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FMLN Expels Former Candidate from Party

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Long-standing disagreements within the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador have grown into a full-fledged rupture that threatens the party's strength in the Legislative Assembly and its unity in future elections. With the expulsion of reformist-faction leader Facundo Guardado, a group of his supporters has demanded the ouster of party leaders and has taken an independent voting position in the legislature.

The FMLN's disciplinary committee (Tribunal de Honor) announced Guardado's expulsion Oct. 1 after a three-month political trial driven by FMLN activities in Apopa municipality in the department of San Salvador. Guardado was the party's presidential candidate in the 1999 election. The local press speculated that 15 others belonging to Guardado's faction could follow him out of the party, including San Salvador Mayor Hector Silva, who has already threatened to leave the party to protest the expulsion.

The party's three factions are the left-wing (ortodoxo) faction led by Jorge Schafik Handal and Salvador Sanchez Cerona, the reformers (renovadores) led by Guardado, and the institutionalists (terceristas or integracionistas) led by Gerson Martinez. Essentially, the divisions conform to Cold War political tendencies, with the left wing holding on to socialist orthodoxy and calling the reformers right-wing anti-communists. The institutionalists place themselves in a nonideological middle ground and call for accommodation and unity. The divisions widened with the finger-pointing that took place after Guardado's defeat by Francisco Flores in the presidential election (see NotiCen, 1999-03-11), but they did not lead to a break. Party elections in July 1999 installed ortodoxo Fabio Castillo as party general coordinator.

With the ortodoxos in control of the party and renovadores putting aside their differences, Shafik Handal said the party had achieved unity and would be stronger. A year later, Castillo was still saying "categorically" that there was no serious trouble within the FMLN. But governing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) Deputy Roberto D'Abuisson was closer to the truth when he commented that the FMLN had only papered over its differences (see NotiCen, 1999-07-29).

The chief reasons for Guardado's expulsion were his support for the administration's dollarization of the monetary system in January (see NotiCen, 2000-12-14), a position that went against party principles; his failure to attend the party's national convention in May; and his participation in a government delegation that went to Spain seeking aid after the January and February earthquakes, even though the FMLN announced it would not send delegates. There were also questions about his handling of campaign funds in the 1996 election and some other minor charges.

All of these actions violated party statutes and directives, according to the Tribunal de Honor. Guardado's case was not helped when he turned down four invitations to attend Tribunal de Honor hearings on the charges. The central issue in all this was the suspicion that Guardado had gone over

to the ARENA side. Sanchez Cerona said Guardado's support for dollarization showed that he must have had high-level talks with the Flores administration. "We can't say whether he has sold out, but we can say that he has acted against [party] decisions," said Sanchez Corona.

Ortodoxo Deputy Humberto Centeno said Guardado was an "infiltrator financed by the right to destroy the party." He added, "This is the year of cleansing within the FMLN." Renovadores marched in protest to FMLN headquarters on Oct. 4 demanding reinstatement of Guardado and some 8,000 other renovadores who supposedly are being cut from the party membership rolls to give ortodoxos an edge in the November party elections. Guardado refuses to go But Guardado said that only God could kick him out of the FMLN. "I continue proudly with the party," he said.

The political vocabulary in El Salvador now includes the word "terrorism," even as applied to internal party frictions. Since Sept. 15, when a group of ortodoxos participating in a demonstration against government economic policies carried signs in support of accused Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden (see NotiCen, 2001-10-04), the renovadores have regarded the leftists in the party as the "Talibanes." Guardado said his expulsion was part of a "policy of terrorism." Guardado is the second major FMLN figure to be expelled from the party in recent years.

In 1996, former FMLN guerrilla commander Joaquin Villalobos left after a similar internal struggle. He and other former party members founded the Partido Democratico (PD). Until now, most FMLN members accepted the orthodox leadership of party chief Schafik Handal and legislative leader Sanchez Cerona. But the expulsion has galvanized the renovadores and thrown the party into turmoil as Guardado's supporters threaten reprisals against the ortodoxo leaders. They are demanding the leadership step aside and allow the party to elect new leaders at its Nov. 25 convention. Deputy Fabio Villalobos, a renovador, said Shafik Handal and Sanchez Cerona have damaged the party's image and should go.

Renovadores go their own way in legislature

On Oct. 4, six of the 11 renovador deputies boycotted a meeting of the FMLN Assembly delegation, refusing to recognize Sanchez Cerona as leader. The six, joined by one tercerista deputy, voted with ARENA and its satellite parties to ratify a free trade treaty with Chile in defiance of an FMLN party order to abstain. Shafik Handal led the opposition to the treaty, arguing that it would protect monopolies such as cement and beer that are owned by ARENA party leaders. He threatened consequences for those who voted with the opposition.

But renovador Maurico Estrada said the seven would vote as they pleased despite threats. "We will make these gentlemen see that the line they follow is incorrect and that we are not disposed to follow it blindly," he said. Others in the party, some from the ortodoxo wing who wanted Guardado expelled, are now saying ortodoxo and renovador leaders should all resign their posts to limit damage to the party. Estrada told the daily Prensa Grafica that Shafik Handal and Sanchez Cerona have been "defending their personal interests" in recent months and suggested they were acting out of "megalomania and sickness." They should have resigned long ago, he said. Shafik Handal should "look after his great- grandchildren and tell stories," and Sanchez Cerona should become a party

advisor, said Estrada. Schafik Handal said that he would not leave the party and that Estrada's views were "superficial."

This FMLN crisis threatens the party's national standing since it has only a plurality 31 of 84 seats in the Legislative Assembly, and half of those are either renovadores or terceristas. Furthermore, should Mayor Silva leave the FMLN, the party would be deprived of its leading presidential contender to run against ARENA's presumed candidate Roberto Murray Meza in the 2004 election. ARENA leaders were delighted with the FMLN deputies' support on the trade bill. ARENA president Murray Meza praised the seven FMLN deputies. "They have made the right decision," he said. ARENA leaders said the FMLN split showed the party could not tolerate divergence of opinion. ARENA Deputy Gerardo Suvillaga said the expulsion of Guardado was "an act of terrorism."

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