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Expecting to end his first year on the job with a celebratory bash, Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes instead marked the milestone in full crisis mode, declaring a state of emergency on May 30 as Tropical Storm Agatha lashed the Central America isthmus.

The first named storm of the season, Agatha killed 10 in El Salvador, provoked some 140 landslides, and forced the evacuation of approximately 11,000 people, Salvadoran officials reported. The deluge was far deadlier in neighboring Guatemala, where it left some 250 dead or missing (see other article in this edition of NotiCen). Lives and property were lost in Honduras as well.

The storm marked a dramatic and certainly unexpected end to Funes' inaugural year. Not only did it rain on his proverbial parade (Funes had planned to hold a music-filled anniversary rally in El Salvador), but it also left the president with an estimated US$20 million in infrastructure damage to contend with. Still, observers say that, while the Salvadoran president's first year may have ended on a damp note, it was hardly a wash.

The presidency began with a bang. Funes, a former television journalist, made history in March 2009 by narrowly winning the presidency for the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), a party that originated during El Salvador's 1980-1992 civil war as a coalition of revolutionary guerilla organizations (see NotiCen, March 19, 2009). He was sworn in less than three months later, becoming El Salvador's first leftist president and unseating the conservative Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party, which had dominated Salvadoran politics for two decades (see NotiCen, June 04, 2009).

A full year into his presidency, the 50-year-old Funes remains a popular figure. Respondents in a recent poll by the Universidad Centroamericana's Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP) gave the president a grade of 6.8 out of 10, down somewhat from the 7.16 score he earned last September but still a sign of continued support. Figures released in April by the polling firm Mitofsky put Funes' approval rating at 83%, the highest of any Latin America leader.

Analysts like Peter Hakim of the Washington, DC-based think tank Inter-American Dialogue suggest Funes owes his continued popularity both in and outside El Salvador to his independent "style" of politics. Despite running on an FMLN ticket, Funes has distanced himself from El Salvador's far left, instead pursuing moderate policies that place him between the country's political extremes. "El Salvador is just not used to this moderate, approachable, pragmatic style. And that's just very attractive in a country's that's been severed by civil war and then by successive governments of the right, with an intransigent left," Hakim told NotiCen. "This is a very welcome
relief in some ways after many years of this high-tension Salvadoran politics, where ideology tended
to be the core of so much of politics."

One of his first moves as president was to re-establish diplomatic ties with Cuba, severed a half
century earlier. But Funes rejected an invitation by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a close ally
of Cuba, to follow nearby Nicaragua's lead and join the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de
Nuestra América (ALBA), a trade group that also includes Bolivia. And, President Funes has made
good on promises to pursue a close relationship with the US, quelling fears on the political right that
an FMLN presidency would put El Salvador at odds with Washington, DC.

His position vis-à-vis neighboring Honduras, where then-President Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009), a
leftist, was ousted in a June 2009 coup (see NotiCen, July 02, 2009), has also raised eyebrows. While
President Chávez and other leftist leaders continue to deny the current Honduran government
legitimacy, Funes is lobbying instead for restored diplomatic ties.

"He faced an early challenge to define himself with the crisis in Honduras," Salvadoran analyst
Rafael Castellanos wrote in a recent La Prensa Gráfica opinion piece. "Chávez deployed all his force
so as not to lose this important piece in his expansionist game. The pressures on the FMLN and on
the president were high voltage. Funes proceeded with measure and caution, but above all with
intelligence and pragmatism; he didn't give in to Chávez. Now he's leading the effort to reinsert
Honduras in the international community."

Funes will host a summit of Central America leaders next month with the objective of bringing
Honduras back into the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA), an economic, cultural,
and political organization established in the early 1990s. Funes says the Honduran people are
suffering unnecessarily because of their government's diplomatic isolation.

**New president, same old problems**

But while Funes may have proven a penchant for foreign affairs, he has stumbled somewhat on
the domestic front. Like his predecessors, President Funes is struggling to boost El Salvador's
limping economy and improve its bleak public-security situation. Poverty and violence are certainly
nothing new for El Salvador. Still, their persistence is a potential Achilles' heel for any leader, Funes
included.

Funes took over the reigns of government smack in the middle of a global recession to which El
Salvador, given its particular dependence on the US, was especially vulnerable. Roughly 2.5 million
Salvadorans are thought to reside in the US. Together they send back an estimated US$3.8 billion
in annual remittances, equivalent to roughly 17% of GDP. The US also buys more than 50% of El
Salvador's exports. Not surprisingly, as a result of the global financial crisis which began in the US
and led to a 10% drop in remittances last year the Salvadoran economy contracted by 3.5%.

After 20 months, that recession is finally over, Funes told El Salvador's unicameral Asamblea
Legislativa (AL) on June 1. Still, what little growth may be occurring (0.8% since March according to
the president) hardly promises a quick change in fortune for a country whose average per person annual income is just US$3,500.

The slow economic recovery provides easy fodder for Funes' political opponents, as does the country's frighteningly high violent-crime rate. Murders were up 34% in 2009, reaching a macabre total of 4,365, roughly 12 per day, El Salvador's Policia Nacional Civil (PNC) reported. El Salvador now has the dubious honor of having the highest murder rate (71 per 100,000 inhabitants) in Latin America.

Funes has surprised some by taking a decidedly law-and-order approach to the crisis, expanding the PNC, supplying it with more powerful weapons, and even pushing through a wiretapping law (see NotiCen, March 11, 2010). He has also turned to the military for help, using presidential-decree power to place troops on the border, in auxiliary crime-fighting units with the PNC, and even in prisons.

It's not yet clear what impact, if any, the president's heavy-handed approach to the crime epidemic is having. On June 1, the anniversary of Funes' inauguration, the PNC reported 14 murders.

"The public safety situation is troubling," Jorge Daboub, president of the Cámara de Comercio, told reporters late last month. "We're seeing that the measures adopted aren't producing the results we wanted. This affects the country's image, because foreign and local investments stop, thus complicating the country's overall development."

ARENA front man and former President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994) took his criticism even further, saying, "Only a crazy person would invest in El Salvador."

"Over the past year, we Salvadorans have seen how this pact between the FMLN and Mauricio Funes has resulted in a disoriented and conflicted government that's unable to tackle the country's most serious problems, like crime, the high cost of living, and job creation," Cristiani said.

Desperately seeking political capital

It hardly comes as a surprise that Funes, who fired back by calling Cristiani's comments "irresponsible," would find himself at odds with ARENA. Funes electoral victory was a huge blow for the long-governing conservative party, which in recent months has begun to unravel. Late last year, 14 of ARENA's 32 deputies split off to form a new bloc called the Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA). The bloc, led by ex-President Elías Antonio Saca (2004-2009), officially gained party status just last month.

What has drawn scrutiny is how much Funes appears to be distancing himself from the FMLN as well. Some observers say the president, by charting an independent course, is biting the hand that feeds him. If Funes loses support from the FMLN, he could be left without political capital at least within the Asamblea. The FMLN is currently the legislature's largest party, with 35 seats. ARENA controls 18 seats. The right-wing Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN) has 10, the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) 5, and Cambio Democrático (CD) 1.

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The president's best option may be to forge a new centrist political bloc, drawing congressional support from moderates in the principal parties, in GANA, or anywhere he can get it. He has already made overtures in that direction, announcing the formation last month of the Movimiento Ciudadano por el Cambio. The real question now is whether he can turn that "movement" into a solid voting bloc.

"Whether he's going to be able to push his program through congress, whether he's going to forge an alliance with some members of the old ARENA, or the new, the GANA party, that's going to be a test of his political skill," said Inter-American Dialogue's Hakim.

"The FMLN has been floundering about for many years, unable to win any elections because of their hard-line image," he added. "Their positions as well as their style of politics were confrontational. Funes has shown that [a middle-ground approach] is what people of El Salvador want. And that immediately gives him some political capital."

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