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LADB Staff

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El Salvador Left to Win

by LADB Staff

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With exactly one year left in his presidency, Salvadoran President Francisco Flores is suffering the lowest approval ratings since February 2000. His party, the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), has just undergone a major overhaul of its leadership after being handed a humiliating defeat in recent local and legislative elections (see NotiCen, 2003-03-20, 2003-04-04). With all this going for it, the opposition Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) might have regarded the upcoming presidential election as theirs to lose. Their first choice, it seems, was to lose.

Against the preferences of their midlevel officials, and probably of the base as well, the FMLN leadership has chosen Jorge Schafik Handal as their candidate. Schafik Handal was leader of the Partido Comunista de El Salvador (PCS) until it integrated into the FMLN in 1980. A recent poll showed Schafik Handal to be the respondents' fourth choice to be the party's standard-bearer.

First choice among those polled was Mauricio Funes, who, if the election were held during the poll period, would have beaten an ARENA candidate by a margin of 17%. The poll was conducted between April 26 and May 9. The relative advantage may be different today, however, because, at the time of the survey, ARENA had not yet picked its candidate. Since then, it has selected ex-President Armando Calderon Sol (1994-2000). Funes is a popular television journalist. He directs the programs Hechos and Entrevista al Dia on Channel 12. Several FMLN officials opposed to Schafik Handal proposed his candidacy.

Several FMLN deputies and mayors met with Funes in an effort to inspire him to contest the nomination. Among them was Orlando Mena, mayor of Santa Ana, who told the press following the meeting, "We've asked him to join the party and participate on the ticket with Oscar Ortiz." Funes had indicated that he would think about it. He doesn't have very long to think, however. Funes was not, at the time of the meeting, a member of the FMLN, and, according to the Comision Politica, he had to become a member before June 6 for his candidacy to be legal. He would then be able to consider his options until June 27, the legal cutoff date for declaring candidacy.

Funes did not deny any of this to reporters. Aware of his overwhelming popularity in polls, he was still reluctant to criticize the party's handling of the nomination process. "I'm respectful of the internal processes of selection of candidates that the FMLN is undergoing, and I cannot interfere with an opinion or a suggestion, much less [exert] pressure," he said. Funes' forces were bolstered on June 3, when the party's internal Tribunal Electoral ruled that the June 6 deadline was not a matter of law, but merely a political decision of the Comision Politica.

The FMLN leadership has clearly soiled itself in some quarters with its choice of Schafik Handal, but remains utterly confident, at least publicly, that it can win with the septuagenarian. If it turns out that it can't, the 2004 presidential election can still be saved for the party by the membership. A majority of only 15 people, the full complement of the Comision Politica less three who were

excused for being interested parties, chose Schafik Handal. But on July 27, the question will be thrown open to the party as a whole in a primary that will determine who will ultimately be on the ticket. Orthodox (see NotiCen, 2001-12-06) supporters of Schafik Handal argued three points in their favor.

First, said party coordinator Salvador Sanchez Ceren, in the end, the voters will vote the party, not the individual candidate, and parties of the left are on a roll in Latin America. "In Venezuela, the people have Hugo Chavez; in Brazil, the people launched Lula," said Sanchez Ceren. "That means that the people are giving the left the opportunity to govern. Whomever we choose, we are going to win."

Second, Schafik Handal is a historic figure who returns the party to its roots in much the same way that ARENA did recently when it embarked on a top-to-bottom reform that included a call to its party's founders to return to the fold. "We are revolutionaries," reminded Sanchez Ceren, "don't ask us to put our confidence in polls."

Third, there is democracy. If people don't like the leaders' choice, they can change it on July 27. But until then, the leadership will not bend to pressure. "One thing that must remain clear is that companero Schafik Handal is the candidate of the Comision Politica, and we're not going to change that," said Sanchez Ceren. "His candidacy emerged by majority, and it was agreed that there will be primaries in order that, on that day, the majority of militants of the party support their candidate. That vote will be respected."

Another card that the leadership can play in putting forward a candidate with impeccable traditional credentials is the issue of a strike in the health sector that has been in effect for almost the entire past year. Schafik Handal has a longstanding ideological commitment to the goals of the strikers. The strike was a major contributor to President Flores' low approval ratings on two counts: He is seen as ineffectual because he has been unable to do anything to stop it (see NotiCen, 2002-11-07). Also, the strike is a reaction on the part of the medical community to the threat of privatization of the sector.

Privatizations have been a feature of Flores' policy that have evoked vehement popular protest. The FMLN is exploiting the strike by postulating unionist Guillermo Mata for vice president. Mata is president of the Colegio Medica. Sanchez Ceren said that Mata, who was not an FMLN member at the time of his selection, would certainly become one before the June 6 deadline. "We have trusted in Mata because he will be the person to make a bridge for us with the social movements to bring about a national reconciliation," said Sanchez Ceren. With the medical strikers as a nucleus, he explained, the party could then reach out broadly to form a "social consolidation" that would also bring in retired military, transport workers, people from small and medium-sized businesses, and from the private universities. Meetings have already been scheduled to this end.

The striking health workers will play their part in the campaign by offering medical services throughout the country, with emphasis on rural areas, while at the same time asking the populations they serve for FMLN support. Explaining this to a group of mayors who oppose Schafik Handal, Sanchez Ceren said, "The doctors are establishing a social struggle against privatization of health,

and the people support them and they believe them. So I don't know where [this idea] is coming from that we don't have support for the elections." A less obvious aspect of the planned social consolidation is the incorporation of retired military, an accommodation with the bitter enemy of the past.

Preempting doubt that such an accommodation is possible, Sanchez Ceren announced in late May that Col. David Munguia Payes would be joining the FMLN campaign to undertake that very task. The "enemy of my enemy" dynamic plays no small part in this alliance. When ARENA's Calderon Sol was president, he passed Munguia Payes up for promotion to general in 1998 (see NotiCen, 1999-01-14). Flores did the same in 2000. Both thought him a leftist. At the time, the FMLN supported the promotion, as did the military Tribunal Disciplinario. Now the FMLN is looking at the colonel for minister of defense.

Comision Politica member Violeta Menjivar said of him, "He has the qualifications to be part of the Frente's cabinet, which will be a cabinet of social consolidation. There are other military officers who have told us that they are interested in contributing to a proper role for the armed forces." But before the ministerial chicken is hatched, Munguia Payes will serve as advisor to the Frente on matters of national security and concentrate on bringing other old soldiers into the fold. "We have met with at least 25 officers about the FMLN national security governmental proposal," said the Colonel.

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