

2019 elections in El Salvador: FMLN Confronts Challenge from the Right

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Salvadoran protester. The sign reads "The water is mine, not the oligarchy's"

In 2009, twenty years after the negotiated end to a brutal civil war, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), former guerrillas turned left political party, finally won the presidency of El Salvador, defeating ARENA, the far rightists who had made the country a showcase of neoliberal "reforms".

With a second FMLN administration nearing its end and a presidential vote scheduled for February 2019, the prospects for a third term for the Frente are very much in doubt. They have attempted to use the existing state to make reforms that could transform the life of their base — the poor, workers and peasants. The right wing has used their still-considerable power to obstruct their efforts to deal with the formidable array of issues — poverty, crime and unemployment — that afflict the country. The result, for now, is a population angry at how little has changed and willing to take it out on the incumbents, who in this case are the left.

Upon taking office the FMLN instituted an ambitious social reform program. To name only one among many, the "Paquete Escolar" (school packet) program provides every public school student with a uniform, a pair of shoes, school supplies, plus daily a hot meal and for those in primary grades, a glass of milk. The Ministry of Education also rescinded "voluntary" fees for attendance that many schools used to make up for under-budgeting by the government, thus making public education truly free. As a result, more kids enrolled in school; students, who were better nourished, did better academically overall and since local small and medium producers received preference in furnishing the food, milk, shoes and uniforms, employment received a boost. [\[1\]](#)

Summing up their achievements, Hilary Goodfriend, a journalist based in San Salvador, wrote in *Jacobin*:

"The FMLN's policy progress often goes overlooked in international media coverage of El Salvador, which prefers to sensationalize gang violence and migration with little analysis of the profound structural causes of these crises. The achievements are modest in contrast with the revolutionary socialist doctrine that the party espouses, yet they offer a first response to the staggering inequality that has kept the vast majority of the Salvadoran population in conditions of misery, precarity, and marginalization for decades, if not centuries. In particular, they have countered the devastating consequences of the neoliberal model that the US-backed Right imposed upon the country over the previous twenty years." [2]

And yet it appears that these advances have not been enough to insure their re-election. In the most recent legislative and municipal elections, held in March, the party lost six seats (giving them 18 out of 84) and now, if the right wing parties can unify, they can override a presidential veto. Similarly the Frente lost the race for Mayor in the capital, San Salvador, many major cities and in some of their traditional strongholds as well. It was a disastrous showing all in all.

Importantly though, the results do not show a shift to the right on the part of the population. ARENA picked up seats but not votes: their total was virtually unchanged from the last legislative contest three years ago. The Frente, on the other hand polled almost 30% fewer votes than they had in 2015. In this contest at least, their base stayed home. So they now have seven months to salvage the situation and repair the breach with their base or see the social progress they have been able to accomplish reversed if the right wing resumes control.

Challenges to governing

Part of the Frente's problem lies in the right's still formidable bases of power. While the left has the presidency, even before the recent election they never had a majority in the legislature. The right has blocked the FMLN's initiatives and often they must compromise with the right to get anything passed. El Salvador is unique in that the center barely exists — the vast majority of political power lies at the extremes of the political spectrum. So, the Frente needed, for example, to horse trade with GANA, a right wing rival to ARENA, in order to get the budget passed.

In addition as Goodfriend has noted:

"The Right maintains a firm hold on the country's judicial system, and the Supreme Court has become a principal destabilizing force in the country, undermining FMLN governance by blocking access to crucial state income, striking down several progressive tax reforms, and wreaking havoc with the electoral system to the benefit of the FMLN's opposition."

In this the right is following a strategy which Latin American observers often refer to as a policy of "soft coups," resorting to legislative and judicial maneuvers to obstruct and even remove center/left governments as seen recently in Brazil, Ecuador and Paraguay.

Finally, Goodfriend notes the importance of the right's near monopoly over the major communications media:

"The country's major television channels, radio stations, and newspapers remain consolidated in the hands of a few families with deep ties to ARENA, who have launched a full-frontal assault against the government. The Right has taken full and cynical advantage of the deeply entrenched gang-related

violence that plagues the country to lambaste the government, all the while blocking funding for urgent public safety measures and comprehensive social spending to address the roots of the insecurity — roots that extend, incidentally, into the neoliberal reforms that devastated the social safety net under ARENA in the wake of the civil war.”

As noted, these measures have not built the right but they have sapped the energy, confidence and resolve of the FMLN's base — breeding cynicism that all parties are equally bad and pessimism about the Frente's capacity to fulfill its mission. This depoliticized populace then is vulnerable to the changes in the political system forced by the Supreme Court that are restructuring it along “US” lines — campaigns driven by the personality of charismatic candidates rather than the content of party platforms and campaigning by advertising in the mass media instead of face to face contact on the local level.

Internal problems

Some regular FMLN voters (although we can only conjecture how many) stayed away from the polls because they were following a call to boycott by Nayib Bukele, former Mayor of San Salvador, who had governed as part of the Frente but was expelled by the party shortly before the vote. The party had made a Faustian bargain with Bukele, rich, young, handsome and media savvy, but not a frente militante of long standing, in a successful effort to win the mayoralty of San Salvador away from ARENA in 2014. They had done a similar maneuver with Mauricio Funes, their first successful presidential candidate in 2009, and survived the experience well enough to win the presidency again in 2014.

Bukele coveted the party's nomination for president in 2019 and, when it was clear that he would not get it, he distanced himself politically from the program and often voiced criticism of party positions that echoed those of the right. After his expulsion, which enraged part of the FMLN's base, he called on his supporters to boycott the vote. Many regular FMLN voters may have heeded his call and, significantly, the number of “votos nulos” (spoiled ballots) rose 300% over 2015. (It should be noted, however, that the Supreme Court has made ballot and voting procedures significantly more complicated so some of that rise may also be due to problems that voters had figuring out how to fill out the ballot correctly.)

On to 2019

Now Bukele has announced for the presidency as the candidate for a new party (“New Ideas”) trying to stake out a center position between the left and right, a sort of Salvadoran version of Clinton's New Democrats. At this point Bukele is not yet an official candidate, and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) is still reviewing his request to run as the candidate of GANA, the third strongest party after the FMLN and ARENA and solidly on the right. However, a poll by the University Public Opinion Institute (IUDOP) of University of Central America in May gives him an early lead. Respondents preferred New Ideas (38.5%) to ARENA (30%) with the FMLN far behind at only 8.9%. More recent but less reliable polls, show the Frente's candidate, Hugo Martinez, bolting ahead of Bukele. And it remains to be seen how many of his supporters will be turned off by the blatant opportunism of Bukele's attempt to run on the GANA line. But bearing in mind that a lot can change in the coming seven months, if the actual results in February 2019 mirrored these figures, then Bukele and ARENA's Carlos Calleja would face off in a second round, and the FMLN would be left to negotiate shifting their support to Bukele from a very weak position. But everyone on the left is acutely aware that the return of ARENA would prove disastrous for the majority of the population

and would threaten what the Frente has accomplished since 2009. And the popular movement, almost universally allied with the FMLN, has been jolted into action to promote the FMLN and defend their program.

A way out

The FMLN has faced difficult situations before and they may find a way to salvage this situation yet. Many of us who have stood with them throughout the long slog from guerrilla war to political power have done so for just that reason: their willingness to face up to reality no matter how unfavorable the balance of forces; to develop a realistic strategy to move forward and to carry it out with unity, organization and courage.

In fact, the right may have rendered them invaluable aid in rallying and unifying their disgruntled base. Not wanting to waste time with their legislative majority, the combined rightwing parties quickly introduced a thinly disguised water privatization law. Response by the Frente and the popular organizations was swift and militant — over the past few weeks marches protesting the deal have been a daily occurrence across the country. Twice so far, the administration of the national university has shut the campus and the combined forces of the students, faculty, staff and at least some administrators have marched on the Legislative Assembly building. During the first march, the Rector of the university was pepper-sprayed by private security guards while trying to deliver the university's demands.

And with their typical arrogance the right parties refused to even hear the objections of the Jesuit University of Central America or the Archdiocese of San Salvador — a remarkably tone deaf move given the strong identification of much of the population with the church.

Yesenia Portillo, a CISPES activist reported from El Salvador,

“The Archbishop has stated his opposition forcefully “We do not believe that private business should have majority control over [water] resources; it should be the state.” Meanwhile the Episcopal Conference issued a statement expressing, “As pastors, we are witnesses to the clamor of our people, who are calling for clean water in every home and who cannot pay the cost if this vital resource were to be turned into a commercial good subject to the rules of the market.” The alignment between the religious sector, the environmental movement and the broader social movement could play a determining factor, much as it did in the [2017] successful fight to ban gold mining in El Salvador.” [3]

Already the rightwing parties are distancing themselves from their water proposal — will the issue re-energize the left's base so that they hold their criticisms in check sufficiently enough to unify around the FMLN? As Salvadorans say “vamos a ver” (we'll see). But if the right regains the presidency the FMLN will resume its role as the voice of the opposition, the varied popular organizations defending the interests of the poor majority. They don't have the luxury of sitting the class struggle out — they will continue to fight regardless.

David Grosser

P.S.

- Solidarity, September 4, 2018:

https://solidarity-us.org/grosser_el_salvador_2018/

- David Grosser is a member of CISPES and Solidarity in Boston. To learn more about how people in the US can support the struggles against water privatization and for fair elections in El Salvador go to www.cispes.org.

Footnotes

[1] You can find many more examples of the FMLN's social programs at www.cispes.org

[2] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/01/el-salvador-fmln-arena-peace-accords>

[3] <http://upsidedownworld.org/archives/el-salvador/water-wars-el-salvador-social-movements-resist-water-privatization/>