

## Indigenous Social Movements in North America

A Comparison of The American Indian Movement and Idle No More  
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### Abstract

Indigenous social movements throughout North America, while varying according to specific local contexts, often share common grievances, goals and obstacles. As these movements attempt to address issues such as land rights, self rule, and resources, activists have implemented vastly different strategies in order to accomplish their goals. This paper examines two indigenous social movements — The American Indian Movement, which was most active in the United States during the 1960s, and Idle No More, a Canadian aboriginal movement that began in 2012. The aim of this research is to understand how these movements' strategies and organizational structures have shaped their impact on indigenous rights in North America. In particular, the comparison focuses on the level of centralization within each social movement, as well as the use (or non-use) of confrontational and violent tactics. The research finds that while there are many similarities between both groups, the major differences in strategy and structure have presented their own unique challenges for each social movement.

### Introduction

This paper examines two indigenous social movements in North America: the American Indian Movement (AIM), which originated in the United States during the 1960s, and Canada's recent Idle No More (INM) movement. These social movements, while varying both geographically and temporally, share many of the same grievances, goals and obstacles. For instance, each movement challenges state governments for the frequent abandonment of treaty obligations; advocates the preservation and resurgence of indigenous culture; and addresses many of the epidemic social problems within indigenous communities such as housing, education, and general standards of living. Despite the clear connections between both groups, however, there remain significant differences related to their strategy and organizational structure. This paper therefore compares the

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similarities and differences between the American Indian Movement and Idle No More, and asks how the strategy and organization of each movement shaped their impact on indigenous rights in North America.

Indigenous activism has existed in many forms for generations, and since the 1960s, there have been many individual protests arising as a response to a particular, immediate issue. In 1974, for example, the Ojibway Warrior Society occupied the Anicinabe Park in Ontario to protest against poor government treatment for First Nations people. In 1990, Cree and Inuit protesters from James Bay canoed near Parliament to call for a halt to the construction of a hydro-electric project. And in 2013, members of the Elsipogtog First Nation clashed with the RCMP in New Brunswick during protests against shale gas exploration in the area (CBC, 2015). Social movements, however, are defined by Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2007) as “a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities” (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 8). While this paper recognizes that many of the individual protests from indigenous groups in no way stand in isolation, and are rather part of a longstanding narrative on indigenous rights, there are also significant differences between the unique social movements within this larger indigenous rights movement. This paper therefore begins by situating each social movement within the larger context of the International Indigenous Rights Movement, while the following sections investigate two unique social movements, AIM and INM.

This paper argues that although the American Indian Movement was significant in bringing indigenous rights to the mainstream media, where indigenous concerns had been largely invisible until that point, the movement’s highly centralized structure and use of confrontational tactics ultimately led to their decline. Meanwhile, Idle No More has experienced significant challenges despite being a completely decentralized and nonviolent movement. Because INM is a very recent social movement, it is difficult to assess its level of “success” or “failure.” The final section of the paper therefore focuses on the benefits and challenges associated with INM being such a decentralized and nonviolent social movement.

### **In Context: International Indigenous Rights Movement**

While strategies for indigenous resistance vary along with regional realities, many indigenous social movements have taken their concerns

beyond the state level and on to the realm of international politics. Relations between indigenous and colonial powers, however, have always been international in that treaties have always acknowledged that the original inhabitants were, in fact, “nations” (Niezen, 2000: 122). In recent decades, indigenous people have explored this international dynamic through international forums such as the United Nations (UN). Their success, at least on paper, has been significant. In 2007, for example, the UN Resolution, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), affirmed that “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination” (UN, 2007: 4). As well, the Resolution recognizes that the dispossession of indigenous lands, territories and resources has prevented indigenous people from developing in accordance with their needs and interests (UN, 2007: 2). Such efforts for international recognition reflect an attempt to achieve local freedom through the use of a global language — making claims of difference through a law that applies equally to all peoples, and insists on local control as a universal right (Muechleback, 2003: 241). While indigenous agendas are diverse, self-governance has been at the forefront for many indigenous social movements; this includes the hope of being able to maximize control over indigenous lands and resources, cultural and civil affairs, and the nature and quality of community life (Cornell, 2006: 8). Indigenous social movements like AIM and INM are therefore connected, not just because of their common goals, but also because of the larger context of such transnational efforts related to self-rule, land rights, and resources.

#### The American Indian Movement (AIM) (1968-1978): Strategy, Organization and Impact

AIM formed in Minnesota in 1968 as a response to local social issues that had arisen due to the American federal government’s relocation policies of the 1950s. During this time, the government terminated many programs in aid of Native American reservations and began relocating these populations to urban centres. Within these urban communities, indigenous people experienced significant poverty, unemployment, domestic violence and drug use (Baylor, 1996: para. 10). The movement quickly expanded beyond these issues, however, with a broadened political agenda that included the reorganization of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the federal government’s adherence to treaty obligations, and also a renewed desire to embrace indigenous identities and culture (Schipper, 1986: v). Under the relatively-centralized leadership of just a few individuals, AIM focused its

message beyond its local community and started to gain national attention on this broadened political message.

During the 1960s civil rights era, subordinated groups within United States developed major social movements in order to gain civil liberties and end discrimination. By this time in American history, indigenous organizations were participating frequently in non-contentious political activity such as voting and lobbying government. However, as indigenous people represented less than 1% of the United States' population, the political impact of such action was quite limited (Baylor, 2007: 11). Young indigenous people were angry with low standards of living and were also frustrated that their cultures were being assimilated within larger urban centres. Despite such significant challenges, young indigenous people felt that they had no political agency to effect change. Inspired by confrontational black nationalist groups like the Black Panthers, who many saw to be more capable of bringing about change than the political activity of their elders, AIM's activity quickly moved to more militant approaches for reaching their goals (Schipper, 1986: v).

In the early 1970s, AIM's confrontational tactics proved to be highly effective for gaining media attention. Major confrontational events for AIM included the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) occupation in 1972, where 500 AIM members forcibly took over and occupied the BIA for seven days; and Wounded Knee in 1973, where 200 AIM occupied the town, resulting in the death of both AIM and FBI members (Schipper, 1986: xix). Up until this time, indigenous grievances had been virtually absent from both mainstream media sources and serious political consideration. However, Tim Baylor's (1996) research into how the media framed indigenous protest at this time reveals that the radical and confrontational tactics gave public attention to AIM in a way unparalleled to any other indigenous rights group. Although there were other groups, such as the National Congress of American Indians, advocating similar issues, AIM consistently dominated the headlines (Baylor, 1996: para. 2). As activists gained momentum in their promotion of indigenous issues, some significant victories were achieved. The Menominee Restoration Act signed by President Richard Nixon in 1973, for example, restored full tribal status to Menominee Indians (Message, 2014: 110). While it remains contested whether AIM's tactics directly contributed to any political developments at the time, most scholars agree that such tactics did bring indigenous rights to the national agenda (Baylor, 1996: para. 3).

In *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, Gene Sharp argues that whatever the merits of violent resistance, it is sure to bring more significant state repression along with it. According to Sharp, “by placing confidence in violent means, one has chosen the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority” (Sharp, 2010: 4). For AIM, confrontational tactics provided both benefits and challenges for the group. Tim Baylor (2007) points out that while AIM’s choice of confrontational, direct action tactics made strategic sense and was likely instrumental in achieving a number of positive outcomes, such tactics also place any organization using them at greater risk from social control agents (Baylor, 2007: 17).

AIM’s leadership was centralized with just a few people, such as Russell Means, Dennis Banks, and Clyde Bellacourt. These charismatic leaders developed strategy, and attempted to portray AIM with a unified voice, inspiring indigenous people across the country (Cook-Lynn, 2014: 14). The federal government cracked down on AIM’s activity, however, by focusing attention on these few leaders which eventually contributed to the dissolution of the entire movement. Following the occupations of 1972-73, for instance, AIM leaders were caught in years of expensive and time-consuming legal battles. As Sanchez et al (1999) notes, “it soon became clear that convictions — not to speak of justice — were beside the point. What was being accomplished, by foul means and fair, was the total disruption of the American Indian Movement, in what was emerging as a program to ‘neutralize’ AIM leaders all over the country” (Sanchez et al., 1999: para 16).

For AIM, two factors seem to have greatly contributed to the dissolution of AIM by 1978: confrontational tactics that pushed authorities to respond with aggressive state repression, and also the highly centralized leadership, whose role in violent activity eventually led to arrests and the disbandment of the movement. State repression came in the forms of violence, litigation and infiltration, and these strategies from the federal government effectively disintegrated AIM by 1978 (Baylor, 2007: 12). While it seems likely that AIM influenced the political agenda of its time and certainly had a lasting impact in the minds of many North American indigenous people, it is also likely that without AIM’s confrontational approach, state repression would not have been so aggressive, well-funded, or successful.

### **Idle No More (2012-current)**

Idle No More emerged in 2012 as an online, social media-based response to Bill C-45, which was the Canadian Conservative government's Jobs and Growth Act. Within its 443 pages, this omnibus bill included a broad range of unrelated acts and regulations. Several of these measures, according to Canadian aboriginal activists, ignored constitutional treaty rights by altering legislation without any consultation with aboriginal groups (Xiu Woo, 2013: 183). In order to challenge the federal government on these issues, four young aboriginal women started a Facebook page titled Idle No More. Soon, the #IdleNoMore hashtag went viral on social media throughout Canada and beyond, with demonstrations occurring all across Canada, as well as London, New Zealand, Egypt, and elsewhere (Xiu Woo, 2013: 183).

Existing scholarship related to social movements and new media often argues that new technologies facilitate social movements so that they are more decentralized and less hierarchical, as there is a decline in the importance of traditional institutional structures (Garrett, 2007: 210-11). INM, in keeping with this assertion, has remained a largely grassroots and non-hierarchical effort (Barker, 2015: 47). The movement's online presence and media spokespeople often emphasize its lack of formal leadership, and organizers have resisted efforts to hand over leadership to national chiefs and other elected officials. Sylvia McAdam, one of the movement's original founders have stated that "[w]hile we appreciate the leadership's support of Idle No More, they cannot take the lead on this" (Bradshaw et al., 2013: para. 5). In another interview, McAdam claimed that "Idle No More has no leader. The founders might be considered guides or maintaining the vision, but Idle No More has no leader or official spokesperson" (Carlson, 2013: para. 6).

Despite the positive opportunities for a non-hierarchical and nonviolent social movement like INM, however, such qualities have also presented challenges. For instance, although INM lacks a formal leadership, where leaders could be targeted by authorities like AIM's leadership in the 1970s, certain individuals have come to represent the movement within the media. National chiefs, such as Chief Theresa Spence of Attawapiskat, have been associated with the movement due to their public appearances on related issues like housing shortages and poverty. The emergence of individuals like Spence as perceived-leaders has presented opportunities for the movement to be discredited, and without a formal voice to distance

themselves from unwanted leaders, it is difficult for INM to distinguish itself in the media. For example, when an audit of Attawapiskat revealed information that raised questions about Chief Spence's integrity, INM was tarnished alongside her (Xiu Woo, 2013: 186).

Another challenge that INM's lack of formal leadership has presented is the movement's inability to distance itself from the confrontational actions of other groups. For social movements representing minority identities like indigenous communities, a wider base of support from non-indigenous people is necessary if the movement expects to influence political decisions. Unlike AIM, whose confrontational tactics often created divisions between it and the general public, INM has made considerable effort to avoid confrontational approaches that create divisions between indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians. The movement has instead focused on marches, peaceful protest and even flash mob dances (Xiu Woo, 2013: 183). As Adam J. Barker (2015) points out, however, several recent blockades and other direct action tactics, which caused economic disruption for Canadian citizens, were unable to be separated from INM within the media (Barker, 2015: 58). When Sylvia McAdam was interviewed by the National Post on this issue, she argued that the purpose of INM is to educate Canadians about indigenous sovereignty and treaty rights, not to create conflicts: "if you have an impromptu blockade that doesn't follow the legal permits, then you're irritating the public and that's not the purpose behind Idle No More" (Carlson, 2013: para. 4-5).

The goals and strategies of the Idle No More movement vary considerably from those of the American Indian Movement. However, while it was the confrontational tactics and centralized leadership that led to the dissolution of AIM, it is the decentralized nature of INM that is presenting the greatest challenges for INM.

## **Conclusions**

Although Canada and the United States are among the wealthiest countries in the world, each country includes indigenous communities with living standards far below the average standards of each country. In Canada, for instance, compared to non-Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people are more likely to have lower income, experience higher levels of unemployment, and live in housing in need of major repairs (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2010: 3). This human rights record for Canada

has not gone unnoticed by the international community. In 2014, the UN General Assembly released its Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, which urged Canada to take considerable steps to narrow the well-being gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, and referred to the challenges for Aboriginal peoples in Canada as a “crisis” (Anaya, 2014: 20).

As Cornell (2006) points out, the significant inequality between indigenous and non-indigenous populations becomes even more outrageous when one considers that the wealth of these two countries has been built substantially on resources taken from indigenous people (Cornell, 2006: 1). One factor that therefore distinguishes indigenous social movements from other modern identity-based social movements is how indigenous agendas can frequently challenge state action. This is because indigenous land and sovereignty claims often come in direct conflict with local interests such as mining, hydroelectricity, and logging (Niezen, 2000: 132). This reality is reflected in the discrepancy between international and national action addressing indigenous rights; while non-indigenous support for international, abstract concepts is generally accepted by UN member states, support for local efforts is often greeted with considerably more skepticism. As Niezen notes, individual UN member states do not seem to be responsive to efforts to define and protect the right of indigenous peoples within their own territories (2000: 132). In light of such major conflicts between indigenous rights and national governments, it is unsurprising that indigenous social movements have struggled to have major breakthroughs within states. As Baylor (2007) asks, “did Indians represent just another ethnic group bound to be assimilated by American society, or did Indians embody something different and far more significant – nations?” (Baylor, 2007: 9).

Despite the similarities and connections between the American Indian Movement and Idle No More, each group represents a very different form of social movement. AIM was a hierarchical and confrontational group, which was inspired by other militant social movements of the 1960’s. These features of AIM greatly contributed to its success and also its eventual downfall. Meanwhile, Idle No More represents the kind of decentralized and non-hierarchical social movement that has been largely associated with new information and communication technologies. Despite the challenges that Idle No More faces, supporters of the group remain optimistic that it will



overcome misconceptions as the public becomes more comfortable with these forms of decentralized organizational structures. Considering the challenges Canada now faces with Aboriginal land claims, resource development in unceded territory, and the environmental costs associated with such development, if INM can overcome public perception, the social movement has much to offer indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians alike.

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