

# Rightist intimidation wins in El Salvador

By Chris Norton

SAN SALVADOR

**W**ELCOME TO DEMOCRACY SALVADOR—an-style, where intimidation is the name of the game. The bullying is practiced chiefly by the ruling Arena Party, which has evolved from the rightist death squads that party founder and ex-Army Intelligence Major Roberto D'Aubuisson allegedly operated in the early '80s to a powerful, well-greased political machine. Along with the support of most of the country's businessmen and landowners, the party also gets a boost from middle-class

## LATIN AMERICA

and poor voters who believe Arena's slick Madison Avenue campaign promises of "progress."

Arena won control of the Salvadoran Assembly in 1988. In 1989, its millionaire coffee-grower candidate Alfredo Cristiani was elected president. Although Arena failed to win an independent majority in the recent March 10 assembly and municipal elections, its continued control is assured with the votes of the rightist Party of National Conciliation (PCN).

Despite the fact that only half of El Salvador's registered voters turned out for the elections and Arena won the votes of less than half of those, party ideologues have taken on a triumphalist attitude. Seeing themselves as the representatives of unrestrained free-market capitalism, they feel vindicated by the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and believe they are riding the crest of the wave of history.

"We're looking not only at one or two more terms but a longer period of domination for a center-right party," says Ernesto Altschul, President Cristiani's deputy chief of staff. Many believe that such assuredness in one's divine right to rule doesn't bode well for democracy. "The right won't allow [the left] to win," says one Western diplomat. "The right doesn't understand that democracy means losing as well as winning."

In fact, not letting the left win is one of the main causes of the bloody, decade-long civil war still raging in El Salvador. Rightist military governments robbed elections victories from a center-left coalition in 1972 and again in 1977, spurring disillusioned young political activists to form small armed guerrilla cells.

**Just like old times:** Arena's behavior in last month's elections was hardly a convincing demonstration that irregularity and fraud are merely memories of the distant past. In most small Salvadoran towns, it is a risk to be an active member of a leftist party. Prior to the elections, sympathizers were threatened, fired from jobs and beaten up; their offices were broken into, searched, surrounded by troops and bombed.

On February 21, a candidate for the smallest leftist party, the Democratic National Unity (UDN), and his six-months pregnant wife were machine-gunned to death after ignoring telephone threats that he would be killed if he didn't withdraw from the race or leave the country. Another UDN candidate was shot in her eye by an Arena gunman during a clash between the rival groups on the final night of the campaign.

Aside from general intimidation, Arena's game plan appears to have been to discour-

age a large voter turnout—which both the party and the army believed would favor the opposition—and to try and help their political ally, the PCN, pick up seats in the provinces where the vote between the PCN and the Democratic Convergence, an alliance of three left parties, would be close. They appear to have been successful at both.

**'Twas the night before voting:** The night before the vote, the Arena-dominated Central Elections Council decided to change the polling sites in a number of populous, working-class suburbs of the capital where the opposition was expected to do well. On election day, many polls in these areas opened late, either because of disputes over election-official status or because the elections council delivered the ballot boxes late. Frustrated by the changed locations, late openings and the long lines under the hot tropical sun, many voters just went home. Some of the polling sites that opened late closed with hundreds of voters still in line.

"Arena did everything possible to obstruct the vote of the opposition," said one Latin American diplomat. "That's very clear."

But more grievous was the mysterious disappearance of tens of thousands of names—some election observers estimate up to 10 percent of eligible voters—from the voting lists. Thus, although many voters possessed valid voting cards, they weren't allowed to vote.

In the eastern town of Chinameca, which the Democratic Convergence had expected to win easily, Arena won by about 200 votes. The Convergence estimates that about 700 of its supporters weren't able to vote because their names didn't appear on the voting lists.

"I can't believe that those were just coincidental mistakes of the Central Elections Council," says Hector Silva, a U.S.-educated doctor who won a seat as Convergence deputy in La Libertad.

Within the Salvadoran voting system that allows smaller parties to pick up a departmental deputy with a relatively small number of votes, shaving a few hundred votes here or there from the Democratic Convergence and giving them to the Arena-aligned PCN may have significantly altered the election results. Although the Democratic Convergence outpolled PCN nationwide, because of the deputy allocation system and perhaps because of fraud, the PCN Party will now receive more deputies.

"There was clearly a fraud," says Antonio Canas, a senior political analyst at the Jesuit-run Central American University in San Salvador. "It doesn't square. The PCN does so well, yet it hasn't done anything to increase its vote and it's clearly a party in decline. That's been the trend."

**Democracy surprise:** Despite the widespread irregularities, the official U.S. observation team termed the elections "free and fair," as did the National Republican Institute for International Affairs, which called the elections, "a major step forward in the con-

solidation of democracy in El Salvador" before boarding a plane back to the States the following day.

The U.S.-dominated Organization of American States (OAS) did little better. In contrast to last year's Nicaraguan elections, attended by a total of 700 international observers, the OAS had only 160 observers in a country with twice the population, and it issued a whitewashed report accordingly.

Because of the opposition's allegations of fraud, vote counting wasn't completed for almost two weeks. Arena was the biggest vote-getter, with 44 percent. Still, this was a 10 percent drop from the party's 1989 showing. With only 39 deputies, Arena will fall short of the 43 needed to maintain its majority in the assembly. Maintaining control won't be hard, though. Arena's rightist ally, the PCN, will have nine deputies of its own.

The Christian Democrats, still discredited by the rampant corruption that marked former President Jose Napoleon Duarte's reign and lacking charismatic leadership, received 28 percent of the vote—a drop from 36 percent in 1989—and will have 26 deputies.

The big surprise was the Democratic Convergence winning 12 percent of the vote, tripling its 1989 showing and even edging out

## Arena's behavior in last month's election was hardly a convincing demonstration that irregularities and fraud are things of the past.

the Christian Democrats in the capital. The Convergence will have eight deputies, while the smaller UDN will have one. This will mark the first presence of the left in the assembly since the civil war began a decade ago.

Although it feels PCN and Arena fraud robbed it of several deputies, the Democratic Convergence is already looking ahead to the important 1994 elections, when both a new assembly and a new president will be elected. The Convergence's strong showing might allow it to lead the challenge to Arena by a broad center-left coalition that could include both the centrist Christian Democrats and the FMLN guerrillas.

However important the elections, they were but a sideshow to the U.N.-mediated peace talks that have moved the country closer to a negotiated solution to the decade-long civil war that has so far claimed 70,000 lives.

Both the Democratic Convergence and the FMLN agree that electoral reform must be put on the agenda of the negotiations. "After these elections, it's clear that the present electoral system doesn't function," said FMLN Commander Joaquin Villalobos while

being interviewed March 19 for the first time on the country's most popular morning talk show.

Now, with the elections over, attention is again focusing on the peace talks, which were stalled last November when U.N. Peruvian mediator Alvaro de Soto drew up a proposal to address the most difficult issue: the future of the 60,000-man Salvadoran military that has ruled the country for half a century. Although formally under civilian control, the military remains the country's most powerful and feared institution.

De Soto's proposal was to drastically reduce the army's size, abolish the security forces and the paramilitary civil defense and put the police under civilian control, although some question whether an Arena-controlled police force would be a giant step forward. His most controversial suggestion was to create a commission that would review the human-rights records of the 2,000-man officer corps. The army replied that it could do its own housekeeping.

But the army's luck started to ebb in November. As the U.S. proxy against the leftist guerrillas, the Salvadoran military was accustomed to getting what it wanted from Congress, despite its bad human-rights record. But that began to change following the army murder of six Jesuit priests and their helpers in 1989. The army was shocked when Congress withheld half of the usual military aid as punishment for the brutal murders. Congress failed to renew the aid when the guerrillas launched a mini-offensive last November. At that time, both the army and the Cristiani government appeared willing to reluctantly go along with the de Soto plan.

**Lucky George:** Soon after, both the army and the Bush administration got lucky. On January 2, the FMLN downed a U.S. Army helicopter and killed two injured crewmen, giving the administration the perfect opening to renew military aid, as well as send three A-37 jet fighter-bombers and six Vietnam-vintage Huey UH-1M helicopters to Cristiani.

Despite its official public support for the U.N. mediation, the State Department began to privately attack de Soto during background briefings to the press. One such officially "leaked" story assailing the mediator appeared in the *New York Times* on February 1, the same day a new negotiating session began in Mexico.

Not coincidentally, the Salvadoran government also hardened its position, demanding that military officers make up half the commission mandated to purge the army. Since then, the talks have stalled.

"Arena seems as triumphalist as ever," remarked one Western diplomat. "There's a complete lack of understanding in the party of the need to make concessions. There's an utter conviction in the government and the U.S. that the FMLN have to concede—that they're effectively beat," added the diplomat. "The government, the right, the army and even the Americans are believing their own propaganda again."

Unfortunately, for negotiations to work the U.S. must pressure the Salvadoran military. But the Bush administration remains ambivalent. Although many U.S. officials are critical of the military, "their hatred for the FMLN is so great they end up supporting the army," says one foreign analyst.

Arena is also making a serious mistake, adds a Latin American diplomat. "They see Bush's New World Order, the Pax Americana. They believe that communism is crumbling

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## El Salvador

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around the world and that time is on their side. Why negotiate with the guerrillas if they will disappear in a year?"

But despite the "crisis of socialism," the FMLN guerrillas seem stronger now than they have in years, with their sophisticated surface-to-air missiles limiting the army's U.S.-supplied air power.

While the FMLN continues to evolve ideologically, with change occurring faster in some of the five guerrilla organizations than in others, senior commanders like Joaquin Villalobos have discarded such tenets of Marxist dogma as a single-party state. Villalobos' group, the Peoples Revolutionary Army (ERP), has abandoned past dreams of seizing power militarily and resigned itself to the realization that if it comes to power it will be electorally, and probably as part

of a coalition that might even include the centrist Christian Democrats. The revolutionary contribution it wants to make to history is the demilitarization of Salvadoran society, drastically reducing the power and influence traditionally enjoyed by the Salvadoran army.

But despite their desire to incorporate into the political system, they won't do that without substantial concessions—concessions the government appears presently unwilling to make in its triumphant frame of mind. If that's the case, the FMLN will probably once again step up the military pressure.

When the rebels briefly seized part of the posh Escalon neighborhood in a pre-election show of strength, they left behind a warning painted on the sidewalk in Day-Glo orange. "If it's war they want, then it's war they'll get. FMLN."

Chris Norton is *In These Times*' correspondent in El Salvador.

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## Yugoslavia

Continued from page 8

without the mandate that he badly needs.

**Down but not out:** The key to setting Yugoslavia back on the track of reason still rests in Serbia. Milosevic has reached deep into his bag of dirty tricks and has come up empty. Still, the petty tyrant clings to his depleted power, and, although his options are limited, they are not exhausted. The question of the 90-percent ethnic Albanian population in Kosovo, Serbia's southern province, still has great emotional pull for the Serbs. It was Milosevic's heavy-handed repression of the Albanians that brought him to power, and he is certain to use Kosovo again in his moment of need. In southern Serbia, the autonomy campaign of the Sanjak Moslems is another prime target for provocation. And, as long as Croatia pushes toward independence, the knotty problem of the Serb minorities there will remain the country's most explosive issue.

With the possible exception of Slovenia, Yugoslavia's constituents cannot possibly break from the country without igniting civil war. A new federation or confederation, based on democratic principles and full respect for minority rights, is the only option for minimizing the threat of further bloodshed. However slow off the blocks, the republics' democracy movements are now in motion. Their success is instrumental to Yugoslavia's future.

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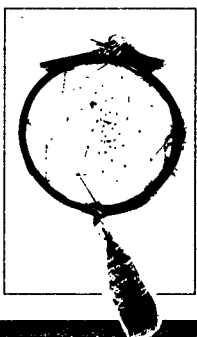
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By Ken Silverstein

RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

**E**ARLY LAST MONTH, BRAZIL'S PRESIDENTIAL spokesman got tired of hearing complaints about his boss. "The people will commemorate [Fernando] Collor de Mello's first year in office on the street," Claudio Humberto Rosa e Silva told reporters. That anniversary came March 15, and, just as Rosa e Silva predicted, the people were out in force. But much to the spokesman's chagrin, they were not celebrating.

In the industrial suburbs that ring São Paulo, South America's largest city, tens of thousands of metalworkers called a one-day anti-Collor strike, forcing the local subsidiaries of Ford and Volkswagen to shut down. Smaller protests were held in other cities, including Brasília, the capital, where 4,000 people marched and cried out, "Collor, the people are in misery." Police troopers ensured that the demonstration did not head

## AUSTERITY

toward the presidential palace, lest it spoil a carefully arranged ceremony there.

While the 41-year-old conservative president has failed at "liquidating" inflation, bettering the lives of the "shirtless and shoeless" and pushing Brazil headfirst into the ranks of the First World—all major campaign promises—he has succeeded in uniting most of the country against him. A recent poll in the one of the country's leading newspapers, *Folha de São Paulo*, showed he was rated positively by only 23 percent of the population. The government's growing isolation was highlighted by a recent strategy meeting between former political enemies Mario Amato, head of the conservative São Paulo Federation of Industries, and socialist Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, whom Collor narrowly defeated in the 1989 election. During the campaign, Amato strongly backed Collor and warned that 800,000 businessmen would flee the country if da Silva won.

Such strange political alliances have arisen because Collor's free-market budget-cutting austerity policies have created the worst recession in many years. In 1990, Brazil's economic output plunged by 4.6 percent—the worst performance since 1947. Bankruptcies were up 112 percent. Some 2.5 million people lost their jobs. The wealthiest 5 percent of the population sharply increased their share of national income. Inflation—while down from the 5,000 percent annual figure racked up during former President José Sarney's last year in office—was more than 400 percent. Brazilians joke that Collor is taking his commitment to the "shirtless and shoeless" so seriously that at the end of his term there will be no other class left in the country. Economist Edmar Bacha says Collor's record thus far represents "one more step ... in the direction of the Fourth World instead of heading toward the First World as announced by the government."

**Living on the edge:** While everyone is angry about the economic disaster, the poor are bearing its brunt. The situation in Vila Malvinas, a shantytown built beneath a bridge and alongside a major avenue that leads out of Rio de Janeiro is typical. Founded a decade ago and named after the islands claimed by both Britain and Argentina, the shantytown was never a model neighborhood. Some 1,400 people live there in tiny scrap-wood shacks. Barefoot children sleep on the red earth that serves as both floor to homes and the community's street. Garbage accumulates everywhere, attracting

# Little hope for Brazil's 'shirtless and shoeless'

chickens, stray dogs and the huge rats that scurry openly when night falls.

Since last March, unemployment has hit the slum like a plague. Ana Maria de Sousa Lima's family recently moved to Vila Malvinas after her husband, Jorge, lost his post at a steel plant. Now Jorge washes cars, sells candies and does other odd jobs to earn enough money to feed the couple's three children. Ana Maria cleans homes for about \$10 a day. "If we find work during the day, we eat at night," she says over the roar of the passing traffic. "Prices keep going up while salaries go down. I sometimes don't even have money to buy rice anymore."

Next door is Sonia Regina de Souza Silva, mother of seven and wife of a newly unemployed janitor. Collor's rush to balance the country's budget led him to scrap a program that provided free milk for needy families. "We buy bread for breakfast when we have the money, but normally we go without," de Souza Silva says. "The worst part is that there is no sign that things are going to get better any time soon."

Dulcinea dos Santos lives with her mother and husband—one of the lucky ones who managed to hold onto his job. He works the graveyard shift at the nearby General Electric plant. There he earns the "minimum salary," which has been reduced to its lowest real level since being created 51 years ago and is now worth about \$70 per month. It is the same pay received by nearly half of Brazil's labor force. Leftist political parties have been pressuring the government to increase the minimum salary to the equivalent of \$100 per month—about 63 cents an hour—but officials say that is "economically unviable" and would destabilize austerity measures. "Our money is good for nothing," says dos Santos. "I go to the street to buy a few items and come back without a single centavo."

The family's income was cut to the bone

by Collor's decision to end three decades of "indexing," whereby wages automatically rose to cover inflation. Now workers must "freely negotiate" pay raises. With labor's bargaining power at its nadir due to the deepening economic downturn, purchasing power has plunged by an estimated 50 percent in the past year. Dos Santos' mother, like 13 million Brazilians, lives only on her retirement benefits. But because Collor vetoed a law that guaranteed the equivalent of one minimum salary per pension, she takes in only about \$35 a month.

**Recipe for disaster:** The economic disaster dates from Collor's first day in office, when he announced an emergency "shock" plan to beat inflation. Its centerpiece was an 18-month freeze on all individual and corporate bank savings accounts over \$1,200. Drastic but necessary medicine, Collor said, and the only people who would suffer were the few Brazilians who had their money temporarily blocked.

The president's measures created the recession that neoliberals insist is necessary to beat high inflation. In the plan's aftermath, industrial production ground to a halt and thousands of employees were fired or put on collective holiday. (In São Paulo, which was particularly hard hit, the downturn produced the biggest baby boom on record this January.)

But nothing else worked according to plan. The rich used connections and loopholes to get their money "unfrozen." Private estimates—including a study by the University of São Paulo—show that more than half the funds blocked last March have been retrieved and most of what remains frozen belongs to middle-class savers.

And the country's economy, dominated by monopolies and cartels, has not operated the way the Economics 101 textbooks said it would. "A recession won't control inflation here because big companies would prefer to

cut production, lay off workers and raise prices to maintain profit margins," said Rene Dreifuss, a prominent political scientist at the Federal Fluminense University. The result: the cost of living, which dipped briefly after the plan was announced, has been climbing steadily ever since. Inflation reached 22 percent in February, the highest rate since Collor took office.

That forced a new economic package, dubbed "Collor II," that featured a price freeze of unspecified duration—already being routinely ignored and selectively eased. It also jacked up public tariffs by as much as 81 percent and gave workers a raise of about 25 percent to be followed by a wage freeze until July.

The new plan has heightened union anger. Workers say the wage increase doesn't come close to covering past losses and now they are expected to keep quiet until midyear. "In the past, we had no expectations because we lived in a dictatorship," says Vicente Paulo da Silva, president of the São Bernardo do Campo Metalworkers Union, referring to the military regime that ruled the country between 1964 and 1985. "But this government was elected by the direct vote, and for that reason the salary squeeze hurts more."

**Backward in every sense:** The basic problem is that Collor wants to beat inflation and stimulate economic growth without disturbing Brazil's rich, who live even more comfortably than their First World counterparts. University of Brasília political scientist David Fleischer calls the corporate class "greedy"—a tremendous understatement since wages here are among the lowest in the world while profit margins are among the highest. He says the government is largely to blame for the economic mess because it talks tough with the private sector but fails to crack down. "Collor doesn't have the political guts to take them on," Fleischer says. "He could force them to reduce their profit margins by auditing their books, arresting a few price gougers and taking other promised actions." Congressman José Serra, of the center-left Brazilian Social Democracy Party, says Brazil—rich in raw materials and human resources—has no economic problems. "We have a political problem," he says. "The elite are backward in every sense, politically, culturally and intellectually."

Many observers are already predicting the rapid demise of Collor II. Fleischer believes the failure of four anti-inflation packages in the past five years—and the government's incompetence—has "immunized" the public. "Brazilians are like a cat that's been scalded," he says. "They've seen this same film many times, and it always ends the same way."

Indeed, hopeful signs are hard to find. Opposition parties boast a growing popularity and are trying to ease the recession's impact on the poor. But leftists are still attempting to redefine socialism in the aftermath of the fall of Eastern Europe's communist governments and have yet to present a coherent alternative to Collor's policies. The public is angry but apathetic. Unions and community organizations report a growing sense of despair among the lower classes.

Meanwhile, more and more refugees from Collor's economic measures are looking for a place to start over. "There's no more room here," says Ana Maria at Vila Malvinas. "But a few families are camped out by the subway station and another group's just up ahead, right off the avenue."

Ken Silverstein is a journalist based in Rio de Janeiro.

Dulcinea dos Santos and her mother live in a shantytown just outside Rio de Janeiro.



Altamiro Nunes