Reporting on Civic Space: Differences in Coverage Between National and International Sources

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1 Introduction

Getting an accurate picture of any country’s civic space is difficult. While many analysts rely on the international news, the vast majority of news coverage on any given country is the news media in that country. The INSPIRES Machine Learning for Peace team has spent enormous time ensuring it is extracting as much news as possible from national sources. But what are the returns to all that effort?

There is very little research on differences in how national and international news sources cover civic space. Though the literature on political communications provides plenty of evidence that different kinds of media owners produce different kinds of coverage (Dunaway 2008; Humprecht and Esser 2018) and that digital media producers cater to the tastes of their readers (Hamilton 2004), there is no work specifically on if and how national and international sources differ in the volume or content of coverage across countries. Understanding those differences is important for developing an accurate perception of civic space and assessing the extent of bias that reliance on international news might generate. Likewise, understanding these differences can provide insight into the potential biases inherent in assessing civic space on the basis of national news coverage in settings where press freedom is compromised and where international sources might be the only source of news on some civic space activities.

Below we use INSPIRES machine coded news on 16 countries to evaluate national and international coverage of civic space. We have four key findings. First, the volume of international news on civic space is dwarfed by that in national sources, even in countries with shallow media markets. Indeed, in many countries international sources provide extremely scant coverage, and certainly too little to systematically evaluate civic space. Second, while national news coverage of civic space is relatively consistent over time, international coverage in most countries is highly episodic and driven by major events. Third, national and international sources cover different dimensions of civic space. International sources cover elections and conflictual events, such as civic violence and protests, at higher rates than national sources. Relative to national sources, international ones under-report on the day-to-day political, legal and civic activities that underpin civic space. Events like the removal and replacement of government officials and arrests are much more frequently covered in national media. Fourth and finally, in repressed media environments (like Zimbabwe and Rwanda), international news covers relatively more contentious civic space activity than do national
news sources. This provides indirect evidence that repressed national media self-censor by reducing coverage of events such as protests, arrests and coups.

2 Previous Research

While little of it specifically covers civic space, research on communications and the media provide three broad explanations for why media organizations vary in their news coverage: first, system-driven explanations emphasize how regime type (i.e., democracies vs. autocracies) affects news content; second, demand-driven explanations focus on how media organizations tailor their content to their audience; and third, supply-driven explanations that emphasize how media coverage responds to the preferences (political, economic, etc.) of an outlet’s owners.

System-driven explanations argue that regime-type matters because non-democracies are less likely to publish stories that reflect poorly on the stability of the regime, while media outlets in democracies operate more independently. For instance, Baum and Zhukov (2015) find that media outlets in non-democracies are less likely to publish protest events from the Libyan civil war than their counterparts in democracies. Consistent with evidence from China (King et al. 2013), they argue that this is because media outlets in non-democracies refrain from publishing stories about collective action.\footnote{Previous research has shown that such bias is more severe in national outlets compared to local ones (Qin et al. 2018). The Qin et al. 2018 piece supports the value of the work Catalyst Balkans is doing in Serbia.} One implication is that international sources headquartered in countries with free media environments might be an important corrective to national sources in countries with repressive media environments where the press is unable to cover key aspects of civic space.

Demand-driven explanations for coverage focus on the audience for news and how media outlets optimize coverage to maximize their readership (Hamilton 2004). By skewing coverage towards the preferences of their consumers, media outlets maximize revenues from consumers and advertisers since the latter prefer outlets with larger audiences (Anand et al. 2007; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Mullainathan and Shleifer 2005). The key takeaways is that any differences in how civic space is covered by national and international news outlets will be driven by the interests of their respective audiences. International news outlets will be less likely to cover countries where their audience shows little interest. Previous studies also show that unexpected, dramatic, and rare events are more likely to be covered (Baum and Zhukov 2015; Graber and Dunaway 2017; Woolley 2000), and this is likely particularly true of international sources that seek to cover many countries simultaneously.

Lastly, supply-driven explanations focus on the motivations of media owners. Some media owners view their outlets as political investments and skew coverage in favor of the government (Durante and Knight 2012; Grossman et al. 2020) in return for favors such as state advertising (Di Tella and Franceschelli 2011; Szeidl and Szucs Forthcoming). Others show that media owners use their outlets to protect their economic interests in other, non-media sectors (Bailard 2016; Gilens and Hertzman 2000). Yet others studies show that privately-held media outlets are less likely than publicly-owned media to cover substantive political news and offer less diversity in perspective and geographical coverage thanks to their need to generate profits (Dunaway 2008; Humprecht and Esser 2018). Similarly, outlets
owned by large, publicly traded companies, are less likely to cover politics substantively (Dunaway and Lawrence 2015) and devote less coverage to local news (Martin and McCrain 2019). The implications are two-fold. First, to the extent that media owners’ political or economic interests are affected by their coverage of civic space events, they will be more hesitant to cover them. This seems most likely to impact national news outlets in politically repressive settings. Second, major international sources, in seeking to cover many countries cost-effectively, are likely to have limited coverage of civic space in many countries.

3 Our Approach

Assessments of civic space around the world are constrained by the fact that while civic spaces are dynamic and can change quickly, existing civic space data mostly provide annual snapshots. The absence of high-frequency data on civic space limits both what researchers can learn about civic space and the capacity of practitioners to rigorously incorporate rapidly changing civic spaces into programmatic decisions.

We address that shortcoming by providing high-frequency data on civic space “events” based on publicly available news reports. An “event” in this context is a structured record of a politically relevant occurrence, such as a protest or a change in a country’s laws. In collaboration with our INSPIRES Consortium partners and USAID, we have defined 19 types of events relevant to civic space. The consistent structure of event datasets allows researchers to track trends over time, expose relationships between events, and build predictive models. Appendix Table 1 presents a list of these categories, and our previous pipeline report provides details on how we produce the data.

A crucial step in our work is the identification of national and international news sources with reliable coverage over time. National sources provide first-hand information from inside a country. Thus, they have the potential to cover events that major international media outlets may not report on. We select national sources for each country on the basis of 4 considerations: (i) the source must be machine scrapable, (ii) it must publish its content in a language that can be translated to English using either Huggingface translation models or Google Translate, (iii) it must have some level of historical activity in reporting events of interest –preferably going as far back as 2012– and (iv) it must produce original content. Our identification procedure begins with a careful examination of each country’s most important newspapers based on circulation, but we also include high-quality online newspapers. The end result is a relatively small list of between 2 and 5 high-quality national sources per country.

To identify international sources we apply the same criteria as for the identification of national sources. Therefore, from the pool of the most reputable global newspapers we use those sources whose websites have well organized and deep archives and a web architecture that allows for scraping. The final list of international sources includes well-known western media outlets such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, BBC, Reuters, the Guardian, France24, and the Christian Science Monitor, as well as large media organization from China (Xinhuanet and the South China Morning Post), Russia (the Moscow Times), and the Middle East (Al Jazeera). We then assign a location to articles
from domestic and international sources.\textsuperscript{2} We then classify articles into the 19 civic space event types using the RoBERTa-based model that we have described elsewhere.

4 Findings

Figure 1: Share of Article from International Sources per Month and Country

We employ, on average, three national sources per country, and the same 12 international

\textsuperscript{2}This is not a straightforward task, since many outlets do not record the location from which reporting occurs in consistent ways. We use the Mordecai API and Spacy’s Named Entity Recognition to determine the location of each article.
sources for all countries. As Figure 1 shows, our monthly event data comes mostly from national sources, with very few exceptions.\(^3\) Indeed, it is rare for even these authoritative international newspapers to constitute even 5% of our data in any given month. Additionally, note the pervasive pattern whereby international coverage of civic space events tends to be episodic and motivated by large or pivotal occurrences, such as the November 2017 coup in Zimbabwe or the ample coverage of Ukraine during the second half of 2019 in association with the first impeachment of Donald Trump.

Figure 2 below further underscores how little international coverage there is of some countries. The graph compares one country, Ukraine, which receives steady (if episodic) treatment by international sources, with Benin and Niger, two countries that receive very little coverage. While the average month sees international sources reporting nearly 100 stories on Ukraine, it is closer to 2 for Benin and Niger. The obvious implication is that international sources miss a lot of news on civic space, and they miss much more in some countries than others.

Figure 2: International Coverage at a Glance: Benin, Niger and Ukraine

How does coverage differ across national and international sources? Are certain types of events more likely to be reported by national than by international sources? Figure 1 hides a great deal of heterogeneity in news coverage across event types and time. Let us now look at the share of articles devoted to each civic space event type published by national and international sources, in Figure 3. Note that there are a few event categories for which, as

\(^3\)The further into the past we go, the more we rely on reporting from international sources, especially in the case of Kenya and Niger, where the historical archive of national media are particularly sparse.
expected, both national and international sources have published few articles. This is the case for rare events such as coups or the enactment of martial law. Rare events aside, a clear pattern emerges regarding the event categories that are more likely to be covered by each type of media.

Figure 3: Share of Article from International Sources per Month and Country

International sources’ coverage of the local news focuses on disasters and events that involve lethal violence (e.g., the assassination of activists or journalists, or instances of brutal repression of protests), but also on the legal prosecution of politicians, activists, journalists and members civil society. International sources also allocate a larger share of their coverage to coups, transitions of power, protests, and armed conflicts and mobilization of security forces more generally. National sources, on the other hand, budget more space to cover day-to-day politics: political changes (purge) and expressions of admiration or approval of elites, political groups or minorities (praise). Only around 6.5 percent of all articles published by local sources report on instances of lethal violence (in comparison to 12.8 percent of articles from international sources). On the other hand, disasters and legal action are devoted similar importance by both national and international sources, occupying between 12 and 11 percent of their total articles, respectively.

Figure 3 gives us a clear picture of the themes and editorial priorities of international versus national sources. Can we learn something about the magnitude of these events from the patterns of coverage across source types? The bars that appear green reflect civic space event categories where international sources report relatively more news than national ones, and the blue/purple bars are event categories where domestic media report relatively more than international ones. The figure shows that domestic sources cover much of the day-to-day politics that impact countries, including arrests and political praise. On the other
hand, international sources skew in favor of events bearing on conflict, including security mobilizations, violent events, and protests; they also have relatively more election coverage, which is very episodic. Indeed, Appendix B contains plots for the number of articles per category as a share of total articles published per month and source for each country in our sample. Spikes in the monthly share of articles from international sources usually coincide with large-scale events such as elections, a coup or a terrorist attack. On the other hand, spikes in the monthly share of articles from national sources for a given event mark both large and the medium-sized events that international sources often do not cover at all.

4.1 Illustrative Cases

In order to illustrate these differences in thematic and event-magnitude coverage we present 3 illustrative cases: the 2017 general elections in Rwanda, the 2017 coup in Zimbabwe, and the civil servants’ strikes of January 2018 in Benin.

4.1.1 Rwandan Elections, August 2017

President Kagame was re-elected with 98.8% of the votes in August 4, 2017. There were numerous reports of irregularities that go from vote buying and ballot stuffing to violence and intimidation against opposition candidates and civil society organizations. According to Human Rights Watch, the aftermath of the elections saw the Rwandan government arrest, intimidate and prosecute members of the opposition, including one ex-presidential candidate. Figure ?? shows the monthly share of articles reporting on issues bearing on the electoral process, arrests, legal actions and threats against members of the opposition and civil society published by national and international sources in and around August 2017. International sources devote a larger share of their coverage to the electoral process, arrests and legal action targeting key political figures. In the case of the first two event categories, the peak in international coverage mirrors that of national sources’ coverage around the election time. The differences between the editorial decisions of national and international sources become more apparent once we look at coverage of different forms of regime repression. Both sources indicate a large increase in arrests after the elections, yet only international news seem to be picking up other forms of legal action against key political figures (e.g., legal prosecution). On the other hand, we must refer to national sources to find evidence of the threats which Human Rights Watch denounced in their reports, but which were completely uncovered by the international press.

4.1.2 Zimbabwe Coup, November 2017

In November 14, 2017, the army took over Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, and begun arresting high officials of the Mugabe government. After protests erupted and his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF), decided to impeach

\footnote{https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/08/18/rwanda-politically-closed-elections}


\footnote{Research on the politics of authoritarian regimes provides insight into why Kagame would want his threats broadcast via the media.
him, Mugabe resigned on November 21, 2017. He was succeeded by Emmerson Mnangagwa. Mnangagwa was Mugabe’s vice-president until November 6, 2017, and in the weeks prior to the coup, Mugabe publicly antagonized Mnangagwa before firing him and forcing him into a brief exile.

Figure 5 shows that Zimbabwe’s repressed national media did not even cover the coups. In contrast, over 10% of all articles related to Zimbabwe published by international sources reported on the coup. A similar pattern emerges with respect to changes in the cabinet (purges): the firing of vice president Mnangagwa and others within the administration was given more importance by international than national sources. Finally, we see an increase in the international coverage of protests in November 2017, coinciding with the popular mobilizations in support of the coup (recorded as our event category “protest”). National sources seem to have slightly increased their reporting of these protests as well, albeit to much less extent.
4.1.3 Strikes in Benin, January 2018

In December of 2017, the Parliament of Benin approved a law to prevent civil servants (specifically those working in the military, the police, and the justice and healthcare systems) from organizing protests. This motivated a series of protests and strikes by public sector workers throughout January, which Figure 5 reveals received little to no attention by international sources. Figure 6 shows the monthly share of articles reporting on legal change and protest events published by national and international sources in and around January 2018. The international sources included in our sample missed both the legal change that originated the protests, and the strikes of January 2018. On the other hand, we can clearly identify these important events by looking at the peaks in the share of articles from national sources dedicated to the law and the strike.

4.2 Press Freedom and Coverage Differences

The previous exercise reveals an additional issue with international source coverage, namely, that it is highly contingent upon the geopolitical importance of a given country. Thus, coverage of Benin news is relatively low, compared to coverage of larger African countries such as Kenya. However, international sources can potentially tell us a lot about the health of
civic space in places where press freedom is compromised or under attack. Figure 6 explores this possibility by comparing international and national coverage in four cases—the two with the highest press freedom ratings in our sample (Jamaica and Georgia) and the two with the most repressed media environments in our sample (Zimbabwe and Rwanda).

We find subtle, but suggestive, differences in coverage of different civic space events between the countries with higher and lower freedom of press. We emphasize three such differences. First, we find that in countries where freedom of the press is compromised and domestic media likely self-censor to avoid state sanctions, national sources appear to devote a lower share of their coverage to civic spaces events that regimes have an interest in silencing (see Figure 7). In Zimbabwe, which ranks near the bottom in V-Dem’s Media Bias and Media Self-Censorship indices, and also in Reporters Without Borders’ Press Freedom Index, international sources cover protests and coups at a higher rate than national sources. Similarly, in Rwanda (the single most repressed media environment in our sample) international sources focus on covering instances of violence (lethal and otherwise), legal action, arrests and protests considerably more than national sources. The finding on protests across both countries is particularly interesting as it echoes results from elsewhere suggesting that authoritarian governments are particularly resistant to any form of collective action by citizens. Second, the domestic press in the repressed environments are both much more likely to report on political threats. As noted above, this likely reflects the interest of autocrats in broadly disseminating intimidation of opponents. Third and finally, in Jamaica and Georgia—the countries with the most free press in our sample—international sources spend a larger share of their coverage on electoral processes and succession of power than local sources do. Per the discussion above, this likely reflects the international press’ episodic attention to elections at the expense of day-to-day politics. In contrast, in Rwanda, the domestic press greatly over-reports the two civic space event types bearing on elections relative to international media also cover protests in Jamaica and Georgia at slightly higher rates, but in Zimbabwe and Rwanda protests are covered with twice the incidence they are in the domestic press.
international media, likely in an effort to impart a sense of legitimacy to elections that the international press largely dismisses as irrelevant.

5 Conclusion

Although civic spaces expand and contract on a daily basis, most existing civic space data around the world provide us only annual snapshots. The Machine Learning for Peace research project addresses this shortcomings by providing high-frequency data on civic space “events” based on publicly available news reports from newspapers and media organizations around the world. These data allows us, among other things, to analyze and compare coverage of key civic space events across national and international sources.

Our unprecedented analysis of news coverage from the national media of 16 countries on three continents, as well as from 12 of the leading global media outlets, leads us to four key findings. First, international media barely and rarely cover civic space in our 16 countries. Our significant investments in scraping national media is reflected in the fact that more than 95% of our civic space reporting comes from domestic sources. Second, when they do cover civic space in many countries, that coverage is highly episodic and reflects only very
significant events. Thus, articles about elections and coups make up a relatively large share of international sources’ coverage. Third and relatedly, international coverage of civic space tends to report on events that involve human casualties and violence, but also instances of legal prosecution of politicians, activists, journalists and members civil society. National sources, on the other hand, place more emphasis on reporting day-to-day politics: changes to the cabinet and bureaucratic staffing (“purge”) and expressions of admiration or approval of elites or political groups (“praise”). Fourth and finally, in countries with repressed media environments, the national press is far less likely to report on forms of contentious collective action than international sources and more likely to broadcast the regimes threat to the opposition. One analytical challenge for future work is to consider how one should weight reporting from international vs. national media in assessing civic space in countries with repressed news environments.
References


Table 1: Civic Space Event Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrest</td>
<td>An arrest occurs when an institution within the government-controlled security apparatus – i.e., the police, the military, or other – apprehends people or groups of people who are part of an opposition movement or party, a civil society organization, a foreign NGO, a media organization, or a protest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Censor</td>
<td>The government actively prevents free speech by individuals in the media, in public or online. This includes banning certain content from individual speech or news stories, dictating how certain concepts or people can be referred to in public speech, or directly dictating agenda setting for media organizations. This category also includes the government censoring internet websites, internet shutdowns, fines on independent media, limitations on foreign ownership of media outlets, and political actors gaining influence within media organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes to Elections</td>
<td>The executive alters the rules around elections, usually with the aim of benefiting electorally. This includes rescheduling/postponing/cancelling regularly-scheduled elections, calling irregular elections or constitutional referenda, hamper the work of independent election observers, erode the autonomy/authority of the electoral commission, as well as any other institutional change that directly affects the electoral process. This additionally include the cancellation of party lists and the boycott of elections by opposition. This does not include standard election proceedings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change Power</td>
<td>Changes in government that are the result of a standard election process called in accordance to the rules laid out in the constitution. This includes situations where the incumbent party/candidate retains power. Normal election results are an example of this event type. Specifically, this includes peaceful government transitions that are nonviolent transfers of power or legitimate continuity of government but does not include coups, which are accounted for separately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperate</td>
<td>Political or social actors collaborate on one or a range of issues or demonstrate an intent to do so. Cooperation indicates a willingness for local actors to work together to resolve important issues, while a lack of cooperation may hinder resolution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coup / Irregular change of government or transition</td>
<td>Changes in government that are not the result of a standard election called in accordance to the rules laid out in the constitution. Coups or a power grab after an unfair election are examples of this event type. This includes unusual transitions of power including violent takeovers, but does not have to be successful to be coded as an event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defamation Cases</td>
<td>Cases in which an individual or a group related to the opposition, CSOs or members of the media are accused, usually by the government of one of its agencies, of: (1) directly defaming the government or one or some of its members; (2) strategic lawsuits against public participation. This category is a subset of legal action, but is broken out separately specifically when accusations of defamation, libel or slander are involved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disaster</td>
<td>This category includes: (1) natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, famines or food crises or any catastrophic event that results or may result in serious damage and loss of life; (2) natural events of a lower scale (reflected in lower magnitude) that could have political implications; and (3) infrastructural accidents that can endanger the population – a dam or pipe bursting, the sinking of a ferry, etc. This does not include minor incidents like traffic accidents. Note: this includes deaths or economic strife caused by disasters, including reports on deaths/infections caused by COVID-19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Action</td>
<td>Legal action refers to the prosecution or investigation of crimes and criminal activity as well as the trials that result. This specifically does not include arrests. Defamation cases are a subset of legal action that are broken out separately after initial coding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Change</td>
<td>Legal change refers to any changes in the laws of a nation in such a way as to affect civic space. This includes legal restrictions on speech, political groups, NGOs, and the changing of constitutions as well as changing of the powers of the government. This also includes some restrictions on assembly, but does not include curfews and other martial law declarations, which are specifically covered by other event categories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lethal violence or attack</td>
<td>Any action of aggression by a government entity, organized group or individual that results in the death of one or more people. Magnitude is an integer, i.e., number of deaths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martial law / limits on gatherings</td>
<td>The executive branch declares a state of emergency and suspends, temporarily or indefinitely, the ability of citizens to gather or protest against it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobilize Security Forces</td>
<td>An event in which the government mobilizes police forces, military troops or government-affiliated militias in unusually large numbers. This is often done to respond to some form of threat to domestic security or in anticipation of events that may cause disruptions to public order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-lethal violence or attack</td>
<td>Any action of aggression by a government entity or organized group that physically harms one or more people or property but does NOT result in death. Magnitude is an integer, i.e. the number of victims/people injured.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Praise

Defined as verbal expressions of admiration or approval of actors such as elites (political, economic, social), political groups or minorities. Examples include extolling the virtues of key political figures, applauding the political positions of policy makers, expressing admiration for certain business leaders, etc. This is a speech only category.

Protest

Planned or spontaneous public mobilization of a large group of people to express strong objection to an official policy or course of action. Labor strikes, political rallies and riots are also included in this category. Speech includes discussions (code explicit threats as 'political threats') about a potential protest, labor strike or rally. Magnitude is an integer for the reported number of protesters. [Note: This category reflects reports of demonstrations/protests. Reports of violence, lethal or non-lethal, should be coded in their separate categories].

Purge

Purging refers to the abrupt removal of individuals from a government position. This includes the resignation of members of the government. This description applies to purging of a target such as the bureaucracy, courts, military, police, or members of party, among others.

Raid / shutdown

Individuals or organizations are assaulted or aggressively coerced. Their property may be encroached or damaged as a result. Examples include a raid on newspaper offices. Victims themselves suffer no physical harm. This category also includes the government shutting down opposition organizations, NGOs, etc. Magnitude is the number of individuals, buildings, offices, etc. that have been raided/harassed.

Threats

A statement of a clear and explicit intention to inflict pain, injury, damage, or other hostile action on someone. This category includes threats of both lethal and nonlethal violence. For instance, the threat of a coup would be a political and not a violent threat unless the message issued clearly specifies an intent to harm or kill –coup can be, and often have been, bloodless. This is a speech only category. Threats can also be political and nonviolent in nature. These threats include, but are not limited to: staging a protest or a labor strike, legal action against political groups or minorities, censorship, etc. This is a speech only category.
Additional Plots

Share of Arrest Articles from International and Local Sources

The solid blue line corresponds to Local sources, and the solid green line, to International sources.
Share of Censor Articles from International and Local Sources

The solid blue line corresponds to Local sources, and the solid green line, to International sources.
Share of change election Articles from International and Local Sources

The solid blue line corresponds to Local sources, and the solid green line, to International sources.
Share of changepower Articles from International and Local Sources

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Share of legalaction Articles from International and Local Sources

The solid blue line corresponds to Local sources, and the solid green line, to International sources.
The solid blue line corresponds to Local sources, and the solid green line, to International sources.
Share of martial law Articles from International and Local Sources

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Share of protest Articles from International and Local Sources

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Share of violencenonlethal Articles from International and Local Sources

The solid blue line corresponds to Local sources, and the solid green line, to International sources.