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Ex-President Antonio Saca (2004-2009) has maneuvered his way back into political relevancy as head of a new "movement" bent on breaking the duopoly of El Salvador's primary parties.

During a rally held Feb. 25 in San Salvador, Saca announced plans to represent the nascent Movimiento Unidad in next February’s presidential election, when he will test his luck against popular San Salvador Mayor Normán Quijano of the far-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) and current Vice President Salvador Sánchez Cerén of the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). Quijano, who enjoys an early lead in the polls, and Sánchez Cerén were selected to represent their respective parties late last year (NotiCen, Sept. 20, 2012).

"If the Salvadoran people decide to elect me once again as their president, I promise to govern with the Bible and the Constitution as my guides," Saca told supporters. The ex-president also pledged job creation, greater foreign investment, more English-language and computer classes in schools, and a brighter future for El Salvador's national soccer team.

The candidate’s Movimiento Unidad is made up of three minority parties—the Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA), the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN), and the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (DC)—plus several dozen civil society and labor groups. GANA, the largest of the three parties, controls 11 of the 84 seats in El Salvador’s unicameral legislature. The party was formed just three years ago by a group of ARENA dissidents, including ex-President Saca, GANA’s unofficial leader.

Saca’s announcement hardly came as a surprise. The 48-year-old former head of state had hinted for months that he would like his old job back. Suspenseful or not, the news is still highly significant—for starters, because it flies in the face of Salvadoran political tradition. There is an "unspoken rule" in El Salvador, El Diario de Hoy columnist Paolo Lüers wrote earlier this year, that "a president who leaves the Casa Presidencial leaves forever."

Despite their efforts to downplay the move, Saca’s candidacy also has major implications for ARENA and the FMLN, which in past presidential contests have had only each other to contend with. There is a good chance, for example, that Saca’s presence on the ballot could force a second-round runoff, something that has not occurred since 1984. El Salvador was mired at that time in a costly civil war (1980-1992). After the conflict concluded, ARENA won four straight presidential elections before losing the 2009 contest to current President Mauricio Funes, who ran under the FMLN banner.

A viable alternative?
Analysts have described the Funes-FMLN partnership as a marriage of convenience. The FMLN, if it was ever going to beat ARENA, needed to run a younger, more moderate candidate. Funes, a former television journalist, needed a party to back him. The strategy worked. Funes won the
election, narrowly beating ARENA’s Rodrigo Ávila to become El Salvador’s first ever leftist leader (NotiCen, March 19, 2009).

Since assuming the presidency, Funes has governed as something of an independent, making policy decisions that have at times put him squarely at odds with the party that elevated him to power. While it frustrates his FMLN backers, Funes’ approach seems to resonate with average Salvadoran citizens (NotiCen, Jan. 6, 2011). A poll conducted late last year estimated support for the president at 72%. Would-be voters, it would seem, are tired of the polarized politics of the ARENA-FMLN era.

And yet when it came to choosing candidates for this election, both parties opted against a Funes-style moderate, deciding instead to nominate what most observers view as political hard-liners. Saca, by casting himself as a conciliatory alternative, is hoping to capitalize. "To my critics and detractors, I extend my hand and offer you a chance to join this unifying effort," the ex-president said during last month’s campaign kickoff. "I never use the word ‘enemies’ because, as far as I know, I don’t have any."

In an appeal to the left, Saca said he would protect Funes’ various social programs. At the same time, he promised "to work hand in hand" with the private sector to encourage investor confidence and crack down on crime. And, in an appeal to Salvadorans of all political stripes, he promised that the national soccer team—which has struggled of late—would qualify for both the 2018 and 2022 World Cup competitions.

"We’re really happy. Really optimistic," Dep. Guillermo Gallegos of the conservative GANA explained in a recent interview with La Página. "The truth is, this is the candidacy the people had been waiting for. It represents an opportunity for many Salvadorans. It seems to us that the country needs another option, something besides just ARENA and the FMLN."

**Looking back at Saca’s legacy**

Saca is widely recognized as a gifted communicator who could gain ground on his opponents when and if they agree to a public debate. The candidate is confident that his past presidential experience will be an asset as well. "El Salvador doesn’t have the luxury of having someone who comes in and learns how to be president on the job," Saca told his supporters on Feb. 25. "[It needs] a president who knows how to govern from his very first day in office."

Critics of the ex-president suspect the opposite is true, that Saca’s legacy will eventually cost him support. They recall his backing of the US-led war in Iraq (NotiCen, Feb. 14, 2008), his largely ineffectual "super-mano-dura" (super-iron-fist) approach to crime fighting, and several large projects—including a maternity hospital, a freeway overpass, and a large hydroelectric dam—that Saca promised but never delivered because the public funds earmarked for the construction simply disappeared.

"We know him because he already governed," wrote Paolo Lüers. "He already showed us how he handles public funds...That’s the disadvantage of being a recycled politician. It’s harder to trick us [the second time around]."

Leaders in both ARENA and the FMLN have expressed similar sentiments, predicting that Saca’s candidacy will eventually collapse under the weight of increasing public scrutiny. But even if the ex-president fails to complete his ambitious comeback bid, he could still end up playing spoiler,
either by convincing voters that the FMLN’s Sánchez Cerén is simply too far left to be elected or by siphoning off just enough ARENA supporters to tip the scales in favor of its traditional rival.

"Most self-identified conservatives, in all likelihood, will vote once again for an ARENA candidate in 2014," Mike Allison, a political science professor at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, wrote in a recent analysis piece. "However, given that the FMLN won by such a small margin in 2009, any division within the right might mean the difference between winning and losing."

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