

3-19-2009

First Ever Win For Left In El Salvador; Mauricio Funes Of The Fmln Is President-elect

LADB Staff

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

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "First Ever Win For Left In El Salvador; Mauricio Funes Of The Fmln Is President-elect." (2009).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9687>

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.

First Ever Win For Left In El Salvador; Mauricio Funes Of The Fmln Is President-elect

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: El Salvador

Published: Thursday, March 19, 2009

Seismic, historic, free, fair, and democratic were some of the congratulatory modifiers plucked from the lead sentences of international press reports trumpeting the victory of Mauricio Funes of the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador's March 15 presidential election. The election was said to be free and fair by observation there were plenty of observers from national and international organizations and democratic by definition. It was seismic in the sense of having shaken to its foundations the Cold War anti-communist fundamentalism on which the hegemony of the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), the party in power since the end of the civil war, was built. And it was historic for a number of reasons. Just a year ago, a candidate from the "former Marxist rebel" organization that became a political party would have been given as much of a chance of becoming president of El Salvador as a black man would of becoming president of the US. It was also historic because it was the first time the FMLN ran a candidate who had not been a fighter in the revolutionary cadres. Mauricio Funes, a popular TV journalist, had not even been a member of the party that chose him to lead it. He earned his chops as a journalist reporting on the civil war, a job that did not lack for danger or commitment. Funes' win might also qualify as historic for the response that both his candidacy and his win brought from the US. After years of heavy-handed interventionism and veiled threats of reprisals against migrants and remittances, the US, now under management of President Barack Obama, appears to be backing off this kind of blustering behavior. At a March 13 regular State Department briefing, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon answered a reporter's question, "Can you assure us at a minimum that the US can work equally well with either candidate, if they're elected, either Funes or Avila?" Shannon said the question goes beyond protocol. "This goes beyond to an important aspect of how we're going to be engaging in this hemisphere," he said. "We've also made it clear with whomever the Salvadoran people elect. I have met with both political candidates here in Washington. We have engaged both major political parties in El Salvador. And we have made it clear that this is the choice of the Salvadoran people, that we will respect, and that we look forward to continuing our very positive relationship with El Salvador and working with the next elected government." Controlling the message but as clear as Shannon says they have made it, it is not clear whom it was made clear to or who was making it clear. Shannon, for instance, is a holdover from the administration of former President George W. Bush, which was very pro-ARENA and very FMLN-averse. Greg Grandlin, professor of Latin American history at New York University (NYU), told Democracy Now that all this clear-making does not amount to much if no one hears it. Speaking on the same day that Shannon was holding forth at State, Grandlin told his radio audience, "The Obama administration, the State Department, issued a neutrality statement yesterday. It was about a paragraph long, but it's not getting any attention within the Salvadoran press." What Salvadorans did hear was Bush-era Republican threats regarding the elections (see NotiCen, 2008-10-16). Congressmen Dan Burton (R-IN) and Trent Franks (R-AZ) said that Salvadorans in the US could lose their immigration status and the right to send home remittances if the FMLN won. Grandlin reminded his listeners that hundreds of thousands of the

estimated 2.5 million Salvadorans in the US are here on Temporary Protected Status (TPS) (see NotiCen, 2008-02-07, 2008-06-19). "And it's almost been a ritual of US politics every time there's a presidential election in El Salvador to threaten to revoke that TPS status. What you saw in El Salvador was headlines blared along all the right-wing newspapers," said Grandlin. That the FMLN and Funes won in the face of an ARENA-led media blitz and the threat of reprisal from the north was as earthshaking for many on the winning side of the 51.3%-49.7% result as was the Obama election in the US for those who thought they would never live to see an African American in the White House. While the Obama administration would make a better partner for Funes than would the former US government, Funes appears reluctant to leave it to blind faith that the Cold War is over in Washington. It certainly is not over in El Salvador. The ex-journalist got out in front of the story with a barrage of reassurances for the Marx-phobic north. "Nothing traumatizing is going to happen here," he said in an interview. "We will not reverse any privatizations. We will not jeopardize private property. There is no reason at this moment for fear." A case for affinity between the two new presidents can easily be made. Funes has compared his message to that of Obama, and his campaign motto is similar, "Hope is being born, change is coming." Some accounts even tried to tie the chant, "Si, se puede," to the Obama campaign, but it is well-known that the phrase predates Obama by decades. Beyond giving assurances that he would not seize the means of production, Funes made some pledges that are very much in line with Obama's domestic agenda. He said he would "end the structure of privileges among business groups who have kidnapped the state and are using it to their own benefit." With the election-day sweat barely dry, Funes met with US Charge d'Affaires Robert Blau to give reassurances. Funes' transition-team member and retired Army Col David Munguia said Funes was sending overtures of continued closeness. "These messages will allow us to build a government that doesn't seek confrontation," he said. Funes had to stay aware of the company he kept to his south as well. His ARENA opponents sought to link him to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, the current incarnation of the communist threat. Funes reportedly kept Chavez at a distance during the campaign, even as ARENA fanned the flames with ads showing Chavez promising that Funes would turn El Salvador into a Venezuelan satellite. FMLN spokesman Sigfrido Reyes denied any movement toward Caracas and away from the US, especially since "Obama wants a new foreign policy. He wants to give diplomacy a relevant role instead of war." There is some reason to doubt, however, that fear of communism is what the aversion on the right toward Funes is really all about. The fear he assuaged about seizing private property may not be at all what is most loathsome to the conservatives. Funes has also promised, and reiterated in his victory speech, that he would crack down on tax evasion, something the rich have been said to do in El Salvador with the same pride of accomplishment that getting out of jury duty evokes in the US. Funes has said he wants a greater regulatory role for government in private business, and he wants better enforcement of labor laws for factory workers. The new president may also make some in the private sector nervous because he is identified in the public mind through his TV program Sin Censura (Uncensored) with anti-corruption crusading and with the ability to buck the dictates of the corporate media. Funes also gives the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) pause. Besides his journalist's nose for malfeasance, Funes has long blamed the national police for the death of his student-activist brother in 1980. A third reason for discomfort among the privileged of El Salvador is Funes' Jesuit education and experience as a teacher in the Catholic schools. The Jesuits have been the bane of the powerful, and the 1989 murder of six of them, along with their housekeeper and her daughter, remains an unsolved crime (see NotiCen 2008-11-20). Funes comes to power just as the church has experienced a major shift away from its traditional conservatism with the replacement of Jose Luis Escobar Alas to head the Catholic hierarchy as archbishop of San Salvador (see NotiCen,

2009-02-19). Both men have said their priorities would favor the poor. Also going Funes' way is the regional electoral trend. Mexico's La Jornada observes that the election of so many leftist or progressive administrations in the hemisphere means that "Mauricio Funes will not confront the regional isolation that, in their time, the presidency of Jacobo Arbenz [1951-1954] in Guatemala, the Cuban revolution, or the government of Salvador Allende [1970-1973] in Chile had to face." Reyes said the new administration would continue to stay close to the US on trade, drug enforcement, the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), and the Merida initiative. He said he would purge the PNC of its criminal and corrupt elements before a crackdown on crime. Even rank and file FMLN supporters seemed aware of the need to calm the fears on the right. The country's conservative bent did not start with the 1992 Peace Accords. The land that is El Salvador has bowed to a nearly unbroken string of authoritarian governments for more than 500 years, since the Spanish conquest. At an FMLN victory demonstration that police might have otherwise broken up, student Danilo Rosales told reporters, "This is a peaceful revolution. This is a new revolution. This is a democratic revolution."

-- End --