

**COLUMBIA WORLD PROJECTS**  
**Summary of Workshop: Worldwide Protest Movements**  
**February 27, 2020**

Columbia World Projects, an initiative focused on partnering scholars with practitioners to address fundamental challenges facing humanity, hosted a day-long workshop regarding worldwide protest movements on February 27, 2020. The workshop was undertaken in collaboration with the United Nations (UN) Peacebuilding Support Office to explore ways in which the international community, and in particular the United Nations, might better enable an environment in which nonviolent protest movements are able to pursue positive change, while also mitigating against the instability and violence that protests can sometimes trigger. The experts who took part in the workshop included scholars and practitioners who have studied protest movements in regions around the world including Africa, Asia, the Americas, the Middle East and Europe, as well as experts in technology and mediation. This report summarizes the discussion that took place during the course of the workshop and specific recommendations for the international community put forward by participants.

*Drivers, Risk Factors, Triggers and Historical Context*

As an initial matter, participants discussed the drivers, risk factors and triggers of protests, in an effort to put the surge of protests over the last decade into context. In doing so, participants discussed the different circumstances under which protests arise, the importance of historical contextualization, what constitutes a protest, the social movements that are often – but not always – associated with such protests, and elements that either enable or undermine such movements.

Participants observed a range of factors driving protests at large, including: a sense of exclusion from political participation and decision-making, marginalization and dehumanization; dissatisfaction with the existing political order, leading protesters to seek radical transformations in leadership or to pursue systemic change when established channels prove ineffective; rising inequality, particularly in newer democracies where the transition away from autocratic governments has not resulted in a hoped for redistribution of economic resources or is otherwise exclusionary; and the erosion of trust in the social contract between people and their governments, as states fail to adequately address pressing social, economic and civic concerns, such as corruption, unemployment, climate change, rising prices and immigration.

In considering why there has been such a surge in protests over the last decade,<sup>1</sup> participants indicated that this was due, at least in part, to the increasing challenges that individuals are facing

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<sup>1</sup> While no participants characterized the extent or scope of the surge, there has been widespread reporting, research and surveys done that reflect a generally increasing number of protests, particularly beginning in 2011, though certainly people have different definitions of what constitutes a protest and it is not a straight-line increase. See, e.g., a global map of worldwide protests captured by GDELT from January 1979 through May 2015 at <http://data.gdelproject.org/blog/mapping-global-protests-redux/protests-eventv1-monthly-1979-2015.gif>; The International Labor Organization's Social Unrest Index, [https://www.ilo.org/newyork/voices-at-work/WCMS\\_217280/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/newyork/voices-at-work/WCMS_217280/lang--en/index.htm); and Verisk Maplecroft Report, which covers research done indicating a significant uptick in protests in 2019, in 47 jurisdictions, <https://www.maplecroft.com/insights/analysis/47-countries-witness-surge-in-civil-unrest/>.

in countries around the world with expressing discontent and addressing grievances through traditional mechanisms, such as civic participation, labor unions or even the media. Such challenges are especially pronounced for young people, who are often excluded from participation in governance structures, find themselves disillusioned by the fact that many newer democracies have not lived up to their expectations, and are increasingly distrustful of public and political institutions. These factors combined have driven more people, and youth in particular, to turn to social movements and protests, rather than to political parties or other formal representative institutions, to express their views and effect change.

Participants noted that although protesting can be an effective means of achieving desired outcomes, it is just one of many tactics that social movements employ when other mechanisms for expressing such grievances are unavailable, inaccessible or ineffective.<sup>2</sup> Whether protests manifest themselves as a mass rally, a march, a boycott, a committee of correspondence, a strike, a sit-in or in some other form, they have the potential to give voice to a constituency outside of existing political or institutional structures.

Participants generally agreed that placing protests into their respective historical context – and studying the social and political structures that inevitably shape them – is critical to understanding such protests and forecasting their evolution over time, including the risk of violence. For example, one participant shared findings on how historicizing the current wave of African protests allows one to understand that they are fragmented in ways that are rooted in the divisions created under colonialism and austerity.<sup>3</sup> Further, what constitutes a protest may differ in various geographies, cultures or political contexts.<sup>4</sup> For example, one participant noted how workers in Vietnam engage in micro-protests – halting work for just a few minutes or days – as a method of protesting work conditions, thereby allowing workers to register dissatisfaction without provoking the severe consequences that would result from a more protracted strike. Others commented on the role of art in protesting in places like Chile, Iraq, Iran, Cuba, Malaysia and Syria, where participants described how street art, performance art and other artistic media have been used as expressions of dissent. One participant remarked that certain forms of protest, such as mass rallies and marches, are not always accessible to everyone, while other forms of protest may not be as visible to the international community or even state actors. For example, it was noted that popular protests are generally only visible in urban or densely populated areas, as opposed to rural spaces. Moreover, under certain circumstances, there may be additional barriers to participation for segments of the population, such as women in Sudan who have been targeted for retribution because of their gender, placing them at higher risk for engaging in certain kinds of protests, like street demonstrations.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Gene Sharp, in his “198 methods of Nonviolent Action,” compiled an extraordinary range of activities and methods of nonviolent action beyond protests, first published in his 1973 book, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action, Vol. 2: The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Under colonialism, urban areas were violently separated from rural areas, and then each was fragmented further. This legacy shapes many of the protests today, for those living in the different compartments have fundamentally different political and economic concerns, expectations, identities and forms of politics. See Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*, London: Zed Books 2015 at p.8.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Eva Hansson and Meredith L. Weiss (ed.), *Political Participation in Asia: Defining and Deploying Political Space*, London: Routledge, 2018. See also, Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, “Africa’s Road to Democracy,” *Jacobin* 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/05/africas-democracy-elections-parties-protest-regimes>.

In sum, without an understanding of the political, historical, geographical and cultural context, protests may be misunderstood or missed altogether. Furthermore, without such context, the impact of relevant trends in urbanization, demographics, democratization, globalization, inequality and the suppression of civil society are unlikely to be adequately factored into efforts to understand the development of social movements that employ mass protests over time.<sup>5</sup>

### *Workshop Focus*

The discussion then turned to the question of where the workshop should focus in this complex landscape, and two areas of particular interest emerged. First, participants agreed that the international community should not be seen as promoting certain social movements over others, but rather as nurturing an environment in which nonviolent and independent social movements might exist without threat of violent reprisal or criminal designation. Such movements, it was observed, are frequently fluid, diverse, decentralized and loosely organized outside of existing power structures, yet they are key drivers of social and political development and thus critical to the health of a society. Participants cited the need for sustained sources of funding – separate from those of political parties or other existing power brokers within the given society – to build and maintain such movements.<sup>6</sup> Others reflected on the need to promote and protect the civic space and the independence required by social movements to effectively engage and represent people across society; to mobilize technology to enable such movements, while avoiding some of the pitfalls discussed later in the workshop; and to support capacity building and training for such movements.

Second, participants agreed to consider how the international community, and in particular the United Nations, might work to reduce the risk of violence associated with protests, regardless of whether such protests are associated with a sustained social movement. Consequently, the workshop focused on what actions might be taken to preserve peoples' freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly, and to safeguard civic space, while also reducing the potential for violence in the context of such protests, particularly on the part of governments that respond to protestors with disproportionate force. In so doing, participants noted that these two areas of focus are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. If actions are taken by the international community to nurture peaceful and independent social movements, and furthermore to foster the development of mechanisms through which such movements are able to have a meaningful opportunity to be heard within their political systems, the less likely it is that popular protests or other high risk tactics will occur.

### *The Impact of Digital Technology*

Advances in communication and information technologies have historically had an impact on the success or failure of social movements and their tactics, but perhaps none have been as impactful as the Internet. In particular, participants discussed how the Internet increasingly provides protestors with a means of communicating with and mobilizing the public at large both quickly

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<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it was noted that without understanding protests as one of many tactics employed by movements, analysts may misunderstand or misrepresent how protests contribute to societal change.

<sup>6</sup> It was additionally noted that in some circumstances, national law may prohibit the provision of such funding.

and at relatively low cost, thereby enabling and accelerating the recruitment and mobilization of people and resources virtually and physically. On the other hand, relying primarily on digital means of communication has some significant downsides for social movements, including for their sustainability and consequently their success. Moreover, many governments have learned how to use these technologies to surveil and repress dissent and spread disinformation, though participants noted that recent innovations among activists appear to be effectively countering some governments' efforts to disrupt social movements and protests.<sup>7</sup> What is also clear, however, is that the technical competence of activists and governments varies widely, and consequently so does the impact of technology on these movements. Ultimately, participants agreed that the impact of technology on protests and social movements continues to evolve and is somewhat cyclical, based on the competing learning curves of protestors and governments.

The impact of the Internet was initially thought to be significantly more beneficial to activists than it was for the governments against which they were protesting and consequently to shift the balance of power, particularly in the Middle East. Even so, the way in which the Internet impacted such movements quickly evolved. One participant noted, for example, that in 2009, the Internet was judged to be far more useful in the context of the Iranian Green Movement by virtue of its ability to get the news out about what was happening in Iran to the rest of the world, than it was for internal mobilization or organizational purposes. Only shortly thereafter, in the context of the series of protests that swept across the Arab world starting in 2010, did it become clear that the Internet and social media platforms were capable of assisting in the internal communication, mobilization and organization of protests. The same participant noted that, in 2013 and 2014, the landscape shifted again, this time in Syria, as it became clear that the proliferation of videos and communication coming out of the conflict drove not only the international response, but also what was happening locally. Only a few years later, the Syrian regime and Russia began to use these same platforms to promote their own agendas, weaponizing the methods pioneered by activists for state disinformation campaigns. Now, in places like Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Hong Kong, activists are again innovating in response to the repressive technological tools of governments, including, for example, by using closed digital networks like WhatsApp to communicate and mobilize, rather than open social media platforms. While this has helped safeguard protesters and organizers, it has also complicated research into these movements and their tactics.

In aggregate, participants were generally of the view that digital technologies have had a number of important and undeniably positive impacts on social movements. To begin with, mass media – once limited in many countries to television, radio and newspaper outlets controlled primarily by the government and sympathetic media monopolies – has grown significantly more diverse in all but the most repressive countries, due to a proliferation of both outlets and types of media. This shift increased the access of a far broader cross-section of the population to different sources of information, allowed more users to generate content in addition to consuming it, multiplied the outlets capable of disseminating information about social movements and the grievances that tend to drive them, and thus enabled greater participation in such movements. Under these conditions, one participant suggested, virtual mobilization at its most vibrant can

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Valerie Belair-Gagnon, Colin Agur, and Nicholas Frisch, "Mobile sourcing: A case study of journalistic norms and usage of chat apps," *Mobile Media & Communication* 2018, Vol. 6(I) 53-70, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2050157917725549>.

give rise to a sense of belonging and allow for “connective action” that is not tied to a particular group identity, ideology, geography or party membership, and thus can help bring together individuals within a community who otherwise would remain divided by institutional politics, cultural norms or other barriers. Further, the ability of movements to communicate almost instantaneously to potential supporters far beyond their immediate geography – including internationally – has strengthened the leverage and resources of many movements.

Participants nevertheless recognized that there are significant challenges associated with digital activism for social movements. First, a digital divide exists in the vast majority of countries, including some with advanced economies, and can produce inequities in such movements by limiting participation to those who are typically more affluent and have access – and in particular, consistent access – to the Internet. Second, online activity by participants of social movements does not necessarily translate into offline activity or long-term participation in a movement, and thus an organization that exists principally online is likely to be less sustainable and perhaps less powerful over the long run. Third, digital platforms permit people to communicate with one another directly, which enables greater decentralization and facilitates the development of networked movements with multiple influencers or leaders.<sup>8</sup> While this decentralization has benefits, it may contribute to weaker and more divided leadership structures within social movements that make them more prone to internal disputes, while also making it harder for such movements to develop relationships with external actors. Fourth, malicious activities on the Internet by both state and non-state actors have resulted in the propagation of disinformation, which has increasingly eroded trust in facts; has exacerbated societal divisions, which tend to undermine social movements; and has deepened skepticism of the very online platforms that can enable greater dissemination and participation.

Participants additionally discussed how technology has been used by governments to effectively suppress dissent, specifically noting the growing proficiency with which regimes use the digital sphere to surveil, control and repress social movements. For example, autocratic governments increasingly offer their citizens walled-off versions of the Internet that they can monitor and restrict, which they use in turn to identify and target individuals who participate in social movements. In addition to cracking down on people who participate in such movements, these tactics are aimed at deterring other individuals from participating in protests and other forms of dissent. Repressive governments also increasingly engage in disinformation campaigns to deflect, distort and deny the narratives put forward by such movements; disrupt protests; and undermine the credibility of movements and their leaders, as one participant noted has happened in Nicaragua, Turkey and Ecuador. These strategies are often shared amongst like-minded regimes and are sometimes deployed by third-party governmental actors.

One participant noted that research had demonstrated that there was a dramatic drop in the overall effectiveness of major nonviolent campaigns focused on challenging incumbent regimes or vying for territorial self-determination since the mid-2000s, when such campaigns went from 70 percent effective at achieving their stated goals to 30 percent effective since that time, and

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Valerie Belair-Gagnon, Colin Agur, and Nicholas Frisch “The Changing Physical and Social Environment of Newsgathering: A Case Study of Foreign Correspondents Using Chat Apps During Unrest,” *Social Media & Society* January-March 2017, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2056305117701163>.

that one theory for this drop in effectiveness is the impact of technology on these movements.<sup>9</sup> While this body of research was focused on, and effectively demonstrates, that nonviolent campaigns challenging incumbent regimes or vying for territorial self-determination are typically more successful at achieving their aims than those that pursue change through armed conflict (which have an effectiveness rate of roughly half that of nonviolent campaigns), it is nevertheless alarming to consider that technology may be making it harder for nonviolent movements to achieve their goals.<sup>10</sup>

While participants recognized the need for more research to fully understand the reasons for this drop in effectiveness of major nonviolent campaigns, they discussed the possibility that the increased ease and speed of digital mobilization with a hashtag or online post may result in less incremental effort being expended on capacity building and organizing, which is critical to sustaining a movement over time. As one participant noted, research has shown that as a general matter, movements that last longer tend to be more effective in achieving change. Furthermore, protestors who are not connected to a well-organized and enduring social movement are less able to pivot to new, more effective tactics. They are also less likely to identify and pursue options for taking hold of civic power in the form of concessions offered by governments, building new opposition parties to strengthen their voice, or holding governments publicly accountable for implementing any concessions they offer in the context of mass protests.

Coming out of this session, participants first noted the importance of, and the increasing challenges associated with, tracking and mapping social movements in the digital realm, which everyone agreed was critical to understanding such movements, forecasting their evolution and ultimately providing opportunities for mediation in the context of a crisis. Particularly as activists in closed societies are turning to private digital networks to communicate, mobilize and organize, rather than open social media platforms, researchers must find other ways to access the information they need in order to study such movements. Organizations like the United Nations, moreover, must engage with such movements on the ground to understand how they are developing and the tactics they are using. Participants also focused on the value of digital communication and its critical role in certain regions where social movements would otherwise lack the capacity to mobilize, for example, due to the distances they would have to travel (e.g., Sudan) or the instability and level of repression exercised by some governments.

In addition, participants noted the importance of having access to the Internet in conflicts and other crises, in order for protestors and organizers to disseminate information that can bring international pressure to bear, pointing to recent examples of when the Internet was shut down to repress dissent and citizen reporting on it, such as in Kashmir and Iran. The question was raised as to whether continuous and widespread access to the Internet might not be pursued and supported by the international community as a key component of creating an enabling

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<sup>9</sup> See Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, “The Interpreter,” *The New York Times* April 21, 2020, <https://messaging-custom-newsletters.nytimes.com/template/oakv2?uri=nyt://newsletter/375eeb8b-49fd-4a0f-933c-9ef2ed0a10d8> (referencing the following study by Erica Chenoweth: “Trends in Nonviolent Resistance and State Response: Is Violence Towards Civilian-based Movements on the Rise?”, *Global Responsibility to Protect* January 2017, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316474594\\_Trends\\_in\\_Nonviolent\\_Resistance\\_and\\_State\\_Response\\_Is\\_Violence\\_Towards\\_Civilian-based\\_Movements\\_on\\_the\\_Rise?te=1&nl=the-interpreter&emc=edit\\_int\\_20200421](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316474594_Trends_in_Nonviolent_Resistance_and_State_Response_Is_Violence_Towards_Civilian-based_Movements_on_the_Rise?te=1&nl=the-interpreter&emc=edit_int_20200421)).

<sup>10</sup> See Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, Columbia University Press 2012.

environment for social movements in general, and as a way of mitigating against the risk of increased violence in a moment of crisis.

Several other participants pointed to the importance of training social movements that use these technologies to engage in what one participant called “deep organizing,” capacity building, and constructing the overall infrastructure needed to sustain such movements and facilitate their interactions with public institutions and political systems to effect change, which often rely on offline trust and relationship-building. Participants finally discussed the ways in which the UN could use digital communication technologies to more effectively respond to crises, as well as to strengthening its voice and those of Member States committed to reducing violence in the context of protests, while also creating space for protestors to exercise their right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. These themes continued to be raised in later sessions.

### *The International Community and Recommendations*

Participants agreed that the international community has a critically important role to play in (1) understanding the social movements that tend to undergird and lead to protests; (2) enabling an environment in which nonviolent social movements, which may or may not engage in protesting, can thrive; (3) mitigating against the risk of violence in the event that protests occur; and (4) promoting an environment in which peaceful protests, whether connected to existing social movements or not, can take place. What generated the most discussion during this part of the workshop was the question of how the international community might effectively pursue these objectives, and the degree to which the international community, including the United Nations, should actively support movements in pursuit of objectives that are consistent with fundamental principles and goals safeguarded by the United Nations. These include the rights and freedoms set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that countries have agreed to, which are closely aligned with the unmet aspirations that appear to be driving many of today’s movements and protests.

Multiple participants underscored that in order to understand social movements, it is necessary for the United Nations to diversify and deepen its engagements on the ground with leaders of such movements and the communities that they represent. Doing so is critical not only for the purpose of better understanding the goals and objectives of such movements, but also to more effectively forecast when movements are likely to lead to protests that may trigger violence. Additionally, by engaging consistently with local movements and civil society, intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations can and should identify in advance of a crisis who appropriate interlocutors might be for purposes of mediation, which could strengthen the options available to the international community for avoiding a violent escalation in a moment of crisis, while also strengthening the prospects of achieving durable solutions. Developing such relationships requires time to build sufficient trust and is most effectively done in the field, as one participant noted, but can allow the United Nations to observe activities of dissent that often precede mass protests, which are generally smaller-scale, less public actions that fail to achieve the change desired. An initial step recommended by participants in this area was that the United Nations engage in a mapping exercise of major social movements around the world and identify relationships that the United Nations’ system already has with such movements.

Several participants noted that it might be possible to identify existing officers in the field, as well as UN agencies and bodies such as the United Nations Population Fund, that already have relationships with social movements locally, and rely on them for help in obtaining this information and for developing the needed relationships, rather than establishing a new institutional role for this purpose. The challenge, one participant noted, is identifying where those relationships exist and ensuring that any information collected is then systematically shared within the United Nations, while also handling the relationships in such a way as to make it possible to quickly identify and engage potential interlocutors in such movements for purposes of mediation in a crisis without compromising the safety and security of activists.

In turning to the question of how the international community can best enable an environment in which nonviolent social movements thrive, a number of ideas were surfaced largely reflecting earlier themes. Participants noted the utility of having an organization like the United Nations highlight the value of social movements as drivers of social and political development, and consequently as a critical element of a healthy society. One participant suggested that an international organization convene social movements across regions to promote the intrinsic value of such groups. Such a meeting could provide opportunities to share methodologies and organizational lessons; collaborate on shared issues; increase knowledge of mediation processes; and discuss how to effectively and peacefully advocate in a complex and often opaque multilateral system, in which social movements often lack a voice or even structures through which to engage. Several participants discussed the importance of making available to social movements basic capacity building and organizational training, particularly on the use of digital technology and combating disinformation; mediation training, including inter- and intra-movement mediation for purposes of better decision-making and unity; and lessons on how to engage with different levels of government that are relevant to social movements' efforts. A further suggestion was to include more activists and movement leaders in high-level events and discussions, which would amplify grassroots voices and perspectives. Another participant discussed the need to facilitate funding for such groups that is not attached to a particular political party or agenda. The question was raised as to whether organizations like the United Nations can help to promote or enable such financial support, even if the funds do not come from them.

In discussing how to engage protest movements, a few participants cautioned against the propensity of some actors in the international community to encourage movements to transform altogether into formal institutions such as political parties or civil society organizations, which may ultimately not be appropriate institutional structures for such movements to achieve desired change or, in the event of such a transformation, could potentially reduce the movement's legitimacy with its members. Instead, the suggestion was made that the international community recognize social movements as separate from political parties, even if they overlap at times with large subsets of civil society. Another participant countered that political parties and more formal civil society organizations are often the institutions through which change is made, and

consequently, it may be useful for such movements to adopt these structures to further their goals.<sup>11</sup>

In turning to protests, participants considered whether there were steps that the international community might take to mitigate against the current surge of protests, which could reduce the risk of violence and instability that is sometimes triggered by such events. Participants reflected on the view that mass protesting, which typically is associated with some level of risk for the protestors, is generally a tactic that is exercised only when there are no other options for protestors to effectively express their concerns. Consequently, one approach to mitigating against such events, several participants noted, would be to encourage governments to create more space for social and political activity through which individuals and social movements can exercise their voice and meaningfully be heard. In some liberal democracies, for example, this might include a shift to more participatory forms of governance, where people have deeper involvement in decision- and policy-making than just the right to vote. One participant noted that to the extent governments are encouraged to do this, it must be clear that merely allowing people to “provide input” that can be ignored is insufficient; rather, any mechanisms developed must allow social movements to take substantive part in setting the agenda.

Participants also reflected on the discussion earlier in the day regarding the extent to which such movements – and the protests that are associated with them – are driven by failures to deliver on basic human rights and citizens’ frustration with governments for failing to address pressing social, economic and civic concerns. One participant noted that given how aligned these concerns are with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by all UN Member States, one approach to reducing the rising tide of protests would be for countries to do more to meet the targets set out in the 2030 Agenda, thereby strengthening what many perceive to be an increasingly brittle social contract.

Some participants, while not opposed to the ideas discussed above, noted that the goal should not be to reduce the number of protests. Protests can be an effective tactic for social movements to achieve change, and thus the international community would be better focused on lowering the risk of violence associated with protests – which most often occurs when governments respond to protesters with a disproportionate use of force – rather than on reducing the number of protests. In fact, at least one participant noted that an increase in the number of protests might be a healthy development, suggesting a more open political climate in which citizens are appropriately exercising their voice. In looking at this issue, participants discussed a series of approaches designed to tackle the problem at different levels, to be taken well in advance of any particular crisis erupting.

First, participants discussed ways in which the international community might more effectively enable an environment where protests can occur peacefully, whether connected to existing social movements or not, while simultaneously raising the costs to governments of responding with a disproportionate use of force. Multiple participants spoke to the value of establishing basic standards or principles building on existing rights, obligations and norms that the international

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<sup>11</sup> This is an area in which it was generally noted that further research is needed, and one participant noted that Sudan would make a good case study. See Zachariah Mampilly, “After Bashir: How Sudan Can Heal From Decades of Dictatorship,” *Foreign Affairs* May 2, 2019.

community could embrace as intrinsic to protests. These standards would need to be independent of the drivers, participants or places where protests occur, but would nevertheless promote space for nonviolent protests and reaffirm the international community's condemnation of governments that respond with excessive force. Participants suggested that, in this context, the United Nations might additionally attempt to build a broader consensus around a normative, principle-based role for the United Nations and like institutions in diffusing and de-escalating protests where violence has erupted, and then try to lead the international community in issuing consistent responses based on that affirmative agenda, rather than trying to build such consensus *de novo* around situations in individual countries.<sup>12</sup> While several participants noted their skepticism regarding the effectiveness of a normative instrument that is intended to restrain governments from engaging in violent repression, others were of the view that while it would not prevent every government from engaging in violent repression, depending on the region and the government, it could be helpful as a method of galvanizing a number of Member States to speak out against violent repression when they might not otherwise do so, and this might deter some countries from taking such steps, or lead them to exercise some restraint. Another participant pointed out that even regularizing the timing and messages of the international community in such circumstances would be helpful, as currently they tend to occur on an *ad hoc* basis with no consistency, and often without the benefit of lessons learned from prior scenarios in which the international community's reactions have been effectively deployed.

Second, participants discussed practical steps the international community might take to promote effective mediation and dialogue in the context of a particular crisis, in an effort to defuse and de-escalate aggression or violence, should it occur. Specifically, several participants noted the value of providing education and training on mediation and dialogue for social movements and governments alike in order to have capable interlocutors available in a crisis, while others noted the value of supporting existing and new mechanisms for local mediation that reflect the culture and politics of different societies. Other participants discussed the importance of establishing direct links between activists and any relevant respective governments, which might be most usefully built before a crisis, to promote communication that could facilitate dialogue and mediation when needed. This point was highlighted by a participant who noted that governments often indicate to the United Nations, during a protest, that they do not know whom to talk to in a social movement. One participant noted the value of the international community directly supporting, including through the engagement of diplomats in such efforts, targeted mediation to mitigate repression and violence by regimes targeting protestors. Another commented that the international community might assist in pushing back against national laws that criminalize support for social movements, which are forms of repression and make it harder for social movements to engage in effective mediation and dialogue with the government, as well as for international actors to support such efforts. Participants again noted the importance of pushing back against state-sanctioned black-outs in communication during such periods, which sometimes include the shutting down of the Internet, and the point was again raised as to whether the international community might be able to work toward promoting widespread and uninterrupted access to the Internet.

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<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., International Center on Nonviolent Conflict Special Report Series, Vol. 3, by Peter Ackerman and Hardy Merriman, "Preventing Mass Atrocities: From a Responsibility to Protect to a Right to Assist Campaigns of Civil Resistance," May 2019, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Right-to-Assist.pdf>.

Participants also discussed at length whether the international community and, in particular, the United Nations, should ever express support for particular social movements or protestors when their platforms are aligned with fundamental principles safeguarded by the United Nations. Several participants pointed out that while the international community must be able to support unequivocally an environment in which peaceful protests can take place and to condemn the disproportionate use of violence by states in response to protestors, questions often come up as to whether the United Nations should do more to express support for specific demands being made by social movements – or even the movements themselves – when their objectives are aligned, for example, with core UN principles and the Sustainable Development Goals.

On the one hand, participants noted the important and positive role that the United Nations had played historically in supporting social movements in Africa against racial persecution and discrimination by mobilizing, for example, governments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and individuals against apartheid and in isolating the South African regime. On the other hand, participants noted that selectively supporting certain movements can be risky for both the United Nations’ legitimacy as a neutral actor in mediation and for the movements themselves, which may be reticent to accept such support because it might delegitimize them as puppets of international actors. One participant noted that finding a way to at least support the positions taken by social movements when they align with those embraced by the United Nations would be an important means of demonstrating its commitment to such principles. Furthermore, another participant noted that for some social movements, simply having access to information produced by the United Nations that holds states accountable for their commitment to certain basic human rights and to the status of the Sustainable Development Goals can be extremely helpful in pushing back against disinformation, and is another way to implicitly message support for a social movement’s expressed concerns.

At the end of the workshop, despite the obvious challenges, a point of agreement among the participants was that the international community – and in particular the United Nations – can have an impact not only in enabling the development of healthy and nonviolent social movements and in mitigating against the risk of violence in the event of protests, but also in helping to restore the social contract between people and governments, and in promoting the dignity of individuals seeking to improve the lives of those in their communities through such movements. While many noted that few governments will welcome assistance or interventions from the international community in relation to a particular set of protests and often there will be insufficient political leverage to effectively promote greater civic or social space, it is critical that the international community do better in addressing these issues, including by improving on current efforts underway.

## PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES



### **Jood Alharthi**

#### ***Associate Peacebuilding Officer, United Nations***

Jood Alharthi is currently working in the Peacebuilding Support Office. She is an Associate Peacebuilding Officer supporting peacebuilding projects in Central Asia, Western Balkans, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Previously, Jood was working in a London based Human Rights Law Firm, supporting on War Crime cases. Jood's work-oriented around Rule of Law, International Human Rights and Post-Conflict Alternative Dispute Resolution. Between 2016-2018 she freelanced with the Economist Middle East Intelligence Unit on a GCC environmental degradation project. Jood studied Pre-Law at University College London, she obtained a Bachelors of Laws from Swansea University and a Masters of Law from SOAS, University of London.



### **Thomas Asher**

#### ***Director of Convenings & Scholarly Relations, Columbia World Projects***

Thomas Asher is Director of Convenings at Columbia World Projects. Prior to this, he worked at the Social Science Research Council for a decade where he directed grant and fellowship programs to strengthen social science research capacity and networks across the world, including in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the United States. There, among other projects, he led a fellowship program designed to address a deficit of PhDs in African universities and to build research capacity in the field of peacebuilding and a grant program to promote public-engagement in international affairs. He serves as board chair to the Reagent Project and sits on advisory boards for the International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden and the African Centre for Cities in Cape Town. He holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Chicago.

### **Nadia Assouli**

#### ***Head of Research and Liaison Unit, United Nations***

Nadia Assouli is a lawyer by training and has been with the United Nations since 1997, first with UNESCO at the HQ and in the Balkans, then UNHCR, and finally Peacekeeping Operations and UNPolitical Missions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, Nepal, and Libya. She has been at UNHQ since October 2012 and head the Research and Liaison Unit of UNOCC, at UNHQ. She has held various positions in the missions; Legal and Protection Affairs, Political Affairs Officer, Civil Affairs officer, and most in Libya as Information Analyst officer.



### **Peter Batchelor**

#### ***Head, Crisis and Fragility Policy and Engagement Team, United Nations***

Peter Batchelor (South Africa) is currently the head of UNDP's Crisis Bureau Policy and Engagement Team. Previously he was UNDP Resident Representative in Myanmar, and before that held various senior leadership positions in UNDP in Sri Lanka, Fiji, Iraq and Geneva. Prior to joining UNDP he worked in academia in South Africa, the UK and Switzerland, and was an economics advisor to the Mandela Government between 1995 and 1999. He is an economist by training, and has a PhD in Economics from Cambridge University.



**Valerie Belair-Gagnon**

*Assistant Professor, Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication*

Valerie Belair-Gagnon is an Assistant Professor at the Hubbard School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Director of the Minnesota Journalism Center, Faculty Affiliate at the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. She is also an Affiliated Fellow at the Yale Information Society Project. She was a Digital Journalism Fellow at OsloMet (2019) and a Fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University (2016). Her work focuses on sociology of organizations, media work, digital media and innovation.



**Laila Bourhil**

*Senior Political Officer, Executive Office of the Secretary-General, United Nations*

Laila Bourhil is the Adviser and Special Assistant to the Secretary-General Senior Advisor on Policy. She has a Master in Law and Human Rights. Before joining the Executive Office, she was the Adviser to the ASG/Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator in OCHA (2014-2017) and prior to that, the Principal Human Rights Officer in charge of intergovernmental affairs in the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in NY (2008-2014). Before joining the United Nations in 2004, Bourhil headed a non-governmental organization in Paris, “Voice of Women”, which was working in the area of women’s rights. In 2004, she joined the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and worked for the Commission on Human Rights. She participated in the discussions on the reform process of the Commission and the establishment of the Human Rights Council. She has provided substantive political advice to both the Chair of the Commission/Council and the OHCHR-Chief of Branch as well as to Members States during the negotiations of various draft resolutions. In 2006, Bourhil was a member of the High-Level Fact-Finding Mission to Darfur, which was headed by Ms. Jodie Williams, Nobel Peace Laureate. She also actively contributed into the negotiations process on the Universal Periodic Review Mechanism, the Durban Review Conference Process and the work of the working group on the Right to Development. Since joining the NYO in October 2008, she has covered issues relating to economic and social rights, discrimination, human rights-based approach to development and gender issues as well as the work of the General Assembly and the Security Council.



**Nanette Braun**

*Chief, Campaigns Service, Department of Global Communications, United Nations*

A believer in the power of communications for social change, Nanette Braun joined the United Nations in 1995. As Chief of the Campaigns Service in the UN Department for Global Communications she works to increase global visibility and engage audiences on the UN’s priorities. Prior to this, Nanette headed the communications and public advocacy departments at UN Women, the women’s rights organization of the UN, and at UN Volunteers, which facilitates the deployment of thousands of volunteers annually in support of the United Nations’ efforts. A journalist by training, Nanette worked for print media and broadcasters in her native Germany and abroad. She holds a M.A. in Modern History and North-American studies from Free University Berlin and Technical University Berlin.



**Henk-Jan Brinkman**

***Chief Peacebuilding Strategy and Partnerships Branch, PBSO/DPPA, United Nations***

Henk-Jan Brinkman is chief of the Peacebuilding Strategy and Partnerships Branch of the Peacebuilding Support Office in the United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. Previously, he worked in the World Food Programme, the office of the UN Secretary-General and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs. He has published on such topics as the peace and justice in the post-2015 development agenda, socio-economic factors behind violent conflicts, the impact of high food prices and human stature. He is the lead author of WFP's World Hunger Series – *Hunger and Markets* (Earthscan, 2009) and the author of *Explaining Prices in the Global Economy: A Post-Keynesian Model* (Edward Elgar, 1999). He holds an M.A. in economics from the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and a Ph.D. in economics from the New School for Social Research in New York City.



**Shari Bryan**

***Vice President, National Democratic Institute***

Shari Bryan is the Vice President of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), overseeing the Institute's operations in 60 countries around the world. She has been actively involved in law, international development and foreign affairs since 1990 and has traveled extensively throughout the world. She has conducted political assessments and missions to more than 75 countries during her tenure at NDI, and played a key role promoting democratic assistance programs in Africa; conceptualizing and organizing projects related to women's political empowerment; political party finance; youth engagement; governance and HIV/AIDS; and transparency in the extractive industries.



**Marie Doucey**

***Associate Peacebuilding Officer - Youth, Peace and Security, United Nations***

Marie Doucey is Associate Policy Officer at the UN Peacebuilding Support Office, and is the focal point for the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda. She also supports the Peacebuilding Fund programmes in Burkina Faso and Niger. Prior to this, she worked as Senior Programme Officer for the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) in Haiti, focusing on democratic consolidation programmes. Her previous work experience includes working as Policy Analyst with UNDP Haiti, where she coordinated Haiti's 2014 MDGs Report. She also conducted various research projects, such as the "Role of Peacekeeping Operations in Electoral Processes," and "Gender and Human Security in the Haitian-Dominican Border Zone."



**Alexandra Fong**

***Senior Political Affairs Officer, United Nations***

Alexandra Pichler Fong heads the Policy Planning Unit in the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs. Current priorities include climate security as well as digital technologies, disinformation, hate speech and conflict prevention. Alexandra recently returned to New York after serving as political

adviser to the UN in Eritrea. She previously held a Visiting Scholar Appointment at Stanford University's Centre for Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law, where her research focused on UN preventive diplomacy in the context of mass popular uprisings.



**Barrie Freeman**

***Director and Deputy Head, Peacebuilding Support Office, United Nations***

Barrie Freeman is the deputy and political director of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) in the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). Prior to her appointment in January 2018, she served as the Chief of Staff for the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and previously as the Mission's Political Affairs Director. From 2011-2014, she served as director for North Africa at the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Washington, DC, managing a wide range of political development programs in response to the political upheavals of the Arab Spring. Prior to that she served as NDI's deputy regional director for Central and West Africa.



**Avril Haines**

***Senior Research Scholar, Columbia University; Deputy Director, Columbia World Projects***

Avril Haines is the Deputy Director of Columbia World Projects, a Lecturer in Law at Columbia Law School, and a Senior Fellow at the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory. She was appointed by President Obama to serve as a Member of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service, and serves on a number of boards and advisory groups, including the Nuclear Threat Initiative's Bio Advisory Group, the Board of Trustees for the Vodafone Foundation, and the Refugees International Policy Advisory Council. Prior to joining Columbia University, she served as Assistant to the President and Principal Deputy National Security Advisor to President Obama. Before that, she served as the Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. She also held a number of senior legal positions in the government, including Legal Adviser to the National Security Council. Haines received her bachelor's degree in Physics from the University of Chicago and a law degree from Georgetown University Law Center.



**Claudia Heiss**

***Professor of Political Science, Universidad de Chile***

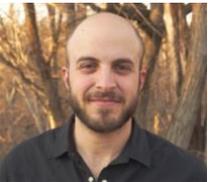
Claudia Heiss is the Head of the Political Science undergraduate program at the Institute of Public Affairs at Universidad de Chile, where she is also a researcher in the Center for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies. Between 2012 and 2014, she presided over the Chilean Association of Political Science. She has published various articles and book chapters on constitutional change, Chilean politics and the history of political science. She holds a PhD from the New School for Social Research and a Master's degree from Columbia University.



**Ali Kadivar**

*Assistant Professor of Sociology and International Studies, Boston College*

Mohammad Ali Kadivar is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and International Studies. His work contributes to political and comparative-historical sociology by exploring the interaction between protest movements and democratization. He has examined both the internal organization, tactics, and perceptions of pro-democracy movements as well as their success or failure in gaining and sustaining democratic improvements. This work grows out of his experience as a participant-observer of the pro-democracy movement in Iran, but his research agenda moves outward from this case to explore these issues on a global scale, using case studies, comparative-historical methods, and statistical analyses. He holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and earned a MA and BA in political science from University of Tehran in Iran. From 2016 to 2018, Kadivar was a postdoctoral fellow at Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University. Kadivar's research has been published in the *American Sociological Review*, *Social Forces*, *Socius*, and *Mobilization*, and has won awards from sections of the American Sociological Association (ASA). He has also published analyses of Iranian politics for the public audience in English and Farsi in outlets such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Washington Post's Monkey Cage blog*, and *BBC Persian*.



**Naseem Khuri**

*Principal of CMPartners, Adjunct Assistant Professor of International Relations at The Fletcher School, Tufts University*

Naseem Khuri is a trainer, consultant, mediator and facilitator specializing in negotiation, influence, and conflict management. He is a Senior Facilitator with Vantage Partners, a Principal with CMPartners, and a Senior Advisor with Dragonfly Partners. He is also an Adjunct Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. In the public and NGO sectors, he works with foundations, non-profit and international organizations, and government institutions managing strategic planning processes, delivering customized negotiation and influence training and facilitating internal change conversations and initiatives. Clients include Israeli, Palestinian and international diplomats and political leaders, the U.S. State Department, U.S. Navy SEALs, the World Bank and human rights organizations in Northern Ireland. In the private sector, he offers training and consulting services to Fortune 100 companies ranging from procurement officers managing key vendor relationships to loan officers managing long-term borrower relationships. Clients come from the manufacturing, tech, energy, consulting and banking industries.



**Marc Lynch**

*Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, George Washington University*

Marc Lynch is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the George Washington University. He is the founder and director of the Project on Middle East Political Science, non-resident senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, associate editor of the *Monkey Cage blog*

for the Washington Post, and Chair of the Middle East Politics Section of the American Political Science Association. He received his PhD from Cornell University.

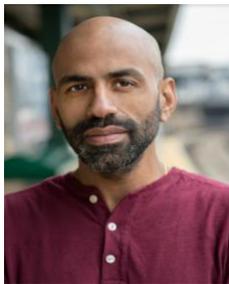


**Ben Majekodunmi**

***Senior Human Rights Officer, United Nations***

Majekodunmi is assistant to Hina Jilani, the U.N. Secretary General's Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders. As such, he is also a Staff Member with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Majekodunmi's human rights experience includes volunteer work with various European NGOs supporting persons in detention, children living on the streets and persons with disabilities. He has worked with the OHCHR in Rwanda and Nepal and with UNICEF in Burundi and at its research centre in Florence, Italy. As an international expert in the field, Majekodunmi has written extensively on human rights monitoring in relation to counterterrorism and emergency situations, armed conflict and peacekeeping, refugees and IDPs, children, the media and numerous other issues. He is also a human rights monitoring trainer and course instructor, speaker and lecturer, with several keynote addresses to his record.



**Zachariah Mampilly**

***Chair of International Affairs, Marxe School of Public and International Affairs, CUNY***

Zachariah Mampilly is the Marxe Chair of International Affairs at the Marxe School of Public and International Affairs, CUNY. Previously, he was a Professor of Political Science, Africana Studies and International Studies, at Vassar College. In 2012/2013, he was a Fulbright Visiting Professor at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He is the author of *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Cornell U. Press 2011) and with Adam Branch, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (African Arguments, Zed Press 2015). He is the coeditor of *Rebel Governance in Civil Wars* (Cambridge U. Press 2015) with Ana Arjona and Nelson Kasfir; and *Peacemaking: From Practice to Theory* (Praeger 2011) with Andrea Bartoli and Susan Allen Nan.



**Daniel Schensul**

***Humanitarian Data and Resilience Specialist, United Nations***

Daniel Schensul works on risk assessment, humanitarian response and humanitarian development-peace links for UNFPA, the UN Population Fund. In this and prior roles, he has developed and strengthened data collection and analysis systems especially linked to risk reduction and crisis response, working with humanitarian and disaster risk reduction partners in governments and across the multilateral system. As a social researcher, Schensul has conducted extensive, applied research on demography, sustainable development, climate change, disaster vulnerability and adaptation, health and gender, with the results published in two books and multiple peer reviewed papers, and supported policy and programmatic responses in a wide range of contexts including Indonesia, Malawi, Maldives and the Caribbean. He has also worked extensively in support of intergovernmental negotiations on

the same issues, at global and regional level. Schensul received his BA from Columbia University and his PhD in Sociology from Brown University.



**Richard Smith**

***Senior Mediation Adviser, United Nations***

Richard Smith (South Africa) has worked extensively on multiple thematic areas including conflict prevention and electoral support, and has worked in countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, South East Asia and in support of peacebuilding practitioners in Syria. Since 2010, he has served as conflict sensitivity advisor and process facilitator for multiple agencies and organizations in Myanmar, working with armed groups, Government and civil society stakeholders. Smith has been a rostered member of the African Standby Force, and from 2018 supported the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission and African Union (AU) Peace Support Operations Division in strengthening the peace support capabilities of the AU Regional Mechanisms. In 2016, he facilitated the development of a regional mediation strategy to prevent electoral-related conflict with the South African Development Community (SADC) Electoral Advisory Council. He is also co-author of *Working with Conflict, Skills and Strategies for Action*.



**Nik Steinberg**

***Forum Director, Columbia World Projects***

Nik Steinberg is the Forum Director at Columbia World Projects. He previously served as the Counselor and Chief Speechwriter for Amb. Samantha Power, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. Prior to that, Steinberg was a Senior Researcher in the Americas Division of Human Rights Watch, where his work focused primarily on Mexico and Cuba. He is a graduate of Dartmouth College and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.



**Maria J. Stephan**

***Director, Program on Nonviolent Action, U.S. Institute of Peace***

Maria J. Stephan directs the Program on Nonviolent Action at the U.S. Institute of Peace. She is the co-author of *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, which was awarded the 2012 Woodrow Wilson Foundation Prize by the American Political Science Association for the best book published in political science and the 2012 University of Louisville Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order. She is the co-author of *Bolstering Democracy: Lessons Learned and the Path Forward* (Atlantic Council, 2018); the co-editor of *Is Authoritarianism Staging a Comeback?* (Atlantic Council, 2015); and the editor of *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization and Governance in the Middle East* (Palgrave, 2009). Previously, she co-led the Future of Authoritarianism project at the Atlantic Council; was lead foreign affairs officer in the U.S. State Department (Afghanistan and Syria); directed policy and research at the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict; and

taught at Georgetown and American Universities. Stephan is a lifetime member of the Council on Foreign Relations.



**Ayaka Suzuki**

***Director, Secretary-General's Office, Strategic Planning and Monitoring Unit, United Nations***

Ayaka Suzuki has been serving as the Director of the Strategic Planning and Monitoring Unit in the Executive Office of the Secretary-General since 2017. Prior to this, she served as the Chief of Staff of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS) at United Nations Headquarters in New York. Her previous positions also include: acting Director of the Africa I Division in the Department of Political Affairs (DPA); Chief of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Section in DPKO/UNHQ; Chief of Staff for the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) in Tripoli; Chief of Staff for the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) in Port-au-Prince; Senior Strategic Planning Officer in MINUSTAH (MINUSTAH) in Port-au-Prince; and Political Affairs Officer in the Africa Division of DPKO/UNHQ. In the mid-1990s, she served as Programme Director of Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA) in charge of the Peace and Democracy programme and Empowerment of Women programme. From 1999 to 2001, she served on the Board of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS). She also worked at International Peace Academy (IPA), Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and the American Assembly. She obtained a Master's degree in International Affairs from Columbia University and has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science magna cum laude from Barnard College, Columbia University.



**Meredith L. Weiss**

***Professor and Chair of Political Science, University at Albany, State University of New York***

Meredith L. Weiss is Professor and Chair of Political Science in the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs & Policy at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Her research addresses social mobilization and civil society, the politics of identity and development, elections, institutional reform, and subnational governance in Southeast Asia, with particular focus on Malaysia and Singapore. Her books include *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (2006), *Student Activism in Malaysia: Crucible, Mirror, Sideshow* (2011), and the forthcoming *The Roots of Resilience: Party Machines and Grassroots Politics in Southeast Asia*. She has also edited or co-edited eleven volumes, including, most recently, *Toward a New Malaysia? The 2018 Election and Its Aftermath* (2020) and *The Political Logics of Anticorruption Efforts in Asia* (2019). Her articles appear in *Asian Studies Review*, *Asian Survey*, *Critical Asian Studies*, *Democratization*, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, and elsewhere.