

El Salvador: Evangelical fundamentalism and the right

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At last, after decades of brutal right-wing rule, the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) won El Salvador's March 15 presidential election.

While this is a welcome ray of hope in impoverished Central America, the slender margin indicates a rocky road ahead for the incoming government, which will have to contend with a concerted destabilisation campaign.

Although some polls had predicted a 15% landslide for FMLN, the final result was agonisingly close — 51% for the FMLN's Mauricio Funes versus 49% for the right-wing Arena party's Rodrigo Avila.

By rights, the cumulative impact of Arena corruption scandals, extreme neoliberal policies and the global financial crisis should have produced a comfortable win for the FMLN.

The narrow margin of Funes' March 15 victory is attributable in part to significant electoral fraud. However, there is a range of other factors working against the FMLN, not least of which is the pervasive power of the Salvadorean religious right.

The latter's support for Arena has, until very recently, been virtually monolithic.

During the 1980s, mega-religious entities based in the US — including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God and Central American Mission International (CAM) — were not slow to take advantage of the bloody mayhem committed by the US-backed and funded ruthless dictatorships in Central America.

Of most concern to North American protestant fundamentalists was the spread of left-wing, pro-poor "liberation theology" among the catholic rank and file in the region, which they considered a "Marxist" conspiracy and a front for "atheistic" Cuban/Soviet infiltration into their "spiritual backyard".

Employing a tried-and-true colonial missionary formula, thousands of pentecostal/evangelical activists surged into dislocated, traumatised communities in El Salvador — poaching for souls with the bible in one hand and a few sops of "humanitarian aid" in the other.

Regardless of the obscure theological differences that divided the many competing fundamentalist sects, the political aim of their preaching was clear and consistent: to subvert the collective impulse for radical social change by inculcating an attitude of submission to "divinely ordained" authority among the poor and dispossessed.

Resistance to the US-backed regime was equated with resistance to god's will. The duty of the true christian was not to change the "temporal sphere" <197> the "here and now" — but to secure a place in heaven after Christ's second coming.

Leftist opposition parties were vilified — including the FMLN (a coalition of guerrilla groups resisting the dictatorship).

Central America's wasteland of genocidal violence proved a fertile ground for the apocalyptic fundamentalist doctrine, which successfully tapped into the psychological trauma of vulnerable populations experiencing cataclysmic upheaval and bloodshed.

From 1980 to '85, churches affiliated with the Assemblies of God saw a four-fold growth, with similar growth rates for other protestant groupings.

By 1990, the number of evangelical christians in Central America had swelled to 6 million — or approximately 20% of the total population.

Since then, evangelical growth rates have continued to increase, aided by transnational, multi-million dollar fundamentalist missions employing the full gamut of manipulative marketing techniques — such as US-style "televangelism".

Owing to this relentless campaign of aggressive proselytising, at least one in three Salvadorans now identify with fundamentalist "christian" beliefs.

As in the US, this ideology dovetails with the social and economic policies of the right, thereby creating a stable constituency for regimes conforming to the neoliberal proscriptions of the Washington Consensus.

Successive US administrations have supported the "hearts and minds" work of protestant missionaries in Central America by providing effusive rhetorical endorsement and a steady stream of funds through generous taxpayer-funded kickbacks.

In El Salvador, Arena has been able to count on solid pentecostal/evangelical support since taking power in 1989.

Founded by Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, the death squad chief who reputedly ordered the assassination of outspoken human rights activist Archbishop Oscar Romero, Arena represents the oligarchy that has dominated Salvadorean politics on behalf of foreign interests for more than a century.

In keeping with its role as a facilitator of imperialist exploitation, Arena enthusiastically wielded the neoliberal chainsaw. It implemented "development policies" that increased the suffering of a country already devastated by the US-backed extermination campaign that was El Salvador's "civil war".

As Arena's elite circle of cronies enriched themselves, the majority slipped deeper into the mire of impoverishment and hopelessness, leading to a collapse of the endogenous agricultural sector, rampant environmental destruction and an upsurge of vicious, gang-related crime in decaying urban centres.

Meanwhile, residual protestant fundamentalist hostility to the FMLN helped to save Arena from an electoral revolt, allowing it to implement the disastrous Central American Free Trade Agreement with the US in 2004.

Since then, the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that the FMLN prevailed in the 2009 contest — successfully reaching out to a few thousand swinging Pentecostal/evangelical voters.

Most fundamentalist protestants, however, either did not vote, or voted for the Arena candidate,

helping reduce Funes' majority and limiting the FMLN government's ability to undertake vital necessary reforms, such as the reversal of the privatisation of water, education and health services.

P.S.

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