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El Salvador's Leftist Presidential Candidate Leads in Polls

by LADB Staff

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The latest polls in El Salvador continue to bear out the wisdom of the party of the left, Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), in choosing a presidential candidate who is not a member of the party. Mario Funes, a CNN journalist, has had a comfortable lead for months against his major opponent, former police chief Rodrigo Avila of the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). The party of the right has never lost a presidential election since 1989. But the contest is far from over. The 16-point lead Funes had in May has been clipped (see NotiCen, 2008-04-24).

El Salvador could yet remain the last Central American country with a right-wing leader at the helm. A new Cid-Gallup poll showed that, if the election were held during the survey period, Aug. 13-17, Funes would still win in a first round, with no need for a runoff. Another poll released Aug. 22 by Prensa Grafica and its in-house pollster LPG-Datos gave the FMLN 38.6% in voter preference and 29% to ARENA. LPG-Datos had more encouraging numbers for the FMLN; in municipal and legislative elections, 40.6% believe FMLN would win against all other parties. The local elections will take place Jan. 18, the presidential on March 15.

The new figures become better for Funes once they are spruced up a bit. When only the "valid vote or effective vote" is counted, his advantage jumps to 13.6%. He would get 53.5% and Avila would get 39.9%. According to the official CID-Gallup explanation of those terms, "Upon eliminating those interviewees who refused to state for whom they would vote or who claim to be undecided," Funes "obtains more than the half the valid votes, with which he would have triumphed in the first round."

Funes is also the country's most popular person, according to the tallies. He gets 55% favorable opinions, followed by President Antonio Saca with 45% and Avila with 44%. Funes seems to be winning with the combination of a very familiar face and a strategy of departure from the politics of fear. "We can defeat poverty and hunger; we can defeat unemployment; we can defeat crime and corruption; we can build national unity. Even more, we can defeat fear and allow ourselves the right to be happy," he said.

Cheerful, uplifting campaigns are not what have brought home the bacon for ARENA, however. Just prior to the release of the new figures, Saca warned the country that the FMLN was involved in "very serious crimes" and added that it has links to the Colombia guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) into the bargain. This last is not new (see NotiCen, 2008-06-05). The occasion of this latest accusation was the second Americas Competitiveness Forum held in Atlanta.

Among those present as he leveled the charge was President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia. Reaching even deeper into the bag of political dogmas of proven value, Saca charged that the FMLN's freshly minted political program is communist, "a work of the communist wing." He said of the governing plan that Funes had just unveiled, "This is not a plan of government of a candidate who claims to

have come to a party to change it to a centrist mentality from communist experiments that have already failed throughout the world and still cause much damage in Latin America."

New, progressive, post-Marxist even

Funes revealed the plan at the FMLN's 24th national convention. He presented his program to some 8,000 party members at the Centro Internacional de Ferias y Convenciones in San Salvador and then submitted it for passage by 584 party delegates. Funes said his program has three fundamental objectives: to lead the country out of crisis, to chart a path to development, and to build and consolidate democracy and the state of law. He promised a government of total transparency that would contribute to strengthening Central American integration. He would maintain the country's place in the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), but would seek to amend it if necessary. He would also maintain the dollarization of the economy but would implement measures to improve the local economy.

In delivering the plan, Funes defined himself. He told his audience that, during his 21 years as a journalist, he had developed a close and direct relationship with "the soul of the people" and that he "could no longer continue commenting on the drama El Salvador is experiencing, indifferent to the ruinous and destructive direction the country is taking." So he turned to politics, he said, because only politics would allow him to struggle for change.

Funes said his plan of government is based on "a change that implies welfare and security for families, stability for workers, confidence for entrepreneurs, and opportunities for the return of Salvadorans who have emigrated." He would continue a policy of trade agreements, and mentioned specifically Europe with which the isthmus is currently in negotiations (see NotiCen, 2008-08-07) India, and China. He would implement policies to fund and guarantee pensions and to encourage education in science and technology. Gender equality would be fundamental to his program. None of this seemed particularly communistic, so it might have been Funes' intentions toward Cuba that raised Saca's hackles.

Funes said he would open diplomatic relations with the island. "We are going to open diplomatic relations with our Cuban brothers and sisters and their government," he said. "We cannot be the only government of Latin America that for penurious interests and lack of strategic developmental and foreign policy does not have relations with Cuba." In the US, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama and Republican candidate John McCain have pledged to continue blockading Cuba, although the US is almost entirely isolated on the matter in the hemisphere.

Funes' running mate is Salvador Sanchez Ceren, an FMLN original. He was a member of the Comandancia General when the party was the guerrilla organization that fought a US-backed Army to a negotiated settlement in 1992. Funes said this governing plan is the product of ten months of work that included consultations with broad sectors of society and with citizens in the diaspora. Included in the consultations was an Open Social Dialogue exercise that brought militants, sympathizers, and people with no party affiliation to talk with each other at 31 tables, each on a separate subject. Saca's spirited defense of the status quo notwithstanding, ongoing news of

Funes' lead and his plans for changing and governing the country have left ARENA candidate Avila scrambling for something to run on.

After the announcement of the plan, ARENA ran a statement paid for as an ad in the newspapers trumpeting Avila's intention to preside over the "installation of the first citizen government in El Salvador." He would integrate into his government the "most able people, with high spirit of service and profound democratic values." "This way," says Avila in the statement, "in 2009 we are going to chose between two paths: that of a partisan, dogmatic, and authoritarian government of the FMLN, or for the first citizen government in the history of El Salvador." The foregoing epithets notwithstanding, Avila pledged to put an end, "once and for all, to the sterile confrontation of left against right."

Avila is hampered in the campaign by what has been referred to in the media as the government's "privatization mania," whereby banks, the pension system, electric and communications utilities, all have been privatized, to the perceived detriment of a population that might support renationalizations. His call for an end to right-left confrontation has been pre-empted. In its choice of Funes, the FMLN has pretty much done that.

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