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Salvadoran Right Unraveling As It Attempts To Fight U.S.'s Battles On Two Fronts

by LADB Staff

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El Salvador has signed up for another tour of duty as principal US ally in Latin America, and now Central America's smallest country has consented to fight on two fronts. Another 280 Salvadoran troops are set to become the tenth contingent to set off for Iraq. Closer to home, El Salvador will play proxy in the US battle for hegemony against Venezuela and its president, Hugo Chavez. The latest iteration of the Cuscatlan battalion will be scaled down by a hundred troops. The ninth wave had 380. Salvadoran President Antonio Saca said that the reduction was a UN decision and that "the time will come to make an almost total troop reduction."

Saca has been beset by disagreement with his country's being the sole Latin American participant in the US Iraq war, and the opposition Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) lost no time in objecting to this fresh show of fealty to the north. "You can't continue to be complacent and continue to line up with the occupation policies of the US, because the price the country has paid for it is high," said FMLN Deputy Humberto Centano after the Congress passed on this contingent and another to follow before December 2008. These forays, largely symbolic for the "coalition" narrative of the US occupation in Iraq, have come at a cost of five dead and 20 or more wounded Salvadoran soldiers since the first wave set out in August 2003 (see NotiCen, 2003-07-10, 2004-03-18, 2004-04-22, 2004-08-19 and 2007-02-01). The deaths and injuries have come as Salvadoran officials have sought to characterize the troops not as combatants but as reconstruction workers. That description has failed to appease detractors, as the failures to reconstruct the destroyed Iraqi infrastructure have become legendary.

In December, chief of Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) Adm. James Stavrides presented the Salvadoran army a plaque in recognition of the country's contribution, while ex-chief of the Salvadoran Army Gen. Otto Alejandro Romero managed to open old wounds at home by recognizing that "the US has historically been our unconditional ally, and it is fitting to recognize the support they provided us during the struggle against international communism." The sentiment for deployment was aided not only by this convoluted rendition of a recent history that cost El Salvador some 70,000 civilian lives and another 10,000 citizens disappeared but also by a dose of evangelical fervor. "If I go there, it is because the Lord sends me," said 20-year veteran Sgt. Pedro Ramos. Ramos spoke of the reconstruction aspects of the mission and expressed confidence that "he [God] takes me there, and he will bring me back."

The second front on which the US is seeking Salvadoran support is the war, so far of words, for hemispheric influence with Venezuela. The US's most recent verbal salvo against the Chavez government was in the form of an item in the intelligence community's annual world threat assessment, wherein Director of National Intelligence John M. McConnell surmised, "We expect Chavez to provide generous campaign funding" to the FMLN (see NotiCen, 2008-02-07). This time, President Saca was somewhat less eager to get involved, interested as he was in being on

good terms with the only provider of oil-price relief, Chavez's Petrocaribe program (see NotiCen, 2006-03-30). He nevertheless played his part, recalling his representative Rafael Hernandez for consultations, to "learn first hand about this subject." Saca told the media, "Any kind of interference of a government like that of Venezuela in Salvadoran internal politics is unacceptable."

Hernandez's recall was the best Saca could do in the way of diplomatic symbolism, since he has no ambassador in Caracas. The countries do not have full normal diplomatic relations. But, even at that diplomatic level, Salvadoran Foreign Relations Minister Marisol Argueta announced that the Hernandez recall "is not necessarily a prior step toward the rupture of diplomatic relations. It is simply a recourse that is employed in cases where some type of controversy could exist or information is required to complement and shape a complete and integral idea." In answer to questions from a bemused media, Argueta translated that to mean that "tension with the government of Venezuela does not exist." Saca seemed out on a limb in succeeding days as he ordered an investigation into what he called an impasse between the countries. It was an impasse because a substantive accusation was never made. McConnell used his annual threat message to the US Congress only to express an unsubstantiated expectation of funding. Saca acknowledged the lack of substance but buried the observation in a polemic on sovereignty. "I say and want to repeat, this is about a fact that we must prove, that we have ordered an investigation of," he said, "because definitely, for another country to intrude into our country favoring one political party puts in risk democracy and sovereignty." Despite the lack of an ambassador to the South American country, Saca said that his country maintains "good relations with Venezuela" and that "the investigations and this approach...will allow us to resolve this impasse and this accusation that has been issued by North American intelligence."

President Chavez played the suggestion that the FMLN needs his money for all it was worth as a cannonade in the verbal war. "This is a lie," he said. "We don't need it and they don't need it. If there is one party, solid, well-organized, on this continent, among many others, it is called the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional." The FMLN denied the suggestion of Venezuelan interference. The party's presidential candidate Mauricio Funes told reporters, "The FMLN is going to fund its campaign with its own funds. It is not going to receive any help from the Venezuelan government or from any government." Funes said the US statement had "no credibility" and minimized its importance, noting, "They are just some lines of a report that has no more than 27 words, where the reference to the FMLN is something marginal." But if the statement had no credibility, the Archbishop of San Salvador Fernando Saenz Lacalle tried to lend it some, telling the country, "Everybody in the country must be vigilant so the electoral process is clean, without external interferences." The archconservative (Opus Dei) prelate then called upon the FMLN to "have no binding relationship of any kind with the Venezuelan government." He added for effect, "I don't make any call upon Chavez because he doesn't listen to bishops." Funes was unwilling to accept the archbishop's framing of the situation.

With regard to external interference, he insisted on his own definitions. While he said that his party would receive nothing from Chavez, he left open the probability of support from Salvadorans living outside the country, because that is legal. He also defended the social aid the Venezuelan government has extended throughout Latin America. ARENA making it true Meanwhile, the ruling Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) took advantage of what could be termed US

interference in the country's internal affairs to raise the prospect of Venezuelan interference to the status of a fact. Said the party's vice president for ideology Rene Figueroa, "It is presumed that Hugo Chavez is sending money to the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional to finance its campaign. The message for Chavez Frias, the message for Fidel Castro, and the message for Mauricio Funes is that they are going to keep waiting, because the next president is here." Figueroa was speaking at the presentation of the group of five precandidates from which a final one will be chosen to face Funes in the March 2009 election.

Ideology chief Figueroa presented the funding allegation knowing well that it was nothing more than an assumption. Funes has blanketed the media with the information concerning the statement and just the day before had been on national radio to tell the electorate, "The document does not say, 'We have an intelligence report where there are accounts that we have investigated,' or, 'There are movements that we have followed,' or, 'We don't know what the sources are and whether they are worthy of belief.'" A journalist, Funes was careful to quote the report, to spell out that it only says, "'We expect.' It does not say, 'We are certain, we have evidence, we have documents.' It is not a warning." But Funes was up against a concerted strategy to make the statement, if not true, at least reasonable.

When Saca was in Washington, he told reporters that the document actually did "specify plans [by the Chavez government] to finance the electoral campaign of the FMLN," and he also provided a possible mechanism. He suggested the money would be moved through the FMLN-led towns that are associated with the Petrocaribe provision of fuel. These are jurisdictions where local governments have sidestepped the central government to secure gasoline and fuels on favorable terms directly from Venezuela. Saca's assertions had Funes somewhat on the defensive but also gave him an opportunity to provide some political perspective of his own. He called it "irresponsible of the president of the republic to start investigations around an intelligence report that hasn't even been approved in the first place. It is not an official report, it has been presented to the Senate. The Senate is going to start to discuss it."

Further shaping the FMLN perspective, the FMLN's Humberto Centeno said ARENA was using the US distortion as part of "a campaign of fear" that the ruling party "always" trots out prior to elections. "Before, it was Cuba. El Salvador was going to be the same as Cuba if the FMLN won, and now it is to Chavezize the campaign." Other tactics included the ARENA use of old photos of deceased former FMLN guerrilla leader Shafik Handel in full camouflage attire, rifle in hand. The fate of the country would be settled around jungle campfires was the implication. The tactic ARENA "always" uses may have been touched with the blush of terror this time around because, hypothesized Chavez, "It looks like the Farabundo Marti is winning." Early as it is in the process, and given that the other side has not yet even chosen its candidate, Chavez may be proved wrong. But at the moment analysts and commentators from the popular sectors have looked favorably on the Funes candidacy and the change from revolutionary dogma it is designed to represent.

With pre-emptive trips to US legislators and a string of strategic meetings with his compatriots abroad, Funes is beginning to gain a reputation for resolving issues before they become problems. He has taken on this issue of foreign funding with the same focused decisiveness. On Feb. 12 he asked the Asamblea Legislativa (AL) to approve reforms that would permit official audits of all

funds handled by the campaigns. He was actually seeking to reactivate a similar petition the FMLN made last year, and he was accompanied by a phalanx of his party's deputies. The move has already been made public to good effect in countering the din raised over the US accusation. Funes has reframed the issue as an attempt by ARENA to oppose legislation aimed at electoral transparency.

Saca was put in the position of publicly defending his party's "open" finances but being unwilling to support the proposed reforms. Against this hesitancy, Funes cut the more impressive figure standing before reporters declaring the party with nothing to hide was the one to present the reforms, which he said "seek to design a mechanism to determine the origin and destination of the resources corresponding to electoral spending." The reforms would also, he said, regulate "the process of presentation of accounts of the political parties regarding the amount, origin, and destination of funds used for electoral expenditures." Crisis on the right Distant rumblings of backfire are beginning to be heard in the international media for ARENA's adoption of a Goebbels-style "big-lie" strategy.

The German news agency DPA has run an analysis paraphrasing the Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez to the effect that "the Salvadoran right is in its labyrinth. A crisis of leadership and identity is demolishing the heretofore impregnable Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, with its 19 years in power and ultrarightist origins." The analysis goes on to fault ARENA's late arrival to the looming electoral battle. Funes is well on his way, and the ruling party has not even chosen its candidate. If things go as planned, the party will not have its standard-bearer on the field until mid-March. The FMLN came out early and secured a significant advantage. Political scientist Roberto Rubio of the Fundacion Nacional para el Desarrollo (FUNDE) said that, within the party, "the balances have been broken" the carefully crafted relationships between the presidency, the party directorate (COENA), and the providers of capital, the most powerful individuals in the private sector.

The disequilibrium has resulted in part from the influx of foreign capital, disarticulating the traditional local stronghold. For instance, explained Rubio, the Salvadoran banking sector no longer exists. It has been absorbed by transnationals who are not interested in concentrating capital to establish a role in political decision making as local bankers were (see NotiCen, 2006-12-14). A result has been the accumulation of power in the presidency, and in the person of the president, giving the administrators an independence they did not have before.

New power loci have cropped up giving rise to a leadership crisis that most recently saw the ouster of the founding core of ARENA. One consequence of this is that ARENA's most likely candidate to face Funes, the powerful business leader Roberto Murray Meza, declined to run. These realignments could leave ARENA unrecognizable as the party of the extreme right and of its founder, Roberto D'Aubuisson, the infamous death-squad leader during the 1980-1992 civil war. With the traditional mix of ultraright politicians, military officers, and neoliberal business leaders upset, the party is set to take on a very different cast. Vice President Ana Escobar, on the short list of presidential candidates, has already spoken of a party of "inclusion" that will bring in people of the left. At the head of the short list is former police chief Rodrigo Avila, who has brazenly attacked neoliberalism, the economic foundation of the party's political project.

Much to the consternation of the business community, the hand that feeds them all, he has said, "I believe in the free market, but the neoliberal posture only benefits the rich, not the poor or the middle classes." The statement shook political analysts. Longtime commentator Juan Jose Dalton noted that, in the not-so-distant past, a candidate would have been "defenestrated" for such a remark. But this is now, and Avila pressed his point. "It is undeniable that the historical project of ARENA must be renovated," he said. For Rubio, this is not a sign of party renewal. "ARENA is doing the same thing that formerly lost the FMLN elections problems of candidates, strategy, and division, with less and less time to resolve the problematic issues."

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