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## **As Nobelists Meet, Rigoberta Menchu Says Guatemala Must Prepare For A Female, Indigenous Presidency**

by LADB Staff

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Antigua, Guatemala, the ludicrously beautiful colonial city in the heart of the country known for mayhem and brilliant textiles, was the meeting place, May 10-12, of an international conference dedicated to reducing violence. The Nobel Peace Prize laureates of the Nobel Women's Initiative convened the meetings under the theme, "Women Redefining Democracy for Peace, Justice, and Equality." The Nobel Women's Initiative was the creation, in 2006, of six Nobel Peace laureates, Jody Williams (USA, 1997), Shirin Ebadi (Iran, 2003), Wangari Maathai (Kenya, 2004), Rigoberta Menchu Tum (Guatemala, 1992), and Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire (Northern Ireland, Ireland, 1976). As a group, they are fully half the 12 women ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in its 100-year history. Of that group, Maguire, Ebadi, Williams, and Menchu attended this conference. Menchu and her Fundacion Rigoberta Menchu Tum (FRMT) were the local hosts. According to the organizers, the conference goals were: \* To highlight women's representation, participation, and rights in democracy and democratization; \* To develop fresh perspectives and practical alternatives for reclaiming and reshaping democracy; \* To share experiences, challenges, and perspectives of deepening democracy; \* And, to develop new alliances between women and organizations working to strengthen democracy. Menchu had a grittier agenda. She wanted to focus the more than 130 women activists from around the world on some of the issues that make her country a day-to-day inferno and to get Guatemalans used to the idea of an indigenous, woman president. She ran in the last election and polled disastrous numbers, leaving her and many analysts to believe that the electorate is resistant to both her ethnicity and her gender. With the conference as backdrop, she told Guatemalans, "If the Guatemalan people are not prepared to have as president a woman who is also indigenous, they are going to have to [get prepared.]" Discretely, Menchu declined to predict that she would be the indigenous woman candidate. However, she is the founder of the party Winaq, which nominated her in the last election (see NotiCen, 2007-02-22). And there are several very well-qualified indigenous women who could rise to the occasion, and politics aside for the moment, Menchu speaks as if any of them would do. "We have to occupy the seat that has been denied us," she said. "The day that Mayas no longer beg, stop asking for alms, and step up to power, the country will change." But Menchu was concerned with other aspects of women's lot in Guatemala. While women's participation has grown, and an indigenous female candidacy has become possible, in that same period of time, violence has rained down on women in unprecedented numbers. The Nobelist noted the 3,500 women murdered in the last three years in the country. It is not the absolute number of women killed that makes this so insidious. In fact, in the first quarter of 2009, 86% of the 1,038 people murdered were men. Rather, what makes the women's murders of such great concern is that many of them seem to have been committed in a similar, organized, and perverted way, as if there were some bizarre campaign at the root of them. Inadequate investigation is in great measure responsible for the mysteriousness of it all and is also indicative of how gender inequality works in the country. Women are frightened even to testify or denounce these crimes, says Menchu, because of fear of their own lack of credibility. There is the occasional exception to the lack of judicial follow-up that occurs when women who have risen to

positions of responsibility in public administration force it, or do it themselves. "The problem is that they can lose their lives for it," comments Menchu. The wave of murders is a cause celebre that at least merits its own conference, if not justice. A May 7 conference on the subject in Guatemala City brought together the Union Nacional de Asociaciones de Mujeres de Guatemala (UNAMG), the Sector de Mujeres, and the Red de la No Violencia Contra la Mujer. At the conference, the Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres (GGM) presented data showing that 98% of these crimes against women went unpunished and uninvestigated. Said Cecilia Alvarez of the Red, "Femicide is the result of unresolved structural problems, of machismo, and of the patriarchy that culturally exists in our country." Running against discrimination In Menchu's judgment, the double discrimination that indigenous women suffer is not offset by the incremental improvements in women's circumstances, because "racism in Guatemala has not moved, not even a centimeter." As secretary-general of Winaq, she is organizing the party platform around indigenous women's issues. The racism part of her political equation ought to attract indigenous men as well, and concentration on the extrinsic problems that these populations face might make up for the lack of a coherent indigenous political movement, like that in Bolivia, that could sweep a leading representative figure into power. Menchu said building a party that could elect an indigenous woman would be a long, arduous process. She is projecting that Winaq will be ready to choose its candidates sometime toward the end of 2010. She said that leaders in the highest offices are necessary to raise the self-esteem of the Guatemalan people, "who have lost faith in their own strength," and that justice will not come until that faith is restored. Until then, "We have a perverse system, with perverse authorities." The Nobel laureate hastened to interject that her criticism was not aimed at President Alvaro Colom, who is popular among the indigenous populations. But she says that nothing short of raising all psychological boats will lift the country out of its present state. The problems are so profound, she argues, that their solution is not just the work of a president. "Efforts are being made to change the situation, but so far, these efforts fall like a drop of water on a rock," said Menchu. Many indigenous women throughout the country are more than prepared to take their place in political life, but, says Menchu, "many obstacles must be solved for that [to happen]." One is that these are the poorest of Guatemala's people, and the costs of political campaigning are beyond possibility for them. The poverty and lack of financing are reinforced by the racism. "Maya women don't find work in any institution," said Menchu. "Racism in Guatemala is not just a theory, it is a daily practice." Menchu described Guatemala's present circumstances as a microcosm of the global picture and her quest for inclusion as a cure for what ails the world. "Decadence has reached high levels, and in these moments in the whole world, democracy is an empty term," she said. "The only way to redeem the credibility of the state is to reorganize communities, local governments, provincialism, and women's organizations. What is happening now does not touch the essence of power." Menchu's choice of this international convocation of some of the world's most influential, or newsworthy, women was strategically adept, characteristics that were painfully missing from her last presidential campaign. But fate has intervened in an interesting way. The meetings have been elbowed off the news stage by headline revelations that President Colom had been accused of murder on videotape by none other than his putative victim (see other story, this edition of NotiCen). Menchu stepped forward to demand that Colom guarantee the independence of the justice system, clearly a diversion from her purpose in Antigua. But elsewhere in the news, a demand has been articulated and is building for Colom to step down. Menchu could see the opportunity for an indigenous woman presidency come up sooner than planned.

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