

# The FMLN Victory and Transnational Salvadoran Activism: Lessons for the Future

By Alfonso Gonzales

THE INAUGURATION ON JUNE 1 OF EL SALVADOR'S new president, Mauricio Funes, followed a historic election in March, in which the country's ruling conservative party, Arena, was dislodged after being in power since 1989. Explaining Funes's victory, many commentators have pointed to his charisma as a former TV personality, but few have discussed the pivotal role of transnational Salvadoran activism. Salvadorans in the United States helped create the conditions for a free, fair, and transparent election—particularly by undermining right-wing fear tactics in El Salvador that aimed to scare voters away from Funes by suggesting that his election would incur the United States' wrath.

In December, TV advertisements in El Salvador paid for by Arena and its allies began to appear that distorted the official U.S. position on the election. In one such ad, clips from an interview with Dan Restrepo, President Barack Obama's senior adviser on Latin America, stating: "The anti-American agenda worries Senator Barack Obama a lot, and the failed policies of Hugo Chávez, be those in Venezuela or . . . be it El Salvador or other places."

In another ad, featured in the leading Salvadoran newspaper, evangelist Antonio Bolainez, one of Obama's 10 official spiritual advisers, suggested that Salvadoran voters should not "bring El Salvador to its destruction" by electing a "radical left regime that favors Venezuela and Iranian terrorism." Such ads might seem frivolous to U.S. observers, but they are influential in El Salvador, where nearly one in four families depend on money sent from relatives living in the United States. Those remittances, the campaign ads implied, would be jeopardized if Funes won.

Similar ads were aired during the last Salvadoran presidential election in 2004. Former Re-

publican congressman Tom Tancredo, among others, was quoted suggesting that a victory by the left-wing opposition party, the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), would endanger remittances. Others suggested that Salvadorans' eligibility for temporary protected status (TPS)—granted to immigrants unable to return home because of an armed conflict, natural disaster, or other circumstance that would endanger their lives—would be revoked. Effectively, this would mean the deportation of thousands of Salvadorans.

Anticipating that Arena would repeat this strategy, a coalition led by the Salvadoran American National Association (Sana), together with *Empresarios por el Cambio*, SEIU Local 1199, the Committee in Solidarity With the People of El Salvador (Cispes), and the Share Foundation, launched a counter-strategy. The strategy was based on the understanding that with the right amount of pressure, the new U.S. administration and Congress, interested in mending fences with Latin America, would not allow someone like Tancredo to distort the U.S. government's official policy of non-intervention in order to manipulate voters.

In January the coalition initiated meetings with key members of Congress in their home districts, such as Representative Howard Berman (D-Calif.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The group also met with Berman's office in Washington and with high-level committee members, whom they urged to reaffirm the U.S. government's neutrality in regard to the Salvadoran election results. Sana organized a three-day lobbying effort in February, with a delegation of about 50 Salvadoran Americans from all over the country, targeting Congress, the State Department, and the Organization of American States.

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Two days before the March 15 election, Berman issued a statement that read: "Sunday's election belongs to the people of El Salvador. As Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, I am confident that neither TPS nor the right to receive remittances from family in the United States will be affected by the outcome of the election, despite what some of my colleagues in Congress have said." The statement was read in El Salvador by one of Berman's staffers at a press conference organized by Sana. Along similar lines, Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) wrote a letter to Obama that was eventually signed by 33 Congress members.

"We wish to express our support for free and fair elections in El Salvador," Grijalva's letter read. "To that end, we request your assurance that your administration will join us in honoring and respecting the will of the Salvadoran people. . . . Furthermore, we call upon all U.S. government officials and Members of Congress to refrain from any attempt, at any point during the campaign, to influence the decision of Salvadoran voters."

Pressure also came from a group of North American academics headed by U.S.-born Salvadoran political scientist Héctor Perla Jr. In February, this group went on a fact-finding mission to El Salvador and produced an open letter signed by 150 scholars calling on the State Department to declare before the election that neither Arena nor any private U.S. citizen spoke on behalf of the U.S. government, that the Arena fear campaign's allegations were untrue, and that the United States would work toward maintaining friendly relations with El Salvador, no matter who won the election.

In response to the swelling pressure, on March 13, Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon stated: "We are committed to free and fair elections in El Salvador. And we've also made it very clear that we will work with whomever the Salvadoran people elect."

These pronouncements by U.S. officials—which would have never been made without popular pressure from a Salvadoran American grassroots movement—effectively delegitimized Arena's fear campaign and reinforced the Salvadoran electorate's right to self-determination.

Salvadoran Americans' ability to combat the Arena campaign is directly tied to their demographic growth and mounting political influence in the United States and in El Salvador. The community has grown rapidly during the last three decades, becoming the fourth-largest Latino group in the United States. Moreover, their remittances from the United States account for the largest source

of wealth in El Salvador. Salvadoran Americans are concentrated in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, Washington, D.C., and New York, giving them access to political power. But the community's potency is to be found not only in its demographics, remittances, or geographic nodes, but also in its human capital.

The lobbying effort speaks to the mounting political power of the Salvadoran American community. Activists from the community have gone from having to organize clandestinely in the 1980s against U.S. intervention in El Salvador, often working behind the scenes of North American activists, to openly launching a campaign to force the U.S. government to

explicitly commit to respecting the sovereignty of the Salvadoran electorate.

This capacity for action did not develop overnight. Rather, it is the product of 30 years of political experience cultivated in the United States in various social and political struggles. Indeed, Salvadorans were at the forefront of the struggle for amnesty for undocumented immigrants in the 1980s, the Justice for Janitors strike in Los Angeles in the 1990s, the campaign against the Central American Free Trade Agreement in 2005, and the May Day immigrant marches of 2006, among other struggles. This rich organizing experience gave transnational Salvadoran civil society the political foresight, networks, and resources necessary to hold the U.S. government accountable to the principle of nonintervention.

There are many lessons to be learned from this experience. It is a timely example of how transnational social movements with a strong base in the Global North can shape struggles for state power abroad. Of particular importance to the U.S. left, Salvadoran American organizations demonstrated that it is possible to cautiously and strategically pressure the Obama administration and to hold it accountable on foreign policy.

One of the most relevant lessons is for transnational Mexican organizations in the United States, which could use some of the same strategies to prepare for Mexico's 2012 presidential election, which will surely be fiercely contested. Yet the most important lessons to retain from Salvadoran American organizations is that groups in civil society cannot leave it up to the "progressives in power" to make wise decisions. The immigrant rights movement, the labor movement, and other Latino social movements should take heed. ■

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