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FMLN Conflict Rises in El Salvador

by LADB Staff

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The Faribundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) held intraparty elections Nov. 7 to determine whether it would continue on with the hard-line, hard-left policies of its leader, Shafik Handal, or take a new, softer direction, one more cooperative with the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) presidency.

In the June 1, 2004, presidential elections, Handal lost his bid for the presidency to ARENA's Antonio Saca (see NotiCen, 2004-06-10). The anti-Handalistas were anything but cooperative and soft in the campaign leading up to the party elections, taking to the streets and using other traditional FMLN tactics. It came down to an unsuccessful effort by forty-something pragmatists to oust the sixty-something Marxists. Handal is in his seventies. Perhaps the only discernable difference between the groups, tactically, was in the motivation.

The hard-liners did what hard-liners do, but the reformers only did it because of, as one who declined to give his name for publication said, "the defamation campaign they mounted against us." He was referring to a rumor he said was circulated by the Handalistas that his group, La Fuerza por el Cambio, was led by right-wingers. This is likely not the case. The Fuerza was on the streets in June protesting the Saca inauguration, and they got their bona fides in order in August when they met with the Cuban representative for Latin America Ramiro Abreu, so that, as another unnamed leader put it, "in that moment it was important to tell the base that we [the Fuerza] also have the support of Fidel Castro." Setback for Saca

The Fuerza also supported walking away from negotiations with Saca and ousting from the legislative deputation Miguel Navarrete. He was the only party deputy to support the subject of the negotiation, Saca's fiscal reforms. Saca, however, clearly had a preference. He needs a legislature he can work with, and Handal made it clear both before and after the presidential elections that he would never give an inch to an ARENA government (see NotiCen, 2004-03-25). With the FMLN the majority party in the legislature, a recalcitrant Handal is more than a speed bump on the road ahead.

With the FMLN walkout a painful memory, Saca pleaded for a new leadership with an "open mind." The president said, "It is important that the FMLN collaborate with and not obstruct any activities that the executive wants to do. There are the empty seats for them to return to, and I pray that the authorities elected in the FMLN have an open mind and help bring forward the program of government for which we voted." The FMLN is the only party in El Salvador to decide its leadership through popular, secret-ballot, election, and it has its own electoral tribunal to field the contests and to adjudicate issues as they arise.

The divisions run deep. Past schisms have spun off new parties; important leaders have been expelled. This election was of that quality. The anti-Handalistas have heaped complaints before

the electoral tribunal. Less than 24 hours before polls opened, in Mejicanos, it was found that a candidate for the board, Salvador Guillen, was left off the ballot. Guillen considered the omission intentional. The tribunal ordered new ballots printed.

Elsewhere other irregularities occurred. Campaign signs containing vicious accusations were put up and ordered taken down. Voter lists failed to appear, threatening to deprive members of the franchise.

Three more years

In the end, neither Fuerza complaints nor Saca's pleas could herd the party toward reform. Orthodox, hard-line Handalista Medardo Gonzalez beat the Fuerza's Oscar Ortiz to head the leadership (coordinacion general) of the party. The electoral tribunal certified 58.45% of the vote for Gonzalez, 41.12% for Ortiz, and, with 62.32% of the vote counted, called the election. Fifty percent of those eligible voted. Gonzalez will rule for three years and will lead the party into the 2006 legislative and municipal elections.

In accepting victory, he noted with some pride that there had been no violence during the campaign, nor was damage done to the party. He would work with the reformers, he said, and, incidentally, said the FMLN had no plans to return to the government's bargaining table. Promising a unified force to crush ARENA in 2006, Gonzalez said, "Ex-combatants and veterans are obligated to become a moral, political, and ideological reserve. My solidarity is guaranteed. My hands are open."

Fuerza fights on

The Fuerza accepted neither Gonzalez's open hands, nor his proclamation of victory, nor the tribunal's certification of the election. Said Ortiz, "We cannot accept final results until this process is cleared up, and until it is definitively supported or documented." Ortiz, the mayor of San Tecla, argued that there was a technical tie because, according to his figures, he got 22,928 votes and Gonzalez got 24,986. He said he had proof in the form of photos and video that the hard-liners' edge came by way of fraud.

On Nov. 9, Julio Hernandez, anti-Handalista electoral delegate, said he would request the annulment of the results in ten municipalities, based on Article 64 of the Reglamento Electoral, which refers to fraud. Specifically, he said, the tribunal must act "when by fraud, coercion, or violence by the authorities or by the members of the electoral organisms of the party or candidates, or by any other person or group, and by consequence of which, the results of the election are caused to change." Hernandez reiterated that documentary evidence would accompany the request. The dispute centers on charges that at some polling places Gonzalez supporters pre-marked ballots and substituted them for those cast by Ortiz supporters.

At others, voters were systematically purged from rolls. The Fuerza also marshaled its lawyers to prepare for a battle that could end up in the courts. One of those allegedly purged, Roberto Hernandez, said, "These people are going to win again without having the legitimacy of the base.

Half the party is not in agreement with them." Hernandez was a party municipal coordinator from San Salvador.

Municipal coordinators were also up for election, and he was beaten by a hard-liner. He said he would appeal the result as fraudulent. Tribunal officials said that, although they had not yet received complaints, they were obligated to investigate them if they were presented within a prescribed time limit, 24 or 48 hours after the election. The limit varies depending on the charge. But even in that, there is disagreement. Julio Hernandez said that there is no established time limit and that his side had the rest of the week to assemble its case.

In the interim, unsure whom he will be facing for the next three years, Saca gave the benefit of the doubt to Gonzalez and hoped for the best. "I hope the new directorate, whoever is at the head of the FMLN, changes that negative attitude it has had," he said. "For us it makes no difference who wins." He repeated his call for open mindedness.

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