

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Presidential Election in El Salvador

Katherine E. Bliss

March 12, 2009

Q1: What is the significance of the March 15 presidential election in El Salvador?

A1: Salvadoran voters head to the polls on March 15 to elect a new president to a five-year term. The leading contenders are Mauricio Funes, of the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), and Rodrigo Avila, who represents the right-leaning National Republican Alliance (ARENA). According to polls conducted in late February, Funes, a former television journalist, led Avila, who previously headed the national police. A Funes victory would represent the first time a candidate from the FMLN will have gained the presidency. The FMLN originated out of a coalition of guerrilla movements involved in El Salvador's civil war, which lasted from the late 1970s until 1992. Following the 1992 peace accords that ended the conflict, the FMLN transformed itself into a political party. ARENA, which also traces its origins to the civil war era, was founded by members of the military and has held the presidency in El Salvador for the last 20 years. Funes is the first FMLN presidential candidate who does not have experience as a guerrilla combatant.

Q2: What are the issues?

A2: Salvadoran voters cite the financial downturn and security issues as their principal concerns. The economy in El Salvador has been hard hit by the recent spike in food prices and transportation costs along with a deepening unemployment crisis. High homicide rates and violence associated with organized crime underpin voter concerns about public security. Identifying himself as the candidate of change, Funes has promised to ramp up social spending and to reinvest in El Salvador's industrial and agricultural sectors. The ARENA ticket is highlighting its historic ties to the business sector to promote a platform of economic development and social investment.

Q3: What is the likely outcome of the election?

A3: Funes led Avila in the latest polls, but the race is tight. The fact that the FMLN picked up three seats in the legislature and won mayoral contests in several cities in municipal- and district-level elections held in January bodes well for Funes. But ARENA's win over the incumbent FMLN in the San Salvador mayoral election has energized Avila's campaign. One late February poll revealed that at least 22 percent of the electorate had not decided for whom they would cast their ballots. According to Salvadoran electoral law, to win the presidency a candidate must secure more than 50 percent of the popular vote. If neither candidate can claim a majority, a runoff will be held. Much will depend on which candidate can secure votes from members of El Salvador's smaller political parties, most of which have withdrawn their candidates in this election cycle. The fact that Funes, who joined the FMLN in 2007, does not have direct ties to the civil war guerrilla movements may appeal to voters attracted to the party's message but leery in past elections of electing a former combatant to the presidency. However, the selection of former guerrilla commander Salvador Sánchez Cerén as the party's vice presidential candidate may raise concerns among voters that an FMLN presidency might seek to reignite the debates of the civil war era or strengthen the country's ties to radical regimes in the region.

Q4: How will the United States respond if the FMLN wins?

A4: The United States has enjoyed a cordial relationship with recent ARENA administrations, including that of incumbent President Tony Saca, who according to Salvadoran law cannot run for reelection. Under ARENA leadership, El Salvador converted to a financial system based on the U.S. dollar, contributed troops to the conflict in Iraq, and ratified the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the United States. During the civil war era, the United States provided the Salvadoran military with significant funding and technical assistance to fight the FMLN and other insurgent groups. In recent years, the United States has supported several initiatives to promote democracy and good governance in El Salvador. Officials have pledged that the United States supports the democratic process in El Salvador and will work with whichever candidate wins the presidential election on March 15.

Katherine E. Bliss is a senior fellow and deputy director of the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

Critical Questions is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2009 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.