

2-19-2004

Rigoberta Menchu Steps Beyond Tradition

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Rigoberta Menchu Steps Beyond Tradition." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9170>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Rigoberta Menchu Steps Beyond Tradition

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: 2004-02-19

Feb. 12 was a good day to be indigenous in Guatemala as the new government performed a pair of acts intended to symbolize a radical change in policy and behavior toward the country's majority, but historically beleaguered, population. President Oscar Berger started things off by turning over the Casa Crema, the building that for 40 years has served as the army's headquarters, to the Academia de Lenguas Mayas. The Academia will have the use of the vast property for 25 years, from where it is to further its work in the recovery, promotion, and diffusion of the Mayan languages.

Berger also installed Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchu as goodwill ambassador, charged with seeing that the provisions of the stalled December 1996 Peace Accords are complied with. After seven years of procrastination, Guatemala has come under international scrutiny for shamelessly turning its back on its obligations under that agreement (see NotiCen, 2002-02-07). The most recent report of the Mision de Verificacion de las Naciones Unidas para Guatemala (Minugua) announced to the world, "The advances in the application [of the accords] were below expectations and were not sufficient to give new thrust to a peace process that has stagnated in the last years."

The Casa Crema handover was not a Berger initiative. It was a parting gesture of ex-President Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004), under whom indigenous people endured the irony of a ruling party, the Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG), headed by Gen. Efraim Rios Montt. Rios was president from 1982 to 1983 following a coup, and thousands of indigenous were massacred during that time.

At the ceremony, Menchu highlighted the importance of the handover of the Casa Crema, stressing that the facility "should be the symbol of the science and technology to which the Mayan people have a right. The building will also house Channel 5, which will be called Maya TV and which will broadcast Mayan-themed programming. Menchu's collaboration with this government represents a radical departure with her traditional role as sharp critic of the state. Wrapped in the protective cloak of the Nobel Peace Prize, she has been able to take past regimes to task for discrimination against indigenous people, for human rights violations against them, and for the "exploitation of the rich against the poor" by the business sector. Now she is part of the governmental apparatus and an ally of the business interests that brought Berger to power.

In addition to her title of goodwill ambassador, she will also serve on a commission of "notable citizens" to oversee the legislature. Right or left? "The turn Rigoberta has taken has been 90 degrees," said Rosalina Tuyuc, an indigenous activist easily the equal of Menchu in accomplishment, in personal history, and in the hearts of her compatriots (see NotiCen, 1999-01-28). Tuyuc is the long-time director of the Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala (Conavigua), a now powerful organization of women widowed by the 36-year internal war.

Tuyuc seemed shocked at Menchu's new affiliations. "A couple of weeks ago she had assured me that she was not going to participate in the government, but now I find out that she is. We don't

know what her reasons were, but the truth is that I don't believe, no matter what she does, that she will change the conditions of poverty, exclusion, and racism toward the indigenous people."

Menchu disagreed. "Its time to participate," she said, "and I believe that we must take advantage of the opportunity we have now of representing the state to get support from the international community for the fulfillment of the peace accords."

Tuyuc clearly thought Menchu was being suckered. "It is evident that what the government wants is a person like her who has credibility at the international level. But I believe that beyond what she could gain to change the conditions of life for the indigenous, the government will gain far more," she argued. An old friend of Menchu's, Tuyuc still was at a loss to explain how the Nobel laureate could have accepted a place at the table with the "business elite and a racist [president] who has disrespected the indigenous people."

Berger needs her

For Berger, the arrangement with Menchu was not such a stretch. He is under the gun to get the accords back on track, and besides, he has said, "she has negotiated with presidents of other countries who are committed to the fight against hunger." He said this on Feb. 2, after meeting with her. One of her assignments will be a Program against Hunger patterned after the one that President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva launched in Brazil (see NotiSur, 2003-01-10). Things have gone badly for the indigenous since the end of the genocidal war against them.

The World Bank has reported that Guatemala is the third-poorest country in Latin America, surpassed only by Haiti and Bolivia, and most of that poverty is borne by the indigenous. Minugua has called the levels of racial discrimination similar to those of South Africa under Apartheid. Menchu had told more than just Tuyuc that she would not serve in the government. She also told Berger that she would not accept his invitation to serve in his Cabinet, but even then she characterized his administration as a "symbol of hope, a good omen for Guatemala."

On Jan. 14, Berger's inauguration day, she said she would "speak today with the president to come up with an agenda and find the best way for me to contribute directly as a promoter of the peace accords." If Menchu has embraced a strategy of working within the system in the public sector, she appears to have done no less in the private sector.

Last November she opened a chain of drugstores, Farmacias Similares, to sell generic drugs at low prices and to offer general medical consultation to the poor. The pharmacies are patterned after a similar project in Mexico that started about five years ago. Now, she said, "We want to establish 50 pharmacies [in 2004] throughout the country, and then start the project in Ecuador, a country with an ample indigenous population and where the first steps in this direction have already been taken." She said she expects that 200 Guatemalan doctors recently graduated from medical schools in Cuba will join the project to bring health care to the entire population, principally those with scarce resources. Hundreds of Guatemalans have received scholarships since 1998 to study medicine in Cuba.

Menchu will need the cooperation of the government to get the project going on a larger scale and to expand the availability of generic drugs, now numbering about 200 that her stores can sell. She said she would be seeking authorizations. Menchu was severely criticized in Mexico last year for supporting a bill in the Mexican Senate to reduce patent protections on HIV and cancer drugs from 20 to 10 years.

The argument against her was that she was using her fame and influence to benefit Farmacias Similares in Mexico, of which she is listed as a director. Parenthetically, Menchu is not a foreign director; she is a naturalized Mexican, having received citizenship in March 1998. Gustavo Meono, director of the Fundacion Rigoberta Menchu, a nonprofit organization, said that the pharmacies are a humanitarian service whose profits will go directly to the foundation to fund human rights projects. He said foundation funds come mainly from international donations but self-sustaining projects like this are needed to guarantee their continued existence.

Menchu called the criticism racist and against what she considers a noble cause. Last year she defended the pharmacy and clinic projects by pointing out that they benefit thousands of poor families. Denying any contradiction between her Nobel status and this business, she said that ex-President Nelson Mandela of South Africa has done the same kind of thing. The project, which offers prescriptions at between 25% and 50% below the retail price of branded drugs, will be managed by the Fundacion and by Salud para Todos, the Mexican company.

-- End --