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Accusations Fly in Final Stretch of Tight Salvadoran Presidential Race

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Less than three weeks before voters head to the polls to select a replacement for outgoing leader Mauricio Funes, El Salvador's marathon presidential race remains too close to call.

Norman Quijano of the far-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) and Salvador Sánchez Cerén of the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) are expected to finish first and second in the Feb. 2 election, though not necessarily in that order. Neither, though, is likely to earn the 50% plus one valid votes needed to win the five-candidate contest outright, meaning the two top vote getters will have to square off in a runoff. The second-round election, should it be necessary, will take place March 9.

Quijano and Sánchez Cerén both launched their presidential bids in late 2012, a full year before the start of El Salvador's official campaign season ([NotiCen, Sept. 20, 2012](#)). In all that time, however, neither has been able to gain any lasting advantage over the other, evidence, say pundits, of just how politically polarized El Salvador remains. A poll published Dec. 4 by the daily El Mundo gave Quijano (35%) a slight edge over his FMLN rival (27%). A week later, San Salvador's Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) released a poll with more or less the opposite result. The UCA predicted 38.7% for Sánchez Cerén versus 31.3% for Quijano. A survey released Dec. 11 by polling firm Newlink Research showed support for the two at an even 33.4% apiece.

The various polls do agree, however, on who will finish third: former President Antonio Saca (2004-2009), an ARENA castaway who now heads the conservative coalition Movimiento Unidad ([NotiCen, March 14, 2013](#)). Parties involved in Saca's "movement" include the Partido de Concertación Nacional (PCN), Partido Demócrata Cristiana (PDC), and the Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANU). The latter, formed four years ago by ARENA dissidents, controls 11 of the 84 seats in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL), El Salvador's unicameral legislature. Saca announced his candidacy last February, presenting himself as a conciliatory alternative to the ever-sparring ARENA and FMLN. He is expected to garner between 15% and 20% of the vote.

Two additional candidates, René Alcides Rodríguez of the Partido Salvadoreño Progresista (PSP) and José Óscar Morales of the Fraternidad Patriota Salvadoreña (FPS), will also compete in the upcoming election. Polls show support for the pair at less than 1% combined.

"Reclaiming" the country

Quijano, a former San Salvador mayor, is hoping to return power to the now-opposition ARENA, which dominated post-war politics until 2009, when Funes, a former television journalist, gave the FMLN its first presidential victory ([NotiCen, March 19, 2009](#)). The FMLN formed during El Salvador's dozen-year civil war (1980-1992) as a coalition of guerilla forces combating the US-backed military, which also had support from the country's oligarchs. It was recast as a political party following the UN-backed peace accords that put an official end to the conflict in 1992. ARENA

also owes its origins to the war. Co-founded in 1981 by deceased Army Major and death-squad commander Roberto D'Aubuisson, it continues to represent the country's military and oligarchic factions.

Quijano's running mate is René Portillo, a professor and television-station owner. Campaigning under the slogan "juntos vamos a recuperar a El Salvador" (together we are going to reclaim El Salvador), the ARENA ticket promises to boost the economy with a fresh pro-market push and to rein in violent crime with a *mano dura* (iron fist) approach.

"A return of ARENA to the executive branch would signal a profound change in Salvadoran domestic and regional policy," senior research fellow Frederick B. Mills of the Washington, DC-based Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) wrote in an essay published last November. "There is little doubt, based on the party's platform and direction, that an ARENA victory would expand the privatization of public services and open the country to the unregulated free trade policies that characterized its economic strategy from 1989 to 2009."

Closer ties to ALBA?

A victory by Sánchez Cerén, President Funes' vice president, could send El Salvador in the opposite direction. Tired of losing election after election, the FMLN changed tack ahead of the 2009 presidential contest, opting for a relative outsider, Funes, rather than for one of its core veterans, as it had previously done. The strategy worked—to a degree. Nominally speaking, the FMLN finally gained control of the presidency. But it fell short when it came to controlling the president himself, who has governed as something of an independent moderate and thus clashed at times with the FMLN's traditional leaders. Sánchez Cerén, in contrast, is a consummate party insider. A guerrilla comandante during the war, he later served the party as an AL deputy.

No longer a radical revolutionary, the 69-year-old candidate is now very much part of El Salvador's political establishment, as is his popular running mate, long-serving Santa Tecla Mayor Óscar Ortiz. "On account of his demonstrated successful management as mayor, Ortiz is able to attract voters from across party lines," wrote Mills. "He is also the point man for courting the small business sector and progressive independent voters that had formed the 'friends of Funes' during the 2009 elections."

Still, Sánchez Cerén is widely seen as being to the left of Funes, who increased social spending for the poor but made a point, for example, of keeping now deceased Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), arguably the hemisphere's most influential leftist, at arm's length. If elected president, Sánchez Cerén might be more inclined than his predecessor to deepen ties with Venezuela and the other member states of the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA), a nine-member cooperation alliance that also includes Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, all of which are under leftist leadership.

Missing millions

The already combative race for the presidency descended into a no-holds-barred slugfest starting early last month, when President Funes implicated Quijano's campaign manager, former President Francisco Flores (1999-2004), in a possible corruption case. Citing sensitive US Treasury Department documents, Funes suggested that then President Flores may have mishandled US\$10 million that Taiwan donated to El Salvador between 2003-2004.

ARENA fired back, accusing the outgoing president of leading a "political persecution." Funes drew heat as well from a former US State Department official, José Cárdenas. In an opinion piece published Dec. 5 in the US magazine *Foreign Policy*, Cárdenas—who served under former US President George W. Bush (2000-2008)—blasted the Salvadoran leader for resorting to "dirty tricks." He also questioned the validity of the documents in question.

"Releasing such documents to the press—in the middle of a presidential election no less—is an egregious abuse of power by Funes and a violation of the protocols governing sensitive law-enforcement cooperation between the United States and El Salvador (or any other country for that matter)," Cárdenas wrote.

Nevertheless, Funes' accusations had the desired result: at the president's behest, the *Fiscalía General*, El Salvador's attorney general's office, agreed to look into the Flores affair. The legislature launched an inquiry as well. Appearing before a special AL panel last week, ex-President Flores admitted receiving millions in Taiwanese donations but insisted the funds were always used as intended. "I would like to say that I have never deposited a check from Taiwan's government in any account; that is key for me, to make clear that I have never deposited a check from Taiwan's government in any account," the ex-president told lawmakers.

More mudslinging

ARENA countered with its own allegations of fiscal mismanagement. Shortly after the president aired his suspicions about Flores, ARENA began revisiting another case of allegedly mishandled millions—this time involving Funes. Opposition lawmakers accuse the president of tax evasion and of repeatedly changing his story regarding a US\$3 million donation he received during his 2009 presidential campaign.

On Dec. 11—the same day Flores resigned as Quijano's campaign manager—ARENA Deputies Mario Valiente and Carmen Elena de Escalón formally petitioned El Salvador's *Tribunal Ética* to investigate the matter. "Funes talks every day about Paco Flores' US\$10 million. ... But when it comes to his US\$3 million, he says it's a closed case. That's not right," Deputy Valiente told reporters.

FMLN opponents have also tried hard of late to discredit Sánchez Cerén. In mid-December, the conservative Spanish newspaper *ABC* published an article alleging "strong ties" between FMLN veteran José Luis Merino, a close confidant of Sánchez Cerén, and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)* guerilla army in Colombia. The article claims Merino helped arrange a meeting between FARC personnel and an Italian drug lord.

How the various allegations and innuendo will play out in the next and final round of poll results—due in the coming days—remains to be seen. Some observers fear the last-minute mudslinging, rather than convincing voters to turn in one direction or the other, will turn them off the electoral process altogether.

"Instead of being about plans for the next government, this campaign has been plagued by attacks and by warnings that—if the enemy wins—chaos will ensue. It is very similar, in other words, to past campaigns," the independent news site *El Faro* wrote in a recent editorial. "The alternation of power didn't change the way parties conduct themselves. Nor did it change the national political narrative. Polarization is more alive than ever."

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