



# INTERVIEW WITH MAURICIA CASTRO

*In 1991, Vicente Matute, former FETRIXI president, and other members of the Directive Commission were ambushed and assassinated. Mauricia Castro, Xicaque, then Secretary of FETRIXI, assumed the presidential office which she holds to this date. She is married and is the mother of three children.*

**M**auricia Castro: My name is Mauricia Castro and I come from the Department of Yoro in Honduras. I am part of the peoples of Xicaque or Tolupan, located in the North of the country.

**SAIIC:** Very little is said about the Indigenous peoples of Honduras. How many are there and what groups do they belong to?

**Mauricia:** In Honduras we have 6 groups, 7 including the Chortis who are not yet organized. Within those 6 groups, with their diverse languages and customs, there are almost half a million Indigenous peoples. There are the Lencas, which number 80,000; the Peichen, about 2,000; the Garifunas, 300,000; the Misikitos 40,000; and the Xicaques which number about 32,000. The Lencas live in Lempira, La Paz, and Intibucan. The Peichen and Miskitos live in Pahuacas, Sumos, Gracias a Dios, and Colon.

**SAIIC:** Do these Indigenous nations still conserve their languages and traditions?

**Mauricia:** We, the Xicaques are on the verge of losing our language. This is why we are working so hard to strengthen it and spread it.

**SAIIC:** What is education like in your schools?

**Mauricia:** This is the most serious problem of the Xicaques. The majority of the schools are

run by Ladinos and the children are prohibited from speaking their native languages. We had a case in which a first grader forgot to greet his teacher in Spanish and instead greeted her in Tolupan. The teacher said she could not understand him and that he could no longer be in school. The child was then forced to abandon his classes. Socially, the native language is not spoken, only in the home.

**SAIIC:** Is there racism?

**Mauricia:** In Yoro there is tremendous racism. Our people are working to develop consciousness of our own identity but, for example, wearing our traditional clothing only serves to frighten people or create a spectacle.

**SAIIC:** How is the land situation in Honduras? Do you have enough? Are your communities respected and recognized?

**Mauricia:** The situation is critical. The government passed a law called "modernization of the agricultural sector" by which they give power to the large landowners to appropriate more lands. This law converts the land into a marketable good that can be sold to the transnational corporations and foreigners. The specific problem of the Xicaques is that, even though we were given titles to our properties in 1861, people keep appropriating our land due to this law of "modernized agriculture".

**SAIIC:** Does the government have any law that recognizes the indigenous communities?

**Mauricia:** Nothing specific. There is only one article that refers to Indigenous peoples in the constitution. There is no law from which we can infer bylaws. The organized nations of Indigenous peoples have passed a legislative proposal that we call "Protection Law for Indigenous Nations". We did this with the help of some lawyers and with the backing of our Indigenous peoples. It has been in Congress for more than four years. One administration takes over, then another, and there is no one to promote this. We are also taking action for the ratification of covenant 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) but there are very few of us. In addition, the government functionaries are very clever. Some of them come to the Indigenous communities and if there is a problem, they say they will solve it and we never see them again.

**SAIIC:** The Honduran peoples are traditionally agricultural?

**Mauricia:** We, the Xicaques cultivate corn and beans and we make some crafts, such as baskets, mats, and pottery. The Lencas make weavings from wool and they also cultivate corn and beans. The Miskitos dedicate themselves to collecting coconuts, oranges, and to planting rice. In Amuskiti, which is a very



photo by SAIIC

Mauricia Castro at the Inter-American Encounter on Indigenous Rights and Common Law

swampy, the people fish. They have little parcels, islands in the middle of the lakes. It's an extraordinary place. The rivers Patuca, Platano, and Coco are very large and navigable. Last year, the president wanted to give a concession to exploit the jungle of Amasquitia, a virgin jungle. I believe that in Central America this is the most luxurious and most dense tropical forest.

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SAIIC: Have you tried to exploit those resources?

Mauricia: The government tires. There is a law called the law of Honduran Corporation and Forest Development that says that the forests belong to the state, independent of the fact that these lands may be private lands. So now the government has the autonomy to sell the forests of our communities. But these has been much resistance. In some cases the Indigenous people have said that it was the responsibility of the government if these people entered and later found their machines burned.

This issue has led to a campaign organized by the Indigenous peoples of Honduras and people from the popular sector, syndicates, farmers, and organizations, because this is an attack against humanity.

The Union of Farm Workers (UTC), wanted to come into Yoro and there was a very serious confrontation. We know that this was not the desire of the farmers themselves but rather of some of the leaders and some of the cattle ranchers, and although we were in jail for several days, we earned respect for the autonomy of the Indigenous people. Now, even the coffee growers have to consult with us before they can mechanize their plantations.

SAIIC: Do you have traditional forms of organization? Has it been difficult to form

federations that are based on Western forms of organizing?

Mauricia: The Tribal Councils existed but they were not united. But with the help of the Catholic Church, the missions, and some of the farmers that wanted to "make friends" with the Indigenous peoples to recuperate vacant lands, we began to know each other. From 1970 to 1977 there was a process of exchange between the tribes in order to share experiences and get better acquainted. In 1977, the federation was organized but in an almost ghostly fashion. Every year we planned meetings but something always happened. Between 1981 and 1983, we began to organize the councils and in 1985, the First Ordinary Congress was held which gathered all the tribes of Yoro, El Negrito, Olanchito, Mozaran, and others. The Congress of Tribes was established and the statutes were made. There were many discussions about the name of the federation because many said we were Tolupanes and not Xicaques. The Spanish gave us the name "Xicaques" because we were not easily tamed so we decided to keep the name, always rebels.

SAIIC: What is the name, then, of the federation you belong to?

Mauricia: Federation of Xicaque Tribes of Yoro, FETRIXI.

SAIIC: Do you belong to any confederation?

Mauricia: This work came after FETRIXI. We began to realize that on the one hand there were the Miskitos and on the other, the Lenkas and others, so, with the help of some university students, anthropologists, that always study us, we managed to have the First Gathering of the Indigenous Peoples of Honduras in 1987, one year after having formed FETRIXI. In 1988 we held the Second Encounter from which a provisional committee for the confederation was born, and where we realized that there were other organized groups. The Third Encounter was held in Yoro and the Fourth in Tegucigalpa when our leader, Vicente Matute, was assassinated. Between



1986 and 1992 we formed the Confederation of Autochthonous Peoples of Honduras (CONPA).

SAIIC: What led to the assassination of Vicente Matute and the repression? We know various Indigenous leaders have died. Who are the repressors?

Mauricia: [The repressors are] the land holders and the cattle ranchers of Yoro. We realized only at the end that the military killed Vicente. There is a whole tribe that is under the control of a general of the Armed Forces of Honduras. Vicente was a very honest and quiet man and in a meeting with president Calleja-we have the video and the tape recording-said that he would not be surprised if the Indigenous peoples of the San Francisco tribe go into a field to get their firewood and are hanged and taken away. Apparently they killed him for talking like that.

SAIIC: Have other leaders been assassinated?

Mauricia: In 1991, the year they killed Vicente, they advised us that they were going to kill five of us and that's what they did. They said it would be those of the directive board. I was

the secretary and they said that we were going to be dead. But the five, two women and three men, were from different councils.

SAIIC: Does the intimidation continue?

Mauricia: The other day I received a call saying: Mauricia Rivera de Zubirana is paying someone to kill you and two other leaders of the tribe. But I don't know...who knows? We have no protection. I could believe that the Police are protecting me but it's just as likely that they are investigating me. The Police are like that always. The federation has been given many diplomas of recognition but you see that it's all politics. The deputy of Yoro is the one that exploits the Plangrande tribe. He is a landholder, the deputy, so how are we going to register a complaint if he is the one who is exploiting us? There are Indigenous zones, where more than 200 non-Indigenous families live, that they want to turn into municipalities. There are schools, electric light, roads, and even though we have property titles, we indigenous peoples live clinging to the cliffs. We have resisted during three regimes because we are the legal owners.

SAIIC: What is the situation of women in relation to the organizations?

Mauricia: FETRIXI is the only organization

that has three women on the board. Five men and three women, and we believe that in the next term there will be four. Women participate in decision making, whether the men like it or not. If I see that it is in favor of the majority, then that is my decision. Since 1987, women leave the house and go to the assembly. Because the worst problem is that women stay in their house, and how are they going to be taken into account if they don't go to the sessions? No one is going to come to the house to tell them: "we named you Cacique". In other communities, there are no women in the organizations. In FETRIXI there are women who have a man as

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secretary and they tell him what to do. But we don't wish to make a parallel organization of women because we believe, and this is a custom of the Xicaques, that women without men can do nothing, and equally men without women. Even though "machismo" always exists, we resist by saying: "Don't walk in front of me, don't fall behind, let's walk together".

SAIIC: How is your spiritual life? Is there much Catholic influence?

Mauricia: There is a lot of influence; little of our spirituality remains. The Evangelists introduce themselves into our communities and put them to sleep. They don't want people going to meetings. They say it's a sin to promote the development of the community, that the riches are in heaven, that the poor are blessed. They put all this in peoples' heads so they later say: "But well, this is how God wants me to live". I don't go to mass. Priests have come to visit me and ask why I have not baptized my children. I tell them I don't interfere in their spiritual lives. I don't want it and my children don't miss it.

SAIIC: Do you have hope in the Continental Indigenous Movement now that you have made contact? Do you think you should unite with the Indigenous peoples of America?

Mauricia: The principal goal of CONPA is to bring our forces together, search for our ancestral past, and communicate with all Indigenous peoples of America. We know that we are not all the same, but we know what we want at the continental level.

SAIIC: Anything else?

Mauricia: I want us to prepare ourselves so our rights as women are respected, so we are given the space that has long been denied to us. This does not mean we want to take it from men, we want to be given an equal opportunity. Greetings to all the Indigenous women of the continent and let's keep going forward because the struggle is ours.