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Outcome Of Salvadoran Municipal, Legislative Elections Still Unclear

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Legislative and municipal elections held nearly two weeks ago have yet to produce official results but are unlikely, polls and preliminary numbers suggest, to alter in any significant way the balance of power in El Salvador, which continues to be dominated—and deeply divided—by the left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA).

At stake in the March 1 elections were all 84 seats in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL), the country’s unicameral legislature; 262 mayorships; approximately 3,000 city council positions; and 20 seats in the Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN), a Guatemala-based body that promotes Central America regional integration.

International observers, including a delegation sent by the Organization of American States (OAS), declared the elections transparent and free from any obvious fraud. Lead OAS observer Gustavo Fernández, nevertheless, proved to be remarkably prescient when he warned just beforehand that there might be delays in producing final results.

The morning after the contests, El Salvador’s top election official, Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) head Julio Olivia, said computer problems had stalled the tallying process but that initial results would, he hoped, be coming in that afternoon. Two days later, still with no results in hand, Olivia complained of "sabotage in the process of transmitting data" and promised to prove his allegation in court. "A bunch of people are going to lose their jobs," he said.

Olivia went on to say that TSE officials would count the votes by hand, a process that could take two weeks to complete. He urged the various candidates and participating political parties, in the meantime, to refrain from any premature speculation about who may have won or lost the various legislative and municipal contests.

Tale of two cities
Several political figures, including the mayoral candidates in San Salvador, the country’s capital and largest city, ignored Olivia’s request. On March 3, Nayib Bukele of the FMLN declared himself the winner in San Salvador. "It's irreversible," he said. "We’ve won … by more than 7,000 votes." Rival candidate Edwin Zamora of ARENA conceded the contest a few hours later. The result, assuming it holds up, puts San Salvador in FMLN hands for the first time since 2009.

The city’s current mayor, Norman Quijano of ARENA, did not seek re-election. Quijano ran for president last year, losing an extremely tight runoff against then vice president Salvador Sánchez Cerén of the FMLN by fewer than 6,400 votes (NotiCen, March 20, 2014). Sánchez Cerén, a guerrilla commander during El Salvador’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992), is the country’s second FMLN president. His predecessor, President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014), ended what had been a two-decade hold on the presidency by ARENA.
Candidates in Santa Tecla, a city just outside San Salvador, also took it upon themselves to call
the election. There, voters appear to have opted for the ARENA candidate, Deputy Roberto
D’Aubuisson, who took to Twitter on March 2 to declare himself the winner. FMLN candidate
Armando Flores accepted the unofficial result. Santa Tecla—just as San Salvador was for ARENA
—had been a real stronghold for the governing FMLN. Vice President Óscar Ortiz served as mayor
there for nearly 15 years (2000-2014).

Deputy D’Aubuisson, the self-proclaimed mayor-elect, has the same name as his father, ARENA
founder Roberto D’Aubuisson, an Army major who commanded death squads that killed and
tortured numerous people before and during the war. The list of victims included San Salvador
Archbishop Óscar Romero, assassinated in 1980 while saying mass. D’Aubuisson the father died in

Election innovations
So far, there is no clear indication of how the legislative elections will pan out. As it stands now, the
FMLN and ARENA have 31 and 28 AL seats, respectively. The Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional
(GANA), a conservative group formed several years ago by ARENA dissidents, has 10 seats; the
Partido de Conciertación Nacional (PCN) has seven; the group Unidos por El Salvador has five; and
the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) and Cambio Democrático (CD) have one apiece. The final
AL seat is held by an independent.

Pre-election polls gave the FMLN a slight advantage. In recent days ARENA has done its own
calculating to predict it will come out ahead. Neither party, however, is expected to win the 43
seats it would need to control a simple majority. For the governing FMLN, that will mean having to
continue working with—and extending political favors to—the smaller parties, particularly GANA,
with which it has enjoyed a de facto legislative partnership in the past several years.

Another big question is how cross-party voting, introduced for the first time, may have impacted
the results. In past Salvadoran legislative elections, voters were presented with fixed candidate
lists drawn up by the respective political parties. This year, thanks to a recent Corte Suprema de
Justicia (CSJ) ruling, people were given the option of either voting the old way—opting for their
preferred party’s set list of candidates—or picking and choosing individual candidates regardless
of party affiliation. The elections were also the first to introduce direct voting for El Salvador’s 20
PARLACEN representatives and the first to adhere to a gender quota: a minimum 30% of the people
running for the various municipal and legislative posts had to be women.

The changes drew praise from groups such as the Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad, a
nongovernmental organization (NGO), which spoke of "a strengthening of the democratic process
in El Salvador." The independent news portal El Faro used similar language in a March editorial,
calling the reforms "an obvious democratic advance" and challenging critics who complained that
the cross-voting innovation and direct PARLACEN elections caused the counting delay.

Questionable characters
Another source of controversy are the murky backgrounds of several of the deputy and mayoral
candidates. One of the people hoping to win an AL seat under the ARENA banner is Juan Orlando
Zepeda, a retired general and former vice minister of defense implicated in civil-war-era human
rights abuses, including the 1989 killings of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her teenage
daughter. A Spanish judge who is pursuing the Jesuit case indicted Zepeda along with 19 other former military officials in 2011 (NotiCen, July 28, 2011). A second civil-war-era general, Mauricio Ernesto Vargas (ARENA), is also hoping to win a deputy seat.

Another deputy candidate with a few skeletons in his closet is Martín Claramount (CD), who worked as a debt collector for a convicted cocaine trafficker. He was also arrested five years ago for being in possession of a stolen pickup truck. And, in the 1990s, according to court documents, the CD candidate was investigated for possible involvement in covering up a homicide.

An ARENA mayor seeking re-election in San Francisco Menéndez, in the western department of Ahuachapán, was involved in a shootout in 2010 that cost three people their lives. Several years earlier he was investigated for human trafficking. At the other end of the country, in La Unión, a former mayor who was convicted and jailed several years ago for corruption is hoping to win his old job back. Mario Osorio Vides, who also served at one point as a PARLACEN representative (ARENA), ran in this election under the GANA banner.

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