

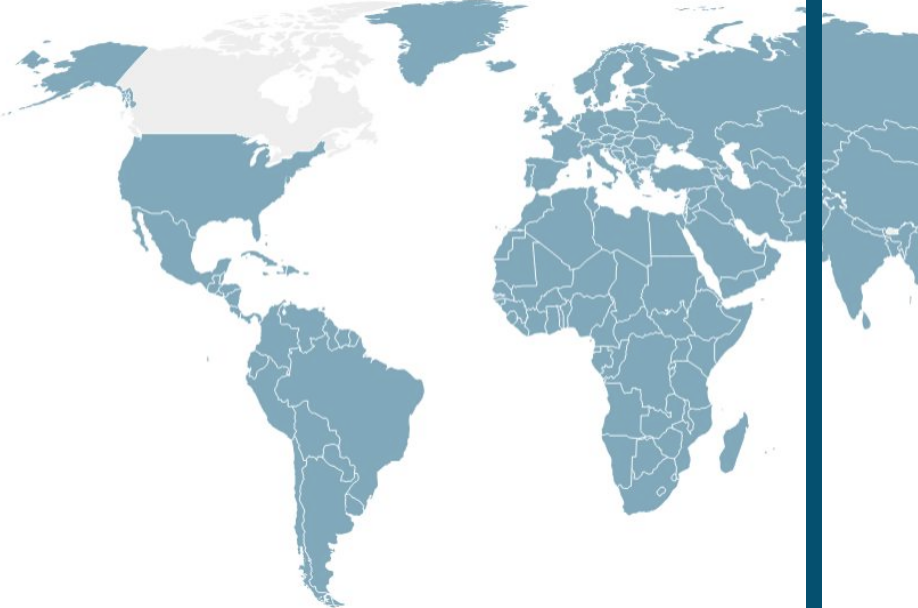


A YEAR OF COVID-19

THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON GLOBAL CONFLICT AND DEMONSTRATION TRENDS

The Armed Conflict
Location & Event
Data Project
(ACLED)

April 2021





A YEAR OF COVID-19: THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON GLOBAL CONFLICT AND DEMONSTRATION TRENDS

Dr. Roudabeh Kishi

INTRODUCTION

March 2021 marks the first anniversary of the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). One year on, this report explores ACLED's special coverage of the pandemic's impact on political violence and protest trends around the world – analyzing changes in demonstration activity, state repression, mob attacks, overall rates of armed conflict, and more through the [COVID-19 Disorder Tracker](#).

Earlier in the project we took stock of evolving political violence and protest patterns during the first 16 weeks of the crisis ([see this ACLED report](#)), and again after more than five months had passed ([see this analysis for Foreign Policy](#)). This report draws on a full year of data and analysis from ACLED's [COVID-19 Disorder Tracker](#) to trace the pandemic's wider effects on global disorder trends.

While demonstrations were initially interrupted as governments around the world implemented lockdowns and movement restrictions, protests ultimately resurged. Initially, this resurgence took the form of direct responses to government (mis)management of the pandemic and the immediate needs of protesters, including better access to personal protective equipment (PPE), or financial support amid the ensuing economic downturn. Soon thereafter demonstrations evolved into a continuation of the social movements that had begun prior to the crisis, with previously held grievances only exacerbated as a result of the pandemic's economic fallout and government (mis)management. In other cases, new demonstration movements emerged altogether. The combined result is that demonstrations actually *increased* in 2020 relative to the year prior,¹ not just despite – but in part

because of – the pandemic.

As a global emergency, the pandemic offered unique opportunities – and cover – for those in power to institute a wide range of new restrictions and pass sweeping legislation. Some capitalized on the occasion to bolster their position and consolidate authority, contributing to democratic backsliding. Others selectively enforced legislation or restrictions as a means to stifle opposition and to limit any challenge to power. Overall, state repression increased around the world.

The pandemic has also had an array of both direct and indirect effects on conflict patterns. While many hoped that the crisis would spur ceasefires in many of the world's conflicts, these hopes were largely dashed ([see this report](#)). Conflict events declined on aggregate compared to 2019, but political violence increased in more countries than it decreased, and most wars continued to rage ([see this report](#)). Rather, the coronavirus has contributed to shifting the incentive structures, opportunities, and timelines of conflict actors. In some cases, violence increased as groups seized the opportunity to ramp up their activity, especially at a time when state forces were preoccupied with the health crisis. In other cases, non-state groups, vying for greater legitimacy, tried to buy the support of local populations through 'better governance' of the pandemic than their state adversaries. In some countries, the effects of the pandemic indirectly resulted in increasing competition among armed groups, while in others, previously competing armed groups coalesced around opposition to government response to the pandemic. Yet in others still, the coronavirus disrupted the political landscape, ex-

1 ACLED expanded to a number of new regions since March 2020; comparisons of trends between 2020 and 2019 take

this into account, and therefore exclude countries for which ACLED does not have data coverage for 2019.

acerbating long-simmering tensions.

A year on, this report marks the end of our special [COVID-19 Disorder Tracker](#) coverage, reviewing the dozens of spotlight pieces and special reports compiled by the ACLED team during the course of the project.² Together, these pieces help to paint a picture of the myriad ways in which the pandemic has impacted global disorder trends over the past year.

DEMONSTRATIONS

Multiple protest movements emerged around the world in 2019, driving and escalation and expansion of demonstration activity relative to the year prior. Sustained demonstration activity led into early 2020, until the WHO's pandemic declaration in March. The immediate result was a **significant decline in demonstrations around the world amid lockdown measures to control the spread of the virus** (see [visual](#)).

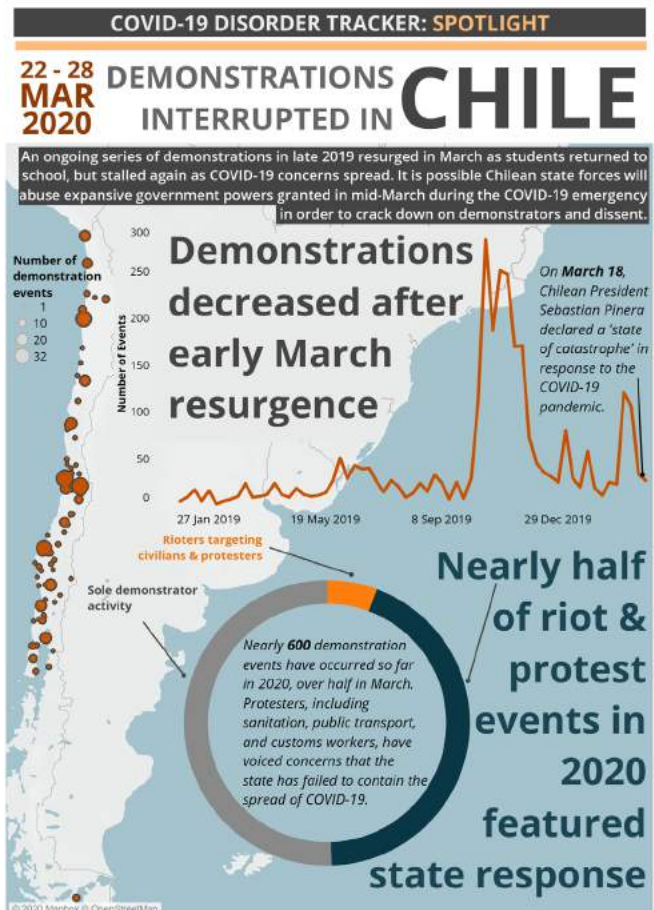
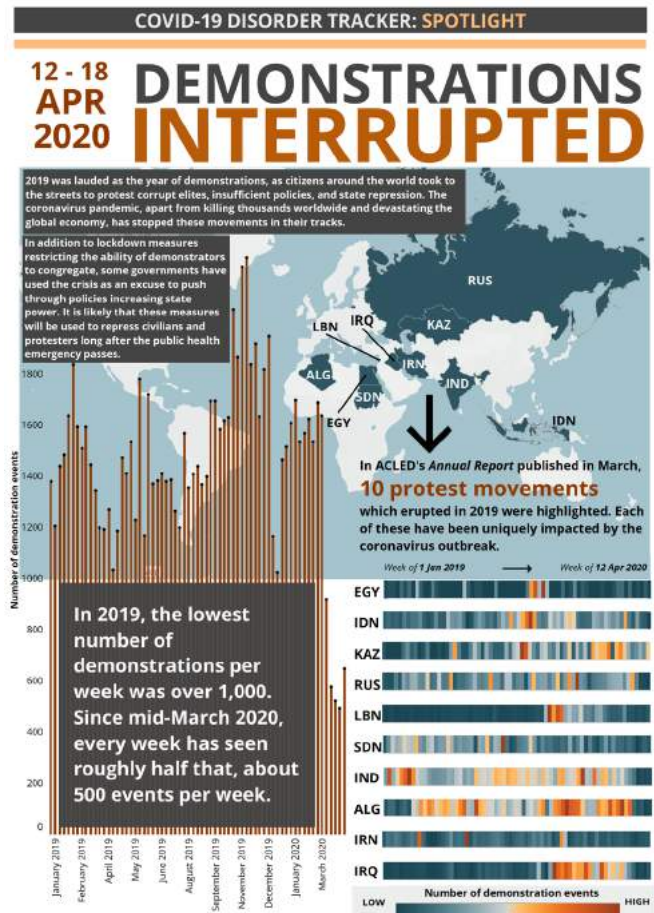
These declines were evident in countries like Chile, where protests in late 2019 were organized by students calling for socioeconomic equality and better social services. The movement resurged in March 2020 as students returned to school, but stalled with the spread of the coronavirus and new restrictions on movement (see [visual](#)).

A similar temporal pattern was recorded in India, which experienced a wave of demonstrations beginning in late 2019 around the Citizenship (Amendment Act). Protests declined precipitously at the start of the pandemic in March (see [visual](#)). Demonstrations dropped significantly in Pakistan during the same month, following the pandemic declaration (see [visual](#)). In Nicaragua, demonstrations declined amid the dual threats of coronavirus infection and government repression (see [this report](#)).

While many existing protest movements slowed in the face of lockdown restrictions and rising fears of infection, **demonstration activity over government responses to the pandemic increased**.

Across the United States, a range of drivers fueled protest patterns during the crisis, including opposition to

2 [COVID-19 Disorder Tracker](#) analysis and special reports are produced by various members of the ACLED team. As a summary review of these pieces, this report's text is drawn in some cases directly from the original analysis. Readers are encouraged to refer to the original pieces – hyperlinked throughout the text – for further information, including original author information.



COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

5 - 11 APR 2020

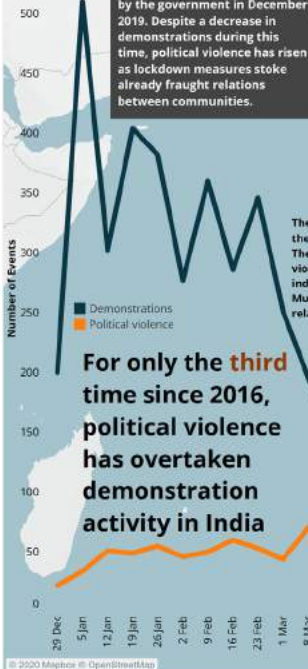
INDIA

When the coronavirus began to spread in early 2020, India was already in the midst of a wave of disorder spurred by citizenship restrictions imposed by the government in December 2019. Despite a decrease in demonstrations during this time, political violence has risen as lockdown measures stoke already fraught relations between communities.

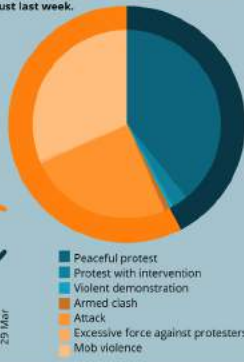
Number of Events
 1 15 20
 Events since March 2020
 Coronavirus-related
 Other disorder event

Coronavirus-related violence is countrywide

There have been nearly 200 coronavirus-related events since the outbreak, the majority of which are political violence. These include police violence over curfew violations, mob violence against healthcare workers, and targeting of individuals suspected of spreading the virus - particularly Muslims, who were the target of over a dozen coronavirus related events just last week.



For only the third time since 2016, political violence has overtaken demonstration activity in India

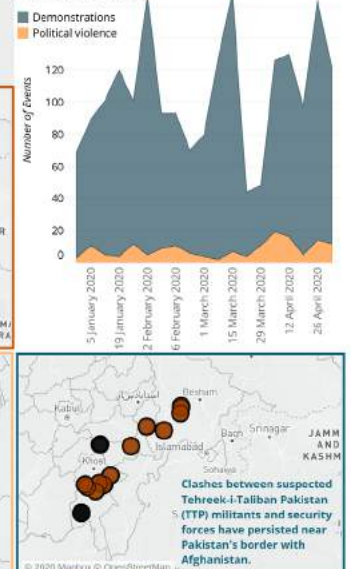
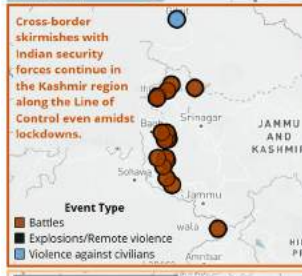


COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

3 - 9 MAY 2020

PAKISTAN

Relaxed lockdown measures have had the added effect of bringing political violence and protest levels in Pakistan back up to pre-pandemic levels. Mass gatherings such as demonstrations may further exacerbate an already rising death toll, and expose more people to the virus. Pakistan also faces continued armed violence on multiple fronts, straining the resources of a state already stretched thin due to the fight against the virus. The potential for an increased caseload, coupled with an overwhelmed state continuing to combat armed groups across the country, may result in disaster.

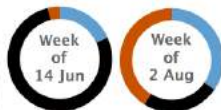


COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

2 - 8 AUG 2020

United States of AMERICA

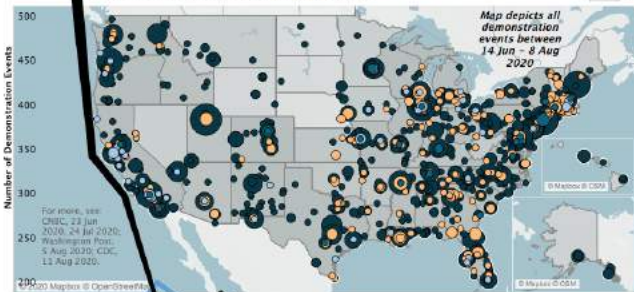
Last week, for the first time in months, the number of demonstration events directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic surpassed the number of demonstration events associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (see line graph below). Data from ACLED's new US Crisis Monitor project, in partnership with Princeton University's Bridging Divides Initiative, now allow us to track these trends across America in real time.



Over 40% of demonstration events last week were directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic, with fewer than 25% associated with the BLM movement (and other drivers making up 35% of demonstrations). This is a significant shift in dynamics from two months ago when demonstrations directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic made up less than 4% of all demonstrations while over 78% were associated with the BLM movement.

Donuts depict make-up of demonstrations. It is important to remember that despite these distinct trends, BLM-associated demonstrations and the COVID-19 pandemic are intertwined. The BLM protests have become the biggest in US history specifically because they occurred within the context of the pandemic. People who have lost jobs and income have been more likely to protest, especially as the pandemic has left clear winners and losers in its wake.

Demonstration driver on map below
 Eviction moratorium
 Health workers
 Reopening of schools
 Other COVID-related demonstrations



A number of factors drive the rising trend in COVID-related demonstrations [depicted on map]. Demonstrations involving teachers and students have been on the rise as many oppose the reopening of schools - although some have also demonstrated in favor of in-person teaching. Coronavirus infections have been on the rise, surpassing 5 million cases. Some schools that have opened have already been forced to quarantine hundreds of students due to exposure, raising questions about steps forward.

Last week, health workers staged protests at health facilities across the country as part of the 'National Day of Action to Save Lives', calling for adequate access to PPE and passage of the HEROES Act to provide aid to states.



The federal eviction moratorium lapsed in the last week of July despite about 21 million people still being unemployed and 1 in 5 at risk of eviction by October due to the economic impacts of the pandemic. A number of demonstrators have demanded a halt to evictions or the cancellation of rents during the pandemic.

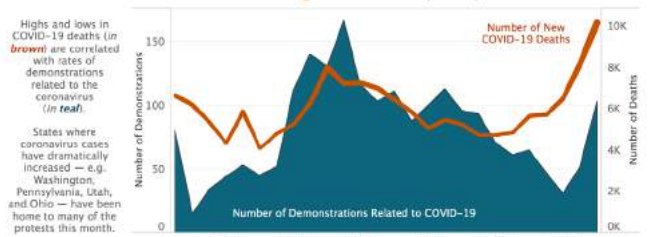
COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

8-14 NOV 2020

COVID-19 & US Protest Patterns

The number of COVID-19 cases is rapidly increasing in the US, with an average of over 100,000 new cases and more than 1,000 deaths reported daily since the beginning of November. This trend is bound to continue, especially in light of record-setting air travel rates in the lead-up to the Thanksgiving holiday. Hospitalizations have already reached a record high, and deaths are projected to soon double.

The rising number of cases - and resulting deaths - are fueling demonstrations, particularly those linked to the government's pandemic response, which has increased sharply. The health crisis has led to a significant shift in US protest patterns.



Highs and lows in COVID-19 deaths (in brown) are correlated with rates of demonstrations related to the coronavirus (in teal). States where coronavirus cases have dramatically increased - e.g. Washington, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Ohio - have been home to many of the protests this month.

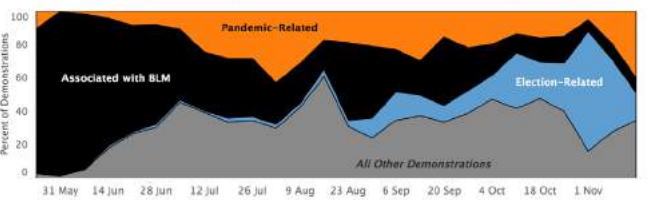
Coronavirus-related demonstrations include both protests that are in support of or against public health restrictions. Recently, the rise has been linked most closely to demonstrations demanding more government measures to curb the pandemic, such as calls for greater protections for essential workers.

This rise in pandemic-related demonstrations has shifted patterns in protest activity across the US.

Currently, nearly 40% of all demonstrations are linked to the pandemic, with the number of coronavirus-related protests recently doubling. In contrast, under 6% of demonstrations were related to COVID-19 at the start of November.

In the immediate aftermath of the general election, over 70% of demonstrations in the US were related to the vote. These events include rallies in support of or against one of the presidential candidates, as well as the election itself (e.g. 'Stop the Steal' and 'Count Every Vote' protests).

Earlier this year, following George Floyd's killing by police in May, demonstrations associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement comprised over 98% of all demonstration events in the country.



Data on COVID-19 cases and deaths comes from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC). For more, see Washington Post, 25 November 2020; CNN, 26 November 2020, 28 November 2020, 29 November 2020.

COVID-19 restrictions (see [this report](#)). Debate around whether schools should reopen for in-person teaching and mobilization by health workers demanding better safety measures — such as access to PPE — also contributed to spikes in demonstrations around the country (see [visual](#)).

More largely, protest patterns have tended to mirror COVID-19 cases in the US, with unrest over the government’s management of the pandemic rising in tandem with increasing infection rates (see [visual](#)).

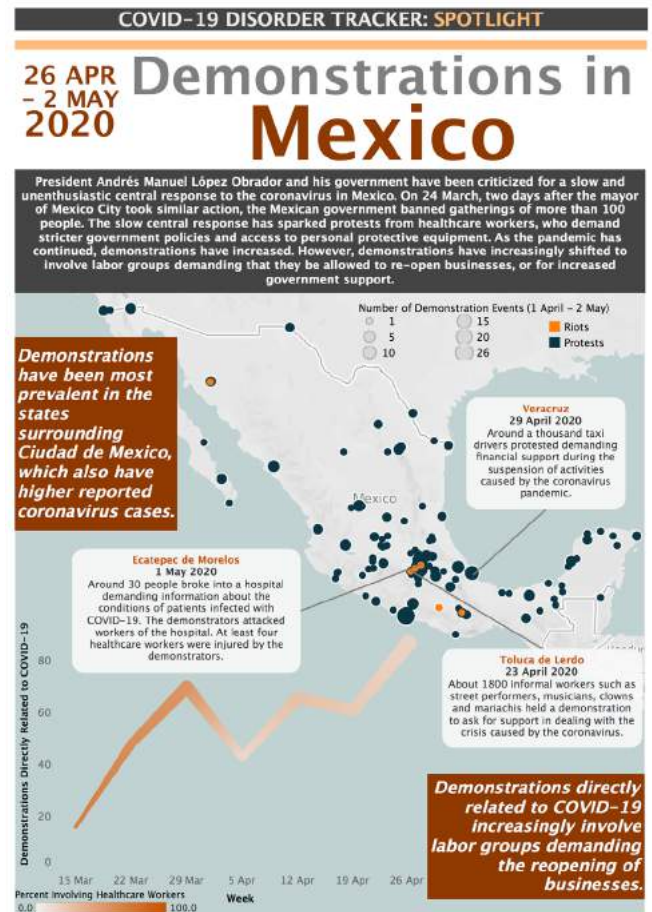
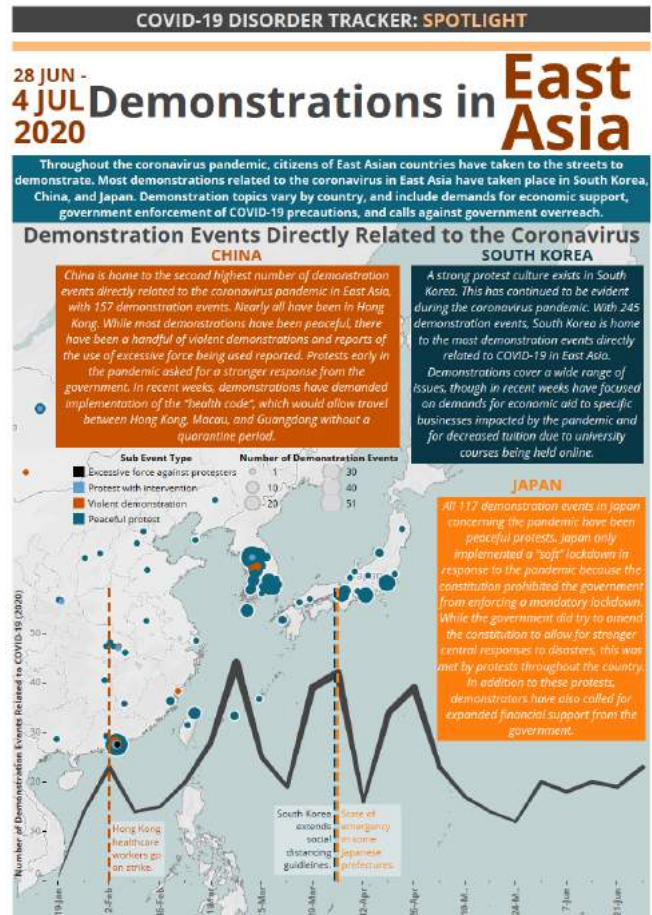
Demonstrations across East Asia also increased during the pandemic for a variety of reasons, including: demands for a stronger pandemic response from the government, such as in China; calls for economic aid for impacted businesses, such as in South Korea; and requests for general financial support, such as in Japan (see [visual](#)).

In Mexico, protests criticized the government’s slow and unenthusiastic central response to the pandemic. Initial protests were led by health workers demanding stricter government policies and better access to PPE. Soon thereafter, labor protests rose as well, with groups demanding they be allowed to reopen businesses or asking for increased government support (see [visual](#)). Protests in Brazil increased too, rooted in public concerns over government mismanagement of the health crisis (see [this report](#)).

While restrictions on movement did much to diminish protest activity in the early days of the pandemic, real and perceived government failures to adequately address the crisis exacerbated existing grievances driving social movements prior to the coronavirus outbreak. **As a result, many of the movements of 2019 and early 2020 soon returned with a vengeance, even as multiple new movements were born in reaction to poor government pandemic responses.**

In Lebanon, the government has been unable to tackle the country’s devastating economic crisis, the effects of which have only been aggravated by lockdown restrictions. Violent demonstrations have broken out over deepening mistrust of Lebanon’s political elites, with a surge of events beginning in late April (see [visual](#)).

Similarly, the fallout from the pandemic has worsened the economic crisis in Tunisia, leading to a revival of demonstration activity across the country



(see [this report](#)).

In Iran, popular concerns over widespread corruption, poor service delivery, and economic hardship — all exacerbated by the pandemic — fueled opposition to the regime and sparked a wave of prison riots (see [visual](#)).

Likewise, in Argentina, the government's response to the health crisis and the subsequent economic fallout has contributed to a rise in anti-government demonstrations amid protests over a controversial abortion law (see [visual](#)).

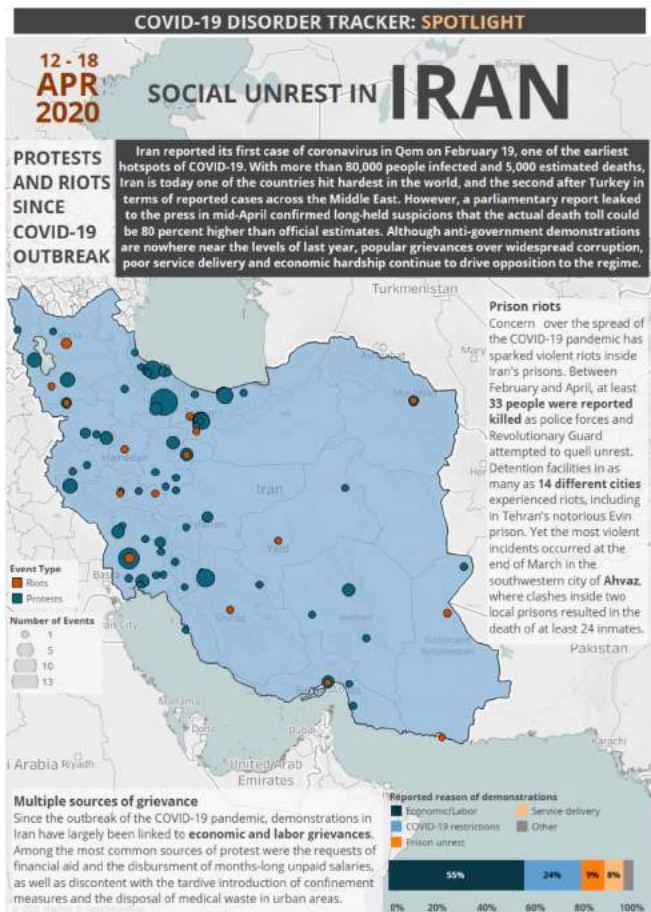
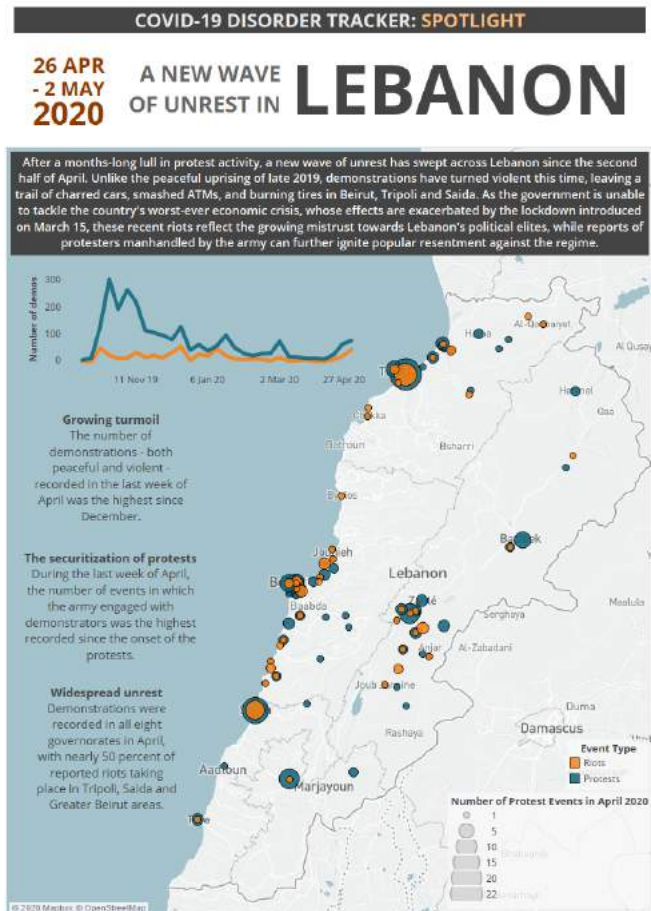
In the US, the massive wave of demonstrations associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that began over the summer is intertwined with the onset of the pandemic. The 2020 phase of BLM became one of the largest protest movements in US history in part because it emerged within a socio-economic environment deeply disrupted by the health crisis. Those who lost their jobs and livelihoods are more likely to participate in protests, and the pandemic's direct and indirect effects have both been felt unequally. The number of Black Americans working in frontline jobs impacted by the pandemic is disproportionately high, Black workers continue to earn less than their white counterparts, and almost half of Black households are concerned with their ability to make rent on a monthly basis. By August 2020, COVID-19 emerged as the third largest cause of death among the Black population in the US (see [this report](#)).

Protests simultaneously rose in Serbia amid allegations of unfair elections and criticism of the government's pandemic response beginning in May (see [visual](#)).

Similarly, in Chile, the government's economic response to the coronavirus pandemic led to a spike in labor demonstrations across the country over the summer (see [visual](#)).

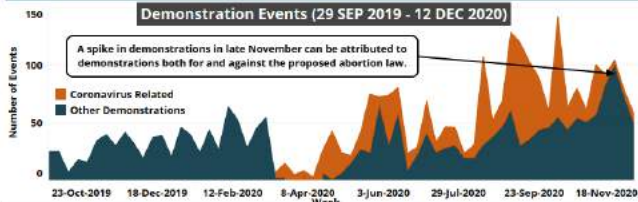
Demonstrations surged in the aftermath of Peru's national lockdown over the summer as well, resulting in one of the largest increases recorded by ACLED during the pandemic. Despite an early lockdown, by August, Peru had one of the highest excess death rates linked to COVID-19 in the world (see [visual](#)).

Meanwhile, in Hong Kong, demonstration activity re-

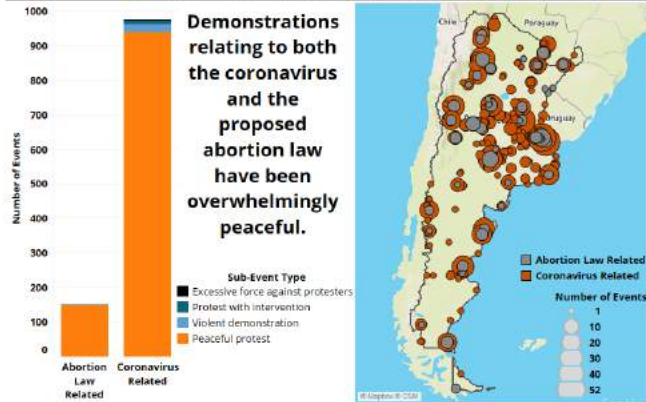


6 - 12 DEC 2020 DEMONSTRATIONS IN Argentina

Since President Alberto Fernandez came to power in December 2019, at least eight nationwide protests have been called by the opposition. A judicial reform bill – which the opposition believes to be a measure adopted to protect former President and current Vice President Cristina Kirchner from corruption charges – led to the initial demonstrations. In recent months, Fernandez's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent economic fallout has been a driving force behind anti-government demonstrations. A bill that would legalize abortion has also sparked demonstrations both for and against the proposed law. The bill was approved on 11 December 2020 by the Congress and is backed by President Fernandez. The bill still needs to be approved by the Senate, which is expected to take it up at the end of the month. The Senate rejected a similar bill decriminalizing abortion in 2018.



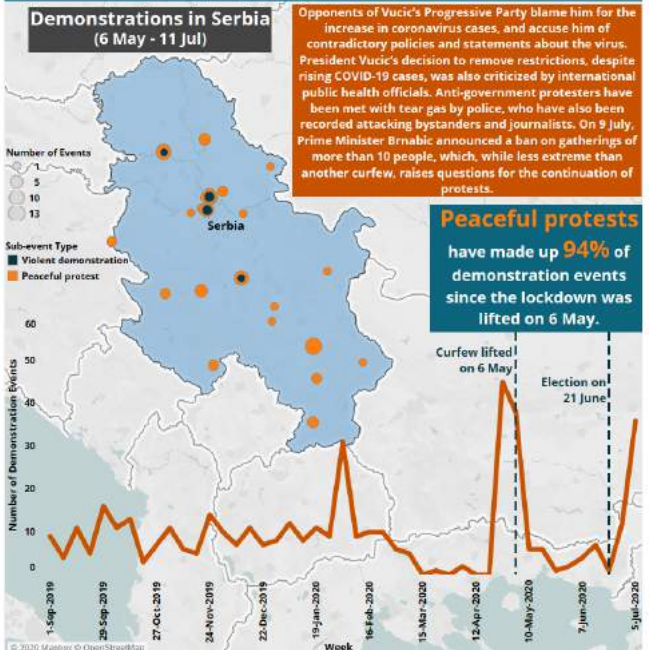
Demonstration Events in 2020 Related to Coronavirus and the Proposed Abortion Law



Demonstrations relating to both the coronavirus and the proposed abortion law have been overwhelmingly peaceful.

5 - 11 JUL 2020 Protests in Serbia

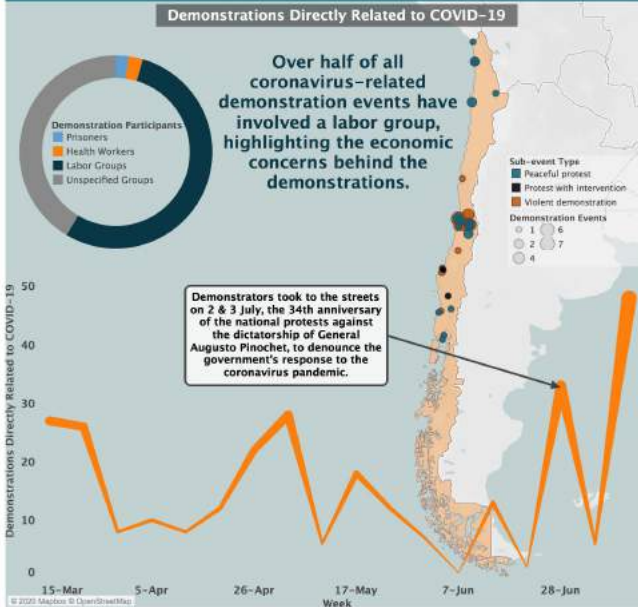
On 15 March, Serbia enacted a strict curfew in response to the coronavirus pandemic. During the week of 26 April, as citizens of Serbia participated in widespread pot-banging protests against the lockdown, ACLED recorded 45 demonstration events. On 6 May, despite the continued COVID-19 outbreak, President Vucic relaxed restrictions to allow for elections to take place. The election, which the opposition encouraged voters to boycott by citing unfair electoral conditions and a lack of press freedom, strengthened the ruling party's control of parliament. On 7 July, citing the rising COVID-19 case count, Vucic announced plans to resume the curfew. This announcement was met by large-scale protests, with opposition leaders blaming Vucic's refusal to postpone elections for the increase in coronavirus cases.



Opponents of Vucic's Progressive Party blame him for the increase in coronavirus cases, and accuse him of contradictory policies and statements about the virus. President Vucic's decision to remove restrictions, despite rising COVID-19 cases, was also criticized by international public health officials. Anti-government protesters have been met with tear gas by police, who have also been recorded attacking bystanders and journalists. On 9 July, Prime Minister Brnabic announced a ban on gatherings of more than 10 people, which, while less extreme than another curfew, raises questions for the continuation of protests.

12 - 18 JUL 2020 Labor Demonstrations in Chile

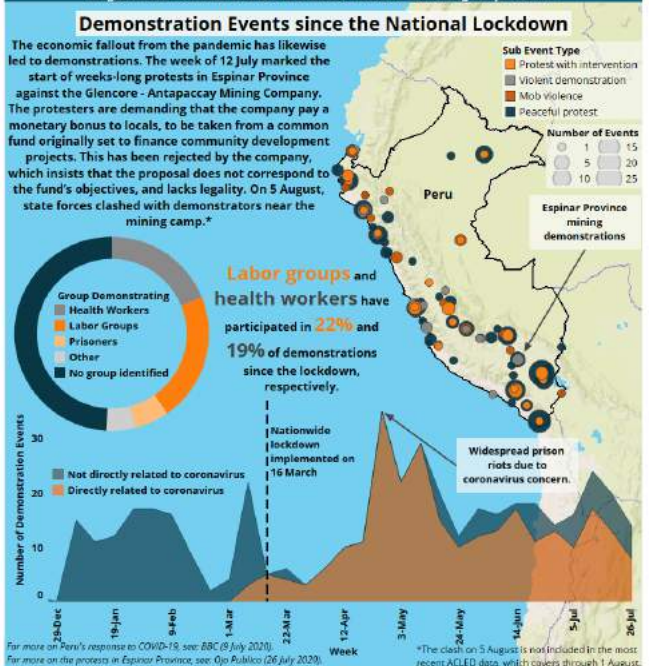
At its peak in early July, Chile had one of the highest per capita coronavirus infection rates of any country. The government's initial plan to control the pandemic brought the country's economic inequality to the forefront of national politics. Chile, which has one of the highest levels of economic inequality in the region, has seen widespread demonstrations directly related to COVID-19. Demonstrations have often been led by labor groups calling for increased government assistance. The demonstrations peaked during the week of 12 July in support of legislation that would allow workers to access a percentage of their pension during the pandemic.



Over half of all coronavirus-related demonstration events have involved a labor group, highlighting the economic concerns behind the demonstrations.

26 JUL - 1 AUG 2020 Demonstrations in Peru

On 16 March, Peru entered a lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic, making it one of the first nations in South America to do so. Despite early action, Peru recorded one of the highest excess death rates in the world during July, likely due to an underequipped healthcare sector. The reliance on markets to get food, and a high rate of participation in the informal economy, likewise put citizens at risk of contracting the virus. Following a steep decline in demonstrations immediately following the lockdown, reported demonstration events have since increased. According to ACLED data, Peru has had one of the largest increases in the number of demonstration events during the pandemic.



For more on Peru's response to COVID-19, see: ABC (8 July 2020). For more on the protests in Espinar Province, see: Ojo Publico (26 July 2020). *The clash on 5 August is not included in the most recent ACLED data, which covers through 1 August.

sumed as authorities began loosening coronavirus-related restrictions (see [visual](#)). Demonstrations spiked in May and June before the Chinese government imposed a new national security law and cracked down on pro-democracy activism in the city (see [infographic](#)).

In short, despite the pandemic — and at times because of the crisis — demonstrations ultimately increased in more countries than they decreased last year. Between 2019 and 2020, demonstration activity rose by 7% worldwide (see [this report](#)).

TARGETED VIOLENCE

The onset of the pandemic paved the way for a number of distinct forms of targeted violence.

The first has been state repression. Some states, especially in the early days of the pandemic, took a heavy-handed approach to enforcing coronavirus-related restrictions like lockdowns.

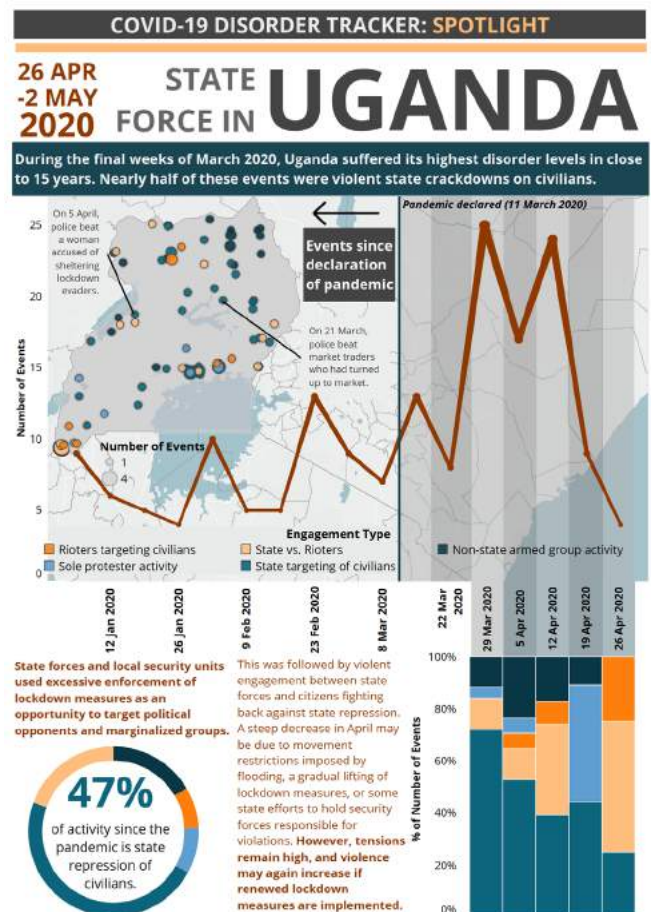
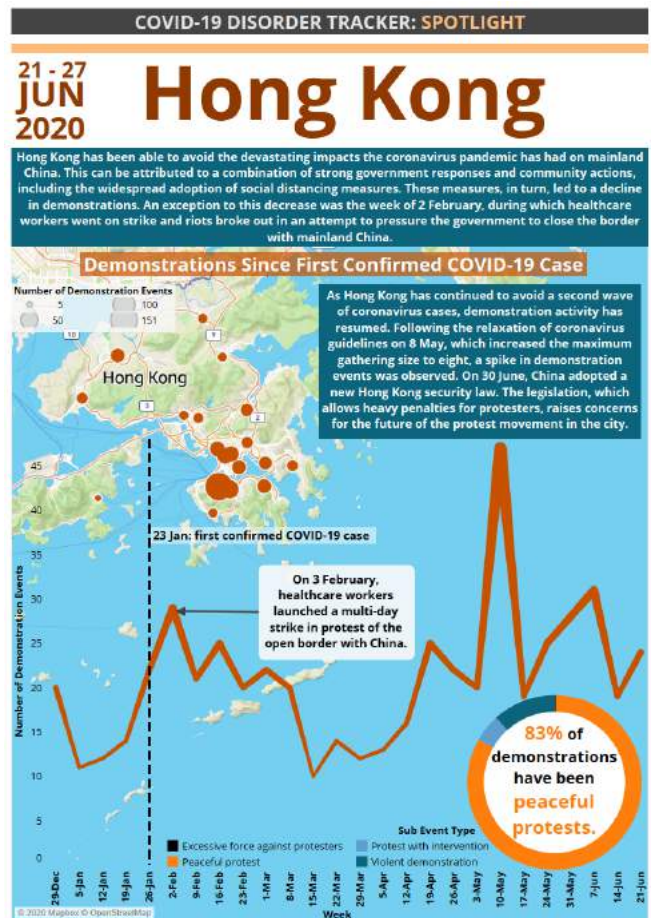
For example, in late March 2020, Uganda experienced its highest disorder levels in over a decade as a result of the government’s violent enforcement of lockdown restrictions (see [visual](#)). State violence against civilians accounted for nearly half of all recorded events during this period.

Similarly, in Nigeria, state targeting of civilians and demonstrators spiked in April as authorities violently enforced coronavirus restrictions (see [visual](#)).

In South Africa, while most types of violence decreased following the coronavirus outbreak, violence against civilians more than doubled by early April as a result of heavy-handed lockdown enforcement (see [visual](#)).

Some political leaders used the pandemic as an opportunity to stifle opposition and tighten their grip on power. These leaders capitalized on emergency powers granted during the crisis to suppress criticism and popular mobilization. The unique state of emergency provided them with cover to consolidate authority, contributing to democratic backsliding in multiple countries around the world since the start of the coronavirus outbreak.

For example, the pandemic has strengthened the po-



sition of states across West Africa. Governments have subtly exploited the crisis to repress opposition and to manipulate elections (see [this report](#)). In Guinea, where there had been large-scale demonstrations against proposed constitutional changes since October 2019, the health crisis allowed the regime to push forward with the changes, silence protests, elect and install a new parliament, arrest opposition leaders, and deflect international attention (see [this report](#)).

In Venezuela, *de facto* President Nicolas Maduro announced lockdowns in the early days of the pandemic, limiting ongoing protests in opposition to his regime in late March (see [visual](#)).

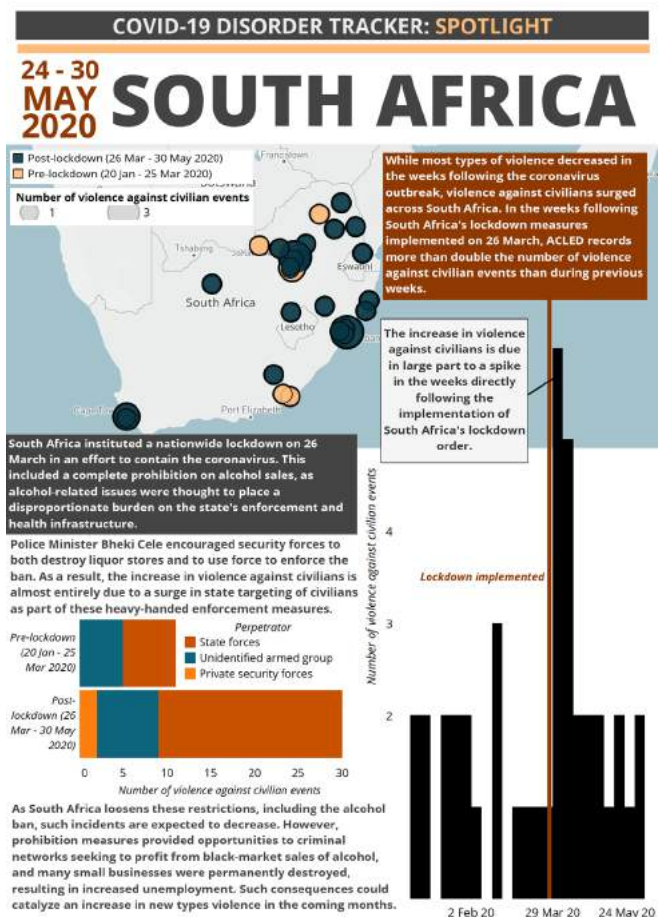
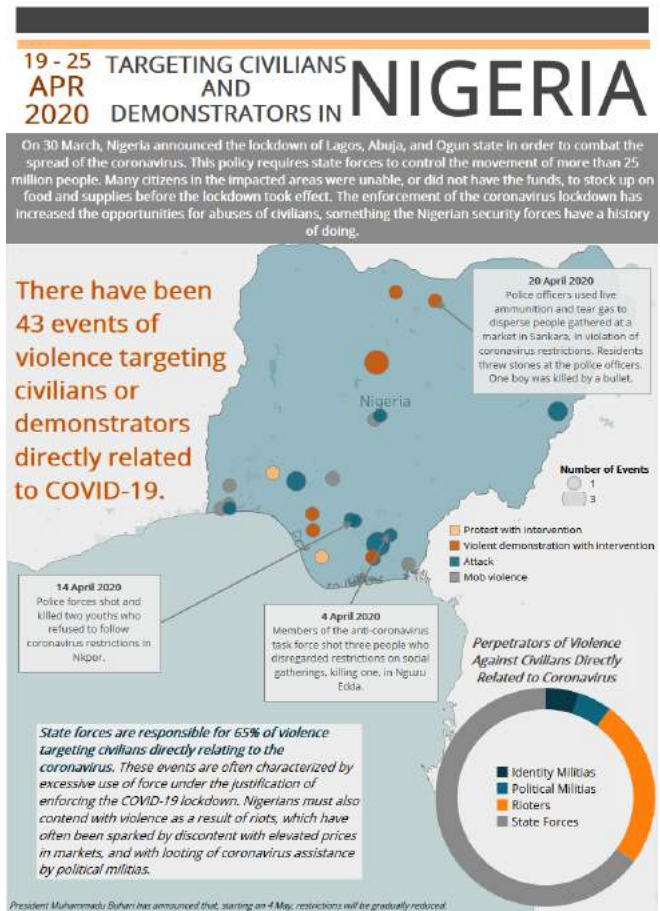
In Bolivia, the repeated rescheduling of elections amid the pandemic triggered unrest across the country over the summer, with critics accusing the government of postponing the votes in an attempt to retain control (see [visual](#)).

In response to the pandemic and the rising threat of the Islamic State in Sinai, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi took steps to tighten his grip on power. He moved to shore up his position in late April, ratifying new amendments to the country's emergency law, granting himself additional sweeping authorities that allowed him to ban or limit public gatherings, even outside of health emergencies. While the government says the measures are meant to deal with the pandemic, the majority of the amendments are not clearly tied to public health issues (see [visual](#)).

In Algeria, the government exploited COVID-19 restrictions to suppress political dissent during an upsurge in unrest. With the world's attention fixed on the pandemic, Algerian authorities pushed through prosecutions targeting activists, journalists, and supporters of the anti-government Hirak movement in May (see [visual](#)).

Globally, state targeting of the media increased last year under the guise of COVID-19 restrictions. Many states used the pandemic as a pretext to impose new limitations on civil liberties and to intensify repression (see [visual](#)).

Other types of targeted violence — such as Mob Violence — also increased during the pandemic (see [visual](#)).



12 - 18 APR 2020 INCREASING DEMONSTRATIONS IN **VENEZUELA**

On 16 March, Nicolás Maduro announced a nationwide lockdown in Venezuela in response to the coronavirus pandemic. (While Juan Guaidó is the de jure president of Venezuela and is internationally recognized as such, Maduro remains the de facto president of the country.) The lockdown has had the added effect of severely limiting citizens' ability to continue protests, many of which have been over access to basic goods — as well as opposition to the Maduro regime. Nevertheless, demonstrations have seen weekly increases, and reported demonstrations have now returned to average levels for the year, despite the lockdown.

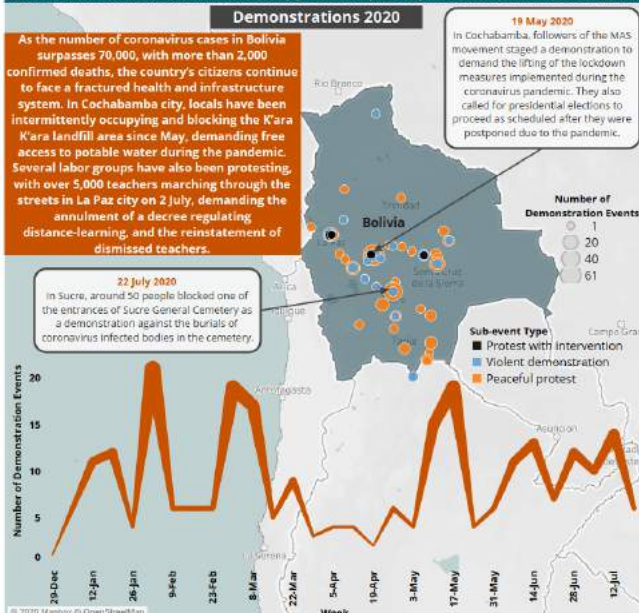
In addition to continued protests, Maduro also faces increased pressure from the United States, which announced its plan last month for a transitional government, and charged President Maduro and other senior officials with "narco-terrorism". Maduro has overcome challenges to his rule before — though the struggling global oil market will increase the difficulty of the challenges faced by his regime.



19 - 25 JUL 2020 **Bolivia: Elections Postponed**

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, Bolivia is facing a political crisis. After elections originally scheduled for May were postponed, supporters of former President Evo Morales and his political party, the Movement for Socialism (MAS), held demonstrations for three consecutive weeks. They demanded the general and presidential elections be held immediately.

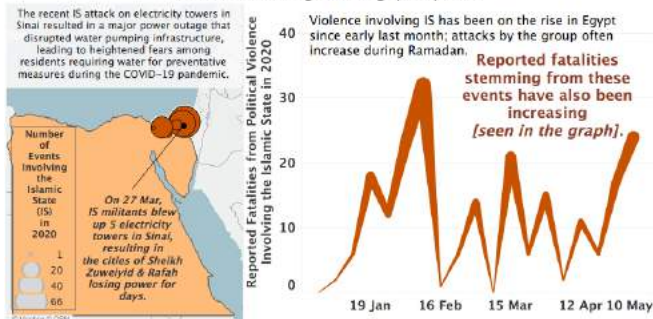
Last week, on 23 July, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal postponed the elections scheduled for 6 September for the second time. The elections have been rescheduled for 18 October 2020. Following this decision, supporters of the MAS movement, which continues to oppose the current government of Jeanine Áñez, claimed that they will again resort to protests to contest the rescheduling. Morales claimed the postponement was an attempt by the current government to hold onto power. He insisted the elections move forward as scheduled, with the necessary protocols in place to protect voters from the coronavirus.



3 - 9 MAY 2020 **EGYPT**

The rising threat of the Islamic State – Wilayat Sinai in Egypt, the strain of the global health crisis, and growing domestic unrest over the pandemic response leaves Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in a vulnerable position.

His solution: silencing news of militant attacks and pushing through new amendments to tighten his grip on power.



Following the attack on the towers, Egyptian authorities prohibited the media from publishing any news of the incident (though the state denies these claims). Details of the attack would suggest that the government is vulnerable to the growing security threat in Sinai. Such exposure, at a time when the state is already spread thin combatting both the pandemic and popular discontent with its management of the crisis, could threaten the president's hold on power.



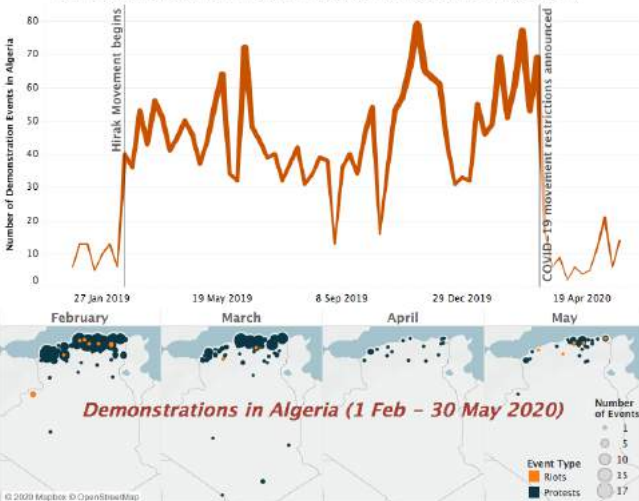
For more, see: Al-Monitor, 5 Apr 2020; Human Rights Watch, 7 May 2020; Al Jazeera, 9 May 2020; Washington Post, 10 May 2020.

24 - 30 MAY 2020 **ALGERIA & the Hirak Movement**

The Hirak Movement began in Algeria in February 2019, following then-President Bouteflika's announced candidacy for a fifth presidential term, and were centered on widespread anti-government sentiment. The protests — with some of the largest crowds since 2011's Arab Spring — helped to usher Bouteflika's resignation in April 2019. Yet the demonstration movement continues, protesting against elite politics in the country. The movement had been holding weekly demonstrations for over a year before COVID-19 movement restrictions slowed things down (see graph below).

There are reports that the Algerian government has been exploiting COVID-19 restrictions to suppress political dissent in the country. Amnesty International reports: "At the time when all national and international eyes are focused on the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Algerian authorities are investing time in accelerating prosecutions and trials against activists, journalists and supporters of the Hirak movement."

Activists have recently been sentenced for creating memes critical of the President and for criticizing authorities on Facebook. These arrests have prompted spikes in demonstration activity in recent weeks (see both graph and map below).



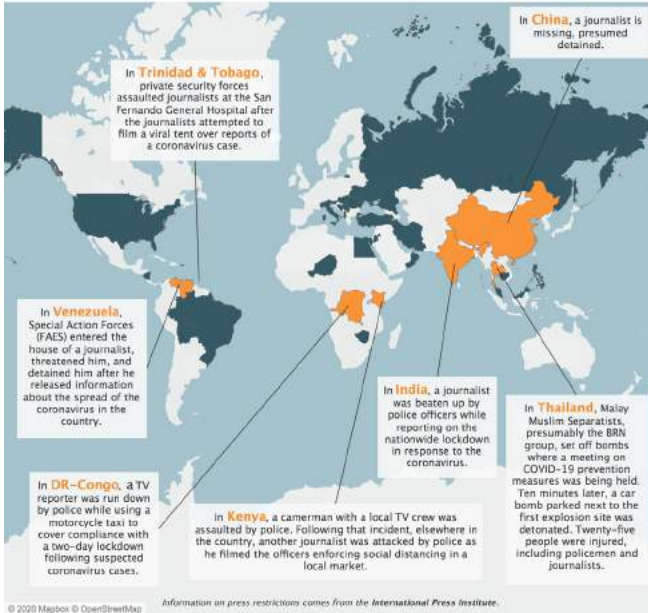
For more, see: Amnesty International, 27 April 2020; Middle East Eye, 29 April 2020; 21 May 2020; ACLED, 8 March 2019, 13 June 2019

22-28 MAR 2020 Media Targeting

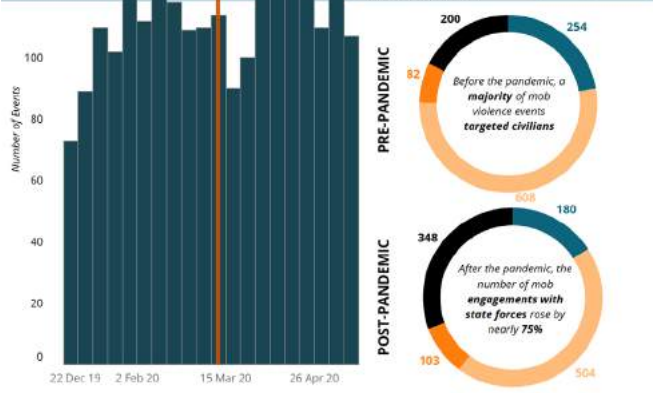
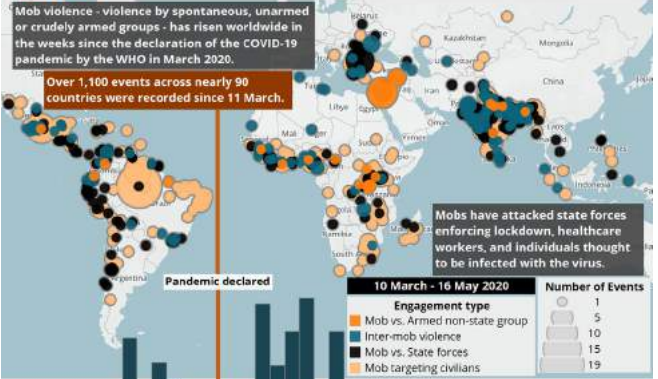
State repression is expected to rise, especially in authoritarian states, under the guise of strict adherence to health security standards. One of these tactics has been attacks on the media – specifically violence against journalists. The map below depicts these trends since the start of 2020.

In **orange** on the map are countries where there have been reports of **violence against journalists** linked to their coverage of COVID-19.

In **navy** on the map are countries where there have been reports of **restrictions placed on the media**, which can be precursors to such violence.

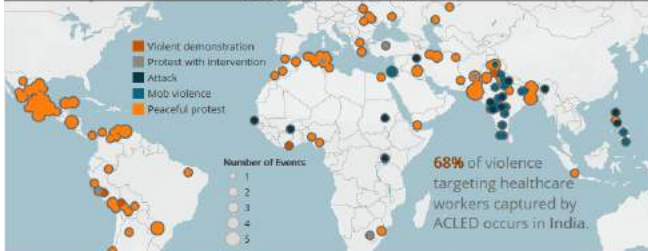


10-16 MAY 2020 MOB VIOLENCE

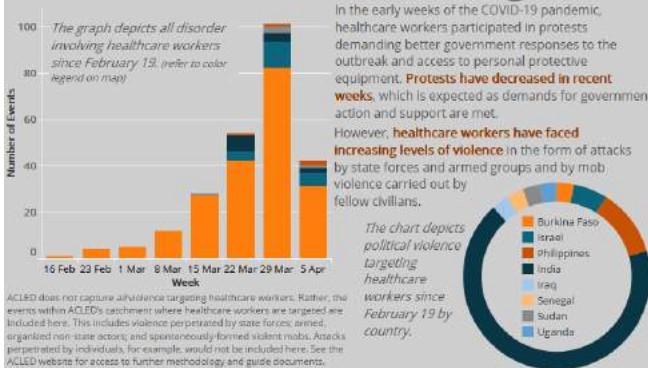


5-11 APR 2020 Healthcare Under Siege

As the coronavirus spreads, healthcare workers and systems have been put under immense strain. On top of treating COVID-19 patients, healthcare workers participated in protests. In some cases despite government intervention, demanding stronger government responses to the pandemic. In recent weeks, doctors, nurses, and EMS providers have also had to contend with attacks by police and armed groups and with mob violence carried out by fearful civilians.



From Protesters to Targets

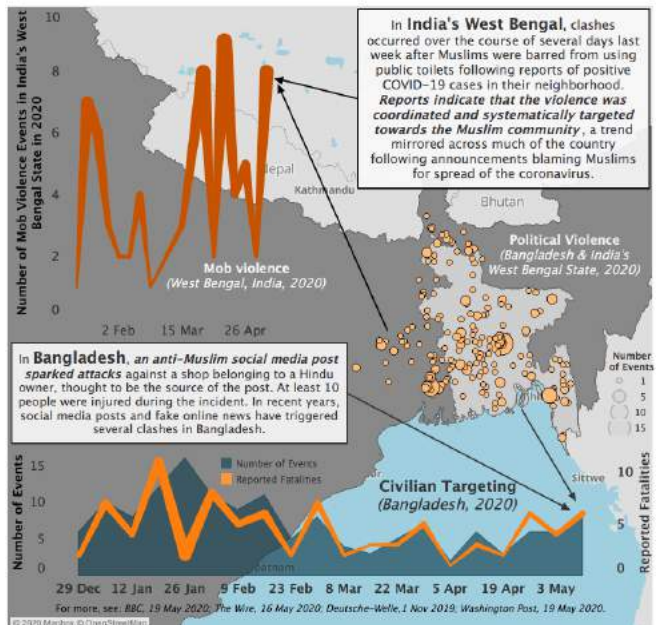


10-16 MAY 2020 Political violence in the path of CYCLONE AMPHAN

Cyclone Amphan, one of the most powerful in decades, made landfall in India's West Bengal state on the afternoon of May 20. As the cyclone approached from the Bay of Bengal, millions of people were in the process of evacuation from India's West Bengal and Bangladesh. The global pandemic, however, has made evacuations more difficult.

Adding further complication has been the recent rise in mob violence and civilian targeting in this region in the wake of the pandemic. The evacuation and housing of affected residents in shelters may lead to an increase in disorder, as people fear sharing confined space with others due to the surge of coronavirus cases in the region.

Such fears have motivated much of the violence in this region in recent weeks.



Mobs have attacked authorities enforcing lockdowns, healthcare workers (see [visual](#)), and suspected carriers of the coronavirus.

Tensions over lockdown restrictions and infection fears are aggravated when compounded with other stressors, such as environmental disasters like Cyclone Amphan in South Asia last May (see [visual](#)).

Political violence targeting women also remained a major threat during the pandemic. Attacks on women in the public sphere continued unabated during the crisis — sometimes at rates consistent to those recorded before the coronavirus outbreak (see [visual](#)).

ARMED CONFLICT

At the start of the pandemic, many hoped that COVID-19 could bring warring parties to the negotiating table, with the UN calling for a global truce to deal with the health crisis. **Yet the ceasefire appeal has not had the desired result** (see [this report](#)).

In Yemen, for example, the ceasefire did not hold (see [visual](#)), with the pandemic leaving warring parties largely undeterred in the south (see [visual](#)).

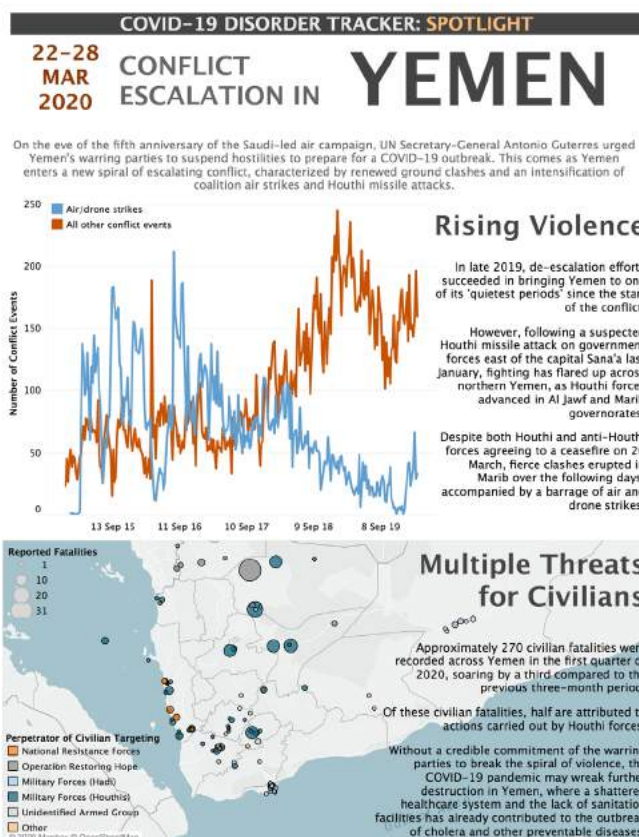
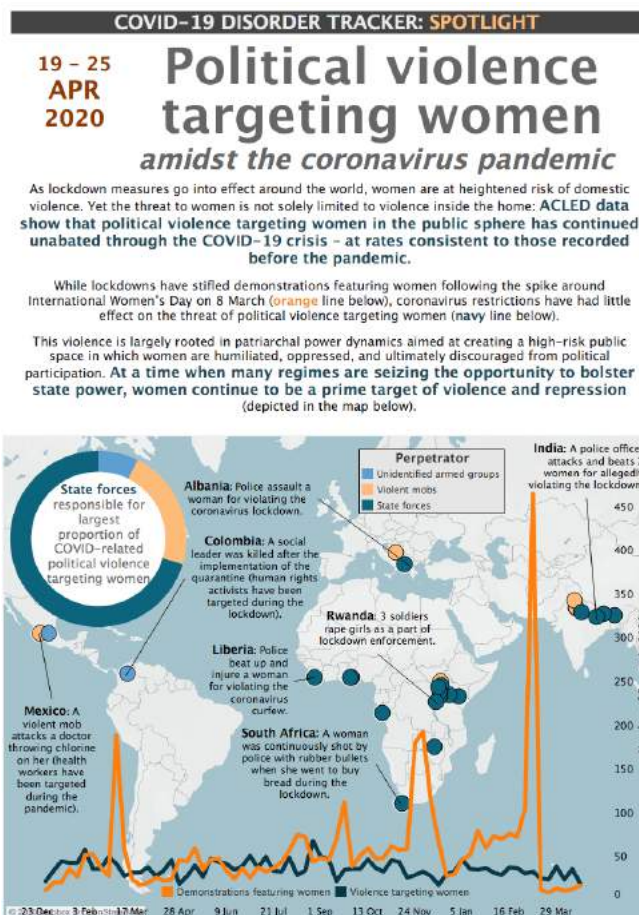
In the Philippines, unilateral ceasefires declared by both the state and the New People's Army in March also failed to significantly reduce violence (see [visual](#)).

In the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine, ceasefire violations have continued throughout the pandemic (see [visual](#)). Although a July ceasefire and de-escalation agreement has succeeded in significantly decreasing the intensity of the conflict, fighting remains ongoing (see [this report](#)).

In many countries, conflict continued with no new ceasefires, and with violent actors undeterred.

In Somalia, Al Shabaab launched daily attacks in May, hindering humanitarian efforts to fight the spread of coronavirus (see [visual](#)). Al Shabaab ultimately escalated its activity by 33% last year — one of the greatest increases recorded for any conflict actor between 2019 and 2020 (see [this report](#)).

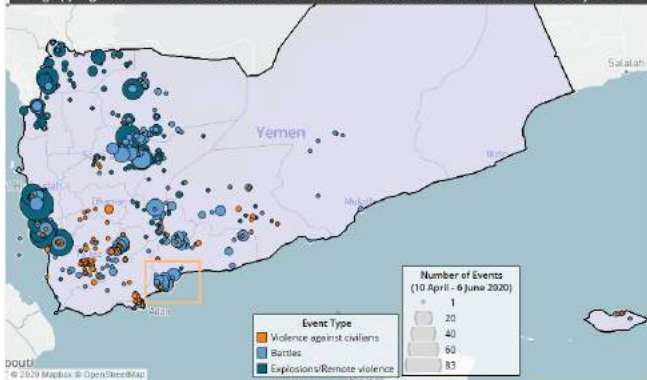
India faced active conflicts on multiple fronts during the pandemic — against militant groups in Jammu



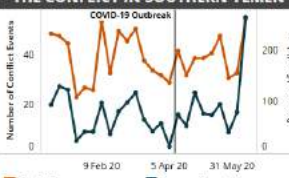
7-13 JUNE 2020

THE BATTLE FOR THE SOUTH IN YEMEN

Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Hadramawt on April 10, conflict has flared in southern Yemen. Clashes between government forces and those affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) broke out on May 11 in Abyan, the home region of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. This latest round of fighting underscores the lack of progress on the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, a power-sharing deal signed in November 2019 under Saudi auspices. Meanwhile, 80 kilometers south-west of the Abyan battlefield, Aden is grappling with a severe outbreak of COVID-19, which is feared to have killed hundreds in the city alone.



THE CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN YEMEN



In southern Yemen, the outbreak of COVID-19 has left warring parties largely undeterred. Following the STC's declaration of self-rule in late April, overall violence levels in southern governorates have gradually increased, culminating in June with renewed fierce clashes in Abyan.

THE BATTLE OF ABYAN



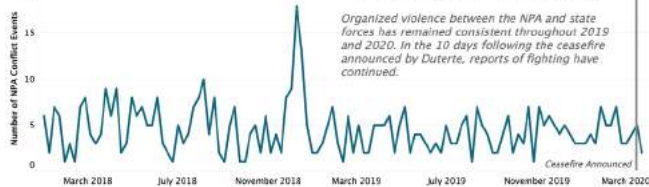
22-28 MAR 2020

Philippines

The Philippine government has been in armed conflict with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA), since 1969. On 18 March, in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, President Rodrigo Duterte announced a unilateral ceasefire with the NPA. On 26 March, the NPA announced they would implement their own unilateral truce in response to the appeal of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for a global ceasefire. Despite hope for a temporary halt to armed clashes, organized violence continues to be reported around the country since both sides made their announcements – calling the efficacy of the ceasefires into question.



Conflict with NPA Remains Steady

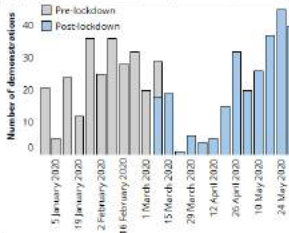


Organized violence between the NPA and state forces has remained consistent throughout 2019 and 2020. In the 10 days following the ceasefire announced by Duterte, reports of fighting have continued.

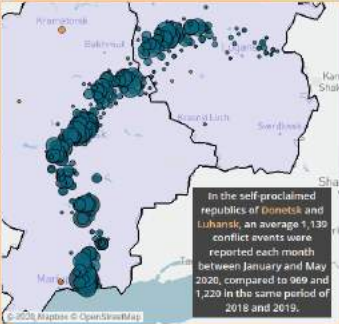
31 MAY - 6 JUNE 2020

PROTEST AND CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

The official number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and related deaths seems to suggest that Ukraine has weathered the crisis better than what many feared for a country plagued by economic distress and internal conflict. However, a mix of old and new challenges lie ahead. The looming recession risks stirring popular unrest, especially if popular demands to curb corruption are not met. In the eastern region of Donbas, ceasefire violations have continued despite the coronavirus crisis, and recent efforts to reach a comprehensive agreement on prisoner exchange, military disengagement and local elections have made little progress.



Although a ban on public gatherings introduced on March 17 has not been lifted yet, demonstrations resumed to pre-pandemic levels in May. This new wave of public discontent is linked to the government's response to the coronavirus crisis, corruption, police violence, and the proposed reconciliation policies for the war in Donbas.

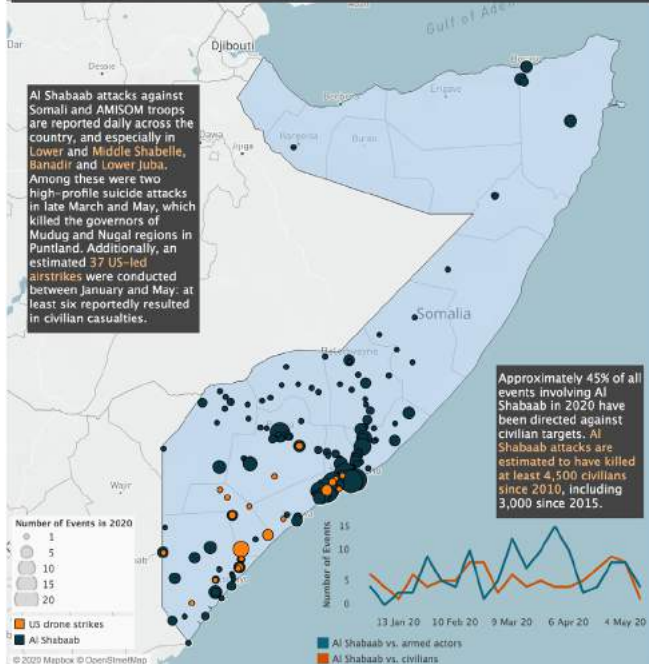


In the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, an average 1,130 conflict events were reported each month between January and May 2020, compared to 969 and 1,220 in the same period of 2018 and 2019.

10-16 MAY 2020

DEALING WITH AL SHABAAB IN SOMALIA

In war-torn Somalia, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are heightened by the ongoing armed conflict. While Al Shabaab refused to embrace the UN Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire, instead accusing foreign forces of importing the disease, the group's daily attacks have hindered humanitarian action to tackle the spread of the coronavirus. There are fears that Al Shabaab could deliberately disrupt aid delivery, capitalizing on ensuing anti-government resentment to boost recruitment and win legitimacy. This is not new for the group, which used the same strategy during the famine of 2011-2012 with dramatic consequences.



and Kashmir, Pakistani forces in the Kashmir region, and Naxal-Maoist rebels in the 'Red Corridor' (see [visual](#)). It was ultimately among the countries with the highest number of civilian targeting events in the world last year (see [this report](#)).

In some conflicts, actors have used the pandemic as an opportunity to escalate campaigns or to push their advantage (see [visual](#)).

In Mozambique, the pandemic failed to stymie Islamist militants in northeastern Cabo Delgado, where the insurgents stepped up attacks against civilians and armed forces in April (see [visual](#)). 2020 proved to be the deadliest year for the Cabo Delgado conflict yet (see [this report](#)).

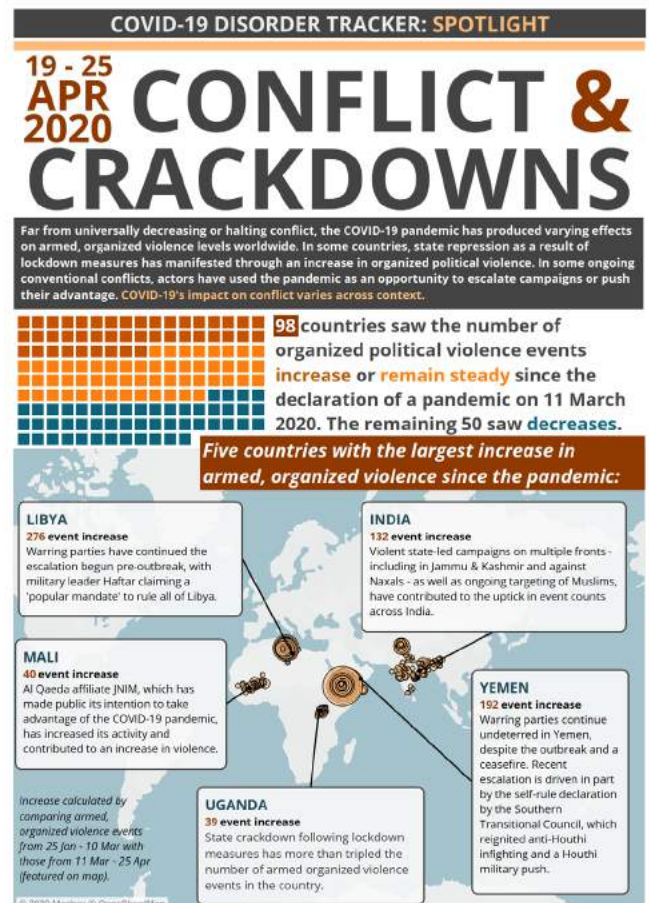
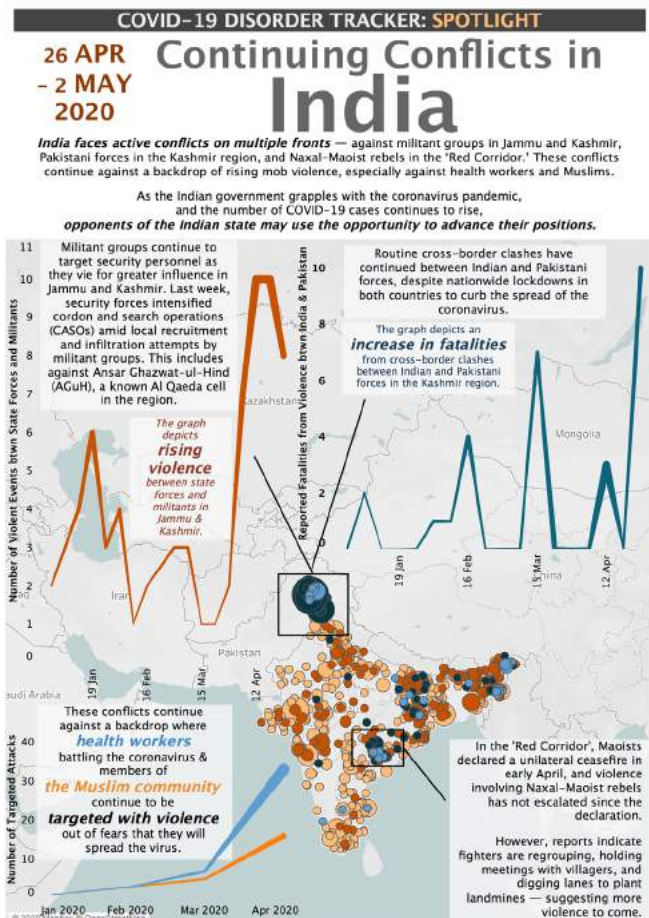
The health crisis significantly impacted political disorder patterns across northeast India, increasing the risk of instability and unrest (see [this report](#)). Fighting escalated in the Jammu & Kashmir region as well over the summer (see [visual](#)), with 2020 marking the most violent year for cross-border conflict between India and Pakistan since the beginning of ACLED coverage in 2016 (see [this report](#)).

The Turkish military intensified operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey as well as in Iraq last year (see [visual](#)). In total, the Turkish military ramped up activity by 32% in 2020, resulting in one of the largest increases in activity across all conflict actors relative to the year prior. Iraq also registered one of the largest escalations in conflict of any country in the world last year, with an increase of 38% between 2019 and 2020 (see [this report](#)).

In Myanmar, conflict rose in the lead up to the general election in November, despite a rapid increase in coronavirus cases (see [visual](#)).

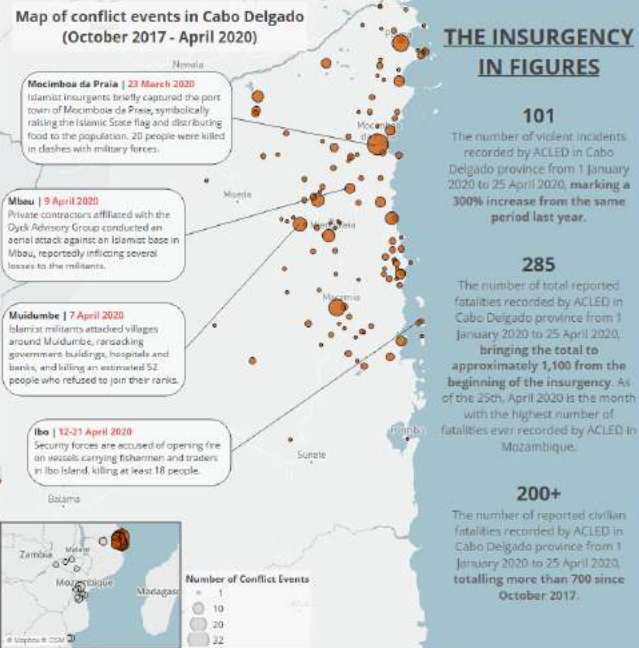
Elsewhere, Israeli settlers and state forces increased attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank in the early days of the pandemic. Relative impunity for settlers, crackdowns by police, and COVID-19 restrictions ensuring crowded close quarters may have all contributed to the violence (see [visual](#)).

Many jihadi groups around the world escalated their operations during the pandemic. There was a rise in



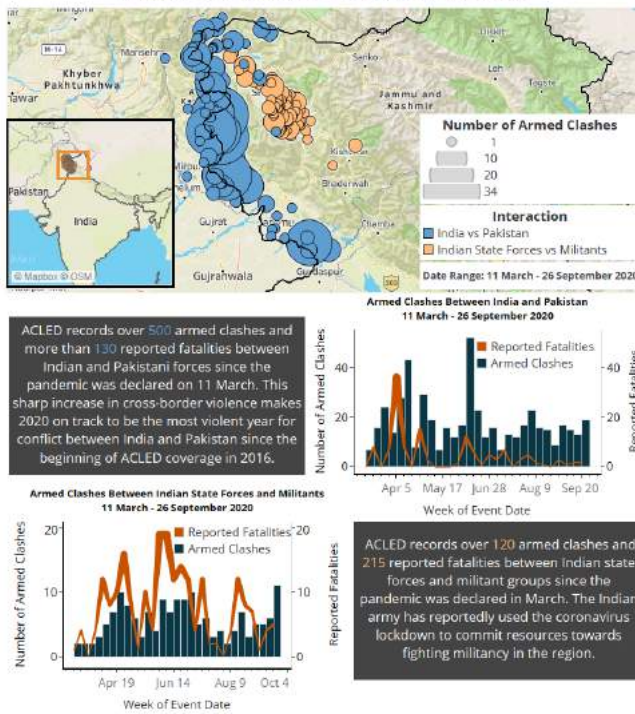
19 - 25 APR 2020 A CONCERNING ESCALATION IN MOZAMBIQUE

The outbreak of COVID-19 has left Islamist militants in Mozambique's north-eastern Cabo Delgado province underfettered, as they step up attacks against civilians and armed forces. The 30-month long insurgency escalated in recent weeks, when the militants - known as Ahlu Sunnah Wa Jama and allegedly affiliated to the Islamic State - seized territory in the oil-rich region. Amid a worsening humanitarian situation, Mozambican security forces, assisted by private military contractors, are reported to also have engaged in indiscriminate killings, contributing to the insurgents' anti-government narrative and further antagonizing the local population.



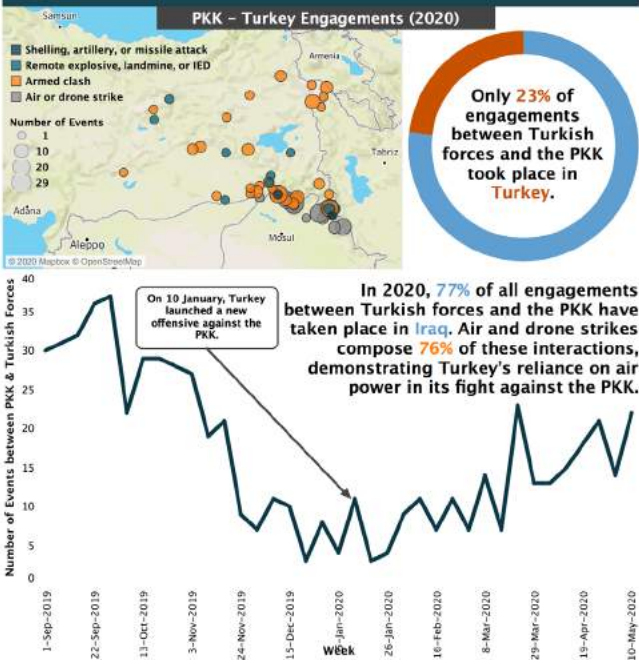
20 - 26 Sept 2020 Continuing Conflict in Jammu & Kashmir

More than a year after the Indian government revoked Jammu & Kashmir's limited autonomy through a controversial constitutional amendment widely viewed as anti-Muslim, tensions in the region remain high. India faces multiple conflicts in Jammu & Kashmir that have escalated during the coronavirus pandemic. Clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces along the border have coincided with an increase in operations by Indian state forces against various militant groups.



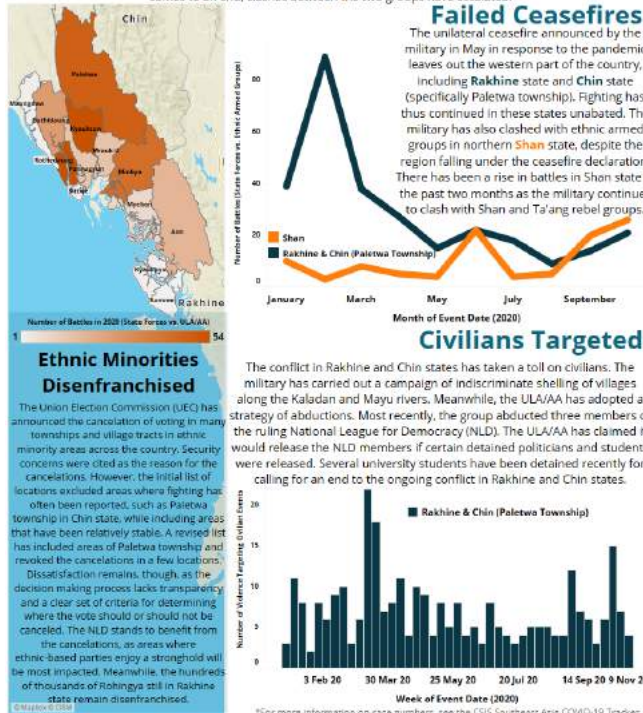
10-16 MAY 2020 PKK & Turkey

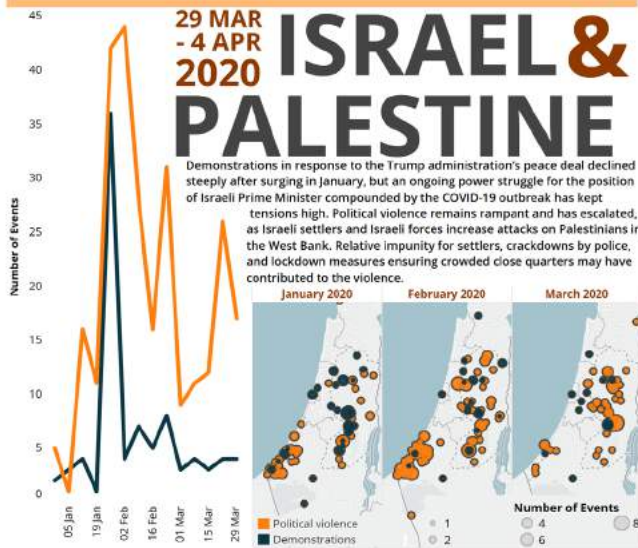
On 10 January, the Turkish military announced the beginning of a new operation against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the rural regions of Turkey near the border with Iraq - the first of several small operations against the PKK in 2020. Since the announcement, engagements between Turkish state forces and the PKK have increased, following a decline at the end of 2019. However, Turkey's campaign against the PKK has not been limited to Turkish soil: the military has increasingly used air strikes against PKK forces in Iraq, where a majority of interactions between the PKK and the Turkish military have occurred. The renewed campaign against the PKK demonstrates the Turkish state's desire to increase security in southeastern Turkey by pushing armed engagements towards Iraq.



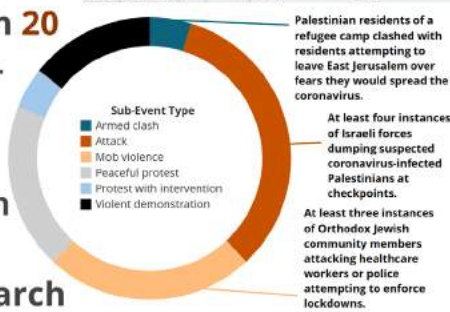
18 - 24 OCT 2020 MYANMAR COVID-19 and Conflict

As the general elections scheduled for 8 November approach, Myanmar is facing a rapid increase in coronavirus cases. Myanmar now has the third highest coronavirus mortality rate in Southeast Asia.* The second wave of the pandemic started in Rakhine state where conflict persists between the military and the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULAA), an ethnic Rakhine armed group fighting for greater autonomy. As the rainy season comes to an end, clashes between the two groups have escalated.



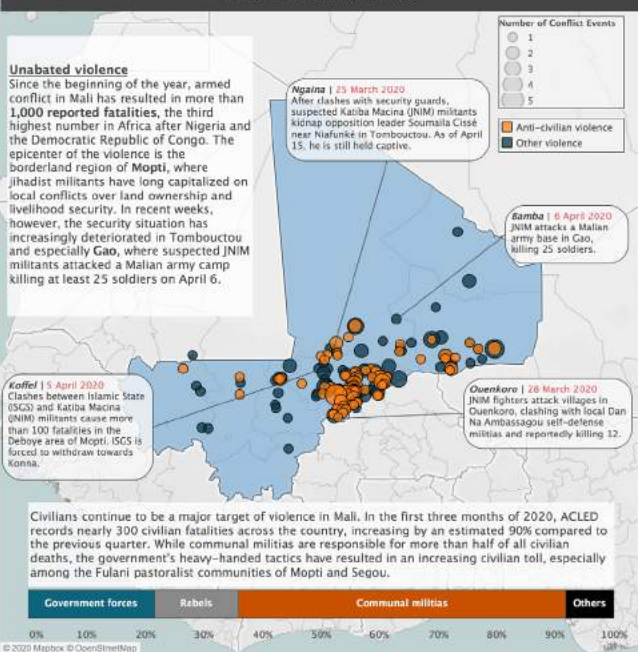


More than 20 COVID-19-related incidents have been recorded since 1 March



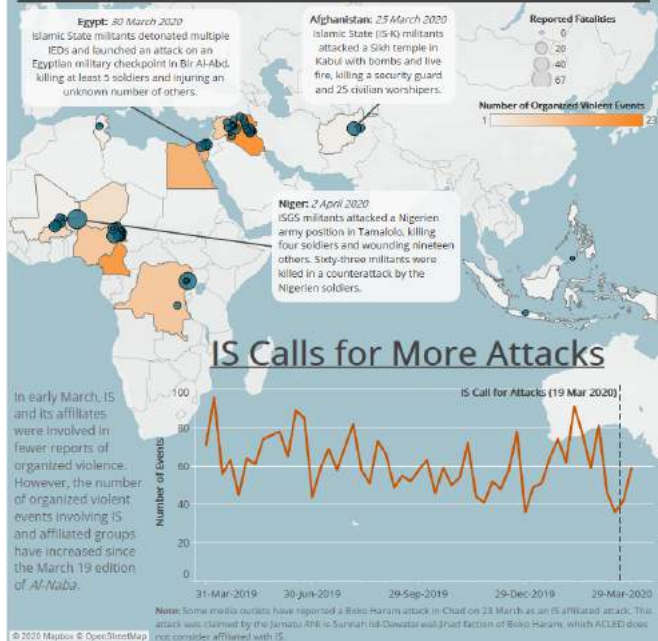
5-11 APR 2020 NAVIGATING THROUGH A VIOLENT INSURGENCY IN MALI

On April 14, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), al-Qaeda's branch in Mali that operates across the Sahel, released a statement claiming COVID-19 is a "God-sent soldier" that is weakening the Malian Armed Forces and the "invaders." As the government introduces movement restrictions and international actors suspend rotations of troops, the COVID-19 outbreak did not prevent the March 29 parliamentary vote from being held amid low voter turnout and rising tensions nationwide. The pandemic comes at a time when the country has experienced another uptick in jihadist militant and intercommunal violence, which has claimed up to 300 civilian lives since January.



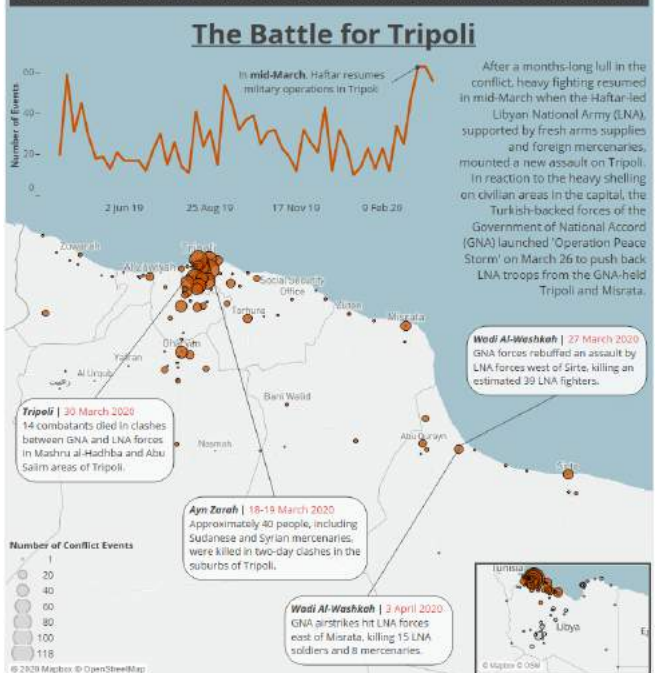
29 MAR - 4 APR 2020 Renewed Attacks by the Islamic State

In the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Islamic State and affiliated groups continue to engage in acts of armed organized violence around the globe. Major attacks in recent weeks demonstrate that IS seeks to exploit the stress that coronavirus outbreaks are placing on governments. An editorial in the March 19 edition of *Al-Naba*, in which IS encouraged its fighters to carry out attacks against the group's opponents while they are struggling to manage the ongoing crisis, confirms that IS leadership views the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to be exploited.



29 MAR - 4 APR 2020 CONTINUED FIGHTING IN LIBYA

The 4th of April marked one year since the self-styled Libyan National Army led by General Khalifa Haftar launched a military offensive to capture Libya's capital Tripoli. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, warring parties and their foreign backers have defied the arms embargo and UN calls for a ceasefire, scaling up military operations in Western Libya. As European officials shy away from the Libyan dossier to tackle the pandemic at home, there are concerns that efforts to secure a political solution to the conflict will be severely weakened.



Islamic State activity, for example, with major attacks reported in the early days of the crisis as the group sought to exploit the stress that outbreaks were placing on governments (see [visual](#)).

Al Qaeda-affiliate Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM) saw COVID-19 as a "god-sent soldier" weakening the Malian army (see [visual](#)).

Elsewhere in Africa, the conflict in Libya escalated as fighting intensified at the start of the pandemic in March (see [visual](#)).

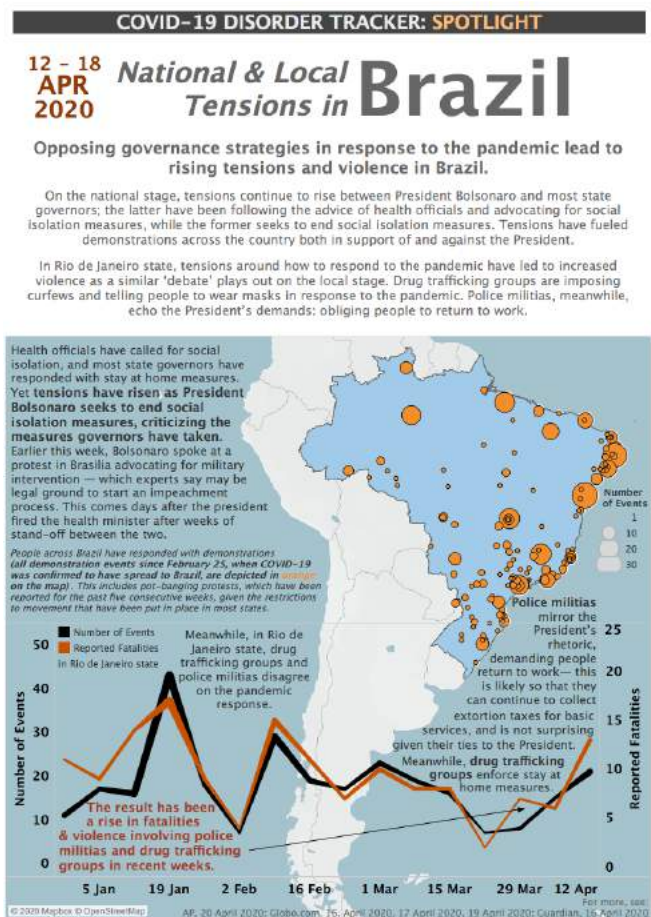
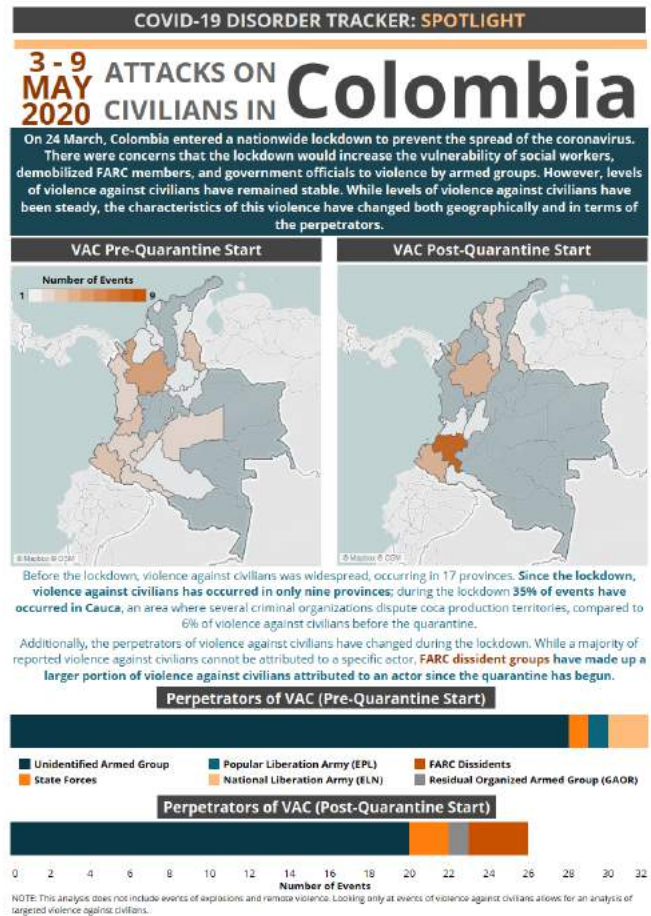
In fact, violence increased on aggregate across the African continent in 2020 compared to 2019 (see [this piece in the Mail & Guardian](#)).

In addition to the pandemic's direct impacts on ongoing conflicts, multiple indirect effects have also had violent consequences.

For example, the killing of social leaders in Colombia has risen dramatically over the past year, hastened by the deteriorating security situation in rural areas during the pandemic. Challenges in implementing the commitments made during agreements between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), as well as the presence of other armed actors, have resulted in new threats. Disputes over territory and resources, aggravated by the health crisis, have exacerbated these trends (see [this report](#)). Specifically, the perpetrators and locations of attacks on civilians have shifted during the pandemic (see [visual](#)), with social leaders and other vulnerable groups facing heightened risks of violence (see [this report](#)).

In Brazil, opposing governance strategies in response to the pandemic led to rising tensions and violence in April. On the national stage, tensions increased between the president and state governors over how to deal with the health crisis. On the local level, as in Rio de Janeiro state, tensions around the pandemic response — this time between drug trafficking groups and police militias — resulted in a spike in deadly violence (see [visual](#)).

The closure of borders in Central America as a result of the pandemic disrupted criminal economies in Mexico, leading to increased competition amongst gangs



and cartels beginning in March (see [visual](#)).

Conversely, the pandemic fostered collaboration among armed groups in the US. Right-wing mobilization against COVID-19 restrictions has been a crucial means for far-right armed groups to build networks around the country. Rallies have provided locations for both unaffiliated individuals as well as organized groups to express their politics, connect, and establish coalitions (see [this report](#)).

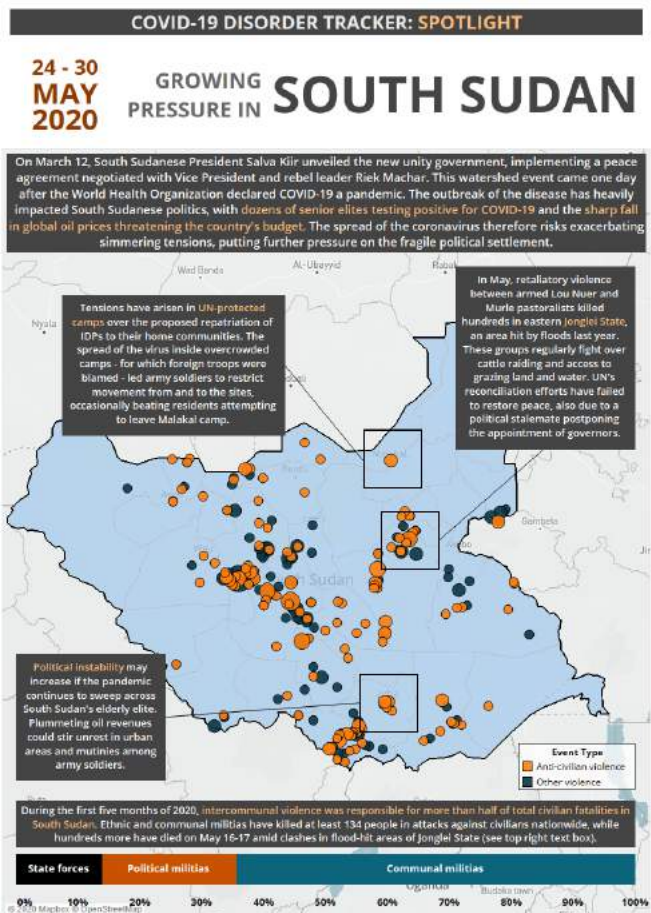
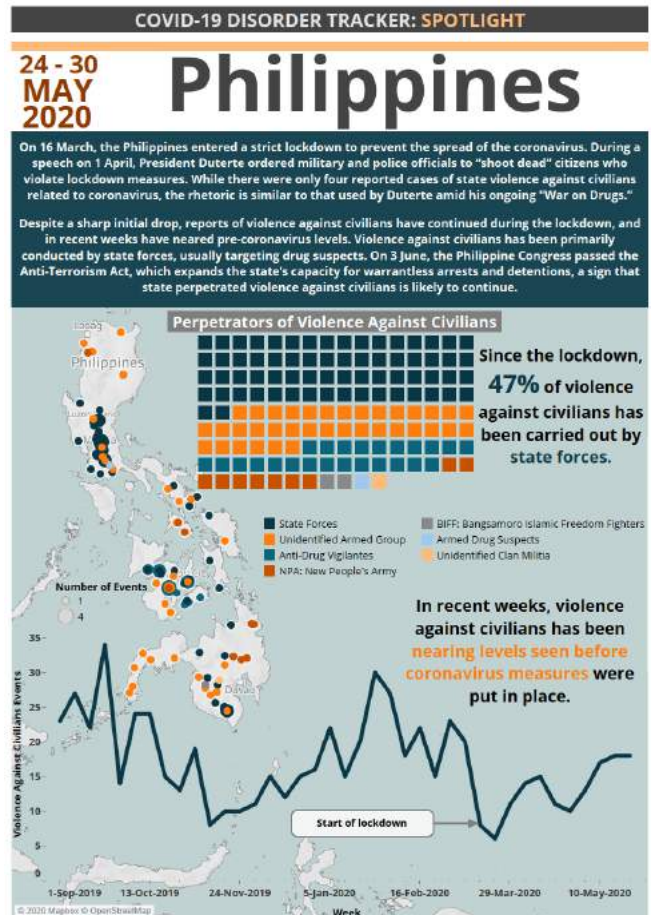
In Afghanistan, the Taliban has taken a multi-pronged approach to bolstering its legitimacy during the pandemic, especially as it vies for increased concessions during negotiations with the US-backed Afghan government. This included attempts to present itself as the more capable governance alternative through efforts to combat COVID-19, such as declaring it would cease fighting in areas under its control if there was an outbreak, holding workshops on preventing the spread of the virus, and distributing PPE to locals (see [visual](#)).

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte ordered state forces to “shoot dead” citizens who violated lockdown measures — a credible threat in a country where similar threats against ‘drug suspects’ are regularly enforced. The result was a sharp decline in violence against civilians in March as local communities adhered to lockdown restrictions and remained out of the public sphere. These trends soon reversed by May, however, with violence against civilians ultimately returning to levels seen before lockdown measures were put into place (see [visual](#)).

In South Sudan, the coronavirus outbreak heavily impacted the country’s political situation, with dozens of senior elites testing positive for COVID-19 in the first few months of the pandemic. With the sharp fall in global oil prices threatening South Sudan’s budget, the spread of the virus has exacerbated existing tensions in the country (see [visual](#)).

In neighboring Sudan, the pandemic compounded an already dire economic situation by reducing tax and oil revenues and squeezing the informal sector, prompting new demonstrations (see [visual](#)).

The health crisis also led to a wave of prison unrest around the world as inmates face both additional



restrictions and heightened risks of infection (see [visual](#)).

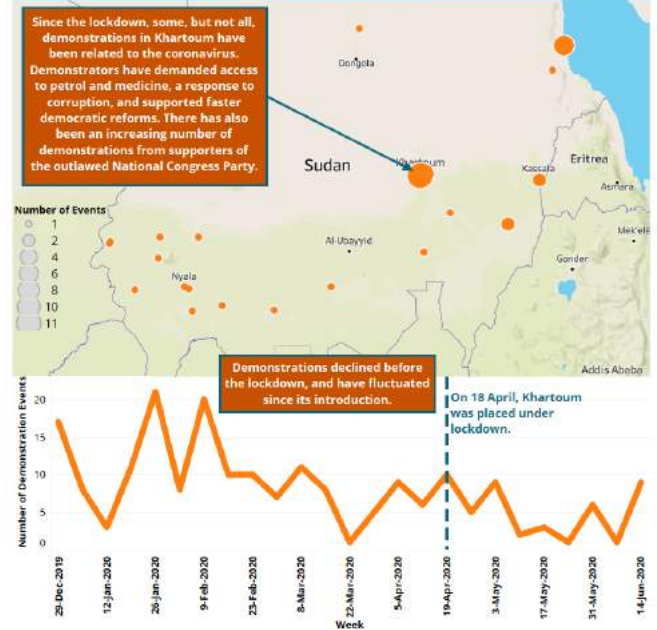
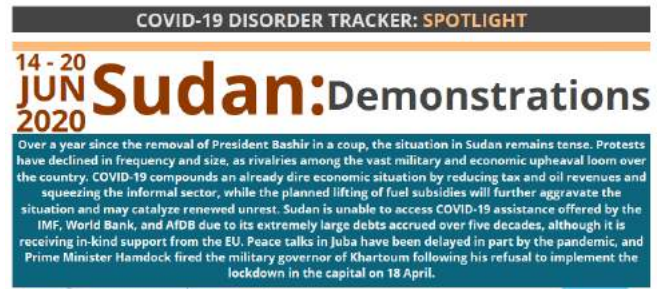
Prison unrest was particularly pronounced in Italy – home to the second-highest number of coronavirus cases after China in early March 2020. The result was that the government and regional authorities deployed a variety of restrictions at different points throughout the year, with measures rippling through detention facilities and fueling a series of violent demonstrations and mob violence events (see [this report](#)).

In the US, prisoners and detainees have also attempted to bring awareness to infection risks and poor detention conditions by demonstrating and calling on authorities to take a stronger approach to preventing outbreaks. When demonstrations fail to garner a response, some inmates have launched hunger strikes or riots. Demonstrations by prisoners are frequently met with force: in more than a third – over 37% – of all peaceful coronavirus-related protests held by prisoners and detainees, guards have used force like fir-ing pepper spray and pepper balls (see [this report](#)).

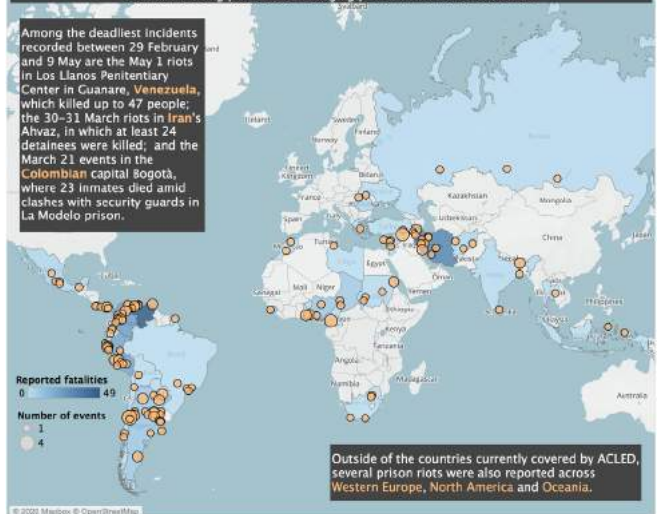
CONCLUSION

The pandemic has not impacted any two states in exactly the same way, with its effects on disorder patterns shaped by the distinct circumstances of each country’s political and conflict landscape. The full range of analysis produced through the [COVID-19 Disorder Tracker](#) – outlined in this report – underscores the importance of combining robust quantitative data on political violence and protest trends with qualitative insights to allow for nuanced assessments of these effects, factoring in each country’s unique context.

While this report marks the end of the [COVID-19 Disorder Tracker](#)’s special coverage, ACLED will continue to collect real-time data on political violence and protest around the world – including direct [coronavirus-related disorder](#) events – making data publicly available so that users can monitor the impacts of the health crisis into the future.



The enforcement of lockdown measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic has severely affected prisons and prisoners across the world. In several countries, governments have imposed restrictions on family members visiting inmates and bringing them food and other goods, inflicting further isolation to detainees. These limitations, along with concerns for the diffusion of coronavirus inside overcrowded detention facilities, spurred a wave of protests and riots which has caused an estimated 179 deaths in 39 countries – of those covered by ACLED – since the end of February. While riots often turned violent and resulted in several prison escapes, authorities have occasionally taken measures to ease pressure on jails, such as releasing prisoners or changing prison terms into house arrest.



Between 29 February and 9 May, ACLED recorded unrest inside detention facilities in 39 countries worldwide: 14 of these are in Latin America and the Caribbean, 10 in Africa, 5 in Europe and the Middle East, 4 in South and Southeast Asia, and 1 in Central Asia and the Caucasus.