

9-10-2009

## El Salvador's President Fares Well In 100-day Evaluation, But Serious Problems Loom

LADB Staff

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

---

### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "El Salvador's President Fares Well In 100-day Evaluation, But Serious Problems Loom." (2009).  
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9731>

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](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## El Salvador's President Fares Well In 100-day Evaluation, But Serious Problems Loom

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: El Salvador

Published: Thursday, September 10, 2009

El Salvador's President Mauricio Funes passed the 100-day-in-office mark riding tall in the saddle. The former TV journalist was already a popular figure coming in, and after three and one-third months, more than 80% of the population is still solidly behind him. Wearing the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) colors, Funes represents the promise of change in a country that has known nothing but conservative government under the rightist Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) since the 1992 Peace Accords ushered in a new democratic period and made a political party of the former guerilla FMLN. The desire for profound change has not diminished since Funes took over, but the distance El Salvador has come in this short time is of micrometric dimension. "The hope for changes and for a better life with the Funes win remains," said Roy Campos of Mitofsky, the polling company that measured his approval rating at 85% at the end of August. In July, the CID-Gallup organization found him at 86%, tied with new Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli for top honors among Central American presidents. Funes, not a member of his party when it chose him, gained favor with the electorate for his moderation compared with the more radical rhetoricians the FMLN usually fielded. Jesuit Jose Maria Tojeira, president of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), termed the administration "a kind of moderate-leftist government that gives the impression it is establishing itself well." Tojeira explained, "It's a government that began with a quite solid position because it gave stability to a country following an electoral period in which stability was in question." The UCA has a polling unit, which completed a recent survey that comported with the others but fell short of the high numbers. Funes scored 70% approval with these respondents. Funes expressed some unease with his first report card. It was not the high marks that bothered him but rather the deprecation of them by the right. "They're already trying to evaluate us as if five years had gone by, and the worst is, the ones criticizing us the hardest had 20 years to do what they want us to do in 100 days, and they didn't do it," said Funes. According to reports, ARENA critics are mostly upset that the new government has placed limitations on projects initiated during their years in power. They have analyzed the current administration as "directionless." An ARENA evaluation report stood fast against Funes' torrent of approval, declaring, "It is a government without direction, without a vision of the country, lacking in leadership, tangled in internal disputes, massive firings [of public personnel], and inexperience." The report contends that the only good to have come of this government is work that the ARENA government of former President Antonio Saca left in progress and funded. But the most visible blemish on the short Funes record is security. Adding to an already high rate of violent crime in El Salvador, a recent wave of mayhem hit the public-transportation sector for four days in August, leaving 90 bus drivers and 26 passengers murdered. More crime, more police Polls have recorded the government failure to deal effectively with this scourge as one of its weak points. Mitofsky's inquiry showed 63% of respondents saying the administration has done "little or nothing" to combat crime. Twenty percent of UCA's respondents called the government's performance on crime an official failure. Criminal activity and violence in El Salvador are staggering and becoming more so. In the first half of this year, somewhere around 2,400 people

have been murdered. That is 37% more than for the same period last year. In less consequential, but still serious, crime like robbery, no significant change from last year is reported, according to the police. Struggling against a reputation for ineffectual response and corruption, the Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) has added 1,000 new cops to the force. In the last two months, the new officers have been deployed in six cities San Salvador, Soyapango, Apopa, Colon, San Miguel, and Santa Ana. Backed by presidential commitment and legislative action, the PNC on Sept. 7 drafted 519 more police specifically to add to those just sent to the six cities. This latest cadre has already graduated from the Academia Nacional de Seguridad Nacional (ANSP). ANSP director Jaime Martinez has told the media that another 480 graduates will be joining the PNC during the course of the year, with 330 more just entering the academy. They will be fit for duty in 2010. It is early to determine whether the new officers will be equal to their task, or even, as has happened before in El Salvador, become an additional part of the problem by falling prey to intimidation and bribery. But police officials are already reporting a decline in the murder rate for June and July. Crime and economics are related in El Salvador, not least in determining the climate for foreign direct investment (FDI). That being the case, the country took a serious blow to its image when veteran foreign journalist Christian Poveda was murdered last week. The 54-year-old Frenchman had recently finished a documentary on street gangs and, the day before his death, told the Los Angeles Times, "Government authorities have no idea of the monster facing them." This was no random act of robbery gone wrong. Poveda's body was found near his car, and none of his equipment was stolen. Funes expressed shock. The media expressed something else. In the Internet publication El Faro, Edu Ponces wrote, "Let's not confuse ourselves; Christian is just one of the ten who will die today. On Sunday, he will be one of the 70, and on Sept.30, one of the 300 for the month." San Salvador Archbishop Jose Luis Escobar Alas has pressed Funes to seek outside help with the crime problem. "It is important to ask the world for help," he said. "The government must request aid from international organizations." The archbishop called upon citizens at large to demand total governmental focus on this single issue. He also criticized the legislature for not naming an attorney general, the Fiscal General de la Republica. On the question of Funes' performance, the archbishop agreed with the president that a hundred days is too short a time to provide a meaningful evaluation. He said, "I am of the idea that a government of five years cannot be rated in so few days of work and time in office." But he was nevertheless supportive of the president and said the church as well took a generally positive view of the administration's initial acts and of its personnel. Economy weighs heavy The second-ranking Funes soft spot is the economy. True enough, he inherited a country deep in recession, with a deficit equal to 5.7% of GDP, or US\$16.49 billion. The president has been struggling against this, most notably with a US\$587 million social-spending program featuring building 25,000 houses and other projects. But the project has not helped in important areas of society. Campesinos demanding seed and supplies have blockaded highways. The government planned on delivering 175,000 seed packages to these small growers, but 400,000 signed up for them. A major economic problem for the president is one ARENA has criticized him for, a megaproject Saca initiated to build a massive hydroelectric dam in the northern department of San Miguel. The trouble started when the Superintendencia General de Electricidad y Telecomunicaciones (SIGET) called for a halt to construction. Director Tomas Campos Villafuerte published a document proposing "to immediately suspend" it pending a complete rethinking of the dam. His report cited "anomalies in contracting the concession, lack of transparency in the bidding process, and contracting the firm ASTALDI SpA." This is an Italian firm that got the US\$220 million contract on a second bid after the first round of bidding was disqualified. The Banco Centroamericano de Integracion Economica (BCIE) is providing credit for 80% of the cost. At issue in the continuance of the project is the

manner in which the contract was let as well as the feasibility and environmental impact studies on which it was based. SIGET contends that it is the only entity that can legally authorize such a contract, but it was another agency, the Comision Ejecutiva del Rio Lempa (CEL), that did so. The Campos report charged that CEL withheld pertinent information and did not adequately explain why it killed the initial round of bidding or why ASTALDI was chosen. Further, said the report, no market studies have been done to ascertain the potential buyers of the energy to be produced. Lacking that data, no technical or financial planning has been done. A final charge is that social and environmental effects have been ignored. San Miguel is an area known for its high degree of social organization; the population opposes the 475,000 cubic meter dam and endorses SIGET's efforts to stop and re-evaluate. The water will drown several communities in the department. According to a second SIGET report, the electricity is not needed in El Salvador. "The installed production capacity of electrical energy of El Salvador is 1,422 megawatts, and only 925 MW are used," the newspaper Diario Colatino quoted from it. El Chaparral will generate 66 MW, enough to supply 200,000 families. Funes has indicated that he wants to see the project through and that a halt to it is improbable. His claim is that, while there is an overabundance of energy now, the country's demand grows at a 6% annual rate, and future need justifies the project. The Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (MARN) is on record that the environmental permit is valid even if it was gotten in an irregular manner. Inforpress Centroamerica quoted an FMLN spokesperson as telling them the party supports the president in the matter because of the difficulty of correcting the situation "without provoking international litigation and without putting the legitimacy of the country's signed contracts in doubt." Meanwhile, organizers in the construction zone challenge Funes' assertions, claiming that he has no basis for the growth figures he cites and that, in any event, energy savings could mitigate the 6% rate. There will be big expenses for Funes either way. If the project is not stopped, the San Miguel organizations are demanding reparations for the enormous damage done to the environment, to property, and to the people who are to be displaced and otherwise affected. CEL is buying these properties, but, say popular representatives, not paying nearly enough to replace elsewhere what they are losing. And then there is the loss of what cannot be replaced or paid for, forest and habitat. Ricardo Navarro of the Centro Salvadoreno de Tecnologia Aplicada (CESTA) told Inforpress, "We cannot destroy this bosque, we need this bosque, big projects only benefit big business." This, for Funes, is just the opening salvo. Other megaprojects elsewhere in the country exhibit similar dynamics and will pose other economic and social problems for the popular president as he adds to his hundred days.

-- End --