

Introduction to Revolutions in Latin America and the Caribbean

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many countries of Latin America and the Caribbean turned to armed struggle and violent revolt as a strategy to overcome the obstacles to development. Examples include Cuba, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Guatemala, Chile, Venezuela, and El Salvador. These revolts were typically based on variants of Marxist thinking and shared certain assumptions: (1) capitalist economic systems would inevitably produce more inequality and concentration of wealth; (2) the United States was a major supporter of capitalism, and therefore all ties with the United States must be broken; (3) because of the great power of capitalists and their support from the U.S., only armed struggle could break their hold on power; and (4) the goal of revolution would be the elimination of most private property and the radical redistribution of wealth. These revolutions were aided and fueled by the Cold War rivalry, with both the United States and communist Soviet Union (Russia) providing aid and training to their respective sides of the struggle. The first test of U.S. power was in Guatemala in 1956, where Jacobo Arbenz's socialist government challenged the United Fruit Company (a U.S. corporation). This brought about a strong reaction from the U.S. that undermined Arbenz's government and succeeded in installing a pro-U.S. Guatemalan government.

Most Latin American revolutions followed an identifiable set of 5 stages. The "successful" revolutions were those which completed all five stages; however, most revolutions were not completely successful and were interrupted or reversed at one of the four earlier stages. The first stage involves the breakdown of the old regime. Economic difficulties, corruption, schisms among government and business elites, and diplomatic isolation by foreign powers are common symptoms of such a breakdown. This is then followed by a second stage, mass mobilization, marked by the mass discontent, protests, uprisings, workers' strikes, and possibly the exit from the country of foreign capital, thus exacerbating the already poor economic conditions that were present. The third stage, armed struggle, is characterized by the formation of armed opposition groups and an alternative government that challenges the weakened existing government. In Latin America, most armed struggle took the form of guerrilla warfare, largely fought in smaller towns and rural areas, gradually advancing to the larger cities and capital, where the armed revolutionaries would surround the government and military headquarters for the final battles. The fifth stage, transition of power, occurs when the old regime abdicates or is defeated and governmental authority is transferred to the new revolutionary government. This process of transition involves not only seizing control of government, military and economic institutions and infrastructure, but also gaining recognition and diplomatic legitimacy by other countries. Finally, the fifth stage of successful revolutions is consolidation. Once in power, the new revolutionary government must implement its social, economic, and political agenda, which usually entails sweeping changes throughout the country and in global relationships with other countries and organizations. In addition, new revolutionary governments usually face armed resistance from reactionaries (members of the old ruling elite) who reorganize and arm themselves to try and prevent the consolidation of the revolutionary regime.

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Latin America has had many revolutions throughout its history, beginning with the uprisings of the Incans (for example, Tupac Amaru) in the 18th century, continuing with the independence movements of the 19th century, the Mexican Revolution of the early 20th century, and then later the modern day Marxist-inspired revolutions of the mid- to late-20th century. This unit focuses on these latter revolutionary movements, a few of which were successful, most of which were not.

The first successful revolution was led by Fidel Castro in Cuba in late 1959. The five stages of revolution outlined above can easily be identified in the Cuban Revolution. First, the U.S.-supported government of Fulgencio Batista was corrupt and illegitimate in the eyes of most Cubans; moreover, the economic conditions for most Cubans were very poor, with high unemployment, inequality, and poverty. Most of the profitable businesses in Cuba were owned by American companies rather than Cubans. The second stage of mass uprisings against Batista took place during the 1930s–1950s, beginning with university students, but eventually spreading to include workers and peasant farmers. These protest movements were brutally suppressed by the Batista government, leading to the third stage of the revolution, the formation of small armed groups who utilized a strategy of guerrilla warfare to fight the government. Fidel Castro (then a recent law school graduate) organized one of the armed groups and unified it with others, dubbing it the “26th of July Movement” (named in remembrance of the day of a failed attempt to take over a military barracks). Starting in the countryside and gathering supporters everywhere his army went, Castro eventually marched into the Cuban capital, Havana on December 31, 1958. By then, Batista and most top-ranking officials and business men had fled Cuba, most of them going to their villas and vacation homes in Miami. This initiated the fourth stage, transition of power from the Batista regime to Castro and his supporters. During this transition phase, Castro maintained relations with the U.S. and entered into negotiations on nationalizing U.S. businesses and property. His government assessed the social and economic situation of the country and made ambitious plans for sweeping changes that they hoped would improve the livelihood of most ordinary Cubans. Perhaps the most important of their proposed changes was the plan to expropriate the land of the large U.S.-owned sugar plantations and redistribute the land among the poor farmers. The fifth stage took place with the implementation of these changes. As one might expect, these changes were met with a strong negative reaction from the former Cuban business elites (now reorganizing themselves in Miami) and the U.S. government. During the consolidation process, Castro imprisoned or executed thousands of Cuban dissidents and exiled many more. Education and healthcare reforms, land redistribution and nationalization were the centerpieces of his economic and social reforms. Politically, Castro aligned Cuba with communist countries, especially the Soviet Union, in order to counter the diplomatic isolation and economic embargo imposed by the U.S. In 1965, Castro formally declared Cuba to be a communist state.

Fidel’s success in overthrowing the U.S.-backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista, sent a political earthquake throughout the hemisphere and inspired several other revolutions and also inspired stronger U.S. efforts to stop them. Although the Cuban revolution was not initially aided by communist Soviet Union, Cuba quickly became dependent on the

Soviet Union for economic, military, and political survival. The Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) epitomized the triangular relationship between Cuba, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

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