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ARENA Favored as Election Starts

by LADB Staff

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From San Salvador Following last March's legislative and municipal elections, in which the opposition Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) party surpassed the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) in actual votes for the first time ever, analysts and pollsters heralded the distinct possibility of an ARENA defeat in next year's presidential election.

Reacting to this possibility, ARENA quickly regrouped in an effort to keep its hold on the executive apparatus that it has controlled for the last three presidencies almost 15 years. For its part, the FMLN became overly confident, operating under the assumption that no matter whom they were to choose as their presidential candidate, electoral victory was at hand. Then, a wildcard was thrown into the polarized political mix that has characterized the postwar period the emergence of a serious new centrist coalition, the first since the Partido Democrata Cristiano (PDC) held office in the mid- 1980s.

Four months away from the March 21 presidential contest, all indications are that ARENA's political makeover has been successful, while the FMLN's feeble and last-minute attempt at one has not. Both parties are responsible for making key strategic decisions, including the selection of candidates and policy choices, but access to money and the media, as well as the privileges of incumbency, have tipped the balance back in favor of the governing ARENA party.

The candidates

In presidential politics, as local polls have traditionally shown, Salvadorans vote the candidates rather than the party they represent. The conservative ARENA reacted quickly to its disappointing showing in last March's elections. In an effort to moderate its image as the party of the rich, the party reorganized, recognizing the need to bring in new sectors to its executive council (Consejo Ejecutivo Nacional, COENA) and distancing itself as much as possible from the administration of President Francisco Flores.

Using a primary election system for the first time, a new figure emerged, previously untested in politics Antonio Saca. Saca, at age 38, is best known as a radio broadcaster, and like his adversary in the FMLN never finished college, is of Palestinian origin, and hails from the department of Usulután. Despite his middle-class origins, in recent years he gained prominence as the president of the Asociacion Nacional de la Empresa Privada (ANEP). In recent months, he has embarked upon a nationwide consultation, often moving to the center by promising more attention to social and economic reforms.

In this campaign, the selection of vice-presidential running mates has proven almost as interesting. Saca indicated long ago that he wanted a woman to accompany him on the ticket, but only recently did he choose Ana Vilma de Escobar, a former director of the Instituto de Seguro Social

and, perhaps more importantly, a professional who worked for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for some ten years. While there, she managed one of its largest grants, for the Fundacion Salvadorena para el Desarrollo Economico y Social (FUSADES), the leading private-sector think tank.

Shafick Handal, the septuagenarian former head of the Partido Comunista, was nominated by an FMLN assembly in late July to be its presidential candidate. He had the backing of the party's political commission since May, which had expected an uncontested election until popular Santa Tecla mayor Oscar Ortiz threw his hat into the ring. Some 30,000 party faithful (out of a registered 90,000 militants) voted in direct elections, but Shafick Handal beat Ortiz by only a little over 1,000 votes. Shafick Handal's candidacy was welcomed by observers on the right, who believed that his revolutionary history, turbulent personality, and tendency toward intolerance would ensure an FMLN defeat. In fact, in all polls including an FMLN poll carried out last May Shafick Handal registers the highest negative rating of any politician, left or right.

The FMLN's May poll also suggested that most people thought the FMLN did well in the March elections more out of disillusionment with ARENA (58.6%) than because of anything positive the FMLN had done (26.9%). Guillermo Mata, the former head of the medical association who led last year's strike, ran unopposed for the vice-presidential nomination.

One novelty of this election has been the entrance into the race of Hector Silva, a two-time FMLN mayor of San Salvador, who has consistently polled as one of the most popular politicians in the country. He decided to accept the nomination of the left-of-center Centro Democratica Unido (CDU) and the right-of-center PDC, reportedly after polls convinced him that he would have a shot at displacing the FMLN and making it into a runoff. If Silva were to make it to a second round, he would be a shoe-in.

Pitted against ARENA, voters on the left would likely go with him; against the FMLN, voters on the right would also have no option other than to go with him. Silva personally selected as his running mate Ana Cristina Sol, a businesswoman and a former ambassador under the Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994) and Armondo Calderon Sol (1994-2000) administrations to Europe and the US, although apparently never an ARENA party member.

In recent years, she was one of the founders of the Movimiento Independiente pro Reforma Electoral (MIRE), which has sought to reform the electoral and party system. Finally, the Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PCN), a right-wing and occasionally populist party that constitutes the third-largest block in the Asamblea Nacional, selected long-time congressman and party stalwart Rafael Machuca, less because of what he has to offer than because of a lack of viable alternatives.

For a running mate, the PCN chose Genaro Ramirez, a bus-company owner. He will likely provide hundreds of buses for transporting PCN supporters come election day. The PCN has traditionally done poorly in presidential races, but it has been gaining adherents at the local level. In the legislative elections, the PCN had more votes than either the PDC or the CDU, but slightly less than the two parties combined.

Crunching the numbers

The numbers point to a probable runoff between ARENA and the FMLN. The CDU-PDC coalition got a combined vote of 190,976 last March, compared with 446,381 for ARENA and 475,146 for the FMLN. Despite its lower numbers, the coalition has argued that it is viable because, when combined with other parties, its votes add up to slightly more than the FMLN or ARENA. However, this overlooks the 181,168 votes gained by the PCN a 75,000 vote increase for them compared with the 2000 elections many of which were probably votes taken away from ARENA and thus not likely to be taken by the center coalition.

An October poll by the Instituto Universitario de Opinion Publica of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) further illustrates the uphill battle facing both the FMLN and the CDU-PDC coalition. In findings similar to other polls, ARENA received 41.1% of voter preferences; the FMLN, 22.3%; and the CDU-PDC, 7.4%. However, when asked about particular candidates, Tony Saca of ARENA polls 48%; Shafick Handal, 14.6%; and Hector Silva, 16.7%. This has been the only poll thus far showing Silva with a higher ranking than Shafick Handal. More importantly, the UCA poll also found that both the CDU-PDC coalition and ARENA were attracting voters from other parties or from voters who did not vote in the 2003 elections far more than was the FMLN. While 71.8% of those who say they will vote for the FMLN also voted for them in 2003, only 52.8% of those people leaning toward ARENA and 28.9% favoring the coalition say they voted for them in 2003.

This points to the real difficulty of the FMLN in expanding its voter base to any great degree. Given its solid base, it will likely have enough votes to make it into a second round runoff; but because of the limited appeal of their candidate, it appears dubious that the FMLN would be able to win. The UCA poll also highlights other key issues that will be played out in the coming months during the campaign. One of the post-electoral moves of ARENA has been to dive headfirst into an anti-gang campaign, Plan Mano Dura (see NotiCen, 2003-09-11). The UCA poll finds that a full 88% of the Salvadoran public supports this campaign, which has included the implementation of strict laws that have been strongly opposed by all opposition parties except the PCN.

ARENA will continue to exploit this issue with great probable success. The FMLN, meanwhile, will stress economic issues in the upcoming campaign. While the UCA polls indicate the public is largely with them on issues of privatization and the economy, other polls suggest there is still overwhelming public support for the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which the FMLN has opposed to varying degrees. Salvadorans also see a good relationship with the US as fundamental to the well-being of the Salvadoran economy, given the more than 2 million Salvadorans living in the US who send back some US\$2 billion a year in remittances (see NotiCen, 2002-11-21).

The administration of US President George W. Bush has repeatedly made clear its concern about a Shafick Handal presidency, given the FMLN's position on high-priority issues such as free trade and Cuba (see NotiCen, 2003-06-12). As recently as May of this year, for example, the FMLN published an open letter to Cuban President Fidel Castro supporting his repression of dissidents and criticizing the "terrorist imperialist North American aggression" against Cuba.

Last week in Managua, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Dan Fisk said that Shafick Handal, along with Guatemala's former dictator Gen. Efraim Rios Montt (1982-1983) and former Nicaraguan Presidents Daniel Ortega (1979-1990) and Arnaldo Aleman (1996-2001) represent "failed philosophies of the past" and hoped for a new generation of "genuinely democratic leaders." The UCA poll shows 44% of the Salvadoran public believe the FMLN would turn the country into "another Cuba" should it get elected exactly the same percentage that says they would "never" vote for Shafick Handal.

"Official" campaign kicks off

On Friday, Nov. 21, it may come as a surprise to many Salvadorans that the campaign to elect a new president officially kicks off. With every utility pole in and around San Salvador painted the party colors of the governing ARENA party, and with the principal candidates appearing on posters, newspapers, television, and radio, this country has been in full campaign mode for months. Even the left-wing afternoon daily Co-Latino has run an ARENA banner ad on the bottom third of its front page for weeks, presumably finding it difficult to refuse the hard cash generated by such an ad. The publicity showered on the public, until now largely by ARENA, underlines the seriousness with which the party is taking these elections as well as the big money it is shelling out to ensure victory.

While parties are not required by law to disclose expenditures, recent press reports indicate that ARENA will spend some US\$5 million during the next four months, while the FMLN hopes to spend as much as US\$3 million. The CDU-PDC coalition has a wish list of US\$2 million, but both funding and a weak party structure are the Achilles' heel of its campaign effort. As the incumbent party has the full backing of the private sector and media, however, these figures hardly tell the full story of campaign finance. Many media outlets traditionally provide free air time to ARENA, while the major dailies have carried mostly negative or, at best, minimal coverage of opposition candidates and their campaigns.

In addition to playing with a media stacked in its favor, ARENA recently joined forces with the PCN to defeat the implementation of the long-awaited system of residential voting. This would have quadrupled the number of voting stations throughout the country, making it much easier for both rural and urban voters to get to the polls and quicker for them to vote once they got there.

This year Salvadorans will be voting with the newly issued single-identity card (Documento Unico de Identidad, DUI), a computer-generated photo id, which provides the basis for an electoral registry of more than 3.3 million Salvadorans. A residential voting system would likely have increased the number of voters even beyond that of the past March elections, whose high turnout reversed a decade-long decline in voter participation. But such a reform would have robbed ARENA and the PCN of the opportunity to engage in clientelistic practices such as bussing their supporters to the polls on election day.

If ARENA wins the upcoming presidential election, it will be poised to finish two straight decades of governing, a relatively rare feat for any party in contemporary Latin America. The FMLN, on the other hand, will likely be forced to renew its leadership and let younger generations take the helm,

while the center coalition will struggle to hold together and further define itself as a reasonable alternative for governing the country.

Whoever wins, all three major political forces face major challenges if they hope to make lasting contributions to democratic governance.

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