Historical Context of the French Revolution

For many centuries, kings and queens ruled the countries of Europe. Their power was supported by nobles and armies. European society began to change. In the late 1700s, those changes produced a violent revolution in France. Social conflict and new ideas contributed to the French Revolution and why the Revolution turned radical. Study the following documents carefully. Answer the questions that follow.

Document 1: Social Classes in Prerevolutionary France

The cartoon shows a peasant (a person of the lowest social class) woman carrying women of the nobility and the Church.

1. What does the cartoon say about the lives of the poor before the Revolution?

2. According to this document, what rights belong to all people? When do these rights begin?

3. What is the aim of all political associations? Why are these rights chosen?

Document 2: A Declaration of Rights

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. . . .
2. The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and [unlimited] rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
   — Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789)

3. What is the aim of all political associations? Why are these rights chosen?

Document 3: The French Revolution—Major Events

4. Over time, the Revolution became more violent. How does the information in the time line show this?

5. Why was the abolition of feudal social structure an important development in French society?