

## Reflections on the Presidential Elections in El Salvador

By Harriet Mullaney

---

In March I participated in an international election observer mission organized by El Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad ([CIS](#)) in El Salvador. Our goal was to "provide objective observation...in order to strengthen the democratic process and accompany the Salvadoran people in their efforts to consolidate their democracy and uphold respect for the will of the Salvadoran people".

I came away from the experience very conflicted. It was incredibly heartening to witness democracy burgeoning in a country where civil war waged from 1980-1992. People came to the polls in record numbers to exercise their franchise in an orderly manner. While the structure of the various electoral authorities was overly complex, my group was able to establish a good working relationship and, on the whole, came away from the experience feeling that we had accomplished our goal-at one level.



*Voter Lists*

It was also a discouraging experience because, at its heart, the electoral process was not truly fair, open and transparent. The campaign was marred by serious intimidation, fear mongering, prohibited propaganda, slander and insults, violence, accusations of vote buying, and blatant violations of the Electoral Code. In the week leading up to the election, we heard numerous reports of employers threatening to terminate employees who did not vote for ARENA. On voting day, we were presented with numerous complaints of vote buying. We split into two groups and went to the sites of the alleged activity but, of course, saw nothing. (It was rumored that the price of a vote was \$10. In a country where the urban minimum wage is \$140/mo. and the rural, \$80, it is no surprise that this might be a prevalent activity when the stakes are

perceived to be high.)

Four candidates vied for office but, in reality, it was a contest between two very bitter opponents: Tony Saca of the rightist ARENA Party (Nationalist Republican Alliance) and Schafik Handal of the leftist FMLN (Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation). Tony Saca is a "new" politician, young enough to say that he did not participate in the civil war. He is a successful businessman, a former sports commentator who owns nine radio stations. ARENA has controlled the presidency since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992, and Tony Saca enjoyed the power of its incumbency-and the backing of the U.S. Schafik Handal is an "old" warrior of the left. He was an official of the El Salvador Communist Party before it consolidated with four other leftist organizations to form the FMLN in 1980. He commanded their forces during the war, was one of the negotiators and signatories of the Peace Accords, and has served in the Legislative Assembly since 1997. The FMLN controls many municipalities and represents the largest voting bloc in the Assembly, but its chances for national office were limited. Handal made for a very controversial candidate, identified by his history and the stridency of his positions.



*ARENA transportation to the polls*

One of the goals of the U.N.-mediated peace negotiations after the war was to reunify Salvadoran society. Although a truth commission was established, ultimately there was a refusal to come to terms with the past, address the root causes of the conflict, and put an end to impunity. As a result, the country has never reconciled. While the election was not necessarily discussed in this specific context, the tensions underlying the war clearly remain and continue to color the country's future. The campaign was one more battle between the rightist party that controls the majority of wealth and resources and the leftist party that believes "the people" deserve a different history.

As part of our observer orientation, we visited some local communities and saw constant

reminders of the gap between rich and poor. In a presentation on the current economic situation, it was sobering to learn that the distribution of wealth approximates the levels prior to the civil war. Wealth is concentrated in five families (a reduction from the traditional 14) and another 25-30 families own banks, etc. and wield significant political influence. It was not surprising to hear concern over the possibility of violence if ARENA does not quickly respond to the needs of all the people, provide opportunity where it has been denied, and work toward greater inclusiveness.



*Poll lines on election day*

A Magistrate of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal told us that U.S. involvement was much greater this time than in the 1994 and 1999 presidential elections. Twenty percent of the Salvadoran population lives in the U.S. and sends approximately \$2 billion home in the form of remittances. For months, the Bush administration has contributed to the climate of fear in this election by suggesting that remittances would be restricted and mass expulsions undertaken if the FMLN won. The U.S. observers were frequently asked (even by ARENA members) if our government would really take such retribution against Salvadorans. Pressure escalated on March 13, when Otto Reich, the special envoy for the Western Hemisphere, expressed concern over the impact of a FMLN victory on U.S. commercial, economic and migratory relations with El Salvador.

Four days before the election, Republican Congressmen Tom Tancredo (R-CO), Dan Burton (R-IN) and Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) appeared before the Foreign Relations Committee of the House of Representatives. According to La Prensa (a mainstream newspaper), these legislators "lanced their darts against a possible FMLN government". Tancredo stated, "If the FMLN controls the government of El Salvador after the presidential elections, it would signify a radical change in the politics of the U.S. basically related to the free flow of remittances from Salvadorans in the U.S. to their home country." Burton suggested that, "If the communist candidate of the FMLN assumes the presidency of El Salvador, it may very well be necessary for the U.S. to reconsider our relationship with El Salvador, the continuation of the Temporary

Protected Status (visa program) and our actual support for the transmission of remittances to their country." Rohrabacher left no doubt by saying, "It is important that the Salvadoran people understand that their decision at the ballot box will have consequences for their future relations with the U.S."

These Representatives seem to have had a goal other than "to uphold respect for the will of the Salvadoran people". Is it any surprise that Sacca captured the presidency?