

A Comparative Perspective of the Peace Process

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I. INTRODUCTION

Good morning everyone.

I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of this event for inviting me to present about a topic that I hold dear to my heart — my country, El Salvador. I work at the University for Peace on educational programmes but I come from El Salvador where I was born 68 years ago. All my life, I have been involved, not only in education, but in the effort of peace-building in my home country, which I love very much.

II. THE DEEP ROOTS OF THE EL SALVADOREAN CONFLICT

What I intend to talk about today is the long standing conflict and long standing struggle for democracy in El Salvador. Such a long struggle has led to social conflict, armed struggle, political demonstrations and a search for democracy and development. As you may know, there was a United Nations (UN) mediation that set out a peace process in El Salvador. The role of the UN in the settlement of such conflict is very well appreciated. They used all their efforts, including negotiation and dialogue, to settle the long standing conflict in El Salvador.

The conflict in my country was provoked by the lack of democracy and the lack of development. Precisely one month ago today, we had presidential elections and the candidate of the former leftist armed insurgency won the elections. The former leftist and armed insurgency became a legal and legitimate political party, the *Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN), because of the Peace Accords of 1992. It is this Peace Accord that ended the conflict in El Salvador. In my opinion, this victory has many meanings, not only for El Salvador, as it is the first time a leftist political

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group has won the presidential election, but for the region and the cause of peace building around the world.

With the 1992 signature of the Peace Accord, an internal armed conflict was settled by negotiations. It is important to know that if we had negotiations it is because we had conflict. And it is important to know and understand that we had a conflict because we had, I would say, a very repressive, undemocratic and elitist regime in El Salvador.

When the Peace Accord was finally signed, Mr. Alfredo Cristiani, then president of El Salvador and a signatory of the accord, delivered a speech. In that speech he said, “[t]he armed conflict we are ending today has deep roots.”¹ It was amazing to hear these words for the first time by one conspicuous representative of the political right in El Salvador. The very fact that the leader of the Right-wing Government said in a speech that the causes were deep was, for me, a very important turning point in the history of politics in El Salvador.

The victory of the Leftist Party in the presidential elections of 15 March 2009 represents the closing of a cycle that started 17 years ago when the warring parties of El Salvador signed the peace agreement through the mediation done by the UN.

What are the deep roots of the conflict? We have to briefly go back and be reminded of the conquest of the Spaniards and the three centuries of colonial rule in El Salvador to grasp the situation. Conquest and colonial rule are a permanent attack against humans and against liberty, which is essential for all human beings and is the most appreciated good we have in life. So, it is important to understand that the colonial period of our history has ingrained violence and gendered the culture of violence in the case of El Salvador.

Very early in our history, there were two elitist parties in El Salvador. On one side, there were the people who wanted to remain under colonial rule and the Crown. On the other side, although they had elitist conceptions of political affairs, there were people trying to consolidate independence.

In 1882, a powerful El Salvador President, Rafael Zaldívar, expropriated communal lands from the indigenous communities and low class peasants with the argument that the communal property was working against the progress of the economy. At the end of the 19th century El Salvador wanted to expand its tiny economy into the international trade and they wanted the land to plant and export coffee.

1. Alfredo Cristiani, President, El Salvador, Speech following the signing of the Peace Accord (Jan. 17, 1992).

In one instance of land reform, they confiscated and expropriated land in the hands of peasants and the indigenous. That reform was protested and the unrest provoked by the reform was either prevented or repressed. That was the beginning of the very peculiar security force that we have in El Salvador and was a determinant component of the deep roots of the conflict.

The Salvadoran elite became more powerful, increasing the amount of wealth in the hands of the elite. In the second decade of the 20th century there was a change of rulers in the Soviet Union: Vladimir Lenin died and Joseph Stalin became the premier leader. (I refer to the Soviet Union because Stalin wanted to expand the communist influence against Western powers by aligning the Soviet Union with Central American countries.) In the same decade, there was the collapse of the U.S. stock market. Through this collapse the economies of the countries of Central America and Latin America and the Third World were negatively affected.

In the Third World, we had a rise in unemployment, poverty, and social activism associated with the international communist movement. Long before the Cold War, El Salvador was part of the ideological and geopolitical confrontation between the Soviet Union and Western powers. These factors, combined with a lack of income, extreme poverty, and disdain for the ruling elites, provoked an indigenous peoples and peasant rebellion in January 1932. Of course, the political activists associated with the communist movement around the world became involved in this social organization and agitation.

The government in El Salvador reacted very violently, perhaps worse than the violence originated by the rebels, and killed thousands of people in two months. How many thousands? Let us suppose 20,000, so in a country with a population of around one million people that is nearly two per cent of the total population. If you compare this with other countries, you will understand the meaning of that conflict and the nature of such a massacre in the history of El Salvador. (For those interested in the massacre of 1932, there is a scholar from the United States named Thomas Anderson who wrote a book called *Matanza* (Slaughter), which is a very well documented book on the event.).

In 1941, the President of the U.S., Franklin Delano Roosevelt, delivered a famous speech about the four freedoms: speech, religion, fear, and want. They were the times of the World War II, when the so-called axis powers — Japan, Germany, and Italy — were confronted with the Allies, basically France, England and other European countries and lastly, U.S. It was a very peculiar coincidence that the Western Capitalistic Powers, Hitler and his allies, were allied with the Soviet Union in order to defeat the common enemy. In this manner, it was normal in those times to see, in Central American countries, progressive people with pro-leftist ideas making juncture alliances with the conservative sector, normally allied to U.S.

So, we have in the decade of the forties in El Salvador and Central America a political opening as the political sectors started talking about freedom. This sparked an insurgence of the number of people who accepted ideological differences and, in 1944, some people started a push in Central America to replace all very conservative dictatorships, especially in El Salvador and Guatemala.

These openings lasted a few months and then we were sucked into the Cold War following the Second World War. Many other events occurred in El Salvador and the military dictatorship consolidated itself. The model that they followed was very simple: the economic elites used military rule and a Catholic hierarchy to control while aligning with the Government of the U.S. All together this became a part of the fight against the Soviet Union and the spread of international Communism. In El Salvador, as a result, a political model was developed: repression, social exclusion, and economic concentration of wealth. The fields were fertile for seeds of social unrest.

III. CONCLUSION

As one consequence, we had a violent civil war. As the Cold War drew to a close and the global political climate was improving, our civil war still existed but reached a stalemate in the late 80's. Following this stalemate we had a vision to settle the conflict through negotiation with the mediation of the UN and, thankfully, they were successful.

With regard the recent election as a turning point in the history of El Salvador, the closing of a cycle that started in 1992 with the signing of the UN mediated Peace Accord. Such accords opened the possibility for political freedom and the possibility to debate ideas instead of killing the political adversary. The victory of the Leftist former armed insurgency, now a legal and legitimate political party, represents a big step forward in the democracy building process started in 1992.

Thank you very much.