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Mass Protests: Will They Make the World More Just?

In the streets throughout nations across Asia, Europe, South America, the Middle East and elsewhere, mobs are demanding change. Will they get it?

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Mass protests are filling city streets in Hong Kong and Cairo, Santiago and St. Petersburg, Bratislava, Barcelona and Beirut—in Asia, in Europe, in South America, in the Caribbean, in the Middle East. “2019 has become the year of the street protester,” the *Washington Post* says.

The specific reasons for the protests are as varied as the locations. But among these disparate rallies, there are some fundamental similarities that enable us to draw some larger lessons.

“In Hong Kong, it was a complicated extradition dispute involving a murder suspect. In Beirut, it was a proposed tax on the popular WhatsApp messenger service. In Chile, it was a 4-cent hike in subway fares,” Associated Press reported. “Recent weeks have seen mass protests and clashes erupt in far-flung places triggered by seemingly minor actions that each came to be seen as the final straw. The demonstrations are fueled by local grievances, but reflect worldwide frustration at growing inequality, corrupt elites and broken promises” (October 26).

“Where past waves of protests, like the 2011 Arab Spring or the rallies that accelerated the breakup of the Soviet Union, took aim at dictatorships, the latest demonstrations are rattling elected governments. The unrest on three continents, coupled with the toxic dysfunction in Washington and London, raises fresh concerns OVER WHETHER THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER, WITH FREE ELECTIONS AND FREE MARKETS, CAN STILL DELIVER ON ITS PROMISES” (ibid; emphasis added). Yes, many fundamental aspects of government, economics and society—the principles, ideas and institutions that have underpinned the way the world works for generations—are being challenged, even denounced. And compounding those concerns, this is all occurring alongside major political instability that has undermined the ability of the Americans and the British to govern themselves.

Let’s take a whirlwind trip:

- In Hong Kong, massive protests have been occurring since June. They sparked when the city government passed a bill that would subject Hong Kong residents to mainland China’s judicial system. Authorities dropped that bill, but the protests have continued, now demanding greater autonomy, democracy and freedoms.
- In Lebanon, people are protesting a government that is subjecting them to cutbacks and austerity measures even while corrupt officials are rewarded for perpetuating the regime.
- In Iraq, financial mismanagement and government corruption are impoverishing many people while public services and infrastructure fall into ruin, yet leaders bicker and squander the nation’s oil wealth. Iraqi security forces have recently intensified measures against protesters, and almost 200 Iraqis have been killed.
- In Spain, after years of peaceful protests by Catalan separatists, the movement turned violent last week over the imprisonment of separatist leaders. New activist leaders are calling for civil disobedience. One group, Tsunami Democratic, “has borrowed some of its tactics and rhetoric from the Hong Kong protesters, and protesters in both places have staged demonstrations in support of one another That one movement is struggling against domination by one-party China while the other is rising up against a European democracy is a distinction that has been lost in the tear gas” (ibid).

- In Bolivia, many dispute the results of an October 20 election that awarded Evo Morales a fourth presidential term. On October 23, protesting workers launched a general strike, and violence has erupted in several regions. Clashes between Morales supporters and opponents have injured many.
- In Ecuador, the government ended fuel subsidies, sparking 12 days of protests this month that killed eight people and injured 1,340. The president and demonstration leaders reached an agreement, and the government reinstated fuel subsidies.
- In Chile, protests have been growing over an increase in subway fares and over economic inequalities. The president canceled the fare increase and made other concessions, yet protests continued. Last Friday, an estimated 1.2 million Chileans protested in the capital of Santiago. Some burned dozens of subway stations and clashed with police. More than 7,000 people were arrested, hundreds were injured, and at least 19 were killed. This is one of Latin America's wealthiest countries, where the poverty rate over the last generation has fallen from almost 50 percent to 6 percent.

Why is all this happening now, all at once? These disparate situations have a couple of factors in common. One of the most powerful is *young people*.

In an October 26 article, the *Guardian* noted that in most of these upheavals, "younger people are at the forefront of calls for change." And there are more young people today than ever: About 41 percent of the global population is age 24 or under, the *Guardian* notes. In Africa, 41 percent are under age 15.

A great many of these youths are growing up in nations whose governments are grappling with recessions and stagnant or falling living standards, and subsequent austerity. "As a result, many current protests are rooted in shared grievances about economic inequality and jobs," the *Guardian* wrote. "In Tunisia, birthplace of the failed 2011 Arab Spring, and more recently in neighboring Algeria, street protests were led by unemployed young people and students angry about price and tax rises—and, more broadly, about broken reform promises. Chile and Iraq faced similar upheavals last week.

"This global phenomenon of unfulfilled youthful aspirations is producing political time bombs. Each month in India, 1 million people turn 18 and can register to vote. In the Middle East and North Africa, an estimated 27 million youngsters will enter the workforce in the next five years. Any government, elected or not, that fails to provide jobs, decent wages and housing faces big trouble."

Intensifying these trends is a powerful mix of other potent factors. "Numbers aside, the younger generations have something else that their elders lacked: They're connected. More people than ever before have access to education. They are healthier. They appear less bound by social conventions and religion. They are mutually aware. And their expectations are higher.

"That's because, thanks to social media, the ubiquity of English as a common tongue, and the Internet's globalization and democratization of information, younger people from all backgrounds and locations are more open to alternative life choices, more attuned to 'universal' rights and norms such as free speech or a living wage—and less prepared to accept their denial."

Read those last two paragraphs again. Think about these ingredients stirring young people to rise up in protest.

Then put it in historical context. Inequality is endemic in the human experience—every people, in every generation (though general standards of living today are far higher than they have been for billions of people throughout history). For thousands of years, generations have submitted to governments at least as corrupt as those today. Many had little choice, but at the same time it was obvious that deeply flawed government was better than no government at all.

Today's generation, though, has far higher expectations. And so, many people who are by historical comparisons quite well off are dissatisfied and angry.

"Hong Kong and Egypt, Chile and Lebanon have two things in common: pervasive social media and a rising generation of discontented youth who are masters of it," the *Washington Post* wrote. "The combination of the two has changed the balance of power between government and society in both democratic and authoritarian states" (October 27).

"Chile's protests began not with unions or opposition parties but with middle and high school students, who used social media to call on riders to jump subway turnstiles in protest of a fare hike. ... Similarly, Lebanon's unrest began with young people outraged over a tax on phone calls made on WhatsApp," the *Post* continued. "In Egypt, thousands of mostly young, male soccer fans took to the streets of Cairo in response to a call from a previously unknown businessman who posted videos on YouTube denouncing corruption." In a nation with considerable opposition, this was "an entirely new channel of discontent." In Hong Kong, activists have skillfully used technology to coordinate demonstrations and avoid police. "As elsewhere, the backbone of the movement is young people, including teenagers."

"This is a motivated generation, pushing for dramatic change in the political status quo," the *Post* wrote. "In that sense, the youth of 2019 are a little like those of 1968. Their command of new communications technologies makes it easy for them to attract followers, circumvent the usual channels of public debate, and blindsides governments. They are able to mobilize large numbers on small issues, such as fare increases, and tap into general discontent that otherwise might have remained unexpressed."

These technologies, and the way that young people in particular are using them, are *disrupting our world* in unforeseeable,

potent ways. Some governments are taking draconian measures to silence them and shut them down. China in particular is using technological measures straight out of Orwell's *1984*. Yet the protesters are savvy, and these technologies can be very difficult to contain once they've escaped the box.

The reality is, we are feeling the birth pangs of a new era of political upheaval. The factors described above will not go away, certainly not without *drastic, radical* authoritarianism. They are certain to create far more disruption, on a wider scale than we have yet witnessed.

Some people are applauding this trend. And it is natural to root for courageous people defying genuine tyranny. But there are fundamental aspects of it that should give us pause.

"Perhaps these protests will one day merge into a joined-up global revolt against injustice, inequality, environmental ruin and oppressive powers-that-be," the *Guardian* author wrote, apparently convinced this would be a positive development.

However, history has little good to say about *the wisdom of the mob*. A "global revolt against injustice and inequality" would be based on some deeply dangerous assumptions. What is justice and equality?—everyone has different ideas. And past efforts to implement those different ideas have time and time again spawned more injustice and greater inequality.

The *Guardian* concluded, "The stifling silence that hangs over North Korea's gulag, China's Xinjiang and Tibet regions, and dark, hidden places inside Syria, Eritrea, Iran and Azerbaijan could yet descend on us all. What helps protect us is the noisy, life-affirming dissent of the young." Intellectuals always seem to deeply trust the inherent wisdom of youthful anger.

This is a complicated trend, involving people in wildly different circumstances among nations sprawling across the globe. But there are similarities with the trend in the United States and Britain—nations that are creating millions of cynical, angry, disenfranchised young people. More and more of these youths have no grounding in family, no positive mentors, nobody to teach them. They lack the moral underpinning of sound religion. They inhabit a godless, amoral universe. They're not learning history, except as something to criticize. They have no respect for institutions, hence no continuity. They mistrust authority and consider everyone with privilege to be corrupt and illegitimate. They are being methodically *taught* to manufacture grievances and summon the moral indignation of victimhood. They recognize problems, and instinctively judge and condemn—often using digital megaphones. They demand changes, and feel the heady rush of revolution.

This is fertile soil for the devil to nurture toxic emotion and nation-shattering dissatisfaction, anger and rage. And this is a project he is undertaking with fervor.

For clear perspective on the surge of the angry mob, look at history. It is littered with examples of peoples rising up and defying the existing order because of injustice and inequality. Peoples seeking to destroy the status quo. In case after case, they were superb at identifying troubles, errors and mistakes. But where they have failed, time after time after time, is in *solving the problems*. With nauseating uniformity, they prove unable to *replace* the current system with something better.

Mobs and mass movements can destroy, but they have a dismal record of building. Revolutionaries know what angers them, but are oblivious to the impossibility of implementing genuine improvements. "The reformer is always right about what is wrong," G. K. Chesterson said, "he is also usually wrong about what is right."

"Does history justify revolutions?" Will and Ariel Durant ask in their superb book *The Lessons of History*. They give several examples of historical figures who took the route of radical change, versus others who defended "patient and orderly reform"—or continuity. "In some cases outworn and inflexible institutions seem to require violent overthrow, as in Russia in 1917. But in most instances the effects achieved by the revolution would apparently have come without it through the gradual compulsion of economic developments. ... To break sharply with the past is to court the madness that may follow the shock of sudden blows or mutilations." This is a truth taught by countless painful, bloody events across nations and millennia.

"As the sanity of the individual lies in the continuity of his memories, so the sanity of a group lies in the continuity of its traditions; in either case a break in the chain invites a neurotic reaction, as in the Paris massacres of September 1792" (*ibid*).

There are problems in the world—after all this is actually *Satan's* world. He literally rules it and influences it (2 Corinthians 4:4; Revelation 12:9). Many of these protesters are reacting against legitimate problems.

But they are mistaken to assume that whatever fills the void will be an improvement. They are mistaken to think the violence of resistance is virtuous. They are mistaken to believe the results it brings will be worth the cost—if they are thinking that far ahead at all.

The Durants made this sage observation: "[V]iolent revolutions do not so much redistribute wealth as destroy it. There may be a redivision of the land, but the natural inequality of men soon re-creates an inequality of possessions and privileges, and raises to power a new minority with essentially the same instincts as in the old."

In historical example after example, upheavals such as those we see today actually lead to greater tyranny. Where governments can, they squash them. Where they cannot, disorder gives rise to new tyrants. Anarchy is insufferable, and people get their fill of it very quickly. Soon someone steps in to reestablish order, often at even higher cost and greater suffering.

Biblical prophecy powerfully backs the lessons of history. It speaks plainly of the conditions that will grow out of today's disruptions. It will be a time of tribulation and suffering worse than any in human history! (Matthew 24:21; Daniel 12:1; Jeremiah 30:7). The instability rolling through country after country today augurs far more serious troubles to come.

Picking sides between governments and protesters misses the bigger lesson we must take from these events: This world desperately needs perfect governance, established by the only Source of genuine solutions to its injustices and problems. Thankfully, it is almost here.

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