

FMLN Likely to Retain Salvadoran Presidency

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In the midst of the current economic crisis, leaders of the world's richest countries (the U.S., most shamefully) claim that they do not have the money to fully fund key programs in healthcare or education. Meanwhile, since 2009, El Salvador, one of the poorest countries in the Americas, has increased social spending across the board.

I doubt that was foremost on the minds of Salvadoran voters when they went to the polls on February 2nd to elect a new president. But they gave Salvador Sanchez Ceren, candidate of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) almost 49% of the vote, just short of a first round victory (50% + 1 votes are necessary) in a three way race. The FMLN, which has overseen those social programs for the last five years, now seems almost certain to win in the March 9 run-off against second place finisher Norman Quijano of the neo-liberal ARENA party.

The vote was widely seen as a referendum on the five years of a left administration—that of Mauricio Funes, who was elected in 2009 as the FMLN candidate. The FMLN, as most readers are probably aware, fought a guerrilla war in the 1980s with the goal of overthrowing the U.S. backed military regime and establishing socialism. However, when that military victory proved impossible (the U.S. poured in over \$6 billion during the civil war to preserve the regime) they accepted a compromise peace settlement in 1992 and laid down arms in return for legalization as a political party and the partial dismantling of the repressive government forces.

The FMLN ran Funes as their candidate despite his political shortcomings. As one party leader told a CISPES delegation in 2012, "we made a strategic alliance which we knew would present us with many tactical challenges." In other words, they gambled on Funes, a popular TV newscaster who had never been a party militante, because they needed to dislodge the right's 20 year hold on the presidency. Funes was an attractive candidate for Salvadorans, concerned about the damage caused by ARENA's neo-liberal project but not fully in support of the FMLN.

The FMLN gambled that they could accomplish enough despite the Funes administration's expected political compromises and shortcomings to hold voters' loyalty. They placed modest goals on the Funes government, which they hoped would be only the first of successive FMLN administrations allowing them to enact more radical program later as they accumulated stronger popular support. Thus, they had to both keep Funes from compromising with neo-liberal forces too much and they had to win real gains for their base, mainly workers and small agriculturalists.

The FMLN proper entered into their alliance with Funes with some definite strengths. First, unlike most countries, the Salvadoran political spectrum is shaped like a dumbbell with power concentrated at the ends of the spectrum rather than in the center. In the first round of the presidential vote, the FMLN and ARENA (the hard right) combined garnered 88% of the vote leaving barely 12% for the center parties. Second, virtually the entire Salvadoran left is united around the FMLN. So Funes needed the FMLN (and their vast grassroots organizing capacity) as much as they needed him, and few forces existed outside the Frente to support building a more centrist project if Funes had that goal.

Funes the President did plenty to disappoint and anger the left. Most importantly, he studiously

avoided conflict with the U.S. El Salvador refused to join The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the alternative trading bloc led by Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia. Most egregiously, he supported a US backed measure that would allow multinational corporations to “concession” public agencies including the air and sea ports as well as water and electrical generation. While they normally attempted to keep differences with Funes out of the public eye (and off the front pages of the mostly right controlled media), the FMLN as a whole stood by the labor movement in opposing the proposal of “their” president. (They lost—all the other parties in the Assembly voted for it.)

At the same time, the Funes/FMLN administration implemented a slew of programs that benefitted the poor majority in a way that no previous administration ever attempted. As part of their deal to run Funes as their candidate, the Frente got to choose the Secretaries of the ‘social ministries,’ those like Health, Education, Agriculture, and Labor, that had the most immediate effect on everyday life of the majority. Here is the key to the FMLN’s impending victory, as they brought free healthcare to neglected areas of the countryside; wiped out “voluntary” school fees; issued land titles first promised to small farmers in the peace accords of 1992; and brought infant mortality rates to below the UN’s Millenium Challenge goal. FMLN Presidential Candidate Sanchez Ceren served as Minister of Education and oversaw the most popular of all, the “Paquete Escolar” (“School Packet”) program that provides every public school with supplies, uniforms, and a meal daily, all for free.

They also reformed the electoral system which made the once common voter fraud by ARENA much more difficult. They prosecuted past corrupt officials and completed several high profile infrastructure projects that past ARENA administrations had looted and abandoned. (Space limitations prevent a more detailed discussion of all this—visit the Cispes website for more info [\[1\]](#).)

Intensive grassroots campaigning insured that the beneficiaries of these programs mobilized to vote. Here the large party rank and file proved key, since the FMLN lacks the funds to run an extensive U.S. style media campaign. Instead they vowed to go casa a casa (“house to house”) and talk with every eligible voter across the country. Observers estimated that 350,000 people attended the campaign closing rally (in a country of 6.3 million). [\[2\]](#)

Looking ahead, the FMLN will now have the leader they want in office and five more years to enact their program. What can we expect?

It’s important to note that despite retaining the presidency they still face several formidable obstacles. First, they do not have a majority in the legislature and will have to strike deals with more right wing parties, or engage in massive popular mobilization to bring changes. Second, the right, despite losing the election, still retains significant power: they control the economy and the media, and still have a hold on some important parts of the government (the judiciary, for example).

Finally, there is the U.S. While a coalition of U.S. solidarity groups organized successfully to get a stance of neutrality from the Obama administration around the election, the State Department and the Embassy have been quite active in making threats to withhold aid in order to extort economic concessions around privatization, as noted above. Remember that over two million Salvadorans live in the U.S.—many without papers—and, thanks to a decision made under ARENA, the U.S. dollar is currently the official currency. Sanchez Ceren would like to avoid it but conflict with the U.S. seems likely to increase under his administration.

Reducing economic dependence on the U.S. will be a big priority. So we can expect the FMLN to draw closer to Venezuela and the other ALBA countries. They will also seek economic relations with other counterweights to U.S. power—China and Brazil are among the likely partners. Finally, they

will seek fiscal reforms to make the rich pay more to stop the wealthy from evading taxes. All this will free up money to deepen the social programs that are the foundation of their popular support.

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P.S.

* <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4099>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.cispes.org>

[2] For a look at the labor movement's participation in the campaign see this Labor Notes article: <http://labornotes.org/blogs/2014/02/union-backed-candidate-wins-first-round-el-salvador-election>