

in debt write-offs, Chamorro's economic team managed to bring down inflation, but overall growth remained sluggish. Unemployment rose from 12 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 1993 (with underemployment affecting another 28 percent). Now known as *recontras*, former Contras engaged in occasional skirmishes with demobilized Sandinistas, known as *recompas*, but the two sides accepted a peace agreement in April 1994. Sporadic clashes nonetheless continued, as the national government proved unable to maintain law and order in the countryside.

The late 1990s drew attention to political issues. A series of constitutional reforms in February 1995 reduced the presidential term from six to five years, placed a ban on immediate reelection, and—in an effort to thwart long-standing traditions of nepotism—prohibited the president from being succeeded by a close family relative. Barely meeting these conditions, the 1996 election went to Arnaldo Alemán Lacayo of the right-wing Alianza Liberal. The following year, Alemán took steps to advance the painful process of national reconciliation, reaching a final agreement with the *recontras* and coming to terms with Sandinistas over property confiscated during the 1980s. In early 1998 the International Monetary Fund approved a second major loan for structural adjustment of the economy. Things seemed to be looking up.

Then came Hurricane Mitch in October 1998, pouring torrential rains down on Nicaragua and leaving a staggering toll: nearly 3000 dead, about 1500 missing or injured, and at least \$1 billion in damages. Mitch inflicted political damage as well. Alemán failed to call a national emergency, bungled international relief efforts, and displayed an awesome level of overall incompetence. In the meantime the Sandinistas were faring little better, since party chieftain Daniel Ortega was publicly accused by his stepdaughter of child abuse.

Amid a swirl of rumors, the two besieged leaders, Alemán and Ortega, reached a political compact in January 2000. Their transparent goal was to secure the dominance of Nicaraguan politics by their respective parties. They called for constitutional reforms that would permit reelection, which Alemán favored, and establish a single-round system of elections, which the Sandinistas supported. The election of November 2001 went to Enrique Bolaños Geyer, the candidate of Alemán's Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (formerly Alianza Liberal). Shortly after taking office, Bolaños broke with Alemán, who was placed under house arrest on charges of corruption—and later transferred to prison. With only modest support in the legislature, however, Bolaños was finding it difficult to lead. Seeking international approval, he backed the U.S. position on Iraq in early 2003 and eagerly signed on to a U.S.-Central American free trade treaty later in the year.

The Sandinistas mounted an impressive comeback in 2006, as Daniel Ortega won the presidency (under the terms of the pact with Alemán) with 38 percent of the vote. Although the country was highly polarized, Ortega won reelection in 2011 with a strong Sandinista majority in the legislature. Taking a pragmatic stand, Ortega expressed strong support for Nicaraguan participation in Central America's free trade agreement with the United States and maintained a distant but functional relationship with Washington. He cultivated connections with neighboring

countries, especially Venezuela, and with the European Union. The poorest nation in Central America, Nicaragua continued to face a precarious future.

POLITICS AND POLICY: EL SALVADOR

El Salvador, Nicaragua's neighbor to the north, faced similar periods of turmoil. As in other countries of Central America, oligarchic control eventually took hold during the nineteenth century. A series of legal decrees paved the way for the usurpation and consolidation of land by a tiny aristocracy—*las catorce*, a notorious clique of "fourteen" families (which have meanwhile expanded in number and size). Coffee became the leading export crop, commerce flourished, and from 1907 to 1931 political power rested in the hands of the patriarchal Meléndez clan.

Peasants did not accept this situation passively. Angered by the loss of land, they staged four separate revolts between 1870 and 1900. The movements were crushed, but they carried a message: like the Zapatistas of Mexico, the *campesinos* of El Salvador were willing to fight for their rights.

In May 1930 a popular throng of 80,000 held a demonstration in downtown San Salvador against deteriorating wages and living conditions. The next year an idealistic landowner and admirer of the British Labour Party, Arturo Araujo, won the presidential election with the support of students, peasants, and workers. Somewhat naively, he announced that the Salvadoran Communist Party would be permitted to take part in municipal elections in December 1931. Exasperated by this prospect, the armed forces dismissed him from office and imposed a right-wing general, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez.

Peasants broke out in rebellion. In late January 1932, as a chain of volcanoes erupted in Guatemala and northwest El Salvador, bands of Indians with machetes made their way out of the ravines and tangled hillsides down into townships. Led by Agustín Farabundo Martí, a dedicated communist who had fought alongside Sandino in Nicaragua, the peasants murdered landlords and plunged the country into a state of revolt.

Hernández Martínez responded with ferocity. Military units moved on the rebels, and the conflict took on the appearance of a racial war, as Indians—or anyone resembling an Indian—suffered from the government attack. In a tiny country of 1.4 million inhabitants, between 10,000 and 20,000 Salvadorans lost their lives.

The events of 1932 sent several messages. Peasants learned to distrust city-bred revolutionaries who might lead them to destruction. Indians began to seek safety by casting off indigenous habits and clothes. On the political level, leftists concluded that they could still cultivate followings in rural areas, especially in the absence of a reformist alternative. The right drew harsh lessons of its own: the way to deal with popular agitation was by repression, and the way to maintain security was through military rule.

A proto-fascist sympathizer, among the first to recognize the 1936 Franco regime in Spain, Hernández Martínez stayed on until 1944. Military officers seized power with the consent and blessing of *las catorce*. Major Oscar Osorio headed a moderate dictatorship in 1950–56. In 1960 his handpicked successor, Colonel José María Lemus,

was overthrown by a civilian-military group with slightly leftist leanings under Colonel César Yáñez Uñas. Just one year later Yáñez Uñas was ousted by rightists under Lieutenant Colonel Julio A. Rivera, whose Party of National Conciliation took control of the state. This alliance of civilian conservatives and military officers would reign supreme until the late 1970s.

A reformist challenge finally came from José Napoleón Duarte, founder of the Christian Democratic Party (PDC). As mayor of San Salvador (1964–70), the dynamic and articulate Duarte built up a strong following among the intellectuals, professionals, and other urban middle-sector groups. The PDC bore a commitment to peaceful reform through electoral means. Though Duarte may have won the presidential election of 1972, the recalcitrant military turned power over to one of its own, Colonel Arturo Armando Molina. Duarte himself was imprisoned, tortured, and exiled—but he did not take to the hills.

Conditions in the meantime worsened for the peasants. Coffee exports were thriving, but the poor were suffering. About 80 percent of the people lived in the countryside, and by 1975 about 40 percent of the peasants had no land at all—compared to only 12 percent in 1960. Increasingly unable to gain access to the soil, the *campesinos* of El Salvador were getting ready to rebel.

Reform-oriented options vanished during the 1970s. The electoral road was proving to be a dead end. For an alternative means of public expression, many dissidents turned to “popular organizations,” apolitical groups that sought non-violent routes to change. Sometimes organized by exiles like Duarte, they found support and stimulus from a revitalized institution: the Roman Catholic Church.

The reawakening of the church proved to be one of the most decisive developments of the time. The trend went back to two events: the Second Ecumenical Council of the early 1960s (Vatican II) and a conference of Latin American bishops at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. Serving as a platform for “liberation theology,” the Medellín conference denounced capitalism and communism as equal affronts to human dignity and placed the blame for hunger and misery on the rich and powerful. To redress these inequalities, the bishops called for more education, increased social awareness, and the creation of *comunidades de base*, small grassroots groups of Catholics.

These events had a profound impact on the ecclesiastical hierarchy in El Salvador; then under Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. As one priest firmly explained:

It is not communism to make the right to organize and defend oneself known to the peasants. They have a right to defend their interests and to promote the political order of their choice, to defend their rights effectively, to denounce abuse by authorities or agents of the powerful. It is simply carrying out the Gospel mandate, a duty the church must not refuse or avoid.

As repression mounted, the church eventually acknowledged, in Romero's own words, “the case for insurrection . . . when all recourses to peaceful means have been exhausted.” No one was immune to violence: in 1980 the archbishop himself was shot dead in the cathedral of San Salvador.

Nevertheless, the realignment of the Salvadoran church had far-reaching implications. Other partners still belonged to the elite coalition: *las catorce* families, the military, and the foreign sector. But the church—at least, an influential segment of the church—had defected from the alliance and thrown its support to the masses. This altered the structure of power.

Secular and religious grassroots organizations met with continued repression. The armed forces carefully controlled the elections of 1977, which turned the presidency over to General Humberto Romero. One of his most significant acts was to promote a law “to defend and guarantee public order.” In October 1979 a group of junior officers ousted Romero and set up a new government. At first the outlook was promising, as the junta sought support from the “popular organizations.” Given its commitment to human rights, the Carter administration greeted the regime with pleasure and relief.

Then things took a turn for the worse. Denouncing all dissidents as “communists,” right-wing officers and paramilitary “death squads” intensified repression. Killings continued at the astonishing rate of 1000 per month. The cabinet resigned in protest, but the minister of defense—General José Guillermo García—clung to his government post. The liberal wing of the Christian Democratic Party defected from the coalition. Now appearing undeniably conservative, the beleaguered Duarte took over as head of the government and announced a plan for land reform.

The opposition then moved underground. The most important organization was the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)—named for the leader of the 1932 uprising. In late 1980 four American women—three nuns and a lay worker—met with brutal deaths. The Carter administration vigorously protested this abuse of human rights, and Duarte promised an investigation. In early 1981 the Reagan administration, more concerned with Cold War anticommunism than with social change or human rights, softened the U.S. demands. By mid-1982 a few low-ranking members of the National Guard were implicated in the crime, but there would be no serious prosecution. With tacit support from the U.S. government, the regime survived international furor.

Yet Washington pressed for elections in 1982. The goal was to select a constituent assembly that would in turn select an interim president. The right was led by a fiery ex-major, Roberto d'Aubuisson, who summarized his platform with a campaign slogan: “Another '32,” meaning that it was time for El Salvador to repeat the slaughter of 1932. The center was represented by Duarte and his semi-conservative Christian Democrats. For its part, the Democratic Revolutionary Front—and the left as a whole—decided to boycott the elections in the face of violence and intimidation. Consequently the 1982 election became a contest between the political right and the tattered remnants of the center. The Christian Democrats won a plurality (and Duarte won the presidency) but d'Aubuisson's right managed to form a coalition that took control of the constituent assembly.

Hopes were high that Duarte, a Notre Dame graduate and a favorite of U.S. policymakers, would realize the reformist programs designed to undercut

support for the Marxist-Leninist guerrillas. In fact, Duarte was less effective in San Salvador than in Washington. FMLN fighters were highly disciplined and deeply entrenched in zones they had controlled for years. Duarte's government redistributed significant chunks of farmland, but he could not displace the oligarchy that had made El Salvador's gap between the rich and poor among the worst in the Third World.

U.S. public opinion became a major factor. As of early 1983, the Reagan administration was supplying the Salvadoran regime with \$205 million in economic aid and \$26 million in military assistance, with higher requests pending in Congress. Growing opposition to the U.S. aid came from congressional liberals and religious groups, especially the Catholic Church, still incensed over the 1980 killing of the four American Catholic women. The intensity of U.S. opposition feeling could be seen in the bumper stickers that read "El Salvador is Vietnam in Spanish."

The battle continued in the Salvadoran countryside. FMLN guerrillas made periodic raids. Aided by U.S. military "trainers" (not called "advisers," to avoid association with Vietnam), government forces conducted sweeping search-and-destroy missions. Villagers and peasants grew fearful of both sides. A decade of continuous fighting resulted in stalemate. It also led to the loss of 75,000 lives.

Presidential elections in March 1989 led to a decisive triumph for Alfredo Cristiani of the conservative ARENA party with 53 percent of the vote. Many observers believed that Cristiani, an athletic playboy without political experience, would be merely a puppet for right-wing forces. Months after his election, six Jesuit priests were brutally murdered, apparently by a military-sponsored death squad. Cristiani solemnly declared that his government would capture and prosecute the assassins, but little was accomplished. Once again, a rightist regime was paying scant attention to human rights.

Even so, Cristiani agreed to negotiate with the FMLN under the supervision of the United Nations. In early 1992 the government and the FMLN signed a historic agreement for peace and reform. The FMLN agreed to lay down arms in exchange for wide-ranging reforms in political and military structures, including a reduction in the role and size of the armed forces and a purge of flagrant human-rights abusers. By December 1992 the movement disarmed its guerrilla forces and became a legal political party, and the FMLN established itself as the country's second-largest political force.

Subsequent elections resulted in three straight victories for right-wing ARENA candidates: Armando Calderón Sol in 1994, Francisco Flores Pérez in 1999, and Antonio (Tony) Saca in 2004. Not until 2009 did the unthinkable occur: Mauricio Funes of the FMLN won the presidency with 51.3 percent of the votes (and no major charges of fraud!). A gregarious person and popular leader, Funes had to struggle with problems of poverty, unemployment, and violent crime. Particularly dangerous were notorious gangs (known as *maras*) that supported themselves by ransoms, thievery, and drug trafficking. In response to such challenges Funes sought to increase spending on social programs, especially health and education, even though fiscal resources were limited. Despite his leftist background



U.S. policy in Central America prompted a great deal of public controversy and debate in the 1980s. Top, cartoonist Tony Auth satirizes President Reagan's position and the hesitancy of the U.S. Congress in voicing opposition; bottom, Steve Benson dramatizes the left-wing threat to U.S. interests. (Reprinted with permission of Universal Press. All rights reserved.)