

The Baltimore Uprising and the U.S. Government's Record on Human Rights

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On Friday, Baltimore state's attorney Marilyn Mosby declared that six police officers will face [criminal charges](#) including second degree heart murder, manslaughter, assault and false imprisonment for their role in the arrest and homicide of 25-year-old African American Freddie Gray. While this is welcome and encouraging news for those seeking justice for Gray and his family, past experience demonstrates the odds the accused criminals will be convicted are [miniscule](#). Regardless, it is not enough to treat the Freddie Gray incident as merely a violation of domestic law. The actions by agents of the State are part of a pattern of human rights abuses that are rampant against the domestic population, especially ethnic and racial minorities. The crimes are not only attributable to the indicted Baltimore officers but to the government they represent, which has failed to deliver the human rights obligations owed to all American citizens.

After the arrests of the six officers, residents continued their protests in a clear indication that the outrage of the Baltimore uprising is about much more than the mistreatment and killing of Freddie Gray as an isolated incident. Interviewed on Friday by the [Baltimore Sun](#), Kevin Moore, who filmed the unlawful arrest of Gray on his cell phone, said that "We're going to keep on marching for human rights. We're going to keep on going until this stops — the police brutality."

Across the country, grassroots movements that have gained momentum after the killings of unarmed African Americans including Michael Brown, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Brandon-Tate Brown, and Freddie Gray have focused on far-reaching political and economic demands. They must be understood as a critique of the entire socioeconomic system that oppresses minorities and manifests itself with excessive use of force by agents of the state against members of these same disenfranchised communities.

Critically, activists have stressed the connections between police brutality, [structural economic inequalities](#), and the epidemic of [mass incarceration](#) that all target predominantly African Americans and Latinos. Economic policies relegate African Americans to an impoverished underclass. They are then attacked by the state through the criminal justice system precisely for their social status. The prison system is used to warehouse what is considered a surplus population that has no role in the modern economy. Law enforcement officers take on the role of enforcers of oppression.

As Michelle Alexander explains in [The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#), "The stark and sobering reality is that, for reasons largely unrelated to actual crime trends, the American penal system has emerged as a system of social control unparalleled in world history."

Police brutality carried out by law enforcement enforcing a racist drug war is merely a symptom of the system of white supremacist-informed politics that produces the nation's unequal social and economic structures. Eliminating the violence of the enforcers would do nothing to eliminate the violence of structural inequality that permeates American society.

Groups like #BlackLivesMatter recognize this and explicitly state their grievances with the systemic factors behind individual crimes against black people: "When we say Black Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. How Black poverty and genocide is state violence. How 2.8 million Black people are locked in cages in this country is state violence. How Black women bearing the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families is state violence."

[We The Protesters](#) write in an [Open Letter](#) that they seek to "build a community that is empowered to establish a new political and social reality that respects and affirms blackness and the humanity therein."

When Freddie Gray was killed, agents of the state violated many of his human rights, as defined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). Namely, he was deprived of his right to life and liberty (Article 3); he was subjected to torture and degrading treatment (Article 5); he was subjected to arbitrary arrest (Article 9); and he was subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy (Article 12).

Possibly the only thing unique about Gray's treatment at the hands of Baltimore police is the scale of the uprising it gave rise to among his community members. As a [Baltimore Sun](#) investigation revealed, city residents have had to pay out nearly \$6 million in the last four years to settle more than 100 lawsuits alleging "that police officers brazenly beat up alleged suspects." The victims ranged from young children to old women. Even City Council President Bernard C. "Jack" Young told the paper that "[residents] fear the police more than they fear the drug dealers on the corner." And the situation in Baltimore is not unique to the rest of the United States.

The [United Nations Human Rights Committee](#) declared in its most recent report they were "concerned about the still high number of fatal shootings by certain police forces ... and reports of excessive force by certain law enforcement officers, including the deadly use of tasers, which has a disparate impact on African Americans." The Committee also expressed its concern about "racial disparities at different stages in the criminal justice system, as well as sentencing disparities and the overrepresentation of individuals belonging to racial and ethnic minorities in prisons and jails."

If the United States had ratified the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#), and was subject to review by the United Nations, the findings would be equally damning, or likely worse. How many Baltimore residents – or those of any major U.S. city – would feel that their government was delivering their right "to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions" (Article 11)? Or "a decent living for themselves and their families" (Article 7)? The right to "the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health" (Article 12)?

Last month, [MintPress News](#) reported that the city of Baltimore has issued notices to residential water customers with overdue accounts that their service will be shut-off. They note that United Nations experts “were among many who expressed concern that water shut-offs violate basic human rights.” Freddie Gray, like many residents of Baltimore, was exposed to [lead paint](#) in his childhood home. Lead paint exposure by children has been proven to result in potentially disastrous development problems.

The [Washington Post](#) writes that it is “hard to know whether Gray’s problems were exclusively borne of lead poisoning or were the result of other socioeconomic factors as well. From birth, his was a life of intractable poverty that would have been challenging to overcome.” The socioeconomic factors must be attributed directly to the state that created them and failed to remedy them for Gray and millions of others.

If protesters were polled about whether the government was fulfilling its human rights obligations to provide basic social and economic rights, is there any doubt that they would nearly unanimously disagree? Could city, state or federal officials even claim to enjoy the consent of the governed among African American communities that have been victimized for decades, if not centuries, of structural inequalities and aggressive policing meant to repress people through a cruel system of social control?

Many voices on the street are loudly calling for an indictment of the system as a whole. The difference between this American movement and other color revolutions overseas that receive much corporate media attention is that it is entirely homegrown and a product of grassroots reaction to oppression, rather than a manufactured product of foreign funding and training.

U.S. government officials have never hesitated to decry alleged human rights abuses by the regimes of official enemies. One year ago, Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) accuses Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro of carrying out a “terror campaign against his own people” who did not “respect human rights.” Kerry neglected to mention that half of the deaths resulting from the protests were of security agents and government supporters, some who were decapitated by [barbed wire barricades](#) erected by anti-socialist protesters.

The U.S. government has showered middle and upper-class Venezuelan students and pro-business interests with [millions of dollars in funding](#) and organizational training to provoke protests they could then condemn for political purposes. The same is true in Ukraine, Syria, Cuba, Hong Kong and across the world. What justification do they have to spend the nation’s resources to manufacture opposition abroad rather than address the demands of citizens at home opposed to the inequality and insecurity that the state subjects them to, and which they could drastically reduce or outright eliminate, through taxation of private wealth and redistribution, if they chose to?

Freddie Gray has become a martyr for the suffering he endured throughout his life at the hands of the social, economic, and political system he lived under, rather than just for his suffering at the hands of the six police officers who ended his life. The Baltimore uprising will not end with the verdicts against the six officers. It will only end when the people of Baltimore and cities across the U.S. are able to hold the people who design the policies that deprive them of their fundamental human rights accountable.

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