people in Cuba experience have become the driver of protests; because these are not necessarily seen as protests that make explicitly political demands, they have often been able to find some space. **Juan Antonio Blanco** of the **Cuban Observatory of Conflicts** outlines recent trends:

*Cuban citizens' struggles are primarily for living conditions, for the full respect of their human dignity. Over the past two years there has been a notable increase in protests for social and economic reasons. These protests do not have legal protection, as the right to public demonstration is non-existent. However, the state has often preferred to appease these protests rather than react with force. Given the degree of deterioration of living conditions – and the even more deteriorated legitimacy of the authorities and the official communist ideology – Cuban society resembles a dry meadow that any spark can ignite.*

*Real power is in the hands of a political elite that represents less than 0.5 per cent of the population, in a country that has abandoned even the ideology of the communist social pact that pushed the idea of submission based on a commitment to basic social rights, which were granted at the price of the suppression of all other rights.*

Juan Antonio outlines the reasons why the attitudes of many Cuban people have started to shift, leading to an increase in protests:

*The factors that have most influenced the current change in citizens' perspectives and attitudes have included the breakdown of the monopoly of information that has resulted from new digital technologies, the leader's death and the gradual transfer of power to people without historical legitimacy to justify their incompetence. The accelerated deterioration of living conditions and the country's*

*entire infrastructure turns everyday life into a collection of hardships. Health and education systems, food, medicine, the transportation system and cooking gas and gasoline supply are in a state of collapse. Hundreds of multi-family dwellings are also collapsing and people waste their lives demanding, waiting for years for a new home or for their old home to be repaired. Many also lose their lives among the rubble when buildings collapse.*

*Cuban citizens – more than half of whom now live in poverty according to respected economists based in Cuba – have increasingly serious and urgent needs, the fulfilment of which cannot wait for a change of government or regime. In a different context these would be 'personal problems,' but in the context of a statist governance regime, which makes all solutions depend on state institutions and blocks all autonomous solutions, whether by citizens or the private sector, these become social and economic conflicts of citizens against the state.*

The fact that there are many people discontented with their economic and social conditions, and they are able to frame their demands in terms that are not seen as threatening to the one-party state, is what accounts for their relative success, as Juan Antonio concludes:

*Social dissidents tend not to express themselves in a public way if they do not believe this will help them achieve concessions on a specific demand. But if their situation becomes distressing, they move – often spontaneously – from complaining and lamenting privately to protesting publicly.*

*The social dissident, who had remained latent and silent, goes public to express their discontent and demand basic social rights. They claim neither more nor less than the right to dignity, to dignified conditions of existence. And unlike political opponents, dissidents are not in the thousands but in the millions. There are not enough jail cells for so many people.*

*When the authorities realised that these citizens were mentally*



People protest in the El Cerro neighbourhood, Havana, Cuba to demand the restoration of electricity and water services. Credit: Observatorio Cubano de Conflictos

*ready to go to public protests, they decided to give them what they demanded, in order to prevent an outburst and to take credit for the result, although this would never have been achieved in the absence of citizen pressure. They showed their preference for occasional win-win solutions to avoid the danger of a viral contagion of protests among a population that is fed-up with broken promises. Each popular victory teaches citizens that protesting and demanding – rather than begging and waiting – is the way to go.*

*The method is simple: to generate a collective demand that has a critical number of petitioners who identify with it and subscribe to it, and send negotiators to request a solution, clarifying that they will not accept negative, delayed responses or a response that does not identify the person responsible for its implementation. At the same time, information is filtered to social media and digital media covering Cuba. That is the way to go along the established roads in a constructive way. What is new here is that it is made clear that if an agreement is not reached and its implementation verified, people are willing to take non-violent public actions of various kinds.*

## HAITI: ANGER BOILS OVER AT VAST CORRUPTION

Corruption, a concern in Chile and Colombia, was the key issue in Haiti, where continuing revelations of a scandal involving the theft of massive amounts of public funds sparked renewed protests and violence.

Under Venezuela's Petrocaribe programme, launched in 2005 to build regional support for Venezuela's leftist government, Haiti was provided with heavily discounted oil, with payment deferred on generous terms. The deal – in effect a **loan of oil** at a time when oil prices were high – was supposed to have freed up billions of dollars for Haiti's government to spend on much-needed development, social programmes and reconstruction following the devastating 2010 earthquake. But the scheme provided little possibility for public oversight and democratic accountability, and the people of Haiti never saw those billions. It appears the money went mostly into the pockets of politicians. One estimate suggests that at least US\$2 billion – almost a quarter of Haiti's GDP – was stolen. Now the Petrocaribe programme has wound down and Haiti still **owes** the government of Venezuela roughly the same figure of US\$2 billion, meaning that corruption has not only stolen from Haitians in the present day, but also threatens to steal Haiti's future: a historic opportunity for progress has been squandered.

In the western hemisphere's poorest country, people saw a clear connection between their continuing poverty and insecurity and high-level corruption, and accordingly took to the streets. Anger at the corruption scandal became the central point around which years of frustration coalesced, including at the earlier grand theft of post-earthquake reconstruction funds, flawed elections, restricted space for civil society, the concentration of wealth into the hands of a tiny elite and the lack of basic services. The rallying cry was, in Creole, '**Kot kob Petrokaribe?**' ('Where's the Petrocaribe money?').

Protests in 2019 followed on from those of **October and November 2018** when corruption allegations first surfaced, combining with anger at high inflation and government proposals to increase fuel taxes as part of IMF loan conditions; as in Ecuador, the international policy prescription provoked pushback, as people wondered why, rather than their politicians, they were the ones paying the price. President Jovenel Moïse – who took

office in 2017 after winning controversial and disputed elections on a low turnout – was accused of blocking any action to hold high-level politicians and officials accountable for corruption, with no prosecutions forthcoming of those alleged to be implicated in the scandal. The security force's violent response to the 2018 protests had left several people dead, and protests had been followed by a general strike. After the 2018 protests, the government had dropped its plans to raise fuel taxes and committed to an official audit of the funds, but anger still simmered.

Protests were **sparked** again in February 2019 following the publication of the first report of the official auditors. **Thousands** took to the streets to **demand** President Moïse's resignation. Protests came alongside violence, looting and vandalism of vehicles owned by the wealthy elite, and at least seven people were **reported** dead. Police even fired **teargas** at a funeral procession for two of the people they had killed. The disruption caused the **cancellation** of normally well-attended Carnival events; festivities would have seemed inappropriate.

On 31 May the official auditors delivered their second report on the scandal, outlining the full extent of the corruption. This revealed that millions of dollars had been channelled to Moïse before he became president. While the report attributed some loss of funds to mismanagement and negligence – which themselves should be scandalous – it also found clear evidence of embezzlement. It reported that many of the funds still remained entirely unaccounted for. Not surprisingly, the report's publication fuelled further protests.

As elsewhere, fuel **shortages** helped spark further protest anger. The Petrocaribe supply had ended and some oil companies were refusing to supply fuel due to unpaid bills. This caused protests to **intensify** in early September. On 15 and 16 September, many roads were **blocked** by burning tyres and other obstacles in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and in other cities.

As protests raged, President Moïse appealed for calm and offered to form a cross-party unity government to help resolve the crisis. This came after his attempts to appoint a new prime minister – Haiti has had only acting prime ministers since the former appointee lost a **censure vote** in March – were



blocked. But with the opposition increasingly seeking to take advantage of protests and many protesters calling for the president's ousting, the offer was rejected.

Protests grew increasingly violent. On 27 September the police used **live ammunition and teargas** to disperse crowds at one of the largest protests, which saw looting and arson. On 21 October, **seven people** were shot and wounded as they set up a roadblock; two of them were hospitalised. There was ample evidence that the security forces were using **excessive force**. By the start of November it was reported that **at least 42 people** had been killed since the protests had intensified in mid-September. At the same time, even police officers **protested**, complaining that they had not been paid for months.

In the febrile atmosphere, media workers were at risk. On 23 September, a photojournalist and driver were injured when Senator Jean Marie Ralph Féthière **opened fire** as his car tried to pass through a crowd of protesters as he left parliament. The Senator **claimed** he had acted in self-defence. Camera operator Edmond Joseph Agénor was hit by **live ammunition** fired by security forces as he covered a protest outside Port-au-Prince airport on 30 September, despite being clearly identified as a member of the media. And on 10 October, radio reporter Néhémie Joseph was **found dead** in his car, having been shot several times in the head. He had reported receiving death threats from politicians over his coverage of protests. Néhémie's killing fuelled **further protests**, as thousands of people tried to march on the president's residence. He was the second journalist killed in Haiti in 2019, after radio reporter Pétion Rospide was **shot dead** in June; Pétion had frequently covered the Petrocaribe scandal.

The protests brought Haiti to a **standstill**, with transport blocked, banks and schools closed and many power lines shut down. Children went **uneducated** for months and people struggled to access essential healthcare. Crime gangs flourished in the chaos. Food shortages started to worsen as a result of the protest disruption and fuel shortages, which caused prices to soar and the currency to depreciate. Many people already living on the edge were tipped into dire food poverty; humanitarian organisations estimated that **35 per cent** of the population

needed emergency food assistance, a challenge made harder by roadblocks and insecurity: a political and economic crisis had become a **humanitarian emergency**. Many people fled across the border to the Dominican Republic, contributing to anti-migrant sentiment in a country where one candidate in the 2020 presidential election is **promising** to build a Trumpian border wall.

In December, an uneasy calm appeared to be descending, as perhaps the worst of the protest anger had begun to burn itself out. Some children were **back in school**. However, many physical barriers removed by the police were quickly rebuilt, and further protest marches were planned. The country still lacked a permanent prime minister and there seemed to be no plans to hold the parliamentary elections that were due. Politicians remained deadlocked.

And after all the unrest, still no one has been held to account for the vast corruption. No money has been returned and no one has gone to jail. Understandably, the anger that triggered the protests remains. People deserve answers, and they deserve justice. They will continue to ask 'Kot kob Petrokaribe?'



Protest signs denouncing corruption hang in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in May 2019.

Credit: Federico Rios/Bloomberg via Getty Images

## CIVIL SOCIETY ACTION ON THE OPIOID CRISIS

Another arena in which people challenged economic power in 2019 was through action on the opioid crisis. When the opioid crisis hit the headlines, it was due to civil society activism that focused on those who have earned incredible wealth from manufacturing and marketing the highly addictive drugs and the philanthropy they use to **launder** their reputations. As with civil society action to raise the profile of the climate crisis ([see section](#)), tactics combined non-violent direct action and civil disobedience with litigation to hold the powerful to account.

The opioid crisis is particularly pressing in the USA, where every day **130 people die** from overdosing on the drugs. An estimated **10.3 million people** misused prescription opioids in 2018, and addiction can lead to demand for illegal drugs, including heroin, and crime in order to buy drugs. The cost to the USA of the opioid crisis has been **estimated** at over US\$78 billion a year. Civil society activism and investigative journalism have brought to light how aggressively the drugs have been marketed and medical practitioners incentivised to prescribe them inappropriately, even though the medication is estimated to work for only **one in 10** of patients with chronic pain. Drug company tactics included the funding of groups that presented themselves as supporters of people experiencing chronic pain due to medical conditions, demanding access to opioids; these effectively operated as **front organisations** to stoke demand. Investigations also produced evidence of attempts to mislead people over the safety and addictiveness of the drugs.

The major drug involved, OxyContin, is produced by Purdue Pharma, a company entirely owned by the **Sackler family**. The combined wealth of the family is **estimated** to exceed US\$13 billion. Such wealth made it easy for Sackler family members to position themselves as generous patrons of world-famous universities and arts institutions. The Sackler brand has therefore reached, and had positive associations conferred on it, by students and arts lovers in the USA and UK.

But what might seem a strength – the use of massive economic resources channelled through philanthropy to project a positive image – also

became a weakness, as activists started to focus on the institutions receiving funding and make the association a negative one. In doing so, they were part of a broader trend of civil society activism that exposes the uses of philanthropic funding to launder the reputations of those doing harm, including companies that contribute to climate change, promote tobacco or are associated with human rights abuses.

In February the Guggenheim Museum in New York, USA was brought to a **standstill** in a protest **initiated** by well-known photographer and activist Nan Goldin over its acceptance of Sackler funding. Goldin, a former prescription opioid addict, founded a group, Prescription Addiction Intervention Now (**PAIN**), along with other activists, to target Sackler-funded institutions. Goldin realised she had in the past been paid for her work by galleries receiving Sackler funding only to use the money to buy black-market drugs to feed her addiction.

In 2019, the strategy started to pay off in the UK, which PAIN says has the world's third-fastest growing use of opioids. In February, Nan Goldin said she would **refuse** a retrospective of her work at the National Portrait Gallery in London if the museum accepted a gift of £1 million (approx. US\$1.3 million) from the Sackler family. The following month, the gallery said it had agreed with the Sackler Trust **not to proceed** with the donation. The Tate group of galleries, also based in the UK, subsequently said it would no longer accept donations from the Sackler family; Tate Modern had plans to show a major Nan Goldin work. In response, the Sackler Trust and a related Sackler family foundation **suspended** new charitable donations in the UK. The Prince's Trust, a UK charity associated with the monarchy, **stated** that it had no plans to accept any further Sackler gifts, as did the New York Guggenheim.

The campaign continued. In July, Nan Goldin **protested** in Paris, France outside the Louvre Museum, which has a Sackler Wing. In August, Goldin and other activists were arrested after a **protest** against the New York governor's inaction in dealing with drug deaths. In November, Goldin led a **die-in** protest in the recently constructed Sackler-sponsored courtyard of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Meanwhile, other groups were active: parents who lost their children to opioid addiction **set up groups** to advocate for changes in the laws. Small groups across the USA **came together** in the Fed Up Coalition to call on Purdue Pharma to do more to help mitigate the effects of its opioids. They also called on the US government to act more strongly on the crisis and stand up to the drug companies, seeking to challenge the close and cosy relationships that made the environment for opioids so permissive.

Alongside direct action to put the issue on the public agenda, those affected worked through the courts. In March, Purdue Pharma **reached an agreement** to settle a lawsuit brought by the state of Oklahoma over its aggressive and illegal marketing of OxyContin, but continued to face **over 2,000 lawsuits** across the USA. In March, the State of New York **sued** the Sackler family for their responsibility in the crisis. In September, at least 20 states **rejected** a tentative multibillion-dollar settlement with Purdue Pharma. The Sackler family themselves, as opposed to their company, have so far managed to avoid being sued, although legal activism is under way to try to challenge their impunity. Even the bankruptcy and conversion into a trust of Purdue Pharma, proposed as one way of settling claims, would leave the family sitting on **vast wealth**.

Other manufacturers have been targeted for action. In August Oklahoma became the first state to sue an opioid manufacturer successfully, **establishing** a precedent that drug companies are responsible for addiction and deaths. Johnson & Johnson was ordered to pay more than **half a billion dollars** for spreading misinformation

about painkillers and violating state consumer protection laws by not fully disclosing the risks. Two months later, another major pharmaceutical company, Teva Pharmaceuticals, along with three drug distributors, were **ordered to pay** US\$260 million to settle thousands of lawsuits made by communities across the country.

But at the same time that the opioid crisis is being exposed in the USA and UK, it is spreading elsewhere. Purdue Pharma, for instance, has subsidiary companies in Asia, Europe and Latin America. And rather as tobacco manufacturers once did, it seems one response to tightening regulation in global north economies is to open up new markets in the global south. The opioid crisis is now **impacting on India**, where **pharmaceutical companies** are taking advantage of a less regulated market and a relative lack of oversight over the healthcare system. As for-profit pain clinics **spring up**, there is evidence that once again drug companies are buying influence with prominent doctors and academics to enable access and stoke demand.

The action will continue, with demands that institutions not only cease accepting Sackler funding, but also remove the Sackler name that allows the family to enjoy positive associations with seats of culture and learning. The call that, instead of art galleries, their philanthropy might better be used to fund centres for the treatment and prevention of drug addiction, is only likely to grow louder. Activists will also continue to call for those whose leadership created the opioid crisis to face criminal justice. Their vast economic power should no longer insulate them from the harm they have caused.

## LEBANON: WHATSAPP TAX SPARKS DEMANDS FOR FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE

Price increases of a different kind were the trigger for the latest round of protests that erupted in Lebanon on 17 October, when the government was reported to be planning to introduce a new **tax** on WhatsApp. The protests this generated followed on from earlier demonstrations in September over

**worsening** economic conditions. Protests quickly raised essential questions about how and in whose interests Lebanon is governed, and what future it can offer its young people.

The protest response in October showed how essential rapid mobile phone communication has become to everyday lives, particularly in the absence of other infrastructure. Communication and internet access have



rightly become regarded as human rights; a new tax on their use would be seen by many as an egregious restriction of rights. WhatsApp is also a key platform for coordinating protests, including those of 2019. The move raised fresh concerns about restrictions on the freedom of expression, with the government having something of a track record in this regard: in early 2019, for example, the authorities **filed lawsuits** against critical journalists and activists and blocked a dating app.

Alongside this, many of the underlying conditions seen in other contexts of mass protest in 2019 were present: high unemployment, particularly among young people, and rising costs of bread and fuel. A growing economic crisis and budget deficit had caused the government to obtain a loan package of US\$10.2 billion in 2018 from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the government of Saudi Arabia and the World Bank, on the condition that it reduce its deficit by increasing tax revenues. As in Ecuador and Haiti, externally determined economic policies were introduced with seemingly little acknowledgement of their impacts on everyday lives.

The protests were also preceded by a series of **wildfires**, which the state **failed** to tackle, due to a lack of adequately maintained equipment, forcing it to rely on foreign help; for many people, this symbolised the dysfunction of the state, unable even to perform its duty to protect its territory and citizens. This was not the first time Lebanese people had been brought to protest by the inadequacy of their government: a pile-up of rubbish on the streets in 2015 spawned the ‘**You Stink**’ movement protesting against corruption and political dysfunction. Those same themes came strongly to the fore in 2019, as protests quickly broadened to express people’s anger about **corruption** and inequality; people **contrasted** elite wealth with their own worsening economic insecurity.

**Ziad Abdel Samad and Zahra Bazzi** of the **Arab NGO Network for Development** identify the fundamental economic and political roots of the protests, and the way in which people quickly made radical demands for change:

*The protests were motivated by the direct repercussions of the economic and monetary crisis on the Lebanese population, but had*

*deep roots in a structurally flawed economic system and wicked political practices and corruption embraced by successive governments for decades.*

*The few months before the eruption of the revolution saw a looming economic crisis with an increase in government debt and questionable monetary and financial engineering coupled with a decrease in GDP growth, as well as a rise in unemployment, reaching approximately 16 per cent among the general population, and more than 45 per cent among young people, along with growing poverty and increases in the prices of essential commodities.*

*One week before the protests, direct signs of a financial crisis had started to show, including strikes at petrol stations and the inability of the government to access new credit to import wheat and other basic goods, in addition to the eruption of roughly 100 nationwide wildfires and forest fires.*

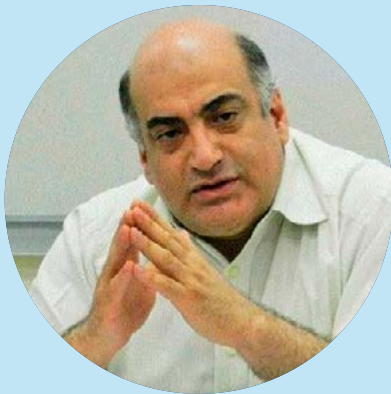
*Following the late adoption of the 2019 budget in July, the negotiations over the 2020 budget were being finalised in October with a clear aim of increasing state revenue at any cost and reducing the enormous deficit of 11 per cent to escape the crisis. The cabinet meeting held on 17 October suggested a new set of austerity measures, including additional indirect taxation, without envisioning the anger of the Lebanese people and the massive protests that would spread through the country that same day.*

*Protesters shared a clear vision and demands of the political and economic systems they want to achieve: the resignation of the government; the formation of a new government comprising people independent from the ruling parties; and the holding of democratic parliamentary elections based on a new democratic electoral law. In addition, there were demands to pass laws on the independence of the judiciary, take action to recover assets and other socio-economic demands.*

Protests mushroomed from 17 October, with people further angered when

“AS LEBANESE PEOPLE OVERCAME THEIR RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL DIVERGENCES AND JOINED FORCES IN AN ATTEMPT TO ACHIEVE REAL CHANGE, THEY MADE THE BIGGEST POST-WAR CIVIL MOVEMENT IN LEBANON.”

ZIAD ABDEL SAMAD  
AND ZAHRA BAZZI



a minister's bodyguard **fired shots** into the air in response to protesters blocking his car. As protests grew the next day, the government closed schools and universities, and hundreds of **arrests** were reported. By the end of the day, the government had already **announced** its scrapping of the proposed WhatsApp tax.

But of course the protests continued, because they were about much more than that. Protesters increasingly directed their ire at Lebanon's system of governance, which is sectarian in its structure, with key posts designated for people from different faith groups and major political parties based along faith lines. It is a system that, while seeking to avoid religious conflict, implicitly enables patronage and inhibits accountability. It produces patchwork governments that tend towards political deadlock, as reflected in the failure to hold parliamentary elections between 2009 and 2018. It has resisted attempts at reform; those inside the system benefit from it and do not want change. But many people now feel that sectarian parties and positions do not speak to them and their priorities.

The organisation of the protests offered a repudiation of sectarianism, with people mobilising **across identity lines**, coming together simply as Lebanese people. People demanded their right to a non-sectarian identity, waving the Lebanese flag rather than sectarian banners. The message was that people did not want gains only for the group they happened to come from; they wanted change for everyone.

Ziad and Zahra attest to the importance of the non-sectarian nature of the protests:

*The protests are widespread across the country. They are decentralised and remain non-sectarian. As Lebanese people overcame their religious and political divergences and joined forces in an attempt to achieve real change, they made the biggest post-war civil movement in Lebanon. This change had been long-awaited, particularly by civil society, which has tried to promote partnerships and engage in policy-making at various levels for years, despite the lack of serious and effective channels for doing so. Although the term 'revolution' has been contested by many, protesters and activists, among others, have insisted on calling the process a revolution.*

*The revolution has increased popular awareness, which has been reflected in thousands of initiatives and discussions. Decentralised protests have taken place across all cities and villages from the far south to the far north and east, and have included all social and age groups. This diverse and inclusive revolution has contributed to breaking the rigid sectarian and regional political discourse, disrupting traditional loyalties and breaking down barriers between social groups and regions.*

Demonstrating their anger at political dysfunction and sectarianism, protesters vandalised the offices of several political parties and, on the night of 18 October, attempted to enter government headquarters and were dispersed with teargas. Protesters set up roadblocks and burnt tyres. The protests grew, and

over the weekend of 19 and 20 October, more than a million people **took to the streets** in cities across Lebanon. **Solidarity protests** were held in cities around the world. On 21 October, a general strike was held.

In response to the strike, the government **offered** a new economic package, which combined proposed cuts to politicians' pay with the promise of more support to people living in poverty. But this did not quell protest anger. Around 60 groups, many of them from civil society and including those formed during the 2015 protests, worked to **coordinate** activism. On 27 October, thousands of people formed a 170 km-long **human chain** across the country, as a symbol of the national unity of protesters. People demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his cabinet, but went further, calling for the removal of the entire ruling class and its replacement by a new technocratic, broad-based government to address the country's economic problems; in doing so, they directly challenged the interests of all the main parties that benefit from the current system.

Protest pressure achieved impact: on 29 October Prime Minister Hariri announced his **resignation**, triggering celebrations among protesters. On 31 October, President Michel Aoun, who had maintained a low profile during protests, promised that a new government made up of specialists would be appointed. There was a **commitment** that parliament would debate laws proposed by civil society, including on corruption and social support.

The protests had undoubtedly achieved an impact, but they continued nonetheless, with thousands mobilising to demand both a completely new government truly free of party ties and fresh, non-sectarian parliamentary elections, as well as new laws to combat corruption. Tens of thousands joined protests on a '**Sunday of unity**' on 3 November. Familiar backroom horse-trading and deadlock appeared to set in over the choice of new prime minister and composition of the new government, but protesters **rejected** the replacement prime ministers proposed. They gained fresh **momentum**, setting up numerous roadblocks, when President Aoun said that people should 'emigrate' if they were unhappy with the various leaders available. Anger was also driven by suggestions that parliament would pass an amnesty law to protect politicians from corruption prosecutions.

As the protests wore on, the disruption, particularly roadblocks, led to fuel supplies becoming low and shortages of medicines, while banks were closed for lengthy spells. Protesters experienced sometimes violent responses. Teargas and rubber bullets were among the instances of **excessive force** used on 18 October, and on 26 October the army clashed with protesters who defied its attempt to clear the roads; several people were **wounded** after the army fired shots into the air. On 12 November, the protests claimed their first casualty, when a soldier **fatally shot** peaceful activist Alaa Abou Fakhr, reportedly in an attempt to disperse a crowd. 14 and 15 December saw some of the worst violence, when **security forces** used rubber bullets, teargas, batons and water cannon against protesters in the capital, Beirut, causing **dozens** of injuries.

Protesters also faced violence from some political party supporters. On 29 October, supporters of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah, both Shia Muslim parties that are part of the government, **attacked** protesters who were blocking a major roadway and pulled down tents being used by protesters at a two-week occupation in Martyr's Square, Beirut. The police were accused of doing little to stop the initial attack. There were further **violent clashes** between Amal and Hezbollah supporters and protesters in November. Supporters of these parties also **attacked** TV crews covering protests, and there were reports of attacks on women journalists as the protests continued.

Ziad and Zahra relate some of the other instances of violence:

*Since the first days of the uprisings, political parties and various elements of the regime felt threatened by the imminent change protesters were calling for, which would jeopardise the power they have held for decades. They reacted to this by using excessive force, teargas, rubber bullets, arbitrary detention and arrests, especially after December.*

*Since the beginning of the protests, several human rights violations were committed against protesters. On 23 November, five young people – including two minors – were arrested and detained by the security forces for taking down a banner belonging to a political party.*





Women protesters stand between riot police and demonstrators during a protest in downtown Beirut, Lebanon, on 19 October 2019. Credit: Sam Tarling/Getty Images

*On the same day, supporters of the Amal and Hezbollah movements violently clashed with peaceful protesters in Beirut and other regions. Violence increased, a fact that was firmly condemned by UN experts and special rapporteurs, who called on the Lebanese government to respect the right to the freedom of expression and protect protesters.*

*The postponement of parliamentary consultations from 9 to 16 December, and then again to 19 December, was accompanied by increasing violence and clashes among protesters, supporters of political leaders and the security forces and army. The most violent clashes were recorded between 10 and 16 December: on 10 December, protesters toured in their cars outside the houses of the previous ministers of public works and transportation, denouncing the poor infrastructure that had caused enormous floods on main roads and highways, locking citizens for hours in their cars. Protesters were attacked ferociously by men in uniforms of the Internal Security Forces, who were affiliated with some political parties. Cars were vandalised, and protesters and journalists were dragged out and beaten indiscriminately.*

*On the nights of 14 and 15 December, security forces clashed with supporters of political parties who provoked and attacked them in different ways. Security forces also arbitrarily attacked protesters gathered in Beirut, and fired teargas and rubber bullets at them. These two days of violence ended with the arrest of 23 people, some of whom showed signs of torture after their release. More than 76 protesters reported experiencing some form of attack, either by security officials or as a result of the rubber bullets fired against them. More severely, a few reported being dragged into the parliament building and beaten by the security forces inside. A few reported the theft of money, legal documentation, or phones.*

*Violence continued until the night of 16 December, with supporters of political parties attacking the people gathered in squares in Beirut and in the south, and burning down tents and cars.*

*Clashes between protesters and security forces and riot police were especially intense during attacks protesters made against banks, and during protests and attempts to remove the massive walls and blocks unlawfully put in front of parliament, and more recently in front of the Government Palace.*

*Following the arbitrary arrest of protesters, on 15 January 2020, hundreds gathered outside the detention facility to call for their release, and were subjected to excessive force by riot police, including the indiscriminate firing of teargas. Journalists and TV reporters were directly attacked by riot police. Footage was leaked showing the security forces beating detainees while transporting them to a detention facility. Some released detainees shared stories of torture and abuse inside detention facilities.*

*Recent **statistics** released by the Lawyers' Committee to Defend Protesters in Lebanon show that between 17 October 2019 and 31 January 2020, around 906 protesters were arrested and detained, including 49 minors and 17 women. Roughly 546 protesters were subjected to violence at the protests or in detention facilities.*

But in the face of increasing violence, people continued to turn out. On 6 November women **marched** in Beirut to demand women's rights, urging that their role in the protests be recognised. December saw a march against sexual harassment. Students, always prominent among protests, also demonstrated on 6 November, demanding changes in tuition fees and an end to the sectarianism and nepotism that characterises the job market. Civil society organised a **civil parade** on Independence Day, 22 November, bringing together an inclusive cross-section of Lebanese society, including from the diaspora, in counterpoint to the official, invitation-only military parade.

Ziad and Zahra point to the extensive participation by women and young

people, and of CSOs, as being a distinct and essential strength of the protests:

*While women in Lebanon have been at the forefront of every important political moment in our country, they have been particularly active during the revolution. Slogans and demands related to women's rights have been very clear and evident, including the right to pass their citizenship to their families, a civil personal status law and protection from violence. Women have organised in groups, or participated individually, to form human shields at the forefront of protests to prevent violence, lead the marches and host discussions on women's issues.*

*Feminist and women's marches were held outside Beirut. These were bold actions that were not very common prior to the revolution. Feminists were also able to engage critically with the slogans of the revolution and to place their discourse on the table. They were able to draw attention to many patriarchal connotations in slogans, even in the national anthem. In addition to being active alongside men, and sometimes alone, closing roads and occupying squares and public facilities, women cooked meals and offered them to protesters and sitters to support them, and initiated cleaning and recycling campaigns on a regular basis. More importantly, on many occasions, they formed a shield on the front rows between protesters and security forces to minimise the clashes.*

*The revolution also witnessed very active participation by young people and youth groups. These formed the backbone of the protests, as for years young people have been eager to take part in decision-making and political life. In Lebanon, people below the age of 21 are not eligible to vote in parliamentary and municipal elections, and yet they found a space in this revolution to participate and make their voices heard. As such, young voices and concerns were loud during the protests. Young people were particularly concerned with unemployment, immigration and the brain drain and suggested bold demands, calling for the downfall of the regime and all its political leaders without exception and the establishment of a secular system promoting social justice and gender equality.*



*The revolution has been an opportunity to revive the student movement in Lebanon. Student clubs in private universities participated heavily in the protests in and off-campus, marching from universities to the main protest squares, and even setting up their own tents in downtown Beirut.*

*Younger school students also had a role in the revolution. Along with university student groups, they took a big part in civil disobedience actions and general strikes. Students closed their schools and universities and protested in front of the Ministry of Education and other public administration offices for many days. As 6 November marked Students' Day, students all across Lebanon were revolting for a better future. A banner raised by one of the students says it all: 'On this day I won't be learning history, I will be writing it'.*

*CSOs played an important role in the revolution, which has benefited from their accumulated knowledge, communication skills and organisational capacities. Most of those organisations participated in the protests since day one, but their role went beyond protesting. CSOs are leading in coordinating the protests and organising daily discussions at various squares in Beirut and other regions. These meetings address politics, law, socio-economic policies and human rights. They address people's concerns and ensure the availability of solutions and alternatives. Participation in discussions has steadily increased and has involved a variety of sectors of society, including young people, women, the private sector, academics, and students.*

Given people's commitment to sustained engagement and the radical solutions they were demanding, it was no surprise that protests **continued into 2020**, as did the use of **excessive force** by security forces. On 21 January 2020, after months of negotiation, Hassan Diab took office as Lebanon's new prime minister, positioning his new cabinet as technocratic; many disagreed, seeing the ongoing influence of sectarian political parties, and continued to demand a truly technocratic government, fresh, non-sectarian elections and real action on corruption. So far those demands remain unfulfilled as the ruling class appears to be attempting to reassert its hegemony, but a new generation of protesters is unlikely to fall silent.



People protest against increasingly difficult living conditions in Beirut, Lebanon on 29 September 2019. Credit: Hussam Chbaro/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images





People protest against unemployment and corruption in Baghdad, Iraq on 7 October 2019. Credit: Murtadha Sudani/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

## IRAQ: THE DEADLY PRICE OF A STATE THAT REFUSES TO LISTEN

Young people were also prominent in mass anti-government protests in Iraq in late September, mobilising around demands for jobs and public services and anger at corruption. In a context where youth unemployment stands at **22 per cent**, young people demanded more from their oil-rich government.

Recent years have seen Iraq's **young people** forming new protest and social movements, combining demands for economic justice with those of democracy and freedom from the strictures of religious leaders, calling out a system that is failing them because they are denied both jobs and a voice. Young people's movements are rejecting the sectarian divisions that have plagued Iraq since the end of the Ba'ath party's dominance over the country, and as in Lebanon, protests brought people together across those divisions. People also protested against the heavy role played by neighbouring Iran in Iraq's governance, as Iran has extended its sphere of influence westwards as part of its ongoing cold war for regional supremacy with Saudi Arabia.

September was not the first time these concerns had been aired. People had protested peacefully over these same vital issues, including the everyday problems of water supply, in **July 2018**. The state's response to the 2018 protests was anything but peaceful, and the same was true a year on. On 25 September in the capital, Baghdad, security forces used **water cannon** to disperse a protest led by young people against government inaction on postgraduate unemployment. Social media platforms and messaging apps were shut down.

As the protests continued, the violent state response **intensified**. By early October, security forces were firing **live ammunition**. On several occasions security forces fired live ammunition directly at crowds rather than overhead, and used stun grenades, water cannon with hot water and teargas against protesters. On at least two occasions, armoured vehicles ran over protesters. Several reports confirmed that snipers positioned on top of buildings were fatally shooting protesters, but the authorities claimed

these were not state forces; armed **militia groups** seemed to be operating with impunity, allowed to do so by security forces.

Not surprisingly, the death toll mounted. According to the **Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights**, as of midnight on 6 October the recorded number of fatalities, including protesters and members of the security forces, stood at 103, with a further 4,035 people wounded. The same source put the number of people arrested at 814, over 300 of whom remained in detention. Several prominent human rights defenders were among those arrested.

With rumours circulating that the government had a **list** of people to be arrested, a number of prominent human rights defenders and journalists went into hiding. Journalists became a **target** over their protest coverage, and the authorities increased restrictions on the media, while masked and armed people **raided** several media outlets, clearly with the aim of trying to prevent protest publicity and diffuse protest momentum. A coalition of 18 human rights and advocacy organisations **urged** the UN Human Rights Council to hold an urgent debate on Iraq's human rights crisis.

On 3 October the government imposed **curfews** in Baghdad and several other cities, but under pressure, lifted them two days later. Amidst a backlash against the severity of the violence, Baghdad's governor resigned. Concessions were offered. On 6 October, Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi announced measures to improve living standards and employment. On 22 October the government **stated** that 12 military and police commanders would be removed from their positions and face prosecution for allowing their troops to shoot protesters.

Unappeased by these concessions and undeterred by the repression, a second wave of protests broke out at the end of October, and the state's heavy-handed response **resumed**. At least **seven more people** were killed on 26 October alone, at protests in Baghdad and Nasiriyah, and between 25 October and 4 November, over 97 people died and thousands more were injured. The majority of those killed were hit by bullets in the head or chest, indicating that they had been targeted. The net widened: in Anbar province, security forces **arrested** people merely for posting messages of

solidarity on Facebook. In November, the government also ordered 12 TV and radio stations to **close down** for several months and warned five others to moderate their coverage; the previous month, it **shut down** the internet for several days and blocked several key social media and communication platforms.

On 6 November, protesters blocked a bridge in central Baghdad, provoking a further lethal response from security forces, who **killed 13 people** over the course of 24 hours. It appeared that unarmed **high school and university students** were deliberately targeted with live ammunition; a ruling elite unable to listen to the demands of young people that they be allowed to realise their potential was instead slaughtering them.

6 November was a grim day: prominent writer and activist Amjad Al-Dahamat – one of the most important leaders of protests in the Maysan governorate – was **assassinated** close to police headquarters in Al-Amarah city, after attending a meeting with the police commander and several other activists; another person present at the meeting, Bassam Mehdi, was seriously injured in the same attack. On the same night, physician Abbas Ali was killed by a riot police officer in Baghdad; his crime was to try to reach wounded protesters to offer urgent medical treatment. The following day, journalist and civil society activist Ali Hashim was abducted by security forces, while civil society activist Hussain Al-Kaabi was arrested at a protest. Many other civil society activists, journalists and medical workers were kidnapped around this time. While some vanished without trace, others were subjected to torture and released after being forced to sign pledges promising to stop participating in protests. The state had clearly decided to intensify its repression, and the killings of civil society activists continued.

In late November the result was carnage. Security forces **shot dead** at least 45 protesters after they stormed and torched an Iranian Consulate in Najaf, protesting at Iran's influence over Iraq. At least 29 more were killed in the city of Nassiriya when troops opened fire on protesters who blocked a bridge and gathered outside a police station. Twelve people were reported to have died in clashes in Najaf and an additional four were killed in Baghdad, where security forces opened fire with live ammunition and rubber bullets against a protest near a bridge over the River Tigris.



At the time of writing, around **700 people** have been killed since the protests began. As COVID-19 spread around the world and cities were put under on lockdown ongoing protests came to a pause. But in Iraq, protesters pledged to **press on with their demands**, viewing their government and corruption as a more pressing virus, and one that was proving far more lethal to them than the disease.

Prime Minister Mahdi at least paid a price for the slaughter, and on 29 November, following pressure from religious leaders, **announced his resignation**, asking parliament to begin the process of electing a new leader. This is a lengthy procedure, still ongoing at the time of writing: Mohammed Tawfik Allawi was announced as the new Prime Minister in February 2020, prompting further **outrage** among protesters, who rejected him as just another member of a discredited elite; he **stood down** the following month after parliament did not approve his cabinet.

Whichever candidate eventually prevails will have to be acceptable not only to various political factions but also to Iran. Whether they are acceptable to the many people who protested seems to be a question the ruling elite is less concerned about. The process of appointing a new prime minister is not one that the many young people who continued to protest into 2020 have any say in, and whoever is appointed is unlikely to satisfy them. Whoever becomes the country's next leader can expect to face continuing protest pressure to make real progress on tackling corruption, creating jobs, redistributing wealth and opening up democratic and religious freedoms. That is a full agenda, to which surely now will be added another demand – that of delivering real justice for the hundreds of people who have been killed by a system that refused to listen. A continuation of governance as usual cannot be expected to provide the answers.



Anti-government protesters light candles in Baghdad, Iraq, to mourn those killed as nationwide protests enter a third month on 6 December 2019.

Credit: Scott Peterson/Getty Images





People in Paris, France, demonstrate in support of the uprising and against repression in Iran in December 2019. Credit: Frederic Stevens/Getty Images

## IRAN: LETHAL RESPONSE TO WIDESPREAD PROTESTS

In Iraq's powerful neighbour Iran, the announcement of a sharp **increase** in fuel prices was the trigger for mass protests from 15 November. As elsewhere, when people struggling economically were asked by an oil-rich state to pay more for their fuel, their response was outrage. A range of other grievances quickly coalesced into much broader anti-government protests. And as in Iraq, the government's response was lethal.

Despite the repression they inevitably face, protests are nothing new in Iran. Past protests included the Green Movement mass mobilisations of 2009

and 2011, **anti-government protests** from December 2017 to January 2018 and **women's protests** against mandatory head coverings in 2018. As in the protests of 2017 to 2018, issues of high inflation, jobs – particularly youth unemployment – and economic insecurity rapidly connected to concerns about lack of democratic voice and freedom. People blamed economic mismanagement and corruption for their struggling economy, rather than simply the impacts of the international sanctions imposed on Iran. They saw the fuel price rises as something that would impact greatly on them but would barely trouble wealthy elites.

As well as domestic issues, protesters focused their ire on Iran's extensive foreign policy agenda, which has seen it exert its influence in Lebanon,

Syria and Yemen as well as Iraq in its battle for regional supremacy with Saudi Arabia. People contrasted their government's imperial ambitions with their domestic poverty and accused their government of losing sight of the essential issues. Another novel feature was the questioning by some protesters of the state's habitual positioning of Israel and the USA as deadly enemies; this is a routine method by which the state deflects anger from itself. People started to demand the overthrow of the government.

Protests also went wider than those before in their composition. Some previous protests had arguably seen the educated and urban middle class disproportionately represented among those mobilising, but the fuel price issue activated people in smaller towns and on lower incomes, who the government normally expects to draw support from. A large cross-section mobilised: students left their universities and marched, shopkeepers went on strike, trade unionists called for action. Protests took place not just in the capital, Tehran, but spread quickly across Iran. People protested in at least 120 cities and towns, in what appeared to be the largest Iranian mobilisations since the 1978-1979 revolution.

Both the growing demands for the regime's overthrow and the widespread nature of the protests made them an existential threat for Iran's ruling theocratic elite. Violent repression is always the Iranian state's response to mass protests, but the sense of threat the regime experienced brought a reaction that was even deadlier than normal. High-level officials gave the **green light** to the security forces to crush the protests by any means, and officers went on a shooting spree, firing live ammunition at protesters, **targeting** people's heads and chests, making clear their intent to kill. Troops were reported to be shooting at people randomly from rooftops and helicopters, with live ammunition and machine gun fire.

According to one investigation, an estimated **1,500 people** were killed, 400 of them women and 17 of them teenagers. This was killing on a scale unprecedented even by Iran's standards of lethal repression. It was hard even to estimate accurately the number of deaths because government forces were said to be removing and hiding bodies to prevent true figures being recorded. Pressure was put on the **families** of those killed not to speak to the media, hold funerals, or otherwise publicly mourn their dead.

Those lucky enough to have escaped with wounds were arrested in medical centres.

The violence of the repression helped fuel protest violence: when there is no other form of voice available, people will start fires. People attacked and tore down posters of Iran's leaders, and also anti-American posters, rejecting the state's propaganda. Hundreds of branches of state banks were set alight. Protesters also targeted religious institutions associated with the regime.

A six-day internet **shutdown** was enforced, enabling the repression to proceed unrestrained and largely **unmonitored**. The government also sent people text messages to warn them of the harsh consequences of participating in protests and summoned protesters to security centres. The government called the people it had killed '**rioters**' and characterised protesters as foreign agents of Israel, Saudi Arabia and the USA involved in a conspiracy against it.

The overwhelming repression worked, at least for now, and the protests ended after almost two weeks. After the protests had been brought to a brutal end, the government continued its **campaign** of arbitrary arrests, detentions, forced disappearances and torture, seeking to silence not only people associated with protests but also journalists, labour rights activists, minority rights defenders: anyone who might bear witness to the slaughter. More than **7,000 protesters** were reportedly arrested.

January 2020, however, saw protests flare up again. When the Islamic Revolutionary Guards shot down a Ukrainian International Airlines flight over Iran and originally tried to cover it up, people once more **took to the streets** to express their anger at the government. These were preceded by protests of people angered by the USA's targeted assassination of Iranian General Qasar Soleimani in Iraq just days before, but even these protests, while patriotic and defensive of national sovereignty, were not necessarily a show of support for a regime that many people clearly no longer trusted. The scale of the killings and torture showed that the state clearly saw the lives of its citizens as cheap and disposable. Many Iranians will continue to demand a government that values them more.

## EGYPT: CORRUPTION PROTESTS SPARK DESPITE REPRESSION

As in Iran, Egyptians do not protest lightly, because they know they live in a repressive state where they face severe consequences if they speak out, including security force violence and jail. President and former army chief Abdul Fattah al-Sisi led the 2013 military coup and has maintained an iron grip on power since, **engineering** the 2018 presidential election to ensure he faced only token opposition. But people live with daily struggles for work and essentials amidst inadequate infrastructure, and they also see high-level corruption. When they are denied a real say in elections, people will sometimes take to the streets and speak out online, regardless of the danger.

On the morning of 27 February, a train ploughed into the buffers at Ramses Station in the capital Cairo, starting a fire that left 25 people dead. It was far from the only deadly **train crash** in recent years. The transport minister resigned, but discontent still spread on **social media** and in the form of small-scale protests. The accident had come despite a government commitment to invest in modernising the railways; people contrasted the apparent lack of care for everyday transport with the government's evident zeal for vast infrastructure projects that offer lucrative potential for corruption, particularly the grandiose new administrative capital currently under construction to the east of Cairo. People called out corruption and **accused** the government of not caring about their lives. The government's response was sadly predictable: at least 70 people were **arrested**, some on the basis of merely having content related to the train crash in their **social media** accounts. There is, it seems, always funding available in Egypt for the infrastructure of repression.

Egypt's authoritarian machinery whirled into action again when fresh anti-government protests **erupted** in cities across the country in September, defying the law that makes unapproved protests illegal. The trigger this time was the **publication** on social media of a series of videos by Mohamed Ali, a whistleblower in exile, alleging **corruption**. An **Egyptian activist and protester**, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, takes up the story:

*The trigger for the September protests came in the form of a series of viral videos shared by the Egyptian actor and construction contractor Mohamed Ali, in which he accused the authorities and armed forces of corruption and the squandering of public funds. While President Abdul Fattah El-Sisi ultimately addressed the videos in some form, more **videos** by Ali and others followed; a broader conversation on the role of the military in Egypt's economy also ensued.*

*On 20 September, and partly in response to Ali's call for demonstrations against Sisi, hundreds **took** to the streets in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez and other cities. As part of this wave of demonstrations, more protests took place on 20, 21 and 27 September. They occurred within a broader context in which many Egyptian citizens were also bearing the brunt of austerity measures and subsidy cuts and were increasingly affected by an escalating crackdown targeting independent, peaceful expression.*

Protesters called on Sisi to stand down, and for doing so they received a violent response, with security forces using live ammunition at times, as well as teargas and batons. The authorities shut down large parts of Cairo and set up arbitrary search checkpoints to prevent further possible protests on 27 September.

Although the protests were again quickly repressed, the campaign against anyone associated with them was sustained. The government carried out a programme of mass arrests and detentions in September and the following months. **Among those** arrested were civil society leaders, journalists, lawyers and academics, along with over **100 children**, and there were credible reports of torture of people in detention. The interviewee relates the clampdown that followed the protests:

*Immediately following the protests and for days afterwards, the Egyptian authorities carried out a widespread arrest campaign that not only targeted people who were present at the demonstrations, but also lawyers, political activists and advocates more broadly. Local CSOs estimate that at least 3,763 people **were arrested**. Many of these people were ordered into pretrial detention in cases involving alleged charges of belonging to a terrorist organisation and spreading false news; a number of them remain in detention.*



*In the wake of the protests, Netblocks **reported** restricted use around Facebook Messenger, BBC News and social media CDN (content delivery network) servers. In Cairo, the authorities blocked some roads and temporarily closed some metro stops, particularly those close to Tahrir Square.*

Along with the social media blockages, the media authority **warned journalists** that it was monitoring coverage. In October, UN human rights experts expressed their **concern** about the reports of abuses coming from Egypt. But what had happened was only a part of the larger and ongoing process of repression that has made it almost impossible to express dissent in public, as the interviewee indicates:

*The use of extended pretrial detention periods as a punitive measure, the sentencing of people in mass trials and a spike in **death penalty sentences** continue to take place. Detention conditions remain poor; instances of torture and deaths in detention as a result of inadequate access to medical care **abound**.*

*Increasingly since 2013, there has been a severe deterioration in the rule of law and respect for human rights in Egypt. Authorities are **using the law** to consolidate authoritarianism. This is reflected in new legislation that restricts rights and rewrites the relationship between civilians and the state; the prosecution of peaceful advocates using overly broad anti-terrorism legislation; and the introduction of amendments to the constitution allowing executive influence and interference in the functioning of what are meant to be independent state institutions, including the judiciary and prosecutors.*

In between 2019's two moments of protest, President Sisi moved to further consolidate his power. In April the government pushed through a referendum on constitutional amendments that extended Sisi's term in office and enabled him to run again, setting him up to rule until 2030. The amendments also extended the all-powerful military's role in government and gave the president new powers over the judiciary.

The pseudo-referendum marked another addition to the **dismal history** of authoritarian leaders holding votes in closed democratic spaces purely to add a legitimising seal to the perpetuation of their power. There was little opportunity to campaign against the proposals, with independent media silenced and many of those who might have marshalled dissent already locked away. A website set up to gather signatures for those opposed to the change was quickly **blocked**. It was little surprise that the referendum, on a low turnout and amidst numerous reports of voting **irregularities** and evidence that people were being **coerced or bribed** with cash and food to vote, endorsed the change.

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Further reinforcing restrictions, in August, a **new NGO law** came into effect. While it was positioned as an improvement on 2017's draconian NGO Law, in reality many of its changes were at best cosmetic and it retained the most repressive parts of the 2017 law. The law gave the state broad powers to deny registrations for CSOs and impose punitive fines for operating without a licence or receiving funds without government approval. The interviewee sets out some of the lingering challenges:

*Egypt's 2019 NGO Law does away with penalties involving jail time, as well as the National Agency to Regulate the Work of Foreign NGOs, a security and intelligence-heavy body created by the 2017 NGO Law to approve and monitor foreign funding. However, the law furthers significant restrictions on the activities of CSOs, places bureaucratic constraints on registration and creates expansive oversight and monitoring authority for government actors.*

*While it may be early to report on the precise impact of the new law, there is no doubt that its passing has already contributed to some self-censorship, as CSOs have reported being uncertain regarding what legal schemes govern their work and have also raised concern about the law's broad restrictions. The law was passed in **an environment** characterised by travel bans, asset freezes and the prosecution and arrest of members of civil society. These trends are only expected to continue. It is important to note that the NGO Law is not the only piece of legislation governing civil society: the media law, the cybercrime law, the counter-terrorism law and the Penal Code are all examples of laws that contain provisions potentially implicating associational activity as well.*

As with the manipulated referendum, it was hard to see the new law as anything other than a marketing exercise for international consumption: as a way for Egypt's government to be able to signal – and for its strategic allies to be able to claim – that it is opening up space for civil society, when the reality is anything but. Egypt's people are not fooled by these empty gestures, and know they live under a state characterised by everyday cruelty and contempt for their rights. Because of this, even though the price for dissent remains high, protests will continue to break out.

## ZIMBABWE: FUEL PRICE PROTESTS ARE MET WITH FAMILIAR REPRESSION

A sudden and sharp rise in fuel prices, more than doubling the cost of petrol and diesel, was also the trigger of **protests** in Zimbabwe in January. The move came amidst **scarcities**, not only of fuel, but also of essential foods and **medicines**, and was likely prompted by a government plan to seek an IMF loan. People protested in the capital, Harare, and Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo. The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions called a three-day **general strike** and people barricaded roads and burned tyres.

The government's response showed that nothing much had changed: current President Emmerson Mnangagwa replaced long-time dictator Robert Mugabe in 2017, but the ruling ZANU-PF party stayed in power in the disputed **2018 election**. Despite the change of leadership, the tactics of violent **crackdown** remained the same. The **violent** repression of the January protests left at least 17 people reported dead, many of them from gunshot wounds after security forces used **live ammunition**. There were over a thousand reported arrests. Police were reported to be **breaking into homes** in some neighbourhoods and assaulting, shooting, or taking away residents. There were reports of raids on medical facilities where injured people were being treated. There were also multiple reports of **rapes and sexual assaults** by military personnel. The army, the decisive force in deposing Mugabe and installing Mnangagwa as president, was said to be behind many of the **worst abuses**.

Not for the first time, internet and mobile phone networks were partly **shut down** and access to key social media platforms was blocked. And once again, key activists were rounded up. Pastor Evan Mawarire, leader of the #ThisFlag protest movement, who had been repeatedly harassed and detained under the Mugabe regime, was again **detained** and charged with subversion after calling for peaceful protest on social media; when he was bailed, he spoke of grotesque overcrowding and injuries of those in detention.

Rather than address the concerns, the minister for national security **blamed** civil society, including youth organisations, for orchestrating

the violence and accused them of working with the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) alliance. A subsequent government briefing **blamed** 'rogue NGOs' connected to foreign powers. Speaking at a rally in February, President Mnangagwa **threatened** to 'go after' lawyers and doctors who had offered to help protesters and people in detention. Accordingly, the crackdown **continued** as the government used the aftermath of protests to persecute its critics. More leaders of CSOs, including trade union leaders, along with other human rights defenders and MDC members, were arrested. Among them was **Rashid Mahiya**, head of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition. Several journalists who covered the protests and their aftermath were also harassed and detained. Many people went into hiding.

A further protest about the state of the economy and the government's poor economic management, organised by the MDC, took place in Harare in August, resulting in an estimated **128 arrests**. Another planned MDC protest was **cancelled** following a court order. Those who had already gathered for the planned protest were **violently dispersed** by police using teargas and batons, and the police **arrested and detained** a senior MDC official for failing to stop the protest. Police also set up checkpoints and roadblocks and conducted random searches.

Ahead of the planned protests, there were more **reports** that civil society and opposition personnel were being abducted and tortured. Democracy campaigner **Tatenda Mombeyarara** was one of at least six rights activists who were left hospitalised after being **abducted**, tortured and brutally beaten by people suspected to be state agents in August.

Even mocking the regime with laughter brought heavy risk: also in August, comedian Samantha Kureya, known as **Gonyeti**, went **into hiding** after being abducted, stripped and beaten due to her satirical sketches about the authorities.

Meanwhile, as living conditions **deteriorated** for all but the wealthy elite and inflation **soared** once more, **civil servants** protested over their pay, amidst a heavy police presence, and doctors in Zimbabwe's two leading hospitals **went on strike**; in November, in an attempt to break the strike, the government **fired** 286 doctors. But before then, they had sent an



Demonstrators sit and sing protest songs after police cordon off a street on 16 August 2019 in Harare, Zimbabwe. Credit: Tafadzwa Ufumeli/Getty Images

ominous message: Peter Magombeyi, acting head of the Zimbabwe Hospital Doctors Association and organiser of the strike, was **abducted** in September and held for four days. He reported being tortured with electric shocks. The government then **refused** to let him leave the country to seek medical treatment for his injuries. November also saw **teargas and batons** used against people who gathered to hear a speech by MDC leader Nelson Chamisa.

The government continued to accuse CSOs of political '**interference**' and attempted to rubbish reports of state violence, falling back on an expression beloved of dictatorial regimes by calling them '**fake news**'. It was clear that, post-Mugabe, there had been no transition in Zimbabwe. There is still neither an economy that works for Zimbabwe's people nor democratic and civic freedoms. Their dreams of true progress still thwarted by a self-serving ruling elite, people will continue to call for a fresh start and a break with the tragic history of Zimbabwe's misgovernance.