

Salvadoran ex-president flees corruption charges for Nicaragua

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On September 6, the Sandinista government of Nicaragua granted political asylum to former Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation (FMLN) party, his current partner and three sons. The state newspaper *La Gaceta* reported that the “ex-president of our sister Republic of El Salvador” argued that “he considered his life and physical integrity and those of his family to be in danger, for fighting on behalf of democracy, peace, justice, and human rights, along with his political affiliation.”

In an interview on September 8 with the Sandinista Channel 4, Funes stated: “Being in El Salvador, and going and coming here to Managua, I received information from people very close to powerful economic groups in the country [El Salvador], where they sent me the message that they would not tire in their efforts to see me in jail and if possible see me dead.”

He explained that this alleged threat is connected to his administration having “investigated 152 corruption cases... accusing former functionaries of past ARENA [far-right] governments and mostly business people tied to wealthy families in the country.” Out of these, only two cases led to judicial processes, including that against ex-President Francisco Flores (1999-2004) for stealing \$10 million donated by the Taiwanese government as assistance for the 2001 earthquake victims and for the National Police.

A 2014 investigation carried out by the Salvadoran online newspaper *El Faro* found that ARENA was not the intended recipient of the money, but that the party transferred the money to Costa Rica and distributed it among several regional divisions and campaign committees. The criminal proceeding was ended after Flores’s death in January of this year.

Funes complained in the interview that “the civil proceeding was kept [open], but the prosecutor is doing absolutely nothing to find out where the resources went and who the main beneficiaries could be.”

Only two weeks after Flores’ death, the Salvadoran Supreme Court gave the green light to begin the criminal investigation against Funes on five charges: “crimes of embezzlement, illicit negotiations, misuse of funds, illicit enrichment and influence-trafficking.” These are related to more than \$700,000 worth of unjustified income and expenses. The court found that Funes

spent over \$54,000 shopping in luxury stores between 2011 and 2013, including \$10,000 spent in a designer shoe store in Miami.

The former president stated in the interview that he is “ideologically identified with the current government in El Salvador and with that in Nicaragua”. Funes also declared that he is not guilty, but that if found guilty, he would not go to jail and would only have to return the funds.

Even though he also denies his participation, his administration sponsored a 14-month truce between gangs that led to a 41 percent drop in the homicide rate between 2012 and 2013. The truce came to a halt under pressure from the US government and Salvadoran elites. Last year, the homicide rate climbed to 103 per 100,000 inhabitants, bringing the country back to civil war-level violence.

The accusation of “illicit negotiations” against Funes is being used to legitimize the current FMLN-led intensification of the “iron fist” policies against gangs and buildup of the repressive apparatus—isolation of alleged gang members in prisons, new elite military and police forces, authorized extrajudicial killings and death squad activity of the state forces.

During his time in office, Funes built closer bonds with Washington and established partnerships with far-right figures like former ARENA President Antonio Saca (2004-2009), who is also accused of illicit enrichment involving over \$6 million.

When pressured by the US State Department, Funes turned General David Munguía and later General Atilio Benítez into ministers of Security and Justice. Together with the FMLN members in Congress, he allowed the far-right and military to take control of the security and justice apparatus. This continues today, facilitating the penetration of organized crime into the armed forces and state.

The US embassy and several members of the US Congress have participated in the selection of judicial cases, including those initiated under the Funes administration, and have given full support to all “anti-crime” and “anti-corruption” efforts led by the current top prosecutor, Douglas Meléndez.

Last May, Meléndez ordered the arrests of several state workers and lower-rank officials for participating in the 2012 truce, and threatened, “Those thinking about a new truce should not do so. We will not allow this to happen.”

The US imperialist use of the judicial and security authorities as levers to discipline its client regimes has a long history in Latin America, and is currently behind the “anti-impunity” international commissions in Guatemala and Honduras. These and similar efforts in El Salvador are being sponsored by “international cooperation” funds from the UN and directly from the US government.

The Salvadoran Supreme Court ruling in July to stop amnesty on crimes committed during the Civil War (1980-1992) is also part of this continued pressure on leaders of both ARENA and FMLN that were involved during the war. The FMLN vice-president, Óscar Ortiz—considered the de-facto head of state given President Sánchez Cerén’s medical condition—said the court ruling would create “a scene of chaos, vengeance, and violence,” while party leaders called it a “coup attempt”.

The Central American University (UCA) protested in an editorial column: “A lot of people made poor by social injustice believed in the FMLN because its language suggested a greater concern over human dignity. But, attitudes like that of the vice-president make one doubt whether that concern still exists within the party.”

An August 31 press release by the US embassy in San Salvador stated: “In our interactions we have been clear that it’s important to demonstrate that a firm political will exists to combat corruption. We believe that this point is key in building a more stable and prosperous El Salvador.”

The investigations against Funes have already led to at least 10 raids, along with judicial orders to make public his travel logs and finances from during his mandate. The state prosecutor’s office stated that even with Funes in Nicaragua, “investigations against him will not stop.”

Ultimately, if these forces are now going after them, Funes and FMLN only have themselves to blame, forming a bourgeois nationalist government and competing for greater privileges and shares of profit from the super exploitation of the impoverished Salvadoran working class.

The claims of innocence are not the only inconsistent part of Funes’ story. He had been living in Nicaragua for three months as a “consultant,” allegedly planning to “reside” in the country, presumably indefinitely, had no arrest warrant against him and was already receiving protection. Moreover, the FMLN’s national secretary, Medardo González, disclosed that the party had instructed Funes to go to Nicaragua to avoid possible arrest. The FMLN President Sánchez has also pledged support for Funes.

The request for asylum and expedited approval by the Ortega government in Nicaragua are a political move to respond to the US judicial and media offensives against both governments.

The Obama administration mouthpiece, the *New York Times*, got the message, and focused on attacking Ortega, claiming he “threatened ... to undermine the early efforts to curb corruption by El Salvador’s attorney general, Douglas Meléndez...”

The *Times* also quoted right-wing academics criticizing

Ortega’s “authoritarian tendencies” and, again, his “effort to discredit the process, to discredit the attorney general.”

These claims match those expressed by the *Times* editorial board on August 4 that Ortega and his wife and vice president, Rosario Murillo, “intend to establish an authoritarian dynasty”. They conclude the opinion piece with a grave warning used historically by the US government: “The course of Mr. Ortega’s own political history should serve as reminder that overthrowing a government can be the citizen’s response when all other avenues for dissent are shut.”

Given the 2009 US-backed military coup in neighboring Honduras against President Manuel Zelaya, and subsequent repression and killings of the opposition, this severe threat is directed against workers and youth in Nicaragua.

While Ortega’s administration has in fact sabotaged the opposition’s electoral coalition prior to the November elections, US imperialism has no qualms about supporting authoritarian and dynastic regimes. Underlying the broader anti-Ortega campaign is the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” coming into direct conflict with Ortega’s military and economic ties with Russia and China, including the 50 tanks recently bought from Russia and the plans to build a \$50 billion interoceanic canal by a Chinese firm.

“Daniel (Ortega) is trying to do a favor to Sánchez and Funes, but it will have a cost, because the perception will be there that he is a fugitive from justice,” claims Aguirre Sacasa, a former right-wing foreign minister, who calls the decision “bad business.” While the US government and corporate media continue to exploit this “cost”, the Sandinistas and FMLN are using their corrupt unity as a lever to seek a better deal with US capitalism. Aguirre has praised Ortega’s “political astuteness” and his efforts to improve “the perception of the business climate in our country,” but has warned that his provocative attitude towards the US “will ruin what has been built in this important aspect.”

In El Salvador, the FMLN leader Medardo González announced that the party’s leadership will meet with representatives of the US embassy to discuss the party’s concerns over “disrespectful encroachment” by US authorities in corruption cases.

With poverty and public debt on the rise, and the closing of channels of political and economic support from Venezuela and other “left turn” governments in South America, the bourgeois nationalist FMLN in El Salvador and FSLN in Nicaragua will continue to defend their own privileges by moving toward greater repression and austerity in the interests of US imperialism and their local oligarchies.



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