1-6-2011

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Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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El Salvador's President Mauricio Funes Earns High Marks Despite Lingering Economic and Security Problems

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: El Salvador
Published: Thursday, January 6, 2011

Salvadorans are proving a penchant for patience when it comes to President Mauricio Funes, who continues to enjoy strong popular support despite having only limited success in tackling the country’s two most pressing problems: crime and the economy.

In 2009, the year Funes took office (NotiCen, June 4, 2009), El Salvador’s already frighteningly high murder rate soared, jumping 34% to a grim total of 4,382—an average of 12 per day. The new president, a former television journalist backed by the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), inherited an equally dire economic scenario. El Salvador’s economy, dragged down by global financial woes, contracted 3.5% in 2009.

Funes reacted to the crime epidemic by employing a series of tough law-and-order measures targeted primarily at the country’s notorious maras (street gangs). Within months of taking office he decided to involve the military in crime-fighting activities (NotiCen, Oct. 29, 2009). More recently, his government rushed through an "anti-gang" law that outlaws the very existence of the violent maras, also known as pandillas (NotiCen, Oct. 14, 2010).

Whether because of Funes’ actions or not, violent crime did dip somewhat in 2010. Murders dropped 9% from the previous year’s macabre peak, down to 3,985, according to the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC). It would be a stretch, however, to suggest Funes is "winning" the war on violent crime. With an average last year of nearly 11 killings per day, El Salvador was still one of the most violent nonconflict zones not only in Latin America but in the world.

El Salvador’s economic figures told a similar story in 2010. Technically the recession ended, though not by much. The Salvadoran economy expanded by a mere 0.5% on the year, falling short of the already modest 1% growth figure many economists had predicted.

Analysts blame the limited turnaround on slow economic recovery in the US, on which El Salvador’s economy is highly dependent. The US alone buys approximately 48% of the Central America country’s total exports. It is also home to an estimated 2.5 million Salvadorans whose combined remittances (averaging about US$4 billion annually) are El Salvador’s number-one source of revenue, accounting for roughly 17% of GDP.

Yet for all the disappointment the stagnant economy and ongoing security concerns may have caused El Salvador’s 6.1 million residents, the largely unresolved violence and poverty problems have yet to make much of a dent in Funes’ level of popular support.

A CID/Gallup poll released in mid-December put the president’s approval rating at 74%, well ahead of Panama’s President Ricardo Martinelli as the most popular leader in Central America. A survey published one week earlier by LPG Datos estimated support for the president at 69%, while a recent poll by Consulta Mitofsky gave him a 79% approval rating, the highest of any Latin American president.
"I congratulate myself because this means, despite the difficulties, that the people have the wisdom to understand that changes don’t come about from one day to the next," President Funes told reporters Dec. 19.

"I never said changes would occur immediately. I inherited a state with battered public finances. I also inherited institutions with high levels of corruption, [a country] with the highest crime rate in Latin America—maybe even in the whole world—and a country that depends on remittances as its principal source of revenue. With the financial crisis in the United States, [remittances] were one of things hardest hit. Tax revenues also dropped. Companies closed. The principal sectors of our national industries are practically disjointed," Funes added.

An attractive alternative

Patience—and a sense that problems like the US financial crisis are indeed beyond the president’s reach—may explain in part why so much of the Salvadoran public continues to support Funes. Polls suggest Funes is also being rewarded for implementing certain popular social programs. Under his leadership, the government has expanded low-income health services and provided free uniforms and shoes to poor school children.

Funes’ biggest selling point, however, may be his "third-way" approach to El Salvador’s traditionally polarized political scene. Hailed initially as El Salvador’s first leftist president, Funes has instead proven himself to be a moderate, charting an independent course that sets him apart from the country’s traditional political extremes: the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), the conservative party he defeated in the 2009 election, and the FMLN, the far-left party Funes represented.

"He’s trying to be more centrist, more moderate....He’s a more modern president than El Salvador has had," Peter Hakim of the Washington D.C. think tank Inter-American Dialogue told NotiCen. "He has his own group around him that rejected some of the extremism of the FMLN. It created an alternative for Salvadoran voters who were forced up to this point to vote either for ARENA or the extreme left, both of which became less and less attractive as time went on. He still represents that alternative."

But while Funes’ moderate approach may have won him support among the general public, it has also made for some prickly relationships with his political peers. Opposed on the right by ARENA, which dominated Salvadoran politics for two decades before losing the 2009 election, Funes also has an increasing number of critics in the FMLN.

The president’s relationship with the FMLN, a party that originated as a coalition of revolutionary guerrilla organizations during El Salvador’s 1980-1992 civil war, began in many ways as a marriage of convenience. Funes, never actually a member of the FMLN, needed a major party to back him, while the FMLN needed a more mainstream candidate to soften its radical image and finally beat ARENA at the polls.

The formula worked. Funes edged past ARENA candidate Rodrigo Ávila 51% to 49% to hand the FMLN the presidency (NotiCen, March 19, 2009). The FMLN also scored big in 2009’s municipal and parliamentary elections, winning a majority of El Salvador’s mayoral posts and taking 35 of 84 seats in the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL).
Since then, however, Funes has made it clear that he, not the FMLN, holds executive power in El Salvador, differing openly—and frequently—with the party on several key issues. To the FMLN’s disappointment, Funes has kept Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez at arm’s length, declining an invitation to join the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA) trade group. He also ruffled feathers in the FMLN by normalizing relations with neighboring Honduras, where a coup in June 2009 deposed then President Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009), a leftist and Chávez ally (NotiCen, July 2, 2009). Honduras is now led by conservative President Porfirio Lobo, who won a November 2009 election organized by the country’s interim government. FMLN leaders called the election "a farce."

"The bride and groom knew they had there differences, but they didn’t really know to what degree," political analyst Rafael Castellanos told the Spanish news agency EFE. "Funes either didn’t think or hadn’t studied the situation enough to know that the FMLN would be so fast and direct in wanting to advance toward [Chávez-style] 21st century socialism. At the same time, the FMLN didn’t expect [Funes] to be such an independent, challenging president who fights tooth and nail for what he wants."

"Schizophrenic" bedfellows

Observers are now wondering if the tempestuous Funes-FMLN relationship is heading toward a full-fledged divorce, especially in light of classified US government cables filtered to the press last month by the international nonprofit group.

In a series of secret cables filed between August 2009 and January 2010, US Embassy official Robert Blau expressed concern about the stability of the Salvadoran government, describing the relationship between Funes and the FMLN as "schizophrenic."

"The part of the government that Funes controls is moderate, pragmatic, responsibly left-of-center and friendly to the US government," the cable reads. "The part he has ceded to hard-line elements of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front is seeking to carry out the Bolivarian, Chavista game-plan, including implacable hostility toward the US government."

President Funes, another of the cables suggests, was at one point concerned about his "physical security" and asked for security assistance from the US. Funes was also concerned that his security apparatus, the Organismo de Inteligencia del Estado (OIE), had withheld information from him and possibly bugged his telephones. The OIE is headed by FMLN veteran Eduardo Linares.

"Funes’ ego has little chance of rapprochemenwith the hard-line FMLN. If things continue to deteriorate, we could see an open break between the two sides, possibly resulting in a new alliance between Funes and an existing party...for the 2012 legislative elections," one of the cables reads.

Whether such a break will come to pass is debatable. Funes may be winning popularity points by keeping his distance from the FMLN, but he still needs its backing in the AL to pass legislation. At the same time, the FMLN—to maintain its recent electoral gains—will no doubt welcome future opportunities to cash in on the president’s high approval ratings.

To maintain his popularity, however, Funes may eventually have to offer voters more than charm and a refreshing middle-ground approach. So far, slow progress on the crime and economic fronts has not hurt him politically. That’s not likely to remain the case forever.

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"The economy is going to play a big role. A sour economy will take its toll, just as an inability to deal with the security issue will take a toll. I don’t think there’s any question," said Hakim. "The ARENA party is still a real threat...somehow I think ARENA is not down and out yet."

-- End --