



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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El Salvadorans bring down a dictator, 1944

- Latin American Democracy Campaigns (1944)

Mid-April

1944

to: 7 May

1944

Country: El Salvador

Goals:

Protesters sought to bring an end to censorship and political repression, deny president Maximiliano Hernández Martínez an unconstitutionally mandated third term in office, and hold free elections.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 043. Political mourning

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 062. Student strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 062. Student strike
- 104. Professional strike
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 051. Walk-outs
- 065. Stay-at-home
- 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 004. Signed public statements
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 051. Walk-outs
- 065. Stay-at-home
- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 051. Walk-outs
- 065. Stay-at-home
- 117. General strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Group characterization:

- Journalists
- Lawyers
- coffee magnates
- dentists
- doctors
- government officials
- labor activists
- market women
- military officers
- shop-owners
- students
- university faculty
- workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Student leaders, including Fabio Castillo, Jorge Bustamante, Galindo Pohl, Jorge Mazzini, Raúl Castellanos, and Mario Colorado; National Reconstruction Committee

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Foreign diplomats, foreign journalists, and Latin American professionals and poets criticized Martínez for his brutal crackdown that followed the April uprising.

Involvement of social elites:

Doctors, lawyers, military officers, resigned government officials

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Students

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Lawyers
- Market-women
- Shopkeepers
- University faculty

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- National Reconstruction Committee

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- doctors

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 4 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Several campaigners who were caught with leaflets were detained.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

In 1938, El Salvadoran president General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez proposed changing the country's constitution so that he could continue holding his position beyond the end of his second term. When Martínez came to power in the early 1930s as a result of a coup, he extended his authority over the state by centralizing decision-making, and organizing the only legally operating political party, the Partido Nacional Pro-Patria. Following a communist and indigenous rebellion in the early 1930s, the government outlawed the Communist Party, banned peasant organizations, censored the press, imprisoned perceived or supposed subversives, targeted labor activists, and assumed direct control over universities. In addition to enforcing a state of siege during the twelve years that followed the rebellion, Martínez created a secret police force and hired informants to monitor private conversations.

In response to Martínez's proposal to change the constitution to allow his continued rule, as well as his subsequent sacking of the undersecretary of defense who opposed the idea, other government officials—including the auditor general, treasury auditor, undersecretary of public instruction, the chief of the treasury legal staff, the public works undersecretary, and the finance undersecretary—decided to resign. However, given Martínez's influence, the National Assembly awarded Martínez with a one-time suspension on the ban on consecutive terms.

Despite this granted permission, Martínez continued to face opposition. Students and university faculty were frustrated by the dictator's control of academic appointments and professional licensing, and newspaper editors were irritated by the restrictions placed on what they printed. Junior officers were also frustrated by the regime's concentration of privileges and opportunities to a select few.

In April of 1944, after an armed uprising failed to remove Martínez from power, university students began organizing against the regime. In response to the government's bloody crackdown that followed the attempted coup, medical students wore black ties in April as a show of mourning for those who had been killed. As they organized with different constituents, the students planned to stage a nation-wide general strike, which they called the *huelga de brazos caídos* ("arms at your side" strike). Circulating leaflets, the students encouraged El Salvadorans to refrain from going to work and to stay indoors in order to avoid more bloodshed in the streets. The students, some of whom included Fabio Castillo, Jorge Bustamente, Galindo Pohl, Jorge Mazzini, Raúl Castellanos, and Mario Colorado, boycotted their classes and raised funds to help support the strikers. The students also made an effort to inform the US Embassy that their campaign would be a peaceful one that sought to avoid bloodshed.

As the strike went into effect during the first week of May 1944, doctors, lawyers, dentists, teachers, pharmacists, engineers, shopkeepers, market women, laborers, technicians, theater employees, and bank, railroad, and electric-utility employees enthusiastically participated. Although police tried to force people to go to work, strikers stayed at home or walked out on their jobs.

As the country came to a standstill, government officials floundered. They knew how to defeat a violent revolt, but were uncertain how to respond to the student-led nonviolent campaign. The government ordered the student organizers to be arrested, but police only detained a few people caught with leaflets. To pacify the strikers, the government announced that it was releasing all the prisoners taken after the failed uprising, and it then tried to discredit the strike by labeling it as a movement that served only the upper classes.

However, the strike's momentum continued to increase. Organizers met to create an organization that would speak and negotiate for the strikers, forming the National Reconstruction Committee on 5 May. The Committee was composed of a student representative, a retired general, a physician, a lawyer, and a commercial employee. The Committee created a list of demands, one of which called for the president to step down immediately.

In response, General Martínez addressed the nation over the radio, calling on citizens to return to work and for business owners to open their doors. On 6 May, groups of men were reported as trying to force striking stores to open, and doctors received anonymous threats. In addition, a police officer opened fire on youths on 7 May, killing one of them. The tragedy brought together a cross-section of El Salvadorans, and after the funeral thousands demonstrated at the Plaza Barrios, located close to the National Assembly and government offices.

On May 7, with pressure mounting, many of the president's ministers decided to resign. As he continued to lose support, President Martínez decided to hold a meeting with the National Reconstruction Committee on 8 May, and after hours of negotiating, the president agreed to resign immediately. The presidency passed to General Andrés Menéndez, a more moderate official who promised constitutional reform and elections. On the day the students called off the strike, the former president Martínez left the country and never returned.

The victory was not retained beyond five months, however. The El Salvadoran democratic leadership that saw how to oust the dictator Martínez did not have a strategy for defending their achievement nonviolently. A successful coup in October 1944 usurped power from Menéndez and set El Salvador on another long path of political strife and instability.

Research Notes

Sources:

Ackerman, Peter and Jack Duval. *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*. Palgrave, New York. 2000. Pp. 241-265

Parkman, Patricia. *Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador: The Fall of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez*. University of Arizona Press, Tuscon. 1988.

Additional Notes:

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