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El Salvador's Governing Party Hammered in Midterm Elections

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Salvador Sánchez Cerén's final year as president of El Salvador promises to be a particularly difficult one following nationwide legislative and municipal elections that saw his party, the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, FMLN), lose significant ground to the hard-right Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Nationalist Republican Alliance, ARENA).

The midterm elections held March 4 were the second to take place since Sánchez Cerén—a guerrilla commander during the country's dozen-year civil war (1980-1992)—squeezed into the presidency in 2014. And like the previous parliamentary and city elections, in March 2015, the results were deeply disappointing for a president and party desperate to shore up their tenuous hold on power.

Three years ago, the FMLN lost a handful of seats in the unicameral parliament, the Asamblea Legislativa (AL) but at least regained control of San Salvador, El Salvador's capital and largest city, for the first time in six years ([NotiCen, March 12, 2015](#), and [April 16, 2015](#)). This time around, the governing party fared even worse, ceding another eight parliamentary seats while losing all but two of the country's 14 departmental capitals, including San Salvador, according to preliminary results.

"We recognize the clear message the Salvadoran people have given us at the polls," the Sánchez Cerén administration's spokesperson, Eugenio Chicas, told reporters on March 5, even before the preliminary results were in. "We have to read it as a hard message ... and correct the ways we've failed to serve the people."

Voter grievances

The results were widely interpreted as a "voto de castigo"—a punishment vote—for a party that, after nine years in power, has failed to steer the impoverished country toward any kind of substantial economic turnaround or make lasting improvements to its dismal security situation.

Since 2008, the last full year ARENA controlled the presidency before the FMLN took power under Mauricio Funes (2009-2014), El Salvador's GDP has grown, on average, less than 1.4% annually, according to the World Bank. In the meantime, the country's ghastly homicide numbers have continued to rank among the world's highest. In 2008, nearly 3,200 people were murdered, the Policía Nacional Civil (National Civil Police, PNC) reported. Last year the annual tally was just shy of 4,000, an improvement only with regards to the even more appalling 2015 and 2016 numbers, when the country recorded 6,667 and 5,278 intentional homicides respectively ([NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2016](#), and [Jan. 5, 2017](#)).

Complicating matters for the FMLN and Sánchez Cerén—who won the presidency by the narrowest of margins, beating ARENA challenger Norman Quijano by fewer than 6,400 votes ([NotiCen, March 20, 2014](#))—is a recent decision by the administration of US President Donald Trump to terminate the so-called Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Salvadoran nationals living in the US ([NotiCen, Jan.](#)

25, 2018). The move affects some 200,000 Salvadorans and their families who, come September of next year, will lose their residency permits and risk deportation. Most analysts see the decision as saddling El Salvador with an additional economic and security burden.

Yet another black mark for the Salvadoran president, whose five-year term ends in June 2019, is the fact that Funes, his once-popular predecessor, fled the country to neighboring Nicaragua a year-and-a-half ago to avoid prosecution for corruption ([NotiCen, Sept. 22, 2016](#)). The FMLN doesn't, of course, have a monopoly on corruption in El Salvador. The late Francisco Flores (ARENA), president between 1999 and 2004, faced corruption charges before his death two years ago ([NotiCen, Feb. 4, 2016](#)). And Flores' successor, Antonio Saca (2004-2009), formerly a member of ARENA, is awaiting trial on corruption. Still, as the party in power, the FMLN is paying the steeper political cost right now for the country's enduring probity problems.

"The FMLN has failed in its effort to effectively face the country's biggest challenges," Héctor Silva Hernández, a political science researcher at the University of Massachusetts, wrote in a March 5 analysis piece for the independent news site *El Faro*. "With its first president self-exiled in Nicaragua and convicted of unlawful enrichment, and its current president unable, since arriving in power, to earn [even a passable approval level] in polls, the Frente shouldn't be surprised by the unfavorable results."

The 'magic number'

The one key election the FMLN might have won was the mayoral contest in San Salvador. But in that case, the party was outdone by internal squabbles with the charismatic incumbent, outgoing San Salvador Mayor Nayib Bukele. Last October, the FMLN formally expelled Bukele from its ranks, thus preventing the rising political star from seeking reelection. The candidate chosen to replace him, lawmaker Jackeline Rivera, was crushed by fellow deputy Ernesto Muyschondt of ARENA by nearly 35 percentage points.

Overall, ARENA won 138 of the country's 262 mayorships, including 11 of the 19 municipalities in the department of San Salvador, preliminary results show. The FMLN won 69 municipalities, 13 fewer than in the 2015 elections. Among the cities it lost is Quezaltepeque, the birthplace of President Sánchez Cerén, in the department of La Libertad.

As disappointing as the municipal results were for Sánchez Cerén and the FMLN, the losses in the legislature were more damaging still. With just 23 deputies left in the 84-seat AL, the governing party will be hard pressed to cobble together enough support among smaller parties—in particular the center-right Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (Grand Alliance for National Unity, GANA)—to assure even the simple majority (43 votes) needed to pass basic legal reforms or the national budget. And collecting a qualified majority (56 votes) to appoint judges to the high court or to name a new attorney general—votes that are supposed to take place in the coming months—may be all but impossible.

"For the FMLN to be able to govern effectively, it'll need at least 29 deputies. That's the magic number. If not, things will be very complicated for President Sánchez Cerén," political analyst and university professor Juan Ramón Medrano told the news service Agence France-Presse (AFP) just before the elections took place.

Falling short of the "magic number"—very short, as it turns out—means the administration will have its hands tied during the upcoming presidential year, when action is of the essence,

particularly with the now-independent Bukele promising to challenge the FMLN on the left with his upstart “Nuevas Ideas” (new ideas) movement. The British news magazine *The Economist*, in a March 10 analysis piece, went so far as to say that Bukele is a clear frontrunner in the upcoming presidential contest.

“A slick 36-year-old businessman, Mr. Bukele has enthralled the capital’s voters with projects to revitalize poor neighborhoods, progressive stances on social issues such as gay marriage, and shrewd use of social media,” the article noted. “[He] aims to become the first president in three decades who belongs to neither of the main parties.”

El Salvador’s next presidential election takes place on Feb. 3, 2019. A runoff, if necessary, would be held a month later. Sánchez Cerén cannot seek reelection due to El Salvador’s term-limit laws. In its bid to retain power, the FMLN is lining up behind Medardo González, who served both Funes and Sánchez Cerén as public works minister before leaving the post in November. ARENA plans to hold an internal election in April to choose from among a handful of candidate options, including lawyer and businessman Javier Simán; Gustavo López Davidson, owner of a pharmaceutical company; and Carlos Calleja, a corporate executive.

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