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Former journalist wins Salvadoran election

Ezra Fieser Catholic News Service | Mar. 17, 2009

Fumes after Salvador victory (CNS photo)

SANTA ANA, El Salvador
Mauricio Funes, who campaigned that the moral strength of churches was at the center of change for this tiny Central American country, was elected president of El Salvador.

In his acceptance speech late March 15, Funes echoed the words of slain Archbishop Oscar A. Romero and touched on the ideas of liberation theology.

"The prophetic message of our martyr-bishop Archbishop Romero ... said that the church would have a preferential option for the poor. This will be the way I proceed, always looking to favor the poor and the excluded in a preferential way," he said.

Funes, a former television journalist who represented the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, or FMLN, defeated Rodrigo Avila by winning 51.3 percent of the vote.

During the country's 1980-92 civil war, the FMLN was a guerrilla group that fought the U.S.-backed government forces. It formed in 1980 after left-wing activists and church workers, including Archbishop Romero, were murdered.

Salvador president-elect offers a conciliatory tone [1]

Funes, who worked for CNN, is said to have developed sympathy for Marxist rebels when he interviewed rebel leaders as a young journalist.

His victory toppled the Nationalist Republican Alliance, or ARENA, which had been in power since 1989.

Funes' campaign used the change mantra, pointing to the alliance's two decades of close ties with Washington as a partial cause for widespread poverty and migration.

That message resonated with Lucrecia Castillo, a 48-year-old Catholic voter who cast her vote in the northern

city of Santa Ana March 15.

"We've given ARENA and (President Tony) Saca enough time. Where has it gotten us?" asked Castillo, who said one of her three sons was killed in gang violence in San Salvador, the capital, and another migrated to the United States. "I thought it was time to change the way we do it."

During the election campaign, Funes courted the church vote, distributing fliers describing his "moral rescue plan." The fliers said a Funes government would address gang violence, stop the deterioration of families caused by migration, and tackle a growing HIV and AIDS problem by promoting abstinence and fidelity. "Without morals, there is no hope," the flier read.

Support from the country's churches -- both Catholic and evangelical -- represented an important piece of Funes' victory, said U.S. Jesuit Father Dean Brackley, a professor of theology at the University of Central America in San Salvador.

The Salvadoran bishops' conference released a statement in November instructing priests to abstain from "active participation" in the election, but to follow their consciences when voting.

Archbishop Jose Escobar Alas of San Salvador repeated that message in the days before the election.

By doing so, Archbishop Escobar "affirmed the Catholic Church's historical position by saying 'We do not endorse a candidate. Vote for the candidate that best represents Christian values,'" Father Brackley said. "What that did is it gave Catholics permission to vote for the left, which had been described as atheists and communists by the opposition."

He said the message from leaders of the growing evangelical churches was similar. In a country where 54 percent of the population identifies itself as Catholic and another 29 percent as evangelical, the religious vote was extremely important.

"I think it probably had quite an impact on the results," said Father Brackley.

For Antonio Rodriguez, a Catholic voter who also cast his ballot in Santa Ana, Funes represented needed social change.

"Every day El Salvador is more violent. It's more poor," said Rodriguez, 37, whose brother migrated to the United States illegally to search for work. "I wanted someone who would make El Salvador whole again."

Due largely to gangs, El Salvador has become one of the most violent countries in Latin America. With a population of roughly 7 million, 10 murders occur daily, leaving the country with an annual homicide rate roughly nine times that of the United States.

Saca also was criticized for his economic and military decisions, which were closely aligned with the U.S. El Salvador is the only country in Central America to use the U.S. dollar as its currency. It was the last Latin American country to withdraw troops from Iraq.

The country's weak economy is blamed for the high migration rate: Roughly one-third of Salvadoran citizens live in the United States.

In a brief statement March 16, Funes said he would begin his work of reconstructing the country by selecting a Cabinet that would work for free speech and uphold the constitution and the free market.

Despite fears of widespread violence, the country's election day passed peacefully. Observers from the

Organization of American States reported few irregularities.

In the week before the vote, Archbishop Escobar called for Catholics -- and the candidates -- to vote, but to keep their emotions in check.

"Whoever does not win must accept the will of the people," he said, according to a transcript of a press conference. "The people are going to reward the party that does not commit electoral violence."

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