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LADB Staff

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Salvadoran President Francisco Flores Receives Low Marks After First 100 Days

by LADB Staff

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President Francisco Flores came into office promising both macroeconomic improvements and a reduction of poverty. But after 100 days, his popular support is evaporating under the strain of a persistent economic crisis, rising crime rates, and new austerity measures. Since taking office June 1, Flores has steadily lost standing in opinion polls, receiving failing grades in two recent samplings. In a poll conducted by the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in late August, respondents gave him 5.7 points on a scale of 10.

In a similar poll by Unimer, he received 5.3 points. In the UCA poll, half the respondents rated Flores' administration as "bad," 53.4% said his administration had no accomplishments, 93.1% said the country was in an economic crisis, 80% disapproved of the government's austerity measures, only 6.9% said he was doing something about crime, and only 3.6% said he was helping the poor.

Fabio Castillo, general coordinator of the opposition Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), said the frustration of Salvadorans is serious enough to threaten governability. Of the economic plan, Castillo said, "All he talks about is export," nothing about improving family incomes.

FMLN deputy Gerson Martinez complained that Flores has no plan and has not asked the opposition to help find one, though he talked about forging alliances during his presidential campaign. Other opposition leaders accuse him of covering up the corruption of the prior administration and of seeing economic problems from the perspective of financiers.

The collapse of public support occurred as his much touted economic program appeared to be in shambles. Before Flores' inauguration, Luis Membrano, director of the Asociacion de Industriales Salvadorenos (ASI), warned that poverty threatened democracy and that it was the president's job to do something about it after his party Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) had spent 10 years in power concentrating on improving macroeconomic indicators. "If the benefits of stability do not reach everyone, the [neoliberal] model will not be sustainable because the people will not support [Flores]," he said.

President's plan promised jobs, growth

In his economic plan, Flores promised to create jobs, revive agriculture, stimulate the growth of small businesses, and reduce poverty without ignoring structural adjustments, infrastructure improvements, and economic growth. Flores' promises were taken seriously. By the end of his first week in office, the agricultural producers organization Foro Agropecuario demanded "positive signs" that the government had policies for helping small producers.

The business organization Asociacion de la Empresa Privada (ANEP) wanted to know what Flores was going to do about increasing business competitiveness and about crime. Government workers,

including employees of the Treasury Ministry, declared a "state of emergency" for themselves and demanded salary increases. The Camara de Comercio e Industria asked Flores for industrial reconversion, trade protections, and government assistance to exporters.

Other organizations requested reforms in public health, education, and environmental protection. Flores addressed some issues, but what his economic plan came down to for many Salvadorans was an attack on the deepening economic crisis through austerity wage freezes, hiring freezes, and the application of the 13% value-added tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) on the basket of basic consumer goods (see NotiCen, 1999-01-08). During the first 100 days, the economy deteriorated, with slower growth, an increase in the fiscal deficit, rising interest rates, and reduced tax revenues.

Besides poor macroeconomic indicators, the administration has had to deal with job actions by workers in the Instituto del Seguro Social (ISSS), violent demonstrations by former members of the paramilitary Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil (see NotiCen, 1999-08-26), and a series of teachers strikes that have yet to be settled. The administration's response to strikes and protests has been to refuse to negotiate demands. Returning from a week in Taiwan during the teachers strike, Flores said he would not give in to strikes and street demonstrations.

Discussing the August poll results with reporters, UCA rector Jose Maria Tojeira attributed the low ratings to the president's lack of credibility. "Since it took power, this government has been very vague," said Tojeira. "There have scarcely been any declarations by the president, while his political plans for the future have remained unclear." Tojeira said the strikes plaguing Flores have been the result of his refusal to listen to demands and his insistence on not negotiating under pressure. If he does not start negotiating, these crises could take a violent turn, said Tojeira.

Compounding his declining support is the perception that Flores fails to communicate. In September, Flores dismissed press secretary Ricardo Rivas, a dentist, and announced he would handle press relations himself. [Sources: Notimex, 05/15/99, 05/29/99, 06/01/99, 06/02/99, 06/13/99, 07/16/99, 07/30/99, 08/23/99, 09/07/99, 09/21/99; El Diario de Hoy (El Salvador), 05/29/99, 06/01/99, 06/03/99, 07/19/99, 08/02/99, 08/17/99, 09/07/99, 09/10/99, 09/18/99, 09/23/99]

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