



Ben Rogers

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## Under Trump, Americans could turn from civil protest to civic revolution



*Over the last 50 years, urban democratic protest has become a powerful revolutionary force, in Europe and beyond. Some of these protests, like those against Soviet rule in Eastern Europe in 1989, led to lasting change. Some, like those of the 'Arab Spring', resulted in bitter and violent defeat. And the fate of some, like the current uprisings in Georgia and Turkey, are still to be determined. The US, with its long history of democratic government, has little experience with this sort of revolutionary protest. But, Ben Rogers asks, with an authoritarian president now in charge, and constitutional 'checks and balances' looking vulnerable, could that be about to change?*

As I write, hundreds of thousands of protestors have **taken to the streets of Istanbul** and other Turkish cities in the largest challenge that the country's strongman ruler Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has yet seen. But though the Turkish protests are particularly large, the protestors are not alone. Crowds have also come out, in the last month, against illiberal rulers in Georgia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia.

There is something very familiar in this activity. The historian Simon Schama has detected in the current uprisings **the spirit of 1848** – the year that liberal revolution swept through the capitals of Europe, catching long established, conservative monarchies off guard. But you don't have to go back as far as that to find Europeans marching against tyranny. Hungary in 1956, Czech Spring of 1968, and the people-powered revolutions that brought down the Berlin Wall in 1989 are more recent examples. The 2000s saw a row of 'Colour Revolutions' in former communist states including Serbia, Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

## The return of civic revolutions

Europeans have made a speciality of taking on non-democratic rulers in the streets. But they are certainly not alone. The Tiananmen Square protests occurred in the same year as the revolutions against Soviet rule. The Arab Spring uprisings that swept across North Africa and the Middle East, from 2010, bringing down regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen, felt very like 1848 and 1989. Writing at the end 2019, the *Financial Times* journalist Gideon Rachman wondered if this would come to be viewed as a 'vintage year' for popular unrest. 'Protests large enough to disrupt daily life and cause panic in government have broken out in Hong Kong, India, Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Columbia, Spain, France, the Czech Republic, Russia, Malta, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Sudan – and the list is not comprehensive'. But almost every year has become a vintage year: the Carnegie **Protest Tracker** identified 160 major anti-government protests last year.

In a way few would have predicted, as the internet has spread, face to face urban protest – the politics, quite literally, of the public square – has become more, not less important to world affairs. Contrasting the revolutionary struggles of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, often fought between warring armies in the countryside, to those of the last 50 years, the Princeton political scientist Mark Beissinger has described ours as age of **Civic Revolutions**. The liberals who led the revolutions of 1848, with their breeches and cockades, lanterns, and journals, would quickly recognise what is going on in Budapest, Istanbul and Tbilisi today.

The results of these protests have been mixed at best. Many failed. The Revolutions of 1848 were followed by the counterrevolutions of the following year. The Hungarian uprising of '56 and the Czech one of '68 were brutally put down by Soviet tanks. The Arab Spring, at the time so hopeful, was followed by **winter**. The regimes that fell were replaced by other regimes generally even more oppressive. But many of these movements ushered in stunning victories. Think of the collapse of the Soviet regimes in '89, or the victory of the 'Orange' revolutionaries in Ukrainian in 2004 and the Maidan protestors in 2014 – victories that Putin never forgot or forgave. Just last year, people power overthrew the corrupt government of Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, and saw off an **attempted coup** by South Korea president Yoon Suk Yeol.

And even those that failed often laid the grounds for later success. Within 15 years of 1848, Italy was unified under a liberal constitution. These protests can be deeply transformative, as people come to recognise themselves as a citizen body.



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### Civil protest vs. regime change

At this point Americans might be putting their hands up and yelling, 'What about us!. Don't we have a proud tradition of street protest too?' And indeed, Americans do. Public protests helped end slavery and win the vote for women. And protests like the Montgomery Bus boycott, the March on Washington and Selma were pivotal in winning civil rights for African Americans. We can also point to the demonstrations against Vietnam the Invasion of Iraq, feminist marches of the 1970s and 1980s and the Women's March of 2017 or the Black Lives Matter demonstrations of 2020 – the two largest protests in US history.

Yet the US story is fundamentally different from the one playing out in the Europe. These American protests did not for the most part aim to challenge the legitimacy of the government. They were understood implicitly or explicitly, as 'civil'. Even in their most extreme form, where they involved deliberately breaking the law, as with the sit-ins of the Civil Rights Movement, the point was, as articulated by Civil Rights leaders, was to awaken the moral conscience of the American people and so reform its government. It was not to overthrow it. It is no coincidence that the US has produced a series of **brilliant theorists of 'lawful' civil disobedience** from Thoreau, through Martin Luther King to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century political philosopher, John Rawls.

The revolutions taking place in Eastern and Southeastern Europe today, like those of 1948 or 1989, are distinct in nature. They were and are aimed at undermining or overturning illiberal and undemocratic governments. These sorts of uprisings are often triggered by one particularly egregious anti-democratic act. The current Turkish demonstrations were sparked by the arrest the leader of the liberal opposition and Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu. The Hungarian ones were triggered moves to ban Pride marches. But they find their context in some combination of rigged elections, persecution of leading opposition politicians, crackdown on the free media, exposure of corruption in high places, or executive interference in the courts or universities. The aim of the demonstrators is to force the authorities to restore constitutional government or give up power.

These are democratic revolutions, so their preferred method is non-violent mass protest. There is clearly a strongly performative element to them. They aim to embody, in the public square, the sort of society they want to create: equal (leaders don't tend to feature largely), peaceful, reasonable, inclusive (women often lead the protests, so as to make it harder for the rulers to turn their guns on them). But the aim is not reform. It is regime change.

## Will American protests begin to look more like those elsewhere?

Yet the US is now facing a challenge not unlike that in Hungary, Turkey and elsewhere. Trump openly admires the strongmen like Putin, Erdoğan and Hungary's Viktor Orbán that the protestors are challenging. The assault on American courts, Congress, sub-national government, **the civil service**, media and universities over the last weeks has been astonishing.

Let's hope that US institutions fight back. That American voters can see the Trump government off without recourse to the streets. But if the president and his backers are successful in their ambitions and fundamentally compromise US democracy, we can expect to see a different sort of demonstration in America. One that has got less in common with Selma or Black Lives Matter, and more like the ones in Istanbul.

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