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Reported Social Unrest Index: May 2023 Update

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Reported Social Unrest Index: May 2023 Update

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Authorized for distribution by Nigel Chalk

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ABSTRACT: This paper is the second update of the Reported Social Unrest Index (Barrett et al. 2022), outlining developments in global social unrest since March 2022. It shows that the fraction of countries experiencing major social unrest events has been stable. Reasons for social unrest can be broadly categorized as stemming from sdebate over constitutional issues, protests connected to specific policies, and other generalized disorder.

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1. Introduction

In Barrett et al. (2022), we introduced the Reported Social Unrest Index (RSUI). This paper used media reports to measure major social unrest events in 130 countries at monthly frequency from the late 1980s to March 2022.¹ This paper is an update to that work, serving two purposes. It extends the dataset to May 2023, making it available for other researchers. And it provides a brief review of major incidents of social unrest during the intervening period.

Since early 2022, social unrest has been broadly stable with the fraction of countries experiencing major unrest events remaining roughly constant. This continues the trend of the last few years, with a rebound in unrest following a sharp decline during the pandemic.

Although social unrest events often have diverse causes, to allow a more structured discussion we group unrest events since March 2022 in three broad themes: national debate over constitutional issues, protests connected to specific policies, and other generalized disorder.

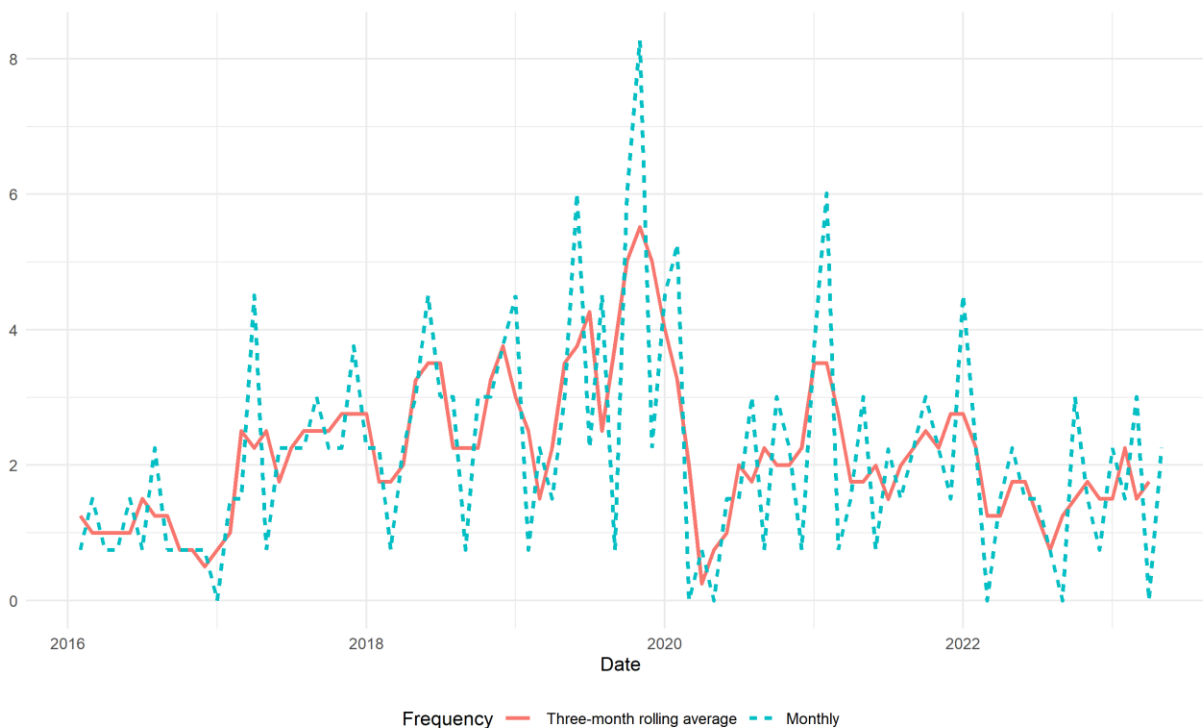


Figure 1: Fraction of countries experiencing major unrest events

2. Background: The Reported Social Unrest Index

The Reported Social Unrest Index (RSUI) 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. Barrett et al. (2022) provide a comprehensive analysis of a wide sample of case studies, revealing a strong correlation

¹ This paper in turn supersedes an earlier IMF working paper of the same name, and Barrett (2022) which added coverage to June 2019 and February 2022 respectively.

between large spikes in the index and key events in authoritative (often peer-reviewed) narrative accounts. It formalizes the identification of these spikes to identify and label major unrest events systematically. This paper also shows that this measure is not significantly affected by variations in search criteria, source used, language of the sources, nor time since the last event. For a full discussion of the construction of the RSUI, as well as a detailed analysis of its strengths and limitations, we refer readers to Barrett et al. (2020).

The RSUI and the associated events have been used in several other settings. Hadzi-Vaskov et al. (2023) 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. This work has also been used outside the IMF, with Diakonova et al. (2022) using the RSUI in a generalized macroeconomic forecasting exercise, and Diakonova et al. (2023) in analyzing the impact of uncertainty and unrest in Russia.

3. Social unrest since March 2022

3.1 Protests Relating to Constitutional Issues

In matters of public policy, it can be helpful to draw a distinction between regular and constitutional debates. The former are those which can be discussed taking the form of the state as given. The latter are those pertaining to the nature or remit of the state itself. (A similar distinction exists in legal matters.) And although the distinction between regular and constitutional issues is not always simple or clear, it is useful: disputes over fundamental issues of how government should work are likely to be longer-lasting and require more dramatic changes to address.

It is therefore notable that a relatively larger number of social unrest events in the last year might reasonably be categorized as relating to constitutional issues. For example, unrest broke out in the Karakalpakstan region Uzbekistan in July 2022 over a proposed change in its status from autonomous republic to a province. Iran saw large and widespread anti-government protests throughout the Autumn. In Peru, the President's attempt to dissolve Congress in the face of his impending impeachment led to a constitutional crisis which saw protests and violence throughout December 2022 and into the new year. Also in January 2023, large crowds stormed the Brazilian Congress, Supreme Court, and Presidential palace apparently with the hope that the armed forces would intervene in the transfer of power to the newly-elected president. And in March 2023, large-scale protests and counter-protests arose in Israel following proposed reforms that would alter the balance of power between the judiciary and other branches of government.

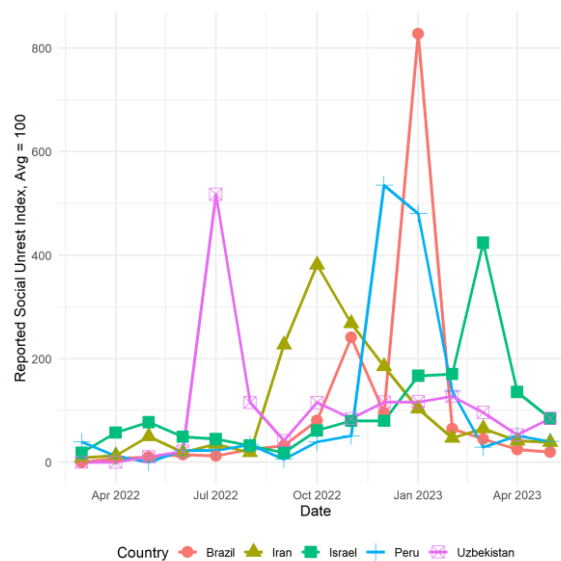


Figure 2: RSUI March 2022 – May 2023, avg.=100²

3.2 Specific Policy-related Unrests

The prominence of constitutional issues in driving recent protest should not obscure that fact that other events have been driven by rather more routine issues. For example, Sri Lanka experienced an unrest event during May 2022, driven by grievances over the deteriorating economic situation and subsequently fueling ongoing anti-government protests. In China, demonstrations occurred in November prior to the relaxation of the government's zero-Covid policy. In late 2022, Serbia witnessed demonstrations over a disparate set of issues followed by anti-gun protests after two mass shooting incidents in May 2023. In March 2023, protests in France emerged in response to proposed reforms to the pension system. And in the same month, protests also took place in Georgia against a proposed law requiring registration of foreign-funded NGOs and media outlets.

² Note that differences in media coverage and interest across countries mean that the level of the RSUI is not directly comparable across countries. As a result, it is normalized to average 100 for each country in each chart. Spikes in the index are thus *relative* to own-country average levels. As such, one cannot directly compare the level of the RSUI across countries to conclude that unrest in any one is greater or less than elsewhere.

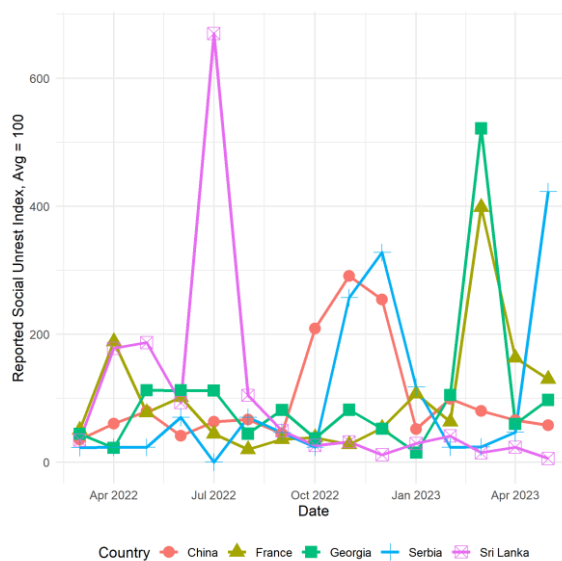


Figure 3: RSUI March 2022 – May 2023, avg.=100

3.3 Generalized disorder

Finally, a significant portion of the remaining social unrest events can primarily be characterized as a generalized breakdown in order, encompassing various aspects such as ethnic violence, police action, and political stances. In May 2022 in Tajikistan, ethnic tensions led to clashes between security forces and protesters in the autonomous region of Gorno-Badakhshan. In the same month, Chad saw protests after security forces fired upon demonstrators. In Sweden, riots erupted in April 2022 over religious tensions and in January 2023 protests broke out in favor of Sweden’s accession to NATO.

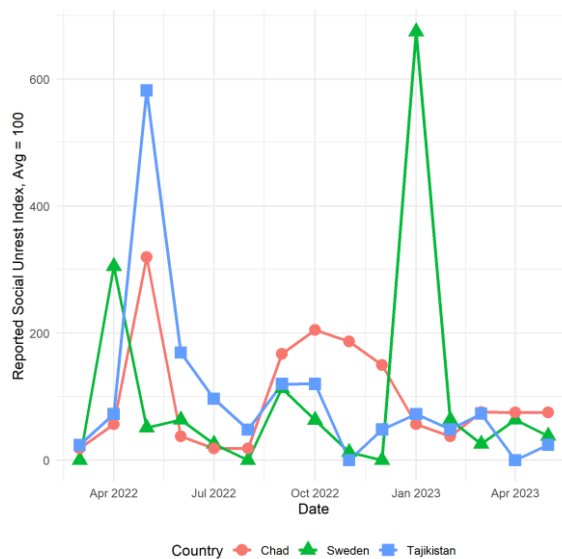


Figure 4: RSUI March 2022 – May 2023, avg.=100

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