Haitians strike and overthrow a dictator, 1956

February
1956
to December
1956

Country: Haiti
Location City/State/Province: Port-au-Prince and nationwide

Goals:
President Magloire’s removal, free and fair democratic elections, end to political repression

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 025. Displays of portraits
  - Students tear down and burn portrait of General Magloire
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

- 062. Student strike
- 085. Merchants’ "general strike"
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 150. Noncooperation by constituent governmental units

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
  - by leading Haitian feminist organizations
Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Group characterization:

- business leaders
- political opposition candidates and their supporters
- students
- women's groups
- workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Students, business and labor groups, political opposition (pro-Fignole and pro-Duvalier supporters), Haitian Revolutionary Committee
Partners:
Women's organizations
External allies:
Not known
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Anti-regime groups such as the Haitian Revolutionary Committee

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Students

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

- The Women's League
- Women's Union

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Pro-Duvalier supporters

Groups in 6th Segment:
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
General Magloire’s regime

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
None known

Campaigner violence:
Pro-Duvalier supporters bombed public areas throughout the country

Repressive Violence:
None known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The movement, in which disparate, relatively leaderless, groups united in their desire to end Magloire’s rule and declare elections, succeeded in removing the President from power. Survival is minimal, as the movement largely lacked infrastructure, although Fignole and Duvalier would remain important figures in the post-Magloire government. The movement grew substantially and organically, pulling together various interest groups across the country in a concerted effort to remove Magloire.

General Paul Eugène Magloire was elected President of Haiti in 1950 with ninety-nine percent of the vote in an army-monitored election and the official support of the army, church, elite, and American embassy behind him. He implemented a successful economic program and oversaw a period of the best economic growth in Haiti in a century, reforming the banking system, attracting foreign investment, fostering tourism, and instituting a Five Year Plan in 1951 to boost agricultural expenditures. In his consolidation of power over the country, Magloire restricted Haitian liberties, jailed dissidents, and actively attacked union organizers.

By 1954, soil erosion and deforestation accounted for a decline in agricultural production, which counted for eighty percent of GNP, and Hurricane Hazel ravaged the country, leaving millions homeless and destroying the year’s crop. Although Magloire raised the minimum wage from 3.50 gourdes to 5, the cost of living rose steadily, unemployment increased, and urban conditions deteriorated.

Having banned the Marxist Popular Socialist Party (PSP) and Peasant Worker Movement Party (MOP) in December 1950, the regime clamped down further on dissidents as political opposition and economic conditions worsened. In January 1955, Magloire rigged the Deputies’ election so that Daniel Fignolé, a popular political figure, former head of the MOP, and labor
organizer in Port-au-Prince, lost his seat in the Chamber of Deputies by an extreme margin. Afterwards Magloire imprisoned Fignolé and closed the Haiti Democratique, a newspaper Fignolé founded. In addition, schools around the country were closed as potential centers of subversion and the Faculty of Medicine dissolved.

A discontented populace was further angered when, in advance of the end of Magloire’s term, officially legitimate through December 1956, it was widely misread that May 15, 1956, marked the end of his presidency. Underground radical groups, including the Haitian Revolutionary Committee, surfaced and issued anti-regime bulletins in February, distributing pamphlets to the populace calling for the government to honor term limits and declare general elections. Perceiving that General Magloire refused to relinquish power and call for elections, citizens gathered in protest. The month of May was marked by a series of protests organized by secondary school students around the country.

On May 17, students at the Lycée Toussaint Louverture in Port-au-Prince staged a protest shouting for Magloire’s removal: “Down with Magloire! He’s no good! He must go!” They also tore down and burnt a picture of Magloire in the schoolyard. Military police and officers arrived to the scene, appearing in classrooms to beat students and teachers with nightsticks and rifle butts. Secondary school students around the country on the streets of Cayes, Jacmel, and the capital organized protests, issuing anti-Magloire pamphlets, and unintentionally evoking the Revolution of 1946, in which students effectively ousted Colonel Élie Lescot (see, Haitians overthrow a dictator, 1946). Small groups of urban workers supported the students, but were effectively suppressed by police forces. Magloire declared a state of siege and arrested many protesters.

Protests were reported throughout Magloire’s remaining year. When his political reforms encouraging the establishment of political parties failed to appease the public, Magloire clarified his intention to step down in 1957, when his term legally ended. The government backed Clement Jumelle, Magloire’s Minister of Finance, as his successor, but François Duvalier, a former official in the Minister of Labor, emerged a significant contender when he declared his candidacy in September.

Protests continued, and two leading feminist organizations, The Women’s League and Women’s Union, bravely organized and protested against the government to push for suffrage rights. These women’s groups were indicative of a wider movement around the country, where underrepresented groups increased their pressure on the regime. Only in November did anti-regime campaigns turn to some violence, as when agents of Duvalier placed bombs in public places throughout the country; Duvalier denied associations with the bombings. Lower-ranking officers in the army were largely aligned with Duvalier or Fignolé at this point, and did little to assist Magloire’s regime.

On December 4, Magloire banned political meetings, broadcasts, and publications, in addition to arresting hundreds of political opponents. Acquiescing to public opinion, however, Magloire resigned on December 6 and turned over his executive power to the Supreme Court, while he retained his post as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. In a prearranged plan with Colonel Levelt, Magloire forced the Supreme Court to reject the executive power bestowed to them. The resulting vacuum in executive power justified Levelt passing the power of the state back to Magloire, to serve as Haiti’s provisional president.

A new provisional government was established with Magloire’s departure by self-claimed successor Judge Joseph Nemours Pierre-Louis, and elections were set for May 15, 1957. Feuding presidential candidates and their parties created disorder and delayed the political process. After multiple provisional Presidents were appointed and deposed, Duvalier was elected president on September 22, 1957.
Research Notes

Influences:
Look to the 1946 coup for reference. Although sources state that student protests did not intentionally reference the student strikes of 1946, it was influential to the 1956 movement as a whole (see Haitians overthrow a dictator, 1946). (1)

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Susana Medeiros, 07/10/2012

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