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El Salvador: Challenges Of Peace, Democracy & National Reconstruction (part 2)

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The Bush administration recently named Michael Kozak to replace William Walker as US ambassador to El Salvador. Kozak, a former deputy assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, is a "heavyweight" in Washington Latin America policymaking circles and a White House adviser. His appointment has been interpreted as a sign of the high priority the US is placing on El Salvador. * The socio-economic aspects of the peace accords, and particularly the land issue, are potentially explosive. The accords stipulate that landholdings in excess of 245 ha. are to be redistributed, and land currently occupied by farmers in rebel-controlled territories is to be legalized. Land has historically been the Salvadoran elite's power base, and land tenure is at the very heart of Salvadoran social conflict. The pattern of land tenure that emerges from the transition period will be critical in determining a new internal correlation of political forces. There are sure to be ongoing, and often violent, struggles over land during the transition. On Jan. 30, for example, National Guard troops forcibly evicted 200 people from the Los Planchos cooperative in Usulutan Department. Four persons were wounded by gunfire, and 12 arrested. President Alfredo Cristiani has accused the FMLN of "instigating land invasions." FMLN leader Joaquin Villalobos warned that the peace process is "getting bogged down in the land issue and this already constitutes a setback in compliance with the peace accords." * There is "built-in" tension in a transition process where two broad "historic blocs" have diametrically opposed conceptions of how Salvadoran society should be organized. The dominant bloc in Salvadoran society consists of the ARENA party and "New Right" business associations, industrialists, financiers and non-traditional exporters. The US and multilateral financial institutions support the dominant bloc's neoliberal socio-economic program in effect since 1989. The opposing power bloc the FMLN, its social base and a loose amalgamation of civic groups, labor organizations and political parties is currently less organized, but has the potential for broader social support. Although less clearly defined than the New Right program, the opposition bloc's vision for the future runs contrary to the neoliberal model: reconstruction and development built around the domestic market and food self-sufficiency alongside exports, democratization of rural and urban property relations, redistribution of wealth, an important role for the state in regulating the production process, and government responsibility for social welfare. This "built-in" tension is already being expressed in a sharp debate over the nature of the government's National Reconstruction Program (PNR). In mid-February, opposition leader Ruben Zamora accused the Cristiani government of having drawn up the PNR without having first consulted with the FMLN, opposition political parties and popular organizations, as stipulated in the peace accords. The government would like to have all foreign reconstruction funds channeled through the state, giving it ultimate control over the destination of these resources. The funds could then be used in ways which would isolate the FMLN's social base, and focus on infrastructure projects to facilitate recovery of the private business sector. The FMLN has been sharply critical of the government's conception of the PNR. It has proposed that non-governmental organizations handle some of the funds and that at least a portion of the resources be channeled to social and economic programs for the impoverished majority, including the Front's
social base in the countryside and urban slums. If military reform and the demilitarization of the
state and civil society are actually achieved in compliance with the accords, competition between
the two antagonistic projects could take place exclusively in the political terrain. However, securing
foreign aid and ensuring enough social stability to keep the peace process on track clearly require
minimal domestic consensus, which, in turn, necessitates some type of reconciliation between
the two projects. Despite these and other challenges, the peace process passed its first test on
Jan. 23 with the approval by the Legislative Assembly of a limited amnesty law that allows FMLN
representatives to return from exile, and reinitiate political organizing in the public arena. Debate
on the amnesty bill was the first test of wills between the ARENA government and the opposition.
The government favored an unconditional amnesty which would have included members of the
armed forces and the death squads responsible for serious human rights violations. Opponents
included center to left opposition parties, the FMLN, international human rights organizations, and
the Catholic Church. In the words of Auxiliary Bishop Chavez, an unconditional amnesty "would
have been opening the door to a dirty war." As approved, the amnesty law excludes individuals
found by the Truth Commission to have committed "grave acts of violence" between 1980 and
the signing of the accords. The Truth Commission's mandate includes a review of human rights
abuse cases which occurred during the civil war. The amnesty also opened the way for the FMLN to
fully cross the threshold from military to legal, political opposition. The rebels' Radio Venceremos
and Radio Farabundo Marti are now transmitting from San Salvador studios. Numerous FMLN
leaders, including Leonel Gonzales, Joaquin Villalobos, and Francisco Jovel are now high-profile
politicians residing in the capital. In the northern and eastern departments of Chalatenango,
Usulutan, Morazan, San Miguel, La Union, Cuscatlan, and Cabanas major war theaters just weeks
ago FMLN combatants began surrendering their weapons over to rebel commanders, and moving to
designated demobilization zones. The separation of government and rebel forces under supervision
of UN peacekeeping units is scheduled to conclude by March 8. The challenge now for the country's
political protagonists from the left to the right is to organize respective social bases of support,
and mobilize supporters for their programs on the entirely new landscape of peace and civic
competition. The FMLN, a revolutionary front made up of five distinct organizations, will have to
open internal debate and reconcile different tendencies which for many years had been suppressed.
But the Front's greatest test is to respond to expectations raised by its political, social and economic
proposals. The FMLN is moving towards alliance with the leftist Democratic Convergence (coalition
of three parties), and the centrist Christian Democratic Party. The FMLN's stated goal is to work
for construction of a broad center-to-left alliance which will compete against the right in the 1994
elections, and to generate the broadest possible national consensus around a program of basic social
transformation. The challenge faced by the right is perhaps even greater than that of its opponents.
Cristiani's support for the peace accords has infuriated the far-right wing of ARENA. Faced with
growing internal fissures, ARENA has managed to hold together to date due to the influence of
party co-founder Roberto D'Abuisson, who insisted on unity. The death of D'Abuisson is expected
to leave ARENA seriously weakened, if not openly divided. The far-right is not organized in the
conventional sense, outside of the death squads and loose factions within the military, ARENA and
several small right-wing parties. In a reshuffling of senior military command posts announced Jan.
12, the Cristiani government removed the most hard-line "Tandona" members. The move took place
just days before the peace accords were signed.