

World at Crossroads: From Scenarios to Action

These short summaries and discussions address highly complex global, regional, and translocal developments occurring up to March 2025, involving numerous actors, perspectives, and nuances. They do not offer comprehensive accounts or detailed analyses, and inevitably may overlook certain events, developments, or viewpoints. Instead, their purpose is to help stakeholders critically engage with the four RESPACE scenarios, stimulating reflection, strategic foresight, and deeper exploration of transformative possibilities for collaboration. Each RESPACE scenario outlines distinct, plausible future pathways but is explicitly not predictive. Users are encouraged to continuously adapt and update these Dialogue Inputs to reflect evolving contexts and emerging understandings.

Global Protest, Grassroots and Autonomous Civil Society

April 2025

Summary & Context

Over the past year, waves of popular protest and grassroots activism have surged across continents – from city squares in industrialised nations to villages and townships in the Global South. Citizen movements have become a defining feature of global politics, driven by grievances old and new. A recent study shows that in 2023 alone, major protests erupted in 83 countries, including unlikely places such as China, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Iraq, and even in traditionally stable societies such as Denmark and Norway. This underscores that no region is immune to public anger or civic energy. The triggers vary widely. Some protests target authoritarianism and demand democracy; for example, protests and acts of dissent in Iran despite crackdowns or pro-democracy protests in Sudan and Myanmar despite facing military violence. Others explode over economic pain and inequality: Think of the cost-of-living and fuel price protests in Nigeria and Kenya in 2024, or demonstrations in Pakistan over inflation and political rights. Industrialised Western countries have seen their share of unrest, too. Huge climate marches across Europe, cost-of-living protests in the UK and France, and in the United States, incidents of labour strikes and social justice protests.

A striking contrast lies in how these movements manifest and what they achieve. The Global South often protests about existential issues. Food and fuel shortages, corruption and poor governance, resistance against foreign interference. In many Western democracies, while disruptive, protests generally occur in contexts that allow freedom of assembly and media coverage; for example, environmental activists in Germany regularly lobby and litigate for greener policies. At the same time, however, the suppression of pro-Palestine protests in several Western democracies is raising concerns about the erosion of civil liberties. For instance, in France, authorities temporarily banned pro-Palestinian demonstrations, citing potential disturbances to public order (but this was later overruled by the courts). In Germany, pro-Palestinian rallies were prohibited, and spontaneous demonstrations were forcefully dispersed by police. In the United States, universities face ongoing criticism for arresting and disciplining students involved in pro-Palestine protests, leading to debates over free speech and academic freedom. In contrast, protesters in authoritarian or conflict-torn states brave far greater risks. Mozambican activists protesting electoral fraud

in 2024 faced lethal force from security services resulting in at least 110 deaths. Student protesters in Bangladesh demonstrating against the reinstatement of job quotas were subjected to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and mass arrests.

These differing conditions shape the strategies and resilience of movements. In the Global South, many protests are decentralised and fuelled by social media, as formal civil society groups are restricted. They may take creative forms – art and graffiti, or religious gatherings doubling as meetings to organise actions. While Western movements tend to benefit from established organisations (NGOs, unions) and get quicker access to global attention, they also struggle against complacency and fragmentation in societies where the sense of crisis is less acute. A notable trend is the cross-pollination of tactics. The 2019 leaderless protest methods in Hong Kong –using Telegram and laser pointers against cameras – inspired activists in Thailand. The 2020–2021 farmer protest in India not only succeeded in reversing laws but also set an example of sustained peaceful encampment with which climate activists in Europe express solidarity.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

The ubiquity of protests and civic movements strongly channels the Bridges scenario – a world of activated civil society forging connections across issues and borders. Indeed, the global protests of today exemplify how interdependence and stronger networks can shape events. For example, climate and social justice movements often coordinate internationally. Greta Thunberg’s Fridays for Future protests resonated on every continent, which reflects the Bridges emphasis on shared global identities and solidarity. We also see protests in the Global South increasingly leading the charge on issues such as inequality and climate justice, embodying the Bridges vision of empowered grassroots driving change from the bottom up. In contrast, the response to these movements often skews toward a Walls scenario. Many governments react with securitisation – from deploying troops and erecting literal or figurative walls against protesters, to passing laws that criminalise demonstrations. Such repression aligns with Walls futures in which

Despite differences, grassroots movements in both the Global North and Global South share common threads: frustration with elites, the demand for dignity and voice, and increasingly, a global consciousness. Climate strikes, for example, see youth from Stockholm to Kampala rally behind the same science and slogans, although their lived realities differ. As we move forward, activists are learning to navigate a world of shrinking civic space (more governments passing anti-protest laws or surveilling dissent) and digital battles (state-sponsored misinformation to discredit them or internet shutdowns during protests).

The big question is whether these disparate sparks of protest can lead to lasting change. In some cases, they clearly have. Think of the 2021 protests in Colombia that paved the way for the election of a reformist government. In others, movements face stalemates or harsh repression. In 2020, the Belarus democracy movement was crushed and many activists jailed or exiled. Nonetheless, the persistence of grassroots activism, even under dire conditions, suggests that people’s movements will remain a powerful force globally, continually adapting to their contexts.

states clamp down on civic space and see activism as a threat. The divergence between more permissive environments (Western democracies) and more repressive ones (authoritarian states) also mirrors the Towers scenario dynamic, whereby different regions have different civic space norms. In some regions (Europe, parts of Latin America), protest is an accepted part of political life (a legacy of democratic norms). In others (Middle East, China), protests are forced to operate undercover or face exile – almost as if they are two separate towers of civic possibility.

Ideally, the Maze scenario would have global institutions responding to protest demands; for example, the UN or regional organisations mediating in response to mass uprisings or governments addressing transnational protest calls via policy changes (climate accords, anti-corruption conventions). There are some hints of this. Global outrage over police violence (Black Lives Matter)

pushed even the UN Human Rights Council to discuss racism in 2020. Youth climate protests pressured governments into stronger pledges at COP summits. Overall, however, protesters themselves often express frustration that the maze of international diplomacy is not delivering results fast enough. The rise of grassroots movements is a big nod to Bridges – people power transcending boundaries. Yet the pushback they face can shove things toward Walls,

if repression wins, or force activists to become more nimble – as in a Maze, navigating complex systems. The focus of many current Global South movements also highlights a crucial point. Whereas Western activists often operate in relatively safe civic spaces (though not without challenges and threats), their Global South counterparts are innovating under pressure and possibly pioneering the future of protest in a world that is increasingly surveilled.

Discussion Questions

- **For Activists (Global North and Global South):** How can grassroots movements in repressive environments sustain themselves and make an impact without the freedoms available in democracies? What creative tactics from the Global South can activists in the Global North learn from? For instance, the use of pseudonyms and secure apps by Sudanese protesters to evade surveillance or the community organising models from indigenous movements that have kept resistance alive for decades. Conversely, are there advantages that Global South activists see in Global North movements – such as fundraising networks or media outreach – that could be localised in their contexts? How can activists across borders support one another more concretely? For example, providing safe digital platforms, sharing legal aid resources or coordinating global days of action that protect those on the ground?
- **For International Donors and Human Rights Organisations:** Given the rise of spontaneous leaderless movements, how can traditional supporters of civil society adapt? Funding an NGO is one thing but how can a decentralised protest movement without formal structure be assisted? Should these traditional supporters of civil society even support these local movements, given the risk of delegitimising them as foreign-funded actions? What new forms of support are necessary? Maybe tech infrastructure – secure communication tools, circumvention of internet shutdowns. Or emergency funds for the legal defence of protesters who are arrested or detained. How can international actors ensure they are amplifying voices from the Global South, not drowning them out? For instance, climate philanthropy has been critiqued for focusing on Global North activists. How can that balance shift to empower youth in the Pacific Islands or Africa who are on the frontlines?
- **For Policymakers and Governance Stakeholders:** The prevalence of protests signals underlying issues that governments have failed to address. What mechanisms can policymakers create to more constructively respond to grassroots grievances? Should there be more institutionalised channels for citizen input – such as participatory budgeting, national dialogues or citizen assemblies? How can governments differentiate between legitimate dissent and security threats without defaulting to repression? In democracies, what reforms (police training, accountability for misconduct, right to protest laws) are needed to rebuild trust so that protests do not become the only outlet for people to be heard? At the international level, is there a role for diplomacy in protecting the right to protest? For example, should democratic nations form a coalition that offers observation or mediation when major protest movements erupt in any country to discourage violent crackdowns?

- **For the Private Sector and Tech Platforms:** Companies are increasingly drawn into protest dynamics – whether as subjects of protest (oil companies facing climate activists, sweatshop allegations sparking boycotts) or as platforms that enable mobilisation (social media, messaging apps). What responsibilities do tech companies have in protest contexts? For instance, when governments request internet shutdowns or want user data to track activists, how should companies respond in line with human rights principles? Could they do more to safeguard activists? Maybe by refusing to store data in jurisdictions prone to abuse or by amplifying credible information during protest crises to counter state propaganda. For businesses more broadly, how can they engage with the concerns raised by grassroots movements instead of seeing them as a nuisance? For example, can multinational corporations use their influence to urge governments to address the corruption and inequality that protesters highlight, recognising that stability is good for business in the long run? As part of their corporate social responsibility obligations, should companies support civic education and dialogue initiatives to help address the polarisation that often underlies waves of protest?
- **For Local Communities:** Protests are often depicted as mass gatherings in capitals but they are fuelled by local community frustrations and can have lasting effects back in those communities. After the banners are rolled up, how do communities carry on the spirit of protest to achieve practical changes in daily life? In villages that participated in nationwide protests for land rights, do they form local councils to negotiate with authorities on those issues? How do communities deal with divisions if not everyone supported the protest movement? How can they heal the rifts that emerge when a segment of society opposed the protests that another segment championed? Importantly, what alternatives to protest might communities consider for the future? Some movements evolve into political parties or cooperatives. Is that a path communities are taking? For instance, protest leaders in some countries later win local office or create development associations. By reflecting on these questions, local groups can strategise how to turn moments of street protest into sustainable civic power and social change, tailored to their unique cultural and political context.

Explore the RESPACE scenarios here.

