



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Malaysian bicycle campaign for government reform (JERIT “Cycling for Change” campaign) 2008

3 December

2008

to: 18 December

2008

Country: Malaysia

Location Description: *Cyclists traveled along the west coast of peninsular Malaysia, stopping to ride through cities and towns along the way. Two separate teams of cyclists converged on Kuala Lumpur, with one group starting from the north in Alor Setar and the other group starting from the south in Skudai (outside Johor Bahru, near Singapore).*

Goals:

The cycling campaign sought to raise public awareness of the "real issues" affecting the country's people, such as lack of democracy, excessive government security powers, environmental hazards, food shortages, and other problems.

In addition to communicating with the general public, the campaign sought to meet the Prime Minister and deliver a petition to him and the parliamentary opposition leader, stating six demands:

- * Support for workers impacted by the 2008 global financial crisis (e.g. price controls on essential consumer goods)
- * Restoration of local government elections (suspended in 1965)
- * Establishment of a minimum wage
- * Repeal of the Internal Security Act
- * Provision of adequate public housing
- * Cessation of privatization of public services (e.g. healthcare, education)

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 019. Wearing of symbols

- 039. Parades
- 042. Motorcades › on bicycles

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 039. Parades
- 042. Motorcades › on bicycles

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 039. Parades
- 042. Motorcades › on bicycles

Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 039. Parades
- 042. Motorcades › on bicycles

Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 039. Parades
- 042. Motorcades › on bicycles

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions › Presented six-point policy petition to parliament

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 039. Parades
- 042. Motorcades › on bicycles

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Approximately 100 cyclists participated
- Environmentalists
- Factory Workers
- advance organizers
- agricultural plantation workers
- and rural farmers. Organizers included opposition party politicians.
- but not exclusively
- etc. The northern and southern teams had about 50 cyclists each (including 28 teenagers on the northern team and 30 teenagers on the southern team). The cyclists were largely
- ethnic Indians. The entire traveling group (not only cyclists) was comprised of students
- leafleting volunteers
- plus other volunteers such as bus drivers
- urban homeless

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The campaign was conceived, organized, and led by a national NGO called JERIT (Jaringan Rakyat Tertindas — Oppressed People's Network).

Partners:

Not known.

External allies:

SUARAM (Suara Rakyat Malaysia — the People's Voice of Malaysia), a national human rights NGO; Aliran, another national human rights NGO; and the Bar Council, the professional association of Malaysian attorneys. Through monitoring and press releases, these groups supported campaigners' right to protest and publicized police misconduct against the activists. As part of those efforts, the organizations encouraged the public to write letters to political officials stating support for the protestors' freedom of expression and assembly. Furthermore, the campaign had the endorsements of 47 civil society groups.

Involvement of social elites:

Some JERIT activists were Members of Parliament, state politicians, and other political officials from the coalition of opposition parties, Pakatan Rakyat (People's Alliance), and the chief ministers of four PR-led states endorsed the campaign. In addition, the arrests of cyclists provoked condemnations from various federal and state-level politicians.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Aliran
- Bar Council
- JERIT
- SUARAM

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF)

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 2.67 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

National government (particularly the administration of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi and his ruling parliamentary coalition, Barisan Nasional); local police in various states along route.

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence.

Repressive Violence:

Over the course of the 16-day campaign, police made at least 120 arrests (many participants were arrested multiple times) on charges of illegally distributing leaflets, illegal assembly, and child exploitation.

On the morning of 7 December, unknown arsonists torched the campaigners' bicycles in the northern state of Penang, destroying eight.

On 9 December, a police officer molested female JERIT activist Helen Mary Johnson and punched her in the face while she was take photographs. The same day, JERIT activist Lee Huat Seng was hit on the arm by police as they confiscated his camera.

On 15 December, police arrested 30 adult cyclists and detained 26 minors participating in the campaign, and forced them "to stand under heavy rain in the middle of the night." Police detained the minors ostensibly to "save them from being misused and exploited by irresponsible people," despite campaign organizers having shown the written consent of the minors' parents.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

2 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaigners were not successful in their push for the government to act on their six policy demands. (While it should be noted that in September, 2011 the government agreed to abolish the Internal Security Act — one of the six policies advocated by the campaigners — this project evaluates success based on the circumstances present two years after the campaign action.)

With respect to the goal of raising public awareness and generating public discussion, the campaign was quite successful. The campaign increased the visibility of human rights groups in the country — particularly among people outside the "political class" of the largest cities — and the public support enhanced the political clout of human rights groups, thereby increasing attention and support from various politicians.

From 3 to 18 December 2008, over 100 activists participated in a nationwide bicycle convoy in Malaysia, spanning the eastern length of the country's peninsular section, in order to garner public and governmental attention to issues that they considered to be among the most pressing concerns facing Malaysia society.

The campaign was organized by JERIT (Jeringan Rakyat Tertindas — Oppressed People's Network), a then-five-year old network of civil society organizations largely focused on representing Malaysia's ethnic Indian community. (As a racial minority in a racially stratified nation, the network considers Indians an oppressed people, disadvantaged compared to the politically dominant Malay community.) Despite leadership role of JERIT, and the mainly (but not exclusively) Indian composition of the participants, the campaign's demands were not specific to race but rather related to broader government policy. Specifically, the campaign sought government action on six points:

- • the restoration of Support for workers impacted by the 2008 global financial crisis (e.g. price controls on essential consumer goods)
- • the restoration of local government elections (suspended in 1965)
- • the establishment of a minimum wage
- • the repeal of the Internal Security Act
- • the provision of adequate public housing
- • the end of privatization of public services (e.g. healthcare, education)

Two groups of cyclists and volunteers started their journey as two separate legs, with one group beginning in the northern tip of the country and the other coming from the south, with both groups converging on the national capital of Kuala Lumpur. Rather than cycle the entire distance, the cyclists transported their bikes by van from city to city, and stopped at towns and cities along their route. At each stop, the cyclists unloaded their bikes and rode through the city center, thus maximizing the number of people that their message reached. Aside from people seeing the spectacle of cyclists riding through town, volunteers distributed leaflets to passerby, held press conferences, and spoke to individual city residents.

In the interest of generating further public awareness, the cycling group invited journalists to join them for their cross-country journey. The presence of journalists also allowed for better documentation of the police response. News stories about the measures that police took to impede the cyclists provoked condemnation of the police measures from numerous politicians and expressions of support for the cyclists. It may also be reasonably speculated that such media coverage also provided police a disincentive against using excessive force against the protestors.

Regarding the specific demands presented in their six-point petition, the campaigners were not successful in their push for any

significant change in government policy. (While it should be noted that the government agreed to abolish the Internal Security Act- one of the six policies advocated by the campaigners - in 2011, this project evaluates success based on the circumstances present two years after the campaign action.)

However, policy changes were only part of the campaigners' goals. With respect to the goal of raising public awareness and generating public discussion, the campaign was quite successful.

Research Notes

Influences:

According to JERIT organizer Y Kohila, inspiration for the cycling campaign came from the march of Bukit Asahan plantation workers in the 1970's, who marched 150 km from Malacca to Kuala Lumpur to meet with the prime minister about their grievances.

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Additional Notes:

Readers may also be interested in viewing Kayuh (2009) by Soh Sook Hwa, a documentary film that follows the cyclists over the course of the 16-day campaign. (Freedom Film Fest cut [not viewed]: 30 minutes, in Bahasa Malaysia with English subtitles. The link below is to a 21-minute version without English subtitles.)

http://www.engagemedia.org/Members/Komas/freedomfilmfest-fff-videos/videos/FFF_kayuh.mp4/view

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

Alexander Blocker, 6/11/2011

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