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## **Arena Wins Salvadoran Presidency; On Low Voter Turnout, Rebel Tactics, Response In U.S., Related Matters**

by Deborah Tyroler

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Election results, low voter turnout On March 20, the Central Election Council released the first official results from the March 19 vote, and all but confirmed victory by Alfredo Cristiani, candidate of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). The Council said of 576,000 ballots thus far counted, Cristiani had received 53.8%, while 36.6% went to Fidel Chavez Mena of the Christian Democrat party. The Council reported the National Reconciliation Party in third place with 4.2% of the vote, followed by the leftist Democratic Convergence coalition with 3.2%. The official vote count is expected March 23. On the same day, Chavez Mena conceded victory to Cristiani. Some 1.83 million of about 5.3 million citizens were registered to vote. Agriculture Minister Antonio Morales Erlich estimated voter turnout at between 850,000 and 900,000, one of the lowest in Salvadoran history and less than half of registered voters. Cristiani said his party's unofficial tally showed him leading with 54% of the vote with about 75% of the ballots counted. "We are sure and we proclaim ourselves the victors," said Roberto D'Aubuisson, ARENA party founder. Late Monday, Chavez Mena said the Christian Democrats would set up "a constructive opposition" and cooperate with the government on certain points. He said only 45 to 50% of those eligible to vote had actually cast their votes. ARENA and Cristiani Cristiani, a multi-millionaire coffee grower, whose party has been authoritatively linked to death squads that killed thousands of Salvadorans in the early 1980s, claims ARENA has changed significantly. ARENA was founded in 1981 to represent the interests of the country's landed oligarchy. Cristiani says he represents a more moderate party than that founded by former army major Roberto D'Aubuisson, who was once described as a "pathological killer" by former US ambassador Robert White. The Reagan administration denied D'Aubuisson a visa to enter the US. D'Aubuisson, called ARENA's "maximum leader," holds no official party position but was at Cristiani's side throughout the campaign. Observers say that he controls the party's majority in the National Assembly. On March 21, Cristiani told reporters that he has assured US officials of his commitment to human rights. In statements on March 20, Cristiani outlined plans to contend with the country's economic crisis. He said his government would push through drastic measures to battle poverty, hunger and infant mortality. He also promised to make health care more available, and to house the thousands displaced by war. He then called on all political parties to unite in the search for peace and prosperity and "of course eliminating...violence and human rights violations." Cristiani said the earlier efforts at a dialogue with the guerrillas were "big spectacles," which were to the FMLN's advantage. He said it would be necessary to coordinate the next step with the Christian Democratic government during the transition period. In a March 21 interview with West German newspaper Die Welt (to be published March 22), Cristiani was quoted as saying he intends to put the country's banks and foreign trade back under private control but will continue "agrarian reform" initiated by President Jose Napoleon Duarte's government. He was also quoted as saying that military victory over the FMLN is possible, "but I would prefer a political solution." Prior to the election, and assuming that Cristiani would win, a group of Salvadoran businesspersons assembled \$10 million to start a bank. Cristiani has promised to reprivatize the banks which were nationalized in 1980. According to the New York Times (03/22/89), many Salvadorans and "Western diplomats"

say the ARENA victory will inevitably lead to a renewed concentration of wealth, and convince poor people that the war is a class war as asserted by the FMLN. An unnamed Salvadoran sociologist who has been sympathetic to the left was cited by the Times as saying, "Interests exist only between nations. Between classes, there are only conveniences. It's been convenient for ARENA to talk about a rising tide lifting all boats. But there's no real sign the oligarchy is ready to tame its gigantic appetite and desire to own it all." When ARENA's Armando Calderon won the mayor's office in San Salvador last year, one of his first acts was to write the wealthiest residents begging them to pay their property tax bills, which they had traditionally discarded. An unnamed Salvadoran told the Times: "To say that his request was ignored is putting it politely." Reactions in the US On March 20, US State Department spokesperson Charles Redman said the sixth nationwide vote since 1982 was deemed by the leader of a US observer delegation to be free and fair despite what he termed FMLN intimidation. Redman asserted that the "Salvadoran people braved violence and terror by the FMLN to participate in the democratic process. We are prepared to support the person who emerges from that democratic process." According to Redman, "These elections are the most recent manifestation of the Salvadoran people's desire for a durable democratic system." He added that US support for the new government will depend on its human rights performance and respect for democracy. For the past seven years, US policy in El Salvador has been presented as an attempt to defeat the guerrillas by strengthening the political center, i.e., Duarte and the Christian Democrat party. In light of the Christian Democrats' electoral defeats, some members of Congress are calling for policy reassessment and new restrictions and conditions on US aid. According to Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-Oregon), "For all of our aid, for all of the genuine commitment to democracy, things in El Salvador are getting worse." Hatfield, the ranking Republican on the Appropriations Committee, has considered a proposal to hold back half of El Salvador's military aid for six months to see if the Bush administration and the Salvadoran government pursue a negotiated settlement of the civil war. On March 20, Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT), chair of the Foreign Relations subcommittee on Latin America, said, "Most members of Congress will be willing to give the ARENA party an opportunity to demonstrate what it is going to do with its power...If it begins to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the re-emergence of death squads and human rights abuses by the military, then as sure as I am sitting here, you can count on resolutions" being introduced in Congress to restrict US aid. Since March 17, dozens of demonstrations were organized in cities throughout the US to protest Washington's policy in El Salvador. On March 20, over 160 demonstrators were arrested in Washington and New York. Leaders intended to be peaceful. However, in New York 10 police officers were taken to a hospital for minor injuries. In Manhattan, about 150 members of the New York Coalition to Stop the US War in El Salvador began blocking entrances to the federal office building at 20 Federal Plaza at 7 a.m. Of 122 people arrested, said police officer Joseph Gallagher, four were charged with second-degree assault, two with resisting arrest and the rest with disorderly conduct. Asked about injuries to police officers, Deborah Grattan of the New York Committee of Solidarity With the People of El Salvador, part of the organizing coalition, said, "We were practicing nonviolence, chanting, singing, talking to employees trying to go into the building." She said the police were hurt in the course of pushing and shoving demonstrators. In Washington, several dozen demonstrators linked arms to bar entrances to a State Department building and sat down on the sidewalk. A total of 44 were arrested for blocking public roadways. Vicki Gross, coordinator of the D.C. Committee in Solidarity With the People of El Salvador, said the Washington demonstration was one of 60 across the country since March 17. "We were protesting the US intervention in El Salvador, where our government is spending \$1.5 million a day. We were also protesting US support for the elections. Elections in El Salvador are not free and not fair." A report by Xinhua said that

over 300 people were arrested throughout the US in demonstrations on Monday. On March 21 in testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee, Secretary of State James Baker asked Congress to delay demands to reduce aid to El Salvador, asserting that Cristiani should be permitted to serve as president for a time "before we start condemning (him) in knee-jerk fashion." Baker expressed frustration with some Democratic congresspersons who were ready to demand cuts in military aid to El Salvador because of human rights violations, which are expected to escalate with ARENA controlling both the legislative and executive branches of government. For several years, human rights groups and numerous congresspersons have said that the judicial branch is so weak as to be ineffectual in curbing rights violations. One group of congresspersons, led by Rep. David Obey (D-WI), has proposed releasing US economic aid to the country in increments with the option of cutting the aid if the Salvadoran government failed to meet predetermined criteria. An unnamed State Department official cited by AFP denounced that approach as "unbelievable micro-management." On March 21 a New York Times editorial (broadcast by Notimex) said that no strategic interest for the US in El Salvador justifies signing a blank check for death squads. The Times called on Washington to receive with skepticism Cristiani's description of his party as conservative, but moderate. The Times pointed out that ARENA was founded by Maj. Roberto D'Aubuisson, who for many years has been linked to death squads. The editorial added that the nature of Cristiani's government will be made clear very soon, and if rights abuses escalate, the US will almost certainly interrupt the aid flow. Because Cristiani knows this, he has said he is committed to continue the efforts of the Duarte administration toward improving the country's human rights record, and has pledged to seek out and punish responsible persons. The editorial stated that before Duarte's election in 1984, El Salvador resembled a funeral parlor more than a country, with a toll of 7,000 assassinations and disappearances per year. The US, said the Times, has done little in support of peace talks in El Salvador, but much to strengthen the government. At present, said the editorial, Washington's task is to do what it can to bring about a permanent end to the blood bath in El Salvador. Response to Rebel Tactics At a press conference in San Salvador on March 21, Guillermo Ungo, candidate of the leftist Democratic Convergence, and leader of the FMLN's long-time ally, the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), said the rebels had committed a serious tactical error by trying to disrupt the election since doing so favored ARENA. In Ungo's words, "The intensification of the war on part of both armies disrupted the people's will," and "the Convergence lost votes." He acknowledged there were differences between the FMLN and the FDR, but described them terms of "temporal and conjunctural tactics." The Social Democrat politician added that the guerrillas "also managed to demonstrate its military force and prove that in this country there is no solution or peace without negotiations with the FMLN." According to Ungo, the Democratic Convergence has become the country's third most important political force. Chavez Mena attributed his loss in large part to the "abstention," or low voter turnout, caused in part by the FMLN's boycott and transport strike. Statements by FMLN on Elections In a March 20 broadcast by Radio Venceremos, the FMLN announced termination of the transport strike which began March 16. The rebels described the strike which paralyzed 90% of the country for four days, closings of gasoline stations, interruption of electricity and water services, and military actions throughout the country, as a political-military victory. At a news conference in Mexico City on March 21, Ana Guadalupe Martinez, member of the FMLN's political commission, said, "Although the latest results show [Cristiani] won 54% percent of the vote, that would actually only be about one-quarter of registered voters." The FMLN spokesperson also said the apparent ARENA victory showed the Christian Democrat party's inability to govern the country. She said that ARENA "will oblige the Christian Democrats to move to the opposition and to strengthen the bloc

of political forces for peace" who favor dialogue with the guerrillas. Results of the elections, said Martinez, "reflect the fact that the majority of Salvadorans support the proposals for negotiation and peace the FMLN presented to President Jose Napoleon Duarte in January." Martinez and other rebel spokespersons claimed the total of abstentions, the 5% rate of defaced or annulled ballots and the votes for the Democratic Convergence amounted to a majority for the FMLN's position on resolving the Salvadoran crisis. Martinez said that events on election day were "proof of the force of the FMLN veto in El Salvador's political reality...Any party that thinks it can rule without negotiating with the FMLN is lost." Next, Martinez said the rebels would accept blame for the poor performance of the Democratic Convergence. If the rebels participate in an election they will support the Convergence, Martinez said, adding that the leftist coalition had contributed to the political debate in El Salvador. Salvador Samayoa, another political commission member, said the rebels were willing to talk to ARENA but had nothing specific to propose and were reassessing their January offer in light of the results. Rebel leaders had offered to participate if the election was postponed until fall and fairness was guaranteed. When the government and most political parties failed to act on the proposal, the rebels then launched a campaign to demonstrate that no solution to the country's crisis was possible without FMLN participation. A communique by the FMLN said the loss by Christian Democrat candidate Fidel Chavez Mena was a defeat for US policy. It added that ARENA is "a party of landholders and businessmen" with those interests at heart. The FMLN statement said: "Hundreds of thousands of citizens, more than a million Salvadorans, despite being registered to vote, refused to go to the polls, and more than 200,000 of those who did voided their vote or left the ballot blank...The votes for ARENA add up to a minority less than one-fifth of all Salvadorans. "A great many of this minority that voted for Cristiani went to the polls tricked by ARENA'S campaign, which promised work, housing, schools, public health, education and economic prosperity for the country... "Mr. Cristiani's election cannot be considered morally or politically legitimate." "The FMLN has no illusions, even though Cristiani said he is ready to talk but not to negotiate," the rebels said, adding that they "will insist in negotiating a peace, but while there are no reliable successes, we will continue to use arms." (Basic data from Notimex, AP, DPA, 03/20/89, 03/21/89; AFP, 03/20-22/89; Xinhua, 03/21/89; New York Times, 03/20-22/89)

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