



EL SALVADOR: WILL THE *COMANDANTES* SOON BE RETURNING?

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While a good part of the world is closely following the American presidential election, the declaration by one of the smallest countries in Latin America, El Salvador, that its own campaign is open has been met by nearly universal indifference.

However, following the example of Nicaragua, which in January 2007 saw the return to power of the 'revolutionary' Sandinista Daniel Ortega, in El Salvador there is a strong chance that in 2009 the presidential office will be held by the candidate of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), a Marxist-Leninist inspired group from the civil war that tore the country apart during the 1980s.

The accession to power of Mauricio Funes would thus extend the list of Latin American leaders who are more inclined to engage in a fraternal embrace with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez than to welcome the more or less expected 'return' of Washington South of the Rio Grande.

And Latin America would have one more head of state ready to play the sorcerer's apprentice by weaving the kind of alliances we have seen recently that are as exotic as they are potentially harmful.

1) Why can this happen in El Salvador?

a) The forthcoming elections

On September 1. the Supreme Electoral Court set the date of March 15, 2009 for the elections that will designate the new President and Vice President who will serve a 5 year term. Ahead of that, on January 18, the approximately 4.2 million voters are scheduled to elect their 82 deputies, 262 mayors and 20 representatives to the Central American Parliament (Parlacen), all of whom will serve 3 year terms.

b) The political panorama of the last few years

In 2007, the country celebrated the 15th anniversary of the peace accords signed on January 16, 1992 in Chapultepec (Mexico) between President Cristiani and the leftist groups within

the FMLN, a document that put an end to about 12 years of civil war that cost the lives of 75,000 persons in this country of 6 million inhabitants.

These accords indeed allowed El Salvador to enjoy domestic peace, to enter on the path of economic growth, to make an overture to the international environment and to exercise democracy.

This democracy is reflected in the existence of a rather limited number of political parties which cover the complete traditional spectrum of left-centre-right. Five groups emerge:

- The Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA - right)
The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN - left)
- The Party of National Reconciliation (PCN - right)
- The Christian Democratic Party (PDC - centre)
- Democratic Change (CD - left).

Ever since the Chapultepec accords, the presidential, legislative and municipal elections have been held under good conditions of transparency and according to a regular calendar. Their results have been endorsed by the competing parties and candidates.

ARENA, which presided over the destiny of El Salvador in 1992 in the person of Mr. Cristiani, was able to keep the presidential office for its candidates during the 3 post-conflict elections (1994, 1999 and 2004) and to make very comfortable leads of more than 20 points (36 points in 1994) over the candidates from the FMLN. The candidates of the PCN, PDC and CD always came in far behind the two main challengers with scores that did not exceed, at best, 7% of the votes.

This same domination by ARENA took place in all the municipal elections (every 3 years). The elections of 2006 gave it more than 56% of the municipalities. The FMLN (20% of the municipalities in 2006) also always achieved 2nd place there, but the 'small' parties nibbled away at its position since 2000.

The scene is, curiously, substantially different as regards representation of the parties in the legislative assembly, which is composed of 84 deputies who are re-elected every 3 years. ARENA and the FMLN have taken turns at holding the greatest number of deputies but never obtained an absolute majority, while the PCN, PDC and CD were the only other political groups capable of gaining seats. The last legislative elections gave 34 seats to ARENA, 32 to the FMLN, 10 to the PCN, 6 to the PDC and 2 to CD.

Despite this nearly unchanging situation for the past 15 years, many observers agree in predicting an upset in favour of the FMLN in 2009, the year in which Salvadorians are invited to elect all of their officials.

c) The motives for the dramatic shift in public opinion

Among the chief reasons prompting Salvadorians to no longer place their trust in representatives of ARENA no doubt is the recent deterioration of the standard of living. This comes on top of the recurrent manifestations of social backwardness. At the social level, there have not been the improvements one might expect from the economic growth.

In fact, since the beginning of the new millennium, and in particular after the choice of 'dollarisation,' El Salvador has doubled its GDP. The competitiveness of its economy, supported by reforms on the liberal model, is ranked among the best in Latin America.

The wish of the government to open the economy up to the outside world was translated into the signing of a free trade agreement with the United States¹, Central America and the Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR in 2006) as well as by similar treaties with other Latin American countries and with Taiwan. In 2007, the GDP (22 billion USD) grew by 4.5% thanks to the good performance of the sectors of animal husbandry, manufacturing and services.² As another sign of good health, the direct foreign investment quadrupled compared to 2006.

This overall remark has to be qualified given the scale of money transfers from overseas made by the many Salvadorians who emigrated abroad for economic reasons, mainly to the United States: the *remesas* of these approximately 2.5 million persons³ corresponded to roughly 20% of the GDP. Moreover, the opening up to the outside world led to the reduction of activities and possibilities for employment in the textile industries.

Finally, and above all, under the influence of rises in the price of petroleum products, inflation rose to 5% since 2006, while in 2007 the minimum income overall recorded a drop after variations from one quarter to another. At H1 2008, the purchasing power of families was badly affected by a surge of inflation that was officially estimated to be 9.6% for the first 6 months of the year.

The official rate of unemployment was 6.2% (30% according to some estimations) and the literacy rate of the population was said to be 80.6%. But as a counterpoint to these numbers, which are still relatively moderate compared to the reality of the other countries of the region, the United Nations Development Programme has assigned to El Salvador an index of human development (IHD) of 0.735, which puts it in 103rd place out of the 177 countries studied, underlining the serious shortcomings of the provisions made for redistribution of wealth.⁴

The second major subject of concern and dissatisfaction among Salvadorians affects public security.

No basic progress on this issue has been recorded despite the announced 10% fall in the number of homicides during Q1 2008, when the average daily number of murders went from 9.8 to 8.7 for the first time in 5 years.⁵ The people responsible for this galloping criminality are members of the *maras*, bands of youths who have broken their ties with society. They come from the poor classes and engage in illicit and criminal activities that the local authorities say are closely linked to organised crime. President Flores (1999-2004) opted for a repressive method (the *Mano Dura* plan in 2003), and Mr. Saca reconfirmed this choice with his *Super Mano Dura* plan that filled the prisons with *pandilleros* (4,500 out of 14,600 prisoners) without exhausting the resources of this criminality, all the more so as the United States added to it by expelling clandestine Salvadorian emigrants, 20% of whom had previous criminal records.⁶

¹ The United States absorbs 50% of the exports and provides 32% of the country's imports.

² Structure of the GDP in 2007 : services 63%, industries 27%, agriculture 10%.

³ I.e., a quarter of the population, which has an annual growth rate of 2.2%.

⁴ Nevertheless, in parallel, the government is trying to improve the social services. Thus, at the end of August, it officially established the National Health System (SNS), which will coordinate the actions of the various institutions in the public health sector and classify medical services into 3 categories based on an account per household.

⁵ At the end of 2007, the percentage of murders stood at 61 per 100,000 inhabitants, i.e., a figure 5 times higher than what the WHO categorises as an 'epidemic' when speaking of deadly illnesses.

⁶ Other countries struck by the phenomenon of the *maras* have adopted similar plans (the Steel Fist in Honduras, the Broom in Guatemala). Washington gave its support to these options after 9/11 in the context of the war on terror. Now each year the International Convention Against Gangs (USA, Mexico, Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica) meets each year in El Salvador.

At the same time, many Salvadorians are concerned over the government's decision a year ago to turn to authoritarian methods to settle social conflicts.

Thus, trouble makers arrested during demonstrations over street commerce or caused by the announcement of the policy of 'decentralisation of the water supply' were initially brought before the courts as subject to trial under the anti-terrorist law. Repeatedly the government has been accused of using disproportionate force in its operations to restore public order in the context of social conflicts that are often local in nature.

As an illustration of the devastating effects of the recent deterioration of the general living conditions of the population, an opinion poll conducted at the start of September showed that 78% of Salvadorians rank the economic problems at the top of the nation's problems, ahead of insecurity, followed by social questions (poverty, unemployment). Moreover, three quarters of the persons asked believe that the government has done nothing or very little to attack the economic problems and more than half think the solutions adopted are leading nowhere....

But according to some observers, there were less 'objective' reasons for this big shift in public opinion, which ever since the end of the civil war hardly varied in its choices despite a context of very bipolarised domestic policy.

Indeed, in this context it seems that the FMLN has played the game of master politician by gathering well ahead of the other parties to present already in September 2007 its candidate for the presidency, television journalist Mauricio Funes. At the age of 49, Mr. Funes, who became a member of the Front only in August 2008, is a personality who is both well known and very popular thanks to his 'talk show' that is openly critical of government actions. He is solidly assisted by the head of the Front's list of members in the legislative assembly, Sanchez Cerén. Aged 65, ex-guerilla commander and companion of Shafik Handal⁷, Mr. Cerén is the candidate for the post of Vice President.

This initiative took ARENA unawares and very soon caused a hardening of positions on the voters' concerns and blocked in the assembly a goodly number of government proposals, thus reinforcing in public opinion the impression of immobility of the executive before growing difficulties of daily life.

2) What the FMLN and Mauricio Funes are proposing

During the approval of his candidature by the party's 23rd national convention in November 2007, Mr. Funes set the tone, without genuine surprise in basic points, by demonstrating a certain skill in the presentation.

He prudently asked to be allowed to make alliances with other parties.

After the coordinator of the Front said, in his introduction, that the FMLN is 'a united party, scientific, pragmatic and flexible,' he carefully avoided expanding on the more thorny subjects such as ideological affinities with the Cuban and Venezuelan regimes or any references to God.

To be sure, Mr. Funes is engaged in promoting 'the construction of a just society with solidarity,' solving the problems of poverty and delinquency by investing in social action and

⁷ Shafik Handal, an emblematic figure of the FMLN who died in 2006 ; he was one of the members of the general command of the FMLN during the civil war. During the last ten years of his life and before Sanchez Cerén, he occupied the place of head of the list of deputies from the Front in the legislative assembly.

combating the privileges of the well-to-do. He promised to respect investments in conformity with the laws as well as the existing agreements with the United States while 'honouring the right of self-determination of peoples.' Finally, he announced the opening of relations with Cuba and the People's Republic of China, as well as the strengthening of ties with Venezuela.

In August, during the 24th national convention of the Front, Mr. Funes presented his programme for the government. One could note a more aggressive tone vis-à-vis ARENA and the administration in office, as well as the promise of a true freedom of expression of the media.... several moments after Sanchez Cerén accused them of manipulating information and seeking to scare the citizens.

The programme, which takes in a goodly number of the proposals presented by the FMLN in the legislative assembly and which makes abundant use of a vocabulary lending itself to radical interpretations, is organised around 4 main chapters:

- social reform that is embodied in a great many measures: education, social security and housing for all, the fight against malnutrition, child labour, etc... ;
- economic reform associated with development of employment and of the rights of workers and assistance to development of SME, but also 'integral fiscal reform';
- management of the environment;
- political reform featuring the choices of participatory democracy and which aims in parallel at establishing a 'strong and effective social state.'

At the same time, at the side of a Mr. Funes who tries not to be confused in speech and attitude with the party regulars, the leaders of the FMLN are taking greater part in the electoral action.

This is notably the case of Medardo Gonzales, the 'general coordinator' of the Front, who, without taking into account the call for alliances launched a year ago by Mauricio Funes, said on the eve of the last national convention that there could be no question of receiving for the post of deputy of the FMLN any candidates not belonging to this party.

Out of this sort of quid pro quo which many voters seem to be satisfied with, Mr. Funes today continues to gain the advantage and comfortably holds the lead in the polls on the voting intentions of his compatriots. The opposition and President Saca in the first place no longer hesitate to point to him as the Trojan horse of the Communists.

3) What about the opposition ?

It is clear that, more than ever, the opposition is embodied by ARENA, even if the parties with smaller following are trying at present to stand out and maintain at all cost a statement of independence, notably the CD on the left and the PCN on the right.⁸

It was only in April 2008, i.e., nearly 6 months after the FMLN, that ARENA designated Mr. Rodrigo Avila as its candidate for the presidency.

Aged 44, Mr. Avila has served since 1992 alternately as Director of the national civil Police, as Deputy Minister in charge of security and as deputy from the ARENA party.

⁸ The PCN has chosen as its presidential candidate Mr. Tomas Chévez, an important member of the evangelical church Elim.

Even though ARENA is now well embarked on the electoral campaign, we still see that at mid-September Mr. Avila has not yet chosen the person who will run alongside him for the post of Vice President.

Right away, Mr. Avila attacked the ambitions of the FMLN by criticising the ambiguity of a party which, according to him, seeks its ideological references abroad and places ‘above our flag...the flags of countries whose systems of life are totally opposed to ours.’

Echoing in a way Mauricio Funes, who claims to represent a new left under the banner of an old party, Mr. Avila presents himself as the representative of a new popular right working ‘for a more just country.’

It is, moreover, under this slogan that Rodrigo Avila placed his ‘Plan for the Nation, 2009 – 2014,’ promoted by a ‘right with a face of greater solidarity, more just... defending free trade ... while being the fierce protector of families and workers.’

In fact, in its main lines, the programme of ARENA is hardly different from that of the FMLN, though it prefers the term ‘management’ to that of ‘reform’ :

- social management;
- economic management;
- management of the environment;
- management of justice ;
- political management.

Though he is not succeeding in winning by his speeches and is not the star on the electoral scene, Rodrigo Avila has a tendency to challenge people, accusing his rival of having copied his programme (!), putting in doubt his authority within the party, declaring that a future public debate would pit him against a ‘Communist board’ rather than against Mr. Funes...

As one might have expected, the FMLN has been accused of receiving assistance from Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez.

President Saca himself got involved in this question by recalling his chargé d’affaires in Caracas in order to clarify rumours to the effect that certain municipalities in the hands of the FMLN were receiving Venezuelan oil at low prices....

Thus, although ever since Mr. Avila entered the electoral lists the impertinent advance in the polls of Mr.Funes has been reduced, it would today be risky to say that the candidate of ARENA will succeed in neutralising the strong propensity of public opinion in favour of a figure who, for a long time now has won his personal popularity by way of the media, accusing him, rightly or wrongly, of being a marionette of the ‘reds.’

4) Some additional difficulties in prospect for Washington

The news of these past few months has made it possible to measure how much political relations with Latin America have retrogressed during the years of the Bush administration, years which saw the coming to power of many populist leaders with ‘caudillo’ tendencies who preach a blend of 21st century socialism and return to the sources of Bolivar’s political philosophy and the interests of the indigenous population.

The most striking illustration was the expulsion at the start of September of the American ambassador to La Paz by Bolivian President Morales, who accused him of having encouraged violent groups in the opposition. This expulsion was followed by that of his counterpart in

Caracas by Hugo Chávez acting in solidarity with Evo Morales, while Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua declared that the measure was completely justified. Immediately after the initiative by Mr. Chávez, the President of Honduras, Mr. Zelaya (who had just joined the ALBA), postponed sine die the presentation of the letters of accreditation of Washington's new representative in Tegucigalpa, invoking his solidarity with the Bolivian President.

The questions of security and defence could certainly constitute the first areas of tension with Washington chosen by a government controlled by the FMLN and under the pressure of 'fraternal' regimes.

In this regard, the reactivation of the US Navy's Fourth Fleet on July 1 provoked very critical reactions on the part of the most hardened adversaries of Washington in Latin America,⁹ with Fidel Castro as the first to say that it was intended 'to spread terror and death and not to fight against terrorism and illegal activities.' While Mauricio Funes has been so bold as to make relatively confident statements on the future of cooperation between El Salvador and the United States in the domain of security and defence, the leadership of the FMLN has long expressed its opposition to keeping this. Thus, it is certain that the new government would withdraw from Iraq the Cuscatlán battalion¹⁰ which has been engaged there since 2003. Moreover, El Salvador could follow the example of Rafael Correa's Ecuador, which decided to close the American base in Manta and demand the closing of the base in Comalapa (opened in 2000) arguing that the materiel there should only be used to fight illicit trafficking.

Another instrument of cooperation with Washington, the *International Law Enforcement Academy* (ILEA) opened in 2005 to participate in the training of Salvadorian police in the fight against illicit trafficking, has, since its founding, come under fire from critics and questions posed by the Front. Thus, there is no guarantee it will continue to be supported.

Following the example of Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, the El Salvador of Mauricio Funes could also in turn follow the simplistic temptation of believing that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.'

Without going to the extremes in which Hugo Chávez recently dared to go in connivance with Moscow¹¹, but 'encouraged' by the assistance which Caracas could provide it with, for example, by lowering its petroleum bills, an El Salvador controlled by the FMLN could, in turn, risk entering into dangerous relations with Iran.

One should recall that under Daniel Ortega Nicaragua has taken this path by re-establishing diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2007 and supporting since then the Iranian nuclear programme in exchange for investment projects in the energy domain. In this area, the Bolivian President Evo Morales has also shown the way by making an official visit to Tehran at the start of September to meet with his 'revolutionary comrade and brother' Ahmadinejad. It is true that the latter had announced during his visit to La Paz in 2007 an investment in Bolivia of more than a billion dollars to support the development of the agriculture and food processing sector as well as the search for hydrocarbons and the opening of radio and television stations.

Washington is thus confronted with the prospect of the opening of new facilities made on its southern borders for a regime whose ideological references are miles away from those of its new 'brothers' and which supports Islamic terrorist groups.

⁹And official interrogations among others, such as Brazil and Argentina

¹⁰ Initially with a staff of 380, it now has some 280 soldiers. President Saca confirmed in August a new relief. The battalion reported a couple dozen wounded since the start of its engagement.

¹¹ Receiving 2 strategic bombers, the announcement of naval manoeuvres with warships, allusion to the possibility of opening a Russian military base in Venezuela.

It is a pity that the political shortsightedness of the new Latin American revolutionaries has still not allowed them to understand the deal of fools in which they are engaging under the banners of another age. Up to now there is no basis for hoping that the *ex-comandantes* of the FMLN who surround Mauricio Funes will not suffer from this.¹²

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¹² See the analysis 'Latin America, the Caribbean, Islamism and terrorism' dated 02/03/2007.