

# **LARGE-SCALE MASS INCIDENTS IN CHINA**

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## **Executive Summary**

1. Since 2003, China has had 248 large-scale mass incidents. There was a huge upsurge of large-scale mass incidents in 2007 and 2008, jumping from 25 cases in 2006 to 63 in 2007 and 76 in 2008, before they dipped to 46 in 2009.
2. All large-scale mass incidents, except for a couple of ethnic conflicts and student anti-Japanese demonstrations, revolved around economic or social grievances. These grievances are generated by the rapid socio-economic transformation on the one hand, and the poor quality of local governance on the other.
3. Labor disputes are the most frequent protests, constituting 45% of the total large-scale mass incidents. Labor disputes in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) usually originate from the effects of the structural change of the SOEs (国企改革), reflecting the uneasy transitions of the SOEs and their social costs.
4. Labor disputes that occurred in non-state sector are different in nature. In most cases, workers are requesting for better working conditions or wage increase. The majority of such cases took place in Guangdong where most of the enterprises are foreign or joint ventures.
5. Both types of labor protests had declined in 2009, overthrowing predictions that world economic slow-down would trigger more social unrest in China.
6. Land requisition and subsequent relocation are one of the main causes of large-scale mass incidents. Land and relocation disputes erupted at a lower rate than labor disputes, and demonstrated a decreasing trend in 2009. However, protests over land disputes, if organized, could be fierce.
7. Disturbances/riots have become the most frequent large-scale mass incidents in 2009, surpassing both labor and land disputes. The increase in social disturbances and riots that are not triggered by specific economic grievances is

alarming. These disturbances were often ignited by minor incidents but rapidly became confrontational between the citizens and the government.

8. The outburst of large-scale disturbances and riots may be explained by the confluence of three factors. First, social tensions had been brewing for a long time in these locations. Second, local governments and police forces were generally perceived as corrupt and incompetent. There was a profound lack of trust in the government. Third, the root cause of the social tension and distrust is poor local governance.
9. The Chinese society is generally stable despite all the social protests. The government is politically flexible to make self adjustment and financially capable of accommodating to social demands. Large-scale mass incidents may continue to decline in the coming years.