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El Salvador Left Gains In Local Elections, But Loses San Salvador And Fails To Meet Poll Predictions

by LADB Staff

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El Salvador's everything-but-presidential elections went off smoothly Jan. 18. The Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) fared well in the congress, gaining five seats and once again becoming the major party in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL), but losing the mayoralty of the capital city, San Salvador, for the first time in 12 years. Overall, the FMLN gained significantly over its rightist rival, the ruling Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), by a margin of 42.83% to 38.46%. This is somewhat narrower than the most recent polls predicted, but sufficient in the eyes of many analysts to portend a first-ever victory in the presidential elections scheduled for March 15. The victory in the capital was unequivocally a plum for the right, but the left insisted it was a plum to be taken with a grain of salt. Defeated candidate and outgoing mayor Violeta Menjivar conceded with 68% of the vote counted and the 50%-47% trend clearly in challenger Norman Quijano's favor. But she did not concede much, accusing ARENA of bussing in voters from outside the capital. "It's legal, but illegitimate, the intense and massive mobilization of voters who weren't from the capital to the capital city," she said. Incumbent Menjivar, whose advantage going into the contest was as high as 11% on some tallies, also blamed electoral violence and intimidation sustained by impunity for her loss. This is not the last that will be heard of the upset in San Salvador. Frente Deputy Hugo Martinez amended Menjivar's statement a couple of days later. The official party stance on the matter is, he said, "We have accepted the results from San Salvador, but we are preparing a legal document with all these anomalies, the mobilization of voters from other municipalities and the presence of foreigners with DUI (Documento Unico de Identidad) trying to vote." The chief of mission of observers of the Organization of American States (OAS), which previously had given the election good marks, also backed up. Gustavo Fernandez told reporters, "The pertinent information" would be included in its final report. The European Union (EU) mission chief, Jose Antonio Gabriel, sounded perplexed at the situation. "What draws attention is the fact that legally, without any apparent justification for it, people can be brought from other municipalities, including from other departments, to participate in the [San Salvador] elections," he said. The EU mission did not indicate an immediate intention to revise its approval of the elections. On Jan. 20, EU Foreign Relations Minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner congratulated El Salvador, calling the vote "serene and correct." European observers reported some irregularities, but, said the statement, "They should not change the results." The ARENA victory came under one of the oldest banners in the party's inventory patria si, comunismo no one that hardly resonates anywhere with the consensus held that the Cold War is over. The theme that seemed to rouse capitalinos appeared to fall flat in some ARENA bastions; they lost in Izalco, where that sort of rhetoric has supplied the party with a string of victories in the past, and where ARENA kicks off campaigns with anticommunist hymns. This is an old custom dating back to the 1932 Peasant Revolt that Farabundo Marti led. Many thousands of peasants were killed as suspected communists by fascist President Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez (1931-1944). The FMLN also beat ARENA in Usulután, La Unión, and Zacatecoluca. In all, it gained handsomely in the municipal races, and ARENA lost significantly. The FMLN captured 34 more municipalities than its showing in the 2006 elections. ARENA ended the day

with 39 fewer than it had as of the last elections. But that is all relative. In absolute terms, ARENA still holds the majority of local governments. ARENA holds 108, the FMLN holds 86. The Partido Conciliacion Nacional (PCN) lost 11 to end with 28 local governments, and the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) gained four to end with nine. In all the country, there are 262 of these jurisdictions. Keeping in mind that pollsters and pundits missed the ARENA win in San Salvador, they remain confident that the momentum is with the FMLN and that the party's candidate Mauricio Funes will win handily in March. He would then be a president with a plurality in the legislature, but without the 43-seat majority he would need to ensure clear sailing for his initiatives. Both parties, therefore, were reported to have begun the courting process for the affections of the PCN, whose 11 deputies would, in coalition, do the trick for the lucky suitor. Funes is seen as a persuasive person of moderate temperament who has done much to counter the red-baiting strategy of his opposition. By word, deed, and lack of prior party affiliation (see NotiCen 2008-02-07), he has let it be known that, if a choice must be made, his preference is to continue to work with Washington rather than join up with the new leftist luminaries to his immediate south. Quijano's win quickly became fodder for the propaganda mills on both sides. ARENA presidential contender Rodrigo Avila, now the underdog, was quick to chomp at the new mayor's passing coattails. "If he could do it, we could do it," was his impromptu take on the victory. Funes took a few more words to say, in effect, "Not so fast." What he said was, "Let's not be too impressed by the results here in San Salvador because this doesn't mean that they have won the presidential election. They want to conceal that they have lost deputies in the Asamblea Legislativa. Now the FMLN will have the faction with the biggest number in the country." Not as impressive as expected FMLN spokesperson Sigfrido Reyes could not put too fine a point on the outcome as a whole, saying, "We have won a historic election for the FMLN that gives us more deputies and more mayoralties." Impressive though it may have been, it is not certain that the results give the left party the leverage it would need to govern in a way that clearly sets it apart from the past. Victory though it was, it is also clear that the Frente failed to reach the numbers the polls had predicted for it. At the low end, LPG Datos predicted 40 seats for the FMLN. At the most ambitious end, Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) pollsters expected a 46-seat majority. In contrast ARENA's results were within forecast parameters. Another expectation for the left went unmet with the demise of the Frente Democrático Revolucionario (FDR). Some analysts saw gains for this historic leftist party and its subsequent coalescence with the FMLN as crucial to realizing their probability of governing easily. But the FDR failed to gain a single congressional seat and, as a result, will cease to exist. This party predates the FMLN, emerging as a grouping of social democratic parties and popular organizations. Said party secretary-general Julio Hernandez, "Our own data tells us the FDR will have neither deputies nor the 50,000 votes [required by law to remain registered]; therefore the party will be cancelled." In a wide-ranging interview given to Central America Report a week ago, Reyes stressed the difficulty of getting and holding a legislative majority, particularly for the left. "The system is designed so that a third party, however small, can benefit from an election," he said. "For ARENA or the FMLN to have one member in Congress, it is necessary to obtain 50,000 votes, but a third party only needs 5,000. Generally, this third party has been a right-wing party that forms alliances with ARENA to reach a majority in Congress." Reyes said his party has promised "a complete change regarding transparency, citizen participation, no more underhanded deals, no more surprise decrees in Congress at 4 am." To reach that standard, Reyes said the party has made important changes in its candidate profiles. "Almost 45% of the FMLN's candidates are new, almost half are women, and 25% are young candidates between 25 and 30 years of age," he said. "We have minimum quotas for the participation of women and young candidates. There is a very important element or renewal in the set of candidates that we have put

forward." Reyes disparaged ARENA's and Avila's refusal to debate Funes, saying that such a forum is needed to take the campaign beyond "continuous mudslinging." In the past, ARENA declined debates because they really had nothing to gain; their victories were more or less assured. Now, said the spokesman, the right is declining for the opposite reason. "When they had the advantage, they could afford not to attend the debates, and now they're afraid because their candidate is so poor," he said. Reyes had to back down, however, when questioned on debates within the party that would allow Funes more flexibility than a doctrinaire internal establishment has tolerated in the past. "That debate simply hasn't taken place. There has been no need for Funes to adopt a more flexible stance on any of the FMLN's policies. Take, for example, the abortion issue. We are in favor of women's reproductive rights, but we've never been in favor of approving laws that promote or legalize them," he said enigmatically. On the economic front, the Frente spokesman likened the Salvadoran situation to that in the US. "It's a similar situation to the one [US President Barack] Obama is faced with in the US," he said. "He has taken over an economy in recession with a financial system on the brink of collapse, with investors who are extremely pessimistic, and he needs to see what he can do to push things forward. Something similar will happen in El Salvador." The financial system, largely privatized under successive conservative administrations, he said, is "not channeling credit to our producers but to the accounts of multinational corporations." Evoking Obama brings to mind the close relationship between the US and El Salvador, a country that has been called the US's best friend in Latin America during the past eight years of the administration of former President George W. Bush and suggests that continued closeness might be facilitated by making the kind of political shift that the US has just done. Adding detail to Funes' stated preference for a US relationship, Reyes explained, "We are the Salvadoran left. We believe that each country has its own particular conditions. Left-wing parties in each country have to understand these differences and look for their own answers. Without a doubt our struggle to change El Salvador has occurred in the context of a huge continentwide struggle to leave behind the neoliberal recipes that have impoverished the region even more."

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