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Open Letter: Against U.S. Intervention in Salvadoran Elections

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We the undersigned are North American academics who study Latin America. We wish to make known several concerns with regard to the electoral process now underway in El Salvador and which include legislative elections in January 2009 and presidential elections in March 2009. In particular, as academics who have studied electoral processes throughout the hemisphere, we believe that there are a minimal set of norms and conditions necessary for elections to be free, transparent, and democratic.

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1) We are against foreign interference in the electoral processes and the internal affairs of other countries. We observe in the Salvadoran case that the United States government has brazenly intervened in previous elections to influence the outcome and that once again it appears to be undertaking such intervention. Among various incidents we draw attention to statements made by the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, Charles Glazer, in May 2008 on alleged and unsubstantiated connections between the principal opposition party in El Salvador, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the FARC guerrilla organization of Colombia. Ambassador Glazer stated that "any group that collaborates or expresses friendship with the FARC is not a friend of the United States."¹ Also, in February 2008, the U.S. Director of Intelligence Director J. Michael McConnell made public a report that, without any evidence whatsoever, charged that the FMLN was set to receive "generous financing" from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez for its electoral campaign.² In October, Ambassador Glazer made public reference to this report.³

Such statements constitute unacceptable outside interference in the electoral process. They are a veiled threat against the Salvadoran people that, should they elect a government not to the liking of the United States, they will face U.S. wrath and possible reprisals. We consider this interference to be in violation of international norms and we call on the U.S. government to immediately desist from all such interference. The United States government must respect the right of the Salvadoran electorate to choose its government free from threats of U.S. hostility or reprisals.

2) We are alarmed by the increase in political violence in El Salvador over the past two years and the atmosphere of impunity with which this violence has taken place. There has been a spate of assassinations the circumstances surrounding which strongly suggests that they have been political in nature. The victims of these crimes have exclusively been leaders of trade unions, community and religious organizations and members or supporters of the FMLN. In 2007, according to the legal department of the Archbishopric of San Salvador, only 31 percent of the homicides which that office investigated was attributed to maras (gang members) or to common crime, while 69 percent, showed clear signs of "death-squad style" and "social cleansing" crimes.⁴ The San Salvador-based Foundation for the Study of the Application of the Law has documented 27 murders of young social movement activists and members of the political opposition over the past three years that appear to be death squad slayings.⁵ In addition, the El Salvador Human Rights Commission has denounced an increase in such death-squad slayings against opposition leaders as the elections have approached and warned that these assassinations are generating a climate of fear.

3) There have been a series of legal changes and reforms to the electoral code that open up the possibility of fraud. Among these, we observe that article 256 of the electoral law was partially derogated unilaterally in December 2007 by the current government.⁶ This article (256-D,c) stipulated that all ballots must be signed and sealed by election officials appointed to each voting center in order to be valid, thus safeguarding against tampering with ballots once they are deposited by voters. In addition, the current Salvadoran government unilaterally moved the official opening of the electoral period from September 17, 2008 to September 1, 2008. This meant that the electoral register will be based on the 1992 national census rather than on the new census conducted in 2007. The electoral register at this time lists 4,226,479 Salvadorans registered to vote, on the basis of the 1992 census. However, the new 2007 census indicates that there are only 3,265,021 eligible voters, 961,458 less than the electoral register.⁷ Relying on the outdated 1992 census opens the possibility of ballot-stuffing and related types of voter fraud by using the names of people who have died since 1992 or who have migrated and are no longer residents of the country. Moreover, the Organization of American States concluding its audit of the electoral register at the end of 2007 and in early 2008 presented its report, which included a list of 103 recommended measures with regard to the electoral process, including 56 which that international organization characterized as "obligatory," in compliance with which would put into jeopardy the integrity of the elections.⁸ To date, the great majority of these recommendations have not been acted upon.

4) Finally, we are highly alarmed by statements issued in Washington D.C. on September 18, 2008, by the Salvadoran foreign minister, Marisol Argueta de Barillas, in a speech before the American Enterprise Institute (AEI).⁹ Ms. Argueta was personally invited by AEI visiting fellow Roger Noriega, a U.S. assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs during the administration of George W. Bush and a man who shamelessly intervened in the 2004 Salvadoran presidential elections. At that time, and while serving as assistant secretary of state, he threatened that if the FMLN were elected the United States would seek to block the sending of remittances from Salvadorans in the United States to their family members in El Salvador and to deport Salvadorans residing in the United States.¹⁰ In her speech before the AEI, the Salvadoran foreign minister openly called on the U.S. government to intervene in her country's electoral process.

Ms. Argueta declared: "The United States must pay close attention to what is happening in El Salvador and the resulting national security and geopolitical consequences, since our enemies are joining together and becoming stronger. The upcoming municipal and legislative elections in January of 2009 and the next presidential elections in March 2009 will be without a doubt, the closest electoral competitions in the history of El Salvador...The opposition party is a remnant of the former guerrilla movement. Some members of its leadership have been closely related to ETA or to the FARC. Losing El Salvador will threaten the national security of both El Salvador and the United States...It will generate instability in the country and in neighboring countries and it will set El Salvador back 30 years, to when Central America was in turmoil. As President Ronald Reagan said 25 years ago...the security of the United States is at stake in El Salvador....US foreign policy in the region must be reassessed and there must be a review of growing anti-American sentiment and the coming to power of increasing numbers of anti-American governments in this backyard."¹¹

These declarations virtually call for U.S. intervention in El Salvador to avoid a possible electoral triumph by the FMLN, and to undermine in this way the right of the Salvadoran people to elect the government of their choosing free from threats, pressures, and interference by a foreign power. Given the long and sordid history of U.S. intervention in El Salvador and in Latin America we view these statements with grave concern and we call on the Salvadoran government to desist from inviting U.S. intervention.

We wish to make these concerns known to the incoming Obama administration. We are hopeful that, with its renewed commitment to better diplomatic relations with Latin America and its message of political change, this new administration will not support any intervention in the Salvadoran elections and nor will it tolerate human rights violations and electoral fraud.

SIGNED:

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Craig N. Murphy, Wellesley College and past president of the International Studies Association (2000-2001)

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NOTES:

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- 10) Noticen, 3/25/2004, Latin America Data Base, University of New Mexico.
- 11) Noticen, 10/16/2008.

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