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Mourning On The Left; Shafik Handal Dead, But Still A Problem For El Salvador's Government

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Shafik Handal is dead. The 75-year-old leader of El Salvador's opposition Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) suffered cardiac arrest in the airport upon returning home from the inauguration of President Evo Morales in Bolivia. Flown immediately by helicopter to a San Salvador hospital, he was pronounced dead within 30 minutes after attempts at resuscitation failed.

Handal was head of the Partido Comunista Salvadoreño (PCS) in El Salvador from 1972 until it merged in 1980 with four other leftist groups to form the FMLN, then not a political party but a revolutionary armed force that waged war against a string of right-wing military and military-influenced governments backed by US Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Handal led the communist faction of the coalition until it became a political party in 1992, when a peace accord was reached. Handal was one of the signers.

The FMLN has never held the presidency of El Salvador, but has, nevertheless, in its often-chaotic history, held important posts and has always been a powerful opposition. Handal ran for president in 2004 and lost badly to 39-year-old businessman and radio personality Antonio Saca (see [NotiCen, 2004-03-25](#)).

Saca and Handal were as different politically as it is possible to be, but they had much in common personally. Both were from Palestinian immigrant families from Bethlehem. They were born within two blocks of each other in Usulután, Handal on October 13, 1930, Saca much, much later. Saca accompanied the Handal family at the funeral, as much, perhaps, because of this affinity rather than protocol. Handal studied law at the Universidad Nacional de El Salvador (UES) in 1949, where he became a communist student activist. His politics put him at risk with the military dictatorships of the time, and he went into exile in 1952, living in Chile, Honduras, and Guatemala. He returned in 1961, continued in politics, and became the PCS's general secretary in 1972.

The loss was felt deeply in the far-left bastions of the world. Had Shafik Handal won the 2004 election, he would have been first to don the mantle now claimed by his friend Evo Morales, as "Washington's worst nightmare" (see [NotiSur, 2006-01-06](#)). Long after the fighting against US proxies in his own country was over, he continued to inveigh against the ravages of capitalism on the poor and against his own country's participation in the US war in Iraq. In May, speaking on International Worker's day in Havana, he said, "We consider that Bush's so-called preventive war is terrorism." He also used the term to describe the neoliberal economic model the US has foisted upon the poor of Latin America. He spoke then, as he continued to do until his death, of the double standard by which the US continues to protect the admitted terrorist Luis Posada Carriles and the servile role played by his own government in the case (see [NotiCen, 2001-10-04](#)).

Within the FMLN, the death of its standard-bearer and powerful leader left a momentary vacuum. Rumors quickly spread in the Salvadoran media of infighting for position and control. Coordinator general of the party Medardo Gonzalez sought to quell the rumors, telling reporters that the party is "sufficiently united to understand that precisely under these circumstances we have to close ranks. Unity, unity, and unity is the condition necessary to be able to beat the oligarchy of this country."

Jose Maria Tojiera, rector of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), said it was too soon to guess what would happen within the party. For the moment, he said, they need to concentrate on reclaiming his legacy. But the legacy was never in doubt.

The funeral on Jan. 29 brought thousands of party faithful and sympathizers into the streets, bringing with them some concern for a confrontation with the government. It was an enormous affair, characterized in the press as one "never before seen in the political history of this nation." The coffin was draped with the flags of El Salvador, Palestine, and the FMLN. The national anthem was sung, the throngs carrying placards reading "La lucha continua" (the struggle continues), the famous phrase with which Handal ended his speeches. There was a minute of silence with fists raised in salute.

The fallen leader's widow and companion of 60 years, the Russian-born Tania, told the crowd, "Seeing this red sea of people in the funeral, the efforts will be greater for the Salvadoran left to construct the country that Handal always dreamed of." She also warned, "Those who attacked him all his life are trembling with fear, because the dead are useful, [even] after death." The teaching of Handal No revolutionary opportunity was wasted at this internment. Medardo Gonzalez took the moment to remind and recommit the party, saying, "From now on, the Frente will work collectively and with individual responsibility. The people are first, and we come after. This is a teaching of Handal."

The funeral would no doubt have been a political event anyway, but Tania's and Medardo's remarks were especially crucial in view of legislative elections coming up on March 12. The latest poll, released a week before Handal's death, showed the FMLN gaining significantly on the ruling Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). The ruling party's lead had shrunk from 16 to ten points.

If the dead are indeed useful even after death, this dead leader could yet prevail. Shafik Handal has already prevailed within the party. They have chosen Sanchez Ceren, Handal's closest associate, as head of the party in Congress. The choice snuffs reformist's hopes of moderating the orthodox party line (see NotiCen, 2004-11-11), at least with the elections looming. Campaign coordinators are expecting a big boost from the voters in tribute, strengthening the orthodox faction.

ARENA's hopes in doubt

If events have proved disappointing for reformers in the FMLN, they will be even more so for ARENA if death deals the leftists a victory in the Congress. Saca was looking for a big win that might have given him a legislative majority and freed him from having his agenda thwarted by the FMLN. Saca would have had to gain 16 seats in the 84-member body to reach the needed 43. With current

minor party coalitions in place, the FMLN needed only to stay even at 31 seats to continue to trouble the administration.

Saca is somewhat cramped in what he can say in the remaining days of the campaign, now that Handal is above criticism. ARENA had been linking the FMLN with the maras (gangs), extending the anti-gang rhetoric that in part won them the presidency. Saca has said that the FMLN has a direct relationship with the gangs and that they are "partners in disorder and destabilization." Saca made the charges without presenting any evidence. The campaigns are currently on hold, and with the mood favoring the FMLN, it might prove counterproductive to continue along that line.

The FMLN has been running on issues that could be even more poignant with the passing of the old warrior. The party has been accusing the government of failing to comply with the terms of the Jan. 16, 1992, peace accords and of blocking democracy. They want ARENA-brokered amnesties for those who committed human rights abuses during the war scrapped and have called for a UN human rights relator to be named to the country.

Former FMLN combatants have charged that they still have not gotten the medical attention and pensions due them, both issues seen as Handal-positive. Shafik Handal was close to becoming an anachronism in his own time and country, but he enjoyed close friendships with luminaries of the left elsewhere in Latin America. He was friends with Evo Morales, Cuba's Fidel Castro, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, all of whom sent sincere condolences.

Their sentiments were expressed by Castro, who said, "It is beyond doubt that, in the history of struggle of our peoples, the example of perseverance, of solidity in his revolutionary principles, and of optimism in victory of popular causes that Shafik passes on to us will continue to light the way toward the construction of a better society for all."

-- End --