

FMLN Reflections, 20 Years Later: An Interview With Nidia Díaz

By ESTHER PORTILLO-GONZALES

ON JANUARY 10, 1981, THE FARABUNDO MARTÍ NATIONAL Liberation Front (FMLN) launched its first offensive, occupying large sections of El Salvador's departments of Morazán and Chalatenango. The same month, María Marta Valladares, also known as Nidia Díaz, became a commander of the guerrilla force. During the 12-year civil war, Díaz became internationally known as one of the FMLN's most exceptional leaders. On April 18, 1985, she was captured, imprisoned, and tortured by the Salvadoran army. Six months later, at the peak of the civil war, she was released in exchange for President José Napoleón Duarte's daughter, Inés.

Díaz continued to be part of the FMLN through January 1992, when she was one of the signers of the Chapultepec Peace Accords, which ended the country's civil war and transformed the FMLN into a political party. On January 16, Salvadorans celebrated the 20th anniversary of the accords. In a historic event in Morazán, President Mauricio Funes, of the FMLN party, commemorated the date by officially apologizing for the violence carried out by the Salvadoran military during the country's civil war. In light of the 20th anniversary of the Peace Accords, NACLA interviewed Díaz, currently the secretary of international relations for the FMLN. The interview took place in San Salvador on February 5, just over a month before El Salvador's March 11 legislative elections.

Could you talk about the FMLN and El Salvador since the 1992 peace accords?

Today we are in a 20-year process of democratization as a result of the Peace Accords that ended the military dictatorship. This made it possible to establish politi-

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cal freedoms and the right to organize, to participate in politics, to have an opinion, and to mobilize without the threat of repression. We have more possibilities and access to further organize politically.

At the end of 1992, the FMLN had the opportunity to become a political party. We have participated in several elections where we have an intimate relationship with the social sectors because in the 1980s the military factor was the common language of the political struggle. That has changed. Politics is no longer waged through bullets but through political, social, and legislative struggle.

At an event early this morning, we paid homage to Farabundo Martí, who was killed 80 years ago on February 1. They executed him along with [student leaders] Alonso Luna and Mario Zapata. Together with workers and peasants, Martí had led an indigenous democratic uprising in the west of the country on January 22, 1932, in a desperate attempt to demand that the government resolve the economic and social problems in the country. Instead, the dictatorship lasted for 60 years.

The Peace Accords we signed 20 years ago were aimed at exactly this: dismantling the leftover military dictatorship that the powerful oligarchy had opted for 80 years before, with the sole purpose of trying to destroy the popular movement. Instead of democratizing the country, they chose dictatorship. And it took a tremendous struggle for us to finally dismantle this dictatorship after 60 years.

Today we continue to struggle to ever more deeply democratize the country, because these problems are resolved with more democracy. Two and a half years ago we finally achieved a great victory when we defeated the oligarchy in the 2009 elections. It has been a great challenge and an opportunity to participate in public policy from the presidency, and it has only been two and a half years.

We will hold legislative and municipal elections on March 11, and our great challenge is to remain the strongest political force in the country and to increase the number of public officials in the Legislative Assembly in order to continue making changes. We want to hold

on to the mayor's offices we have now, grow elsewhere, and take back San Salvador. We are in the final stages, but we see it as part of the people's struggle to continue every day to better meet our objectives in order to—as [the former FMLN leader] Schafik Handal called it—live in “a place worth living in.”

As one of the official signers of the Peace Accords, what do you believe has been achieved and what is yet to be accomplished?

We engaged in dialogue for eight years, from 1984, when we began negotiating with President Duarte, until the day we signed the Peace Accords. During those eight years the dialogue was constantly interrupted, and it was only in the last two years, from 1990 to 1992, that the accords were finalized. At no moment was the FMLN willing to agree to a ceasefire or lay down our weapons unless it was under accords that would move us toward ending the structural causes that had led to the conflict.

We had four overall objectives. One was, of course, to topple the dictatorship and submit the military's power to civilian authority. One of the greatest victories was to establish the political and civil rights of all citizens. Now, 20 years later, we have problems, a lot of them, like citizen security as well as poverty. We were also never able to jump-start the country's economy. But today we have a tool, which is to make proposals, to have dialogue, to be critical, to build public opinion, to protest, and to take the streets. In other words, no one can kill us, disappear us, nor exile us for our ideas and our proposals. This is the principal legacy that we have left for the generations today. Our second objective was to profoundly democratize the country, which we have done. The third major objective was to guarantee respect for human rights, and the fourth was to reunify Salvadoran society.

The problem is that in 1992, when [the conservative party] ARENA assumed the government under President Alfredo Cristiani, they began to promote a neoliberal model, which they developed over 18 years. We have only had two and a half years to dismantle it. Their model was profound. The country was dollarized and they privatized a lot of goods that belonged to the Salvadoran people. There was a rise in the cost of living and unemployment. They abandoned agricultural production—and thousands of other disastrous things. As soon as Cristiani took power, he recuperated the banks, which had been nationalized, and he bought them at next to nothing. He privatized the banks, commercialized coffee, and he began the neoliberal model. This contradicted the spirit of the Peace Accords, which

called for the democratization of the economy, and contradicts the very idea of democracy as it appears in the country's Constitution, which, in its economic component, calls for a country with a fair economy.

That said, the accords did create a new doctrine for the armed forces and a new public security model, which restrained the military, reducing its intelligence agencies. They created a new police academy, a new police force, and there were new reforms to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal emerged and the Ombudsman for the Defense of Human Rights [PDDH] was created.

Where is the FMLN now as a political force in El Salvador?

After the Peace Accords, the FMLN became a growing left-wing force, and in 2009 it became the leading political electoral power in the entire country. This is not only because we defeated the oligarchy at the voting booth when we beat ARENA and won the presidency, but also because in the last three legislative periods, we were the primary force in the national Legislative Assembly. We do not have a simple majority but we are the largest political force and we have half the population under our jurisdiction in the municipalities that we govern—this is how we have maintained our influence.

The FMLN has fought all these battles in order to maintain the spirit of the accords. The great challenge today is to deepen democracy and to reactivate the productive sectors of the country. For instance, we have just had our largest harvest of corn, despite the floods we had last year. We are prepared to provide people food from here until May and then it is time for the next harvest. We have begun to support small businesses. For the first time an education reform also contains an economic support for families through the Lets Go to School program, which offers students free uniforms, shoes, school supplies, and a glass of milk. In the area of medicine we haven't just revitalized our hospitals, but we are taking medicine to rural communities with medical teams, so communities no longer have to go to far-away hospitals. In other words, we have begun a process of change, and it's a great challenge for the FMLN to continue these transformations and to convert ourselves into a true alternative for our country on our way toward the 2014 presidential elections.

Some people say the armed struggle in El Salvador wasn't worth it because there are still a lot of problems, like migration and crime. What is your response to this critique?



The patriotic struggle that we have waged for democracy was well worth it. We dismantled the dictatorship. Over the past 20 years, we have also dismantled the attempts of powerful sectors to penalize types of struggle. For example, people were arrested and jailed under the anti-terrorist law for protesting the privatization of water. We, the FMLN, were able to defeat this law.

There have been some changes to cabinet positions, and former military leaders are now occupying public-security positions. That is why we are working hard to elect more FMLN representatives to the Legislative Assembly, so that our country continues down the democratic path and so there are no excesses in violation of citizens' rights. The people who had the chance to influence this country after the accords were members of the ARENA party, and they are largely the ones to blame for how things turned out.

These people who abused their power while heading the armed forces did so in the name of defending a supposed democracy or freedom. They created obstacles

The FMLN leadership celebrates the January 16, 1992, Peace Accords in San Salvador. FRIDA HARTZ

for justice and they have never apologized for their acts. Funes has asked for forgiveness, and there are cases that are getting some attention in the Inter-American Court. There is a plan to provide reparations to the victims. The problem is that the former leaders have no capacity for self-criticism or to ask for forgiveness and say, Yes, we were abusive. Yes, we did it. We recognize it and therefore will collaborate in the investigation, for example, into where the 8,000 disappeared are.

For those of us who fought for social justice, yes it was worth it. Now my child, and our children, can exercise our political and civic rights, and continue the struggle. The problem is that change happens over many generations, not just one. We would be very frustrated if we didn't continue to struggle, and continue struggling our whole lives. Things change when the people decide that it is time. ■