El Salvador’s Opposition Signals Comeback With Win In Municipal, Parliamentary Elections

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Category/Department: El Salvador
Published: 2012-03-22

The opposition Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) eked out a narrow victory in El Salvador’s March 11 midterm elections to maintain its numbers advantage in the country’s municipal governments and earn a slim lead in the unicameral legislature. Hardly a rout, the results nevertheless marked a major reversal of fortunes for the far-right party, which stumbled significantly after losing the last presidential election.

ARENA outpolled the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) 40% to 37% to secure 33 seats in the 84-member Asamblea Legislativa (AL). It now has a two-seat advantage over the FMLN, which dropped four of the 35 seats it won in the last parliamentary election in January 2009 (NotiCen, Jan. 22, 2009). ARENA won 32 seats in that contest but later saw its presence in the AL dwindle to just 18 after ex-President Antonio Saca (2004-2009) convinced a large continent of the party’s lawmakers to split off and form a competing conservative bloc, the Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA).

Already disappointed by its loss to FMLN-backed Mauricio Funes in the 2009 presidential election, ARENA ended up downright deflated after the GANA mutiny. Now, however, the wind is suddenly back in party’s sails. Not only did ARENA weather the storm of the GANA defections, it also managed to roll back the FMLN’s representation in the legislature—despite President Funes’ continuing popularity.

"To those who thought the party was dead, I say that we’re very much alive and kicking," ARENA’s party leader, ex-President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994), told supporters. "The Salvadoran people have made us the leading political force in the country, and we don’t need those who left," he added, referring to ex-President Saca and the other GANA dissidents.

Eyes on the big prize
ARENA is hoping to ride its newfound momentum to the next presidential election, set to take place in March 2014. The far-right party controlled the presidency for two decades prior to President Funes’ 2009 victory over Rodrigo Ávila (NotiCen, March 19, 2009).

San Salvador Mayor Norman Quijano, for one, cannot wait to win it back—and thinks he is the man to do it. "I have experience and support. I’m the most popular political figure in the country," Quijano, fresh off a landslide victory over the FMLN’s Jorge Shafick Handal, said in a March 12 interview with Canal 33. "[ARENA] owes its turnaround in the department of San Salvador in large part to me….My party should keep that in mind when deciding its candidate for the 2014 presidential race."

Quijano’s trouncing of Handal (66% to 32%) in San Salvador, the country’s capital and largest city, was a bright spot for ARENA. But the party had plenty of other reasons to celebrate as well, winning
more than 115 mayoralties overall and ousting FMLN incumbents in several populous San Salvador suburbs, including Soyapango, Mejicanos, and Apopa.

El Salvador’s Diario de Hoy reported that some 52% of El Salvador’s voting population resides in what will now be ARENA-controlled municipalities, up from 36%. The 93 municipalities won by FMLN mayors account for 32% of the voting public, down from 52%.

Accepting defeat

In a statement issued March 12, the FMLN’s Comisión Política officially accepted the election results with "maturity and responsibility" and promised to study them with "cool heads." Acknowledging that it lost by 2.9% to ARENA in the parliamentary elections, the FMLN also admitted its defeat in "important cities all over the country."

But, while the results are certainly a setback for the FMLN, they hardly amounted to a deathblow. Even before losing four seats in the legislature, the party lacked the numbers to pass bills by legal majority. Depending on the type of legislation, approval requires either 43 or 56 votes. The FMLN had just 35 seats, meaning that to push through new legislation it had to seek support from the other parties—if not from ARENA, then from GANA or the other more-marginal groupings. In that sense, ARENA's victory has not really changed things in the AL all that much. The conservative party may have gained seats, but, like the FMLN, it, too, lacks a proper majority.

Both ARENA and the FMLN will have to jockey for support from the other parties, particularly GANA, which lost ground in the election but is still a relevant third force with 11 seats. The Concertación Nacional (CN), formerly known as the Conciliación Nacional, won approximately 7% of the vote to take six seats in the AL. The Cambio Democrático (CD) and Partido La Esperanza (PES) each won a single seat. The biggest losers in the election were the Partido Popular (PP) and Partido Nacional Liberal (PNL), which lost their AL representation completely.

"We have to think about the new configuration in the legislature," FMLN communications secretary Roberto Lorenzana explained in a March 12 press conference. "No doubt we will be obliged to work with ARENA when it comes to decisions requiring a two-thirds majority. Neither of the two blocs has enough seats to pass that kind of legislation without taking the other into account. Even if ARENA can secure votes from all the other parties combined, it's still short of that two-thirds majority. The same goes for the FMLN."

Voting for "faces"

And just because ARENA has momentum on its side now does not mean the FMLN cannot make a surge of its own heading into the next presidential election. Handal’s drubbing at the hands of ARENA’s Quijano was a troubling sign for the governing party. But the FMLN still has some popular figures of its own, including Deputy Sigfrido Reyes, the second-leading vote-getter for the department of San Salvador, and Oscar Ortiz, who was re-elected mayor of Santa Tecla.

Come campaign time, President Funes, whose five-year term ends in 2014, could also prove to be an asset for the FMLN. The Funes-FMLN "marriage of convenience," as some analysts describe the partnership, certainly has its limitations. The moderate president has openly clashed at times with the leftist FMLN’s party leaders, who do not always appreciate his independent governing style. The general public apparently does, however, rewarding Funes with consistently high approval
ratings. Should the president decide in the end to lobby actively for the FMLN, it is logical to think at least some of that popularity would rub off on his would-be successor.

The FMLN also stands to benefit from a possible third-party run by former President Saca, who could end up dividing conservative voters. Expelled from ARENA in 2009 following allegations of corruption, Saca remains a visible figure in Salvadoran politics. The controversial former president was greeted with audible boos, shouts of support, and plenty of media attention on election day when he showed up to vote—"for faces," rather than along traditional party lines. "I think voting for faces means improving the quality of the democracy," Saca told reporters.

Prior to this election, "voting for faces" was not an option in Salvadoran parliamentary elections. Rather than pick individual candidates, voters could choose only from among parties. Their votes determined the number of AL seats each party would hold, but it was up to the parties to decide who the actual legislators would be. Last year the Sala de lo Constitucional of El Salvador’s Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) ruled the old system to be unconstitutional. The Sala de lo Constitucional also struck down a ban on independent candidates (NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2012).

FMLN leaders raised objections to both reforms, seeing them as benefiting wealthy—usually rightist—candidates, and as turning elections into popularity contests between charismatic individuals, rather than referendums on competing political platforms. FMLN critics also argue that the previous voting system, under which parties had the right to fill AL seats at their own discretion, allowed for better representation of women and youth.

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