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FMLN Reformers Struggle Against Orthodox Faction

by LADB Staff

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Defeated in the battle for leadership of the Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), the party's reformers (renovadores) find themselves outside the party as six reform deputies explore an alliance with minor parties within the Legislative Assembly. The FMLN held internal primary elections Nov. 25 that gave the left-wing orthodox faction (Corriente Revolucionaria Socialista, CRS) a firm grip on power.

Salvador Sanchez Ceren of the CRS defeated reform candidate Francisco Jovel and two others to become the party's national coordinator. Orthodox leaders now control almost all top posts in the party. Reformers charged at the time of the election that the CRS faction was planning election fraud and demanded an investigation (see NotiCen, 2001-12-06). At the party convention in December, the CRS and the neutral or tercerista factions monopolized the leadership positions and took control of the ethics tribunal as reformers boycotted.

Report gives credence to fraud charges

In early February, an anonymous report circulated within the party claiming that "phantom" voters had shown up in the final tallies and that numerous other irregularities occurred such as falsified documents and stuffed ballot boxes. The report said that, in some municipalities, every vote cast was for the CRS, and in others more than 100% of registered party members voted. In one voting place, election officials counted 87 ballots, but only 34 people had voted. In another, an orthodox candidate received 200 votes from 87 eligible voters. In a municipality where no one voted, 200 votes were counted. Only 38.14% of eligible voters cast ballots, yet a review of the final tally showed 30 municipalities where supposedly more than 75% voted.

The FMLN electoral tribunal was swamped with complaints. In one municipality, a reformer lost by the votes of two drunks and a party member ineligible to vote. The tribunal refused to overturn the results but did annul elections in seven other municipalities because of obvious fraud. It upheld the results in all the others. Analyzing the total vote more closely, the report concluded that the CRS had attracted only a tiny minority of eligible voters. Of the nearly 75,000 members eligible to vote, said the report, only 16.28% chose CRS candidates, while the reform and tercerista candidates received a combined total of 21.1%. No one signed the report, but it is assumed by its language that it came from the tercerista faction.

Reformers said the report was prepared by three terceristas who sat on the party's electoral tribunal: Ileana Rogel, Liduvina Magaron, and Arturo Fernandez. Reformers said some in the orthodox faction privately agreed with the report's findings, but the CRS publicly denied the accusations of fraud. CRS leaders portrayed the report as part of a disinformation campaign "to halt our political progress," and likened it to dirty tricks perpetrated by the governing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA). The report said the fraud plan was directed by the Secretaria Nacional de

Organizacion (SNO), which manages the FMLN's membership rolls and is controlled by the CRS. Deputy Medardo Gonzalez runs SNO and saw to it that reformers and terceristas were left off the voter lists, the report said.

Reformers consider starting new party

Jovel, leader of the six reform deputies in the Assembly, said that, before being expelled, he would quit the party and form a new one because of the need for the left to readjust to worldwide changes. "The communists [CRS] are digging the FMLN's grave," reformer Raul Mijango said. Considering that the party is likely to die, "it's necessary to look for another alternative, a new hope." Facundo Guardado, the party's presidential candidate in 1999, was expelled from the party last year for having sided with ARENA on several key votes in the Assembly (see NotiCen, 2001-10-11).

Final steps to complete the expulsion have been delayed because he and other reformers have refused to attend ethics tribunal meetings to answer the charges against them. In January, reformers told a news conference that the six reform deputies had joined deputies from other minor parties in some kind of alliance, but did not explain whether the bloc would be a temporary alliance or a permanent party structure. Reformer Rosario Acosta described it as an alliance "of voluntary permanence." In the meantime, reformers are calling their group the Movimiento Renovador.

In 1992, former guerrilla commanders Joaquin Villalobos and Ana Guadalupe Martinez quit the FMLN and founded the Partido Demócrata. However, the PD failed to maintain its status as a registered party and has just one deputy elected through a coalition vote. There is some speculation that the emerging alliance could face the same fate.

An opinion poll by the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in November 2001 showed that the FMLN's image had deteriorated. ARENA received approval from 20% of those responding while the FMLN had a 14% approval rating. Worse for the party, 36.2% perceived a deterioration in the FMLN's image, and only 17.9% thought the image had improved. As for overall party preference, 21.3% chose ARENA, 14.9% FMLN, and 1.2% the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN). Viewing political prospects for 2002, the weekly UCA publication Proceso wrote that the FMLN elections had been a disaster for the party because they created more division instead of promoting unity.

"The least that can be said is that the FMLN keeps sailing without direction," said Proceso. The strategy of the reformers "is to increase the sympathy that the right-wing press has for them." Consequently, ARENA could gain in strength. To reverse the party's decline, "the reformers would have to be convinced that by exposing their internal problems to the news media they are not necessarily helping their party. To renovate the FMLN's image, the reformers as well as the orthodox have to become more mature."

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