



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Kenyan mothers win release of political prisoners and press for democratic reform, 1992-1993

- African Democracy Campaigns (early 1990s)

February 28,
1992

to: January 19,
1993

Country: Kenya

Location City/State/Province: *Nairobi*

Location Description: *Uhuru (Freedom) Park and All Saints Cathedral*

Goals:

To secure the release of the mothers' sons who were detained as political prisoners, and to pressure the Kenyan government into upholding democratic principles by allowing fair, multi-party elections and freedom of speech.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 015. Group lobbying
- 022. Protest disrobings
- 032. Taunting officials
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins
- 068. Sanctuary
- 097. Protest strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

- 117. General strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 037. Singing
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins
- 068. Sanctuary

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 037. Singing
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins
- 068. Sanctuary

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 037. Singing
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins
- 068. Sanctuary

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 037. Singing
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins
- 068. Sanctuary

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 037. Singing
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins
- 068. Sanctuary

Notes on Methods:

It is not clear from sources how long the national strike lasted in support of the mothers.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Mothers of Political Prisoners

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Wangari Maathai, leader of the mothers' group

Partners:

All Saints Cathedral, Release Political Prisoners (RPP) pressure group, National Council of Women of Kenya, Mothers In Action, Opposition parties including the Forum to Re-establish Democracy (FORD)

External allies:

US government, German government

Involvement of social elites:

Archbishop of the Anglican Church Manasses Kuria

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- All Saints Cathedral
- Forum to Reestablish Democracy (FORD)
- Mothers In Action
- National Council of Women of Kenya
- Release Political Prisoners (RPP) pressure group

Groups in 2nd Segment:**Groups in 3rd Segment:****Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:**

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Kenyan Government, Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi, Attorney General Amos

Wako

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Government police forces beat protesters with batons, fired gunshots into the air, and hurled tear-gas into the tent where protesters were gathered. In addition, gun-wielding police forces occupied the All Saints Cathedral to intimidate the mothers into ending their campaign.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The mothers were successful in securing the release of their sons, and their demand for democratic reform helped to build local, national, and international support for free speech and fair multi-party elections.

Although the mothers are still politically active, they spend a majority of their time working with the Green Belt Movement (an environmental organization that focuses on tree planting and environmental sustainability).

The women's rallies at All Saints Cathedral included thousands of people and the mothers gained the support of several other opposition groups.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the political atmosphere in Kenya was characterized by brutal government repression and terror. Under the single-party rule of President Daniel arap Moi, any form of political dissension was swiftly met with government interrogation, detention, and torture. Many students, journalists, lawyers, and human rights advocates were among those imprisoned for perceived anti-government statements, ideas, and actions.

By the early 1990s, the Moi government began to face increasing national and international pressure to re-introduce fair, multi-party elections. Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement organization that helped reforest much of Kenya's environmentally devastated lands, publicly criticized the repressive policies of the Moi government. (She was later, in 2004, to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.) In addition, at a November 1991 World Bank meeting, several major donors deferred on their decisions on aid to Kenya as they awaited evidence of political reform in the country. In response to such pressures, the Moi government agreed in December 1991 to move towards multi-party government.

In light of this announcement, a group of Kenyan mothers, ages 60-70 years old, resolved to secure the release of their sons who had been detained as political prisoners. Led by Maathai, these mothers held a publicized meeting on February 28, 1992 with Attorney General Amos Wako to whom they handed a letter of support for their sons. They demanded that the Kenyan government uphold democratic principles and allow freedom of speech, but Wako met their demands only with a promise that he would look into the matter.

In response, the mothers set up camp in the Uhuru (Freedom) Park that was located across from several parliament buildings. There, they staged a hunger strike and waited for the release of their sons.

The striking mothers soon garnered much support for their cause. Several sympathizers set up a tent under which the mothers could sleep, and many frustrated Kenyans came forward and openly recounted their stories of torture. These supporters joined in on the mothers' singing of traditional Kenyan songs, which included such lyrics as, "Go and take the child back..." The mothers set up banners and handed out flyers to curious Kenyans as they continued their vigil at the parliament buildings.

On March 3, the Moi government decided to forcibly disperse the demonstrators. Government police forces beat protesters with

batons, fired gunshots into the air, and hurled tear-gas into the tent where protesters were gathered. To ward off the police, three of the protesting mothers stripped their clothing, shook their breasts, and shouted, “What kind of government is this that beats women! Kill us! Kill us now! We shall die with our children!” The police forces responded by turning away and leaving the scene. According to Maathai, the tactic of disrobing was particularly effective in stopping the police because, “In the African tradition, people must respect women who are close to their mother’s age, and they must treat them as their mothers. If men beat mothers, it is like sons violating their mothers, and the mothers respond by cursing them. And they curse them by showing them their nakedness.”

The violent beatings of the mothers and their supporters made newspaper headlines, and the news sparked riots all over Nairobi. Transportation workers boycotted their work in protest of the government’s harassment of the mothers, and large crowds of stone-throwing demonstrators had to be dispersed by tear gas-firing riot police. The U.S. and German governments even directed criticism at the Moi government for its violent beating of the mothers and for its abuse of human rights. In defense, the Moi government denied using excessive force and attempted to trivialize the mothers’ campaign.

The next day, the mothers regrouped at the All Saints Cathedral, which was located one block away from Uhuru Park. Because the government prohibited the mothers from returning to their previous location (by then christened “Freedom Corner”), the priests of the cathedral granted them sanctuary. There, the mothers continued their campaign.

Over the next 11 months, the mothers held daily meetings outside the cathedral to speak with their growing numbers of supporters. They held open forums and spoke about democratic procedures and citizens’ rights. They asserted that individuals should not be placed in jail because of their political beliefs. Thousands of supporters visited the mothers, and many political opposition groups (including the Forum to Re-establish Democracy and Release Political Prisoners pressure group) and women’s organizations (including Mothers in Action and the National Council of Women of Kenya) openly lent them their support. To further pressure the Moi government, the Forum to Re-establish Democracy called for a national strike to begin on April 2, 1992. On March 31, the mothers attempted to deliver a petition to President Moi to give him an opportunity to avoid the strike, but they were turned away by police forces.

On the evening of April 1, government police raided the All Saints Cathedral and occupied the grounds for three days as the mothers barricaded themselves in the church basement. On April 12, Archbishop of the Anglican Church Manasses Kuria declared that “idlers” were officially barred from the cathedral grounds, and that the cathedral was “...a sanctuary for the mothers of the political prisoners.”

With this protection, the mothers were able to continue their campaign. On April 16 and 17, the mothers distributed 6,000 leaflets containing information about their sons and the conditions under which they were arrested. In addition, the mothers regularly attended their sons’ court hearings.

On June 24, 1992, four of the political prisoners were released, and by January 19, 1993, all of the mothers were reunited with their sons.

Research Notes

Influences:

Not known.

Sources:

British Broadcasting Company. “Summary of World Broadcasts: Kenya in Brief: Political Prisoners’ Mothers Resume Hunger Strike”. 12 March 1992.

“Police Attack Kenya Protesters”. Toronto Star. 4 March, 1992. Pp. A12

Schofield, James. "Women Protest Over Kenyan Detentions". The Age. 16 March 1992.

"Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai". Produced and directed by Lisa Merton and Alan Dater. New Day Films. Copyright 2008.

Tibbetts, Alexandra. "Mamas Fighting for Freedom in Kenya". Africa Today. Volume 41, Number 4, 1994. Pp. 27-48.

Additional Notes:

Wangari Maathai received the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her work with the Green Belt Movement and for her unwavering commitment to democracy and peace.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (20/05/2011)

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

Aden Tedla, 11/03/2010

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