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FMLN Wins in El Salvador: No Mandate for Revolutionary Change

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On March 15, citizens of El Salvador elected—for the first time in the nation's history—a president hailing from the political left. The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) candidate, television journalist Mauricio Funes, defeated the ruling National Republican Alliance's (ARENA) candidate, Rodrigo Avila, by a slender margin.

The FMLN's evolution from guerilla force to a triumphant political party, as well as the peaceful transition from political right to left in an often-polarized society, symbolizes the continued evolution of democracy in the Western Hemisphere.

ARENA v. the FMLN. For the past two decades, ARENA and the FMLN have dominated the Salvadoran political landscape. A basic understanding of these two political parties is essential to any discussion of the March 15 presidential election.

ARENA was formed in 1981 as a conservative, pro-business alternative to the revolutionary and social Christian left. Since 1989, a succession of skilled ARENA presidents governed El Salvador with market-friendly, pro-U.S. policies. Under current President Tony Saca, elected in 2004, El Salvador has been a supportive partner on the international stage, kept (until recently) combat troops in Iraq, and worked closely with the U.S. in the counter-narcotics fight. Yet President Saca's term has not been free of criticism, and El Salvador's commitment to a free market and a transparent investment climate appears to have faltered.

In October 1980, under the mentorship of Fidel Castro, five revolutionary factions united to conduct

a revolutionary struggle as one: the FMLN. This new political entity waged a violent campaign of terror against the military, the ruling class, and moderate reformists of El Salvador until the signing of the 1992 peace accord. FMLN guerrillas shed their fatigues, if not their ideology, and entered the political process, winning positions as mayors and deputies but never—until now—the presidency.

On the eve of the presidential election, several members of the U.S. Congress expressed deep concerns about the FMLN's violent, revolutionary past and its relations with terrorist organizations such as Colombia's FARC guerrillas and to Venezuela's populist, anti-American president Hugo Chávez. Members of Congress warned that if the FMLN aligned itself with designated sponsors of international terror like the FARC, such actions would have an adverse impact on remittance flows and the renewal of Temporary Protected Status in 2010. The Obama Administration, fearful of being accused of interventionism by the American left, expressed impartiality toward the election's outcome, thereby distancing itself from a long-time friend and carefully sidestepping any serious discussion about potential negative consequences arising from an FMLN victory.

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The Presidential Elections of March 15. Unlike the January legislative and municipal elections, the March 15 presidential elections proceeded with remarkable transparency and efficiency. Thousands of international observers, including the author of this paper, were on hand at the polls. Although minor logistical and procedural problems arose and at least one death was said to be political in nature, overall the elections had the air of a “civic festival.” Despite dire warnings by pro-FMLN voices of possible violence and massive fraud, order prevailed. Vote counting moved swiftly and within five hours of the polls closing, the outcome was known.

Funes and the FMLN garnered 51.29 percent of the vote, while ARENA and Avila received 48.70 percent, a victory margin of less than three percentage points. ARENA lost by less than 70,000 votes out of the 2.6 million ballots cast. The day ended with FMLN supporters taking peacefully to the streets to celebrate a historic victory. The Funes government will assume office on June 1, and defeated ARENA candidate Avila and President Sacá promise a constructive relationship during the transition.

No Clear Mandate for a Radical Left Agenda.

Given the FMLN’s narrow victory, its mandate for radical change is open to question. Getting new legislation passed will require Funes to work with the National Assembly and build coalitions. A largely independent judiciary still reflects the prevailing views of the long-dominant ARENA and will become a target for change under the FMLN. Many observers consider El Salvador’s checks and balances as an institutional safeguard against radical change.

El Salvador’s new political leadership enters uncharted territory. The battle for the soul of the FMLN will likely be waged behind closed doors between President-elect Funes—a pragmatist and non-guerrilla—and the FMLN’s inner party apparatus led by Vice President-elect Salvador Sánchez Céren, an aging guerrilla warrior turned politician. Funes symbolizes the new face of the post-peace-accords FMLN. Sánchez is a “reformed combatant” with blood on his hands. Salvadorans hope the FMLN will play by democratic rules, but they are wary of its violent past

and affinity for Cuban-Chavista ideology. Many Salvadorans fear a populist, polarizing, confiscatory approach to governance that will have a negative effect on the investment climate and job creation. Lacking Venezuela’s oil to fuel redistributionist policies, El Salvador has its competitive advantages in its hard-working people, its spirit of entrepreneurship, and its access to the U.S. market. Most Salvadorans do not want a government that is anti-U.S. and breaks the mutual trust and confidence developed in a relationship that has been 30 years in the making.

Challenges for the FMLN. Last Sunday’s elections provided the FMLN with a modest mandate for change. A little over 30 percent of the electorate voted for the FMLN; over 60 percent of Salvadorans either expressed no opinion or voted against the FMLN. Most Salvadorans want good relations with the U.S. as well as jobs, security, and a path out of poverty. They want President-elect Funes to build a stable left-center coalition, to reach out to ARENA, and to be more like Brazil’s social democratic President Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva than Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. The FMLN’s institutional challenge is to rise above its Marxist–Leninist worldview, dampen any urge to launch a drastic, anti-U.S. foreign policy reorientation, and avoid hollowing democratic institutions and safeguards to perpetuate its political power.

In order to assist the FMLN in meeting these challenges, the Obama Administration should:

- Congratulate President-elect Funes and the FMLN on its electoral victory and its commitment to responsible, democratic governance,
- Make clear there are opportunities and incentives for continued close cooperation with the U.S.,
- State frankly that canceling the bilateral agreement on anti-drug cooperation, supporting the FARC, or opening the door to Middle Eastern sponsors of terror will have serious repercussions for the relationship with the U.S.,
- Encourage counter-drug cooperation under the Merida Initiative, support anti-gang efforts, and work for the overhaul of El Salvador’s judicial system to improve the security climate.

Whether the FMLN charts a course of its own or becomes an echo chamber for the rhetoric and programs of Latin America's radical, authoritarian left is of great importance not only to the United States but to the evolution of genuine rather than pseudo-democracy in the Americas.

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