

Published on North American Congress on Latin America (<http://nacla.org>)

What's Driving El Salvador's Left Turn?

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Nov 19 2008

The leftist FMLN party is the current favorite to win El Salvador's March 2009 presidential elections. Besides the economic downturn, the party's success at the polls is being driven by a series of political innovations that have helped broaden the party's appeal and boost its inclusiveness—both at home and abroad. Could this new strategy make El Salvador the next Latin American country to make a turn to the left?

After more than 15 years since the end of El Salvador's civil war, the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) is poised to accomplish what its guerrilla predecessors never did: Takeover the national government. A recent poll by the University of Central America shows FMLN presidential candidate Mauricio Funes with a 15-point lead over his main opponent, Rodrigo Ávila of the right-wing ARENA party.

With FMLN candidates also ahead in polls for municipal and congressional elections, the party appears on the verge of a resounding victory in the March 2009 presidential elections. If the FMLN holds its lead, El Salvador could become the next country in Latin America making a turn to the left.

Boosting the FMLN's poll numbers is a broad rejection of failed free market policies and fear of the related global economic crisis. The Salvadoran economy, which the *Wall Street Journal* ranks as the second-most open market in Latin America (after Chile's), grew at a rate of five percent last year. But the benefits of this expansion have not reached the country's impoverished majority, and the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. Making matters worse, the economic crisis in the United States will likely cause a precipitous drop in the hundreds of millions of dollars Salvadoran immigrants send home to help their families in El Salvador.



Funes is generally considered an "outsider candidate." (By Wilson Dias/Abr)

A New Politics

The FMLN's success at the polls is also tied to a series of political innovations that have helped broaden the party's appeal and boost its inclusiveness—both at home and abroad. The candidacy of Mauricio Funes, a popular and well-respected journalist seen as something of an outsider to the party, has helped attract support beyond the party faithful. But even before Funes became the candidate, the FMLN was already making significant strides incorporating civil society, particularly sectors traditionally excluded from direct participation in politics and people not affiliated with the FMLN. Finally, the campaign

has also elevated its political strategy to a transnational level, recognizing the importance of El Salvador's sizeable diaspora in the United States and Canada.

Encompassing all these innovations is the FMLN's initiative, announced in September 2007, for a “*diálogo social abierto*” (an open social dialogue). The FMLN set up the dialogue process with the intention of generating a set of proposals that would provide the foundations for a governing platform should the party emerge victorious in 2009. Officials explained the process would include thematic workshops, town hall meetings, general assemblies, proposal collection boxes, and discussions with specific social sectors in various geographic locations. The FMLN established some 32 itinerant “*mesas*,” literally tables, but really committees, to focus on a range of specific issues, including themes such as immigration, the economy, and culture.

Any ambitious political process is bound to have its imperfections, but the experience of the *diálogo social* in Los Angeles and the *mesa* assigned to culture are two examples of how the FMLN's outreach strategy has created new forms of political participation. In the process, dialogue participants are pushing the party toward an extension of the *diálogo social* and more vibrant debates, particularly when it comes to engaging El Salvador's citizens abroad.



A promotion flyer announcing the dialogue in Los Angeles.

From the start, the FMLN showed it sought to include the diaspora by simultaneously making the announcement about the dialogues in El Salvador, Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and Toronto, Canada. And subsequent trips by party officials to Los Angeles, Houston, and Toronto confirmed the party actively sought the contribution of its emigrants throughout North America. Last year, immigrants sent home nearly \$4 billion dollars in remittances, which constitutes the country's largest single source of foreign exchange. Salvadorans abroad finance schools, hospitals, and even

sports facilities in their hometowns, but they remain barred from voting by absentee ballot. Although the *diálogo social* made great strides to incorporate them, participants in the Los Angeles dialogues and in the *mesa* on culture complained that the FMLN could still do more to incorporate the demands of its supporters abroad.

The *Mesa* on Culture

When Roberto Quezada first learned about the *diálogo social abierto*, he worried the process would be a fleeting, election-year strategy without lasting consequences for an eventual FMLN government, but he seemed surprised by the results. Quezada is one of El

Salvador's most popular musicians and was named general coordinator of the *mesa* on culture.

At the *mesa de cultura* meetings, Quezada was joined by some 350 artists, ranging from established musicians like himself to youth and community members. Quezada estimates that about 90 percent of the participants were not FMLN militants. Although the *mesas* were originally slated to hold just one meeting in San Salvador, FMLN officials agreed to expand the number of meetings to two meetings in the west and east of the city, a meeting in Washington, D.C., and another in Los Angeles.

The *mesa de cultura* coordinators began each session with up to an hour of completely free dialogue to foster an atmosphere of openness, which was followed by discussion in break out groups of up to a dozen people. These groups, in turn, presented their conclusions, which became fodder for some three hundred pages of proposals. A committee of three members of the *mesa de cultura*, with Quezada acting as general coordinator, synthesized these discussions and following a year of labor developed a concrete proposal on culture for the FMLN.

The *mesa de cultura* presented their synthesis to the FMLN and a series of discussions and debates followed. Quezada noted that one of the benefits of the process was the opportunity of getting FMLN politicians, who are normally more concerned with kitchen-table issues, to consider the importance of culture and cultural production. Quezada said, "This is one of the points that we worked on most, because the reality is that most politicians did not understand that culture and national patrimony are not limited to historic buildings, statues, ruins, and public monuments."



One of several cultural performance held at the Sunday dialogues in Los Angeles. (By Douglas Carranza)

Quezada reported that the FMLN included 99 percent of the *mesa de cultura's* conclusions. The proposals emphasized creating new spaces for cultural production, providing government resources to support them, developing an academic foundation for artists, and forging new cultural identities. One place the dialogue fell short, according to Quesada, was in recognizing cultural contributions of Salvadorans outside of the country.

***Diálogo Social* in L.A.**

The difficulty of incorporating the diaspora is a challenge that became apparent in the larger *diálogo social abierto* process that took place in Los Angeles. Mauricio Funes visited Los Angeles twice and gave presentations coordinated by the *diálogo social*.

In both appearances, one at the offices of the Central American Resource Center (Carecen) and another at a Presbyterian Church, Funes spoke and listened to full houses. Participants included a range of people affiliated with neighborhood associations, churches, individuals, students, and established non-governmental organizations such as Carecen, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (Chirla) and others—none with any formal affiliation with the FMLN.

Beatriz Cortez, coordinator of the Central American Studies Program at California State University Northridge, and moderator for Funes's appearance at Carecen, initiated one discussion by thanking Funes for being the only presidential candidate that recognized the crucial contribution of Salvadorans in Los Angeles to their country.

At each of these encounters, participants were encouraged to submit their questions and concerns in writing. Organizers assured participants that the FMLN and the candidate would take the questions into consideration. A persistent concern among participants was their immigration status in the United States and the lack of being able to vote in El Salvador's election through absentee ballot. Funes mentioned both concerns in his speeches, but did not offer any specific plans for addressing either.



A float promoting the dialogues during Salvadoran Independence Day celebrations in Los Angeles, September 15. (By Douglas Carranza)

In Los Angeles, the *diálogo social* process began taking on a life of its own. Each Sunday for eight months, participants met at the offices of Carecen to develop their positions. The participants in the L.A. meetings are trying to gain a stronger voice for the Salvadoran population outside the country by transforming the *diálogo social abierto* into a permanent institution, and they continue to meeting every Sunday. The proposal coming out of L.A. included input from five different *mesas*: Immigration, Culture, Youth, Women, and Reconciliation and Unity. The most potentially controversial petition by the *mesas*

included an appeal to revoke the amnesty granted to military officials guilty of human rights violations during the civil war. The *mesas* also called for a series of programs that would recognize the contributions of Salvadorans outside the country and improve their status and treatment both in El Salvador and in their countries of residence. The FMLN did not include these appeals in its final plan of government, raising a question about whether this stems from emigrants inability to cast ballots in Salvadoran elections. But it is questions such as this that MAY get resolved through the sustained dialogue begun in places such as Los Angeles.

The input the party received has given new insights into the nature of Salvadoran communities, especially those outside of the country, and of their needs, interests, and experiences. Immigrants place their status in the United States and their right to vote by absentee ballot in Salvadoran elections high on their list of concerns. And various Salvadoran popular groups have proven to be extremely adept at engaging official spaces to promote their own interests and agendas. The *diálogo social abierto*, by creating new spaces for discussion and doing so at home and abroad, has the potential to change the political process.

The FMLN's ability to address these issues will depend on whether or not the FMLN gains a legislative majority, which will be determined by congressional elections in January and the presidential elections two months later. It remains to be seen if new insight and political opening will lead to real change of the kind Salvadorans need at home and abroad.

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Source URL: <http://nacla.org/node/5238>