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Reported Social Unrest Index: March 2022 Update

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ABSTRACT: This paper updates the Reported Social Unrest Index of Barrett et al (2020), reviewing recent developments in social unrest worldwide since the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic. It shows that unrest was elevated during late 2019, coincident with widespread protests in Latin America. Unrest then fell markedly during the early stages of the pandemic as voluntary and involuntary social distancing struck. Social unrest has since returned but generally remains below levels seen in 2019.

1 Introduction

In Barrett et al. (2020) we devised a method for systematically measuring unrest in a consistent manner across a wide range of countries at a monthly frequency from the mid-1980s to June 2019, the Reported Social Unrest Index (RSUI). This paper updates that dataset through to February 2022. This serves two purposes. First, to review developments in social unrest during intervening period. Second, as a vehicle to distribute the updated data.

Developments in social unrest broadly follow three periods. From mid-2019 until the onset of the pandemic, social unrest rose, a continuation of a trend since 2016, peaking in late 2019 as a wave of protest swept through Latin America. Once the pandemic hit, though, unrest declined sharply, coincident with lockdowns and voluntary social distancing. However, as countries have loosened restrictions and the pandemic has waned, unrest has since risen (Figure 1[1]).
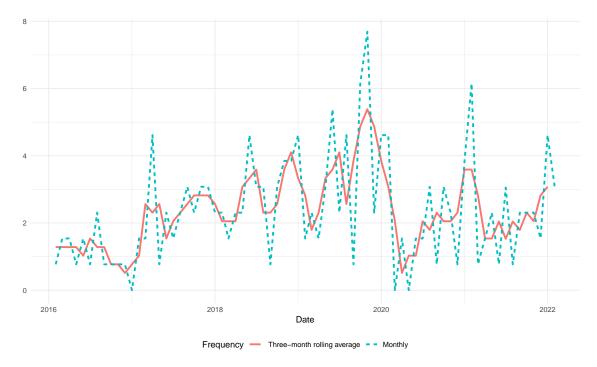
Figure 1: Fraction of countries with RSUI-identified events, 2016-2022

2 Background: The Reported Social Unrest Index

The Reported Social Unrest Index attempts to proxy for major social unrest events by counting the number of articles which include terms related to social unrest in a variety of media sources. In Barrett et al. (2020) we showed that for a wide sample of case studies, large

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[1]Due to differences in media coverage and perception across countries, events are our preferred way to compare trends in unrest internationally.

spikes in the index line up closely with key events in authoritative (often peer-reviewed) narrative accounts. We devised a systematic way to code these spikes, terming them "events". We also showed that this measure is robust to specifics of the search criteria, sources used, and language of the sources. We also show that our measure performs at least as well as the next best alternative (the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database). For a full discussion of the construction of the RSUI, as well as its advantages and disadvantages, the reader is referred to Barrett et al. (2020).

The RSUI and the associated events have been used in several other settings. Hadzi-Vaskov et al. (2021) and Hlatshwayo and Redl (2022) use the measure of events to show that real economic outcomes deteriorate following an unrest event. Hlatshwayo and Redl (2021) use machine learning techniques to predict the likelihood of unrest from a wide set of socio-economic variables, using RSUI-identified events as the outcome variable. This work is, in turn, used to inform IMF surveillance and assessment of social unrest vulnerabilities. And Barrett et al. (2021) use a daily version of the RSUI within event months to identify stock market responses to unrest events.

3   Social unrest since July 2019

This section describes trends in unrest as measured by the RSUI since July 2019. This is split into three periods: pre-pandemic (the second half of 2019), the early pandemic (2020), and the later stages of the pandemic (January 2021-February 2022). Throughout, examples of unrest are presented as illustrative rather than comprehensive.

3.1   Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

As illustrated in Figure 1, unrest was rising around the world prior to the pandemic. During late-2019, the activity was concentrated in two regions. First, a wave of protest swept parts of Latin America in October and November, starting in Chile and then spreading more widely. As a result, the RSUI rose sharply in several countries in the region (Figure 2a). Second, unrest rose also in the Middle East, although the cross-country correlation was not quite as tight as in Latin America. There, unrest spiked in Algeria, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon (Figure 2b)

3.2   The Early Stages of the Pandemic

At the start of the pandemic, unrest declined suddenly. The timing of the decline coincided very closely with the start of the pandemic, which saw an increase social distancing, both voluntary and mandatory (see Figure 3).[2] That is not to say that social unrest completely halted. Significant unrest events occurred through the Summer, including in: Brazil, driven by anti-government sentiment; the United States, where there were large protests for racial justice; Ethiopia, as inter-ethnic tensions became more pronounced; and large anti-government protests in Lebanon and Belarus (see Figure 4).

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[2]See Barrett and Chen (2021) for evidence that social unrest in general tends to decline during epidemics, at least in the short term.
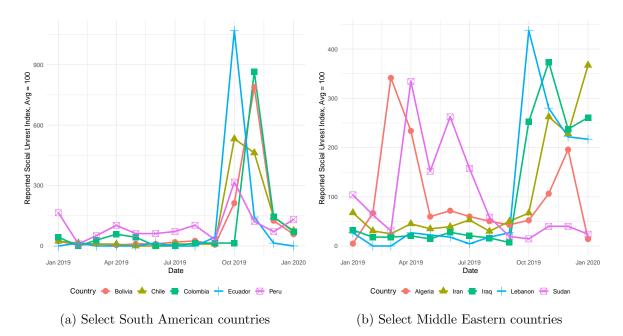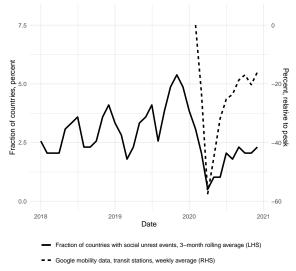
(a) Select South American countries

(b) Select Middle Eastern countries

Figure 2: RSUI January 2019 - January 2020, avg.=100

Figure 3: Unrest and mobility, 2018-2022

Figure 4: RSUI January 2020 - January 2021, select countries, avg.=100

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3.3 Later in the Pandemic

Social unrest has continued through the later stages of the pandemic, with events in both Advanced Economies and in Emerging and Developing Economies. In the former group, protests have erupted in places where major social unrest is usually rare, often with anti-government or anti-lockdown motives, including in Canada, New Zealand, Austria, and the Netherlands (Figure 5a). In Emerging Markets and Developing Economies, though, the putative motives for unrest have been more diverse, with examples including: anti-government protests in Kazakhstan and Chad; a coup in Burkina Faso; regional protests in Tajikistan; and a constitutional crisis in Sudan (Figure 5b). Yet overall, social unrest remains low relative to pre-pandemic levels.
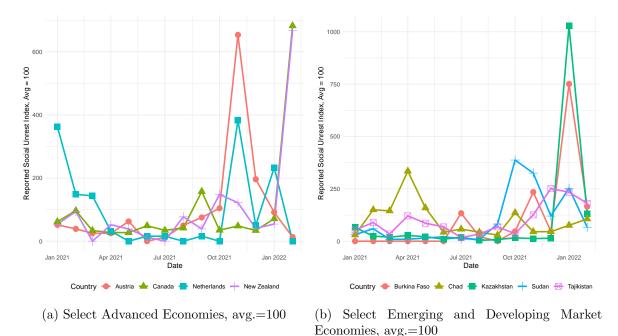

(a) Select Advanced Economies, avg.=100

(b) Select Emerging and Developing Market Economies, avg.=100

Figure 5: RSUI January 2021 - February 2022

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