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Salvador president-elect offers a conciliatory tone

by Blake Schmidt



Funes prays in convent before election (CNS photo)

Church leaders in El Salvador welcomed the reconciliatory tone of El Salvador's first leftist President-elect Mauricio Funes after he declared victory over the rightwing ARENA party, which has ruled the country for 20 years.

After emerging triumphant in the returns with a 2.6 percent lead over opposing candidate Rodrigo Avila, Funes assured opponents that he will not use power to seek revenge.

Funes' FMLN party was founded by guerrillas who waged a 1980-1992 war against the outgoing ARENA party, which enjoyed U.S. backing despite its links to death squads.

'Funes used sober, conciliatory, dignified language,' said San Salvador's Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez.

Upon the FMLN's victory, leftist leaders invoked the figure of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was slain during mass in 1980.

Merardo Gonzalez, Secretary General of the FMLN, said the victory brought back memories of victims of the armed struggle he waged against the ARENA government as a leftist guerrilla commander in the 80s.

‘I think of all my slain brothers and sisters. I think of Archbishop Romero,’ he said.

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Investigations by the InterAmerican Human Rights Commission and U.N.-sponsored Truth Commission have linked rightwing death squad members to the 1980 murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980, but the crime remains unpunished.

Romero’s death is one of a slew of war-era abuses that remain unpunished. Chavez said an outpouring of nostalgia for Romero since the election ‘Funes quoted him in his victory speech’ is a sign from a country that it wants to heal its past wounds.

‘The country had tried to forget him and forget that there was an unacceptable crime,’ Chavez said.

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Chavez said he hopes the victory for Funes, who campaigned under a slogan of ‘safe change,’ will open up an opportunity to ‘close up the wounds of the past and do it without a tone of revenge.’

Funes says he’s a moderate leftist leader who admires Brazil’s center-left leader Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva, though he’ll certainly face pressure from a more hardcore left within his party as well as opposition from the ultra-right.

The FMLN will propose a reconciliation policy that will seek to get to the bottom of unresolved war crimes such as the assassination of Romero, though FMLN leaders say they won’t revoke a 1993 amnesty law.

ARENA Congressman Roberto D’Aubisson said he suspects that an FMLN reconciliation campaign to seek out the truth of war-era human rights abuse allegations may be used to settle political ‘vendettas.’ The legislator is the son of ARENA party founder Roberto D’Aubisson, who maintained close ties to rightwing death squads in the 80s.

‘They’ll open old wounds,’ D’Aubisson said.

But FMLN party leaders say they only want the truth, not revenge, and that they’ll let current legal proceedings take their course. A Spanish court launched at the beginning of this year an investigation of 14 Salvadoran military officers for their involvement in the 1989 killings of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and 16-year-old daughter.

Chavez said such issues are ‘the most delicate’ and will have to be taken up only under the most moderating circumstances. He said it’s still early to predict how exactly an FMLN government will deal with such issues.

‘The Church has a lot to contribute. It’s a very long experience. We’ll wait a while, because it’s a very,

very sensitive issue," he said.

Gonzalez said the first leftist victory in the polls ever in El Salvador has injected confidence into this tropical country's fledgling democratic institutions.

"We've broken from the past that tied us down," Gonzalez said. "The system works."

Despite an oft-acerbic campaign leading up to the election day, international electoral observers including delegations from the European Union and the Organization of American States, said the elections were carried out in relative calm. Chavez agreed. Funes' victory speech echoed the day's peaceful tone.

"I'm convinced that national unity is the best way to confront the crisis," he told exuberant supporters.

Though results are still unofficial, Funes' lead prompted ARENA candidate Rodrigo Avila to admit defeat on election night. Avila promised his party will be a "constructive" opposition.

Funes wants to enforce minimum wage standards, crack down on tax evaders, purge police corruption, and give a "preferential option for the poor." His social programs include revival of state-run social security and a massive "women's city" complex offering healthcare services, job training, microcredits and domestic violence assistance. FMLN leaders receive discounted oil from Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, but Funes says relations with Washington will take priority over Caracas. Some 2.5 million Salvadorans call the United States home; most of El Salvador's trade is with the northern economic giant and most remittances, which represent 18 percent of GDP, come from the United States.

In a country where as much as half the population lives in poverty, Chavez said hopes are high for change. But an impending economic crisis will restrict Funes' ability to act, Chavez said.

"A large part of the population was waiting 20 years for this moment," Chavez said. "It won't be easy for people to feel their expectations are met. We hope that people stay content and feel their situation is improving."

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