



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Chinese students campaign for democratic reform (Tiananmen Square), 1989

- Asian Democracy Campaigns (1980s)

April 15,
1989

to: June 4,
1989

Country: China

Location City/State/Province: *Beijing*

Location Description: *Tiananmen Square*

Goals:

Wu'er Kaixi, one of the student leaders who voiced the demands of protesters, called for faster political reform, guarantees of rights to the people, a free press, an end to government corruption, and real democracy.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 025. Displays of portraits
- 038. Marches
- 043. Political mourning
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 162. Sit-in
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 062. Student strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 001. Public speeches
- 013. Deputations
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Academic Scholars
- Democracy Advocates
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Student leaders included Wu'er Kaixi, Chai Ling, Wang Dan, and Li Lu. Despite their common goal of bringing about democratic change in China, these leaders differed in leadership style and strategy. As a result, student leadership was weakened, as miscommunication and internal bitterness prevented the leaders from effectively coordinating their plans.

Partners:

Beijing Autonomous Union of Workers, other citizens in Beijing, and students in Shanghai, Harbin, and Tianjin

External allies:

Zhao Ziyang, the general secretary of the Communist Party

Involvement of social elites:

Many prominent writers and academic scholars supported the students in their call for democratic change and freedom.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Academic Scholars
- Democracy Advocates
- Students
- Zhao Ziyang

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Beijing Autonomous Union of Workers
- Students in other cities

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 9 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Chinese Communist Party (CCP); China's Premier Li Peng; Shanghai Communist Party secretary Jiang Zemin; Chinese

military forces

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Records, radio, and television (11) - China's Premier, Li Peng held a televised meeting with student leaders to negotiate an end to the student protests.

Campaigner violence:

On June 3, 1989, prior to the June 4 Tiananmen Square incident, the Chinese government reported that campaigners had injured several troops and killed one soldier.

Repressive Violence:

Government military forces forcibly removed protesters from Tiananmen Square by sending in tanks to break through student barriers, firing gunshots, beating students. Reports of the estimated death toll range from 300 to 10,000.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The student campaign that began in Beijing did grow to encompass other students and democracy advocates in other Chinese cities. Demonstrations began with several hundred students and by the end included approximately 2 million citizens. However, after the government crackdown in June, the campaign deteriorated.

During the second half of the 20th century, Chinese society experienced profound and tumultuous changes. Communist rule was declared in 1949, and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in much social and economic upheaval. Students were particularly hard hit by the changes made during the Cultural Revolution as university funding decreased and education quality deteriorated. Student resentment towards the Communist government was further exacerbated by the practices of nepotism and profiteering among party officials.

As discontent increased, the Communist government attempted to quell political dissent by silencing writers and speakers who criticized the government and its practices. In 1979, one such writer named Wei Jingsheng posted several critical essays on "Democracy Wall", a wall located near Tiananmen Square upon which many dissenters posted slogans and signs that called for increased freedoms. In response to Jingsheng's essays, the Chinese government arrested Jingsheng and sentenced him to fifteen years in prison.

Despite the Communist government's harsh repression of free speech, Hu Yaobang, the General Secretary of the Communist Party during the 1980s, tended to tolerate student dissent. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) released Hu Yaobang in 1987 because of his more tolerant attitude and on April 15, 1989, Hu died of a heart attack. As a result of his more reformist policies, many students and democracy advocates mourned his death beginning that evening by putting up posters with his image and demands for free press and democratic reforms.

To honor him, University students marched to Tiananmen Square, the center of CCP politics in Beijing, on April 16 and 17 to place wreaths at the Monument to the Martyrs of the People. On the 16th several hundred students marched and by the next evening approximately 2,000 students took part in marches to the square. For five days, these mourners staged pro-democracy demonstrations and made wall posters that demanded an end to government repression and corruption. Pamphlets that criticized the regime began to circulate in increasing numbers.

Although the government prohibited student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square during Hu's funeral on April 22, the students continued to protest in the Square. 50,000 students occupied the square the night before the funeral and remained there through the next day. A large group even sat on the steps of the Great Hall in an attempt to deliver a petition to the Chinese premier. Student leaders including Wu'er Kaixi, Chai Ling, Wang Dan, and Li Lu were among those to call for a student strike to begin on April 24, 1989. These dissidents demanded faster political reform, guarantees of rights to the people, a free press, an end to government corruption, true democracy, and a dialogue with Chinese Premier Li Peng.

In response to the protests, Communist government officials wrote an editorial in the official newspaper

The People's Daily

on April 26, describing the demonstrations as "disturbances" and "a planned conspiracy" by a small group of students. Angered by this editorial, over 100,000 students and 400,000 other citizens marched to Tiananmen Square the following day in the largest demonstration yet.

Student protests continued well into the month of May as students persistently demanded democratic reform and a meeting with Premier Li Peng. The inspirational speeches of student leader Wu'er Kaixi also helped draw more support for the demonstrations. On May 4, the students celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the May 4 movement (see "Chinese students protest the Treaty of Versailles (the May Fourth Incident), 1919").

On May 10, 10,000 bicyclists made their way to Tiananmen Square in support of the protests, and on May 13 (two days prior to Mikhail Gorbachev's planned visit to China) 3,000 students staged a hunger strike as they attempted to embarrass the Chinese government and attract foreign media attention. News of the hunger strike soon spread to other cities including Shanghai, Harbin, and Tianjin, where more students began to support the demonstrations. The Beijing Autonomous Union of Workers even threatened the government with a general work stoppage in support of the protests. On May 17 and 18, one million people protested in Tiananmen Square in support of the hunger strikers.

Following these successive actions, the Chinese government began to open up negotiations. On May 19, the day after members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo paid a hospital visit to hunger strikers who had fallen ill during the protest, Premier Li Peng held a televised meeting with the student leaders. However, negotiations were unsuccessful and the following day Li Peng declared martial law. In addition, Zhao Ziyang, the General Secretary of the Communist Party who had sympathized with the students, was promptly replaced by hard-liner Jiang Zemin. On May 20, 100,000 troops attempted to prevent the protesters from entering Tiananmen Square, but the soldiers were blocked by an estimated 2 million civilians before they could blockade the square.

The students strongly objected to these actions and continued to protest in Tiananmen Square. However, divisions within the student leadership concerning the issue of whether the students should continue to occupy Tiananmen Square and potentially face a brutal government crackdown hindered the students' ability to effectively strategize.

In June, the Chinese government sought to permanently end the Tiananmen Square occupation. On June 3, claiming that protesters had injured several troops and killed one soldier, the government sent 30,000 unarmed troops to Tiananmen Square to remove the protesters. However, the protesters formed barricades and human rings to prevent the soldiers from entering the Square. On June 4, the government sent in tanks and armed soldiers to forcibly break through the human barriers. The soldiers opened fire on the demonstrators, and media and government reports of the estimated death toll ranged from 300 to 10,000. News of the June 4 incident made international headlines, and it soon became known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre.

The government crackdown on the student demonstrations effectively brought the student campaign for democracy to an abrupt end. Many protesters fled the country, including student leader Wu'er Kaixi. Despite the large scale protests and international criticism, the Chinese government continued to implement a policy of tight censorship and refused to enact democratic reforms.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Solidarity movement in Poland and the easing of government censorship in the USSR by Mikhail Gorbachev helped influence the Chinese student movement (1).

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

Edited by Max Rennebohm (02/09/2011)

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

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