

REPORT: EL SALVADOR

Social Movements, Political Parties, and Electoral Triumph in El Salvador



FMLN supporters rallied in support of Mauricio Funes along Alameda Juan Pablo II in San Salvador. Funes's electoral victory in March represented the first peaceful transfer of power to a political party of the left in the Salvadoran republic's 188-year history.

By Paul D. Almeida

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IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS OF SUNDAY, March 15, 2009, about 500 volunteers for the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN) political party gathered in the parking lot of an Esso gas station in central San Salvador. FMLN leaders distributed uniforms and supplies to their campaign workers (*vigilantes*) to supervise the presidential elections that were to begin in a few hours. At about 4:30 a.m., the volunteers and election monitors, most of whom appeared to be under the age of 35, lined up and began marching down 29th Street to the country's second-largest voting center a few blocks away in the General Francisco Menéndez National Institute (INFRAMEN), one of El Salvador's oldest public high schools. As they marched, they sang and chanted protest songs

from the height of the country's popular movement in the 1970s—"La marcha de la unidad" and lyrics from the popular musical group Yolocamba I Ta. They looked more like a social movement than an institutionalized political party.

Before the polls closed at 5 p.m., rumors swirled from exit polling data that the FMLN's candidate, Mauricio Funes, had triumphed over the National Republican Alliance (ARENA) party's candidate, Rodrigo Ávila Avilés (former director of the National Civilian Police). As the election monitors from both political parties tallied the ballots of the more than 200 electoral tables in the INFRAMEN voting center, shouts could be heard at the end of counting in each table. If ARENA won the most votes at the table, the party's election monitors would yell, "Patria

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sí, comunismo no!” And if the FMLN received the most votes, the party’s volunteers would shout, “Un paso al frente, con el Frente!” (A step forward with the Frente!).

In the end, the FMLN prevailed at several more tables than ARENA at this major urban voting center. Already by 6 p.m., spontaneous celebrations broke out on the streets in San Salvador and in other towns around the country. On Calle San Antonio Abad, near the southwestern corner of the University of El Salvador, hundreds of youths with red FMLN flags dashed into the streets rejoicing. By 7 p.m. TV news was reporting that the FMLN was winning. Large crowds began to gather at the Redondel Masferrer plaza near the elite Escalón district of San Salvador, where Funes would address the crowd of more than 50,000 at about midnight.

In June, Funes assumed the presidency, representing the first peaceful transfer of power to a political party of the left in the Salvadoran republic’s 188-year history. How did this happen? Funes’s unprecedented victory, and the historic turnaround it signifies, is best understood as the result of the political mobilization undertaken by an alliance between the FMLN and Salvadoran popular movements. This party-movement alliance, forged in the 1990s and the early 2000s, was shaped in the context of two powerful forces unleashed in the post–Cold War era: democratization and neoliberalism.

The Salvadoran democratization process commenced with the Chapultepec Peace Accords signed in January 1992, which put an end to 12 years of civil war and opened up political space for both social movements and oppositional political parties. Before this, El Salvador had been home to one of the longest-lasting military-controlled governments in Latin America in the 20th century, with the exception of a few rounds of regime liberalization in the late 1920s, 1960s, and 1980s.¹ Some form of military rule was in effect from late 1931 until 1982, and the Salvadoran armed forces continued to exercise enormous sway inside the state until the United Nations–brokered peace accords.²

Even with the implementation of competitive elections during the civil war in the 1980s, only center-right and far-right political parties participated in the electoral process while a state of emergency was in effect from 1980 to 1987. These conditions hampered the ability of social movements in civil society to sustain nonviolent campaigns for more than a few weeks at a time. Meanwhile, the Salvadoran government constantly claimed that the most powerful civic organizations and labor unions maintained clandestine links to the FMLN, then still an armed insurgency, which exposed the civic leadership and rank-

and-file members to selective forms of state repression until the early 1990s.

Soon after the peace accords, the FMLN was legally recognized as an electoral political party; that recognition itself represented a major accomplishment in terms of constructing social peace, as a former insurgent army turned over its weapons and entered local and national elections. In addition, social movements on the streets benefited from the possibility of having a partner inside the government and the dismantling of several notoriously repressive security bodies like the Treasury Police, National Police, and the National Guard.

With democratization under way, the neoliberal economic model was coming to dominate policy makers’ plans in the region.³ Even before the civil war ended, Salvadoran governments enacted economic-stabilization programs along the guidelines of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), like Christian Democrat president José Napoleón Duarte’s “economic package” of January 1986, which included a devaluation of the national currency. However, a more consistent neoliberal policy-making trajectory came with the electoral triumph of Alfredo Cristiani and the ARENA party in 1989.⁴ The Cristiani administration (1989–94) implemented several neoliberal reforms, including the re-privatization of the banking system, the closure of the Regulatory Supply Institute (IRA), the government food and basic-grains agency, massive layoffs in the public sector, and the privatization of coffee-export institutes and sugar refineries.

The onslaught of neoliberal restructuring, together with democratization, provided the glue that would assist the FMLN in becoming a major oppositional political party in the post-civil-war era. Although these forces took time to converge and produce the strategic alliance that consolidated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, they eventually led to the triumph of the party in the March presidential elections.

IN THE EARLY 1990s, THE FMLN BEGAN RECONSTRUCTING itself as a major electoral party. Historically constituted as an uneasy coalition of five left-wing factions, the party suffered from internal ideological disputes over political platforms, programs, and policies in the post–Cold War context. These conflicts blew up at the end of 1994, when seven legislative deputies left the FMLN, along with two of the five founding parties—the National Resistance and the People’s Revolutionary Army. (The bases of these two renegade parties either remained with the FMLN or later returned as sympathizers.) Hence, in the early to mid-1990s the FMLN struggled to overcome

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earlier internal tensions and transform itself into one of the main political contenders in Salvadoran institutional politics. Many of its top leaders with connections to popular movements, like Humberto Centeno from the telecommunications workers' association, enmeshed themselves in electoral mobilization and left behind their earlier work in social movements.

During this period, as the civil war ended and the country transitioned to peacetime, the social movement sector and civil society organizations also adjusted their strategies and alliances in accordance with the new political climate. The "traditional" types of labor organizations attempted to confront some of the Cristiani austerity measures and held short protest campaigns and one-day strikes. (These battles of the early 1990s included popular movement coalitions like the Inter-Gremial and UNAS-TEMA, which fought the closing of the IRA and the mass layoffs in the public sector under the first ARENA government.) However, some of the largest conflicts in the period centered on issues left over from the civil war, like peasant associations and rural cooperatives' struggles for access to land and ex-paramilitary bodies (*patrulleros*) combating the state through violent street actions for ongoing indemnification and benefits for their services rendered during the civil war.

Beneath the surface, El Salvador was transforming into a largely neoliberal political economy, especially with the implementation of a second generation of major economic policy reforms.⁵ These new reforms centered on privatization, dollarization, and free trade. Beginning with the presidency of Armando Calderón Sol (1994–99), privatization measures were implemented via the executive office's State Modernization Program, which began in earnest in 1994 with the announcement of massive layoffs in the public sector.⁶ In early 1995, Calderón Sol announced plans to increase the value-added tax and privatize telecommunications (ANTEL), electrical power distribution, and the state-run pension system. Popular movements and the FMLN confronted these reforms with a few mass street marches in the course of 1995, but these mobilizations lacked the capacity to sustain a unified opposition campaign, given the period of adjustment to the emerging neoliberal environment.

In the 1994 elections, the FMLN had established itself as a substantial, if still minority, political party by forcing ARENA into a second round runoff election for president and winning 21 seats in the country's 84-member unicameral legislature. With its momentum building, the FMLN went on to take over 51 municipal governments and 27 legislative seats in the 1997 elections, nearly equal-

ing ARENA in parliamentary power.⁷ The party also triumphed with the election of Dr. Héctor Silva as mayor of San Salvador. Yet despite these unprecedented electoral gains for a leftist political organization in El Salvador, the party failed to attract the necessary mass support to win a presidential election, which it lost in 1999 and 2004 in the first round of balloting. Nonetheless, a new wave of social-movement activity emerged by the late 1990s, which helped the FMLN sustain its electoral base in local and parliamentary elections in 2000, 2003, and 2006.⁸

Yet the majority of resistance waged by popular sectors between 1995 and 1998 were fought out in discrete sectors, as the telecommunications workers battled privatization, the public works labor association (ATMOP) fought mass layoffs, the state pension workers (SITINPEP) tackled pension privatization, and consumer-defense NGOs mobilized against the regressive value-added tax and electricity price hikes. On most occasions, the popular sectors failed to unify their struggles into a larger campaign, while at the same time their key political ally inside the parliament, the FMLN, lacked the political capital to prevent these measures from being passed in the legislature. Nonetheless, the balance of power began to shift in favor of both the popular movement and the FMLN in late 1999, when the government moved to outsource and privatize a key sector of the Salvadoran economy: the public health care system.

SOON AFTER TAKING OFFICE, FRANCISCO "PACO" FLORES, the third consecutive ARENA president (1999–2004), pursued an initiative that began in the mid-1990s with the assistance of the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank to outsource the services of the country's premier medical institution, the Salvadoran Social Security Institute (ISSS). The doctors of the ISSS—who had just formed a labor union in 1997 (SIMETRISISS) and launched a successful strike in 1998 for better wages and more voice in the restructuring initiatives—immediately joined forces with the health care workers union (STISSS). Their combined protest campaign proved much different than the episodes of resistance to economic policies in the 1990s. Most notably, they effectively formed wide coalitions with other groups in civil society, together with the FMLN.⁹

This successful new coalition came into existence largely as a result of a change in the structure of Salvadoran civil society in the late 1990s. After the isolated, sector-specific campaigns in the mid-1990s, several new multi-group and multi-sectoral alliances were founded. In the health sector, the Tripartite Commission came together in 1998 to de-



In 2003, health care workers, together with thousands of allies, blocked major thoroughfares in San Salvador in protest of the government's plans to privatize the national health care system. During the protest campaign, which ultimately forced the government to back down, the FMLN effectively absorbed much of popular movements' mobilization capital into its electoral campaigns.

to defend public health and included the newly formed ISSS doctor's union, the physicians in the general hospital system, and the Medical College, the doctors' professional association. In the labor sector, the Movement of Integrated Labor Organizations (later renamed) brought together more than a dozen public-sector unions, while the Union Coordinating Committee of Salvadoran Workers (CSTS) united workers in the government, construction industry, and maquiladoras, as well as informal workers.

These two labor coalitions then joined municipal employees, teachers, and several important organizations beyond urban labor (including the two most prominent university student organizations, peasant associations, and community-based confederations) under the loose umbrella structure of the Labor and Social Alliance (CLS), formed in June 1999 to fight state sector privatization, state repression, increase the minimum wage, and prevent flexible labor laws. In the NGO sector, an important coordinating organization, the Civil Society Forum, had already formed in early 1999 in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. It counted at least 50 NGOs among its ranks, including the largest agricultural worker associations and rural cooperative federations, as well as important rural community associations.

Hence, on the eve of the first major health strike against privatization, a major restructuring had taken place in Salvadoran civil society in which dozens of the

most important labor, peasant, student, professional, and consumer-defense organizations entered into alliances. The doctors and health care workers tapped into this vast and newly created web of civic associations to launch two of the most important strikes in Salvadoran history and one of the longest-sustained resistance efforts against privatization in Latin America.

The first labor strike against health care privatization erupted in November 1999 and lasted until the following March. The nonviolent protest campaign involved dozens of mass marches in the country's major towns and cities, including some that mobilized up to 50,000 participants. This round of mobilizations stood out for the participation of multiple groups beyond the health sector. Peasants from Chalatenango and the lower Río Lempa region rode buses into the capital en masse to participate, public sector labor unions held at least a dozen solidarity strikes, and the NGO community formed an ad hoc coalition of 30 groups to support the strike. In the face of the mounting resistance, the government was forced to back down and negotiate with STISSS and SIMETRISSS.

Significantly, the protests co-occurred with the 2000 legislative and municipal elections. The FMLN publicly supported the strike, while social movements campaigned for the party, which partly explains the FMLN's electoral success in 2000, when the party surpassed ARENA for the first time in the number of legislative seats. But the fight was

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not over. In mid-2002, the ARENA government, working with the private business association ANEP, decided once again to try outsourcing medical services in the ISSS. This triggered an even larger and longer strike, from September 2002 to June 2003, led by STISSS and SIMETRISSS. The doctors and health care workers called on their allies, who again played decisive roles in mobilizing civil society. This time, they erected dozens of roadblocks on the country's major highways and organized massive "white marches" that reached up to 200,000 participants.

The FMLN joined the mobilizations, dispatching not only rank-and-file party members but also legislative deputies and mayors to the marches and highway barricades—in fact, the entire FMLN parliamentary faction joined anti-privatization marches as its own protest contingent. The FMLN also used its weekly public rally, the *Tribuna Abierta*, to call on its supporters to join the mobilizations. The party also introduced legislation that would prohibit health care privatization. As before, the second anti-privatization strike occurred during the municipal and parliamentary elections, in 2003. The FMLN once again benefited from its open support of the strike, winning enough votes to maintain its representation in the legislative assembly and in local governments, including the capital. And the strike movement once again forced the government to halt its outsourcing efforts.¹⁰

AFTER THE HEALTH CARE BATTLE IN JUNE 2003, THE FMLN had effectively absorbed much of popular movements' mobilization capital into its electoral campaigns. The party created a social movement section within its organizational structure that focused on supporting social movement causes and bringing their grievances into the Legislative Assembly. A new social movement coalition also came into existence, the Popular Social Bloc (BPS), which maintained close links to the FMLN. Another major popular movement coalition, the October 12 Popular Resistance Movement (MPR-12), emerged and signed accords with the FMLN during election campaigns to offer strategic support while the FMLN incorporated social movement demands into its election platform. Both the BPS and MPR-12 acted as key vanguard coalitions in the campaigns against the government's plans to sign on to the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) between 2004 and 2007.

In 2004, the FMLN chose a major leader from the health care strikes, Dr. Guillermo Mata Bennett (former president of the Medical College), as the running mate of presidential candidate and historic FMLN leader Jorge Schafik Hándal. The party mobilized for the election almost like a

social movement campaign, going door-to-door to drum up electoral support, while social movement organizations used their affiliates to help mobilize the vote. In the end, ARENA's presidential candidate, former TV sports journalist Antonio Sacá, garnered a record 1.3 million votes. But the FMLN more than doubled its usual electoral turnout, with about 800,000 votes. And in the 2006 municipal and legislative elections, the FMLN maintained its numbers in parliament and received more than 780,000 votes. This electoral success is all the more remarkable given the schisms in the FMLN with the defection of important factions in 2005. What may have made up for this was the continuing unpopularity of the ARENA government's policies, including privatization, as well as its inability to control consumer inflation, its ongoing corruption, and its decision to continue sending Salvadoran troops to Iraq.

Following the government's second defeat in the health care war, it began a crackdown on popular mobilizations against CAFTA, environmental degradation, water privatization, and mining (and, following the crackdown, police repression itself). In April 2004, police forces arrested top leaders of the STISSS while they were attempting to occupy the metropolitan cathedral in San Salvador. A year later, the government expelled a key SIMETRISSS consultant from the country. Police continually harassed informal market vendors who violated CAFTA rules by selling pirated CDs and DVDs to scrape out a living. And after a rare shootout occurred between police and protesters in front of the National University of El Salvador in July 2006, the government passed the Special Law Against Acts of Terrorism. The law was soon used to criminalize demonstrators from the country's leading NGOs, who were blocking roads near the town of Suchitoto in a campaign against water privatization in July 2007.

Under pressure from more stringent government laws against collective public protests and other reasons, popular movements were unable to generate the level of mobilization they had effectively pieced together for the two health care campaigns. Meanwhile, however, the FMLN's ability to hold on to its representation at the municipal and parliamentary levels in the early to mid-2000s set the stage for this year's extraordinary presidential elections. In August 2007, on the eve of launching the 2009 presidential campaign, the FMLN invited several civic organizations, social movements, and NGOs into the halls of the Legislative Assembly to hold a special forum to push for the passage of a national bill that would prohibit water privatization. The head of the FMLN parliamentary faction, and soon-to-be vice presidential candidate, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, implored the attendees active in the social

movement sector: "The coming struggle to defend water is going to demand struggle and many mobilizations from the communities."¹¹

In late 2007, the party ratified Funes and Sánchez Cerén as the presidential and vice presidential candidates, respectively, for the FMLN. Funes, a well-known former journalist with decades of exposure on Salvadoran national television, is an outsider to the party. Sánchez Cerén began participating in the popular movement in the late 1960s as a local leader of the teachers' labor association ANDES-21 de Junio in La Libertad Department. He was also one of the highest-ranking leaders in the Popular Forces of Liberation (FPL) party until it dissolved into the FMLN in 1995.

The FMLN candidates began their campaign in the Cuscatlán soccer stadium with some 50,000 in attendance, almost a year and a half before the elections in March (ARENA did not choose its slate until March 2008). The Funes campaign judiciously used the 17 months at its disposal. Immediately, the FMLN launched the Caravan of Hope (echoing one of Barack Obama's campaign mantras). The caravan traveled through multiple municipalities every weekend, getting out the message. The campaign rallies resembled popular movement protest gatherings, with the same slogans and protest songs chanted and sung in unison along with a whole host of new songs crafted just for the election.

The Funes campaign also enlisted the support of radio stations. A key radio with national reach included Radio Mi Gente, founded by a recently repatriated Salvadoran evangelical minister. Radio Mi Gente broadcasted daily in favor of social change and consistently highlighted the various ills plaguing the popular classes of El Salvador, including gang violence, official corruption, and the high cost of living. Radio Mi Gente, Radio Maya Visión, the Caravan of Hope, and an army of campaign volunteers also distributed and sold songs in support of the campaign. Musicians composed dozens of new songs to accompany the electoral mobilization in popular genres, from cumbia and merengue to mariachi, ranchero, and even reggaetón. All of these popular communication strategies could be seen as overcoming the shortfalls of past electoral campaigns, in which right-wing political parties controlled the three major national TV stations and the most important radio stations in the nation.

The Funes campaign also maintained confidence in the first test of its mobilizing drive when municipal and legislative elections were held on January 18, 2009. The FMLN

lost the capital San Salvador to ARENA by a narrow margin (as the FMLN had defeated ARENA by an even smaller margin in 2006). Nevertheless, the FMLN triumphed in more than 90 municipal governments and took 35 legislative seats (its highest proportion of local governments and legislative deputies to date). In the final two months before the presidential elections, candidates from the smaller parties dropped out of the race, ensuring a final showdown between the FMLN and ARENA to be decided in the first electoral round. The Amigos de Mauricio group played a fundamental role in these final months by attracting the support of disaffected members from other political parties, the military, some business groups, and part of the evangelical Christian population.

The final pre-election test for the FMLN occurred March 7, a week before the elections. Funes and the FMLN convoked a final election rally in San Salvador along Alameda Juan Pablo II. The culminating public gathering turned out to be one of the largest collective political events in Salvadoran history. Crowds stretched from Soyapango all the way to the Centro de Gobierno, where multiple stages were set up for political speeches and more live campaign music into the evening hours.

This final rally in San Salvador is estimated to have reached 300,000 participants.¹² The 300,000-strong crowd may not have heeded Funes's plea to persuade 10 more people to come out on election day, but the FMLN sympathizers appear to have been able to bring out at least four more: The final election tally resulted in 1.3 million votes for the FMLN and 1.2 million for ARENA.

While it is difficult to forecast future political events, the Funes government has, since taking power in June, managed the unenviable task of moderating FMLN sympathizers' high expectations in the midst of the world financial crisis. Social movements continue to mobilize on the streets, especially over mining issues and hydroelectric dam construction in the northern departments. These conflicts appear similar to the skirmishes between Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa and Amazonian indigenous communities over resource extraction. At the same time, Salvadoran popular movements could be called upon to defend democratization if the legally elected Funes government were to come under threat, as has occurred with popular sectors and indigenous groups in Bolivia and Honduras. How Latin America's new "pink tide" governments, including the FMLN in El Salvador, will respond in the long term to pressures from the popular sectors that brought them to power remains an open question. ■

The Funes government has managed the unenviable task of moderating FMLN sympathizers' high expectations in the midst of the world financial crisis.

NOTES

Social Movements, Political Parties, and Electoral Triumph in El Salvador

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