

# El Salvador: How not to have an election

by Shawn Houlihan

As the date draws nearer when Salvadoreans will go to the polls to vote for a constituent assembly, concern and debate grow within the international community about whether or not to even recognize the legitimacy of an election at this point in time.

The civilian-military junta of Napoleon Duarte has set March 28 as the date for elections to provide an assembly which would act as a "reviewer" of present government policies and prepare for presidential elections in March of '83. Eight political parties are running candidates but the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) opposition has boycotted the elections because they believe elections now would just be ignoring the fundamental problems that have resulted in the present violence and oppression in their country. They claim that "the so-called Constituent Assembly would be the symbol of the most disgraceful deception".

Official Canadian policy now stands at recognizing the outcome of the election, but turning down an offer to send observers. However, Maurice Dupras, chairman of the parliamentary sub-committee on Latin America, who has just returned from a fact-finding mission to El Salvador, says he would like to see the Canadian government try to influence the

United States government to change its policy of massive military aid and seek instead a negotiated settlement immediately after the election.

Among the observers was former External Affairs minister Flora MacDonald, who has said "...we should go a step further and say we are in no way supporting the election." She noted "There are a number of things that would seem to me to make the election so seriously in question, so illegitimate that one could not recognize or accept the outcome." Another member of the committee, Liberal MP Kenneth Robinson, feels Canada should support the elections no matter how flawed the process may be.

The view that the timing of the elections is poor was also expressed in a December '81 report of the Common's sub-committee on External Affairs and Defence: "We are acutely conscious that meaningful elections rest on the foundation of political rights that voters are able, securely and effectively, to exercise. These go to the heart of the legitimacy of elections... There is sufficient evidence that El Salvador will not be able to secure these conditions under present circumstances."

Since December, the inability to secure these conditions has worsened. The army and guerrillas fight intensely over control of

territory in this tiny country, and more and more violations of civil rights by the military groups are being reported in the press daily.

El Salvador has not been without election failures in its recent history. In 1972 Napoleon Duarte and Guillermo Ungo ran together under the banner of the United National Opposition. The election was hailed as a democratic triumph until the military sent Duarte into exile before he could be sworn into office. It appears ridiculous to some observers that it is Duarte who is now supposed to control those same forces which ousted him so easily in '72 and that it is those same military leaders who are now promising the people a free election.

It is against this background of deeply rooted mistrust that the FDR has insisted the election proposal is a total disregard for the internal political and socio-economic problems of El Salvador. Furthermore, they insist the election is simply a gimmick of the junta and its U.S. backers to window-dress a government they know will never result in a pluralistic democracy. Meanwhile, both sides strive for military victory in bloody battle where hundreds of civilians are killed monthly.

The FDR points out that in their opinion the realistic conditions under which elections are being offered are far from optimal.

- The same military who now offers "free elections" are those responsible for past systematic repression against all popular opposition to the regime.

- Fundamental civil liberties are non-existent since the government has declared the State of Siege and Martial Law since January '81. In particular all opposition news media has been removed and almost all opposition leaders have been sentenced to death by the Armed Forces.

- Col. Garcia, present Minister of Defence, was the key man responsible for blatant '72 election frauds.

- Even the Electoral Council has advised candidates to campaign "through paid advertisements in the press, radio, and TV and to remain outside the country".

The FDR has stated that they consider elections as part of the solution but insist the government must first seek a total political solution, through talks, so that an electrical process can result in a truly democratic system. As it stands there is no political infrastructure or precedent to suggest that an election now would result in anything but a continuation of the present

situation. The FDR has requested international mediation but either the junta, the U.S. State Department, or both, have refused to sit down at negotiation tables with the rebels. Their precondition is that the rebels lay down their arms. The FDR believes this would be suicidal.

While the U.S. State Department firmly backs going ahead with the elections, they are also about to send \$55 million more in military and economic aid to the junta. It is their opinion that the guerrillas are backed and supervised by outside forces - namely Cuba, the Soviet Union, Nicaragua and the PLO - and that as long as this is true they will not recognize the FDR. President Reagan has promised Duarte that he will not allow the junta to lose on the battlefield.

However, U.S. policy is not without its critics in the government. On Tuesday March 2, the U.S. House of Representatives voted an overwhelming 398 to 3 for President Reagan to press for "unconditional discussions" among major political factions after the election.

Meanwhile the Mexican and French governments have proposed a resolution condemning the election and urging governments to recognize the FDR as the legitimate representatives of the Salvadoreans in any negotiations.

(See petition, page 24)

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on

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Dunn Building  
Rm. 117

March 4  
8:00

(Reception to follow)

This lecture is part of a series of events the Chaplains are sponsoring to focus attention on the area of work and its importance to the people today and to the modern church. We feel that the Christian Gospel has an important contribution to make to the present discussion and for that reason are offering these events.

This lecture will be open to the public and all are invited to attend.

In conjunction with the lecture we will also present a student forum on **March 5th at 11:30 a.m.** in the **Green Room** of the S.U.B. to examine:

"The Right To Work and The Rights Of Work"

On the forum panel will be:

Archbishop Hayes  
Rev. Dr. Russel Hatton  
Blanche Potter

The Chaplains invite all students, faculty and staff to attend, with or without their lunch.

