

Chapter 14. Assessing El Salvador's Transition From Civil War to Peace

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In January 1992, the leadership of the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the negotiating team of the right-wing Salvadoran government, joined at the last minute by President Alfredo Cristiani, signed a peace accord ending twelve years of civil war in El Salvador. Many analysts consider El Salvador's transition from civil war to peace among the most successful implementations of a peace agreement in the post-Cold War period. Following the signing of the peace accord, the agreed-upon cease-fire between the two sides was never broken. Two years later, the guerrilla forces were demobilized and reconstituted as a political party, significant demilitarization of society and the state had taken place, and "founding" elections were held. In the mid-1990s the former guerrillas became the second most powerful party in the country. One study of post-civil war agreement elections rates El Salvador's 1994 presidential and legislative elections as the only free and fair elections carried out without crises or contested results.¹ The peace accords provided a catalyst for the incipient institutionalization of democracy in El Salvador. Despite the existence of elected civilian rule since 1984, sweeping institutional reforms negotiated as part of the accords permitted the country for the first time to be considered a procedural democracy.²

The United Nations played an important role throughout the negotiation and the implementation of El Salvador's peace accords. The United Nations served first as the mediator between the two sides, then as the verifier of a series of peace agreements, and finally as "institution-builder" and reconstruction-agent through its coordination of financial and technical assistance. Although the principal "implementers" of the Salvadoran peace accord were the two

parties to the agreement -- the Salvadoran government and the FMLN -- the United Nations played a prominent and perhaps determinant role in the implementation process. The U.N.'s role in El Salvador was unprecedented in many respects: it was involved in the resolution of an internal conflict from start to finish; it emphasized human rights verification as an element of U.N. peacekeeping; it deployed U.N. observers before a cease-fire was in place; and, above all, it aimed at preventing future conflict through institution-building or "peacebuilding."³

To what extent is El Salvador's successful transition to peace the result of these unprecedented efforts by external verifying actors? In this chapter, I make two arguments. First, based upon the Salvadoran case, I argue that the character of a conflict and the conditions that facilitate its termination are at least as important as the role of implementing actors. More specifically, the class-based nature of the conflict, the presence of a strategic stalemate between the parties, the number and cohesion of the parties, the changing nature of the international environment and the shifting interests of major international actors all converged to foster a political will and capability for a negotiated settlement whose character facilitated successful implementation. In the Salvadoran case, the United Nations and other implementing parties made important contributions to implementation of the peace accords. However, analyzing the choices and strategies of the United Nations and other international implementers without tying them back to the conditions of the war and the process of negotiation would be misleading.

Second, I show that El Salvador's transition from civil war to peace was highly contested, and that the "success" of the Salvadoran peace process was not without important shortcomings or qualifications. These shortcomings do not mitigate the important achievements of the peace process; indeed, to a large degree the flaws of the process stem from the very same conditions that led to the agreement and paved the way to peace, political democratization, improved human

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rights, and strengthened state institutions and legitimacy. However, the nature of the conflict and the negotiated agreement shaped the process of implementation in ways that continue to constrain “success.”

Nature and Consequences of the Conflict

In one of the few statements with which his leftist opponents agreed, President Cristiani stated in 1992 that the cause of El Salvador’s war lay in the absence of democratic political space and the lack of economic hopes in a country characterized by exclusion and authoritarianism.⁴ Civil war was rooted in class and ideological, rather than religious or ethnic, divisions, in an economic system whereby a small number of landed elites controlled the state in alliance with a powerful military. Despite the holding of periodic elections under a formal constitution between 1948 and 1979, authoritarianism reigned in El Salvador. The military guaranteed stability and order for the elite, and received resources and autonomy in exchange.⁵

Although five main guerrilla opposition groups had been formed by 1979, their disparate efforts did not pose a threat to the state -- and the situation did not constitute civil war -- until 1979 and 1980. Spurred by a desire to avoid an experience like Nicaragua’s July 1979 revolution and emboldened by U.S. support for reform, a group of junior officers executed a coup in October that resulted in a “Revolutionary Governing Junta” whose progressive members startled military hardliners and conservative elites. The junta, promising an era of openness and social and economic reforms, dissolved the National Democratic Organization (ORDEN), the paramilitary spy network, and the Salvadoran Security Agency (ANSESAL), a state intelligence agency involved in running ORDEN’s death-squad activities. However, death-squad killings and disappearances increased as the military showed its unwillingness to heed the junta.⁶ As the

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junta's lack of effective control over the armed forces became apparent, the more leftist members of the junta resigned in disillusionment, and a second junta gave way to a third in March 1980.⁷

A record number of political murders -- over 1,000 per month -- were recorded in 1980.

Although kidnappings and killings by guerrilla groups increased, the bulk of these killings were conducted by right-wing death squads and the security forces, including the assassination of the country's Archbishop, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, in March 1980.⁸

The military's wave of repression deepened polarization in the country, which strengthened and unified the armed and unarmed opposition. In 1980 the five guerrilla groups -- the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), the Popular Revolutionary Army (ERP), the Communist party's Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL), the National Resistance (RN) and the Workers Revolutionary Party (PRTC) -- formed the FMLN, which, despite internal tensions, would remain a united armed opposition until after the war. The government's repression focused principally upon peasant, worker, and Catholic church organizations associated with reform efforts rather than on the guerrilla combatants. Many members of these organizations joined the ranks of the FMLN, and in May 1980 almost all of the important leftist and centrist popular organizations and political parties formed a large coalition called the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR),⁹ which quickly formed an alliance with the FMLN that would last throughout the war.

Between 1980 and 1983 the FMLN's forces operated in rural areas in large units of dozens or even hundreds, driving the armed forces from what became known as FMLN "control zones."¹⁰ From 1983 through the end of the war, the FMLN operated mainly in smaller units with a highly political strategy aimed at consolidating its support among the population through the provision of education and health services and the establishment of local "popular" governments.

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The guerrillas' relationship with popular organizations proved indispensable to its strength and strategy. The FMLN's military ranks numbered about 12,300 at the war's end.¹¹

The United States played a decisive role in the conflict. When the FMLN was on the verge of winning the war in 1983, materiel provided by the United States helped prevent the government's collapse. Military aid per fiscal year rose from \$6 million in 1980 to \$35 million in 1981 to \$197 million in 1984, staying between \$80 million and \$137 million per year for the remainder of the war.¹² U.S. officials promoted the drafting of a new constitution in 1983, and pumped \$1.8 million into the 1984 elections to ensure the victory of Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte, subsequently, using the centrist image of Duarte to convince a skeptical U.S. Congress to permit the provision of \$1.2 million per day into the war against the FMLN.¹³ All told, U.S. economic aid from 1980 to 1991 totaled \$3.15 billion, and military aid totaled \$1.1 billion.¹⁴

The government's military strategy was rooted in isolating the FMLN from its logistical and arms supplies and attacking the civilian population perceived to be the support base for the guerrillas, a strategy that ultimately failed, though the armed forces gained experience and improved their fighting capability. Their ranks and air power grew dramatically. In 1979 the armed forces, including all the internal security forces, totaled 10,000 persons with 28 airplanes and 5 helicopters. By 1989 the armed forces totaled 56,000 with 63 airplanes and 72 helicopters.¹⁵ Budgetary outlays for the regular army grew from 118 million to 888 million colones between 1979 and 1991, and from 50 million to 247 million colones for the internal security forces.¹⁶

The government's strategy accentuated the tide of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) produced by the war. Most of those forced from their rural homes sought refuge

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either across the border in Honduras, in the United States, or in camps erected near the capital. An estimated 750,000 persons were internally displaced, and approximately one million persons sought refuge in the United States.¹⁷ Because the Honduran border areas served as one of the few refuges for both combatants and civilians during the war, the several camps erected there were especially sensitive. An estimated 32,000 persons eventually returned from Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Mexico.¹⁸ Repatriation and resettlement in El Salvador were less contentious than in other civil war situations, due both to shifting U.S. immigration policies and to an effort by government, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies to resettle before the war had ended.

The war also involved numerous human rights violations that became the focus of intense international scrutiny and debate. An estimated 75,000 persons were killed directly because of the war, the majority of them civilians. Over half of this total were killed during the first four years of the war, when death squads targeted a broad range of civilians presumed to be active in “subversive” popular organizations and the armed forces executed thousands and conducted ground sweeps targeting civilians as well as combatants.

The peace accord in El Salvador emerged from a strategic stalemate on the battlefield.¹⁹ The U.S.-designed government strategy proved unsuccessful, yet it gave the government a measure of stability, as the FMLN proved unable to defeat the military. At the same time, the war accentuated the economic crisis experienced throughout Latin America during the 1980s. By 1989 the real minimum wage for the poorest had declined to 1980 levels. Direct attacks upon strategic economic targets by the guerrillas also took their toll.

The inability of the Duarte government (1984-89) to provide prosperity was accompanied by its failure to secure peace. Despite a lack of U.S. support for a negotiated settlement during

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his term, Duarte initiated peace talks with the FMLN in 1984, 1986 and 1987, all of which failed. During this period, the FMLN continued to believe it could win the war, and both the economic elite and the military, backed by the United States, were unwilling to make the concessions demanded by the FMLN. Principally, the FMLN demanded participation in a temporary power-sharing arrangement that would arrange truly open elections, reorganize the military, and replace the 1983 constitution.²⁰ By 1987 polls showed that 83 percent of the national population supported an end to the war through negotiated settlement. In that same year, the Duarte government signed the Esquipulas II agreement, which, as Caroline Hartzell described in Chapter 13, outlined procedures to end the region's armed conflicts and humanitarian crises.

As a result of Duarte's inability to provide peace or prosperity, the right-wing ARENA party took control of the legislature in 1988 and the presidency in 1989. In elections in which the FMLN did not participate, landowner Alfredo Cristiani was elected president in March 1989. Although he pledged to seek peace, his government immediately intensified the war and ousted more moderate elements in the military leadership.

Two changes would prove necessary for both sides to fully recognize a stalemate and begin the negotiating process. First, the end of the Cold War changed the strategic environment for both sides. The gradual collapse of the Soviet bloc reduced the likelihood of continued support for the FMLN from allies such as Cuba. More importantly, it removed a powerful ideological framework that had influenced the FMLN's political thinking and vision for post-war El Salvador. The end of the Cold War also coincided with the change from the Reagan administration to the Bush administration, which soon pronounced its support for negotiated settlements in Central America. This shift in U.S. policy prevented the Salvadoran military from counting on unlimited U.S. support and reduced its ability to ignore the peace process.

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The second decisive event that opened the way to peace was the FMLN's November 1989 offensive, which was a military failure but a political success. The guerrillas launched coordinated attacks upon the country's key military bases and brought 2,000 combatants into the capital, convincing significant sectors within the economic elite that a negotiated solution might be necessary after all.²¹ At the same time, the guerrillas' inability to win through a massive insurrection was laid bare, allowing guerrilla commanders who had previously supported a negotiated settlement to convince hardliners a negotiated settlement was necessary. During the offensive, six Jesuit priests and two colleagues were killed in their residences at the prestigious Central American University in San Salvador. Speculation that a military unit was responsible would eventually be confirmed. The killing shocked the nation and eventually elicited a suspension of U.S. military aid conditioned upon both sides making progress in peace talks.

Within weeks of the offensive, FMLN representatives asked the United Nations to widen its role, and in early 1989, the presidents of various Central American countries asked the United Nations to mediate a series of talks between the two sides.²² After a series of diplomatic moves, including a joint letter supporting the U.N.'s mediation in the conflict signed by then-Secretary of State James Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Scheverdnaze, U.N. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuellar on April 4, 1990 announced that the United Nations would act as mediator.²³ Alvaro de Soto assumed the role of mediator on behalf of the Secretary General.

At government insistence, and despite a longstanding FMLN demand of joining a provisional government before agreeing to a permanent cease-fire, the negotiations took place in the context of the 1983 constitution, which established formal democratic rights and a series of multi-party elections that, in contrast to the authoritarian regime of 1948-79, were not dominated by the military's party and candidates. Thus, the negotiation and the implementation of the

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accords, especially the transition of the FMLN to civilian life and into a political party, took place in anticipation of the constitutionally slated elections of March 1994. Because presidential, legislative and municipal elections coincided during this cycle, these "founding" elections of El Salvador's post-war democracy came to be referred to as the "elections of the century."

The negotiated settlement involved a series of agreements between the government and the FMLN. The first important accord was the Human Rights Agreement signed in July 1990, in which the parties recognized a wide range of internationally guaranteed human rights and established a U.N. "verification mission" on human rights issues. Despite concerns about opening a human rights verification mission before a cease-fire had been agreed upon, the U.N. opened the U.N. Observer Mission in El Salvador to verify the human rights agreements one year after the agreement was signed.²⁴ Known by its Spanish acronym ONUSAL, the mission opened in July 1991, with a budget of \$23 million and a staff of 101 persons.²⁵

The United Nations played a crucial role in reaching peace. De Soto repeatedly proposed solutions to impasses during the two-year negotiations, achieving recognition by the parties and among outside observers for his initiative. In addition, Undersecretary-General Marrack Goulding deftly mediated discussions over the complex details of the cease-fire and military aspects of the accords. After a series of other preliminary peace agreements, including one which paved the way for constitutional reforms in April 1991, the final Chapultepec Accord was signed on January 16, 1992.

The Peace Agreement

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