

El Salvador: The Battle for Democracy



United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs
Washington, D.C.

Public
Information
Series

November 1988

In the early 1980s, the United States made the historic decision to join in El Salvador's effort to transform itself from a closed oligarchy into a modern democracy. The immediate impetus was the emergence of a Marxist-Leninist insurgency. The key question then was—assuming that El Salvador could survive the insurgency—whether democracy was a realistic option.

Did El Salvador, in fact, possess a political center with enough leaders and followers to make a difference? Could these men and women coalesce sufficiently to lead a democratic transformation despite violent opposition from the extreme left and right?

The Salvadoran people have been answering this question affirmatively for almost a decade. They have made the difficult decision to defy the extremes which seek their allegiance through violence and terrorism and, instead, to rally to try to build a modern system of political debate, choices, and competition. Since then, in their overwhelming majority, they have continued to support the struggle for El Salvador's democratic transformation.

At the end of 1988, the question for El Salvador is how to continue this remarkable democratic experiment. Extremist forces are declining in numbers, but their behavior still reflects the politics and passions of a decade ago. The violent right remains isolated outside the system, as it has since the 1979 reformist coup; the armed left still attempts to advance its agenda by driving the Salvadoran people to revolutionary despair.

More clearly than ever, the political extremes are relevant only because

they are violent. As viable options, they have been left behind by the public debate that now concentrates on issues of governance and national policies within a democratic consensus.

The center has held. Its members are developing self-confidence and trust in the maturing democratic framework. They are determined to overcome the political culture of the antidemocratic past. The center's challenging objective is to complete El Salvador's democratic transformation despite the resistance and provocation of the extremes.

The United States reengaged in El Salvador after prolonged noninvolvement during the decisive period of the late 1970s, when the outlines of the Salvadoran conflict developed and an inchoate center had begun to emerge. Reformist juntas groped for an option between oligarchy and the slaughter (*matanza*) of civilians, as in 1932, and capitulation to Marxism-Leninism. Recognizing that emergence, and the fact that the leftist attacks against it were linked to Cuba, President Carter reversed U.S. policy—from detachment to near-total engagement. Four days before the end of his term, he authorized resumption of military assistance to El Salvador.

For more than 7 years, in partnership with El Salvador's legitimate political leadership, the United States has sought to help the center to consolidate its position. We have brought resources and influence to bear on the democratic transformation of

Salvadoran institutions. One important objective has been to assist the development of a defense force that could hold its own in the field while also changing itself from a partner of the oligarchy into a professional military service for the defense of democracy.

The process of change in El Salvador remains incomplete, sometimes with tragic effects for its private citizens as well as for those who have the courage for public service or political leadership. It will require economic growth and political maturity. The pace of change is a crucial issue. It depends on an issue even more fundamental: the future of the partnership of the United States and El Salvador to keep the extremes at bay and to reduce the constraints extremist violence places on the dynamics of democratic development.

Polarization, Process, and Politics

The several years preceding U.S. reengagement in El Salvador provided abundant, if superficial, evidence that Salvadoran society and politics were deeply polarized around reactionary and revolutionary extremes. In 1979–81, the center seemed miniscule and powerless to endure, much less to reach for and hold on to power. Its military, social, and political elements and modernist economic sectors seemed irrelevant. Organized absolutist factions of the left and right (which included the huge paramilitary organization, ORDEN) were in open conflict that swept up thousands of citizens and produced thousands of deaths.

The desire for change, in fact, was very widely shared. The fact that the majority of Salvadorans had no real voice, were not speaking through the absolutist groups, and were primarily concerned with shielding themselves from the consequences of the struggle went largely unnoticed. For most observers it was even less obvious that the seeds of real change already had been sown by the two transitional reformist juntas led by Col. Adolfo Majano in 1979 and then by Jose Napoleon Duarte in 1980.

Although beset by their own political inexperience and disunity, by reactionary plotting, and by violent disorder, the Majano and Duarte juntas were able to proceed with fundamental agrarian and other economic reforms. On the military front, they prevented a takeover by the armed left; on the political, they prepared for a systematic transition to democratic constitutional government. The apparently imminent outbreak of full-scale civil war instead revealed itself to be a struggle of extremist minorities against each other and the center. The armed left retreated to the hills to wage guerrilla war and rural terrorism or into clandestine cells for urban terrorism. The extreme right was obliged to go underground for a vigilante war against the left or violent reactionary subversion against the emerging democratic structure. Left to emerge as the extremes retreated was the center—the great majority of Salvadoran people who began to look to the reform process to provide the change they sought and accommodate the spectrum of political views they held.

El Salvador elected a Constituent Assembly in 1982 which wrote the Constitution of 1983. A civilian independent, Alvaro Magana, became interim president and worked indefatigably to cement alliances among fractious politicians and retain military loyalties. Christian Democrat Jose Napoleon Duarte was elected to a 5-year term as president in 1984. Legislative and municipal elections were held in 1985 and 1988. In each case, international observers testified that the election had been conducted fairly, in an open and noncoercive environment.

The development of a radically new political culture has proceeded erratically but steadily, finding expression in a carefully tended electoral mechanism and especially in competitive party politics and their application in an open system of political rewards and punishment. For the

March 1988 legislative and municipal elections, voter registration cards were issued to 1.65 million people, of whom 67% voted. When the votes were counted, the Christian Democrats (PDC) had lost control of the National Assembly to the opposition Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) along with most of the nation's mayoralties.

This first peaceful transfer of power by an incumbent party in El Salvador's history thus was decided on issues of national policy and of performance in office. The elections proved correct the emerging sense that Salvadoran democracy is making decisions to punish and reward parties based on their record rather than on ideological matters. They reaffirmed yet again that the Salvadoran people have already made their ideological choice—for democracy. The internal debate continues—as it has for the past 5 years—to be about the array of concrete issues that democratic change has opened up for public decision.

El Salvador is preparing for the regular presidential election of March 1989 (with a possible runoff in June). It will apparently do so with the participation of the principal leaders of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR), who have returned to El Salvador and to electoral competition. The FDR has been allied politically with the insurgents of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) since 1980. Guillermo Ungo, the Secretary General of the National Revolutionary Government, and Ruben Zamora, of the Popular Social Christian Movement, have joined with the Social Democratic Party to form the Democratic Convergence (CD), which has been registered as a legal political party and has begun to campaign.

Against the background of the past 8 years of armed conflict, the return of these leftist leaders is a dramatic departure that potentially expands the constitutional political center and redefines the realm of the possible in Salvadoran political culture. The good faith of the CD remains to be tested: it has refused explicitly to sever ties with the FMLN and its strategy of violence, but it has been legally accepted and is free to organize its supporters and publicize its views. The FMLN itself has been ambiguous about the CD, and it is unclear whether the guerrillas will again target polling places, candidates, and voters for assassination, harassment, and intimidation.

Other leftist leaders also have returned to El Salvador from abroad. Mario Aguinada Carranza, Aronette Diaz de Zamora, and Tirso Canales of the Nationalist Democratic Union (UDN) reentered El Salvador without incident after self-imposed exile. (The UDN, the political arm of the Communist Party of El Salvador, always has been legally recognized as a political entity.)

In 1988, it is clear that the majority in El Salvador has found the political voice that it lacked in the violent uproar of 1977-81. It exercises that voice through political parties and electoral judgments on issues and performance. The consensus on democratic principles and procedures underscores the political irrelevance of the two extremes, which have only violence with which to resist the democratization of power. U.S. policy supports those struggling to empower the democratic center more fully against the extremes that still seek to destroy it.

The Armed Left

Spawned by the radical political blocs of the late 1970s, the armed left has remained outside the process of change in Salvadoran political and economic life. In battling the reformist politics that emerged from the 1979 coup, the insurgent Salvadoran leftist groups found unity in Havana through Fidel Castro. The military front they formed during 1979-80, the FMLN, since has been a formidable obstacle to orderly democratic development. The FMLN continues to follow a strategy of guerrilla war against national political, economic, and defense institutions with cycles of urban and village terrorism. Some FMLN component groups remain committed to prolonged military attrition of the democratic state; others to classic schemes of provoking mass uprising. Overall, however, the FMLN tries to provoke governmental repression through terrorism and sabotage and openly hopes to see it develop should the conservative ARENA party win the presidential election in March.

In a profound sense, the leftist option collapsed politically with the FMLN's defeat in its badly miscalculated "final offensive" of January 1981. El Salvador was not Nicaragua: the FMLN demonstrated that it had little popular support, and it failed to provoke a general uprising against the beleaguered Duarte junta. The army remained loyal to the civil-military junta. It declined the opportunity for

a counter coup or a new *matanza* of suspected FMLN supporters. The paramilitary right had to remain underground. The reforms continued. The democratic reform option had been severely tested under fire and had endured.

Guerrilla strength in 1988 is estimated at 6,000–7,000, down from a 1983 high of 12,000. The Salvadoran Government has met with the FMLN/FDR 17 times since 1983 in an effort to reach a negotiated solution, but the armed left still rejects the government's repeated offer of amnesty and challenge to test their popular support at the polls. The guerrillas walked out of the last meeting in October 1987. Their preconditions for renewed talks—including power-sharing before elections in a transitional government, a *de facto* demand that the political center dissolve its agonizingly developed consensus on democracy—are formally rejected by the Salvadoran Government as unconstitutional.

Doubts about the FMLN's sincerity regarding a negotiated democratic solution seem fully justified: the FMLN has changed nothing in its position since it presented a scenario of peace through government surrender during the first talks at La Palma and Ayagualo in 1984. Guerrilla documents captured by the Salvadoran army in February 1988 included a communication between FMLN leaders on the peace talks. It reads in part:

The dialogue is not an end. It is a means. Whatever form a negotiated political solution takes does not mean that we cease the struggle. Even the best negotiated solution would mean that we would put more emphasis on the political, rather than the military struggle; in the most likely event, it would mean the continuation of the struggle in all its forms—political and military—but now from a position of legitimate and recognized power at the national and, to a good extent, international level.

The Army

The Salvadoran army has come far from the confused, poorly equipped force of about 10,000 that began the decade. While the FMLN has remained intellectually frozen in 1981 and decreased to half of its peak strength, the Salvadoran armed forces have become a more professional and efficient force of more than 50,000 troops. The army's increased effectiveness in direct combat has forced the guerrillas to operate chiefly at the small-unit level and against soft economic targets. The

FMLN's frontal attack on the 4th brigade headquarters at El Paraiso on September 13, 1988, followed almost a year of relative inactivity in the field. The guerrillas were unable to penetrate the inner perimeter and took numerous casualties. It was a failed repetition of a similarly heavy attack in January 1984 which overran El Paraiso and routed its defenders.

At the end of 1988, it is instructive to look back to the beginning of the decade. The democratic center in El Salvador did not then and still has not defined political success in military terms, e.g., totally exterminating the guerrillas. The basic issue from the military perspective in 1979–81 was whether the juntas could field an army able to protect the democratic option against the attacks of the armed left.

Ironically, before January 1981, U.S. weapons were available to the FMLN (provided clandestinely by Vietnam, Cuba, and Nicaragua, along with other materiel from the PLO, Ethiopia, and Eastern Europe) but were denied by the United States to the Salvadoran Government forces that were trying to offer their nation the possibility of an alternative to monopoly of power by the political extremes.

In fact, the democratic option had proven that it had the loyalty of the army in 1980 when Duarte took the courageous step of committing his party's life and credibility to a transitional partnership with the military for democratic reform. As an institution, the military had committed itself to the quasirevolutionary reform decrees of 1979–80—physically implementing and defending the land reform—but left their administration to the political leadership, and it has continued to do so. The army backed the transition from junta to Alvaro Magana's provisional presidency in 1982 and then the promulgation of a constitution in 1983 that subjected the military to the authority of the president, as civilian commander in chief, for the first time.

In June 1985, the conservative ARENA tried to invalidate the legislative election won by the Christian Democrats. However, the army's commitment to the democratic process was reaffirmed by the united senior military leadership, which publicly underscored that the outcome of free elections was binding. Since then, the military as an institution has continued to put its blood on the line in the field

and in the city streets without seeking to reassert control over political life or public policy. By accepting the reforms—which Ungo, as he rallied to the armed left, claimed it never would—the army fundamentally has realigned economic power in El Salvador. Today, the future of the sociopolitical vision first articulated by the leaders of the 1979 military coup rests totally in the hands of civilian leaders appealing for a mandate to a civilian electorate.

Human Rights

From a horrifying level of political criminality in the late 1970s, El Salvador has experienced a steady upward trend in respect for human rights to the present uneven plateau of performance. Progress has been insufficient, and the present situation remains too imperfect to qualify El Salvador as an institutionalized democracy capable of ensuring respect for the human and civil rights of all its citizens. But the political center has created sufficient public confidence, despite the violent extremes, to encourage its natural majority to participate in the political process of choosing leaders and policies.

President Duarte's personal commitment, governmental institutional efforts, and the provision of training and human rights instruction to the armed forces have brought unequivocal progress. The governmental Human Rights Commission, with offices in San Salvador and other cities, documents allegations of abuses, conducts investigations, visits prisoners, and keeps statistical records. Another official body, the Commission on Investigations, has a Special Investigative Unit and a Forensic Unit to apply modern criminological techniques in investigating serious crimes, including those that seem politically motivated.

El Salvador, nonetheless, remains a violent society. Disturbingly, the general level of violence has increased slightly over the past year. As always, it remains difficult to determine the motive in the majority of murders. However, U.S. Embassy statistical indicators, based on news accounts of violence and other public sources, confirm that murders of apparently political motivation have declined dramatically over the last 8 years, from a high of 750 deaths a month in 1980 to 23 a month in 1987. There is little reason to expect the basic improvement to be reversed.

While the Salvadoran Government has made concerted efforts to improve the military's observance of human rights, FMLN assassinations, kidnappings, use of pressure-detonated mines

that kill and maim indiscriminately, and other abuses continue to mount. The FMLN assassinated six mayors in Morazan and Usulután Departments this year; guerrilla mines have killed 39 people and injured more than 130 in the first 9 months of 1988.

The violence today, although deeply rooted in history, is deeply conditioned by the turmoil of the 1970s. At the beginning of the decade, the violent right found a natural recruitment base in the former members of the clandestine White Warriors Union and of ORDEN, the massive paramilitary organization linked to army elements which was dispersed by the army under junta orders in October 1979. Retired and active-duty police and military personnel linked to individual landowners or personally opposed to the reform juntas were another source of support. At the same time, guerrilla terrorism—especially the assassinations of political figures and individual active-duty or retired uniformed personnel going about civilian pursuits (still a favorite tactic)—provoked passionate reactions.

The resulting dynamic led some security force personnel to adopt a pattern of abuse against policy and orders, which has not been extirpated and which plays into the hands of the enemies of the democratic center. In some cases, this has meant lack of action against abuses by members of state institutions or indifference to the activities of clandestine rightwing terrorism. In other cases it has meant shooting first and asking questions later or reprisals against noncombatants known or thought to be sympathetic to the guerrillas.

The fact that some elements of the army still chafe against the relatively new obligation to respect civilian welfare while it fights the war is clear. Its evolution is incomplete—notably its inability still to accept that fully subjecting the officer class to law and justice will strengthen, rather than weaken, the army's prestige, cohesiveness, professionalism, and institutional prospects. Yet, this is an army whose history encompasses the wholesale massacre of civilians in the *matanza* of 1932. The extent of change in military conduct and attitudes is as striking as the extent of socioeconomic and political change it has endorsed.

If change is an issue and a challenge for the military, it is neither for those at the political margins where nothing has changed. The extreme left and right still embrace the politics of

systematic terror and induced despair—disappearances, murder, the calculated destruction of people's livelihoods through economic sabotage—in fanatic opposition to the accrual of power at the center.

Justice

A judicial system upon which all citizens can depend for reliable law enforcement and justice is an obvious requirement for systematic protection of human rights. The Salvadoran judicial system, by contrast, is characterized by poorly paid and trained court officers and judges subject to intimidation and bribery, as well as by inadequate material and personnel resources. The Salvadoran Government acknowledges the challenge of judicial reform, which the United States supports with financial and training assistance. It has taken some positive steps forward, but much remains to be done.

El Salvador's democratic transition inherited a historic lack of reliable justice for any element of society. The poor have been abused, exploited, and murdered; the rich have been kidnaped, extorted, and murdered. El Salvador's democratic leaders inherited a culture of violence and vigilantism that long has been a substitute for dependable justice. The creation of a satisfactory system of justice will require time—to produce a sufficient pool of properly trained attorneys, magistrates, prosecutors, court officers, and enforcement officials. It will require time as well to overcome the instinctive distrust of state institutions bred by El Salvador's history of class division and to dissipate the passions of the past decade of violence.

Meanwhile, however, one crucial change in El Salvador's administration of justice has been largely unnoticed in the past 5 years: the judicial system is still unable to deliver justice evenly and adequately, but it is no longer a system of state repression. It now operates on a basis of openness and accountability. The use of secret prisons and places of confinement has been outlawed and abandoned; arrestees are no longer held incommunicado; the International Committee of the Red Cross is notified of arrests and has access to prisoners. Standards of proof and due process are applied in determining whether arrestees should stand trial (which few

do, given the police's insufficient investigative training and resources); time spent in prejudicial confinement, which magistrates alone can impose, is deducted from sentences of those convicted; the death penalty has been constitutionally abolished.

This quiet transformation—a crucial foundation for progress—is unmatched by change at the political extremes, which remain explicitly committed to murder, abduction, and extortions, whether in the name of the traditions of the past or of revolutionary justice.

Economic Challenge

In 1986, gross domestic product (GDP) was \$4 billion; per capita GDP was \$780, and the rate of inflation was 32%. With coffee production accounting for 21% of GDP, agriculture remains the mainstay of the economy and of exports (coffee, cotton, sugar, and shrimp). Light industry (food processing, textiles, clothing, petroleum products, and cement) now accounts for 15% of GDP. International debt stood at \$1.7 billion in 1987, and debt service payments totaled 31.2% of 1987 export earnings.

El Salvador's once solid economic base—the most dynamic and promising in Central America in the 1970s—has deteriorated drastically under the psychological and physical blows of nearly a decade of insurgency and sabotage. Economic decline has made it extremely difficult for the government to achieve institutional effectiveness, eroded popular confidence in the future, magnified unemployment, and discouraged investment. It now rivals the insurgency itself as a threat to El Salvador's democratic transition.

Nine years of guerrilla attacks on the economic infrastructure have caused billions of dollars of damage. The guerrillas repeatedly have targeted hydroelectric stations, transmission towers, water and sewer lines, telecommunications facilities and equipment, roads, railways, and public and private transportation networks. They have systematically forced the abandonment of farm operations, destroyed the vital coffee mills, burned crops, and attacked workers to prevent them from harvesting.

In addition, the economic situation has been damaged by the drought conditions of the last 3 years and the sharp drop in world commodity prices for coffee, sugar, and cotton. In October 1986, a major earthquake in San Salvador caused more than \$1 billion of damage.

The government launched an economic program in 1986-87 which has begun to produce results. Inflation dropped from 32% in 1986 to 25% in 1987, and projections for 1988 are still lower. The country also has registered 5 consecutive years of modest growth in gross domestic product (2.6% in 1987).

U.S. Support for Democratic Transition

Cooperation between the United States and El Salvador has kept open and given shape to a democratic option that seemed unthinkable when the decade began. U.S. policy in El Salvador encompasses assistance for the consolidation of the democratic transition,

the promotion of equitable economic growth, the reduction of human rights violations, the support of El Salvador's regional peace efforts, and the development of an adequate national security capacity. Since 1980, U.S. economic assistance to support private sector initiatives, to assist the government to repair damage to the economic infrastructure from guerrilla sabotage, and to fund programs in education, health, land reform, human rights, and judicial reform has totaled \$2.4 billion. After providing no military assistance between 1977 and 1981, the United States has provided more than \$800

million in military aid to help equip, train, and professionalize the Salvadoran army.

Ironically, however, the decade closes with the communist insurgents counting on political fatigue in the United States, hoping to solve their military problems and achieve their political objectives by inhibiting or even interrupting the U.S. support that has enabled El Salvador's center to seize and hold the initiative in defense of democracy. ■

Published by the United States Department of State • Bureau of Public Affairs
Office of Public Communication • Editorial Division • Washington, D.C. • November 1988
Editor: Colleen Lutz • This material is in the public domain and may be reprinted without permission; citation of this source is appreciated.