

**Social Movements, NGOs and the State:  
Contesting Political Space in  
the Transition to Democracy in El Salvador**

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# **Social Movements, NGOs and the State: Contesting Political Space in the Transition to Democracy in El Salvador**

## **1. INTRODUCTION.**

The post-1989 transition to democracy in El Salvador has opened up political space in an emerging civil society for social movements where little existed before. However, democratization with equitable and sustainable grassroots development is a necessary condition for the creation of a stable and robust civil society (Foley 1996a). This research investigates the impact of the transition on the organization, capability and viability of social movements and their changing relations with NGOs<sup>1</sup>, and the state, focusing on the last two decades.

When I was a neophyte in the Salvadoran solidarity movement in the late-1980s, I often heard the word political space used in conjunction with a military action by the FMLN either resulting in such space being opened or closed and the popular movement moving to fill that space or battering down the hatches as we prepared to respond to human rights abuses with protest, faxes and phone calls. The advent of the peace accords in El Salvador left many in the solidarity movement in a celebratory mood, inconducive to sober analysis. Many of us assumed, wrongly, that the political space opened up by the accords would favor the opposition; forgetting, or in most cases not being aware of the literature on and, experiences of, other revolutionary movements in transitions to electoral democracy elsewhere.

When I set out to conduct the research I argued that a successful transition to democracy with sustainable development is conditioned by the ability of grassroots movements to achieve their goals through resource mobilization within a civil society

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<sup>1</sup>In El Salvador, as elsewhere, there is a conceptual fuzziness when it comes to defining what constitutes an NGO, which can range from anything that is not a formal governmental agency, including private businesses and social movement organizations together with non-profit, non-membership professional organizations staffed and run to provide technical services on a contractual basis, which is my working definition (one with which I am not entirely happy). NGO's can be movement support organizations if their decision making structure is in some way answerable democratically to a membership-based social movement organization. For example, CRIPDES, the social movement organization which I studied whose leadership is elected by representatives of 201 communities containing 80,000 people, works with CORDES, an NGO whose board of directors is elected by an assembly drawn from CRIPDES' communities and the directors themselves are also from those communities. There are various difficulties that occur in practice with making CORDES responsive to the base, but the intention and the structure fulfills the conditions of the definition of a movement support organization. This definition remains problematic, since one can cite examples of NGO's hired on a purely contractual basis who have proved more effective in the field at the work they were hired to do than NGOs with organic ties to movements.

in which NGOs play a central role in promoting social investment. However, I found that the political space created by the accords process was hardly neutral terrain which social movements of the opposition were ill-equipped to fully exploit, since the new arenas of struggle required different repertoires of contention and technical skills than those which these movements had developed before the accords. The research project as such examined changing social movement dynamics as well as opportunities and constraints to cooperation between development actors through a regional study that combined ethnographic field methods with archival analysis and compares two types of rural movements: 1) coffee cooperatives of the Federación Salvadoreña de Cooperativas de la Reforma Agraria (FESACORA) 2) rural communities of the Comité Cristiano Pro-Desplazados de El Salvador (CRIPDES) (Now la Asociación de Comunidades Rurales para el Desarrollo de El Salvador.) The primary observational focus was on how relations have changed between base organizations, their membership organizations, NGO's, the state and relevant international actors. However, this paper focuses less on the specific organizations studied in depth, and more on how the Salvadoran left is managing the opportunities and constraints of the neo-liberal political-economy.

## **2. POLITICAL SPACE AND THEORIES OF DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

The results of this investigation have broader regional and theoretical relevance. In 1989, El Salvador became one of a number of countries to enter into U.N.-mediated peace agreements between the state and an insurgent movement. Cases of this type have sparked a lively debate across the social sciences about the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The end of the cold war has seen a proliferation of literature on the transition from authoritarianism to democracy in Latin America, Eastern Europe and elsewhere (Huntington 1991; Schmitter and O'Donnell 1986). Unfortunately, not enough of this literature places social movements at the center of debates on citizenship and civil society, focusing instead on elite bargaining and institutional reorganization. In the case of El Salvador, the role of the United States and the United Nations in brokering the peace process has been overemphasized while ignoring the impact of the transition on popular social movements previously excluded from political participation and on their ability to make effective demands on the state.

In addition, the concept of democracy used has tended to be formalistic and ahistorical, tending to conflate the formation of formal democratic political institutions with the meaningful and substantive existence of democracy, imposing theoretical

limitations that obscure possible departures from the status quo (Nef 1988; Petras and Vieux 1994). This appears to stem from the analytical and conceptual separation of political democracy from social and economic power relations (Cohen and Arato 1992; Foley and Edwards 1996). This study critically examines how differing conceptualizations of civil society and democracy can aid or impede our understanding of the changing nature of State, NGOs and Social Movements in a process of transition to democracy. In the new context - characterized by multi-party democracy, a fledgling civil society and persistent inequalities of wealth - it is crucial to examine the opportunities and constraints faced by Salvadoran popular movements seeking access to resources for sustainable grassroots development at the local level. It is in this context that the capacity of NGOs to compensate for the withdrawal of the state from the provision of social services in Latin American has been called into question (Arrellano-Lopez and Petras 1994; Gill 1995). This project makes a practical contribution to the local development efforts it examines and contributes to the broader theoretical and comparative literature on democratic development and social movements (Foweraker 1995; Reuschmeyer 1992) (Vilas 1996).

This research also confronts current debates in Latin American social movement theory. I agree whole-heartedly with Ken Roberts' position as articulated in a recent review article in *Latin American Research Review* criticizing the romanticization of new social movements approaches. "The best of the recent literature is not content merely to celebrate the emergence of grassroots organizations or the opening of space for autonomous cultural expression<sup>2</sup> but is making a serious effort to understand how social movements engage the formal arenas of institutional politics and try to influence policy. . . The new literature has thus provided important insights into many of the most significant challenges confronting social movements in contemporary Latin America<sup>3</sup>. They include the tendency for popular mobilization to wane following transitions to democratic rule, the difficulty of constructing horizontal linkages between grassroots organizations to enhance their political leverage, and the strained relationships frequently existing between popular organizations and the formal representative institutions of democratic regimes" (Roberts 1997: 138-139). As in the works on the gamut of countries that Robert reviews, that phrase could easily have been written to describe the post-war situation of the left-opposition in El Salvador.

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<sup>2</sup>See, e.g. (Escobar and Alvarez 1992).

<sup>3</sup>See e.g. (Edelman 1995); (Eckstein 1989).

What do we mean by political space? One definition current in the Anglo-European literature on social movements defines it in terms of political opportunity structure, which Charles Brockett has neatly summarized as "the presence of allies and support groups; the availability of meaningful access points in the political system; the capacity of the state for repression; elite fragmentation and conflict and the temporal location in the cycle of protest. (Brockett 1991: 254). Boudreau (1996: 176), critiquing the uncritical use of 'northern theory to analyze southern protest' takes Brockett to task for assuming that "all movements seek access to state institutions and decision making power" when "southern movements often aspire to seize state power, to capture . . . resources or to shield society from state initiatives."

While this criticism remains valid in some respects, it is ironically no longer entirely so for El Salvador in the post- civil war period. While civil war movement objectives were indeed revolutionary in the classic sense of aiming to seize state power and remaking the state according to its own design, the objectives, strategies, and tactics of the FMLN and the social movements, while they may talk of revolution and socialism as a discursive strategy, have increasingly resembled the relation between left party and left movements directing their energies at 'meaningful access points in the political system'. The major difference from so-called advanced democracies being, are in other respects considerable. Among the most important are: 1) proto-democratic institutions that are nascent, weak and/or corrupt; 2) no history of a welfare-state, and 3) being a primary-commodity producing small-country economy. In an era when all welfare states are being undermined by a race to the bottom in terms of the social costs of production, and when the so-called free market determines commodity prices downward for peripheral countries, the political space foreclosed by the neo-liberal international regime is considerable<sup>4</sup>.

### **3. BACKGROUND.**

Emerging from a synergism between liberation theology, Marxism, and a long history of Salvadoran resistance repertoires reaching back into the colonial era, the FMLN and the popular movement struggled for a series of objectives that have changed over time. With due respect to history and historians I must mention at this point that for purposes of focus and time, this is a huge simplification of a complex historical discussion since there were clearly a diversity of objectives across the various

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<sup>4</sup>I find the Dependency-World-Systems theory term less problematic than the 'developing country' discourse of the modernization theory.

movements and within the periods I'm about to describe. We can however, periodize these objectives roughly into three times for heuristic purposes: the transition from reformist to revolutionary goals from 1960 to 1980, the revolutionary period of the civil war from 1980-the late 1980's to early 1990s<sup>5</sup>, and the subsequent transition to reform strategies<sup>6</sup>.

The social and political conflicts that led to the 1980-1992 civil war also produced a large and vibrant popular movement that was repeatedly frustrated in its demands for reform by an authoritarian political system (Dunkerley 1988). Punctuated by the gradual expropriation of common lands from the 1870's, the Matanza of 1932, and the massacres perpetrated by the security forces in the second half of the 1970's, the civil war was the culmination of a series of challenges to the power of the oligarchy focusing on the disparities in access to natural resources as well as labor compensation and conditions which were (and remain) at the heart of Central America's ecological and political-economic crisis (Painter 1995). The decades leading up to the war were marked by rapid transformation and modernization of agriculture (Lindo-Fuentes 1990), environmental degradation (Durham 1979), concentration of landholdings and escalation of landlessness (Browning 1971; Paige 1997). At times, these struggles took on an electoral focus, but a succession of fraudulent results in 1972 and 1977, combined with mounting repression of labor and peasant organizing convinced a growing number of Salvadorans that armed struggle was the only option for change, even as most who were active in politics continued to organize peacefully. The civil war occurred when peaceful attempts at change - i.e. civil political spaces - were foreclosed by repression which reached a bloody crescendo in the late 1970s.

As repression and opposition militancy escalated, the U.S. -government and centrist sectors of the Salvadoran elite attempted to form a 'middle-way' between the right and the emerging revolutionary left by forming a reform junta with a land reform in 1979. Lacking the power over the military to reign in the terrorism from the right and unwilling and or unable to fundamentally challenge their power base with a substantive land reform, this counter-insurgency strategy failed. The war effectively

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<sup>5</sup>Some have argued that revolutionary goals were compromised as early as 1983, when a split within the FPL led to the Murder of Melida Anaya Motes by Salvador Cayetano Carpio and his subsequent suicide. Others point to a failure of military strategy during the offensive of 1989, and still others criticized the FMLN's handling of the negotiations. For this reason, I hesitate to end the revolutionary period neatly in 1992, when the Peace Accords were signed.

<sup>6</sup>As I'll mention later, a significant number of militants in the FMLN and the different opposition movements talk of their goals in revolutionary terms, but in practice, the term becomes indistinguishable from reform.

began with the resignation of the reform government, and a series of high-level political assassinations in 1980 - including Archbishop Romero and six member of the Political wing of the FMLN - followed by the FMLN's 'final offensive in January of 1981.

Though the relationship between the FMLN and the popular movement was highly verticalist during the late 1970's and throughout the civil war, there was a diversity of views as to how to achieve socialism through revolution and what the future socialist society would look like, despite the pressure of wartime.<sup>7</sup> Given this diversity, it is possible, however, to summarize some common themes.

1. The repressive power of the state must be broken. This requires the dissolution of the security forces, and the reconstitution of the army under new leadership subordinate to civilian authority with the sole purpose of defending Salvadoran sovereignty.
2. The Concentration of wealth and resources must be ended in favor of a massive and comprehensive land reform, nationalization of banking and finance and trade and other measures to assure access for the majority. Small and medium scale enterprise would be respected, supported and the formation of cooperatives among small producer and consumers would be particularly encouraged.
3. Services such as health and education and housing would be progressively expanded, with massive literacy, health, and housing campaigns at the start to address the crisis in these areas.
4. An emergency program to aid to those effected by the war and to reconstruct infrastructure damaged by the war, which together with the promotion of increased public and private investment in labor-intensive sectors of the economy would help address the unemployment problem.
5. Government would be decentralized and opened to popular participation, with new structure promoting joint planning between community organizations and municipalities for projects and processes that are desired by and benefit local communities.
6. Legal, Electoral and human rights would be respected, those guilty of human rights abuses would be brought to justice and the legal and electoral systems would be reformed to end corruption and fraud, and promote democratic political freedoms.

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<sup>7</sup>This should not be surprising, given that the FMLN was formed of five, at times highly contentious parties, which in turn had various divisions within them. The social movements, though closely linked to the various factions of the FMLN, by no means followed lock-step with FMLN leadership. The multiple splits in the FMLN following the war bear out the earlier pattern.

7. The country must become truly independent and sovereign, especially vis a vis the United States, and would join the non-aligned movement.<sup>8</sup>

Observers have argued that among the most important factors which made the Peace Accords possible was the belief held by many grassroots movement participants that the peace process would allow them to create alternatives to state institutions that historically excluded them from political participation and economic resources (Lungo 1995; Consejo de Mujeres Misioneras por la Paz 1996). Post-war interviews with movement participants and a review of some of the testimonial literature showed an understanding in general terms that movement goals would lead to the end of inequality, repression and poverty, that poor Salvadorans would be given access to land or other means of making a living, as well as health, and education. Their legal and human rights would be guaranteed and elections would reflect the voice of the majority. However the accords did not address many of the socio-economic problems at the root of the conflict (Murray 1994; Vilas 1995; Foley 1996a).

It was understood by social movement actors that the construction of the new society described above would require the remaking of the state that could best be accomplished by destroying the current one. However, the opposition did not win a revolutionary victory, by which it might have had the opportunity to remake the state in its own image. As part of the counter-insurgency strategy of the US and sectors of the Salvadoran ruling class, a land reform was partially implemented, and banking and foreign trade were nationalized. When it was recognized by all sides that a military stalemate had been reached in 1989,<sup>9</sup> a peace accord was worked out between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government and military, with scant participation by the popular movement and signed on January 16, 1998. Though it was termed by U.N negotiator Alvaro de Soto 'the negotiated revolution', this was far from the case, especially in its weak provisions for socio-economic change.

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<sup>8</sup>Adapted from (Gettleman 1986:205-209). A Review of FMLN platforms during the war as well as demand made by popular movement organizations finds much variation a greater detail, but these themes are a fair reflection of the basic thrust of the movement.

<sup>9</sup>Again, this glosses over a lot. The collapse of the Soviet Union undoubtedly played a major role in reducing the importance of the Salvadoran conflict for the U.S., which could then present its Salvadoran allies with a more credible threat of the withdrawal of support if negotiations were not pursued. Some of the FMLN undoubtedly saw the beginning of the end of the Socialist bloc counterweight to the U.S., as well as the opportunity presented by the change of position by the U.S. Others saw it differently (see note 2). My own view, borne out by discussions with ex-combatants and other researchers who have had similar discussions is that it was becoming increasingly difficult for the FMLN to recruit and retain new fighters after 1989, and that a general level of social exhaustion had been reached, where ending the war became of equal or greater importance to other social and political demands.



#### 4. THE PEACE ACCORDS.

The accords process has been ably analyzed elsewhere<sup>10</sup> so I will simply give an overview of the main points, which has no pretensions at being exhaustive. The process itself was plagued with delays and primarily but not exclusively resistance by the government. For purposes of analysis, the accords provisions can be divided into provisions for demilitarization of society, democratization of institution, and economic development:

The Demilitarization measures had four basic components: dissolution of the security forces; reduction of the armed forces and disarming and demobilization of the FMLN combatants, the creation of a truth commission and ad-hoc commission to investigate human rights abuses and to make recommendations for prosecution or punishments; and subordination of the army to civilian command. Democratization focused on institutional and legal reforms to the electoral code and the judiciary, and the creation of a National Civilian Police force. The third, and weakest, development component, involved reconstruction programs in the former conflictive zones, reinsertion programs for excombatants from both sides and a modest land transfer program (the PTT) for excombatants and the *tenedores* - landholders - who had made homes and communities on land abandoned by its owner because of the war.<sup>11</sup>

While the army was reduced in half and its officer corps purged, those accused of human rights abuses by the truth and ad-hoc commission were pardoned by an act of the National Assembly, leaving many Salvadorans with a feeling of amnesia, not just reconciliation. The security forces were dissolved and the National Civilian Police force created, but many of the former security forces found their way into the PNC's ranks at all levels. To this day the institution is the target of strong criticism from all sides for corruption, inefficiency and more than a few officers have been accused and or convicted of violent crimes.

Though real progress has been made in Judicial and electoral reforms, particularly the dismissal of corrupt judges, the criminal justice system remains overburdened and undertrained. The accused are imprisoned in nightmarish condition for months or years before a first hearing and violent criminals are released on technicalities. The electoral roles remain filled with the ranks of the dead, and

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<sup>10</sup>See the series of Hemisphere Initiatives reports, especially (Spence 1997).

<sup>11</sup>A forum for social and economic '*concertacion*' of business and labor, a highly optimistic enterprise at best, collapsed before the intransigence of the business association to even recognize basic labor rights incorporated into International Labor Organization agreements to which El Salvador is a signatory.

Salvadorans still must vote according to where they are placed in the alphabet, rather than where they reside.

While no comprehensive evaluation of the reconstruction and reinsertion programs has been seen by this investigator, one only need look at the number of unemployed, the number of ex-combatants who have taken to crime, and the fact that the National Reconstruction Program (PRN) did not function in non-conflictive zones, where, together with the areas that it did operate, poverty and inequality continue. A recent voluminous study of poverty in El Salvador by CRECER, a USAID contractor, found that while urban poverty has diminished between 1992 and 1996 from 53.8 to 42.9%, that rural poverty has remained essentially constant. Further, the national distribution of income has remained virtually stagnant over the period in question, with the top 20% of the population earning about 62% of national income while the bottom 50% earned approximately 20%. (Chanchán 1998).<sup>12</sup>

Thus the achievements of the accords, while opening up political space for the left to organize as never before was not a negotiated revolution. The most substantial changes were the removal of the military from politics, its subordination to civilian authority and the elimination of the security forces. Open oppositional political organizing is not met with repression. The creation of democratic institutions, while an important step forward, have a long way to go, however it is now possible for the left to compete in the electoral arena with moderate transparency. The unequal socio-economic structure which existed before the civil war remains so - with the important exception of the lands held by the Reform Sector and the PTT.

The question is, can El Salvador's poor people's movements use this political space to make serious changes to the Salvadoran political economy? This question cannot be properly answered if one only looks at the Salvadoran economy. El Salvador, like most small economies producing mainly primary agricultural commodities with the recent addition of maquiladoras, has become highly vulnerable to changes in the commodity markets, the anarchic ups and downs of the world currency markets and the dictates of the World Bank and the IMF.

## **5. THE RISE OF NEOLIBERALISM AND THE RESPONSE FROM THE LEFT**

From 1989, the Salvadoran state, far from being coerced by the International Monetary Fund, embarked on its own ambitious structural adjustment plans. Its broad

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<sup>12</sup>Interestingly, the Salvadoran government stopped including reports of income distribution by decile after 1990.

goals are familiar to observers of the IMF: privatization of public goods and services, deregulation of wages, prices and financial transactions, reductions of tariffs and government expenditure on social services. The specific objectives were to reverse the reforms that had occurred during the war: the nationalization of the banks and of foreign trade, as well as the land reform. By this year, these goals have been achieved, despite opposition at various stages. The few remaining price supports for basic grains were phased out. The banking system was privatized, and the system of regulation in the financial sector was turned over to those being regulated, resulting in a series of high-profile swindles over the last few years. Public utilities are either privatized or on their way to being so, and the public sector unions which resisted were either crushed or left severely weakened. Reversing the land reforms was quite another matter. Unlike the union movement, which has been in steady decline for some time, rural movements in El Salvador continue to be among the most dynamic in the country. However, this renewed dynamism followed a period of demobilization and confusion following the accords and to some extent continue to the present day. Despite the resistance of rural movements, the government's priorities since 1989, and even more so since the election of the current president, Armando Calderon Sol, have favored the financial, commercial, real estate and maquila sectors, at the expense of agriculture and local development.

Salvadoran social movements have not taken all of this lying down, but the transition period continues to be a difficult one. From the signing of the peace accords until the period following the so-called elections of the century - where all elected offices in the country were contested with the full participation of the FMLN for the first time- social movements, experienced an existential crisis. In the case of rural movements the wartime tasks of mobilization and protest, denouncing human rights abuses, repatriating and repopulating rural communities, and pursuing economic survival strategies, *seemingly* became contentious repertoire for a bygone age. While assassinations of FMLN militants continued after the war, their frequency diminished as the years went by.

The central task now in the post-war period seemed to be 'development.' Community boards and associations needed legal status to receive funds from the government or foreign NGO's, and every conceivable social or economic need became the province of social movement organizations and allied NGOs. The movements had some experience as semi-governing structures together with the FMLN during experiments at popular local power in the zones of control under conditions which could be described as autarchy under fire. The new conditions were utterly different.

International solidarity and cooperation showered the FMLN and the popular movement with 'material aid' during the war, and cared very little about accounting for how it was spent, much less asking to be paid back. This was also the case with the UNHCR in the refugee camps in Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, where the so-called experiments at economic self-sufficiency were completely dependent on foreign aid, and sheltered from market forces. Now, aid required accountability and came more and more in the form of loans for productive projects under highly uncompetitive conditions in very competitive markets (basic grains, small-scale agroindustry, etc.). Social movement leaders were under pressure to reinvent themselves and their organizations to conform to the demands of funders, and to the new technical and professional demands of a competitive NGO sector.

Members of communities, cooperatives and small-holders which had made great sacrifices during the war, have seen their hopes - raised by their leaders - dashed by the disappointing results of the peace-accords and the 1994 elections followed by the splits in the FMLN. These frustrations were further compounded by the expectation that they become 'competitive, modern entrepreneurs' overnight, under conditions where the structure and distribution of capital (human, fixed and fluid), markets, inputs and credits, were all stacked against them. These were some of the very things they struggled for during the war. The challenge of re-mobilizing communities with this history is that many at grassroots have no expectation that movements can solve their problems, so are more likely to pursue individual solutions and less likely to spend their time in community organizing, let alone, militant action or economic risk-taking.

In *¿Valió la Pena?* a book of testimonials of rural women activists interviewed after the 1994 elections, 42-year old ex-combatant Carmen Abrego clearly expresses a sentiment that I have heard from many different Salvadorans:

"Yo esperaba que cuando se diera el cambio, según nos habían dicho a nosotros, pues sí, que todos íbamos a ser iguales; entonces yo pensaba que ellos iban a reconocer el trabajo que uno había realizado. Todo eso yo pensé, pero quizá no ha sido así, no se ha visto así, para unos tal vez, pero para otros no. Con los Acuerdos de Paz, yo pensaba que eran pasos que se iban dando; hoy lo que sé yo, es que es un espacio que se ha abierto para seguir luchando principalmente, no con las armas, sino con nuestra voz, nuestros pensamientos, para que esto cambie, ¿verdad? . . . Por ratos se ha visto la gente bastante cansada, como que ya no quiere, como se ha dedicado sólo al proceso del trabajo y que ha dejado la base fundamental que es la organización;

eso yo lo he observado, y que para mí no es esa la base; nosotros no tenemos que olvidarnos de la organización, eso es lo que yo miro. (Rivera 1995: 37, 39)."

She realized then what many still are unwilling to acknowledge, that the strength in the movement is based not on become a professional development agency, but in the quality of organization at the grassroots level. If sufficiently effective, such a movement can press for the resolution of their 'development' problems by the state and NGOs on the movement's own terms. The question of organization brings us to the relation between economy and politics the meaning of democracy when most of the decisions that most effect people in their economic activities are off-limits. If our definition of political space includes the notion of "meaningful access points in the political system that allow the movement to achieve its objectives", what is the meaning of democracy when the structure of the political economy rules central movement objectives out of bounds?

## **6. POLITICAL SPACE IN A 'LOW-INTENSITY DEMOCRACY'.**

The constraints imposed by U.S. hegemony in the region, once counterbalanced by the Soviet Union are now compounded with the disappearance of that problematic counterweight and by the economic straight-jacket of neo-liberal policy boundaries enforced by the multi-lateral institutions. The role of the U.S. has changed markedly, however, in terms of tactics and strategy. According to James Petras "[t]he new politics takes place in the context of a new role for the U.S. No longer directly intervening in the minutiae of financing and directing everyday repressive activity, Washington stands as an overseer. The Embassy and the associated aid agencies and military advisors are consulted by major parties and social movements and are involved in setting forth economic agendas and delimiting the boundaries of "acceptable politics." (Petras 1997).

William Robinson's description of "low-intensity democracy" "a system in which a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision-making is confined to leadership choice in elections carefully managed by competing elites" is quite a propos to describe the Salvadoran political structure if we modify the definition to include formalistic mass participatory exercises where possible outcomes are carefully limited through prior design by competing elites. (Robinson 1996).<sup>13</sup> Of course, these exercises

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<sup>13</sup>For an excellent review and discussion of the points Robinson raises see (Foster Sep 1997).

"For Gramsci, on the left, the goal was to challenge bourgeois cultural hegemony. This emphasis on the consensual basis of politics was most highly developed in the work of Gramsci. Fundamental to his

and elections are contested, sometimes very strenuously by movements, and sometimes even by political parties, but the odds are heavily stacked against them, and the challenge they face are not only 'external' to the movements themselves.

From the 1970's onward, each of the five parties in the FMLN allied with or created organizations that after 1992 became increasingly professionalized and eventually took on many of the characteristics of NGOs, resulting in duplication of effort among left-NGOs. Added to the proliferation of NGOs from the right, the USAID contractors and those described as 'family businesses' or 'middle-class employment agencies', there exists an immense dispersion and competition in the NGO sector. In addition, the focus on competing micro-development projects has left movements and NGOs with a serious problem of not seeing the forest for the trees. In the competition for foreign NGO dollars and the desire to resolve all of the problems that the central government is unable or unwilling to solve, NGO's and movements get bogged down in literally thousands of loosely coordinated projects, while few resources remain for political task of transforming the priorities of the state. This dynamic, aptly described in the words of Carmen Abrego is fed by an over-reliance on external funding where there is usually money for 'development' and little or none for organization.

Even more insidious is the ideological role played by those in the NGO sector who intentionally or unwittingly promote low-intensity democracy by insisting in the separation of politics from economics in 'development' work. There is a strong current of ideas emerging from USAID funded NGO's (but is by no means limited to them) that has established the nostrum that the big problem with the Salvadoran NGO sector is that it is too politicized. Their proposed solution is for NGOs and movements to leave politics and focus on technical questions and productive projects. Like many corollaries of the neo-liberal discourse, this one contains a grain of truth, if one defines political to mean partisan. The patronage system is alive and well in Salvador, left, right and center, and while many social movement organizations have been attempting, with varying degrees of success, to establish independent, autonomous relations with

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analysis was the notion of extended state, in the sense that the "State - political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armor of coercion." Hegemony, which itself stood for the possibility of political rule based on the consent of the governed backed up by coercion, could only be secure if rooted in institutions of civil society: "the ensemble of organizations commonly called 'private.'" Gramsci's analysis thus led to the conception of an "extended state," encompassing civil society as well, by means of which the hegemony of a given ruling class was secured. At the same time, Gramsci pointed to a theory of counter-hegemony, whereby a revolutionary class might challenge the hegemonic ruling class by means of a long march through civil society."

political parties, there is much left to be done in this area.<sup>14</sup> It is equally true that Social movements have been much stronger at oppositional political organization and much fuzzier in their articulations of alternatives to neo-liberalism, and that cooperatives are, after all, agricultural enterprises which would do better with efficient systems of administration, production, distribution and marketing. However, the promoters of democracy-lite are not merely talking of partisan politics, but of political action in general. The idea is that NGOs and movements should devote their energies to empresarial re-engineering and the search for insertion points in the world capitalist system following the 'rules of the game.' It is hard to see how basic grains cultivators on too little land of poor quality can compete with large subsidized foreign grain producers. Even the most favored of the popular agricultural sector, the coffee cooperatives, will not be able to achieve the prescribed re-engineering goals without political struggle, as the state and the private coffee sector have marginalized the cooperatives from the technical knowledge necessary in processing, marketing and export where the real money is made in the modern coffee industry.

Despite these pressures, some movements have successfully resisted pressures to depoliticize on a number of fronts. One such place are spaces of *concertacion*, where different sectors come together to attempt to negotiate common projects. El Salvador is teeming with such political spaces. The move toward decentralization and 'municipalismo' has created new opportunities for local exercise of power for the FMLN (which has governed about half the population on the local level since the 1997 municipal and assembly elections). Movements now have a local interlocutor who at the very least is not hostile, and in some cases effective at fomenting participation in local government, often for the first time in many municipalities. One space for *concertación* is the Municipal Development Committee, where community organizations, NGOs and municipal governments attempt to form a coordinated local development strategy instead of the usual fragmented or conflictual practices. The formation of micro-regional or even departmental development groups is also taking place, with similar goals. While these groups varied widely in terms of their efficacy, the vast majority of cases represent legitimate attempts directed by well-meaning people to resolve local problems with scarce resources. While these efforts are nascent, and filled with difficulties, they are a very definite step forward in improving access of local people to decisions that effect their daily lives. However, despite recent

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<sup>14</sup>For an excellent discussion of the theoretical basis for neo-liberalism and its political component, 'low intensity democracy, see (Foster Sep 1997).

legislation increasing appropriations to municipalities to 6% of the national budget, the ruling ARENA party has used its control of the executive and its majority in the assembly for a series of maneuvers that have favored 'its' municipalities to the cost of the other parties. Even with this 6%, most municipalities do not have sufficient funds to meet even the costs of most basic services. In addition, many FMLN municipal officials complain that the ruling party uses its control of resources to favor ARENA municipalities and strangle the opposition, in an attempt to make the FMLN look incapable of governance when it fails to keep its campaign promises for infrastructure repair.<sup>15</sup>

While participation in movement activities shows slow, but steady growth, public distrust in parties, government and the political process in general shows similar growth. This disillusionment and fatalism reaches down to the most basic levels of community and movement organizing, and in El Salvador, as in many of the recent Latin American transitions, one result is a distancing of movements from the left party. In El Salvador, because the FMLN has not yet held the presidency, this process is still in its early stages, but recent events will no doubt increase its pace. The FMLN came into the pre-election period with a number of advantages: Fragmentation of the right-wing ARENA party, and the effective non-existence of a political 'center', and challenging an incumbent party with few defensible accomplishments, particularly on the economic front.

The confines of electoral politics in the neo-liberal era that have doomed many a left party to administering structural adjustment policies are plaguing the FMLN even before it has reached the presidency. Most observers thought an FMLN victory in March of 1999 would be a distinct possibility up until its August convention at which the party's presidential candidate was to be chosen. The main divisions in the party are between supporters of general coordinator Facundo Guardado - who had backed the candidacy of the Mayor of San Salvador, Hector Silva - and the supporters of former Human Rights Ombudsman Victoria de Aviles, who was preferred by party militants identified with Salvador Sanchez Ceren, Nidia Diaz and Shafik Handal. The latter are caricatured by the right-wing Salvadoran media as the '*ortodoxos*', who are stuck in a Marxist-Leninist past. The Facundistas are the *renovadoras* within the FRENTE, and criticized in solidarity circles as privileging business-sector alliances over those with

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<sup>15</sup>A particularly bold-faced example of traditional patronage politics is the allocation of road building machinery. Through a Byzantine regulation which allows presidentially-appointed departmental governors to allocate this machinery, I discovered that (at least) the departments of La Libertad and San Vicente, this equipment has been systematically withheld from FMLN municipalities.



social movements. Despite these seemingly significant splits, few expect great differences between the factions in actual policy in the near term-should they win the presidency. (International Solidarity Center 1998).<sup>16</sup> When neither candidate received the statutory 50% plus one of the total number of eligible delegates (Aviles did receive a simple majority), a second convention was convened two weeks later. Just before the convention, Silva withdrew from the race stating that he did not want his candidacy to weaken the FMLN and citing his commitment to his mayoral post. At the August 29th convention, 31 of the 52 national council member were successful in convincing a majority of the delegates to boycott the vote, while party statutes prohibited their proposal that the council decide the question and an alternative proposal to turn the selection process over to a nationwide referendum of the 60,000 party militants. These events have left the FMLN's credibility in disrepair and will undoubtedly hurt them at the polls

On the national level, however, the *espacios de concertacion* become more problematic. Two examples of such spaces, the rural development committee (CDR) and the Bases for a National Plan form a part of my study, though I will only discuss the first in detail here<sup>17</sup> The CDR is a committee initiated by USAID in the fall of 1997 in an attempt to bring together "group of people involved in the formulation of agricultural policy . . . to debate the elements of a medium and long-term strategy to reactivate Salvadoran agriculture. (Comité para el Desarrollo Rural 1998:4)." The CDR initially consisted of representatives of USAID, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Chamber of Salvadoran Agricultural (a conservative growers association), FUSADES (the pre-eminent right-wing think tank), the U.N development program, the UN Food and agriculture organization, and two other U.S. government-funded NGOs.<sup>18</sup> By the beginning of 1998, the USAID and UNDP representatives were pushing the group to include left-of-center rerepresentatives, and representatives of the FORO Agropecuario

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<sup>16</sup>The full details of these divisions would involve a contentious and tiresomely labyrinthine exegesis of the internal politics of the FMLN, reminding one of the adage ascribed to various contentious groups that in any group of 3 *efemelenistas* you'll find 4 opinions. During the six months between its last convention, when the national leadership of the party was elected and the August convention, party leaders strove mightily to frame the debate as an internal debate in a democratic party and not evidence of factional divisions, which is rather difficult to sustain at this point.

<sup>17</sup>Bases para el Plan de Nacion is an initiative of the Presidents National Development Commission, which created a 'representative "*grupo gestor*" for an ambitious department-by-department consultative process that would creat what its title suggests. Since the initiative came from the government, it was instantaly suspect, and remains so in many circles, although the dynamic differs from place to place, and many on the left have gotten involved so that their input might be included in the final document, and this political space not controlled by the right.

<sup>18</sup>NB: confirm the original membership list

and FUNDE (a large left-of-center think tank) were added. Much later, and over the muted objections of FUSADES and CAMAGRO, a representative of the ADC was brought on board.

Aside from the difficulties of the left groups being brought in after the initiative was well under way (especially the ADC, who came in as the final document was being drawn-up) the CDR was a mixed bag. On the positive side, it brought groups to the table in constructive discussions on a crucial theme who had never talked to each other before. On the other hand, despite the real commonalities of interests on a number of fronts between the different parties, the context of the discussion (those limits to acceptable politics) excluded, almost without discussion, certain conflictual items - e.g.. land redistribution. This created an atmosphere where the level of agreement seemed too great, given the differences that existed outside the conference room.

Meanwhile, the campesino movements had been taking on the government and the banks in the biggest struggle since the accords, the question of the agrarian debt. The government of El Salvador, together with the World Bank and the IMF have used a variety of means at their disposal to 'create a free market in land' including passing legislation removing barriers to the sale of cooperatively held land, lowering tariff barriers to more cheaply produced basic grains, and doing nothing to stop the rapid increase in prices of agricultural inputs<sup>19</sup>. In 1995, campesino organizations like the Alianza Democrática Campesina, CRIPDES, and a number of cooperative federations decided that aggressive measure would need to be taken to deal with the agrarian debt, which was being used as a tool by the state to force sale or foreclosure on rural properties, and by most accounts was completely unpayable<sup>20</sup>. Despite initial divisions between the ADC, uniquely formed by campesino organizations and the newly (1995) formed FORO Agropecuario, which included NGOs and associations of medium scale private land-owners, they were able to come together in a series of demonstrations and legislative actions from 1996-1998 which resulted in the total forgiveness of the PTT bank debt<sup>21</sup> and approximately 90% of the land and bank debts in the rural sector. This involved close coordination not only within the campesino sector<sup>22</sup> but with key legislators in the FMLN, who constructed unlikely alliances across the political

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<sup>19</sup>This market is under the control of an oligopoly.

<sup>20</sup>This debt was basically in two parts: the original land debt for purchase and the bank debt for yearly production costs. The biggest chunk of debt was in the reform sector which was created for purposes of counter-insurgency and not meant to be economically viable.

<sup>21</sup>USAID paid off the land debt previously.

<sup>22</sup>Despite the presence of NGOs and wealthier farmers in these alliances, the political protagonism was clearly in the hands of the campesino leaders.

spectrum to achieve this victory. This effort was not without its critics and problems. The inclusion of a handful of wealthy landowners in the forgiveness package was roundly criticized by many observers. The remaining debt refinancing mechanisms were not written into the original law, leading to confusion among cooperativists and campesinos figuring out how to pay or refinance their debt. Attempts by some banks and state institutions to exploit this confusion did not help. In addition, while the divisions between the FORO and the ADC ultimately were not serious enough to derail the effort, it is possible that a better deal might have been struck had they been unified. Perhaps more importantly, this is symptomatic of continuing divisions within social movements that have more to do with political history and competition for leadership than major differences in objectives.

On the international level, I looked at two types of solidarity networks: sister cities and fair coffee trade, both in the U.S.<sup>23</sup> Historically, these networks have contributed significantly (in very different ways) to the repopulation movement - now the rural communal movement - and the coffee cooperatives of the reform sector, in terms of moral and political accompaniment, as well as material support. However, the existential crisis in the Salvadoran movements also inflicted the solidarity movement. Once the war was over, interest and numbers decreased, and in the case of the sister city movement, micro-projects like sewing and egg-laying projects threatened to turn solidarity into micro-development. However, by 1995, it became clear that such a role was both counter-productive and that the sister-groups were very bad at it. It was realized and reaffirmed at a 'sistering summit' July of 1996 that the role of solidarity should be to support community organization on the local, regional and national levels so that the communal movement would be in a better position to politically demand access to the resources they needed, which were far beyond anything that solidarity groups could provide in cash or kind<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup>Another interesting international space consists of the Structural Adjustment Policy Research Initiative, in which an international consortium of NGO's has negotiated with the World Bank to do a series of joint Bank-NGO studies on the effects of adjustment in 10 countries around the world. The idea is to force the bank to listen to voices the Bank has not been hearing using indicators and methods which do not privilege economic growth and stability above all else, and then using the consultative and research process itself a political space (See their web page at [www.igc.org/dgap/saprin/](http://www.igc.org/dgap/saprin/)) . Yet another is the FORO de Sao Paulo, an association of left-wing Latin American parties which has met annually since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989 (see Robinson 199?). The FMLN hosted the 1996 meeting.

<sup>24</sup>Expand and deal with Fair trade example

## **7. CONCLUSION.**

On balance, the political space available to movements in El Salvador is not large, if one talks in terms of achieving objectives rather than participation for the sake of participation. I had an almost palpable sense of the strict limitations of the system on the discourse of the opposition. This is much more effective than repression ever was. By reducing what Salvadorans even conceive of as the possible, unconscious self-censorship reduces how much of the existing political space movements are able to occupy, and keeps the fundamental structural questions off the negotiating table. 'No hay alternative' was a constant refrain, sung from people across the political spectrum. The utopian possibilities of socialism, which, during the war was a very real perception that gave movement participants the hope to make enormous sacrifices, is a very real limitation to the use of political space by movements.

Despite the numerous spaces for dialogue and planning, especially at the local and regional levels, the capacity of movements, NGOs and municipal governments to meet basic needs, let alone the goal of 'sustainable development' is very limited by a hostile state. Even if the FMLN wins the upcoming elections, the 'limits of acceptable politics' and the fact that key economic decisions vitally effecting the Salvadoran economy cannot be controlled from El Salvador, reduce room for maneuver significantly.

However, all is not doom and gloom. The cycle of movement activity as shifted out of the slump which followed the disappointment of the peace accords and the 1994 elections, and movement activity is on the rise. While the problems described above in the NGO sector continue, many opposition NGOs at least acknowledge that they are problems and discuss them openly, even if they are uncertain how to solve them. The two year campaign for debt forgiveness in the agrarian sector, while not 100% successful, did achieve significant gains, as well as contributing to bridging divisions between agrarian movements. If El Salvador's problems were limited to 'internal' matters, I would be far more optimistic, but it is clear that transnational organizing to meet the challenges of globalization will be essential.

We must be cautious about the possibilities and objectives of such networks. While I share William Robinson's call for a globalization from below that takes racial, ethnic and gender inequalities seriously while constructing new and democratic forms of political practice, most people live and act locally even if they are thinking and networking at the global level as well. I agree that existing transnational movement ties must be deepened and broadened and that the strategies and tactics of movements

should not be constrained by national boundaries. I'm not convinced that the creation of a counter-hegemonic global society is the proper goal to advance, before discussing intermediate steps that I think would revolve more around creating a political-economy that is less global in its control mechanisms, whether on the regional, national or subnational level. Political and economic decisions must be decentralized, not centralized in an alternative way, at least to start. The globalization that exists today is without polity or civil society, and it must be constructed from the bottom up. The considerable limits of space and time and resources must be taken into account in any alternative formulation. If it has proved difficult to organize successful counter-hegemonic projects at the national level, it will be harder still to do so at the global level. And to what end? I'm not sure that a global civil society should be the goal or is even meaningful in terms of the density of associations and social ties that the somewhat shopworn term (civil society) implies. Perhaps the goal should be to construct a counter-hegemonic project with the objective of removing key economic decisions from the global ambit and returning them to a level closer to where people live, be it national or regional. Models of global commodity, trading and finance chains should resemble thousands of spider webs spaced across the globe, rather than a half dozen with the spider located always in the north. Participatory democracy, environmental sustainability, and social-movement organization become more difficult the further key decisions are removed from our localities. With the call to globalize movements, we must not forget why all politics is local.

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