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Salvadorans Reminded of War's

Ex-Rebels Lead in Polls for Midterm Elections, Provoking Furious

By Douglas Farah
Washington Post Foreign Service

SAN SALVADOR—Three weeks before legislative and municipal elections in El Salvador, former Marxist guerrillas who have become political candidates find themselves in the unexpected position of being front-runners. But a surge in political violence and scathing personal attacks show how difficult it is for this Central American nation to shake the heritage of its 12-year civil war.

The March 16 elections, for mayors of 262 cities and towns as well as the 84-member unicameral Legislative Assembly, have been widely viewed as the first test of the still-polarized country's ability to hold clean, fair elections without massive international supervision.

El Salvador's civil war ended in 1992, and presidential and legislative elections were held in 1994 with the presence of hundreds of United Nations observers and thousands of other international delegates to protect against political violence.

The vote next month also has been seen as a test of whether the former insurgents in the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), now a political party, can survive in a political system dominated for decades by the far right and its military allies.

The right-wing Republican Nationalist Alliance (Arena) won the most recent elections for control of the legislative and executive branches. The group was founded in 1980 by cashiered army major Roberto d'Aubuisson, who was accused by the U.S. government and human rights groups of helping found right-wing death squads that killed some 40,000 people during the war. D'Aubuisson died of cancer in 1992, and the party since then has evolved toward the center.

"We still have campaigns that are directed and driven much more by the country's past than its future," said Hector Dada, a political analyst. "That is unfortunate, because these

elections, almost more than any other, will determine the country's future."

The campaign remained civil until mid-month. Then, several pollsters, ranging from a Gallup affiliate to that of the Jesuit-run University of Central America, released polls showing the FMLN with a slight lead, both in legislative races and in the campaign for mayor of San Salvador, the nation's second-most powerful elected position. The polls

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Polarization

Reaction on Right

showed the FMLN with about 21 percent of the vote, to 17 percent for Arena, and about 40 percent undecided.

Since the polls began being released, Arena leaders have verbally attacked both the pollsters and the FMLN. President Armando Calderon Sol warned that an FMLN victory would jeopardize the nation's democracy, and other Arena leaders accused pollsters of manipulating the numbers.

On Wednesday, a splinter of the FMLN that now often aligns with Arena accused its erstwhile allies of financing their election campaign by selling hidden caches of weapons. The FMLN denied the charge and no evidence has been presented to substantiate it.

As the accusations flew, two FMLN campaign workers were shot and killed and three others wounded following a campaign rally Thursday in the town of Nejapa, 30 miles north of the capital. No one took responsibility for the attacks, and there were no arrests.

In a communique Friday, the FMLN blamed "nefarious death squads" for the attack. Salvador Sanchez, FMLN party chairman,

warned that "these criminal acts endanger the electoral process."

"Our big fear is that there will be some incident that will begin a process of escalating violence," said a diplomat here, shortly before the shooting. "With so many different groups with so many different hatreds and agendas, if there is an incident, it could easily spiral upward."

The harshest criticisms of both Arena and the FMLN come from groups that have split off from the main parties.

Last month, three members of Arena's board of directors, accusing the party of having abandoned its principles, joined the small National Conciliation Party, which for decades represented the military's interest. Among those defecting were former vice president Francisco Merino, former supreme court president Mauricio Gutierrez Castro, Arena party co-founder Antonio Cornejo, and retired colonel Sigifredo Ochoa, as well as several mayors.

The polls show the defections have hurt Arena, which has launched a counterattack.

Arena invited the son of party idol d'Aubuisson to run for for the assembly. Roberto d'Aubuisson Jr. accepted and has been a leading

spokesman, barnstorming to try to revive the party's fortunes based on his father's image.

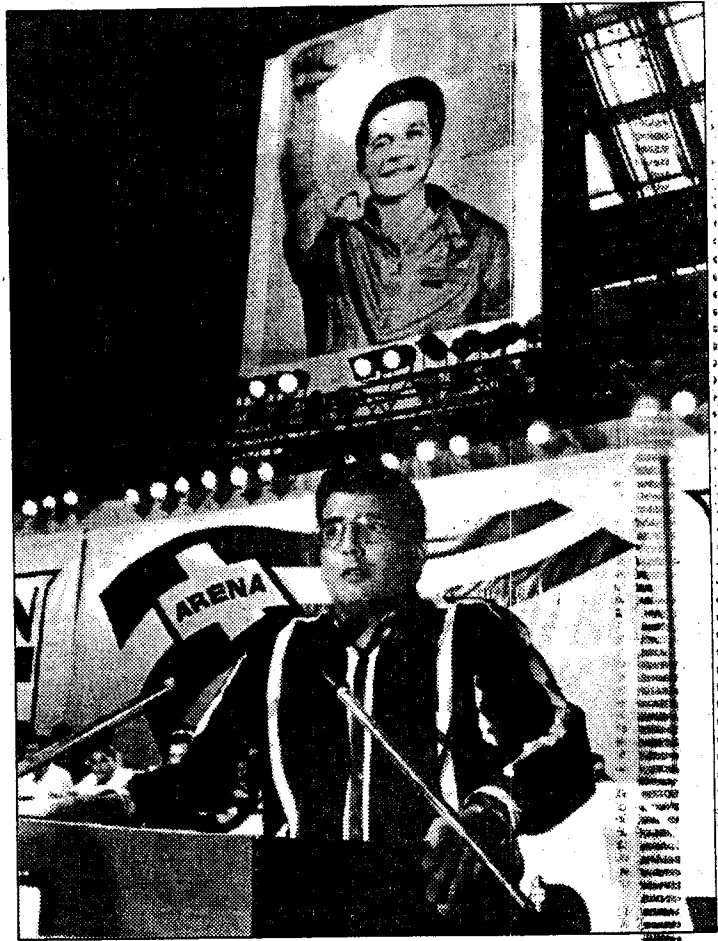
Highlighting the claim as d'Aubuisson's true heirs, his son, Calderon Sol and legislative and party leaders gathered on Thursday at d'Aubuisson's grave, which is adorned with a large bronze bust.

"Roberto, we know you never died," said Calderon Sol in a sort of prayer at the tomb, while surrounded by TV cameras. "You live on in all of us."

While Arena has been hurt by defections, so has the FMLN. A small group now called the Democratic Party split from the FMLN a year ago and has turned into the FMLN's most acerbic critic.

Its leader, Congresswoman Ana Guadalupe Martinez, accused the FMLN of selling the weapons to finance the campaign, and of continuing to work with other guerrilla organizations, including Peru's Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement.

Francisco Jovel of the FMLN counterattacked, saying the dissident group had hidden its weapons and tried to sell surface-to-air missiles after the peace agreements were signed.



BY ALEXANDER RENDERO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Candidate Roberto d'Aubuisson Jr. campaigns beneath likeness of his father.