Guatemalan activists defend human rights, 1960-1995

1960
to:
1996

Country: Guatemala

Location Description: *Throughout Guatemala*

Goals:

The goal of the campaign was to promote peace and defend the human rights of the Guatemalan population. Specifically, the movement sought to stop the "disappearances", find their disappeared family members, demilitarize the country, and seek justice for the perpetrators.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 033. Fraternization
- 043. Political mourning
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 154. Severance of diplomatic relations
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 033. Fraternization
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 043. Political mourning
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 033. Fraternization
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 043. Political mourning

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 033. Fraternization
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 043. Political mourning
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 033. Fraternization
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 043. Political mourning
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 064. Withdrawal from social institutions
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 033. Fraternization
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 043. Political mourning
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 129. Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 013. Deputations
- 015. Group lobbying

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity
Peace

Group characterization:

- Women
- family members of the victims from the civil war
- indigenous communities
- students
- urban middle class

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Committee of Family Members of the Disappeared (Comité de Familiares de Desaparecidos), the Group of Mutual Support (GAM- Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo), and Rigoberta Menchú.
Partners:
Families of the Detained-Disappeared in Guatemala (FAMDEGUA- Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos de Guatemala), National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA- Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala), Council of Ethnic Communities Runujel Junam (CERJ- Consejo de Comunidades Etnicas Runujel Junam), Mayan Defense (Defensoría Maya), Foundation Rigoberta Menchú, Alliance Against Impunity (Alianza Contra la Impunidad)
External allies:
The Catholic Church, Association of University Students (Asociación de Estudiantes Universitarios), Bufete Popular (Popular Lawyers Group), Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Association of University Students
- Committee of Family Members of the Disappeared
- Popular Lawyers Group

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:

- Mayan communities
- Rigoberta Menchu
- The Group of Mutual Support
- the Catholic Church

Groups in 5th Segment:

- CERJ
- CONAVIGUA
- Mayan Defense

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Alliance Against Impunity
- FAMDEGUA
- Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)

Segment Length: *6 years*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
The Guatemalan government and military

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
The human rights movement used no known violence to achieve their objectives. However, because some human rights advocates shared the ideas promoted by guerrilla groups, the government sought to delegitimize the movement by accusing them of participating in violent and destabilizing activities.

Repressive Violence:
Repression was the primary tactic employed by the military government. Dissidents and activists were often intimidated, kidnapped, tortured, and killed. Additionally, the military raped many indigenous women and "disappeared" numerous community leaders and activists.

The chaos and confusion of the Guatemalan civil war was an excuse for the government to brutally torture guerrilla sympathizers or advocates of human rights. In order to scare the population, the government even burned or tortured dissidents in public places. Many of the victims had their ears, eyes, and other body parts cut off before their executions.

Success Outcome

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

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
Success was mixed, although the balance is slightly tipped towards positive outcomes. That is, the movement was able to demilitarize many different Guatemalan communities, help bring about the end of the civil war and repressive violence, and establish constitutional protection for indigenous communities. Nonetheless, the movement was not able to seek justice for most of the perpetrators, the whereabouts of many of the disappeared remain unknown, and it took the movement almost thirty years to stop political persecutions and violence.

Most of the organizations involved in the defense of human rights movement continued to work in Guatemala to further their cause.

Most of the organizations involved in the movement grew in terms of popular support for their cause, members, allies, and resources. The growth was gradual.

The Guatemalan people have endured numerous hardships throughout the years, but none more tragic than those perpetrated by

the Guatemalan government and military during the country's thirty-six year civil war. The Guatemalan civil war began in 1960, when a group of insurgents sought to depose the US-backed military government. The military had obtained complete authority in Guatemala by overthrowing the democratically elected President Jacobo Árbenz in 1957. Consequently, there was tremendous popular discontentment, and the military used violence as their primary means to control the population. Government repression was most strongly felt in marginalized Mayan communities, yet dissidence was strictly prohibited throughout the country.

As a result of the oppressive nature of the regime, and the armed resistance by some guerrilla groups throughout Guatemala, there were massive amounts of civilian causalities. In fact, it is estimated that the conflict caused more than two hundred thousand deaths, out of which eighty-three percent were from indigenous communities. Moreover, the Historical Clarification Committee, an independent commission in charge of investigating the conflict, determined that the military government was responsible for ninety-three percent of those violations. Additionally, the government fostered fear in the population by torturing and "disappearing" its enemies. That is, many dissidents were taken from their communities, and their whereabouts became unknown to their families and friends.

Even though Guatemalans were initially compliant with the military regime, as disappearances continued the victims' family members began to speak out and organize. The mothers and wives of victims were particularly active in their struggle to find their loved ones, and thus were often the protagonist of the human rights campaigns. At first, search efforts for the disappeared were individual and disarticulated, yet as individuals began to see each other checking the morgues, hospitals and burial sites, families began to coalesce under common organizations. For instance, desperate family members, who were propelled by their tragedies to confront the government's brutal policies, created the Committee of Family Members of the Disappeared (Comité de Familiares de Desaparecidos) and the Group of Mutual Support (Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo).

The first objective of human rights groups was to prevent further disappearances and to search for the missing, yet shortly after the movement began to adopt more comprehensive demands for human rights. In order to challenge the regime, the family members of the disappeared sought help from the Association of University Students, the Catholic Church, and other professional groups in the country. Through these allies, organizations such as the Group of Mutual Support were able to extend their network of popular support and to develop a united front against the injustices of the regime. Moreover, different groups became active participants in the defense of human rights, such as Alliance Against Impunity, Mayan Defense, and the Foundation of Rigoberta Menchú. These groups strived to end impunity, demilitarize their society, and end political violence.

Human rights organizations employed varied tactics to promote peace and justice. These methods ranged from exposing and denouncing crimes, to actively resisting military policies. Many communities defied the government by signing petitions, going on marches, and sending delegations to Guatemala City to seek meetings with government officials. At first, the government ignored these actions and paid no heed to the demands. However, the public nature of the protests allowed the movement to gain more supporters, and it provided activists with the opportunity to recount the tragedies they had endured.

As more people began to protest government policies, the military increased political persecutions. Nonetheless, when repression increased, many communities became more defiant. For instance, on December 2, 1990, in the municipality of Santiago Atitlán, families left their houses at the sign of a ringing bell in order to band together to defend their community. The military, confronted by popular protest and resistance, responded by shooting at the crowd. As a result, fourteen people were killed, and news about the tragedy spread throughout Guatemala and the world. The events were recounted on television, and activists and groups from other neighborhoods went to Santiago Atitlán to show their support. Because of the news coverage, popular reaction, and international pressure, the government acquiesced and forced both the military and national police to leave the municipality. Although the outcome was a minor triumph in the face of so much injustice, it encouraged activists to continue their struggle. Many communities continued to defy the government by refusing to enlist in the military, ostracizing local military representatives, and advocating an end to military impunity.

Although human rights organizations played the primary role in the struggle, the leadership of Rigoberta Menchú was significant for the movement. Rigoberta Menchú was a young Mayan activist who helped internationalize the heinous crimes committed against the Guatemalan indigenous communities. In her book, I, Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans, she

expresses the plight of her people. Readers from all over the world were shocked by the stories in the book, so Menchú's accounts helped discredit the Guatemalan government. She also denounced the government in different international organizations, including the UN's Human Rights Commission. As it happens, her work in the defense of human rights was so extensive, that in 1992 Rigoberta Menchú was awarded the Nobel Peace Price. Thus, she became a renowned international figure and was able to use her position to advance the promotion of human rights and to champion for an end to the civil war.

Lastly, it is important to note that while many activists sympathized with the ideals of unity and prosperity of the guerrillas, they did not advocate violence. Evidently, the government sought to delegitimize activists by accusing them of being guerrilla members, yet human rights defenders acknowledged that violence would only bring more harm to the population. In fact, the guerrillas were not equipped to defeat the well-funded and US-trained Guatemalan military. Therefore, the movement used other means to accomplish their objectives. Actually, they often even appealed to the same laws and the constitution purported by the government. For example, rather than simply reject the system, the movement sought to have it truly enforced. Activists participated in the Constituent Assembly of 1985 and were thus allowed to ensure the constitutional protection of indigenous rights. Though in practice the military ignored the laws and constitution, the institutional change gave human rights defenders further legitimacy in their struggles.

Therefore, despite the long and enduring campaign by human rights activists and groups, their perseverance contributed in bringing about an end to the military repressions. Most of the organizations recognized the success of the campaign, yet they all realized that much more work needed to be done. Though the end of the civil war decreased violence in Guatemalan society, the military was still protected by an aura of impunity. Not all the perpetrators were brought to justice, and indigenous communities continued to be somewhat marginalized. Nevertheless, overall the movement was able to accomplish most of its objectives. After guerrilla groups and the government signed a peace treaty on December 29, 1996, most communities were demilitarized, political repression was substantially reduced, and human rights organizations were allowed to freely continue their work. Thus, the Guatemalan nonviolent campaign proved to be effective, although it required tremendous sacrifice and time.

Research Notes

Influences:

Not known
Sources:
"EL TERROR Y SUS SECUELAS." AAAS - The World's Largest General Scientific Society. Web. 28 Nov. 2011. <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/mds/spanish/cap3/ter.html>.

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When the Mountains Tremble. New Yorker Films, 1983.

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Additional Notes:
Many different actors were involved in the struggle against the military and the government, yet not all of them chose the nonviolent path. Although the human rights movement never used violence, they often shared the same ideals and sympathized with the goals of the guerrillas. As a result, the government often accused human rights advocates of being guerrilla members, and thus justified violent acts against them. Moreover, the guerrilla's actions intensified the government's repression against the population. Therefore, this case shows how violence, even if perpetuated by external groups to the campaign, can beget more violence and prolong conflicts.
Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Manuel Figueredo, 17/12/2011

Links:

[1] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color

[2] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-women

[3] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/example-paradox-repression

[4] https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/included-participation-more-one-social-class