

Feature interview with Rodrigo Carazo Odio, co-chair of the Kreddha council

Hard work and passion

“A third party leader should not lead” says Don Rodrigo Carazo Odio, co-chair of the Kreddha council since its founding, talking about the role of third parties in intrastate peace processes. But, being in his presence does make you realize that this is a man to listen to. The style of the former president of the Republic of Costa Rica and founder of the University for Peace, is that of a wise elder: someone who can make the simplest things sound profound and the most complex crystal clear.

Don Rodrigo has seen the world change; change to which his life evidently contributed. During his term as president of the country (1978-1982), the UN-mandated University for Peace and the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights were established in Costa Rica (1980); he served as the first president of the latter until 1988. As a member of the Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government of the Americas at the Carter Center since 1987, he has overseen national elections in 14 countries. Today, he continues his work as a respected activist and senior statesman in peace and human rights initiatives throughout the world, often accompanied by his wife Estrella.

His commitment to peace has been a motivating factor throughout his life. This is why Don Rodrigo has been involved with so many conflicts, or ‘problems’ as he calls them, first hand. His experiences include engaging South American presidents in the Central American Peace Plan launched by his compatriot Óscar Arias Sánchez; participating in successful negotiations for the liberation of prisoners in Colombia; talking with the leaders of North and South Korea with respect to UN membership; and meeting with Tanzanian leaders (including the late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere and President Benjamin Mkapa) and Zanzibari political leaders (including Seif Sharif Hamad) to help initiate dialogue between conflicting parties in Zanzibar on behalf of Kreddha, then called the Peace Action Council.

These and many other experiences have convinced Don Rodrigo of the key importance of education. “You never know when the light goes on here (tapping his head). Many people think that the development of peace equals military development. If you give weapons to two people who have a problem, they will use those and not their brains to settle it.” And the news media do not help: “They do not contribute to finding positive approaches to a conflict, but to the confrontation taking place. There have been many very creative positive solutions to conflicts no one has heard of and reported on. But they exist.”

Don Rodrigo believes that the role of leaders, in their capacity to teach their constituencies, is crucial in solving conflicts. He witnessed Josip Broz Tito promoting the concept of unity. “That is what made the second Yugoslavia possible! But when the sense of union faded, very old problems resurfaced. The people in the Balkans are living the consequences of it today.” He shakes his head with sadness when he considers the future of this region. “Two issues are presently not addressed in the peace processes there: peace education and empowerment. The people are in need of a permanent education of trust, which is completely lacking. They cling to historic justifications for

their positions. Fine, this is understandable. But which elements in the present will justify their future? They need to learn how to trust each other if they want to develop a society.” The other issue is the passive attitude of the local leadership: “They feel weak. They are not working to find a solution by themselves, but waiting for an outsider, the international community, to come up with one.”

What would he do if he were in Martti Ahtisaari’s shoes? Don Rodrigo laughs: “These are very tight shoes, but I would analyze the problem and talk to the parties, as he very ably does. I would experience the way the people are doing things and try to find positive approaches in their cultures as to how to solve conflicts. All their religious problems, ethnic difficulties and very difficult backgrounds need to be addressed. Education, again, is important here. They need teachers of peace. And sit down and talk. Talk, talk, talk, as long as it takes to solve the problems.”

Don Rodrigo observes that the issues in different intrastate peace processes are often similar, but that local solutions need to be found. An important recurring issue, for example, is participation in the governance of a country: “Parties often try to control one another by force, but usually find this is unsustainable in the long term. Lasting political solutions to such issues can only come from the parties themselves, based on their way of thinking. As I have said before, a third party should not lead.” What difference can a third party, such as Kreddha, then make? “Making people think” emphasises Don Rodrigo. “Third parties should help the leaders realise that solving the problems is *their* job. The problems are theirs, so should be the solutions. They must be based on common understanding, this is why military or legal ‘solutions’ do not exist. People have to talk. It was only by talking with the leaders of North and South Korea that I discovered that they desired the same thing. What Kreddha can do and does, is listen, offer a dialogue process, help build a relationship between the parties, and provide advice during the peace talks.”

Kreddha facilitators repeatedly experience how lack of trust hampers peace negotiations between the leaders of population groups and the government of the state they negotiate with. Does Don Rodrigo have any suggestions as how to handle this? He sighs. “It is always the same problem. The parties mistrust each other because they believe, rightly or not, that the other will not fulfil its promises. They cannot believe that the other is looking for positive solutions, but are convinced the other is trying to win. So both parties defend themselves. The problem of false leaders is that they indeed are trying to win instead of solving the problem.” Here Don Rodrigo sees a need for the third party facilitator to build confidence and trust. He admits it is not easy: “Third parties should be willing to meet again and again, not only with the conflicting parties, but also with civil society leaders and teachers. As often as necessary and under every condition.”

Under every condition? Does that explain Don Rodrigo’s recent support for Lehendakari Ibarretxe, the president of the Basque parliament, who is being tried by the Spanish government because of his meeting with representatives of the outlawed Batasuna party in April 2006? Don Rodrigo answers resolutely: “I support the solution, not the party.” He opposes outlawing any group, movement, or political party: “When you divide groups, you create confrontation. This wisdom is as old as the existence of nations.”

Rodrigo Carazo Odio is proud to be a Costa Rican. “We love peace! Our way to solve problems is through discussion. Our education has fostered this mentality. And because we abolished our army in 1948 right after the revolution, we did not have the means to impose ideas on each other anyway. We have learned how to live unarmed and that is unique in the regions of Latin America. Costa Ricans have been developing relations between communities and among the members of each community since early history. The foundation of the Costa Rican society is the attitude of

respect for each other.” Don Rodrigo believes that each lasting solution to a problem is based on mutual respect: “We have to educate people how to live together. It’s just like marriage...” He smiles warmly at his wife who is sitting next to him and to whom he has been married for 60 years: “...hard work!” But that clearly is his passion.

Interview by Jeannine Suurmond
Zeist, 14 March 2007