

# Winds of Political Change in El Salvador: The FMLN's Historic Victory

By Marc Becker

FOR THE FIRST time, the left will govern El Salvador. In the March 15, 2009 presidential elections, Mauricio Funes of the former guerrilla movement the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) defeated former police director Rodrigo Ávila of the conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) by a thin margin of less than three percentage points.

This victory brings an end to 20 years of ARENA rule, and almost two centuries of right-wing domination of El Salvador. Popular movements entered the elections with high expectations, and ecstatically greeted Funes' victory with fireworks and dancing in the streets late into the night.

After decades of electoral losses and neoliberal governments, leftist organizations had lost some of the initiative that brought them to the verge in the 1980s of bringing down the conservative regime that ruled this small Central American country.

A long and bitterly fought electoral campaign also drew energy away from local organizing, but now activists are positioned to continue their struggles against mining companies and free trade agreements. Controlling the government promises to return the initiative to the left in its struggle for a more just and equitable future.

The FMLN also won local and congressional elections in January, including taking 35 of 84 seats in the legislature. ARENA, in contrast, won 32 seats. This makes the FMLN the largest party in congress but without an outright majority, particularly for decisions that require a supermajority of 56 votes. Together, conservative parties hold a majority of seats but currently the right is so fragmented that it is unlikely that they can work together. If the FMLN plays its cards properly it might be able to control congressional decisions, but it might require that they moderate their positions.

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The biggest defeat for the FMLN was losing the mayorship of the capital of San Salvador to ARENA in the January elections. The FMLN had won that position in the four previous elections. Nevertheless, in the March presidential elections the FMLN won San Salvador by a broad

margin, leading some to point to an unpopular incumbent rather than party positions as the reason for the mayoral loss.

## From Armed Struggle to Politics

The FMLN formed in 1980 as the unification of five guerrilla groups who sought to topple El Salvador's oligarchy. They took their name from a communist leader who led a failed 1932 uprising that led to the massacre of 30,000 Indigenous peasants. In the 1980s, the leftist guerrillas fought a much larger and better-funded U.S.-backed military to a standstill. The war left 75,000 dead, mostly at the hands of the military and right-wing death squads.

After a 1992 peace agreement, the FMLN transitioned into an electoral party, but lost elections in 1994, 1999 and 2004 to ARENA. Death-squad commander Roberto D'Aubuisson, who was responsible for the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero, founded ARENA in the 1980s. Some observers have commented that this successful transfer of power between contending parties finally represents the culmination of the long sought after promises of the peace accords.

After long-time communist leader Shafik Hándal lost the 2004 elections in a landslide, the FMLN began to make changes in its party in order to assure victory in the next election. Funes, the first FMLN candidate who did not emerge out of guerrilla ranks — in fact, he only joined the FMLN after being named its candidate in September 2007 — was a popular and charismatic television journalist who was openly critical of government policies.

Funes represented a more moderate face for the party, which convinced many hesitant voters to support him. The FMLN also capitalized on popular discontent with the country's deteriorating economy.

Funes pledged to keep trade agreements, including the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) which social movement activists bitterly opposed for its neoliberal orientation. Funes has pledged to respect private property, arguing that private investment rather than nationalizations and a larger state sector, is the solution to El Salvador's problems. Rather than new taxes, his government promises better enforcement of current tax laws.

Funes also said he would retain the U.S. dollar as the legal tender, continuing the symbolic and economic subjugation of El Salvador to U.S. imperial interests.

The currency, in any case, can only be changed through legislative action in an assembly that the FMLN does not control, and CAFTA can only be annulled or modified by common agreement of both the U.S. and Salvadoran governments. Historically tight connections with the United States mean that the country has limited control over its economic policies.

## Hope for Progress

At the same time, Funes promises to implement several policies that will have dramatically positive impacts on the marginalized and working people of El Salvador. These include controlling prices, raising salaries, subsidizing basic services, dedicating resources to reduce gender inequality, advancing agrarian reform, eradicating illiteracy and implementing health programs. All of these programs promise to improve the quality of life for the rural and urban poor.

ARENA resorted to fear tactics to scare people from voting for Funes, claiming that Funes was a puppet of Venezuela's left-populist president Hugo Chávez and threatening that a FMLN victory would lead to the cutting off of remittances from immigrants to the United States. About a quarter of the Salvadoran population lives in the United States, and remittances are the largest source of revenue for the country.

Pressure from solidarity activists led the Obama administration to state that it would

respect the outcome of the elections, and work with whoever won. While ARENA attempted to disparage the FMLN, the elections showed that Salvadorans have grown weary of their conservative policies. A FMLN campaign slogan promised that "hope defeats fear."

In his victory speech, Funes pledged to govern on behalf of all Salvadorans, and especially for the poor and marginalized. He also promised to work with the United States, and underscored this position by meeting with the chargé d'affaires Robert Blau at the U.S. Embassy shortly after claiming victory.

Blau said, "we have said many times that our intention is to continue with the good relations with El Salvador from government to government, and from people to people" — a marked contrast to embassy actions during the Bush administration when it actively campaigned against the FMLN.

Although the FMLN victory represents a significant swing to the left for El Salvador, it also points to an increased diversification of the Latin American left. While careful not to alienate the United States, Funes has also sought to distance himself from Venezuelan president Chávez. He compares himself to the more moderate leftism of Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

At the same time, Funes says he will restore diplomatic relations with Cuba. El Salvador will be the last country in Latin America to do so after U.S. pressure led all countries but Mexico to break them after the 1959 revolution. He may also move toward hemispheric alliances that challenges

the Washington Consensus, such as the Venezuelan-led Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA).

Other flavors of leftist governments also control Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Uruguay. Leftist victory in El Salvador, however, has special significance because the country has long been held under tight U.S. control, including being the location of one of the largest U.S. embassies. El Salvador was one of only four Latin American countries to send troops to Iraq, and the last to withdraw. In Latin America, only Colombia remains with a hard-right government closely allied with Washington's imperial interests.

While Funes represents a moderate position within the FMLN, the party remains strongly in the hands of more radical militants who emerged out of the 1980s guerrilla war. One of these leaders was the vice presidential candidate Salvador Sánchez Céren who helped found the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), the country's oldest and most militant guerrilla movement. Although party militants moderated their discourse during the electoral campaign, they still remain very critical of neoliberal policies that have failed to generate economic growth or reduce growing inequality.

A question that remains is whether Funes has so compromised the FMLN's historic leftist roots that he will inevitably run into conflicts with a much more radical grassroots, much as Lula's social movement base and in particular the landless workers movement (MST) have increasingly and vocally complained about the Brazilian

leader's compromises in power.

During the campaign, the FMLN base eagerly and vocally supported Funes, but observers wonder how long that support will last once he takes office on June 1.

One thing that leftist political parties in Latin America have learned is that winning an election is not the same as taking power. In El Salvador, the right will still control the judiciary and electoral apparatus.

The FMLN recognizes this as a limitation of working within the confines of a constitutional framework rather than gaining power through an armed struggle. The FMLN cautions the "ultra-left" against making unrealistic demands of the new government, while at the same time urging the grassroots to mobilize to demand compliance with its electoral promises.

After two decades of ARENA administration and two centuries of oligarchical domination, winning a presidential election is only one step toward social movements implementing their agenda in El Salvador. Despite these restrictions and limitations, the Salvadoran people feel a giant step closer to realizing long-held dreams of social and economic justice.

FMLN leaders adamantly argue that the best path to achieving these goals is through support for Funes in the face of what is sure to be ferocious right-wing opposition. They do not fear a strong, organized popular movement, but see a mobilized and engaged citizenry as critical to building a strong and just democracy. With the energy of this electoral victory behind them, popular movements have high expectations. §

## The NAACP at 100 — continued from page 6

Garvey opposed the belief of the NAACP and especially Du Bois that whites could be won to the cause of Black freedom. Both a charismatic and highly controversial figure, Garvey and his followers saw all whites as anti-Black, advocated an all-Black party and supported a "Back to Africa" program. He was prosecuted for alleged corruption and his movement essentially crushed by the government in the 1920s.

In the 1930s and '40s Blacks pressed for civil rights during the Great Depression and organized a March on Washington in 1941 (later called off) to press for full equality. It took until the Korean War for the military to be desegregated.

The NAACP's most important legal case after World War II was *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Years in preparation, the case was argued before the Supreme Court by the NAACP's lead counsel Thurgood Marshall, who would become the Court's first African-American justice. The Court held "separate but equal" public education unconstitutional because it could never be

truly equal.

The graphic timeline — from chattel slavery, emancipation, loss of rights, desegregation and recovery of most legal rights in the 1960s and now to the election of the first Black president — chronicles a period of mostly second-class citizenship.

For the past century, the NAACP was central to most of these fights. Its members helped found other civil rights groups. From its Niagara Movement origins, it used lawyers and direct action to fight the cause. While more militant Black groups, including Black trade unionists like those leading the Sleeping Car Porters, organized fightbacks, the NAACP remained front and center, especially in the South.

The SCLC and Martin Luther King, the youth of SNCC, along with the NAACP legal department, led the battles in the 1950s and 1960s to end Jim Crow. Sometimes called the Second Civil War, that battle is still ongoing but made it possible for Obama to be elected president. Yet the U.S. Supreme Court decision on the Voting Rights Act in 2009 shows, again, how quickly

what has been won can be eroded.

This contradictory and at times sordid history explains why civil and human rights groups must remain vigilant. Until a new socialist-based system that outlaws discrimination permanently, civil and human rights activists must be aggressive in pressing their democratic, socio-political and economic demands.

The 100th anniversary of the NAACP thus is not just a time to look to the past. It is an opportunity to understand what needs to be done today to go forward and build a mass direct action movement to protect past gains and bring about revolutionary change. §

### A brief list of important readings:

John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans* (1947)  
Elliot Rudwick, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Voice of the Black Protest Movement* (1982)  
Langston Hughes, *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* (1962)  
Peter B. Levy, *The Civil Rights Movement* (1988)  
Philip S. Foner, *American Socialism and Black Americans: From the Age of Jackson to World War II* (1977)