

TIME TO CHANGE U.S. POLICY TOWARD EL SALVADOR

FMLN wins historic victory, people of El Salvador have their Barack Obama moment

By Ollie Ruth Jefferson, Special Contributor

Joined by a few other members of the National Lawyers Guild, I was a part of a delegation of international election observers who went to El Salvador to witness its presidential elections on Sunday, March 15, 2009. The delegation was sponsored by the SHARE Foundation, which has programs in El Salvador that encompass meeting basic human needs and building long term solutions to poverty and social injustice. Our participation, which was independent of the US government, was in an effort to see whether the elections were fair. While I have had hundreds of Salvadorans as clients, and empathize with what they have suffered, my participation as a certified presidential electoral observer required objectivity.

At 5 a.m., on Sunday, our group of observers and the election poll workers arrived and set up for what would be a long awaited day, the presidential elections in this Central American country. Their procedures are numerous and highly bureaucratic, developed over time to prevent fraud. The voting was to start at 7 a.m., but when the first voter arrived at 6:30 a.m., the table was ready, thus the beginning of the day.

The first voter at the table to which I was assigned for observation was no more than 5-feet tall, minute in frame, rather stooped over – an old woman, coming to have her say. She went through the process smoothly, and left with her thumb inked, a sign that she had voted, and hence a mark that would prevent any duplicate voting. As I looked on, I wondered what had she experienced, or if she had suffered any loss of relatives during the country's civil war.

In the 1980's, thousands of El Salvadorans were killed in a civil war, which ended with the peace accords of 1992. The combatants reshaped themselves into political parties with differing philosophies, and continued their struggle in a more peaceful manner. Since the accords, and up until March 15th's historic win, El Salvador has been ruled from the right by the Arena Party, which has its foundation in the death squads of the 80's. FMLN was founded by the Guerrilla Freedom Fighters, and was named for Farabundo Marti, a martyred organizer of farm workers. Their candidate, and the new president of El Salvador, Mauricio Funes, is a respected journalist with a centrist agenda and hopes of creating a government of change.

Before the elections, some US government representatives attempted to influence the elections in favor of the Arena Party candidate by suggesting that if the FMLN won the election, the U.S. government would end a program that currently allows certain Salvadorans to live and work legally in the US, called TPS. Republican Rep. Trent Franks, on the floor of the House of Representatives, said, "Should the pro-terrorism FMLN party replace the current government in El Salvador, the United States, in the interests of national security, would be required to re-evaluate our policy toward El Salvador, including cash remittance and immigration policies to compensate for the fact there will no longer be a reliable counterpart in the Salvadoran government." Rep. Dan Burton, another Republican who also commented prior to the elections, said, "Those monies that are coming from here to there, I am confident, will be cut, and I hope the people of El Salvador are aware of that because it will have a tremendous impact on individuals and their economy." Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, Republican, said Salvadorans should

"understand the consequences" of voting for Funes, adding that "if an ally of Al Qaeda and Iran comes to power in El Salvador, the national security interests of the United States will require certain immigration restrictions and controls over the flow of \$4 billion in annual remittances sent from the US back home to El Salvador." Each of these statements were calculated to make Salvadorans believe that their relatives in the US would no longer be able to live in the US and send money home to them if the Arena party did not win the election.

The US government's program of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) allows nationals of certain designated countries to remain in the US and work legally for determinate periods of time. The program has been utilized by Liberians, Angolans, Somali's, Central Americans, and nationals of other countries based upon crisis occurring in their home countries. TPS is not permanent asylum, and is granted in increments of 12- to 18-months typically at a time. These pronouncements were reported widely and prominently in the local Salvadoran media, calculated to strike a cord with voting Salvadorans because the money sent home, called remittances, is a major source of the El Salvadoran economy, and is estimated to be in the billions annually.

A simple but important question was raised in an orientation session with Father Dean, a resident Jesuit Priest at the University of Central America -- where two Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, and four American church women were killed during the conflict. He was asked, "Why is the US interested in El Salvador?" Father Dean answered that the US intervenes in Latin America to protect its allies as a matter of national security. A threat to them is a threat to the US. So by extension, one might ask, "Why is a Funes / FMLN victory threatening to the US?" Although FMLN has been accused of being a Populist Socialist Party, and had been demagogued in election propaganda as being aligned with Venezuela's Hugh Chavez, Funes' platform was not at all radical and may be more moderate and to the center.

With our own new presidential administration in place, this is a pivotal time for the American government to rethink U.S.-Latin American relations. Maybe it is time for the US to shake off its Cold War mentality as it relates to Latin America, realize that the Communists really are not coming, and that much of the world views such a form of government for what it is, merely a failed experiment.

Funes should be viewed for what he stood for as articulated in his platform, and not through the foggy eyeglasses of old, worn-out stereotypes. Funes' government of change has three broad objectives of bringing El Salvador out of an economic and social crisis, promoting development, and building and consolidating democracy and the rule of law. He articulates the specifics of implementing these policies very well. Latin American struggles with what US President Barack Obama has inherited, a poor economy rife with unemployment. As these two new administrations interact with each other, we need to acknowledge our shared experiences, and not get bogged down in past perceptions.

Ollie Jefferson is an Arlington-based immigration attorney who traveled to El Salvador as an observer of the presidential elections of 2009 with a group of 20 other lawyers with the National Lawyers Guild and the SHARE Foundation.