

(IPS) - As the campaign gets underway, the left-wing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) is the favourite in the polls for El Salvador's March 2009 presidential elections.

A win for the FMLN would be historical in a country traditionally governed by the right, analysts point out.

Since this Central American country declared its independence from Spain in the 19th century, it has been governed by conservatives, economic liberals or military dictatorships (from 1931 to 1979).

And since 1989, it has been ruled by the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA).

Christian Democratic and Social Democratic parties won the presidential elections in 1972 and 1977, but the military resorted to fraud and repression of opponents, forcing many of them into exile.

In 1980, civil war broke out, with the leftist FMLN guerrillas fighting government forces. The insurgent group became a political party after a peace agreement was signed in 1992.

Today, the party's presidential candidate, Mauricio Funes, is leading the polls by a margin of two to 15 percentage points over his main rival, ARENA's Rodrigo Ávila.

Although the campaign did not actually begin until Friday, Nov. 14, political scientist Napoleón Campos told IPS that the Supreme Electoral Court has allowed the parties to informally campaign for nearly two years.

Under the country's electoral laws, campaigns can only last four months in the case of presidential elections, two months in the case of parliamentary elections, and one month for municipal elections.

For the first time ever, the FMLN -- the main opposition party -- stands a real chance of winning the presidency, after four unsuccessful attempts since 1994.

But despite the natural wear and tear suffered by ARENA after nearly 20 years in power, and the impact of the current international financial crisis, Campos said the scenario could change from here to Mar. 15.

Local media outlets have estimated that the country's six political parties will spend a combined total of 30 million dollars in the campaign. The parties taking part in the elections, besides the FMLN and ARENA, are the Christian Democratic Party, the National Reconciliation Party, Democratic Change and the Democratic Revolutionary Front.

The FMLN is also ahead in the polls for the Jan. 18 legislative and municipal elections.

Nelson Zárata, director of the Centre for Research on Public Opinion (CIOP), whose latest poll found that Funes is 15 points ahead of Ávila, told IPS that the leftist candidate has generated "a wave of credibility that is drawing people to vote for the FMLN" at all levels, not only in the presidential elections.

Funes, a popular journalist and talk-show host, did not even actually belong to the FMLN until August, which in the view of analysts puts him in a position to draw voters who would not have cast their ballots for one of the party's long-time leaders.

The FMLN kicked off its campaign with a caravan of hundreds of cars that set out from San Salvador on Saturday with Funes at its head. They were joined by more and more cars until thousands were driving from city to city around the country.

The aim of the caravan, said the head of the party, Medardo González, is to awaken people's "confidence" in the change that the FMLN proposes to bring to the country.

ARENA's campaign opened, as always, in the western city of Izalco, which is a symbol for the governing party. In 1932, an estimated 30,000 indigenous peasants were slaughtered there by the anti-communist dictatorship of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, who took power in a January

El Salvador: FMLN Starts Out Ahead

Written by Raúl Gutiérrez

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1931 military coup.