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Predicting Civil Unrest & Riots

By Wei Meng Yeo

SYNOPSIS

The recent riots across the globe has shown how destructive such uprisings can inflict. It has now become more relevant as more countries face the prospect of riots across their major cities. But why do riots start and can their triggers be predicted and planned for?

COMMENTARY

AS THE recent social civil unrests in Baghdad, Barcelona, Hong Kong and Quito will attest, riots have not only become more frequent but the damage that they inflict have become much more considerable. Correspondingly, due to their severity and political impact, they have now come under additional scrutiny by security practitioners.

Different from other forms of political violence, such as insurgent attacks or terrorism, riots are largely unplanned. These acts of political violence are, in essence, mob violence — groups of people assembled, acting with the common intent to execute an activity.

What Causes a Riot?

Indeed, riots are opportunistic with no sense of order. They may occur over weeks or even months, but remain a spontaneous eruption rather than a planned, organised, protracted campaign. There are many sorts of riots: racial, economic and political. All are equally intense, destructive and deadly.

While a riot may be initially triggered by a specific dramatic event, much of the study in explaining or predicting how and why riots occur has been focused on identifying key underlying socio-economic or political causes associated with the prevalence of riots.

The conventional understanding of how riots are initiated is that a certain event, such as a political assassination or the killing of an allegedly innocent person by the authorities, escalates the discontent among the affected community and leads to rioting. Thus, in order to understand how a riot occurs, one must comprehend the causes of the discontent — typically rooted in factors such as racism, poverty and lack of economic opportunity.

Although there is some element of truth in this explanation, it still is inadequate in offering a complete picture on how and why riots do take place.

First, the predisposing social conditions are often ubiquitous, yet riots remain episodic events. Second, many riots are triggered by news not related to social injustices. Indeed, the London riots in 2011 are notable for the fact that, despite being apparently catalysed by a specific incident – the fatal shooting by a police officer of a suspect in North London, anyone with a television set could witness that the jubilation rather than fury best characterised the mood of the looters on the streets.

Thirdly, these explanations also underestimate the importance of state preventive actions. These actions can be crucial in preventing attempts to incite riots and then stopping the violence once it breaks out. Calculations about when to engage in rioting are also conditional on people's expectations about the likely state response to rioters.

Common Pattern & Trends

While every set of riots is a manifestation of a combination of distinct factors that vary significantly from event to event, they often do share common characteristics from which patterns and trends can be identified. The expected area of outbreak for a riot type can be defined based on the locus of previous outbreaks as well as an understanding of the factors that determine where riots can potentially occur.

As illustrated in the case of the riots in Hong Kong, such acts of political violence do not occur everywhere within a city or district. According to the authorities, the riots were only concentrated in certain areas, particularly the commercial areas of cities where their protest will offer the largest media exposure.

This is not surprising, as different classes of riots have different 'focal points' where they start. For example, race or ethnic riots tend to occur around the area where a particular ethnic group is concentrated. On the other hand, political riots erupt at the political heart of the city.

It must also be noted that the damage within each riot tends to be geographically restricted as there are constraints on the geographical extent of a riot. The extent of a riot depends on the capability and strategy of policing, and the degree to which aggrieved citizens choose to risk being arrested or injured. The level of damage and arson within the riot reflects the duration over which the rioters have the potential to be in control. Fast-moving riots may create a longer trail of low levels of damage across the areas that have been affected.

Political Dissatisfaction & Riot Contagion

The study of riot contagion seeks to understand whether a riot engenders further violence. In our globalised society where the flow of information is much more rapid and expansive, the impact of social networking tools — such as Facebook, Twitter, and instant messaging via encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram — on riot contagion patterns cannot be underestimated.

Social networking has created tools ideal for mobilising mass protest. Many of these tools have been used to rally supporters to take action at a certain time and place. People across the country were influenced by a sense of shared identity against the authorities and resort to violence to express their shared dissatisfaction.

The recent riots in Iraq that have killed more than 93 people have seen Twitter and other social network tools used in similar ways. Systems such as Twitter hashtags have also made it easy for ad hoc networks to form anonymously around a common agenda, work together and then disperse.

In times of political dissatisfaction and economic austerity, countries across the globe will increasingly face the prospect of riots. Moreover, it is likely that, in the future, issues such as climate change and an increasing demand on finite resources resulting from an ever-increasing global population will also contribute to dissatisfaction and further civil uprising.

These dangers have highlighted the need for security practitioners to take a more comprehensive approach by assessing exposure to political violence in all its forms whether it is terrorism, political revolution or riots.

Wei Meng Yeo is a Director at Risk Management Solutions (RMS). He was previously with the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He contributed this to RSIS Commentary.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg