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US Seen Interfering Salvadoran Election

by LADB Staff

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The US Embassy reacted quickly to recent polls showing that the Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) was projected to be a likely winner in El Salvador's presidential elections next year (see NotiCen, 2003-06-05).

US Ambassador Rose Likens told the press that the FMLN has "generated worry." The message from Liken, reminiscent of the Cold War, was, "That their holding up Cuba, China, or Vietnam as a model or speaking of an end to privatizations when there are US companies that have invested in developing key sectors of national life could endanger investment."

Likens, having served three years as ambassador, is on her way out. She conceded that it is a bit early to evaluate possible changes in bilateral relations, but the warning and the intention to sow fear into hearts in the political sector were unmistakable. "Without mentioning what happened the eleventh of September, the Frente's negative comments against Washington or the letter from Fidel Castro accusing our president of wanting to invade Cuba indicate possible future policies that concern us," said Likens.

The concerns may be rooted in the past, but they arose soon after the release of polls showing that the party of the left has a strong probability of wresting the presidency from the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) on March 21, 2004. Both ARENA and the president it elected are sinking fast in the esteem of the electorate. Likens is feeding a burgeoning fear on the political right in El Salvador at the prospect not only of an FMLN win, but a win that could bring Jorge Schafik Handal, a former communist, to the presidency. Likens declined to comment on Schafik Handal. "I'm not going to mention specific names. Perhaps it is better to speak now before the candidates are chosen to make clear the basis of our relationship. We want the voters to decide, keeping in mind the current factors. Maintaining good relations is in all our interests," she said.

Pressing the point, Likens warned that a relationship with a country is not written in stone. "Salvadorans have the right to decide what they want, but we also have to react on the basis of what happens in March of 2004." She sharpened that point in another interview with a local newspaper, saying, "It will be the voters who decide, but I want them to do it having all the factors present." Perhaps aware that her remarks were pushing diplomatic limits, Likens cautioned that her appraisal should not be taken as blackmail. "I'm speaking in a sincere and honest way, simply reflecting reality," she said. "I have no intention of giving instructions."

That said, she went on to say that, in the case of an FMLN victory, diplomatic relations "will be analyzed," and she restated her concern about the "democratic values" of the FMLN and the future of US investments in El Salvador. The FMLN was not unaware of a potential problem. It is one thing to run against ARENA and quite another to run against the US.

Early in June, four members of the party leadership paid the ambassador what they called a "courtesy visit." The four were party coordinator general Salvador Sanchez Ceren; the candidate most favored by the leadership, Jorge Schafik Handal; magistrate of the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) Julio Hernandez; and Nidia Diaz, famed former guerrilla comandante, author, and party leader. The party members were not particularly forthcoming with the press following the meeting. Diaz declined to say that the conversation dealt directly with Schafik's candidacy, but she did say they discussed "diverse themes of national importance." None would give details, but, as a group, they characterized the meeting as "very frank and cordial," and said that its purpose was "to discuss future relations between the FMLN and the government of the United States."

The release of polls showing an upsurge in FMLN popularity and a steep decline in that of the current president, whom the US strongly supports, may have been precipitants for the ambassador's polemic, but there is ample history for US hostility toward the party. The FMLN has been outspoken in its disapproval of post-Sept. 11 US foreign policy, particularly its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The US also faults the party for its relationship with Cuba and Venezuela.

Likens has criticized the FMLN's "open support" for the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in Colombia.

Responded one FMLN deputy, Gerson Martinez, to the contentions, "Regarding the declarations of Ambassador Likens, I want to reaffirm that the FMLN is trying to build friendly relations with the United States. We want reciprocal cooperation with the United States, based on the self-determination of the Salvadoran people, under the sovereignty and principles of nonintervention recognized by international law."

From the centrist Centro Democratico Unido (CDU), Deputy Hector Dada Hirezi saw the ambassador's onslaught as having been encouraged by the regime of President Francisco Flores. He said that the government has failed to create an independent foreign policy and instead dedicated itself to being "useful" to the pretensions of the US. "We have done unnecessary things, losing the only defense in foreign policy that a small country has acting with dignity. The United States needs friends, not subordinates," he said.

Rafael Machuca, leader of the Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PCN), said that his party regards Likens' statements as having gone a step beyond what her diplomatic function permits. "I don't know that diplomats can take a public position on the affairs of countries and parties," he said. But Flores was making the most of the US-FMLN rift. As he enters the last year of his term, his fortunes have sunk not only in the polls, but also within his own party. The US State Department is currently his only visible means of support, not only in his current role, but also because he needs US support for his bid to become secretary-general of the Organization of American States (OAS) next year.

Flores took the opportunity to warn against the possible consequences of an FMLN-inspired decay in the bilateral dynamic. "I believe that the risks to the country are going to increase. It could increase the cost of living, and I think if the positions (of the FMLN) were to materialize, we would have many very specific risks." The risks would be, he said, loss of remittances (see NotiCen, 2002-11-21) and the return of Salvadorans resident in the US.

A mass return of countless thousands of penniless Salvadorans from the US would overwhelm the economy and almost surely destroy any government in power at that moment. The loss of remittances, El Salvador's largest source of foreign export dollars, would be equally devastating. The president cautioned, "Many people would lose their jobs, because investment would start to be withdrawn from El Salvador." He said that avoiding capital flight from the country was in the hands of the citizens, not the government.

Also, support of the FMLN was putting the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) at risk. By contrast, after instilling economic terror in the hearts of the citizens, Flores flew off to Miami, where in a public speech he held himself up to an international audience as a model for leadership in developing countries. The El Salvador daily Prensa Grafica called the speech "loaded with mysticism and dramatic figures." Flores said, "We have discovered the way to leave poverty aside and reach prosperity: democracy." The paper noted that the State Department's Undersecretary for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky repeatedly encouraged the audience to applaud during the speech.

Flores was introduced as the principal speaker by Assistant Secretary for Hemispheric Affairs Daniel Fisk, who said, "President Flores is a leader of the new commitment to the regional democratic framework." The audience consisted of about a hundred political leaders from Latin America and Africa, brought together by the State Department under the rubric "Jornadas de Dialogo sobre la Democracia." The exercise, together with the State Department's cheerleading, was widely taken to be the launch of Flores' OAS career plans. There are indications, however, that US backing for Flores at the OAS could be counterproductive, if not the kiss of death.

On June 12, the OAS voted to exclude the US from representation on the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). It was the first time the international body had done this, and The New York Times characterized it as a "symbolic rebuke to the Bush administration." Salvadoran reporters covering the Miami event questioned Flores about the apparent contradiction between the monolithically pristine portrait he painted for foreign audiences and his scare tactics at home.

Didn't his domestic rhetoric point to a fragile democratic process in El Salvador? The president thought not. "The achievement is that we are resolving it in a peaceful manner, in the field of ideas," he said. He offered one more idea to the field: the FMLN is promoting class warfare. Back in El Salvador, FMLN officials called a press conference to clarify their position against the Flores-Likens discourse. High on their agenda was the issue of privatizations. Sanchez Ceren told reporters that the party had no intention of renationalizing already privatized companies.

Julio Hernandez of the party's Comision Politica explained, however, that an FMLN government would not expand privatization and would seek to "revise existing regulations." This was a somewhat softened version of the interpretation Schafik Handal gave to the Asamblea Legislativa, when, on the occasion of the opening of the new session in which the FMLN is now the majority party, he said, "Projected privatizations will be stopped, and those already realized will be examined, especially the pensions." Hernandez also took up the question of dollarization (see NotiCen, 2001-12-13), which ARENA forces have said the FMLN would reverse.

Not so, said Hernandez. They have no problem with the free circulation of the dollar. "What we have announced is that we will enforce the law of monetary integration," he said. On international relations, he said that an FMLN government would open relations with all countries of the world, including Cuba, and that it would seek contact with high US officials.

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