Paraguayan indigenous peoples resist the Stroessner regime, 1969-1989

1969 to: 1989
Country: Paraguay
Goals: The indigenous population hoped to reclaim traditional native lands, secure cultural rights, and open the politics of the dictatorial regime.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 013. Deputations
- 034. Vigils
- 058. Excommunication
- 061. Boycott of social affairs
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 013. Deputations
- 015. Group lobbying
- 048. Protest meetings
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 015. Group lobbying
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 4th segment:
- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 015. Group lobbying
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 015. Group lobbying
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 015. Group lobbying
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 060. Suspension of social and sports activities
- 121. Refusal of public support
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Indigenous tribes in Paraguay
- members and leaders of the Catholic Church

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Bishop Ramón Pastor Borgarín Argraña, Enelhit leader René Ramírez, Archbishop Rolón

Partners:
Catholic University Paraguay, the Catholic Church
External allies:
Anthropologists Mark Münzel, Bartomeu Melià, and Miguel Chase Sardi

Involvement of social elites:
Pope John Paul II supported the indigenous struggle, as did leading Catholic clergy in Paraguay

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
- Bartomeu Melià
- Bishop Argraña
- Catholic University
- Indigenous Tribes
- Mark Münzel
- Miguel Chase Sardi

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:
- Archbishop Rolón
- Chief Ramírez
- Pope John Paul II

Segment Length: Approximately 3.5 years

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
The Stroessner regime

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Severance of diplomatic relations, refusal to recognize movement

Campaigner violence:
Not Known

Repressive Violence:
Arrests, tortures, imprisonment

Success Outcome

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

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The indigenous tribes were able to reclaim some of their traditional lands through diplomatic means, however much of it remained under the control of farmers and investors and many hectares were already deforested and destroyed before they could be reclaimed. The fall of the Stroessner regime, however, did bring about more indigenous rights and open democracy. Despite much persecution, the leaders of the movement remained active for years in Paraguay until the fall of the Stroessner regime. Some sectors of the movement, such as the Marandú Project, remained in existence even after shift.

The Catholic Church and many of the indigenous tribes immediately joined the efforts of the greater indigenous resistance and yet the movement had trouble making allies within the country. It wasn’t until towards the end of the Stroessner regime that other opposition groups such as students, workers, and peasants, became involved with the movement.

In 1954, a young military officer, Alfredo Stroessner, organized a military coup and overthrew Paraguayan President Federico Chávez. A devoted anti-communist, Stroessner declared a state of siege and suspended constitutional freedoms for the entirety of his 35-year rule. Throughout Stroessner’s last two decades in power, indigenous people organized widely to oppose the negative effects that his massive development projects were having on their communities.

Originally the dictatorship planned to integrate the indigenous population into society by making indigenous people live as the Paraguayans did and abandon their distinctive identities and cultural practices. When the policy of integration failed in the 1970s because of increased attention to human rights violations inherent in the policies, Stroessner began trying to exclude the indigenous population from national development policies and to make them “disappear” by whatever means possible. The regime promoted colonization of rural Paraguay, which traditionally had been occupied by native groups, and sold the land to foreign ranchers and investors to cultivate. The new owners began to clear the forests and evict the natives, which exacerbated the already tense issue of land scarcity and unequal distribution of land in the country.

Another part of the regime’s integration plans involved converting many of the indigenous people to Catholicism. The religious organizations originally cooperated with the regime’s plans but the shift in church doctrine stemming from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Medellín Conference (1968) caused them to reexamine their role. The Catholic Church adopted a critical stance toward the regime and in January 1969 Bishop Ramón Pastor Borgarín Argraña positioned the Catholic Church strongly against the dictator’s abuses of human rights. The security forces responded swiftly to this radicalization by expelling Jesuit priests from the country, canceling relief shipments from the United States, and violently repressing church-backed student demonstrations.

On December 8, 1969 when the president traditionally led thousands on a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Caacupé, bishops instead held a vigil of penitence to protest the repression. Following the march, police beat up a priest and injured students to end their nonviolent demonstrations. The march was held again the next year, again asking Stroessner to respect the Church’s rural organizations and stop persecuting the indigenous people. When the regime refused to do so, church authorities excommunicated one of Stroessner’s ministers and the chief of police. In retaliation, security forces murdered several priests who worked with the peasant leagues, expelled others from the country, and clashed with protesters.

Foreign attention to indigenous human rights continued to put pressure on the regime. In 1971, German anthropologist Mark Münzel denounced Stroessner for attempted genocide against the indigenous population of Paraguay and Jesuit anthropologist Bartomeu Melià called the attempts to forcefully resettle the population ethnocide. The church hierarchy, linked to the case through the Anthropology Center at the Catholic University, used the ensuing scandal to call attention to regime abuses of human rights.

Bartomeu Melià and colleagues such as Miguel Chase Sardi, an ethnographer, spoke out with increasing frequency about “the genocide.” Chase Sardi’s criticism was especially threatening because he had recently studied in the United States under a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship, had participated in the 1971 Barbados Symposium on Interethic Conflict in South America, and enjoyed international recognition. Led by Catholic denunciations, regime opponents denounced its indigenous policies in the Parliament, to the Vatican, and eventually even to the United Nations.
Over the next few years, numerous human rights organizations and religious agencies pressed the dictatorship to alter and improve its policies for native people. Missionaries encouraged indigenous people to defend their autonomy and to oppose state integration. In April 1974, the Catholic University launched the most ambitious non-governmental organization effort in favor of indigenous lands and political rights: the Marandú Project. The activists and their church sponsors began to inform indigenous communities about their legal rights. Over the next three years, anthropologists and their Catholic advocates created projects to improve access to legal, medical, and educational assistance for the native Paraguayans. In October 1974, the Marandú Project organized thirty indigenous leaders to issue a call for improved attention by states, respect for their languages and cultures, and communal land ownership. They created a council where leaders began to meet and lobby for land and rights. The organization however, quickly raised animosity among landowners and the elite. Security forces crushed the organization in December 1975 when police raided council headquarters at the Catholic University, imprisoned and tortured the indigenous secretary, Gloria Estrago, and the director Miguel Chase Sardi, whom they held for seven months.

Meanwhile, the charges of genocide continued to embarrass the regime. In May 1974, the Minister of Defense, Marcial Samaniego, forced representatives from government cabinets, religious agencies, educational institutions, and a diplomat from the U.S. embassy to sign a decree stating that the accusations of genocide were false. Immediately, Catholic bishops declared they had signed this statement against their free will, condemned regime coercion, and demanded an investigation into the charges of genocide.

Throughout the 1970s, the regime instituted a development project to encourage peasant settlement. The project forced indigenous ethnicities to divide communal territories and forced many groups off ancestral lands. Local bishops and indigenous leaders continued to lobby for their rights and achieved limited success in a handful of the campaigns. The Enenlhit tribe, for example, began to demand access to tribal lands in 1977 (relying heavily on Catholic lawyers to represent their case). The Church threatened to cite the case as a human rights violation and finally forced the regime to expropriate the territory in November 1979. When the ranching company who owned the land begrudgingly opened the gates, three hundred Enenlhits who were camped outside rushed in to reclaim the land. The Enenlhit were the first indigenous community in recent Paraguayan history to reclaim tribal territory. Five months later however, after firing the director of the indigenista agency that had lobbied for the Enenlhit, soldiers moved the community over fifty kilometers away to a barren, dry plot completely unsuitable for either crops or ranching.

In 1981 the regime, fearing it was losing control of integration, enacted a progressive indigenous-rights bill. Indigenous communities and Catholic advocates capitalized on the new legislation and vowed to hold the regime accountable to their promises. In 1985, the regime promised to title native lands by the end of the year. This announcement made the land grab worse as settlers rushed to strip forests and claim lands before they were surveyed. Indigenous leaders, the Catholic Church, and its lawyers demanded that the lending agency, the World Bank, pressure the regime to monitor the land, but nothing swayed the dictatorship and the land grab and deforestation continued. The public outcry however, was enough to attract the attention of foreign human rights agencies and together the allies forced the government to officially sell thousands of hectares of land to the indigenous communities.

By this time it was not only indigenous people who opposed the regime’s development plans. Many Paraguayans were tired of the worsening economy, widespread corruption, and repression. The Church often united political activists, students, workers, the urban poor, and rural peasants against the continued repression. In January 1987, bishops proposed a national discussion on political opening. The regime refused to participate in the Diálogo Nacional, claiming the Church should not become involved in politics. Throughout the year, anti-regime rallies shook the nation. Peasants rallied in March and April, priests and lay workers paraded through Asunción to demand social justice and political opening in May, and students and youth paraded in support of the Diálogo Nacional in June. Labor unions, church based communities, and campesino organizations added their support. In November, 10,000 people signed a petition urging the government to expropriate land to the Enenlhit tribe. The next year, the regime reluctantly agreed to return their homeland territories.

In August of the following year, the Church announced that Pope John Paul II would visit Paraguay in 1988. The prospect of a papal visit encouraged further anti-regime demonstrations and by October, protests had reached an unprecedented level. On
October 30, the Church united the opposition into a large show of peaceful resistance. Catholic schools closed their doors, and Archbishop Rolón led 35,000 workers, students, priests, and laypersons on a silent procession to the National Cathedral. It was the largest anti-regime demonstration in Stroessner’s 34 years of power and all levels of opposition participated. Rolón insisted on silence throughout the walk to avoid the violence that the appearance of such a march might have provoked. There are no reports of regime retaliation.

On May 17, 1988, seven hundred indigenous people from Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil welcomed Pope John Paul II to the Catholic Mission of Santa Teresita. Enenlhit leader René Ramírez presented the collective statements of the indigenous people to the Pope. He had traveled widely for a year to collect statements from indigenous peoples that he and advocates from the Catholic Church had compiled into a moving speech in which he summarized the difficulties indigenous people faced in their daily struggle to secure food and worked to oppose heavy-handed state policies that encouraged them to disappear into the larger peasant population. The Enenlhit leader accused the regime’s Instituto Paraguayo del Indígena, the agency that was by law supposed to defend native rights, of working against the long indigenous struggles to reclaim land.

The encounter with the Pope was a symbolic victory for the indigenous people and highlighted the successful cooperation between the Catholic Church and indigenous communities in successfully opposing the Stroessner regime. In response to its loss of papal approval, the regime immediately forced Chief Ramírez into hiding and it wasn’t until the regime’s rule came to an end seven months later that he was able to return to his home.

The rise of indigenous demands for land and Catholic advocacy on their behalf drew enough negative attention to erode the regime’s staunch opposition to indigenous rights. In June 1988, Stroessner ordered the Senate to expropriate land to various indigenous communities who had been displaced by the regime’s land initiatives. The Stroessner regime finally collapsed in January 1989 due to internal conflicts within the ruling party and widespread popular opposition, including the pressure from indigenous communities and their human rights advocates in the Catholic Church.

Research Notes

Influences:

Similar indigenous movements in Brazil and Argentina both influenced and were influenced by the resistance in Paraguay (1 and 2).

Sources:


Additional Notes:

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