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Deborah Tyroler

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Salvadoran Government, Christian Democrats & Arena Reject Rebel Proposal

by Deborah Tyroler

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Jan. 24: Salvadoran government and Christian Democrat officials rejected a proposal by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) on delaying the presidential elections and opening peace talks presented on the evening of Jan. 23. (See CAU, 01/26/89.) The officials said the offer was "positive," but presented insurmountable constitutional problems. An unnamed source "close to the rebels," cited by the New York Times, said the FMLN had indicated they were willing to listen to a counterproposal, and would not raise new demands during any subsequent negotiations. If their offer was rejected, the rebels reportedly said they would launch a major offensive. At a Mexico City news conference, rebel spokesperson Salvador Samayoa said, "For eight years the US has been saying that the only obstacle to a political solution in El Salvador was our demand for a formula for power sharing before elections. We are removing that obstacle for the US. It's their move." The FMLN proposed holding the elections on Sept. 15, Independence Day. The Salvadoran Constitution specifies that the elections must be held no less than two months and no more than four months before the expiration of the president's term on June 1. Unnamed "Western diplomats" cited by the Times said that it would not be unprecedented to adapt the Constitution to accommodate the proposal. One diplomat said, "The Constitution's not exactly sacred here." Christian Democrat presidential candidate, Fidel Chavez Mena, said: "If it's good in September, why not February or March?" The rightist Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party rejected the proposal as unconstitutional and an attempt to obtain at the bargaining table what the FMLN could not achieve on the battlefield. One of the points described as unconstitutional proposed by the FMLN was that President Jose Napoleon Duarte's government remain in office until after the election. Communications Minister Roberto Viera said Duarte had indicated that the election should not be postponed so long. Jan. 25: At an informal evening news conference, President Duarte rejected the FMLN proposal, describing it as little more than an attempt to seize a share of power. He reiterated that negotiations would take place only if the rebels disarm, and become involved in the legal political process. According to Duarte, the offer "is neither valid nor acceptable from any point of view, because it is unconstitutional." Duarte said the offer "is not a proposal for peace but a proposal for war," adding -that the rebels "are threatening to increase their attacks if their plans are not accepted." However, the peace offer was significant, he said, because for the first time the guerrillas accepted the electoral process as an alternative to violence. Duarte ruled out a government counterproposal, and stated that elections would take place on schedule. ARENA presidential candidate Alfredo Cristiani said that the proposal "from the beginning violates the constitution and there is no point in discussing it." The National Union of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS) called the rebels' proposal "positive," arguing that it could form the basis for a political solution to the conflict. If the offer is not accepted, the union said, "the elections would only serve to elect a new US puppet, which will continue the war against the people, especially against the workers." Jan. 26: Guillermo Ungo, presidential candidate for the Democratic Convergence denounced the government for hiding behind the constitution to prevent the rebels from participating in the election. At a news conference, Ungo said, "This is the moment for the political parties to demonstrate whether they

want peace or bones." In a communique, the Democratic Convergence said, "The constitutional problem invoked by some seems to us no more than a pretext to prolong the war and impede the advent of peace." According to another Convergence leader, Ruben Zamora, "The problem is not constitutional, it is one of lack of political will." Convergence members said parties contesting the elections could force a postponement by withdrawing from the March balloting. In Ungo's words, "The absence of candidates would prevent the holding of elections." Ungo cited the constitutional provision for election by the legislature of an interim president who would hold office until elections are held. "The constitution exists to serve the people, as an instrument providing for peace and coexistence not to impede peace and coexistence," he added. Zamora said the Christian Democrats and rightwing parties "are using the constitution as a skirt to hide behind." In the press conference, the coalition cited examples of repeated violations of the constitution under the current administration. For example, the constitution requires security forces to obtain a search warrant before entering a citizen's home. Army troops and police regularly conduct searches of entire working class neighborhoods without warrants. Some diplomats have pointed out that the proposal was significant for what it does not say. For instance, it implicitly drops several conditions that had reportedly defeated previous negotiations, such as demanding a role in government. The new proposal suggests that the Duarte government remain in power until the election. Another demand which appears to be have dropped is that their forces be guaranteed a role in the Salvadoran army. (Basic data from AFP, 01/25/89; New York Times, 01/25/89, 01/26/89; AP, 01/26/89)

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