

A lack of ‘real democracy’ is the key reason driving the spread of protests across the world

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The world has seen a number of high profile protests in recent years, from the Arab Spring to the “Indignados”, or the Euromaidan in Kyiv. [Hernán Cortés Saenz](#) looks at data from more than 800 protests across the world since 2006, finding that protests are increasing, especially in developing regions such as Latin America. He writes that these protests are often driven not only by a desire for economic justice, but also by what the protesters perceive as a lack of ‘real democracy’ that prevents economic issues from being addressed.

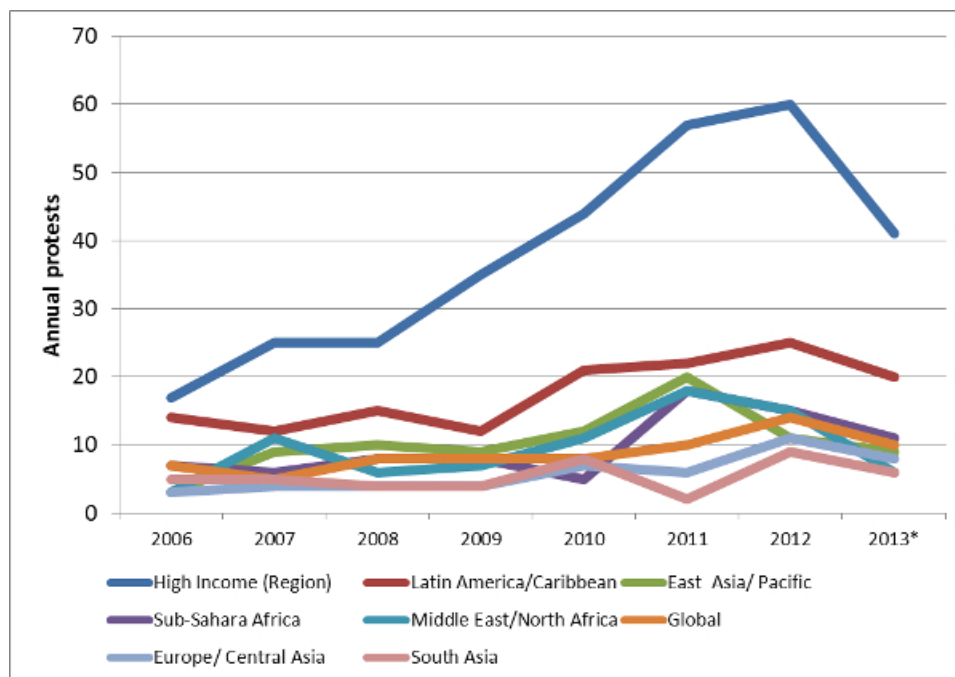


Indignados, Occupy Wall Street, Chilean students, Que se lixe a Troika, the Arab Spring, Movimento Passe Livre, Anthill, Los Viejitos,. all these names have been appearing periodically in the mass media, becoming *vox populi* challenging governments and, in general, the current status quo. These protests raise questions such as: is the perception that people are protesting more, real? Where are the main protests located? Who are they opposing? Have the methods of protest changed in recent years?

There is, however, a key question, which is absolutely necessary in order to understand these protests and the current context: why are people protesting, and what are the protesters’ main demands and grievances? It was these questions that motivated our recent joint [research on world protests](#) between the [Initiative for Policy Dialogue](#) at Columbia University and the [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung NY Office](#).

Through analysis of more than 800 protests (demonstrations, campaigns, strikes, occupations) in 84 countries, and globally, we find that people are protesting more. We are living in an historical context where protests are spreading all over the world. It is not just a dynamic of developed societies – although our research shows there are more protests in High-Income countries according to the World Bank’s classification – but also that protests are becoming a common trend in Africa, Asia and, Latin America, as Chart 1 illustrates.

Chart 1: Distribution of protests since 2006



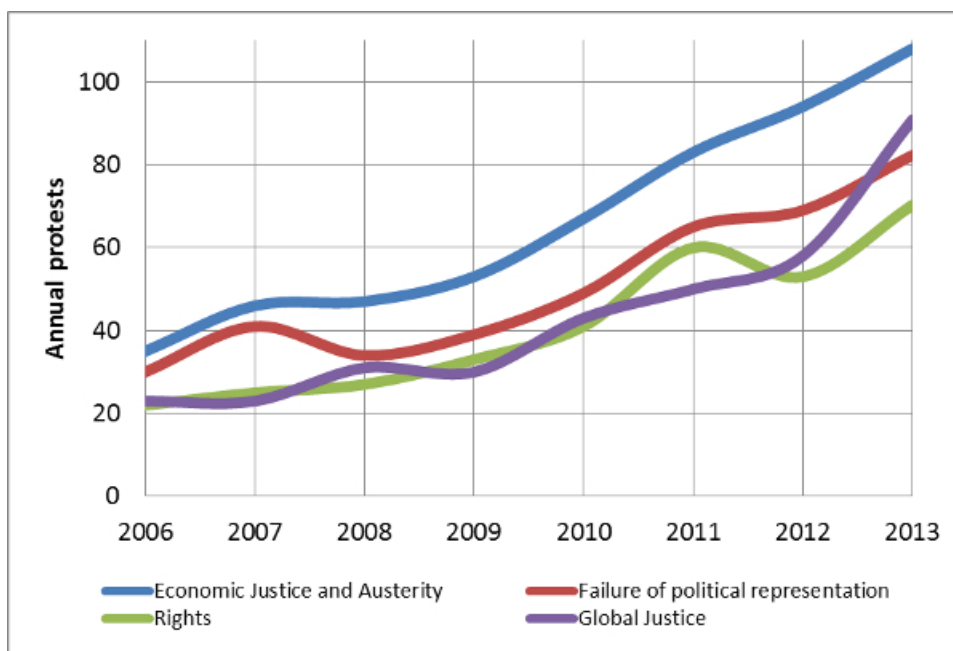
Note: Until July 2013. Regions are based on World Bank classifications. Source: Ortiz, Isabel; Burke, Sara; Berrada, Mohamed; Cortes, Hernan. World Protests 2006-2013. New York: FES & IPD. September 2013.

In parallel, once we began our the analysis of the protests, we were able to observe how demonstrations against austerity measures in Southern Europe were not only due to economic causes, but stemmed from a number of grievances. This was and is a common trend among a huge number of cases in our study – we could name them as “multi-cause protests”. While even though the current international context could make us believe that as President Clinton’s office stated in his 1992 election campaign, “it’s the economy stupid”, our analysis shows that this is not exactly the case. As a result, we classified the motivations for protests into two main types of grievances.

Main grievances

Among the different causes that push citizens to protest, we established four main groups, from major to minor importance. The most important is ‘economic justice and austerity’, the second most important cause of protests is ‘failure of political representation’, the third most important is ‘global justice’, and the fourth group relates to the ‘rights’ of citizens. Chart 2 illustrates the prevalence of these different causes in global protests between 2006 and 2013.

Chart 2: Number of world protests by main grievance or demand (2006-13)



Source: Ortiz, Isabel; Burke, Sara; Berrada, Mohamed; Cortes, Hernan. World Protests 2006-2013. New York: FES & IPD. September 2013. Figures are up to July 2013.

Within these four categories it is important to highlight “global justice”. In this category we can find the different kinds of protests that are mainly related to environmental issues or austerity measures that the IMF, European Central Bank or other International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have recommended that governments implement. This category – which has increased the most in recent years – shows us how citizens are increasingly linking the local with the global, what some authors called the “glocal”.

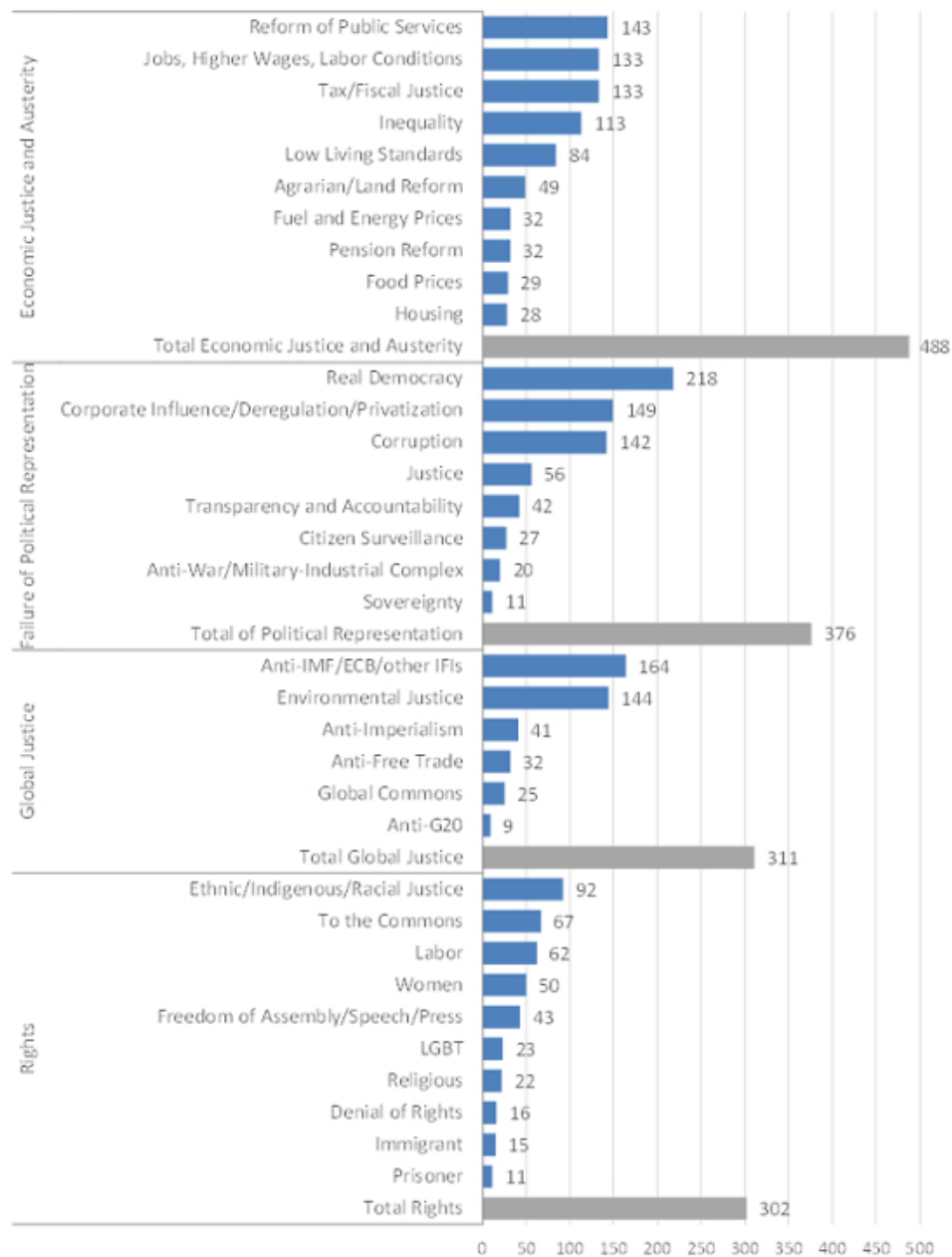
We can see, for instance, how protests against a mine exploitation in the Greek peninsula of Halkidiki are identified with the role of a transnational company, or how protests in Mexico against the increase in the price of tortillas are

not just focused on the government's role and how subsidies are given, but also in the context of the role of speculation in commodity futures markets in Chicago, or the implementation of a free-trade agreement such as NAFTA. A global conscience exists, that could drive us to conclude that global protests are likely to continue their steady rise.

Secondary grievances

Within each of the previous categories there are a whole range of subcategories that give us more information about the exact reasons behind the grievances of protests. Chart 3 shows the five more important, which are: 'real democracy'; 'anti-IMF, ECB, and IFI' protests; protests against 'corporate influence, deregulation or privatisation'; 'environmental justice', and protests focused on the 'reform of public services'.

Chart 3: Number of protests by secondary grievance or demand, 2006-2013*



Source: Ortiz, Isabel; Burke, Sara; Berrada, Mohamed; Cortes, Hernan. *World Protests 2006-2013*. New York: FES & IPD. September 2013. Figures are up to July 2013.

As Chart 3 shows, the main demand from protestors was for bigger and better democracy ('real democracy'), the same demand that came from the Spanish squares more than two years ago. It is paradoxical how in a moment in which the mass media, political classes and institutions are focusing on economic issues, society is asking for a better democracy. This could mean that the perception of the functioning of the current political and economic system is that it is one that benefits some elites, and that it is full of corruption, tax evasion, increasing inequality, financial speculation on food prices, land grabbing by private companies and governments, human rights violations, censorship, and surveillance.

In this context, a real risk exists of a "clash" between society and politics, financial and corporate elites that could threaten the maintenance of the social contract. The lack of accountability of these actors towards society becomes one more reason for increasing outrage and the perception that the gap between both sides is increasing.

Susan Strange, the 'mother' of International Political Economy, wrote in one of her last papers that the Westphalian system was failing. It was, as she named, *The Westfailure System*. There were three main causes for this failure: ecological (lack of averting ecological deterioration), financial (the inability to govern and control the institutions and the market that creates and trades credit instruments that are essential for the real economy) and social (the inability to maintain a sustainable equilibrium between the growing power of the transnational capitalist class and the 'have-nots'). For many citizens, the answer is greater discontent, a demand for more and better democracy, transparency, the denunciation of governments for not listening to their demands, new methods of protest and, most importantly, more protests.

This article is based on the Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York Working Paper [World Protests 2006-2013](#).



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