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El Salvador Inaugurates Its First Leftist President

by LADB Staff

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El Salvador ended two decades of right-wing rule June 1 with the investiture of former journalist Mauricio Funes as president. His first official act was to declare, "Diplomatic, cultural, and trade relations will be established immediately with our sister nation of Cuba." With this restoration of full diplomatic ties, El Salvador ends its distinction as the last remaining Latin American country to lack them. In restoring his country's relationship with Cuba, Funes left the US isolated (see other story, this edition of NotiCen), the last country in the hemisphere to resist accepting the communist island back into the fold of the Organization of American States (OAS). The US engineered Cuba's ouster in 1961, solely on the basis of its Marxist orientation. In recognition of this, Funes reached out to the still diplomatically bewildered superpower, acknowledging, "Historically we are bound by many ties, in particular by the presence of many of our compatriots who live there, work there, and build their dreams there." Attending the inauguration were soft-left Presidents Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil and Michelle Bachelet of Chile. Hard-left Presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia did not show up as anticipated. Venezuela's Minister of Foreign Affairs Nicolas Maduro explained that his president's last-minute cancellation was because of an assassination threat involving CIA-related groups. He said the matter was under investigation in El Salvador in connection with the presence in the country of Venezuelan opposition leader Alejandro Pena Esclusa. Pena Esclusa is known to have tied Chavez to Funes as part of a negative campaign against Funes. Maduro also mentioned forces linked to the CIA's Luis Posada Carriles, a fugitive of Venezuelan justice as the terrorist behind the downing of a Cubana de Aviacion jet in 1976 (see NotiCen, 2008-07-03). In his speech at the inauguration, President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua said that President Morales had also cancelled for security reasons and that he, Ortega, had changed schedule to arrive late and miss the ceremony. He emphasized that he did not want to minimize the abilities of Salvadoran security forces, but there had already been too much blood spilled. He cited the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, and mused, "And if they assassinated Romero, we are so small beside that immense spiritual figure." Ortega also assured listeners that Chavez's failure to show up in no way meant a diminished regard for the new president. Funes found it useful to identify himself with the soft progressiveness of Lula and of US President Barack Obama for those Salvadorans still not sure about the first Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) presidency, even if he was never a guerrilla, and even though he was not a member of the party prior to his nomination. He said in his inaugural speech, "We turned to the strong examples of Obama and Lula as proof that progressive leaders instead of being a threat can be a new, safe alternative for their people." Nor was Obama the only member of the US government singled out for recognition. US Secretary of State Hillary R. Clinton was Obama's envoy to the event, and Funes acknowledged her as a woman "who honors America and radiates the brilliance of the feminine gender throughout the world." But while identifying with Obama's place on the political spectrum and lauding Clinton's radiance, Funes was clear that the days when El Salvador followed wherever the US led were over. He did this with his statement on "the sister nation of Cuba." The man in the middle Funes let his audience know that he was aware of the uniqueness of his position between the radical elements of his own party and the extreme right edge of ARENA. He told the crowd gathered at the Estadio Cuscatlan de San Salvador that he knows he will not have "the luxury of

making mistakes." He knows he cannot follow his predecessors into the errors of "governing for the few, being complacent about corruption, [and being] accomplices of organized crime." He also knows that ARENA has the votes in the legislature to stall him out if he does not keep a civil tongue. Funes is so far the voice of moderation, but it is well to keep in mind that just a heartbeat away sits Vice President Salvador Sanchez Ceren. During the civil war, Sanchez Ceren was Commandante Leonel Gonzalez, a commanding general of the FMLN. He has been an FMLN deputy since 2000 and succeeded the legendary hard-liner Shafik Handal as legislative leader when Handal died in 2006. Prior to the revolution, Sanchez Ceren was a grade school teacher. Funes has appointed him minister of education, so, in addition to being vice president, he will be a member of the Cabinet. Another Cabinet appointee with two jobs will be first lady Vanda Pignato. She will sit as minister of social inclusion. But threading the political minefield has a purpose, said the new president in his speech, which is anything but modest. He said that Salvadorans want social, economic, and institutional reconstruction, and that means "that we need not only to rebuild our country, we also need to reinvent it." He spoke of a need to create a development model that diminishes internal inequality and overcomes poverty as well as political and technological backwardness and "marginalization of broad social sectors, and particularly the hopelessness and lack of perspective for our youth. We need, above all, to integrate and transform a tiny country that has become a giant of inequality." Change, regardless of conditions Funes told Salvadorans that these changes are going to have to take place under terrible economic circumstances, in which most indicators show a general deterioration, for much of which he blamed the governing elite. "Nevertheless, the crisis, despite its drastic nature, can foster favorable conditions for our country to adopt a better and more viable political and socioeconomic direction." He promised that he and his economic team (see NotiCen, 2009-05-28) would soon unveil details of an anti-crisis plan that would encompass four general objectives. First, it would preserve existing jobs and generate new sources of employment. Second, it would protect social sectors most vulnerable to the effects of the current crisis. Third, it would take advantage of the crisis to move forward on state social policies. And last, it would create a "system of universal protection for all the women and for all the men of our country." The employment component aims to create 100,000 jobs in the next 18 months through seasonal work, expansion and improvement of public services and of public infrastructure. There is to be a construction program for building 25,000 urban housing units and 20,000 buildings in severely poor rural communities. Also planned is a state-owned bank to provide financing for micro, small, and medium-sized productive projects. There will be outreach to people living in precarious conditions in urban settings as well. In all, it sounds like a Salvadoran version of former US President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Work Projects Administration (WPA), a tool that helped lift the US out of the depression of the 1930s. Children will be fed through the schools with the expansion of a school feeding program to 500,000 children more than receive such benefits now. More than a million school children will also get free uniforms and school supplies for the coming school year. For those who have lost their jobs, Funes promised extended health care benefits that would otherwise have expired. Contributions to the system are to be eliminated for this period, and essential medications are to be delivered immediately to health care facilities. "No more units or hospitals without medicines, the public hospitals and health units will have the basic supply of drugs," the new president promised. Funes said he would put a government austerity plan into effect as part of a plan to pay for these programs. Along with this will be a rationalization and focusing of subsidies that he said would save a great deal of money. He said that the current process was haphazard, contributing to significant waste and increasing inequality, "because many of the beneficiaries are people of high income." Speaking of whom, Funes said there would be an immediate start to a

program to eliminate tax evasion, avoidance, contraband, and corruption. The new president got a bonus when, on June 3, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) announced a US\$500 million additional credit to be used for social spending. IDB president Luis Alberto Moreno told the media, "We would be looking at the coming year, beyond the support we have given to date, we would be studying a program on the order of US\$500 million in credits, which we call investment to aid many initiatives that the president spoke of in his speech, in the social, and production areas." The funds would become available in 2010 and would be added to the US\$200 million the legislature approved in December 2008 for the retirement of eurobonds coming due in 2011 (see NotiCen, 2009-05-28), and other funds the legislature reoriented to deal with crisis-related matters. Moreno said the new loan would allow El Salvador to confront a fiscal deficit amounting to approximately the same amount of money.

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