Protest Dynamics in Azerbaijan and Their Relation to Authoritarian Regime Stability

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We can easily anticipate what would await political opposition groups if they were to attempt to hold a political rally in front of a government building under a consolidated authoritarian regime. But what happens when ordinary citizens gather in the same venue for a protest centered on a social issue? In January 2019, the Azerbaijani opposition held its last sanctioned rally, which brought nearly twenty thousand citizens together to demand the release of well-known political prisoners and improved living standards.[1] Thenceforth, a de-facto ban has been imposed on anti-government protests in the country. Several attempts by opposition parties to hold unsanctioned rallies or demonstrations have been met with violent intervention by law enforcement.[2] In the meantime, issue-based, socially-oriented and mainly local protests of ordinary citizens have continued to take place, if not grow. However, such protests are generally overlooked despite their potential in revealing key issues of concern in society. To fill the gap, this article presents research into the recent protest dynamics in Azerbaijan, followed by an analysis of the potential effects on the stability of the authoritarian regime. The text proceeds in three parts. Firstly, based on original data, this article provides an overview of recent protest developments, including major protester concerns, targets of the protests, and immediate government responses. The second part moves on to examine, on a theoretical basis, the logic of regime responses to protests, particularly from the perspective of authoritarian stability. Finally, the article discusses

potential outcomes of the ongoing protests in the country's political context.

Methodology

This article draws on a protest dataset that has been generated by the author.[3] In half a year's time, bimonthly from April to August 2021, each protest action in Azerbaijan was coded into the dataset. All of the protest data were collected from online sources covering developments within the country. Following preliminary monitoring, six media outlets were selected based on their activeness in protest reporting. In the specified timeframe, the selected online sources were regularly scanned, and each reported protest was registered in the dataset, along with the location, concerns of the protesters, approximate number of participants, and immediate response/s by the authorities. When available, preference was given to livestreams and video reports on social media (mainly Facebook and YouTube) – to be able to grasp the protest environment and narratives. The audiences of the above media outlets ranges from a few thousand to nearly a million subscribers. Due to the sensitivity of the research subject, no reference is made in this text to the protest reports of the monitored local media. Because this study focuses on protest trends rather than the number of the protests in a given timeframe – the data was collected throughout every second month. Therefore, the dataset includes protests that took place in the course of months of April, June, and August 2021.

This methodology of data collection has certain limitations. Firstly, as the media environment remains restrictive, and only a small number of independent online media outlets cover the developments outside government control[4] – we can expect that the actual number of protests is larger. Especially in the regions, many protests go unnoticed due to the limited capacities of independent media to report them. Secondly, post-protest updates are not provided by media in most cases,

making it difficult to track subsequent outcomes or repercussions for the protesters. Only in cases of repeat protests can we draw a conclusion that protesters' demands had been neglected in some way. Another limitation, of course, is Covid-19 and related restrictions. Studies indicate that protest activity significantly declined at a global level during the pandemic due to the distancing measures.[5] In Azerbaijan, although the most restrictive quarantine measures, including curfew, had been loosened by April – it is safe to assume that Covid-19 has diminished political protests in size and quantity. Nevertheless, the collected data yields some crucial findings presented below.[6]

Findings

A total of 122 protests were recorded in April, June, and August. As noted above, the majority of those reported protests were in the capital, Baku, while 21 percent of them occurred in other cities and towns across the country without any specific pattern in a particular region. The issues of the protests included property rights violations and disputes, injustice (unfair trials and/or investigations), lack of infrastructure, social protection, labor rights (workload and/or unpaid salaries), missing soldiers, environmental problems and police violence, fraud, and more (see Table 1). The most common form of protest is gathering in groups; however, in some instances, attempts at road blocking, marching, striking, hunger striking, and self-immolation were made. One-fifth of protests took place in front of offices of the local authorities (executive powers) to which protesters' concerns were addressed. Others venues for frequent protests are the presidential administration (12%), the parliament (5%), various ministries (18%), courts (7%), and the general prosecutor's office (6%). Protests were organized in front of at least 9 various ministries, including those of internal affairs, education, health, and state security. However, among them, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, and the Ministry of Justice stand out in terms of being subject to

quantitatively more citizen protests. The estimated number of protesters ranged from a single person to over 200. The average number of protest participants in the dataset is 29, while the median is 10.

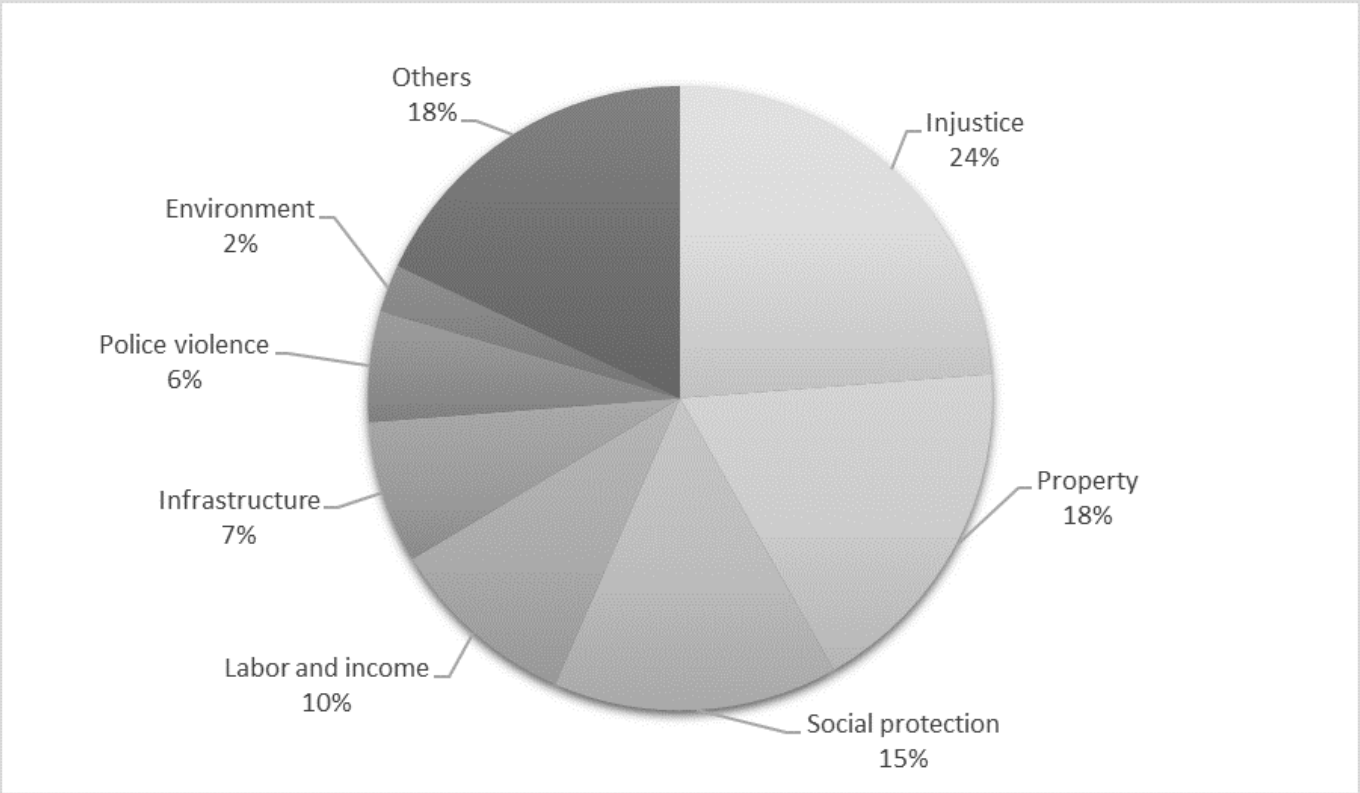


Table 1. Issues of protest concern

The largest protesting community in the country is the former residents of the *Sovetski* neighborhood in central Baku, who have not been offered fair compensation after their houses were forcefully demolished in 2014.[7] Hundreds of them have been gathering to find a solution for over six years; however, recently, their protests have elevated in size and volume – they now address multiple state institutions, while authorities have remained reluctant to find a compromise with them. Former *Sovetski* residents have held multiple protests, but interestingly, on 26 April, when they gathered in front of the presidential administration, the police intervened and shoved the protesters into buses before transporting them to the office of local authorities to continue their demonstration. This is in line with the logic of authorities' immediate response to the protests, which will be elaborated

in the following paragraphs.

Over the past few months, there has been increased instances of protests over the treatment of Karabakh war veterans and their families by the authorities in the post-war period, especially concerning the lack of allocation of medals and military ranks, social benefits, jobs, psychological rehabilitation, medical care for the wounded, and more.[8] Protests of various groups of young war veterans have taken place every month, mainly addressing the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection. Another post-war protest group is family members of missing soldiers of the Second Karabakh War (2020). The relatives of missing soldiers have organized multiple protests targeting military and state security authorities, blaming them for inaction in determining the whereabouts of the soldiers.

Recently, the authorities cancelled or suspended disability benefits for nearly 23 thousand citizens, which sparked outrage in society and triggered numerous protests by people with disabilities – including permanently injured war veterans – and their families, who were left without social protection.[9] Additionally, 190 thousand citizens' disability pensions are expected to come to an end by the end of 2021[10], against the backdrop of public pressure on the government to develop responsive social policy.

Infrastructure-related problems – from lack of roads to electricity cuts – have commonly been a source for citizen dissatisfaction, especially outside Baku. Among such issues, recently, severe scarcity in water supply has brought larger groups of people from neighborhoods together in protests. Demanding access to water to maintain the small farming efforts that provide their livelihood, protesters angrily accused wealthy local officials of monopolizing limited water resources. These protests took place in remote settlements of Baku as well as different regions of Azerbaijan, including the Goychay and Sabirabad districts. Experts believe that the

authorities have failed to implement necessary policies to deal with the water shortage problem.[11]

Problems of the judiciary are another matter that has given rise to small protests, mainly by families of prisoners, demanding fair trials from courts. Not necessarily all of these cases have involved political motives. In numerous instances, citizens have also protested against corruption and bribery in the judiciary and law enforcement system, which have impeded the impartial delivery and implementation of judgments over cases involving fraud and property dispute.

A notable protest trend is the tendency by new civic actors, who include environmental, animal rights, and feminist and LGBT+ activists, to use alternative means of engagement with the authorities in order to raise awareness to their causes. These actors are referred to as new because they have emerged mainly after state authorities' crackdown on the NGO sector (2013-2015). Since the government shut the doors for any genuine civil society involvement in policy decisions long ago, new informal civic groups have frequently organized various kinds of protest activities to get their message from the bottom up. All of these groups have organized protests over recent months, including, respectively, protests against deforestation, mass killings of stray dogs, femicide cases, and homophobic murders. Although the immediate and long-term responses to these protests by the government and society have been mixed – in general, these new civil society groups have managed to generate more discussions, at least on social media, in comparison to other protesters.

According to the collected data, only one protest was organized by an opposition political party, although this protest did not target the Azerbaijani government. The protest was held in April by the opposition Musavat Party in front of the Russian Embassy in Baku with the demand that Russian peacekeeping troops be removed from Karabakh.[12] The only protest against the government, which was called for on social

media by anti-regime bloggers in exile, attracted few people for its 15 June demonstration. Those few were moved away by police shortly after they started to talk about social issues.

Interestingly enough, despite the immensely repressive political context of Azerbaijan, the degree of immediate repression of ordinary citizen protesters has not been high lately, the collected data suggests. Police intervened in one quarter of protests, in most cases to disperse the participants. Data shows if the protest took place near a central government office, i.e., the presidential administration, the probability of police interruption was very high. This is also the case for demonstrations in the central (Fountains) square of Baku – a familiar venue for mass anti-government protests in the past. In that location, a peaceful protest of animal rights activists in April resulted in the brief detention of at least 5 of the participants.[13] Following a repeated attempt to march through the central square in August, the animal rights activists were violently detained by the police, and three of them were sentenced to 15 days detention.[14] This is the only reported case of post-protest administrative detention, which is a common practice of Azerbaijani authorities against opposition activists.

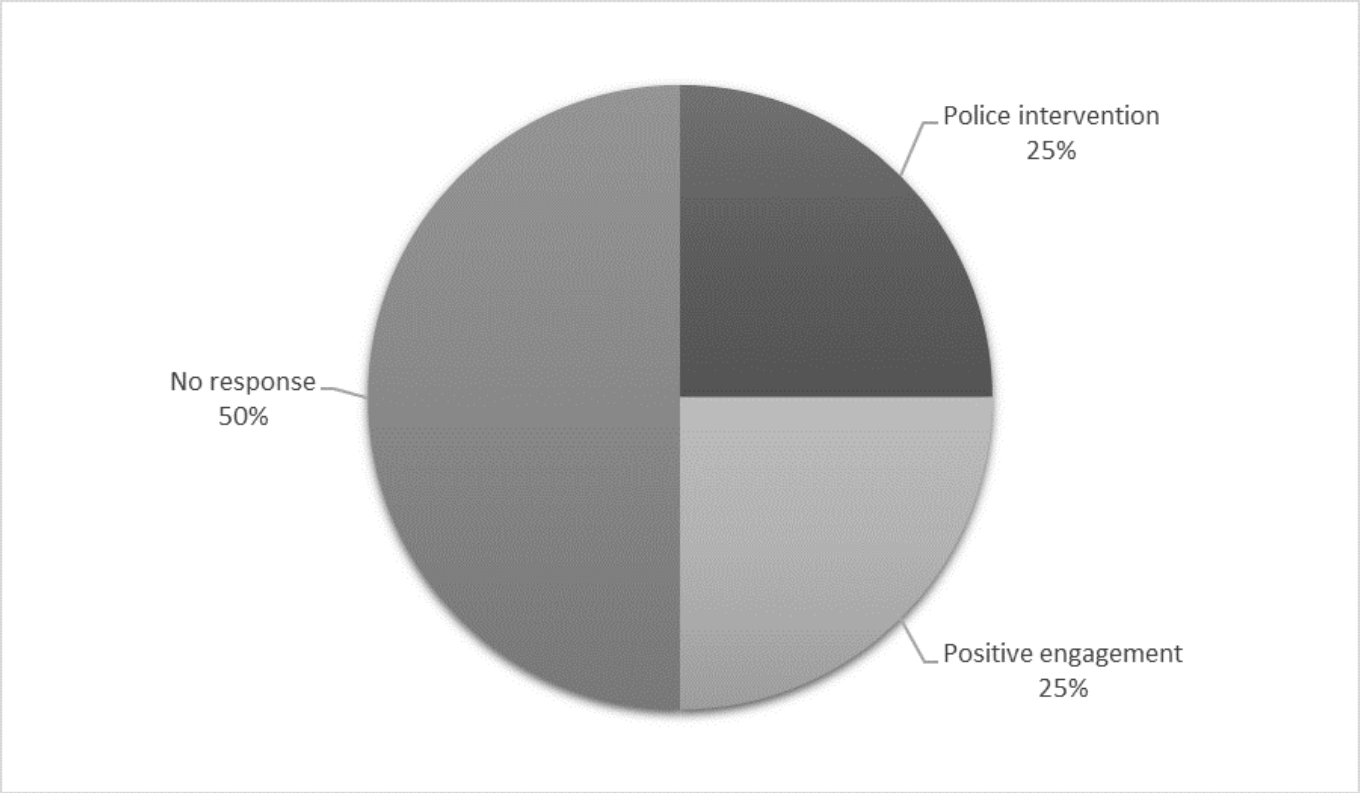


Table 2. Immediate responses by the authorities to protesters

As can be seen in Table 2 – if the protests in the timeframe would be categorized into three groups with regards to responses by authorities, the largest group would be those who either drew positive engagement or no response from the authorities. Half of the protests continued in the absence of any reaction by the police or respective authorities. This applies to the majority of protests in the regions, most of which were targeted at local officials.

The rest of the protests, particularly the ones taking place in front of ministries or organized by war veterans, drew constructive engagement by the respective authorities in the form of registration for meetings to hear the concern or pledges of a solution.

With this background, what are the potential outcomes of the ballooning protests for the state? The next section will probe the implications of these recent protest dynamics on authoritarian stability in Azerbaijan after providing a brief theoretical framework.

Protest and authoritarian stability

As in other non-democratic regimes, the Azerbaijani state tends to respond to uncontrolled societal developments based on perceived threats to its stability. Along with elite discontent, civil protests are considered to be one of the primary sources of challenge for authoritarian stability. One stream of the existing research on protest under authoritarian regimes theorizes the signaling potential of protests, i.e. how they act to inform fellow citizens about levels of dissatisfaction in society, and, in general, how they reduce uncertainty about citizen attitudes towards the rulers.[15] According to the signaling model, especially in repressive contexts, if citizens opt to protest, it has a robust information-revealing potential for other citizens about the anti-government sentiments of the protesters.[16] The signaling model is a useful analytical tool to understand how anti-government resentment spreads in authoritarian contexts; however, according to some other scholars, it falls short in explaining the dynamics of the protests that are local and overtly non-political. This group of scholars believes that the latter kind of protests might actually prove to be useful to autocrats: firstly, for identifying and remedying existing social grievances before they transform into collective action, and secondly, for monitoring the performance of officials.[17] In the absence of free elections, a vibrant civil society, and institutions of accountability, ordinary citizen protests can tell the central authorities what is going wrong at the lower levels of government.

The spontaneous rise and diffusion of unrest in the Azerbaijani regions in 2016 represents a noteworthy case. Following the drop in global oil price, the devaluation of the national currency, and the subsequent hike in the living costs – combined with high unemployment and weak social assistance by the state – hundreds of residents in at least 12 administrative districts of Azerbaijan took to the streets to express their frustration.[18] The protests emerged locally

and were uncoordinated, but, nevertheless, gained extensive (social) media coverage. Soon enough, law enforcement linked the protests to opposition groups and responded with a wave of repression, involving the imprisonment of some local protesters, to suppress dissent.[19] The regime significantly raised the political cost of participation in further protest but also made some concessions, such as waiving taxes on bread and minor increases in pensions. However, experts have warned that failure to undertake fundamental reforms might lead to broader and less controllable discontent.[20]

The analysis of the collected data on recent protest developments suggests that Azerbaijan's autocratic leadership has recently been imprudent with regards to a majority of the protests of ordinary citizens over social concerns, especially when the targets of the protests were lower-level officials. Arguably, such protests are not seen as threats anymore because of the underlying confidence in the consolidation of the authoritarian regime. Authoritarian stability entails some crucial causal factors or cornerstones, which this article, by drawing on previous studies of this subject, has determined as elite cohesion, legitimation, and repression.[21] Understanding how regime stability has been maintained since 2016 might be helpful to grasp the logic of responses by the authorities to protesters and vice versa.

In the aftermath of the 2016 regional protests related to the economic crisis, President Ilham Aliyev took up some critical measures to reform the ruling elite and strengthen its cohesiveness, a process which resolutely commenced with the appointment of the first lady as Vice President and continued with consistent efforts to replace powerful rent-seeking oligarchic officials with loyal technocrats who promised state reforms.[22] Concurrently, the majority of ministers and local officials were either removed or reshuffled, while some of them were demonstratively arrested on corruption and abuse of power charges.[23] Throughout this process, almost all ill-reputed faces of the cabinet of ministers and the presidential

administration, as well as the chief executives in all regions where 2016 protests took place, were pushed out of the government.

In the aftermath of the last sanctioned mass protest of the opposition in 2019, organized by the Popular Front Party, the authorities emboldened their pledges for socio-economic reforms. In the meantime, steps were made towards co-opting opposition elites, even though decades-long systematic repression has created a colossal power asymmetry between the government and opposition groups. Later that year, the renewed cadres of the presidential administration offered a dialogue platform with the opposition parties.[24] Those parties who were attracted by the idea of a dialogue with the authorities – namely, the Republican Alternative and the recently emerged nationalist AG Party – were offered some political and material rewards. For example, the former was registered as a political party by the Ministry of Justice after a very long time, its representative was allowed to have a seat in the Parliament and the party received financial support from the state. The latter was given an office space. Leaders of both parties were granted access to show up in state TV channels. Whereas, traditional opposition parties, Popular Front and Musavat, which rejected the dialogue, were further repressed and marginalized in the government's rhetoric.[25] In either case, the opposition groups have remained too weak, restrained, and distracted to recruit and mobilize ongoing social protest.

Yet, Sergei Guriev and Daniel Triesman have argued that autocrats "survive not because of their use of force or ideology but because they convince the public – rightly or wrongly – that they are competent."[26] Although the ruling elite has not taken any substantial and systemic steps to improve its social and economic performance[27], the decisive victory over Armenia in the Karabakh war in 2020 has boosted the legitimacy of Aliyev, the Commander in Chief.[28] In the post-war juncture, he enjoys popularity at a level that he has

never experienced earlier, although experts believe this might change in the near future due to different reasons, including the country's poor standard of living.[29] For now, a closer look into protester narratives reveals that the president and the first lady are referred to by ordinary citizens as the sole authority capable of solving pressing problems of the state. Thus, the current degree of legitimacy protects the ruling family from major public protests against them.

Having consolidated elite cohesion and legitimacy does not mean that the regime is inert in exercising its coercive power in the face of a potential public dissent. This can be understood from Azerbaijani spending on security. In the state budget for 2021, more than 23 percent of total expenditures are allocated for the defense, state security, law enforcement, judiciary, and the prosecutor's office.[30] In comparison, this spending is nearly twice as much as allocations for social protection and assistance. However, as can also be observed in responses to the protests, an upsurge in the scale of repressions is unlikely due to the following rationalizations. Firstly, repression of the ordinary citizenry might bring "unintended consequences," such as escalated public anger, which might, in turn, trigger further protests and damage to central state legitimacy.[31] Secondly, modernized autocracies with educated and skilled technocrats aiming to build a globally integrated economy tend not to opt for harsh repressions in order to avoid reputational costs both at the local and international level.[32] The comparatively lower level of recent repressions in Azerbaijan can be explained by the latter approach.

Implications

The potential danger of protests under an authoritarian regime is in their signaling function, as was discussed earlier. Our data show that the vast majority of recent protests in Azerbaijan are neither strictly political nor anti-regime in general. These protests do not attract many participants and

are not mobilized by any opposition group or social movement. Thus, their current signaling potential – the threat to authoritarian regime stability – is shallow. On the contrary, we can assume that small issue-based protests are beneficial for the regime in the short term because they decentralize the targets of contention in a highly centralized political system. Additionally, this allows the central government to eliminate discredited officials, especially at the local level, to be reframed as solutions to problems in the short term. Furthermore, confidence in regime stability explains the indifference of authorities towards protesters. In the longer term, however, implications exist for the ruling regime.

Over the past year, the Azerbaijani economy was hit by what Ilaha Abasli dubs the "dual shock" – a decline in global oil price and the pandemic[33] – while the government offered only scant support to the country's vulnerable populations. The social security system continues to suffer from underfunding, corruption, and mismanagement.[34] In the wake of rising social tensions, experts have predicted that social protests will continue to grow.[34] Lowered levels of coercive force towards ordinary protesters and their visibility to larger audiences through social media can potentially produce an effect of diffusion, which will result in more citizens choosing protest as a means of communication with the authorities over social issues. Having failed to introduce over-arching reforms in response to major protester concerns – such as advancing the rule of law in the justice system, improving on property and labor rights, and investing more in social protection and infrastructure while eliminating corruption – the authorities will encounter burgeoning instances of protests conjoined with a troublesome dilemma of repression or concession.

Finally, even the skeptics of the signaling model acknowledge that "when the regime refuses to address localized grievances, such pent-up grievances will turn into resentment against the whole regime."[36] This was also confirmed in studies of other

autocratic contexts, where disregarded local and issue-based protests contributed to the shaping of "collective identities and collective action frames that shape protesters' future interactions with regime officials."[37] Thus, there is an established relationship between regime responses to protests and future mobilizations of citizens.

Conclusion

This article presented a historical overview of protest dynamics under authoritarian rule in Azerbaijan, which has been known to be consistently intolerant of civic protests. The collected data suggest that major protester concerns are related to issues of the judiciary, property and labor rights, distribution of social protection, infrastructure, and more. A quarter of protests were disrupted by police while the majority of protests did not attract any official reaction, either positively or negatively. This is explained by the increased legitimacy and cohesiveness of the incumbent political elite as well as the complete elimination of opposition groups as a threat to the regime, especially in the wake of the pandemic, during which no political protests could take place. Because citizen dissatisfaction over social and economic problems is unavoidable, the ruling officials have an interest in allowing localized protests against lower level authorities. In the absence of systematic solutions to the expressed problems, however, the unconventional engagement of citizens with authorities can potentially regularize and begin to challenge regime legitimacy and stability over the longer term. Therefore, continued observation and research of protest trends and government responses is important.

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