

Another Student Revolution?

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In the past several months, massive social unrest has occurred in more than a dozen countries and regions. Among them are Algeria, Bolivia, Britain, Catalonia, Chile, Ecuador, France, Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, and more. In many cases, these social movements have profoundly shaken the existing system, and the end result remains unclear. While the causes of each of these movements differ, as do the key actors, there do seem to be some common elements. Students have been key in many, and have participated in all of them, even when they have not been central.

Immediate and Underlying Causes

Neither the immediate nor the proximate causes of most of the many recent upheavals have been related to university-based issues such as tuition fees or other campus causes. The one exception is perhaps Chile, where longstanding demands for the implementation of free tuition promises have intermingled with broader social issues. Indeed, the Chile case is rather typical. The current protest movement was sparked by an increase in metro fares and was initially spearheaded by secondary school and university students. It then spread far beyond its student base and the fare issue, to protests concerning social inequalities (Chile is among the most unequal countries in Latin America), with more than a million people demonstrating in Santiago on October 25, 2019.

In most cases, protest movements were sparked by a specific issue, but soon grew far beyond that issue. The continuing Hong Kong protests, again involving, on several occasions, more than a million people (one-fifth of the total population), started by opposing a proposed extradition law permitting authorities to send people convicted of a crime to Mainland China. The protests soon expanded to demands for democracy, a separate Hong Kong identity, and, underlying all this, broad discontent with housing costs and general inequality. Iraqi protests, spearheaded by students but soon joined by all segments of society and spreading to major cities in the country, started with issues of corruption and lack of basic services and soon spread to discontent with Iranian influence in the country and other issues.

A common underlying element to virtually all of these protest movements is unhappiness with social inequality, the growing gulf between rich and poor, and a feeling that large segments of the population have been “left out” by neoliberal policies and the insensitivity of the “political class.” In this sense, the causes for the current wave of social unrest are not unlike the forces that contributed to the election of Donald Trump in the United States or to Brexit in the United Kingdom.

One can look back as well to the movements in North Africa and the Middle East that generated the “Arab Spring” in the early 2010s. The Arab Spring was initially consistently driven by young people, unemployed graduates, and students. It reflected a similar discontent with the established and often repressive political order. Widening social inequality and deep pessimism about future job prospects following graduation created a powerful force for activism.

Twenty-First Century Variables

Today’s protest movements have several significant characteristics. They tend to be leaderless—making it difficult for authorities to negotiate with protesters, or even for the movements themselves to present a coherent set of demands or rationales. Their very spontaneity has given them energy as well as unpredictability. They have typically started very peacefully—although small factions often engage in violence along the periphery of mass demonstrations—and at times deteriorated into street battles with police brutality becoming a factor in escalating, sustaining, or repressing protests.

Abstract

A wave of student activism is sweeping the world. Countries and regions such as Algeria, Bolivia, Britain, Catalonia, Chile, Ecuador, France, Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, Iraq, Kazakhstan, and Lebanon, among others, have experienced campus activist movements, some of which have toppled governments. The reasons and results of these movements are varied, but most are related to social inequalities.

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And, of course, social media, an especially powerful force among young people and students, has become the key tool for creating awareness and mobilizing and organizing movements. Many of the most well-known student movements in the past decade have involved massive online campaigns. The #FeesMustFall hashtag, which started in South Africa in 2015, was so catchy that it was taken up again by student movements in India and Uganda in October and November 2019 to make similar demands. For governments, the power of social media in movements remains a challenge to harness and in many places the response has been to slow down the Internet or create social media blackouts.

The Role of Students

Students have been key initiators in several of the recent activist movements—Hong Kong and Iraq are good examples. In others, such as the “gilets jaunes” (yellow vests) in France, students played no role in the origins of the movement and have not been a key force throughout. Student involvement has not meant, however, that education-related issues are a key theme, even when students are key participants. And it is fair to say that, unlike in the activist movements of the 1960s, students have not been the central actors in all of the movements, but they have been at least supporting players in most and have been leaders in some.

The decade since the Great Recession was opened with student protests. Indeed, while 2019 has become the international year of street protests, it is students that started taking to the streets, protesting austerity policies and increasing social inequality in the years leading up to the present time. The trigger then has been attempts by governments to increasingly privatize the cost of higher education as part of austerity policies. Over the decade, in Bangladesh, Britain, Chile, Germany, India, Italy, Malaysia, Quebec, South Africa, South Korea, Uganda, and so forth—on every continent—there have been massive student protests about tuition fees. An added dimension, and perhaps a precursor of future trends, is the involvement of high school students in activist movements—and in a few cases, such as Chile and Hong Kong, in political struggles, but more importantly in growing environmental activism around the world.

What we have been witnessing in 2019 may not quite be a student revolution as it was in 1968; it may better be coined a youth (r)evolution. The important role of students as a specific group in the present social movements is however undeniable, not the least in their calls for social justice and sounding the prelude to the current wave of activism. ▲