

Brief: World Protests 2021-2022

By Isabel Ortiz, Sara Burke, Mohamed Berrada and Hernán Saenz Cortés

People around the world are angry because governments and intergovernmental organizations have turned to austerity to address the rising cost of living.

Failure of democracy and poor political representation top the list of grievances followed by demands for rights and economic security.

People know their demands are legitimate; social movements for change continue to emerge in the face of repression.

Table of Contents

Why are people protesting? _____	2
Who protests - and where? _____	3
➤ East Asia and the Pacific _____	5
➤ Europe and Central Asia _____	5
➤ Latin America and the Caribbean _____	5
➤ Middle East and North Africa _____	5
➤ North America _____	5
➤ South Asia _____	6
➤ Sub-Saharan Africa _____	6
➤ Global _____	6
➤ High Income _____	7
➤ Upper Middle Income _____	7
➤ Lower Middle Income _____	7
➤ Low Income _____	7
Against whom? _____	8
How do they protest? _____	8
Conclusion _____	9
References _____	10
About the authors _____	11
About FES New York _____	11
About IPD _____	11
Imprint _____	11

Figures

Figure 1: Main Grievances and Demands 2006-2022 (p.2)

Figure 2: Grievances and Demands in Detail 2021-2022 (p.3)

Figure 3: Groups represented in protests 2021-2022 (p.4)

Figure 4: Protests by Region 2006-2022 (p.4)

Figure 5: Protests by Country Income Group 2006-2022 (p.7)

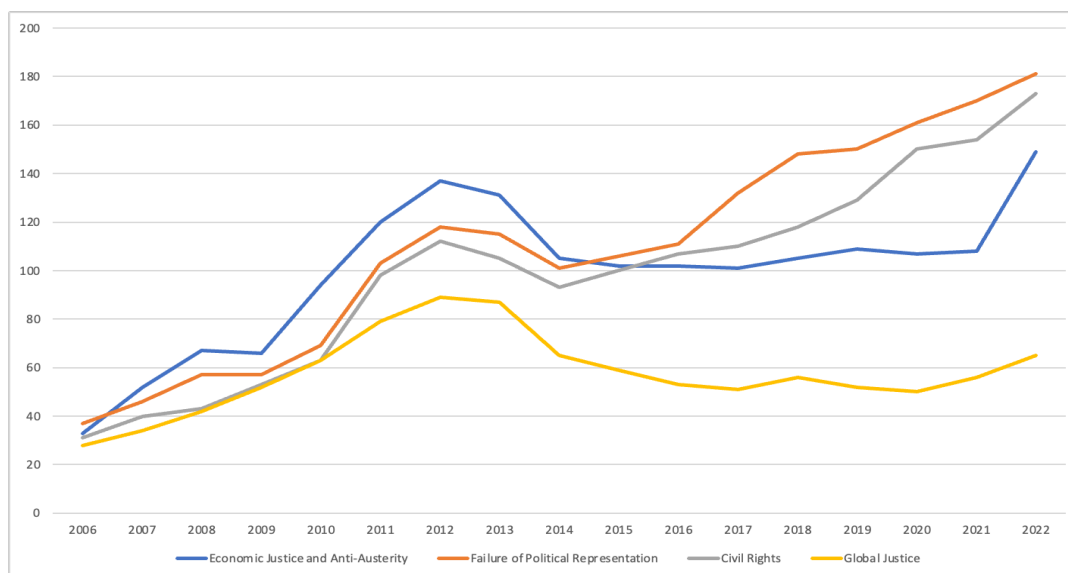
Figure 6: Targets of protests 2021-2022 (p.8)

Figure 7: Methods of protests 2021-2022 (p.9)

Why are people protesting?

Around the world, people have become increasingly angry at the failures of their governments to address their needs. This is as true for democracies, both new and established, as for more authoritarian governments. Topping the list of main grievances and demands for every year since 2015 is the **Failure of Democracy/Political Representation**. Incidences of this grievance continued to climb steadily in 2021 and 2022 (Figure 1), figuring in 65 per cent of protests for those years¹. People protesting these governmental failures demand justice, transparency and accountability, point the finger at corruption, and call for effective representation and “real” democracy (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Main Grievances and Demands 2006-2022



Source: Authors' analysis of world protests in media sources 2006-2022; each episode is counted yearly when ongoing, see: <https://worldprotests.org/>

Episodes of protest against threats to **Civil Rights** have been rising for almost a decade, a trend that accelerated in 2021-2022 (Figure 1), when the grievance figured in 61 per cent of protests. Threatened rights include freedom of assembly, association, thought, and speech as well as the rights of peoples discriminated against because of their race, ethnicity, sex and sexuality, gender, religion, or immigration status. Protests for labor rights, rights to the commons, and personal freedoms are also included (Figure 2).

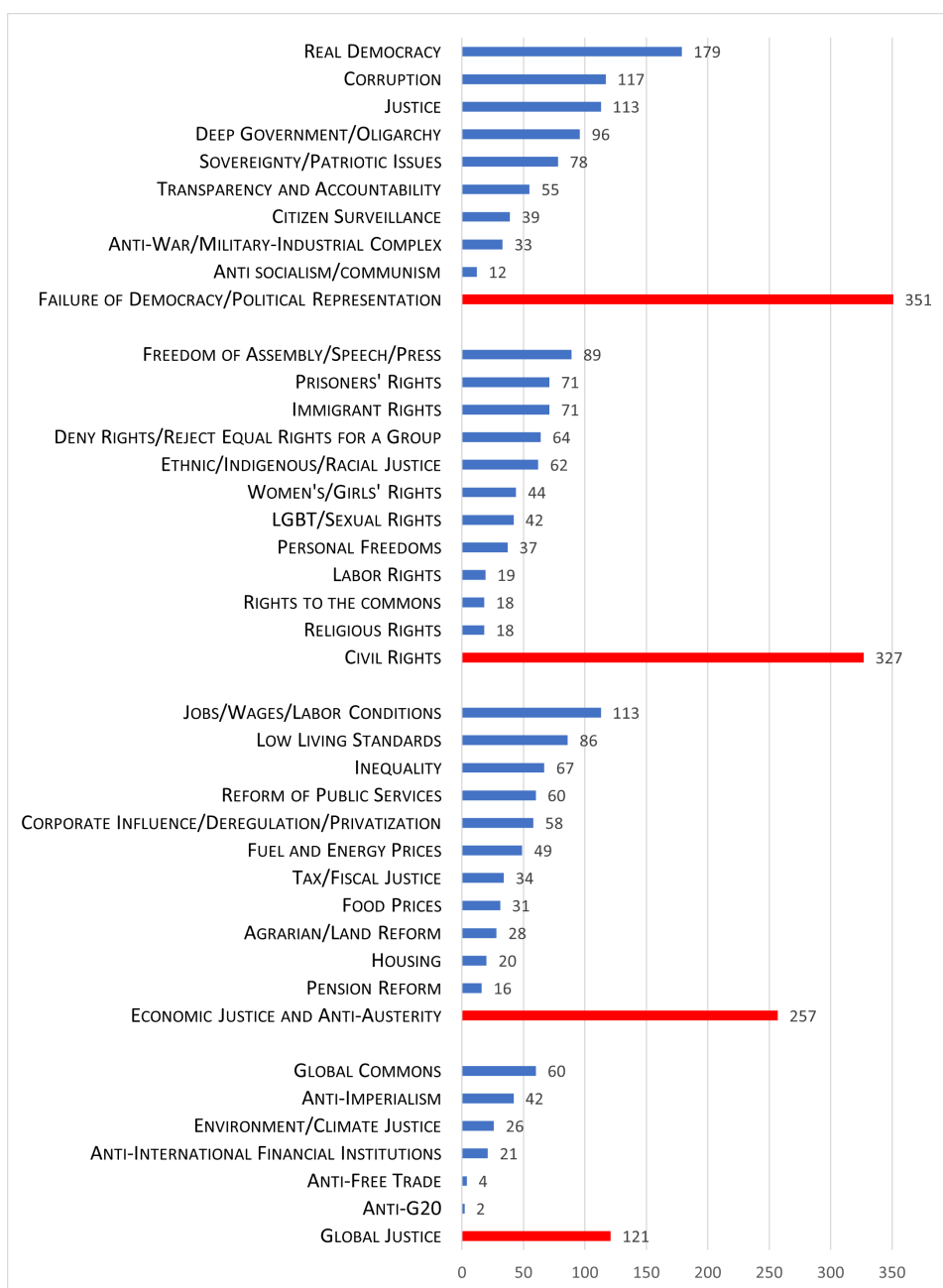
Calls for **Economic Justice** and protests against **Austerity** spiked dramatically in 2022 (Figure 1), following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, figuring in 48 per cent of protests. The stage for a cost-of-living crisis had already been set in 2021 by rising inflation in the global economy and by the widespread implementation of austerity policies by governments exiting Covid stimulus. High food, fuel and other energy costs decreased the quality of life for people in poverty and for middle classes around the world. (Figure 2).

Episodes of protest calling for **Global Justice** regarding the climate, the oceans and environment, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and the global commons appear in smaller numbers than the other demands, even though there are large movements behind them. One reason is that many are led by NGOs that have been campaigning for years, in long episodes of activism. Nevertheless, incidences of global justice protests rose in 2021 and 2022, figuring in 22 per

¹ Grievances and demands are not mutually exclusive and are frequently found together in protests. Therefore, the percentages given do not add up to 100.

cent of protests and reflecting distinct shifts in some of those movements, especially those focused on the climate. These shifts were reflected in new energy, groups, leadership, and funding.

Figure 2: Grievances and Demands in Detail 2021-2022



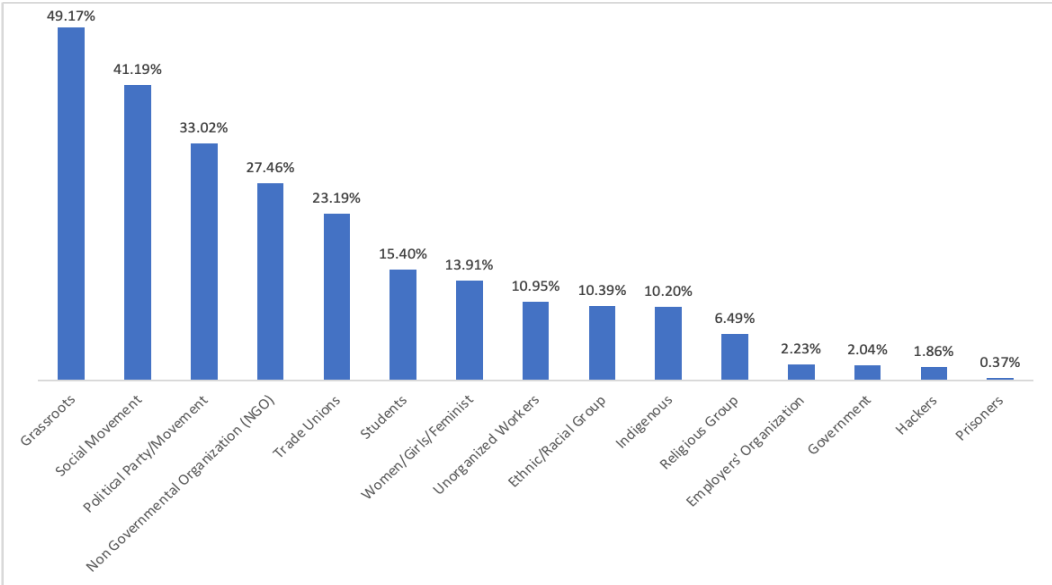
Source: Authors' analysis of world protests in media sources 2021-2022, episodes typically have multiple grievances; each episode is counted yearly when ongoing, see: <https://worldprotests.org/>

Who protests - and where?

Ordinary people, not necessarily affiliated with an organization, have been the driving force behind protests, with grassroots movements present in a majority of protests around the globe (Figure 3). There has been a significant increase in the participation of social movements, indicating a greater level of organization among individual protesters, and perhaps even hinting at new political forces in the making. Political parties have also played a larger role in protests,

reflecting the growing polarization of politics worldwide, with the ballot alone no longer being sufficient to solve the divide. A trend of increasing participation of women in protests, which began in 2016, predating the #MeToo movement, continue to rise in 2021-2022. A very clear uptake can be observed in the participation of students, trade unions and otherwise unorganized workers in 2022, reflecting the focus on economic issues and the high costs of living associated with inflation this year.

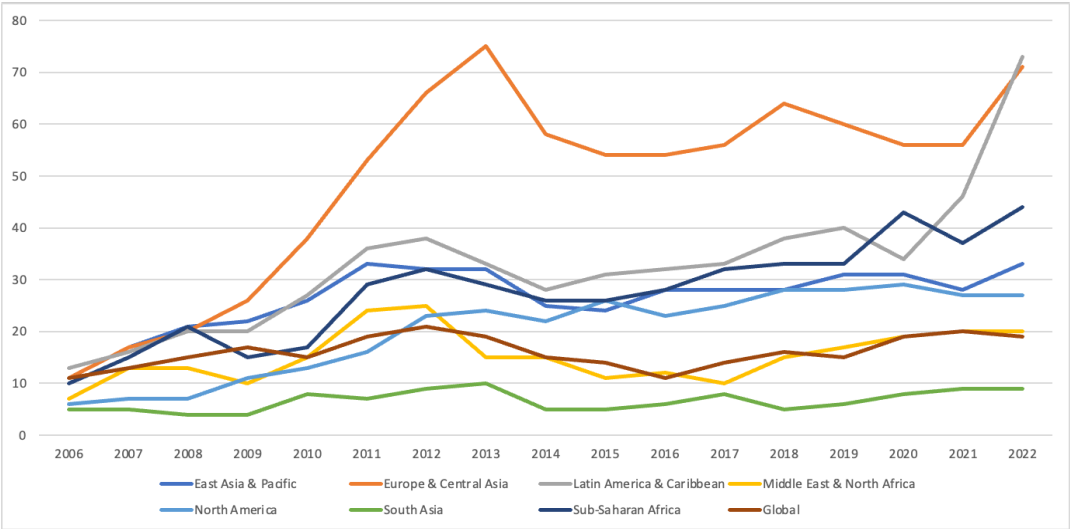
Figure 3: Groups represented in protests 2021-2022



Source: Authors' analysis of world protests in media sources 2021-2022, percentage of protest episodes in which there is documented participation of groups, see: <https://worldprotests.org/>

Protests occur in all world regions (Figure 4). In 2022 there were an increasing number of episodes in Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia and the Pacific. There are also a number of protests in multiple countries, on both an international and a global scale.

Figure 4: Protests by Region 2006-2022



Source: Authors' analysis of world protests in media sources 2021-2022, number of active protest episodes by region; each protest is counted yearly when ongoing, see: <https://worldprotests.org/>

East Asia and the Pacific

The main episodes of protest in the region have consistently put forward calls for more democratic participation; examples include Myanmar and the Philippines. Price increases due to inflationary pressure also led to demonstrations (e.g., Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia and the Philippines). Protests against pandemic measures were found in Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and most notably in China. While these demonstrations were large for China, they are not outliers: for instance, China saw multiple land grab protests over the past 20 years, prompting the government to consider compensation for land seizures.

Europe and Central Asia

After declining for a few years, protests for economic justice rose sharply in Europe and Central Asia in 2022, largely because of an explosion of anger over the rising cost-of-living (e.g., Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom). There were also protests for women's rights, both reproductive rights and against violence directed at women and girls (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Poland). Protests against Covid restrictions were also prevalent in 2021-2022 (e.g., Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania). Right-wing protests attacking basic freedoms were also found in many countries (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovenia, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom).

Latin America and the Caribbean

Protests increased dramatically in 2021-2022 in Latin America and the Caribbean. Hit especially hard by rising inflation, protests against the rising cost of living were found throughout the region. In addition, a "pink tide" demanding abortion rights and an end to violence against women also spread across the region - including in Central America - with protests in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Peru. Protests to defend the environment and indigenous rights continue to be prevalent (e.g., Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Peru). However, the main grievance continues to be the failure of democracy/political representation in a region where the elites have controlled many states for decades.

Middle East and North Africa

After the Arab Spring, the number of protests in the MENA region decreased as countries attempted to address citizens' concerns. However, starting in 2015, there has been an upward trend in protests. A significant increase in protests related to freedom of assembly, speech, and press has been observed in the past four years, making it the third most common issue, behind calls for democracy and against corruption (e.g., Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Iran). As some countries have restricted free speech in response to the Arab Spring, protest movements have adapted their demands to make their voices heard. Worldwide inflationary tendencies impacted the region as well with cost of living related protests reported in Lebanon, Libya and Morocco.

North America

In North America the number of new episodes of protest declined somewhat since 2020's massive Black Lives Matter protests drew between 15 and 26 million people into the streets during the height of the Covid pandemic in what may be the largest demonstrations in US history. Protests against US immigration and detention policies were ongoing, as were protests with misogyny and white nationalism at their core; the storming of the US Capitol was the most notable example. A huge movement for women's reproductive rights was ignited between May and July 2022 between a leak of the US Supreme Court decision on abortion rights and the announcement of their official ruling. A new labor movement in the US also emerged with unionization efforts in companies like Starbucks, Amazon and Google. In 2022 in Canada, the

The **World Protests** study was conducted by a research team supported by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and the Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Global Social Justice Program at Columbia University that has examined 1085 episodes of protest from 2006 to the present, reflecting tens of thousands of individual protest events, in 100 countries representing more than 93 percent of world population. The research compiles information from news reports available online in Arabic, English, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish on why people are protesting, who is protesting, where, against whom, and what methods they are using to protest. The objective of the study has been to document and analyze protest trends globally, regionally, and according to country income levels and to present the main grievances and demands of protesters to better understand the drivers of social unrest.

This brief puts a spotlight on protests in 2021 and 2022, a dynamic two years in which approximately 200 new episodes of protest emerged and in which many episodes from previous years continued, most of them of multiple years in duration. By looking at episodes rather than individual protest events, the authors aim to reveal the unique sets of grievances and demands that drive prolonged episodes of protest. In the analysis, protest episodes are weighted by duration.

The companion website for these studies is <https://worldprotests.org/>. The 2022 Palgrave Macmillan e-book presenting a detailed examination of protests between 2006-2020, "*World Protests: A study of key protest issues in the 21st Century*" can be downloaded for free. Executive summaries of the book in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish can be downloaded [here](#).

wave of anti-colonial protests has emerged, targeting the colonial nature of relationships with Europe and the rest of the world. These protests have been both local (e.g., Congo and Mali) and global (Francophone Africa and Commonwealth nations with some demonstrations in support in France and the UK respectively). Demands range from the removal of foreign military troops to the recognition of past and ongoing colonial crimes. Anti-imperialist protests have always been present on the continent, but the focus on colonial ties and roots is more marked than ever before.

Global

Global protests have continued to be expressions of solidarity with oppressed or war-torn regions (e.g., in support of Ukraine, for freedom of speech in Egypt, and against the war in Ethiopia, the electoral practices in Nicaragua, and the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). The movements also continued to address issues of global concern like climate justice, inequality, and the rise of citizen surveillance. Protests in solidarity with people who continue to suffer under forms of systemic violence have also gone global, starting with MeToo and Black Lives Matter and expanding into a renewed wave of anticolonial protests in Africa and the Caribbean.

Protests occur in all country income groups (Figure 5). In 2021 and 2022, protest episodes increased in every region. This increase can be attributed to a number of factors, including the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, rising costs of living, and government restrictions on civil liberties. Despite these challenges, demands for real democracy remain at the forefront of many protests, with different income groups having their own unique priorities when it comes to other demands.

"Freedom Convoy" against anti vaccine mandates escalated to anti-government protests when the police moved in to shut it down.

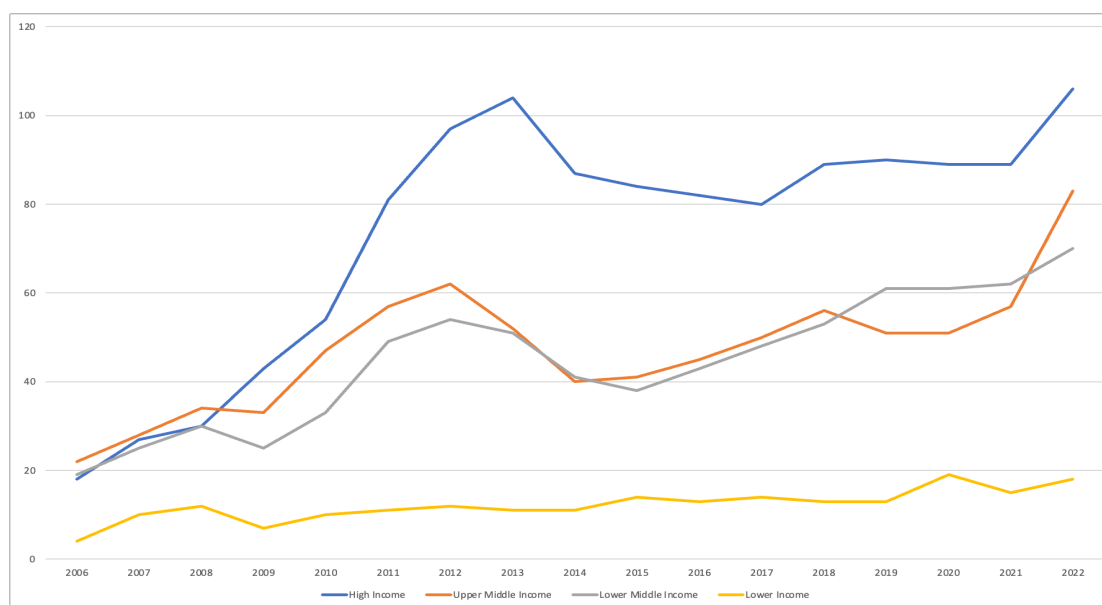
South Asia

In South Asia, protests have been on the rise starting 2019 with no signs of slowdown. The magnitude and visibility of protests has become more significant, drawing more media attention than before (e.g., Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal). The main issues driving these protests include demands for improved political representation (e.g., Pakistan), civil rights (e.g., Bangladesh), as well as calls for economic justice (e.g., India), or all of the above at the same time in the case of the omnibus protests in Sri Lanka. South Asia is home to some of the largest protests in history in terms of number of protesters, most notably the 250 million farmer mobilization that has seen the Modi government abandon reforms on agricultural pricing.

Sub-Saharan Africa

As the cost-of-living crisis shot to the forefront of economic news in 2022, so did protests related to prices across the continent. The main issue has shifted from food prices to fuel and energy prices (e.g., South Africa, Madagascar, Uganda and Ghana). Additionally, a new

Figure 5: Protests by Country Income Group 2006-2022



Source: Authors' analysis of world protests in media sources 2021-2022, number of active protest episode by region; each protest is counted yearly when ongoing, see: <https://worldprotests.org/>

High Income

In high-income countries such as in North America and northern Europe, the focus has been on personal freedoms, as COVID-19 restrictions were met with vocal opposition, and on the cost-of-living crisis. Demands related to jobs and wages have risen from the tenth to the third most common grievance. There are also consistent demands for social justice. Additionally, the denial of rights to groups based on religion, race, ethnicity, sex, and gender has become a contentious issue, signaling a resurgence of identity politics.

Upper Middle Income

In upper middle-income countries like Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Thailand and Türkiye there has been a marked increase of protests in 2022 for women's and girls' rights as well as an increase in protests related to justice. Calls for more effective democracy, the end of corruption, and better jobs and wages remain the top three issues driving upper middle-income protests.

Lower Middle Income

Lower middle-income countries like Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, and the Philippines have seen a growing demand for real democracy, along with an increase in calls for justice and opposition to perceived oligarchic governments. These countries have been increasingly challenging their government's policies alongside continued demands for more economic justice such as seen in India, Morocco and Indonesia

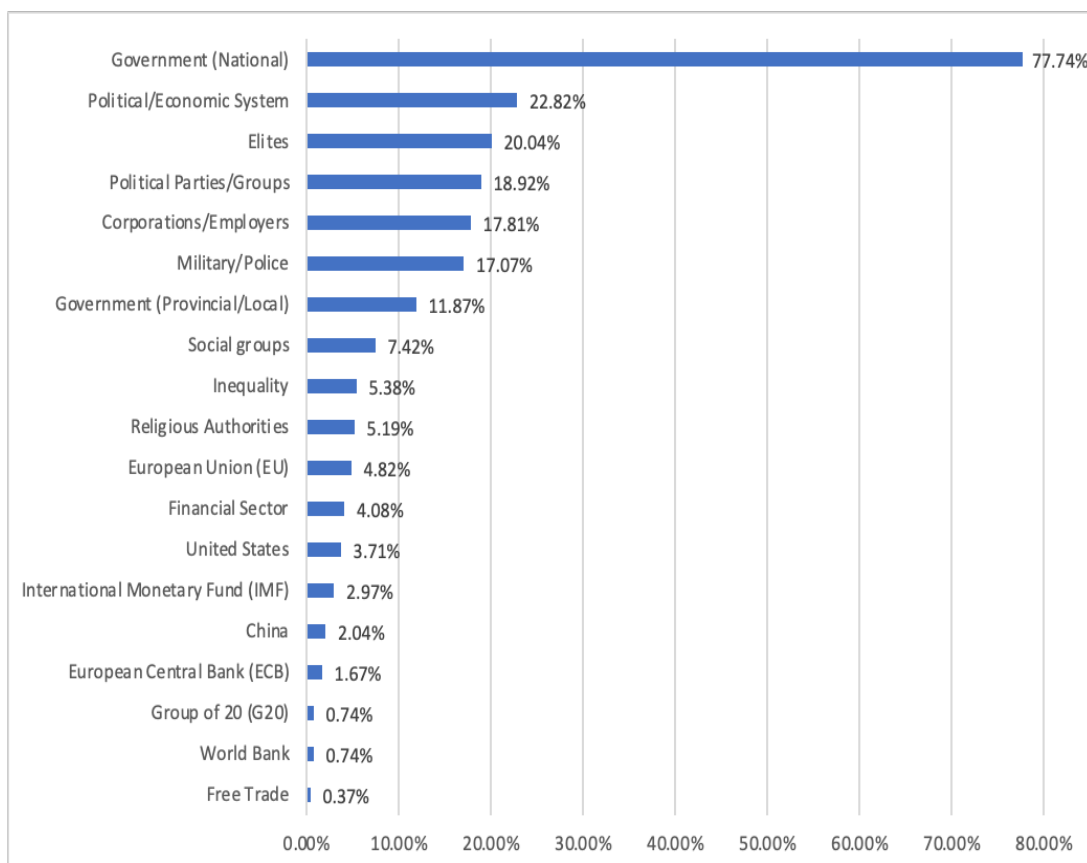
Low Income

In low-income countries like Ethiopia, Mali, and Zambia, there has been a significant increase in protests against failures of democracy/political representation since 2020. These protests are driven by a range of issues, including low living standards, war and military interventions, sovereignty and imperialism, with a renewed wave of anti-colonial protests in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Against whom?

Protest movements around the world have a clear target - their own national governments. This is a common theme since the national government is the legitimate policy-making institution responsible to citizens. Other frequent targets include elites, the political and economic system, political parties, the military and police, and corporations. It is clear that they are targeted by protesters because they wield great power in societies. Demonstrations, whether on the streets or online, continue to be powerful tools for people to convey their messages and demands to those in power.

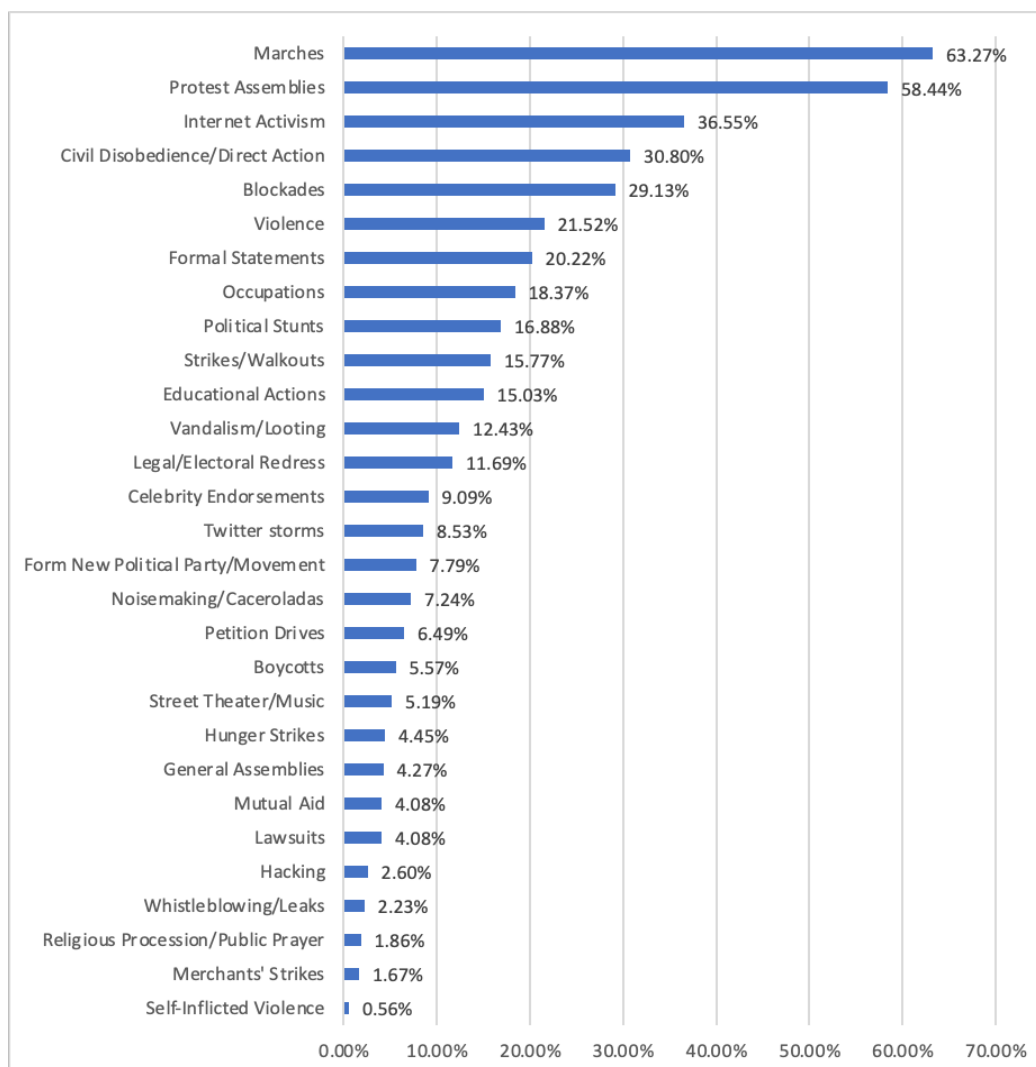
Figure 6: Targets of protests 2021-2022



Source: Authors' analysis of world protests in media sources 2021-2022, percentage of protests designating the target, each protest can have multiple targets and is counted yearly when ongoing, see: <https://worldprotests.org/>

How do they protest?

Marches and protest assemblies remain the most common forms of protest globally, with over half of all protests worldwide incorporating one or both of these methods. However, in recent years there has been a significant uptick in internet activism as a form of protest, with the use of digital platforms now being the third most popular method of protest. Other forms of protest such as civil disobedience, direct action, and blockades are also increasingly being utilized; they are found in nearly one third of protests. While some rise in internet activism can be attributed to the pandemic-induced lockdowns, the continued prevalence of marches and protest assemblies despite these restrictions highlights their enduring significance as a means of expressing dissent.

Figure 7: Methods of protests 2021-2022

Source: Authors' analysis of world protests in media sources 2021-2022, percentage of protests designating said target, each episode typically employs multiple methods and is counted yearly when ongoing, see: <https://worldprotests.org/>

Conclusion

More than any other issue in 2021-2022, the rising cost of living has driven people around the world to the streets in protest. A recent report, "[Food, energy & cost of living protests, 2022](#)" has identified an unprecedented global wave of more than 12,500 individual protest events across 148 countries in all regions and country income groups over the cost of living (Hossain and Hallock, 2022). Although this crisis has hit countries of the global South hardest, it has also placed severe hardship on the poor and middle classes in the industrialized global North.

In addition, the crisis has been compounded by the turn to austerity policies (more nicely called "fiscal restraint" or "fiscal consolidation" in the international financial institutions) in many countries as part of a Covid exit strategy. Another recent report, "[End Austerity: A Global Report on Budget Cuts and Harmful Social Reforms in 2022-25](#)" projects that a huge wave of budget cuts is expected in 2023, in 143 countries, which could impact more than 6.7 billion people, or 85% of world population (Ortiz and Cummings, 2022). Indeed, the authors conclude that measures already undertaken by governments will bring significant negative impacts for people in general and women in particular.

Significantly, most cost-of-living protests have been triggered not by specific price rises or shortages, but by government failures to act to protect citizens against their effects and also by the widespread perception that governments are more responsive to corporations and elites than to ordinary citizens. As a consequence, protests against the cost of living and the breaking of the social contract are becoming common not only around the world but across divided societies - when groups at opposite ends of the political spectrum turn out with similar slogans and grievances. In several countries these protests have escalated into larger national political crises, featuring significant violence, casualties, and demands for political change. So far only Sri Lanka has seen its government fall as a consequence, but 2023 might tell a different story.

Policymakers need to understand that there are alternatives to austerity. There are [financing options](#), available even to the poorest countries, that are endorsed by the UN and the international financial institutions, from increasing progressive taxation to reducing debt (Ortiz, et. al, 2019). Policymakers must urgently identify new sources of finance to address the multiple crises, learning from countries that have already implemented these options. People across the world are aware both that trillions of dollars were given out to support businesses and military spending during the pandemic, and also that their own demands are legitimate. A recent UNICEF report on global prospects for children concluded that social movements, perhaps especially those led by young people and women, are continuing to emerge even in the face of the repression that often accompanies democratic decline (Youth Foresight Fellows, et. al, 2023). Unless policymakers change course, the prevalence, size, and volatility of cost-of-living protests is likely to increase.

References

Hossain, N. and Hallock, J. 2022. "Food, energy & cost of living protests, 2022", Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/usa/19895.pdf>

Ortiz, I. and Cummins, M. 2022. "End Austerity: A Global Report on Budget Cuts and Harmful Social Reforms in 2022-25, Eurodad and partners

https://assets.nationbuilder.com/eurodad/pages/3039/attachments/original/1664184662/Austerity_Ortiz_Cummins_FINAL_26-09.pdf?1664184662

Ortiz, I. et al, 2019. *Fiscal Space for Social Protection: A Handbook for Assessing Financing Options*, International Labour Organization <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/RessourcePDF.action?id=55694>

Youth Foresight Fellows Abada, H., et. al., 2023. "Prospects for Children in the Polycrisis: a 2023 Global Outlook", UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/3001/file/UNICEF-Innocenti-Prospects-for-Children-Global-Outlook-2023.pdf>

About the authors

Isabel Ortiz is Director of the Global Social Justice Program at the Initiative for Policy Dialogue at Columbia University. **Sara Burke** is a Senior Policy Analyst at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in New York. **Mohamed Berrada** is a Senior Economist and Independent Consultant. **Hernán Saenz Cortés** is a Senior Analyst on International Relations.

About FES New York

The office of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in New York serves as the liaison for FES offices worldwide with the United Nations (UN) in New York and the international financial institutions (International Monetary Fund and World Bank) in Washington, D.C. The office addresses peace, justice and economic issues, working closely with academia, civil society, multilateral institutions and their Member State governments to convene multi-stakeholder debates. The formats of our work include international conferences, expert workshops and high-level meetings involving government representatives, as well as published policy briefs and analytical studies. Our overarching mission is to bring a special focus to the perspectives of trade unions, women, and developing and emerging-market countries in an effort to forge consensus toward multilateral solutions to international and global challenges.

About IPD

Founded in July 2000 by Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz, the Initiative for Policy Dialogue (IPD) stimulates a heterodox policy dialogue on major issues in international development. IPD is a global network of leading economists, political scientists, and premier academic and policy centers in the global South and North. We bring the issues of developing countries to academics and the fruits of academic research to policymakers. We promote more inclusive and pluralist discourse on the major global debates on economic and political development, in which countries often face a narrow set of policy prescriptions that may not fully suit their domestic preferences and capabilities. IPD helps countries analyze the complex policy trade-offs they face and provides them with access to a broader range of economic solutions that promote democratic, equitable and sustainable development.

Cover photo: Adobe Stock (© tampatra)

Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
New York Office

747 Third Avenue, Suite 34D
New York, NY 10017, USA
+1-212-687-0208
info@fesny.org
www.fesny.org

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is not permitted without the written consent of FES. Publication by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung may not be used for electioneering purposes.