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Arena and US Win In El Salvador

by LADB Staff

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What has been called one of the most pro-US governments in the hemisphere will remain so. Tony Saca, candidate of the rightist Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), has won El Salvador's presidential election handily over Schafik Handal, veteran communist and candidate of the Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN).

With most of the votes counted, Saca's 57.7% margin was well over the 50% needed to avoid a second-round runoff. Schafik Handal got barely 35.6%, with the remainder split between Hector Silva, a coalition candidate (see NotiCen, 2003-09-04) for the Centro Democratico Unido (CDU) and the Partido Democraata Cristiano (PDC), and Rafael Machuca of the Partido Conciliacion Nacional (PCN).

Saca, 39, was a sportscaster and businessman who began working at a radio station when he was 13. By 22, he was nationally known and had begun buying his own stations. While very much Handal's junior, both candidates are from Usulután and are of Palestinian descent. That may be where any similarity ends, but it may have policy implications in the new government.

No love lost

The campaign was rancorous. With support and encouragement from the pro-Saca press, the winning ARENA strategy defined Handal as a communist kidnapper who, according to reports, "would stamp out freedom, teach schoolchildren guerrilla warfare, and cause the United States to expel Salvadoran refugees." The 73-year-old FMLN standard-bearer promised the winner that if he governed as he campaigned, "with fear and blackmail, the country is going to suffer and we will resist without pause." The FMLN controls the largest bloc in the Asamblea Nacional and can be a serious bird in the new president's bush.

This election was unusual in several ways. First, the turnout was huge, a record. Second, the US was heavily involved, both actively, with US officials making suggestions, pronouncements, and threats in favor of ARENA, and passively, with the implicit incentives of free-trade and remittances casting their pall. Third, the election was solely a presidential one. This last fact amplified the lingering wartime polarization of Salvadoran society since the 1970s by removing buffers that would have been available were voters able to choose one candidate for president but then hedge their bet by choosing legislators, or municipal officials, from another party.

US significantly invested

The issue of US interference first arose in mid-2003 when then US Ambassador Rose Likens accused the FMLN of post-Sept. 11 glee (see NotiCen, 2003-06-12). She railed against their holding up Cuba,

China, or Vietnam as a model and their speaking of an end to privatizations while there were US companies that had invested heavily in key sectors (see NotiCen, 2003-06-10). The US kept up the pressure even after it became evident that the FMLN had squandered its advantage by nominating Handal, a candidate that younger leftists considered a dinosaur.

As late as February 2004, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega explicitly called upon Salvadorans to vote for someone who "shares our vision and values." Otto Reich (see NotiCen, 2002-10-12) followed up the Noriega campaign performance with accusations that the FMLN "has fraternal relations with terrorist governments and groups." He said the FMLN had a relationship with ETA, the Basque separatist group the recently repudiated Spanish government erroneously blamed for bombings in Spain. Reich specifically warned the Salvadoran electorate, "I don't think this would lead to good relationships between the United States and El Salvador if the FMLN wins."

Big turnout, small parties must die

The rancor and interference did not diminish the vote. More than 2.1 million of the nation's 3.4 million eligible voters voted. This is, according to one diplomatic observer, about one-third more than in any previous election. Moreover, ARENA more than doubled its votes since the disastrous 2003 outing (see NotiCen, 2003-04-24), and the FMLN increased its totals by about 50%. Unlike the badly bruised FMLN, the CDU, PDC, and PCN will all cease to exist as a result of this election. Parties need to get 3% of the vote to survive as parties, but in the case of coalitions, they need 3% times the number of parties. Hence, Hector Silva's CDU-PDC with 3.9% and Machuca's PCN with 2.73% are goners. These results came as a shock to party leaders who were assured of a loss, but not of dissolution.

This is likely another consequence of a presidency-only election. With no municipal or legislative posts at stake and their own candidates certain to lose, voting just to keep the parties alive was evidently insufficient incentive for their bases. Another paradox of the unusual election is that the loser could suffer a resounding defeat but keep a legislative majority. The FMLN as opposition could be more troublesome to US hopes for a compliant El Salvador and to ARENA hopes for a business-friendly environment than it might have been as the ruling party. Under a winning scenario, a governing FMLN would have had an interest in maintaining cordiality with the country that allows it to export its citizens and repatriate their earnings.

Instead, unless the party undergoes profound top-to-bottom changes, ARENA will face an opposition whose leader concluded Sunday's democratic exercise by saying, "If they think they are going to govern the country with this method of fear and blackmail, the country is going to suffer because you're going to have relentless resistance." Handal promised to sink approval of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in the Asamblea, to put an end to privatizations, to eliminate the value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) on the basic basket of commodities, to reverse the dollarization of the economy, any or all of which measures, as president, he might have had to hedge. As things now stand, the agenda of resistance is expected to gain popular support with the loss of the smaller parties.

This was implicit in the post-election comments of CDU Deputy Hector Dada, who pointed out that "polarization and the campaign of terror generated by the ARENA party triumphed." Party secretary Ruben Zamora agreed, saying, "Polarization won which will be very dangerous for the country." Recognition that the country could easily fracture along traditional fault lines emerged as a first point of convergence.

After just a day of glaring across the breach, Tony Saca reached out on television to say, "I am committed to dialogue with other parties to seek solutions. This is the moment to forget all the past. No society can develop if it is divided. I want to tell Schafik Handal that I don't share many of his opinions, but I respect him and I want to establish communication with him for a future reconciliation. The country is not viable if we do not understand one another." And there is another point of convergence one that might not play out importantly in El Salvador, but which has implications for another nation that wears the mantle of "most pro-US country" Israel.

Saca and Handal might be worlds apart on everything else, but they are both proud Palestinians and both have spoken of moving the El Salvadoran Embassy in Israel from Jerusalem back to Tel Aviv. Of all the countries on earth, only El Salvador and Costa Rica have their embassies in Jerusalem, the city Israel claims as its capital. Last year in San Salvador, before the election's acrimony, Saca and Handal both supported building the Palestine Plaza in San Salvador, a park dedicated "to the millions of Palestinians expelled from their lands" by the creation of Israel. Over the park waves the flag of the Palestinian Authority.

During the campaign, the FMLN tried to make foreign policy an issue, and Handal promised that, if elected, he would move the embassy out of Jerusalem. This earned him the support of the Palestinian Ambassador to Central America George Salameh during the dedication of the plaza. Upon receiving the keys to the city from Mayor Carlos Rivas Zamora, Salameh said, "That a Salvadoran of Palestinian origin could become president of the land for which he has fought for so many years is a matter of pride. As a Palestinian, my words are indeed endorsement of the FMLN candidate, of whom we feel proud." The park is located scarcely a block from the Israeli Embassy, and reaction from the ARENA government calling the remarks "an inadmissible intrusion" was swift. Salameh had also said of Saca, "There are others who should have been here, but for fear of the Northern imperium they didn't attend."

But Handal's position was clear, "The Arab world does not want to have relations with El Salvador for having its embassy where it is." Importantly, even with the sharp rebuke from the Flores government, Tony Saca never repudiated the Palestinian and successfully dodged committing himself to keeping the embassy in Jerusalem. He said that moving the embassy would do little toward resolving the problems in the Middle East, and he said he saw no reason to entangle El Salvador in them. Most observers note that Saca will probably not move the embassy soon, out of fear of offending the US, but he might do so in the future. It is only this lessened likelihood that won Saca the support of El Salvador's Jewish community.

Said Claudio Kahn, the community's president, "If the other party had won, we would have been in trouble. We are more at ease with this result." But they are still, Kahn told a reporter, viewing Saca with caution. In Costa Rica, Nobel Peace Prize laureate (1987) and former President Oscar

Arias (1986-1990) announced he would run again in 2006. He has committed himself to moving the embassy out of Jerusalem, and, if he does so, Saca would almost have to follow suit. Saca has said privately that he would like to do it. Ties between ARENA and Israel go back to the war years, when Israel supported right-wing forces both overtly and covertly, but analysts have taken note that Israel was much less enthusiastic about this election than it has been in the past.

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