4-16-2015

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FMLN Loses Ground in El Salvador’s Botched Legislative and City Elections

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Category/Department: El Salvador

Published: 2015-04-16

President Salvador Sánchez Cerén and his governing Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) suffered a modest but nevertheless frustrating setback in El Salvador’s bungled municipal and legislative elections, which took place March 1 but failed to produce official results until nearly four weeks later.

After eking out the narrowest of victories in the 2014 presidential contest (NotiCen, March 20, 2014), the left-wing FMLN hoped the March elections might give its tenuous mandate a bit of a boost. Instead the opposite happened as the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), the FMLN’s principal rival, picked up several seats in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL) and won 132 (some in coalitions with other parties) of the country’s 262 mayorships. The FMLN won only 82 mayoral contests but did manage to secure control of San Salvador, El Salvador’s capital and largest city, for the first time in six years.

ARENA countered by winning nearby Santa Tecla, a traditional FMLN stronghold (NotiCen, March 12, 2015). Nayib Bukele, a former publicist, won the San Salvador contest over ARENA’s Edwin Zamora. The victor in Santa Tecla was Roberto D’Aubuisson, a deputy whose father, also named Roberto D’Aubuisson, was an Army major who commanded death squads that killed and tortured numerous people before and during El Salvador’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992).

The San Salvador and Santa Tecla contests were among the few to produce timely (albeit unofficial) results, primarily because the losers in both cases were relatively quick to concede. For the rest of the election outcomes, Salvadorans had to wait—first for days, then for weeks—while authorities went through the painstaking process of counting ballots by hand. The historic delay was reportedly caused by a computer glitch. El Salvador’s top election official, Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) head Julio Olivia, spoke early on about "sabotage in the process of transmitting data" but has since backed off from that hypothesis.

The official results, finally made public the night of March 27, give ARENA a four-seat advantage over the FMLN in the AL, El Salvador’s 84-seat unicameral legislature. Neither group, however, will have the minimum 43-seat majority required to pass legislation on its own. ARENA won 35 seats (three of them in coalition with the right-wing Partido de Convercación Nacional, PCN). The FMLN finished second with 31 seats, followed by the Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA), which won 11. GANA, a conservative party formed several years ago by ARENA dissidents, has participated of late in a de facto alliance with the FMLN (NotiCen, Sept. 11, 2014). The PCN, which won six AL seats, and the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), which won a single seat, tend to side with ARENA.

Also up for grabs in the March elections were El Salvador’s 20 Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN) seats. PARLACEN is a Guatemala-based body that promotes Central America regional integration. The FMLN and ARENA each won eight seats; GANA won two; and the PCN and PDC claimed one seat apiece.
This year marked the first time Salvadoran voters had an opportunity to select PARLACEN representatives directly. The elections also introduced a major change in the way AL candidates are selected. For the first time, people were allowed to choose not just among fixed candidate lists drawn up by the respective parties but also among individual candidates, regardless of party affiliation.

Observers suspect that the voto cruzado (cross-voting) innovation, made possible by a recent Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) ruling, was partly to blame for the TSE’s initial counting problems. But it may also have helped breathe new life into the legislature. A number of long-serving lawmakers, including PCN deputies Roberto Angulo and Rafael Machuca, who have been in the legislature for a combined 58 years, lost their seats. The same fate befell Mario Valiente (ARENA), who joined the AL in the early 1990s, left to serve as mayor of San Salvador from 1994 to 1997, and then returned to the legislature in 1989; and ARENA lawmakers Enrique Valdés and Mariela Peña Pinto, who have both been deputies since 1997.

A most violent month

As disappointing as it may be, the election outcome doesn’t necessarily spell disaster for Sánchez Cerén and the FMLN. ARENA also came out ahead in the last round of midterm elections in 2012 but ended up losing its AL advantage because of an internal scandal that saw four deputies migrate to GANA (NotiCen, March 22, 2012). One of the biggest stars of those elections, San Salvador Mayor Norman Quijano (ARENA), went on to lose the 2014 presidential contest, albeit by fewer than 6,400 votes.

Nor, however, do the results do the Sánchez Cerén administration any favors as it tries to push through an agenda that promises job creation, improvements to the health and education systems, and, above all, relief from the dismal public security situation in El Salvador, where at least 481 people (an average of 16 per day) were murdered in March. The body count was the highest single-month total in a decade.

Sánchez Cerén unveiled his crime-fighting strategy, Plan El Salvador Seguro, in January (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015). The five-year plan was developed by the multisector task force Consejo Nacional de Seguridad y Convivencia Ciudadana (CNSCC), which includes government ministers, mayors, international-organization representatives, church officials, media directors, and business-association leaders. Some of its members are openly sympathetic to the country’s conservative opposition parties.

Plan El Salvador Seguro places a heavy emphasis on crime prevention and calls for approximately US$2.1 billion to be spent on things like job creation for youth, improvements to the country’s grossly overcrowded and decrepit prisons, and the construction of parks, sports facilities, and training centers. Backers of the plan hope the targeted spending will eventually reduce the country’s appalling homicide numbers, which have spiked since the collapse last year of a tenuous tregua (truce) between the country’s principal street gangs, known as maras or pandillas (NotiCen, April 24, 2014). Murders jumped 57% in 2014 compared with the previous year, from 2,492 to 3,942, according to El Salvador’s Instituto de Medicina Legal (IML).

Massive peace march

The president endorsed the CNSCC’s recommendations immediately upon receiving them and called on the Salvadoran public to do the same by joining him in a nationwide peace rally. More
than two months later, on March 26 (one day before the election results were released), an estimated half million Salvadorans took to the streets in coordinated demonstrations throughout the country to demand reprieve from the country’s violent-crime scourge.

"We’re in the street to ask for peace, to ask for a better country for our children, so that they can live in peace and without fear," Javier Carillo, a 38-year-old demonstrator in San Salvador, told the Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency.

Carillo was one of approximately 300,000 people, many dressed all in white, who congregated in the capital’s Plaza Salvador del Mundo, where Sánchez Cerén made a pitch for national unity and announced a "gang-member reinsertion" bill that he will submit to the AL. The legislation looks to create a framework allowing gang members to give up theirs lives of crime and become reintegrated into society.

But Sánchez Cerén also promised to take a firm hand with lawbreakers. "The law will be enforced with firmness to destroy violence," he said. That same day police killed eight suspected gang members (seven men and one woman) during an early morning raid on a coffee farm some 25 km outside San Salvador. The massacre occurred two months after Sánchez Cerén’s vice president, former Santa Tecla mayor Óscar Ortiz, announced that police, in cases where they feel threatened, are free to shoot gang members "without any fear of suffering consequences."

The vice president made the declaration in response to a wave of gang attacks against law-enforcement officials. In 2013, 14 police officers were killed, according to the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC). In just the first 100 days of this year the number of murdered police already stands at 19.

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