



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Beninese campaign for economic justice and democracy, 1989-90

- African Democracy Campaigns (early 1990s)

Time period notes: April is considered the end point because that is when the university students who had begun the strike campaign ended their strike.

9 January

1989

to: April

1990

Country: Benin

Location City/State/Province: Mainly Cotonou and Porto Novo

Goals:

The payment of civil servants' and teachers' salaries and student grants which the government had not paid since September 1988. The continuation of the student scholarship payments.

After December 1989, campaigners also called for the democratization of the government and the overthrow of President Kérékou in addition to their economic demands.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 013. Deputations
- 023. Destruction of own property
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike
- 145. General administrative noncooperation

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike
- 116. Generalised strike
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials
- 198. Dual sovereignty and parallel government

Methods in 6th segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike
- 116. Generalised strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Defense

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Civil Servants
- University and high school students
- teachers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

University Students, Trade Union Leaders, Teachers, Laurent Mentognon (a Finance Ministry Worker and strike leader)

Partners:

Communist Party of Dahomey, National Union of Teachers in Higher Institutions, Benin National Union of Post and Telecommunications Workers

External allies:

High School Students and Parents, Journalists, State Radio and Television workers

Involvement of social elites:

Nigerian Government

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Finance Ministry Workers
- High School Students
- Nigerian Government
- Secondary School Teachers
- University Students

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Finance Ministry Workers (Exit)
- National Union of Teachers in Higher Institutions
- Teachers of all levels
- University Professors

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Finance Ministry Workers
- Most other civil servants

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Benin National Union of Post and Telecommunications Workers
- Communist Party of Dahomey
- Journalists

- Journalists (exit)
- State radio and television workers
- State radio and television workers (exit)

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Most Civil Servants (Exit)
- Most Unions (Exit)
- Teachers (exit)
- University Professors (Exit)

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Since media coverage of this event was not very in depth, there were probably many more groups and unions as part of the campaign that are not mentioned here.

Segment Length: *Approximately 2.5 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Benin Government, President Kérékou, University Officials

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

On January 23, 1989, some campaigners in Porto Novo looted government buildings and threw stones. High school student demonstrators threw stones at attacking security forces in Porto Novo on April 6, 1989 and April 7, 1989. On December 11, demonstrators burned the cloth on a Lenin Statue, threw stones at security officers and the president, and a group lynched two policemen.

Repressive Violence:

Groups tortured students at some points at the beginning of the student strike in January 1989. The government called for troops to shoot assemblies without warning at the end of January, 1989. Troops attacked demonstrators in Porto Novo on January 23, 1989. Security forces attacked demonstrating high school students on April 6 and 7, 1989. Security forces also arrested students, teachers, and civil servants for striking throughout the campaign. Police and military fired tear gas at demonstrators on December 11 and killed at least two during these demonstrations. Police arrested several strike leaders in January 1990.

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:

Students, civil servants, and teachers received at least several months' worth of arrears, but it is not clear if they received all the salary and grant arrears that they demanded. The government agreed to reinstate the scholarship system. Through the national conference as a result of the strikes, the government was democratized and Benin held successful open elections in 1991. One point was taken from success in achieving goals because it was not known how much of the arrears were paid.

All known unions and groups involved survived despite some repression.

The campaign grew from a group of students to encompass most teachers and civil servants and many other citizens and political groups.

Benin gained its independence from France in 1960 and was then named Dahomey. Colonel Mathieu Kérékou took power of the country in a coup in 1972 and later renamed the country the People's Republic of Benin, organized the economy under a Marxist-Leninist ideology, and outlawed all political parties except his People's Revolutionary Party of Benin. By the 1980s, Kérékou remained as the president of Benin, but the economy was failing. The government had to lower government aid to students and the salaries for civil servants and in 1988 the state owned banks crashed. Faced with great debt, Benin was forced to seek international aid from the International Monetary Fund and countries like France and Nigeria. By the end of 1988, the Beninese government had failed to pay both the government grants and scholarships for university students and the salaries for teachers and civil servants for the months of September to December 1988.

In response to this failure to pay grants and the government's announcement that it would be ending student scholarships, high school and university students began a strike on January 9, 1989 in the cities of Cotonou and Porto Novo. Some students returned to schools as early as the next day and the government sent troops to attempt to stop demonstrations in Cotonou. After two days, the students ended this first strike when the government promised to pay part of the arrears in grants that it owed to the students.

However, the students at the National University in Cotonou began what they said would be a 3-day strike on January 17, still demanding the arrears in grants owed by the government. Striking students tried to march to the presidential palace on that first day, but soldiers stopped them and arrested several of the demonstrators. The next day several students met with University officials and announced that they would continue their strike beyond the stated 3 days unless the state paid the arrears and guaranteed further scholarships.

By January 19, 1989, secondary school teachers and civil servants from the Finance Ministry had joined the strike demanding that the government pay their salaries for the last four months of 1988. While some civil servants stayed away from work, others went to their offices, but refused to do any assigned tasks. Two days later, while students, teachers, and civil servants continued the strike beyond the 3-day window, the government's National Executive Council announced on the radio that any workers who did not return to work would be forfeiting their jobs with the government. Following this announcement, the university students stated that they would continue their strike indefinitely until their grants were paid.

When their first call to end the strike failed, the government's Interior Minister called on "all vigilant citizens" to defeat the demonstrators with force. In Porto Novo on January 23 students clashed with security forces, some demonstrators burned pictures of President Kérékou and others looted some government buildings. However, demonstrators in Cotonou remained peaceful. Then, on January 24, the Defense Ministry announced that security forces would fire without warning on all assemblies on public roads and sent 300 additional troops to Porto Novo to prevent riots. There was no more known violence after the in this period of the campaign. Furthermore, the government ordered the banks to prepare payment for government employees for the months of October and November 1988. Although the government had paid much of the military, the campaigners remained unpaid. As the civil servants continued to strike, the government announced that they would dismiss all strikers if they did not return to work by January 31.

On February 2, the government sacked all striking civil servants and began to replace them with young, unemployed university graduates. A week later, Nigeria agreed to give aid money to Benin in an attempt to end the strike and pay the arrears owed to the strikers. At this point most civil servants and teachers returned to work, while the students continued to strike. However, in the following months the government failed to pay all of the salaries it owed for the last four months of 1988.

On March 14, 1989 the civil servants threatened to strike again after the government announced it would cut allowances for all

government workers. They never began this strike. The announced cut in allowances was part of the austerity measure agreements that the Beninese government had made with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

As the university students in Cotonou continued their actions, at the end of March university officials threatened to close the school if students did not return to classes by April 3. Despite this ultimatum, the students remained on strike, even as the government threatened to invalidate the 1988-89 school year. Furthermore, high school students in Porto Novo had again begun demonstrations. As these students and their parents protested outside of their school, security forces attacked the students. Over the next two days soldiers and police continued to fight students in Porto Novo and students retaliated throwing stones and even chairs. There was calm after this and university students continued to strike.

At this same time, teachers at all levels rejoined the strike demanding an end to a 50% allowance cut, release of students and teachers who had been arrested for striking earlier in the year, and payment of three months' salaries from the end of 1988, which the government still had not paid. Amidst the strike, teachers also sent signed petitions with their demands to the government.

In the beginning of May the government agreed to pay teachers' and civil servants' salaries for the month of April and to continue to pay them regularly after that, but still refused to pay the arrears for the end of 1988. The teachers, however, continued to strike into July. During this period teachers began negotiations with the government but by July 6 these negotiations had failed. In mid-July Finance Ministry workers again joined the striking teachers and on July 24, civil servants from at least 5 sectors began to strike as well. A majority of the nation's 22,000 teachers and most of the 50,000 government employees were on strike at this point, although the exact numbers are not known.

In response to the continued strikes by students and teachers, the National Executive Council announced at the end of July that it was closing schools and invalidating the current school year. This meant that the government could suspend payment of teachers and not begin paying them again until October if teachers returned to work. Nonetheless, the government had still not paid the teachers for work done before the strikes began.

At the end of August, teachers sent a letter to President Kérékou reiterating their demands for the payment of salary arrears. In addition they asked that the government repatriate money invested in other countries and identify people who had tortured and killed demonstrators earlier in the year. The president said that he could not meet these demands directly, but that the government would address each issue one at a time.

On August 30, having received pressure from international donors, the government agreed to release most of its political prisoners in the hopes that this action would bring more aid money into the country. This meant that members and leaders from Benin's main opposition party, the outlawed Communist Party of Dahomey, were released from prison. A week later the government also agreed to pay three months of the salary arrears that it owed to teachers if the teachers agreed to return to work on October 2, 1989. The teachers agreed on the condition that the government would release the rest of the students who had been arrested for strikes. The final two students were released on October 2.

By October 23 the teachers had ended their strike and university students and professors, who were organized in the National Union of Teachers in Higher Institutions, returned to work on October 30. However, the teachers and students announced that they would go back on strike if the three months' worth of salaries were not paid by December 8, 1989. Civil servants also returned to work.

By the end of November the government had still not paid either the three months' salaries for 1988 or the salaries for the month after the strike had ended. As the deadline for the resumption of the strike grew closer, President Kérékou asked for patience in the payment of these arrears. He also called for free political expression in Benin and stated the need for political reforms in the near future to fit with the agreement between Benin and the IMF, but did not set a specific time frame or goal for reforms.

At the beginning of December, the government announced the cancellation of a second school year. In response, on December 2, several hundred people throughout Benin went into the streets in protest. Two days later, 1,000 students in Cotonou marched in

their school uniforms, carrying signs demanding their right to an education.

Meanwhile the Beninese government held negotiations with its foreign donors in hopes of being able to prevent the December 8 strike. At the same time, the opposition Communist Party of Dahomey supported the teachers by calling for a general strike in support of the teachers and civil servants.

The day before the strike was to begin, the government renounced its Marxist-Leninist ideology and announced that political reforms would follow in the next year, including the creation of the post of Prime Minister. The government hoped the shift to a market economy would help the country's economic situation and even covered a statue of Lenin in Cotonou as a symbol for this change. Nonetheless, the workers and students continued their strike plans, beginning the strike on December 8.

Three days later, 40,000 people in the cities of Cotonou and Porto Novo and throughout Benin launched demonstrations against the government. Some demonstrators held banners against the President and the IMF, while others called on the army to join their side. Some protesters gathered in Lenin Square in Cotonou and burned the cover on the statue of Lenin. Security forces fired tear gas at the crowds and one source said that a group of protesters lynched two policemen. The police also killed two demonstrators, and the exact numbers of casualties for security forces or demonstrators are not known. President Kérékou went to Cotonou to call for an end to the demonstrations. He banned all assemblies and said that the security forces would disband the protests. As he moved through the city, some people threw stones while his supporters cheered him on.

By the next day there was no more known violence, but the civil servants, teachers, and students continued their strike. On December 13, thousands of people again demonstrated in Porto Novo, where they met riot police blocking the main road. However, there was no known violence from either side at this meeting in which protesters shouted to the police blocking their path.

On December 18, journalists and state radio and television workers joined the strike after they had sent a signed petition with their demands for salary payments to the Minister of Information. On December 20, the Minister of Finance announced that Benin's "partners in development" had agreed to provide the money for the 1989 salaries, but he made no mention of the 1988 salaries that the government still owed. He also called for finance workers to return to their jobs so that they could process the salary payments. Journalists ended their strike on that day, but the rest of the strikers continued to stay away from work.

At the end December the government passed a new rule that government workers who continued to stay away from work after January 2, 1990, would not be paid their salaries. The government also claimed that it was paying off the arrears, and that workers needed to return to their jobs in order for the country to begin economic recovery. By January 3, the government had paid only two of the six months' worth of overdue salaries. Also in the beginning of January, the police arrested the leader of the Benin National Union of Post and Telecommunications Workers for two days for inciting workers to strike. Around the same time protest leaders began to circulate leaflets calling for a full general strike in Benin.

By January 8, the government had announced that it would hold a national conference to organize a transition government and plan free elections. It also lifted the ban on other political parties and at least seventeen new parties registered early that month. Even as the government called for an end to the strike so that reforms could be made, citizens in some towns around Benin attempted to replace mayors with their own elected officials. Police arrested at least one of these citizen-elected mayors.

On January 15 the government began negotiations with strike leaders, but these failed and the security forces continued to make arrests of demonstrators. The trade union leaders who were taking part in the negotiations had demanded the release of all political prisoners before they would continue talks. In particular they wanted the government to release Laurent Mentognon, a strike leader from the Finance Ministry. Negotiations failed for a second time on January 18. In the meantime, however, the government began to pay the government employee salaries for December 1989 and on January 19 the government agreed to pay all student grant arrears and reinstate the student scholarship system that it had planned to abolish.

On January 25, the government released Laurent Mentognon. The strike continued, but the National Conference, containing delegates from a variety of political parties, began in February. This National Conference stripped the president of his powers

and instated Nicephore Soglo as the new Prime Minister on February 28. Although Prime Minister Soglo continued to agree with the austerity measure agreements put in place by the IMF, he called on civil servants and teachers to end their strike and promised to pay them for January and February 1990. On March 15, teachers and civil servants agreed to return to work as long as the prime minister upheld this promise. By the end of March the government had paid two months of the arrears for student grants and within the week the University students that had been striking since January 1989 returned to classes on the condition that the government would begin to pay ten months worth of student grants.

At the beginning of 1991 the transition government held successful democratic elections. Although the university held a separate strike for educational changes several months after the end of their yearlong strike, they appeared to have received most of their initial economic goals. It is also not clear how much of the salary arrears were eventually paid to teachers and civil servants.

Research Notes

Influences:

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