

EL SALVADOR Watch

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March Presidential Elections Approach!

Important victories for FMLN party in January elections set stage for tense March 15 vote for president

On January 18, voters in El Salvador went to the polls to elect the nation's 262 mayors and 84 deputies to the Legislative Assembly. At the end of a tense day of voting, marked by legal disputes and allegations of irregularities and fraud, the leftist FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) celebrated victory, despite losing the capital city to the right-wing ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance) for the first time in 12 years.

The stage is now set for the March 15 presidential election, a contest between Mauricio Funes of the FMLN, a former independent journalist, and ARENA's Rodrigo Ávila, former director of the national police force.

The FMLN declared itself the strongest political force in the country after winning the most seats in the Legislative Assembly, adding three deputies for a total of 35. Meanwhile, ARENA lost two seats and will have 32 deputies for the 2009-2012 legislative period. The smaller right-wing National



Conciliation Party (PCN) retained its position as the third largest bloc in the Assembly with 11 seats, giving the right-wing enough votes to pass legislation that requires a simple majority of 43 votes.

According to official results released by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), the FMLN won 42.6% of the national vote for deputies, making it the most popular party in El Salvador by 4 percentage points, or about 90,000 votes, over ARENA. This consolidates the

party's steady gains in legislative seats since 1994, when the FMLN first entered electoral politics, having converted itself from a guerrilla force via the 1992 Peace Accords.

On the other hand, ARENA claimed victory for its mayoral candidate, Norman Quijano, in the capital

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A Personal Reflection on the January Elections

by Francesca Austin-Ochoa, Bay Area CISPES

Despite being smaller than the state of Massachusetts, El Salvador is home to more than 25 volcanoes. They tower above the country's industrial cityscapes and rustic villages alike. When they awake, the earth trembles, and the people anxiously wait. It is this waiting, poised between fruition and disaster that now pulses through the republic. There are rainy seasons, dry seasons, duck hunting seasons, but right now it is election season, and the fervor is tangible. The social movement in El Salvador has swollen beneath the surface of the right wing's hegemony. Like the volcanoes, it waits to erupt. The idealism and the promises of the 1980s have not been swept under the rug of bureaucracy. They have simmered for over a decade and are ready, no longer "if," but "when" the FMLN gains power.

It was into this whirlwind that the CISPES January 2009 Elections Delegation wholeheartedly plunged. Ten days,

eleven delegates working fifteen hours a day, twenty meetings, thirty boxes of cigarettes, three hundred cups of coffee, and pupusas, lots of pupusas. Our objective was to learn from and support our allies in the Salvadoran social movement through observing the municipal and legislative elections. We recognized that we could not depend on the purported neutrality of international observer missions like the European Union or even the Organization of American States. We committed ourselves to becoming well-educated about the electoral system, and as well-trained as observers possibly could be, all in the one week leading up to Election Day.

On the eve of the election, members of our delegation cheered each other as we parted ways. Four of us were heading to the northern department of Chalatenango, the rest were staying in the capital. Those of us heading to Chalatenango heard reports of busses being detained and hundreds of Nicaraguans crossing the border on foot. Our ride to the lush northern

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Neocolonialism in Central America: An Analysis by Raúl Moreno

Raúl Moreno, a Salvadoran economist, has written extensively on the dangers and injustice inherent in free trade agreements, privatization and other neoliberal economic projects. Moreno serves as Research and Monitoring Coordinator at FESPAD (Foundation for Study and Application of the Law) and is on the economics faculty at the University of El Salvador. Members of the January CIS-PES delegation to El Salvador met with Moreno to learn more about the massive infrastructure development being ushered in with the Central American Free Trade Agreement, and how we can support community resistance to these exploitative projects.

Many of us have wondered, “What is the United States’ abiding interest in Central America anyway? It’s not like they have oil...” Moreno explained the ultimate objective of the United States is to control natural resources throughout the Americas: water, land, gold, plant and animal species. Central America is in a privileged geographic position, between the Pacific and the Atlantic, between Asia and Europe. In the battle among the global economic superpowers, the U.S. is desperate to maintain influence in this key region, relying on a joint apparatus of free trade agreements, infrastructure development, and militarization under the guise of fighting terrorism and drug trafficking.

CAFTA: The Legal Framework of Domination

According to Moreno, the fundamental goal of CAFTA – the Central American Free Trade Agreement – is the subordination of El Salvador’s legal framework and sovereignty to the interests of U.S. businesses. Upon ratifying CAFTA, Central American governments were forced to change their domestic laws, for example, to criminalize violations of intellectual property rights, to become “CAFTA compliant.”

CAFTA’s Chapter 10, the investment chapter, is what Moreno calls an “authentic blank check for U.S. corporations,” giving powerful rights to international investors. An alarming example of a corporation invoking these rights is Pacific Rim, a Canadian/U.S. mining corporation on the verge of suing the Salvadoran government for \$77 million for not granting gold mining permits despite widespread, organized community resistance.

Among other rights, corporations can sue governments if their laws or actions prevent the company from maximizing profits. There are several startling precedents under NAFTA, which contains investor rights language almost identical to CAFTA’s. The Mexican government closed a waste treatment facility owned by California-based Metalclad after it poisoned a community’s water supply. Metalclad sued the Mexican government in a secret NAFTA tribunal and won. Mexico was ordered to pay \$15.6 million in “lost profit” to Metalclad and to re-open the plant.

Megaprojects: The Infrastructure of Exploitation

While CAFTA provides the legal framework, the U.S. needs more adequate infrastructure to facilitate the extraction of natural resources from Central America. Enter the “megaprojects”: highways, dams, electricity transmission, ports. These projects are financed and planned under various initiatives involving the U.S. government, including Plan Puebla Panama and the Millennium Challenge Corporation.

A series of superhighways is envisioned across Central America, with the Northern Longitudinal Highway stretching across northern El Salvador. Despite the environmental risk of running closely along the Río Lempa, the biggest river in El Salvador, the highway route is designed to intersect with a “dry canal,” a high-speed railway connecting the ports in La Unión, El Salvador, and Puerta Cortés, Honduras, to facilitate the movement of goods and natural resources to Asia, Europe and the United States.

Other megaprojects in the works include a network of electrical cables crisscrossing Central America, financed by loans from the Inter-American Development Bank, the Bank of Spain, and the European Union, and to be owned by *Empresa Propietaria de la Línea*, a conglomerate of global energy corporations. Raúl Moreno remarked, “The free trade agreements allow the corporations to do whatever they want, and then the people of Central America create the infrastructure for them to run their operation. This is neo-colonialism.”

Perhaps the most infamous megaprojects are the dams, which have been met with heavy resistance from communities in El Salvador and Guatemala. Salvadorans have organized to prevent the construction of dams that would cause the displacement of entire communities. One of the leaders of this resistance, Catholic priest Padre Confesor, has notably proclaimed, “They will have to take us out of here dead.”

Militarization: Repressing the resistance

Seeing the powerful grassroots movements building in El Salvador to defend land and resources, the U.S. and Salvadoran governments are building up police and military power to silence opposition to their plans. They use a classic pretext: waging a war on drugs, gangs, and terrorism. Within a month of implementing CAFTA, the U.S. announced the opening of the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA), a new police training school in El Salvador. Furthermore, social movement organizations argue that resistance to free trade agreements and megaprojects is one of the real reasons why the U.S. is now spending an additional \$1.5 billion in military training, weapons and surveillance equipment through the Congressionally-funded Plan Mexico.

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January Week of Action; From Coast to Coast CISPES calls for Free and Fair Elections

CISPES members in California and Washington D.C. took part in public events the week before El Salvador's January 18 municipal and legislative elections. Their actions showed support for Salvadorans in the quest for elections that are free of violence, U.S. intervention, fraud, and manipulation.

In Los Angeles, CISPES joined allies in a press conference outside the Salvadoran Consulate on January 13. The group was composed of many organizations representing unions, academics, lawyers, religious leaders, different social movements, and college students. The main goal of the press conference was to denounce the lack of transparency and the dirty “fear campaign” that the right-wing used in the days leading up to the legislative and municipal elections. CISPES also informed the public about an upcoming meeting with Representative Howard Berman, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. During the meeting, the group presented Rep. Berman with results from the first round of elections and concerns they had about the upcoming March elections. Berman agreed to take action during the elections in some way.

In the Bay Area, CISPES held a candlelight vigil to commemorate the 17th anniversary of the signing of the Peace Accords in El Salvador. Supporters not only called for free and fair elections in El Salvador, but also spoke out in solidarity with Palestinians by denouncing the recent violence in Gaza. The vigil was a success, as it attracted the attention of many Salvadoran passersby who were curious about what was going on in their home country. There was even a mysterious musical guest: an unknown woman stepped off of a bus and sang *Casas de Carton*, a famous revolutionary song, in solidarity with CISPES' struggle against imperialism.

In Washington, D.C., allies in the Salvadoran community invited CISPES to participate in a press conference outside the State Department on January 14. The goal was to pressure Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon to declare U.S. neutrality with respect to the Salvadoran elections and to refute the fear-based campaign ads being aired in El Salvador by the right-wing group Fuerza Solidaria.

CISPES representatives made the following statement as part of the press conference:

“We have been invited by partners from the D.C.-area Salvadoran community to participate today, and we’re here to express our complete support of the democratic process in El Salvador. We recognize that there has been a recent spate of violent attacks related to the elections, including the assassination of two activists, a father and son, from the opposition FMLN party on Friday, January 9.

“The Coalition for Free and Fair Elections in El Salvador has also condemned the dirty and deceitful campaign of non-governmental organizations such as Fuerza Solidaria as they relate to the upcoming elections.

These groups, seemingly in line with the governing ARENA party, have filled the airwaves in El Salvador with propaganda playing on the relationship between the U.S. government and El Salvador, and threatening the livelihood of immigrants in this country and the money they send home to their families. Such ads — which amplify threats to immigrants and warn of the termination of diplomatic relations between the US and El Salvador should the opposition party prove victorious — are based entirely on lies.

“Some US officials have made positive statements about US neutrality; however, they have done nothing to back up these statements, and instead have allowed for the lies of Fuerza Solidaria and others to be utilized in the fear campaign.”

Numerous media outlets covered the event, and the press conference was one of the opening stories that night on Univisión and Telemundo. Allies around the country also made coordinated calls to Shannon’s desk at the State Department as a form of concrete action to reinforce the message of the press conference.

CISPES and its allies were heartened by a public statement made that same week by Charles Glazer, outgoing U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, which reaffirmed that the U.S. would respect the results of the upcoming elections. However, CISPES also pledged to keep the pressure on the Embassy and the State Department as the elections approach and to organize pressure on President Obama to declare U.S. support for El Salvador’s sovereignty. ■



CISPES and allies held a press conference outside the State Department days before the January 18 elections

FMLN victory. from pg. 1

city of San Salvador. FMLN leaders believe that Quijano's victory was due in part to the illegal migration of thousands of voters into San Salvador, a claim backed up by the fact that FMLN candidate for re-election Violeta Menjívar had a significant lead in opinion polls in the weeks before the January 18 vote.

Despite losing San Salvador, the FMLN won mayors' offices in most of the other large cities in the metropolitan area – including Mejicanos, Apopa, San Marcos, Soyapango, and Santa Tecla – and will govern 76% of the urban area's population. Nationwide, the FMLN increased the municipalities it will govern by more than 60% percent, from 59 to 96.

The FMLN also won symbolic victories in several smaller municipalities. El Frente reclaimed Perquín, a historic bastion of resistance during El Salvador's 1980-1992 civil war, after losing there to ARENA in 2006. The FMLN also won in Izalco, the site of an uprising that led to the infamous 1932 massacre of some 30,000 indigenous peasants who were aligned with FMLN namesake Farabundo Martí. The FMLN will govern Izalco for the first time ever beginning May 1, when newly-elected mayors take office.

Inaccuracies in voter rolls leave open door for fraud

Behind the election results, national and international observers' election day reports indicate consistent irregularities across voting centers, and point to the likelihood that large-scale fraud was set in motion long before Salvadorans went to the polls. Particularly troubling to observers were the Legislative Assembly and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal's (TSE) handling of census data and the voter registry in the months leading up to the January elections.

In September 2008, the right-wing controlled Assembly issued the official convocation of the 2009 election period ahead of schedule, days before data from the 2007 census was to be released by the government. As a result, the number of legislative seats apportioned to each of El Salvador's 14 departments through the 2009 election is based on 1998 census data, which grossly underestimates the population of San Salvador and other major cities, thus granting disproportional representation to more conservative rural areas that have largely lost population through emigration.

In spite of electoral regulations to the contrary, not all of the political parties have had equal access to the current registry of naturalized citizens, upon which the voter lists are based. By controlling access to the citizen registry, the ARENA government has prevented comparison of the national registry with the voter lists, thus precluding the possibility of identifying and resolving inconsistencies between the two. The right-wing dominated TSE failed to attend to this problem before the 2009 elections, despite a prominent 2008 rec-

ommendation by the Organization of American States that this obstruction to electoral integrity be resolved.

These inconsistencies in the voter registry left the January elections extremely vulnerable to fraud by parties bringing in people from neighboring countries to vote, as well as those transporting voters internally from one municipality to another. Incidences of deceased and relocated persons on the voter registry allow for others to vote using those identities and counterfeit identification cards. Reports of this nature were rampant leading up to and on election day.

FMLN representatives reported that six buses of foreigners were detained in the department of La Unión, and another 3 buses in the department of Usulután.

Meanwhile, the National Civilian Police reported a bus of Nicaraguans in the municipality of San Miguel. Observers also investigated reports of large groups of people being housed the night before the election in government buildings in San Salvador, the most sought-after municipality for ARENA.

In San Isidro, Cabañas, representatives of the FMLN, PCN, PDC, and CD parties filed a joint complaint with the Electoral Tribunal days before the January elections

stating that the incumbent ARENA mayoral candidate was distributing identification cards to Honduran citizens. On the day of the election, the Municipal Electoral Committee, over the opposition of ARENA's representative, agreed to shut down the vote at midday due to the obvious influx of foreign voters. Thanks to the active local response, the people of San Isidro Cabañas had another opportunity for a fair election in a special revote on January 25.

Although the FMLN has pushed for solutions to voter registry-related fraud – including public access to the citizen registry, the use of ultraviolet lights at voting tables to verify identification cards, and “residential voting,” in which citizens would vote at smaller polling places in their own neighborhoods, thus decreasing the likelihood of non-residents voting – these proposals have either gone unaddressed or have been rejected by the TSE.

El Salvador now faces a March presidential election that will again be based on inaccurate voter rolls, leaving the door open for foreigners to cast votes in the hotly contested race. Based upon past experience, and with its candidate Ávila trailing the FMLN's Funes by 10-17 points in recent polling, ARENA is expected to rely on this sort of electoral fraud in an attempt to retain the presidency for a fifth straight 5-year term. However, the January elections prove that a growing plurality of voters see the FMLN as a hopeful alternative to 20 years of ARENA-led government. ■

Nationwide, the FMLN increased the municipalities it will govern by more than 60% percent, from 59 to 96... The January elections prove that a growing plurality of voters see the FMLN as a hopeful alternative to 20 years of ARENA-led government.



CISPES and Allies publish Open Letter to President Obama

(This ad was published in *La Prensa Grafica* and *Diario Colatino* newspapers during the week of February 23, 2009)

Dear President Obama,

We the undersigned write to congratulate you on your historic victory and wish you the best as you confront the difficult challenges we face as a global community. We also wish to bring to your attention the equally historic elections scheduled for March 2009 in El Salvador, which promise to be the most contested elections since the 1992 Peace Accords.

We write now to express our strong belief that U.S. government officials should refrain from using fear and misinformation to influence voters in El Salvador and instead should honor and respect the will of the Salvadoran people. We wish to express our full support for free and fair electoral process El Salvador, and to this end, we firmly state the following:

- The proper position of the U.S. government is one of neutrality and respect for El Salvador's independent democratic process, thus allowing the Salvadoran people to freely decide, as a matter of personal conscience and conviction, which parties and candidates they will vote for. El Salvador and the United States have a very close relationship - nearly 25% of El Salvador's population lives in the United States, and the remittances that these immigrants send home comprise approximately 20% of El Salvador's GDP. **As we work to strengthen the rights of immigrants in the United States, we also recognize that this close relationship can be used to manipulate those same Salvadorans when elections occur in their country.**
- We pledge to take action to ensure that the US government remains neutral during the campaign leading up to the March

2009 Presidential vote and respects the Salvadoran people's choice regardless of the result. In 2004, Bush Administration officials made threats that they would retaliate diplomatically and against the status of Salvadoran immigrants if an opposition party won the election. They further threatened to restrict the remittances those immigrants send to their families. However, Members of the U.S. Congress, as well as a variety of international organizations, rejected those statements as false and asserted that U.S. immigration policy is not determined by the results of foreign elections. **We will work to ensure that the U.S. Congress and State Department stand by El Salvador by making a commitment against partisan intervention in El Salvador's 2009 electoral campaigns.**

- The United States' immigration policy will not be influenced by the party or candidate that wins the presidential elections in March 2009. We acknowledge that already in 2008, radio and television advertisements in El Salvador have proclaimed that an opposition party victory would threaten the immigration status of Salvadorans living in the US, as well as remittances they send home to their families. **We denounce such propaganda campaigns as false and call on the U.S. Embassy to clarify that there are no threats to immigrants related to the 2009 elections results.**

We congratulate the Salvadoran people on their quest for free and fair elections in 2009 and we look forward to a future that holds peace and shared prosperity for El Salvador, the United States, and the rest of the global community.

SIGNED:

The Coalition for Free and Fair Elections in El Salvador (which includes CISPES, The SHARE Foundation, US- El Salvador Sister Cities and Voices on the Border), and nearly 100 other organizations. *Go to www.cispes.org for the full list of U.S.-based and international organizations.*

Moreno cont. from pg. 2

Since the opening of the ILEA, there have been over 30 assassinations of social movement organizers in El Salvador, as well as violent state repression of demonstrations. In July 2007, 13 people were arrested, tortured and charged with terrorism under El Salvador's new "anti-terrorism" law after protesting the privatization of water.

"We must conjugate a verb: Resist" –Raúl Moreno

The resistance to U.S. domination must have two dimensions. The first is to actively reject and organize opposition to the "death projects": CAFTA, the dams, the mines, the highways and water privatization – even in the face of an increasingly repressive state apparatus. The second is for the marginalized and dispossessed to construct grassroots alternatives themselves. As Moreno explained, real popular power must always come "from below, from within and to the left."



Social movement groups protest mining at a march in 2008

There is a crucial role for U.S.-based solidarity activists to play in building a movement within the U.S. to dismantle the apparatus of domination. There is a clear call for action in solidarity with the Salvadoran movement as it organizes to overturn CAFTA, cut off the Millennium Challenge funds for the Northern Highway, and close the ILEA. Raúl Moreno concluded, "Another world is not only possible. It is necessary and it is urgent." ■

Reflection cont. from pg. 1

province was shared with international observers from Guatemala.

One man, a longtime friend of the Salvadoran *pueblo* and ex-member of the Guatemalan *Ejercito Guerrilleros de los Pobres* seemed entirely unsurprised. He explained to me that the tactic of “borrowing” the poor from other countries to vote for a particular party was a favorite of Central American right wing governments.

El Paraiso, Chalatenango, is a municipality of around 4,000 people, mostly from small agrarian communities in the hills surrounding the town’s center. The official voters’ registry, however, showed over 7,000 names. The incumbent PCN (National Conciliation Party) mayor is notorious for filling in the 3,000 person divide by bussing in people from other municipalities and countries with falsified documents to usher in his victory.

In a municipality where a mayoral candidate can win or lose by a single vote, and that vote could determine whether or not U.S. corporations will be welcomed in with their scalpels for reconstructive surgery, what happens on election day is of utmost importance. At 4:30 a.m. on January 18th, our small band awoke to the cacophony of rural life – namely, roosters. We headed into the still-dark morning to the *zocalo*-turned-voting center, where throngs of officials, each representing one of the six vying political parties, had gathered, somewhat tumultuously, to set up and review the voting materials.

As the day progressed, people began to fill the voting center. By midday, swarms of people waited in the dusty sun, youth sat flirting in the shade, ice cream and shaved ice peddlers weaved through the crowds, and the lingering scent of *platanos fritos* hung over us like a sticky, sweet cloud.

Embedded in the carnivalesque excitement, another story was playing out: the foretold busloads of strangers arriving, residents unable to vote because of irregularities between their identifications and the registry, worried whippers of people buying votes, and people being apprehended with multiple ID cards.

As observers, I think we all felt the frustration of hearing these reports and witnessing first hand the fraudulent activity, but not being able to do anything more forceful than furiously jot down notes. Our role as observers became clear, though, when other observer missions gave the elections two thumbs up. It was left to us to issue one of the only public denouncements, via a press conference with both mainstream and independent media, of the explicit and calculated fraud that had occurred.

Though CISPES’ role as solidarity organization opposed to U.S. intervention has not changed, the methods



Members of CISPES report to the press their observations of the January 2009 municipal and legislative elections

of intervention are continuously morphing. We were constantly reminded in our meetings with labor and social movement leaders, professors, student and youth organizers that U.S. intervention is as strong as it ever was. Rather than channeling millions of dollars a day into the Salvadoran military, the U.S. – through “aid,” affiliated banks, and its corporate networks – is now spending billions to colonize the markets, infrastructure and resources of El Salvador. Their investment – a civil war, billions of dollars in arms, military and police training, billions of dollars in government bailouts and election campaigning, billions of dollars in roads, factories, and canals, the murder of 70,000 (and counting) resisters – stands to profit. All this in a country the size of Massachusetts.

With a likely FMLN presidential victory only a month away, we hope that we will see a distinct move away from U.S. economic imperialism. However, as Salvadoran economist Raul Moreno warned our delegation, “getting elected is the easy part.” Staying in office and effecting the ideals and the change that have been called for again and again will be the true challenge. Happily, the *Frente* supporters – from the wizened and dedicated ex-combatants, to the theory-addled, beer-guzzling students, to the *viejitos* fanning themselves in the shade – are up for the challenge. ■

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