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El Salvador's Ruling Party Purge

by LADB Staff

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The humiliating defeat that El Salvador's ruling Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party suffered in recent countrywide elections has reportedly resulted in the most profound internal purge and reorganization in its 21-year history. The changes represent the first time that leadership has been chosen by rank-and-file members. The base chose to oust nearly all the party's leadership group, the Consejo Ejecutivo Nacional (COENA), at an Extraordinary General Assembly attended by 2,275 delegates. They named Antonio Salaverria Borja (see NotiCen, 2001-09-20) party president and replaced 12 of COENA's 13 members.

Amid the jubilation and expectations accompanying the sweep, President Francisco Flores reminded the party that there had been changes before. He called for unity and an end to the tendency to blame COENA for every adverse political result. He recalled that, during the last eight years, the same fate had befallen COENA under the leadership of three other chiefs before the most recent ouster of Archie Baldocchi. "When Juan Jose Domenech presided, they said the hard-liners were better, and they called upon Gloria Salguero; then they said the young ones were better, and they called on Walter [Araujo]; then they said they were too young, and called upon the businessmen (see NotiCen, 2001-10-18)," said Flores.

It was these last, the businesspeople, who were just thrown out. The new leader, Salaverria, is a coffee magnate and an ARENA deputy in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL). He said he would seek special permission from the AL to devote all his time to his COENA duties. "We have achieved for the first time a clear and precise unification in these new members who comprise COENA," said Salaverria. "There are no power quotas, but rather a consolidation and renovation. We are ready to work in many areas." He said he intends to work closely with Miguel Tomas Lopez, president of the Instituto Salvadoreño de Transformación Agraria (ISTA), to advance land and agriculture issues, his main priorities.

The purge at the top is just the beginning of a planned cleansing that will go to the roots of the party. Within its first 60 days in command, COENA will restructure the leadership throughout the country, from sector leaders to departmental leaders to municipal leaders. Once that is done, plans call for the development of mechanisms for the election of a presidential candidate. Presidential elections are set for March 2004.

New vice president of ideology of the party Mario Acosta laid out this schedule for reporters. Acosta was former interior minister during the administration of President Armando Calderon Sol (1994-1998). His new post is said to be the second most powerful in the party. He will exercise that power in a number of ways, not the least of which will be to bring the fractious ARENA AL delegation to heel. "From this day on, the 27 ARENA deputies will also have to understand that the lines to follow are those that emanate from COENA," he said. This means that committee assignments and the appointment of judges to the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) will be decided

from above. "We will even be involved in our deputies' trips, recommending the themes and deciding whether a particular official invitation from outside the country is useful," said Acosta.

This strict discipline was not to be taken, however, as an attempt to shut President Flores out of the policy loop, nor a competition with the executive branch, according to Acosta. "A collision with the executive is not on the agenda," he said. "The deputies will be able to have a direct relationship with the presidency but the outline will come through the party."

Looking down the road toward the 2004 presidential elections, the new junta has its eye on the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN), now aligned with ARENA (see NotiCen, 2003-03-20). Based on the present analysis of electoral currents, the 2004 election will likely go to a second round, making the PCN a crucial ally. Said Acosta, "We expect a change in the PCN considering our future plans." The COENA sweep is the first step in a comprehensive overhaul whose ultimate aim is recovering voters who have strayed over the years, and that depends in part on bringing back some party stalwarts.

In his speech to the Extraordinary Assembly, Flores mentioned some of the most important. "We have no resentments toward anybody. Lets call back Gloria Salgado, Cecilia Gallardo, Roberto Angulo," he exhorted. Those three all left ARENA for different reasons. Gallardo was first to leave. She was minister of education in 1988, now is editor in chief of the major daily La Prensa Grafica. She is said to have left because former President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1993) did not support her as a presidential candidate in 1999. Angulo left ARENA early in 2003.

The former president of the AL went over to the PCN. Salaverria has already spoken to both Gallardo and Salguero about the "national situation," and said, "I'll soon be talking to all of them." All three are important figures within the party, but perhaps the most important is Salguero, who was a founder of ARENA 21 years ago. She left the party in 2001, saying that she no longer felt represented by COENA. She had to step down from the presidency of the leadership group after turning in poor results in the municipal and legislative elections of 2000. But Gloria Salguero has moved on.

As important as she may be to the reunification of ARENA, she is also the pivotal figure in a new party she founded, the Partido Popular Republicano (PPR). The PPR failed to win any seats in the March 16 election, but Salguero refused to see that as its death knell. Even with Flores calling urgently for her return, she still has hopes for her new creation and has said that she does not want to betray all those who believed in it. On the subject of the renovation of her former organization, she said, "ARENA is reacting, perhaps a bit late, because the presidential campaigns are beginning in which our country's system will be defined: market economy or socialist. This is ARENA's last chance." Much depends on whether the new COENA provides leadership.

Salguero said that the party had been effectively leaderless during the spate of COENA presidencies of recent years. She looks favorably upon Salaverria, though, giving him credit, along with herself, for saving ARENA from ruin in 1997, when Calderon raised the Impuesto al Valor Agregado (IVA) and the electricity rates. On balance, she thought that, with the new leadership, the party was returning to its original precepts.

But on the subject of her return to the fold, Salguero was gracious but firm. "The intent of their argument was good, that, above all, good Salvadorans who have worked for the good of the country should unite. I'm glad for the mention, but I'm in my struggle for the PPR. No, I'm not going back to ARENA. I make my fight through the PPR, and I'm going to do that to the end."

Other parties opine on the new ARENA From the Partido Democrata Cristiano (PDC), secretary general Rodolfo Parker said the new ARENA lineup is good for the political right in the country, "because this way the right is unified and has one single discourse. As a party of the right, we too will have a better ability to work together." From the Partido Social Democrata (PSD), Deputy Juan Ramon Medrano said, "I hope they get more deeply into the social measures announced by President Flores; that would give them a better image among the people." Both politicians agreed that the reformed party is more representative of its base that it had been previously. The new and improved COENA now includes:

1. Jose Antonio Salaverria, president. He is 49 years old, an agriculturist, and ex-president of ABECAFE, a coffee exporter.
2. Mario Acosta Oertel, ideology. He is 46 years old, a former minister of interior, and an agribusinessman.
3. Roberto Murray Meza, organization. He is 56 and was COENA president before being toppled by the last president to fall, Archie Baldocchi.
4. Miguel Armando Miguel, vice president for campaigns. He is 56 years old, executive director of Mike-Mike, a retail chain.
5. Miriam Mixco Reyna, acts and agreements. She is 43 years old and a corporate lawyer.
6. Silvia Aguilar, juridical affairs. She is 43 years old and a member of the directorate of the Department of San Salvador.
7. Miguel Tomas Lopez, communications and transportation for the party. He is 43 years old and an agronomist.
8. Eduardo Zablah Touche, economic and social affairs. He is 46 years old and a former economy minister.
9. Gustavo Lopez Davidson, affiliation and statistics. He is 41 years old and a government worker in the Department of San Salvador.
10. Amanda Milla de Angulo, director of information. She is 62 years old and a holdover from the previous COENA.

11. Cesar Daniel Funes, political affairs. He is 32 years old and a former member of the youth sector of the party.

12. Magdalena Guzman, municipal affairs. He is 41 years old and an agriculturist and cooperative director.

13. Ricardo Arango Macay, executive director. He is 50 years old and a professor of geopolitics for the military.

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