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The United States is at Risk of an Armed Anti-Police Insurgency

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2021-04-05

The killings of African Americans at the hands of police officers has continued unabated in the United States. In the past year, the deaths of Breonna Taylor in her bed and George Floyd by public asphyxiation are two of the most egregious.

As the officer who knelt on Floyd's neck was being tried for the killing in court, another officer shot and killed Daunte Wright.

Scholarly research has begun to document the traumatic consequences of police killings on African Americans. One study finds the effects on Black males meet the "criteria for trauma exposure," based on the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, used for psychiatric diagnoses.

Besides police use of force in North America, one of the trajectories of my research focuses on armed insurgency in sub-Saharan Africa. I am beginning to observe in the U.S. some of the social conditions necessary for the maturation and rise of an armed insurgency. The U.S. is at risk of armed insurgencies within the next

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Retrieved on 2021-06-11 from The Conversation

lib.edist.ro

five years if the current wave of killings of unarmed Black people continues.

Conditions for Insurgency

To begin, the armed insurgencies would not have a defined organizational structure. They may look like Mexico's Zapatista movement or the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta in Nigeria.

Entities operating independently will spring up, but over time, a loose coalition may form to take credit for actions of organizationally disparate groups for maximum effect. There will likely be no single leader to neutralize at the onset. Like U.S. global counterterrorism efforts, neutralizing leaders will only worsen matters.

Using research and contextual experience from the developing world to make predictions about the U.S. in this regard is apt. There are many interrelated conditions for the rise of an armed insurgency. None of them in and of itself can lead to an armed insurgency, but requires a host of variables within social and political processes.

Transgenerational oppression of an identifiable group is one of the pre-conditions for an armed insurgency, but this is hardly news. What the U.S. has managed to institute on a national and comprehensive scale is what sociologist Jock Young calls "cultural inclusion and structural exclusion."

A strong sense of injustice, along with significant moments, events and episodes — like the killings of Taylor and Floyd — are also important.

Historically, police officers are not held to account for the extrajudicial killings of Black people.

The racialized trauma from police killings adds to the growing sense of alienation and frustration felt by African Americans, but

police killings aren't the only way they experience disproportionate death rates.

African Americans have the second highest per capita death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic: 179.8 deaths per 100,000 (second only to Indigenous Americans with 256.0 deaths per 100,000). They are also at a higher risk of death from cancer, for example. The pandemic has compounded these deaths, adding to the disproportionately high unemployment rate and the impact of layoffs during the pandemic.

Potential Insurgents

There is another, related variable: The availability of people willing and able to participate in such insurgency. The U.S. has potential candidates in abundance. Criminal records — sometimes for relatively minor offences — that mar Black males for life, have taken care of this critical supply. One study estimates that while eight per cent of the U.S. general population has felony convictions, the figure is 33 per cent among African American males.

Some of these men may gradually be reaching the point where they believe they have nothing to lose. Some will join for revenge, others for the thrill of it and many for the dignity of the people they feel have been trampled on for too long. Although 93 per cent of protest against police brutality is peaceful and involves no major harm to people and property, there is no guarantee that future protests about new police killings will remain peaceful.

The legitimacy of grievances of Black Americans among their fellow citizens is also an important variable. Their grievances appear to have found strong resonance and increasing sympathy within the broader population. Many Latino, Native American and white people see the injustices against Black people and are appalled. Black Lives Matter protests are now major multicultural events, particularly among young adults.

A sense that there are no legitimate channels to address the grievances or that those channels have been exhausted is also crucial. This is evident in the failure to convict or even try police officers involved in several of the incidents. A grand jury could not indict the officer whose chokehold led to the death of Eric Garner, despite video evidence. Such cases have led to a troubling loss of trust in the criminal justice system.

Mode of Operation

Any anti-police insurgency in the U.S. will likely start as an urban-based guerrilla-style movement. Attacks may be carried out on sites and symbols of law enforcement. Small arms and improvised explosive devices will likely be weapons of choice, which are relatively easy to acquire and build, respectively. The U.S. has the highest number of civilian firearms in the world with 120.5 guns per 100 persons or more than 393 million guns.

Critical infrastructure and government buildings may be targeted after business hours. The various groups will initially seek to avoid civilian casualties, and this may help to garner a level of support among the socially marginal from various backgrounds. The public would be concerned but relatively secure in understanding that only the police are being targeted. Escalation may ensue through copycat attacks.

The U.S. government will seem to have a handle on the insurgency at first but will gradually come to recognize that this is different. African American leaders will likely be helpless to stop the insurgency. Anyone who strongly denounces it in public may lose credibility among the people. Authenticity would mean developing a way to accommodate the insurgents in public rhetoric while condemning them in private.

Moving Forward

I am often amazed that many people appear unaware that Nelson Mandela was co-founder of uMkhonto we Sizwe, the violent youth wing of the African National Congress, which carried out bombings in South Africa. The rationale provided in court by Mandela regarding his use of violence is instructive. Mandela told a South African court in 1963:

I did not plan it in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen after many years of tyranny, exploitation, and oppression of my people.... We chose to defy the law. We first broke the law in a way which avoided any recourse to violence; when this form was legislated against, and then the government resorted to a show of force to crush opposition to its policies, only then did we decide to answer violence with violence.

To predict that an armed insurgency may happen in the U.S. is not the same as wishing for it to happen: It is not inevitable, and it can and should be avoided.

Police reform is a first step. A comprehensive criminal justice overhaul is overdue, including addressing the flaws inherent in trial by jury, which tends to produce mind-boggling results in cases involving police killings. Finally, the judgment in the trial of Derek Chauvin for George Floyd's death will have an impact on the trajectory of any possible future events.