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

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

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

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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 strike already fraught relations between communities.

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.

**Coronavirus-related violence is countrywide**

![India Map with Ticket to Pakistan Border](image_url)

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Type</th>
<th>Number of Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political violence</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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 dire health 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 overstrained state continuing to combat armed groups across the country, may result in disaster.

**Cross-border skirmishes with Indian security forces continue in the Kashmir region along the Line of Control even amidst lockdowns.**

![Cross-border skirmishes](image_url)

![Cross-border skirmishes](image_url)

**The decades-long conflict in Balochistan continues unabated, with attacks específica infrastructure and killing multiple security personnel.**

![Balochistan conflict](image_url)

![Balochistan conflict](image_url)

**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 allows us to track these trends across America in real time.

Over 45% 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 30% of demonstrations. This is a significant shift in dynamics from two weeks prior, when fewer than 15% of demonstrations were directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**COVID-19 & US Protest Patterns**

The number of COVID-19 cases is soaring 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 with the threat of record-setting air travel rates in the lead-up to the Thanksgiving holiday. Hospitals 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 have increased sharply.

**The health crisis has led to a significant shift in US protest patterns.**

![COVID-19 & US Protest Patterns](image_url)

![COVID-19 & US Protest Patterns](image_url)

**8 - 14 NOV 2020**

US elections were marked by demonstrations nationwide, with the number of demonstration events related to the election reaching a peak of over 1,500. Demonstrations included protests against voting restrictions, as well as calls for the return of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement as a major political force.

**Coronavirus-related demonstrations include both protests that are in support of or against public health restrictions. Recently, the new has been linked most closely to demonstrations demanding more government resources 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 demonstration events are linked to the pandemic, with the number of coronavirus-related protests recently doubling. In contrast, under 5% of demonstrations were related to COVID-19 at the start of November.

In the weeks leading up to the election, protests against movements 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 ‘Rallies’ 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 90% of all demonstration events in the country.

![Election-Related Demonstrations](image_url)

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**Data on COVID-19 cases and death rates come from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC).**

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
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-
**COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT**

### Argentina

Since President Alberto Fernández 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 adapted 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. This 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 legalizing abortion in 2018.

### Serbia

On 15 March, Serbia enacted a strict curfew in response to the coronavirus pandemic. During the week of 26 April, 20,000 citizens of Serbia participated in widespread protests against the lockdown. ACLED recorded 45 demonstration events. On 6 May, despite the continued COVID-19 outbreak, President Vucic rejected restrictions to allow for elections in the same place. The elections, which the opposition considers a boycott by citing unfair electoral conditions and a lack of press freedom, strengthened the ruling party's hold on parliament. Vucic said he would meet with the opposition 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.

### 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 backfired due to the government’s lackluster approach to tackling the pandemic. The government's inaction led to a decline in public support for the government. The protests have often been led by labor groups and have highlighted the government's overreaction and its economic policies. The government has since promised to make changes to labor laws that would allow workers to access a percentage of their pension during the pandemic.

### 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 success, Peru recorded one of the highest excess death rates in the world during July, likely due to an underprepared healthcare sector. The reliance on markets to get food and a high rate of participation in the informal economy, however, 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.

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**Protests in Serbia**

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- The opposition considers the boycott, citing unfair electoral conditions and lack of press freedom.
- Vucic said he would meet with the opposition to resume the curfew.

**Protests in Argentina**

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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).
COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

INCREASING DEMONSTRATIONS IN VENEZUELA

On 14 March, Nicolás Maduro announced a nationwide lockdown in Venezuela in response to the coronavirus pandemic, but failed to gain the support of the country’s opposition. The lockdown has been extended several times, but has not been fully effective. Opposition leaders have called for regular demonstrations, despite the lockdown. Despite the lockdown, Maduro’s government has taken several measures to reduce the spread of the virus, including closing borders and quarantining areas with confirmed cases. However, this has not been effective in containing the spread of the virus. The opposition has called for regular demonstrations to protest the government’s response to the crisis.

There have been 507 demonstration events in Venezuela this year.

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 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 attack; in the absence of reports, the state disseminated claims. Details of the attack were confirmed by the Egyptian security forces.

COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

Bolivia: Elections Postponed

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, Bolivia is facing a political crisis. On 18 October 2020, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal postponed the elections scheduled for 4 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 support the government of President Luis Arce, claimed that they will again resort to protests to contest the rescheduling. Arce said that, in the event of a government crisis, he would re-elect the president and his government. The decision to reschedule the elections is due to the worsening of the pandemic in the country, which has caused a significant increase in cases and deaths. The new date for the elections has not been announced yet.

As the number of confirmed cases in Bolivia surpasses 1,000, there are over 1,000 confirmed deaths. The country’s citizens continue to face a fragile health and infrastructural system. In Cochabamba city, locals have been intermittently violating lockdowns and blocking the Paraguay-Argentina border since 15 March, demanding free access to available water during the pandemic. Several labor groups have also been protesting, with over 5,000 teachers marching through the streets on a national strike on 23 March, demanding the amendment of a decree regulating distance learning, and the reinstatement of dismissed teachers.

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 since 2011 Arab Spring – helped to usher Bouteflika’s resignation in April 2019. Yet the demonstration movement continues, protesting against the politics in the country. The movement has 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).
COVID-19 DISORDER TRAJECTORY: SPOTLIGHT

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, 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.

- In Trinidad & Tobago, a police officer acused a journalist of the 5th Edition Grenada Hospital. After the journalist attempted to film a viral video of the hospital, he was arrested.
- In China, a journalist is missing, presumed detained.
- In Venezuela, a television reporter was arrested.
- In Nigeria, a TV reporter was arrested.
- In Kenya, a respiratory therapist was assaulted.

Information on press restrictions comes from the International Press Institute.

COVID-19 DISORDER TRAJECTORY: SPOTLIGHT

10 - 16 MAY 2020

MOB VIOLENCE

Mob violence — by spontaneous, unarmed or crudely armed groups — has risen worldwide in the weeks since the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic by the WHO in March 2020. Over 1,500 events across nearly 80 countries were recorded since 1 March.

- In Belarus, a police officer was assaulted.
- In Malaysia, a police officer was assaulted.
- In Indonesia, a police officer was assaulted.

Number of Events

- Engagement type
- Mob vs. State police
- Mob vs. State police
- Mob vs. State police
- Mob targeting civilians

COVID-19 DISORDER TRAJECTORY: SPOTLIGHT

5 - 11 APR 2020

Healthcare Workers 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 heartless civilians.

From Protesters to Targets

The graph depicts all disorder involving healthcare workers since February 1, 2020. Over 200 incidents have been recorded.

- In India, 68% of violence targeting healthcare workers captured by ACLED occurs in India.
- In Bangladesh, 50% of violence targeting healthcare workers is in Dhaka.

COVID-19 DISORDER TRAJECTORY: SPOTLIGHT

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 spaces 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.

In India’s West Bengal, clashes occurred over the course of several days last week, after Muslims were barred from using public toilets following reports of positive COVID-19 cases in their neighborhood. Reports indicate the violence was coordinated and systematically targeted towards the Muslim community, a trend mirrored across much of the country following announcements slamming Muslims for spread of the coronavirus.

In Bangladesh, an anti-Muslim social media post spurred attacks against a shop belonging to a Hindu owner, thought to be the source of the post. At least 10 people were injured during the incident. In recent weeks, social media posts have ramped up, triggering several clashes in Bangladesh.

ACLED does not capture all incidents targeting healthcare workers. Rather, the events captured by ACLED involve violence where healthcare workers are targeted and are ininclude attacks, violence involving employment by state actors, armed or state actors, and spontaneously formed violent mobs. Attacks perpetrated by individuals, for example, would not be included here. See the ACLED website for access to further methodology and data sources.
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
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COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

**THE BATTLE FOR THE SOUTH IN YEMEN**

Yemen

Since the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Hadramawt on April 19, conflict has flared in southern Yemen. Clashes between government forces and tribes affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) broke out on May 15 in Abyan, the home region of President Abdurabu Mansour Hadi. This latest round of fighting undermines the lack of progress on the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, a peace agreement signed in November 2019 under Saudi auspices. Meanwhile, 800 kilometers south of the Abyan battlefield, Aden is grappling with a severe outbreak of COVID-19, which has left hundreds of the city's loved.

**THE CONFLICT IN SOUTHERN YEMEN**

In southern Yemen, the violence of the COVID-19 has led to a series of deaths and injuries. The UN declaration of self-rule in late April, overall violence levels in southern Yemen have dramatically increased, culminating in June with renewed fighting that has seen over 300 people killed.

**THE BATTLE OF AYAN**

In Abyan, fighting has erupted between government forces and tribes affiliated with the STC, ending a long period of relative calm. The conflict has escalated, with over 50 people killed in recent weeks. The situation remains tense, with both sides seeking to gain control of the region.

**COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT**

**PROTEST AND CONFLICT IN UKRAINE**

Ukraine

The official number of confirmed COVID-19 cases and related deaths is not clear, but reports suggest that Ukraine has been among the countries where measures to combat the virus have had mixed success. The government has taken unprecedented steps to curb the spread of the virus, including the abrupt closure of borders and the cancellation of events.

**COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT**

**DEALING WITH AL SHABAAB IN SOMALIA**

Somalia

In war-torn Somalia, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are being felt with the ongoing armed conflict. While Al-Shabaab has shown less interest in the pandemic, fear and restrictions on movement have led to matching foreign troops of opposing factions, instead focusing on internal conflicts.

Al-Shabaab attacks against Somali and AMISOM troops are reported daily across the country, and in recent months, soldiers and police have been killed in several attacks. Among these was a large-scale attack in early March that left at least 19 dead, including 14 AMISOM soldiers and one police officer. The attack was carried out by Al-Shabaab fighters, who had infiltrated the area.

**ANALYSIS**

Al-Shabaab attacks against Somali and AMISOM troops are reported daily across the country, and in recent months, soldiers and police have been killed in several attacks. Al-Shabaab has shown less interest in the pandemic, focusing on internal conflicts.

Approximately 40% of all events in Somalia in 2020 have been related to civilian targets. Al-Shabaab attacks against farmers and civilians have been reported, with at least 4,000 civilians killed since 2020, including 1,000 since January.
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 Islamists 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
COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

19 - 25 APR 2020

A CONCERNING ESCALATION IN MOZAMBIQUE

The outbreak of COVID-19 has left stellen baths in Mozambique's north-western Cabo Delgado province under control, as many top officials against civilians and armed forces. The Mozambique army has been deployed in recent weeks, when the leaders known as Al-Sheikh Waheeb and allegedly affiliated to the Islamic State - based on the communities in the affected region. Past a lengthy humanitarian situation, Mozambique's security forces, assisted by private military contractors, are reported to have also engaged in indiscriminate killings, contributing to the insurgency and committing human rights abuses and further intensifying the local population.

Map of conflict events in Cabo Delgado (October 2017 - April 2020)

THE INSURGENCY IN FIGURES

101

The number of violent incidents recorded by ACLED in Cabo Delgado province from January 2020 to 25 April 2020, marking a 300% increase from the same period last year.

285

The number of total reported fatalities recorded by ACLED in Cabo Delgado province from January 2020 to 25 April 2020, bringing the total to approximately 1,100 from the beginning of the insurgency. As of April 2020, the insurgency in Cabo Delgado involves more than 211 reported fatalities recorded by ACLED in Mozambique.

200+

The number of reported civilian fatalities recorded by ACLED in Cabo Delgado province from January 2020 to 25 April 2020, involving more than 700 since October 2017.

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. India faces multiple conflicts in Jammu & Kashmir that have escalated during the coronavirus pandemic. Clash between Indian and Pakistani forces along the border have coincided with an increase in operations by Indian state forces against various militant groups.

ACLED records over 130 armed clashes and more than 100 reported fatalities between Indian and Pakistani forces since the pandemic was declared on 13 March. This sharp increase in cross-border violence made 2020 the most violent year for cross-border attacks between India and Pakistan since the beginning of ACLED coverage in 2016.

ACLED records over 130 armed clashes and 210 reported fatalities between Indian state forces and militant groups since the pandemic was declared in March. The Indian army has repeatedly used the coronavirus lockdown to strengthen its resources, fighting for the military in the region.

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 northern region 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, the Turkish army's operations against the PKK have not been limited to Turkey itself; the military has increased attacks against PKK forces in Iraq, where a majority of international negotiations between the PKK and the Turkish government have occurred. The renewed campaign against the PKK demonstrates the Turkish state's desire to increase security in its northeastern provinces by pushing armed engagements towards Iraq.

PKK – Turkey Engagements (2020)

Only 23% of engagements between Turkish forces and the PKK took place in Turkey.

In 2020, the Turkish military launched a new offensive against the PKK, resulting in 77% of all engagements between Turkish forces and the PKK taking place in Iraq. The Turkish government's reliance on air power in its fight against the PKK.

18 - 24 OCT 2020

MYANMAR

Coup

As the general elections scheduled for 8 November approached, Myanmar was facing a rise 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 Liberation Army of Arakan (ULA/A), on occasion, the Arakan army group fighting for greater autonomy. As the rainy season comes to an end, clashes between the two groups have escalated.

Rakhine State

The United Nations announced the military in May in response to the pandemic, leaving the western part of the state, including Rakhine state and Chin state (specifically Paungdaw Township), fighting has continued in these states unabated. The military has also clashed with ethnic armed groups in northern Shan state, despite the region falling under the ceasefire declaration. There has been a rise in battles in Shan state in the past two months as the military continues to clash with Shan and Arakan rebel groups.

Veiled Ceasefires

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Ethnic Minorities Disenfranchised

The Union Election Commission (UCEC) announced the conclusion of voting in township and village elections in ethnic minority areas across the country. Security concerns were cited as the reason for the cancellations. Meanwhile, the Union Election Commission has announced the conclusion of a new set of local elections in the country. The new set of local elections is expected to be held in the coming months. Civilian elections are scheduled for 2021.

Civilians Targeted

The conflict in Rakhine and Chin states has taken a toll on civilians. The military has carried out a campaign of systematic killing of villages across the Arakan and Arakan rivers. Meanwhile, the ULA/A has adopted a strategy of destruction. Most recently, the group ambushed a set of local police stations in the northern Shan state, killing at least 10 people. For more information on crisis factors, see the CSA Southeast Asia COVID-19 Tracker.
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COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

29 MAR - 4 APR 2020

ISRAEL & PALESTINE

Demonstrations in response to the Trump administration’s peace deal declined steeply after surging in January, but an ongoing power struggle for the position of Israeli Prime Minister compounded by the COVID-19 outbreak has kept tensions high. Political violence remains rampant and has escalated, as israeli settlers and Israeli forces increase attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank. Relative impunity for settlers, crackdowns by police, and lockdown measures ensuring crowded close quarters may have contributed to the violence.

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

Palestinian residents of a refugee camp clashed with residents attempting to leave East Jerusalem over fears they would spread the coronavirus. At least four instances of Israeli forces dumping suspected coronavirus-infected Palestinians at checkpoints. At least three instances of Orthodox Jewish community members attacking healthcare workers or police attempting to enforce lockdowns.

COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

5-11 APR 2020

NAVIGATING THROUGH A VIOLENT INSURGENCY IN MALI

On April 14, Jamaa Naar al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Qaeda’s branch in Mali that operates across the Sahel, released a statement claiming COVID-19 for “African soldier” that is weakening the Malian Armed Forces and the “invaders.” As the government introduces movement restrictions and international access is suspended, reports of violence are scarce. The COVID-19 outbreak did not prevent the March 19 terrorist attack from being held amidst low-water season and rising tensions nationally. The pandemic comes at a time when the country has experienced another spike in jihadists militant and intercommunal violence, which has claimed up to 300 civilian lives since January.

COVID-19 DISORDER TRACKER: SPOTLIGHT

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 Sirte (Libya’s coastal capital). Aside the COVID-19 pandemic, Haftar’s war and their foreign backers have defied the UN arms embargo and UN calls for a ceasefire, scaling-up military operations in recent months. As the conflict continues, the security situation in the capital and the Turkish-backed forces of the Government of National Accord (GNA) launched Operation Peace Storm on March 26 to push back LNA troops from the GNA-held Tripoli and Misrata.

The Battle for Tripoli

After a months-long halt in the fighting, heavy fighting resumed in mid-March when the Haftar-led Libyan National Army (LNA), supported by fresh arms supplies and foreign mercenaries, mounted a new assault on Tripoli. In reaction to the heavy shelling on civilian areas in the capital, the Turkish-backed forces of the Government of National Accord (GNA) launched Operation Peace Storm on March 26 to push back LNA troops from the GNA-held Tripoli and Misrata.

Unbiased violence

Since the beginning of the year, armed conflict in Mali has resulted in more than 3,000 reported fatalities, the third highest number in Africa after Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The spate of the violence is the border region of Mopti, where jihadist militants have long capitalized on local conflicts over land ownership and livelihood security. In recent weeks, however, the security situation has increasingly deteriorated in Tombouctou and especialy Gao, where suspected JNIM militants attacked a Malian army camp killing at least 25 soldiers on April 6.

Civilians continue to be a major target of violence in Mali. In the first three months of 2020, ACLED records nearly 300 civilian fatalities across the country, increasing by an estimated 90% compared to the previous quarter. While communal militias are responsible for more than half of all civilian deaths, the government’s heavy-handed tactics have resulted in an increasing civilian toll, especially among the Fulani pastoralist communities of Mopti and Segou.
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 firing 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.