

# MESOAMERICA

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## EL SALVADOR

### **Close But No Cigar**

The Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) was unable to register as an official party in time to participate in the municipal elections to be held in Mar '06. The party, created by former Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) members who withdrew from that party earlier this year because of disagreements with its direction (Vol. 24, No. 7), submitted a grand total of nearly 58,000 signatures in support of their registration, but the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) was unable to count them all before the 11 Nov deadline. Nevertheless, the FDR has created an alliance with the Democratic Change (CD) party and the National Liberal Party (PNL) in order to be represented in the upcoming elections.

In a series of events that ran down to the wire, FDR officials first handed in 48,808 signatures to the TSE in late Oct, only to have 11,743 of them rejected because of apparent irregularities. Two days after the rejections, with 4,094 signatures still needed to reach the required 41,197, the FDR presented over 9,000 more for inspection by the TSE on 3 Nov. The validity of these signatures was unable to be confirmed by the 11 Nov deadline, thereby eliminating the FDR's chances of official party registration until next year.

In addition to gathering signatures, the FDR asked the legislature to approve a decree that would have allowed them to bypass the petition process altogether. This would have required approval by the FMLN and other official parties, something that the FDR thought it had secured. However, at the last minute, the FMLN accused the FDR of having "secret negotiations" with the TSE and withdrew its support, thus denying the possibility of the decree's approval by the legislature.

The FDR has accused the country's two largest parties—the FMLN and the National Republican Alliance (ARENA)—of creating a "political blockade" against it. "There was an agreement made by the two large political forces, ARENA and FMLN, to boycott our registration," said Julio Hernández, Secretary General of the FDR. However, Antonio Saca, President of the Republic and of the ARENA party, responded by saying, "As ARENA, we have not pressured anyone ... There has been no exchange here, no negotiation."

Despite losing its registration battle, the FDR plans to run municipal candidates throughout the country by means of its new alliance. Carlos Rivas Zamora, current mayor of San Salvador and member of the FDR, is up for reelection as are the mayors of Mejicanos and Nejapa. "The candidates

will be divided between the PNL and CD. There is no doubt that among these people the FDR will be represented,” said Rubén Zamora, director of CD.

### **Dirty Business**

Sixteen current and former FMLN mayors and council members have been sentenced by the General Accounting Office (GAO) to pay a \$3.7 million fine for their involvement in the creation of a partnership that built and manages a garbage dump in Nejapa. The partnership, Integral Management of Solid Waste (MIDES), was created in '98 by the Metropolitan Area Mayor's Council (COAMSS) and Cintec, a Canadian company with alleged ties to the mafia. The GAO declared that the partnership was created without a legal basis and, therefore, the \$37 million that was paid to Cintec for honorariums was paid illegally. COAMSS, which owned 10% of MIDES, must now repay its share of this money.

Those convicted include Héctor Silva, the former mayor of San Salvador; Carlos Rivas Zamora, the current mayor of San Salvador; Óscar Ortiz, the mayor of New San Salvador; Carlos Menéndez, the mayor of Mejicanos; and René Canjura, the mayor of Nejapa, among others. On top of the \$3.7 million, each of those convicted must pay \$1,371 for the violations they committed by their actions while running the business.

FMLN members and ex-members maintain their innocence in the face of the convictions and insist that they had no part in any wrongdoing. “It’s absurd. We never touched a penny, never had anything to do with it, and they sentence us to pay more than three million dollars,” said Ortiz. Héctor Silva made light of the charges by saying, “where did the web come from if there is no spider?” However, René Figueroa, Minister of the Interior, did not think the verdict was so funny. “He who unites with the mafia ends up a prisoner,” he said.

All 16 have decided to appeal the GAO’s decision and the court has agreed to listen. This process may be the only way that the politicians can secure their positions as official candidates in the Mar '06 elections, because the TSE does not recognize candidates who are currently facing criminal charges.

### **ILEA Agreement Reached**

It is now official, the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) is coming to El Salvador. On 31 Nov, the Legislative Assembly ratified the US-sponsored ILEA agreement to install the academy on Salvadoran soil, amid strong debate and much opposition.

Supporters of the academy maintain that its purpose is focused on fighting terrorism, organized crime and human trafficking, among others. Detractors warn of the potential similarities between the academy and the US-run School of the Americas, infamous for training military officers of suppressive regimes in Central America during the '80s.

“We have approved the installation of the academy because with it we are helping ensure that we have personnel more capable to combat money laundering and organized crime,” said Milena Calderón of ARENA.

The approval came in a legislative vote that secured 48 votes in favor of the installation without a single favorable vote cast by an FMLN party member. “This academy is nothing more than another backyard that imposes US imperialism in El Salvador. With this poorly named academy they are

going to want to manipulate the actions of judges, attorneys and politicians. This is not correct,” said FMLN legislator Hugo Martínez.

### **Money For Education**

El Salvador’s Minister of Education, Darlyn Meza, announced on 29 Nov that the country had successfully negotiated a World Bank loan of \$85 million to be spent on education programs. Specifically, the loan will be used to strengthen the country’s Plan 2021, a 16-year program launched in Mar ’05 by President Antonio Saca intended to increase access to education throughout the country. In addition, the Salvadoran government will invest another \$12 million, bringing the total investment to \$97 million.

Within the goals of Plan 2021 is the universal coverage of public education for preschoolers, access to technology in the classrooms and the intensive promotion of English-language instruction, among others. The loan, once ratified by the Legislative Assembly, will be available for disbursement next year.

El Salvador will also be focusing much of its energy on increasing high school registration. Right now, only 60% of students continue to this level. “We need to reach 80%,” said Meza.

Another victory for education was won when the government of Spain agreed to waive \$10 million of an outstanding \$68 million debt if El Salvador agreed to invest that money on education. This money will be distributed primarily to the 100 poorest municipalities in the country and will be disbursed over the next four years. Meza wished to recognize the key role played by Saca in obtaining the “yes” from Spain during his trip there earlier this year.

—*Ian McLoone*