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El Salvador’s Gang Truce Hanging By Thread

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The government of outgoing President Mauricio Funes appears to have turned its back once and for all on a controversial gang "truce" it helped broker more than two years ago.

Initially hailed as a success, the peculiar pact—signed by imprisoned leaders of the street gangs Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18—which is split into two factions—helped cut El Salvador’s homicide figures by almost half, from an average of 12 per day in 2011 to 6.8 per day last year, according to the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC).

So far this year, however, killings have been on the rise, prompting government officials to issue a string of disparaging remarks about the truce, which is being treated more and more as a lost cause. "In practical terms, it no longer exists," PNC Director Rigoberto Pleités, a Funes appointee, said in early March.

A month later, the government’s top forensics official, Instituto de Medicina Legal Director Miguel Fortin, offered an even grimmer assessment of the unconventional accord. "The truce never worked," he told reporters April 3. "The murder rate fell but the not the rate of violence."

Fortin’s damning dismissal of the truce came just two days before alleged gang members carried out a series of presumably coordinated attacks in Quezaltepeque, in the department of La Libertad, that left one PNC officer dead and four others injured. The police suspect Barrio 18’s Los Revolucionarios branch of planning and executing the ambushes. The gang’s other faction goes by the name Los Sureños.

The government’s Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública issued a statement soon after claiming that the country’s pandillas (gangs) are stronger and more influential now than they ever were. "The PNC has information and evidence showing that the gangs have increased their criminal activity, expanded their organization and presence in the territory … acquired more military-style weapons, and are involved in more drug-trafficking activity," the statement read. The ministry also accused "some groups within the gangs" of directly ordering attacks on "police, military personnel, and public servants, with the aim of putting pressure on the incoming administration [of President-elect Salvador Sánchez Cerén]."

Limping into office

Sánchez Cerén will certainly have his work cut out for him starting June 1, when he officially replaces Funes as president. While the PNC’s "information and evidence" may, as some critics suggest, prove to be a bit of an exaggeration, there is no disputing the sudden surge in homicides. During the first three months of this year, the number of murders registered in El Salvador rose 44% compared with the same period in 2013, according to the Instituto de Medicina Legal. The country is now averaging approximately 10 killings per day, nearly double the rate registered during the heyday of the gang truce, when authorities even had cause to celebrate an occasional murder-free day (NotiCen, April 26, 2012).
The surge in violence is all the more complicated for the president-elect given how politically vulnerable he is as a result of the country’s bruising presidential campaign and disputed final vote (NotiCen, March 20, 2014), which took place, coincidentally, on the second anniversary of the gang truce (March 9).

Sánchez Cerén, a veteran of the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), won El Salvador’s first-round election in February by a comfortable 10 percentage points. He finished just short, however, of the 50% plus one valid vote minimum needed to win the presidency then and there (NotiCen, Feb. 6, 2014). The near miss forced him to compete in a runoff against former San Salvador mayor Norman Quijano of the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). Given his first-round success, Sánchez Cerén was the clear favorite going into the head-to-head contest. In the end, though, it was Quijano who delivered the day’s big surprise, coming within a hair’s breadth (fewer than 6,400 votes) of turning the tables on his leftist rival.

Quijano immediately challenged the results, alleging voting irregularities and demanding a full recount. He also uttered some ominous remarks regarding the military, saying, "Our armed forces are keeping tabs on the fraud that is unfolding," and later asking that the vote be annulled. The ex-mayor’s antics ultimately failed to change the result. On March 16, El Salvador’s electoral authority, the Tribunal Suprema Electoral (TSE), called the election in Sánchez Cerén’s favor. Eleven days after that, Quijano finally accepted defeat. His late surge and defiance in the face of defeat were successful, however, in significantly weakening Sánchez Cerén, who has little momentum left as he limps into the presidency.

"Incoherent and cowardly"

Critics on the left say ARENA and Quijano—by repeatedly attacking the truce and thus turning public opinion against it—are to blame for the worsening security situation. Others say the gangs themselves are responsible, that they failed to keep their proverbial house in order. The imprisoned gang leaders who signed the truce were supposed to have instructed their underlings not to kill each other. Either they have rescinded those orders or the leaders are no longer able to exert sufficient control on what takes place in El Salvador’s hyperviolent streets.

But a number of observers say the Funes government—in which Sánchez Cerén played a major role, serving as both vice president and education minister—deserves much of the blame. Former FMLN deputy Raúl Mijango, one of the key mediators involved in the gang truce, is among those who say the administration’s herky-jerky handling of the issue led to unnecessary confusion and, ultimately, undermined the accord.

"[The Funes government] has been incoherent and cowardly," Mijango explained in an early March interview with Spain’s El País. "At times it supported the process and at other times it withheld support. It wanted to exploit the benefits of the process but without having to pay the costs of admitting its involvement in a process that is unpopular within a sector of the society."

The mediator’s complaints are echoed by the news portal El Faro, which has long challenged government claims that the truce was an independent initiative organized by the gang leaders and their mediators—Mijango and Fabio Colindres, a Catholic bishop (NotiCen, July 12, 2012). In reality, the online paper reports, the truce was a government plan pursued by then justice and security minister David Munguía Payés, an army general. Munguía Payés admitted as much in an interview...
with El Faro, portions of which appeared in a revealing September 2012 article titled "La nueva verdad sobre la tregua entre pandillas" (the new truth about the gang truce).

President Funes dismissed the article as "the biggest lie" and continued to deny any direct responsibility for the truce. His stance vis-à-vis the gang pact became even less transparent starting in mid-2013, when a Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) ruling forced Munguía Payés to give up his government post (NotiCen, June 27, 2013). Then candidate Quijano took the opportunity to begin openly attacking the truce and accusing the Funes administration of "negotiating with criminals." Perhaps to prove Quijano wrong, Munguía Payés' replacement, current Justice and Security Minister Ricardo Perdomo, implemented a de facto "blackout" of the peace process by doing away with the periodic press conferences jailed gang leaders had previously used to communicate with the media and the public at large.

**Still salvageable?**

Raúl Mijango insists that the gang truce, despite the government’s claims to the contrary, remains in effect. "For 18 years there’s been a [gang] war that has resulted in more than 52,000 deaths, most of them gang members and their families," he told El País. "As someone who has lived through a war, I understand [the gang leaders]. They’re looking for a way to end this conflict. All conflicts produce exhaustion, and that raises the need to find exit routes. The truce didn't come about because gang members want flat-screen televisions in the jails."

Mijango served as a guerilla commander during El Salvador’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992), as did President-elect Sánchez Cerén. Their respective armies, the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) and Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí (FPL), were part of a coalition, the FMLN, that later evolved into El Salvador’s current governing party.

During his long campaign for the presidency, Sánchez Cerén was careful to keep his distance from the divisive gang truce. How he will treat the issue now that he has won remains to be seen.

The outgoing government, as its recent assessments of the pact seem to indicate, no longer wants anything to do with the matter. Sánchez Cerén could follow suit and just let the truce die its natural death. But if, as Mijango suggests, the gang pact is still salvageable—and can survive until June—it may be in the new president’s interest to revive it. As imperfect as it has proven to be, the truce is still the only policy that has had any major impact in recent years on El Salvador’s ghastly murder rate.

"The next government could turn the truce into the starting point for a true change in the current situation," El Faro opined in a recent editorial. "That will require the coordination of various ministries and a major investment in social spending. [The government] will also have to accept that there aren’t any magic solutions, that the road toward a safer country is long and takes time to traverse. It’s not something that produces immediate political rewards. So far that’s not something any of the previous governments have been willing to accept."

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