

Protests Are Taking Over the World. What's Driving Them?

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September was turbulent: [More than 200 Australians arrested](#) during citywide protests and a temporary no-fly zone declared over Melbourne. [Rubber bullets and tear gas](#) unleashed by the Thai riot police into an angry crowd. Health care workers [assaulted](#) in Canada. Rallies of up to [150,000](#) people across the Netherlands.

The pandemic has coincided with an upsurge in protests across the globe. Over the past 18 months, people have taken to the streets in [India](#), [Yemen](#), [Tunisia](#), [Eswatini](#), [Cuba](#), [Colombia](#), [Brazil](#) and the [United States](#). The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project reports that the number of demonstrations globally increased by [7](#) percent from 2019 to 2020 despite government-mandated lockdowns and other measures designed to limit public gatherings.

What is driving this international discontent?

[Some](#) experts argue it is the pandemic itself. People of poorer nations are protesting the lack of available vaccines or personal protective equipment, while those of wealthier countries are objecting to perceived civil liberties violations.

But the continuing protests in both poor and wealthy countries cannot simply be explained away as reactions to the pandemic. The presence of simultaneous uprisings in countries with a range of income levels, government types and geopolitical significance indicates a deeper disillusionment: the loss of faith in the social contract that shapes relations between governments and their people. Put simply, the governments of today seem incapable of offering both representative *and* effective governance. And ordinary citizens have had enough.

The rise in protests globally actually began long before the pandemic. [Following the 2008 economic crash](#), mass demonstrations — including [Occupy Wall Street](#) and the [Arab Spring](#) — called for a fundamental rethinking of the existing post-Cold War social contract between governments and their people. Since President George H.W. Bush's announcement of a [new world order](#) in 1990, this contract was largely founded upon the notion that market-centric policies would lead to global prosperity and peace.

But the financial crisis in 2008 shed light on this social contract's shortcomings. Both political and economic in nature, the ensuing protests demanded that governments respect the basic rights of citizens and address the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots. Around the world, authoritarian and democratic leaders alike responded to the financial crisis with more [neoliberal](#) policies such as [fiscal austerity](#) and the [privatization](#) of public-sector services — policies that only further galvanized popular anger.

This frustration has carried over in the so-called Covid protests of today. While many demonstrations explicitly invoke the pandemic, the bigger, latent concern is the inability of modern governments to serve the majority of their populations, especially the middle and poorer classes. This failure is made visible by the growing number of [monopolies](#), the increasing political power of [corporations](#), the unremitting [spike in economic inequality](#) and the policies that are exacerbating [climate change](#).

Add the botched responses to Covid and it is no surprise that citizens have little confidence in their leaders, elected or otherwise, to confront these challenges. After President Iván Duque of Colombia attempted to [overhaul the health care system](#) in April and apply new taxes even as the pandemic spiked, there were [mass demonstrations and blockades](#) along all major highways for weeks. As a young activist explained to the [BBC](#): "It's not just about a tax reform, or reform to the health system, and all the other laws. It's people showing the discontent that they have been feeling for a long time."

The mishandling of Covid is just the latest offense.

Early in the pandemic, [experts debated](#) whether it would be democracies or autocracies that would be better equipped to handle the crisis. Nineteen months later, it is clear both have struggled. Democracy, at least in its dominant neoliberal form, prioritizes the rights of individuals and corporations while ignoring the basic needs of the social body. Authoritarian governments — even in countries with robust welfare systems — cannot respond effectively without stoking popular resentment because of their reliance on force to ensure compliance.

This is why both South Africa, [once a model](#) of [neoliberal democracy](#) now [mired in corruption](#), and Cuba, a paragon of welfare authoritarianism that [initially overperformed](#) in its Covid response, have recently faced substantive challenges to their leadership.

Fissures in the social contract are nothing new. But unlike in times past, when activists pushed colonial and then Communist powers to reimagine a different social structure, there are no good, obvious alternatives capable of challenging the current neoliberal consensus.

Going back to the pre-Covid status quo globally is not an option. The pandemic is fundamentally a social challenge. Any social challenge requires a collective response, and every collective undertaking requires trust. In many countries, trust in government has been shaken by leaders who put their faith in market-based solutions to the detriment of most citizens. A [Pew Research study](#) shows that Americans' trust in their government has declined to 24 percent from an average of 54 percent in 2001.

Public trust is still high in some wealthy democracies with robust social welfare programs like [New Zealand](#) and the [Nordic countries](#). There, governments have been rightly lauded for their Covid response and have faced few protests. But even poorer countries where [confidence in government runs high](#), like Bangladesh and Vietnam, and the Indian state of [Kerala](#) have achieved better outcomes and witnessed less unrest than their market-centric peers. Notably, Vietnam and Kerala have steered clear of neoliberal economic policies.

Social trust is a precious thing. It can take generations to build but can be lost in a flash. And so protests are likely to continue wherever that trust remains low, either because of a botched Covid response or other crises like climate change, dysfunctional political institutions and corporate greed.

The pandemic has revealed the disconnect between governments and their citizens. The latter now demand a different, more just world.

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