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Haitians overthrow regime, 1984-1986

May
1984
to: February 7,
1986
Country: Haiti
Location Description: *Cities and large towns around the country, particularly Gonaives and the capital Port-au-Prince*

Goals:
To protest state violence and food costs and to get President-for-Life Jean-Claude Duvalier to relinquish his power.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 3rd segment:
Methods in 4th segment:
Methods in 5th segment:

- 085. Merchants' "general strike"

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 026. Paint as protest
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 125. Boycott of government employment and positions › Resignation of government officials

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Group characterization:

- Political opponents of the regime
- largely workers across the country as well as student groups and religious leaders

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Sylvio Claude and Gregoire Eugene, leaders of the two opposition parties
Partners:
Catholic Bishops, Labor organizations, Protestant leaders
External allies:
Catholic radio stations
Involvement of social elites:
National army

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bishops

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Labor organizations

Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

- Army
- Catholic radio stations (exit)
- Protestant leaders

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
Student groups were an important ally, but it is unclear when they joined. Catholic radio stations were allies insofar as they offered the only independent media source, although it is unclear when their broadcasts started dealing with the opposition campaign. Government mandates and fear of state violence caused them to stop broadcasting near the end of the campaign.
Segment Length: *3.5 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
President Jean-Claude Duvalier
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known
Campaigner violence:
Not known
Repressive Violence:
State officials fired weapons and tear gas at protesters, frequently killing people. The campaign was in part trying to stop the repressive violence that had been a part of the regime for decades. In the last few weeks of the campaign, the violence escalated precipitously.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
5 points out of 6 points
Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Notes on outcomes:
The campaign was entirely successful, in that the campaigners got Duvalier to flee the country. However, within months, an organization with similar leadership had started a new campaign against the government Duvalier had set up to replace him, which was run by Duvalierists and had many of the very same problems that the campaigners had hoped to eradicate by ousting Duvalier.

In 1957, Haitian elections put Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier in power as “president-for-life.” When he died in 1971, his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier took over. There were no elections during either regime, and both presidents used force to keep the populace subservient. Papa Doc was dependent on his secret police, the Ton-Ton Macoutes (Haitian Creole for Bogeymen), to use violence against the people. Although Baby Doc formally disbanded the Macoutes, the group continued throughout his regime as the Volunteers for National Security, and maintained the same violent presence. Haiti was the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, with widespread problems of starvation and rampant unemployment.

In late May 1984, citizens in the city of Gonaives started protesting against Duvalier’s government, and particularly an event where police officers publicly beat a pregnant woman, who soon died. Activists’ listed grievances under Duvalier’s regime included general brutality against civilians and rising food costs; some went to an aid warehouse to demand food. Law enforcement from the capital of Port-au-Prince came and quickly stopped the protests violently, and the government imposed a curfew on the city. However, the protests soon spread to other cities.

The protests came after the regime had loosened some of its restrictive laws. Duvalier said that state violence in prisons would no longer be allowed, and loosened press censorship.

The United States, a big source of monetary aid for Haiti, said that Duvalier should be less brutal than his father had been, and granted a large annual aid package under the condition that Haiti improve its human rights situation. Haiti was dependent on foreign aid, primarily from the U.S., for 70% of its budget.

Leadership in the criticism of Duvalier included Sylvio Claude, head of one opposition party, and Gregoire Eugene, the head of the other opposition party, as well as some other opposition politicians. Bishops in the predominantly Catholic nation also denounced the regime. 2,000 people signed a petition saying that the regime was enslaving the masses.

The protests continued in towns and villages nationwide through November 1984. Some cities started having general strikes.

In July of 1985, a referendum increased Duvalier's power, angering much of the populace. In November 1985, opposition held protests in cities around the country. Law enforcement killed and arrested many protesters across the country.

In November 1985, protesters held a demonstration with popular slogans and signs. The troops shot at the protesters, killing at least three students. The protests continued through December in two main towns, but did not reach the capital. Students started to boycott classes. Church radio stations, the only independent news sources, stopped broadcasting, so it was very difficult for much of the country to get any information about the strikes. It seems that some closed voluntary, while the government closed the more radical ones down itself. In December 1985, increased state violence led the U.S. to threaten to cut aid.

On January 13, 1986, opposition called for a general strike and both Catholic and Protestant church officials in the predominantly Catholic nation denounced Duvalier's rule, declaring their opposition to the injustice and oppression that the dictatorship exercised. In the capital city, protesters handed out leaflets calling for "operation uproot," a general strike against the regime. Activists set up roadblocks separating Port-au-Prince from the rest of the country. Citizens continued expressing their unhappiness by painting slogans on walls, speaking more openly with international reporters, and occasional expressions of violence. The U.S. threatened to cut aid, and 4 senior officials stepped down from the government. On January 7, when students of most age groups returned to school from break, there were many protests. The government responded by closing schools across the country. It also responded to protests by arresting people, and forcing businessmen, civil servants, and military officials to swear loyalty to Baby Doc in the palace. Nevertheless, the army threatened to turn against the regime if Duvalier failed to resolve the political crisis. Baby Doc declared a nationwide day of mourning for the students murdered in November, and swore to try the police officers that had killed them. He also drove around the capital throwing money from his car window, and fired some officials, but many people declared that the efforts to improve his image had not appeased them.

By January 1986, there had been demonstrations in over a dozen towns since the murder of the students in November. Administrators from 24 schools sent an open letter to the Education Minister demanding that the schools reopen, and 111 teachers signed a similar letter. The government did not respond, although armed soldiers often watched the political processions. Campaigners set fire to a court building and threw rocks at a Duvalierist's home, although it is not known whether anyone was injured. Protesters also looted hospitals and aid deports.

As the end of January 1986 approached, protests increased in size, and became almost constant. Protesters took over or destroyed the government offices in some outer towns, and blocked major roadways around the country. Some rumors circulated saying that Duvalier had fled, but they were untrue. State violence increased, and Duvalier suspended certain civil liberties, declaring a state of siege. Stores closed and remained shut. Graffiti carrying certain popular slogans increased on walls around the capital in early February. Activists defaced a large statue of Duvalier in front of city hall.

For several consecutive days in early February, Duvalier traveled around the capital as a symbol of his continuing control. Stores and businesses stayed closed, ignoring Duvalier's demand that business proceed as usual.

On February 7, 1986, Duvalier fled to France in a U.S. supplied plane. However, before leaving, he set up the 6-member National Governing Council (CNG), under the leadership of Army Commander Henri Namphy, to rule the country after his exile. For information on the subsequent campaign to overthrow Namphy and the CNG, see "Haitians demand civilian government and democratic elections, 1986-88."

Research Notes

Influences:
This campaign fairly directly influenced a campaign that started almost immediately after Duvalier's flight. The leadership, tactics, and organizations were very similar, but the goal differed; the later campaign aimed to topple the interim government that Duvalier set up before his flight (see "Haitians demand civilian government and democratic elections, 1986-88"). (2)
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