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Summary Of Salvadoran Elections To 1985

by Deborah Tyroler

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Since gaining political independence from Spain in the early 19th century, the coup d'etat was the principal means of changing administrations in El Salvador until well into the present century. As revenue from coffee exports boosted the national budget three-fold between 1900 and 1914, a faction of the landed oligarchy was able to assume direct and unchallenged political control, and for a period of 18 years (1913-1931) the presidency was the exclusive domain of the Melendez-Quinonez clan. Clan members "elected" and appointed each other with great consideration for various relatives. When coffee prices plummeted as a result of the 1929 stock market crash, El Salvador entered a period of social and political crisis. Although President Pio Romero Bosque (1927-1931) had been put in power by the Melendez-Quinonez clan, he permitted a genuine election in November 1930. Romero did not nominate a successor, throwing the oligarchy into confusion. Six candidates, five of whom were distinctly conservative, decided to run. The election was won with surprising ease by the liberal candidate, civilian Arturo Araujo. Araujo inherited a regime that was bankrupt, corrupt and unable to exercise independent authority. Mistrusted by the oligarchy, opposed by workers and peasants, and surrounded by a discontented officer corps, Araujo's rule lasted nine months. A military junta led by Gen. Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez seized power in December 1931, and promptly proceeded to ruthlessly suppress a peasant uprising, leaving 30,000 dead (including Augustin Farabundo Marti). Hernandez ran a repressive military dictatorship until 1944, when an officer conspiracy removed him. Gen. Salvador Castaneda Castro assumed the presidency in 1945. He was ousted by a military junta led by Maj. Oscar Osorio in December 1948. Osorio was elected, and actually managed to stay until the end of his term in 1956. Osorio's party, the Partido Revolucionario de Unificacion Democratica (PRUD), controlled elections, monopolized the legislature, and elected Osorio's successor, Lt. Col. Jose Maria Lemus who received 93% of the vote. The small opposition complained of widespread ballot tampering, but to no avail. Lemus stayed on until an insurrection in October 1960 coup brought to power a military-civilian junta, which lasted all of three months. That junta was overthrown by another junta led by Col. Julio Adalberto Rivera. Rivera ran for president under the National Conciliation Party (PCN) ticket in 1962. He was succeeded in 1967 by his colleague-in-arms Col. Fidel Sanchez Hernandez, and in 1972, by Col. Arturo Armando Molina, both of the PCN. As opposition to this succession of rightist regimes increased, liberal and reformist politicians grouped together to form the Union Nacional Opositora (UNO), with Jose Napoleon Duarte and Guillermo Ungo as running mates for the 1972 elections. As the elections drew near, it became clear that UNO would win. The PCN, or the military, tried everything, from murdering competitors' aides to the sabotage of opposition broadcasts and the control of voting booths by government troops. Early returns in the capital showed UNO with a strong lead. Suddenly, a complete radio blackout was followed by the announcement that Col. Molina had been "elected." In 1977, UNO again competed for power by electoral means. Again, the military blocked its efforts, declaring Gen. Humberto Romero the winner after extensive fraud. The massive protests that resulted were violently repressed. Despite the imposition of martial law, guerrilla activity and popular demonstrations continued. In 1979, Romero was overthrown by a group of reformist junior officers who feared that El Salvador's military government would face the same fate as the Somoza regime in Nicaragua if something was not done to gain popular support.

The new junta government included three civilians and promised reforms. It expected but did not receive strong support from Washington. Older, hard-line military officers led by Defense Minister Col. Jose Guillermo Garcia permitted only superficial changes. The junta could not halt rightwing terror and military violence. On Jan. 3, 1980, junta civilian members Guillermo Ungo and Ramon Mayorga resigned. The second junta formed on Jan. 10 included two Christian Democrats, but the junta was short-lived. On March 3, Christian Democrat Hector Dada resigned. PDC leader Napoleon Duarte took Dada's place in what became the third junta government. Duarte became the country's first civilian president in 49 years (since Araujo), a privilege granted him due to US pressure and his loyalty to the military institution. As Duarte said at the time, "The only reason I am in this position is because I have the support of the Army." The power behind the throne was Gen. Garcia. Duarte's government lasted until March 28, 1982, when Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, leader of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) gained power in the National Assembly. In the 1982 legislative elections, a total of 1,362,000 voters cast ballots from an eligible total of 2,439,000. More than a third of registered voters (38%) stayed home. The Christian Democratic party captured 40% of the ballots cast. ARENA received 29.5%, establishing itself as the country's second largest party. In alliance with the rightwing National Conciliation Party (PCN), recipient of 19.2% of the votes, ARENA was able to form a controlling bloc in the Legislative Assembly. Candidate D'Aubuisson promised to abolish the US-supported agrarian reform and to unleash the security forces on the opposition. When he became president of the National Assembly, the US and the military "persuaded" D'Aubuisson to accept Alvaro Magana as the country's provisional president. As longtime president of the National Mortgage Bank, member of the coffee oligarchy and a wealthy lawyer who had studied economics at the University of Chicago, the US believed Magana could provide a dignified, centrist image to the government. In the 1984 presidential elections, out of 2,530,000 eligible voters, 1,113,000 (44%) abstained. Duarte won, but did not receive a majority of the vote. Washington spent over \$10 million on the Salvadoran elections, and the political section of the US Embassy became the largest in the world. The Christian Democrats also won the 1985 legislative and municipal elections. In that balloting, 58%, or 1,523,000 eligible voters decided not to participate. Less than one million voters went to the polls. Many Salvadorans became increasingly frustrated by the Christian Democrats' inability to deliver on their electoral promises. Results of the March 1988 legislative elections provided evidence of the deterioration in the Christian Democrat image. Out of 2,700,00 eligible voters, only 1,650,000 (61%) registered to vote. Of these, 943,400 cast valid ballots. The rest did not vote, or spoiled their ballots. Abstention reached 65% of the eligible population. Of the valid ballots, 385,000 went to ARENA, and 231,000 for the Christian Democrats, or 11% and 9%, respectively, of eligible voters. [Basic data from Tom Barry and Deb Preusch, *The Central America Fact Book* (New York, Grove Press, 1986); *Encyclopedia of Latin America* (McGraw-Hill, 1974); reports by Radio Venceremos, 03/03-19/89]

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