

“Religious Actors in El Salvador Since 1992”

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Introduction: Religion, Political Culture, and Civil Society

Of the recent cases of negotiated transitions from civil war to political democracy in Central America, El Salvador's experience appears – on the surface, at least – to be the most promising. The armed forces have been significantly reduced, former insurgents have competed in two national elections with significant gains in vote share and political office, and new institutions were created as part of the peace accords to protect individual citizen rights. The aim of this paper is to weigh the impact on religious institutions and actors (particularly the Catholic Church) on the nascent democratic system over the past six years. Recent scholarship has stressed key variables for the long-term survivability of democracy: a political culture among key elites and the mass public that fosters support for democratic values and accommodation (Coleman et. al., 1996; Seligson and Cordova, 1995), the rule of law, and vibrant networks of civic associations (Linz and Stepan, 1996).

Religious actors have been widely acknowledged to have promoted non-violent solutions to the conflict, denounced and documented human rights violations, and furthered mass political organization and participation in the period up to and during the civil war (Berryman, 1994; Caceres, 1989). In the intervening years of 1992-1998, the religious landscape of El Salvador has undergone substantial change. This paper will examine whether efforts by Catholic Church leaders to distance the institution from its previous social activism and frequent conflicts with Salvadoran governments have lessened their favorable impact on the evolution of democracy in the country. In the almost two-decade-long interval from the start of the civil war to the present, the percentage of Catholics among Salvadorans has dropped by one-fourth or more, and

Protestant groups have proliferated to the point where they now constitute 15-20 percent of the population (Stein, forthcoming; IUDOP, 1995). Thus, not only has the socio-political context in which religious actors influence democratization changed dramatically, so too, has the make-up of important religious actors, themselves. This paper will discuss the extent to which religious leaders and institutions have furthered democracy since 1992 in 3 senses: a) in the development of a political culture emphasizing civil liberties and compromise; b) in their efforts to establish a more effective rule of law and respect for human rights, and c) in the promotion of mass participation and organization.

Elite and Mass Political Culture: How Religion has had an Impact

Elites in El Salvador historically had a very poor record in terms of their respect for civil liberties, and tolerance of viable opposition groups in civil society. As Paige notes (1993:8), “The persistence of a landed class dependent on agriculture that is labor-repressive has long been recognized as a substantial obstacle to democracy.” His careful study of the coffee growing and industrial elites of the country showed that they held a constrained understanding of democracy, and a gradual movement among members of the latter faction toward more acceptance of democratic norms (Ibid., 21-27). Other elites such as members of the judiciary and legislature before 1992, were close enough to the landed elites that they often contributed to a political culture characterized by partiality and impunity. That legacy still has a negative impact today (Ortiz, Ruiz, 1997:124). Military elites’ historic anti-communism and fierce defense of institutional and personal privileges led them to disregard continually and devalue such democratic values as respect for civil liberties, non-violent conflict resolution, support for popular sovereignty,

and a preference of democracy over alternative political systems (Williams and Walter, 1997; Stanley, 1996).

In the short term, elite compromise with archrivals helped make the 1992 Chapultepec accords possible. The ARENA coalition and then-President Alfredo Christiani came to a minimal consensus with FMLN-FDR leaders. The result was the end of the war, demobilization of combatants, institutional reform, and inclusion of the FMLN as a legitimate political force. There are some indications that a democratic political culture among elites and the mass public has begun to take root in El Salvador (Seligson and Cordova, 1995: 52-54; 111; Wood, 1995:210-228); however, there are still those analysts who doubt that political tolerance is firmly established, or that the cultural patterns and legacies of anti-democratic institutions have been overcome (Coleman, et.al., 1996). Stahler-Sholk (1994:20) concurs that basic consensus on values and agendas were lacking immediately following the end of the war:

Wide differences in interpretation of the participatory component of democracy... still existed [as did] the relative priorities accorded to such goals as democratization, reconciliation, and development.

Studies by Higley and Gunther (1989:18-19) suggest that democracies may be unstable in the absence of a “consensually unified elite.” Without a consensus on the rules of political competition and some degree of certainty over how actors will be treated, new democracies may be short-lived.

In this context, religious elites did influence the aftermath of the war, particularly in the case of the conduct by Archbishop Arturo Rivera y Damas, Archdiocesan officials, and the Jesuits of the Central American University (UCA). Catholic, Baptist, and Lutheran leaders may have lacked the political or economic power that other Salvadoran

elites possessed. However, the moral authority, perceived neutrality, and long-term support for a negotiated end to the conflict and support for human rights, gave church leaders a unique opportunity to influence elite and mass democratic values. This was particularly the case in the face of elite disunity, which prevailed equally on the right and left of the political spectrum.

There is not evidence to suggest that the actions and statements of religious elites in the period 1987-1991 determined the negotiating positions of the FMLN-FDR, or the Salvadoran government and armed forces. Yet, the unequivocal stress of key Catholic and Protestant leaders on tolerance, compromise, and a plurality of proposed solutions and actors legitimized these political values in a political culture that had previously equated multiple-sum political solutions to treason. From the beginning of the Esquipulas peace process to the signing of the 1992 peace accords, leading clergy had a role in bringing the parties together, and working to lessen polarization among elites. This very trend, which was promoted by a small but visible and influential minority of Catholic and Protestant clerics, continued throughout the war. As a result, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Auxiliary Bishop Juan Ramos, and 20 parish priests were murdered. Nearly fifty additional priests were expelled by Salvadoran governments in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, often for advocating these same democratic values among other elites and the general public.

From 1992 up to the 1994 elections religious leaders served on the official peace commission (COPAZ), overseeing implementation of the accords. In addition to mediation of disputes, the clergy worked to hold both sides accountable in the case of non-compliance with what was promised. Catholic officials also criticized those

irresponsible media elites whose style of journalism continued the demonization of adversaries and ideological polarization of the war years. At a time when many political leaders (most especially ARENA leaders) tried to downplay and forget the past, Catholic officials constantly reminded the public and governing elites of what was done, so as to create values, practices and institutions different from those that had led to the outbreak of the civil war. At a minimum, there is some evidence that the efforts of the Catholic Church in this regard had a lasting impact on student and other activists, some of whom were in the FDR and now hold seats in the Legislative Assembly (Darling, 1998). The extent to which religious discourse on democracy has influenced other elite evaluations of democracy and adherence to a democratic political culture is probably minimal.

In the period since the 1994 elections, as Armando Calderon Sol replaced Cristiani, popular support for the ARENA government declined. An equal lack of support for government institutions prevails when one considers popular evaluations of or trust in the executive, the judiciary, and legislature. The Calderon administration's inability to solve economic problems (taxes, unemployment, inflation), and rising criminal violence further eroded its credibility with Salvadoran voters (Cruz and Gonzalez, 1997; IUDOP, 1997a and b:523-524;528; Briones and Ramos, 1995:104-150). Polls continued to show that religious institutions and leaders, along with the mass media, enjoy greater public trust than do political parties or institutions. However, in the last four or five years, churches and church leaders have gradually withdrawn from social commitments, political statements, and ongoing programs that could advance a broader commitment to democratic values.

Some scholars such as Wood (1995: 38; 147-152; I. Gomez, 1998) argue that “new forms of political identity and citizenship” resulted from the experience of the war for average citizens in rural conflict zones. A more democratic peasant political culture has been forged, in part as a consequence of Catholic civic education and rural organizing activities during the 1970s and 1980s. Elements of this culture include high value placed on social justice, equality, individual rights, and citizen participation. It is unclear how widespread the impact of religious teaching, organizing and promotion of mass mobilization was in rural zones less directly affected by the military conflict, or in larger urban areas (IUDOP, 1995:855-859).

Churches’ Support for Human Rights and the Rule of Law

The United Nations’ Truth Commission Report of 1993 verified what the Catholic Church had alleged and documented throughout the war – that massacres, assassinations, disappearances, torture, and other flagrant violations of individual rights were widespread. According to the ONUSAL study, the military, police forces or allied death squads carried out 85% of human rights abuses during the war. Contrary to wartime government claims, the FMLN was charged with only 5% of all victims. The period of mass mobilization from the mid-1970s up to the end of the war was a context in which habeas corpus, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and the parties to the war largely ignored other rights of civilians. Most human rights violations took place in rural areas and in the first four years of the armed conflict:

Violence originated in a political mind-set that viewed political opponents as subversives and enemies. Anyone who expressed views that differed from the Government line ran the risk of being eliminated as if they were armed enemies on the field of battle. This situation is epitomized by the extrajudicial executions,

enforced disappearances and murders of political opponents (United Nations, 1995:311).

The pattern during the war and up to the first two and a half years after the signing of the peace accords was one of minimal government investigation of charges, denial of government institutional links to the authors of massacres, and efforts to question the credentials of citizens alleging abuse of human rights (United Nations, 1995: 535-538; 575-592). During the 1980s military courts had exercised broad (and often arbitrary) powers in judging civilians (Williams and Walter, 1997: 117-118). In the highest profile cases involving human rights violations -- many involving the murder of Catholic clergy and religious personnel -- Salvadoran government commitment to a thorough investigation and prosecution was missing even after the end of the war. While the accords signed in Mexico obligated the government to create a new Human Rights Prosecutor (Procuraduria para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, PDDH), the Cristiani government's delay in purging the worst human rights violators from the armed forces and support for an ARENA-sponsored legislative amnesty of human rights violators in 1993 showed a limited commitment to the issue.

The relevance of establishing formal legal mechanisms and enforcement of human rights guarantees for a newly democratic regime coming out of a brutal civil war is evident. Catholic officials, most especially the Archdiocese of San Salvador's Legal Aid office (Tutela Legal), and a research institute at the UCA run by Jesuit priests meticulously calculated data, investigated human rights violations, and documented events throughout the course of the war. The public discourse of several priests and Archbishops Romero (1977-1980) and Rivera y Damas (1983-1994) was one of condemnation of government abuses, calls for legal and moral accountability for acts

committed, and an appeal for the rule of law over political murder and arbitrary violence. The Catholic Church's defense of peasants – the main victims of repression and violence – established new standards of legal conduct and broader concepts of rights.

Church and United Nations sources documented death squad activity in 1993 (though on a much lesser level than before 1991) against former FMLN combatants and suspected criminals. In addition, remaining right-wing fringe groups continued to make death threats against outspoken Catholic officials such as Bishop Gregorio Rosa-Chavez, Rodolfo Cardenal, and Lutheran Bishop Medrardo Gomez (*Oficina de Tutela Legal*, 1997: 10-11; *Carta a las Iglesias*, December 16-31, 1993: 5-7). Moreover, religious officials (mostly from the Catholic Church) spoke out on police abuses of authority in their treatment of criminal suspects, protesters, squatters, and prisoners. Rivera y Damas observed in 1993:

The healthy administration of justice depends in large part on the solidity of democracy and social peace. It does not take a great deal of analysis to realize how poorly our system of justice has functioned. Our human rights office confirms this daily (*Carta a las Iglesias*, March 1-15, 1994:6-7).

Religious actors' behavior was crucial in fostering the idea of rule of law, in providing institutional arenas for citizens to express grievances against state abuses, and in legitimizing the right of the poor to exercise and have their individual rights expressed. In the six years since the signing of the peace accords, however, the gap between the legal mandate of the PDDH and its actual enforcement powers has not been closed entirely. The number of cases included over 15,000 admitted complaints in the first five years after the peace process, a figure likely to be less than half of the total number of abuses reported by citizens. The investigative resources of the office are limited. According to PDDH documents, its legal mandate is to uphold a wide array of rights

ranging from rights of life, personal safety, privacy, free expression, association, travel, personal documentation, due process of law, the right to health, work, union membership, social security, education, and others (PDDH, 1997a: 17-33).

Judicial and constitutional reform is a broad problem related to the upholding of human rights protections. Church leaders (most prominently, Catholics) have pressed for a reform of the justice system that has been characterized by impunity, inefficiency, corruption, and limited political independence (Sieder and Costello, 1996: 170-171; 182-192; O'Donnell, 1996:45). Although judicial reform was begun under U.S. auspices in the early 1980s, and a new Supreme Court was elected by popular vote in 1994, progress has been slow. One recent analysis noted that in the period 1984-1991, 21% of crimes were dealt with in the first trial, and 79% remained unresolved, often due to limited investigative capacity. To the extent that religious actors such as Catholic and Protestant clergy can have an impact, it could be in pressuring legislators and the executive to have the political will to enact and see through the intended reforms. The Catholic Church has remained polarized after the war, and a new administration under Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle has taken over the diocese of San Salvador. As a result, clerical voices on the issues of human rights and rule of law have been muted. On one hand, Saenz criticized abuses by the new National Police (E. Gomez, 1998; Gonzalez, 1996), and on the other, he has considered that application of the death penalty for certain crimes may be appropriate (as was contemplated in a 1995 bill before the ARENA majority in the legislature). The Jesuits and other sectors of the Church vehemently opposed this policy, on moral grounds, and on the grounds that it was hypocrisy given the 1993 amnesty of political crimes committed during the war. The greatest impact of religious actors today

is the legacy of past efforts, and continuing attempts to hold government institutions accountable when they fall short of what the law requires of them (Stein, forthcoming). A stark example of the need of continued vigilance was the 1998 legislative nomination of a judge Human Rights Prosecutor who was himself under investigation for judicial corruption (*Proceso*, July, 1998).

When popular perceptions of the human rights situation and the judiciary are taken into account, it is clear that most Salvadoran citizens view the rule of law as an unachieved goal. The majority of respondents approve of the statements and conduct of the PDDH, but find its work inadequate. While the most common causes of human rights abuses in the past were the war and its ideological polarization, more violations are now attributed to the crime wave that has increased during 1992-1998 (IUDOP, 1998; 1996).

Churches' Promotion of Political Participation and Civil Society

One potentially enduring legacy of Catholic pastoral work in the Archdiocese of San Salvador and some conflict zones (Morazan, Usulután, Chalatenango), is a focus on mobilization and organization of poor people to demand social and political rights. Rural church work led to the formation of peasant cooperatives and unions, refugee protection, religious and civic education, and other activities that gave the rural poor practical experience, skills, and motivation to participate in politics and assert their rights (Wood, 1995: 129-133; Berryman, 1994; Caceres, 1989). However, the lasting importance of this church trend for mass participation and civil society vitality depends on Catholic elites' vigorous promotion of such programs. In the time since 1995, it appears that the commitment has weakened, and thus, the present-day religious impact on political participation may be less than it was from the 1970s to the early 1990s (Valdez, 1998;

Williams and Peterson, 1996). Cleary (1997:261-262) speaks of two contending models of the church among bishops and priests in Brazil that is also germane for El Salvador, and helps in large measure to explain the lack of clerical support for mass organization and participation:

The basic conflict in ... the church is between two strong ideologies, each with its own program... one tendency as ... centralizing, hegemonic, demanding obedience. The other is a participatory tendency, with the image of church as brother/sister, as companion... the second [vision] emphasizes the role of church as servant within society.

In El Salvador since 1995 the former vision has predominated among the high clergy, and adherents to the second view (that was fundamental to church-sponsored social movements and political influence) have been pushed to the margins, silenced, or forced out of parishes, seminaries, and diocesan administration.

Protestant impact on politics is varied both in its direction and strength. In the 1990s there have been attempts to organize a confessional political party and involve this growing segment of the population. Two political parties inspired by these growing religious denominations have been created, but their dismal performance in the 1994 and 1997 elections (about 1% or less of the vote) undercores that they have not been able to attract voter support (Williams, 1997; CIDAI, 1997). Data suggest that during the first half of the 1990s, the poorest and least-well-educated Salvadorans are those who most participate in religious organizations. To the extent that participation in religious organizations increases, other kinds of voluntary, social or political association membership drops (IUDOP, 1996a: 184-189).

Foley's portrayal of foreign and Salvadoran government relations with non-governmental organizations, and civil society more broadly, stressed that many anti-democratic legacies need to be overcome (1996:90):

While civil society in El Salvador today displays some vigorously democratic shoots, of equal vigor are those elements that reinforce the power, privilege, and control of the few, whether it be the economic elite of the Right or the political elite of the Left.

The potential for religious actors to have a significant impact in the growth and diversification of a democratic civil society seems to be less at the end of the 1990s than it was during the context of the civil war.

Conclusion

Religious actors prior to 1992 had a significant impact on public discourse about democratic values and the nation's political culture. Additionally, they were largely responsible for the verification of human rights violations and raising awareness of the need for institutions to protect individual rights and legal equality. However, a change in leadership of the Catholic Church, and much changed political, social, and religious context have led to the diminution of religious influence on democratization. Voter abstention in El Salvador remained high compared to Central American standards and mass participation in the choice of representatives and policies remains limited. The growth of Protestant churches has not been characterized by a totally apolitical posture among adherents. However, the new political parties backed by these churches have failed. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church has moved toward cooperation with national governments, doctrinal rigidity, and ever less emphasis on human rights, mass organization or political participation.

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