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LADB Staff

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## Leadership Changes Make ARENA Pro-Business

by LADB Staff

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El Salvador's governing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) has installed a new executive council (Consejo Ejecutivo Nacional, COENA) dominated by business leaders. The new council is supposed to unify and modernize the party in preparation for elections in 2003 and 2004, but some party factions, including influential party founders (fundadores), are not satisfied with the changes. The shake-up in leadership follows a period of decline during which ARENA lost ground in the Legislative Assembly.

The opposition Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) went from 14 seats in 1994 to 31 in 2000. ARENA has only 29 seats in the 84-seat unicameral body (see NotiCen, 2000-03-16). ARENA also lost the San Salvador mayoral race to FMLN candidate Hector Silva in 2000. Judging from the monolithic COENA now in place, party leaders intend to win back lost ground by concentrated attention to economic development in key sectors. ARENA president Walter Araujo recieved much of the blame for the party's declining fortunes. He took over after former President Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994) stepped down in June 2000.

A group of fundadores pressed for Araujo's removal and for modernizing the party with broader representation of the base. ARENA president ousted In May, party divisions erupted when Interior Minister Mario Acosta resigned to work exclusively on party issues, announcing he wanted to head COENA a challenge to Araujo.

### *Araujo resigned under fire on*

Aug. 16 and was replaced not by Acosta but by beer magnate Roberto Murray Meza, who had been ARENA's director of economic and social affairs. Along with Araujo, all COENA members also resigned, clearing the way for a major overhaul. Murray Meza said in an interview with the daily Prensa Grafica that Araujo's decision was "an act of great political maturity." He said the new COENA would allow the party to modernize and to become more representative. Mercedes Gloria Salguero Gross, a party founder and member of the Liga Areneros al Rescate (LAR), said Araujo's departure was a good thing, giving the party time to regroup for the next elections. Fundadores set up LAR during the Araujo presidency to push for reforms and, in the words of LAR president Roberto Avila, rescue "the party mystique."

On Sept. 30, the party's General Ordinary Assembly confirmed Murray Meza as president and elected a new COENA. The officers will serve a two-year term taking the party through the 2003 elections. The newspaper Diario de Hoy described the new COENA members as independent businessmen without ambitions for power. Eight of the 13 new members, including Murray Meza, are high-powered business executives. The list includes Banco Agricola president Archie Baldocchi and Guillermo Sol Bang, president of the electric company Comision Ejecutiva Hidroelectrica del Rio Lempa (CEL). After the vote, Murray Meza said the party would reinvent itself and, within 18

months, it would no longer be the party of 2001. While sticking to traditional principles, it would be more modern and prepared to win the next three presidential elections.

### *Party elders are disappointed*

An outgoing member of COENA said LAR wanted two seats on the committee, but got none. With LAR frozen out of COENA, LAR president Avila said he was disappointed with the outcome and talked of creating a "new force." He did not say whether that would be a new party or a new faction within ARENA, but the remark was ominous since LAR was expected to dissolve after the replacement of Araujo. "We are a little surprised, especially at the failure to include some of the political forces that figure in the party. We were expecting a more inclusive COENA, more in tune with the party's needs," Avila said.

Salguero Gross, who apparently wanted a place on COENA, said the election of so many officers from business had "privatized" the party. She told Prensa Grafica that she felt "defrauded" by the results, in part because the rejection of her bid for a spot on COENA had diminished the representation of women at the top of the party. COENA's lack of representation was a surprise, she said. "Is it all right that there are no campesinos or workers in COENA?" she asked.

The press reported discontent among ARENA assembly deputies because they were not represented in COENA either. El Diario de Hoy said a "quiet rebellion" took place in the Assembly when some ARENA deputies tried to unseat Rene Figueroa as leader of the party delegation and get themselves included in COENA. Murray Meza refused any such changes and the rebellion ended. Those who allegedly participated denied there had been any rebellion. Flores was ecstatic about the new council. He told La Prensa Grafica he had never seen "such prestige, leadership, and ability together in one body." Responding to Salguero Gross' privatization remark, Flores said it was the kind of criticism he would expect from leftists.

As for broad representation, Flores said COENA should not be seen as a system of quotas representing all sectors. "What we are looking for is party leadership," he said, "the best to move the whole party forward." ARENA business executive Orlando de Sola said the new COENA showed that divisions in ARENA had hardened. To choose only businessmen for COENA is a reflection of party divisions, he said. "This is not a party of common citizens," he said, but of merchants, manufacturers, and bankers.

Analysts consulted by Notimex suggested that the turmoil in ARENA and in the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) shows the exhaustion of the party system in place since the 1992 peace accords. In preparing for the upcoming elections, both parties have taken ideological positions that exclude important sectors both in their parties and in the electorate. The FMLN recently expelled former presidential candidate Facundo Guardado for taking alleged centrist and pro-government positions (see NotiCen, 2001-10-11). The FMLN now is dominated by orthodox leftist thinking from the party's guerrilla past, and ARENA is controlled by orthodox neoliberal economic interests.

Political analyst Napoleon Campos said that, to purify their parties, the FMLN used a purge reminiscent of the Stalinist era in the former Soviet Union, while ARENA did it more "elegantly," excluding party sectors from leadership roles. Miguel Cruz, head of the Instituto de Opinion Publica at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), said the party shake-ups have increased political polarization, which contributes to conditions that could bring on independent populist leaders.

A similar polarization in 1989 in Peru led to the rise of Alberto Fujimori, he said. "We are at a very similar moment, very delicate. I think the door is open for the emergence of new political actors."

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