

After winning El Salvador vote

FMLN vows respect for private property and Washington

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The victory of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in last Sunday's presidential election in El Salvador has brought the political party formed by the former left-wing guerrilla movement to power for the first time. It has likewise removed from office the rightist ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance) party, founded by the leaders of the country's infamous death squads, which had exercised a political stranglehold over the national government for the past 20 years.

While this political shift undoubtedly reflects a growing radicalization among El Salvador's impoverished working people, the FMLN is taking office on the basis of the most right-wing program in its history.

El Salvador, one of the poorest and most socially polarized countries in the Western Hemisphere, has never recovered from the 12-year civil war that began in 1980, which claimed the lives of more than 75,000 people, saw some 8,000 "disappeared" and left another 50,000 permanently disabled. Washington backed the country's military, which a UN commission blamed for 85 percent of the crimes carried out during the war, with hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid as well as US "advisers."

In 1992, following its failure to defeat the government forces, the FMLN signed a peace agreement with the ruling ARENA party, laying down its weapons and transforming itself into a traditional bourgeois party. Since then, it has been the main opposition party in El Salvador, controlling municipal governments in the capital of San Salvador and many other cities.

The FMLN's victorious candidate and El Salvador's president-elect is Mauricio Funes, a former correspondent for CNN's Spanish language station and talk show host who joined the party just last year in order to run for office.

Funes won with 1,359,142 votes (51 percent) to 1,280,995 votes for Rodrigo Ávila, the former national police chief who was the candidate of ARENA. A voter turnout of 70 percent was among the heaviest in the country's history, considerably above the 63 percent turnout in the 2004 election won by ARENA.

In the next Legislative Assembly, the FMLN will have the largest delegation—35 out of 84 seats—but not a governing majority. ARENA will hold 32 seats with the rest split between two other right-wing parties aligned with ARENA.

The FMLN ran a campaign that emulated that of Barack Obama,

including the use of his image—formally protested by the US State Department—and slogans, such as "Yes we can."

ARENA, whose candidate boasted of shooting guerrillas as a soldier during the 12-year civil war that began in 1980, waged a Cold War-style fear campaign claiming that the FMLN's victory would mean turning El Salvador into a satellite of Hugo Chávez's Venezuela.

Funes countered that his model for El Salvador was not Chávez but Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, indicating that he wanted to reproduce the kind of minimal social assistance programs combined with support for big business that have characterized the corruption-plagued Workers Party in Brazil. The former television announcer is married to Vanda Pignato, a Brazilian woman who served as both Brazil's cultural attaché and the representative of the Workers Party in El Salvador.

In an interview with the Honduran daily *La Prensa*, Nunes affirmed: "The Chávez model is not my reference point, rather it is the model of President Lula in Brazil. Why Lula? Because he has made efforts in the three years of his second term to rid businessmen of the traditional fear that they have had of the left."

While running as the candidate of the FMLN, Nunes's bid for the Salvadoran presidency evidently enjoyed substantial support from other political forces identified with the Salvadoran right.

These included a group calling itself "Amigos de Mauricio Funes," which raised funds, provided advisers and recruited supporters for the FMLN candidate. As Rogelio Núñez points out in an article on the Spanish news web site *Infolatam.com*, this group, which is closer to Nunes than the FMLN leaders, includes "some with links to the parties of the right, both ARENA and the PCN, or with the old paramilitary groups."

Among them, he writes, are "figures like Luis Ángel Lagos, the founder of the paramilitary group ORDEN; the businessman Gerardo Rafael Cáceres; the economist Álex Segovia; the ex-military officer David Munguía Payés; and the businessman José Miguel Menéndez Avelar and Nicolás Salume."

Support from such figures suggests that powerful layers within the Salvadoran ruling elite concluded that the government needed a "new face" after two decades of ARENA rule and amid rising social discontent brought on by soaring food prices and an economy that is being hard hit by the world financial crisis.

Nunes vowed to pursue a policy aimed at furthering the interests

of the business groups in El Salvador, while forging even closer ties to Washington.

"Nothing traumatizing is going to happen here," he declared in an interview with El Salvador's Megavisión television. "We will not reverse any privatization. We will not jeopardize private property. There is no reason at this moment for fear."

Similarly, in his victory speech, the FMLN candidate said, "I will build a dynamic, efficient and competitive economy and promote the creation of a broad business base. Our proposal is to convert El Salvador into the most dynamic economy of Central America. To this effort, I invite all businessmen, medium, big and small, to contribute to the building of a new country." He again swore his allegiance to "private property" and said his government's key objectives would include "macroeconomic stability and a responsible fiscal policy."

In an interview with the *Washington Post*, the president-elect declared his admiration for Obama, adding, "I will work to strengthen the relationship with the United States, to make the US more of a partner, and I think we will work well together." He likewise promised to uphold the free trade agreement between the two countries.

El Salvador's economy is already among the most closely tied to the US in the hemisphere, with the American dollar serving as its currency. Close to one third of the country's population, some 2.5 million people, have emigrated to the US. Remittances sent back to the country by the immigrants are estimated at \$3.8 annually, about 20 percent of the Salvadoran gross domestic product and the country's largest source of foreign reserves.

According to the country's central bank, remittances sent to El Salvador fell 8 percent in January compared to the same month last year, as the immigrant workers confront the impact of the deepening economic crisis in the US. The US is also the country's largest trading partner, accounting for more than 60 percent of its exports. Falling commodity prices and the deepening recession are threatening to unleash an economic catastrophe in the Central American nation.

The scars of El Salvador's civil war have never really healed. The ARENA party that has ruled the country for 20 years was founded by Major Robert D'Aubuisson, the leader of the death squads that carried out much of the violence against the population. Known as "Major Blowtorch" for his use of torture, D'Aubuisson was described by the US ambassador to the country, Robert White, as a "pathological killer." While he died of cancer in 1992, his accomplices remain in the party and occupy top positions in government and business thanks to an amnesty law that was imposed a year after the 1992 peace accord between the FMLN and the ARENA party government of Alfredo Cristiani.

Funes stunned rank-and-file supporters of the FMLN when he announced in the course of the campaign that as president he would keep this amnesty law in place.

The law prevents any prosecution of those responsible for the assassinations, massacres, forced disappearances and torture carried out by the US-backed security forces during El Salvador's civil war. Among the countless crimes that have gone unpunished are the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the 1981 massacre of some 900 women, children and men in the

village of El Mozote carried out by the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion.

As recently as last fall, the FMLN had publicly demanded an end to impunity, launching a formal initiative in the legislative assembly for the amnesty's repeal. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has also issued repeated appeals for the law to be scrapped, all of them rejected by right-wing governments of the ARENA party.

Funes told the Salvadoran media that he would make no attempt to repeal the amnesty and that the FMLN leadership supported his position. Echoing the arguments and rhetoric of the right, he told Tecnovisión television news earlier this month: "We have to look to the future; not more to the past. We cannot change the past of hatred, clashes and confrontation. But the future we can build in a different way."

The announcement by Funes provoked bitter denunciations by human rights organizations in El Salvador. Benjamín Cuéllar, the director of the University Institute for the Defense of Human Rights at the University of Central America (IDHUCA), commented that those who thought an FMLN victory would hold accountable those guilty of crimes against the Salvadoran people would be cruelly disappointed. "You cannot expect changes in the sense of a break with impunity. This guy is adopting the same ideas as ARENA."

The claim that the issue of amnesty is merely one of the past is politically and morally bankrupt. El Salvador remains one the most violent countries, with the highest murder rate in the Western Hemisphere. While the killing is routinely blamed by the media on violent gangs, there is substantial evidence that much of it is the work of death squads still in operation carrying out summary executions of presumed criminals, gang members and others in what are known as "social cleansing" operations.

The election of Nunes and the FMLN is being portrayed in the media as part of a broad shift to the "left" in Latin America, following the rise of figures like Chavez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador. The reality, however, is that his government—like those elsewhere on the continent—will represent not the interests of the working class and oppressed layers, but those of the local elite and foreign capital.

Official figures put the poverty rate in El Salvador at 38 percent, but more realistic estimates suggest that it is well above 60 percent. The distribution of wealth is among the most unequal on the planet, with the top 0.3 percent claiming 44 percent of the country's total income. Given the deepening global capitalist crisis and its impact on the country, the explosive resurgence of class struggle in El Salvador is inevitable, with the working class entering into confrontation with the FMLN government.



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