Zairian citizens initiate general strike to force dictator’s resignation (Dead City Strike), 1997

Time period notes: The first general strike lasted from April 14-15 and the second from May 14-16. In between there was no known campaigner action.

April 14, 1997 to: May 16, 1997
Country: Democratic Republic of the Congo
Country: Zaire
Location City/State/Province: Kinshasa
Goals:
All strikers involved wanted the resignation of President Mobutu. Many strikers also wanted the reinstatement of Prime Minister Etienne Tshisekedi.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

• 065. Stay-at-home
• 117. General strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

Notes on Methods:
There are no tactics for segments 2-5 because campaigners ended the first general strike after 2 days and did not resume until a month later.

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy

Group characterization:

- Supporters of former Prime Minister Etienne Tshisekedi

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
There were no known leaders. Supporters of Prime Minister Etienne Tshisekedi and opponents of Mobutu acted out together to organize and initiate the general strikes.

Partners:
Democratic Union for Social Progress (DUSP) – opposition party founded by former Prime Minister Etienne Tshisekedi

External allies:
Laurent Kabila – leader of rebel army and successor to President Mobutu

Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (ADFLC) – rebel army lead by Laurent Kabila

Involvement of social elites:
Prime Minister Etienne Tshisekedi – challenged President Mobutu’s authority and spoke out against his rule

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- All known groups

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 5 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
President Mobutu and his regime

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not Known

Campaigner violence:
The strikers refrained from using violence, but their allies did use violence; Kabila and his army were at war with Mobutu

Repressive Violence:
It is unclear whether any violence from Mobutu’s regime was directed at anyone involved with the general strikes. It is more likely that Mobutu targeted Kabila and his army.
Mobutu Sese Seko became the president of Zaire in 1965. Mobutu’s presidency began after serving as a Chief of Staff of the Congolese Army during the Congo Crisis, which started off as a war of independence from Belgium. Soon after becoming president, Mobutu established an authoritarian government with a new constitution and a one political party system.

Laurent Kabila, a Marxist, united several anti-Mobutu forces into a rebel army in 1996. This army became formally known as the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (ADFLC). Kabila launched a full-scale war to overthrow Mobutu in what would become known as the First Congo War.

While Kabila’s forces progressed closer and closer to Zaire’s capital city of Kinshasa, Mobutu appointed Etienne Tshisekedi as Prime Minister. Tshisekedi had previously served under Mobutu as Prime Minister in 1991 and 1992, but had recently begun to resent some of Mobutu’s policies. Prior to his third appointment as Prime Minister, Tshisekedi had formed his own political party: the Democratic Union for Social Progress (DUSP). Soon after his appointment, Tshisekedi undermined Mobutu’s authority; Tshisekedi discharged all of Parliament and the constitution. Mobutu did not approve of Tshisekedi’s behavior so he acted swiftly and quickly dismissed the prime minister within weeks of his appointment. Mobutu then replaced the former Prime Minister with an army general.

Members of the Democratic Union for Social Progress, rebel forces, oppositional political parties, and other supporters of Tshisekedi united to protest the dismissal of the prime minister. It remains unclear as to how residents learned of the general strike, but it is believed that the various aforementioned groups were responsible for raising awareness of the impending strike. On April 14th 1997, nearly all of the 5 million residents of Kinshasa participated in a general strike. Businesses, schools, and public transportation were all shut down; everyone stayed home and left the streets deserted. Supporters of Prime Minister Tshisekedi labeled Kinshasa a “dead city.” The strike proceeded peacefully with little response from Mobutu who was preoccupied with Kabila and his rebel forces.

Kinshasa remained a “dead city” on April 15th as the strike continued. The strikers made it clear that they wanted Mobutu to resign and others also wanted Tshisekedi to be reinstated as prime minister. Willy Kashama, a local resident who stayed home from work to participate in the general strike, was quoted as saying, “We want change. We’re willing to accept anyone – even
the devil should he arrive – if it will bring change.” The strike did not result in either of the goals being met and so the strike did not continue onto the next day. The strike, however, was very complementary to the actions of Kabila’s rebel forces; an ailing Mobutu now had to delegate resources to maintain order in Kinshasa and in its neighboring cities. By the second day of the general strike, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo was just 160 miles away from the capital city of Kinshasa.

The strikers would not strike again until ordered to do so a month later. In the meantime, Kabila and his army remained on the offensive. The United States, the United Nations, and the South African president, Nelson Mandela, all made pleas for a cease-fire. Their pleas went largely unanswered as the conflict continued. On several occasions, Mobutu and Kabila made arrangements to meet and discuss a peaceful surrender, but the two leaders never met.

One such meeting was scheduled to happen on May 14th. Previously, Mobutu and Kabila had agreed to meet aboard a South African ship off the coast of Congo. When the various organizers of the first strike heard about the arranged meeting, they called for a second general strike to take place in Kinshasa on the same day as the meeting. This time, the supporters included a specific duration –3 days– with their call for a general strike. The goals of the strike remained the same; the resignation of President Mobutu and the reinstatement of Prime Minister Tshisekedi.

On May 14th, a month after the last general strike, a second general strike began and the city of Kinshasa was once again a “dead city.” The residents of Kinshasa retreated to the comfort of their homes as Kabila’s army reached the outskirts of the city. Kabila’s alliance released leaflets calling for the strikers to welcome the rebel forces as they came in to liberate Kinshasa. Opposition parties and moderate politicians began to speak out publicly against Mobutu, calling for a welcoming party to greet Kabila’s forces as they entered Kinshasa. In an attempt to defend the capital, Mobutu imposed a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. and demanded that the city’s residents help the army defend the city against the rebel forces. The residents ignored the order, and stayed inside their homes.

Kabila did not attend the scheduled peace talk and his army entered Kinshasa. By the second day of the strike, Kabila’s forces had pushed Mobutu’s army to the edge of the city’s limits. The next day, on the 16th of May, Mobutu and his army fled the country. The strike ended and Kabila appointed himself the new president. As president, Kabila ordered a violent act of restoration and renamed the country the “Democratic Republic of Congo.” Mobutu later died from prostate cancer on the 7th of September.

Though they were not responsible for the eventual outcome, the strikers and the various groups that organized the strikes did aid in the removal of Mobutu. Both strikes contributed to the weakening of Mobutu’s regime and the second strike was especially impactful because it left the streets of Kinshasa deserted, thus clearing the way for Kabila’s army to enter Kinshasa and eliminate Mobutu’s forces. Much to the dismay of the strikers, Kabila would not be much more democratic than Mobutu. This was immediately evident, when Kabila ordered the violent act of restoration to tame Kinshasa’s celebrating residents and restore order. Kabila went to install a new authoritarian regime and excluded both Tshisekedi and the Democratic Union for Social Progress from his government. The result would be a second Congo war to overthrow Kabila.

Research Notes

Influences:
Not Known
Sources:
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Additional Notes:
It is unclear whether or not the strikes, alone, would have forced the resignation of President Mobutu. In hindsight, the two general strikes appear to be little more than a complementary campaign to the actions of Laurent Kabila and the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo. Though purely speculative, it is worth remembering that Mobutu was suffering from prostate cancer and that may or may not have influenced his ultimate decision to flee. It is also worth pointing out that the strikers had no way of knowing that Kabila had plans to install his own authoritarian regime once in power.

A note to activists and researchers: the strikes were largely overshadowed by the war between Mobutu’s and Kabila’s forces and so with little media coverage, many of the organizational details regarding the strikes remain unknown or unclear.

Edited by M.R. (07/05/2011)

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