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Early Candidate Nods Set Stage For Marathon Presidential Race In El Salvador

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
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El Salvador’s two principal political parties—the rightist Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) and left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN)—have decided to show their cards early, naming their respective candidates more than a year and a half before the next presidential election.

ARENA is pinning its hopes on Norman Quijano, a party veteran who spent 15 years in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL) before being elected in 2009 as mayor of San Salvador, El Salvador’s capital and largest city. ARENA head and former President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994) made the announcement Aug. 20, some 15 months before the official start of campaign season. By law, Salvadoran political candidates can only begin campaigning four months before a given election. The next presidential contest is scheduled for March 16, 2014.

"This wasn’t a horse race. In this process there were no losers," Cristiani said of the closed-door selection process. Other would-be candidates ARENA leaders considered were former vice president Ana Vilma de Escobar (2004-2009), now an AL deputy; Edwin Zamora, also a member of the legislature; and ex-foreign affairs minister Francisco Laínez. The conservative party is expected to ratify Quijano’s nomination during a general assembly set to take place later this month.

The governing FMLN lifted back the curtain on its presidential hopeful earlier still, announcing in June that it will support current Vice President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former teacher who until recently doubled as President Mauricio Funes’ education minister. Upon receiving the party’s unofficial nomination for the presidency, Cerén gave up his education post, which is now being held by Franzis Hato Hasbún. Cerén will continue to serve as vice president, a role that guarantees the "pre-candidate" high visibility in the coming months.

"Warming up the motor"

In an effort to boost his own visibility, ARENA’s Quijano has spent many recent weekends on the road, visiting towns and cities throughout El Salvador. In early September, he even ventured abroad, stopping in Los Angeles, California. A routine campaign stop for Salvadoran presidential candidates, Los Angeles is considered the world’s second-largest Salvadoran city after San Salvador.

The Migration Policy Institute, a Washington, DC-based think tank, estimated in 2008 that, of the 1.1 million Salvadoran-born immigrants living in the US, more than 270,000 live in Los Angeles alone.

Quijano insists he visited California not as a presidential candidate but as San Salvador’s mayor—to learn about new transportation options and waste-management techniques. "Don’t let anyone say this is political campaigning," he told reporters after returning home from Los Angeles. "This is just warming up the motors. It’s not the same thing."

The 65-year-old mayor need not have worried so much about semantics. El Salvador’s top electoral authority, Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) head Eugenio Chicas, acknowledged in a recent
television interview that Quijano and his FMLN rival are carrying out "veiled" campaigns. He went on to say, however, that there is not actually anything the TSE can do about it. Salvadoran electoral law bars candidates from prematurely hanging posters and erecting billboards, but it does not prevent them from "going wherever they've been invited," said Chicas.

The TSE president’s comments did not sit well with San Salvador Archbishop José Luis Escobar, who used his Sunday pulpit last week to demand more "discipline" for the parties. "Hopefully the Asamblea Legislativa will step in," the church leader said. "It's true that [the members of the legislature] belong to political parties, but they ought to act on behalf of the common good, for the benefit of the society." The behavior of the politicians, he added, "is a mockery."

Advantage Quijano

Early polls favor Quijano, an avid athlete who played professional soccer before launching a successful career as a dentist. Six months ago, the San Salvador mayor squashed his FMLN challenger, Shafick Handal, in the country’s municipal/parliamentary elections. The 66% to 32% romp over one of the FMLN’s most high-profile figures was a major highlight for the resurgent ARENA, which fared well on the parliamentary front as well, winning 33 seats in the AL. The rightist opposition party now has a two-seat advantage over the FMLN, which lost four seats—and a significant amount of political momentum—in the election (NotiCen, March 22, 2012).

History seems to be on Quijano’s side as well. Since the end of the 1980-1992 civil war, ARENA has won all but one of El Salvador’s presidential elections. The only exception was in 2009, when the FMLN chose as its representative Mauricio Funes, a former television journalist and political moderate (NotiCen, March 19, 2009). The choice was a departure for the then opposition party, which began during the war as a coalition of guerrilla forces. Unlike the FMLN’s past candidates, President Funes was neither a war veteran nor a party ideologue. The public embraced the strategy change and—more than three years into Funes’ term—continues to reward the moderate president with high approval ratings. A recent survey by the Mexican polling firm Consulta Mitofsky put support for the president at 72%.

Salvador Sánchez Cerén fits the party’s more traditional mold. As a young teacher in the 1970s, Cerén helped found El Salvador’s first armed leftist group, the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación "Farabundo Martí" (FPL), a precursor to the FMLN. Known by the alias Comandante Leonel González, Cerén took an active FMLN leadership role during the civil war and participated directly in negotiations that eventually led to the Chapultepec Peace Accords, signed Jan. 16, 1992, in Mexico City, Mexico. Consulta Mitofsky says Cerén trails Quijano by more than 20 percentage points (26% versus 47%).

Needless to say, the polls—like the candidacy announcements themselves—are very premature. "There are going to be more polls and surveys," Douglas Avilés, a deputy with Cambio Democrático (CD), one of El Salvador’s smaller parties, told reporters in early September. "I want to remind people that these polls are just snapshots of the moment. There’s still a long way to go….The [whole political] spectrum hasn’t yet been filled."

Observers are keeping an eye in particular on Funes’ predecessor, ex-President Antonio Saca (2004-2009). As president, Saca—a wealthy businessman and broadcast journalist—represented ARENA. He is now the unofficial leader of a competing conservative group, the Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA), which was formed in early 2010 by ARENA dissidents and holds 11
seats in the 84-member AL. Many expect Saca to mount a "third-party" run at the presidency, representing not only GANA but the smaller Concertación Nacional (CN), Partido de la Esperanza (PES), and CD parties, which control eight AL seats among them.

Promises, promises

Saca is a major long shot to regain the presidency. But he could certainly spell trouble for ARENA, maybe even siphon off enough votes to tilt things in the FMLN’s favor. Quijano insists he is not concerned about Saca. "The only thing I fear is God," the ARENA candidate said. "The issue of ex-President Saca is a matter that’s been dealt with in our party….I worry more about the situation in the country and the work we’re carrying out here in the San Salvador mayor’s office."

Quijano would do well to worry also about President Funes, whose continued popularity makes him a force to be reckoned with during the many months remaining before the election. Because of El Salvador’s term-limit laws, Funes cannot seek immediate re-election. But he can use his charisma and political clout to angle for his allies or take aim at his adversaries.

In his first television appearance since being designated the ARENA candidate, Quijano boldly challenged one of Funes’ signature accomplishments: the paquetes escolares. Early in his presidency, Funes implemented a policy whereby school children are provided free uniforms, a daily glass of milk, and other basic supplies. Quijano said he would do away with the program, which he called a waste of money, and invest the money instead in improving education standards.

"We have to speak truthfully to the Salvadoran people," Quijano said. "We’re subsidizing uniforms, but the students are still performing badly on the PAES [standardized exam]."

The mayor’s comments drew a fierce rebuke from President Funes. "[Quijano and ARENA] want to take the shoes off these poor children’s feet. They want the poor to go around barefoot," he said. "We’ve provided shoes and clothes to more than a million students….For the majority of them, the only pair of shoes they have is the one the government gave them."

Speaking to reporters the next day, Quijano backtracked, saying that, if elected, he would not only continue providing uniforms, shoes, and a glass of milk but would also provide "breakfast, like in the old days."

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