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El Salvador Left Chooses Moderate Candidate

by LADB Staff

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Serious about breaking the right wing's relentless grip on the presidency, El Salvador's leftist Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) has picked journalist Mauricio Funes as its presidential candidate. The choice is as remarkable as it is early. El Salvador's elections are more than a full year away, March 2009. Funes is a moderate leftist with no ties to the guerrilla war from which the FMLN evolved into a peacetime political party and with little resemblance to the party's hard-line Marxist leadership.

The Sept. 27 nominating announcement at a rally attended by more than 50,000 people was widely taken as recognition that the party is seriously considering polls and surveys indicating that a large majority of the electorate wants a change from the ARENA party that has been in power since 1984 but is reluctant to follow the dictates of a hard-line leadership still figuratively in jungle fatigues. Analysts had their reservations, nevertheless, pointing out that the choice of traditional FMLN member Salvador Sanchez Ceren as running mate meant Funes was on a short chain. The Sanchez Ceren choice also complicates any rapprochement with the Frente Democratico Revolucionario (FDR) and Cambio Democratico (CD), groups that have splintered from the party.

Leaders of both groups have demanded Sanchez's removal from the ticket. While very much a moderate who favors trade and political ties with the US, Funes advocated a multipolar policy that would turn from the servility of the ARENA government, establish diplomatic relations with Cuba, and improve relations with Venezuela. Vice President Rene Figueroa seized on this to charge that Funes was looking to impose a Chavista model on El Salvador. President Antonio Saca used the statement to claim Venezuela was funding Bolivarian circles in El Salvador "linked closely to the FMLN." Awakening the sleeping Cold War, these charges triggered US security mechanisms that operate in the absence of a coherent Latin America policy and earned El Salvador a first-time mention in the intelligence community's annual threat assessment given Feb. 5 by Director of National Intelligence John. M. McConnell before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

After a lengthy rundown of the US situation in the Middle East regarding Al Qaeda and other threats, McConnell turned eventually to Latin America, where he inveighed against certain governments that have "aligned with Venezuela and Cuba and increasingly Iran on international issues, and advocated measures that directly clash with US initiatives." After roundly taking Venezuela to task for its intent to "continue to seek to unite Latin America, under his [Chavez's] leadership, behind an anti-US radical leftist agenda and look to Cuba as a key ideological ally," McConnell charged, "We expect Chavez to provide generous campaign funding to the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front in El Salvador in its bid to secure the presidency in the 2009 election."

Workhorse candidate heads north Funes has been profiled in the press as a fine journalist but not much of a politician. He is faulted for a severe charisma deficit and for not even being a member

of the party that chose him. Yet, he surprised many by getting immediately to work, despite the year and a half he has before the election. He has been credited with having "achieved more in the two months since he was designated...than previous FMLN candidates managed in their whole campaigns." He has already been to the US, met several members of Congress, and even, on Dec. 19, paid a visit to Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon.

The visit was interpreted as Funes' determination to present the FMLN as a reformed party. The effort could be said to have failed if the McConnell testimony is the criterion, but the US administration, which will be gone before the Salvadoran election, was not the target audience. It was, said reports, the Salvadoran diaspora, the 2.3 million expatriates who sent home US\$3.7 billion last year. These people, 20% of their country's population, have backed ARENA in the past. But analysts say that support, for the most part, is because they are under threat of retaliation in the form of obstructed remittances or deportation if they were to support the FMLN. Funes knows some of these people, having covered them as a journalist. He said that Saca was behind the threats. "This campaign of fear was mainly directed at Salvadorans who live here in the United States because, even though they don't have the right to vote, they have enormous influence on their families back home," said Funes. "So we want to reach those people to allay their fear and gain their trust." He said under Saca deportations rose from 7,000 in 2005 to 14,000 in 2006 to 20,000 in 2007, all despite Temporary Protected Status (TPS) that has been the subject of several discussions between Saca and Bush.

Funes has approached the business communities both in El Salvador and in the US, with some reported success. Salvadoran business people in the US have told their national media they thought Funes represented a real alternative to ARENA. In El Salvador, Funes has met with prominent members of the private sector and assured them he would not reverse dollarization nor would he seek to pull out of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), two initiatives associated with the FMLN. He told them, "We are talking about a change of vision. We are not talking about a radical change of system." This commitment comes at a time when it is Saca who has had to deal with the negative effects of these two economic measures. It was Saca who promised to intercede between the private sector and social groups to ameliorate the effects of economic policy on the poor majorities of the country with a program called Alliance for the Family (Alianza por la Familia).

Funes said he would approach the problem with a broad national debate and crackdown on tax evasion and contraband. He would raise more money for social programs and improve transparency and institutional oversight. He has said he would not increase taxes and would spell out "clear economic rules to encourage investment." He said this would amount to a genuine "fiscal social pact," and not "populist engineering" that characterizes Alliance for the Family. He accused Saca of coming up with that concept to appease the groundswell of resistance to a new fuel tax introduced Dec. 1. The tax adds US\$.10 to a gallon of gasoline and would be used to subsidize public transport to avoid fare increases.

The Alliance package is actually broader than that. It contains 19 separate measures to improve maternity benefits, control excessive interest charged by credit-card companies, hire some 3,000 teachers, eliminate tuition at secondary schools, and reduce monthly phone bills, all at an estimated cost to the state of US\$53.5 million. For the time being, Funes seems to have the authority to make

these commitments to Salvadorans abroad, leaving some to speculate that his chain is a bit longer than first thought. ARENA has taken the change of course seriously in more ways than just pulling out moth-eaten anti-communist banners and pressing the US to restart the Cold War. In February, still early by Salvadoran custom, it announced its shortlist for the 2009 election. The candidate will be one of five, including Vice President Ana Escobar, former foreign minister Francisco Lainez, former police chief Rodrigo Avila, former presidential legal adviser Luis Rodriguez, and businessman Eduardo Barrientos. These are the survivors of a process underway since Jan. 21, and further paring will reduce the list to three, who will be presented to the party for an internal vote March 15.

ARENA may have been spurred to action by a December poll indicating the FMLN would win if the election were held that day. While there was plenty of reason to downplay a poll this early, with a named candidate against a hypothetical one, analysts were moved by the size of the lead, 34.5% versus 27%, a highly significant reversal for a party that has never lost a presidential election confronting one that has never won one. It is also the case in El Salvador that many vote for a party irrespective of candidate. Another poll finding of interest to analysts was that, even though there remains a large undecided population, 28.8%, the smaller parties are attracting less support than normal. That means that ARENA's traditional ally, the Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PCN), with just 2.3%, may not be the help it usually is and that the CD and FDR are less of a concern to the Frente.

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