Ghanaians campaign for independence from British rule, 1949-1951

Time period notes: Although there was a long preparatory period before 1949, the nonviolent campaign here is considered to start in November 1949 with the first known collective declaration demanding independence. In addition, although the "positive action" was officially ended in early 1950, the nonviolent campaign is here considered to have continued until the elections of 1951 because the Convention People’s Party continued to use nonviolent methods until that point.

Country: Ghana

Goals:
Self-government and independence from British rule

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 013. Deputations
- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings
- 076. National consumers' boycott
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:
• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 020. Prayer and worship
• 036. Performances of plays and music
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 020. Prayer and worship
• 036. Performances of plays and music
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 020. Prayer and worship
• 036. Performances of plays and music
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 020. Prayer and worship
• 036. Performances of plays and music
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Notes on Methods:
The "positive action" direct action portion of the campaign lasted from December through January (first segment). After that the campaigners focused on gaining support for the elections to be held in February 1951. For that reason, a variety of methods were used for shorter periods in Segment 1, and in the following segments the methods are here kept the same. See the narrative for more specific details on either portion of the campaign.

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
National/Ethnic Identity
Group characterization:

- Black Africans in the British colony of the Gold Coast (later Ghana)

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Kwame Nkrumah and other Convention People’s Party (CPP) leaders

Partners:
Cooperatives, labor unions, farm groups, educational, cultural, women’s and youth organizations.

External allies:
The United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC)

Involvement of social elites:
Some African chiefs (such as Nii Kwabena Bonne III), journalists and cultural figures

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
- UGCC
- cooperatives
- cultural organizations
- educational organizations
- unions and other labor groups
- women’s and youth organizations

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 2.5 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
The British colonial administration

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not Known

Campaigner violence:
In January 1950, ex-servicemen staged a march to Christiansborg; the protesters clashed with police forces sent to stop them and two policemen were killed.

Repressive Violence:
In January 1950, the Governor imposed a state of emergency, during which an anti-African pogrom was encouraged (with armed Syrian and European civilians enrolled as auxiliary police and allowed to terrorize and even kill peaceful citizens) and the offices of the Party newspaper and two others were raided by police and closed. The editors of the said publications were jailed, together with many CPP leaders, including Nkrumah. His personal assistant and some of his companions were beaten
Ghana was the first African country south of the Sahara to gain its independence. The process aimed at African representation had begun as early as the 1920s and under the post-World War II Constitution African parties were allowed to contest elections. But the British tended to favor cooperation with conservative African chiefs and a small intellectual elite, who no longer represented the people as a whole. Kwame Nkrumah, the leader of a Convention People’s Party, which began in 1949, encouraged the nationalist movement demanding immediate independence and led a campaign of nonviolent ‘positive action’ influenced by Gandhi and India’s struggle for independence.

After Nkrumah had been studying abroad for several years, J. B. Danquah, president of the Gold Coast’s first opposition political party, the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), invited Nkrumah to become the secretary of the Convention in 1947. Nkrumah arrived in December 1947 and began work immediately. In February 1948, a national crisis occurred. A group of unarmed African ex-servicemen set out on a march from Accra to the suburban residence of the British governor to present him with a petition of grievances. Ordered to stop, they refused and the police forces opened fire, killing two and wounding five of the participants. When news of the incident spread, rioting broke out in several towns. European and Asian stores were looted by the angry mob and the rioters forced open the Central Prison and set free its inmates. The riots spread from Accra to other cities, such as Nasawam, Koforidua, Akuse and Kumasi, and lasted for days, resulting in 29 deaths and 237 other casualties by the time they were over. Prior to the riots there had been a month-long peaceful boycott of all European and Syrian merchandise organized by Nii Kwabena Bonne III, a Ga Chief, who was trying to force the foreign shopkeepers to reduce the exorbitant prices they were charging Africans for essential commodities. The boycott ended the very day the riots broke out.

None of these events was the work of the UGCC, which had been engaged in a struggle for constitutional reform. Nkrumah, however, used the crisis in favor of the independence campaign. On February 29, 1948, in the midst of the rioting, he cabled to the Colonial Office in London saying that people were demanding self-government and that a commission to supervise the transition towards independence should be sent to the Gold Coast. He sent copies of this message to the international press (The New York Time, the Associated Negro Press, the Novoe Vremya, etc.). Hoping to put a stop to the riots, the Governor exiled Danquah, Nkrumah, and other UGCC leaders on March 13th. The governor also set up an all-African committee to draft a new constitution. This body issued a report, adopted with a few modifications by the Colonial Office as a basis for gradual, guided self-governance and for the first general election in Gold Coast history. Dissatisfied with this solution, Nkrumah pressed for a more radical alternative and precipitated a split with the UGCC. With several others, Nkrumah formed the Convention People’s Party (CPP) in June 1949. The party was headed by Nkrumah with Kojo Botsio as its secretary and K. A. Gbedemah as its vice-
Nkrumah and nine other CPP members immediately embarked on a countrywide tour to present the CPP program to the people. They gained support quickly and on November 20th, 1949, the CPP called a constituent assembly such as the one Nkrumah had earlier demanded of the Colonial Office. The assembly was attended by more than 80,000 representatives of over fifty groups, including cooperatives, labor unions, farm groups, educational, cultural, women’s and youth organizations. The assembly demanded that the “people of the Gold Coast be granted immediate self-government, that is, dominion status” and drew up a memorandum outlining the structure of government, both central and local, which they wanted embodied in the new constitutions. Nkrumah also asked for a round-table conference with the British officials, but they refused to meet with him or other CPP leaders, or to recognize the assembly. Nkrumah gave the British three weeks to respond and when they did not, he informed the Governor on December 15th, 1949 that the CPP would embark upon a campaign of “Positive Action”, based on Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolent noncooperation, and would continue with it until the British Government conceded the right of the Gold Coast people to convene their Constituent Assembly. The same day, through the CPP newspapers, Nkrumah instructed the nation to prepare, reminding the people that strikes and other activities which were to be part of the campaign must remain strictly non-violent, and that actions such as looting, burning and destruction of property, rioting or other forms of violence would undermine the campaign and its goals.

Nkrumah distinguished two stages in the campaign: first, the period of “positive action”, a combination of nonviolent methods with effective and disciplined political action, and second, the stage of “tactical action”, a sort of contest of wits. CPP organizers first prepared people around the country for the first stage of civil resistance, the positive action phase. The government responded by testing the strength of the organization and its tactics. Three CPP journalists and the secretary of the Ex-Servicemen Union (partner organization) were imprisoned on charges of sedition, but the bail was quickly raised and paid by CPP volunteers. Hoping to forestall the threatened positive action campaign, government officials agreed to a conference with CPP leaders, which began on January 5, 1950. The British asked Nkrumah to postpone positive action while they studied the proposals put forward by the CPP and announced on the radio that an agreement had been reached. The CPP reacted by breaking off the negotiations and on January 8, 1950, called a mass meeting, telling the participants that a nation-wide boycott of British goods and a general strike should begin at midnight that day. In his speech at that meeting, Nkrumah presented the main weapons of positive action as being legitimate political agitation, press and educational campaigns, and, as a last resort, the constitutional application of strikes, boycotts and noncooperation based on the principle of absolute nonviolence. The strike began at the set time.

The same day, Nkrumah travelled to other key cities – Cape Coast, Sekondi and Tarkwa – formally declaring the onset of positive action in each of them, while CPP organizers spread the word to other areas. The strike paralyzed the country. Nobody worked, transportation was brought to a standstill, however, essential services like water, electricity and medical care continued to work, as the nationalist leaders had agreed. Positive action continued for 21 days, despite threats of dismissal of workers from jobs, numerous warnings and curfews, and the full evocation of a state of emergency (called by the Governor).

Seeking to create division among the participants and put an end to the strike, the government broadcasted radio “updates” of the situation, telling people in each city that strikers in other regions had already gone back to work. To counteract the government manipulation, Nkrumah called another mass meeting on January 11th, where he spoke for two hours to a large crowd. At 7 PM the same day, the Governor imposed a strict curfew and a series of emergency measures (the state of emergency would last from January 11th to March 6, 1950): public meetings were forbidden, all Party letters were opened and censored, an anti-African pogrom was encouraged (with armed Syrian and European civilians enrolled as auxiliary police and allowed to terrorize and even kill peaceful citizens), the Party newspaper and two others were banned and their offices were raided by police and closed, the editors of the opposition publications were jailed, together with many CPP leaders, including Nkrumah. None resisted the arrests. Nkrumah had instructed the country to keep calm and make “no demonstrations of any kind”. Although incidental violence on the part of the British occurred (for instance, Nkrumah’s personal assistant and some of his companions were beaten), overall, they acted with restraint. One serious incident marred the campaign: on January 17th, ex-servicemen staged a march to Christiansborg. The marchers clashed with police forces sent to stop them and two policemen were killed. Nkrumah
did not stop the campaign and, at his trial, disclaimed responsibility for this “unauthorized occurrence”. He and his colleague were convicted for “inciting others to take part in illegal activities” and received prison sentences from six months to two years.

Positive action was over, but the solidarity it had demonstrated was channeled to electoral activity. When elections for the town council took place in Accra, Cape Coast and Kumasi, the CPP won majorities in all three cities. In April 1950, Kimla Agbeli Gbedemah, one of the jailed CPP leaders, was released from prison. He immediately took charge of the Party as chairman and organized it for the forthcoming general elections (in the process creating a strong network of party branches across the southern half of the colony), receiving directives smuggled out of prison from the other leaders. Rallies, picnics, dances and skits were organized in all major cities, party flags, slogans and salutes embodied the CPP and its goals, and loudspeaker vans painted in the Party’s colors (red, white and green) were used to disseminate electoral messages. On a more emotional level, the Party was masterful in adapting prayers and biblical phrases to popularize its message among people for whom Christianity had deep appeal.

The elections were held in February 1951, less than a year after the positive action campaign, and the CPP swept the country, winning 35 out of 38 seats. The British then released the CPP leaders who had remained in prison; they became the center of public ceremonies organized by the Party to maintain the cult of martyrdom that had developed around its imprisoned leadership and, as “prison graduates”, were awarded diplomas and celebrated almost as heroes. They promptly occupied their government posts. The governmental structure contained all the defects that they had protested against, but under Nkrumah’s leadership, they were worked out as the Gold Coast moved rapidly towards full self-government and independence, which was proclaimed on March 6, 1957, with Nkrumah as prime-minister of the new nation of Ghana. The nonviolent “positive action” campaign was not the sole factor in bringing this result, but it provided strong impetus to hasten the day, and powerful leverage for political action both through the election and in the parliamentary maneuvering that followed. Though not used again, its potential gave substance to CPP moves within the government.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Indian independence movement, and Gandhian and Marxist philosophies influenced the campaign (1).

The campaign influenced similar protests in the colonial world (for example, Zambia’s struggle for independence featured a similar philosophy of “positive action” (2).

Sources:


Bankole, Timothy. Nkrumah, Kwame: His Rise to Power. ch. 4-11 (esp. ch. 9). Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1963


Cowan, E. A. Evolution of Trade Unionism in Ghana. Accra: TUC (Ghana), 1960. ch. 5


Wallerstein, Immanuel Maurice. The road to independence : Ghana and the Ivory Coast. La Haye: Mouton, 1964

Additional Notes:
For easy-access web resources see:

- http://www.counterpunch.org/sutherland1.html
- http://www.civilresistance.info/bibliography/B
- http://www.slideshare.net/gsill/african-independence
- http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=ad43

This campaign was also researched by Gavin Musynske (2009) and some information was added from his account (by the editor). However the narrative was written solely by the author.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (17/05/2011)

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Adriana Popa, 07/11/2010

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