10-6-1989

Interview: Ignacio Ellacuria, Rector Of Central American University (San Salvador)

Deborah Tyroler

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation
https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/3439

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Interview: Ignacio Ellacuria, Rector Of Central American University (san Salvador)

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Friday, October 6, 1989

Jesuit priest Ignacio Ellacuria is rector of the Simeon Canas Central American University in San Salvador. The institution is run by the Roman Catholic Church; a large proportion of the faculty are members of the Jesuit order. Accused by rightists of "subversive activities," UCA has often been the target of bombings and other forms of harassment. In July, the university's print shop was destroyed by a bomb. The interview below was conducted by Pensamiento Propio, a service of the Regional Coordination for Economic and Social Research of Central America and the Caribbean (CRIES, Managua), and distributed on Sept. 27. Pensamiento Propio (PP): How has the Esquipulas II peace process affected the situation in El Salvador? Ellacuria: The peace process has affected our situation a great deal. For instance, two years ago the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) openly opposed the regional peace plan. At the August summit in Tela, Honduras, ARENA party President Alfredo Cristiani agreed to signing a opposition to the regional peace plan to one of signing a death sentence for the Nicaraguan contras. He has also proposed opening negotiations with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The Esquipulas process has also had repercussions on the FMLN. The rebels' armed struggle, although not discredited at present, will be in the future if they do not negotiate. The four summit meetings of the Esquipulas process have been very positive, and hopefully, the road to peace will be consolidated when the circle of summits closes next year with the fifth one in Managua. PP: Did anyone win at Tela? Ellacuria: Cristiani himself said there were no winners or losers. Cristiani came out legitimized as a follower of the democratization process initiated by [former president Jose Napoleon] Duarte, and violence as a means to obtain power was delegitimized. At the same time, Tela made a very clear distinction between the contras and the FMLN, and the five presidents ratified what the FMLN had been putting forward for some time: negotiations. From Tela, an image was projected of an FMLN that is not the enemy of democracy and of a Cristiani who is not the head of a dictatorial regime. PP: Cristiani shows a willingness to negotiate, but the ultra-right and the army speak of dialogue without negotiation... Ellacuria: It is necessary to see where we are coming from and where we are going. The extreme right present in the national government, the army, and the party has maintained until very recently that dialogue would be anti-patriotic. In this sense, for the right to speak of dialogue is a major advance. There is an emotional and a semantic problem here. The right cannot accept the idea of the guerrillas having a share of power, so they reject modifications to the Constitution and participation of the FMLN in power and in the army. My thesis is that we have entered into a new phase in the Salvadoran process. The most recalcitrant rightists felt betrayed by the Tela agreements. That's why you hear appeasing declarations from Defense Minister General Larios about how it is possible to dialogue but not to negotiate. Cristiani, after all is said and done, had achieved consensus on June 1 when he made the proposal to hold an uninterrupted, unconditional dialogue through a commission. The Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and the Democratic Convergence, opting not to give any sort of winning card to Cristiani, hurt themselves by refusing to participate in this commission. The commission could not be considered partisan to the extreme right. The PDC and the Convergence would have been able to withdraw from the commission if it failed to accomplish anything. Cristiani
was planning a serious process of dialogue that would have caused divisions in his party. Now he has returned from Tela offering dialogue without the pre-condition of a cease-fire. PP: Does Cristiani have enough influence to do this? Ellacuria: Alone, no. For the first part of his projected, Cristiani counted on support from the armed forces high command and the US embassy. Dialogue is difficult to sell in El Salvador; you are quickly accused of being a communist if you propose it. But the tendency is irreversible now. No one here can withstand another five years of war, not even the United States. And the confrontational attitudes mistakenly assumed by the two sides after the March 19 elections seem to have run their course and are giving way to conciliatory positions. In addition, there are no significant symptoms of Cristiani being weakened. His economic measures have been applied very carefully and that is a concession to the FMLN. There is evident fear of a social explosion. But Cristiani has shown himself to be a good calculator and is simultaneously presenting the argument to the right that national conditions do not permit going further with his government's economic plan. PP: What about the differences inside ARENA? Ellacuria: In my view, ARENA has three factions with about equal influence. The "squadronists," dominant in 1980-82 and today a minority, want a "dirty war." The "militarists," led by [former major Roberto] D'Aubuisson, favor total war and oppose negotiation. The third faction consists of the "civilists," who are led by Cristiani. The three factions agree on the economic level to make things as easy as possible for capital. For Cristiani, transforming all factions into civilists is desirable, or transofrming ARENA into a conservative right-wing party with a more or less reasonable political practice. PP: What do you think of ARENA's version of the recent murders [of government officials, including Cristiani's main adviser]? Ellacuria: Based on my experience, the FMLN is credible. When it does not take responsibility for an action, you can believe the rebels were not involved. So these murders have to be attributed to ARENA's "squadronist" faction. Cristiani did not fall for the provocation and impose immediate ultra-repressive measures. He did not withdraw his offer to negotiate. Those actions, aimed at creating domestic instability, failed. This is something which the FMLN has also had illusions about. PP: Has repression increased since ARENA took power? Ellacuria: Quite frankly, I do not think that repression has increased since Cristiani took office. More than repression, there is persecution by the police in order to find out who the FMLN guerrillas and their contacts are in the cities because of their growing presence in urban areas. That, from the point of view of political pragmatism, is inevitable under any regime. It would be quite another thing if the past policy of terror killing 200 people a night as was done in 1980-82 had been resumed. There are definitely more human rights violations, but I do not think there has been a major increase over last year. Next, actions by the police and military have little to do with Cristiani, as was the situation under Duarte. Their actions are determined by the High Command establishing a certain general line of action and strategy with the US embassy which does not fundamentally contradict Cristiani's policies. PP: Some accuse of the FMLN of terrorism... Ellacuria: That is part of the army's ideological and psychological warfare techniques. In reality, the FMLN is not a terrorist movement even though in the course of its history, it has carried out terrorist acts. Some of these, such as the assassinations of mayors, the FMLN does not recognize as terrorist. In any event, these kinds of actions have been a small part of the FMLN's overall activity. In its latest proposal for dialogue, the FMLN has even offered to end insurrectional violence, or economic sabotage. This could become an opening point in negotiations. The FMLN has to abandon terrorist violence for ethical reasons, and insurrectional violence which usually does not result in deaths, for political reasons. PP: Do you feel there is no future for an insurrectional explosion? Ellacuria: For some time now, we have been arguing that the probability of insurrection is not very high. Perhaps that has been the point of most dispute with the FMLN, but time is proving us right. In 1982, sabotaging the energy network...
and calling a transport strike animated the masses to rise up. Today, in contrast, these actions create resentment and animosity among the people as shown irrefutably by our polls. Next, if the FMLN continues dreaming indefinitely of an insurrection, it cannot make progress in a strategy of political struggle, a struggle which would be profoundly revolutionary (and openly marxist as Comandante [Joaquin] Villalobos says). Conditions for political struggle have not yet manifested throughout the country. This strategy was already elaborated by the FMLN General Command last year when they met for months in what I called their "Vatican II." Out of their debates came the FMLN's January proposal for participation in the elections. This process of "getting up to date" has not yet been concluded, and there are tactical vacillations. But if conditions improve, armed struggle can be supplanted by political struggle. The people in the FMLN are very capable, reasonable, patriotic, and by taking a close look at the 40 years of their heroic experience, they have realized what is possible and what is not. PP: What is your view of meeting in Mexico between the opposition parties and the FMLN? Ellacuria: It is an obvious political ploy for whoever is in the opposition...to weaken the government...There is also interest on the FMLN's part in forming an anti-ARENA alliance. But the PDC's political program, like that of the National Conciliation Party, is much closer to ARENA's program than to the FMLN's. The meeting in Mexico is a purely situational convergence. If the PDC were in power, it would once again become the FMLN's major enemy. PP: What role is being played by the United States? Ellacuria: There are signs of a positive change between Bush and Reagan administrations. The United States continues to be the determinant factor for Central America and for the Salvadoran process. If Washington can arrive at an understanding with Managua and the Sandinistas show that they can respect it, that experience could be transferred to El Salvador. In this respect, the coming elections in Nicaragua will be decisive for the entire region.

-- End --