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Salvadoran Center Taken by Silva

by LADB Staff

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The popular former mayor of San Salvador, Hector Silva, has joined the field as a presidential candidate in El Salvador's March 21, 2004, elections. Silva accepted the nomination of a recently formed centrist coalition of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) and the Centro Democrático Unido (CDU). The Boston-born physician was mayor of the capital from 1997 to 2003. He was the choice then of a coalition headed by the Faribundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN).

In a dispute over his agreement to help President Francisco Flores resolve a health-workers strike, Silva was ejected from the FMLN (see NotiCen, 2002-11-02), and, rather than run for mayor again with a new coalition, ran for the Asamblea Legislativa (AL) as a CDU candidate and won. Silva has proven to be one of the most electable people in the country and can be considered a major participant, with the potential to change significantly the dynamic between the FMLN and the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). He told reporters, "I accepted being a candidate of the coalition because we have come to an agreement on a nonpolarized platform."

Silva's entry could make moot a question of the validity of the latest CID-Gallup poll, which showed ARENA candidate Antonio Saca with a large lead over the FMLN's Schafick Handal, soon after a previous poll yielded the opposite result. FMLN leaders doubted that so large a change could have happened so quickly.

CDU leader Ruben Zamora said that the coalition platform amounts to a "second transition" in the way government functions since the peace accords of 1992 that ended the civil war. By second transition, he meant that "we're going to go from a 'patrimonialist' state to a modern state; our model will not be based on attracting investments, but on developing a productive economy."

Further, said Zamora, under a coalition presidency, the country would "pass from a socially stingy state to a state that provides the population with services like health, education, and housing." Zamora's explanation serves to distinguish a Silva presidency from the FMLN vision of Schafick Handal. The leftist platform, as articulated at the party's 17th national convention, calls for an end to privatizations and for selective renationalization of some privatizations that have already taken place under ARENA governments. ARENA has spun off into the private sector the telephone system, electricity, the pension fund, and banking.

By contrast, Silva has been having meetings with representatives of various social and economic sectors and has been said to be listening to the business sector. While declining to name the people with whom Silva has consulted, spokespersons for the coalition said that outreach of this kind will be broadened to other sectors in a national consultation seeking recommendations that will add planks to the coalition platform. Before starting that phase of the effort, campaign managers will have to be chosen and a running mate selected. Coalition officials would not speculate on a

running mate, leading some reporters to conclude that Silva discussed the subject with the business community and that the discussion is continuing.

Besides the vice president being acceptable to the private sector, other observers have suggested that the candidate be a woman. The point is that the coalition is positioning itself at the extreme center between the FMLN and ARENA. So far, those two major parties of the left and right, respectively, have failed to notice the threat that has popped up between them. This allows the coalition to play "let's you and him fight," while they get their ducks in a row. Left and right in each other's cross hairs The major parties are obliging. ARENA has sought to cast the FMLN opposition as "communists," while the latest strategy from the FMLN is to blame the party in power for everything currently wrong in the country. At its national convention last week, the FMLN adopted the blame strategy as a way to "wear ARENA down as the cause of the crisis of the country."

Eugenio Chicas, the FMLN campaign director, said they would use the legislative agenda as the primary weapon in that effort. "The legislative scenario is one of the instruments that allows us most effectively to oversee the problems of the country, correct laws that don't work, and reveal the responsibility of the government and its lack of will to resolve problems."

Predictably stooping to retrieve the gauntlet at his feet, ARENA vice president Mario Acosta reflected, "This is a lamentable attitude, because it is the Salvadoran people who end up affected...and every action provokes a reaction." It remains to be seen how Silva's coalition will take advantage of the battle of the titans.

PDC deputy Agustin Diaz hinted, "Schafick has to talk with us. We're prepared to make constructive opposition." The Partido Conciliacion Nacional (PCN) has said through Deputy Orlando Arevalo that it "would only support the FMLN if its proposals were viable and feasible." A coalition or any electoral pact with the PCN would have required some internal regulatory changes on the part of the FMLN.

In its 2002 convention, the party prohibited any such arrangements with the PCN, ARENA, and the splinter group Movimiento de Renovador. Anti-gang issue influences party alignments But the PCN connection was not to be. The PCN made common cause with the CDU-PDC coalition, largely on the issue of how the government relates to the country's youth in times of economic crisis. ARENA had determined that the issue was a winner politically (see NotiCen, 2003-08-28), and President Flores sent the AL an "anti-gang law."

In an effort to trump ARENA, Silva, as head of the CDU delegation, together with the PCN and its PDC coalition partner, announced in the AL, "We propose to limit the sale of alcohol from 12 midnight to 6 a.m." Silva and the others then proposed a string of new legislation that would prohibit the carrying of arms on public streets, punish young people who drive irresponsibly, and punish parents "who materially abandon their children." The punishment would include denial of passports and identity documents, even though that would violate the Universal Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees the right to documentation.

These proposals have served the dual purpose of moving the PCN away from FMLN and toward the coalition, although the PCN has not officially joined as yet, and of offering a competitive alternative to ARENA's anti-gang law. The three parties together have touted their gambit as the "responsible way" to combat gangs. Said PDC leader Rodolfo Parker, "ARENA couldn't do it right because they presented a trick law that their own main advisors told them was a trick." The centrists are now head to head with ARENA on the issue, while the FMLN opted out of the war on youth by opposing the ARENA version.

The same CID-Gallup poll that showed a surprising reversal between the major players also gave Silva 6% of voter preference, even though the ex-mayor had not yet agreed to run on the coalition ticket when the poll was conducted, Aug. 15- 19. The results of the poll will remain in doubt until its numbers can be confirmed by a subsequent sampling, both because of the unexpected reversal and because of criticism of the company and of the technique.

Walter Raudales, director of the Centro de Opinion Publica (COP) of the Universidad Francisco Gavidia, said that the CID-Gallup results could be wrong because of the use of the telephone. "To start with, the majority of people in El Salvador, because they are poor, don't have phones; therefore, in telephone surveys, a large sector of society is left out." Raudales also pointed out that the CID-Gallup track record is historically poor at predicting election results.

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