



CISPES 2009 Salvadoran Elections: The Road to Victory and Beyond

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Starting at 7am on Sunday March 15, Salvadorans headed *en masse* to the polls to cast their ballots for the future president; by 9:30pm Mauricio Funes, presidential candidate of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), pronounced himself President-elect of El Salvador—the very first leftist head of state in the country’s history.

The historical significance of this shift in power cannot be understated considering the repressive rule that the right-wing has exerted over the Salvadoran people since the massacre of nearly 30,000 indigenous *campesinos* in 1932. In electing the FMLN, the political party formed in 1980 as an alliance of popular armed forces that fought back against widespread state repression, the Salvadoran people have created an opportunity to realize the goals of social and economic justice. Furthermore, in rejecting the ARENA party, one of Washington’s closest and longest-standing allies in Latin America, Salvadorans have dealt another blow to the Washington Consensus and to the United State’s presumption of free reign throughout the Americas.



Analyzing the official results

The [official results from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal](#) (TSE) show the FMLN winning the election by 51.3% over 48.7% for the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), with a margin of roughly 70,000 votes delivering this historic victory to the left.

March’s election results represent a startling turnaround from the 2004 presidential elections where ARENA won by a significant margin: 57% to 36%. In 2004 the FMLN received about 813,000 votes; this time they received 1,354,000 votes—a gain of over a half million votes in country of 6.5 million.



photo by Joeff Davis (www.joeff.com)

The voting trends that emerged from the local and legislative elections this past January rang true for March—urban municipalities supported the FMLN while ARENA carried the more rural areas of the country. According to official TSE figures, every major city in El Salvador went to the FMLN candidate, Mauricio Funes. The most populous department of San Salvador alone delivered 33% of all votes cast for the FMLN nationwide. Although the capital city of San Salvador produced many of those votes, the five other major cities of the department—all with at least 100,000 inhabitants—overwhelmingly supported the FMLN as well. The citizens of Soyapango, for instance, cast an astonishing 81,000 votes for Funes—just 23,000 votes short of the capital city’s contribution, despite

having a quarter million fewer inhabitants.

In a surprising turn of events El Salvador’s fourth largest city San Miguel also went to the FMLN. The notorious Wil Salgado, San Miguel’s sometimes-Christian-Democrat Party (PDC) sometimes-ARENA party (but always

right-wing) mayor, had proclaimed that he alone could bring 100,000 voters for the party of his choosing on election day. Despite his open endorsement for ARENA party candidate Rodrigo Ávila, San Miguel's citizens came out by the tens of thousands to vote FMLN. At final count, the city of San Miguel provided one of the greatest margins of FMLN victory in the country, with around 23,400 more votes for Funes than Ávila.

By department, the FMLN received the majority of votes in 6 departments while ARENA won 8. Whereas the FMLN dominated in all the major cities and the most heavily populated departments, ARENA dominated the low-population departments. Six of the 8 departments won by ARENA border the neighboring countries of Guatemala and Honduras. This may be a testament to the well-documented ARENA practice of transporting foreigners into El Salvador to vote illegally for the right-wing party. Numerous citizen accounts of this fraudulent tactic for the March 15 vote were widely reported to the CISPES observer delegation.

Conflicting Polls & Continued Fear-Campaign

Last minute attempts to predict the outcome before election day were obfuscated by the highly conflicting poll results. For example, a University of Central America (UCA) poll gave an 18-point advantage to Funes, while a *Jabes-Diario El Mundo* poll gave a 3-point advantage for Ávila in the last weeks of February. The few polls showing an advantage for Ávila were striking anomalies to the polling pattern of the previous months, whose results had consistently favored Funes by at least 5-10 points. The anomalous polls were considered by many Salvadorans to be attempts to manipulate voter opinion through contrived results.



In the final weeks and days, ARENA ramped up efforts to gain votes through its fear-campaign by hitting upon two common alarmist themes—Venezuela and the FMLN's guerrilla past. Throughout March, Salvadorans were subject to a [ceaseless stream of TV and radio spots](#) that cast FMLN presidential hopeful Mauricio Funes as a puppet of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez. The underlying message was one that ARENA and right-wing allied groups like Venezuela-based *Fuerza Solidaria* drilled into the Salvadoran mainstream media for the past year—Don't deliver El Salvador to Venezuela. Don't vote for the FMLN.

FMLN vice presidential candidate—Salvador Sanchez Cerén—was also targeted by the right for his role as an FMLN *comandante* during the 12-year civil war. *Fuerza Solidaria* flyers calling Cerén a murderer rained from the sky and appeared on doorsteps. “Don't vote for a bloodthirsty terrorist” was the bottom line, the same smear tack used by ARENA and allies against the 2004 FMLN presidential candidate, also a former *comandante*, Schafik Handal.

US Solidarity & Obama Administration Shut Down Rogue Republicans

CISPES and SANA, the Salvadoran American National Association, spearheaded a grassroots Congressional campaign to stop US intervention in the 2009 elections, resulting in a letter to President Obama calling for an official US declaration of neutrality [signed by 33 Democrats in the US House of Representatives](#). Less than a week after the letter was released, US House Republicans reverted to the interventionist scare tactics that succeeded in maintaining ARENA party rule in the 2004 presidential elections.



In both a letter released to the press on March 10 and speeches from the House floor on March 11—just 4 days before elections—Republicans stridently defamed the FMLN and emphatically repeated the threats of the Bush administration: to cut off remittance monies to El Salvador and to end the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) of Salvadoran immigrants if the FMLN won on March 15. From the House floor, [Representative Dana Rohrabacher](#) (CA) warned, “El Salvador's election is on Sunday. If an ally of Al-Qaeda and Iran comes to power in El Salvador, the national security interests

of the United States will require certain immigration restrictions and controls over the flow of the \$4 billion in annual remittances sent from the U.S. back home to El Salvador.” Salvadoran mainstream media outlets dutifully provided extensive coverage of the Republicans’ statements, posting their threats as front page news.

This was a deliberate Republican effort to undercut the FMLN’s momentum with days left before the vote—a staged attempt to affect the elections at the last minute without enough time for any officials in El Salvador or the US to raise a neutralizing response. In fact, the declarations were made after the formal close of the campaign in El Salvador, stepping in for ARENA when they could no longer campaign and leaving the FMLN legally unable to respond.

The Republicans calculated incorrectly. CISPES organizers and Democratic members of Congress mounted a lightning-quick and extremely effective response. Calls from thousands of concerned US citizens flooded the State Department and US Embassy, demanding a public statement of US neutrality from the Obama administration. Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ) and Representative Howard Berman (D-CA) made public declarations to the press both rejecting the Republicans’ threats and reaffirming US neutrality. [Rep. Berman declared](#), “Sunday’s election belongs to the people of El Salvador. As Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, I am confident that neither TPS nor the right to receive remittances from family in the United States will be affected by the outcome of the election, despite what some of my colleagues in Congress have said.”



By Friday March 13, only 48 hours after the Republicans’ statements hit the press, the US State Department and US Embassy in San Salvador both made [a formal declaration of neutrality](#), further promising to respect the results of the elections and to work with whoever won the presidency. In his press briefing on March 13, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon stated: “We’ve also made it very clear that we will work with whomever the Salvadoran people elect...We have made it very clear that this is a choice of the Salvadoran people that we will respect and that we look forward to continuing our

very positive relationship with El Salvador, and working with the next elected government.”

Public declarations of neutrality and respect for El Salvador’s independent democratic process made *before* the elections on Sunday helped prevent a repeat of 2004, when threats of U.S. retaliation secured a victory for the right-wing.

A Historic Vote

With the heated controversies of the previous days still heavy in the air, election day arrived after months and years of anticipation. This was unlike any other election since the end of the civil war in 1992: never before had the FMLN maintained such a steady lead in the opinion polls, and never before had CISPES and allies in the U.S. solidarity movement won an open commitment to neutrality from the US government.

Some 61% of registered voters hit the polls to cast their ballots for the next leader of El Salvador. Voters and election-day staff were so anxious to get started that some voting centers opened even before the official start time of 7:00am. International observers noted that from the early morning on, many polling places were a “sea of red,” with voters arriving in red FMLN t-shirts, hats and headbands.

Sources agree that election day progressed smoothly: election day staffers did their job in facilitating the vote, political violence was minimal and on the whole Salvadorans were able to vote their conscience without intimidation. Experienced observers noted that this was the most tranquil elections they had observed in El Salvador, commenting that the atmosphere was eerily calm.



photo by Joeff Davis (www.joeff.com)

That is not to say that the elections were completely clean. As a massive influx of voters streamed into the polls, [reports of electoral irregularities](#) began to arrive from citizens, observers and federal agencies. A heavy police and armed forces presence was observed around Chalatenango and San Vicente voting centers, bodies that are strictly prohibited from interfering in elections according to the 1992 Peace Accords. In [Stadium Flor Blanca](#), the designated voting center for Salvadorans who had obtained voting cards in the US, thousands of ballots were found soaking wet and the police officer guarding the ballot storage room couldn't explain why. Oscar Luna, El Salvador's Human Rights Ombudsman, declared during an election day interview that his office was investigating reports of businesses attempting to force employees to vote ARENA, further demanding that employees photograph their ballot to verify that they had cast their vote for ARENA.



Furthermore, it was widely understood that the most serious variety of fraud was set in motion by ARENA long before the polls opened: mobilization of the foreign vote. Disturbing reports came in the night before the elections telling of foreigners being trucked in and housed overnight in preparation for Sunday's vote. International observers responded to [two such reports](#) in San Salvador late Saturday evening from concerned citizens and FMLN members who witnessed busloads of people being brought to a public government building and the national ARENA headquarters. CISPES observers later saw dozens of mattresses trucked in and rapidly unloaded. In both cases, ARENA officials appeared on the scene without a reasonable explanation for what many first-hand witnesses had observed.

Reports of this kind were heard from all corners of the country in the days before and on election day. The Organization of American States (OAS) observers witnessed Hondurans with voter cards ready to vote in 3 municipalities of Morazán and San Vicente departments. TV reports told of a Nicaraguan who had apparently voted 3 times in San Miguel before being caught by authorities.

However, the mobilization of foreign voters by the right-wing was not enough to overcome the margin by which ARENA trailed in the polls, in large part because of the Salvadoran populace took on an extremely active role in countering these fraudulent schemes. There was a highly-organized effort by Salvadoran citizens to defend their vote, and the warning that such vigilance would be necessary was a key component of the FMLN's campaign. FMLN militants across the country arose at 2:00, 3:00 and 4:00 am on election day to watch over the roads leading into their municipalities and prevent busloads of illegal voters from entering their towns. In San Salvador and San Miguel, neighborhood residents and FMLN activists linked arms and sealed off buildings where foreigners were housed, collectively vowing not to let anyone leave on election day. In San Miguel, the confrontation even turned violent when police attacked FMLN members who were guarding a building containing Nicaraguans, ready to cast their illegal ballots.

Salvadorans assumed authority over their own elections to protect the true voice of the *pueblo*. Needless to say, it worked.

The celebration

Early televised reports from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) put the FMLN in the lead with 51% of the vote, a pattern that continued with 35%, 70% and 95% of the ballots counted as the night progressed. While the TSE refused to declare an official winner that night, it was clear that the FMLN won and at 9:30 pm on Sunday, March 15, [Mauricio Funes gave his victory speech](#) and announced himself President-Elect.



In his victory speech, Funes said, "I want this night to have the same feeling of hope and reconciliation as the day in which the Peace Accords of our country were signed," and that this victory represented the signing of a new agreement for peace. While being very careful to assure the world leaders and the financial sector that their private investments were not in danger, he spoke of making "profound changes in the model of public management, of

transparency, of participation and of social justice” and committed to governing with what Monseñor Romero called a “preferential option for the poor.”

While many started to celebrate the victory, tense doubts remained as to whether the right-wing ARENA party, twenty-years entrenched as the governing party, would admit defeat. Perhaps sooner than anticipated, at 11:00 pm, Rodrigo Ávila conceded and vowed that ARENA would become a “vocal” and “constructive” opposition.

The streets were already filled with thousands and thousands of Salvadorans celebrating the people’s victory, waving FMLN flags, chanting “*Sí se pudo, sí se pudo!*” and crying tears of joy. A feeling of happiness, relief and triumph was palpable as FMLN *militantes* remembered their heroes who had fallen in the struggle and new FMLN supporters joined the masses to celebrate their new government.



photo by Joeff Davis (www.joeff.com)

Congratulations to Mauricio Funes and to the FMLN began pouring in from governments throughout the Latin America. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said that the victory “consolidates the historic current that, in this first decade of the 21st century, has been raised in all of Latin America and the Caribbean,” and that “in this crucial moment, the sons of Bolívar extend a hand of solidarity to President Mauricio Funes.” President of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, said that the triumph of the FMLN should put the conservatives of his own country on notice because they would “have to make changes.” President of Guatemala Alvaro Colom congratulated the Salvadoran people on their “high democratic spirit” and committed to deepening the process of integration in the region.

Recognition of the FMLN victory came quickly from the US government as well, albeit with overtones of a different political agenda. Spokesperson for the US State Department, Robert Wood, expressed his wishes to work with the new government in El Salvador and congratulated the Salvadoran people on their democratic election, saying that they have made a decision and it must be respected. *Charges d’affaire* and acting US Ambassador, Robert Blau echoed the sentiment, “We have said many times that our intention is to continue with the good relations with El Salvador from government to government, and from people to people,” stated Blau.

In the week following the election, Mauricio Funes received telephone calls from both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressing interest in working together on a “bilateral agenda.” While this immediate recognition of the FMLN government by the new US administration is undoubtedly a positive development, concerns remain as to who is really driving this “bilateral agenda,” which appears thus far to revolve around maintaining free trade agreements and increasing “security cooperation,” and who stands to benefit, the poor majority in El Salvador or the transnational business class.

The Long Road Ahead

President-elect Maricio Funes assumes his duties as head of state on June 1st, 2009. He stands to inherit a nation that has been devastated by decades of economically unsound neoliberal policies and a poverty-stricken populace suffocating under the current global financial crisis. This great electoral victory for the FMLN is only the first step in the much more difficult task of repairing a damaged and suffering nation.



Funes has characterized his presidency as one of “national unity”, and for good reason. One of the greatest challenges that lie before him is to overcome the deep political rift that divides the country. He must build consensus around innovative policies that can truly strengthen the nation, in the presence of a powerful, well-financed, and ultra-conservative opposition. Luckily for the newly leftist El Salvador, the geopolitical map has changed appreciably since 2004. There are more allies in the hemisphere—Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Brazil to name a

few—with similar domestic situations who can provide experienced support for El Salvador's democratic transition to the left. These days there are more political allies in the hemisphere than there are opponents.

Even to the North, there are signs that the age-old model of US domination is being recast. The Obama administration's public position of neutrality played an important role in this election, as Salvadorans were able to vote without the twin specters of life without remittances and deported relatives hanging over them. Grassroots pressure from the solidarity movement was necessary to spark the Obama Administration to declare their position, but popular pressure did effectively produce remarkable and timely results, a scenario that seemed nearly impossible under a Republican administration and might be even under a different Democratic administration.

Obama's presidency has also cut off ARENA's direct line to Washington, provided unquestioningly by the Bush Administration. Surely this is one of the reasons why Ávila conceded the election so graciously—there was no powerful, Republican hand to prop him up if his party contested the results.

But the big question remains: now that ARENA's lifeline to the White House has been severed, what kind of relationship will the FMLN expect to have with the US? Funes recognizes the enormous importance the US holds for the country, both politically and economically. The United States is El Salvador's biggest trade partner and nearly one third of the population lives in the US, sending home enough remittance money to compromise the single greatest source of the country's income. During his campaign and now as President-elect, Funes has consistently espoused a pragmatic and diplomatic approach to US relations. Funes has said he will not immediately repeal CAFTA because it doesn't make sense in economic terms. Rather than denouncing the bloody history of US intervention in his country, he pledges to work to strengthen relations between the two nations.

However, Funes and the FMLN will be unable to create the change demanded by the Salvadoran people without making profound changes to the economic systems that privilege the ruling elite and transnational corporations. The relentless implementation of the privatization and free trade as directed by the US is the cause of the high levels of poverty and marginalization in El Salvador today and the FMLN has always challenged the neoliberal model. As the ground in Latin America shifts quickly, it seems likely that the Obama administration is cozying up to Funes as early as possible in an attempt to keep him close to the less-threatening model adopted by President Lula in Brazil and far away from President Chavez' model of 21st Century Socialism. It is doubtful that the US will let go of El Salvador as one of its last military and police bases in Central America, especially as it takes a more aggressive stance in the "War on Drugs," and the US appears to be adopting a strategy of keeping its friends close and its enemies closer in an attempt to continue to dominate a changing hemisphere.

How FMLN will respond to such friendly advances by the Obama administration remains to be seen. Funes is not a firebrand; he is a pragmatist, and he is backed by a party with a long-term vision for social and economic justice in El Salvador. Both President-elect and party occupy a unique and unprecedented position in Salvadoran history, one that holds tremendous possibilities and challenges for the future of El Salvador and the future of the Latin American left. The presidency of Funes and the government of the FMLN can be expected to reflect its long-term vision to build popular power in El Salvador, block by block, and neighborhood by neighborhood. They face the future with a healthy recognition of the challenges ahead but also with a spirit of struggle that has driven the people of El Salvador since 1932 and will now define a new era of history.



photo by Joeff Davis (www.joeff.com)

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