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Presidential Run For Rigoberta Menchu Would Alter The Political Equation In Guatemala

by Mike Leffert

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The 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu Tum has announced her intention to run for president in the September 2007 general elections, setting the stage for the most profound change in the way Guatemala does its political business in years. The indigenous leader launched her candidacy with the Movimiento Politico Winaq as her platform. "After Guatemala's 200 years as a republic, we will exercise our constitutional right to be elected. We want to contribute today to the country's construction of intercultural bases. It is an indigenous overture for all the country," said Menchu. Winaq means humanity in the K'iche language. Internationally, Menchu is the country's best known figure and by many estimates a natural for political office, but few expected her to enter the arena as early as 2007. As recently as December 2006, she announced in Costa Rica that she would form an indigenist party that would field candidates in the 2011 general elections. "In Guatemala, there is a distinguished national indigenous leadership, and, yes, we are going to create a political party to seek the government," she said. "I will be one of the key people in the formation of this instrument that is ready to be born." Somewhere between then and now, the plan changed. Rather than going it alone and seeking legal-party status, Winaq has been considering making common cause with left and center-left parties already in existence, substantially accelerating the process. Still in negotiation, the plan would have the Winaq team up with Encuentro por Guatemala (EG) and the just-formed Movimiento Amplio de Izquierda (MAIZ). MAIZ includes the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), which has a substantial organizational base. The major union and popular organizations are also involved. Such agglutination would create a formidable political bulwark from a fractured left barely able to gain traction in this conservative country where rightists have reigned with aplomb. Difficult alliances Work still remains to nail down this arrangement. Menchu has been in negotiation with EG leader and congressional Deputy Nineth Montenegro. Montenegro is a longtime advocate of the kind of politics Winaq has in mind, a political program described by Wineq's Amilcar Pop as "seeking the reconstruction of the Guatemalan state to make structural changes and eradicate all expressions of institutionalized racism." Montenegro has called the program "reasonable," but the new arrangement was not what she had in mind when her party originally approached Menchu. The EG wanted to run Menchu as its candidate, but the Nobelist had a broader agenda. She wanted a deal by which Winaq would have 50% of the candidacies for mayors and deputies on the slate. Menchu's demand would leave Montenegro in difficulties within her own party, since it would amount to giving up half of the EG's slate. The two leaders are at loggerheads. "One of them is not going to lower the bar, and the other is not going to jump over it," said an unnamed source within Winaq. At the moment, Menchu has a number of options. She could run as an EG candidate, as a MAIZ candidate, as a candidate of an alliance between the two and Winaq, or with Winaq alone. The first would leave Menchu at the head of a relatively weak new party, one entering the electoral fray for the first time with a volatile constituency. Luis Ochoa, analyst at the Instituto Centroamericano de Estudios Políticos (INCEP), says the less-risky choice would be integration with MAIZ, with "a more faithful militancy and a more stable organizational structure." URNG is no political powerhouse, having

failed in 2003 to get enough votes to maintain its registration as a party, but the MAIZ connection brings along other groups, including the Movimiento Politico y Social de Izquierdas (MPSI) and the Colectivo de Organizaciones Sociales (COS), both with a countrywide presence. A coalition of all three forces, Winaq, MAIZ and EG, would entail unifying three distinct and until now relatively marginalized, political forces. Winaq represents indigenism; MAIZ, socialism; and EG, the center-left. In this divided country, such a merger has not been attempted, but one of its implications would be the kind of international support it might bring to bear. Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, for instance, supported the successful presidential campaign of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. Both would be expected to back a Menchu candidacy with MAIZ on board. President Evo Morales of Bolivia has already offered Menchu his full support. She has said that she would like to emulate his example as an indigenous leader who rose to national presidency. The leadership of Morales' Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) delivered Menchu a letter Feb. 16. The letter said, diplomatically, that MAS would help her by sharing "unconditionally" its experience but not as an "intromission." It was signed by the entire leadership of the party, but not by Morales. Menchu said she was pleased by the letter. "We are a political instrument of the sovereignty of the indigenous peoples," she said. "Before we elected the authorities, now we are going to vote, but for ourselves." The letter was read before an audience of about 800 people by MAS vice president Gerardo Garcia at the Encuentro de Pueblos Indigenas por la Democracia at the Instituto Indigena Santiago in Guatemala City. It said Menchu's candidacy demonstrated that the indigenous people can lead and praised her as "a worthy woman, a fighter against neoliberalism." A common theme of the encuentro was, "It is the moment to have access to power and to make decisions," and it was seen as an early start in the effort to get out the indigenous vote. Said participant Maria Isabel Perez, "We are tired of politicians who deceive. Later they humiliate us when they occupy important posts." Menchu closed the gathering with the message, "We'll see you Jan. 14 [when the new president takes office]. Even though we don't have a party, Winaq is a seed that we planted, and we have to water it so it can grow." Tending this tender growth promises to be arduous. Just as the EG wants Menchu at the top of the ticket without giving much to Winaq, so is MAIZ eager for a figurehead but not necessarily a mix of indigenism with its leftist program (see NotiCen, 2006-02-16). MAIZ appears as reluctant as the EG to run Winaq candidates. A negotiating session scheduled for Feb. 20 was abruptly cancelled. Winaq spokesman Ricardo Cajas said the expectation was that this meeting would finalize a deal. "There was an agreement to finalize this panorama," he said. "We acknowledged the proposal they made. In these moments and in this period, it is going to be difficult to work with them." This meeting had been confirmed on Feb. 19, just moments after the conclusion of a bargaining session with the EG. It was not immediately clear what issue caused the breakdown. Cajas said, "The URNG offered the presidency and other spaces, but one part of Winaq was not in agreement with the negotiation." MAIZ showed signs of resignation and determination to move on from the Menchu negotiations. "The URNG-MAIZ has decided to advance with alliances with the other sectors, parties, and groups, and we will follow up on this intent. Winaq was part of the strategy and the alliance did not come to fruition, but we will continue forward," said Alba Estela Maldonado, URNG adjunct secretary-general. Secretary-general Hector Nuila said that outreach to indigenous sectors would go on. "They are not all with Winaq," he said. The door was not shut entirely, but the unexpected cancellation was enough to confirm that melding the three political tendencies would be hard to accomplish. Montenegro's door remained open. She said the proposals of Feb. 19 were still on the table, and she awaited Menchu's decision. As far as is publicly known, under those proposals, Winaq would be able to field legislative and mayoral candidates wherever the EG does not have departmental organization. Winaq would also get slots on the national lists but not on the party's executive

committee. Candidates on the national lists are elected to legislative posts in proportion to the party's percentage of the overall vote. A coalition with the EG would not automatically get Menchu's candidacy up and running. The party still must become registered as a party by submitting a formal petition to the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE). To be eligible, it must first have complied with a number of requisites, including holding departmental and municipal assemblies. EG officials believe they have complied. The consequences of failure A failure to coalesce with the EG would have different consequences than would a failure with MAIZ. Without Menchu at the top, the EG would concentrate on running legislative and local candidates. The presidential equation would not change. But MAIZ would run a presidential candidate. The name of Hector Rosada has been mentioned. Rosada is a longtime political insider with a depth of experience and decent name recognition. If Menchu cannot find a party affiliation for herself and a coalition for Winaq, it is likely that her presidential bid would be put off until 2011. The big winner in that case would be Alvaro Colom of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE). Colom has led the intention-to-vote polls since 2005. In 2003, he ran for president and won in the Western departments with indigenous majorities, the same departments where Menchu would be expected to triumph. A Menchu ticket could crush Colom. Weakening Colom would also strengthen the far right's Partido Patriota and its candidate Otto Perez Molina, who would benefit from the sexism and racism endemic to the electorate that would, in any event, work against Menchu. Racism and sexism have already begun to show up in the nation's newspapers' opinion pieces, albeit in a highly codified manner, touching upon whether the nation is "ready" for a woman or for an indigenous person. The discussion is civilized, courteous, respectful, but fraught. The media coverage also concentrates more heavily on whether an indigenist party constitutes a logic of segregation rather than on discussing the specific proposals of a Menchu candidacy. Menchu has been reticent on the specifics in light of her ongoing negotiations. Said Claudia Samayoa of the Movimiento Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (MNDH), "Everything that has been written about Rigoberta Menchu is pure noise. The communications media have not played their role and have not allowed us to hear the candidate's proposals." Samayoa said the candidate's viability is less important than her ideas about governing. At the same time, the political parties have become sensitized to the utility of having indigenous people on the ticket to attract newly energized indigenous voters. Rigoberto Queme, former mayor of Guatemala's second city, Quetzaltenango, was courted last year by the Gran Alianza Nacional (GAN), the coalition that brought President Oscar Berger to power. Well aware of the latest trends, the indigenous Queme declined, saying he believed the parties' agendas were already set and would offer little to the communities with which he identified. "The parties continue being the same despite the media changes that encourage indigenous participation. Even the leftist parties are not receptive to multiculturalism. They do not accept indigenous participation of the first line and then call upon a personality but not a political movement," said the ex-mayor. Indigenous analyst Daniel Matul of the Liga Maya sees the country in a crisis, evidenced by the current situation of "parties without candidates and candidates without parties." He notes that, in the ten years since the signing of the peace accords, the nation has not been able to build the pluricultural state the accords call for, leaving the possibilities for an indigenous candidate extremely limited. The parties, he says, are "exclusionary, discriminatory, and authoritarian," and he notes that access to government does not necessarily mean access to the power to govern. Matul leaves Menchu and other observers to mull, "Is the correlation of forces favorable for the indigenous peoples to participate in the competition to assume the government? What is the desire of the indigenous peoples, to modify our position within the state or modify the state to start a new republican era with the presence of the four cultures [of Guatemala] in decision making?" [Sources: Inforpress Centroamericana, 02/16/07; Spanish news

service EFE, 02/18/07; Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 12/05/06, 02/12/07, 02/13/07, 02/16/07, 02/20/07; El Periodico (Guatemala), 02/19/07, 02/21/07]

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