

# Conference Report

sef:

Berlin Summer Dialogue 2021 – Online Edition

## Protesting for Political Reforms – Prerequisites for peaceful transformations and violence prevention

Larissa Neubauer

**In the past decade, the world has seen a new rise in protests against governments. In the last five years alone, over 75 per cent of authoritarian regimes have experienced significant protests. Many of these governments had failed to cater for their citizens' needs. The "age of mass protests" has also been characterised by a rising number of protests in democracies.**

**In a series of five online events, the Berlin Summer Dialogue 2021 looked at current trends in protest research in order to identify what is needed to help societies transform peacefully and prevent violence. In addition, the event offered the opportunity to hear first-hand accounts from activists about their struggles in their home countries.**

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### Triggers of protest movements

Lara Baladi, activist, artist and educator from Egypt, has collected an extensive archive of social media documents on protests from around the world. While going through videos from different protest movements, she soon discovered some similarities, as she explained at the kick-off session of the Summer Dialogue: first of all, trigger events often involve the death of a young person, as with the killing of Khaled Saeed in Egypt in 2010. A Facebook page dedicated to him sparked the protests on Tahrir Square on 25 January 2011. And there are parallels found in history – from the beginnings of the civil rights movement in the US to the protests in Tunisia and recently the killings of Mike Brown in Ferguson

in 2014 and George Floyd in 2020. Those events opened the way for demands for changes in society at a legal, social or judicial level.

But what was also common were the different phases of "revolutions": starting off with a first phase of uprising, followed by the removal of the regime and uncertainty surrounding new possibilities for the future or the danger of the regime making a comeback. This post-revolution phase often results in a backlash against the protesters, with many activists fleeing or being imprisoned.

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### Empowered citizens expect more from their governments

Lara Baladi pursues an artistic and visual approach to archiving protest movements, also taking the voice of the people into account. Complementing this view from a political science perspective, Thomas Carothers from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C. provided an overview of trends in protest movements. With the Global Protest Tracker, Carothers started to chronicle major protest movements and was able to show a steady increase in protests, with a pause due to Covid-19. As he explained, the 21st century can be described as a series of struggles by citizens who are more empowered by technology, education and travel than ever before, who expect more and often need more from their respective governments. But they are confronted with governing systems that are not able to cater for those needs. In fact, "most

authoritarian regimes are terrified of their people,” Carothers said. Today’s protests have often been characterised as “leaderless movements”. People are not so attached to institutions any more, and they don’t necessarily need a leader figure to follow. Instead, these movements are driven by a broad sense of energy which is quite decentralised. People are looking to find a sense of community by forming horizontal networks. Carothers described these forms of protest as a manifestation of the deep changes we see in all societies, affecting democracies and autocracies alike.

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### Drivers of protests – and misconceptions

While analysing protest movements, Thomas Carothers has found common drivers, but also misconceptions. Often, protests are attributed to economic conditions. However, from his research, he found out that one main driver of protests is political anger towards the elites, for example due to rigged elections, highly repressive measures against citizens or stagnation. Corruption is another important factor: more than 10 per cent of the regimes in the world have fallen in the last five years due to corruption. In addition, incompetence on the part of the political elites is contributing to this anger, as also seen during the Covid-19 crisis. The mishandling of the Covid-19 crisis makes it likely that the number of protests will increase again. On top of this, growing horizontal inequalities in societies are an important factor as well. Another misconception is seeing the growing protests only as something that attracts young people. In fact, the above-mentioned drivers impact and mobilise people across the whole of society.

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### Inside Belarus – a regime oppressing its people

Carothers’ findings were mirrored by the insights provided by Dr Ryhor Astapenia, Director of the Belarus Initiative at Chatham House. After irregularities in the elections in 2020, the protests were taken to the street. The regime was initially taken by surprise; however, people expressing doubt over Lukashenko’s win were met with brutal force. Adding to the disappointment was the feeling of being left behind by the government in its response to the Covid-19 pandemic. With an oppressive regime controlling media outlets, different options for disseminating information and connecting with each other became essential. YouTube served as a source for independent news, and Telegram became an important tool for connecting with each other. It also served as a channel for support from the diaspora community, including the use of digital crowdfunding.

### “Archiving the revolution”

Following the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, Lara Baladi, who had been personally involved in the protests at Tahrir Square, began to archive social media articles, images and videos of protest movements she found online. Baladi realised that with the help of social media, new narratives – narratives by the people – were created in a way never seen before. She also noticed how algorithms began to determine what you get to see and what not. Furthermore, content can get lost or deleted after a while. So she started to sort the collected material in an event timeline to “archive the revolution”. With her video installation “Alone, Together.. In Media Res”, she mimicked the way algorithms determine what we get to see in search engines, and combined video material from other iconic protests in history – from Malcolm X to Tiananmen Square – with those from Egypt.



Video installation  
“Alone, Together”

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### Playing the “cat and mouse” game online

However, using “secure” methods of communication and staying unharmed has taken its toll – for one, Belarusians keep changing their names on Telegram, making it difficult to know who they are in touch with or who to trust, and in addition, the state and protesters are playing a “cat and mouse game” on these channels. This is one of the observations Espen G. Rød, Researcher in the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, has also made in his research. Governments in autocratic regimes rely on censorship, disinformation and surveillance to try to stay in power and to fend off protest movements, while protesters use technologies to coordinate and mobilise. However, as Astapenia added, fancy surveillance technologies are not always needed to hunt activists. In the case of Belarus, the regime simply applies the blunt instrument of detaining activists and brutally forcing them to hand over their phones, which will provide contacts of other members of the movement.

Often, the existence of censorship and surveillance mechanisms prevents people from going out and protesting. However, as Rød noted, once protests start, online tools help movements to grow, not only in a limited area, but also spread out throughout the

country. Rød stressed that there was little systematic evidence that internet technology per se would lead to democracy, as was initially believed after the Arab Spring. Autocratic regimes learned how to use these tools as well.



Session II (clockwise): Ute Lange (Chair), Ryhor Astapenia and Espen Geelmuyden Rød

### “Make-or-break” moments for protest movements

Srđa Popović, Executive Director of the Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) in Belgrade, has offered training and support for protesters around the world, having been part of the Otpor! group which toppled Slobodan Milošević in 2000. From his experience, protest movements need some key ingredients for achieving change, such as a clear vision and unity, the capability for strategic and tactical planning, and discipline, often referred to as non-violence. His practical experience made him realise that while violence may be tempting in order to achieve goals “faster”, it almost always seems to be the wrong battlefield, resulting in loss of support for a movement in society.

### Creating lose-lose situations for autocratic regimes

One of the strategies Popović is advocating for is the use of dilemma actions. Using provocative methods with a wink and a smile puts regimes in a position where they look weak or ridiculous if reacting with force, violence or oppression. As an example, he mentioned the recent protests in Myanmar, where the protesters dressed up as Disney princesses – “and no one would want to throw tear gas at a ‘princess’,” he said. Other striking images showed the snowmen decorated with the forbidden red and white flag in Belarus, which according to the law, forced the police to arrest snowmen.

However, dilemma actions are not only successful in autocratic regimes. The well-known group “The Yes Men” have also demonstrated how to use them. Their dilemma actions targeted businesses and democratic countries, putting them in a position where they found themselves in a lose-lose situation.

### Combining vision with a diverse tactical repertoire is key

Having a vision of what to achieve may also lead to small actions that may not be very visible but create a larger impact; for example, disrupting money flows and the banking system. Popović stressed that what is important is not just the large publicly visible protest on the street, but a combination of different tactics in line with a strategic goal. This was something Professor Sharon Erickson Nepstad, Distinguished Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, also emphasised.

Professor Nepstad added that a rich tactical repertoire of actions that people can draw on is key – unfortunately, in many instances, movements rely on a single tactic, mainly mass demonstrations. This makes it easy, particularly for oppressive

#### Dilemma action – When the city becomes a protester against the central government

Occasionally, it’s not only the people protesting against a government. Sometimes, even a city may (unwillingly) become a protester, as happened in Budapest recently. Gábor Kerpel-Fronius, Deputy Mayor for Citizens’ Engagement and Digitalisation, City of Budapest, informed the audience about the difficulties his city faces being led by an opposition party. There is currently a lack of dialogue between the national government and local municipalities, which became apparent when the national government decided to grant permission to build an offshoot of China’s Fudan University on a space in Budapest which was already earmarked for much-needed student housing. As the land was owned by the Hungarian state, Budapest didn’t have a say in the new plans. However, many people voiced their discontent, including Budapest municipality. Having no right to influence the decision, Budapest decided to rename the neighbouring streets. Some were called after campaigns for human rights, such as Free Hong Kong Road and Dalai Lama Road).



regimes, to counteract. Instead, a diverse range of tactics is needed to confuse regimes and make it more difficult for them to suppress a movement. She compared it to a chess game where you also need to keep changing tactics and make your counterpart guess your next move. In her opinion, it is a mistake to highlight moments like Rosa Park and Tiananmen Square, creating the impression that it just takes someone who's fed up to protest and things will change. The failure to look at the behind-the-scenes work that needs to be done often derails a movement.



Session III (clockwise): Ute Lange (Chair), Srđa Popović, Sharon Erickson Nepstad and Véronique Dudouet

In addition, it's important to maintain and broaden support for movements. Nepstad referred to a study by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, who found out that mobilising at least 3.5 per cent of the population is crucial for a successful movement. This number seems to have been a kind of tipping point for many movements. For example, staging a general strike nationwide has a much wider impact and minimises the risks for individuals – governments cannot put the whole country in jail for going on strike.

### Non-violence as an important factor

Sharon Nepstad also emphasised that remaining non-violent is key for gaining public support. Sticking to non-violence while the regime uses violence against unarmed citizens can be a turning point for society, as well as for gaining international support. This point was emphasised by Dr Véronique Dudouet, Senior Advisor for Conflict Transformation Research at the Berghof Foundation in Berlin: staying non-violent is important not only during the protest phase, but also when looking beyond. Quoting Hannah Arendt – “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world” – Dudouet mentioned how important it is to keep in mind the kind of society actors want to create when in phases

of transition. Also, the probability of a civil war following violent campaigns within 10 years after the end of the protests is much higher than in the case of non-violent campaigns.

Having been involved in the protest movement in Belarus, Ryhor Astapenia pointed to the other side of the coin. While non-violence is desired for many reasons, many people in Belarus are quite disappointed. Remaining non-violent seems to have led to nothing from their point of view: they see a failed revolution with hundreds of political prisoners and people facing oppression and violence at the hands of the government forces.

### Dual strategies for transition periods needed

What makes movements more effective out on the streets – having broad horizontal support across society and not necessarily needing a leader figure – might make them weaker in transitional periods where representation is needed to negotiate and make progress. It can be difficult for protest movements to transform the broad horizontal support across society and identify spokespersons who are able to represent all of them. “It's usually antithetical to how protest movements think,” Dudouet said. In addition, movements need to develop a vision of what to create, instead of only focusing on “removing” the old order. This is also something Srđa Popović advises movements to take seriously. Aside from going out and leading movements with a megaphone, it is also necessary to have people who are able to broker a deal with their opponents later on, he added.

### External actors between staying “neutral” or picking a side?

Protest movements do not operate in a vacuum. While the first sessions focused mainly on what happens inside protest movements, the last session turned the spotlight on the role of external actors, in particular international or regional organisations and other countries. In most cases, they are put in a difficult spot: what are the reasons for them to get involved – or not? Dr Dylan O'Driscoll, Director of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, has done extensive research on the MENA region and found different patterns of reacting, depending on the proximity of the country and the country's own strategy. Neighbouring countries, for example, have an interest in preventing internal conflicts spilling over into their own countries, so they often prefer to support the government and stabilise the situation. As an example,

Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have provided financial support for their neighbour's armed forces. Support may often also result from ethnic affiliation, with ethnic groups in different countries supporting each other.

Looking at a wider circle of external actors, such as international or regional organisations like the EU, there is an additional lens through which protests are being assessed. Often, other countries stress their desire not to interfere; in many instances, however, this does not reflect a neutral stance but results from short-term strategic/security interests (such as migration or counterterrorism). "By not interfer-

to reflect on the engagement and ensure that no harm is done in the long run.

## Inside Myanmar – The hope of a young generation

One of the countries currently under the international spotlight is Myanmar. Since the military coup and the arrest of the democratically elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi in early 2021, many citizens,



Session IV: Thinzar Shunlei Yi

ing, you are not neutral, you are picking a side," said O'Driscoll. Also, some countries would not wish to get involved with protest movements, but influence the region by selling arms, for example.

## Support behind closed doors

Simon Bojsen-Moller, Deputy Head of Unit at the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), provided some insights into the complexity of the EU with its different institutions and member states. His unit monitors developments on the ground by reaching out to a broad network of embassies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) operating in the various countries. Being in touch with protest movements can be challenging, since they are not always organised with spokespeople, etc. One form of support provided through his unit is capacity building for movements through INGOs, for example on how to get their messages across effectively and do advocacy work. If a transition process starts in a given country, the EU would also provide support to ensure that the process is inclusive and respects international law and international human rights. However, he also noted the need for a holistic view,

## Spotlight Beirut – Cities and Protests

Beirut has seen a wave of protests since the creation of Lebanon under the French Mandate after the First World War, and its history overshadows its development to this day. After 15 years of civil war in the 1970s and 1980s, the rebuilding of Beirut not only led to protests back then, but also laid the foundation for today's collapse of the city and nation. The reconstruction project led by Solidaire under the then Prime Minister Rafik Hariri privatised the city and gentrified the downtown area. Many long-term residents and businesses were evicted and lost their homes, making room for international investors. Facing an economic crisis in 2019, the people started flocking to the streets, finding spaces to demonstrate for social and environmental justice and asking for an accountable and effective government. Many of the already abandoned buildings were reclaimed and transformed into public meeting spaces, providing room for dialogue. The city



became a stage for different "performances". Professor Mona Harb from the American University in Beirut also stepped up with some colleagues and founded the Beirut Urban Lab, filling a gap between citizens and academia. With their research and activism, they are seeking social justice and want to create a city that is more viable and inclusive for all. She stressed that pushing an agenda for the people is a difficult struggle in contexts where governments are not serving the people. In particular, the region's colonial history and the many authoritarian governments in the Arab world make it difficult to restore justice. The Urban Lab is also playing an important role in the recovery and reconstruction of Beirut after the port explosion in 2020, which is an immense task. However, "we are condemned to hope," she concluded, quoting an Arab proverb.

and in this case especially the youth, started to protest against the military coup. One of the activists, Thinzar Shunlei Yi, a democracy activist and journalist from Myanmar, talked about the dramatic oppression seen in her country, but also the will of the people to defend their freedom and fight to end military rule. The Covid-19 pandemic has made the situation even worse. Those protesting are longing for a federal democratic nation and a true federal constitution. She also pleaded for more support from the international community, particularly to help ensure the protesters’ safety and security. She added that young people in particular are under attack by the military, with new directives to prevent them from renting apartments or to punish landlords who rent to them; they need immediate help to stay safe and alive

but also external actors and donors in particular. “When it’s about protests, we are not only dealing with the usual suspects, we are not only dealing with the conflict-ridden countries or LDCs, we are dealing with middle-income countries too. This is where inequality increases.” She found the transnational dimension of protests particularly striking. Even when we find ourselves in situations where it is difficult to support protest movements from the outside, Leininger stressed the need for all of us to at least express solidarity with those at the forefront of fighting for their rights, freedom and future. “Ideas and demands spread across countries: diffusion is no illusion,” she concluded.

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### Solidarity for protest movements

Dr Julia Leininger, Head of the Transformation of Political (Dis-)order: Institutions, Values and Peace Research Programme at the German Development Institute (DIE), Bonn, stressed that the series portrayed well how protest movements are challenging not only their own governments,

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### Cooperating partners



### Imprint

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