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El Salvador: Cabinet Minister Assassinated

by Deborah Tyroler

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On June 9, unidentified gunmen killed Jose Antonio Rodriguez Porth, minister of the presidency, shortly after he left his home in western San Salvador. Rodriguez, 73, died after arriving at Zaldivar Hospital. Rodriguez's car was riddled with machine gun fire. His driver and bodyguard also died in the attack, according to Armando Calderon Sol, president of the Nationalist Republican Alliance and mayor of San Salvador. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. It was the first attack on an ARENA official since President Alfredo Cristiani took office June 1, and the fourth attack on party officials this year. Rodriguez Porth was the highest ranking official killed in the nine-year civil war. Considered chief of staff for President Alfredo Cristiani, Rodriguez was a founding member of ARENA, and considered one of the party's principal ideologues. He served as a vice minister in the 1940s, a member of the civilian-military junta in 1961 and foreign minister in 1978. Rodriguez Porth was considered a "hard-liner" whose philosophy would dominate a cabinet composed largely of technocrats and relatively inexperienced politicians. However, recently he had reportedly supported calls for negotiations to settle the war. As a result, some analysts believe he may have been killed by "rightwing extremists" who are loathe to see "moderation" take hold in ARENA. According to the New York Times, "The theory was in large part fueled by the circumstances of the killing. Instead of driving himself to work as usual, witnesses said Rodriguez Porth was picked up today by a jeep. He was seated in the back seat on the curb side when a car pulled up and shots were fired, the witnesses said." Gerardo Le Chevallier, leader of the Christian Democratic Party, said the polarization that the party had expected when ARENA came to power had begun. Guillermo Ungo, a Social Democrat and political ally of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), called it "an assassination in cold blood...that does not contribute in any way to peaceful coexistence and dialogue." Calderon blamed the FMLN for the attack. The rebels were also blamed by unidentified US diplomats, and army and police officials cited by the New York Times. At a press conference, US Ambassador William Walker said: "I am obviously appalled by this act of mindless terror, shocked that anyone would attempt to project their political will by gunning down in cold blood a 73-year-old man...The motive behind this brutal assassination is all too clear. It fits the pattern of other recent terrorist attacks, so provocative, so repugnant that the government, or others, must retaliate." The Attorney General, the highest ranking ARENA member to have served in the outgoing Christian Democratic government was killed in April. A new rightist group claimed responsibility for the assassination. (Basic data from AP, 06/09/89; Xinhua, New York Times, 06/10/89)

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