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## **El Salvador: A Disappointing First Two Years For President Antonio Saca**

*by Mike Leffert*

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El Salvador's President Antonio Saca stepped up to the podium in the legislature early in June to give an account of his first two years in office. Saca has seen a decline in his popularity and a general impression that he has little to show for his tenure. Of greatest popular concern is his failure to make progress on criminality and violence. Two recent polls put violence and insecurity at the top of the list of popular worries.

"People think delinquency has increased despite all the government plans to combat it. Looking at the polls, we note that the people feel insecure, that they fear something could happen, and they demand something be done," said vice rector of the Universidad Centroamericana Jose Simeon Canas (UCA) Rodolfo Cardenal. The UCA's Instituto Universitario de Opinion Publica (IUDOP) conducted one of the polls.

The UCA survey found more than 55% of the population believing the problem has gotten worse. These findings were confirmed a day later when a survey commissioned by La Prensa Grafica said 60.3% of its respondents believe that Saca was not resolving the problem, while 33% thought he was solving it. Official figures indicate that violent acts in general increased by 5% in the first quarter of 2006, bringing the total number of murders in this country of 6.9 million inhabitants to 1,434. The total number of murders for 2005 was 3,812, or 10.4 per day.

Last year under Saca, El Salvador recorded the highest murder rate in the last seven years. Mano dura bluster gone Saca has stepped back considerably from promises of quick fixes to the problem (see NotiCen, 2004-06-24). In the campaign that brought him to the presidency he was quick to blame the Los Angeles-spawned gangs for the violence and proposed continuation of "super-mano-dura" policies for their quick eradication.

But after two years of unabated insecurity, Saca says, "This problem of delinquency must be resolved in time....Today, we have new modalities in crime, I recognize these problems, and we're going to work on them in the coming years." Another of Saca's campaign promises still in need of work is economic improvement.

Citizens are leaving the country in greater numbers than ever to seek their fortunes on the other side of quickly rising steel fences on the US border. Salvadorans left behind have become more dependent on the remittances (remesas) the successful economic refugees send home. An estimated 2.5 million Salvadorans in the US, a third of their country's population, sent back almost US\$3 billion last year. That amounts to 80% of the national budget, or 17% of GDP. These figures are projected to go higher in 2006.

The Saca government and the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) governments that preceded it have cleaved, as has no other country in the region, to US policies. First to pass the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and last to abandon the US in its Iraq war, El Salvador has yet to see a benefit.

The government has no policy to deal with these massive emigrations, said Jesus Aguilar of the Centro de Recursos Centroamericanos (CARCEN). "I think this continues to be a great vacuum; the Salvadoran community [in the US] continues to be seen as some kind of cash machine." Ex-foreign minister and political scientist Hector Dada Hirezi said Saca has not known how to utilize this human capital in the exterior for national development. "We are a transnationalized society, no longer located in any specific territory, but with a population dispersed through several countries of the world," Dada Hirezi said. "Our compatriots in the exterior are thought of simply as senders of remittances and as possible buyers of nostalgic products."

He said this situation "relieves the government of the responsibility to make social policy and fills its mouth with talk of diminishing poverty, which in large part is the result of the exportation of the poor and the remesas. If poverty declines, it is because we have US\$3 billion in remesas." This reliance on remittances combined with a blind faith in CAFTA has produced an administration devoid of economic policy, says Dada Hirezi. "It is enough to look at the pressures from the international financial institutions to see that, if there is no fundamental change, the country will not have better possibilities [of development]."

Dada was making reference to a 2005 Human Development Report that concluded, "Today, as 20 years ago, El Salvador needs a new model of economic growth; a model that allows it to take advantage of potentialities that it has: the highest per capita income in its history and more than 20% of the population living in the richest countries of the world." Dada centers his critique on Saca's democratic instincts, or lack of them. "The great problem of President Saca is that he has no clear idea of the meaning of dialogue in democracy. The fundamental problems, like the wave of emigration, or the wave of crime, have never been put on a table for concerted discussion, hence, the outlook is very bad."

These sentiments are shared even in traditional bastions of Saca's support. Said Maria Elena de Alfaro, president of the Camara de Comercio e Industria de El Salvador (CCIES), "Many young people who have come from the universities and colleges don't find worthwhile employment or a salary that fills their expectations."

These factors weighed on Saca as he faced his congressional audience to give an account of his two years in office. With his credibility damaged among friends and foes, he called for a raise in the minimum wage, promised to do better on crime, and outlined plans for building several hydroelectric plants in 2007. But on the crime and violence issues, the president seemed short on ideas. He called for cooperation from the judicial system and the prosecutors, and he said he would give the police a raise. Nor was there much indication that he intended to sit with the opposition to work out strategies.

He told them, "We all gain from an opposition that, without losing its independence, proposes its national projects and reconciles them with the plans of the executive." The principal opposition, the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), heard no offer from the government to coalesce with them in any meaningful fashion, however, and their deputies sat silently in their Asamblea Legislativa (AL) seats behind placards reading, "Two more years of unemployment," "Two more years of migration," and other similar sentiments.

Other promises from Saca included:

Opening new Fondo Solidario para la Salud (FOSA-LUD) centers.

Setting up nutrition programs for municipalities where there are deficiencies.

Investing more than US\$100 million to reconstruct the hospital system damaged in 2001 earthquakes.

Creating a Sistema Nacional de Salud, as recommended by a reform commission.

Distributing fertilizers to campesinos and providing grain-storage bins.

Cold-storage tanks for dairy farmers.

US\$15 million worth of marketing aid to the coffee sector. Critics and the opposition found the speech superficial. Salvador Sanchez Ceren, FMLN leader, said, "We'd hoped he would talk about a basic fiscal reform because, for the unity he spoke of to exist, it is necessary that those who have the most sacrifice for those who have nothing." More substantively, Ceren said that, on the subjects most citizens care about, crime and the high cost of living, "the president evaded these realities."

Rather than provide an opening for cooperation with the powerful opposition, Saca's speech seemed to alienate them further. "For the people, and for us, the FMLN, we are left with nothing but struggle," said Medardo Gonzalez, coordinador-general of the party. The Centro Democratico (CD) joined in the critique. "We expected important announcements on the subjects of security and the economy, but instead he just appropriated accomplishments that are those of the Asamblea," said Deputy Oscar Kattan. Both he and coreligionist Dada focused on the superficiality of the speech. Saca has seen his approval ratings slide during these two years from a high of nearly 70% to somewhere around 50%. Analysts anticipate a further slide with the announcement on June 9 of a 14% hike in electric rates at this sensitive time for the economy. It is reported that Saca lobbied hard in the AL to unite his forces on the right against an FMLN attempt to freeze rates. The director of the Asociacion Nacional de Agua y Alcantarillado (ANDA) Cesar Funes said an increase in water rates is also on the horizon.

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