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Salvador Sánchez Céren Wins Salvadoran Presidency by Hair's Breadth

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Category/Department: El Salvador
Published: 2014-03-20

After a year-and-a-half-long campaign season, two rounds of voting, competing claims of victory, right-wing protests, a thinly veiled coup threat, and a partial recount, El Salvador's grueling presidential race has finally produced a victor: former guerilla commander and current Vice President Salvador Sánchez Céren.

El Salvador's top election official, Tribunal Suprema Electoral (TSE) head Eugenio Chicas, made the announcement on March 16, a full week after Sánchez Céren of the governing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) faced off against Norman Quijano of the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) in an astonishingly close winner-take-all runoff.

The FMLN candidate came into the contest a clear favorite having won the first round of voting by an unexpectedly generous margin. In that election, held Feb. 2, Sánchez Céren beat Quijano by 10 percentage points (49% versus 39%) but finished just short of the 50% plus one valid vote minimum needed to win the presidency then and there (NotiCen, Feb. 6, 2014). Former President Antonio Saca (2004-2009) came in a distant third with approximately 11% of the votes cast.

In their March 9 rematch, it was Quijano—a former San Salvador mayor—who delivered the big surprise, erasing his first-round deficit to end up in a virtual tie with his left-wing rival. The tally, 50.1% for Sánchez Céren versus 49.9% for Quijano, was so close that the TSE chose not to declare an immediate winner. It urged the two candidates to show similar restraint.

Both were quick to ignore the request. Sánchez Céren told supporters that his victory "is irreversible," while Quijano, taking to Twitter, insisted, "By our count, we have won." The ARENA candidate also used the social-media platform to accuse the TSE of partiality and to make an unsettling reference to the military. "Our armed forces are keeping tabs on the fraud that is unfolding. The will of the people cannot be toyed with," he wrote.

"Essentially obedient"

Alleging various voting irregularities, Quijano called on the TSE to conduct a complete recount of the runoff. He later demanded that the election be annulled. The electoral authority denied both requests, opting instead for a partial recount. The TSE concluded its review of the votes early on the morning of March 13, confirming, via its Web site, that Sánchez Céren had won the election—by the narrowest of margins. Fewer than 6,400 votes, of nearly 3 million cast, separated the two candidates, according to the TSE’s final count.

Sánchez Céren received more good news later that day, when a group of top military officials—contrary to Quijano’s alarming insinuation—formally recognized the TSE decision. "We are committed to respecting the official results issued by the Tribunal Suprema Electoral," Defense Minister David Munguia Payes, an Army general, told reporters. "We repeat that we are committed..."
to strictly respecting the sovereign decision that the people of El Salvador expressed at the ballot box."

"No type of coup or conspiracy is being planned," the general added. "We are an essentially obedient force, not a decision-making force."

**Pending challenges**

The president-elect's by-a-nose triumph may be historic (Sánchez Céren is the first former guerilla to be elected president), but it is hardly auspicious. Rather than storm to victory, as some polls predicted he would, Sánchez Céren ended up limping across the finish line. The opposition, in contrast, has been energized by its strong finish. Quijano picked up a remarkable 400,000 votes between the first and second election thanks in large part to aggressive last-minute campaigning centered around the current instability in Venezuela. El Salvador, the ARENA candidate warned, risks following in Venezuela's footsteps should it allow Sánchez Céren to take power.

Given the success of that strategy, ARENA is likely to stay on the offensive, especially with the country's next legislative elections now just a year away, according to blogger Mike Allison, an assistant professor of political sciences at Scranton University. "The lesson ARENA could take home is that attack, attack, attack is the best policy and that's how they'll campaign for the important legislative assembly elections next year. I don't see much getting done before then," he told Al Jazeera last week.

The hyperpartisan political climate does not bode well for Sánchez Céren who—even under the best of circumstances—would have had his work cut out for him starting June 1, when he officially replaces Funes (also of the FMLN) as president. Topping his list of challenges are the economy, which continues to struggle, and violent crime. GDP growth averaged less than 2% during the past three years, the lowest rate in Central America. The country's public-security situation, in the meantime, appears to be worsening. A government-backed gang truce that went into effect two years ago helped halve El Salvador's notoriously high murder rate (NotiCen, June 27, 2013). This year, however, killings are again on the rise, leading some observers to declare that the gang truce is all but over.

Sánchez Céren's ability to tackle those problems will depend in part on how successful he is at bridging the country's vast political divide, especially since his party, the FMLN, controls just 31 of 85 seats in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL), El Salvador's unicameral legislature. This month's messy election finish makes what would already have been a difficult task harder still.

**Great expectations**

More than one observer has described the current political climate as the most complicated since the early 1990s, when the FMLN—then a coalition of guerilla forces—negotiated a series of UN-backed peace accords with the ARENA government of then President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994).

"Sunday's very close election results, with the FMLN now the declared winner, present the nation's two main parties, which fought each other in a bloody civil war, with the most significant challenge to the democratic process since the signing of the 1992 peace accords," Douglas Farah, senior associate in the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), explained in a recent issue of Latin America Advisor (published by the Washington, DC-based think thank Inter-American Dialogue).
"The elections show how deeply polarized the nation is, and the traditional tactics of each side to try to delegitimize and demonize whatever the other side does or says are now underway. This is dangerous, given the history of political violence in the country and current levels of violence," Farah went on to say.

Besides fending off attacks from the right, Sánchez Céren can also expect to face pressure from the left. He is not the FMLN’s first president. That honor went to outgoing President Funes, a former television journalist. But Sánchez Céren is the first FMLN veteran insider to win control of the government. Unlike Funes, who ran under the FMLN banner but was always something of a party outsider, Sánchez Céren (a rural school teacher who went on to lead one of the FMLN’s guerilla forces) is one of the party’s key historic players. As such, his victory carries with it expectations that he will push a more hard-line FMLN agenda.

The same goes for human rights groups, who are hoping Sánchez Céren will help open the door for legal action to be taken against perpetrators of numerous atrocities committed during the country’s 1980-1992 civil war. The authors of those crimes enjoy protection under an amnesty law that was passed—at President Cristiani’s behest—22 year ago (NotiCen, April 11, 2013). Sánchez Céren has said publicly that the amnesty is no longer "convenient" for the country.

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