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El Salvador Marks 25th Anniversary of Chapultepec Peace Accords

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Twenty-five years after the Chapultepec Peace Accords brought an end to El Salvador's civil war (1980-1992), the tiny Central American nation continues to struggle with deep political polarization, rampant violence, and an anemic economy that fails to provide adequate employment or living standards for a large section of the population.

Little wonder that the 25th-anniversary event held Jan. 16 in San Salvador was a rather "downbeat" affair, as *The Economist* reported, or that the keynote speaker, President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, used the moment to call for "new national accords" so that Salvadorans might finally have the country they "dreamed of" and "a culture of peace."

The peace agreements, signed in 1992 at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City, marked a major turning point after 12 years of open warfare between US-backed security forces and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) guerrilla coalition. The conflict killed more than 70,000 people and displaced roughly a quarter of El Salvador's populace, according to the UN Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, convened in 1992 as part of the Chapultepec agreement. Thousands more went missing, never to be seen or heard from again.

In an essay published last month on the teleSUR website, writer Hector Perla Jr., a Salvadoran who grew up in the US but was in San Salvador the day the final peace deal was signed, recalled the jubilant scene he witnessed in the capital's central square. "I realized something had radically changed in the country," he wrote. "That day, as a nation, we buried the past. We buried an entire history, since colonial times, of hundreds of years of brutal dictatorship without even the pretense of democracy."

One of the keys to the peace agreements is that they allowed FMLN guerrillas to enter mainstream politics and compete head-on, without violent reprisals, against the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party, the political arm of their wartime enemies. ARENA controlled the government for two decades, starting in 1989. Little by little, however, the FMLN gained ground, finally winning the presidency in 2009 ([NotiCen, March 19, 2009](#)). The party won again in 2014, when Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla comandante (commander) who participated directly in the peace negotiations, narrowly beat ARENA candidate Norman Quijano.

Age-old antagonisms

That the two parties have managed to coexist all these years, with the right eventually ceding control of government to the FMLN, is testament to the real and lasting effectiveness of the Chapultepec Peace Accords, observers say. "It's rare in the world to see two former military opponents be able to participate peacefully in a system of government with democratic elections," Douglass Cassel, a legal advisor with the truth commission who now works with the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in the US, told CNN Español.

That's not to say, however, that the two sides have ever really mended fences or found a way to cooperate. Decades after the war, the FMLN, ARENA, and their respective supporters still have a highly antagonistic relationship that, if anything, was only exacerbated by the election of Sánchez Cerén. It didn't help that the former comandante won the 2014 runoff by fewer than 6,400 votes ([NotiCen, March 20, 2014](#)).

In recent years, those tensions have had serious repercussions on the country's finances. ARENA has sided with other opposition parties to limit the Sánchez Cerén administration's access to outside funding. They have also refused, so far, to approve the 2017 budget, further complicating matters for a country whose economy is growing at a snail's pace and continues to depend heavily on remittances sent home by the more than 2 million Salvadorans estimated to be residing in the US. The political acrimony "doesn't allow for a vision of the country," Luis Mario Rodríguez of FUSADES (Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social), a pro-business think-tank, told *The Economist*.

The divide is so entrenched that the two sides are once again turning to the UN for help, just as they did 25 years ago. During last month's anniversary event, President Sánchez Cerén took the opportunity to introduce a special UN envoy, Benito Andión of Mexico, who is being called on to "facilitate dialogue." Andión served as Mexico's ambassador to El Salvador in the mid 1990s.

"The sad reality is that UN intervention is necessary," ARENA lawmaker Mauricio Vargas, a former general who, like Sánchez Cerén, was one of the signatories of the 1992 agreement, told the independent news site *El Faro*. "We have achieved an understanding. The two sides haven't made space for each other. Tension is mounting, and experience tells us that eventually things can explode."

Crime conundrum

Another very much unresolved problem for El Salvador is violence, which may not be of the political variety, as it was during the 1980s, but is all too present nonetheless. Murderous street gangs known as maras operate throughout the country, fighting police and each other for control of entire communities, terrorizing residents, and forcing local businesses to pay extortion money. The state has reacted with increasingly repressive tactics, passing legislation that defines gang activity as "terrorism" and giving police and soldiers what essentially amounts to a license to kill ([NotiCen, May 26, 2016](#)).

The result has been a staggering amount of bloodshed, even by El Salvador's own skewed standards. In 2015, more than 6,600 people were murdered, a macabre milestone for a country that, in terms of both population numbers and land area, is roughly the size of the US state of Massachusetts ([NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2016](#)). Homicide numbers fell last year by roughly 20%, but the death toll from what some describe as a "crime war" still topped 5,000, giving El Salvador a per capita murder rate of roughly 80 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, among the highest in the world ([NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2017](#)). By way of comparison, the homicide rate in the US as of 2013 was less than 4 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Analysts say the violence is both a product of—and contributing factor to—El Salvador's deep-seated economic problems, which the Chapultepec Peace Accords—as transformative as they may have been on the political front—did little to improve. Marginalized and with few legitimate work prospects, impoverished youth turn to the gangs, which have a suffocating effect on the economy by

squeezing local businesses and forcing both the public and private sectors to spend their respective resources on security rather than on things like education or business investments.

“The structural causes that gave rise to the conflict weren’t negotiated, they weren’t resolved by the signing of the Peace Accords,” Roberto Cañas, an FMLN co-founder who has since parted ways with the party, said in a recent interview with the Colombian weekly magazine *Semana*. “The inequality and social exclusion are still there, and they’re the ingredients of the country’s current conflict. There were 5,000 deaths in 2106, 14 per day.”

Time for new talks?

The Sánchez Cerén administration indicated initially that it would take a prevention-oriented approach to the country’s crime epidemic. It promised job training for youth, infrastructure improvements for high crime areas, and increased education spending, among other things ([NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015](#)). In practice, however, government policy has been more stick than carrot, observers say, a return to the *mano dura* (iron-fisted) strategies employed by the conservative administrations of President Antonio Saca (2004-2009) and his predecessor, the late Francisco Flores (1999-2004).

The heavy-handed tactics mark a departure from the previous government’s tenuous and never very transparent attempt to negotiate with gang leaders. Behind-the-scenes maneuvering by the Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) administration helped bring about a *tregua* (truce) between gangs that, for about two years, starting in March 2012, brought murder numbers down to approximately 2,500 annually ([NotiCen, Dec. 20, 2012](#), and [June 27, 2013](#)). The politically untenable *tregua* experiment unraveled in the buildup to the 2014 election, and President Sánchez Cerén—who served as vice-president under Funes—has since made it clear that he is neither interested nor willing to negotiate with the *maras*.

Recent events, however, may end up testing that resolve. In late December, reporters from *El Faro* met in secret with several high-ranking members of *Mara Salvatrucha*, the largest of El Salvador’s street gangs. Two weeks later, the award-winning news site published details of the encounter and revealed that *Mara Salvatrucha*, also known as MS-13, is keen to hold peace talks with the government. Remarkably, the gang members even said they would consider disbanding. Several days later, the *Sureños* branch of the country’s other leading gang, *Barrio 18*, made a similar overture, suggesting in their case that they’d not only be willing to disband, but also help authorities locate the bodies of missing murder victims.

The reports have caught the attention of Catholic Church leaders, who are offering to mediate should the government eventually agree to talks. For now, the Sánchez Cerén administration and its allies continue to dismiss that possibility. Some opposition members, however, see potential peace talks as an option that’s at least worth exploring. “We can’t listen to [the gangs] say they want to disband and not pay attention,” ARENA lawmaker René Portillo Cuadra told *El Faro*. “We should take [the offer] seriously and sit down and talk with them, within the framework of the law.”

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