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## El Savador Election Results

by LADB Staff

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The major party of the left, the Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), appears to have gained some strength in El Salvador's March 16 elections. For the third time running, the FMLN has captured the mayoralty of San Salvador. The party also improved its standing in the Asamblea Nacional, winning 31 seats. The ruling party, right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), won 27, with the remaining 24 divided among five parties. The Partido Conciliacion Nacional (PCN) won 16, the Centro Democratico Unido (CDU) five, and the Partido Democratico Cristiano (PDC) won four. The Popular Revolucionario (PR) and Accion Nacional still await a final count to determine the last seat.

These are the results reported by the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) on March 18, with 84% of the vote counted. Newly elected mayor of San Salvador Carlos Rivas Zamora claimed victory, saying, "The people of El Salvador have written a new page in the revolutionary process driven by the FMLN with this new example of democracy." While he took between 49% and 51% of the vote, trouncing ARENA candidate Evelyn Jacir de Lovo who had between 30% and 32%, it wasn't much of an example of democracy.

About 60% of the electorate abstained from voting, according to estimates, which may change somewhat for the better as tallies are completed. Eighty-four legislators and 262 mayors were elected to three-year terms by one-fifth of the eligible voters. The outcome will not significantly change the correlation of forces in the country, according to analysts. In the Asamblea, the PCN will likely continue to funnel its votes to ARENA, and the CDU will incline toward the FMLN. The two major parties will create alliances with the tiny parties for cleanup votes, no easy task in the highly polarized legislative environment. But with the current alignment, ARENA maintains the majority with 43 of the 84 seats.

The more salient question is how representative these parties and their elected officials are, given the small vote. Journalists have characterized the situation as democracy in free fall. The first election in the country following the signing of the peace accord that ended the civil war was held in 1994, when 53% of the eligible population voted. Since then, abstention has climbed, reaching 65% in the 2000 exercise that elected President Francisco Flores (ARENA). The legitimacy of these recent elections is put in doubt for some Salvadoran analysts not only by the small turnout, but also by the tremendous amount of advertising that for the most part misrepresented the actual policies and proposals of the candidates. People who vote rarely know what they are voting for, say these analysts.

Elections are further compromised by violations of electoral law and, in this election, violence, which claimed the lives of at least six people during the campaigns, even though there was little violence on election day. Another significant factor contributing to low numbers is the practice of vote float, in which people vote outside their districts of residence. This is not illegal, but has the effect, say

analysts, of robbing local voters of autonomy in electing their own representatives. Dollarization of the economy (see NotiCen, 2000-12-14) was also given as a reason to stay away from the poles.

Said one nonvoter, "Flores tricked me; I'm an economist and listened very carefully to his speeches about dollarization. The president indicated that it was going to be an indexation, which is very different from dollarization, strictly speaking. It was going to be like Argentina, equalizing the dollar with the colon; but it wasn't like that, and I felt tricked when dollarization occurred." (The colon is currently pegged at 8.75 to the dollar, but US currency is in common use.) This same person also sees the major parties as extremists, splitting his sentiments. "In economic aspects, I'm more inclined toward the proposals of ARENA, but on social and ecological issues, I feel much more identified with the FMLN."

Another man who withheld his vote over the dollarization issue sees the nonvote as a punishment of the political establishment. "The ARENA government made the change from the colon to the dollar, and it didn't benefit us, we didn't deserve that, and I didn't like it," he said. "I feel unhappy with my government."

Perhaps most important, if not most astounding to proponents of democracy, in understanding the decline of participation in El Salvador, was the finding of a poll by the Instituto Universitario de Opinion Publica of the Universidad Centroamericana Jose Simeon Canas (UCA). Ninety percent of those polled said that an authoritarian government could be preferable to a democratic one. Luis Gonzalez, editor of the magazine *Proceso*, a UCA publication, explained that the political culture of the country continues to have an authoritarian bent, manifested in religion and in respect for order and hierarchy. This view might partially explain the gains of the FMLN. Overall, as nonbelievers in democracy drop out, ARENA, standard-bearer of the extreme right, declines and the FMLN gains.

In 2000, the FMLN overtook ARENA in the Asamblea Nacional for the first time, taking 31 seats to ARENA's 29. Since 1992, as participation declined, the number of FMLN mayoralties increased, from 6% then to 30.5% in 2000. Going into this election, the party of the left governed around 60% of the population. But as the FMLN's percentages increased, its raw vote decreased. The party is really losing votes while gaining seats. Fewer voters accounts for only part of this. The party has undergone internal struggles between its hard-liners and center-leftists (see NotiCen, 2002-02-21), with a resulting spinoff that created the Movimiento Renovador (MR), still another small party (see NotiCen, 2002-04-18). There are currently 11 parties. If the count holds, this number will shrink to five as parties that did not meet minimum numbers of votes established in the Electoral Law lose their registrations.

The ongoing Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) negotiations may also have contributed to the growing disenchantment with electoral politics. Civil-society groups have found their interests increasingly ignored as a government eager to enter into a less-restrained trade relationship the US threatens to further abdicate its responsibility to its citizenry through privatization of traditionally state-sponsored services. This election campaign was waged against the backdrop of a national strike of health care workers who have shut down public medical services to prevent privatization of the sector that would, in their view, place those services out of the reach of

less-affluent Salvadorans. The strike figured prominently in the FMLN's internal struggles, and the outcome of that fight may have permanently changed the class composition of the party.

The party's original candidate for mayor of San Salvador was not Carlos Rivas Zamora, but Hector Silva. Silva, a physician, on his own initiative allied himself with President Flores by offering to mediate between the government and the strikers, violating FMLN policy. When the party reacted negatively, Silva withdrew as mayoral candidate, instead standing for election as AN deputy under the CDU banner. He appears to have won. Silva had strong support among the educated middle classes. He took that support with him, it now appears to observers, leaving FMLN support more concentrated in the working and lower-middle classes. These are the classes that traditionally resonate with the party's ideology. They live, for the most part, in the metropolitan area, and this is where the FMLN made its strongest showing.

Nuances aside, the FMLN regarded itself the clear winner. "There's no doubt about it," said party secretary-general Salvador Sanchez Ceren, "we've won, and tomorrow we start to work on the presidential elections [in 2004]." While the correlation of forces remains static for the country, the election results precipitated major change within ARENA. On March 18, party president Archie Baldocchi resigned. Party leaders also heaped blame on President Flores, who had personally directed the campaign. The move to toss Baldocchi was led by former President Armando Calderon Sol (1994-1999). Calderon had been critical of the composition of the Comité Ejecutivo Nacional (Coena), of which Baldocchi was head. His objection was that Coena was dominated by business leaders hostile to social programs aimed at helping the poor.

Ricardo Sagregra, vice president of ideology of the party, will replace Baldocchi temporarily. Francisco Lainez, party vice president of organization, also resigned, saying that this is not the first time the leadership has undergone restructuring and evaluation and that "our experience is that in the face of every challenge and difficult situation, we always have come out stronger." Flores had been in constant meetings with Calderon and other critics, trying to preserve his influence within Coena. But there is now powerful sentiment within the leadership to dump the business leaders, whose support of neoliberal policies over the past four years, they say, has plunged the country more deeply into poverty.

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