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Hong Kong anti-government protester Fiona, 16, during a march organised by the Civil Human Rights Front in the protest-racked city on Dec 8.

2019 will be remembered as a year of mass street protests, including violent ones. The sharp disruptions to normalcy highlight the resistance to the dysfunctional status quo and the quest for political and socio-economic change in increasingly polarised societies.

While taking to the streets in protest is not new, this year's unrest in at least 18 countries in different corners of the world is characterised by the breadth and intensity of the protests.

What else can we glean from these protests and what do they say about governance today?

At its core, protests challenge governmental authority and state power. Protests are a means of demonstrating social, economic and political discontent, often in the quest for change to safeguard the protestors' individual and collective futures.

What is unique this time is the pervasive use of social media and the significant participation of young people, who are themselves adept in using social media.

But each protest has a different spark. It could be about corrupt, repressive, or inept governments, high costs of living, inequality and social injustice, or inaction over climate change.

In Lebanon, a tax on WhatsApp calls sparked the country's largest protests in over a decade, as hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets.

Similarly, each protest has different objectives even if they evolve and produce different outcomes. Bruce Lee's aphorism on adapting to the circumstances comes to mind: "Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless like water."

In Hong Kong for instance, originally peaceful opposition and protests have degenerated into manifestly violent ones. Protestors, even without leaders, succeeded in forcing the government to reverse its course on the proposed law on extradition of criminal suspects to China.

The protests have now evolved into a riot act of the government's failings in dealing with basic needs such as housing, social inequality, and broader questions on Hong Kong's future.

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Emboldened, protestors are insisting that China honours, in form and in substance, the high degree of autonomy promised under the “one country, two systems” formula for Hong Kong.

Social media amplifying divisions

The adroit use of encrypted communication platforms enables the protests to scale up efficiently and effectively. Social media enables the swift and widespread articulation of grievances; it can also rapidly mobilise supporters, communicate messages and coordinate strategies, share evocative memes, and crowd source ideas and funds.

This year’s many protests also underscored the growing concern, particularly among the young, with climate change. As the scientific prognosis for our planet worsened, Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teen activist, became the face of anguished opposition to “business as usual”.

At this year’s United Nations Climate Change Summit in New York, she denounced the lack of urgent and real action by governments and businesses to deal with the climate emergency.

Her call for stronger action on global warming inspired other students to organise similar protests in other parts of the world. There were at least two coordinated multi-city protests this year involving over one million students.

Such protests also seek to promote greater awareness of the climate emergency, which would result in unborn generations and hers paying the existential price for environmental inaction

This year’s protests showed how they can spread like a contagion.

They also demonstrated remarkable resilience despite the initial lack of grassroots mobilisation that was the hallmark of durable protests of the past.

In France, the Yellow Vests Movement — named after the fluorescent vests the protesters wear during their demonstrations to signal their working class background — continues after more than a year.

What started as a protest against higher fuel taxes, they spread across France and now represent a reaction to the government’s overall economic policies and the high cost of living.

The protests this year point to more troubling times ahead given that public institutions globally now enjoy lower levels of legitimacy and support.

The widening gap in trust and confidence between the political class and the public often makes attempts to solve the problems woefully inadequate.

The popular discontent signifies the failures of representational politics where out-of-touch politicians are oblivious or even sneering to the concerns of the masses. On the other hand, the masses may be polarised and susceptible to populist measures that address the symptoms but not the causes of their plight.

As 2020 beckons, there is much for governments and the economic elites to reflect on. But political will to address the concerns is patently needed to help keep a system responsive to people’s concerns, needs and fears.

But deep polarisation means the minimum trust threshold is absent for there to be meaningful engagement.

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This is further complicated by the protestors' diffused demands that are often evolving. Some of the protest movements are also leaderless. It is not clear who the government ought to negotiate with.

Singapore has been spared of such debilitating and divisive protests. While protests are permitted at the Speakers' Corner, they are not a common mode of expressing discontentment and distress. Political stability remains highly valued by Singaporeans.

Furthermore, the laws provide for and the authorities adopt a no-nonsense approach to protests, such as the rule against foreigners participating and the prohibition against protests on issues relating to race, language and religion.

Trust in the government remains relatively robust and governance remains purposeful. While Singapore is fortunate not to experience protests, that does not mean we are immune.

Across the world, how those in power respond to the people's unhappiness, fears and aspirations matters immensely.

Otherwise, in the face of helplessness and hopelessness, the unhappiness will easily transmogrify into violent protests and civil unrest that can develop into full-blown opposition movements.

This year's protests may well presage a new era of political and societal conflict and protests as a norm. Governance has its work cut out for it in the years ahead.

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