
Central America

A lesson in Alexander Haig's 'romantic' death-squad democracy

by Gretchen Small

Whatever the wishes of those who voted, the results of the elections in El Salvador March 28 are a disaster for El Salvador, a debacle for U.S. interests in the area, and the probable trigger for general conflagration in Central America. Combined with the State Department-engineered Guatemalan coup d'état just five days before, which placed an "ayatollah" in power, Central America is facing wholesale slaughter in the months ahead.

Moderate forces around the Christian Democratic party behind President Duarte were weakened badly in El Salvador's elections for a Constituent Assembly. Majority control was seized by an extremist coalition, headed by El Salvador's new "strong-man," former army major Roberto D'Aubuisson, a founder of the White Warriors Union death squad, who campaigned on a platform of "exterminating" all opposition within three to six months after the elections. Duarte continues to fight for the power mandated by his party's 40 percent share of the vote, but he is not likely to succeed against the extremists. Duarte is open to the idea of a negotiated settlement to the civil war, and if he goes, so do any hopes for a mediated settlement in the area.

The electoral result in El Salvador will simultaneously strengthen the country's ultra-left. Prior to the elections, Jorge Bustamante, the head of Salvador's electoral commission, had warned that sections of the left might well throw their support to D'Aubuisson in order to heighten the "contradictions" in the country, thus building their base for recruitment. "Where there are now 3,000 guerrillas, tomorrow there will be 300,000," if D'Aubuisson wins, Bustamante stated.

Cuban radicals were also counting on a D'Aubuisson victory, Caribbean sources at the United Nations reported, to prove that negotiations were impossible, and a military victory is the only strategy for the guerrillas.

After D'Aubuisson's National Republican Alliance (ARENA) announced the formation of a five-party coalition excluding the Christian Democrats March 30, Christian Democrat Rey Prendes repeated the warning: if the Christian Democrats are not an important part of the next government, "then violence will be increased Perhaps many people will join not only the left but some might join the extreme right, making a tremendous

polarization, and that means civil war . . . God save this country."

Haig's romantic democracy

The elections were rigged from the beginning to bring about the polarization that has occurred. Mexican government officials and Vatican spokesmen were among those who argued that elections under conditions of civil war were untenable, and measures had to be taken to stabilize the country and institute a ceasefire before elections could be successful.

Over a million Salvadorans turned out to vote, many because they sought an end to the irrational violence which has lacerated their country over the past two years. Many, however, also voted because officials marked each citizen's I.D. card "have voted," and in that terrorized country, anyone stopped on the streets for identification found without the markings is a good target for a roadside ditch as a supporter of "subversives." Villages on election day awoke to the thunder of nearby artillery—another subtle hint of how to vote.

"Observers" by and large were an embarrassment. The military dictatorships of Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Guatemala all sent observers. Former Bolivian Interior Minister, Col. Luis Arce, thrown out of office for being too publically involved in the cocaine traffic, was invited to join Badder Meinhof-lawyer Ramsey Clark on the observing team! The U.S. delegation was heavily weighted by old Vietnam hands, including two election specialists who had overseen the 1967 elections in South Vietnam.

Secretary of State Haig, who had once hoped to rule the United States in his military uniform, loved it. He made a special appearance before the March 29 State Department briefing to hail the elections as a sign of the "power of the democratic vision" and a "major achievement in the development of democracy in El Salvador . . . which we have all won." Haig had announced on national television the day before that military rule in "romantic societies" (sic) "without Anglo-Saxon roots" is often necessary to defend "human rights."

Starting over a month before the elections, Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders began backing the D'Aubuisson option in El Salvador, according to congressional sources, telling American politicians privately that the death squad leader (who once claimed responsibility for a machine-gun attack on the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador) is "manipulable" and necessary to keep the Christian Democrats in line.

Over the course of the elections, D'Aubuisson was thus converted from an important but fringe maniac, forced to operate in hiding for nearly a year, into the central powerbroker in Salvador's political factions, now a "legitimate politician." U.S. Ambassador Deane Hinton was an intimate part of this image-building effort. Two nights before the elections, Hinton called in selected journalists to announce that the United States was prepared to live with a D'Aubuisson government. "D'Aubuisson is a leader . . . charismatic . . . in the caudillo tradition of Latin America," Hinton mimicked Haig. We should judge the man by his future, "not for his past." After the elections, Hinton offered his personal assurances that D'Aubuisson had promised not to carry out his threats to "hang" Duarte if he won. According to latest reports, D'Aubuisson is seeking permission to visit the United States to receive blessings from Haig and company. A U.S. visa had been denied him in 1981 following his threats on U.S. officials.

The next steps

U.S. Ambassador Hinton has been busy after the elections, putting together the pieces of the next government. Although Duarte's party captured an estimated 40 percent of the popular vote, the combined forces of ARENA, and the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN), the party associated with old landlord interests in the country which ruled for the military from 1960 to 1979, give them a larger number of seats in the Constituent Assembly which will determine the next government of El Salvador. Washington sources report that the announcement of final vote tallies and distribution of seats in the Assembly is being withheld until agreement is reached behind the scenes on a coalition that is acceptable to the United States, and the State Department, while willing to work with D'Aubuisson-dominated government, hopes to pull at least some Christian Democrats into a government to provide a "sellable" cover for the U.S. Congress and others.

The consensus remains thus far, however, that Duarte must go. PCN spokesmen announced March 30 that they could work with the Christian Democrats, with hesitations, as long as three conditions were met: 1) Duarte is dumped; 2) the land and banking reforms of the previous government are "rewritten"; and 3) continuation of the war against the guerrillas is guaranteed. "We will never accept negotiations," Rodriguez Equizabal said.

Those terms seem to be acceptable to Ambassador Hinton, who sponsored a "luncheon of national reconciliation" at his home, the day after the elections, to which he invited representatives of all six parties who participated in the elections, but excluded Duarte in order not to offend the death squad extremists who consider him a "communist."

The elimination of Duarte from the scene removes one of the few people inside the country prepared to join efforts for an end to cycle of violence and counter-violence between left and right which has left over 30,000 dead in the past two years, and blitzed the economy. Intelligence sources reported that Haig and his Socialist International allies feared the potential of an independent agreement on behalf of settlement mediated by the Vatican (whose Apostolic Administrator in El Salvador, Rivera Damas, has been outspoken against both right and left terrorists), President Reagan, and Mexican President López Portillo, who has maintained close relations with President Reagan throughout his administration. Shortly before the elections, the Christian Democratic government in Venezuela had given signs they were willing to add their support to an attempt to get negotiations going within El Salvador. With an extremist government installed in El Salvador, the chances for negotiations are nil.

Now, a new "ayatollah" factor has been introduced in Central America, with the ascension to power of Gen. Rios Montt in Guatemala during a bloodless coup on March 23. Rios Montt was called on by "young officers" directing the coup to assume leadership whole preaching at a Church of the Christian Word tent in Guatemala City. Rios Montt is an administrator of the Guatemala branch of the cult whose headquarters are in Eureka, California. One of his followers urged him to accept the call on the basis that it was a "sign from God," according to press reports, and General Rios Montt is now urging his countrymen to join in "brotherhood" to reestablish peace, and end the fighting.

The main support for his coup, however, is the same death-squad apparatus behind D'Aubuisson in El Salvador. In Guatemala it is centered around World Anti-Communist League Vice-President, Mario Sandoval Alarcon. Sandoval heads the extremist National Liberation Movement party, advocates the same "extermination" approach to the opposition, and has been connected with the Guatemalan death squad Mano Blanca since its founding in the late 1960s.

Sandoval Alarcon and his wife were among the 10,000-plus civilians who demonstrated March 31 in support of the Rios Montt government—a march filled with religious banners and slogans. The introduction of a mass fundamentalist movement in superstition-ridden Guatemala may prove a shock-wave effect as important for the region as the theology of liberation movement of the late 1960s.