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Causes for Civil War and Failed Revolution in El Salvador

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Research Question: What were the causes of the civil war in El Salvador and why did it fail to result in revolution?

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The civil war in El Salvador exhibited many classic hallmarks of a left-wing guerrilla movement fighting to overthrow a repressive authoritarian government. At a time when much of Central America was locked in conflict between opposing ideological forces, El Salvador gradually succumbed to their irreconcilable social, economic, and political problems. The most downtrodden and disaffected segments of Salvadoran society were seduced into choosing armed rebellion in order to contest control of their country.

Many factors contributed to the eventual commencement of hostilities, foremost among them, the extreme disparity in land ownership and severe economic inequality, as well as the persistence of a semi-repressive military government through a series of discrediting events. To a lesser extent, growing discontent among disaffected intellectuals and the success of foreign guerrilla movements produced war. External influence from the United States and its detractors intensified the ideological nature of the conflict and eventually gave the government considerable military advantage.

Theory of Revolution

Latin American revolutions and insurgencies have been the focus of many studies and have given rise to theories such as Timothy Wickham-Crowley's ideas on the "Winners, Losers, and Also-Rans" of Latin American guerrilla movements.¹ His analysis of sociological factors in recent guerrilla wars identifies a variety of trends that characterize many rebellious efforts. The theory details the likelihood for sustained existence of the revolt and reasons for the ultimate success or failure of the guerrilla cause. Understanding the "origins of guerrilla movements" provides a possible explanation for the waves of insurgency Latin American countries experienced in the 1960s and again in the 1970s. The success of the revolution in Cuba under Fidel Castro in 1959 empowered long-dormant communist parties throughout Latin America. Many communist groups had grown accustomed to irrelevance in their respective nations' political structures and had lost their revolutionary zeal, but Castro's takeover gave them reason to believe they could gain power.² Similarly, the communist foothold in the western hemisphere inspired an entire generation of revolutionaries as they were introduced to a new alternative in their struggle against the status quo. Crowley makes the connection from the "ideological crucible" of the Cuban Revolution to the development of leadership of guerrilla movements in other countries.

In general, it has been "disaffected intellectuals and marginal political elites" who have led insurgencies against a government that has effectively shut them out of the political system or has been unresponsive to demands for a redress of grievances.

¹ Timothy Wickham-Crowley, *Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes Since 1956* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), 132.

² *Ibid.*, 139.

Intellectual leadership of guerrilla movements can be explained through the rapid increase in university enrollment. Expenditures often did not keep pace with the growing student population, increasing radicalism due to “social density,” meaning that angry students easily influenced each other and intensified their dislike for the ruling government. That discontent is typically fostered by the relative autonomy from political life that university professors and students enjoy.³

As significant as the leadership and organizational aspects of guerrilla war may be, it is clear that peasant support is essential for the survival of a rebellion. Crowley notes that “peasant support is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for ultimate success” in achieving revolution and details the extent to which peasants are involved and in what capacity. Peasant support can range from a non-action such as not reporting the presence of guerrillas to government forces to the extreme of enlistment as “full-time combatants.” Second, the proportion of peasants who give their support is a significant factor in sustaining revolutionary action.⁴ The third indication of support is one of considerable importance in future discussion. As peasants are often the “innocent bystanders” who bear the brunt of the violence in a civil war, the conditions under which they give their support has serious implications for how they will be treated through the duration of hostilities. Peasants have the option of supporting one side over the other even when threatened by the opposition, supporting neither side in an attempt to remain truly neutral, or support either side alternatively to maintain their own survival.

Crowley’s theory considers aspects of society that determine the degree of peasant support shown to guerrillas. Among them are the agrarian social structure,

³ Ibid., 142.

⁴ Ibid., 143.

changes in agrarian systems, tradition of rebellion, and organizational links to either of the competing groups. Each of these is believed to be an important indicator of the exact kind and extent of peasant support guerrillas could count on in a given conflict.

Overt military strength is a crucial aspect of contestation for power in a civil war. Alone, though, military strength is not a sufficient condition for success. The relative strength of the competing forces is dependent upon external, foreign support, internal financing, and unity of the armed groups.⁵ The issue of military strength is different from many of the other factors, because it involves conditions under which the competing groups affect each other, but whose success is determined independently from the opposition. Each side is responsible for running its own armed forces efficiently and effectively, even when not engaged in combat, or in order to be able to engage in combat.

Wickham-Crowley identifies the “shifting of mass loyalties” as the final element necessary for revolutionary success. It is still not enough for intellectuals simply to lead a rebellion, gain the support of peasants, and successfully confront government military forces. The final key to success in revolution is to win the support of the majority of the population.⁶ That support may not be in the same degree of action that is expected of the peasantry, but more directly the belief among the general populace that the guerrillas would be able to build an effective government. The government provided by or promised by the guerrillas would have to be substantially better than the current system to win the support of those who are either apathetic to or fearful of the revolutionary movement. Crowley expands on the ideas he sets forth and expresses the view that the

⁵ Ibid., 160.

⁶ Ibid., 162.

success of revolution is rare due to the complexity of the factors involved and their influence on each other.

Many of the issues in Timothy Wickham-Crowley's theory apply to the case of El Salvador. Most directly, the civil war was caused by oligarchic control of land, peasant poverty and dislocation, and a history of repressive military rule. Specific events in the 1970s helped to exacerbate these long-standing tensions and served as the catalyst for civil war.

Persistence of Military Government

Historically, periodic military rule has not been uncommon in Latin American countries. El Salvador, however, had been under military control since 1931. Internal strife frequently changed the military's leaders, but the military was always in charge. In general, military governments often justify their rule by insisting that they can run a country better than civilian politicians, but the Salvadoran military was unable to substantiate this claim. None of the military regimes had particular success in the economic sphere and economic conditions for the overall population did not improve. People grew tired of one ineffective administration after another. The Salvadoran army repressed dissent and periodically held "elections" in which the ruling officer chose his successor and squelched political opposition to the extent that the military candidate was the only person in the race. Over time, the government made gestures toward democracy but still outlawed the communist party and generally created a political environment committed to their own survival, rather than to mass participation.

The 1964 elections finally marked the arrival of a legitimate political competitor. The Christian Democratic Party arose as a party for the people but consciously avoided being associated with any calls for radical reform and distanced themselves from communists by consistently denouncing Castro's regime in Cuba. Christian Democrats' growing support was truncated by El Salvador's 1969 war with neighboring Honduras. The so-called Soccer War was set off by a series of clashes between sports fans. El Salvador invaded Honduras but quickly lost the capability and will to pursue the war.⁷ Nevertheless, El Salvador considered the adventure a success; and politically, it bolstered the military government in the following year's elections.

The 1972 presidential race presented a different scenario. The Christian Democrats allied with smaller parties to form the National Opposition Union (UNO) and were in a position to make a good showing against the military regime. As election returns became available, UNO was indeed winning. In a panic, the military "imposed a media blackout" and announced the next morning that they had won the presidency by 22,000 votes.⁸ The proper count, revealed by the San Salvador election board, put UNO in the lead by 8,000 votes, so the military once again revised their numbers to insure their own victory. The army held on to power for just a little longer, but the implications of their unsavory actions began to tear the country apart. It is precisely this "persistence of the old regime" that Wickham-Crowley points to as a cause for the formation of a guerrilla movement. The old regime clung to power longer than the Salvadoran population could tolerate and refused to step down even when defeated.

⁷ Philip Russel, *El Salvador in Crisis* (Austin: Colorado River Press, 1984), 46.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

The campaign for the 1972 elections had significantly increased Salvadorans expectations for democracy in their country. Christian Democrats were by no means radical and held promise for the future of civilian governance. They had built a substantial following in San Salvador as well as making inroads with the military-dominated rural population. The denial of their success upset their supporters to the extent that many of them lost faith in electoral politics altogether. The military was generally unresponsive to their demands to begin with, and it became increasingly clear that there was no way to challenge their authority. As such, the UNO refused to participate in the 1976 elections. The failure of democratic promise in the 1970s led the people to create their own grass-roots organizations with the hope of building a better life without the help of government. The general response was to keep these groups in check through violent repression, which forced peasants to arm themselves in self-defense.

Prior to the emergence of the guerrilla movement, land reform was viewed as the most plausible policy for avoiding conflict and alleviating tension. Traditionally, land reform had been endorsed only by fringe political groups that came to be considered radical, or sometimes, inaccurately dubbed as “communist revolutionaries.” In spite of the negative connotations, support for the idea grew, and even before opposition to the military government had strengthened to the extent that seriously threatened the regime, the government began to notice the displaced peasants and the gross inequality in land ownership. The failure here was simply one of inaction. The military agreed that agrarian reform was, indeed, important and probably a good idea, but they did not bother to pursue any policies that would change the troubled situation.⁹

⁹ Ibid., 47.

Failure of Land Reform

Agrarian reform could have been a cornerstone in winning the support of the peasantry for the military and changing the perception of the government's attitude toward social and political change in general. Land reform, if begun, had to be effective in order to achieve its ancillary goals. The mere suggestion or attempt at reform would not be sufficient to convince people of the positive intent of the policy, rather it would undermine the government's support and divide the country.

Under Colonel Molina in 1976, the government prepared a small-scale, "pilot" program for "agrarian transformation." The plan was to use USAID funds to expropriate large landholdings at market value in San Miguel and Usulután and redistribute small plots to the landless. Molina hoped that the payment landholders received for their property would then be invested in another sector of the economy, providing an even greater benefit to economic development.¹⁰ Naturally, those landowners who stood to lose opposed the plan ferociously, apparently ignoring the latter intent of Molina's program. El Salvador's National Association for Private Enterprise feared the idea of such blatant state interference in the economic structure of the country and consequently stood in solidarity with the threatened landowners. Confronted with staunch opposition from the oligarchy, including increased intimidation from right-wing death squads, peasant organizers lost hope for change. Molina, accused of being a communist and facing the threat of a coup, withdrew his plan and never again spoke of reform.

¹⁰ Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 83.

The great tragedy of this attempt at reform is that it once again raised the hopes of those who, for so long, had no hope. While meager in proportion and of questionable immediate value, it was an unprecedented proposal for alleviating the extreme disparities in control of land. In a sense, it was a good-faith measure intended to be a demonstration of the government's benevolence. Instead, it exhibited the power of the enduring forces that would forever deny change. The proposal did have the effect of revealing how nervous the military regime was about the growing discontent among the majority of its populace. The perception that the military was concerned about the possibility of a popular uprising was not lost on the masses. In many ways, they came to understand that they held more power than their rulers were willing to admit. Yet, for the people, this realization created an even less desirable situation. The oligarchy made it clear that they would not give up their status in society, and that they would fight the masses, as well as discredit the military in order to maintain the status quo. Violence against peasants intensified as the wealthy tried to suppress any and all who organized for reform; and Molina, to maintain order and partly to save face, increased military activity across the country. The failure of agrarian reform marked the final step in discrediting military rule and solidified rural discontent, giving the people another reason to call for the ouster of the regime.

Growing Radicalism

Growing discontent alone does not produce civil war. The masses need coordination and leadership to capitalize on their numerical advantage. Organization into civic groups requires the presence of those who can raise the government's awareness of

serious grievances, or ultimately manage guerrilla units. Some members of the intelligentsia fulfilled this role in El Salvador. The persistence of the regime through a vast series of disgraceful scenarios coincided with the rapid growth of the university student population. A 602% increase from 1965 to 1975 created serious stress on the country's educational resources.¹¹ Students had no outlet to pursue change, and in facing a "closed political system" quickly became the classic "disaffected intellectuals" of their nation.¹² El Salvador effectively demonstrates Wickham-Crowley's theory for the marginalized political groups who emerge as the leaders of guerrilla movements. As landowner-funded vigilantes escalated the violence, their opponents formed guerrilla groups to protect unionized workers as well as peasants.

The Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) became the leading political organization among the leftist cause. It included several student groups as well as labor unions and was built on a coalition of intellectual and professional leadership. The FDR seemed to be a forward-looking group trying to gain political recognition rather than resorting to force, but it was associated with the Unified Revolutionary Directorate (DRU), which claimed to have the same objective but also was equipping guerrillas.¹³ Consequently, members of the FDR, such as President Enrique Alvarez were soon targets for assassination. His unique background as a U.S.-educated wealthy landowner and former member of government gave him credibility with the United States and his

¹¹ Wickham-Crowley, 142.

¹² Ibid., 141.

¹³ Armed Conflict Events Data, "Salvadoran Civil War 1980-1992" [article on-line] (onwar.com 2000, accessed 23 April 2003); available from <http://www.onwar.com/aced/data/echo/elsalvador1980.htm>; Internet.

support for reform won him friends among the Salvadoran people.¹⁴ His murder at the hands of government forces in 1980 was an effort to undermine the legitimate leadership of the left.

The military's actions and attitude toward the academic institutions of the country illustrate the extent to which they feared the intelligentsia and its ability to influence young people. In 1972, the Molina government ordered the army occupation of the National University in San Salvador, saying it had "fallen into the hands of communists."¹⁵ Military vilification of professors and students for their leftist leanings often pushed them further toward the belief that the forces of coercion must be destroyed in order to achieve true reform. The military based its belief on the fact that the curricula and faculty of the National University are "oriented to favor the poor."¹⁶ The university was trying to create a new class that could reform society and the nation as a whole. The two sides persisted in their view of the other and the military continued to conduct attacks on the intelligentsia. Soldiers murdered six Jesuit priests at the University of Central America in November of 1989. The United Nations Truth and Reconciliation Commission was not able to determine exactly who ordered the killings, but evidence

¹⁴ Central America, "Enrique Alvarez: ¡Presente!" [article on-line] (Hanover: Dartmouth, 2002, accessed 23 April 2003); available from http://hilbert.dartmouth.edu/~lamperti/centralamerica_presente.html; Internet.

¹⁵ Russell, 48.

¹⁶ El Salvador: A National Security State in the Periphery of the World Capitalist System, "University/Church" [article on-line] (geosoc.org 2000, accessed 23 April 2003); available from <http://www.geosoc.org/schools/adult/docs/elsal.html#UNIVERSITY/CHURCH>; Internet.

suggests that the Minister of Defense was responsible for the attempt to destroy the guerrillas' intellectual leadership.¹⁷

Finally, a factor that strengthened the impact of the growing student population and discontent among intellectuals was the recent success of Marxist guerrillas in nearby Nicaragua. The 1959 Cuban Revolution inspired the rise of many insurgencies in the 1960s.¹⁸ Similarly, the Sandinista takeover gave Salvadorans reason to believe that they, too, could be successful in the violent overthrow of a powerful and long-standing regime. It was no accident that the leftist guerrilla coalition fighting in El Salvador took the name Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) after the national hero who had fought alongside his Nicaraguan counterpart, Augusto Sandino, nearly 60 years earlier. While there is little evidence to connect these two movements in any significant way, the psychological bond between guerrillas in both countries cannot be denied. Salvadorans saw hope in Sandinista success and were convinced they could achieve revolution too, giving a possible answer to the question that asks why El Salvador would have endured repression for so long, and finally began to challenge tyranny.

As a case study, El Salvador exemplifies the theoretical development of a Latin American guerrilla movement. The origin of the guerrilla campaign was influenced by the external success of surrounding revolutions. Civil war began in response to the continued rule of a discredited regime that insisted on maintaining its position of authority. The war was propagated by those who met the regime's qualifications to be legitimate political contenders and as such had been promised reform yet were denied

¹⁷ New Day Films, "Historical Overview: El Salvador" [article on-line] (Harriman: New Day Films 2002, accessed 23 April 2003); available from <http://www.newday.com/guides/mango/20histelsal.html>; Internet.

¹⁸ Ibid., 139.

any such change. Each of these factors plays an essential role in explaining the direct cause for the outbreak of significant and enduring conflict in El Salvador, but it is important to recognize long-standing trends that made the country ripe for an attempt at revolution.

Economic Inequality

In the approach to civil war, El Salvador was a prime example of the profound economic inequality plaguing Latin America. On the surface, the social implications of such resentment among the masses for a small, wealthy oligarchy seems like a natural cause for revolution just waiting to happen. Wickham-Crowley has perceptively noted, however, that poverty and inequality exist in many countries that never engage in violent conflict and certainly never undergo social revolution. The agrarian structure of a country seems to explain better the persistence of conflict once the war has begun rather than an immediate cause for battle, but the severity of the social tensions in El Salvador gives one reason to believe that it was, indeed, an important motivation for the resort to violence and was first and foremost on the minds of guerrilla fighters and peasant sympathizers.

El Salvador had not just a disparity in wealth among its population but also serious inequity when considering access to profitable enterprise. Economic production in El Salvador excluded much of the population from its benefits. In a country where agriculture accounted for 23% of the gross domestic product in 1975, it is clear that the land itself is a resource of considerable importance.¹⁹ Throughout its history, the nation

¹⁹ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, "Report on the Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador" [article on-line] (Washington, D.C.: Organization of American

has been controlled by an oligarchy of landholding elites. In 1979, as El Salvador descended into war, 0.7% of property owners held 40% of the land.²⁰ With such disparity in land ownership, wealth was concentrated in the hands of those who could effectively produce cash crops with large-scale farming. Those few families bought more and more land, and by 1975, 41% of the rural population owned no land.²¹ This proletarianization of the peasantry inflicted great harm on the nation, as the number of unemployed and underemployed rose dramatically. As farmers turned into rural wageworkers, the areas that supplied migrant laborers to large farms experienced increasing radicalism.²²

Population pressure had serious implications for the country of just over 20,000 square kilometers in land area. El Salvador is well known as the most densely populated nation on the American mainland, and their extraordinarily high annual growth rate of 2.9% from 1970 to 1979 contributed to the ever-expanding class of poverty-stricken peasants.²³

Conflict Across Borders

Unfavorable economic and demographic trends were not enough to force peasants into open rebellion against their government. These changes were gradual and seemed to be part of the natural order of the nation's development. The population pressures became more apparent after the Soccer War. Seeking a better life, many Salvadorans had

States, 1978, accessed 7 April 2003); available from <http://www.cidh.oas.org/countryrep/ElSalvador78eng/chap.11.htm>; Internet.

²⁰ Tommie Sue Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²² Wickham-Crowley, 150.

²³ *Ibid.*, 28.

immigrated to Honduras in the decades following the Second World War. They fared little better in Honduras than they did in El Salvador, but the immigration created friction between the two countries. As landless peasants in Honduras began to show their discontent for the concentration of land ownership in their own country, the Honduran government blamed Salvadoran immigrants for the undue land crisis, and by 1969 expelled 17,000 Salvadorans. However, the negative economic and social effects ran far deeper than the short-lived patriotic fervor. Honduras forced 130,000 Salvadorans to leave the country and boycotted Salvadoran imports.²⁴ The sudden influx of more landless peasants created distress that was much more noticeable than the gradual population increases the country had grown to expect.

A Failed Revolution

The civil war in El Salvador, like most challenges to a nation's ruling authority, did not result in revolution. Because the guerrilla revolutionaries failed to seize power, the war in El Salvador can be termed less a revolution and more of an extended rebellion. There are a variety of factors to explain the failure of the guerrilla insurgency, some of which correspond to Wickham-Crowley's theory, and some of which are so specific to the conflict in El Salvador, that they are beyond the scope of general analysis. Salvadoran rebels, with prototypical disillusioned intellectual leadership, were able to gain the support of peasants as well as build military strength great enough to confront government forces. Ultimately, they failed to sway popular support in favor of their

²⁴ Russell, 46.

cause. Other reasons for revolutionary failure in El Salvador include U.S. involvement and disunity among the left.

Popular support is the final and most important goal for a guerrilla movement. In order to seize power, the revolutionaries must be able to convince the masses that they are responsible leaders with the moral authority to control the country.²⁵ Salvadoran rebels failed in this regard for a variety of reasons. Most significantly, the guerrillas' own actions were enormously destructive. They employed tactics that lived up to their slogan of "everybody eats or nobody eats" and often carried out raids on large farms and wealthy landowners' property. Initially, this appeared to be a good way to hit the oligarchy in the pocketbook by making it difficult for them to produce the cash-crop export goods they relied upon for income. Quickly, it became clear that the rampant destruction of elite property was not hurting the absentee landlords, but rather it was terrorizing the peasants themselves and often leaving them without jobs, once the landowner decided it was pointless to produce anything because it would be lost. The FMLN also was unable to limit its own fighting and control its use of force. They became associated with much of the destruction of the country's infrastructure and political instability. The rebels were making a hard life even harder as more and more people were unemployed. Foreign-financed industry was devastated as capital flight took hold. Even in 1980 – after the announcement of impending conflict but before the commencement of hostilities – over \$800,000 was withdrawn from Salvadoran banks each day.²⁶ With this kind of record, it seemed unlikely that many people could be persuaded to believe that the rebels were actually better than the military government.

²⁵ Wickham-Crowley, 162.

²⁶ Montgomery, 172.

FMLN Violence

The guerrillas in El Salvador also propagated a great deal of political violence that undermined stability of the nation and actually made it more difficult for them to seize power. Assassination of local political leaders destroyed any organizational capacity in small municipalities where the guerrillas were not already in control. They would have done better to gain even a façade of cooperation from the leaders who could possibly be swayed to their side. The guerrillas, by nature, were leery of counterrevolutionaries or infiltrators who could severely compromise their operations, so they often murdered civilians on even the suggestion that they could be spies. Rebels are believed to have been responsible for as much as 20% of the tens of thousands of civilian killings in the early phase of the war.²⁷ The people of El Salvador had already faced the brutality of one repressive regime for nearly half a century and were not likely to trade it for another. But the statistics of violence belie some of the nobler practices of the FMLN. They were well known for providing literacy training and as much education as possible. In combat, guerrillas tried to hold true to their intention of liberating their country and sparing people from harm. As fighting intensified in civilian populated areas, the FMLN urged civilians to leave combat zones and evacuated 3000 people from Morazán. Also, the leftist guerrillas treated captive soldiers well in an effort to encourage soldiers in subsequent battles to surrender rather than fight to the death for fear of being tortured. Once a captive was returned to his unit, the policy had the unintended consequence of demoralizing other

²⁷ Wickham-Crowley, 176.

soldiers who heard about the comparative decency of the guerrillas.²⁸ Their contradictory actions served to create an atmosphere of violence in which it was difficult to determine who held moral authority, and the majority of the populace began to be more concerned with ending the war than with the outcome.

The relative disunity of the population in fighting the military regime stemmed from the nature of the conflict. The military government, though it had been in power for almost 50 years, had gone through many leadership changes, and therefore, was not seen as a dictatorship in which the ills of the nation were personified. The sentiment among guerrillas and civilians alike was that the goal of the conflict was not to overthrow a dictator but to revolutionize the social and economic structure of the country. This aim, in itself, became an obstacle to success. The oligarchy was able to function independently of the government in terrorizing the population through the formation of death squads such as the White Warriors' Union. Wealthy landowners held a certain degree of autonomy in violent action and their clandestine operations did not have to obey even the mild restrictions on government security forces. The Molina administration's proposed land reform had shocked the oligarchy and made them question the military's support. They, much like the peasants, lost trust in the government. Consequently, the oligarchy targeted guerrillas and vice-versa, making the conflict less about popular participation in government and more about communist revolution.

United States Involvement

²⁸ Helen Schooley, *Conflict in Central America* (Essex: Longman House, 1987), 186.

The prospect of another communist insurgency in Latin America deeply concerned the United States. The FMLN was strong, and the degree of support they enjoyed from the peasantry was reason for the United States to fear that they would be successful in propagating revolution in El Salvador. In 1981, with 4,000 active guerrillas and 5,000 militia members, the FMLN had considerable forces that grew as the war escalated. FMLN leaders were in need of weapons more than combatants.²⁹ The dedication of guerrillas far exceeded the low morale of government forces who were often compelled into service and poorly trained. As El Salvador approached war, each of these issues frightened the Carter administration. He reluctantly supported the military government through financial and military aid, but attempted to place conditions on the funding on the basis that the Salvadoran government would enforce human rights. The conditions failed, but the United States felt compelled to maintain the fiscal solvency of the government and help combat the guerrillas.

United States involvement in the war intensified under the Reagan administration. The new president saw the war as a purely ideological conflict that would surely go the way of the Sandinista revolution if the United States did not firmly support its ally. President Reagan was convinced that the Salvadoran civil war was a classic example of Soviet, and in this case, Cuban, subversion of an otherwise stable country. A 1985 U.S. State Department report on the situation implicated worldwide communist regimes in supporting the guerrillas and stated simply, “the unification of the Salvadorean guerrillas was co-ordinated by Fidel Castro.”³⁰ The accusations were, at best, a stretch. While Cuba and the Soviet Union often supported communist revolution in other countries, by the

²⁹ Montgomery, 144.

³⁰ Schooley, 309.

1980s the Soviets had long-abandoned their policy of exporting revolution, and there was little evidence to indicate Cuba's direct involvement in the war. Well-documented information, though, shows that in 1981 alone, citizens of West Germany raised \$1 million in an "Arms for El Salvador" program.³¹ As for Castro's role of coordination, perhaps the greatest shortcoming of the revolutionaries was their lack of unification and organization. There was ideological conflict even among the leftists, and many groups who considered themselves to be part of the same united front operated independent of each other, with little communication. Yet, the United States continued to pursue the perceived communist menace in El Salvador.

Before persistent fighting occurred, the FMLN raised demands for bilateral talks with the United States, believing that they could negotiate conditions for U.S. involvement and get them to pressure the military to implement reforms that they had promised for so long, but the U.S. government refused.³² The FMLN was left with few options other than to carry out their own promise of initiating conflict. The guerrillas enjoyed initial success, but their lack of organization and inability to communicate in the field forced them to limit their opening offensive, giving the military an opportunity to counter their advance. Within a year of beginning hostilities, the two sides were stalemated. However, United States involvement and President Reagan's insistence on "total victory" against the communists effectively turned what would have been a short-lived and failed guerrilla insurgency into a full-scale civil war that would persist for a decade and cost the lives of 80,000 Salvadorans.

³¹ Montgomery, 145.

³² Schooley, 61.

The United States supply of weaponry to El Salvador actually served to equip the FMLN, as they conducted ambushes and attacked barracks in order to steal guns and munitions from the army. The most influential contribution the United States made to the prosecution of the war was to supply air power and satellite surveillance photos to the military. El Salvador's topography – vast, undulating rugged hills – made infantry movements difficult and inhibited the speed with which the military could respond to guerrilla attacks. Therefore, the introduction of helicopters and U.S. military planners who trained rapid response units, greatly increased the capacity of the Salvadoran military in combating their enemies. It also greatly increased the civilian death toll as the army often bombed indiscriminately without clear knowledge of the ground presence. U.S. intelligence sought to reduce this problem by providing photographic surveillance. The fear of detection forced FMLN guerrillas to operate in much smaller units, sometimes in groups of just two or three people, which in many ways facilitated guerrilla ambushes and small-scale incursions into towns.

Government Reform

The Salvadoran government did, on its own merit, succeed in preventing revolution. The military regime, replaced by a series of failed civilian-military juntas, was able to elicit the support of the peasantry and the population as a whole by initiating democratization and attempts at land reform. While the land reform programs that were proposed fell short of successful implementation and did little to alleviate the inequality that had led to conflict, the perception that the government was interested in reform grew and undermined the guerrillas' principle promise of the benefit of revolution. Similarly,

holding elections meant the transfer of power to civilian leaders and gave a modicum of legitimacy to the new regime.

In 1983, an elected 60-member Constituent Assembly was given the task of forming a new constitution for the country. While the majority of the assembly's members were drawn from conservative political parties, they were unable to exclude the more moderate Christian Democratic representatives in part due to U.S. pressure. The United States threatened the withdrawal of economic and military aid – upon which the Salvadoran government had become dependent for survival – if they did not incorporate the land reforms already begun by the civilian-military juntas. The Constituent Assembly was also given the duty to appoint a president and chose Alvaro Magana Borja for the post. He was relatively moderate and enjoyed support among the military, so he was seen as one of the few choices that would not be divisive or incur opposition from the armed forces. Political infighting continued, though, and the Salvadoran military along with the United States urged the conflicting sides to agree on a “basic platform of government.”³³ The plan succeeded in the form of the Pact of Apaneca in which the differing groups approved broad principles for human rights, economic development and reform, as well as democratization and social reform. The agreement helped to stabilize the assembly and led them to develop the constitution. Ultimately, the institutionalization of agrarian reform was too politically sensitive to pass through the assembly easily. Once again, the idea existed, but little could be done to implement it. On the other hand, reform of governance proved to be important and effective.

³³ Library of Congress Country Studies, “El Salvador: The Constitution of 1983” [article on-line] (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1988, accessed 23 April 2003); available from [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sv0084\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sv0084)); Internet.

Jose Napoleon Duarte, of the Christian Democratic Party, won the 1984 presidential election and took office as the first freely elected administration in more than 50 years. His popularity was based on his continued willingness to institute reform and engage in dialogue with rebels. Overall, the election was peaceful and unmarred by violence, but it was limited by the ongoing conflict in that no voting took place in 58 municipalities under guerrilla control.³⁴ Duarte's time in office saw less change than the reformers would have hoped. He allowed the military to continue its operations and to maintain its leadership. The 1989 presidential election brought the right-wing ARENA party to power under Alfredo Christiani. ARENA seemed poised to win from the start, but the FMLN asked for that the election be postponed and that they be given the right to participate in exchange for a 60-day cease-fire. The request was flatly rejected and the election was characterized by "boycotts and disrupted polling."³⁵ The election inspired less confidence in the public than the 1984 election had, but it marked a symbolic and significant peaceful transfer of power from one civilian president to another. The transition from military rule to civilian governance changed Salvadorans' perception of the government. In the midst of conflict, there was hope for the new power structure and the possible expansion of the political system.

Conclusion

The civil war in El Salvador closely exemplifies Wickham-Crowley's theory for the development of a guerrilla movement in Latin America. The persistence of a semi-

³⁴ Russell, 96.

³⁵ Cascon ELS, "El Salvador 1980-92" [article on-line] (Boston: MIT, 1999, accessed 23 April 2003); available from http://web.mit.edu/cascon/cases/case_els.html; Internet.

repressive discredited old regime, a closed political system confronted by a rapidly growing student population, and external influences all help to explain the causes of armed conflict. Failure to produce revolution is similarly determined by the inability of the guerrillas to capture popular support for their cause, foreign opposition to the revolution, as well as reform of the old regime.

The final factor here is perhaps the most significant for future discussion. Revolutionary guerrillas did not succeed in directly overthrowing the military regime. However, they created a crisis in governance to such an extent that military rule dissolved and eventually grew into a political system based on mass participation with universal suffrage at age 18. The FMLN, after fighting the government to a standstill for more than a decade, is now the second largest political party in the country. It won 3.5% more votes than ARENA, the conservative party, in the March 16, 2003 Legislative Assembly elections, giving them control of 31 out of 84 seats – more than any other single party.³⁶ Additionally, the FMLN holds the mayorship of many important cities, including that of San Salvador itself. Though some agrarian reform projects have been carried out, disparity of land ownership, as well as the broader issue of poverty, are still serious issues for the country. Guerrilla insurgents failed to revolutionize the system of government in El Salvador, but they won access to the political process and secured their right to influence public policy in their nation.

³⁶ Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), “Final Results Show FMLN Triumph in El Salvador” [article on-line] (New York: CISPES, 2003, accessed 14 April 2003); available from http://www.cispes.org/english/Communiques_-_Action_Alerts/elections2.html; Internet.

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