

Hopeful Change In El Salvador?

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Like other Latin American nations, El Salvador has had a long and troubled history, ruled from one decade to the next by successive military dictatorships, then since 1989 by the right wing National Republican Alliance or ARENA Party.

Long-suffering Salvadorans recall the 1980s struggles when the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) failed to end what the civil-military Junta leader, Jose Napoleon Duarte, told New York Times reporter Raymond Bonner in 1980:

“Fifty years of lies, fifty years of injustice, fifty years of frustration. (El Salvador’s) history (is pockmarked by) people starving to death, living in misery. For fifty years, the same people had all the power, all the money, all the jobs, all the education, all the opportunities.” Finally they rebelled but failed.

Throughout the decade, billions in US aid poured in, including weapons, munitions, training, and US advisors, troops, and CIA operatives on the ground supporting the government against resistance fighters in a struggle they had little chance of winning.

Roberto D’ Aubuisson founded ARENA in 1981 and was notorious for organizing and leading many of the right-wing death squads that still operate in El Salvador as “hired guns” or criminally embedded elements in the National Civilian Police (PNC), fully supported by Washington and the country’s business elites.

They tortured, disappeared, disabled, and murdered tens of thousands of Salvadorans, including Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980 for his outspoken Liberation Theology, compassion for the poor and oppressed, and denunciation of the “war of extermination and genocide against a defenseless civilian population.” It’s now down-shifted to a lower gear but very much an ongoing enterprise.

ARENA took power in 1989 and held it for the past 20 years until March 15 when The New York Times headlined the next day: “Leftist Party Wins Salvadoran Vote” with Mauricio Funes the new president of a country troubled by crime, an epidemic of violence, corruption, deep poverty (between 60 - 70% of the population), and the specter of Washington in the wings. It’s why 500 - 700 undocumented Salvadorans come to America daily to earn money to send home to their families.

The FMLN won a plurality and will share power with a right wing National Assembly majority ARENA - PCN (National Conciliation Party) coalition.

It was a dirty campaign, replete with scare tactics, very similar to most others in the region with Washington calling the shots. Funes was called a communist, a foreign agent, and a Hugo Chavez/Castro tool. Bitter vitriol accused them of funding his campaign and plotting a

dictatorship with his election.

Around 46 Republicans asked Obama to punish 260,000 undocumented Salvadorans in America, end their Temporary Protected Status (TPS), order them deported, and halt the \$3 - 4 billion in annual remittances they send home to their families if Funes wins.

On March 11, Republican Dana Rohrabacher called the FMLN “pro terrorist,” and accused them of being “an ally of Al-Qaeda and Iran” for celebrating the 9/11 attack and burning the American flag in response. He cited a “new world reality of terrorism (and) the global offensive waged by terror groups against the United States and free world.” He said it’s “imperative to review our policies to protect the national security” in light of a possible FMLN victory.

He reflects the worst of American politics determined to deny Funes a moment’s peace and subversively plot against him unless he surrenders his government’s sovereignty to Washington. More on that below.

For the moment at least, El Salvador’s mood was celebratory after the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) announced the results with over 90% of votes counted – 51.27% for the FMLN v. 48.73% for ARENA, so for the first time in 20 years, Salvadoran politics shifts left, but hardly enough to matter.

Funes promised change, a fresh start, and offered “a new accord on peace and reconciliation.” He congratulated ARENA, said they’ll now be the opposition, but “in that capacity, rest assured that the party will be respected and heard.” He invited social and political groups to improve welfare for the people (with no specifics) and “appeal(ed) to other political forces to work for unity.” He promised to make El Salvador “the most dynamic economy in Central America....to be the president of social change and reconstruction (and) leave behind the revenges of the past.”

He also assured Washington and El Salvador’s elite that he’ll “build a dynamic, efficient and competitive economy and promote the creation of a broad business base.” He promised to respect “private property (and work for) macroeconomic stability and a responsible fiscal policy.” He told the Washington Post that he’ll “work to strengthen the relationship with the United States, to make the US more of a partner, and I think we will work well together.” His economy is closely tied to America, accounting for 60% of its exports with the dollar as its reserve currency.

He promised not to alter US - Salvadoran trade practices under DR-CAFTA or join Venezuela’s ALBA (the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas). He likens himself to Brazil’s Lula, not Hugo Chavez or Ecuador’s Rafael Correa, and intends to be very friendly to business. Perhaps too much, so it’s hard imagining that Salvadorans will benefit from him any more than Americans do under Obama or Brazilians from Lula.

During his campaign, he had right wing support, including from a group called “Amigos de Mauricio Funes,” whose members come from El Salvador’s ruling elite, and who apparently decided two decades of ARENA were enough and the country needed change, or at least its appearance given the extreme privation and fear it could boil over. For now it’s quieted.

Washington agreed, and it showed in a State Department Robert Wood statement “specifically congratulat(ing) Mauricio Funes as the winner of the presidential election....we

look forward to working with the new government of El Salvador on our bilateral agenda.” US Charge d’Affaires in San Salvador, Robert Blau, added: “We have said many times that our intention is to continue with the good relations with El Salvador from government to government, and from people to people.” It’s clear Washington is comfortable with Funes, and that should be cause for worry.

In 1992, the party ended its armed struggle, signed a peace accord with ARENA, became the loyal opposition politically, and agreed to a law granting amnesty to its officials and death squad killers. During his campaign, Funes said he’ll honor it if elected and (sounding much like Obama) told Tecnovision news that “We have to look to the future; not more to the past. We cannot change the past of hatred, clashes and confrontation. But the future we can build in a different way.” That despite last fall others in FLMN demanding that amnesty be repealed so that murderers and torturers will be punished.

No longer in a direct affront to his supporters. Instead he assured business and the ruling elite he’s reliable while the message to Salvadorans is that promised change was just talk, not policy once he’s in office.

Funes is a political outsider, a new face, a moderate so he says, a former TV host and CNN reporter who gained prominence from his 1980 - 1992 civil war coverage. He’s young (age 49), intelligent, articulate and much like Obama in those respects. Last September 28, the FLMN nominated him to run against ARENA’s Rodrigo Avila, an establishment figure and former National Police director.

From most early signs, the power structure rests easy knowing Funes represents continuity; business as usual, not hoped for change; so Salvadorans, like Americans, soon enough will know they were fooled again. And if they need more convincing, the painful global economic collapse will be the clincher.

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