

Political Violence Increases in El Salvador

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As student groups prepare to commemorate the anniversary of an infamous massacre of students by government forces on July 30, 1975, political violence continues in El Salvador 33 years later. In the last two years, social organizations, human rights monitors, community groups and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) political party have publically denounced the alarming increase in politically-motivated assassinations of their members and leadership. 2008 has been particularly violent for organized sectors of the population.

Since the beginning of the year, there have been more than a half dozen murders that, though unresolved, seem to be political in nature. The Salvadoran population in general continues to be affected by the assassinations of community leaders, including the recent murder of Holman Riva. According to police reports, Riva, an employee of the FMLN's municipal government in the municipality of Ilopango, was killed on July 2, along with his nephew. The victims were taken from their home in the middle of the night and shot with nine bullets each.

Student activist Ángel Martínez Cerón was killed in a similar fashion on July 26 in the city of Santa Ana, located in western El Salvador. Martínez Cerón, coordinator of the January 24 Revolutionary Socialist Student Bloc, was shot eight times before his assassins delivered a final bullet to the head. According to statements made by the Student Bloc, other members of the organization have been detained and harassed by agents of the National Civilian Police (PNC). Just days before Martínez Cerón's death, PNC officers had searched the youth's home, arresting him, his brother, and another member of the organization. Police harassment of the young activists followed a series of protests against bus fare increases in Santa Ana.

These recent assassinations come in the wake of a series of murders of activists and opposition politicians earlier this year. Hector Ventura, who had been cleared of terrorism charges in February after participating in a protest against water privatization last summer, was killed in his home on May 2. In January, the mayor of Alegria, Wilber Funes, was killed alongside municipal employee Zulma Rivera. The young, popular mayor had planned to run for reelection as a member of the FMLN party in 2009. Referring to these assassinations, FMLN deputy Benito Lara recently stated that "here we have various cases that remain unresolved, unclear, and it is difficult for us to accept the theory that these are merely cases of common crime."

In spite of national and international outcry, Salvadoran authorities have yet to respond to calls for serious investigations into each one of these cases. To this date, each of the cases remains in impunity.

Right-wing parties refuse to audit comptroller's office

Faced with the fact the El Salvador's Corte de Cuentas (comptroller's office; in

charge of government accountability and oversight) has not been audited since 1995, and in response to a series of solicitations made the FMLN seeking an explanation of anomalies in the government's handling of five international loan agreements, the Legislative Assembly recently ordered an audit of the entity.

However, the president of the Corte de Cuentas, Hernan Contreras, has publicly refused to cooperate with such an audit. Contreras is a leader of the right-wing National Conciliation Party (PCN). "Constitutionally, [the audit] should not be done," declared Contreras, whose consecutive appointments as leader of the comptroller's office has been vociferously challenged by opposition parties. Roberto Lorenzana, a legislative deputy representing the FMLN, countered that "all of the institutions of the state should be audited."

According to the legal organization FESPAD, various social organizations have also called for an audit of the Corte de Cuentas. Following FESPAD's analysis of the situation, the Corte's failure to fulfill its oversight functions has resulted in widespread distrust of the institution among the Salvadoran population.

ARENA's "Grand Crusade" deemed "absurd"

On July 6, the governing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party held a campaign event titled the "Grand Nationalist Crusade" in San Salvador's Cuscatlan Stadium. Facing next year's elections with a presidential candidate, Rodrigo A. Vila, who still does not have a running mate and who has not been able to consolidate the party's supporters, ARENA's event sought to duplicate the leftist FMLN's national convention, which took place in the same stadium last November, and at which that party's presidential ticket was officially introduced to a capacity crowd of 70,000. According to media reports in the online newspaper El Faro, as well as personal testimonies of workers, many government employees were forced to attend the event in an effort to fill the stadium.

ARENA's "Grand Crusade" has been strongly criticized by ARENA's traditional right-wing allies in the PCN party, whose General Coordinator, Ciro Cruz Cepeda, judged the activity to be "an absurd thing." Cruz Cepeda added that, "when a political institution forces its employees to attend its campaign rallies, it could generate weakness within the party."

Several days before the event, employees of various public institutions began speaking out against pressures they were facing from high-level government officials to attend the partisan event. Among the government entities that pressured employees to take part in the "Grand Crusade" were the Social Security Institute, the public water administration, and the ministries of education and governance. On the day of the event, the ARENA party transported attendees to the stadium using government vehicles.

In his speech at the event, presidential candidate Vila urged the audience to work to defeat the FMLN at the polls, calling on ARENA's supporters to be unified to defend liberty in the face of the threat of communism.

According to Juan Pablo DurÃ¡n, legislative deputy from the Democratic Change (CD) party, ARENAâ€™s event sought to demonstrate unity in a moment of weakness. Many analysts also pointed to signs of continued internal divisions within ARENA as evidenced by the conspicuous absence of ARENAâ€™s three ex-presidents, Christiani, Calderon Sol, and Flores.