

## POSTCARD

# 61. Inequalities and protests

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In recent years, the world has been shaken by protests, from the Arab Spring to the 'Indignant' in Europe, from Occupy to food riots. There have been periods in history when large numbers of people rebelled about the way things were, demanding change, such as in 1848, 1917 or 1968; today we are experiencing another period of rising outrage and discontent, and some of the largest protests in world history.

An analysis of 843 recent world protests reflects a steady increase in the overall number of protests every year, from 2006 (59 protests) to mid-2013 (112 protests in only half a year). Following the onset of the global financial and economic crisis, there has been a major increase in protests, beginning in 2010 with the adoption of austerity measures in all world regions. The major grievances of protestors relate to economic and social justice, and range from demanding real democracy, public services and civil rights to opposing international financial institutions, corporate rent-seeking and corruption (*Figure 61.1*).

Not only is the number of protests increasing, but also the number of protesters. Crowd estimates suggest that thirty-seven events had 1 million or more protesters; some of those may well be the largest protests in history (for instance, 100 million in India in 2013, and 17 million in Egypt, also in 2013).

A profile of demonstrators reveals that it is not only traditional protesters such as activists and union members who are demonstrating. On the contrary, middle classes, young people, older persons and other social groups are actively protesting in most countries because of lack of trust and disillusionment with the current political and economic system. They are increasingly joining activists from all kinds of movements, not only in marches and rallies (the most common methods of civil protest, in 437 events), but also in a new framework of civil disobedience that includes occupation of squares and road blockades to raise awareness about their demands (a total of 219 occupations of public spaces).

Contrary to public perception, violence and vandalism or looting appears in only 8.9 per cent of world protests. Of violent riots, 48 per cent occurred in low-income countries, mostly prompted by spikes in food and energy prices.

Demonstrators mostly address their grievances to national governments, as they are the legitimate policy-making institutions that should respond to citizens. But it is also worth noting the rising number of protests on global issues. Protesters demand that policy-makers at national and global levels take public responsibility for economic, social and environmental policies that benefit all, instead of just the few.

However, governments often respond to protest with repression. Repression leading to arrests, injuries and deaths is well documented in over half of the protest episodes between 2006 and 2013.

If governments aim to be legitimate, they need to listen to the messages coming from protesters and act on their demands. The majority of grievances, from reducing inequalities and corporate influence to promoting jobs, social protection, public services and racial justice, are in full accordance with United Nations proposals and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

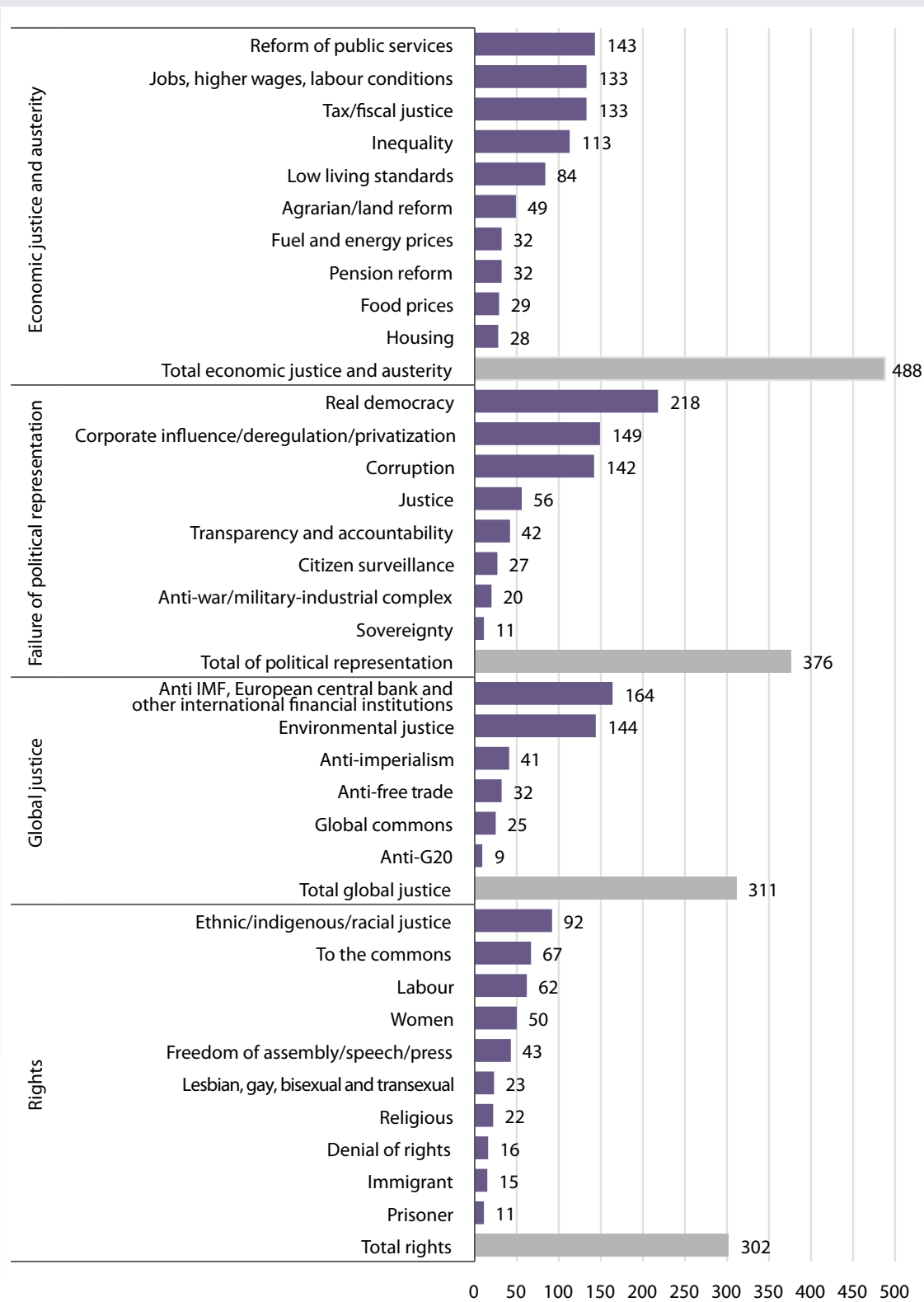
## Acknowledgement

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Figure 61.1 Number of protests by grievance or demand, 2006–13



Source: I. Ortiz, S. Burke, M. Berrada and H. Cortes. 2013. *World Protests 2006–2013*. New York, Initiative for Policy Dialogue and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Data correct to 31 July 2013.