



El Salvador

How to Read ARENA's Electoral Campaign

The ARENA party, pillar of the Central American Right, is worried. All polls show the FMLN ahead of it in the March 2009 elections. From costly publicity campaigns to reforming the Electoral Code, ARENA is doing everything it can to keep the Left from winning. What else will it be willing to do in the coming months?

Elaine Freedman

In El Salvador, the municipal, legislative and presidential elections only coincide every 15 years. March 2009 will be one such occasion.

The electoral campaigns don't officially kick off until October, but unofficially they began virtually the day after the election of congressional representatives and mayors in 2006. It's commonly known that the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), El Salvador's governing party, uses an often unimaginable range of resources to convince the population that its candidate is the best, and that the candidate of the FMLN, the powerful guerrilla movement of the eighties and now the main opposition party, would represent ruin for the nation. This year, ARENA's unofficial campaign seems more multifaceted and fiercer than ever.

Polls favor the FMLN

It isn't hard to understand the concern of El Salvador's right wing, and particularly of its main party. For the first time since the FMLN entered the civil sphere and took part in elections (1994), polls consistently show it in first place in their projections for the presidential elections. In a country whose political system gives the presidency enormous powers, this race vastly overshadows those for congressional representatives and mayors in defining the nation's direction.

Between May and June this year, the results of three polls conducted by the well-known survey firms of CID-Gallup, IUDOP (Central American University) and the Technological University were published. Some 12% of those surveyed still said they wouldn't vote for anybody and another 40% said they were undecided or would not comment. These numbers reveal that many Salvadorans aren't counting on the electoral process or formal politics to resolve their problems. All that said, the FMLN candidate was far in front of ARENA in all three polls: 21, 16 and 32 points, respectively.

There are a number of interpretations of the FMLN's wide lead. Some attribute it to the foothold that political parties and alliances identified with the Left have been gaining throughout Latin America and others to this party's growing cohesion after years of internal dispersion and infighting. Many see it as a reflection of ARENA's erosion as a political party and the failure of the neoliberal model it has followed during its 20 consecutive years in the presidency. Finally, some believe that the key to the FMLN's lead is its candidate, Mauricio Funes, a journalist with a great deal of credibility among the populace and no history of party militancy.

Surely the FMLN's advantage is due to some combination of all of these factors, but it must be said that the Right was already concerned about the new electoral scenario even prior to the announcement of the FMLN's candidate on November 11 last year.

Friction between the dominant class and its political instrument

ARENA's pretension of owning the concepts of freedom and democracy is nothing new. Its discourse on freedom has been an essential part of its warning of a "communist threat." It has also been a centerpiece of its economic project, leading the Wall Street Journal and the Heritage Foundation to put El Salvador in second place in Latin America and thirty-third place worldwide in their Free Economy Indices. What does seem new, however, is the way ARENA is fitting these concepts to its own internal processes. One example is its presidential candidate selection process.

Two important factors provide the backdrop to this process, of which the growing tensions and contradictions within the party itself were probably primary. These tensions aren't new, but they've become more accentuated over the past year.

In a TV interview, political analyst Dagoberto Gutiérrez defined it as a "confrontation between the dominant class and the governing class." He explained that "there have been shifts in both of these sectors. The traditional dominant class was the coffee growers, but this changed during the war and a new financial sector emerged. Since 1932, the traditional governing class was the armed forces. But since they didn't win the war, they lost their hold on the governing apparatus and a new governing class appeared—the technocrats. These technocrats include intelligent, studious young men and women who have graduated from gringo universities, the José Matías Delgado or important businesses in our country."

"Why," he asks, "has there been a breakdown between the dominant class and the governing class? Because the dominant class is suddenly no longer Salvadoran. The Salvadoran bankers have disappeared; they now work for one of the planetary banks. This globalized dominant class doesn't much care who wins the presidential elections because its strategic businesses aren't linked to what happens in this little country. But the governing class does care, because its economy depends on controlling the state apparatus. We're referring to all the businesses that survive on contracts from the Ministry of Public Works, to the thousands of people who make their living from this and depend on the public administration."

This reality has generated contradictions and the formation of sub-groups within ARENA. In March 2008, the Corn Team, an NGO that publishes an analysis of current events each week, identified four of these groups: The Dominant—current President Antonio Saca, who is also president of COENA, ARENA's Executive Council, and powerful businessmen from the banking and import industries; The Torogoces—owners of the Salvadoran Telecommunications Corporation and the Diario de Hoy newspaper, together with big business from the agricultural and agro-industrial sectors who asked Saca to resign from COENA in 2007; The Generals—former presidents of the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP); and The Apostles—business owners, politicians and intellectuals who are grouped around industrialist/banker Roberto Murray Meza, including former Foreign Minister María Eugenia Brizuela, former director of La Prensa Gráfica Cecilia Gallardo de Cano, and FUSADES president Antonio Cabrales.

ARENA is "different"

The other key factor behind the change in ARENA's internal process was the selection of the FMLN's presidential candidate. In December 2006, the FMLN changed its statutes, among other things adding the specification that the party's executive bodies—not its assembly—would be responsible for selecting candidates. The ensuing selection process, engaged in with a certain degree of secrecy, concluded on September 27, 2007, with the Political Commission's announcement proposing Mauricio Funes. Although some questioned the process, it was hard to qualify it as "imposed" since Funes had extensive backing both within and outside the party.

In the days leading up to the announcement, amid heated rumors about the FMLN's process being played out in much of the media, President Sacca, wearing his COENA hat, declared from the presidential offices that "all Arena members who believe they meet the criteria have the right to present themselves as presidential candidates, and the party structures will make the final decision." His obvious aim was to publicly de-legitimize the FMLN's selection process as having been "imposed by the party directorate," and present ARENA as a "democratic" alternative.

The spectacular "freedom and democracy fiesta"

Sacca's declarations triggered a three-month media spectacle that ARENA dubbed a "freedom and democracy fiesta." On January 7 he reported on how the process would work: the registration of candidates, who would have to resign from public and party positions; national tours; presentations to party structures; public debates and personal interviews with party leaders. COENA would make two cuts prior to selecting the three finalists. Only at the last stage of the process were democracy and transparency insured, in which "close to 2,800 members from joint departmental, municipal and sector directorates" would vote for the candidate of their choice.

A total of 18 candidates registered, some of them anticipated and others barely known. They included COENA members, founding members of ARENA, the current Vice President, the current foreign minister, ANEP members and the director of the National Police (PNC).

For almost three months, the "ARENA fiesta" was the main item covered in TV and radio news programs. All El Salvador watched as the runoff process gradually moved forward, only to reach the outcome everyone already expected: the selection of Rodrigo Ávila.

Rodrigo Ávila: A gun-wielding macho?

Rodrigo Ávila, former Legislative Assembly representative, former deputy minister of security and two-time National Police director, was the candidate closest to both Sacca and René Figueroa, COENA's vice president of ideology. He was also the most likely presidential candidate until he was forced to play the game to avoid exacerbating the party's internal conflicts. Sacca concluded his announcement saying, "Today, I wish to enthusiastically congratulate the man freely chosen by the grass roots of this party as its candidate for the presidency of the republic."

Ávila's personality, his colloquial speaking manner and his constant presence in the media in recent years fit the profile described by President Sacca. "We need a simple, ordinary, unpolished kind of person who can connect with the population as our candidate." His personal involvement in police operations, pistol at his hip, earned him the nickname of "Attila," creating an image of valor that ARENA party loyalists believe make him a good presidential candidate.

According to the newspaper El Mundo, "Rodrigo Ávila doesn't want to be seen as a

policeman. He says he is more than that, for instance an industrial engineer and a fiscal adviser.” It’s understandable that he would want to separate himself from the Police, given the poor reputation it has acquired due to its inability to reduce crime and insecurity rates, the constant accusations of human rights violations committed by its members, and its presumed links with drug trafficking and hired killer rings.

Nonetheless, his desire not to be perceived as a policeman clashes with his reputation as a tough, gun-wielding macho. The argument against René Figueroa’s candidacy used by Enrique Altamirano, owner of El Diario de Hoy and member of ARENA’s Los Torogoces sub-group, was precisely the inconvenience of having a presidential candidate with links to the Security Ministry.

A campaign of terror

Most opinion polls find that “citizen security” is the main concern of Salvadorans, who want solutions and are thinking about their personal safety when they go to vote. But managing this topic requires a certain circular logic. A climate of terror needs to be maintained to justify the need for the tough approach that only a former police chief or someone of a similar background could guarantee.

Thus, the 10 homicides that occur every day in El Salvador justify the need for a candidate like Rodrigo Ávila. It’s worth noting that this image still works, despite the fact that crime rates have gone up 1.54% since the repressive “get tough” (mano dura) and “get super tough” (mano super dura) policies were started in 2004. In other words, there’s seems to be no correlation between the “Attila” image and effectiveness in reducing crime.

Also noteworthy are the more than 16 cases of community activists, trade unionists and FMLN activists who have been murdered since 2006, crimes that have gone unpunished. A complaint filed with the Attorney General’s Office by a group of social movements and NGOs states that “our assumption that these are politically motivated crimes that use hired assassins and other intermediaries is based on a factual analysis of the cases and application of the parameters established by the Joint Group Investigating Politically-Motivated Illegal Armed Groups in El Salvador, whose final report was published on July 28, 1994. Legal authorities tend to discard any political motive for homicides, relying upon the unquestionable common criminality that is overtaking our country, and failing to investigate the responsibility of other possible authors.”

The enemy is now in the South

Another ingredient in the campaign of terror being unleashed by ARENA is that of guilt by association. In other words, FMLN=Communism=Violence=Terrorism. It evokes the media campaigns, first by the Christian Democratic and later the ARENA governments with support from the major media companies during the years of the armed conflict, to convince the population that the FMLN was responsible for the violence during the war, linking its identity with an attraction to violence and chaos. Today, the Permanent Forum for Freedom is the loudest voice of those presenting terrifying messages. Its television spots juxtapose violent acts from the past with those from the present, attributing them to the FMLN and repeating the slogan, “They’re the ones who don’t change.”

Where might the FMLN be getting support to weave this future of insecurity and violence? According to this logic, Venezuela has now assumed the historical role played in Central America by the Soviet Union and Cuba in the seventies and eighties, “exporting evil” and acting as a source of ideology and financing. On February 7, during a visit to Washington, President Saca announced his concern about a report by the office of the US National Intelligence Director suggesting that the Chávez government was funding Mauricio Funes’

electoral campaign. Citing the report, Saca predicted that Chávez will provide generous financing to the FMLN campaign to influence the 2009 presidential election in El Salvador.

It's no surprise that the United States identified this threat, as it has played a similar role in previous elections. When the FMLN responded with a proposal for a campaign financing law that would insure funding transparency, the news released in Washington disappeared not only from the front pages of newspapers but from all Salvadoran media. This "disappearing act" and the ignoring of a measure that would have contributed to more accountable electoral financing leads one to question the veracity of the accusation as well as the nature of campaign financing received by the parties opposing such a proposal.

The "Devil" is Colombian

Months later, the Venezuelan "devil" was substituted by the Colombian "devil." The FMLN was dragged into the fray following the Colombian army's attack on a FARC base commanded by Raúl Reyes inside Ecuador. For the press, the most notable fact wasn't the incursion into Ecuadorian territory, or the killing of 18 people while they slept, but rather the capture of a computer that allegedly belonged to Reyes.

According to the Colombian army, information about the FARC's international relations, including its relations with the FMLN in El Salvador, was found in the computer. Although INTERPOL's final report was inconclusive, alleged email messages between Reyes and different members of the FMLN and Salvadoran social movements inundated the front pages between April and June. Some reports indicated that FARC leaders participated in arms dealing, while others spoke of organizing groups of Salvadoran recruits to the FARC's rank and file. Others simply referred to participation in public acts of solidarity with Colombia. Clearly, what was important was not proving that some "crime" had taken place, but rather establishing links that would discredit these individuals, their organizations and, of course, mainly the FMLN.

Social band-aids on an electoral campaign?

Along with the traditional fear campaign, the ARENA government's social initiatives—hailed in huge publicity campaigns—are another basic ingredient of its electoral campaign. The government insists that its social programs are trying to alleviate the effects of the growing world food crisis and the crisis caused by high fuel costs. President Saca has systematically stated that social investment is one of the pillars of his government program.

However, this discourse is questionable. The UNDP shows El Salvador as having the lowest per-capita social investment in Central America, with only 6-7% of the GDP going to basic social programs such as education and health. The Latin American average is 13%.

Initiatives linked to the electoral battle, such as the so-called "Alliance with the Family" announced in December 2007 and the recent salary increase for public employees announced by the President on June 1, are not about social investment. The Alliance with the Family is a package of 19 measures that includes eliminating enrollment fees, monthly fees and graduation fees in state schools, the Social Security Administration's provision of 100% of their salaries to women on maternity leave and the reduction of credit card fees charged by banks.

This potpourri of measures mainly benefits the middle class, following no apparent logic, similar to the announced \$50 increase in public employee salaries that will go into effect in July. Only 1.84% of the Salvadoran population works in the public sector.

Huge spending on government publicity

The measures are part of the electoral strategy, not of an economic strategy. FMLN spokesman Sigfrido Reyes cited someone who had monitored one of Telecorporación Salvadoreña's TV channels for an entire day and recorded 50 television ads publicizing these government measures. A 30-second spot on this channel costs between \$500 and \$3,000, depending on the hour it airs, the program, etc. Based on an average cost of \$1,000 per ad, approximately US\$50,000 is likely being spent every day on official propaganda.

This type of expenditure raises doubts about the Saca government's supposed austerity plan intended to confront the crisis. We might even conjecture that manipulating public opinion is more important to ARENA than responding to the nation's needs. Given the current crisis, the \$7.33 million budget of the Presidential Communications Secretariat—seven times more than the amount spent during Francisco Flores' presidency—sparks serious concern.

Why change the dates?

As if ARENA's efforts weren't enough, recent Electoral Code reforms facilitated by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) and the Legislative Assembly give it an additional margin. Through a series of maneuvers both within and outside the legal framework, whoever controls the system wins the elections.

The first measure was passed in mid-2007. Walter Araujo, the TSE president and ARENA's representative on it, announced that the municipal and legislative elections would be held separate from the presidential election: the first two in January 2009 and the third in March. Why was this decision made, since it implies increased spending to the tune of some \$5 million?

According to Araujo, the separation facilitates consolidation and reinforcement of the democratic system and political pluralism, and allows greater citizen control at the time the votes are cast. The proposal, promoted by the National Conciliation Party (PCN)—which governed prior to the 1979 military coup and is ARENA's main ally—seeks to favor the PCN and the Christian Democratic Party (PDC). Their argument is that the voters could become confused if they have to mark three ballots at the same time, and could be swayed by the tendency to vote a straight party ticket for one of the two main parties, ARENA or the FMLN.

This logic creates more confusion than clarity, and reveals the measure's hidden agenda. Rumor has it that ARENA negotiated the support of a trust fund with the PCN in exchange for separating the election dates.

And why the other electoral reforms?

Some months later, the Inter-Party Working Group, created so parties would work together on proposals to reform the Electoral Code, was dissolved at ARENA's urging. It argued that the group was not producing the anticipated results and proposed that it would be better if each party brought its own proposals directly to the Legislative Assembly. There, a committee decided in favor of a series of reforms proposed by ARENA and the PCN, with support from the PDC.

One of the most serious reforms has eliminated the stipulation that any ballot not signed and sealed by the president of the polling table should be declared null. Others include closure of voter registration a year prior to the elections, instead of 60 days, and appointment by the TSE of the president, secretary and member for the Departmental and Municipal Precincts and polling tables rather than by consensus of the members of each of these bodies.

Paying of election monitors from each party prior to the elections, rather than afterwards, was also approved. Alvaro Renato Huezo, legal adviser to the FMLN's TSE magistrate believes this will make it easier for "small parties that don't have enough people to provide election monitors at all of the 10,000 polling places to sell their credentials to parties that do, and this will make corruption easier."

This type of measure, together with restricted access to voter rolls—currently subject to the TSE president's whim—and the delay of Walter Araujo's signature on the agreement with the OAS to audit the voter registration system, all reduce this body's credibility and give rise to speculation about possible fraud.

How will they resolve the contradictions?

When Rodrigo Ávila was proclaimed ARENA's candidate, many analysts speculated that if he didn't do "a good job," the right wing would be prepared to replace him. Some even spoke of "a trial period" as candidate. Shortly after the announcement of Ávila's candidacy, Antonio Sacca turned over the COENA presidency to him, and the party's entire leadership made their positions available to him. The party's highest leadership structure was immediately reorganized and the symbolic back-up figure, René Figueroa, was removed as COENA vice president.

Dagoberto Gutiérrez emphasized the formation of a support committee, led by Salvadoran Ambassador to the United States René León and made up of business leaders who aren't part of ARENA's institutional circles, to draft the government program and direct the election campaign.

The way this party deals with its internal contradictions will undoubtedly affect its ability to run an effective electoral campaign. Nonetheless, as worn down as ARENA may be after 20 years of neoliberal government, it is still the Salvadoran bourgeoisie's political instrument par excellence.

Are 20 years really nothing?

Carlos Gardel sang that 20 years are "nothing." Clearly for those with economic, political and ideological investments in ARENA, it hasn't been long enough.

What can we expect in the time that remains before the elections? A little more than a year ago, Elías Jorge Bahaia, COENA's director of economic and social affairs, wrote to the business community asking for financial contributions to the campaign. "We need to be able to keep building the social, political and economic structure within a free system," he said, "and not allow power to shift to opposition groups." How far are they willing to go to avoid this change? With six months to go until the elections, this is the million dollar question.

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