1-5-2012

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Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Right Poised For Gains In El Salvador’s Municipal-Legislative Elections

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: El Salvador
Published: 2012-01-05

Even though President Mauricio Funes continues to enjoy strong popular support, the party that catapulted him to power three years ago, the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), may soon lose ground in El Salvador’s Asamblea Legislativa (AL).

The FMLN has 35 of the AL’s 84 seats. Its principal rival, the far-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), has just 19. Recent polls suggest, however, that ARENA could close the gap—and maybe even outpoll the FMLN—in El Salvador’s upcoming legislative and municipal elections, set to take place March 11.

A survey published early last month by the polling firm Mitofsky y Telecorporación Salvadoreña (TCS) has ARENA leading the FMLN on both the legislative (29.7% versus 22.7 %) and municipal (33% versus 22.7%) fronts. A poll published just days earlier by LPG Datos offered similar findings. If the numbers hold up, ARENA has a chance of regaining control of the AL at the expense of not only the FMLN but also the upstart Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA).

The election is the first for El Salvador since 2009, when Funes and the FMLN ended two decades of ARENA control (NotiCen, March 19, 2009). At stake are 262 mayoralties and all 84 seats of the unicameral AL.

Alphabet soup

Three years ago, the FMLN—a party that originated during El Salvador’s 1980-1992 civil war as a coalition of revolutionary guerilla organizations—won 35 AL seats to earn its first legislative lead. The once-dominant ARENA saw its representation trimmed from 34 to 32 seats, while the minority Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCL), Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), and Cambio Democrático (CD) won the legislature’s other 17 seats among them.

Things went from disappointing to downright dismal for ARENA in early 2010, when ex-President Elías Antonio Saca (2004-2009) led 14 of the party’s deputies to split off and form a new bloc, GANA (NotiCen, June 10, 2010). The dissident party has 16 deputies. ARENA seems, however, to have survived the mutiny. Both the TCS and LPG Datos polls predict GANA will remain something of a third force in Salvadoran politics but lose representation in the AL.

Whatever momentum GANA may have lost in the past 18 months, the centrist PDC and conservative Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN)—El Salvador’s oldest parties—have lost even more. In fact, neither party will be allowed even to participate in the upcoming election thanks to a late November ruling by the Sala de lo Constitucional of El Salvador’s Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ).

The ruling ends several years of legal wrangling that began after the 2004 elections, when the PDC and PCN failed to earn the minimum number of votes needed to legally maintain their party
status. The legislature intervened in 2005 to keep the two parties alive. But last June, the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) revisited the issue and officially "canceled" the PDC and PCN.

"The dead are dead, and that’s how they’re going to stay," TSE Justice Silvia Cartagena said after learning of the Sala de lo Constitutional ruling.

Refusing to go quietly into the night, members of the PCN and PDC hope to prolong their political lives under new logos, colors, and, of course, new acronyms. The rightist PCN has already recast itself as the Concertación Nacional (CN), while the PDC has spun off into the Partido de la Esperanza (PES).

A middle-ground approach

The demise of the PCN and PDC makes it even more likely the FMLN and ARENA will continue dominating not only the legislature but also municipal governments, where ARENA has a 120 to 95 advantage over the FMLN in mayoralties. Fewer than 50 Salvadoran municipalities are led by mayors from other parties.

Polls suggest ARENA will maintain its municipal advantage, although the FMLN has a chance of unseating the conservative mayor in San Salvador, the country’s capital and largest city. The incumbent, ARENA’s Norman Quijano, faces a stiff challenge from Deputy Jorge Schafik Handal Vega Silva, son of iconic guerilla leader Comandante Simón, as FMLN founder Jorge Schafik Handal was known.

There is one key area of government, however, where the influence of the FMLN/ARENA duopoly is less cut and dried: the presidency. Since assuming office in mid-2009, President Funes, a former television journalist who ran under the FMLN banner, has governed more as an independent, demonstrating again and again that he is not beholden to the party that made his election possible (NotiCen, Jan. 6, 2011).

The president’s open differences with the FMLN were again on display in late November following the resignation of Justice and Security Minister Manuel Melgar, a civil war-era guerilla commander. Funes replaced Melgar with Defense Minister David Munguía Payés, a retired Army general. The move sparked outrage among FMLN leaders, who called it a violation of the country’s peace accords.

"El Salvador may see a spiral of violence comparable to Mexico," said FMLN Deputy Roberto Lorenzana. "When the Mexicans militarized law and order enforcement, the cure proved even worse than the disease."

Funes’ maverick approach may ruffle feathers in both the FMLN and ARENA. But it seems to play well with the general public. Halfway through his five-year term, the moderate leader remains popular despite struggling to kick the economy into gear and lower the country’s macabre murder rate.

The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) says El Salvador’s average annual homicide rate is 66 per 100,000 residents, nine times the global average and second only to Honduras (82.1 murders per 100,000) on the global list (NotiCen, Oct. 27, 2011). Still, 72% of the people interviewed for last month’s TCS poll say they approve of the job Funes is doing. Among his attributes, respondents
cited his handling of the October flood crisis (NotiCen, Nov. 3, 2011), his balanced foreign policy, signature social programs, and independence from the FMLN.

**New voting procedures**

El Salvador’s executive office is not the only branch of government demonstrating some real autonomy of late. As evidenced by its decision to do away with the PDC and PCN—against AL objections—the judiciary has shown a real independent streak as well.

The high court’s Sala de lo Constitucional also made several key rulings affecting election procedures. In August it struck down a ban on independent candidates. FMLN leaders criticized the ruling because they worry that only wealthy individuals—usually rightists—will have the resources to run without party backing. President Funes even aired concerns that the ruling could lead to campaign financing by organized crime.

The five-judge Sala also voted to make legislative elections more direct. It ruled unconstitutional the practice by which voters in legislative elections picked parties but not individual candidates. Previously, voters would determine the number of AL seats each party would hold. But the leadership in those parties selected who exactly would fill those seats.

That ruling, too, raised objections, particularly among FMLN leaders and social groups, who argued that the previous system allowed for better representation of women and youth. Discretion on how to distribute the AL seats it won gave the FMLN the option to implement its own pro-diversity quota system, the leftist party argued. The FMLN also claims that, by placing the focus on individual candidates, the election risks becoming a popularity contest rather than a competition between political platforms.

A third change being tested in the upcoming elections is a new residential voting system that will apply to nine of El Salvador’s 14 departments and affect nearly 50% of the country’s voters. The new system places emphasis on proximity—voter stations are being added and made more accessible—and is meant to neutralize the right’s historic practice of bussing in voters from outside.

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