Decisión 2004: El Salvador's Need for and Fear of Change

Graciela González
Victoria Stob

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As early as the 1970s civil discontent, social inequities, particularly in the area of land distribution, and a repressive military leadership set the stage for a civil war that would claim the lives of nearly 75,000 civilians. The war pitted the far right-wing government against the insurgent Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). In 1989, shortly after the party's conception, Alfredo Cristiani of ARENA took office and all of El Salvador's subsequent presidents have belonged to that party since. Throughout the 12-year conflict United States involvement, through the strong support of the right-wing government, was prevalent. In 1992 the fighting government and guerrilla forces "officially ended" the civil war with the signing of the United Nations Peace Accords. Today, El Salvador is no longer in civil war, although many of the same conditions that led to it still lurk throughout Salvadoran society. Today's issues are different, but in many ways identical; land and wealth distribution is still largely asymmetrical, people do not have access to basic life necessities like clean water, healthcare, education, and work. These are some of the many issues that face the country today, and the same issues that the new president has acquired.

In early December of 2003 we both participated in the short-term study abroad program that went to El Salvador. During our time there we saw the beginnings of each party's presidential campaigns and the faces of each candidate, more so Antonio "Tony" Saca of ARENA, and Shafik Handal of the FMLN, become regulars on television and in newspapers. Upon returning, we began plans to return in March to witness what many claimed could be one of the most important presidential elections in El Salvador's political history.

This past March, the Center for Latino Research joined the Latin American/Latino Studies, International Studies, Political Science, Steans Center for Community-Based Research, Women's and Gender Studies, University Mission and Values and the Congregation of the Mission, in sponsoring us on an international election observer mission to El Salvador. We joined the Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America, who had received the invitation to observe from the Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad in El Salvador. Through this mission we would have the opportunity to return during the elections and possibly develop a project that would continue our learning about the country's social and political reality. What we learned shed light on the many ways that an independent country's decision can be easily influenced and manipulated by what stands outside of its national borders, and particularly by an economic and political global power.

Former radio sports announcer Elias Antonio "Tony" Saca was the ARENA presidential candidate. He leads the largest private business association in the country, la Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada and owns many of the popular communication medias in the country, including radio stations, television channels and newspapers. ARENA is pursuing an aggressive strategy to increase exports in order to attract foreign investment. One of the most important points of dispute within the trade agreement is policy that reduces trade and investment barriers. El Salvador has already signed free trade agreements with Mexico, Chile, the Dominican Republic and Panama. U.S. support for El Salvador's privatization of the electrical and telecommunications markets has markedly expanded opportunities for U.S. investment in the country.
Governor, Jeb Bush, visited the country endorsing the Central Salvadoran people against voting for a candidate who does not support U.S. interests. Following the lead of President Bush and his administration, ARENA employed strategic rhetoric, accusing the FMLN of supporting “terrorism”. Shafik Handal, the FMLN candidate had expressed no intent to harm relations with the United States, but rather to continue friendly relations. Most effective however, was ARENA's claim that if Shafik Handal were to win the presidency there would no longer be remittances sent into El Salvador from their families in the United States. This claim was grounded in public statements made by Republican members of Congress including: Tom Tancredo, Dana Rohrabacher and White House special assistant Otto J. Reich, stressed that if a FMLN president would result in the roll back of free trade, negatively affect immigration and cause friction between Washington and San Salvador. Reich, in fact, implied that Salvadoran immigrants under temporary status would be deported if the FMLN won. The elimination of remittances is a legitimate concern considering that more than $2 billion a year from the exportation of labor contributes to the country’s national economy.

Several other private organizations funded media campaigns against the FMLN as well. Most visible were a series of newspaper ads by a group called Mujeres por la Libertad. These ads, which ran almost daily in El Salvador’s most popular newspaper, La Prensa Grafica, implied that an FMLN victory would lead the country into Communism, which, also according to these organizations, would lead to drastic increase in poverty, unemployment and repression.

One full-page ad displays a picture of a guerrilla and two young boys holding full-size rifles and machine guns and the caption reads “Un tipico día de clases en la escuela del comunismo (A typical day in the school of communism) ... Con el Comunismo, la enseñanza es gratis (In communism, education is free). Es esto lo que quieres para tus hijos? (Is this what you want for your children?)”. Also in the picture are two “official texts” on being a typical day in the school of communism... "Con el Comunismo, la enseñanza es gratis. ¿Es esto lo que quieres para tus hijos?"

More than 300 U.S. companies have established either a permanent commercial presence in El Salvador or work through representative offices in the country.

The FMLN presidential candidate was the former guerilla leader, Shafik Handal and the candidate for the vice presidency was Guillermo Mata Bennett. Until recently Guillermo headed the country’s Union of Medics (Colegio Medico) and was one of the leaders of the hospital strike against privatization. Together, they planned to establish the FMLN’s “project for a Peoples’ Government”: a plan to stop privatization and market liberalization and start processes of change which, according to the FMLN, would give Salvadorans better living conditions, social justice and democracy.

As Election Day came to a close, no evidence of significant fraud was reported, signifying that the voting process itself was reasonably transparent. It seemed, in fact, that ARENA's victory had been ensured since campaigning began. The outcome on Election Day reflected the nature of the ARENA presidential campaign, what many Salvadorans referred to as “propaganda negra”, black propaganda. When interviewed and asked why ARENA had won the elections by such a large margin, Salvadorans responded that citizens had voted out of fear. ARENA's rigorous media campaign used divisive slander that claimed supporting the former guerrilla party would ensure bad relations with the United States. True enough, several United States officials had made statements prior to Election Day that discouraged voting for the FMLN as a result of the party's communist affiliation and intent to reject the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

In early February Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, Roger Noriega, visited El Salvador. Following his visit he made statements warning the Salvadoran people against voting for a candidate who does not support U.S. interests. Following that visit, Florida Governor, Jeb Bush, visited the country endorsing the Central American Free Trade Agreement. He only met with candidate Tony Saca and made public statements that urged citizens to encourage democracy by supporting capitalism.

ARENA also exploited a small demonstration by several FMLN supporters cheering the attacks of September 11th on the United States. Following the lead of President Bush and his administration, ARENA employed strategic rhetoric, accusing the FMLN of supporting “terrorism”. Shafik Handal, the FMLN candidate had expressed no intent to harm relations with the United States, but rather to continue friendly relations. Most effective however, was ARENA's claim that if Shafik Handal were to win the presidency there would no longer be remittances sent into El Salvador from their families in the United States. This claim was grounded in public statements made by Republican members of Congress including: Tom Tancredo, Dana Rohrabacher and White House special assistant Otto J. Reich, stressed that if a FMLN president would result in the roll back of free trade, negatively affect immigration and cause friction between Washington and San Salvador. Reich, in fact, implied that Salvadoran immigrants under temporary status would be deported if the FMLN won. The elimination of remittances is a legitimate concern considering that more than $2 billion a year from the exportation of labor contributes to the country’s national economy.

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ARENA, in collaboration with the United States, was able to efficiently take advantage of the climate of fear generated by an illegal and misleading presidential campaign. U.S. interference while unsurprising in terms of its historic meddling in Latin American affairs, is yet another sign of the ramifications of “democracy,” as conceived and mandated by the dominant global actor. El Salvador’s 2004 elections showed that direct military intervention has been replaced by intimidation and threats, however, economic agendas have remained the ends in accessing what is and is not acceptable governance.

The election this year was a reflection of the many ways foreign relations, particularly the United States, can affect the outcomes of the nation’s choice for president. Interviews prior to Election Day lead us to believe that the FMLN had a chance at winning the presidency. Also, many polls taken a few days before indicated the same, but ARENA won with a huge margin, why? It seems that the decision was more about what Salvadoran’s feared most, poverty, and the right-wing party exploited that fear to its advantage.

Victoria Stob is a current student at Depaul University, with a major in Political Science and minor in Women’s and Gender Studies. Graciela Gonzalez has a major in International Studies with a minor in Latin American/Latino Studies. Both graduating in November 2004. Contact Graciela at ggonzal5@students.depaul.edu