

Political scientist asks: Is the United States on the brink of a revolution?

September 26 2019, by Serbulent Turan



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Political scientists have historically been bad at foreseeing the most important developments. Few of us guessed the end of the Cold War; almost no one saw the Arab Spring coming.

In defense of my discipline, there is a reason for that.

Before a momentous event occurs, there are numerous possibilities and

different ways events can unfold. After it happens, however, it will appear inevitable. And after it happens, we will be very good at explaining why it had to happen.

Very few of us are now predicting the socio-political situation in the United States, which [now features an impeachment probe](#) into President Donald Trump, will lead to an uprising.

But after years of teaching on protests, uprisings and revolutions, it seems to me the U.S. is currently showing all the signs political scientists and historians would identify in retrospect as conducive to a revolutionary uprising.

What brings about a revolution?

Of course, every revolution is unique and comparisons between them do not always yield useful insights. But [there are a few criteria](#) we identify in hindsight that are usually present in revolutionary explosions.

First, there's tremendous economic inequality.

Second, there's a deep conviction that the ruling classes serve only themselves at the expense of everyone else, undermining the belief that these inequalities will ever be addressed by the political elite.

Third, and somewhat in response to these, there is the rise of political alternatives that were barely acceptable in the margins of society before.

Combined, these factors create a deeply felt and widely shared sense of injustice, an almost palpable conviction that the system is not working for the majority and only for the very few who abuse their positions of privilege. These qualities weaken any regime's claim to legitimacy.

But they're not solely sufficient. The indispensable ingredient of a political revolution is the mental revolution that happens before: personal convictions that the system is no longer working and needs to be replaced.

The coming of a revolution

Before most major revolutions, there's a substantial increase in the number of protests. Populations display their displeasure and voice their grievances via marches, petitions and protests.

If their concerns remain unaddressed, these protests become more extreme: petitions become strikes, marches become violent uprisings. Resistance becomes a daily fact of life and political organization commonplace.

Once the population is convinced that the system is not working, and their grievances will remain unheard, then almost anything can set off a political explosion.

It could be a historic development like the Lutheran Reformation that triggered the great [Peasant Uprising of 1525](#), or the Great War that [fueled the 1917 Russian revolution](#).

But it could also be a relatively mundane, common event like the taxation conflict that [led to the English Civil War in 1640s](#), or a [famine in France in 1788](#). In the Arab Spring, it was a [fishmonger's anger](#) with the corrupt police.

Really? A revolution in the U.S.?

The United States is displaying all of the above characteristics. The

country is experiencing tremendous levels of economic inequality that's worsening according to every meaningful measurement.

The *New York Times* writes about the "[broken economy](#)," *The Atlantic* notes the "[toxic class divide](#)" that is "fast becoming unbridgeable," and the *Intelligencer* calls recent data released by the Federal Reserve "[a damning indictment of capitalism](#)."

Compared to the previous decade, Americans are working much more for much less pay, and they're paying substantially more for their basic necessities. Even Fox News is having a hard time spinning the fact the more Americans than [ever need to hold multiple jobs](#), a full-time job and part-time employment on top of that, just to make ends meet.

While the devastation visited upon the working class by the 2008 recession is [far from remedied](#), economists are already [forecasting a new recession](#).

These would be troubling signs in a country where trust in political authority is strong. In the U.S., that's not the case.

There has been a substantial loss of faith in the political authority. Trust in the political system is at an [all-time low](#), and Americans also seem to have [lost faith in politicians](#), even the rare few they believe mean well.

Biggest protests

Meanwhile, the last few years have seen [the largest protests in the country's history](#). And few of the issues that have spurred the protests, from Occupy Wall Street to the Women's March and March For Our Lives, have been addressed. In fact, the situations that gave rise to them have either continued or worsened.

Law enforcement, for decades plagued with justified accusations of systemic racism, is for the first time experiencing difficulties [hiring and retaining new officers](#).

And the gap between law enforcement and the people goes [beyond just a lack of trust](#)—there is now a diminishing faith in the ability and neutrality of [law enforcement](#) agencies.

When that happens, people start arming themselves [explicitly against the state](#). All the while, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency is building facilities to train its officers for [urban warfare](#).

In response to the crises, political movements that would have been unimaginable a decade ago are rapidly, and [rather visibly, rising](#).

Fascism on display

Though the U.S. system was never free of its racist and colonial roots, the last time fascism has been this prominent in the country was [the brief period before](#) the Second World War.

But this time, it's the government condoning fascist marches and openly deliberating whether anti-fascism is terrorism.

It's accompanied by a general sense of alienation from and revulsion with capitalism by Americans.

Indeed, two of the leading contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, have built their campaigns on the failures of capitalism, the servitude of Washington to the rich and the powerful and the promise of structural change.

Could a U.S. revolution be a good thing?

No. Revolutions are never good things to live through; they bring conflict and war, pain, suffering and hunger, and plunge the country into political instability for decades.

But also: Yes.

Almost all political rights citizens enjoy and all the protections they have from the arbitrary use of political authority are results of past revolutions.

And sometimes political systems remain so far behind political consciousness that revolutions become the only way to catch up.

In places with longstanding political culture and institutions, where organized political movements engage in politics without using weapons, revolutions can be relatively better-controlled without spiraling into total chaos.

Tunisia, for example, emerged from the Arab Spring and its political [revolution](#) unscathed. It was also the only Arab Spring country with longstanding political institutions that took charge of the process. Those four institutions later [received the Nobel Peace Prize](#) for protecting the country from absolute chaos.

In the U.S., it's clear the system is not working for the good of all. There are still numerous possibilities and different ways events can unfold. But unless these systemic failures are addressed soon, [political scientists](#) of the future will be explaining how a societal explosion in the U.S. became inevitable.

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