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## Salvadoran President Francisco Flores Moves to Address Crisis in Legislature

by LADB Staff

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After an ugly contest over leadership of the Legislative Assembly that pushed the government toward a legislative stalemate and chaos, President Francisco Flores and the opposition Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) have moved toward a political detente that has achieved at least one bipartisan vote on a social-spending bill. On May 1, the governing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) maneuvered the FMLN out of the presidency of the Legislative Assembly through an alliance with a smaller opposition party (see NotiCen, 2000-05-18).

Since then, speculation about ungovernability has thrived amid declining popular approval of the Flores administration. Political analysts have pointed out the dangers of denying the presidency of the legislature to the FMLN, which holds 31 of the 84 seats compared with ARENA's 29. "What happens when ARENA wants a bill passed?" they ask.

Political analyst Roberto Rubio said the "crude" tactic undermined governability "at a time when social and economic problems are at their worst." A study of the legislative situation by the nongovernmental Centro Civico Democratico (CCD) predicted that the FMLN would come under great pressure to stop the appointment of corrupt officials to block them from "robbing public funds," including newly borrowed funds for health and education and donations for Hurricane Mitch recovery. In the first weeks after the May 1 legislative coup,

Flores placed himself above the torrent of criticism leveled at ARENA. His job, he said, was not to evaluate what the Assembly did but to convince legislators to support projects beneficial to the nation.

While renewing his old campaign promises to fight crime and reduce poverty, Flores' popular support has sagged. A poll conducted in May by the Universidad Tecnologica found that 65.5% of respondents thought Flores had failed to deliver on his campaign promises.

In another poll taken in May by the Centro de Investigacion de la Opinion Publica (CIOPS), 55% of respondents had very little confidence in the government and another 23% had none. Asked about the May 1 maneuver in the Assembly, 46.8% agreed that the procedure was "incorrect." Nearly half said it would hurt ARENA.

More alarming for ARENA, the CIOPS poll found that 53.6% of respondents thought the FMLN would win the presidential election in 2004 if present conditions were to continue.

## *ARENA looks to renew itself*

Aside from the impending crisis in governability, ARENA had already suffered an internal crisis stemming from the March election debacle that cost the party its control of the Assembly (see NotiCen, 2000-03-16).

Flores ignored criticism from a group of party founders about the handling of the Assembly presidency. Instead, he focused on their concerns about internal party organization and structure. "I feel very happy and optimistic to hear the founders' suggestions because that is exactly what the party...leadership is looking for," Flores said. "I think what the founders are asking for is to be able to participate in the organization of the [party] Congress, and I think the [Comite Ejecutivo Nacional] COENA will listen to them."

ARENA called its IV Congreso Nacional in mid-May to discuss ways to renovate the party to initiate what ARENA legislative leader Rene Figueroa called a "process of reflection."

Former President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994) outgoing head of COENA said it was not necessary to revise the party's principles and values. What ARENA has to do is change its "policies and strategies," he said. At the same time, he insisted the party had not lost the March elections because it got more votes than FMLN. "Those who believe we are no longer the leading political force in the country are wrong," said Cristiani.

The conference made no changes in party rules or leadership, but moved to work more closely with the party's base on candidate selection. It rejected proposals to hold primary elections.

## *Flores recites accomplishments*

During his formal address to the Assembly June 1 marking his first year in office, Flores underscored his administration's accomplishments. He said he had led the economy out of recession, increased exports, and increased tax revenues. He took credit for US legislation extending trade preferences to Central America (see NotiCen, 2000-05-25), which he said would create 40,000 jobs. He also mentioned the economic-integration pact signed with Guatemala and Honduras (see NotiCen, 2000-05-11), and the Northern Triangle trade treaty with Mexico (see NotiCen, 2000-05-18).

The president omitted mention of the ongoing troubles in public transportation, strikes in the health-care sector (see NotiCen, 2000-03-16), and discontent over the tax (impuesto al valor agregado, IVA) on vegetables and other basic consumer goods (see NotiCen, 1999-09-30).

The most noteworthy part of the speech was a conciliatory gesture promising to improve relations with the Assembly. This was taken as a response to the FMLN vote the previous day for an administration bill on an US\$88 million loan for the Ministry of Education.

"I understand that the vote yesterday represents a concrete act of political will," said Flores. He called the vote a "bridge" leading to collaboration. Speaking directly to the FMLN deputies, Flores said, "I am going to cross this bridge." FMLN leader Jorge Shafik Handal said, "Finally, after one

year, he has shown conviction. We would like to believe that when he says he is going to cross the bridge, it is for cooperation."

FMLN leaders asked that ARENA cooperate on electoral and social reforms, agricultural policy, and on programs to reduce rampant crime. Meanwhile, FMLN deputy Salvador Sanchez said the FMLN would search for votes among the smaller parties in the Assembly to pass anti-poverty and other social legislation. Where it could not get the votes, it would have to count on pressure from "the workers and from the social movements." Where the FMLN holds real power is on major pieces of legislation that require a 56-vote majority.

Without the FMLN, ARENA can not get legislative approval on such matters as international loans and appointments to the Corte Suprema de Justicia. Sanchez said the FMLN would not support more privatization and foreign-debt bills that lend themselves to corruption and personal enrichment.

The FMLN has proposed a bill to double the budgetary allocations to municipal governments. The FMLN controls many of the larger town governments. "We said we would back the government, but they must support the initiative for local officials to increase their budgets and approve loans that are going to benefit the people," said Sanchez. [Sources: La Prensa Grafica (El Salvador), 05/28/00, 05/31/00, 06/02/00; Notimex, 05/08/00, 05/09/00, 05/19/00, 05/25/00, 05/28/00, 06/10/00, 06/12/00, 06/13/00]

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