

# NO SAVIOUR FOR EL SALVADOR?

*A human rights commission of the right and another of the left are evidence of El Salvador's political polarization.*

BY MARY LOU FINLAY

THE ONLY SURPRISE THAT awaits a visitor to El Salvador is that there are no surprises. The capital and its surrounding countryside are as you would expect: the dusty, rolling hills, the poverty, the bad roads – and everywhere the familiar dark youth decked out in camouflage gear and a submachine gun, perennial symbol of a world beset by misery and conflict, the Third World.

The military is the only growth industry in El Salvador. It is estimated that people bearing arms now number about 50,000, not counting the guerrillas, of whom there are another six to nine thousand. There's the regular army and air force; there are special counter-insurgency forces; there are para-troop battalions; there are local militia and treasury police and security forces.

The day I arrived President Jose Napoleon Duarte was speaking to a gathering of Salvadoran businessmen, begging them to co-operate with him in his efforts to cope with the situation . . . the situation being a failing economy, widespread disaffection, and a guerrilla war that has dragged on for over seven years. A week later the business people gave Duarte their answer: they boycotted the bi-annual international trade fair in the capital.

Chamber of Commerce President Victor Steiner accuses Duarte of socializing the economy, of killing free enterprise with high taxes, import controls and corrupt practices: "They have no respect whatsoever for the participation of the private sector in the economy."

Steiner is bitter about President Duarte. In the agrarian reform that

began in 1980 – and is plagued with problems – his wife's family lost all their holdings. The government expropriated their land in return for some cash and some bonds, but the bonds, says Steiner, are worthless, and the purchase price was too low. It was based on the value of the land as declared in the owner's 1975 and 1976 tax declarations. The peasants are equally disgruntled about land reform because it doesn't go far enough.

LAND REFORM HAS BEEN THE clarion call of all the revolutionary movements in the region for decades. In El Salvador the big landowners have been particularly successful in resisting it. In 1932 their response to a *campesino* revolt was the *matanza* – an army massacre of ten to twenty thousand peasants. By 1975, El Salvador had the highest ratio of landless families to total population in Latin America.

In 1980 initial land reform measures were carried out like this: The government bought a number of large farms. On a given day, on the designated farms, all the workers who were then living on the property became co-operative owners, who would then manage and run the farms and assign some of their earnings to the banks that held the mortgages on the property.

The result has been rocky ploughing so far. The owners feel aggrieved at the seizure of the farms. The farmers who worked the land but did not live on the farm feel cheated by the arbitrary fashion in which the cooperatives were established. And the farms lost all the managerial skills that had resided in the previous owners.

A US Agency for International

Development (AID) report points out that most of the co-operatives are not keeping up with mortgage payments, and that the government is behind on its debt payments to the previous landowners. Many of the expropriated lands are still the object of litigation. And many of them still suffer from raids by guerrillas, making them at best unprofitable and at worst totally uninhabitable. But providing encouragement and counsel to the land reform movement is one arm of the complex American strategy in El Salvador, evidence that simple gun-boat diplomacy has been replaced, in part, with more sophisticated action.

Two US AID workers, farmers from Iowa and Arkansas, accompanied me on a visit to one of the co-ops just outside and to the south of San Salvador. This farm is planted mainly in sugar cane and rice, with some beans and a few other food crops. It's one of the "prosperous" ones; clearly a showcase.

In the broiling heat of noon, there were still a handful of men cutting sugar cane, their arms scratched and blackened from the twenty-foot stalks that were falling under their machetes. The cane had been burned before cutting, explained one of the Americans. They shouldn't burn it, he said, because it loses a lot of its value if it is burned first, but it makes the cutting easier. And anyway, the price for sugar is so low that the stuff is practically worthless. Duarte has to subsidize the price of sugar; if he didn't, all the sugar cane properties would be bankrupt.

No one commented on the irony of a US government actively conspiring in the running of a col-

lective venture, controlled by the Salvadoran government, as part of an overall fight to ward off communism.

The afternoon of the farm visit we were back in the capital to witness a noisy student demonstration outside the US embassy. The US embassy in San Salvador looks more like a maximum security prison than an embassy, a towering structure with steel-plated walls, surrounded by another wall of concrete, topped at the corners by gun-towers.

The embassy is located in the centre of the city just a couple of blocks from the University of El Salvador, where the demonstrators assembled before marching off in full war-paint and masks. There were only a couple of hundred of them, out of a total university enrolment of 30,000, so it wasn't much of a turn-out. What it lacked in size, however, it made up in noise and rudeness. Armed with loud-speakers and spray cans, they shouted obscenities and painted slogans on the concrete wall: YANQUI GO HOME, and AMERICA IS SHIT.

THE US PRESENCE IN EL SALVADOR is a mixed blessing to say the least. When he was mayor of San Salvador, Jose Napoleon Duarte had harsh words to say about American policies in Central America. Now his tone has softened, as befits the recipient of nearly \$2 million a day in US aid: "I had made speeches in the National Press Club of Washington saying that historically the United States is living a democracy but it's exporting dictatorship. This