

“Si, nosotros podemos” – Change Comes to El Salvador

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On March 15th, change came to El Salvador as Mauricio Funes, a well known television talk show host, was elected President with 51.3% of the vote. Funes was the candidate of the FMLN political party.

The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) was created in 1980 as the umbrella organization uniting five rebel factions. El Salvador’s horrific civil war lasted twelve years (1980-92), with the FMLN emerging as the country’s second-largest political party after the signing of the peace accords.

The losing party ARENA had held power for twenty years. The conservative party’s candidate, Rodrigo Avila, had been head of the National Police. ARENA was created in 1981 by military officers and a few members of the economic oligarchy. Major Roberto D’Aubuisson was the person who led the effort to create ARENA. At the time, he was running the army’s intelligence war. According to declassified US documents, Major D’Aubuisson gave the orders for Salvadoran police intelligence agents to assassinate Archbishop Oscar Romero.

With memories of the civil war still alive in the Salvadoran people, one could expect the campaigns to be negative, especially regarding television and radio advertising. Studies showed that two-thirds of the negative ads were aired by ARENA. The theme was predictable. A FMLN victory would mean El Salvador would be under the influence and control of Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez. Forty-six Republican U.S. Congressmen and women signed a letter stating that a FMLN victory would necessitate a change in US foreign policy towards El Salvador since “Chavez and Venezuela are tied to Iran, a terrorist nation”. Other ads linked Funes to the Castro brothers and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega.

Funes’ campaign was a replica of Obama’s. The theme was not simply change but responsible change. The FMLN’s candidate constantly referred to Brazil’s President Lula da Silva as his role model.

In reality the two parties’ political platforms were very moderate. ARENA, recognizing recent elections of leftist presidents throughout Latin America, wrote a party platform very different from past elections. The economic oligarchy recognized that ARENA would lose big unless it could convince undecided and poor voters that it cared about their economic plight.

The ARENA Platform¹

Poverty was the first priority in ARENA’s platform. The first order of business would be to design a program for the alleviation of poverty in the country’s poorest 100 rural communities and 80 poorest urban marginalized barrios. The core of this effort to alleviate “extreme” rural poverty (families living on less than \$2 a day) consisted of a three-pronged program:

- 1) A direct transfer of funds to use for education and pre-natal care.

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¹ The figures presented here come from a lecture given by ARENA party representative Rafael Lemus.

- 2) Funding for municipal infrastructure (water, electricity and roads).
- 3) Extending credit for agriculture and the service sector.

The program for the urban poor consisted of:

- 1) A \$4,000 housing subsidy enabling families below the minimum level of poverty, living in multi-material homes to construct a new home with a concrete floor, wood walls and a corrugated tin roof. The homes would have electricity and propane gas.
- 2) Funding for sports facilities
- 3) Funding for community development to combat delinquency and strengthen security.

ARENA's poverty alleviation program also had an international aspect designed to grow the economy. This entailed:

- 1) Public investment in ports, airports, irrigation systems and major highways.
- 2) Improvement of conditions for private foreign direct investment.
- 3) Provide subsidized fertilizer, grain and technical training to the agricultural sector.
- 4) Increase credit for small and medium sized businesses and industries (SMEs). The goal was to grow the export sectors.

The second major issue for ARENA was public security. In this area the platform called for restructuring the judicial system, the Attorney General's office, the office of the Ombudsman, and introducing updated technology for the police in forensics. With El Salvador having a serious gang problem, ARENA called for strengthening the family, strengthening the presence of churches in neighborhoods and institutionalizing regional cooperation to combat drug trafficking.

Regarding education, ARENA has approved free high school and proposed that this become a constitutional guarantee. Universal pre-school education (ages 4-6) was proposed. According to ARENA the educational curriculum needs to better reflect the Salvadoran reality. This would mean a greater emphasis on vocational education in high school and university and the strengthening of university level engineering and computer technology programs.

In the area of health care, ARENA called for creating hospital centers throughout the country, with specific health programs for women and children.

ARENA's platform in foreign policy proposed signing a free trade agreement with the European Union, strengthening ties with Taiwan while expanding trade with mainland China, assuring the political rights of Salvadorans living in foreign countries and passing migratory reform measures.

The FMLN Platform²

In June 2007, the FMLN initiated a grassroots process of consultation with communities and party members to dialogue about prioritizing issues for the party's platform in the

² The figures quoted in this section are from a lecture by FMLN representative Gerson Martínez.

presidential election. The methodology was rooted in the pedagogy of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. The FMLN platform was finalized in December 2008.

For the FMLN, extreme poverty is the greatest national concern. The FMLN differed from ARENA by addressing the need for the poor to transcend the psychological trauma of having lived in extreme poverty. For the FMLN, economic growth is not synonymous with sustainable economic development, a holistic approach to the problem of poverty. It is the FMLN belief that developing human capital must precede the development of productive capital.

The FMLN platform emphasized the need for an immediate program for food and nutrition, since many Salvadorans do not have a diet that meets minimum daily calorie intake. Therefore, the FMLN called for subsidizing the production of food for domestic consumption. There was also a call for ending ARENA subsidies that benefit the wealthy more than the poor, for example, the \$203 million gas and electricity subsidy that currently is benefiting the wealthy.

The FMLN called for an integral healthcare plan that would provide all 14 Departments (states) in the country with access to basic medical treatment. Emphasis would be placed on health education to prevent common illnesses with the focus on women and children. The FMLN platform called for increasing spending on health care from 1.6% of GNP to 3% of GNP by 2014. Related to a healthy citizenry the FMLN also called for increasing spending on water and sewage infrastructure from 0.3% of GNP to 1.5% by 2014. Education and a healthy population are also related. Currently, El Salvador spends 2.7% of its GNP on education, while the average for developed countries is 6%. The FMLN recognizes that more must be allocated to education but the 6% of GNP figure will not be achieved in five years.

Job creation would be focused on youth entering the workforce. The FMLN platform recognizes that there are few jobs for high school and university graduates with 63% of youth unemployed or underemployed. Gangs succeed in recruiting members from the pool of disenfranchised youth. Therefore, the FMLN proposed subsidizing the salary of a youth for one year when employed by a business or industry.

The issue of crime is more complex for the FMLN. The party platform refers to three types of crime: street crime, organized syndicates and white collar crime. An example of the latter given by the FMLN is the accusation that \$262 million disappeared from the national public water system. The FMLN position is that any policy on criminal behavior ought to be as tough on white collar crime and public corruption as on gangs and organized syndicates. Increased cooperation with the US on transnational criminal activity is supported by the FMLN. Organized crime poses a threat to El Salvador's sovereignty in the eyes of the Party.

Regarding foreign policy, the FMLN, referring to the fact that El Salvador sent troops to Iraq, called for a non-ideologically aligned foreign policy. The FMLN does want to have the country's military participate in UN sponsored peace operations. The program also calls for Central American economic integration. The FMLN wants the Central American nations united so they can negotiate a new relationship with the United States. For example, prescription medication is currently more expensive in El Salvador than in the United States. The hope is that if Central America spoke with one voice, the region could negotiate better prices.

The Economic Reality

Alfonso Goitia, an economics professor at the Jesuit University of Central America (UCA) presents a stark analysis of the Salvadoran reality. The most optimistic projection for El Salvador's economic growth in 2009 is 1%. Recently, 30,000 jobs were lost when maquiladoras were closed. More job loss in this sector is projected for this year. Regarding remittances, there was a significant drop in the last five months of 2008 compared to 2007. Normally remittances, which sent \$3.57 billion to El Salvador in 2007, grow 7-8% annually. In 2008, the growth rate was 2.5 %. It is expected to be zero growth in 2009. Approximately 22% of El Salvador's families receive remittances which have an impact on stability, lifting families out of poverty and preventing massive social unrest.³

Goitia's critique of a reliance on remittances is that it is not a sustainable way to grow an economy. Remittances are not equivalent to sustainable human development. They create an unhealthy and unstable dependency!

El Salvador's currency is now the U.S. dollar. Dollarization in the midst of a global economic meltdown presents challenges for the country. The Government was placed in an economic reality where it had to apply for IMF loans. However, having dollarized the economy means El Salvador has no central bank or Federal Reserve equivalent. Therefore, the government has no ability to design a national monetary policy in a time of crisis. While the government applied for IMF loans, the money was given to the large transnational banks, especially Citigroup and Scotia Bank. Thus, transnational banks determine what they will do with the loan money and the types of loans to be approved. As Goitia pointed out, if the US government takes control of Citigroup, the US will be making decisions that limit the ability of the Salvadoran government to design policy deemed to be in the best interests of the country. This means that President-elect Funes will assume the office with one arm tied behind his back. While Funes would prioritize loans to agriculture and small-medium sized enterprises, the transnationals might not approve of this strategy.

The last two years have been devastating to Salvadorans due to the food and oil crisis. According to a UN study the food crisis led to 104,000 families entering extreme poverty in El Salvador. Poor families are currently spending 13% less in food than two years ago. In a modest grocery store in San Pedro Perulapan, a poor town, a gallon of milk cost \$4.05, three litres of cooking oil \$12.85, 30 eggs \$3.57, a loaf of bread \$2.17 and a pound of cheap coffee \$2.04. Twelve rolls of toilet paper cost \$6.05.⁴ In El Salvador the income needed to provide a family with a lower middle class lifestyle is \$800 a month. In San Pedro Perulapan the average family income is \$190. In remote rural areas families often live on less than \$60 a month.

A recent poll of youth 16-18 years of age showed that over 60% say their goal is to migrate to the U.S. They see no future in El Salvador. Studies have found over 500 persons leaving El Salvador daily! Economist Goitia stated that more Salvadorans have left for the US since the war ended than during the war. ARENA, he states, has had a two decade economic policy of exporting labor rather than building a sustainable economy. It was a policy designed to export the country's poverty.

Emigration produces many problems beginning with a breakdown of the family making children more susceptible to gangs. The strongest and most violent gang is Mara

³ Alfonso Goitia himself gave me these figures during an interview I had with him at UCA.

⁴ I made this survey of prices this past March 2009 when I was in San Juan Perulapan to observe the presidential elections.

Salvatrucha or MS-13. It began in a Salvadoran barrio in Los Angeles in the late 1980s. With a deportation program in which the U.S. returned gang members to El Salvador, MS-13 grew to become a transnational organization. The FBI states that MS-13 now operates in 42 states in the United States.

Another way ARENA has held down social unrest is to ignore the informal sector of the economy. This sector accounts for 52% of the economy. Businesses in the informal sector do not pay taxes nor do those working in the informal sector pay into the social security and pension fund. In retirement, those who have paid into the fund receive just under \$100 a month.

Personal Analysis

My first trip to El Salvador was in January 1986, in the midst of the civil war. I returned every year until the Peace Accords were signed. The trip to be an election observer for the March 15th presidential election was my eleventh to this country named after the Savior.

I admit to being emotionally tied to El Salvador. On the first trip our group of seven was abruptly ushered out of the US Embassy for questioning the woman responsible for writing the human rights report for the US State Department. The human rights officer stated that she got her statistics on human rights violations by reading Salvadoran newspapers because of the war. Our questions became more specific and the young Foreign Service Officer was not handling them well, so her supervisor, who had been listening to our discussion from another room, suddenly came into our room and escorted us out of the Embassy.

In 1988 I interviewed Fr. Ellacuria, the Jesuit priest who was president of the University of Central America. He stated the five most powerful groups/institutions in the country were:

- 1) The US Embassy
- 2) The Salvadoran military
- 3) The FMLN
- 4) The economic oligarchy
- 5) The Salvadoran government

Fr. Ellacuria said the critical issue was how to have numbers 1 and 5 exchange places.

Unfortunately, I had other bad experiences at the US Embassy. On one occasion the Director of Public Affairs answered a question about the El Mozote massacre by saying Embassy personnel were not convinced a massacre had occurred, that it was a very remote area difficult to access. Plus, he said, "There is a war out there". I replied that it was hard to access since it had taken our group one whole day to reach El Mozote, but we were able to interview the lone survivor. And yes, I stated, "There is still fighting in the area".

The summer after the six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and daughter were assassinated (December 16, 1989) this same Foreign Service Officer stated that this was an "unfortunate incident", not planned, but a result of the intense pressure one man was under – Col. Benavides. To say this was not planned was, to put it politely, insulting.

In the summers of 1988 and 1989, I interviewed Herbert Ernesto Anaya, the Director of CDHES, a human rights NGO. As a student of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., he advocated nonviolent resistance to the military and government. Anaya was assassinated on October 16, 1987. He had just dropped off his two children at school. I remember asking him why, since had received death threats, he did not take his family to

Canada where he would receive political asylum. I said “what will your children be left with if you are assassinated?” He responded, “My values”.

I was also fortunate to be in El Salvador in July 1991 when U.S. Representative Joseph Moakley, on the University of Central America (UCA) campus, read his findings on the murder of the Jesuits. It was a packed room. On the front row was U.S. Ambassador Walker, the President of El Salvador and Rene Emilio Ponce, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Moakley gave a courageous talk, naming Gen. Ponce among others for creating a military responsible for institutionalizing violence. Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino gave a moving response to Moakley’s presentation.

I could go on with stories too numerous to mention, but this is the background for my happiness when Funes and the FMLN won the election. I believe the FMLN victory is good for El Salvador. It strengthens the transition to democracy. When Funes takes the oath of office it will mark the first meaningful peaceful transition of political power in El Salvador’s history. If the FMLN victory was psychologically healing for me, I can’t begin to imagine the depth of feelings of Salvadorans who voted for the party.

Funes will have to work with a legislative assembly controlled by a coalition led by ARENA. Although the FMLN party won 35 seats in the January legislative elections, it lacks a majority in the 84 seat assembly. A two-thirds vote is needed on major legislation so much of Funes’ success will depend on whether ARENA chooses to cooperate on key legislation or tries to block Funes at every turn. The FMLN will constantly try to convince one or more of ARENA’s coalition partners to split and join with it. There is nothing radical in the FMLN program but it does promote policies giving a preferential option to the poor.

On our way to the airport to leave El Salvador we stopped to have breakfast tamales in the home of Maria Julia, whose son was the godson of our group leader, Ann Butwell. Maria and her family had moved to San Salvador after the devastating earthquake in the 1980s destroyed her village. She and others from her community squatted on unused land and have lived there ever since. The home had a tin roof, cement floor and three rooms. Her youngest son, Arsenio, is a university student studying to become a teacher and school administrator. Her daughter died in her late twenties leaving a daughter to be raised by Maria Julia. Ann told us Maria Julia had gone back to school and had just passed exams for the 9th grade. Maria Julia said “I did this so I can help my grandchildren with their homework”. There was no “victim” message from her. Maria Julia was full of hope for the future and gave thanks to God for all her blessings. She was excited the FMLN won the presidency. I asked if she had a specific hope for the Funes presidency. She replied “I have one. I want Funes to give me and other families in our community (23 families in all) title to the land our house is on. ARENA presidents would never do this”. If Funes were to do nothing else than give Maria Julia title to the land under her house, I would mark his presidency a success.

El Salvador has serious economic and social problems and they will worsen in 2009, but in the midst of all the suffering I continue to meet persons of hope. Therefore, I must also be a person of hope. The summer after the murder of the Jesuits, their housekeeper and daughter, I asked Fr. Jon Sobrino, who lived in community with those assassinated, how I could be in solidarity with Salvadorans when I returned to the United States. He looked me in the eyes and said in a gentle voice “you teach at a Catholic University. When you go to commencement and watch students you have taught receive their diplomas, ask yourself if those students are going to be part of the problem or part of the solution. If they are going

to be part of the problem, you need to re-evaluate what it is you are teaching and whether students see you as part of the problem or as part of the solution”. Throughout El Salvador’s history as a nation the United States has been part of that country’s problems. If the U.S. is to now become part of the solution I must accept my responsibility to work to make this a reality. Si, nosotros podemos.