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El Salvador’s Leading Parties Spar as ex-President Francisco Flores' Corruption Trial Looms

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The upcoming launch of a landmark court case against former President Francisco Flores (1999-2004), together with recent developments in neighboring Guatemala and Honduras, have combined to push the issue of corruption to the political forefront in El Salvador and exacerbate deep-seated antagonisms between the country’s two leading parties.

Those divisions were very much on display on Oct. 3, when, for the second time in a month, demonstrators held rival anti-corruption rallies in San Salvador, the capital. The protests garnered a fair amount of media attention, not so much because of the turnout, which was low, but because of the less-than-subtle political undertones of competing gatherings.

One of the demonstrations was organized by the supposedly nonpartisan De 5 en 5 movement, a name that refers to the five invitations each affiliated person is expected to extend to potential new members. Formed in late August, the group demands solutions to the country’s gang-driven violent-crime epidemic (NotiCen, Sept. 10, 2015) and calls for the establishment in El Salvador of a foreign-backed judicial instrument akin to Guatemala’s Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG). The UN-supported investigative body has made headlines in recent months for a corruption inquiry that led to the resignation last month of President Otto Pérez Molina (NotiCen, Sept. 3, 2015). Former vice president Roxana Baldetti resigned four months earlier (NotiCen, May 28, 2015).

"We’re gathered here to demand once again the installation of a commission against the crimes of impunity of the past 25 years," José Portillo, one of the movement’s principal organizers, told the Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency.

The group’s call for a Guatemala-style anti-impunity apparatus echoes demands made by lawmakers from the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), El Salvador’s main opposition party. ARENA members have been pushing the idea since July, when Thomas Shannon, a top-level US State Department advisor, visited the country and suggested to reporters that El Salvador and Honduras would do well to follow Guatemala’s lead in this regard (NotiCen, Aug. 13, 2015).

The governing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), a left-wing party that began during the country’s dozen-year civil war (1980-1992) as a coalition of guerrilla forces, adamantly opposes the possibility, calling it a threat to national sovereignty. "We need to know how to listen, but I don’t think it should be up for debate that others come and decide for us," Vice President Óscar Ortiz said in a late August interview with the TCS (Telecorporación Salvadoreña) news program Frente a Frente.

The Honduran government, meanwhile, has bowed to popular pressure and invited outside help from the Organization of American States (OAS), which plans to establish a special legal body
called the Misión de Apoyo contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras (MACCIH). OAS Secretary-General Luis Almagro made the announcement Sept. 28 alongside embattled Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, a conservative. The announcement followed months of large-scale demonstrations (NotiCen, Aug. 27, 2015). Many of the indignados, as the protestors have come to be known, demand that the president step down.

"Presentes por la patria"

News reports describe De 5 en 5 as an attempt to emulate the anti-government movements that arose in Guatemala and Honduras. But organizer José Portillo says the group is nonpartisan, and he challenges claims that it is trying to "destabilize" the government of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén. "We've carried out our gathering on a Saturday afternoon, when there is less traffic, and without any plans to close the streets," he told the conservative Diario de Hoy in early September, when the movement made its debut demonstration. "If we wanted to destabilize, we wouldn't have done things this way."

Members of the FMLN insist otherwise, calling De 5 en 5 a front organization for ARENA, which lost last year's presidential election by the narrowest of margins and is determined to undermine Sánchez Cerén, a civil war guerrilla commander, by any means necessary. "They want to create a parallel [with Guatemala], suggesting that in Salvador there is corruption, that foreign intervention—from the US, because they are the main sponsors of CICIG—is needed," FMLN Deputy Nidia Diaz said in a late September interview with the teleSUR news network.

An article published last month by the independent news site El Faro suggests there may be some truth to the governing party’s claims. Journalist Valeria Guzmán, who attended De 5 en 5’s inaugural rally on Sept. 5, noted Portillo’s use that day of the words "presentes por la patria" (present for the homeland), a party slogan, she wrote, "that is as synonymous with ARENA as ‘yes we can’ was for the US presidential candidate Barack Obama."

The El Faro reporter also noted the presence—despite ARENA’s promise to stay clear of the event—of former ARENA government minister Luis Cardenal, whose daughter, Andrea Cardenal, is one of the movement’s lead organizers; René Rendón, a close collaborator of the deceased ARENA leader Adolfo Tórrez; and Jorge Daboub, the president of the Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada (ANEPI), a normally anti-FMLN business guild with ties to ARENA.

Focusing on Flores

The FMLN and allied groups such as the Foro Nacional de Salud (FNS) and Frente Social Sindical Salvadoreño (FSS) have tried to neutralize De 5 en 5 with counterprotests that call for improving the existing judicial system rather than introducing a new, outside mechanism like the CICIG. The pro-government demonstrators are also adamant that ex-President Flores and other former officials be held accountable for alleged acts of corruption carried out during ARENA’s two-decade hold on power (1989-2009).

Flores makes for a particularly obvious and timely target given his high-profile stint last year as a fugitive from the law and his upcoming date with the Salvadoran justice system, which is set to begin initial hearings Nov. 3 regarding his alleged misappropriation of US$15 million that Taiwan donated to El Salvador between 2001-2004. The ex-president’s appearance in court promises to be a watershed moment for El Salvador, which has never before pursued such a high-level government official for corruption offenses.

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"This is a case that could set a very important judicial precedent for the country," Oscar Campos of the Iniciativa Social para la Democracia (ISD), a legal watchdog group closely involved with the Flores proceedings, told the pro-government newspaper Diario Co Latino last month. "We believe it can be a real step toward breaking the chain of impunity that has existed all these years."

The allegations first surfaced in late 2013, when then President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) of the FMLN revealed the existence of sensitive US Treasury Department documents purportedly linking Flores to the missing millions (NotiCen, Jan. 16, 2014). The information cost Flores his job as campaign manager for ARENA’s presidential candidate, Norman Quijano, who lost to Sánchez Cerén, Funes’ vice president, by fewer than 7,000 votes (NotiCen, March 20, 2014). It also forced Flores to make a pair of appearances, in January 2014, before a special investigative committee in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL), El Salvador’s unicameral legislature.

Flores was supposed to make a third appearance, on Jan. 30, 2014, but was a no-show. He promptly disappeared from public view. Four months later, authorities officially charged the missing ex-president with embezzlement and unlawful enrichment and issued an international arrest warrant against him (NotiCen, May 15, 2014). Flores made a dramatic reappearance that September, turning himself over to Salvadoran police (NotiCen, Oct. 16, 2014). The ex-president was jailed briefly but was later given permission to serve house arrest pending trial.

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