

4-15-1988

Analysis Of Recent Salvadoran Elections

Deborah Tyroler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "Analysis Of Recent Salvadoran Elections." (1988). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/1993>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Analysis Of Recent Salvadoran Elections

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, April 15, 1988

[Reproduced below are excerpts from an article titled, "A Brief Look at the March 1988 Elections in El Salvador," by El Rescate, a non-profit data collection and solidarity organization headquartered in Los Angeles. The article was released for distribution to the Central America Resource Network (Palo Alto, Calif.) on April 4.]

The Context of the Elections The results of the March 20 elections in El Salvador must be viewed within the context of severe repression and intimidation of the population by conservative forces, military and para-military. This repression has had the effect of reducing the political field to candidates from the center-right and ultra-right. Since the signing of the Esquipulas II Agreement on August 7, 1987, the human rights situation "has deteriorated quantitatively and qualitatively at an alarming rate," according to the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador (CDHES). An understanding of the causes of this deterioration helps to view the elections as the result of a process of increasing strength within the hardline factions of the military, as well as hardline political parties, rather than an abrupt and unexpected shift to the right beginning on March 20. The peace plan signed by President Jose Napoleon Duarte represented compromises which the most conservative military and political forces found unacceptable. In addition to obligating the government to negotiate with the military arm of the guerrillas (FMLN), the plan also allowed the return of exiled opposition political leaders and declared an amnesty for all political prisoners. Furthermore, Salvadoran refugees in Honduras were permitted to return to their homes in or near areas of conflict, areas which the military purposefully drained of populations in order to reduce support for the guerrillas. These developments were, and still are, viewed as disastrous by the right, which has no intention of settling for anything less than a total military defeat of the guerrillas. Pressure from these conservative forces made itself felt immediately following the signing of the peace plan: the amnesty requirement for political prisoners was extended to include all military men accused (but never formally charged or even incarcerated) of killing civilians, as well as death squad members who alone accounted for thousands of civilian deaths in recent years. It is now prohibited, by law, to prosecute any of these men, sending a clear message that violence and murder are viable instruments in dealing with the opposition. Thus, it is difficult to regard as coincidence the timing of the assassination of Herbert Anaya, CDHES president, on October 26 last year. Although reprehensible, Anaya's murder is but one of a long list of human rights abuses since Esquipulas II. Instances of torture and death-squad type killings have increased significantly since October, including such brutal tactics of intimidation as using acid to disfigure victims, cutting off sexual organs and displaying mutilated bodies in public places. On three separate occasions, prisoners in official custody have died and the government has failed to investigate or charge anyone with the crimes. Just recently, in an attack on organized labor, union leader Humberto Centeno was beaten and tortured, and had to be hospitalized. It is in this environment of violence and fear that the elections took place. Conspicuously absent from the elections were any parties left of Duarte's Christian Democrat Party (PDC). The current level of violence, combined with expectations of fraud (in three separate elections in the 1970s, widespread fraud and manipulation by the military denied gains made by parties on the left), forced all parties left of the PDC to boycott the March 20 elections. Leaders of the Democratic Revolutionary Front's (FDR) member parties feared that persons known to have campaigned for them or to have voted

for their party or parties, especially in rural areas, would be targeted for violence. They added that elections within a context that does not provide democratic guarantees to voters can offer no hope of real change or reform for El Salvador. Consequently, the election came down to a two-party race between the PDC and ARENA. Why did ARENA Win? The results of the elections, specifically the resounding defeat of the PDC, reflected a broad-based popular discontent with the current government that coincided with mounting frustration on the right. There is little doubt that the US-supported PDC clearly emerged as the loser in the elections because of its failure to rejuvenate the economy (half the population is un- or underemployed, inflation remains high, and the majority of Salvadorans have suffered a devastating deterioration in living conditions during the Duarte administration despite the massive infusion of US aid) and because of the widespread perception that corruption is rampant within the PDC. Its inability to end the war also hurt Duarte's party, especially in the countryside. The rejection of the PDC can also be interpreted as a rejection of the Reagan administration's policy in El Salvador which has placed all of its support behind the PDC as the best hope for "true democracy." The success of ARENA in courting voters is thus largely due to a lack of alternatives: voters wanted to punish the PDC and ARENA represented the only other major political party which mounted a well-organized and highly visible campaign. Though known for its ties to death-squad activity and political violence, ARENA has been trying to clean up its image, while the PDC has begun to share the blame for human rights abuses. Most important, the level of voter abstention was very high, a key fact often overlooked in analyses of the elections. Of a population of slightly more than 5 million, 1.6 million voters were registered for the election and only 1 million voted, roughly 40% of the voting age population... Voter absenteeism is very significant, since the pressure to vote remains intense in El Salvador. Without a voter's registration card, individuals could be easily targeted for political violence as subversives and have trouble with employers. The Future The election results will have an impact on the lives of Salvadorans and will undoubtedly create serious contradictions for proponents of current US policy. ARENA stands in a very good position for the March 1989 presidential elections, especially now that their candidate, Alfredo Cristiani, seems to be increasingly acceptable to the United States. ARENA, which now controls the judicial and legislative branches, could control the executive branch as well, giving it thorough dominion over the country. By winning the March 20 elections, ARENA will already be in a position to appoint a new Supreme Court, which in turn will appoint judges to lower courts. Meanwhile, the PDC is likely to become increasingly divided as its two presidential candidates, Rey Prendes and Fidel Chavez Mena, continue their bitter struggle to win the party's nomination. It thus seems that political polarization and disunity will increase, as the most repressive forces in the country, represented by ARENA, consolidate their grip on the political machinery. It is also very likely that ARENA leader Roberto D'Aubuisson, once described by an American ex-Ambassador as a "pathological killer," will be able to resist impeachment and prosecution for his role in the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980. Since the Assembly is the body which would have to initiate such actions, no one expects justice since ARENA now controls the majority vote. Moreover, intolerance of the opposition, political violence and drastic solutions to end the war can be expected. It is possible that the population will become more radicalized as peaceful means of opposition are closed off and violence seems to be the only alternative.

-- End --