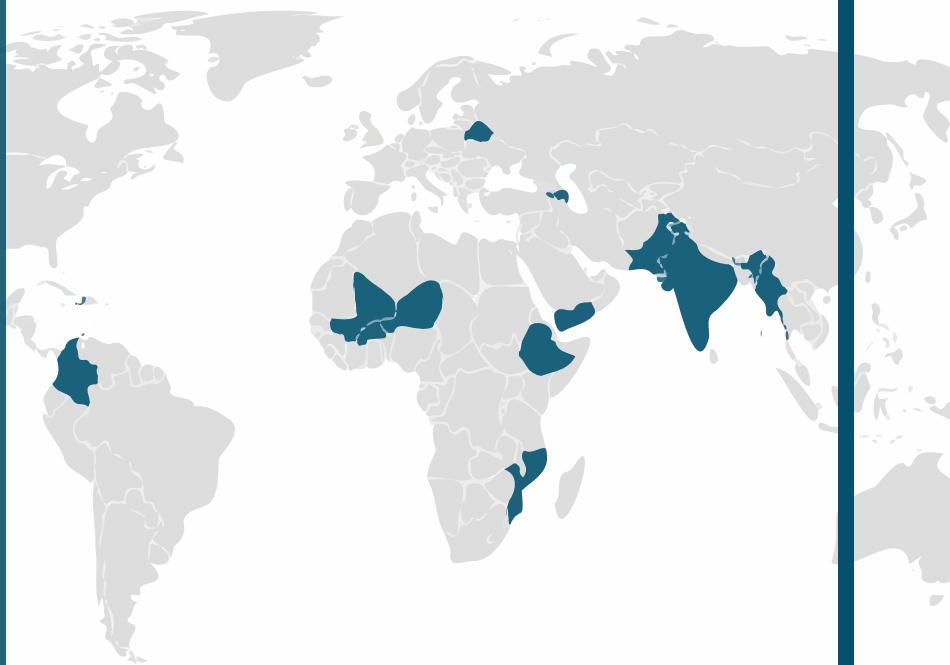




# TEN CONFLICTS TO WORRY ABOUT IN 2021

The Armed Conflict  
Location & Event  
Data Project  
(ACLED)

February 2021



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# FOREWORD

Conflict levels in 2020 slightly decreased from 2019 in all regions except Africa. Still, many [conflicts continued unabated](#) despite the global COVID-19 pandemic, and several [took on new dimensions](#) as actors responded to the health crisis. Because the pandemic is a unique development, we expect global conflict levels, locations, and agents to increase significantly in 2021 — ultimately to a higher point than both 2019 and 2020.

Each year, ACLED identifies 10 conflicts or crisis situations around the world that are likely to worsen or evolve in the coming months. Not just hotspots, these 10 cases represent areas where new directions and patterns of violence are becoming clear, where there have been major shifts in conflict dynamics, and where there is a significant risk of conflict diffusion. This year's report reviews key trends in Ethiopia; India and Pakistan; Myanmar; Haiti; Belarus; Colombia; Armenia and Azerbaijan; Yemen; Mozambique; and the Sahel. Ethiopia, Yemen, and the Sahel were previously highlighted in our 2020 series, and their re-inclusion here underscores how these conflicts have changed substantially in the preceding year, and how new risks continue to emerge.

All 10 conflicts are expected to evolve in 2021. They do not fit the standard narratives of state failure, exclusive politics, grievances, or resource competition. Each is shaped by the decisions governments have made in order to exert or retract their control and strength, as well as the ramifications, opposition, and vulnerabilities exposed by those decisions. While many world leaders stole the spotlight with political antics and by inflaming dangerous domestic fault lines, state actors in these 10 conflicts exploited global distractions to repress, attack, and subjugate their citizens. Others took advantage of rising radicalism and populism to sustain their leadership, ultimately resulting in scapegoating and further violence. As a result, violent and brutal governance is on the rise in many of these countries, while multiple powers compete for control in others.

Each case also illustrates the wide range of different political violence patterns currently affecting states: Haiti's gangs have arisen in a context of highly politicized 'law and order' campaigns; the Sahel's jihadi threat is reinforced by pastoralist populism and poor international coordination; Mozambique's conflict was initially viewed by its government as a local revolt, but reached unprecedented levels of sophistication in 2020. Russian interests are a growing and determining factor in Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan; and the violent indirect effects of incomplete peace agreements are felt in Yemen and Colombia.

2020 was a sobering year, and one in which politics has failed the vast majority around the world. In 2021, we may be forced to reap what has been sown: the coming year is likely to be a dangerous and violent period leading to more uncertainty and less peace, especially for the countries embroiled in these 10 conflicts.

*In our mid-year update to this special report, we will revisit these conflicts to assess our analysis and determine if our expectations were accurate.*

Prof. Clionadh Raleigh  
February 2021

# Ethiopia: At risk of multiplying conflicts stretching the capacity of the state

Clionadh Raleigh and Braden Fuller

With national elections scheduled for 5 June 2021, and the country gripped by several co-occurring conflicts, Ethiopia is headed towards a tumultuous year.

The conflict in Ethiopia between the federal government and the former administration of the northern Tigray region, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), has dominated headlines since clashes began in early November 2020. Four weeks of intense fighting resulted in what appears to be a decisive victory for the federal government, but recent information suggests that scattered local challenges and a massive humanitarian emergency is creating a costly occupation. Pockets of resistance still exist and some clashes continue to occur, and some combination of federal government troops, Eritrean soldiers and Amhara regional militias claim to have successfully established control over all major towns in the region. Given the disjointed and distorted reporting and planning of this conflict, questions are being asked by international and national actors alike about conflict patterns more broadly in Ethiopia, and how secure the state is going into 2021.

In addition to a costly occupation and the task of replacing the political leadership of the Tigray region, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration faces the daunting task of establishing security in many areas of the country. The many conflicts across the state are less acknowledged in the international media, but each of these threats are associated with dire outcomes, including thousands of deaths, millions of displacements, and variable levels of disruptions to economic and political development. Economically, investment has slowed as the future of the country is uncertain and large-scale farms and development projects have been the subjects of attacks by rioting groups. Political development has likewise been curtailed through the repression of

of opposition movements, marking a regression since Abiy was first hailed for opening political space at the beginning of his tenure.

Several conflicts are simultaneously occurring in Konso, West and Kelem Wollega, Gujji, Tigray, and the Oromo/Somali border area. All have resulted in the death of hundreds and the displacement of millions. Recent violence in the Sudan border region adds to the list ([BBC, 3 January 2021](#)). The common thread linking these conflicts are the 'administrative contests' that have emerged as groups driven by ethno-regional nationalism seek formal recognition, authority, and territory. Administrative recognition and dominance are the basis of most conflicts that the Abiy government confronts, which have been incentivized by suggestions that Abiy may try to alter the basis of ethno-nationalist territorial claims to authority. Over the past year, ethnic political parties from the various regions have generally become more radical in their claims for self-determination — for example Wolayta in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR) ([Addis Standard, 10 August 2020](#)), or the TPLF in Tigray ([Al Jazeera, 30 October 2020](#)). Further, rising ethno-nationalist sentiments have transformed long-running territorial squabbles over resources into bigger and wider conflicts that potentially include all members of an ethnic group. Examples include the Somali/Afar border ([Reuters, 29 October 2020](#)), the Oromo/Somali border, Western Tigray, Metekel Zone, and Kemise (Oromo special zone).

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:

### *Authority Shifts*

The war with the TPLF was fought by troops from the federal forces and a host of regional militias from across the country — and considerable action from

from Eritrea. The neighboring Amhara region supplied significant troops for this effort. They have since been associated with securing territory in the Tigray region and administrating subregions for the transition. These patterns are pronounced in Western Tigray, where Amhara nationalists claim ownership based on historical and ethnic ties ([Africa News, 8 February 2016](#)).

The Amhara political elites have sought to extract significant concessions for their actions in Tigray and for their ongoing support for Abiy. In particular, the Amhara police and the National Movement of the Amhara (NAMA) have engaged in an overt campaign to overtake territory that they believe was illegally taken from their region — a move that was largely advocated by the TPLF when they were in power. They likewise seek control of areas where Amhara people live outside of the region and are being persecuted. Areas that Amhara actors have vested interest in because of high numbers of ethnic Amhara residents, include (in part or in whole) Wolkait, Tegede, Telemt, and Raya of Tigray region, as well as Metekel zone of Benishangul/Gumz region, where large numbers of ethnic Amhara are living in fear after a spate of violent attacks on civilians ([National Movement of the Amhara, 11 November 2020](#)).

Over the past year, Metekel zone has been one of the most violent locations in the state. Since 2018, ACLED has recorded more than 500 fatalities (likely a conservative estimate) among mostly ethnic Amhara who have been attacked by Gumuz ethnic militias and other unidentified armed groups as they attempt to engage in agricultural work. A recent massacre in the zone left 207 dead ([Africa News, 26 December 2020](#)). Abere Adamu, Commissioner of the Amhara Regional State Police Commission, recently requested that his force be made responsible for solving the crisis in Benishangul regional state, or that the federal government intervene ([Amhara Mass Media Agency, 7 December 2020](#)). The government declared the area an 'emergency zone' in January, allowing them to overtake administration and security.

While the powerful Amhara militias may succeed in stopping violence directed at Amhara civilians in the state, federal allowance of ethnic-based militias to operate outside of their own regional boundaries creates a dangerous precedent for the rest of the country. Violence occurring as a result of boundary demarcation disagreements could worsen and spread. Rifts already visible between the Oromo and Amhara regional administrators could deepen, throwing the country into a spiral of violence.

### *Political Bargaining*

The deployment of federal forces into the regions of Ethiopia is a costly intervention. Each operation both strengthens and weakens the government's hand: by gaining the control of territory and overtaking the political structure, concessions are made to those agents who will hold the areas for the government and in line with central directives. These decisions, and the overall costs of securing territory, are long-term transactions by the government that trade some risks (e.g. direct violence) for others (e.g. the rise of local subnational autocrats and associated violence).

This dynamic is especially visible in the Oromia region, where high levels of violence throughout the past year have forced the central government to engage in political maneuvers and repressive behavior to keep the region in check. Although Abiy initially rode a wave of Oromo mobilization into office, his popularity has plummeted following the arrest of several popular Oromo opposition leaders and a series of violent incidents in 2019 that left the Oromia region engulfed in unrest ([Al Jazeera, 19 September 2019](#)). Even more seriously, splinter factions of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) are actively engaged in an insurgency across remote areas of the Oromia region, launching violent operations against local government representatives and federal troops. These splinter faction (Shane) militants have been accused of committing violence against civilians, including massacres, killings, and intimidation.

While information in remote areas of the Oromia region is extremely difficult to access, reports of continued police violence, displacement, and insecurity suggest that the issue has continued far beyond the capacity of a local law enforcement operation. Major military efforts will be required to gain full control over areas dominated by the OLF/Shane. Widespread political unrest is to be expected throughout the Oromia region during the election period as opposition party members denounce the jailing of potential candidates ([Addis Standard, December 2020](#)).

The dynamics discussed above are also present in conflicts occurring in the SNNPR. Although more localized, the overall issues of ethnic federalism and attempts by Abiy at reining in violence across the region are likely to play out in a similar fashion of elite positioning and conflict.

In the run-up to the first national elections following a major change in government, Ethiopia is in the midst of several concurrent political struggles.

Armed groups are challenging federal government troops across areas of the country, while ethnic violence and killing occurs on a weekly basis. Although Prime Minister Abiy proved that the central government possesses considerable capacity through the defeat of the TPLF in the latter half of 2020, additional challenges that remain in the state are likely to contribute to a volatile year. Ethiopia's position as a linchpin for security in the region means that violence occurring in the state will have consequences beyond domestic implications, affecting policy and conflicts across the Horn of Africa.

## FURTHER READING:

[Ethiopia: TPLF Overview](#)

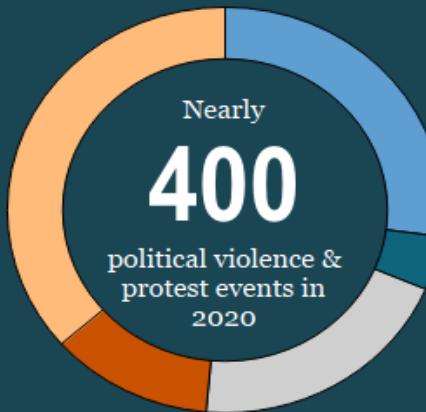
[Red Lines: Upheaval and Containment in the Horn of Africa](#)

[Bad Blood: Violence in Ethiopia Reveals the Strain of Ethno-Federalism Under Prime Minister Abiy](#)

[Change and Continuity in Protests and Political Violence in PM Abiy's Ethiopia](#)

# ETHIOPIA

At risk of multiplying conflicts stretching the capacity of the state

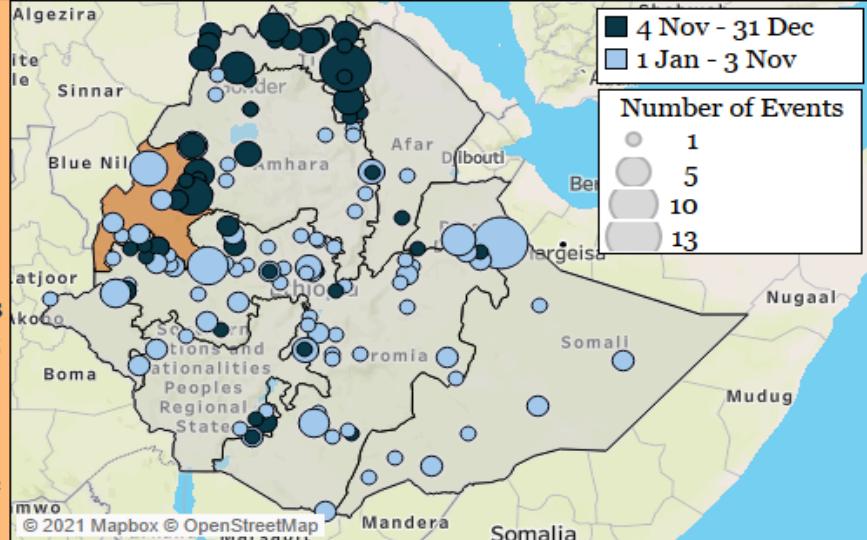


Regional ethnic groups continue to challenge the authority of the federal government and engage in inter-ethnic violence. The federal government has engaged in increasingly violent measures to maintain political and territorial control.

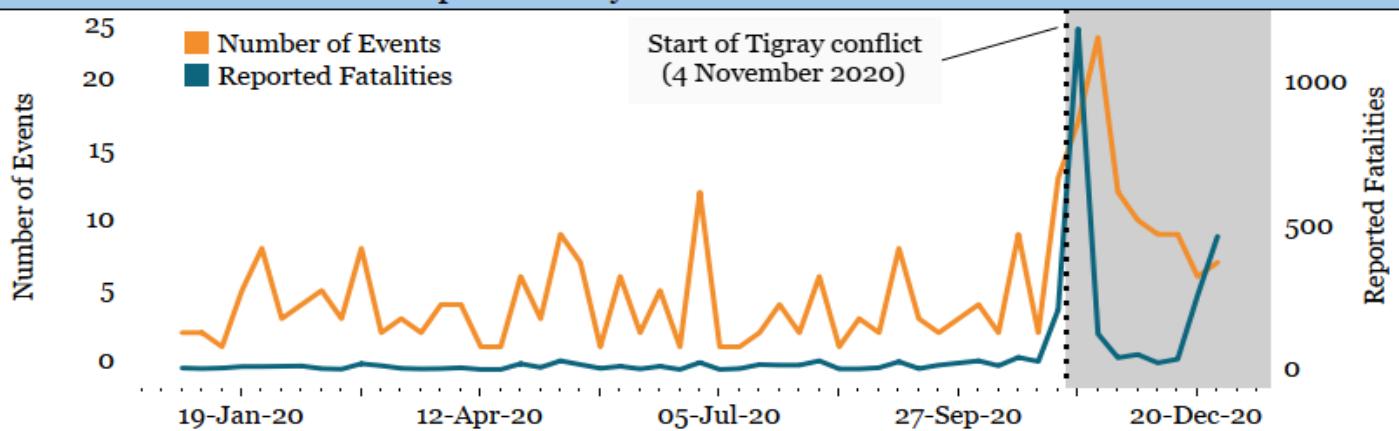
- Battles
- Explosions/Remote violence
- Protests
- Riots
- Violence against civilians

Most organized political violence in Ethiopia has been concentrated in the northern Tigray region since the beginning of the Tigray conflict in November.

Ethiopia's conflict between the federal government and the former administration of the northern Tigray region, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), began in early November. The regional conflict has subsided after four weeks of intense fighting. However, widespread displacement of millions throughout the Benishangul-Gumuz region (highlighted in orange), and simmering inter-ethnic conflicts, continue to present serious security and humanitarian challenges for the Abiy administration.



Organized political violence and reported fatalities peaked during the conflict between the Ethiopian military and the TPLF in November.



# India and Pakistan: At risk of increased cross-border violence in Kashmir

Danyal Kamal and Katerina Bozhinova

2020 was another tumultuous year for India and Pakistan as relations plummeted amid increased clashes along the disputed Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) border. The spike in fighting made 2020 the most violent year for conflict between India and Pakistan since the beginning of ACLED coverage in 2016.<sup>1</sup> India focused on deflecting opportunities for negotiation and tightening control of Kashmir, while promoting pro-Indian politics in the region. Pakistan responded by continuously casting doubt on the bilateral ceasefire agreement with India by highlighting Indian violations and human rights abuses in Kashmir at international diplomatic forums, as well as inciting violence near the Line of Control (LoC) ([United States Institute of Peace, 5 August 2020](#)).

Meanwhile, the first deadly clash after more than four decades took place between the Indian and Chinese armies in the neighboring Ladakh region in June 2020, which resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers and at least one Chinese soldier. The two states accused each other of cross-border encroachments and firing warning shots, threatening military conflict ([AP News, 11 September 2020](#)). The disputed Kashmir region of Ladakh has a poorly demarcated Line of Actual Control (LAC), which can shift due to the abundance of rivers, lakes, and snowcaps ([BBC News, 16 June 2020](#)). India has accused China of sending troops into Ladakh's Galwan valley and occupying its territory ([BBC News, 16 June 2020](#)). Fresh tensions exacerbating Sino-Indian relations stemmed from New Delhi's August 2019 move to establish a separate centrally-administered Ladakh region ([Anadolu Agency, 18 December 2020](#)). After several rounds of diplomatic talks last year, the border standoff has not yet been officially resolved ([Al Jazeera, 10 December 2020](#)).

1. While ACLED coverage of India spans back to 2016, and is therefore the date used here, ACLED coverage of Pakistan extends back to 2010.

Besides cross-border tensions, Indian security forces have continued to face the threat of Islamist militancy in J&K. Security forces reportedly used the coronavirus lockdown to obtain better intelligence inputs and to crackdown on militancy in the region ([New Indian Express, 7 May 2020](#)). In addition to militant clashes with authorities, several targeted attacks against members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) were carried out by Laskhar-e-Taiba (LeT), leading to the death of at least nine politicians. The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs issued a list of 10 Islamist militant organizations operating in the state to be eliminated, including LeT, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM), and Al-Badr, among others ([National Herald India, 6 October 2020](#)). Authorities expressed concerns that militant groups infiltrated across the border while the government was preoccupied with handling the coronavirus pandemic. While the steady rise in militancy has been largely attributed to Pakistan-based jihadist groups, such as JeM and LeT, militant movements in the region are also fueled internally ([International Crisis Group, 5 August 2020](#)). Disillusionment and anger caused by the revocation of the special status of J&K in August 2019 has enabled both domestic and foreign groups to recruit young Kashmiris.

To add to the preexisting tension, a new law allowing Indian citizens from other states to claim residency and purchase land in J&K has sparked concerns over potential demographic changes that would render the Kashmiri Muslim majority a minority. Furthermore, the redrawing of Assembly constituencies in 2021 is expected to shift political power to the Hindu-majority Jammu division and away from the Muslim Kashmiris ([The Washington Post, 5 August 2020](#)). According to the ruling BJP, the population in Jammu has increased and thus Kashmir holds a disproportionately larger share of As-

sembly constituencies ([Indian Express, 18 February 2020](#)). With the first State Assembly elections since J&K became a Union Territory likely to be conducted in 2021, the marginalized Muslim community in the region could become even more disenfranchised, which could in turn spur militant activity in the region ([One India, 9 December 2020](#)).

In India's 'Red Corridor', ACLED records a reduction in Naxal-Maoist violence in 2020 compared to 2019. This reduction is particularly notable between the months of March and June, coinciding with the onset of coronavirus lockdown restrictions, when Naxal-Maoist rebels have historically carried out their annual tactical counter-offensive campaign (TCOC). Lockdown restrictions, coupled with an increased counterinsurgency focus against militancy across India, have reportedly weakened the Naxal-Maoist operational capacity ([Economic Times, 28 June 2020](#); [The Diplomat, 31 August 2020](#)). However, the reported number of Naxal-Maoist related violent events in the final quarter of 2020 are comparable to the same period in 2019. The impending TCOC offensive in the summer months will be indicative of the insurgency's vigor in 2021.

A year after the controversial 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) was passed, mass demonstrations were reported across India, culminating in deadly riots and clashes between Muslims and Hindus in Delhi. The CAA aims to fast-track the citizenship of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Parsis, and Sikhs who fled Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan before 2015, excluding Muslims ([Deutsche Welle, 11 December 2020](#)). It has been criticized for being discriminatory toward Muslims and undermining India's secularism. Although anti-CAA demonstrations decreased in the second half of 2020 due to the imposition of coronavirus restrictions and the ensuing state crackdown, 18 organizations, including All Assam Students' Union (AASU), have resumed mass demonstrations in January 2021.

In Pakistan, militancy targeting security forces and civilians was on the rise in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. Balochistan is the country's least urbanized and most impoverished province, while KP has historically been a site of Taliban and sectarian violence ([Gandhara, 15 June 2019](#)). In KP, security forces have conducted major operations against militant groups for the past few years, yet Taliban-linked militants, as well as the Islamic State, have carried out sporadic attacks. Taliban groups, including Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), consistently targeted security forces in 2020, causing over 100 total fatalities. Political violence also increased in Balochistan, particularly in regions

where Baloch separatists were thought to be weak. The resurgence of Baloch separatist violence was preceded by greater unity among Baloch separatist groups, including the formation of trans-province alliances between separatist groups, as well as repression of Baloch civilians by the Pakistani army during security operations.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:

Cross-border violence between India and Pakistan in the Kashmir region is expected to continue increasing in 2021. With both sides adopting non-cooperative militarized strategies, bilateral attempts at resolving the Kashmir conflict remain unlikely in the near future. Tension between Indian and Chinese forces in Ladakh further compounds the conflict dynamic in the Kashmir region. Diplomatic negotiations between India and China aimed at de-escalating the conflict remain inconclusive. Failure to reach a peaceful settlement of the LAC dispute with China would leave India to contend with both Pakistan and China — regional allies — along both borders in Kashmir. Additionally, recent policy shifts fueling the increased marginalization of J&K's Muslim population may aggravate the persistent threat of domestic and foreign militancy in Kashmir.

Elsewhere in India, discontent surrounding the passage of the CAA continues to be a cause for concern. While deadly religious clashes and violent demonstrations surrounding the CAA subsided following the initial coronavirus lockdown, organizations in northeastern states have announced plans to resume the anti-CAA movement. The Indian Home Ministry missed a deadline in June to finalize the Act and it is still unclear when the CAA will be carried out. Once implementation begins, demonstrations and violence are likely to renew and escalate. Additionally, a wave of nationwide demonstrations by farmers demanding the repeal of three agricultural acts passed by the central government in September has continued into 2021. Demonstrating farmers fear losing market protections, including a minimum guaranteed price for their produce, due to the new acts ([BBC News, 27 November 2020](#)). While most of the demonstrations have been peaceful, some clashes have been reported between police and demonstrators. Although India's supreme court suspended the implementation of the agricultural acts in January, farmers have continued demonstrating ([Foreign Policy, 13 January 2021](#)). A tenth round of talks is scheduled to take place between farmer's unions and the government in January 2021 ([Business Insider, 19 January 2021](#)). If a compromise is not reached, a surge in nationwide demonstrations can be expected.

In Pakistan, an increase in militant violence targeting state forces in KP and Balochistan indicates a resurgence of the TTP network and the Baloch separatist movement in each province, respectively. While militancy was largely thought to have been defeated in KP, the TTP network continued to regroup and strengthen their presence in 2020, revealing gaps in the effectiveness of the National Action Plan against terrorism ([Asian International News, 4 January 2020](#)). In Balochistan, despite increased attempts to renew the separatist movement, Baloch militants continue to suffer from a lack of resources and international support. The Pakistani government demonstrated its ability to constrain insurgencies and carry on with its projects and plans for the province, including the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) ([Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs, Fall 2020](#)). Deprived of opportunities for prosperity and repressed by the Pakistani state, the Baloch population may become increasingly marginalized, fuelling further separatist tensions. It remains to be seen how the Pakistani government will respond to the threat of domestic militancy in 2021, given its overt focus on the Kashmir conflict.

Besides militant struggles, a new alliance of opposition parties, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), aims to oust Prime Minister Imran Khan, accusing the army of installing him during the 2018 elections ([The Guardian, 16 October 2020](#)). Anti-government demonstrations gained mass support, as the country has been struggling with unemployment and the highest inflation rates in Asia ([The Guardian, 16 October 2020; Indian Express, 25 October](#)). With a national march planned in February 2021, culminating in Islamabad, anti-government discontent is set to continue, and may escalate ([Dawn, 1 January 2021](#)). The upcoming 2021 Senate Elections may stir anti-government tensions, especially considering the PDM's intention to resign from the national and provincial assemblies, thus disrupting the election process. However, it remains unlikely that this move will destabilize the government, as Prime Minister Khan has stated that the government will hold elections for any vacated national assembly seats ([The Diplomat, 11 December 2020](#)). While PDM may not immediately succeed in overthrowing the government, their tactics may generate increasing opposition to the current political and military establishment, influencing future elections in Pakistan.

## FURTHER READING:

[CDT Spotlight: Continuing Conflict in Jammu & Kashmir](#)

[COVID-19 and Political Unrest In Northeast India](#)

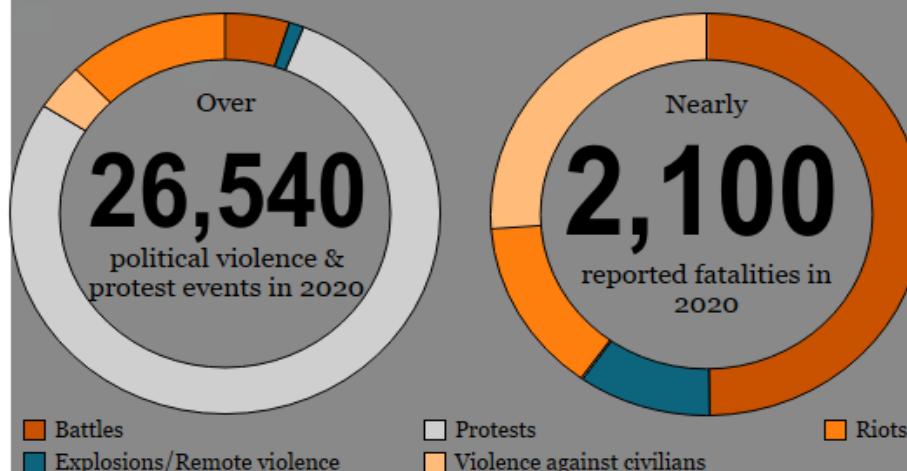
[CDT Spotlight: Pakistan](#)

[CDT Spotlight: Continuing Conflict in India](#)

[Rising Organized Political Violence in Balochistan: A Resurgence of Baloch Separatism?](#)

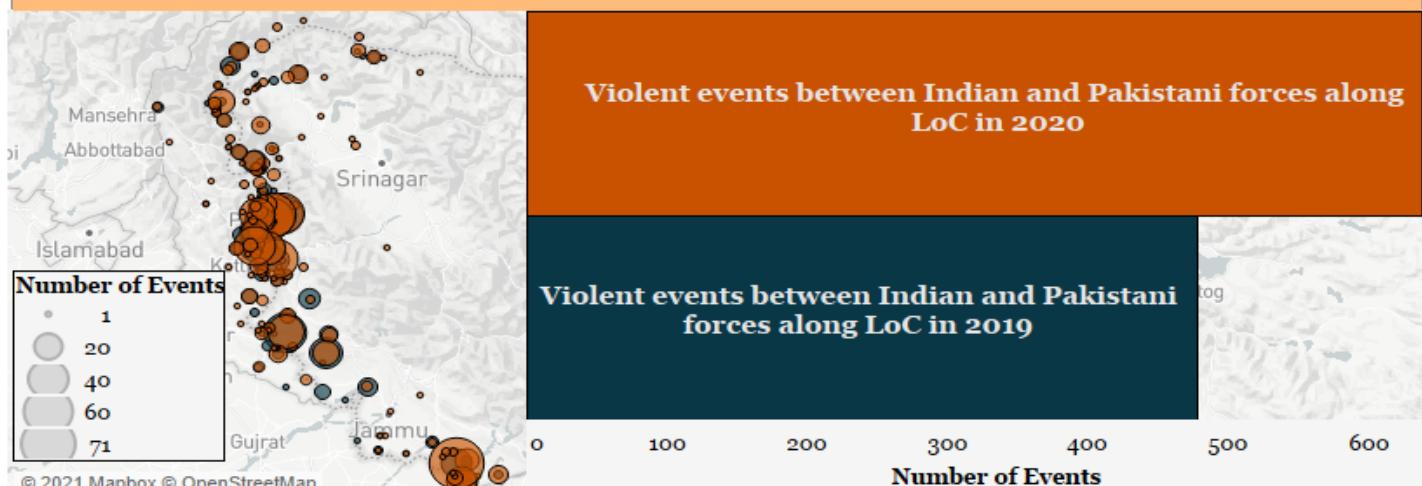
# INDIA & PAKISTAN

At risk of increased cross-border violence in Kashmir

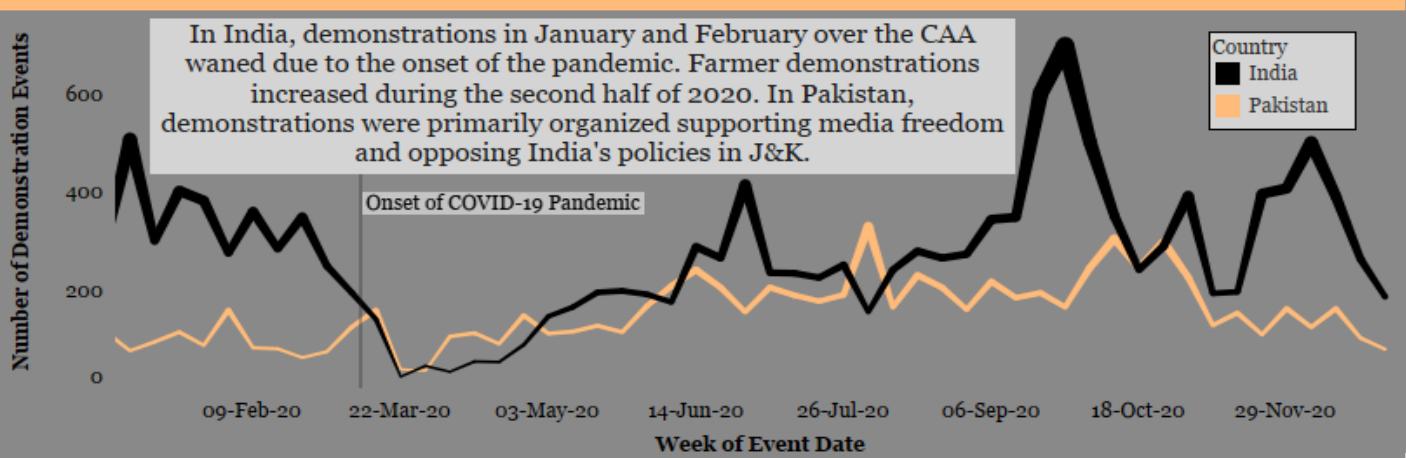


2020 was a tumultuous year for India and Pakistan amid increased clashes along the disputed Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) border, making 2020 an especially violent year -- a trend set to continue in 2021. Elsewhere in India, discontent surrounding the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) remains concerning. While demonstrations surrounding the CAA subsided following the coronavirus lockdown, once implementation begins, demonstrations and violence are likely to restart.

Activity increased along the J&K Line of Control (LoC) in 2020



Despite the pandemic, demonstrations in both countries continued



# Myanmar: At risk of dormant conflicts reigniting

Elliott Bynum

Following the general elections on 8 November 2020 in Myanmar, fighting in Rakhine state and southern Chin state came to a sudden halt. The United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), an ethnic Rakhine group fighting for greater autonomy, announced a unilateral ceasefire, which the military then reciprocated. Subsequent meetings have since been held to discuss the possibility of a bilateral ceasefire between the groups. The current military coup underway in Myanmar will likely derail such talks.

Prior to the current cessation of fighting in Rakhine state and Chin state's Paletwa township, conflict in the region had been on the rise. Most notably, the military's use of airstrikes and shelling both during combat and in civilian areas had been increasing relative to 2019. Many civilians have been injured and killed during the conflict over the past two years. While fighting has temporarily stopped, no stable solution to the conflict has been achieved.

As conflict in the west abated, clashes between the military and the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) increased during December 2020 in the east in Kayin state. The clashes have continued into the new year in eastern Bago region. There is growing animosity between the two sides as the military continues with its road construction project in areas controlled by the KNU/KNLA. The KNU/KNLA views these intrusions as violations of the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Large-scale demonstrations by people in Kayin state calling for the military to leave the area have also been reported ([Karen Information Center, 8 January 2021](#)). The increased fighting in Kayin state and Bago region, and the breakdown of monitoring mechanisms put in place to de-escalate conflict, threaten the relative calm the region has enjoyed since 2012 ([Frontier Myanmar, 18 January 2021](#)).

Aside from the increased fighting in Kayin state, the military deployed its forces to checkpoints that have previously been manned by the Kayin Border Guard Force (BGF) in December. The Kayin BGF was formed in 2010 after members of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, which had broken away from the KNU/KNLA in 1994, acceded to the military's border guard force scheme. Illicit businesses run by the Kayin BGF along the Thailand-Myanmar border in Shwe Kokko have created tensions with the military, though the recent crackdown on such businesses is likely a pretense for the military to assert more control over the region amid increased fighting in the state ([Frontier Myanmar, 30 December 2020](#)).

Meanwhile, in Shan state, while tensions between the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army-South (RCSS/SSA-S) and Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA) had largely subsided earlier in the year, fighting between the two rebel groups increased towards the end of 2020 and has continued into the new year. The PSLF/TNLA views the RCSS/SSA-S as encroaching on its territory in northern Shan state ([Frontier Myanmar, 26 January 2021](#)). Prior to the outbreak of inter-ethnic armed group conflict, the RCSS/SSA-S had been engaged in clashes with the military at a higher level than in years past.

Against this backdrop, anti-war demonstrations in 2020 by youth activists were met with state repression. Student and youth activists held demonstrations in Rakhine state and also in Mandalay region, which has become a hotbed for current student activism. Members of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), a national-level umbrella student union, have been detained and face imprisonment for distributing anti-war leaflets around Mandalay last year ([Fortify Rights, 12 January 2021](#)). Anti-war sentiment among the youth in Myanmar

notably crosses ethnic boundaries, and the continued repression of such activism is only likely to lead to further discontent.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:

After the November elections, which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won handily, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) organized a series of demonstrations claiming irregularities in the voter lists used during the elections. These pro-military demonstrations have continued into 2021 with some becoming violent.

On 1 February, the day the new parliament was scheduled to convene, the military — using the pretense of electoral fraud — carried out early morning raids detaining elected NLD officials, as well as a number of prominent political activists. A state of emergency was declared for one year and the military announced that it would reconstitute the Union Election Commission and eventually hold new elections.

The military claims that its seizure of power is allowed under the 2008 military-drafted constitution in situations where the country's sovereignty or national unity are threatened ([Frontier Myanmar, 1 February 2021](#)). The NLD has long sought to change the undemocratic charter while operating within its parameters. As the military-backed USDP is unable to win at the polls, the military — which is granted a quarter of the seats in parliament under the constitution — has manufactured a crisis to justify reclaiming some of the power ceded to the civilian government.

In detaining not just the NLD government, but also political activists, the military is attempting to undermine the ability of the public to organize in protest. Yet, it is likely that activist networks that had largely laid dormant in the hopes that the military might allow the NLD to govern according to the will of the people will be recharged by the threat of prolonged military dictatorship. Demonstrations by Burmese groups in the diaspora have already been reported in Thailand, Japan, and the United States.

As 2021 progresses, in addition to the likelihood of increased disorder resulting from the military coup, the threat that dormant armed conflicts could reignite remains. No political solution to the conflict in Rakhine state has been achieved. Many ethnic Rakhine and Chin villagers remain displaced, not to mention the many thousands of Rohingya refugees still languishing in camps in Bangladesh. There are

troubling signs that conflict in Kayin state could intensify while fighting between Shan and Ta'ang rebel groups continues in Shan state. The military's decision to seize power has thrown any discussions of peace into doubt.

## FURTHER READING:

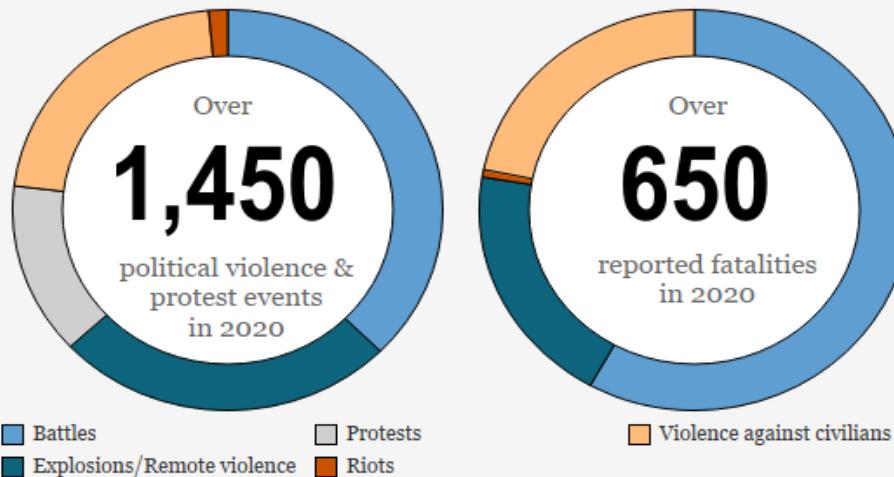
[2020 Elections in Myanmar: Political Violence and Demonstration Trends](#)

[CDT Spotlight: COVID-19 & Conflict in Myanmar](#)

[Coronavirus Cover: Myanmar Civilians Under Fire](#)

# MYANMAR

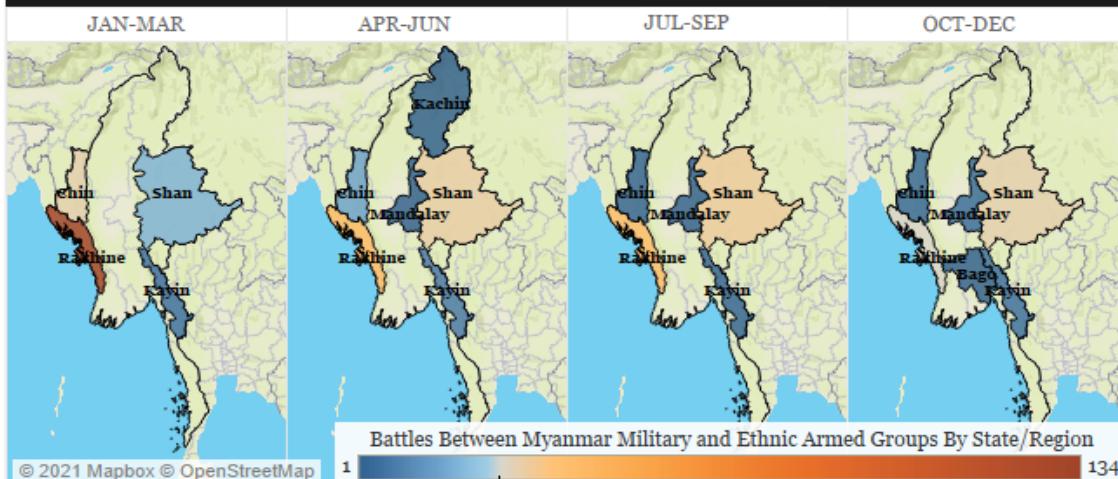
At risk of dormant conflicts reigniting



While fighting in Rakhine and southern Chin states between the military and the ULA/AA stopped after the November elections, most violence and fatalities in Myanmar in 2020 were a result of the conflict in the region. Despite talks between the two sides, no political solution to the conflict has been reached yet.

The current military coup underway in Myanmar will likely derail such talks.

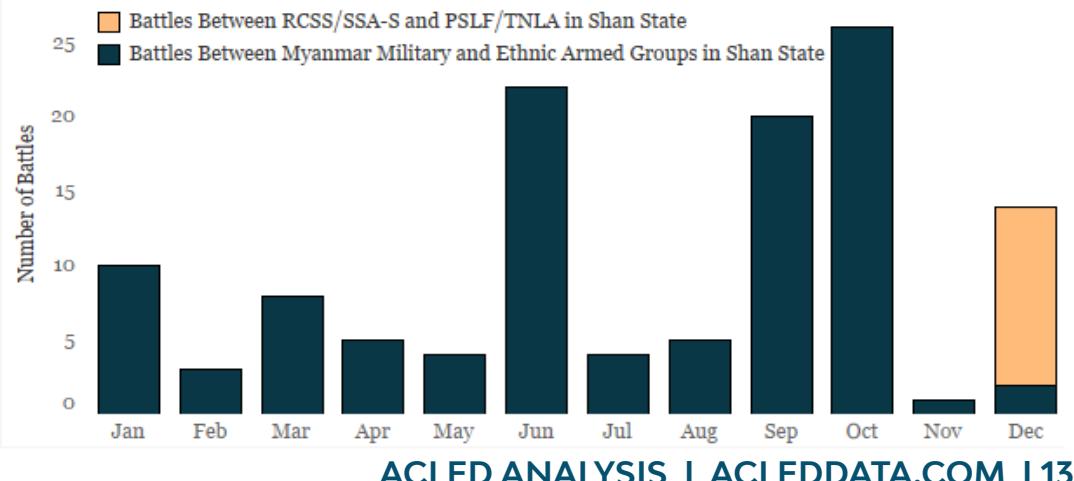
## Increased fighting in Kayin state and Bago region at the end of 2020



As conflict in the west abated, in the east in Kayin state, clashes between the military and the KNU/KNLA increased in December. There is growing animosity between the two groups as the military continues with its road construction project in areas controlled by the KNU/KNLA.

## Renewed conflict between Shan and Ta'ang rebels in Shan state in 2020

While fighting between Shan and Ta'ang ethnic rebels had largely abated earlier in 2020, towards the end of the year, fighting between the RCSS/SSA-S and PSLF/TNLA increased, and has continued into the new year. The PSLF/TNLA views the RCSS/SSA-S as encroaching on its territory in northern Shan state.



# Haiti: High risk of increased gang violence amid rising authoritarianism

Sandra Pellegrini

Amid a worsening political crisis, the security situation in Haiti has continued to deteriorate as levels of gang violence have increased. Throughout 2020, violence against civilians in the country rose by nearly 35% compared to 2019. Violence has been concentrated mostly in the impoverished neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince, which are divided and controlled by local gang lords.

The upsurge of violence in Haiti is largely tied to the operations of local gangs whose activities are often connected to political developments in the country. In 2020, the majority of violence against civilians was perpetrated by both known and unidentified criminal groups. The rise of gang violence is likely connected to the end of President Jovenel Moise's constitutional mandate on 7 February 2021 and to the upcoming elections scheduled for September 2021. Political elites in power in Haiti have long relied on gangs to terrorize the population and suppress opposition votes through intimidation and the use of force against residents of marginalized neighborhoods in the capital — hotbeds of Haiti's political opposition ([Haiti Progres, 22 October 2020](#)). In exchange, gangs receive government support in the form of funds, weapons, and the assurance that their crimes will go unpunished. In October 2020, the leader of the G-9 gang alliance — a coalition of several gangs, formed in June 2020 under the leadership of former police officer Jimmy Chérizier — released a video in which he publicly threatened demonstrators, to dissuade them from participating in an anti-government march ([Gazette Haiti, 17 October 2020](#)). This trend has also been observed outside of Port-au-Prince, with similar radio threats made in July by a gang leader in the Sud-Est region of the country, following a demonstration against rising insecurity.

2020 was marked by the deepening of Haiti's political crisis. The tenure of President Jovenel Moise has been tarnished by corruption scandals and killings of high-profile activists, resulting in low approval ratings and demands for his resignation. The president's legitimacy was further impacted by the parliament's failure to vote on the organization of legislative elections before its dissolution in January 2020. With a dysfunctional parliament, under Haiti's constitution, Moise has been able to rule with a series of controversial presidential decrees ever since ([Al Jazeera, 13 January 2020](#)).

In order to consolidate his power, civil society organizations claim that President Moise has supported the G-9 gang coalition. Allegations of collusion between political elites and the G-9 gang were fueled by reports that G-9 members have been travelling in police armored vans and have built their arsenal through state-sponsored weapons donations ([Loop, 15 December 2019](#)). In turn, the creation of this alliance and its material advantage has impacted the gang landscape. G-9 members have sought to increase their influence and have started to wage a war on gang leaders who refused to join the G-9 alliance or who supported political rivals of President Moise. In July, violent incursions of the Belekou and Nan Boston gangs, both members of the G-9 coalition, were reported in the Nan Brooklyn neighborhood, which is controlled by the dissident Ti Gabriel gang leader in Cité Soleil ([RNDDH, 13 August 2020](#)). Similarly, members of the G-9 coalition launched coordinated attacks in the Nan Tokyo and Pont Rouge neighborhoods in May ([RNDDH, 23 June 2020](#)). These violent operations are reminiscent of the 2018 La Saline massacre that took place in the midst of anti-corruption protests following the Petro Caribe embezzlement scandal. While some attribute the massacre to gang warfare, others claim that it was a government-led attempt to quell the protest

movement ([Le Nouvelliste, 25 May 2020](#)).

Civilians are often targeted and exploited by the warring gangs. Gangs terrorize civilians as they win rival territories and as a means to ensure the population's allegiance. In 2020, sexual violence tripled compared to 2019, suggesting that gangs increasingly use rape as a weapon of war. The number of kidnappings for ransom in 2020 also spiked compared to 2019, with at least 27 kidnappings recorded by ACLED. While some observers argue that kidnapping is part of gangs' 'terror toolkit', others claim that ransoms have been part of a strategy to secure alternative sources of revenue for gangs that are no longer sponsored by political elites ([Le Nouvelliste, 22 June 2020](#)).

The upsurge of violence in Haiti has sparked public outrage. Throughout 2020, over 30% of demonstrations were centered around insecurity and the killing of civilians. In November, the brutal kidnapping and killing of 22-year old student Evelyne Sincère by gang members triggered a wave of demonstrations. In September, widespread mobilization was reported following the killing of Montferrier Dorval, a prominent constitutional lawyer, by unidentified armed men. Demonstrators have been questioning the government's ability to curb the violence as police forces appear to be either working with criminal groups or are too poorly equipped to face them. Protesters have also denounced police abuses, especially following the killing of a student by law enforcement in October. Although fatalities decreased compared to 2018 and 2019, at least four people lost their lives while demonstrating in 2020.

The killing of Montferrier is not an isolated case. In 2020, ACLED records at least 17 attacks targeting judges, lawyers, political activists, and current and former civil servants. Targeted killings are facilitated by a weak judicial system and a culture of impunity. In an alleged attempt to address armed violence in the country, President Moise signed two presidential decrees on national security on 26 November, establishing the National Intelligence Agency (ANI), an institution meant to curb terrorism. The presidential decree widens the definition of "terrorism," to include extortion, usually perpetrated by gangs, but also the obstruction of traffic with barricades, a common practice used by demonstrators ([CEPR, 14 December 2020](#)). The initiative has been criticized by civil society organizations as a means to further crack down on opposition due to the vague description of the ANI's powers and wide authority over security matters. Key ruling positions of the security body are to be nominated by presidential decrees, while agents of the ANI are dotted with immunity

while exercising their duties, and are allowed to access all documents and locations necessary for the fulfillment of their mandate. Furthermore, the ANI can carry out any action entrusted by the government and provide the latter with summaries of the information it gathers ([RNDDH, 16 December 2020](#)).

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:

The beginning of 2021 will be crucial for the trajectory of demonstration and political violence trends in Haiti ([Haiti Libre, 4 Janvier 2021](#)). Although the next elections are scheduled for September 2021, members of the opposition argue that President Moise's constitutional mandate should end in February 2021, while members of the government claim that his mandate extends to 2022. President Moise was elected in 2016 after a first election round held in 2015 that was suspended for fraud. He took office for his five-year mandate in February 2017 ([Europa Press, 16 January 2021](#)). This conflicting interpretation of the electoral calendar sets the ground for political unrest.

Furthermore, Moise has announced that elections will be held only after constitutional reforms are approved. Despite an overall consensus among Haitian society of the necessity to reform the current governance system and to strengthen institutional stability, the opposition has raised concerns with the constitutional reform process. In the absence of a functional parliament, the president intends to ratify the new constitution with a referendum — a procedure strictly prohibited by the current constitution. In addition, the president has nominated members of the Independent Advisory Committee, a body in charge of drafting the new constitution ([Constitutionnet, 12 December 2020](#)). This raises further doubts on the impartiality of the constitutional reform process.

In light of a heavy 2021 political agenda, clashes between rival gangs and attacks targeting civilians are expected to increase as the G-9 alliance continues to fight for control of new voting constituencies and to silence opposition ahead of the upcoming elections. However, if the agreement between the government and the gang coalition breaks down, the G-9 coalition's growth into a dominant armed force may pose a new kind of threat to Haiti's political stability ([Insight Crime, 24 July 2020](#)). Following a clash between police forces and a gang affiliated with the G-9 coalition in December 2020, the Prime Minister announced that further measures against the G-9 gang will be taken. This unprecedented direct declaration against the G-9 alliance came after the United States issued sanctions against Jimmy Chérizier and

Even if a rupture between the government and its armed wing is unlikely in the near future, this new official positioning against the gang reveals a crack in this alliance amidst mounting international pressure.

Although the president tasked the newly created ANI with addressing rising insecurity in the country, tackling violence and corruption will require long-term structural reforms of the criminal justice system. The president's discretionary oversight over this new security instrument might be used to divert the ANI from deterring crime. As it stands, the president may use the ANI to suppress opposition and crack down on demonstration activity in the name of national stability, rather than targeting criminal groups. The government's slide toward authoritarianism risks generating further violence and unrest.

## FURTHER READING:

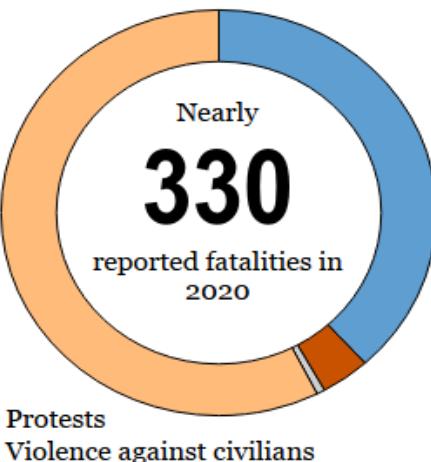
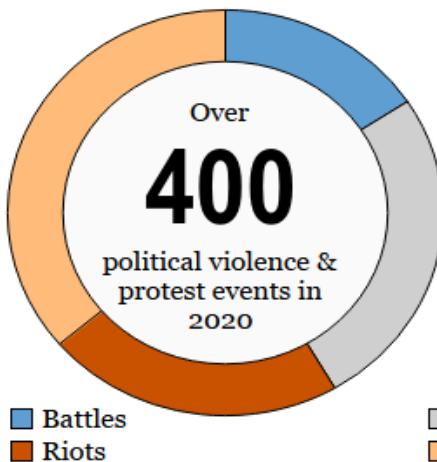
[Gang Violence: Concepts, Benchmarks and Coding Rules](#)

[Anti-Government Demonstrations in Latin America & the Caribbean: 2018-2020](#)

[Disorder in Latin America: 10 Crises in 2019](#)

# HAITI

High risk of increased gang violence amid rising authoritarianism

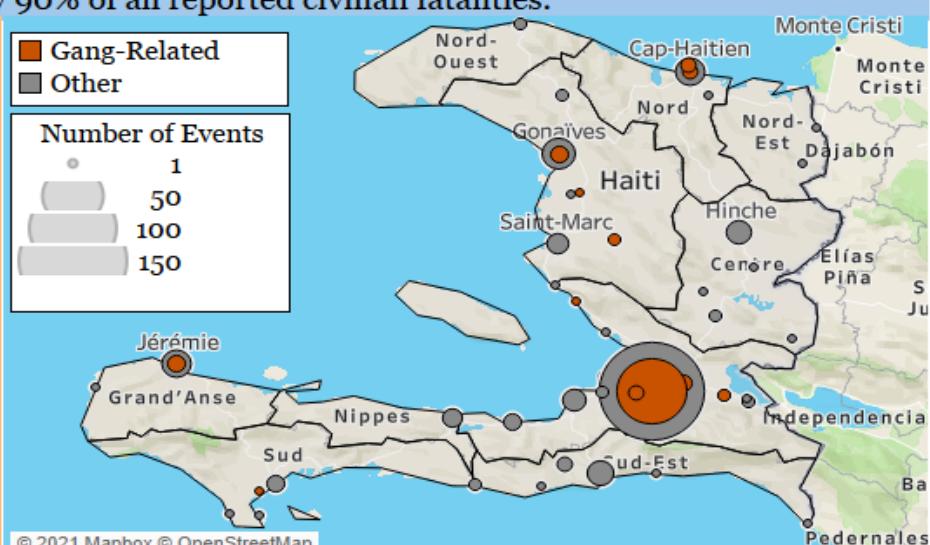
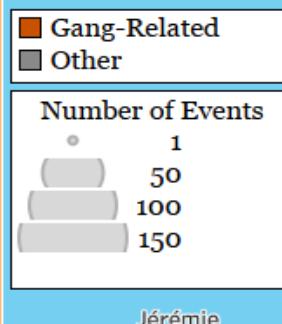


Gang violence largely concentrated in impoverished neighborhoods in the capital, Port-au-Prince, is increasing as gangs continue to secure local support for political elites in exchange for resources and impunity from the law. President Jovenel Moise has been suspected of supporting gangs while attempting to further consolidate his political control. Recently, he has allegedly supported the G-9 gang coalition, which is implicated in over a quarter of gang-related violence against civilians.

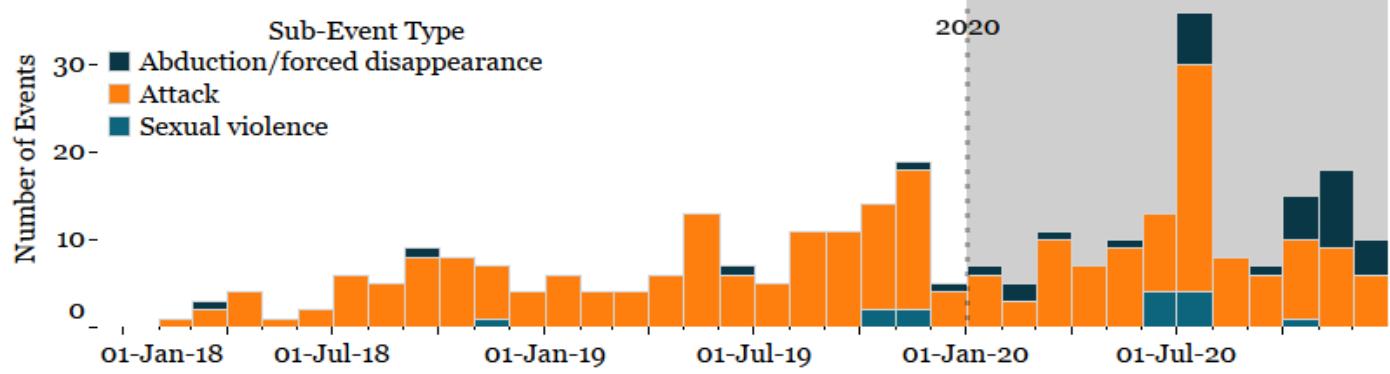
Gangs have committed over 75% of all violence against civilians events and are responsible for nearly 90% of all reported civilian fatalities.

Civilians are often targeted as gangs vie for territorial control and seek to ensure local allegiance for their political allies. In doing so, gangs have increasingly relied on sexual violence and forced abductions. July was the most violent month on record for civilians with over 30 events and over 80 reported fatalities.

Lawyers, journalists, and members of the political opposition have been subject to targeted killings by gangs allegedly affiliated with President Moise.



2020 had the highest number of violence against civilians events compared with the past two years. July 2020 was the most active month on record.



# Belarus: High risk of destabilization as regime, demonstrator, and Russian interests clash

Franklin Holcomb

Eight months into the demonstration movement against Alexander Lukashenko that began ahead of the August 2020 elections, neither the demonstrators nor the regime have backed down. Major demonstrations across the country have continued since the election, with demonstrators expressing anger over the falsification of election results, demanding the resignation of Lukashenko, and calling for new elections to be held. They have likewise called for the prosecution of members of the security services responsible for brutality against demonstrators. The Lukashenko regime has refused to give in to the demands, and has instead floated superficial reforms while cracking down on demonstrators in an effort to weaken the movement. The regime relies on Russian support to maintain power, though Russia may attempt to undermine Lukashenko as it tries to expand control over Belarus. It remains unclear what specific endstate Russia is pursuing in Belarus, though it is likely to involve both the destruction or co-option of the current political power structures in the Belarusian government and the dispersal of the pro-democracy demonstrations.

Demonstrations against Lukashenko's government began in May 2020 and surged surrounding the presidential elections in August 2020. Regime efforts to undermine the opposition by refusing to register certain candidates failed and resulted in major demonstrations across Belarus in support of the remaining opposition candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Lukashenko claimed to have won a massive victory in the fraudulent elections, provoking outrage from demonstrators who began to call for his resignation and new elections. State authorities immediately responded with excessive force and torture, though with little immediate effect on the strength of the movement.

Throughout this time, the demonstration movement

has remained largely decentralized and politically neutral — other than opposing the Lukashenko regime. However, over time, key leaders have emerged, including President-elect Tikhanovskaya, who won the August 2020 elections and has been acknowledged as president by several neighboring states. Tikhanovskaya is overseas, where she fled following her detention in August. In self-imposed exile, she has been attempting to rally support for the pro-democracy movement in Belarus and to increase pressure on Lukashenko and his regime.

In recent months, demonstrations have shifted from major events involving hundreds of thousands in the capital to more decentralized events in provincial cities and towns. This is likely part of an effort to complicate the regime's attempts to allocate resources to suppress the demonstrations, but may also be due to other factors, such as worsening weather conditions during the winter months, concerns over the coronavirus, and fear of the state's response. Despite the regime's violent response to the movement, demonstrators have remained nearly entirely peaceful.

The Russian government, which backs Lukashenko, is the key player in the crisis in Belarus. Lukashenko has never been a popular figure in Moscow and has played a delicate game balancing pro-Western, Belarusian nationalist, and pro-Russian forces in his country for decades, much to the frustration of the Kremlin. Despite its distaste for Lukashenko, the ruling Russian elite see the prospect of the victory of a major democratic movement in another Slavic nation as a direct threat to its own legitimacy within Russia. Because of this, Moscow has backed Lukashenko's government and has provided key political support, while working to expand the integration of Belarusian-Russian security forces. So long as Lukashenko enjoys Russian support, it is unlikely

that either the Belarusian people or Western political pressure will be able to trigger a transition.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:

Demonstrations are likely to increase in size and number in the spring and summer of 2021, especially as both the weather improves and demonstrators react to regime efforts to pass superficial reforms. Despite arbitrary detentions, brutality, and torture, demonstrators have not resorted to large-scale violence to achieve their aims. This is unlikely to change unless regime behavior worsens. Opposition leaders, including Tikhanovskaya, will work closely with European governments and the new Biden administration in the US to put pressure on Lukashenko, though this will likely have minimal effect unless Russia cooperates.

Russia may abandon Lukashenko in 2021. Not only has the Kremlin disliked Lukashenko for years, but after eight months of political and economic turmoil in Belarus, Lukashenko has lost much of whatever leverage he may have had as a guarantor of stability — something highly prized by Moscow. To that end, the Russian government has begun to lay the groundwork for the establishment of pro-Russian political parties in a post-Lukashenko Belarus ([The Insider, 25 December 2020](#)). It remains unclear if Russia, or its proxies in Minsk, would fully support the integration of Belarus into Russia through the Union State mechanism established between the two countries in the early 1990s. However, it is likely that Moscow would prefer a Belarusian government that is less actively autonomous than Lukashenko's, and more in tune with Russia's global, economic, and political interests. It is also important for the Kremlin that the demonstration movement fail, or be discredited. Moscow may intend to allow Lukashenko to take the blame for the brutal repression of demonstrators before turning on him.

Lukashenko may attempt to increase political stability at home, and thereby improve his leverage with Moscow, through a series of sham reforms. These may include a referendum on some changes to the constitution and may include his resignation as president, and the assumption of an equivalent role ([Tut.by, 8 December 2020](#)). This could potentially be as leader of the All Belarusian People's Assembly, which would ensure his continued control of the state ([ISANS, 28 December 2020](#); [Al Jazeera, 31 December 2020](#)). He will likely attempt to return to his chosen political strategy of past decades and balance pro-Western and pro-Russian forces off of each other in order to ensure his regime's stability. However, should this approach fail as public and Western

pressure proves too destabilizing, or if Moscow turns on him, Lukashenko's forces may increase their brutality in an effort to stabilize the country if they are to suddenly and completely collapse.

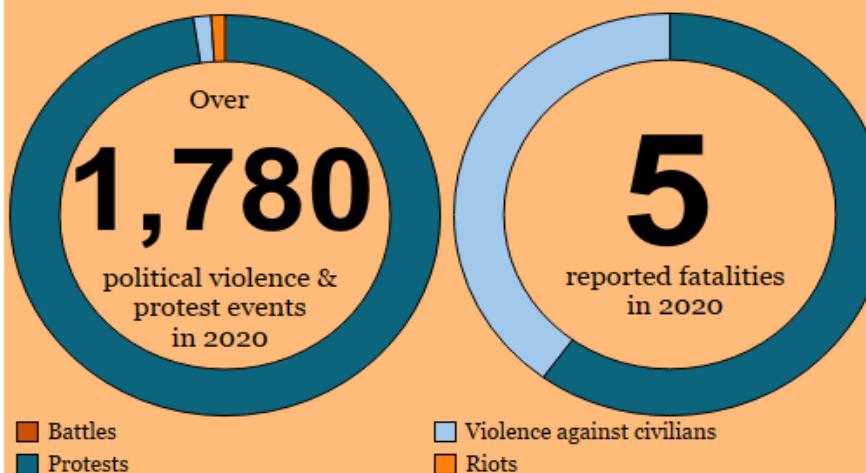
## FURTHER READING:

[Lukashenko's Last Legs? The 2020 Belarusian Presidential Election](#)

[Lukashenko versus Belarus: the State Against the People](#)

# BELARUS

High risk of political destabilization as regime, demonstrator, and Russian interests clash



Major demonstrations across Belarus have continued since the August 2020 election. Demonstrators have expressed anger over the falsification of election results and have demanded the resignation of President Lukashenko. They have demanded new elections be held and the prosecution of members of the security services involved in violence against demonstrators. The Lukashenko regime has refused to give in to demands while brutally cracking down on demonstrators. It remains unclear whether Russia will continue to support Lukashenko in 2021, especially following months of political and economic turmoil.

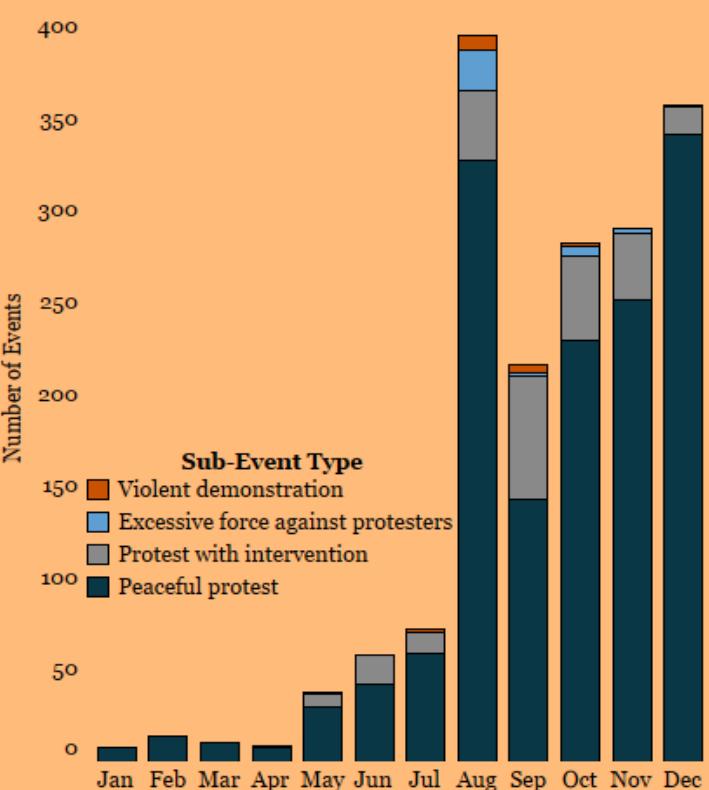
Demonstrations have taken place in both major cities and smaller towns across Belarus. In recent months, demonstrations have shifted from large gatherings to smaller groups.

Demonstrations August - December 2020



A spike in demonstrations following the August election was accompanied by an increase in interventions and excessive force against protesters.

Demonstration Events in 2020



# Colombia: High risk of rising violence targeting social leaders and vulnerable groups

Bhavani Castro

In 2016, the five decades-long conflict between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) ended with the signing of a comprehensive Peace Agreement. Although initially celebrated as a milestone, the government's inability to implement the treaty's guidelines has brought significant challenges. The power vacuum left by the dismantling of the FARC led to the expansion of other groups, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Gulf Clan, a former paramilitary group also known as the Gaitanistas. After facing decades of violence, Colombia's civilians have been put at further risk due to the lack of government action.

A record number of attacks against civilians were reported in 2020 in Colombia, with more than 600 fatalities recorded, compared to 2018 and 2019 ACLED data. Approximately 450 of those killed were social leaders or members of vulnerable groups, compared to approximately 300 in 2019. The rising death toll can be partially attributed to the increased presence of competing armed groups in historically conflict-affected areas, such as in the Cauca, Valle del Cauca, Nariño, Antioquia, Chocó, and Norte de Santander departments. Additionally, there has been an alarming increase in killings since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, with more killings reported between April and December 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019 ([ACLED, 5 October 2020](#)). By the end of December 2020, there had been an average of 11 killings per week, a trend likely to continue in 2021.

Apart from being active at the local-level in promoting development projects in their communities, social leaders are often advocates for the peace agreement and the conflict's victims. This activism puts them at higher risk of being targeted by criminal groups who aim to extend their control over relevant

territories. These groups often regard local leaders as obstacles to the development of their illicit economic activities. Members of vulnerable communities — including farmers, indigenous people, and Afro-descendants — are also frequent targets. Other groups exposed to attacks include members and former members of the government, including of the Community Action Boards (JAC: Junta de Acción Comunal, in Spanish); political parties; journalists; women; teachers and students; and LGBT people. In the context of the peace process, former FARC and ELN combatants who decided to reintegrate into society are also at higher risk of attack.

Since Colombia's coronavirus lockdown began on 24 March, these risks have intensified. Several leaders were left alone inside their communities and homes, in many cases without protection or bodyguards. The confinement has facilitated intimidation by armed groups that know these leaders' locations. Armed groups have also implemented curfews and strategies of coercion under the guise of sanitary measures against the coronavirus in order to exert control in disputed territories. As of September 2020, they have enforced curfew and lockdown measures in at least 11 departments of Colombia ([Insight Crime, 3 September 2020](#)), including in areas with high levels of conflict, like Antioquia, Cauca, and Nariño departments.

While the pandemic amplified the upsurge in violence, the current increase can be traced back to the Peace Agreement of 2016. With several territories left abandoned by the FARC, new and fragmented armed groups started to dispute control over territories and drug trafficking routes. Local criminal groups, dozens of dissident factions of the FARC, former paramilitary actors, and international cartels all saw an opportunity for expanding their illegal economies into former FARC strongholds.

Moreover, government operations to enforce coca eradication and military operations targeting illegal groups have increased the vulnerability of rural communities. At the end of November, clashes intensified between military forces and armed groups in Antioquia, Arauca, and Caquetá departments. As no armed group is strong enough to take an offensive approach and face state forces directly, they often clash with one another — a trend that was on the rise at the end of the year — and attack civilians in retaliation and as a way to demonstrate their power ([International Crisis Group, 6 October 2020](#)).

The increase in attacks against civilians also generated protest activity throughout the country, with citizens taking to the streets to demand government action. In October, nearly 7,000 members of several indigenous communities and farmers started a motorcade in rural areas of Cauca department to call for more protection for their communities. Similarly, at the beginning of November, hundreds of demobilized FARC combatants took to the streets in Bogotá to call for government protection against the killings of former combatants. While many former FARC combatants have committed to integrating back into civil society by adhering to government programs of training and reincorporation activities, the government has struggled to keep its promises to help the group. The temporary arrangement for the reintegration camps built for the demobilized rebels has already expired and the government has not yet announced plans to turn them into permanent facilities or villages.

More broadly, there are also heightened risks of displacement for vulnerable communities, especially indigenous groups and farmers, who are often caught in the crossfire in territorial disputes between armed groups. On 3 December, the killing of an indigenous leader led to the displacement of around 900 members of an indigenous reserve in the rural area of Bahía Solano municipality, Chocó department, amid fears of escalating violence ([InSight Crime, 10 December 2020](#)).

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Colombia is experiencing a severe economic contraction and a sharp increase in unemployment, which is expected to continue in 2021. The decrease of employment opportunities can push workers into the informal sector and into illegal economies. Armed groups can take this opportunity to recruit more fighters and increase their presence in rural and remote areas with no state presence. This will continue to put social leaders and vulnerable groups, especially farmers

and indigenous people, at risk of being targeted by armed groups if they refuse to comply with their directives.

Additionally, the pandemic has also put pressure on government institutions in Colombia, as guarantees of protection for vulnerable groups have decreased since the onset of the health crisis. The continued inability of the government to implement the guidelines of the Peace Agreement of 2016 will undoubtedly have a negative impact on the security and livelihoods of civilians in 2021.

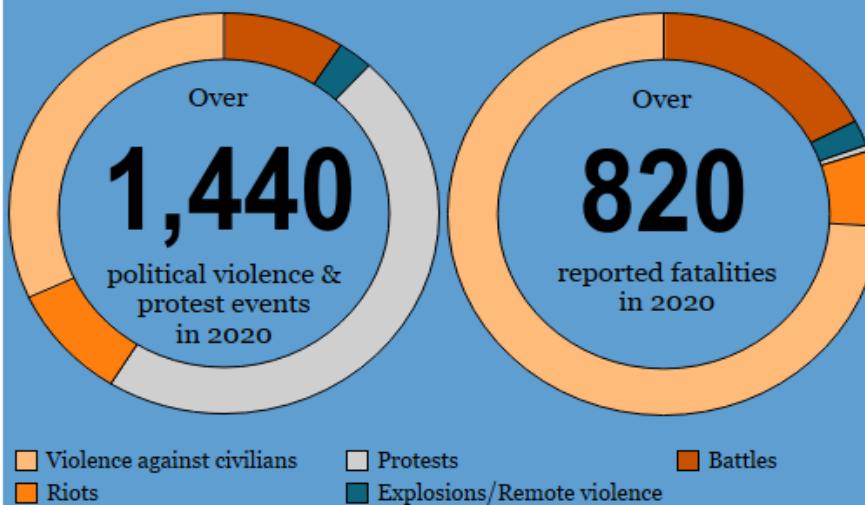
## FURTHER READING:

[Understanding the Killing of Social Leaders in Colombia during COVID-19](#)

[CDT Spotlight: Attacks on Civilians in Colombia](#)

# COLOMBIA

High risk of rising violence targeting social leaders and vulnerable groups



A record number of attacks against civilians occurred in Colombia last year, with over 600 fatalities reported. Of those, over 450 were social leaders or members of vulnerable groups, compared to 300 victims from these groups in 2019. Most attacks occurred in southern Colombia, which has historically seen high levels of conflict in the Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and Nariño departments. Additionally, the pandemic has also put pressure on Colombian institutions, resulting in declining guarantees of protection for vulnerable groups. The lack of state presence in rural and remote areas generates opportunities for different armed groups. These factors will continue to impact civilians in 2021.

## Violence against civilians concentrated in southern Colombia in 2020



## Attacks targeting civilians from vulnerable groups increased in 2020



# Armenia and Azerbaijan: High risk of cross-border violence in Nagorno-Karabakh despite ceasefire

Vardan Ghaplanyan

In 2020, renewed fighting broke out in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region,<sup>1</sup> under the control of the de facto Arstakh Republic, as decades-long negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the status of the area failed. Since then, tensions have continued between Armenia, the de facto Artsakh Republic, and Azerbaijan.

In 2018, following the election of Armenia's current Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to reduce ceasefire violations along the Line of Contact (LoC). Shortly after, the average number of ceasefire violations dropped from 35 to 20 per day, where they remained until relations between the countries began to deteriorate mid-July 2020.

Starting from the beginning of 2020, parallel to the decreasing efficiency of the negotiation process, the parties to the conflict began to adopt harsher rhetoric. In July, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev repeatedly declared that international efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict were "meaningless" ([Asbarez, 7 July 2020](#)). In August, Turkey and Azerbaijan conducted military drills in a number of cities. Simultaneously, the Armenian prime minister planned to bring the de facto Artsakh government into peace negotiations as a separate side to the conflict — a move not welcomed by Azerbaijan ([Eurasianet, 6 April 2020](#)).

The coronavirus pandemic further complicated the deadlocked negotiation process. International monitoring of ceasefire violations in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, conducted by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), stopped

due to restrictions on movement during the pandemic. The economies of Armenia and Azerbaijan were also hit hard by pandemic-related restrictions.

The first drastic development took place in mid-July when the Azerbaijani and Armenian militaries — with the use of tanks, drones, and mortars — engaged in direct clashes for several days in the northeastern part of the Armenia-Azerbaijan frontline, far from the de facto Artsakh Republic. For the short period from 12 to 16 July, the clashes resulted in the deaths of five Armenian soldiers and 16 Azerbaijani soldiers, including two high-ranking Azerbaijani officers. Buildings across the region were damaged, forcing locals to flee.

In the following months, both Armenia and Azerbaijan continued to accuse each other of provocation. Tens of thousands staged a demonstration in Azerbaijan following the July clashes, calling for large-scale operations in the region ([BBC, 15 July 2020](#)). The demonstrators stormed the parliament building, clashing with police in the only violent demonstration recorded by ACLED in Azerbaijan since the beginning of coverage in 2018. Meanwhile, in Armenia, social media was filled with patriotic reactions to the clashes.

On 27 September, Artsakh authorities reported that the Azerbaijani army had attacked military and civilian infrastructure in the region, including in the de facto republic's capital, Stepanakert ([Ministry Defence of Artsakh, 27 September 2020](#)). After 44 days of fighting, Azerbaijani forces captured most of the Hadrut and Kashatagh regions of Artsakh. Despite three failed attempts to establish a ceasefire in October, both sides agreed to stop the fighting only on 9 November, after signing a ceasefire agreement mediated by Russia.

1. The disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. ACLED refers to the de facto state and its institutions as Artsakh — the name by which the de facto territory refers to itself. For more on methodology and coding decisions around de facto states, see [this methodology primer](#).

According to the joint agreement, Russia deployed over 2,000 peacekeepers in the region to prevent further clashes. The deal also committed Armenia to surrender the territories adjacent to those Azerbaijan had already captured. The 44 days of fighting resulted in a total of over 5,000 military fatalities and 100 civilian fatalities on both sides, the displacement of tens of thousands of people, and the destruction of significant urban infrastructure. Although the joint agreement and deployment of peacekeepers has established a new status quo in the region, the president, the parliament, and the government of Artsakh continue to operate, trying to overcome the consequences of the war. At the same time, the agreement ending the war has created turmoil within Armenia. The territorial and military losses have exacerbated tensions, starting a string of opposition demonstrations, demanding the resignation of the prime minister.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:

The trilateral statement signed between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia ended the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, but major issues remain unaddressed. These include the demarcation of the borders, mechanisms to prevent ceasefire violations, the safe return of refugees, as well as the long-term presence and security of the Armenian community in the region ([Kremlin, 10 November 2020](#); [International Crisis Group, 10 November 2020](#)).

Meanwhile, the deployment of Russian peacekeepers has strengthened Russia's position in the region and has set Moscow as the only mediator between Yerevan and Baku. The mandate of the Russian peacekeepers will expire in five years, after which both Azerbaijan and Armenia will be in a position to call for their withdrawal. This assumes that Russia will try to bring the sides to the negotiation table to resolve the conflict peacefully, rather than risk a resumption of fighting. At the same time, after providing significant military and diplomatic support for Azerbaijan during the war, Turkey expects a more active role in the regional processes of the South Caucasus. The establishment of the Turkish-Russian joint center for monitoring the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2021 is an attempt by Ankara to strengthen its position in the region ([Azernews, 18 December 2020](#)).

Despite the fact that on 11 January 2021, during the meeting in Moscow, the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to open the regional roads and railways between their two countries, still there is no announced format or timetable for renewed negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan ([Public](#)

[Radio of Armenia, 11 January 2021](#)). The status of Nagorno-Karabakh will remain a key sticking point. Azerbaijani President Aliev has already stated that the region would not have any special status within Azerbaijan ([APA, 10 November 2020](#)). Meanwhile, for the Armenian side, the priority is international recognition of the independence of the de facto Artsakh Republic ([Sputnik Armenia, 14 December 2020](#)). These divergent positions will make talks challenging.

Another urgent issue is the demarcation of the final borders between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the de facto Artsakh Republic. The border determination in the joint statement is vague, indicating that the sides should stay at the positions they occupied as of 9 November 2020. Since 26 November, five armed clashes in Hadрут and Kashatagh regions have been reported, resulting in 20 fatalities. Continued uncertainty surrounding the borders may raise the risk of new deadly cross-border clashes. Alongside the armed clashes, another deadly threat is that of landmines. After the recent war, the region is still covered by landmines planted by Azerbaijani and Artsakh forces, despite demining efforts. In January 2021, ACLED records at least seven landmine explosions in the region (20% of all landmine explosions in the region since 2018). These numbers may rise in the future as, according to specialists, the demining process might last another 15 to 20 years ([News.am, 3 January 2021](#)).

Finally, the political crisis is likely to persist in Armenia. The opposition Homeland Salvation Movement — led by Prosperous Armenia, Homeland Party, Republican Party of Armenia, and Armenian Revolutionary Federation — have organized over 50 demonstrations across a number of cities calling for the prime minister's resignation since 10 November. This marks a significant increase in protest activity since the 'Velvet Revolution' in 2018. In response to the demonstrations, the prime minister has already announced extraordinary elections in 2021 ([RFE/RL, 25 December 2020](#)). However, as opposition protests continue, it is possible that the political parties will not compromise, further destabilizing domestic politics in Armenia, and jeopardizing potential peace negotiations.

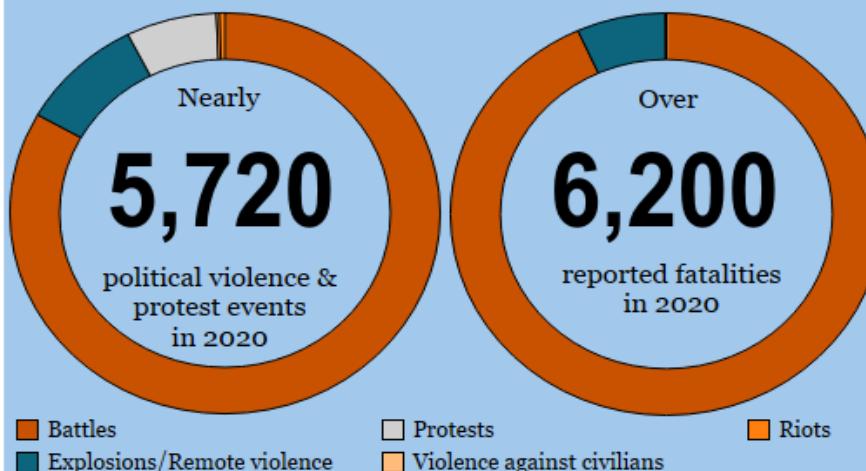
## FURTHER READING:

[Civilians Under Fire in Nagorno-Karabakh: September - November 2020](#)

[ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around Political Conflict and Demonstrations in Central Asia & the Caucasus](#)

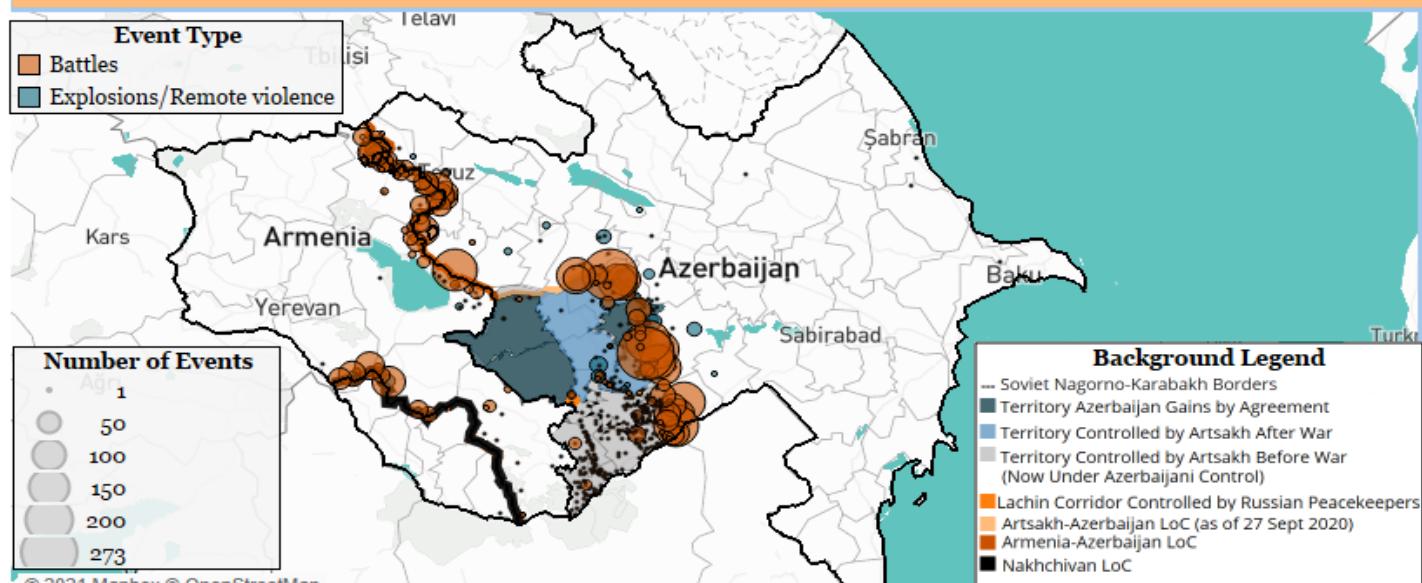
# ARMENIA & AZERBAIJAN

High risk of cross-border violence in Nagorno-Karabakh despite ceasefire



Ceasefire violations between Armenia and Azerbaijan were stable throughout the first half of 2020, before spiking in July. War broke out in September in the disputed Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) region. Forty-four days of fighting resulted in over 5,000 military and 100 civilian fatalities, displacement of tens of thousands, and destruction of urban infrastructure. While the trilateral statement signed in November between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia ended the war, major issues remain unresolved.

## Violence occurred outside the usual Lines of Contact



© 2021 Mapbox © OpenStreetMap

Information used to create the background map layers on the legend was drawn from maps created by Meduza, EurasiaNet and International Crisis Group

## Ceasefire violations occurred throughout the year



While ceasefire violations remained at an elevated level, peaking in the summertime amidst increased tensions, they did not result in significant fatalities until war broke out in September. Nearly all reported fatalities in 2020 occurred during the war.

The disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh is internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. ACLED refers to the *de facto* state and its institutions as Artsakh -- the name by which the *de facto* territory refers to itself.

# Yemen: High risk of humanitarian fallout amidst the offensive on Marib

Matthias J. Sulz

Six years into the conflict, the scale of destruction in Yemen has reached unprecedented levels: ACLED estimates approximately 130,000 people have died as a direct result of the violence, including over 13,000 civilians killed in targeted attacks. More than 19,000 fatalities were reported in 2020 stemming directly from the conflict — a 29% decrease in total reported fatalities from 2019, but still the third deadliest year of the war.

The war in Yemen consists of a variety of interconnected local conflicts involving regional powers competing for influence. The first of these conflicts pits the Houthis — a Zaydi revivalist movement hailing from Yemen's northern highlands that seized the capital, Sana'a, in 2014 — against the internationally-recognized government led by President Abderrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Hadi enjoys the support of Saudi Arabia which, together with allies like the UAE, launched a military intervention in support of the government in March 2015 in order to prevent the Houthis from overtaking the southern port city of Aden.

The second conflict is linked to the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC), a political organization established in May 2017 that advocates for the creation of an independent state in southern Yemen. The STC has extended its influence across Yemen's southern governorate through a vast network of armed groups, most of which are backed by the UAE. While some of the pro-STC forces are fighting against the Houthis, others fight against Hadi loyalists in the southern governorates.

The third main conflict is an Islamist insurgency launched by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State (IS). Both groups currently possess limited operational capacities in the country and have crumbled

amidst an extensive campaign of US drone strikes, coalition operations (i.e. the build-up of 'local' counter-terrorism forces), and a heavy phase of infighting.

The conflict between the Houthis and pro-Hadi forces escalated in 2020. While the UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement had borne some fruit in 2019, especially around Hodeidah, it seems to have had adverse effects in 2020. Houthi forces opened up several new fronts last year, with the main objective to gain control of Marib city. Marib is the anchor and stronghold of the internationally-recognized government, and losing the city might enable the Houthis to further advance towards the nearby oil fields and the desert areas of Shabwah and Hadramawt governorates.

Since the beginning of 2020, the Houthis continuously advanced towards Marib from the west, northwest, and southwest. At the time of this writing, the frontlines are only several dozens of kilometers from the city. The current balance of power seems to tilt in favor of the Houthis. Despite an intensive air campaign by the Saudi-led coalition to stop the Houthi offensive, pro-Hadi tribes and military forces are losing ground. If the Houthis achieve a takeover of Marib city in 2021, the humanitarian fallout will be devastating. Marib grew from a city of 30,000 people to almost two million during the civil war, as it provided a safe haven for IDPs from other governorates ([International Crisis Group, 17 April 2020](#)).

At the same time, negotiations between the STC and the Hadi government to implement the Riyadh Agreement — signed in November 2019 under the auspices of Saudi Arabia, in order to solve the conflict in southern Yemen — witnessed a breakthrough in December 2020. The STC agreed to join a newly constituted Hadi government in exchange for allow-

ing the government to move back into Aden, the interim capital. How exactly the restructuring and redeployment of security units, foreseen in the Riyadh Agreement, will be implemented is yet to be seen. Moreover, it is unclear how and why the STC would give up control over the de facto minimized southern state under their control in Aden, Lahij, Socotra, and some parts of Abyan, Ad Dali, and Shabwah.

Nevertheless, first steps were achieved. Both forces retreated from the Abyan frontlines, while neutral elements of the Presidential Guard moved back into the Presidential Palace in Aden. Earlier purported breakthroughs in the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement throughout 2020 had failed to solve the conflict on the ground. In all southern governorates, the success in implementing the Riyadh Agreement will be crucial in determining future patterns of violence.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:

While 2020 was met with a mixture of hope and scepticism over the prospects for peace in Yemen, the actual trajectory of the conflict has dashed any hopes for an end to the fighting in 2021. Houthi forces continued advancing on several fronts, especially in Al Jawf and Marib governorates, while pro-Hadi forces barely registered any successes on the battlefield. This imbalance of power will make it unlikely that Houthi forces will agree to a ceasefire or inclusive peace process in the short term. As long as one side in the conflict believes it can overpower the other militarily — as Houthi forces currently do — the conflict will not end.

In the same vein, successes in negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis over border insecurity could lead to a significant decrease in the Saudi war effort. Saudi disengagement will also affect the trajectory of the civil war in Yemen. Nevertheless, as long as neither of the Yemeni sides to the war come to an agreement between themselves, and in the absence of an enduring stalemate on the battlefield, violence will continue.

The US government's designation of the Houthis as a "terrorist organization," which went into effect on 19 January, just before the Biden administration took power, could also contribute to increased humanitarian fallout. While the designation includes exemptions for agricultural products and medical supplies, among other things, it nevertheless threatens to exacerbate the humanitarian and economic crises in the country. Companies and organizations may not want to risk the liability exposure that comes with shipping products to Houthi-controlled

territories ([ACAPS, 14 January 2021](#)), and the designation may disrupt remittance flows, upon which as many as 10% of Yemenis rely ([Reuters, 14 January 2021](#)). The Biden administration decided to suspend the designation for 30 days, however, there is no indication of how fast and if the designation will be reversed ([Reuters, 22 January 2021](#); [Twitter 26 January 2021](#)). As current US support for Saudi-led forces in Yemen is negligible, the new administration's indications that it will end military assistance to the coalition will likely fail to significantly affect the trajectory of the war ([Middle East Eye, 19 January 2021](#); [Reuters, 10 November 2018](#)).

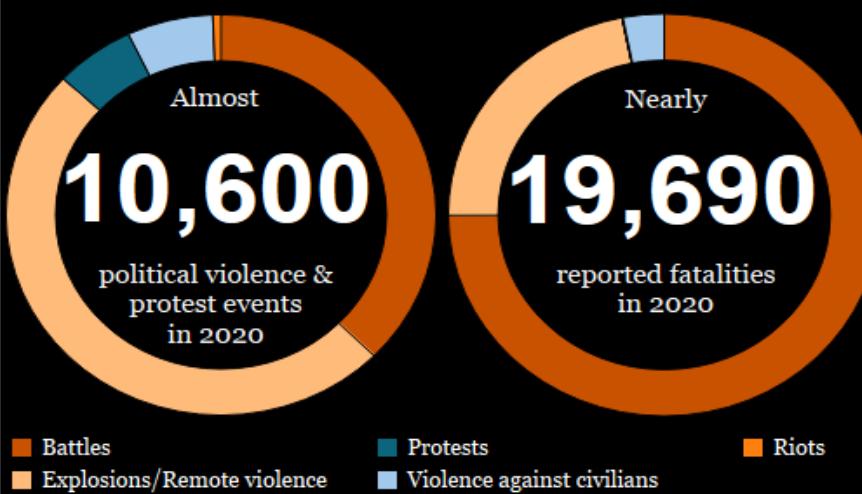
Finally, the breakthrough in implementing the Riyadh Agreement to solve the southern issue opens a window of opportunity to unify the ranks of southern secessionists and the Hadi government against Houthi forces. This could provide the necessary manpower to fend off Houthi advances on Marib. The ultimate success or failure of the Riyadh Agreement on the one hand, and the indirect negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis on the other, will be critical for the future of the war in Yemen in 2021.

## FURTHER READING:

- [The Wartime Transformation of AQAP in Yemen](#)
- [Little-Known Military Brigades and Armed Groups in Yemen: A Series](#)
- [Yemen's Fractured South: ACLED's Three-Part Series](#)
- [Inside Ibb: A Hotbed of Infighting in Houthi-Controlled Yemen](#)
- [Yemen Snapshots: 2015-2019](#)
- [Yemen's Urban Battlegrounds: Violence and Politics in Sana'a, Aden, Ta'izz and Hodeidah](#)
- [ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around the Yemen Civil War](#)

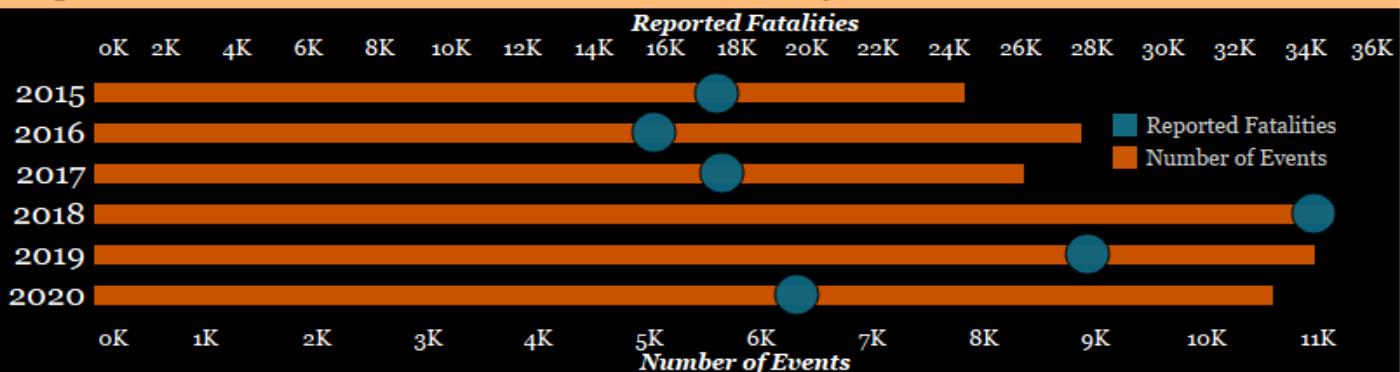
# YEMEN

High risk of humanitarian fallout amidst the offensive on Marib

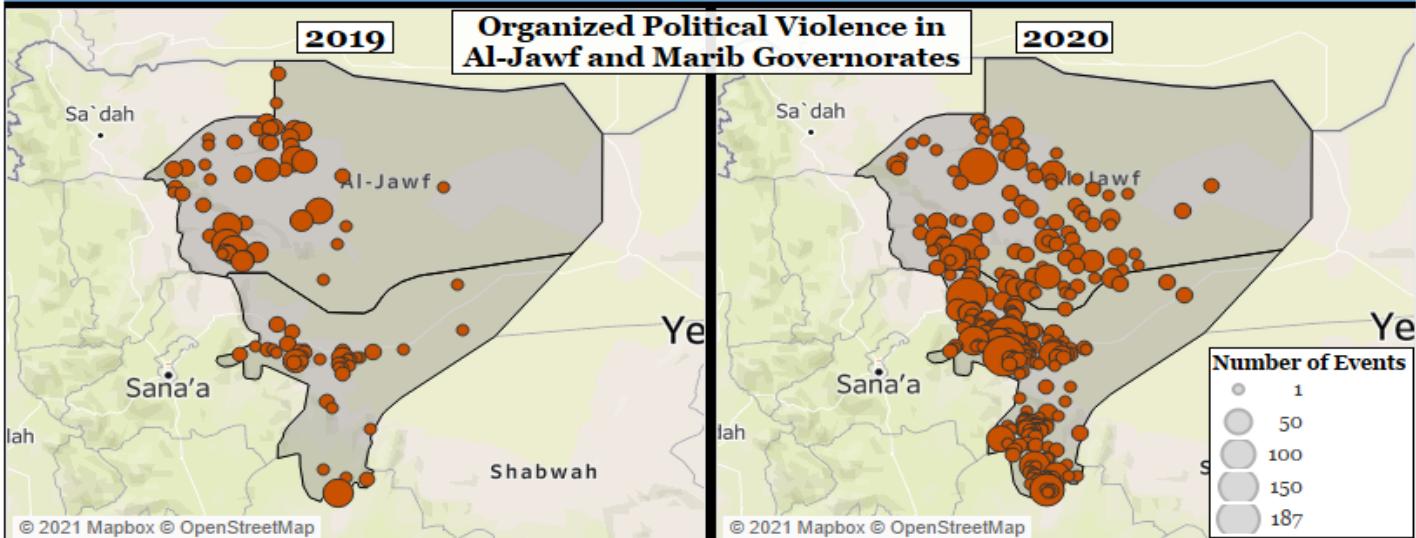


The civil war in Yemen consists of multiple overlapping conflicts. In 2020, the conflict between the Houthis and pro-Hadi forces escalated, with the Houthis' main objective being control of Marib city. Currently, frontlines are only several dozens of kilometers from the city. If Houthi forces reach the city, the humanitarian fallout might be devastating. Also, during 2020, negotiations to implement the Riyadh Agreement between the STC and the Hadi government witnessed a breakthrough. In late December, the STC agreed to join a newly constituted Hadi government in exchange for allowing the government to move back into Aden.

Reported fatalities decreased in 2020, but the year was still the third deadliest



Organized political violence increased in Al-Jawf (44%) and Marib (733%) in 2020



# Mozambique: No end in sight for the Cabo Delgado insurgency

Timothy Lay and Jasmine Opperman

In Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado province, an increasingly sophisticated Islamist insurgency, growing numbers of IDPs, and outbreaks of cholera as well as COVID-19 have combined to expose the government's capacity constraints in effectively countering worsening insecurity. These constraints, along with insurgent incursions into neighboring Tanzania, are pushing the Cabo Delgado conflict into an increasingly internationalized theater.

The insurgency in Cabo Delgado, built on years of discontent with the absence of effective governance in the region, first announced itself in October 2017 with attacks in the eponymous district capital of Mocimboa da Praia. Though the insurgents are predominantly comprised of local youth, an extremist Islamist narrative has resulted in cross pollination with Tanzanian extremists ([The East African, 11 August 2018](#)), and exposure to Somali and Congolese jihadi influences, including the Ugandan and Congolese rebel group, the Allied Democratic Forces ([Mail & Guardian, 4 May 2020](#)).

Insecurity deepened in Mozambique last year, with the Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado escalating to unprecedented levels. During 2020, ACLED records more than 1,600 fatalities in the province, more than three times the number of fatalities reported in 2019. Insurgents also demonstrated an ability to operate across a large expanse of territory throughout the province, establishing an operational presence across 11 districts, from the northern district of Nangade to Ankuabe district in the south. Militant operations have threatened critical infrastructure and undermined Mozambican territorial control.

In December, attacks were launched near Mute in Palma district, forcing Total to close its flagship liquefied natural gas (LNG) project. Since that time, the

threat to Total's LNG projects have remained consistent. Islamist militants have also been able to exert and maintain control over strategic territorial positions, including Mocimboa da Praia. The widespread attacks show the limited ability of state forces to consolidate their hold on towns and access roads.

With state forces stretched by the conflict, the government has increasingly relied on support from private security forces, most notably the Dyck Advisory Group (DAG), and local self-defense militias. While not providing boots on the ground, DAG has become an important partner providing air support to state forces during operations in Cabo Delgado. The importance of DAG forces is made evident by their involvement in at least 36 conflict events in 2020, more than 25% of engagements with insurgents.

Further contracts have reportedly been signed with DAG, as well as with Paramount Group, a military supplier, as the foremost support mechanisms for the Mozambican government ([Africa Intelligence, 10 December 2020](#)). DAG will provide training support for government troops in addition to their ongoing air support ([Zitamar, 16 July 2020](#)). Paramount will focus on increasing the capacity of the Mozambican military by providing armored vehicles, air support, and training of pilots ([Africa Intelligence, 10 December 2020](#)).

Additionally, President Filipe Nyusi acknowledged in November that he is reaching out to secure international support to build capacity and competency, acknowledging the fight will require external assistance ([Club of Mozambique, 19 November 2020](#)).

Despite this, Mozambique has maintained a general reticence to deploy foreign boots on the ground to assist with the actual fighting (Daily Maverick, 17 December 2020), insisting its own forces are capable of routing the insurgents alone.

Notably, insurgents launched five attacks across the border in Tanzania in October, clashing with security forces, burning homes, looting goods, and killing civilians. The attacks — first at Kitaya, then at the border post at Kilambo, and then in the villages of Nanyamba, Mihambwe, and Michenjele — constitute the first major insurgent push into Tanzania.

At the same time, militants have actively targeted civilian populations within Cabo Delgado, with violence against civilians amounting to nearly 70% of all organized violence recorded in the province in 2020. The attacks have caused increased civilian displacement in the region. As of December 2020, more than 500,000 IDPs were reportedly resident in Cabo Delgado ([The New Humanitarian, 21 December 2020](#)).

The displacement of local communities has added ever increasing demands on limited local resources. A warning by the World Food Programme (WFP) asserted that current budget allocations are insufficient to sustain support for IDPs ([Lusa, 24 November 2020](#)). This lack of budgetary support has the potential to worsen insecurity, compounded by cholera outbreaks and the highest rates of coronavirus outside of the capital, Maputo ([UNICEF, 25 November 2020](#)). In November, a local leader was beaten to death at the Nangua IDP camp in Metuge, accused of being responsible for a deadly outbreak of cholera in the camp.

## WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:

In 2021, the absence of a sustained turnaround strategy suggests that a campaign of unrelenting attacks will continue and state forces will be limited to containing hot spots without eroding the insurgents' capacity. Militants are likely to continue pushing the geographical bounds of their operations, including further incursions into Tanzania. The government, meanwhile, will continue to rely heavily on private security forces and increasingly on local self-defense militias to augment their limited capacities.

Further international involvement in the conflict is also likely, including a potential shift in the reluctance of the Mozambican government to accept direct military support. The ongoing successes of the Cabo Delgado insurgency have left the Mozambican government under pressure from several countries, especially those interested in LNG developments, to press ahead with intensifying its security response. Several countries have publicly offered support, including Portugal — Mozambique's former colonial power — and the United States ([Daily Maverick, 17 December 2020](#)).

([December 2020](#)). The government has also reportedly reached out to France, with a maritime co-operation agreement under discussion to provide training and to strengthen coastal security ([Club of Mozambique, 17 July 2020](#)). France is well positioned to lend its support, with a naval base located at its island territory of Mayotte in the Mozambique Channel.

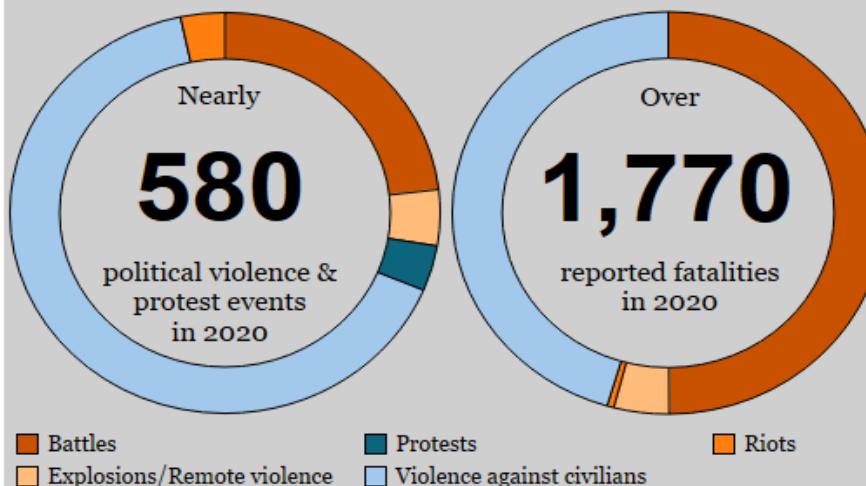
## FURTHER READING:

Weekly infographics from ACLED's [Cabo Ligado](#) conflict observatory

[CDT Spotlight: Escalation in Mozambique](#)

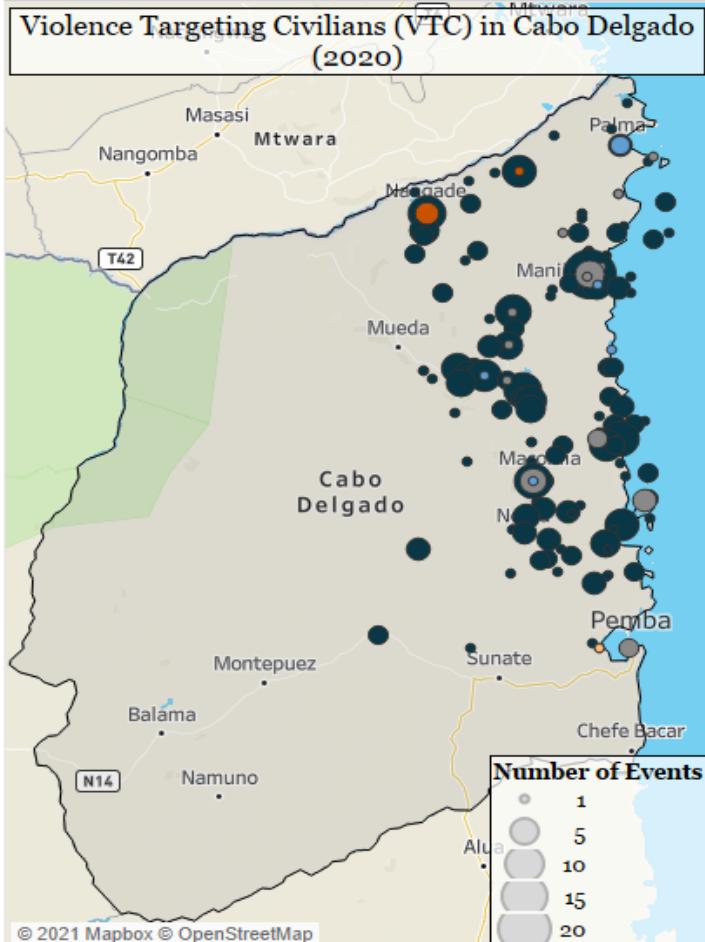
# MOZAMBIQUE

## No end in sight for the Cabo Delgado insurgency

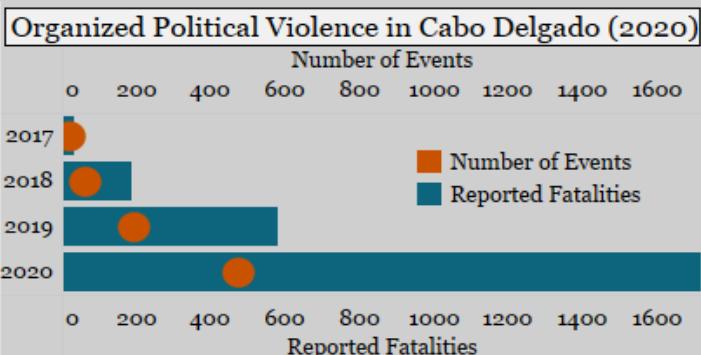


2020 was a year of worsening insecurity in Mozambique, with the Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado escalating to unprecedented levels. The increasingly sophisticated insurgency, growing numbers of IDPs, and outbreaks of cholera and coronavirus have exposed the Mozambican government's capacity constraints. The government has increasingly relied on support from private security forces and local militias to counter the insurgency. With insurgent incursions into neighboring Tanzania, the Cabo Delgado conflict risks becoming internationalized in 2021.

Civilians in Cabo Delgado were targeted more than 330 times, with over 780 reportedly killed



2020 was the deadliest year of the conflict in Cabo Delgado



Islamist insurgents have actively targeted civilian populations within Cabo Delgado. In 2020, ACLED records more than 290 events of violence targeting civilians perpetrated by the Islamist insurgents, resulting in over 640 reported civilian fatalities. The attacks have caused increased civilian displacement in the region.

# The Sahel: Insurgency and fragile politics at the center of an unabated crisis

Héni Nsaibia

## *Assessing the Insurgency*

As the Sahel crisis nears a decade, numbers of events and fatalities from armed, organized acts of political violence in 2020 surpassed 2019's full totals in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This escalating trend continued for the fifth consecutive year. However, there was a significant shift when comparing conflict patterns of violence in the past two years. In 2019, the Sahelian insurgency reached its apex when the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) simultaneously overran "the tri-state border" region. Government forces in all three countries were forced to withdraw from the border areas and leave previously disputed territories under jihadi militant control. This left government forces in a highly defensive position, and the militant offensive underscored the lack of effective coordination and interoperability between the affected member states of the G5 Sahel Force.

A progressive change began when France, in early 2020, shifted its posture by surging troops and scaling up operations alongside local forces. While widespread human rights abuses accompanied the operations ([ACLED, 20 May 2020](#)), international and local forces progressively regained momentum. The descent into a full-fledged turf war between JNIM and ISGS further weakened the insurgency. Fighting between the two organizations and counter-militancy operations accounts for a substantial increase in reported fatalities and conflict recorded in Mali and Burkina Faso. When comparing 2019 and 2020, estimated militant fatalities doubled as a result of offensive state military actions. JNIM and ISGS clashed on at least 121 occasions, causing an estimated 712 fatalities in 2020. The sheer number of militant losses are also indicative of the cumulative growth of the insurgency. While counter-militancy

operations and jihadi-on-jihadi fighting are concentrated in the tri-state border region, this particular focus should not overshadow militant consolidation processes underway in other parts of the region and their potential longer-term impact. Both JNIM and ISGS have repeatedly demonstrated resilience and ability to recover. Hence, so far, tactical victories for international and local forces are not leading to strategic defeats for the jihadi militants, whose playbook continues to hinge on the logic of winning by not losing (completely). Instead, they are changing behaviors. JNIM is increasingly engaging its enemies using remote violence, as evidenced by recent fatal IED attacks targeting French, United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and Malian forces. ISGS often resorts to mass violence and exerts pressure on civilian populations through excessive tax extortion and cattle rustling.

## *Fragile Politics*

Unrest boiling over and leading up to an August 2020 coup d'état underscored the complexity and uncertainty of Mali's crisis. Key stakeholders within the international community feared that Mali would slide further into chaos, which did not materialize. Nevertheless, the country has witnessed escalating sub-conflicts and new flashpoints. For instance, JNIM expanded its operations to the southern regions of Kayes ([Dakaractu, 20 November 2020](#)) and Sikasso. In the central Mopti region's "Dogon Country," conflict substantially increased, between JNIM and Fulani militias on one side and the Dogon-majority Dan Na Ambassagou movement on the other. Both sides also incessantly targeted local communities. Fatalities remained on par with 2019 even though 2019 experienced a spate of unprecedented mass atrocities. In neighboring Segou region's Niono Cercle, relations between Bambara and Fulani com-

munities deteriorated into conflict. Consequently, Donso hunters strengthened their hold of the urban areas, causing many Fulani pastoralists to flee. At the same time, Katiba Macina militants (part of the JNIM alliance) control the surrounding rural areas and have imposed an embargo to subjugate Bambarra farmer communities along the river area ([ACLED, 17 December 2020](#)).

The insecurity afflicting the region is accompanied by a soaring humanitarian emergency with more than two million people displaced ([Le Monde, 22 January 2021](#)) and rampant food insecurity ([WFP, December 2020](#)). Burkina Faso has shown to be particularly vulnerable, being the epicenter of the humanitarian crisis. Elections held in November proved the central government's tenuous hold on the periphery, as no voting took place in numerous localities in the country's north and east. Despite a continuously worsening security situation, with 14 provinces under a state of emergency for more than two years, incumbent President Roch Kaboré was re-elected for a second term in elections that took place amid a relative calm ([Sahelblog, 30 November 2020](#)).

Neighboring Niger held its first presidential election round in December, putting the country on course for its first democratic transition of power. Former Interior Minister Mohamed Bazoum, and protege of incumbent President Mahamadou Issoufou, is the favorite for the second round scheduled for February 2021. Niger has often been considered less overrun by armed groups compared to its neighbors Mali and Burkina Faso. Yet, the country faces several distinct threats: the Boko Haram insurgency in the Lake Chad basin, the Sahelian insurgency driven by ISGS and JNIM in Tillaberi, and a criminal insurgency raging along its border with Nigeria. Niger was also largely spared the trend of mass violence against civilians troubling its neighbors, though this began to change in 2020. Recent attacks in Toumour by Boko Haram (Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad) — both a predecessor and offshoot of Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) — and ISGS in Tchomabangou and Zaroumadarey demonstrate the conflict's increasingly dangerous scope in Niger.

### *Threatening Neighbors*

The lingering presence of Sahelian militant groups along the northernmost borders of the West African littoral states continues to pose a significant threat. Benin and Ivory Coast are especially susceptible to the risks of jihadi militant violence due to political instability, internal vulnerabilities, and social dynamics in border communities. Clandestine mili-

ant activities including cross-border movements are more frequently recorded across these states' territories and bordering regions. While Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger undoubtedly remain Sahelian militants' primary focus, observed precursors, even if transitory or for logistical purposes, in neighboring states cannot be ignored. External pressure could potentially push militant encroachment into new areas and circumstantially alter jihadi militants' tactical calculus.

### **WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2021:**

Previous large-scale operations have only achieved short-term gains and the military effort has yet to translate into dividends for populations in the targeted areas. International and local forces need to establish and provide security after ongoing operations have ended if these are to have any useful and lasting impact.

Fragile relations between states and communities and armed groups instrumentalizing ethnic and communal cleavages have led to some of the deadliest violence ever recorded in the Sahel. Recent attacks by Boko Haram (JAS) and ISGS underscore that the region remains at imminent risk of experiencing further mass atrocities at the hands of jihadi militant groups, community and ethnic-based militias, and state forces.

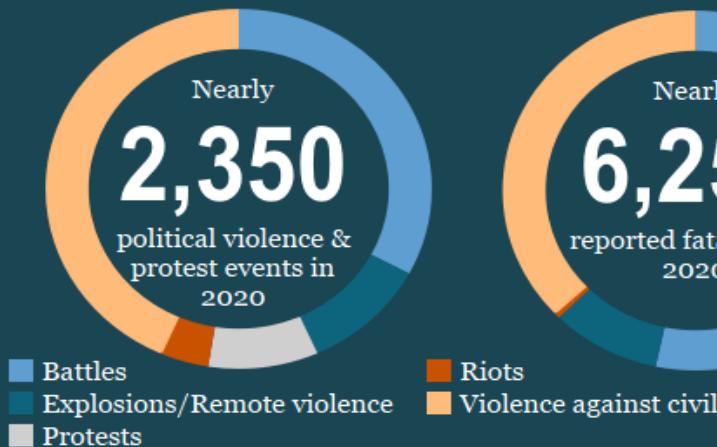
### **FURTHER READING:**

[State Atrocities in the Sahel: The Impetus for Counterinsurgency Results is Fueling Government Attacks on Civilians](#)

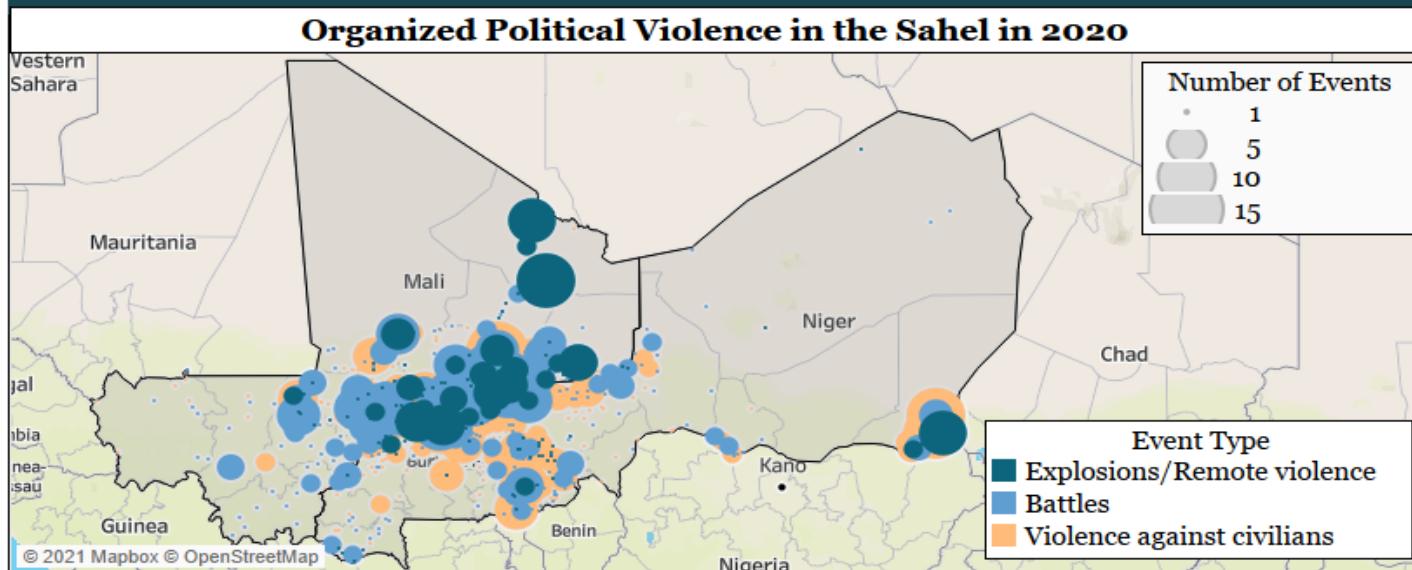
[Mali: Any End to the Storm?](#)

# THE SAHEL

Insurgency and fragile politics at the center of an unabated crisis



The jihadi militant insurgency led by Al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM and ISGS continues to pose a major security threat in the Sahel, particularly around the “the tri-state border” region of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Counter-insurgency operations by French and local state forces in Mali, combined with political instability and increasing jihadi-on-jihadi fighting, are the primary drivers behind the region's 35% increase in organized political violence compared to 2019.



In Mali, organized political violence increased by 68% and reported fatalities increased by 50% since 2019.

