



VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

THE
KARIBU
FOUNDATION

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A Just Peace in the Wake of Dictatorship

An Interview with Nobel Peace Laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel and Mothers of May Square-Founders' Line member Nora Morales de Cortiñas

The Karibu Foundation is an independent foundation that supports voices from the Global South that provide alternatives to the dominant paradigms of power, distribution, and development.

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Jubileo South / Americas is a network of groups, organizations, popular movements and activists who are fighting for the annulment and reparation of illegitimate debt and against all forms of capitalist domination.

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The Argentine dictatorship from 1976-1983 is widely recognized as one of the bloodiest historical episodes of 20th century Latin America. Similar to other trends in Latin America at the time, the authoritarian right-wing regime in Argentina rose to power with backing from the US government as part of its anti-communist foreign policy initiatives. The Argentine regime argued that repression was a justified necessity to maintain political stability in the country, and it is estimated that between 15,000 and 30,000 citizens were tortured and killed during the period. Many of these individuals simply “disappeared”—seized by the authorities and were never heard from again.

The legacies, impacts, and wounds of the dictatorship still remain deep in Argentina, and the fight for a just peace continues. In May 2014, the Karibu Foundation sat down with Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel and prominent member of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora (Mothers of May Square-Founders' Line), Nora Morales de Cortiñas, in Buenos Aires to discuss the role of human rights activists, civil society, and everyday citizens in the struggle for justice. Both are members of Dialogue 2000, the Argentine affiliate of Karibu partner organization Jubileo South.

Karibu: *Thirty years have now passed since the civilian-military dictatorship ended. How are the effects still felt in Argentina today?*

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel: The effects of the dictatorship are still felt everywhere: socially, politically, and economically. Families still are missing their children and grandchildren; the people have inherited an illegitimate and immoral debt that squeezes their lives; and impunity remains for many of the perpetrators of the state terror 30 years later - even after we were able to overturn the laws that had been created to ensure such impunity.

Argentina is one of the few countries in the world that has instigated legal action to examine crimes of the state, yet there are remnant legal structures that the State acquired during the dictatorship, and even earlier, that have not been laid aside. This leads to continued human rights violations and impunity.

Karibu: *How have social movements and human rights organizations responded to these types of human rights violations and legal structures?*

Nora Morales de Cortiñas: For social movements, the situation is much better than it was 30 years ago. During the dic-

JUSTICIA

Photo: Banner at Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires, Argentina



Nora Morales de Cortiñas

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- Nora Morales de Cortiñas

is going on because they don't want to see the continuities and new challenges. Since the governments after the dictatorship have made efforts for human rights, many of the human rights groups that emerged during the dictatorship have taken a step to the side. But this puts democracy building at a risk.

The motto however needs to be “No to the impunity of yesterday and today”.

Karibu: Argentina is often lifted up as a prime example of a country in the region that has made immense progress towards human rights and justice following the fall of the dictatorship. Is this the case? What is still missing in the struggle for justice and peace regionally?

Nora: In addition to burning questions about achieving basic rights to food and shelter, water, health and education services for all people, the country and the region are still highly militarized, and influenced by neo-liberal economic forces. US military presence has increased dramatically over the past years, especially in places like Colombia, Paraguay, Honduras, the Malvinas Islands where there is even a NATO base. This control is here to facilitate the continued exploitation of our peoples and of nature, through unjust investment and trade rules, repeal of labor laws, new indebtedness. All of this has led to even wider human rights violations and violations against indigenous peoples.

tatorship, we (the Mothers of May Square) had to march silently in protest for our disappeared children. Now we can speak out openly. But there are still many limitations to freedom of speech and assembly when people speak out against human rights violations in other settings.

In Cordoba (Argentina), for example, and around the country, there are now thousands of activists who face criminal charges for their resistance against multinational companies that are exploiting the resources and the rights of indigenous populations. There is police and government control, and a lot of intimidation.

Adolfo: It is a challenge for the human rights organizations at times. There is a shared sense that now that the dictatorship is over, we can relax. Many human rights organizations don't want to address the abuses of today. They close their eyes to what

Adolfo: When we talk about human rights, we need to talk about civil, political, economic, cultural, and environmental rights. All of these things need to be lived together. We need to ensure the rights of individuals, of peoples, of nature – all together. For me, we need to address these issues together in an integrated sense, both here in Argentina but also regionally and globally.

In Argentina, for example, we need to be acutely aware of the dramatic human rights situations in Honduras and Haiti because our military has been and is currently involved. We need to strengthen our own regional



Nobel Laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel

capacity to prevent and respond to problems, based on the experiences we have had. We need a focus on a regional level on democracy building.

Karibu: The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Heads of State of UNASUR have both recently declared the Americas as a “Zone of Peace”. What does this declaration mean for your work for human rights in the region?

Adolfo: This declaration is important, but primarily because it is one of the first times that heads of State in the region have come together to seek a common vision for regional integration. After so many years of colonization and dependency, Latin America is now attempting to build a common voice as part of changing dynamics around the world that can't be ignored.

Yet at the same time, the governments have come together and declared “peace” without exploring its many layers: political, economic, social, environmental peace. Plus, as Nora pointed out, there is still an enormous foreign military presence and control. We have a long way to go.

Nora: The struggle for a just peace in the region and in Argentina continues, regardless of what CELAC and UNASUR have declared. We continue to face many of the same challenges now that we did at the time of the coup, 38 years ago. In Argentina, and in many other countries of Latin America like Guatemala, Colombia, Brazil, Uruguay – we still demand to know where our children are, what has happened to them. They are still gone.

But we now have a responsibility to take on the

demands and struggles for which our children were fighting when they were disappeared.

In Argentina, and throughout the region, we see continued human rights abuses, torture, and disappearances. But we also have to take on as a priority strengthening the resistance to the many new forms of human rights abuse, the fight to protect our access to water, for instance, food sovereignty, the struggles against mega extractivist projects and even events like the World Cup, with their disastrous consequences for many communities.

We need to continue to struggle to put these issues on the agenda of policy makers worldwide. Otherwise, we will continue to see forced displacements, loss of identity, crimes against humanity, and other violation into the future. ■

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel – Argentine human rights activist, community organizer, pacifist, art painter, writer and sculptor. He was the recipient of the 1980 Nobel Peace Prize for “his courageous nonviolent struggle (that) had lit a light in the darkness of Argentina’s violence.”

Nora Morales de Cortiñas – Argentine homemaker, social psychologist and member of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo-Línea Fundadora (Mothers of May Square-Founders Line). The movement was founded 1977 by women in Argentina whose children had disappeared under the civilian-military dictatorship. The Mothers still march every Thursday in Buenos Aires to demand justice and to know the truth about what happened to their children.

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