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Reported Social Unrest Index: September 2024 Update

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Reported Social Unrest Index: September 2024 Update
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ABSTRACT: This is the third update of the reported Social Unrest Index (Barrett et al. 2022), describing the evolution of social unrest worldwide since June 2023. It shows that the global incidence of unrest has stayed broadly stable in the last year. However, the global distribution has not been even, with a concentration of major events in Europe and sub-Saharan Africa and, to a lesser extent, in the Western Hemisphere.

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1. Introduction

This paper updates the Reported Social Unrest Index, developed in Barrett et al 2022. There, we showed that sharp spikes in media reports matching certain keywords are a good measure of social unrest events. The original dataset covered 130 countries monthly from the late 1980s to March 2022. In Barrett & Bae 2023, we updated that data to June 2023. In this paper, we again extend coverage of the dataset, to July 2024. The paper not only serves as a means to disseminate that data but also serves as a review of social unrest episodes in the last 13 months.

Since the middle of last year, the frequency of global social unrest events has stayed relatively stable (see Figure 1), with events in July 2023 and May 2024 offset by a quieter period in late-2023. This contrasts to the years just before and after the pandemic, when national unrest events were observed more frequently.

In the last 13 months, there has been a noticeable geographic pattern in the incidence of social unrest events, with a concentration in Europe, Africa, and, to a lesser extent, the Western Hemisphere, with fewer events in the Middle East and Central Asia and Asia-Pacific regions. Accordingly, the remainder of this paper reviews social unrest events by geographic region.

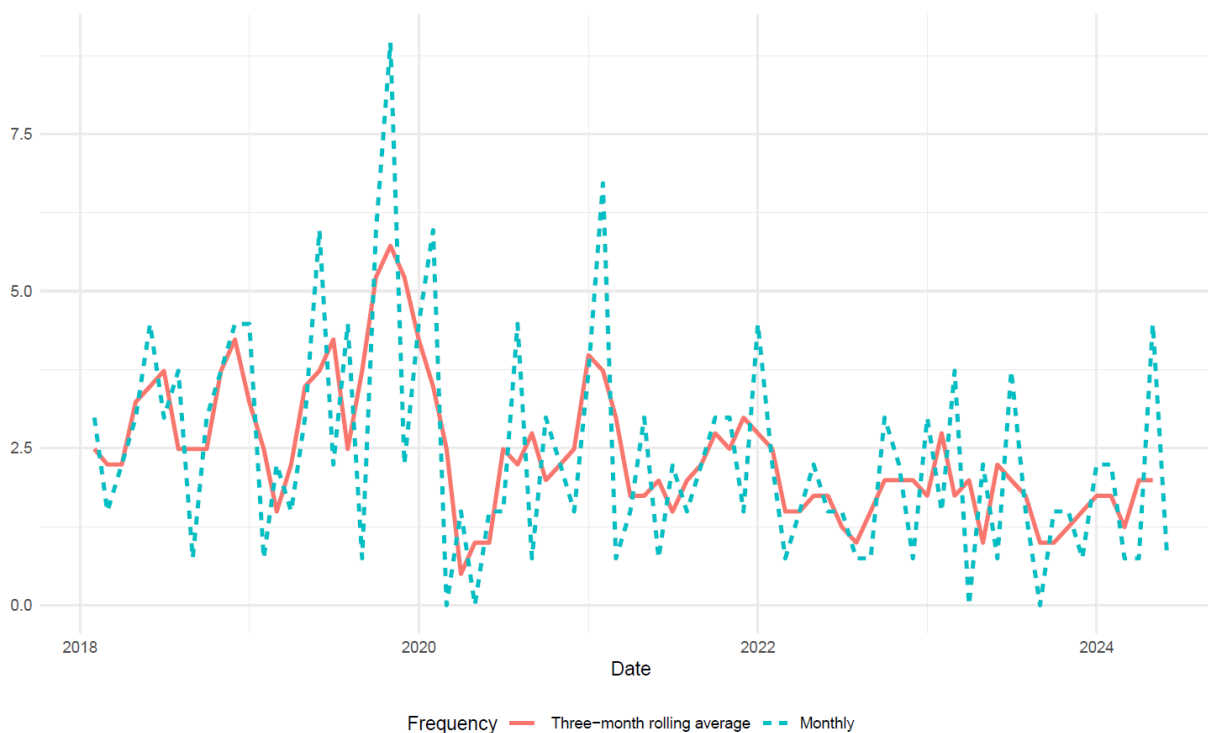


Figure 1: Fraction of countries experiencing major unrest events

2. Background: The Reported Social Unrest Index

The Reported Social Unrest Index counts mentions of terms relating to unrest in prominent media outlets. The index is computed monthly and covers some 130 countries. In Barrett et al. 2022 we describe the construction

of this index and note that it is characterized by episodic large spikes. We provide criteria for codifying these spikes and show that they correlate very closely with major episodes of unrest. We validate this method on several case studies, showing that this method can distinguish unrest in nearby countries at similar times (e.g. Egypt and Tunisia during 2011) as well as lining up well with consensus views of waves of unrest. We thus term the spikes identified by these criteria “RSUI-defined events”. For a full discussion of the construction of the RSUI, as well as a detailed analysis of its strengths and limitations, we refer readers to Barrett et al. 2022.

The index and the associated events have been used in a number of further studies. Hadzi-Vaskov et al. 2023 study the macro-economic impact of social unrest using our data. Hlatshwayo & Redl 2021 investigate the predictability of unrest using RSUI data. Diakonova et al 2022 use this data in a more general forecasting exercise. Cebotari et al. 2024 consider the RSUI in their set of predictors for coups d'état. And in Barrett et al 2024, we use a daily version of the index to measure the stock market response to social unrest events.

3. Social Unrest since June 2023

3.1 Europe

July 2023 saw unrelated social unrest events in several European countries (See Figure 1). In France, the shooting of a motorist by police lead to protests and riots. In Israel, protests around judicial reform saw mass demonstrations and disruption in multiple cities. And in the Netherlands, the long-running farmers' protests saw a pick up in the RSUI but not quite enough to trigger a RSUI-defined event. However, pre-election climate protests in November 2023 and pro-Palestinian demonstrations in May 2024 did generate sufficient changes in the RSUI to meet the event criteria. Other European countries also saw major protests during this period for a variety of other reasons. In November 2023, there were mass demonstrations in Spain against an amnesty for Catalan independence leaders. In February 2024, farmer protested against EU policies in Belgium. Poland saw a series of demonstrations throughout 2023 in the run-up and following elections in October 2023, although only January 2024 meet the criteria for an RSUI-defined event. Finally, in the Slovak Republic, reforms of the public broadcaster led to mass demonstrations in May 2024.

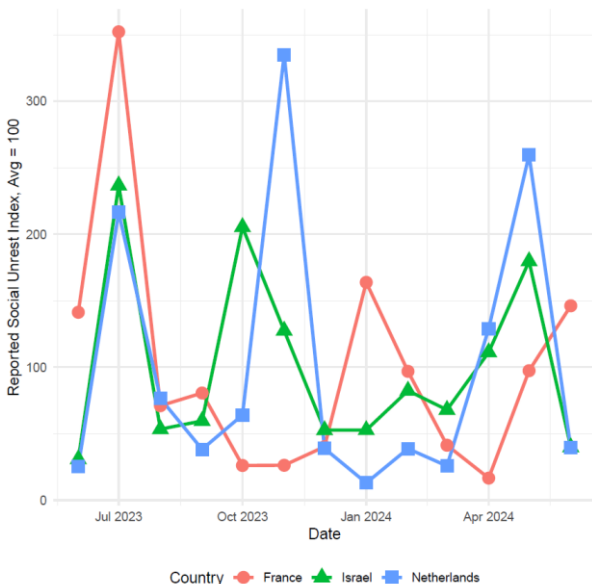


Figure 2: RSUI June 2023 – July 2024, select European countries¹

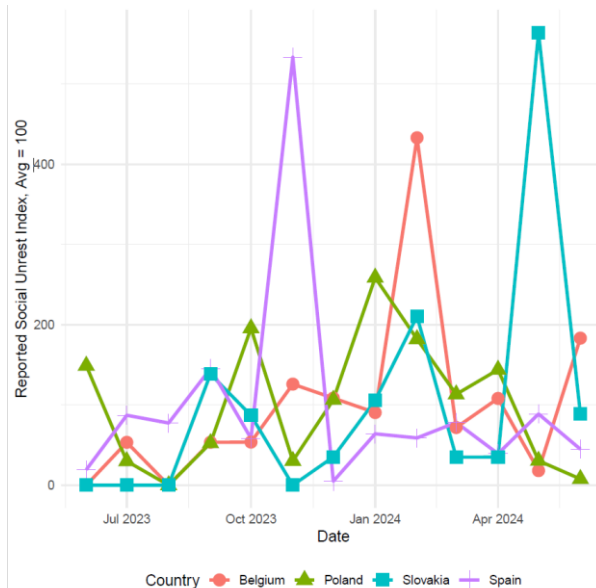


Figure 3: RSUI June 2023 – July 2024, select European countries

3.2 Sub-Saharan Africa

Although the wave of coups and political instability which swept through the Sahel region starting in 2021 seems to be lessening,² its effect continue to be felt in the northern part of sub-Saharan Africa. In July 2023, a military coup toppled the government in Niger (see Figure 4). In Chad, protests marked the transition to civilian rule in May 2024. And in Senegal, the delay of elections led to social unrest in February 2024. Elsewhere in the continent, domestic political tensions drove protests in Madagascar, around elections in October 2023, and in Kenya, where tax changes led to mass demonstrations.

¹ Note that differences in media coverage and interest across countries mean that the level of the RSUI is not directly comparable across countries. As a result, it is normalized to average 100 for each country in each chart. Spikes in the index are thus *relative* to own-country average levels. As such, one cannot directly compare the level of the RSUI across countries to conclude that unrest in any one is greater or less than elsewhere.

² Powell & Clyne 2011, subsequently updated, are arguably the premier course of data on coups.

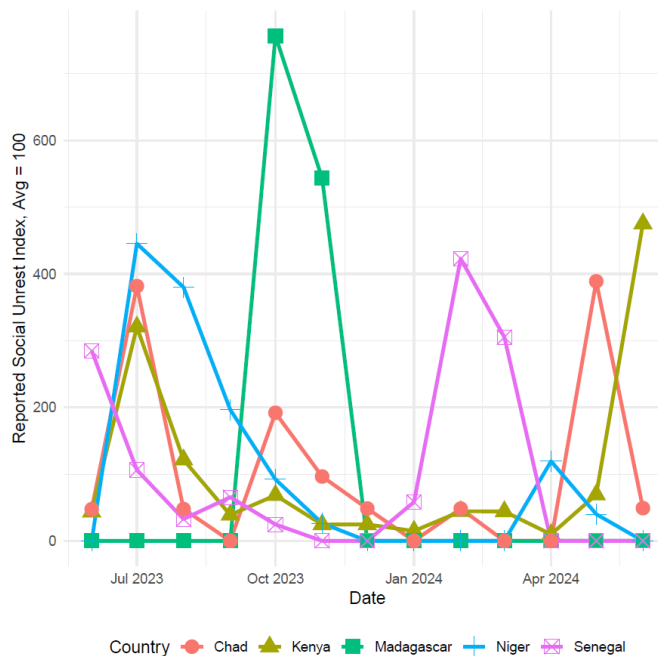


Figure 4: RSUI June 2023 – July 2024, select African countries.

3.3 Western Hemisphere

Several countries in the Western Hemisphere also experienced episodes of unrest during this time, largely stemming from political disputes. In Ecuador, the assassination of a candidate for the upcoming presidential election led to an RSUI-defined unrest event in August 2023. In January 2024, the index also rose notably in Ecuador, as violence erupted between the government and criminal gangs, although was not enough to meet the event criteria. And following the announcement that a reform package would be sent to congress, Argentina saw large demonstrations in December 2023.

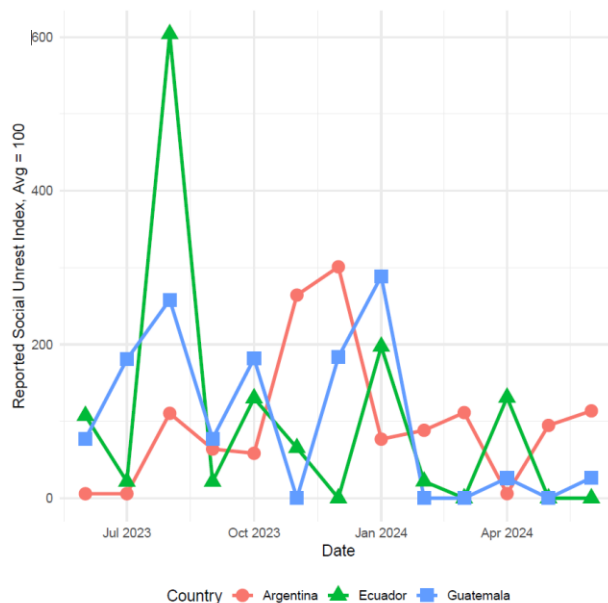


Figure 5: RSUI June 2023 – July 2024, select countries in the Western Hemisphere.

3.4 Rest of the World

Finally, unrest events also occurred in countries outside Europe, Africa, and the Americas. In Papua New Guinea, a dispute over police pay led to a strike by police as subsequent disorder in January 2024. In February, Pakistan saw unrest related to elections. In May 2024, Georgia and Armenia both saw large political demonstrations related to a parliamentary bill and a border dispute, respectively. And in July, mass demonstrations in Bangladesh led to the President fleeing.

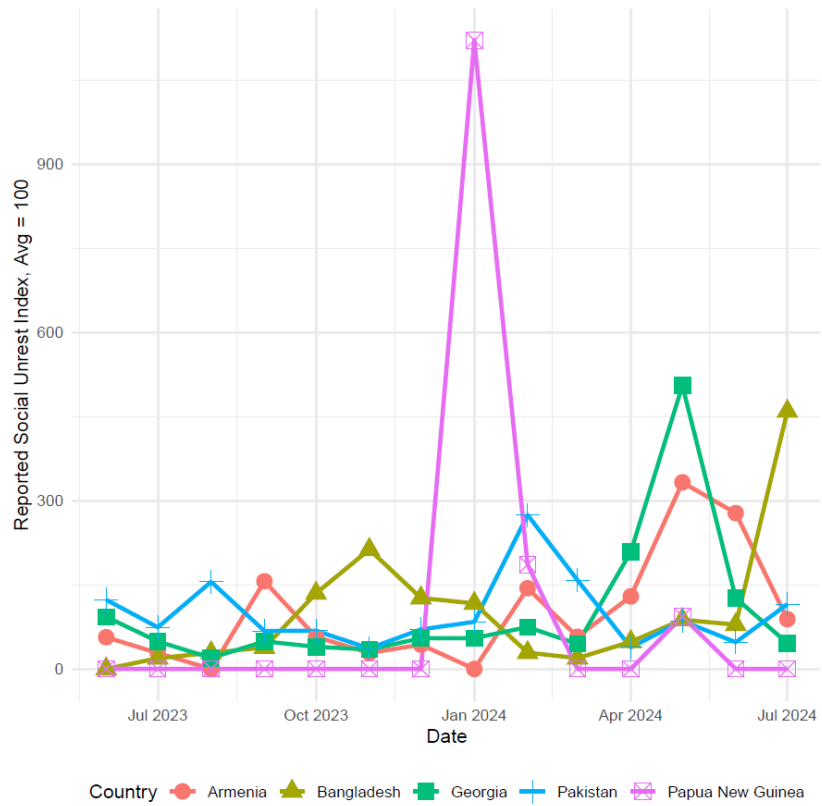


Figure 5: RSUI June 2023 – July 2024, select countries elsewhere.

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