

# The New Internationalists: where are they now?

MARCH 2013

*Aminatou Haidar, from Western Sahara; Rigoberta Menchú, from Guatemala; Mari Marcel Thekaekara, from India; and Domitila Barrios de Chungara, from Bolivia.*

## Aminatou Haidar, Western Sahara (NI 297, 1997)

Aminatou Haidar is one of those campaigners who has come close to embodying her people's cause in the eyes of the international community. Her heroic nonviolent resistance and hunger strikes have caught the imagination of the world. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012.



Rafael Marchante / Reuters

For almost the entire life of the *New Internationalist*, the people of Western Sahara have been enduring their agony of exile and occupation. Following the withdrawal of the colonial power, Spain, the International Court of Justice ruled in October 1975 that the Saharawi people should be given the right to self-determination. In November of that year, however, King Hassan II of Morocco instituted a mass march over the border to claim the territory. Tens of thousands of Saharawis fled from Moroccan troops into the desert, eventually establishing refugee camps hundreds of kilometres away, near the Algerian town of Tindouf. The other half of the population stayed at home and have suffered the consequences of military occupation ever since.

Morocco's invasion of Western Sahara was not reported by *New Internationalist* at the time – each edition of the magazine in the 1970s was given over to a single theme, with no gestures at all to news events. But over subsequent years there were periodic short articles about the Saharawis' battle for independence before finally, in December 1997, Western Sahara was given the full-theme treatment.

By that time, Aminatou Haidar had already suffered her first three years and seven months of torture and imprisonment. As a 21-year-old student in 1987 she had become involved in distributing leaflets and carrying messages for a secret cell of Polisario, the Western Saharan liberation movement. She was arrested in a sweep of such activists.

### The blindfold would remain in place for three years and seven months

'Only years later would I know exactly where I had ended up. The place was just 500 metres away from my house, where I used to play with the other children from the neighbourhood... Their torture methods and ways of degrading me were very systematic and it seemed they enjoyed doing it. The more I resisted, the more they varied their methods. In the end, my body was only a heap of flesh and bones...

'[After the first week I was put on my own in a corridor about a metre wide.] The door was left open and I only had a very thin blanket to protect myself, so when it got cold, it was really cold. For three weeks I was subjected to questioning, enduring an endless stream of torture and insults. Because of the blindfold, I lost all notion of time and space. I spent nine months there, while they left the light on day and night. The blindfold would remain in place for three years and seven months. We never washed our faces and never had a shower...'

Aminatou was released from prison in June 1991 as part of the newly initiated UN peace process that was supposed to end

in a referendum on self-determination.

She continued her studies but maintained her activism on behalf of political prisoners and took part in protests in the occupied territories in 2005 that became known as the Saharawi *intifada*. Imprisoned again, she launched her first hunger strike along with other political detainees, drawing international attention that forced their release. She used her new global profile to tour European and North American countries publicizing Morocco's human rights violations in Western Sahara. Returning home from a trip to the US, where she had received the 2009 Train Foundation Civil Courage Prize, she was immediately deported for refusing to write 'Moroccan Sahara' on her immigration forms.

"There is no Moroccan Sahara," [I said to the Moroccan chief of police]. "There is only Western Sahara. Isn't MINURSO the United Nations Mission for the Referendum of Western Sahara? If it's not Western Sahara, why did the King of Morocco sign all these UN documents starting and ending with the words Western Sahara? Why are you asking me to write something that doesn't reflect the truth?"

'For 24 hours, police and security officers interrogated and humiliated me. They confiscated my passport and deported me from Western Sahara against my will and put me on a plane to Lanzarote on the Canary Islands, which are part of Spain. But while in the airport, I decided to take a stance. I started an unlimited hunger strike to defend my inalienable rights to liberty and dignity.'

The hunger strike lasted 32 days and left Aminatou on the brink of death, but the surge of global interest in her case forced Morocco to give way. She remains a thorn in the side of the Moroccan regime – and of the UN.

'After receiving the Robert F Kennedy Human Rights Award in 2008, I addressed the UN Special Political and Decolonization Committee. This is what I said then: "We hold the United Nations responsible for the stalled state of affairs that characterizes the issue of Western Sahara and for your complete silence in the face of crimes against humanity being committed by the government of Morocco against civilian Saharawis who demonstrate peacefully for the right to self-determination."

'International politics are based on strategic or economic interests. That is our problem in a nutshell. But neither the Moroccans nor the Americans, the Spanish nor the French, can ignore an entire people that continue to stand up for their human rights and their legitimate rights to simply exist. Over the past 35 years, we have never lost hope, because the young Saharawis are even more courageous than previous generations, whether they live in Laayoune, the south of Morocco, in Mauritania, in the camps near Tindouf or in other countries. We will never surrender.'

**Aminatou Haidar** was talking to Arne Peter Braaksma, whose book *Trailblazers* sees her telling her life story in more depth than ever before (ISBN 9-789460-221866)

## Rigoberta Menchú, Guatemala (NI 242, 1993)

When a former coffee-picker stepped forward to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, a light was momentarily cast upon the plight of indigenous people throughout the world.



Juan Meono / AP Photo

Guatemalan-born Rigoberta Menchú Tum, who was living in self-imposed exile at the time, was awarded the prestigious accolade in recognition of her work: highlighting the exploitation and persecution of her country's indigenous people during its brutal civil war.

More than 20 years later, the war may have ended, but has Menchú's esteemed prize improved the rights of the people she was fighting for?

With two unsuccessful presidential campaigns under her belt, where she failed on both occasions to garner more than three per cent of the vote, it may seem like her work has done little to enhance the lives of Guatemala's native peoples. However, in a country where votes are often bought, not earned, her success is far larger than the polls suggest.

## Elections here are a carnival, they're not democratic

'I've really enjoyed the last two elections,' says Menchú. 'I haven't reached a large percentage of the vote, but I've reached 95 per cent of the country.'

In 2007, the Mayan activist became the first indigenous person to run for Guatemala's top position, and four years later founded the country's first Mayan political party, WINAQ.

'We were never interested in winning the elections. You can't win without money and no multimillionaire would support us,' she says. Recounting an anecdote from her last campaign, she describes addressing a rural town when an opposition party's bus drove by announcing it was giving away packets of rice, and her audience disappeared.

'Elections here are a carnival, they're not democratic. Parties use poverty: giving the poor hope by handing them food.'

Despite the irony that the majority of the people she campaigns for do not vote for her, Menchú considers her political career a great success.

'I've opened a door to Mayans and to women. Not only do we now have a party, but we also have one person in congress,' she says, referring to Mayan lawyer Amilcar Pop.

But it's not all politics.

In the same year she won the Nobel Peace Prize, the indigenous activist founded the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation, dedicated to the pursuit of peace and promotion of indigenous people's rights.

In the past two decades, the organization has campaigned for justice for the victims of the war: exhuming mass graves, legislating new crimes, fighting for usurped ancestral lands to be returned to Mayan communities and legally documenting around 36,000 women. Menchú herself even travelled to Spain to bring genocide cases against Guatemala's war criminals.

The Foundation recently implemented a multicultural education programme at the country's state university. Menchú calls previous syllabuses 'racist' and 'colonial' and says this degree, with its emphasis on ancestral culture, trains students from rural communities to become teachers.

Although sometimes misunderstood by Guatemala's non-indigenous population, Menchú remains devoted to her original cause: the plight of her people. However, for their position within society to be significantly enhanced, the government needs to act on the issues that were highlighted in Oslo two decades ago – many of which are still prevalent today.

**Anna Bevan**

## Mari Marcel Thekaekara, India (NI 200, 1989)

Almost a quarter of a century ago, I wrote my first *New Internationalist* piece, 'Where has all the conscience gone?' – a bit of a rant about how the development sector had lost its values. The 40th anniversary is a good opportunity to look at what has happened since.



Varsha Yeshwant Kumar

India has changed incredibly in the last 25 years. Every major city has unrecognizable new areas. Dubai-like malls and characterless glass-and-concrete buildings rise from the debris of ravaged neighbourhoods, where once there were tree-lined avenues, gardens and graceful old buildings, where children played as grandparents looked on fondly. I have seen farmers with tears rolling down their weatherbeaten cheeks as they watched their unharvested crops brutally bulldozed to make way for technology hubs. Economists call it growth.

The voluntary sector has transformed itself, too. I see people who have fought poverty for 40 years looking tired and burnt out. Concepts like social justice and lasting change are being thrown out. The new jargon is social entrepreneurship. Many

profiteers have jumped on the bandwagon, starting businesses where they can claim the benefits of the 'social' brand and are fêted as pioneers. Capitalism is no longer a bad word. Socialism is.

At a British charity event, I watched appalled as a brash CEO promoted herself by using an MDG campaign. Decades of sensitivity and caring were thrown out by a decent, globally respected donor agency. The CEO filled three-quarters of the screen while in the corner an African child smiled. There was a ripple of distaste in the room – we'd thrown out such posters decades ago. But no-one objected strongly. Brash branding is here to stay.

### Concepts like social justice and lasting change are being thrown out

The relationship between Western donor agencies and Southern countries is somewhat similar. They call the shots, set the agenda. We remain partners only in name. Money is scarce. So old firebrands who once fought fiercely for their independence now put up with demands for endless inane reports and graphs that no-one reads, either in Delhi or in London. But the poverty game goes on.

There's more money if you dance to their tune. Millions for climate change and advocacy, environment and tigers. Microcredit has been proved fatally flawed, sucking the blood of poor women. But the band plays on.

From the perspective of Gudalur, my small hill town, much has changed. In 1990, when I began my *New Internationalist* column, I had to drive 100 kilometres to Mysore to fax my copy to my editor. In 2005, a conference call linked editors from Oxford, Toronto and Adelaide to (unbelievably) Gudalur! Yes, India's technological leap has affected even the remotest parts of the country. There are computer training centres everywhere. Village kids think IT is the way to the top. But though even the poorest homes have cellphones these days, we still see a few malnutrition cases.

South India is relatively less poor but north India remains immersed in grinding poverty. Malnutrition and maternal mortality figures rival Sub-Saharan Africa even as Indians gloat at the acquisition of Jaguar Land Rover and other international companies.

Dalit action campaigns have seen some success, though Dalits continue to be raped and murdered every day. India's adivasis (indigenous) are currently the most persecuted people in the country. They are being hounded out of their forest and hillside homes to make way for dams, mining and large companies. Thousands in central India have been raped, tortured and killed by paramilitary forces as well as by Naxalite guerrillas.

The entire world now knows Delhi as India's rape capital. Yet in 2013, in spite of the outpouring of grief over Nirbhaya's gang rape and death, we felt hope. The unprecedented protests and anger, the thousands who turned out on Delhi streets braving police batons and water cannons, promised a new beginning. Perhaps India is at a crossroads. Maybe things have to get really bad before they can get better. What else can we hold on to but hope?

## Domitila Barrios de Chungara, Bolivia (NI 75, 1979)

When the NI last asked 'Where are they now?', in October 1989, we tracked down Domitila, who had originally been featured a decade before. She had risen to prominence during the time of military dictatorship as leader of the Housewives' Committee of one of Bolivia's most militant mining communities, Siglo XX, and for a brief while had won international notice following the publication of her book *Let Me Speak*.



David Mercado / Reuters

By 1989 Siglo XX had become a ghost town – ravaged by collapsing tin prices on the world market. Like many of her neighbours, Domitila had moved with her children to Cochabamba. She seemed bitter and somewhat diminished, not then engaged in any political activity.

In subsequent years, however, she certainly regained her political fire. She is pictured at a rally remembering her hero Che Guevara, and for years she ran a political training centre for young people from the poorest districts of her city.

When she died of cancer last year at the age of 74, President Evo Morales declared three days of national mourning.



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