

# ***MESOAMERICA***

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## **EL SALVADOR**

### **ARENA and FMLN Still Dominate Political Scene**

Having now taken part in seven general elections, the former Salvadoran guerrilla movement under the banner of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) has maintained its position as the country's second most-powerful political group. During each election, the FMLN's historical and ideological rival has been the rightwing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), formed in '81 as an anti-communist and anti-agrarian reform party, which has ruled the country for most of the past 25 years.

The struggle between these two dominant political forces has seen them grow almost symmetrically, sidelining any other political group. The legislative and municipal elections of 12 Mar were no exception, with both parties dominating the results following a campaign characterized by mudslinging and strong outbursts of class sentiment.

### **FMLN Wins Important Victories in Legislative and Municipal Elections**

The final results of the 12 Mar legislative and municipal elections demonstrate some important victories as well as some setbacks for the FMLN. The FMLN won 60 mayoral and 32 legislative seats and maintained its control over the central zone of the country by winning 12 of 19 mayoralties in the San Salvador metropolitan area, with a population of 2.2 million. However, the net gain for the FMLN was only one more legislative seat and two fewer mayoralties than in '03.

One of the big victories for the FMLN was Violeta Menjivar, its candidate for the mayoralty of the City of San Salvador, who was finally declared the winner on 16 Mar by the Supreme Electoral Council (TSE) in a closely contested race. The ruling ARENA party deliberately delayed accepting Menjivar's victory, and only did so only after FMLN supporters occupied the Civic Plaza for several days and marched to TSE headquarters to denounce the alleged fraud.

On the positive side, more than half of the national population lives in the 59 municipal districts that were won by the FMLN. On the downside, the FMLN lost some department capitals like Santa Ana,

Usulután, and La Paz. ARENA won 147 of the 262 municipalities, or 56%, whereas the FMLN won only 23%.

On the legislative front, the FMLN obtained the highest number of votes for legislators and will have 32 seats (38%) in the upcoming legislative assembly out of a total of 84 seats. However, despite having fewer actual votes than the FMLN, ARENA won 34 seats (40%) because of the residual vote system. The National Conciliation Party (PCN) won 10 seats (down from 16 in '03); the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) won six seats (a gain of two seats from '03); and Democratic Convergence, CD (formerly United Democratic Center), won two legislative seats (down from 5 in '03).

This means that the rightwing bloc—ARENA and PCN—will have slightly more than a simple majority (44) in the upcoming legislative assembly. Nevertheless, ARENA was unable to curtail the FMLN's growth in the legislature and will be forced to negotiate on laws requiring a two-thirds majority vote (55).

The 12 Mar elections also were marked by serious accusations of fraud, violations to the rule of law, lack of transparency, violence and domination by rightwing groups more than any other elections since the '92 Peace Accords. The municipal and legislative elections are critical in that they set precedent for the '09 municipal, legislative and presidential elections and will, in the course of the next three years, factor into the further consolidation of the neoliberal economic model or support for resistance to this model and the building of alternatives.

### **City of San Salvador to be Governed by a Woman for the First Time**

After more than three days of tension resulting from ARENA's stalling the announcement of the election results for the City of San Salvador, the TSE was finally forced late Wednesday night (15 Mar) to accept that the FMLN had won San Salvador in Sunday's elections (12 Mar). The announcement only came after the FMLN took to the streets to protest the TSE's alleged illegal actions, a protest that was brutally attacked by riot police.

As of late Sunday night it had already become clear by most counts that Violeta Menjívar, the FMLN candidate, had won the election by a small margin. However, for the next three days ARENA used its stranglehold on the TSE to stall the announcement of doña Violeta's victory, and many Salvadorans believed they were using the TSE's stalling tactics as a way to buy time to prepare to steal the elections.

Tuesday evening the TSE called a press conference to announce a winner, but it was after midnight when the ARENA magistrate and president of the TSE, Walter Araujo, finally appeared to announce that due to "logistical" issues he would wait until 15 Mar to announce a winner. Shortly thereafter, Araujo announced that the difference in the tight race between the FMLN and ARENA was just 54 votes. Since 83 votes had been contested by ARENA, Araujo said the TSE would go back and recount those 83 ballots. At that point, the FMLN magistrate on the TSE walked out, refusing to participate and thereby legitimize the TSE's alleged fraud. Many Salvadorans immediately reacted to the announcement, worried that ARENA, through the TSE, had already manipulated the ballots.

Another serious violation of the law that led people to believe ARENA was conspiring to commit fraud was President Tony Saca's announcement on Sunday night that the ARENA candidate for mayor of San

Salvador had won the race. Although Sacca had been purposefully using his role as president to campaign for ARENA for months, the announcement that ARENA had won—when the TSE had not yet made its official announcement—was a serious violation of the institutionality of the TSE, so much so that even representatives of the Organization of American States criticized Sacca's announcement.

On Tuesday FMLN activists began a permanent rally and the occupation of the central plaza downtown, demanding that the TSE announce the final election results. Late in the evening on Wednesday, with Araujo still insisting on opening the ballot boxes and doing a recount, the FMLN leadership decided to march to the TSE headquarters to denounce the alleged fraud. Despite threats from the police that they would attack anyone who tried to get near the hotel where the TSE was installed, the leadership of the FMLN, together with hundreds of activists in the central plaza, marched in the dark up to the hotel and into a fire of rubber bullets and tear gas. A few hours later, in the middle of the night, the TSE finally had to officially announce that Menjivar had won the mayoralty of San Salvador by 44 votes.

San Salvador, the nation's capital and its largest city, has been governed by the FMLN for the past six years. ARENA leaders had pinpointed the capital as a FMLN stronghold that they wanted to take away, allegedly resorting to fraud and manipulation of the voting system at every step of the way. The fact that the FMLN was able to win the mayoralty of San Salvador despite all of ARENA's manipulation of the electoral process is an indication of the strong support the FMLN continues to have in San Salvador and around the country.

### **Marchers Say NO to Water Privatization**

Thousands of people took to the streets of San Salvador on 22 Mar representing labor unions, environmental organizations, *campesinos*, students, religious groups and the Popular Social Bloc. The marchers arrived at the Legislative Assembly to present their proposal for a "Special Water Law" that would guarantee universal access to water. March organizers chose World Water Day to denounce governmental attempts to privatize water and to present their alternative to the government's proposed "General Water Law." "They now call privatization concession!" chanted march participants.

The proposed "General Water Law" authorizes the government to grant concessions to private operators in the country's water administration system. A group of marchers representing FESTRASPE, a federation of unions, carried a huge banner that read: "Water is life, to concede it is death." A commission representing all organizations participating in the march entered the Legislative Assembly building and introduced their proposal for a "Special Water Law," which was immediately endorsed by several FMLN legislators.

The government's *de facto* water privatization strategy for the smaller water systems has been largely unsuccessful due to opposition from SETA, the Water Workers' Union. It appears that the push for privatization will play out on the legislative front where the FMLN won 32 seats in the 12 Mar elections. Water privatization is but one piece of unpopular legislation that rightwing politicians will try and force through the Legislative Assembly. Meanwhile, the Salvadoran social movement is resisting privatization efforts through organizing, mobilizing and presenting alternatives to protect the rights of citizens.

—Compiled by Clifton L. Holland