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Analysis: Unlike Nicaragua's Superpowers Have Little Say In El Salvador's Bitter War

by Deborah Tyroler

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[The article below by Bob Ostertag was distributed by the Pacific News Service the week of 03/28-04/03/88. Ostertag is a Lehman Fellow at State University of New York at Binghamton who has traveled widely in El Salvador since 1985. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] Superpower influence played a crucial role in producing the ceasefire agreement between the Sandinistas and the contras in Nicaragua. But there is little either superpower will be able to do about El Salvador. Caught between the Sandinista offensive and the ambivalence of Congressional Democrats, the contras appear to have thrown in the towel on their armed struggle, at least for the moment. Soviet influence on the Sandinistas is less clear. The insurrection that toppled the US-backed dictator Somoza was an indigenous uprising that received only marginal assistance from the Soviet Union and which the pro-Moscow Nicaraguan left did not even support. But once in power, the Sandinista government had to manage an economy trapped between the contra war and an economic downturn squeezing almost all Third World countries. Over the last year, it became increasingly obvious that the Sandinistas' "war economy" could not, in fact, support the war. This must have given Gorbachev and his vital oil supplies increased leverage over the Sandinistas, no matter how indirectly it was wielded. And there are indications that Moscow was willing to play this game. In a major speech in Thailand last year well before there was any hint of serious negotiations in Nicaragua a leader of the Soviet-backed Afghan regime announced that Soviet frustration with interminable Third World wars was going to lead to compromises that would produce broad coalition governments of former enemies in places like Afghanistan, Angola and Nicaragua. Gorbachev also reportedly raised the issue of Nicaragua himself with Reagan during his visit to Washington, and subsequent meetings between superpower officials are known to have focused on Third World conflicts. In El Salvador, on the other hand, it is unlikely that either superpower will have much say in matters, regardless of what their intentions may be. In the March 20 elections, eight years of US policy toward El Salvador came unglued when the Christian Democratic party of President Jose Napoleon Duarte received a historic drubbing from the far right party Arena. Led by reputed death squad leader Roberto D'Aubuisson, Arena made anti-American rhetoric a central feature of its successful campaign. Washington's policy had been to promote Duarte as a "centrist" alternative to the conflict between the extreme right and left. Some \$3 billion was sunk into his government, including a few million dispersed by the CIA directly to his election campaign in 1984. Duarte returned the favors, rigidly adhering to US positions in regional peace talks and even adding gestures such as stepping off a plane in the US last year and kissing the American flag. After almost a decade, most Salvadorans were apparently unimpressed, voting against the Christian Democrats in such numbers that even their Arena opposition was surprised. Though the Salvadoran army will continue to require US aid to fight off the rebels, and the government will require US aid to keep the economy afloat, Washington's influence in the country will be drastically reduced. As D'Aubuisson said at the outset of the campaign, "If you want to know what's going on in El Salvador today, ask the US Embassy. After March, ask us." On the other side of the conflict, the rebel Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) also showed their strength during the elections, not by running

candidates but by putting on a display of military force that demonstrated continuing improvement in their military capabilities. The rebels declared a total ban on traffic during the elections which the government army was unable to counter, and launched numerous attacks around the country. In the capital, long an area of rebel weakness, the FMLN sharply escalated its guerrilla actions, using car bombs and economic sabotage. Unlike the contras, who made no secret that they were totally dependent on the United States for support, there is no evidence of major outside support for the FMLN. In fact, while the United States outfitted the contras with sophisticated Redeye surface-to-air missiles, journalists who recently visited guerrilla-controlled territory in El Salvador report extensive efforts underway to construct a variety of homemade weapons, ranging from land mines to extremely crude anti-aircraft guns. Neither the USSR nor any other outside power can cut off this indigenous supply of weapons on which the rebels appear to increasingly rely. Support for the Duarte government was a consensus project in Washington, backed equally by Democrats and Republicans. This is why the public has heard so little about the war there in recent years. And unlike in Nicaragua, the Democrats are as perplexed as the administration as to what to do next in EL Salvador. The matter is not discussed by any presidential candidate, despite the fact that El Salvador may well be the first foreign policy crisis the next president will face. It is a good bet that discussion of El Salvador will begin soon, but in good Washington style, after a serious crisis has erupted.

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