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Commentary: El Salvador Loses Its Center—slides Back To Polarization That Started Civil War

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Commentary: El Salvador Loses Its Center Back To Polarization That Started Civil War

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[The article below was distributed by the Pacific News Service on 03/20-26/89. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] By Bob Ostertag After a decade of US-backed attempts to forge a moderate center as an alternative to leftist revolution in this war-ravaged nation, the March 19 presidential elections have brought the nation back to the stark political polarization that started the war in the first place. Once again, an extreme right-wing government is facing a marxist insurgency with little in between. Whatever there had been of a political center represented by the Christian Democrat party of currency president Jose Napoleon Duarte was summarily pushed aside. Over half of those who voted (some 1 million in all) did so for Alfredo "Fredy" Cristiani, the candidate of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), now president-elect. But at least 800,000 registered voters did not vote at all. While the guerrillas of the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) had called for a boycott of the election after a rebel peace proposal was rejected, the low voter turnout did not reflect a broad swing of public sentiment to the left. Many voters stayed away from the polls due to fear or lack of transport, as rebels attacked numerous towns and brought public transportation to a halt. Nor did the Cristiani vote, estimated at some 500,000, necessarily reflect a dramatic swing by the populace to the right. The fear and uncertainty have helped push the rightists over the top, as the highly motivated and organized ARENA supporters turned out to vote in party-provided transportation while other voters stayed home. Despite the reputation of ARENA leadership for violent anti-communism, the party's campaign was empty of ideology, focusing instead on the much more popular issue of the corruption of the ruling Christian Democrats. Nevertheless, the elections are a political watershed in El Salvador's civil war. The several thousand cadres of the FMLN and their counterparts in ARENA have virtually cleared the field of other political players. Both sides will face daunting challenges in the coming weeks. The FMLN, while paralyzing the country and launching widespread attacks in the early morning hours of election day, failed to demonstrate a military capability equal to that predicted by their spokespersons beforehand. Full details of the fighting in more remote areas are unknown, and the rebel hype prior to election day may have been intended in part to throw the army off balance. But at least in the politically crucial capital city, the army carried the day. Thousands of troops covered the city, and the rebels managed only one minor incursion in the working class barrio of San Ramon. Furthermore, the rebels' political allies in the Democratic Convergence, a coalition of Social Democratic politicians who participated in the elections, did extremely poorly in the voting. They failed to pull away from the pack of largely irrelevant, minuscule parties clustered in the single digit returns. Convergence leaders had complained that the violence and the guerrilla boycott seriously hampered their campaign, and vainly called on the guerrillas to lift their traffic ban on the day of the elections. The difficulties confronting ARENA, however, may be even more imposing as they seek to govern a country where some 70,000 have died in political violence over the last decade. Despite an economy ravaged by war and sabotage, they will now have to deliver on campaign promises of expanded public health services, state-backed housing loans and similar programs for virtually anyone who asks. In fact, analysts agree that the first order of business for the Cristiani government
after taking power on June 1 will be a sharp devaluation of the national currency. Furthermore, ARENA is expected to move quickly to "privatize" agricultural cooperatives formed during the US-designed land reform program nine years ago. This will put the new government on a collision course with many of the cooperative members. The cooperatives form the backbone of the rural vote which brought current president Duarte to power five years ago, but drew increasingly away from the Christian Democrats as the cooperatives fell into financial chaos. Many now see the ARENA privatization program as a veiled attempt to turn the cooperatives back to their previous owners, the oligarchs who form the core of ARENA, and have threatened to "take up arms" in response. It was, after all, the more or less overt rule of the oligarchs in the 1960s and 1970s that led El Salvador into civil war in the first place. And though they have again placed themselves at the helm of the government by astutely capitalizing on the mistakes of the Christian Democrats, it is doubtful they can now end the war they helped start.

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