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Interview With Dora Maria Tellez: Critical Reflections On The Sandinista Revolution

by Deborah Tyroler

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. Robinson Dora Maria Tellez became a national heroine in Nicaragua in August 1978 when, as "Comandante Dos," she helped lead a 12-member Sandinista commando unit in taking over the National Palace, a spectacular action that brought the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship into the international spotlight. After the Sandinistas took power in July 1979, Tellez occupied numerous positions, including a stint as Health Minister. In the February 1990 elections, she was elected to the National Assembly. The charismatic yet humble Tellez is today one of the most popular and respected woman in Nicaragua. In July, at the Sandinista National Liberation Front's (FSLN) first national congress, media attention was focused on Tellez result of debate over including women in the FSLN national directorate. Shortly before the congress, daily newspaper Barricada published a commentary by Orlando Nunez, a well-known Sandinista sociologist. Nunez summarized the views of many Sandinistas on the participation of women in party leadership as follows: "In Nicaragua a woman is the head of state; a woman could also be included in the [FSLN] National Directorate... "The principal reason [for including women in the party's highest leadership positions] resides in the FSLN's need to democratize itself and contribute to the democratization of the nation...[A] democratization process cannot be undertaken without women's participation and representation of women, and without women's leadership...Comandante Tellez has won the confidence not only of Sandinista militants, but of a large portion of the Nicaraguan people." The Sandinista revolution was one of the first to have incorporated women in a substantial way as combatants, political leaders, professionals, and statespersons. Women won political equality and a formal end to their subordinate status. But numerous social, economic and ideological constraints upon women's full equality and development remain. Machismo continues to be deeply ingrained in Nicaraguan society and within the FSLN. Critics point out that of the nearly 600 voting delegates at the congress, only 17.5% were women. The proposal to nominate Tellez to the national directorate was first made at an FSLN departmental congress held in June, and became the focus of controversy as the national congress approached. The issue eventually attracted international attention as a symbol of the issue of feminism in Latin America and women in revolutionary processes. However, Tellez herself declined to accept the proposed nomination, supporting the position that while women's participation in the party is an important issue, a change in the top leadership should await the next congress in 1994. The delay was justified by Nicaragua's current crisis and political and economic transition. This position regarding party leadership eventually prevailed. Questioned by reporters during the congress, Tellez emphasized under-representation of women among party delegates. The key issue, she said, "is not the token presence of a woman in the national directorate, but the position and evolution of the women's movement" as a whole. According to Tellez, "A token woman can lead to reductionism and friction. It's not gender which defines the qualities of a leader. Margaret Thatcher is a politician, and only a woman in addition, i.e., in second place, coincidentally. Her presence insofar as she is female, doesn't determine anything. I think that in a party like the FSLN the only way to stop or reduce discrimination against women is through our effective involvement in the struggle for our rights. Otherwise, no one, not even a godsend, can

save us." While Tellez became a symbol of the controversy around the issue of women in the FSLN, her leadership in women's issues is not the key to her popularity. Rather, it has been her overall political leadership within the revolution, her intellect, selflessness and personal integrity. In the words of most Nicaraguans, Tellez stands out for "her political clarity." The attention focused on her during the controversy, including many interviews that appeared in the Nicaraguan media, has highlighted Tellez as a leading contributor to the FSLN's internal "new thinking," or the process of democratization and renewal that began with the party's electoral defeat last year. (See "A Latin American Revolutionary Party Faces the 1990s," CAU 04/10/91.) Appearing below are excerpts from an interview with Tellez on the eve of the party congress, published in the July 1991 issue of monthly magazine *Pensamiento Propio* [Regional Socio-Economic Research Coordinator for Central America and the Caribbean (CRIES), Managua]. In the interview, Tellez expresses her views on the "trials and errors" of the Sandinistas' 10 years in power, and theoretical reflections regarding the state, civil society, power and revolutionary process. In particular, she criticizes the "vanguardist" concept adopted by most revolutionary movements, including the FSLN. *Pensamiento Propio* (PP): What were the principal errors of the Sandinista Revolution, as seen from within? Tellez: One of the problems...has been the concept of a vanguard...The assumption is that the vanguard always has the right and correct interpretation of reality, and that its actions are always just and reasonable. This is the first problem: no one holds absolute truth. Second, leaders in the "vanguard" emerge from a process of natural selection [during the underground struggle] and in practice become a source of "absolute truth." But it is one thing to be a vanguard in the struggle [against the dictatorship] and another to claim such position once the revolution has taken power. Thus the question arises: is there any validity to the position that there can be a vanguard in power? PP: Is there a contradiction between this type of vanguard and the development of civil society? Tellez: That is precisely the contradiction. The revolution developed civil society and organized professional, labor, political and mass organizations. On the other hand, although the vanguard is an instrument for interpretation of reality, this does not make it an infallible interpreter of reality this is a deformation of Marx. What is the expression of the vanguard in power? The state. And that was Sandinismo's basic expression when it was in power? If the vanguard is always right and is in power and controls the state, then the state is always right. And this implies the negation of civil society! Added to the above is a collateral problem: self-censorship within the party, which was another symptom of the flawed conceptual, philosophical, ideological and generalized concept of the vanguard, or vanguardism... This concept of vanguard has been completely discarded in fact, since even before the 1990 elections. It did not make any sense in a social scheme committed to multi-party political, economic and ideological pluralism. PP: Did the revolutionary leadership lag behind the social development stimulated by the revolution itself? Tellez: The philosophy of the revolutionary party, not the leadership lagged behind, not just in Nicaragua, but all over the world. The only place where [revolutionaries] left government but managed to stay standing on their two feet was here, and that is an achievement of our revolution. Compared with the rightward drift in the Soviet Union, our situation is wonderful! The problem of the world revolutionary movement is an overall, philosophical one. What happened to Sandinism is a lesson which must be well assimilated. The case of El Salvador is distinct, because when the FMLN emerged from the union of revolutionary organizations in that country, there was already a strong mass movement. Who gave birth to the mass movement in Nicaragua? The huge, mass organizations in Nicaragua were created by the Sandinista Front after the revolutionary victory because the dictatorship never permitted such development. Afterwards, vanguardism became a problem for the continued development of the mass movement in civil society... PP: Then the vanguardist conception influenced the development and functioning of the mass organizations?

Tellez: These organizations were excessively party-oriented. This is part of the phenomenon I am referring to the principal mass organizations did not emerge from the grassroots. Sure, there was a great desire among the people to get organized, but the trade union federations as well as the women's and neighborhood movements were organized from the top down... The vanguardist conception (practiced from the position of state power) engendered a situation of "statist" over party attitudes, in the sense that the FSLN ended up becoming a "parastatal party." And what is a parastatal party? A party whose actuation is dependent upon the actuation of the state. PP: Why did the FSLN not correct this logic of a parastatal party? Tellez: Maybe there was a problem of emphasis. The Revolution was very good in the foreign policy arena, very good in military defense, but weak regarding the economy and domestic policies. In 1985 we began giving priority attention to the issue of the economy, but we still neglected domestic policies, even though the overall situation hinged on them. PP: If you had to make a political-ideological summary of the last 10 years, what would it be? Tellez: That people don't live on ideology but on practice. They want to see if a government produces results or not. In the elections, the people did not opt for another model. It was not an ideological vote...The contras and the campesinos (who supported the contras) and voted for UNO, did so demanding their rights as campesinos. And what was the revolution's main program? Was it not to give a voice to the campesinos? PP: As some have pointed out, in 1980 the revolution taught the campesinos how to read numbers [during the literacy campaign], and 10 years later the campesinos distinguished well between the number 1 on the ballots and the number 5. [The number 1 was the UNO slate, and 5, the FSLN slate on the official ballots.] Tellez: Exactly. We did a remarkable job regarding education even if we don't like the results it produced. The Front has to renew itself precisely because society's demands increased. Revolution is essentially a phenomenon of consciousness. This is the difference with capitalism. If there is no consciousness, [the revolution] does not work. We see this now in the struggle of the campesinos who were formally with the contras, of the demobilized contras, who, even though they were contras, are now demanding land and credit from the new government. Thus, they have taken up the Sandinista Front's political program, which is precisely the democratization of land tenure, and liquidation of the oligarchy and unproductive latifundismo. If we are not able to understand things in this way, then we will continue living with the obsession of power and we will convert power into a fetish, into an end in itself. Who says the revolution cannot move forward under the current conditions? I firmly believe it can... When were we stronger? Before or now? The strength of a party depends on the correlation of forces at the grassroots and on its organization at that level. If we stop seeing power as a fetish, our conception of political work, and our relationship with the mass organizations will change. If we change our perception of what the government is, then we can see it as something which we can occupy, but not as a party eternally sitting in the presidency. We can no longer be verticalist. Our misreading of public opinion [regarding the 1990 elections] was a product of the vanguardist philosophy. PP: Then, is the revolution moving forward or is it going backwards? Tellez: I am not so sure the revolution is moving backwards. It suffered a major blow. The right has always had its own program, but we will see if they are able to put the program into practice and make it work. This is where we will be able to gauge if there was revolution or not in Nicaragua. Because if we could only wage this struggle [against the right's program] from the position of state power, then it means there was no real revolution, as there was not in East Germany. If there really was a revolution in Nicaragua, we will see the people fighting for what is theirs. If the right is able to turn things around here within a few years while the people sit by idly, it means that we accomplished nothing in the last 25 years.

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