

Following legislative and municipal elections on January 18, El Salvador is preparing for March 15 presidential elections. The governing Nationalist Republican Alliance party (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*, ARENA) and the opposition Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, FMLN) are the only parties fielding candidates. It has been 15 years since these two elections have taken place in the same year. Since the 1992 peace agreement that ended Salvador's civil war, ARENA has always won the presidency and the majority of municipalities. Despite an early start to the campaign and ongoing party confrontations, there have been fewer incidents of violence than expected. Most polls indicate a highly competitive race; undecided voters and voter turnout levels will be key factors in the outcome.

To help promote transparency in the elections, NDI is helping impartial Salvadoran election observer groups to implement systematic and coordinated initiatives to monitor the pre-election and election-day processes throughout the country. This bulletin provides an overview of the March 15 campaign period and a summary of projects being implemented by NDI's Salvadoran partners.

Presidential Candidate Field

The March 15 presidential election is a two-candidate race between the ruling ARENA party and the opposition FMLN party. Leading the ARENA ticket is former National Civil Police Chief Rodrigo Avila; his running mate is businessman and former Minister of the Economy Arturo Zablah, who had been considered as a presidential candidate for a small center-left party. In a bid to broaden its appeal, the FMLN nominated independent journalist Mauricio Funes as its presidential candidate. Funes' running mate, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, has been a key FMLN party leader and activist since the civil war and was a signatory of the 1992 Peace Accord. Although both presidential candidates have campaigned vigorously, the parties were unable to reach agreement on a formula for candidate debates. While Funes called for a presidential debate moderated by CNN, Avila proposed a joint presidential-vice presidential debate through a national television channel.

Following the legislative elections, both the Christian Democrat Party (*Partido Demócrata Cristiano*, PDC) and the National Conciliation Party (*Partido de Conciliación Nacional*, PCN) pulled their candidates out of the race and their party leadership endorsed ARENA. However, various PDC and PCN mayors and other leading party figures expressed their support for the FMLN, as has the center-left Democratic Change party (*Cambio Democrático*, CD).

Campaign Violence and Preventative Measures

The Prosecutor General's Office (*Fiscalía General de la República*, FGR) is investigating more than 80 cases of election-related violence, and the National Civil Police (*Policía Nacional Civil*, PNC) has registered more than 100 cases of election-related violence since the beginning of the year, including some shootings. However, PNC figures to date reflect a lower rate of violence than noted in prior election periods, including during the build-up to the January legislative and municipal elections.

The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (*Tribunal Supremo Electoral*, TSE) recently convened a closed-door meeting with ARENA and FMLN representatives to enlist the leading parties' active support to end electoral violence. To deter election-day confrontations during the March 15 balloting, the PNC will field 18,000 officers around the country. The FGR will field more than 300 electoral prosecutors (*fiscales electorales*) and the Attorney General's Office (*Procuraduría de la República*) plans to deploy an unspecified number of mediating lawyers.

Many of the party confrontations have occurred around the practice of *pinta y pega* (painting and posting party propaganda on public and private spaces), which is prohibited by the Electoral Code. This practice, and the confrontations it has generated, has been intensified by the early start to the campaign period.¹ As cited by both the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM) and the Organization of American States (OAS), limited capacity and limited action by the TSE has left both of these aspects of the campaign unregulated. Both the OAS and the EU observed the January 18 election and have large election observation missions on the ground.

Outlook for March 15 Presidential Election

Of the many polls released in February, only Borge y Asociados gave Avila (ARENA) an advantage over Funes (FMLN). Both parties claim to have private polls showing their candidate leading.

	Funes / FMLN			Avila / ARENA			Undecided			FUNES – AVILA		
	2008	Feb-09	Dif	2008	Feb-09	Dif	2008	Feb-09	Dif	2008	Feb-09	Dif
Cid Gallup	44%	42%	-2%	31%	36%	5%	19%	22%	3%	13%	6%	-7%
Borge y Asociados	42%	40%	-2%	38%	41%	3%	–	–	–	4%	-1%	-5%
IUDOP/UCA	44%	49%	5%	28%	32%	4%	16%	14%	-2%	16%	17%	1%
CIOPS/UTEC	46%	51%	5%	29%	49%	20%	–	–	–	17%	2%	-15%
UFG	39%	42%	3%	25%	36%	11%	20%	22%	2%	14%	6%	-8%

Comparison of a selection of polls from November/December 2008 with February 2009, including Cid Gallup, Borge y Asociados, University Institute of Public Opinion (Central American University), Public Opinion Research Center (Technical University), and Francisco Gavidia University (UFG).

Compared to the polls released in November and December 2008, most February polls show an increase in support for Avila after the center-right PDC and PCN candidates withdrew from the

¹ The early campaign start was noted by the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM). Through its monitoring of campaign publicity, the National Foundation of Development (FUNDE) noted that publicity spending spiked as early as May 2008, another indicator of an early campaign start.

race. The large percentage of poll respondents identified as undecided could be a key group in determining the election outcome. Many analysts speculate that a high voter turnout could also be a decisive factor. The TSE plans to publish partial results hourly starting at 6:00PM on election day.

The likelihood of a close election outcome has contributed to political tension in the final days of the campaign. Both parties held massive rallies last weekend, and the legal close of the campaign is March 11. The FMLN has expressed concerns with the potential for election fraud and ARENA has accused the FMLN of being tied to armed groups. Neither party has provided evidence sustaining these allegations.

National Democratic Institute-El Salvador

NDI's El Salvador program is supported by funding from USAID and Denmark. With support from USAID, NDI has provided technical and other assistance for impartial Salvadoran civil society organizations to monitor the pre-election and election-day processes.

- A. Media Monitoring – Salvadoran partner: Social Initiative for Democracy (ISD). ISD is monitoring the tone and quality of media coverage during the presidential campaign.
- B. Campaign Publicity Spending – Salvadoran partner: National Foundation of Development (FUNDE). Salvadoran electoral law does not regulate campaign expenditures or require reporting or other disclosure of non-public campaign financing. FUNDE is monitoring parties' campaign advertising expenses and conducting a comparative study of campaign finance regulations to propose reforms to encourage greater campaign transparency.
- C. Systematic Election Observation – Salvadoran partner: Central American University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP). During the January 18 election, IUDOP conducted a parallel vote tabulation (PVT or "quick count") of the San Salvador mayoral race, which coincided with the official results. It will also conduct a national quick count in March. The PVT – a proven methodology using a statistically random sample of actual polling station results – and the qualitative data collected can help to generate citizen confidence in the electoral process by an independent check on the quality of the process and on election results. IUDOP will field more than 2,500 observers on March 15.