

## **Tribute to Martin Khor (Martin)**

Since April 1, 2020, the physical world has lost a multi-dimensional man, a husband, a brother, a father, a grandfather, an organizer, an activist and a leader. But the universe has gained another bright shining guiding star. I sometimes joke to friends that God or the master(s) of the universe are now in great discomfort as between Martin, Bernaditas (Mueler), Norman (Girvan) and Amin (Samir), there is a high-level posse of organizers now roaming the universe try to right wrongs.

But truly, we, here in this place and in this time, are bereft of a powerful leader, thinker, friend and comrade.

Martin Khor was a brilliant, dedicated, visionary and enlightened leader, thinker, story teller, historian, economist, climate change fighter, and a social scientist. We could add many more accolades; but, most of all, he was humble, funny and attuned to the movements of the society and people around him.

I don't know how he did it. He would be able to sing a line from a calypso or rocksteady from years ago and in the next breath update you on the latest happenings of lady Gaga or other enterprising entertainers. He also knew the value of the most mundane things. Like what was a good suitcase to buy and where to get it. I would say Martin, "how do you know these things." He would say I read about it or I heard about it. He noticed what was going on about him; and he seemed to remember everything.

He loved this world and the men, women and children in it.

He loved writing and reading. He loved books, magazines, newspapers. He paid attention to the news big and small.

On trips to meetings, he would seem to not sleep but a wink, no matter the length of the journey. He was always working. But he also had time to listen. He never made one feel that he was too busy. Yet he got so much more accomplished than most any one I know.

Martin's advice and recommendations were valued by ambassadors, ministers and presidents who knew him and sought him out. Because his understanding of issues—complex and technical and or political and sensitive was thorough, he was excellent at communicating it to people so they could easily understand it and grasp its nuances for their eventual decision-making. Their interactions with him whether public or private was a sacred trust and like his staff they felt safe and cared for.

As the executive director of the South Centre, his leadership was unparalleled, he excelled in his work and his constituency of developing countries valued and trusted in his leadership. He brought the Centre back from fading into irrelevancy and financial hardship. Under his leadership, the Centre regained its purpose and mission and grew in prominence. Members came to feel connected and valued and so they resumed their contributions, which had been faltering over the years. He helped to build a healthy board with sterling supportive leadership. He also believed in surrounding himself with great talents. He was a mature man and a secure leader. He inspired people. He

recruited talents from the South as he was able, given the budgetary constrained he inherited at the Centre.

Martin Khor was also an adept and proficient fund raiser. He left the Centre in financial surplus and with an empowered and thriving staff.

I joined the staff of the South Centre, initially as a consultant, in late 2010 and was very fortunate to work with Martin until his illness forced him to refuse to be re-contracted as the ED. That was a monumental loss for the Centre.

But I knew Martin before that. I knew him when he led TWN—through the MIA battle, the WTO Singapore issues and the Debacle in Seattle. ‘No new round turn around’; that came from TWN’s effort. Martin, laboured night and day working on trade and investment issues environment and climate issues. Yet he loved food, good conversations and sharing strategies with folks. He would often invite us to join him in his temporary quarters in Geneva, in Studio House, Acacias, where a few of us would hold-out during those intense WTO struggle days. Back then, I was in Geneva, first, representing the Network Women in Development Europe (WIDE, based in Brussels) and, later, the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN) with frequent travels to Geneva. I would often be with Martin at bus stops in the cold somewhere in Europe after long day of meetings, when he would bolster my flagging spirit with a joke or a line from the ‘banana man’ and Harry Belafonte and other melodies from Jamaica and the Caribbean musical lore. His energy was indefatigable.

He did not find a thing he could not organize about. I remember when once in Stockholm, I somehow got food poisoning. I was sick, embarrassed, and trying to be low key about it. Martin knew, and to my chagrin, when he preceded me on a panel, he announced to the audience. “You folks are always worried about our food and getting sick in the developing world, yet look at poor Mariama Williams who got sick from eating your food here!” Though embarrassed (but grateful) by all the attention that I then later received from my hosts, I could not help but laugh with him about it as we walked back to hotel later that evening. “Martin, I said to him, laughing till I almost keeled over, “is there nothing you will not organize about.” He said. “But they needed to know that one can get food poisoning here; they are always worried about eating in the South.” And, of course he was right. He was always defending the South. We bonded on that trip. Him, me and Meena, then still at FOE. He would tease me mercilessly about feminism but he always said we would work more closely together. Ultimately, it happened when he became ED of South Centre and encouraged me to come aboard. What a stimulating, learning and life-altering journey!

That was Martin, always thinking ahead, planning a head, but living in the present.

Before ending this tribute, I want to speak about Martin’s leadership as I think he was one of the few remaining leaders of a generation that we have lost and that we will surely powerfully miss. He was a leader with professional and personal impeccable integrity, though not perfect, as after all he was a human being. He cared about people, the person in front of him and the vast majority of the so-called faceless, nameless poor in the developing countries; it was personal; their struggle was personal as well as political for him. Paradoxically, a feminist trait, for he was not a feminist. He was a male leader, but not predatory. He was a good listener, an excellent motivator and an

‘empowerer’. He walked and work with Purpose, Presence and Perseverance grounded in a strong ethical foundation that was so characteristics of many of past leaders of the South.

Though it might be quaint to say, he had faith in his work, something that I greatly admired. He would always see the long play, the long game, the greater good. Even when myself and others despaired. These qualities enable him to be a strong, powerful, visionary and enlightened leader and a paripatic fund-raiser. Donors knew their investment in the South Centre and whatever Martin chose to do would be wisely used and give value-for-money. They also felt his understanding and empathy for their work and mission and knew that he would protect their interests as well as the organization’s interest. They and us, his staff, grew to know that for him, their giving, however large or small, was not a casual thing to be taken for granted, but a sharing in the cause; a reflection of their passion for social, economic and environmental justice.

Lastly, his profound spirituality is demonstrated in his parting gift to his granddaughter, Isabel, but surely for me, a true gem, the little book, *the Secret to Happiness* (2019, Consumer Association of Penang).

Nuff respect!

We miss you Martin Khor Kok Peng. Rest in Power.

Mariama Williams, Villette, Geneva, Switzerland. April 14, 2020