

4-24-2008

Discontent On El Salvador's Right As Arena Picks Police Chief Avila To Succeed President Saca

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Discontent On El Salvador's Right As Arena Picks Police Chief Avila To Succeed President Saca." (2008).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9602>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Discontent On El Salvador's Right As Arena Picks Police Chief Avila To Succeed President Saca

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: El Salvador

Published: 2008-04-24

After lagging behind the opposition for five months, El Salvador's ruling party, the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), at last chose a presidential candidate on March 15. A poll, the first to sample voter sentiments ahead of the March 15, 2009, elections, found the ARENA candidate, Rodrigo Avila, trailing Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) candidate Mauricio Funes 28.3% to 20.7%. The Prensa Grafica poll was followed a day later by one done for the nation's largest newspaper, El Diario de Hoy, confirming the findings, with Funes leading 26.8% to 19.7%. With more than a third of those intending to vote still undecided, the numbers have been interpreted to be less significant as predictors than as indicators of deep discontent with ARENA and President Antonio Saca. The FMLN has never elected a president; the right-wing ARENA has won the last four presidential elections. The leftist party is confident this time.

Spokesman Sigfredo Reyes dismissed the Avila nomination as "more of the same," representing continuity with the Saca regime. He said the ARENA nomination process was a pantomime, a "reality show" lacking transparency. In so saying, the FMLN spokesman lined up with Saca's Vice President Ana Vilma de Escobar, who had charged that party bosses, including Saca, had urged members "not to vote for a woman." She had complained that members of the party's Consejo Ejecutivo Nacional (COENA), including Saca's cousin Herbert Saca and the party director of San Salvador department Adolfo Torrez, had conspired to draw support away from her and throw it to Avila.

Going into the nomination, at least one poll, that of La Prensa Grafica, had shown de Escobar with a clear lead, but, in the voting, she came up with just 2% of the 2,093 votes of the party representatives. Despite denials of undue influence from COENA, at least three local officials complained of arm-twisting. Avila swept all 14 departments and eight national sectors, leaving de Escobar in third place. In second, with 15% of the vote, was Saca's legal advisor Luis Mario Rodriguez, who had no complaints about the process. The party has been described as being in crisis, owing to the probability of a first-ever loss of the presidency and to the complaints, not only from de Escobar but from several other aspirants, and even from ex-presidents Armando Calderon Sol (1994-1999), Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994), and Francisco Flores (1999-2004).

Amid charges of fraud and manipulation, viable candidates like businessman Roberto Murray Meza, Security Minister Rene Figueroa, and former foreign minister Francisco Lainez were turned away, while Avila, ex-chief of the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC), was abruptly chosen late in the process. He had not even entered the race until January 2008. Attila the moderate ARENA, however, is as much about the power of the far right as it is about democracy, and Avila, nicknamed "Attila," accepted his nomination with the statement that "the legacy of Maj. Roberto d'Aubuisson and the valiant men who followed him inspire me." ARENA founder d'Aubuisson is famed and lauded for the death squads he headed during the civil war (1980-1992). As PNC chief in the era of the draconian Mano

Dura and Ley de la Mano Superdura (see NotiCen, 2007-01-11, 2007-02-15 and 2007-06-14), Avila saw his country become one of the most dangerous in the world, failing miserably, but violently, against common crime, organized crime, the international youth gangs Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha, and narco-traffickers.

In the face of all this, Attila the candidate is running as a moderate. In doing so, he acknowledges that the strength of his opponent, Funes, lies in his dismissal of hard-line FMLN discourse in favor of a social-democratic political stance (see NotiCen, 2008-02-14). Avila is running under the motto "Pais mas justo, progreso con equidad" (A more just country, progress with equity). This is a reworking of the ARENA slogan "Paz, progreso, libertad" (Peace, progress, and liberty). Carrying the make-over further, Avila has intimated he might as president forgo the mano dura in favor of social rehabilitation. He said his campaign would rest on five principles: order and discipline, compromise, solidarity, subsidiarity, and innovation and creativity. Some analysts have written that these concepts are without meaning and lead to the conclusion that Avila has no real plan for governance. This lack is especially worrisome to the ARENA business sector, which did not support his candidacy.

Bank restructuring to extend credit

Avila did say later in April that his emphasis on a "more just" society would entail restructuring the central bank (Banco Central) to vitalize the micro-, small and medium-sized business sectors, as well as the agricultural sector. He spoke of creating a Banca Solidaria to attend to these sections of the national economy, from which come most jobs in the country. "We will inject funds into the solidarity bank to make the sectoral policies work that we, as the government, promote." This, he said, "will improve even more the quality of life of the population." Along with the Banca Solidaria would come a restructuring of the Banco Hipotecario (BH) and the Banco de Fomento Agropecuario (BFA). "We need to make the land produce more, we need to invest more in livestock, but sometimes it is difficult to have access to credit for the agro and other productive sectors." Along with eased credit would come a program to lease some 3,500 manzanas (1 manzana = 7,025.79 square meters) of idle land to be put to agriculture. He promised an "agricultural decade" that would also provide improved seed and fertilizers, along with technological innovations and the construction of 37,000 silos to store grains and avoid losses from spoilage that are part of every harvest. These, said Avila, are real proposals, unlike those of the FMLN. "We cannot allow them to continue to trick the people," he said in reference to the party's recent gains in popular support. "The FMLN has opposed everything," said Avila. "It is irresponsible and populist. We will make concrete and real proposals."

While claiming to have created a "new right" within ARENA, Avila counts no fewer than seven of the party's ultra-rightist founders among his relatives. At the same time that the new right seeks to meet its main adversary in the political center, it is reaching rightward for coalition partners. The Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PCN) has been mentioned as the possible supplier of a running mate. PCN secretary-general Ciro Cruz Zepeda has called for a grand alliance against the FMLN, citing Nicaragua's fractured right, which opened the door to the re-election of President Daniel Ortega, as the regional cautionary tale.

Avila lent credibility to the possibility of a non-ARENA name on the ticket on April 20 when asked by a reporter if he would consider it. "Yes," he told Prensa Grafica, "not a member at this moment, but for me, this person would have to put on the ARENA jacket, because he would have to share the more-just vision of the country that we have. The party is open, but I'd say the important thing is that this person proudly wears the colors, even though he hadn't been in the party before."

Avila went on to explain that such a candidate would have to share his vision of justice, freedom, democracy, and development but that "COENA would be important as an entity of consultation and opinion" in the choice. He gave the impression that the discussion was not entirely hypothetical and that there was a list of people who might fit the description. "Some are not public figures, others could be, but this is not the time to give their names," he said. Avila said that a coalition ticket "is something that we (COENA) have not yet analyzed and that such a move would need the approval of the party general assembly.

Avila is 43 years of age, a graduate in engineering from North Carolina State University. He attended the FBI Academy and studied police administration at Texas A&M. He was PNC chief from 1994 to 1999 and later elected to the legislature, where he served as deputy delegation chief from 2000 to 2003. He was Saca's deputy security minister until returning to the job of police chief in 2006.

-- End --