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### **EDITORIALS**

## **SALVADOR'S GUERRILLA VOTE**

*By DAVID HOLIDAY*

On March 16 in El Salvador, the former leftist guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) scored unprecedented victories at the polls in municipal and legislative races, reversing nearly a decade of political dominance by the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party. This vote constitutes both the most significant event in El Salvador since the 1992 peace accords, which ended a dozen-year civil war, and the most important achievement by the Latin American left in the nineties. It legitimizes the former guerrillas as an alternative within the legal political spectrum, although the FMLN faces many obstacles before it can aspire to the presidency in 1999.

The FMLN increased its seats in the eighty-four-member legislature from fourteen (it had twenty-one before a split in the party) to twenty-seven, while Arena's representation declined from forty-two to twenty-eight. The distribution of power in this assembly means that to be successful, parties will be forced to develop consensus positions. Although ARENA can be expected to form alliances with other conservative parties, there may also be some issues (such as forgiveness of the agrarian debt) on which the FMLN could form a majority coalition. The equilibrium also extends to constitutional amendments; both the FMLN and ARENA will be able to block reforms not to their liking.

The real strategic victory of the FMLN, however, may well prove to be in its local gains. It won the capital city of San Salvador, most of the surrounding towns, half the fourteen departmental capitals (including the second-largest city, Santa Ana) and fifty-four of the country's 262 municipalities. Arena lost a quarter of the 210 municipalities it had governed since 1994. Because of its electoral success in more densely populated areas, the FMLN will govern locally about half of the Salvadoran population. This is a strong base upon which to build for the 1999 presidential elections, but only if FMLN mayors manage to provide effective leadership and provide services to constituents. The vast majority of Salvadoran municipalities still depend heavily on central government financing; an Arena executive branch, desperate not to lose the presidential poll, may try to find ways to complicate matters for the new FMLN-run municipalities.

The most important of the municipal victories is that of San Salvador, won by a left coalition candidate. The mayor of San Salvador is the second most visible official in the country, and past mayors--such as Jose Napoleon Duarte and the current president, Armando Calderon Sol--have easily made the leap to the presidency. The mayor-elect, Hector Silva, a U.S.-educated doctor, comes out of the Democratic Convergence (a democratic left party historically allied with the FMLN), which he represented in the Legislative Assembly from 1991 to 1994.

The FMLN would not have won in San Salvador had it relied purely on its own votes: ARENA still had more votes than the FMLN in the capital, and it was only with the votes of two additional parties supporting him that Silva was able to win. It is unlikely that the FMLN would have fared as well with an old-line FMLN figure as a candidate, since such a person would not have appealed to a broad audience. Silva's victory demonstrates that the FMLN will have to practice coalition politics in the future if it is to expand its electoral base.

Another lesson of March 16 is that the average Salvadoran is still not engaged by electoral politics. The turnout of 1.2 million represents about 40 percent of the estimated voting-age population of 3 million. The FMLN increased its overall vote by around 100,000--from 287,000 in 1994--which is all the more significant given the 20 percent decline from 1994 in total voter turnout. ARENA's numbers dropped sharply; some previous supporters simply stayed at home, while others switched parties. Since the death of death-squad baron Roberto D'Aubuisson, ARENA has suffered a crisis of leadership. Its bitter divisions and public infighting surely contributed to its electoral decline.

The clearest immediate reason for the left's success, however, was its ability to appeal to those disaffected by ARENA's economic policies. The peace accords signed in 1992 brought about a brief infusion of foreign aid for reconstruction and development, and thus provided some respite for the structural adjustment policies begun under the administration of President Alfredo Cristiani. But ARENA's economic strategy has recently been geared toward bolstering the financial sector and has ignored the development of a coherent agrarian policy—this in a country where 40 percent of the work force still labors in agriculture. Underemployment affects half the work force, real wages are still not up to what they were a decade ago and social indicators are among the worst in Latin America.

The good news for Salvadoran politics is that this may have been the last campaign in which the tragedy of civil war is manipulated for electoral purposes. Arena's negative campaign, invoking images of the war and trying to blame the economic mess on FMLN wartime sabotage, simply didn't work. The former guerrillas who left the FMLN to form the Democratic Party (PD), led by Joaquin Villalobos, were also punished at the polls for their attempts to use the issue of wartime abuses against their erstwhile colleagues in the FMLN. The PD will have only two deputies in the new assembly.

Salvadoran voters have given the left a chance to govern not because they have a successful track record at governance but precisely because they have none at all. So far, the oppositional posture of the FMLN has increased its following; two years from now, the criteria for getting votes will be very different.

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