



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Mexicans in Chihuahua protest electoral fraud, 1985-1988

Time period notes: *Although there had been nonviolent action before the electoral reforms of 1985, concerted organizing in nonviolent action began in Chihuahua after the reforms were passed and grew when the results of the subsequent 1986 election were announced. In addition, nonviolent action continued past August of 1988, but began to focus on a national scale in preparation for national elections, rather than the gubernatorial or municipal elections in Chihuahua.*

July
1985
to: August
1988

Country: Mexico

Location City/State/Province: Chihuahua

Location Description: *Although this campaign was centered in Chihuahua, electoral fraud occurred nationwide, and therefore there were many coordinated actions with other areas of the country as well*

Goals:

The campaign's organizers, mostly members of PAN (National Action Party), demanded an end to electoral fraud by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which engaged in massive voter fraud and had not lost a major election since the party's founding in 1929. Specifically, they demanded the repeal of the 1985 electoral reforms and subsequently, nullification of the 1986 gubernatorial elections in Chihuahua.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › by the Catholic Church in opposition to the electoral fraud
- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › by PAN mayors of Ciudad Juarez and Parral

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 034. Vigils › at the homes of city officials that participated in the electoral fraud
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › Hunger Strike led by National Action Party (PAN) officials
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › of 10,000 people on bridge connecting Chihuahua, Mexico with El Paso, Texas
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › of 200 PAN party supporters in major intersections and roads in Chihuahua
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › of 5,000 people on bridge connecting Chihuahua, Mexico with El Paso, Texas

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Protesters on bridge hold posters depicting PRI candidates as rats
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction › about 200 PAN party members and supporters block two bridges from Chihuahua, Mexico to El Paso, Texas

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 006. Group or mass petitions › by intellectuals, professionals, businessmen and interest groups such as the Catholic Church
- 038. Marches › Silent
- 048. Protest meetings › in order to decide what nonviolent tactics to use and to train organizers and participants in workshops
- 071. Consumers' boycott › of supermarkets and businesses that collaborated with the PRI
- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments › refusal to pay utility bills

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Catholics
- Citizens of Chihuahua
- National Action Party (PAN) officials
- affluent professionals
- conservative businessmen
- the Catholic Church

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Luiz H. Alvarez (PAN Mayor of Chihuahua), Gustavo Elizondo (PAN candidate for Ciudad Juarez Mayor), Manuel Oropeza (leader of small leftist parties), Francisco Villareal (non-partisan businessman), and other PAN officials

Partners:

The Catholic Church in Mexico, Democratic Electoral Movement, Real Vote National Forum

External allies:

The Organization of American States (OAS)

Protesters across Mexico who engaged in acts of solidarity during the Chihuahua campaign

Filipino Catholic Church leaders

Involvement of social elites:

Conservative businessmen were a large base of support for the PAN (National Action Party), as were affluent professionals

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- PAN (National Action Party) officials
- Peasants
- Teachers
- citizens of Chihuahua
- the Catholic Church

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Additional conservative businessmen
- Democratic Electoral Movement
- Real Vote National Forum
- affluent professionals

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Filipino Catholic Church leaders

Groups in 4th Segment:**Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:**

- Organization of American States (OAS)

Segment Length: *Approximately 6 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Although there had been wide occurrences of post-electoral violence from the populace throughout Mexico, no known cases were found in Chihuahua during this time and the campaign's leadership espoused the necessity of nonviolent means. However, in the early stages of the campaign there was limited violence between different political parties and camps fighting against the electoral fraud.

Repressive Violence:

Jailing of election observers, break-up of protests on international bridges by riot police

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

2 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Although the campaign did not see the nullification of the 1986 Chihuahua gubernatorial election, the next elections in 1992 were conducted in a more equitable manner and the PAN won more seats. Although the local infrastructure did not flourish over the course of the campaign, it evolved into a far more national entity. In terms of growth, the campaign seems to have shrunk over the course of the three years on the local issue in Chihuahua; however, on a national scale the campaign against electoral fraud grew considerably.

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had controlled Mexico and won almost every presidential, gubernatorial, and senatorial election since its founding in 1929. The PRI also dominated politics in most municipalities and on local levels. In the 1983 and 1985 elections however, the National Action Party (PAN) won many municipal seats and posed a significant challenge to state offices held by the PRI. The growing popularity of the PAN was due to myriad factors, one of which was the financial disaster of 1982, which saw many wealthy businessmen and professionals withdraw their support from the status quo and ruling PRI party.

As a result of the changes in the electoral dynamic, the PRI leadership decided to institute voting reforms in order to be able to manipulate the vote and engage in electoral fraud far more easily. With these reforms, the PRI would not need to worry about the growing popularity and influence of the PAN party. However, when the PRI passed these reforms in 1985, PAN officials, the Catholic Church in Mexico and citizens throughout the country would not accept it. They claimed that widespread electoral fraud was in the making for the 1986 elections, and the PAN mayors of Ciudad Juarez and Parral began a hunger strike that lasted for twenty-two days. The PAN establishment began collecting petitions to drop the reforms and also engaged in protests in the form of marches, rallies, and demonstrations, but the reforms were not dropped.

In the July 1986 elections, the PRI received 65 of the 67 mayorships in Chihuahua, all 14 legislative seats, and the governorship, which had been projected to be won by the PAN candidate, Francisco Barrio Terrazas. At the ballot-box, the PRI stuffed fraudulent ballots before the polls opened, replaced local police with federal troops, arrested legal election observers and released voter lists late. Church leaders and PAN officials publicly denounced the election results and three individuals immediately began a hunger strike: Luiz H. Alvarez, PAN Mayor of Chihuahua, and two other individuals in Ciudad Juarez. The Catholic Church even threatened to cancel Sunday mass, but the pope intervened and did not allow the Catholic Church in Mexico to cancel mass. The hunger strike ended after 40 days, with Alvarez taking a position of leadership in the campaign against electoral fraud.

The citizens of Chihuahua supported the hunger strikers against the electoral fraud by holding candlelight vigils outside the private homes of city officials that participated in the electoral fraud. In addition, three days after the fraudulent elections about 200 supporters of the PAN blocked major intersections, and PAN officials met to construct plans for nonviolent direct action.

On July 15, 1986, less than two weeks after the fraudulent elections, over 10,000 people gathered by the United States-Mexican border and blocked a bridge leading from Ciudad Juarez to El Paso, Texas. Although the protesters took the bridge without violence, riot police soon broke up the sit-in protest. At the time, protesters across the country engaged in local nonviolent action to demand an end to electoral fraud in their municipalities as well. However, all protesters were not unified at this early stage in the campaign. There were parties other than PAN that also detested the electoral fraud, and at times limited violence broke out among the different camps of protesters.

On July 25, 1986, 5,000 supporters again gathered at a bridge connecting Ciudad Juarez and El Paso, Texas, occupying and closing the bridge for business for over 24 hours. Francisco Barrio Terrazas met with Mexican government officials two days prior to discuss the electoral fraud, of which, the authorities had said, they couldn't be convinced occurred.

In order to have better chances for success, better organization and a critical mass of the populace, all parties that rallied against the PRI began to form organizations and coalitions. First, teachers, peasants, and smaller left-wing political parties formed the Democratic Electoral Movement, which the PAN, although a conservative party, quickly joined. Later still, the Real Vote National Forum became an all-inclusive organization that brought all parties and individuals together who were interested in organizing against electoral fraud.

In Chihuahua, PAN party officials, citizens and leaders decided upon a range of economic sanctions as well, including a boycott of supermarkets and businesses that supported the PRI and a refusal to pay utility bills.

PAN Party officials also closely watched a popular movement in the Philippines that forced President Ferdinand E. Marcos from power (see "[Filipinos campaign to overthrow dictator \(People Power\), 1983-1986 \[2\]](#)"), and decided to travel to the Philippines to learn more about the successful employment of civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action, which they believed would be vital to their campaign. In the summer of 1987, Filipino church leaders traveled to Mexico on a delegation to meet with PAN officials, leaders and organizers fighting against electoral fraud. Together, the various organizations in Mexico planned a series of nonviolent action workshops and trainings across the country, and eventually trained over 9,000 people.

In addition, the PAN made a formal complaint to the Organization of American States (OAS) regarding the electoral fraud that had been occurring in Mexico. After an investigation, the OAS ruled that the Mexican government had infringed upon its citizens' human rights and subsequently mandated that the Mexican government establish fair voting mechanisms and a Human Rights National Commission. After this ruling, rhetoric of the national campaign became more focused on human rights abuses inherent in electoral fraud rather than the fight for democracy. It is at this point that organizers began to focus efforts on the national stage in preparation for the next round of elections.

On July 11, 1988, protesters again gathered by the United States-Mexican border. This time, there were only 200 of them, but they brought their cars and stopped traffic on two bridges connecting Ciudad Juarez and El Paso, Texas. Many individuals held signs that implied the PRI presidential candidate was planning to steal the election.

By this point, the numbers of individuals involved in the campaign at the local level in Chihuahua were dwindling compared to the early turnout amidst the outrage of the fraudulent elections. One reason for this is that in order to most effectively fight against voter fraud, PAN and other groups focused their resources and organization on a national level, especially as the time until new elections drew closer and closer. The results of such organization on a national level are not detailed here, but it is clear that the campaign in Chihuahua helped to inspire nationwide action on the issue of true electoral reform along with campaigns in other smaller regional areas. The OAS ruling also helped to develop a national consciousness around the issue and concentrate efforts on the national level.

The Mexican government did not nullify the 1986 gubernatorial vote, but the PAN candidate, Francisco Barrio Terrezas won the election in 1992. It is clear that the campaign and the individuals that engaged in civil disobedience and nonviolent action throughout this period were instrumental in bringing this issue to international attention and paving the way for more equitable elections in the following year. This campaign also spurred national action around the issue of electoral fraud and was a precursor to the larger campaign to end electoral fraud throughout all of Mexico.

Research Notes

Influences:

The PAN (National Action Party) officials and the citizens of Chihuahua were influenced by the popular movement in the Philippines that forced President Ferdinand E. Marcos from power in 1986 (see "[Filipinos campaign to overthrow dictator \(People Power\), 1983-1986](#)") and the struggles of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi. (1)

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Additional Notes:

This campaign ended toward the end of the electoral term when it was clear the government would not yield to any demands of the citizens of Chihuahua or the PAN, and therefore the organization and nonviolent action merged with other groups and national organizations in order to change the prevalence of electoral fraud at the national level. These actions embodied a new campaign that sought to free Mexico from uninterrupted PRI rule since 1929, and are not embodied in this campaign file.

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

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