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Salvador Sánchez Cerén Sworn in as President of El Salvador

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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El Salvador’s first "guerrilla" president, Salvador Sánchez Cerén of the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), assumed leadership earlier this month of a nation that continues to be plagued—more than two decades after its brutal civil war (1980-1992)—by rampant violence and poisonously partisan politics.

"I will carry out my duties as president with honesty, austerity, efficiency, and transparency," Sánchez Cerén, a rebel commander during the war, said June 1 upon being officially sworn in as president. "I will work tirelessly to achieve the major national agreements that allow us to resolve the country’s principal problems and that facilitate making the structural changes that El Salvador needs."

Sánchez Cerén, 69, replaced President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014), also of the FMLN. Funes, a former television journalist and political moderate, attended the inauguration despite losing his mother the day before. Also in attendance were lawmakers from the leading opposition party, the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). The ARENA deputies, according to news reports, refused to shake the outgoing president’s hand, evidence of just how divided the two principal parties remain in the wake of Sánchez Cerén’s hair’s-breadth victory in the recent presidential elections.

Sánchez Cerén beat ARENA’s Norman Quijano by fewer than 7,000 votes in a March 9 runoff. Quijano, a former San Salvador mayor, initially refused to concede, alleging voter fraud and warning, at one point, that the armed forces might intervene on his behalf. Top military leaders later announced they would "respect the official results issued by the Tribunal Suprema Electoral," El Salvador’s electoral authority, which declared Sánchez Cerén the winner (NotiCen, March 20, 2014).

Many on the right blame their narrow defeat on Funes, who made himself a protagonist in the bitter campaign contest by publicly accusing one of his conservative predecessors, ex-President Francisco Flores (1999-2004), a member of ARENA, of corruption (NotiCen, Jan. 16, 2014). The allegations have since led to criminal charges and a pending international arrest warrant for the former leader, who is currently on the lam (NotiCen, May 15, 2014).

Relations between the rival groups have gotten so bad that on May 31, as news was circulating about the death (from natural causes) of Funes’ mother, ARENA party members "were shooting off rockets for two hours," Roberto Lorenzana, a former FMLN deputy who now serves as President Sánchez Cerén’s technical secretary, told the independent news site El Faro. "There’s a complete disrespect by ARENA," he said.

Sharp spike in homicide numbers

As ugly as the political climate in El Salvador has become, the country’s security situation is even worse. In early 2012, rival street gangs, known as pandillas or maras, agreed to a tregua (truce) that
quickly halved the nation’s notoriously high homicide rate (NotiCen, July 12, 2012). Lately, though, the numbers have again begun to climb.

During the first three months of the year, murders were up 44% compared with the same period in 2013, leading then Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) director Rigoberto Pleités to declare that, "in practical terms, [the truce] no longer exists" (NotiCen, April 24, 2014). Since then, public security has deteriorated further still. The death toll last month was particularly high: nearly 400 murders occurred, 170 more than in May 2013. The current homicide rate, roughly 14 per day, is now on par with numbers registered prior to the truce, when El Salvador was routinely ranked as the world’s most murder-prone country. That dubious distinction now belongs to neighboring Honduras, which has a homicide rate of 90.4 per 100,000 residents, according to a recent report from the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS), an initiative launched by a trio of nongovernmental organizations (HelpAge International, Merlin, and the Norwegian Refugee Council).

A number of the recent victims have been police, leaning analysts to suggest that El Salvador’s powerful maras, besides attacking each other, are now taking aim at the state. On May 23, just eight days before the presidential handover, assailants killed six people—including a police inspector and two prison guards—in an attack on a bus traveling from Usulután to San Salvador. The killings kicked off a chaotic weekend during which 81 people were murdered, the government’s Instituto de Medicina Legal (IML) reported.

"Machine-gunning a police station is not a random act, nor is machine-gunning a bus," Héctor Silva, a Salvadoran writer and researcher at American University in Washington, DC, told The Christian Science Monitor. "The incoming government does not have the luxury of just looking away. They have to deal with this."

**Calling for a unified approach**

In his inauguration speech, Sánchez Cerén identified El Salvador’s security situation as one of his government’s three priority areas. The other two are employment and education. "Development isn’t possible if we can’t guarantee citizen security," he said. "To accomplish that, we need a unified effort to effectively fight crime. We must overcome our differences and join forces for the common good, which is to live in peace, free from violence."

The new president promised to use every "legal and coercive" means available to him to crack down on criminals. He went on to say he would continue the previous government’s policy of sending soldiers in to assist police, address the problem of corruption within the PNC, and "modernize" El Salvador’s grossly overcrowded prison system.

Sánchez Cerén also said he would address the "structural causes" of the security problem by boosting investment in high-risk communities and by providing better employment and education opportunities to would-be criminals. "Starting today, I am placing myself at the head of a National System of Citizen Security (Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Ciudadana)," he said. "The only way we can resolve these challenges is by coming together, engaging in dialogue, reconciling with one another. With the peace accords, we already provided the world with a great example [of how to go about it]. Through them we were able to end a cruel war."

Sánchez Cerén, a rural teacher and union leader who later led the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), was one of the signers of the UN-backed peace accords that the FMLN—then a
coalition of left-wing guerrilla forces—inked in 1992 with El Salvador’s ARENA-led government. Following the peace accords, the FMLN transformed itself into a political party. Sánchez Cerén served several terms as an Asamblea Legislativa (AL) deputy before working under Funes, El Salvador’s first FMLN leader, as both vice president and education minister.

Re-emergence of death squads?

Skeptics say there was little in the president’s speech to suggest any real change of course regarding security policy. Funes, too, spoke about mixing heavy-handed police tactics with uplifting social policies. Neither approach proved particularly effective. The one thing that did make a difference—at least for a while—was the gang truce, which the Funes government helped facilitate but later turned its back on. This month’s inauguration speech—which contained no mention of the gang deal—seemed to suggest that Sánchez Cerén has given up on it as well.

Backers of the truce were hoping otherwise. Raúl Mijango, another former FMLN guerrilla and one of the gang accord’s chief mediators, insists that the truce is still salvageable and that its recent problems are the result of the Funes administration’s "incoherent and cowardly" approach to the matter. "This process remains alive and kicking," Mijango told the news agency EFE last week. "When people talk about its failure, the only thing they’re doing is expressing their desire."

Columnist Paolo Lüers, who has also been involved in the gang negotiations, shares Mijango’s opinion. "What’s in crisis is the government’s relationship with the truce," he told The Christian Science Monitor. "If the next government comes in with the same attitude [as the Funes administration] they could lose everything at any moment. And that doesn’t mean that the gangs are going to return to killing each other. It means they are going to confront the state."

As the recent surge in killings suggests, that may already be happening. In just the first five days of June, four police officers were shot and killed in separate incidents around the country, the PNC reported. In addition, 26 private guards have been murdered so far this year, El Diario de Hoy reported on June 7.

Not all the killings can be blamed on gang members. El Salvador’s human rights ombud, David Morales, drew attention last month to a number of murders that appear to have been carried out by grupos de exterminio (death squads). He has asked the PNC to investigate whether some of its agents may be involved in such groups. "I’m concerned about homicides that have the characteristics of being extrajudicial killings," Morales said in a May 12 press conference. "The presumption is that this is being done by death squads for the purpose of social cleansing."

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