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# What matters take people to the streets nowadays and how likely are they to accomplish effective change? A comparative study of protests in the developed and developing world

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## Abstract

While development studies the process of ameliorating people's living standards, protests and demonstrations are the way with which citizens reveal their requests and strive to obtain them. Srdja Popovic, a Serbian Political activist, leader of the movement Otpor! which effectively managed to overthrow a Serbian president in 2000, provided a list of guidelines on launching successful civil demonstrations: defining an exact objective, detecting and expanding your spectrum of allies etc. This paper initially examines factors such as social media, the level of democratization and ethic or cultural dynamics to discover whether there exist differences civil society organizations between Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) and Most Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs) that render the former unable to follow the aforementioned guidelines, hence unable to launch a successful demonstration. This examination hints that LEDCs have specific attributes, which hamper success in civil demonstrations. However, examining trends in the global arena, we observe that the objectives and trajectory of protests in both worlds begin to diverge. Studying a review of the more recent protests around the world, this paper identifies that, nowadays, some demands of citizens in both MEDCs and LEDCs prove to be notably similar.

**Keywords:** protest, effectiveness, LEDCs, change, development



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## Introduction

The term social protest refers to different forms of “political expression through which a group of civilians seeks to bring about social or political change by influencing the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of the general public or the policies implemented by organizations or institutions” (Lipsky, 1968). Such forms may entail overt public displays, demonstrations, or civil disobedience (Lipsky, 1968). The latter refers to instances where intentionally and actively breach the laws that formal institutions have set. Nowadays, protests may also take the form of signing online petitions, lobbying or other activities manifested and spread through online platforms (Lipsky, 1968).

Protests can take different forms while seeking to serve different purposes. Civil disobedience refers to non-violent refusals to abide by governmental or societal norms<sup>1</sup>. For instance, recent gatherings of people, across USA and around the world, to protest against racism and anti-black violence after the death of George Floyd could be characterized as a non-violent protests; protesters are kneeling or shouting but have no intention to use violent means. Mean whilst, the 2008 Greek riots in central Athens, were incited by the shooting of a young student by a policeman resulted in violent confrontations with rioters setting up fires and damaging shops and houses. Furthermore, protesting can be rooted in social, political or economic reasons (Vatikioti, 2016). The ‘Mouvement des gilets jaunes’ which begun in France in 2018 expressed the working class’s frustration, angst and exhaustion when a new rise on fuel prices was about to further undermine their ability to make their living (Cigainero, 2018). Alternatively, the #MeToo movement largely advancing with the aid of social media expresses a desire to end a social issue, sexual abuse and harassment against females. Protests happening in Venezuela since 2014, derive from citizens’ need to and systemic corruption and overthrow the current Political leader (Carothers et al, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Civil disobedience. 2021. In *Merriam- Webster com*. Retrieved February 21, 2021 from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/civil%20disobedience#:~:text=of%20civil%20disobedience-,%3A%20refusal%20to%20obey%20governmental%20demands%20or%20commands%20especially%20as%20a,Merriam%2DWebster%20on%20civil%20disobedience>

This paper will not specify the type of protest being examined, but use of the word 'protest' will indicate citizens' expression of disapproval, dissatisfaction and the desire for a situation to change. I argue that encapsulating all types of protesting will facilitate my deriving of general but important conclusions on the effect of international development on protest outcomes. I deem that the two aforementioned topics are significantly relatable. Experts in the field of International Development, often express the concern that it is difficult to prioritize different objectives. Should economic growth precede attempts for greater equality? Should we focus on income or the secure provision of public goods and services (e.g., education, healthcare, etc)? Would people choose a higher income over a wider endowment of freedoms? Examining protests can help experts answer some of these questions because protests reveal people's feelings, needs and desires. One can claim that protests usually occur when people's basic needs are not satisfied, and protests rarely advocate for ambitious plans for extensive development. Still, if international development looks for the amelioration of individual's living standards, then acknowledging and satisfying people's demands in a protest is a fundamental first step towards this goal.

More importantly, we must study the probabilities of success protesters face coming from different socio-economic backgrounds. For this purpose, this paper seeks to discern whether there exist specific factors that render protesters from LEDCs less likely to attain their desired change. To facilitate my investigation, I have randomly selected an experts' (Srdja Popovic, a Serbian Political activist) guidelines to effective protesting. Following, I lay out Popovic's advice and discuss why protesters from LEDCs may face difficulties in trying to follow them.

### **The probabilities of winning and losing**

'Everything must change' is not precise enough.

At a first glance, Popovic's first requirement: "Define the change you want to see", seems like difficult task for any and all protesters (Satell et al, 2017; 2). Arguably when people march on the streets, they have been experiencing a substantial amount of unease and dissatisfaction caused from one policy or more generally from their overall living standards. In many instances, protests that seem to be focused on a specific objective (e.g. a newly implemented policy that burdens disproportionately one or more social groups) are in reality

triggered by multiple other causes of dissatisfaction felt amongst protesters. Put differently, the reason that sparked the protest can be the tip of the iceberg underneath which lies a longer period of discontent. A simple example could be the ‘yellow vest’ (in French: gilets jaunes) protest ignited and spread around France but also later extended in other European countries. The governmental decision to implement a green tax drew rural inhabitants of the working and middle class on the streets due to the heavy burden that this tax would bring on their daily lives which involved extensive driving (Cigainero, 2018). The yellow vest protesters were initially expressing their inability to bear the expense of heavily taxed fuel but were later demanding the resignation of the President Emanuel Macron (Cigainero, 2018). Ostensibly, there had been numerous policies favouring higher social strata, namely relaxing labour laws and slashing the wealth tax.

Nonetheless, a thorough examination reveals that some protests are appreciably more focused than others. There exists a large number of protests, primarily in democratic countries, whose objectives are specific socio-economic policy issues and in which campaigners do not aim to transform the governmental system holistically (Carothers et al, 2015). For instance, the recent outbreak of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement in USA demands the cease of systematic police violence against the Black community. Other examples may include protests around gender violence observed in India and protests to decrease housing costs in Israel (Carothers et al, 2015). Conversely, a wide proportion of protests in non-democratic countries can be confidently characterized as pro-democratic (Carothers et al, 2015,). In other words, they are protests demanding a comprehensive transformation of the country’s political system. In such cases, the objective of the protest is markedly broad and abstract as protesters demand the cease of the current system but do not know neither what institutions they would rather desire nor how to establish them. In short, it is difficult to delineate what needs to change when everything must change.

More specifically, Srdja Popovic recommends choosing and starting battles that are ‘big enough to matter but small enough to win’. On that note, studying the new higher tides of protests in Africa, Arnould et al (2016;5) conclude that the “democratisation wave of the 1990s’ led to a ‘regime change but not a systemic change”. In other words, there is evidence that the necessary changes that need to happen in some parts of the worlds are notably deep and complex. Even though this argument may seem a hasty generalization to many, it is demonstrably reasonable and legitimate to claim that, according to Popovic’s theorem for

effective protesting, protesters in LEDCs are more likely to fall short in their efforts to bring about change. Falling behind in the development signals wider and more comprehensive defects in the social, economic or political systems of these countries. Consequently, citizens are asking for a broad remodelling and not merely for a more favourable stance in specific policies. This difference will be made clear in the following section.

### Unification hampered by tribal or religious differences

Popovic's second advice comes from Sun Tzu's saying "Know yourself, know your enemy, and know the terrain" (Satell et al, 2017; 2). Popovic instructs protesters to study and become aware of the stance of their entourage and manage to influence some to become their allies. In other words, identify who could share your disposition and demands and effectively reach out to them (Timcke, 2017; 1). I support that this objective is notably more difficult to meet in LEDCs for distinct reasons.

To examine the possibilities of establishing alliances within one's society I study the concept of 'social capital' which I came across during my research. Social capital is "an instantiated norm that promotes the cooperation between two or more individuals" (Fukuyama, 2001; 7). It comprises tools that fabricate co-operation between different people: "honesty, trust, the keeping of commitments, reciprocity and other virtues" (Fukuyama, 2001; 8). According to Fukuyama, the development of networks and civil society are outcomes of the deployment of social capital (Fukuyama, 2001). Furthermore, every part of 'traditional culture (e.g. social class, tribes, village associations, religious sects etc) has been established through the norms that manifest social capital'"(Fukuyama, 2001; 9). What follows from Fukuyama's theory is that establishing alliances will be difficult in societies stratified by tribes or religions with polarized beliefs and interests.

Fukuyama mentions that in the Chinese parts of East Asia and in Latin America, individuals have a narrow circle of family members and social friends and exhibit difficulties in trusting people outside this tight sphere (Fukuyama, 2001). This trend impedes both the expansion of protester's allies and economic development. For instance, this social arrangement eases practices of corruption with public officials stealing state funds on the grounds of helping their families (Fukuyama, 2001). Fukuyama further explains that while modern societies exhibit numerous interrelating social groups allowing individuals to adopt different

memberships and dimensions of self-identification, traditional societies showcase narrow segmentary social units often in the forms of villages or tribes (Fukuyama, 2001). Suggestions of methods to increase social capital include the role of education and the provision of public goods with a focus on property rights and public safety. Arguably, these elements are lacking in LEDCs (Fukuyama, 2001). Lastly, Fukuyama points out to anecdotal evidence that outsiders will face difficulties in encouraging civil society in contexts where it has no local roots (Fukuyama, 2001).

The aforementioned finding opens up a new discussion leading to the identification of another interesting and possibly significant factor which could prevent protesters in LEDCs from identifying and expanding their sphere of allies. Recurrent instances have been reported whereby leaders commence conspiracy theories and “put the blame on foreigners” (Carothers et al, 2015; 20). Countries from which these trends have been documented, are Russia, Turkey and Venezuela. Hence, I cannot argue that there is a concrete relation between the level of development and this trend, however I do deem that this is an important area to be examined. Leaders have been reported to label protesters as foreign agents in their effort to close off space for civil society organizations (Carothers et al, 2015). “Blaming the Foreigners” has also been a strategy of developed European countries. Namely, when confronted with a severe financial crisis, the Cypriot and Greek governments attempted to appease their indignant populations by blaming the European bureaucrats (Iordanidou et al, 2014;71). Ergo, this practice does not hamper social capital activation only in LEDCs. Seemingly legitimate hypothesis that ‘the more isolated a country is from the dominant norms and institutions in the global arena, the easier for the leader to turn the public against it’ need to be examined further.

### The institution paradox

This section identifies a problem encountered in LEDCs greatly similar to that discussed on the first paragraph. However, this difficulty is re-examined and extended to reveal plausible strains that LEDCs can face while trying to meet Popovic’s third requirement for an effective protest. Popovic claims that to successfully attain the change they wish to see, protesters must know beforehand the way with which this difference will be made. More importantly, protesters must have identified “the institutions that have the power to implement the change they seek” (Popovic et al, 2017;3). Examples of potentially useful and necessary ‘pillars of power’ are ‘the police, the media, the educational system, governmental structures etc’

(Popovic et al, 2017; 3). Interestingly enough, in his own endeavour Srdja Popovic, helped the revolutionary group identify the useful capacities of the military and police forces and gradually build positive relations culminating to their defection (Popovic et al, 2017).

Apart from a variety of reasons that render cooperation between protesters and institutions less likely in LEDCs, the predominant difficulty that must be proclaimed is the following: As aforementioned, protests in LEDCs often demand for fundamental changes in the entire political system. But which are the pillars of power which one can rely on in order to bring about this transformation when transformation is needed to create these pillar powers? I use the phrase 'institution paradox' as a playful title to describe the situation whereby the institutions created after the change are the institutions needed for the change. Put differently, these pillars are not there to create themselves. In western literature (which arguably blindly focused on democratisation), one can find the assertion that "recent protests are able to tear down old structures but do not foster sustained political institution building or new forms of participation in formal political processes. (Carothers et al, 2015;18). Indeed, in countries with rigid, long standing democratic institutions protesters' demands can be easily translated into a new change. For example, in Greece and Spain, protests driven by citizens' dissatisfaction against tough austerity measures led shortly to the creations of new parties, able to be elected and bring forward citizen's demands (Carothers et al, 2015). On the contrary, in countries where citizens are fighting for a transition to democracy, an effective change is difficult to attain. (e.g. during, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, aggravated protests managed to end the presidency of Leonid Kuchma, marked by multiple political crises and scandals, successfully enabled the doing of a new election, but lacking the sufficient preconditions to render the electoral process free of malpractices, was unable to bring about a deeper institutional reform (Kuzio, 2014).

Indeed, many countries, arguably require an out-and-out changes of the institutions and leaders than manage power which is not entirely unattainable but still largely grinding. Data suggests a significant augmentation in the numbers of protests manifesting in Africa since the mid-2000s (Arnould et al, 2016). These protests spring from "unmet popular aspirations for change' and the 'deep-seated frustration with the economic and political status-quo" (Arnould et al, 2016; 2 ). An interesting point to note while studying the case of Africa is that many African countries have experienced the introduction of multi-party systems, however without ceasing the continuous eruption of public protests. One important reason of this

phenomenon is the lingering of the old political regimes in the new, slightly changed political space (Arnould et al, 2016).

Arguably, the outcome of a protest is a function of the protester's tactics and the social structure in which they act (Yang, 2016). Scholars have come up with two terms which describe two possibly shaping factors of protest outcome. "Political opportunity structure" refers to a flexible social structure that is open to negotiation" (Yang, 2016;2898).

Accordingly, "issue opportunity structure" refers to a political opportunity structure related to one issue (Yang, 2016;2898). Yunkang Yang examines protests in China, and finds that in a rather rigid political structure, Chinese protesters are more likely to derive successful protest outcomes when fighting for environmental causes (Yang, 2016). Exploring these new theoretic concepts, I reflect on how difficult it may be for an attempted protest to succeed when the structures are rigid and unbending and the pressing target (issue) of this protest is the transformation of this structure.

Two luxury goods= Equanimity and patience.

Popovic's fourth lesson "seek to attract, not to overpower" comprises different pieces of advice: "anger is an effective mobilizer, but anger without hope is a destructive force", 'it is best to start with small affirmative goals... cheap, easy to replicate, low-risk tactics" (Popovic et al, 2017;3). Three important elements are "planning, unity and maintaining non-violent principle"(Timcke, 2017; 1). It would thus be helpful to explore the environments in which protesters in LEDCs act as well as their physical and psychological state in order to discern whether equanimity and patience are easy for them to demonstrate and maintain. Arguably for "an aggrieved people to reject violence and insurrection to their problems, discussion of principles and ethics may have little effect" (King, 2006; 13).

The maintenance of non-violence is crucial in both possible outcomes (success or defeat). King explains that in South Africa and Madagascar, the numbers of casualties escalated when violence by the opposition incited violence amongst the protesters (King, 2006). On the other hand, in China and Burma, protester's non-deviation from non-violence to retaliate against a violent opposition, prevented such a spike in deaths (King, 2006, ). Nonetheless, the same author points out that in Africa, "many individuals fail to grasp and recognise how non-violent struggle can and has led to accomplishing significant goals" (King, 2006; 14).

Many explanations can be given to this trend. Belief in revolutionary violence can be a powerful philosophy especially amongst individuals who are inundated with hunger and anger (King, 2006). Additionally, King reminds us that 'many consider non-violent struggle to be synonymous with Western Liberal Democracies, in particular with civil society organizations and (...) trade unions, anti-globalisation campaigns, anti-war movements, and environmental campaigns' (King, 2006; 11). Therefore, arguably, there are specific organizational prerequisites for protesters to be and remain non-violent.

Another important factor that needs to be examined and taken into consideration, is the tendencies expressed by the opposition groups. Exploring governmental reactions to protests, Mix suggests that non surprisingly, during the Arab Spring protests, many authoritarian regimes used lethal repression against protesters. For instance, the Tunisian police shot protesters as did Gadhafi's security forces and regimes in Yemen, Syria and Bahrain (Mix, 2014). As expected, when foreseeing such a governmental response, protesters equanimity and patience is difficult to maintain as it can quickly be transformed to fear, panic, the need to self-defend and deeper anger. "Lethal repression often radicalizes factions and initiates a spiral of violence" (Mix, 2014;3). Furthermore, in such contexts, civil protests have often converted to a civil war (Mix, 2014). It is not illegitimate to argue that many Western democratic governments will not employ legal suppression to fend protesters off.

## Examining Global Trends

The second chapter of this paper seeks to zoom out and bring us up to date. It is worth examining the causes and objectives of protests in all around the world to decipher synchronous developments and trends in the way people express their needs and dissatisfactions. Surprisingly enough, findings suggest that despite the outburst of COVID-19 followed by lockdowns and repressive environments all around the world, protests endured as a critical part in the global political landscape (Carothers et al, 2020). Carothers points out that even in the start of 2020, when very little was known about the virus, huge demonstrations were erupting or enduring in diverse places around the world: Chile, Hong Kong, Lebanon and Iran (Carothers et al, 2020;1). Even though a small surge in protests was documented in February and March 2020, while the virus was establishing its global

dimensions, protests begun to re-emerge only a few weeks after lockdowns were widely adopted (Carothers et al, 2020). These findings evince that protests citizens' potent desire and need to actively voice their requests and aspirations despite hardships and ascertains that studying protests is essential to achieving international development.

Another important topic which I will not be exploring in-depth, but provide findings which reveal the need for further and more in-depth research, is the examination of recent protests objectives. These findings can highlight and prove the need to employ a comparative study between the two worlds to understand why protests can be effective in MEDCs but not in LEDCs. Do protests in LEDCs have different aims than protests in MEDCs? The stimulus that incited me to pose this question was recent development in the US. The 'Global Protest Tracker', a source for following trends in significant protests from all around the world, shows a compelling observation. Under ongoing protests, one can see that electoral protests are being held in Uganda (LEDC), Belarus (economy in transition) and USA (MEDC)<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, 'Opposition leader arrest protests' are held in Uganda and Russia, Corruption protests are held in Iraq and Bulgaria". Exploring news sites with headlines similar to "20 Protests making Headlines around the world in 2020"<sup>3</sup>, one can find similar trends. Protests again gender-based violence have erupted in Mexico (2020) but also Greece (2021)<sup>4</sup>. Protests for the protection of the environment have unravelled outside the European Union in Brussels, the UK but also in Kenya<sup>5</sup>. Protests against the rise of fuel prices have been held in France and Iran<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> "Global Protest Tracker." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker](https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker).

<sup>3</sup> In photos: 20 Protests making headlines around the world in 2020. (2020). Retrieved February 27, 2021, from <https://www.news18.com/photogallery/world/in-photos-20-protests-making-headlines-around-the-world-in-2020-2931535-6.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> PROTESTS 2020, 2020 begins as 2019 left off - dissent. (n.d.). Retrieved February 27, 2021, from <https://www.euronews.com/special/worldwide-protests>

For brevity purposes, I will forejudge inferences that need to be explored in future papers. I deem that we see two important trends in the global arena: firstly, MEDCs start to experience anti-government and electoral protests similar to the ones long ongoing in LEDCs (namely, protests against election winner do not happen only in Algeria but also in the US), secondly, LEDCs have started to protest for social and environmental causes. The #METOO or environmental protests seemed were perceived as ‘first-world problems’, in the sense that only those who have secured a decent livelihood will have the opportunity to protest for further dignity. I firmly support that these trends need to be examined further.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

As explained in my Introduction, I support that civil disobedience and protests are indispensably relevant to international development. Civil protests reveal citizens’ demands, need, desires and aspirations for a life with greater living standards. Even more importantly, the objectives of civil protests can unveil the specific standards with which citizens are evaluating their living conditions. Furthermore, by identifying the probabilities of meeting these objectives or, conversely, the reasons why civil protests will not succeed, we can understand the reasons that prevent the amelioration of people’s lives in the first place. My deliberations suggest there are specific elements are interlinked and re-appear in different chapters creating impasses in protesters’ efforts in LEDCs. The lack of favourable political structures hinders the precise delineation of the desired objective, results in what I can an ‘Institution paradox’ and could plausibly hamper the use of social capital to extend the sphere of allies. The ‘institution paradox’ (i.e. the lack of institutions that would drive the desired change which is to create those institutions) amplifies the inability to set out a specific target and distinct steps to reach it. The lack of equanimity and patience results to the outbreak of violence and does not permit any procrastination from taking time to design a precise and thoughtful plan. These vicious circles, domino effects and impasses are often encountered in the study of international development: the lack of one element creates problems by and of itself and cause the lack of another element which will breed its own problems and deficiencies. Being particularly fond of discovering and studying these puzzles of International Development, I call for further research to solve the puzzles of my findings. Concerning my second chapter, I touch upon evidence that suggests that protest objectives in LEDCs have begun to resemble those in MEDCs and the vice versa. These observations can reinforce the queries raised in the first chapter. More precisely, Yellow vest protesters in

France prompted the French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe to call upon a meeting with all party leaders to discuss possible solutions (Cigainero, 2018). The French government even invited yellow-vest protesters to a meeting (Cigainero, 2018). Can one find the similar accountable Pillars of Power in Iran, or are Iranian protesters faced with a complicated situation whereby making a precise plan is immeasurably more difficult? Discerning and studying trends in the global arena can help us understand find our position and direction in the path for international development. Furthermore, given that countries have comparable objectives, we can rigorously examine whether LEDCs face distinct barriers when fighting for analogous causes.

The first and foremost remark that needs to be made is that, in this paper I do not consider Popovic's theory as the most realistic, reliable or effective or accurate. I acknowledge that other experts have proposed different theories with respect to effectively accomplishing protest outcomes. However, coming across Popovic's ideas during my studies, I decided to explore whether protesters from LEDCs and MEDCs can follow the Popovic's recommendation with the same ease. I deem that it would be inconvenient to attempt a comprehensive analysis of all possible theories, hence I used Popovic' recommendations as a roadmap to derive some initial conclusion which can be explored further. For instance, Popovic's movement plausibly faced many of the difficulties delineated above and associated with environments prevailing LEDCs. Astoundingly, Popovic managed to find ways to fulfil his guidelines. Correspondingly, my discovery of specific factors that could restrain the efforts of protesters in LEDCs paves the way for new research on how to overcome these obstacles and meet Popovic's requirements in different contexts with different obstacles.

My paper does not derive vigorous and tested conclusions opens up the way to further research which can unravel ground-breaking findings. I call upon pundits to test my hypothesis rigorously and subsequently explore ways with which to bridge the gaps I have found between MEDCs and LEDCs.

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