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## **El Salvador Foreign Minister Invites U.S. To Interfere In Presidential Election**

by LADB Staff

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In a departure from the customary complaints from the region about the US interfering in regional affairs, El Salvador's Minister of Foreign Relations Marisol Argueta de Barillas has made a pitch for the US to get involved in Salvadoran elections, set for March 15, 2009. The plea comes as her party, which has never lost a presidential election, finds itself struggling behind a resurgent left in the race to govern Central America's last unequivocally pro-US country.

The Cold War rhetoric and appeal to the communist threat of Argueta's Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) has not been working this time around, and a newly modernized Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) appears to have successfully turned the page on its traditional revolutionary discourse by fielding a presidential candidate it has been courting for years, Mauricio Funes, who was not even a party member (see NotiCen, 2003-06-05, 2008-02-07). With that as context, the minister took advantage of an appearance at the conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where the Cold War argument still finds an audience, to exhort, "The United States must involve itself more in the region, in particular putting greater attention to what is happening in El Salvador and the resulting geopolitical and national consequences, since the enemies are grouping together and strengthening." She went on, "The United States must be vigilant that El Salvador continue on the path of liberty, the stronghold of the law."

### *The ARENA bulwark against anti-Americanism*

Argueta then took a directly partisan turn to warn the assembly that the FMLN was part of an anti-democratic wave determined "to damage the US in the region and in the world." She wanted them to know that "The US must take very seriously the risks and threats to its security [that would be posed by] the loss of El Salvador" and its addition to the "growing number of anti-American governments in its own backyard." But those attending the AEI forum, *The Perils of Populism: Hot Spots in Latin America*, were already familiar with the concept.

One of the organizers was Roger Noriega, former assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs in the administration of US President George W. Bush. As the shoot-from-the-hip manager of a Latin America policy that resulted in a massive loss of US influence and prestige in the hemisphere, Noriega reportedly had threatened to impede the flow of remittances to El Salvador if the FMLN won in 2004 and called upon Salvadorans directly to vote for a candidate "who shares our vision and our values" (see NotiCen, 2004-03-25). Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO) was also reported to have threatened remittances.

The problem with all this is that, in addition to being at least somewhat unseemly, Argueta's speech may have been illegal. The foreign minister had come to the US in an official capacity to meet with

US government, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and Organization of American States (OAS) officials. As such, she was constrained from getting involved in partisan politicking, which, from the point of view of the FMLN and other parties, this was. An FMLN press release said, "It is damnable that the minister, in an extreme act of outrage against the national dignity, asks a foreign country to safeguard El Salvador's continuation on the path of freedom."

The party was incensed that as an ARENA surrogate Argueta went even farther beyond the pale in calling the FMLN a "remnant" of the guerrilla movement and charging that "some members of its leadership have been very close to [Basque separatist group] ETA and the Colombian guerrilla group FARC [Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia]." Candidate Funes leapt into the fray, demanding a congressional hearing to compel Argueta to explain her behavior on foreign soil. "The minister has no right to go and say all that she said, with the manifest intent that the US government intervene in the internal affairs of El Salvador," he said, adding that the behavior violates the Constitution.

The issue seems to have struck a chord with the public, as the opposition parties pick up and amplify comments moving ever closer to an outright charge of treason. Said FMLN spokesman Sigfrido Reyes, the words of the minister "seriously compromise the sovereignty and independence of the republic" and "injure the national dignity and cause severe damage to foreign relations." The media reported these statements under headlines reading, "Salvadoran chancellor requests USA intervention in elections."

The most recent polls show the FMLN maintaining a wide lead, but it is difficult to tease out the effect of the minister's call for intervention. A Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) poll had Funes leading ARENA's Rodrigo Avila 44.9% to 30%, while 58.8% of those intending to vote said ARENA should not continue to govern, and 33.4% said they should.

A more immediate problem for the ruling party and President Antonio Saca is the XVIII Cumbre de Jefes de Estado y de Gobierno de Iberoamerica. Saca personally invited some of those very leaders his foreign minister just called "the enemies that are grouping together and strengthening." Reyes, who is also an FMLN deputy, made the most of the awkwardness of the situation. "This puts in serious risk the credibility of this government and more than anything compromises the realization of the summit," he said, "which is supposed to be a conclave where the Ibero-American nations come to converse, to seek solutions, and in this particular case to deal with the subject of youth and development."

On the basis of the constitutional issues Argueta's statement brings up, Reyes has called for other smaller parties to help in seeking a formal congressional interpellation, a constitutional mechanism "to receive explanations of the ministers with respect to their performances in matters of public interest." A well-supported spectacle of this kind would go a long way toward sealing the electoral deal next March. The idea has received support from Hector Dada, deputy of Cambio Democratico (CD) and former chancellor, and Orlando Arevalo of the Partido de Conciliacion Nacional (PCN). Both are members of the congressional Foreign Relations Committee and have expressed a disposition to examine the matter in the light of Article 218 of the Constitution, which states that "officials and public employees are at the service of the state and not of a particular political sector,"

and therefore they "cannot assert [their own values] from their positions to make partisan policy." A minister found in violation of this provision can be deposed.

### *The US has its ways*

An intervention of the kind Argueta recommended on the part of the US is unlikely in the extreme. The government to which she appealed will not be in power in March 2009, and, US history in the region notwithstanding, the Bush government is in no position to interfere dramatically in its waning months. But history also demands vigilance, and so FMLN vice presidential candidate Salvador Sanchez Ceren is taking precautions. He has called Saca and his party "desperate" and asked for international observation of the political scene.

In the Dominican Republic on Oct. 8 for a conference, he asked for help, requesting that his hosts come to El Salvador to join the OAS and other observers. But there are other ways the US can make its presence known in a manner relevant to Salvadoran domestic policy and the politics that drive it. For instance, the *mano dura* method of dealing with gang activity in the country has been widely repudiated by experts round the world. It has been counterproductive and has led to avoidable violence and death among the nation's youth (see NotiCen, 2007-01-11). Yet, the policy is also associated with Saca's ARENA government and has been effective as a means of focusing blame for many of the social and economic ills that plague El Salvador (see NotiCen, 2007-06-14).

On Oct. 14 the US signed an agreement with El Salvador to enable the continuation of these same policies, providing US\$2.6 million to do it. Minister of Public Security and Justice Rene Figueroa signed the letter of understanding with US Ambassador Charles Glazer. Figueroa called the arrangement "another significant step to consolidate a regional anti-gang strategy." In keeping with the political line on continuing the policies, Glazer said, "extortion and violence related to the gangs discourages investment, damages economic growth, and causes honest, hardworking Salvadorans to emigrate." That is quite a lot for the gangsters to be responsible for, and more than most analysts would credit them with.

The government's own statistics tell much of the story of the effectiveness of the policies. Claiming 13,500 gang members in the country, the record shows that 5,700 of them, including 95% of the leadership, are in prison, and yet crime continues to rise. Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) director Jose Luis Tobar says the two rival gangs Mara Salvatrucha (MS-130) and La 18 account for between 60% and 70% of all crime in the country. The money will be available under the agreement for just one year. In apparent preparation for a change in governmental philosophy after the election, Glazer took the opportunity at the signing to urge the Saca administration to hurry along with a US request to legalize telephone surveillance in the country and to renew an extradition treaty.

To the extent that US aid in support of this policy represents interference, the agreement contradicts a Glazer statement to the effect that there would be no such involvement. In June, Glazer admitted to intervention in the 2004 election. A June press release from the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) noted, "When asked directly if the US government had intervened in the 2004 presidential elections on behalf of the Nationalist Republican Alliance Party (ARENA), Glazer replied in the affirmative. When asked if such intervention would occur again, he said 'no.'"

According to an In These Times article, US Embassy public affairs counsel Robert Riley later denied Glazer acknowledged intervention, but he did admit that "certain American officials made public comments in the context of the 2004 Salvadoran elections."

More to the current point, however, Riley told the magazine that Glazer "has stated numerous times publicly, the US government will not take sides in the upcoming Salvadoran elections."

-- End --