



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Guatemalan indigenous peoples campaign for equal rights, 1977-1981

Time period notes: *Fernando Romeo Lucas García was the President of Guatemala from July 1, 1978 to March 23, 1982 after being elected by a very narrow margin, with accusations of fraud. He was succeeded by Efraín Ríos Montt in March 23, 1982, who began the massive attacks against indigenous Mayans in full.*

1 May

1977

to: 14 February

1981

Country: Guatemala

Location City/State/Province: *El Quiché (department) and Guatemala City (capital city)*

Location Description: *El Quiché is a rural department in the western highlands Guatemala with a large number of indigenous residents*

Goals:

The Comité de Unidad Campesina (Committee of Campesino Unity - CUC) was created to "struggle aggressively (though not as armed combatants) for the interests and rights of rural people, a struggle not based just on legalities." Their slogans were "No more forced recruitment by the Army," "Lack of land," "No to repression," "No to discrimination," and "No to the high cost of living."

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Demonstration celebrating the democratic revolution of 1944
- 048. Protest meetings
- 049. Camouflaged meetings of protest

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 049. Camouflaged meetings of protest
- 106. Industry strike › Miners go on strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 019. Wearing of symbols › Traditional Clothing and Rural Farming Tools to show status as laborers
- 049. Camouflaged meetings of protest

Methods in 4th segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television › Publicizing massacre and subsequent protest in indigenous languages
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Protest in response to the massacre of Kekchi indigenous people
- 049. Camouflaged meetings of protest

Methods in 5th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books › Propaganda against the government
- 049. Camouflaged meetings of protest
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › Blocking highways, creating barricades

Methods in 6th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › Indigenous leaders meet at historic indigenous city to declare change in tactics in response to Spanish Embassy massacre
- 010. Newspapers and journals › Protesters/Delegates went to newspaper offices in Guatemala City seeking publicity
- 011. Records, radio, and television › Protesters/delegates went to radio stations in Guatemala City seeking publicity
- 015. Group lobbying › 39 Delegates from the department of El Quiche under the name of the CUC petition the government to stop human rights abuses
- 038. Marches
- 049. Camouflaged meetings of protest
- 097. Protest strike › 70,000 sugarcane workers on the Soth Coast strike in response to Spanish Embassy massacre
- 152. Delay and cancellation of diplomatic events › Spain ended all diplomatic ties to Guatemala
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 199. Nonviolent confinement › Occupied Spanish Embassy and took employees hostage, but with no threats of violence

Notes on Methods:

It is unclear whether the occupation and confinement of employees was entirely nonviolent. We have determined the role of violence to be minimal, if nonexistent, but there is debate about the role of violence in this action.

Classifications

Classification:

Change
Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice
Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Rural Indigenous Groups

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The campaign was led by the Committee of Campesino Unity (Comite de Unidad Campesina, CUC). The leaders of the CUC

were purposefully kept secret to avoid government assassination attempts

Partners:

The CUC had associations with the Revolutionary Student Front (FERG), local ladino peasants, mine workers, sugarcane plantation workers

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

The Spanish Ambassador Máximo Cajal y López was sympathetic to the protesters cause, and a former Guatemalan vice president and current Guatemalan foreign minister were in the Embassy for negotiations.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Mine workers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Former Guatemalan Vice President
- Present Guatemalan Foreign Minister
- Revolutionary Student Front (FERG)
- Spanish Ambassadors
- Sugarcane plantation workers

Segment Length: *Approximately 5.5 Months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The Guatemalan government, led by General Romeo Lucas García, the current president

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

None known

Campaigner violence:

None was reported, though there may have been some struggle in securing the Embassy in the first place. The role of violence was not clear in this action.

Repressive Violence:

Killing of protesters, killing of organizational leaders, burning of Spanish Embassy and those inside

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

While none of the goals of the campaign were met, the Committee for Campesino Unity was created and grew exponentially from 1977 to 1980. It survived as an organization after the end of the campaign, but switched tactics from nonviolence to violent resistance against the government. Systematic repression and violence against indigenous people that was highlighted in the burning of the Spanish Embassy caused many indigenous people to transition from protests and organizing to armed struggle. At the same time, the government began a massive killing campaign, killing over 200,000 indigenous men, women, and children from 1981 to 1983, though murders continued past that point. Fighting between the army and guerrilla groups would continue until 1996 with the signing of the Guatemala Peace Accords.

On February 4, 1976, a massive earthquake hit the highlands of Guatemala and displaced more than one million people. Indigenous groups from the departments of Sacatepequez, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, and Quiche were hit the hardest and the weak response from the national government brought to light the racial inequalities affecting indigenous peoples.

Indigenous leaders spoke regarding the need for community organizing to improve living conditions and held a number of discussions in which all men (though not women) held an equal voice. Following traditional methods of decision making by group consensus, the men moved to create an action-based campaign using some, but not all, of the organizational systems of an organization called Accion Catolica. Wealthier indigenous people sought to influence the government through the creation of a Congressional party, but failed. The army continued committing human rights abuses and killing indigenous organizers so many organizations went underground.

On May 1, 1977, large numbers of indigenous people left the highlands to observe and learn from a large public demonstration for the first time. On October 20, 1977, many indigenous people participated in a different demonstration celebrating the democratic revolution of 1944, but were not under the name of any group.

In November of that same year, a large number of indigenous and ladino miners participated in a 351-kilometer march to the capital demanding better working conditions. The march, which followed the Pan American highway, went through indigenous land in the western highlands and prompted indigenous groups to support the miners. These groups provided assistance for 275 km of the march and prompted indigenous organization on a larger scale that had been present before.

Because of the success of the mining march, organizers prepared for a May 1, 1978, demonstration, contacting all grass-root groups in Quiche, Chimaltenango, and the South Coast. The organization Comite de Unidad Campesina (Committee of Campesino Unity, CUC) was created with the goal to “struggle aggressively (though not as armed combatants) for the interests and rights of rural people, a struggle not based just on legalities. Their slogans were “No more forced recruitment by the Army,” “Lack of land,” “No to repression,” “No to discrimination,” “No to the high cost of living.” On May 1, 1978, the protest was well attended and CUC participants spanned several blocks of the march.

Twenty-nine days later, the government killed 150 Kekchi Indians in a village of Panoz. This prompted a number of organizations to call for a demonstration on June 8, 1978. CUC was one of the primary organizers of the demonstration and publicity was broadcasted from local radio stations in a number of indigenous languages.

The CUC grew exponentially and radicalized. By 1979 they began to block highways and create barricades.

Later that year, the CUC delegation, composed of a number of indigenous leaders from the Quiche region, decided to march to Guatemala City to bring attention to the violations of human rights occurring in the countryside. In the capital city, they hoped to gain the attention of the international community and denounce the disappearances and subsequent murders of nine indigenous workers from Uspantán, El Quiché, as well as military repression from the 3,000 troops stationed in Ixil. They also sought to regain the land that had been taken from them by military officers.

Little used to listening to the demands of indigenous people, the Guatemalan government felt threatened and considered the march subversive. The government also disliked the protest's association with CUC because the CUC been organizing mass strikes with plantation workers and thus causing problems for government officials. The protest also had associations with a radical university student group called the Revolutionary Student Front (FERG). Both of these groups had associations with EGP rebels.

When the delegates reached Guatemala City, the capital, the president, General Lucas Carcia, refused to see them. They made surprise visits to newspaper offices and briefly occupied radio stations to try to make their voices heard, but the efforts were largely unsuccessful. The delegates then attempted to attend a hearing in Congress, bearing flowers to show their peaceful intentions, but were again turned away. The delegate's legal advisor was assassinated outside of police headquarters by unknown assailants shortly thereafter.

Unable to access Congress, the delegates changed tactics and, out of desperation, decided to occupy the Spanish Embassy. In taking control of the building and keeping of the employees inside hostage, the delegates hoped to gain international attention and thus create a stage to voice their demands for justice. Because this protest would be taking place in the embassy, a foreign property, the indigenous protesters assumed that the government would be unlikely to threaten them there.

At 9:30 AM on January 31, 1980, months after their arrival in the capital, the protesters broke into the Spanish Embassy and locked the security guards outside. Sources disagree whether the protesters were armed, but the general consensus of non-Guatemalan military organizations, the occupation was for the most part peaceful. One source mentions that the protesters were seen to have machetes, a common representation of rural labor. Only the Guatemalan police and military sources claim that the protestors had pistols and Molotov cocktails, though there is no mention in their own reports or any other source that these weapons were ever used.

Some sources say that the Spanish Ambassador Maximo Cajal gave tacit approval to the protestor's occupation of the embassy, though the government asserted that this break-in was an assault on the Spanish Embassy by a guerrilla group disguising themselves as an indigenous group from El Quiché. The government refused to believe that the protesters were there with permission, despite the Spanish ambassador's frequent requests for negotiation and discussion regarding his own embassy.

Spanish Ambassador Máximo Cajal y López was sympathetic to the protestors cause and Cajal later described the negotiations as being relatively tranquil although the protestors refused to relinquish their hostages. Both ambassadors attended the press conference that the protestors had arranged to begin at noon, along with a former vice-president of Guatemala and a foreign minister. On the other hand, the Guatemalan government refused to negotiate. When President Lucas Carcia learned of the occupation, he met with the police chief German Cupina Barahona and Minister of the Interior Donald Alvarez Ruiz and ordered Ruiz to "Take them out as you can."

At this point, almost all the reports vary, sometimes greatly. All sources agree that police surrounded the building, and that the protestors barricaded themselves inside. In all accounts, the police fired on the building and a blaze ignited. Sources disagree whether police started the blaze purposefully or if it was an accident, but all accounts agree that the police waited outside the locked building and prohibited a fire truck from intervening while those inside screamed for help. In at least one account, the police also fired upon anyone trying to escape the building.

All but two people were killed by the blaze, including the 39 protestors, embassy staff, and two Guatemalan state officials who were acting as negotiators. The survivors were Gregorio Yujá Xoná, a CUC indigenous organizer, and an ambassador who had jumped out of a window. The ambassador requested police protection for Gregorio in the hospital, but the police withdrew during the night and Gregorio was kidnapped, tortured, shot in the head, and left on San Carlos University campus.

In response, 70,000 sugarcane workers on the South coast went on strike, which was the largest mobilization of workers the South Coast had ever seen. In addition, a large group of indigenous leaders met on February 14, 1980, at historical ruins near Tecpan. The CUC had called the meeting and the group of indigenous leaders determined that "In light of this situation, we

lamentable must resort to defending ourselves with the same arms the army utilizes. We, the Guatemalan people, all the campesinos, all the Indians as they say, the natives, those here by birthright, have the right to defend ourselves.”

The systematic repression and violence against indigenous people that was highlighted in the burning of the Spanish Embassy had caused many indigenous people to transition from protests and organizing to armed struggle. At the same time, the government began a campaign of repression, killing over 200,000 indigenous men, women, and children from 1981 to 1983, though murders continued past that point. Fighting between the army and guerrilla groups would continue until 1996 with the signing of the Guatemala Peace Accords.

Research Notes

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

Mackenzie Welch, 17/03/2012

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