FMLN government escalates repression amid civil war-level violence in El Salvador

Andrea Lobo
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In response to a dramatic rise in the homicide rate, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) government in El Salvador has imposed greater militarization in the streets and a state of emergency in seven prisons.

The new measures consist of banning cellphone use, limiting visits, increasing surveillance, and placing gang leaders in isolation. The plan was approved by the Legislative Assembly on April 1 with 83 out of 84 members voting in favor. A special $100 million loan to finance it was approved on April 6.

The vice president, Oscar Ortiz, stated, "Today we are making right with this crusade against crime and extortion."

This is expected to worsen the already horrid conditions in prisons, holding over three times their capacity and described by the U.S. State Department as "harsh and life threatening." Out of the 30,000 prisoners, the Salvadorian authorities estimate that about 13,000 belong to gangs and claim that high-level decision making in these criminal organizations happens inside prisons and gets communicated out.

The 6,656 killings last year brought the murder rate back to civil war levels. At 103 per 100,000 inhabitants, El Salvador is the most violent country in the hemisphere. In comparison, the rates in Honduras and Guatemala have slowly decreased in recent years but remain in the top five most violent countries in the Americas with respective rates of 57 and 30. According to the Salvadoran National Police, 1,380 people were murdered in January and February of this year, a rate that, if continued, would lead to over 8,000 deaths for 2016.

The violence primarily affects poor and working class neighborhoods. As reported by *La Prensa*, 70 percent of small shops and small businesses are extorted by gangs, who exert *de facto* rule over large parts of the country. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) reports that violence is meted out for "bearing witness to a crime, attempting to leave a gang, or failing to pay an extortion fee or war tax."

As is to be expected from the bourgeois press, there has been no attempt to look into the deeper causes of violence, which are rooted in the history of the local ruling layers defending their interests with extreme state violence, while today forcing thousands of youth into the dead ends of migrating or joining organized crime.

The consolidation of the two largest gangs—the MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) and the 18th Street Gang (Barrio 18)—arose as byproducts of the 1990s Clinton administration crackdown on crime and mass deportation of members of smaller gangs formed in the U.S. "Eventually it became a gang, but initially it was just to protect each other from other groups that were harassing us…These kids were being treated like trash," told one of the deportees during this period to the *Huffington Post*.

During his second year in office in 2010, FMLN President Mauricio Funes was criticized for lacking a plan to deal with gang violence, so he pushed for cooperation between the police and the military. A series of massacres began, which analysts and former police officials and directors have linked to highly-trained special forces. The second documented incident was a massacre of five young construction workers and students, who, as recounted by a survivor, were mistaken for gang members.

The return of death squads, called "groups for social cleansing," has been connected to government authorities. This was made especially clear after Funes discounted their existence without any investigations. Extrajudicial executions, as reported by several newspapers, have been increasingly linked with the Armed Forces.

Since 2009, the military has reportedly defended one or another gang in order to generate some authority and even receive kickbacks. In one instance, in February, members of the Armed Forces beat up and threatened with death a 19-year-old worker, Cristian Campos, for scoring a goal against an MS-13 team. He was killed a few days later at 6 a.m., presumably on his way to work.

After a temporary truce between gangs, which led to a drop in homicides in 2012 and 2013, extrajudicial executions and militarization of policing have escalated to levels not seen since the end of the civil war in 1992. During the war, although 85 percent of violence complaints were against government forces and only 5 percent to FMLN forces, the latter also carried out documented torture and killings of civilians.

Since taking office in June 2014, FMLN President Sanchez Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla leader himself, has continued an "iron fist" against gangs, with policies "nearly identical to the 'mano dura' policies of the past," according to WorldPost.

During 2015, 74 percent of alleged human rights charges submitted to the attorney general's office were against cops and soldiers, compared to 40 percent in 2014. The National Police estimated that 30 percent of murder victims belonged to gangs.

U.S. imperialism has continued to finance state terror in El Salvador, which has served to maintain one of the cheapest and most vulnerable labor forces in the world. It continues to protect

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its economic and political dominance. *Forbes Magazine* reports, "Venezuela's economic decline and El Salvador's poor relationship with China (due to its recognition of Taiwan) mean that El Salvador has few alternatives to U.S. support." However, the Salvadoran Ministry of the Economy announced "multimillion investments" by Chinese companies for this year, which has surely raised some eyebrows in Washington.

Supposedly aimed against violence and corruption in the Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala), the U.S. Congress approved $750 million in "assistance to Central America" for the current year, a 155 percent increase over 2015.

Importantly, 25 percent of the funding is directed at preventing undocumented migrants from fleeing to the U.S., thereby encouraging even greater abuses by government authorities against the population.

During the civil war, Washington provided more than $4 billion to the Salvadoran government, leaving it hungry for more military aid packages and incentivizing future state-sponsored violence and collusion of gangs and government forces.

Economic policies bound to U.S. ruling class interests have long exacerbated the abysmal living standards of the Salvadoran working class and destroyed opportunities for the youth. Export-led industrialization, primarily with U.S. capital dressed as national enterprises during the 1970s, led to greater unemployment, lower shares of income going to labor, and a greater economic dependence on imports from the U.S. in the forms of machinery, pesticides, and oil.

These were major causes of the civil war during the 1980s, which in turn led to high inflation, capital flight, economic contraction, and a crushing external debt, which remains today the highest in Central America in proportion to GDP (64 percent and increasing).

Abiding by World Bank and IMF orders, the government has continuously placed the mounting debt on the shoulders of the working class through cuts in social spending and privatizations, which began in the 1980s with coffee and sugar exports, banks, electricity, and telecommunications.

The extreme right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) of death squad organizer Roberto d'Aubuisson, in power between 1989 and 2009, expanded the attacks on workers by privatizing the pension system and water, and dollarizing the economy. The ensuing social crisis came to a head in 2009, amid the global financial crisis, with the country registering the highest youth homicide rate in the world, 40 percent of the population in poverty, and 0.3 percent of the population owning 44 percent of all assets.

Desperate for a change, Salvadorans elected the FMLN. Coming into power under the banner of "national unity," it proved to be an even more ruthless defender of imperialist interests. Aside from limited social assistance programs and education, the focus has been to protect previous privatizations, apply regressive sales taxes and impose austerity measures, mainly in health care and agricultural subsidies.

The government has increased military repression by enlarging its security budget. With this week's addition, it has climbed to $680 million for 2016, becoming higher than the total spent on health.

Violence is being used by the business elite and its current political representative, the FMLN, to implement further attacks against the working population. "The problem with El Salvador is not the lack of resources (to finance the Safe El Salvador plan that needs $2.1 billion), but the lack of good austerity government policies," said the president of the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP) last September.

According to a 2015 report by Oxfam, despite growth slowing to around 2 percent, the number of millionaires has increased by 6.7 percent, and they have amassed a fortune equal to 87 percent of the GDP. In 2014, the two richest people owned $7.5 billion or three times the social development budget for that year. In contrast, El Salvador has, along with Nicaragua, the lowest minimum wages in Central America, which ranges by sector between $94.80 and $242 per month, while the basic food basket costs $193.

Rural areas have been virtually abandoned leading to 60 percent of inhabitants living in poverty and 30 percent in extreme poverty. Work is scarce and insecure in both the cities and rural towns. According to the World Labor Organization, 65.7 percent of the labor force works in the informal sector, with 44 percent of them living in poverty. Moreover, the youth suffer a school desertion rate of 70 percent, with only 14.8 percent of students going to high school in 2013.

Corruption and corporate tax evasion are especially widespread, with private enterprises evading 35 percent of their taxes or $1.2 billion yearly, according to the Foundation for the Study and Application of Law (FESPAD). The FMLN has staunchly opposed the creation of any anti-corruption agency.

Only the mobilization of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program—independent from all bourgeois parties like FMLN and ARENA—can successfully combat the local ruling oligarchy's and U.S. imperialism's violent defense of their interests, using gang violence as the pretext for employing repressive measures to attack the living standards and democratic rights of the workers and youth.

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