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Progressive party wins in El Salvador

by Blake Schmidt



President-elect Mauricio Funes, left, and his running mate, Sánchez Cerén, attend a news conference in San Salvador, El Salvador, March 15. (CNS/Reuters/Luis Gaidamez)

San Salvador, El Salvador -- Church leaders in El Salvador have welcomed the reconciliatory tone of El Salvador's leftist President-elect Mauricio Funes after he declared victory over the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance Party, known popularly as ARENA, which has ruled the country for 20 years.

After emerging triumphant in the returns March 15 with a 2.6 percent lead over opposing candidate Rodrigo Avila, Funes assured opponents that he will not use power to seek revenge.

Funes' Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) party was founded by guerrillas who waged a war from 1980 to 1992 against ARENA, 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 Chávez.

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

Merardo González, FMLN secretary general, 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 1980s.

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

Investigations by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and a U.N.-sponsored truth commission have linked right-wing death squad members to the murder of Romero, but the crime remains unpunished.

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

"The country had tried to forget him and forget that there was an unacceptable crime," Rosa Chávez said.

Rosa Chávez 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."

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Funes says he's a moderate leftist leader who admires Brazil's center-left leader Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. He will certainly face pressure from a more hard-core 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'Aubuisson 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'Aubuisson, who maintained close ties to right-wing death squads in the '80s.

"They'll open old wounds," D'Aubuis-son 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 her 16-year-old daughter.

Rosa Chávez said such issues are "the most delicate." 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.

González 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," González said. "The system works."

Despite an often acerbic campaign leading up to 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. Rosa Chávez 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.

Funes wants to enforce minimum-wage standards, crack down on tax evaders, purge police corruption and exercise 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 assistance for victims of domestic violence.

FMLN leaders receive discounted oil from Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, 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 the gross domestic product, come from the United States.

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