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Former Guerilla Commander Takes Round One In Salvadoran Presidential Election

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Vice President Salvador Sánchez Cerén of the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) won El Salvador's Feb. 2 presidential election by an unexpectedly solid margin but fell just short of the 50% plus one valid votes needed to avoid a runoff.

The FMLN candidate drew nearly 49% of the vote, finishing a full 10 percentage points ahead of his main rival, former San Salvador mayor Norman Quijano of the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). Ex-President Antonio Saca (2004-2009), another conservative, finished a distant third (11.4%). Fringe candidates René Alcides Rodríguez of the Partido Salvadoreño Progresista (PSP) and José Óscar Morales of the Fraternidad Patriota Salvadoreña (FPS) earned less than 1% of the vote between them.

"They gave us a triumph in the first round, and we’re sure that in the second round the difference will not be 10 points, it will be more than 10 points," Sánchez Cerén told supporters. "It is a great victory for the people of El Salvador."

The 69-year-old vice president will face Quijano, 67, in a winner-take-all second round election on March 9. A victory for Sánchez Cerén, a guerilla commander during El Salvador’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992), would give the FMLN its second straight presidency. A win by Quijano, a dentist by training, would swing power back to the right, which controlled the presidency for nearly two decades before losing the 2009 election to President Mauricio Funes, a former journalist (NotiCen, March 19, 2009).

Momentum would appear to be on the FMLN’s side. And yet, given how close the race has been throughout, the final outcome is still very much up in the air—especially since no one can predict at this point how supporters of ex-President Saca will swing. Sánchez Cerén confounded the pundits and pollsters by winning the "too-close-to-call" contest with relative ease. Quijano hopes to deliver a similar surprise come March 9. "We’re beginning a new fight," the ARENA candidate told a crowd of backers. "This is a like an airplane that, in the middle of a flight, steadies itself to regain altitude. There’s no time to rest."

The Saca factor

Sánchez Cerén has already hinted at a possible "pact" with Saca, an ARENA castaway who now heads the conservative coalition Movimiento Unidad (NotiCen, March 14, 2013). The leading party in Saca’s "movement" is the Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA), which controls 11 of the 84 seats in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL). Formed by ARENA dissidents, GANA is right of center yet has collaborated on numerous occasions with the governing FMLN.

The curious arrangement raises huge questions as far as the upcoming runoff is concerned. Do backers of the Movimiento Unidad, given their conservative leanings, opt for Quijano? Or will the bad blood that continues to boil between Saca and GANA, on the one side, and ARENA, on the other, convince the ex-president’s supporters to vote FMLN?
A recent survey by the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) suggests that roughly one-fourth of Saca’s supporters could end up backing Sánchez Cerén. Given the results of the first election, that 25% (of Movimiento Unidad voters) may be all the now front-running FMLN candidate needs to win the second round. The percentage could be higher still if Saca goes so far as to officially endorse the vice president. Unofficially, the Movimiento Unidad candidate has already pledged his support, according to Sánchez Cerén. "He called me to congratulate me," Sánchez Cerén told reporters election night. "Ex-President Saca told me, 'In this second round, we're going to work with you.'"

**Corruption crusade**

But an eventual alliance with Saca could also pose problems for the FMLN—by saddling it with a potentially long-term political debt and, in the short term, by taking the sting out of one of its key campaign issues: government corruption.

Taking its lead from President Funes, a major protagonist in the Salvadoran elections, the FMLN has hammered ARENA in recent months for the alleged misdeeds of one of its past standard bearers, ex-President Francisco Flores (1999-2004). In early December, Funes went public with sensitive US Treasury Department documents suggesting Flores may have mishandled US$10 million that Taiwan donated to El Salvador between 2003 and 2004 (*NotiCen, Jan. 16, 2014*). The former president—who until recently worked as Quijano’s primary campaign advisor—has since been forced to appear twice before a congressional inquiry panel. The second grilling took place Jan. 28, less than a week before the election. One day later, El Salvador’s top government prosecutor Luis Martínez ordered a freeze on Flores’ assets.

Flores, however, is not the only former president accused of using his position for personal financial gain. His successor, Saca, was also notoriously opaque when it came to finances. During his time in office, Saca managed to build a multimillion-dollar mansion (for himself) but famously failed to complete several large public projects—including a maternity hospital, a freeway overpass, and a large hydroelectric dam—because the public funds earmarked for the construction simply disappeared.

Keen to attract as many Saca supporters as possible, the FMLN has cause for concern, nevertheless, when it comes to overtly embracing the controversial ex-president. Cozy up too much and the party risks undermining whatever moral high ground it may have established by attacking Flores in particular and government corruption in general.

**Clashing on crime**

Another issue likely to dominate the political discourse in the coming weeks is crime. El Salvador’s homicide numbers, among the highest in the world (when calculated on a per capita basis), have fallen dramatically the past two years thanks to a gang "truce" that went into effect in March 2012 (*NotiCen, July 12, 2012*). That year, the number of murders fell from approximately 4,300 (in 2011) to fewer than 2,600, the lowest since 2003, according to the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC). In 2013 the body count dipped lower still: 2,492.

The situation has been something of a mixed blessing for Funes and the FMLN. Happy to take credit for the decrease in homicides, the president and his allies have been loath to admit, nevertheless, that they directly helped negotiate the truce—despite compelling evidence to the contrary.

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Under pressure from Quijano and ARENA, which accuse the FMLN of kowtowing to cold-blooded killers, the Funes administration has distanced itself even more from the truce, which appears to be suffering as a consequence (NotiCen, June 27, 2013). Last year ended with an upsurge in killings. The trend is continuing so far this year. On Jan. 12, six evangelical Christians were gunned down while leaving church in the western city of Tacuba, near the Guatemalan border. The assailants are believed to be gang members. Elsewhere in the country, police registered eight other murders that same day.

That night, in their only presidential debate, El Salvador’s various presidential candidates promised starkly contrasting approaches to the problem. Sánchez Cerén said he would employ an "intelligent" two-pronged strategy that mixes education and prevention with "no-tolerance" policing. Quijano promised to "militarize public security." If elected, he plans not only to expand the use of soldiers in domestic crime fighting, but also to forcibly recruit would-be troublemakers into the armed forces. The ARENA candidate also took the opportunity to sound off on the gang truce, saying it "has only made the gangs more belligerent."

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