UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA

GRADUATE INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS IN CENTRAL AMERICA:

THE CASES OF NICARAGUA AND EL SALVADOR

DISSERTATION

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the

Master in International Studies – MIS

Specialization: International History and Politics

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Geneva

2008

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I want to thank my supervisor Jussi Hanhimäki who provided guidance and encouragement from the beginning.

I would also like to extend a warm word of gratitude to Susan Hyde, who accepted to be my second reader in spite of her numerous research and teaching duties at Yale University.

I received valuable feedback on a prior version of this thesis and research guidance from Cynthia Arnson (Wilson Center), John Booth (University of North Texas), Francesco Manca (United Nations), and Charles Call (American University).

I owe special thanks to Richard Stahler-Sholk (Eastern Michigan University) and Patricia Weiss Fagen (Georgetown University) who read the entire draft -despite the short notice- and provided constructive comments that led to improvements in the final result.

Academic projects of this kind need financial as well as intellectual nourishment. I thank the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies for the full scholarship granted to me, which allowed me to devote all my efforts to my research in the second semester of the academic year 2007-2008.

Finally, I am indebted to Jennifer Leland (IHEID) with whom I had many long discussions over the substance of this work. She always listened carefully and provided constructive feedback. She also read the entire manuscript and helped me to improve the style and the language.

Needless to say, any remaining errors of form, fact, or interpretation belong to me alone.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANSP	National Public Security Academy (El Salvador)
ARENA	National Republican Alliance Party (El Salvador)
COPAZ	National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (El Salvador)
CIAV	International Support and Verification Commission
CSE	Supreme Electoral Council (Nicaragua)
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Salvador)
FSLN	Sandinista National Liberation Front (Nicaragua)
ICJ	International Court of Justice
OAS	Organization of American States
ONUCA	United Nations Observer Group in Central America
ONUSAL	United Nations Observer Group in El Salvador
ONUVEN	United Nations Observer Mission for Verification of the Electoral Process in Nicaragua
PAT	Auxiliary Transitory Police (El Salvador)
PN	National Police (El Salvador, dissolved in 1995)
PNC	National Civilian Police (El Salvador)
TSE	Supreme Electoral Tribunal (El Salvador)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNO	National Opposition Union (Nicaragua)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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Abstract

This study argues against one of the premises of the transition paradigm, viz. that it is fruitless to look for international factors contributing to the collapse of authoritarian regimes. On the contrary, we show that internal dynamics alone are insufficient to explain democratic transitions in Central America, and we present the numerous international factors that contributed to regime change.

Our work uses cases studies of two democratic transitions in Central America that took place at the beginning of the 1990s: Nicaragua and El Salvador. We show that the international dimensions of the democratic transitions in these two countries are visible at every stage of the process.

A regional peace initiative (the negotiating process of Esquipulas) put forth the idea that democratization was the solution to the civil wars in the region. Geopolitical shifts (the end of the Cold War and the arrival to power of pragmatic leaders in the United States and the Soviet Union) allowed the Esquipulas process to go forward, which was essential for democratization in Nicaragua.

Two international organizations (the UN and the OAS) contributed to peace processes and democratic transitions in Central America by carrying out different roles that include mediation during the peace talks and careful supervision of the implementation of the peace agreements.

Finally, our work presents the key role played by a host of international organizations and international NGOs during the first democratic elections after the civil wars. The international observation kept these electoral processes on track despite numerous problems and irregularities and contributed, by the same token, to the overall success of the democratic transition.

Introduction

In the 1980s the Central American region was in a constant state of turmoil. Three countries suffered from bloody civil wars (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala) whose negative effects (fleeing of refugees, economic crisis) spilled over the entire isthmus.

In Nicaragua, a civil conflict erupted between the leftist regime governed by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) and the US funded Contras. In the Salvadoran civil war, the government (allied with the armed forces) was opposed to a left-wing guerrilla: the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN). The consequences of the civil wars were devastating for both countries. Nicaragua suffered the most from the Central American crisis. As a result of the civil war in this country, there were over 30,000 casualties, an enormous inflation rate at the end of the 1980s (36,000% in 1988), and a reduction of the GDP per capita by one-half in the decade (Pastor 1991: 4). In the same vein, in El Salvador there were approximately 75,000 dead and one-quarter of the population was displaced during the civil conflict. Moreover, the war created economic ruin. The GDP per capita and the real minimum wages decreased drastically, and the physical destruction of infrastructure amounted to $1.5 billion (Karl 1992: 150-151, Weiss Fagen 1996: 215-216).

Despite the holding of elections in both countries in the 1980s, we cannot consider these countries democratic during this period, lest we fall in the fallacy of "electoralism" (Karl 1986). On the one hand, large sectors of the population were not represented because the opposition parties did not participate in the contests, boycotting them either to delegitimize the regime in place (Nicaragua) or out of fear (El Salvador). These "demonstration elections" were held by the Central American regimes only to gain legitimacy in the international arena (Herman and Brodhead

1984). On the other hand, the civil wars impeded the emergence of a fully fledged democracy. Some of the "procedural minimal" conditions for a modern democracy (or polyarchy) as identified by Robert Dahl (1972) were conspicuously absent in Central America during the 1980s. For instance, freedom of expression was jeopardized and political dissent could lead to severe punishment including death (e.g. death squadrons in El Salvador). Moreover, the repression and the human rights violations emerging from both sides (guerrillas and governments) hampered the creation of independent associations or interest groups and undermined the activities of those already existing. To sum up, under these façade democracies only one side of the political spectrum was represented in the elections and civil society was almost inexistent.

In this work, I will look into the factors that made possible democratization in Nicaragua and El Salvador in a brief lapse of time (1987-1994). Special attention will be paid to the international dimensions of democratization, which are critical to understand the political processes in the two countries under study.

Democracy is here defined as a "system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their *elected* representatives" (Schmitter and Karl 1991: 76 -emphasis added-). Free and fair elections are thus a key element of democracy. Four of the "procedural minimal" conditions advanced by Dahl (1972) concern elections:

1) control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected officials
2) elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections
3) practically all adults have the right to vote in the election of officials

4) practically all adults have the right to run for elective offices in the government

Although we acknowledge that democracy is much more than elections (even if they are freely and fairly conducted) this study will focus on the transition from "demonstration elections" to democratic elections in Nicaragua and El Salvador. We will also look into the peace and reconciliation processes in both countries (demobilization of the guerrilla movements, reduction in the size of the army) because these processes are closely associated with the transition to democracy in Central America. However, the consolidation of democracy and the gradual re-emergence of civil society are beyond the scope of this study.

The mainstream theoretical framework to study the passage from an authoritarian regime to a democracy is the so-called "transition paradigm" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). The transition is presented by this strand of literature as a contingent, uncertain process in which political actors (moderate representatives of the authoritarian regime and of the political opposition) struggle to define the rules and procedures that the political game will follow in the future. The origins of a democratic transition vary from case to case but, according to this paradigm, "the reasons for launching a transition can be found predominantly in domestic, internal factors (…) [and it is] fruitless to search for some international factor or context which can reliably compel authoritarian rulers to experiment with liberalization, much less which can predictably cause their regimes to collapse" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 18).

Our study will show that this theoretical framework is inadequate to make sense of the democratic transition in Central America. The democratization in Nicaragua and El

Salvador is a direct result of the changing geopolitical situation and of the intervention of international actors in every stage of the process. We will explore the international dimensions of democratization in these two countries from the beginning of the transition in 1987 with the signature of the Esquipulas Accord until the successful democratic elections held in 1990 in Nicaragua[1] and in 1994 in El Salvador. The role of external actors was decisive to keep the transition alive and to assure the fairness of the first democratic elections.

We do not intend to deny the internal dynamics[2] that drove democratization in Central America nor the considerable role of domestic actors at key moments during the transition.[3] Moreover, it is difficult to consider the external and internal factors in isolation, since both variables are of course intertwined. However, we will focus here on the external factors that severely constrained the manoeuvrability of the political elites in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

In this work, I first present the regional initiatives (Esquipulas process) and the geopolitical shifts (end of the Cold War) which allowed more pragmatic leaders in the United States and the Soviet Union to gradually disengage from Central America, paving the way for democratization in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Chapter 2 presents the positive contribution of international organizations to democratic transition in Central America. In Nicaragua, the UN and the OAS helped keep the peace process on track after the 1990 elections. In El Salvador, the UN

[1] In Nicaragua, the repatriation and demobilization of the Contras came after the 1990 elections. We will also study this part of the peace process, which received a lot of external support, because it is essential to understand Nicaragua's transition to democracy.

[2] Wood (2001 and 2005: 179-188) focuses more on the internal dynamics that lay at the roots of the democratization in El Salvador (mobilization by the economically and socially marginalized, a change in the attitudes of the elites due to socio-economic structural transformations). My study does not aim to reject her work, but to complement it with an analysis of the international variables that also intervened.

[3] For instance, the acceptance by the Sandinista leader Ortega of his defeat in the 1990 presidential elections, as well as the outstretched hand offered by Violeta Chamorro to the FSLN after the UNO victory, were essential to allow the democratic transition to go forward in Nicaragua.

mediated peace talks and then played a key role during the implementation process through the presence of ONUSAL.

Finally, chapter 3 broadly discusses the role of international observers during the first democratic elections after a civil war, and then provides a more detailed analysis of the pivotal elections in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Chapter 1
Regional Diplomacy and Geopolitical Shifts: the Breaking of the Stalemate

1.1 The Reagan Administration Intransigency and the Failure of Contadora

The conflicts in Central America were all linked to internal socio-economic and political factors. Poverty and inequality, combined with authoritarian regimes associated with the economic elites and the armed forces, propelled in the end of the 1970s the strengthening of leftist guerrillas. The FSLN came to power in 1979 in alliance with other political forces opposed to the Somoza dictatorship. The FMLN initiated in El Salvador an eleven-year long civil war with the same objective (Bataillon 2003, Booth 1991, Lafeber 1984, Montgomery 1995a, Torres-Rivas 1997). Despite the evident internal origins of the civil wars, the Reagan administration persisted in its belief that Central America was a theater of the Cold War. It is noteworthy that US policies toward Latin America were driven by Cold War ideology, at least since the 1960s.[4] In fact, the Cuban revolution and the alliance of Castro's regime with the Soviet Union created a trauma in the United States and influenced the way Washington drafted its Latin American policies. A perceived threat of communism in the Western Hemisphere was enough, in the eyes of the US administrations during the Cold War, to launch actions that were illogical, excessive

[4] I subscribe to Michael Hunt's useful definition of ideology: "an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality" (Hunt 2004: 222).

and very costly[5] (Domínguez 1999: 41-45). The Reagan administration was even more obsessed with the possibility of a second Cuba than its predecessors. Reagan had a Manichean vision of Central American realities and saw the Sandinista victory and the FMLN challenge as evidence of the global expansion of Communism. The Reagan administration considered that the Central American revolutions were orchestrated by the Soviet Union and Cuba, posing an important threat to the national security of the United States because they took place in the American "backyard" (Lafeber 1984, Leogrande 2000).

This reading of the problems of the isthmus through Cold War lenses allowed only one solution, viz. the military aid to the forces fighting for "freedom" and capable of containing the communist threat. The United States trained and funded the Nicaraguan Contras, who were based in the territory of one of the US allies in the region: Honduras. El Salvador also received large amounts of military aid from the United States to fight the FMLN.

The policies adopted by the Reagan administration polarized the political forces in Nicaragua and El Salvador, creating the conditions for an escalation in the military confrontation. They were also counterproductive because the Sandinista regime and the FMLN were forced to obtain military aid from the Soviet Union and Cuba (Ryan 1995).

The Reagan administration's policies had a negative impact in another important way: they presented an obstacle to any significant negotiation to bring an end to the armed struggles.

The most important of the diplomatic attempts to solve the conflict in the beginning of the 1980s was the Contadora process. It was launched by the foreign ministers of

[5] For instance, the military intervention in the Dominican Republic under Lyndon Johnson (1965) or the overt and covert policies directed against the democratically elected President of Chile Salvador Allende under Richard Nixon (1970-1973).

Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Panama. The dialogue between the Central American states and the collective mediator focused largely on interstate security issues. The goals of Contadora were the control of arms supplies, the prohibition of activities destabilizing neighboring states and the elimination of the US military presence. The Reagan administration supported publicly the Contadora process but undermined it by continuing its military aid to the Contras. The United States feared that a negotiated solution could legitimate the Sandinista regime that they wanted to eliminate. The other countries in the region also preferred to put an end to the Sandinista experience. The US military aid to countries like Honduras or El Salvador allowed them to be less concerned with the successful outcome of the negotiations (Dunkerley 1994, Ryan 1995).

The Soviet policies toward Central America also constituted a destabilizing factor in the region. During the Brezhnev years, Soviet policies followed a "revolutionary model strategy" that strongly supported radical or Marxist-inclined states or national liberation movements in the Third World. In 1979, the Soviet Union greeted the success of the Sandinista revolution and rapidly recognized the new regime. Military assistance to the Sandinista regime was readily available from the USSR and its allies. Soviet economic aid and trade between the USSR and Nicaragua gradually increased from 1980 to 1985. The Sandinista victory was seen by the Soviet Union as an opportunity to extend the Soviet influence in the American backyard (Adams 1992: 8-10). Nonetheless, the Soviet Union never considered the possibility of establishing a military base in Central America and acted cautiously in the region through different surrogates (mainly Cuba). The Soviet officials were as concerned as Reagan with the perspective of another Cuba. (Ryan 1995).

It is evident that under these geopolitical conditions the pacification and the democratization of Nicaragua and El Salvador were impossible.

1.2 The Esquipulas Process

The Esquipulas process consisted of a series of regional diplomatic efforts led by the President of Costa Rica Oscar Arias after the blatant failure of the Contadora mediation process. The reasons for this failure are manifold. First of all, the collective mediator failed to provide strong and definite leadership during the negotiations because each country had its own objectives. Secondly, the Contadora Group had a complex agenda and wanted to deal with numerous problems in a single document. As a result, each negotiation phase led to bitter confrontation, and little progress was made in the peace process. Moreover, the negotiations focused largely on security issues[6], thereby ignoring the internal political and social matters that were at the roots of the Central American turmoil. Finally, as already stated, the militaristic approach of the Reagan administration posed an obstacle to the success of this diplomatic initiative (Arias 1997: 156-157, Dunkerley 1994: 44).

In 1986, the Esquipulas process began in earnest and represented the first Central American initiative to solve the Central American conflict. Dunkerley (1994: 40-41) presents this diplomatic process as a break with the "geographical fatalism", understood as a passive acceptance by the Central American governments of the militaristic and Manichean vision of the United States. The Esquipulas process promoted dialogue as a method of conflict resolution. Each advance in the peace process was negotiated in summits where the presidents of all the Central American

[6] For example: control of arms supplies, removal of foreign advisers, creation of demilitarized zones, prohibition of activities destabilizing neighbouring states.

countries were present (Arias 1997: 154). The dialogue between governments and guerrillas in each country was also promoted as part of this negotiating process. In fact, the focus shifted from interstate relations and security issues to establishing a linkage between democratization and the reduction of external intervention. Oscar Arias believed that establishing democratic and pluralistic regimes in all the Central American countries (and especially in Nicaragua) was a precondition to a peaceful solution to the Central American civil conflicts, which in turn would appease the interstate tensions in the region. The importance of the ideological starting point of the Esquipulas process (i.e. the belief that democracy was the foundation for peace and development) to understand the democratization in Central America cannot be overemphasized (Dunkerley 1994: 45).

One of the reasons that can explain the progresses made within the Esquipulas framework is that the different agreements reached were not very specific or demanding. The Central American governments agreed on certain basic principles and in a series of general goals, but then were allowed the necessary space to implement the accords in the way that best corresponded to their reality (Oliver 1999: 161-162).

A series of deep reasons lay at the roots of the Esquipulas process. First and foremost, the civil wars provoked an economic disaster. In a region as interdependent as Central America, the decrease in the volume of trade had a negative economic impact in all the countries of the region. Moreover, the civil conflicts claimed an enormous percentage of the national budget and deteriorated the productive capacity in countries like Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador.[7]

Another factor in the origins of the Esquipulas process was the problem of displaced persons affecting all counties in the region. The fear of violence, combined with the

[7] For example, see Montgomery (1995a: 190-191) for a presentation of the disastrous situation of the economy in El Salvador in the mid-1980s.

economic crisis, provoked a massive refugee flow that created instability in the Central American countries (even those not suffering from a civil war). For instance, 100,000 undocumented inhabitants threatened the tranquillity of Costa Rica, which was the only truly democratic state in the region (Dunkerley 1994: 49). Honduras was also enormously affected by the refugee problem during the 1980s. Thousands of refugees fled Nicaragua when the Sandinistas took power in 1979, and Honduras is one of the countries that suffered most from this refugee flow.[8] Similarly, the disputed border between Honduras and El Salvador served as a rearguard for the Salvadoran guerrilla (d'Ans 1997: 278).

The last reason Central American countries had to initiate this diplomatic process was the threatening possibility of a generalized and interstate war that no one wanted. The Central American governments feared that if the internal conflicts continued to spill over into the other states of the region, an interstate war with heightened participation of the two superpowers could materialize, with potentially devastating consequences for the whole region (Oliver 1999: 149).

All of these factors were activated in 1986 by three important shifts allowing for a new process of negotiations to start. These shifts can be considered the immediate causes of the Esquipulas process.

The first change concerned the arrival to power of three new presidents in Costa Rica (Oscar Arias), Guatemala (Vinicio Cerezo) and Honduras (José Azcona). These new leaders proved to be more pragmatic in their dealings with Nicaragua and more committed to a negotiated solution.

The second shift occurred in the arena of international law. In June 1986, the ICJ ruled against the United States and in favor of Nicaragua. The ICJ found that the

[8] It is estimated that 43,000 Nicaraguan refugees and displaced persons lived in Honduras in 1987 (Weiss Fagen 1988: 75-76).

United States had violated international law by mining Nicaraguan harbors and by supporting the Contras in their war against the Nicaraguan government (ICJ 1986). The ICJ decision gave a new diplomatic weapon to the Sandinista regime, which now threatened to apply the same arguments in cases against Costa Rica and Honduras. This probably led the Central American presidents to redefine their position on Nicaragua.

The most important shift had to do with the temporary blow to the US leadership in the region after the Iran-Contra scandal. The rift between Congress and the Executive, and the loss of prestige of the Reagan administration created a vacuum that was occupied by the new president of Costa Rica Oscar Arias.

The Esquipulas process started in May 1986 when the Central American presidents met and agreed to institutionalize the presidential meetings and advocate democratization in the isthmus. The Reagan administration paid lip service to this new diplomatic initiative but rapidly started to press Costa Rica and its other allies in the region to abandon the Esquipulas process. Oscar Arias also wanted to remove the Sandinistas from power in order to defend Costa Rica's democracy and avoid militarizing the country (Oliver 1999: 154).[9] But he perceived the intervention of the United States (and the USSR) in the region as a factor exacerbating the internal conflicts in Nicaragua and El Salvador, instead of contributing to a peaceful and durable solution. Arias was able to convince other Central American governments to distance themselves from the militaristic approach of the Reagan administration, which paved the way for the signature of the Esquipulas II peace accord (August 1987). This short document addressed the region's problems in a way that was acceptable to the governments of all countries involved. The major focus of the

[9] Costa Rica abolished its armed forces in 1948.

accord was on the democratization of the Central American states. A pluralist and democratic regime was seen as a necessary step to reach national reconciliation. The agreement also reassessed the prohibition on aid to irregular forces by external actors. This was an important concession to Nicaragua because the Contras had camps in other countries (especially Honduras), which would have to be closed. However, the accord didn't prohibit the presence of foreign militaries in Central America, which allowed El Salvador to maintain its large contingent of US military advisers in their fight against the FMLN. Another major innovation of the agreement was that it called for international verification and follow-up. This stipulation was very important because it paved the way for the participation of the UN and the OAS in the peace processes in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The promises made within the framework of Esquipulas were slow to materialize, and the Reagan administration encouraged the Central American presidents to accuse the Sandinista regime of non compliance with the accord, although most observers agreed that Nicaragua was implementing more of the measures required than any other state in Central America. In fact, at the beginning the Esquipulas process focused largely on finding a solution to the Nicaraguan conflict, mostly because other Central American governments felt threatened by the Sandinista regime. But as Nicaragua was isolated in the region and the Esquipulas process seemed to offer the only possibility to stop the US indirect military intervention in this country, the Sandinista leaders decided to make an important number of unilateral concessions. For example, in the Alajuela summit (January 1988) Ortega accepted to lift the state of emergency and to release political prisoners. He also committed to hold direct talks with the Contras. This dialogue between the government and the insurgents led to the Sapoá agreement, in which the Contras accepted a cease-fire and the government committed

to conducting free elections that would allow the Contras to reintegrate the formal political life in Nicaragua. This agreement probably allowed the Esquipulas process to survive in 1988 despite the efforts of the Reagan administration to derail it.

Under different geopolitical conditions[10] during the Tesoro Beach presidential summit (February 1989), a major breakthrough was achieved. Ortega announced his decision to advance the Nicaraguan elections to February 1990 and to invite international observers to monitor the fairness of the electoral process, which led to the creation of the United Nations Observer Mission for the Verification of the Elections of Nicaragua (ONUVEN). The Central American governments also agreed to develop a plan for the demobilization and the repatriation of the Nicaraguan Contras located in Honduras. Finally, a call was made for the involvement of the UN in overseeing the border between Honduras and Nicaragua during the process of demobilization.

In the Tela presidential summit (August 1989), the Central American presidents recognized the efforts made by the Sandinista regime to comply with their previous commitments, and called for the final demobilization of the Contras by the end of 1989, and requested again the assistance of the UN and the OAS during the demobilization. This call opened the way to the establishment of the International Support and Verification Commission (CIAV) to observe demobilization, disarmament, the dismantling of camps, and humanitarian aid.

The objectives of the Tela agreement were not achieved because the Bush administration continued to support the Contras until the Nicaraguan elections in February 1990. Overall, however, the Esquipulas process has largely contributed to the peace process and to the democratic transition in Nicaragua. The momentum for peaceful transformation was maintained between 1987 and 1990 because of the

[10] The Bush administration was already in power in the United States. See below (section 1.3).

systematic dialogue between the Central American presidents. The guiding principle of Esquipulas (i.e. the idea that peace, democracy, and development are inseparable) was accepted by all the governments in the region and led to democratic elections in Nicaragua. The major international mechanisms that were created to supervise the transition to peace and democracy in Nicaragua (ONUVEN, CIAV) were also born out of the Esquipulas negotiations. Finally, the Esquipulas process was also indirectly helpful for solving the other civil conflicts in the region. In fact, democratization and pacification in other parts of Central America (El Salvador and Guatemala) were contingent on the success of the democratic transition in Nicaragua.[11]

1.3 The Pragmatic Turn: Bush and Gorbachev

The access to power of a more pragmatic president in the United States gave a new boost to the negotiations. George Bush had the same ultimate objective as Reagan: the overthrow of the Sandinistas. He thus encouraged the continuation of diplomatic and economic pressures on Nicaragua. Nonetheless, the Bush administration differed significantly from the Reagan administration in that it was ready to co-exist with the Sandinistas if the FSLN complied with its commitments under the Esquipulas agreements: i.e. free elections and a stop in the delivery of aid to the Salvadoran guerrilla (Leogrande 1990: 599).

The Nicaraguan imbroglio has been described as "the most divisive issue in American foreign affairs since the Vietnam War" (Uhlig 1991: 103) and as a "slow motion Bay of Pigs" (Lowenthal 1990: 28). In fact, the Central American policies of the Reagan administration were extremely controversial at home, and seriously harmed inter-

[11] The last pages draw largely on Arias (1997: 148-155) and Oliver (1999: 153-158).

American relations. The more pragmatic approach of the Bush administration to Central American problems sought to solve those problems. On the one hand, Bush attributed much less importance to Central America than Reagan. He perceived the region as a "troublesome bequest of his predecessor" (Leogrande 1990: 620) and wanted to remove the conflicts in Central America from the top of the agenda in order to concentrate on more important matters in Latin America (e.g. crucial hemispheric issues like debt relief, drug trafficking, and support for fragile democracies). To achieve its objectives in those areas, Washington needed to change substantially its ideological approach to the Central American problems in order to improve its relations with the other countries in the Western hemisphere (Fauriol 1989/1990, Lowenthal 1990).

On the other hand, one of the main objectives of the Bush administration was to restore bipartisanship in foreign policy after the fratricide that characterized the Reagan period. Secretary of State James Baker knew that Central America was a politically dangerous issue and realistically assessed that the possibility of obtaining aid for the Contras from Congress was meagre. He thus sought a bipartisan approach to the Central American problem. The negotiation process initiated by the Central American governments created an opportunity for the new administration to reevaluate US policies toward Nicaragua. According to Baker, the bipartisan approach did not intend to short-circuit Esquipulas II, but to complement the regional efforts at peace and democratization (Rubin 1990: 159-160). After long negotiations, a middle ground was negotiated, and the bipartisan accord was announced on March 1989. Both the Republicans and the Democrats made concessions to reach this agreement. The Democrats accepted the continuation of the "humanitarian aid" to the Contras until the holding of free elections in Nicaragua. The Republicans, however, accepted

to support the Esquipulas efforts and to respect the results of the 1990 elections (even in the case of a Sandinista victory) if they were fairly conducted. Washington thus finally gave diplomacy a chance. It is clear that this pragmatic approach allowed the Esquipulas process to go forward despite the continuation of the "humanitarian aid" to the Contras (Baker 1995, Pastor 1991: 9-10). The Bush administration objective was to secure the success of Esquipulas and the holding of the presidential elections in Nicaragua on schedule by keeping the Contras intact as a credible deterrent. It is difficult to know whether US aid to the Contras during the last months before the election had a positive or a negative impact. However, the more flexible attitude in Washington was critical for allowing the Esquipulas process to go forward.

Despite the more pragmatic attitude adopted by the Bush administration toward Nicaragua which contributed to the democratic transition in this country, it is undeniable that Washington was biased during the 1990 elections. During the electoral process, the Bush administration provided overt and covert economic and political support to the UNO -National Opposition Union- coalition (LASA 1990). Washington was instrumental in keeping the fragile coalition together and funnelled funds for the UNO campaign through different surrogates (Robinson 1992). However, O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 62) argue that "for a transition to political democracy to be viable in the long run, founding elections […] cannot be too accurate or representative of the actual distribution of voter preferences. Put in a nutshell, parties of the Right-Center and Right must be "helped" to do well, and parties of the Left-Center and Left should not win by an overwhelming majority". In fact, if the interests of the socio-economic elites and of the armed forces are not represented by the winning party, those actors may abandon the electoral game in the future and choose a strategy of antidemocratic destabilization. It is rather paradoxical, then, that even the

illegal and condemnable intervention of the United States in the internal politics of Nicaragua during the electoral process may have had a positive impact in the transition to democracy in this Central American country.

The Bush administration gradually changed its policy toward El Salvador too. After the November 1989 massacres of six Jesuit priests by the armed forces, aid to the Salvadoran army was made dependent on the human rights record of the regime and of the pursuit of negotiations with the FMLN. At first, the Bush administration defended publicly the Cristiani government and made the FMLN responsible for all the violence taking place in El Salvador, but Congress was shocked by the murder of the Jesuits. Although the House and the Senate did not take any immediate punitive action, the Congressional Democrats started to push for a definitive stop to military aid to El Salvador. Finally, in October 1990, Congress cut military aid in half.[12] However, the Bush administration was authorized to restore the rest of the military aid if the FMLN abandoned the negotiating table or launched a military offensive. With this vote, Congress intended thus to press both sides into serious negotiations. Some high-ranked officials in Washington were also shaken by the November events. Moreover, the State Department still wanted to avoid putting forward policies that would be divisive and conflictive at home. As a result, the Bush administration became much more committed to successful talks between the Cristiani government and the FMLN as a way out of the Salvadoran imbroglio, and the United States supported publicly the resumption of negotiations mediated by the United Nations (Leogrande 1990: 611-613, Munck 1993: 81-82). More fundamentally, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War the Bush administration was less interested in supporting rightist regimes in Central America, and was much more

[12] The Congress voted an aid package of $42.5 millions instead of the $85 million demanded by the Bush administration.

favorable to direct negotiations between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN (Weiss Fagen 1996: 217). Washington also contributed to the success of the peace process after the signature of the peace agreement (January 1992). For instance, in November 1992, the US Joint Chief of Staff (Colin Powell) was sent to El Salvador to press the Salvadoran Army into accepting the "purification" demanded by the Ad Hoc Commission created as a result of the Peace Agreement. This US intervention was essential to avert a major crisis, which could have derailed the peace process and the democratic transition (Munck 1993: 84-86).

The Soviet Union also adopted a more flexible position toward Central America from the mid-1980s onwards. The arrival to power of Gorbachev brought about fundamental changes in Soviet foreign policy, which had an impact on the Central American playground. The new Soviet leader gradually put an end to the revolutionary thrust in foreign policy. Under the framework of the "new political thinking", Gorbachev sought more cooperative relations with the United States. This was partly linked to the perceived danger of the atomic age in international relations. As an article in *Pravda* pointed out, "refraining from the export of revolution is an imperative of nuclear age". The new foreign policy doctrine also stressed the necessity of cooperation with capitalist states in an interdependent world. Gorbachev's new thinking in foreign policy was characterized by moderation and a rejection of adventurism. Moreover, the changes in the Soviet Union and the economic crisis facing the country forced Gorbachev to disengage from costly national liberation struggles in Central America and elsewhere. Furthermore, the Soviet Union did not want the issue of the Central American conflicts to interfere with the improvement of

East-West relations.[13] As a result, direct military aid to the Sandinistas was cut in 1988 and the Soviet Union announced that it supported the Esquipulas agreements and would press the Sandinista government to accept the electoral outcome of the 1990 presidential elections (Adams 1992, Cerdas Cruz 1989, Leogrande 1990: 603).

In addition to the cut in military aid, Soviet leaders made clear to the Nicaraguan government that they had their own strategic interests, and that support to the Sandinista revolution was not one of their priorities. This revelation was felt as a big disillusionment by the Sandinista leaders. When the Esquipulas negotiations were at an advanced stage, Kasimirov (the official responsible for the Americas in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) visited Nicaragua and urged the Sandinista leaders to reach an agreement with the Contras to end the civil war in order to find a *modus vivendi* with the United States and obtain economic aid from European countries. Kasimirov made clear that the Soviet Union was no longer in a position to bring political and economic support to the Sandinista cause (Ramírez 1999: 148-150). The unilateral concessions made by the Nicaraguan government during the Esquipulas process are certainly linked to this loss of support from the Soviet Union.

The attitude of the Soviet Union toward El Salvador also changed noticeably in the late 1980s, paving the way for a negotiated agreement between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN.

During the 1980s, Moscow funnelled military supplies to the FMLN through its surrogates (Cuba and Nicaragua). This military aid allowed the leftist guerrillas to maintain enough military strength to vie with the US-funded Salvadoran armed forces. The Soviet Union also had close political ties with the PCES.

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[13] The Bush administration made clear to the Soviet Union that warmer East-West relations were contingent on Soviet support to the peace process and to free and fair elections in Nicaragua (Baker 1995: 59).

However, from 1988 onwards, the Soviet Union sought to implement its "new political thinking" in El Salvador. For example, Moscow admonished the FMLN for attacking polling places during the 1988 elections. The Soviet Union also urged the Sandinista government to stop sending arms to the Salvadoran guerrillas. In 1990, Moscow made clear to the FMLN that it favored serious negotiations between the guerrillas and the Salvadoran government under the auspices of the UN.

The sea change in Soviet policies toward El Salvador is nicely captured in the complaint of an FMLN political officer to a *New York Times* reporter: "for years, the Communists have been telling us to be more radical. Now they are telling us we have to be more practical and pragmatic".[14]

It is also noteworthy that during the peace talks the Moscow-backed PCES proved to be the most moderate of the five-part coalition of rebel groups, constantly pushing in the direction of a negotiated settlement (Adams 1992: 137-143).

The geopolitical shifts that accompanied the end of the Cold War are thus essential to understand the negotiated settlement of the civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The more pragmatic policies implemented by Bush and Gorbachev also contributed to democratization in Central America because, as already mentioned, pacification and democratization were closely intertwined under the terms of Esquipulas.

[14] Quoted in Adams (1992: 140)

Chapter 2
The Contribution of International Organizations to Peace Processes in Central America

2.1 International Support to the Peace Process in Nicaragua

The OAS and the UN had an important role in the demobilization and repatriation of the Nicaraguan resistance. Unlike the Salvadoran case, the bulk of the demobilization of the guerrilla movement (the Contras) took place *after* the presidential elections. As already mentioned, the Contras were kept alive by the United States, with the belief that their continued existence would press the Sandinistas into full compliance with their commitments (e.g. democratic elections). Once the FSLN was driven out of power, the *raison d'être* of the Contras disappeared.

The first major contribution of the international community to the consolidation of the Nicaraguan peace process was the positive role played by different international bodies in promoting dialogue and reconciliation between the defeated Sandinista government, the victorious UNO coalition, and the Contras after the presidential elections.[15]

When the results of the elections were known, both Chamorro and Ortega asked the major representatives of the election observation missions of the UN (Richardson), the OAS (Baena Soares) and the Carter Center (Carter) to remain in Nicaragua and help during the transition. They all accepted. Carter was especially active and met repeatedly with UNO and Sandinista leaders during the 48 hours following the elections. These shuttle negotiations led to rapid results. On February 27, an

[15] On the February 1990 election in Nicaragua and international election monitoring see section 3.2.

agreement on the principles guiding the transition was reached between Humberto Ortega (Minister of Defense of the Sandinista government) and Antonio Lacayo (UNO campaign manager and future minister of the Presidency), under the mediation of Carter, Baena Soares, and Richardson. The major concerns of both sides were addressed. It was agreed that President Ortega and Violeta Chamorro would call for a ceasefire and that the Contras would rapidly demobilize. Humberto Ortega accepted to implement Chamorro's objective of reducing substantively the size of the armed forces. This understanding served as the basic foundation of the Transition Protocol signed by Lacayo and Humberto Ortega, in which the major points negotiated on February 27 were reaffirmed in an official document (Pastor 2002: 266-277).

But the major contributions of the international community to the peace process and to the democratic transition in Nicaragua were made through the United Nations Observer Group in Central America (ONUCA) and the International Support and Verification Commission (CIAV).

ONUCA was created in November 1989 at the request of the Central American presidents. Its original mandate was to verify compliance with the Esquipulas II accords (cessation of aid to irregular forces, verification of the non-utilization of any state's territory to commit aggression against another state). But the observers were unarmed and served, according to Pérez de Cuéllar (1997: 410) a "largely symbolic purpose" during the first phase of ONUCA. In fact, ONUCA was unable to detect a single case of arms shipments across the borders in violation of Esquipulas II.

After the victory of the UNO coalition in the 1990 elections, the Contras faced a loss of support from the United States and widespread pressure to demobilize. There was a need for an impartial international actor to monitor the demobilization process. This led to an expansion of ONUCA's mandate to enable the UN to contribute to the

demobilization of the Nicaraguan resistance. The UN Security Council also accepted to give combat power to ONUCA and a battalion of paratroopers joined the mission (Child 1999: 19).

The International Support and Verification Commission (CIAV) also played an important role in the initial demobilization and repatriation of the Contras. CIAV was created in August 1989 as a joint initiative of the UN and the OAS to support the Esquipulas II peace plan. Its mandate was to assist in the process of demobilization, repatriation, and resettlement of the Nicaraguan resistance. The OAS was responsible for the Contras (and their families) when they entered Nicaragua. The UN was responsible for the repatriation of the Contras while they were still in other countries (El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Honduras). This distribution left the lion's share of the work to the OAS (Child 1999: 20, O'Shaugnessy and Dodson 1999: 119-120).

ONUCA and CIAV-OAS had different but complementary roles during the demobilization of the Contras, and their active participation proved essential to stabilize the fragile democratic institutions in Nicaragua. In its second phase, ONUCA had a much more significant role. Five "security zones" were established within Nicaragua. The Contras assembled in those areas and handed over their weapons and equipment. Both unarmed and armed members of ONUCA supervised the demobilization. CIAV-OAS was instrumental during this period in providing humanitarian aid to the members of the Resistance that accepted to demobilize and to their families. Despite some delays, the demobilization was completed less than five months after the elections (on June 29 1990), which was a remarkable achievement given the generalized distrust reigning in Nicaragua (Pérez de Cuéllar 1997: 410).[16] The success of the demobilization and the rapidity with which it was conducted was

[16] Over 23,000 members of the Nicaraguan Resistance were demobilized and 17,000 weapons were destroyed (Spencer 1997: 19).

largely due to the positive role played by ONUCA and CIAV-OAS. This is another clear instance of international support for democratization in Central America. Despite the elections, a return to civil war in Nicaragua was possible if a small incident materialized between a unit of the Sandinista Army and a group of Contras (Lincoln and Sereseres 2000: 21). By helping to demobilize the Contras, the UN and the OAS removed this threat.

After the demobilization of the Contras, ONUCA returned to its previous and more limited role of verifying compliance with the terms of Esquipulas II concerning the prohibition on cross-border support of irregular forces. On the contrary, the role of CIAV-OAS expanded as it now had the responsibility of supporting the social and economic reintegration of Resistance combatants and their family members -over 120,000 persons- (Child 1999: 21).

This was perhaps the least successful aspect of the international effort to support the peace processes and the democratic transitions in Central America. The disastrous situation of the Nicaraguan economy after the civil war made the reintegration of ex-combatants a daunting task. The Chamorro administration committed to an agrarian reform that would provide the former Contras with parcels of land, thus facilitating their reintegration into civilian life. The Nicaraguan Resistance did not trust the Chamorro plan and negotiated for the creation of "development poles"[17] as a condition for laying down their arms. But the government was unable to deliver on its promises. The "development poles" had a poor infrastructure (no water, electricity, or telephones) and were very difficult to access.

[17] Those "development poles" were supposed to receive assistance for agriculture, infrastructure, and development.

The Chamorro government had also made promises to the demobilized soldiers of the Sandinista army (e.g. medical care, housing lots, and access to farm lands) but also failed to comply with these commitments (Spencer 1997: 23-24).

The incapacity of the government to cope with the problem of reintegration of the ex-combatants enhanced the importance of the role played by the international donors through CIAV-OAS and other international and nongovernmental organizations. However, the CIAV-OAS was severely understaffed and underfunded to accomplish a task of this magnitude (O'Shaugnessy and Dodson 1999: 120). The help provided by CIAV-OAS to the resettlement and the reintegration of former combatants to civilian life was thus ineffective. For example, the CIAV-OAS assisted the ex-combatants in the assembly areas before their departure for reintegration into civilian life by giving them a US $50 cash payment. The amount was small and most of the former Contras spent the money within a few days on drink and food (Spencer 1997: 31). The delay in the delivery of an US $30 million aid package further aggravated the situation. Many ex-combatants from both sides became increasingly frustrated with the inability of the government to provide reintegration assistance. This led rapidly to the creation of rearmed groups of former Contras (*recontras*), former Sandinista soldiers (*recompas*) and the two working together (*revueltos*). This remilitarization of the country posed a serious threat to the peace process and to the fragile democratic institutions (Spencer 1997: 25-28).

CIAV-OAS reemerged as a central actor in the peace process in Nicaragua at this point. Even though it had been unable to contribute decisively to the reintegration of the former Contras, CIAV-OAS was instrumental in resolving many violent conflicts involving the rearmed groups, the Chamorro government, and the Sandinista Army. CIAV-OAS was present in different zones of tension in Nicaragua in the two years

following the demobilization of the Contras. Each time, the Verification Commission promoted dialogue between the parties in conflict and became a mediator in the ensuing negotiations. CIAV-OAS was not composed of bureaucrats but of professionals and academics imbued with a sense of historic mission. They often behaved in unorthodox and audacious ways, although they were unarmed. Moreover, the CIAV-OAS staff did not have a manual to restrict its operations and often improvised as the situation demanded. This proved to be essential in the success of the CIAV-OAS activities, allowing the Verification Commission to react rapidly to the violent conflagrations initiated by the rearmed groups (Lincoln and Sereseres 2000: 28-30).

From mid-1991 to mid-1992, 40 meetings between rearmed groups and the government were held, always mediated by the CIAV-OAS. These negotiations were often successful and over 3,000 individuals who had joined one of the armed groups turned in their weapons for a second time in exchange for cash, land, and security guarantees provided by the government.

The CIAV-OAS also took on other tasks that contributed to reduce the climate of insecurity. For instance, they mediated a large number of land disputes and negotiated the release of hostages held by the rearmed groups. The Verification Commission was thus instrumental in preventing further escalation of violence. According to Lincoln and Sereseres (2000: 30) "the national reconciliation process would have broken down by mid-1991 without a proactive CIAV/OAS". If this had happened, the democratic transition in Nicaragua could have ended abruptly despite the success of the 1990 elections.[18]

[18] In subsequent years, however, there was an explosion in the levels of violence in the country. Nonetheless, the skyrocketing of violence did not constitute, at least in the short term, a threat to the democratic institutions. In fact, it was not political violence but criminal violence linked to the persisting levels of poverty and inequality in a country affected by a culture of violence where arms

International actors, especially ONUCA and CIAV/OAS, were thus very important to support peace and democracy in Nicaragua in the years that followed the 1990 presidential elections. They also provided solutions for most of the problems that emerged during the democratic transition.

2.2 The UN Mediation in El Salvador Negotiations

In Nicaragua, the UN contributed to the peace process at the request of the Central American presidents, but did not intervene directly in the Esquipulas negotiations. On the contrary, the involvement of the UN in El Salvador started during the peace talks. The role of the UN in the negotiations gradually increased in the period 1989-1992. Soon after his election to the Salvadoran presidency in March 1989, Alfredo Cristiani called for negotiations with the FMLN. In May, a delegation of the FMLN met Javier Pérez de Cuéllar to request the participation of the UN in the peace talks (Montgomery 1995b: 140-141). However, the UN made only a modest contribution to this first negotiating effort. A representative of Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar observed the talks between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government in September 1989 (Holiday and Stanley 1993: 417). During this first round of negotiations, the government exerted a series of unacceptable demands on the FMLN (widely believed to be militarily weak at this point): viz. an immediate cease-fire and the unconditional surrender of the guerrillas. The FMLN then decided to launch a major military offensive in November 1989 (Montgomery 1995b: 141).

The November 1989 attacks by the FMLN and the subsequent governmental response (the murder of six Jesuit priests) created incentives for both parties to negotiate a

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abounded. The same problems affected El Salvador and Guatemala after the end of the civil wars (see, for example, Pearce 1998: 587-593).

settlement to the conflict. The FMLN realized that it didn't have the military power to overthrow the government. The guerrillas were also frustrated by the passive reaction of the Salvadoran population, which showed that a massive insurrection in support of the FMLN was unlikely. But the situation was not better for the Salvadoran military and for the government. The military's lack of competence was evident during the November attacks and the expectations of defeating the FMLN by the force of arms vanished thereafter (Holiday and Stanley 1993: 417-418). As a consequence, the two parties realized that it was the ripe moment to seek a negotiated solution. The concept of "ripe moment" is based on the perception by both parties to a conflict of a Mutually Hurting Stalemate (MHS). According to this theoretical framework, "when the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them […], they seek an alternative policy or Way Out" (Zartman 2001: 8). As we have shown, in the case of El Salvador the perception of a hurting stalemate was clearly present after the November 1989 offensive by the FMLN (see also de Soto 1999: 356). Moreover, the best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA)[19] was rapidly deteriorating for both parties because of the geopolitical changes that were taking place in the beginning of the 1990s.[20]

The political and military situation in late 1989 forced both parties to return to the negotiating table. But even if both parties had strong incentives to seek a negotiated agreement, the fundamental distrust the government and the FMLN had for one another posed a redoubtable obstacle to the peace process. The role of the UN as a mediator was crucial during the negotiations to enable both parties to trust the peace process, even if they distrusted one another (Holiday and Stanley 2000: 41-43).

[19] The best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA) is the alternative situation to a negotiated solution if an agreement cannot be obtained (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991: 100).
[20] See section 1.3.

Soon after the events of November 1989, both parties asked for a greater role of the UN during the negotiations. On December 18, the spokesman of the FMLN (commandant Shafik Handal) wrote to Pérez de Cuéllar asking for UN mediation in the Salvadoran negotiations and for the personal involvement of the UN Secretary-General.

Shortly after the end of the offensive, the five Central American presidents in their San Isidro declaration requested the UN Secretary-General to "ensure the resumption of the dialogue between the government and the FMLN, thereby facilitating the dialogue's successful conclusion". The Salvadoran president called Pérez de Cuéllar to personally reaffirm his support for the direct involvement of the Secretary-General in the Salvadoran conflict (Pérez de Cuéllar: 418-419). The United Nations finally accepted to participate in the negotiations and ended up having a key role in the transition from conflict to peace (and from semi-authoritarianism to democracy). In the months of February and March 1990, the United Nations initiated a process of shuttle diplomacy that led to meetings in Geneva and Caracas. In April 1990 (Geneva Accords), both sides agreed on a common agenda and committed to a process of negotiations under the mediation of the UN Secretary-General (Montgomery 1995b: 141).

In July 1990, the parties reached an unprecedented agreement on human rights issues (San José agreement). A pledge to respect human rights was accompanied by the decision to establish a UN mechanism to monitor compliance with the accord after the cease-fire. The agreement originated in a draft proposal written by a UN official (Pedro Nikken). The FMLN refused to deal with one of the issues of this proposal (armed forces) but the other two items (human rights and the creation of a "special commission") resulted in the San José agreement.

However, the San José agreement left aside the most intractable issues (e.g. institutional reforms, armed forces). The negotiations of these issues led to several impasses until the final agreement in December 1992. During this year and a half of negotiations, the difficulty of reaching agreement increased the proactive role of the UN negotiating team. Confronted with a stalemate over the issue of armed forces, the government and the FMLN requested the assistance of the United Nations. Alvaro de Soto[21] prepared a paper on this issue and this paved the way to a tacit agreement between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government to work only with papers prepared by the United Nations. Very often, these papers compiled the key proposals of the two sides, but both the government and the FMLN leaders granted more legitimacy to proposals originating from the UN (Holiday and Stanley 2000: 42). The FMLN spokesman during the peace talks goes as far as to say that "Alvaro de Soto presided over the negotiating table while Pedro Nikken wrote almost all the accords" (Montgomery 1995b: 142-143).

The deadlock in the negotiations led to the aggravation of the situation in El Salvador, and the FMLN initiated a new military offensive which could have derailed the negotiating process (November 1990). The UN decided at this point that the observer mission (ONUSAL) would be dispatched even in the absence of a cease-fire. ONUSAL was successful in monitoring human rights and human rights violations decreased noticeably. According to Pérez de Cuéllar, these results helped "very directly" to bring the conflict to an end. The presence of UN observers readily helped to deflate tensions on the ground, and provided a climate of relative confidence for both parties. Moreover, the presence of ONUSAL made it more difficult for either party to leave the negotiating table. Pérez de Cuéllar's decision to establish ONUSAL

[21] Alvaro de Soto was the Secretary-General's Personal Representative for the Central American Peace Process.

thus had a significant impact on the resumption of negotiations (Holiday and Stanley 1993: 421, Johnstone 1997: 314, Pérez de Cuéllar 1997: 425-426).

In early April 1991, soon after the ONUSAL mission was deployed, negotiations on the armed forces and constitutional reforms resumed on the basis of a working paper that de Soto had prepared. The talks were held in Mexico City in proximity mode because of the mistrust that reigned between the government and the FMLN, with the UN negotiating team shuttling between the two delegations. At the same time, Pérez de Cuéllar asked the Friends of the Secretary-General[22] to press the government of El Salvador to make the necessary concessions to allow the reaching of an agreement (Pérez de Cuéllar 1997: 431). After three weeks of difficult negotiations, an important breakthrough was made and the first set of agreements on constitutional reforms was reached. Among the most important reforms, it was agreed that the power of the armed forces would be limited and subordinated to presidential control, a civilian national police (PNC) would be created, and a "Truth Commission" would be put in place to look into human rights violations. Other reforms dealt with the judicial system and the electoral process (Munck 1993: 82-83).

In spite of this big step forward, the negotiations were soon stalled again. The main issues still pending were the terms of a cease fire and the insertion of the FMLN into the political arena. The government took the position that no political role could be given to the FMLN as long as it remained armed. The FMLN feared that by accepting the cease-fire they would lose leverage in the last phases of the negotiation (Montgomery 1995b: 144).

[22] The Friends of the Secretary-General was a group originally composed by Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and Venezuela, later joined by the United States. This informal group of countries was at the disposal of the UN Secretary-General to provide the necessary leverage to support the UN efforts during the negotiations. The relative success of the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General in El Salvador led to the reutilization of this model in other cases - Haiti, Guatemala, Western Sahara, Georgia - (LeVine 1997: 248-253, Prantl 2006).

Under the original agenda, some important political issues were left for a negotiation phase that would take place after the cease-fire. After the April accord, it became clear that this two-stage approach to the negotiations was a serious obstacle to the success of the peace process. In June 1991, the FMLN suggested to de Soto the possibility of negotiating all the remaining issues in one negotiating phase before a definitive cease-fire. The UN negotiating team and Pérez de Cuéllar accepted the idea, and de Soto was able to convince the Salvadoran government that the altered agenda provided the best chances for an agreement.

In another initiative to break the paralysis in the process, the Secretary-General invited to the UN headquarters the top level negotiators on both sides. President Cristiani and five FMLN commanders participated in the New York negotiations (16-25 September 1991) permitting major advancements that, according to Pérez de Cuéllar, "untied the Gordian knot".

On the one hand, the creation of a National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (COPAZ) to supervise all the agreements reached was decided. On the other hand, extensive understandings were reached on all the remaining issues, including: reorganization of the armed forces, functioning of the new national civilian police, and a number of economic and social goals.

However, it was still necessary to reach detailed agreements on how to implement these general understandings. After two months of unsuccessful talks, Pérez de Cuéllar again invited both parties to New York and used the imminence of his retirement as a lever to gain an agreement. Boutros Boutros-Ghali had made clear to Cristiani that there were other issues at the top of his agenda and that it would take him a long time to be able to deal effectively with the Salvadoran peace process. Finally, on December 31, only minutes before the end of Pérez de Cuéllar's term as

UN Secretary-General, an agreement was reached on all the substantive issues and on the implementation of all previous agreements. The peace treaty was signed on January 16, 1992 (Pérez de Cuéllar 1997: 431-435).

Zartman and Touval (1985: 38-40) distinguish three possible roles that mediators can play to help in the resolution of a conflict. All these roles were embodied by the UN mediation during the Salvadoran peace talks. The first role (*mediator as communicator*) requires mediators to facilitate communication between parties that dare not contact each other directly because of the mistrust created by the conflict or because they are afraid of losing face. In the case of El Salvador, the UN provided a neutral environment to conduct the first talks that led to the crucial Geneva Accords. Moreover, UN officials accepted participation in a long process of shuttle diplomacy, which allowed the negotiations to go forward despite the mutual suspicion. The second role (*mediator as formulator*) is the one played by mediators when they redefine the issues in a conflict and present creative solutions to the parties. This role was also played by the UN mediators during the Salvadoran negotiations. As already stated, the UN officials prepared numerous papers, in which innovative solutions to the most intractable problems were advanced. Those UN proposals were often essential to break the deadlocks during the negotiations. Finally, the third role (*mediator as manipulator*) demands the mediator be even more active and use available resources and positions to push the parties into agreement. Arguably, this role was less present in the Salvadoran case because the UN does not have a lot of resources of its own to influence the parties. Nonetheless, the mechanism of the Friends of the Secretary-General partially compensated this lack of resources, and allowed the UN mediation team to press both the Salvadoran government and the FMLN into agreement at key moments during the negotiations.

It is thus clear that UN mediation was essential to the success of the Salvadoran negotiation process (1990-1992). As we will show later, the peace process and the democratic transition were inextricably linked in Central America. Hence, the positive role played by the UN during the peace talks was also an indirect - but indispensable - contribution to democratization in El Salvador.

2.3 The UN and the Implementation of the Peace Agreement in El Salvador

The significant role played by the UN in the crafting of the Salvadoran peace agreement paved the way for the establishment of ONUSAL which was instrumental in supervising the implementation of the accords.

UN involvement in El Salvador after the peace agreement is the first case of "post-conflict peacebuilding" in the history of the organization. ONUSAL helped bring about the conditions necessary to make the implementation of the peace agreements in El Salvador possible. By helping to consolidate peace, the UN opened the way to a more successful democratic transition.

During the Cold War, the UN was relatively impotent in reaching decisions and taking action on issues that were of special interest to one or both superpowers. The civil conflicts in Central America -the US backyard- fell clearly within this category. The vetoes of the permanent members of the Security Council made common action almost impossible. The end of the East-West conflict gave rise to a period of euphoria in which there was an explosion of resolutions and consensual initiatives. Scholars and policy-makers discerned the emergence of a "new world order" that would respect the supremacy of international law and the UN Charter.

The Agenda for Peace (June 1992) of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali is to be understood within this context of post Cold-War optimism. In this document, the concept of "post-conflict peacebuilding" was advanced for the first time. Peace-building goes farther than traditional UN peace-keeping operations and "includes comprehensive efforts to identify and support structures which will tend to consolidate peace and advance a sense of confidence and well-being among people" (UN 1992). According to the Agenda for Peace, the post-conflict period has to be given much more attention and UN activities may include disarmament of warring parties, the custody and possible destruction of weapons, the repatriation of refugees, advisory and training support for security personnel, monitoring elections, political reordering, and the protection of human rights (Janet 1996, Gareis and Varwick 2005: 103-114).

ONUSAL engaged in all these activities in El Salvador. The UN role during the interim period between the peace accords and the first democratic elections was essential to keep the peace process alive and give the democratic transition a chance after eleven years of civil war.

The peacebuilding and peacekeeping activities of the UN helped the democratic transition in El Salvador in two crucial ways. On the one hand, they helped to eliminate the root causes of the civil conflict, by creating the institutional structures that would allow solving conflicts in a peaceful way through political institutions. On the other hand, the presence of ONUSAL and the verification of the peace accords it undertook helped establish confidence in the peace process. Under these favourable conditions, it was easier for both parties to transform the armed struggle of the 1980s to a political competition. The presence of ONUSAL was then essential to create the conditions necessary for relatively free and fair elections in 1994.

Demilitarization

One of the most important activities undertaken by ONUSAL immediately after the peace accords was the verification of the demilitarization (separation of forces, demobilization of the FMLN, substantial reduction and restructuring of the armed forces).

It was soon clear that the timetable for demobilization of the FMLN and for the restructuring of the armed forces was very ambitious considering the distrust existing between the parties. Several delays occurred during the first months following the cease-fire. Both sides were unable to concentrate their forces on schedule and the weapon inventories provided by the FMLN to ONUSAL were suspect. In April 1992, both parties asked the UN to act as a mediator to prevent a collapse of the peace process. ONUSAL met with both sides and rapidly released a public report on 26 May 1992. This report affirmed that both sides were responsible for the delays but put most of the blame on the Salvadoran government. As a consequence of this public embarrassment, the government was forced to comply with its previous commitments, which paved the way for a new agreement in mid-June. This agreement established that the first 20 percent of the FMLN forces would demobilize on 31 June 1992 in exchange of the derogation by President Cristiani of legislation recently passed that violated the peace accords in keeping legally intact two public security forces that had committed human rights abuses during the civil war -see below- (Holiday and Stanley 1993: 421-422, Montgomery 1995b: 150-152, Stahler-Sholk 1994: 12-15).

Another obstacle to the demobilization of the FMLN was the resistance by the Salvadoran government to purge high-level officers of the armed forces implicated in human rights violations. Under these circumstances, the FMLN felt that the

continuation of the demobilization process threatened its security. The third and fourth phases of the demobilization were missed and it became clear that the 31 October deadline for the FMLN's full demobilization would be impossible to reach. The problem was extremely serious and the intervention of two external actors (the UN and the United States) was required to solve it. In late October, the UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali proposed an extension of the original deadline for the FMLN's full demobilization to 15 December, which was accepted by both sides and contributed to the success of the process. In November, the Bush administration pressed the Salvadoran army and the government to comply with their commitments, and finally in late November the President Cristiani sent a letter to Boutros-Ghali presenting the decisions taken to implement the army's purge. After the UN Secretary-General gave assurances to the FLMN, the former guerrillas resumed their demobilization which was completed on schedule on 15 December (Munck 1993: 84-86). ONUSAL also verified in December the final arms inventories of the FMLN and destroyed the weapons. Six months later, however, an undisclosed FMLN weapons cache exploded in Managua, and soon after this incident other caches were discovered. ONUSAL was embarrassed but after Boutros-Ghali applied pressure on the FMLN leadership, the location of the remaining weapons caches was disclosed.[23] This UN intervention again unravelled a potentially disruptive crisis (McCormick 1997: 286-287).

ONUSAL verified also the reduction of the armed forces and the dissolution of the security forces associated with the military. The rationale behind the agreement to dismantle these security forces (the National Guard and the Treasury Police) was to put an end to the military's role in public security. But the military failed to dismantle

[23] See section 3.3.

the security forces by March 1992, as established in the timetable agreed upon in the peace accords. The two security forces were simply renamed and incorporated into the army. As shown above, the unwillingness of the armed forces to dissolve the security forces threatened the whole peace process. ONUSAL stepped in and mediated talks leading to a new agreement that established that the National Guard and the Treasury Police would be definitively dismantled by June 28 1992.

ONUSAL also supervised the reduction of the armed forces from 63,175 to 30,500 troops, which was successfully completed by March 1993 almost a year ahead of schedule (Williams and Walter 1997: 153-163).[24]

In sum, despite the numerous delays and foot-dragging created by the mutual mistrust after eleven years of civil war, both parties accepted the irreversibility of the demilitarization and respected the cease-fire. By the end of 1992, the demilitarization had made important headway. The active verification of ONUSAL was essential to induce both parties to make the indispensable concessions for the process to go forward. Indeed, these peacekeeping activities have been considered "the most successful aspect of the UN's involvement in the peace process" (McCormick 1997: 285). The success of this aspect of ONUSAL's activities was very important because a number of other institutional reforms depended on the decision of both sides to lay down their arms. Equally important, the demobilization of the FMLN paved the way for its integration into the political life of the country and in the electoral field when it became a legal political party in December 1992. The contribution of the UN mission to pacification and democratization during the first year after the peace accords was thus invaluable.

[24] This reduction was an important success in the road to demilitarization in El Salvador even if it was less dramatic than it appeared at first sight. The rapidity with which the reduction was carried out suggests that the number of troops claimed by the armed forces during the negotiation of the peace accords was voluntarily inflated (Williams and Walter: 162-163).

Police Reform

The peace accords also established major reforms of the police in El Salvador and a police division was created within ONUSAL to monitor evolution in this area. The accords provided for a gradual phasing-out of the National Police -PN- (implicated in several human rights abuses) and its replacement by a new National Civilian Police -PNC- over a period of 24 moths. The importance of the police reform for the overall transition to peace and democracy in El Salvador cannot be overestimated. First of all, the elimination of the PN contributed to the dismantling of the counter-insurgency state. Secondly, the new PNC would be a clear symbol of the supremacy of civilian over military rule. And finally, the PNC would guarantee the security of the demobilized FMLN guerrilla troops and their supporters (Stahler-Sholk 1994: 16).

One of the activities of ONUSAL in this area was to monitor the activities of the National Police until its final disbandment and replacement by the PNC in January 1995. The UN mission was only partially successful in this endeavor. Numerous illegal acts committed by the PN (excessive use of force, torture, arbitrary detentions) persisted during the transition period. But the presence of ONUSAL observers alongside PN patrols and their regular visits to PN posts improved human rights conditions (McCormick 1997: 288-291). However, in the former conflict zones where the guerrillas had demobilized, the presence of the old National Police (even if supervised by the UN) would have been perceived as very threatening. For these specific geographical areas, ONUSAL negotiated an interim solution: the Auxiliary Transitory Police (PATs) composed of civilian police academy cadets that would patrol these zones under the direct supervision of the ONUSAL police division. ONUSAL's role in monitoring the PAT's was seen as a success by both sides (Holiday

and Stanley 2000: 53). The police monitoring of the PN and the PAT's carried out by ONUSAL was thus very important to make the population gain confidence in the peace process and keep the democratic transition on track.

The other important aspect of the activities of the police division of ONUSAL was its direct contribution to the institutionalization of the new PNC. This new force was composed by civilian personnel independent from the armed forces. Linked to the establishment of the PNC was the creation of a National Public Security Academy (ANSP) where the members of the new security forces would be trained. The UN mission, assisted by a team of local and external technical experts, was instrumental in developing a plan for different aspects of the functioning of this new Academy (lesson plans, infrastructure, and budget). Despite some delays at the beginning, both the FMLN and the government saw the creation of the ANSP as a success. In the same vein, the ONUSAL police division helped in the institutional reform by advising, assisting and monitoring the new PNC forces. The UN mission also provided technical and logistical support (e.g. vehicles, radio communications) once the PNC began to deploy in February 1993. Soon after its deployment, the PNC was praised for its professionalism and for contributing to lower crime rates in the areas where it operated (McCormick 1997: 298-305).

The contribution made by ONUSAL to the reform of the police was also of the utmost importance for the success of the democratic transition in El Salvador. The repressive policies of the Salvadoran government during the 1970s and early 1980s constituted one of the reasons for the outbreak of violence that led to the civil war. These repressive policies were carried out by the National Police and other Security Agencies. By helping to eliminate these bodies, ONUSAL contributed to the removal

of one of the roots of the problem. The reforms in this area were key for El Salvador to move in the direction of a democratic polity.

Human Rights

Human rights abuses were widespread in El Salvador in the 1980s, especially by the government, the armed forces, and the paramilitary "death squads" that they sponsored. A criminal prosecution of the persons responsible for these abuses could have jeopardized the process of national reconciliation, and yet a systematic denial of these heinous acts also posed a danger to the peace process. Burying the past would have caused a continuing source of tension during the transition (and afterwards). During the negotiation of the peace agreements, the UN designed an alternative (the investigative commissions) that could show that impunity would no longer be tolerated in post-conflict El Salvador, thereby restoring a basic principle of a democratic polity: accountability (Johnstone 1997: 339).

The *Ad Hoc Commission* was composed of three independent Salvadoran civilians. Its task was to evaluate the military officers, taking into account their human rights and professional records. The commission presented its recommendations confidentially to the UN Secretary-General and to President Cristiani on 23 September 1992. The report called for the removal of 102 officers, including the minister and vice-minister of defense. The recommendations should have been implemented one month later but, given the fierce resistance from the armed forces, Cristiani decided to delay action until the FMLN's full demobilization. The UN Secretary-General pressed the Salvadoran government into full compliance, but he also understood the sensitivity of the issue and was flexible on the pace of implementation. Cristiani negotiated an

extension with UN emissaries and in January 1993 he announced a plan for the removal of most of the officers named in the report. Further UN pressure pushed the Salvadoran authorities into full compliance. The minister of defense finally stepped down in July 1993, and all of the officers listed in the report were retired by the end of 1993 (Johnstone 1997: 316-318).

The *Truth Commission* had as its objective to investigate and publicize serious acts of violence that occurred during the civil war in El Salvador. The three commissioners (all foreigners) were appointed by the UN Secretary-General in December 1991. The Truth Commission began its work in July 1992 and released its report in March 1993. The Commission found that most of the political killings and human rights abuses had been perpetrated by the armed forces and the government security forces. The brutality with which the armed forces conducted themselves during the civil war was publicly denounced. As already stated, this contributed ending the impunity that prevailed in the past, opening the way for a successful democratic transition. The Truth Commission also made numerous recommendations to avoid the repetition of human rights abuses. Some of these recommendations (e.g. deconcentration of the power of the Supreme Court, disqualification from public office for ten years for the persons named in the report) were dismissed by the government, which accused the Commission of exceeding its authority. But, under intense pressure from the UN, the Salvadoran authorities accepted to take action on some of the recommendations. For instance, in March 1995 the Legislative Assembly ratified the optional protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and accepted the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Johnstone 1997: 318-323).

Moreover, the recommendation of the Truth Commission to create a group to investigate death squad activity was finally implemented. In the second half of 1993,

the death squads reactivated and were suspected of committing a series of political homicides. The UN pressure then intensified and the Human Rights division of ONUSAL assisted the government of El Salvador in carrying out the investigation called for by the Truth Commission. The Joint Group for the Investigation of Illegal Armed Groups was then created and issued its report in July 1994, uncovering information about the connections between the death squads and the public security forces in El Salvador during the civil war. The activities of this investigative group had a dissuasive effect, and a major recrudescence of death squad activity did not occur during the electoral process as feared. Hence, the Joint Group made a major contribution to a peaceful democratic transition (Johnstone 1997: 323-325).

The UN also encouraged and monitored efforts to reform Salvadoran institutions in order to avoid the perpetration of human rights abuses after the departure of ONUSAL (Johnstone 1997: 330-336).

Land Program

One of the challenges facing the Salvadoran government and the FMLN during the peace talks was to create mechanisms to reintegrate the combatants of both sides into productive and civil life. The main channel set up for this purpose was the land program, which aimed to provide a land parcel to ex-combatants and also to a large number of civilian supporters of the FMLN who had taken land in the conflict areas during the war.

The improvement of the economic and social conditions of demobilized soldiers and guerrilla fighters was essential to assure a peaceful transition to electoral democracy. But the land program proved to be the most difficult to implement of all the peace

agreements. As Stahler-Sholk (1994: 19) points out, frustration over the little progress achieved in this area could have undermined confidence among FMLN supporters in the peace process and the democratic transition. For this reason, the contribution of the UN to break the impasse in this area was of the utmost importance.

The Chapultepec agreement was extremely vague on the land issue. Certain crucial parameters were ignored (e.g. the number of beneficiaries, the size of the parcels to which they were entitled). The vagueness of the agreement on this issue rendered implementation very difficult and the land program rapidly became one of the most contentious problems of the transition. To avoid a collapse in the peace process, the UN rapidly stepped in and, after consulting the two sides, the Secretary-General drafted a more detailed program and presented it to the parties in October 1992. Both parties accepted the draft that became a supplement to the Chapultepec agreement (del Castillo 1997: 347-349).

Despite this compromise, the implementation of the land program remained problematic and suffered several delays in the following years. Still, the intervention of the UN at a key moment (September-October 1992) removed a major obstacle to the implementation of the peace agreement. Moreover, the continuing presence of the UN in El Salvador (through ONUSAL) served as a guarantee for both parties while they struggled to complete the land transfer.

Chapter 3
The International Observation of the First Democratic Elections in Central America

3.1 The international assistance to post-conflict elections

As mentioned above, the contribution of the international community to the Central American peace process extended well beyond simple peacekeeping operations. The international monitoring of the first elections after the civil wars is another example of the key role played by the international community in the democratic transitions and in the peace processes in the isthmus. In this section we will present the positive contribution of different international actors to the post-conflict elections in Nicaragua (1990) and El Salvador (1994). But before presenting the international assistance to the pivotal elections[25] in these two countries, it is important to define some of the key terms (post-conflict elections, international electoral monitoring) and to present more generally the role that the international community can have in this type of elections according to the literature.

The *post-conflict elections* are the first elections after a civil war. Pivotal elections have two main distinctive characteristics. First of all, this type of election comes after the signature of peace accords ending a civil conflict and contributes to the transition to peace and democracy.[26] In fact, one of the main objectives of post-conflict elections is to "consolidate fragile peace agreements into a lasting peace under a democratic system" (Kumar 1998: 5). The pivotal elections also intend to promote reconciliation

[25] We borrow the label "pivotal elections" from McCoy (1998).
[26] In the case of Nicaragua, there was not a peace accord between the Sandinistas and the Contras, but several agreements had been reached at the regional level.

between the parties that were at war, which can also help to smooth the democratic transition (Kumar 1998: 5-7). Jennifer McCoy (1998: 56) explores further the link between elections and democratization. She argues that post-conflict elections can contribute to the democratization process in three important ways. First, pivotal elections force the different parties to agree on the rules of the game before the start of the electoral process, allowing for the development of a political compromise between the previously warring sides. Second, post-conflict elections are instrumental in building or reinforcing institutions that are essential for the functioning of a democracy (e.g. electoral institutions and political parties). Third, elections may instil respect for the rule of law and start a process in which disputes are solved peacefully.

The second main characteristic of post-conflict elections is that they are held under very difficult conditions, which poses a great obstacle to the success of the electoral process. Post-conflict societies are economically and socially unstable, and reconstruction efforts are only beginning to develop when the first elections are mounted.[27] Moreover, the institutional infrastructure necessary to conduct successful elections is lacking in post-authoritarian or post-conflict settings (Garber 1998: 1-3, Kumar 1998: 7-9).

The importance of the international monitoring of post-conflict elections is clear from the previous discussion. International observers help during every step of the electoral process to ensure a successful election despite the difficult conditions. Hence, they become key players in one of the last phases of democratic transition.

International monitoring contributes to the success of transitional elections in many ways. First, the external actors are the guarantors of the fairness of the process in a context of generalized distrust after years of civil war and many rigged elections. The

[27] All the more so that a lot of international donors withhold their aid until after the pivotal elections have been held successfully.

international monitors are often seen as impartial actors in a polarized process. They improve the credibility of the electoral process in democratizing countries. By so doing, they serve the incumbent government by keeping the opposition in the race.[28] But they also serve the opposition which receives guarantees that the elections will be publicly denounced if they are considered fraudulent. The international monitors also reassure the population regarding the efficacy of the process and the secrecy of the vote. Second, the international observation of the election helps detect and deter fraud. Out of fear of being caught, the political authorities who plan to rig an election may refrain from doing it. Hence, if the international monitors are effective, not only is the electoral process fair and democratic but so is the end result. Through their public reports (before and after the elections) the international monitors attract international attention and help ensure that the process will be fair and that the election results will be respected. Third, international observers are instrumental in providing assistance during the elaboration of the rules of the electoral process and in disseminating the basic standards of electoral administration, and press those who breach these rules and standards into compliance. Finally, some international observation teams stay after the elections to mediate the transition, and, if necessary, contribute to a smooth transfer of power (Carothers 1997: 19-21, McCoy 1998: 57, McCoy, Garber, and Pastor 1991: 107-108, Middlebrook 1998).

The international groups who monitor pivotal elections therefore have a very important role in the process of democratization. The international observers undertake this role by carrying out three different functions. First of all, they have *electoral functions*. They supervise all aspects of the electoral process (conditions of participation in the campaign, election rules and procedures, campaign violence,

[28] The incumbent power needs the opposition to stay in the race so that the elections can be seen as free and fair by the international community.

access to the media, registration process). International observers also monitor the election day (availability of ballots, secrecy of ballots, and transparency in the scrutiny and counting of ballots) and ensure proper implementation of electoral outcomes (installation of successful candidates on schedule). The international monitors also have *informative functions*. They publicize their findings and conclusions through press conferences and written reports. Finally, international observers have the function (sometimes unintended) of *deterring violence* (Scranton 1995: 184-186).[29]

Only the most serious international organizations and NGOs have the willingness and the resources to carry on this type of long term observations. A host of other organizations observe only the election day, but their work is severely criticized by the democracy promotion community. In this section we will deal only with the work of the most conscientious and serious observers, which had much more impact on the electoral process in Nicaragua and El Salvador than the thousands of observers that arrived just before the elections.

3.2 The "Most Observed Elections in History": Presidential Elections in Nicaragua (February 1990)

The 1990 Nicaraguan elections marked a watershed in intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations' approach to electoral monitoring. For the first time, the UN and the OAS put in place comprehensive, long term missions to monitor

[29] We have presented here an ideal type of international monitoring. Important critiques have been raised concerning international observation of elections. The most important of these criticisms is that there is a lack of clear standards to judge if an election is "free and fair". See, for example, Carothers (1997: 23-25), Elklit and Svensson (1997), Geisler (1993). We still believe, however, that the presence of international monitors during pivotal elections is essential to ensure the success of the electoral process and contributes enormously to the success of the democratic transition, as it will be clear after we study the cases of Nicaragua and El Salvador.

elections in a sovereign country (McCoy 1998: 58-59). The Carter Center and other NGOs also participated in the observation effort and contributed to the procedural success of the 1990 elections and to the smooth transition between the incumbent president Daniel Ortega (FSLN) and the winner of the elections Violeta Chamorro (UNO).

Several reasons may explain why the political actors in Nicaragua invited large delegations of foreign observers to monitor the 1990 elections and why some international organizations accepted this role though it countered their previous practices.

The FSLN and UNO had different motivations to welcome external observation during the elections. Ortega and the other leaders of the Sandinista party were convinced that they would win the elections. Hence, for the Nicaraguan government, the presence of respected international organizations and NGOs was essential to establish the regime's legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. As part of the Esquipulas process, the other Central American governments would accept to co-habit with a democratically elected Sandinista government accepted by the opposition (Ramírez 1999: 250). Moreover, the resumption of economic aid from Western Europe, indispensable in the disastrous economic situation of Nicaragua after ten years of civil war, was contingent on the commitment of the FSLN to democratization (Pastor 1990: 15). Free and fair elections, extensively observed by external actors, were thus an opportunity for the Sandinista government to gain the necessary legitimacy to solve the major problems facing Nicaragua in the early 1990s.

The opposition also warmly welcomed the international efforts to monitor the elections. For UNO, the international supervision was a condition *sine qua non* for its participation in the electoral process. The opposition coalition considered that the

external observers were key to assuring the fairness of the election and the freedom of all parties to participate in the process (Booth 1998: 190, Santa-Cruz 2004: 193-194).

The efforts of the Nicaraguan political actors to invite international organizations to observe the 1990 elections were successful. Both the UN and the OAS accepted to carry out missions that contradicted their previous position on election monitoring. The OAS had observed elections since the 1960s but had never put in place such an ambitious mission to monitor the whole electoral process. The UN had never monitored elections in a sovereign state. Until 1990, national elections were considered to fall within Article 2 (7) of the UN Charter, which affirms that the UN cannot intervene "in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state".

The key to understanding the acceptance by both organizations of the Nicaraguan invitation is the context of civil war and the regional peace process (Esquipulas II). To put an end to the war and allow the peace process to go forward, the elections had to be credible both within Nicaragua and abroad. The presence of international observers during the electoral process assured the other Central American governments as well as the US administration that the elected government in Nicaragua would be a legitimate one. As we have already pointed out, the resolution of the Nicaraguan conflict was seen by the other governments of the isthmus as the first step toward the pacification of the whole region. If tensions had arisen during the electoral process or if the credibility of the results had been put into question, the regional peace process could have been disrupted. The 1990 elections in Nicaragua thus had a clear international dimension. This provided the rationale for the UN and the OAS to send missions to supervise the electoral process (Santa-Cruz 2004: 189-195). As Pérez de

Cuéllar (1997: 413) affirms in his memoirs, "successful elections in Nicaragua, properly verified, could contribute to the goals defined in Esquipulas II".

The international perception of the strategic political importance of the 1990 elections in Nicaragua helps to explain the success of the monitoring efforts. As Middlebrook (1998: 22) points out, the influence that external observers have on political parties and election officials, the amount of resources available for the organizations in charge of the observation, and their capacity to draw international attention to their conclusions depend largely on how important the election is perceived to be by the international community.

In the case of Nicaragua, for instance, two of the three larger missions (OAS and Carter Center) and some of the minor ones were funded by direct US aid (López-Pintor 1998: 41-42). For the United States, free and fair elections seemed the only way out of the Nicaraguan imbroglio after the failure of the militaristic policies undertaken under Reagan. The extensive resources available for the observation missions are at the roots of their efficiency in monitoring the elections.

In the same vein, the extensive international press coverage on election day[30] allowed the monitoring missions to draw international attention to their findings. Under these restrictive conditions, it would have been almost impossible for the incumbent power in Nicaragua to cheat without getting caught.

Let's now turn to the different actors that participated in the electoral observation and their tasks during the electoral process. Three organizations sent observation missions that monitored the entire electoral process: the UN, the OAS, and the Carter Center.

[30] 1,500 foreign correspondents covered the 1990 presidential elections in Nicaragua (Pastor 1990: 18).

ONUVEN

As already stated, the United Nations Observer Mission to Verify the Elections in Nicaragua (ONUVEN) was an unprecedented effort by the organization to monitor the whole electoral process. The Nicaraguan government invited the UN in March 1989 to observe the elections. After a series of fact-finding trips that produced positive reports, the Secretary-General established ONUVEN on July 6, 1989. With both the United States and the Soviet Union in favour of free and fair elections, the Security Council rapidly ratified the decision to establish ONUVEN (resolution 637), which provided strong support for the UN electoral observation.

The mandate of the UN observer mission identified many tasks. The central role of ONUVEN was to verify the fairness of the electoral process (freedom of organization and mobilization for all the political parties, equitable representation in the Supreme Electoral Council -CSE-, equitable access to the Medias). The observer mission was also mandated to inform the CSE of any complaints received or any irregularities observed.

The field office in Managua welcomed its first 17 staff-members in August, but the mission expanded to 48 members when the campaign officially started in December. During the last phase of the campaign, almost 200 more observers joined the mission. The personal representative of the Secretary-General for this mission was Elliot Richardson. He was a US citizen and a Republican, which was reassuring for Washington (McConnell 2000: 115-121).

ONUVEN undoubtedly contributed to the success of the electoral process, and hence to the peaceful democratic transition in Nicaragua. It did it in at least two ways.

Firstly, the ONUVEN personnel were present in rallies and other political events. Their presence helped to deter violence at those events, which in turn deflated tensions during the campaign. Secondly, ONUVEN chose to issue periodic reports to the UN Secretary-General covering issues such as media use, registration of candidates, and campaign violence. These reports were rapidly released to the press and this public exposure often pressed the CSE to change what was going wrong. In a more subtle way, ONUVEN personnel discussed campaign problems with the CSE and with the political parties before the reports were issued. As the political actors in Nicaragua knew that a report was being written, they often found remedies to these problems before the reports were released (McConnell 2000: 122-124).

Moreover, the mandate of ONUVEN was wide and comprehensive. The systematic everyday work of the UN staff in the field was instrumental in solving most of the problems that emerged during the campaign (Santa-Cruz 2004: 203-205).

The role of ONUVEN was also essential in another important way. The UN staff had strong analytical skills and the UN reports were extremely helpful to other international observers. These reports allowed the missions of the Carter Center and of the OAS to keep track with major campaign difficulties (Pastor 1990: 18).

OAS

In March 1989, the Nicaraguan government also invited the OAS to send an observer mission to verify the fairness of the electoral process. The Secretary-General of the OAS (Baena Soares) rapidly accepted the invitation. The issues at stake for the OAS were regional security and the transition to democracy in a member state. The OAS mission was also unprecedented in its scope and duration. The observations of

elections that the OAS had undertaken before were limited in time and objectives. On the contrary, the role of the OAS in Nicaragua in 1989-1990 was more than just observation. The OAS mission played a key role during the electoral process as a mediator between the FSLN and the opposition. For instance, the OAS mission monitored the legislative procedures to reform both the laws on the use of the media during the campaign and electoral law.

The OAS observers in Nicaragua went from 18 staff members in August to 52 in October, and finally 433 on election day. During the first phase of its activities, the main task of the OAS mission was to observe the voter registration process. In December, the most intense phase started which covered the campaign period. The OAS mission monitored election propaganda, access to the media, and use of resources. The observers were also present at political rallies which, as in the case of ONUVEN, helped reduce campaign violence (Santa-Cruz 2004: 200-203). The main force of the OAS mission was to mediate privately the problems that emerged between the FSLN and UNO. The large personnel of the mission allowed the OAS to deploy observers to every region. In addition to its more visible work at the national level, the OAS mission worked out a number of problems with the FSLN and UNO at the local level. This was an invaluable contribution because an accumulation of incidents in different regions could have harmed seriously the electoral process, and thus the democratic transition in Nicaragua (Pastor 1990: 18).

Carter Center

The Carter Center mission to monitor the election was different in kind from the two other major observer groups (OAS, ONUVEN). It was not a comprehensive mission

present in Nicaragua during the whole electoral process. Instead, it was a 34-member delegation composed of members from the Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government and a bipartisan group of 12 from the US Congress only intermittently present in Nicaragua.

The strength of the Carter Center mission was the prestige of its chairman (former US president Jimmy Carter) and a distinguished delegation that included seven former presidents from different Latin American countries.

Like the other major missions, "the Council's observers were not passive recorders of events, but active mediators and conciliators, who worked to prevent violence and build trust in the election and its results" (Carter Center 1990: 9). In addition, the high-level group of the Carter Center mission allowed the delegation to work out problems by dealing directly with President Ortega, Mrs. Chamorro, and other high-profile political leaders in Nicaragua.

The Carter Center mission had a very limited presence in Nicaragua during the months leading to the elections. The office in Managua was directed by Jennifer McCoy, a political science professor on leave from Georgia State University, who kept the 34 members of the delegation informed of the problems and issues that emerged during the electoral process. Nonetheless, the mission was influential at every stage of the process through the trips made by different members of the delegation. During each visit, they tried to solve the problems threatening to derail the electoral process by engaging directly with the leaders of the FSLN and UNO. According to Robert Pastor (1990: 19-20), who was the staff director of the mission, Ortega always responded and almost every problem was resolved.

The activities of the international observer missions played thus a key role in building trust during the campaign and facilitated the democratic transition. The international

monitoring was very important to give the necessary guarantees to the opposition, which contributed to keeping UNO in the race despite some irregularities.

On election day, the role of the international observers was also essential. There were 2,578 accredited foreign observers from 278 organizations monitoring the election. The OAS deployed 435 observers, who observed 3,064 voting sites -70 percent of the total- and ONUVEN had 237 observers who monitored 2,155 sites -50 percent of the total- (Pastor 1990: 21). The international monitoring on election day had a twofold importance. On the one hand, the presence of the international observers provided tranquillity to the voters. On the other hand, it made major electoral fraud almost impossible. The three larger international observation missions agreed on declaring the elections free and fair. The final report of the Carter Center (1990: 10) stated that "voting procedures were excellent [and that] a secret vote and honest count occurred". In spite of some problems during the observation of the campaign (animosity between the OAS and the UN missions, competition for resources and public attention between the three organizations), the coordination of efforts between the three major missions on election day was exemplary. Both the UN and the OAS conducted quick counts that showed a wide and consistent lead for UNO. In compliance with a previous agreement, the OAS and the UN shared these early returns with the Carter Center's delegation.

With this info in hand, Carter, Baena Soares, and Richardson attended a meeting organised by Daniel Ortega at the FSLN headquarters from 12:20 to 1:10 am. They informed the FSLN leaders that the numbers were stable and definitive. Ortega confirmed that he would respect the results of the elections. The quick counts made by the UN and the OAS reduced the possibility of fraud to a minimum. Had the FSLN not respected the popular will, the international observer teams would have

denounced the fraud, with potentially disastrous consequences for Nicaragua.[31] Ortega feared clashes between UNO and FSLN militants, and asked assistance on how to handle the situation. The Sandinista leader wanted Chamorro to wait until SEC's results were announced before declaring victory. He also wanted the UNO leadership to urge their supporters to be calm. The chairmen of the three observer teams then went to see Mrs. Chamorro who accepted the demands of Ortega (Carter Center 1990: 23-25). As pointed out by Ramírez (1999: 133) the mediation role played by the three observer teams (and especially Carter) was "crucial [for the FSLN] to reach an understanding with the new government in a moment of dangerous uncertainty".

The three observer teams also played an important role during the transition period between the elections and the inauguration of Violeta Chamorro. At the request of both Ortega and Chamorro, the three principal observer missions remained during the interim period.[32]

In sum, the role of the international observer groups contributed decisively to the success of the pivotal elections in Nicaragua, which in turn allowed the democratic transition to go forward.

[31] In May 1989, the Panamanian elections were monitored by a 22-member international delegation organized by the National Republican Institute for International Affairs and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. The elections were fraudulent and were denounced as such by the international monitors (NDI/IRI 1989). In December 1989, the United States invaded Panama, in complete disregard of international law, to remove Manuel Noriega from power (see, for example, Maechling, Jr. 1990). This was certainly perceived by the Sandinista leaders as a threat of what could happen if they chose to openly defy the Bush administration.

[32] See section 2.1.

3.3 The "Elections of the Century" in El Salvador (1994): External Assistance and Supervision

The March 1994 electoral contest in El Salvador was labelled "the election of the century" for two reasons. On the one hand, the Salvadorans were called to cast votes for three elections simultaneously (presidential, legislative, and municipal elections). On the other hand, these elections were the first in which the entire political spectrum would be represented. All the political forces (including the FMLN) had a chance to field candidates and campaign (Baloyra 1998: 23).

The 1994 elections can be seen as the last step in the democratic transition initiated with the signature of the peace agreement (1991-1992). These agreements had put in place the institutional transformations that were necessary for democratic elections to take place. The Mexico agreement (April 1991) stipulated the creation of a new and impartial jurisdictional authority in electoral affairs: the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE). The Chapultepec agreement (January 1992) opened the way to the incorporation of the FMLN in the political scene as a political party, and the former guerrilla movement also obtained the political rights of a political party (Manca 1997). As already mentioned, after its final demobilization (December 1992) the FMLN was legally recognized as a political party.

The 1994 general elections provided the first test for those institutional transformations, and it was hoped that they would succeed and symbolize national reconciliation. Nothing of the sort happened. The electoral process was marked by serious flaws and irregularities.

The TSE had been created to depoliticize the agency. However, in the words of Montgomery (1995b: 153), the TSE was "more politicized than ever" in the months

preceding the 1994 elections. Systematic favouritism toward the ARENA party was evident as the majority of magistrates came from ARENA and an allied party. The TSE consistently ruled in favour of ARENA during the period 1992-1994 in different issues: problems with the electoral registry, electoral reform, electoral infractions (Orr 1996: 355).

Moreover, voter registration was rigged with problems. The list of registered voters was defective and incomplete. In 1993, it was estimated that 675,000 Salvadorans lacked the credentials to vote after the peace accords (O'Donnell et al. 1993: 3). The people who lived in the former combat zones (where much of the FMLN support was located) were more affected by this problem since many people in these areas had not been able to register during the 1980's, and the FMLN had often destroyed the birth certificates that were kept in the town halls during the civil war. Those documents were necessary to register and obtain a voter ID card (Stahler-Sholk 1994: 24). The TSE was not only politicized but incompetent. It devised a cumbersome and slow voter-registration process that required eligible voters to travel at least twice to TSE offices. This complex procedure tended to disenfranchise the poor who could not afford the numerous trips (Montgomery 2000: 148, Stahler-Sholk 1994: 25).

The voter registration imbroglio was only the most visible of the procedural problems during the electoral process. Other procedural defects were related to advertising time on television and access to funds during the campaign. ARENA advertising time on radio and television averaged more than five times the spots of the FMLN. The ruling party also had much easier access to private money and to the state's campaign funds (Stahler-Sholk 1994: 24).

Finally, the first and second rounds of voting were marred with problems. According to ONUSAL, 25,000 citizens with voter ID cards were not able to cast their vote

because the numbers of their documents did not correspond to those appearing in the list of voters contained by polling centers. Voters were sometimes obliged to cast their vote far away from their residence. This problem combined with the dearth of vehicles to transport voters. Under these conditions (registration problems and polling station irregularities), it is not surprising voter turnout was below expectation: 52 percent in the first round and 46 percent in the runoff (Lehoucq 1995: 181).

It is thus clear that the first elections in El Salvador after the civil war were much less successful than the 1990 elections in Nicaragua, where there were fewer and less serious flaws. To a certain extent, the electoral division of ONUSAL failed because it was unable to prevent some of these irregularities during the electoral process. More importantly, ONUSAL did not accomplish one of its main tasks, which was to expose clearly the irregularities of the elections to the Salvadoran population and to the international community. For example, Augusto Ramirez Ocampo, special representative to the Secretary-General, made a blatantly contradictory declaration in which he stated that the elections had taken place under "appropriate conditions in terms of freedom, competitiveness and security… despite the serious flaws regarding organization and transparency" (quoted in Manca 1997).

Paradoxically, however, observation of the election by ONUSAL may have been all the more important because the electoral process was rigged with irregularities. In fact, all the problems we have pointed out could have not only delegitimized the elections, but also the peace process and the democratic transition. As Montgomery (2000: 156) rightly asserts, "ONUSAL's electoral division saved the elections from certain disaster".

The electoral division of ONUSAL was born out of the request of the Salvadoran government to the UN in January 1993 to verify the March 1994 elections. The

mandate of the electoral component of ONUSAL was broad and included the observation and verification of the entire electoral process (voter registration, campaign, election day). In addition to its verification role, the electoral division of ONUSAL would receive and examine complaints regarding irregularities during the process and, when needed, inform the TSE and require corrective measures (Manca 1997).

As the deputy director of the electoral division Francesco Manca pointed out, ONUSAL made four positive contributions to the electoral process (Manca 1997).

First, as already mentioned, ONUSAL dealt effectively with the crisis that was created by the accidental explosion of FMLN armaments in Managua (May 1993). After this incident, President Cristiani threatened to disband the FMLN as a political party. This action could have derailed the peace process and the democratic transition in the country. ONUSAL's rapid response facilitated the dialogue between the government and the FMLN, while also verifying the destruction of the last weapons caches of the former guerrillas. This kept the electoral process on track.

Second, the electoral division of ONUSAL was proactive in its efforts to permit the registration of as many voters as possible despite the incompetence of the TSE. Even though this meant exceeding their mandate (observation and verification), the electoral officials of ONUSAL helped enormously during the registration process because they knew that few people would get their voter ID card otherwise. For example, ONUSAL implemented plans to register voters at the regional level in one day (*mega-jornada*) in which all the resources of ONUSAL and of national NGOs would be mobilized to help in the registration process. ONUSAL officials provided logistical support for voter registration and sometimes even travelled to distant municipalities to find the birth certificates that were required to obtain a voter ID card.

The massive effort of ONUSAL had a positive impact even if the result was still disappointing. A UNDP study conducted in July 1993 estimated that over 700,000 adults were not registered to vote. By the end of the registration period (January 1994) half of the unregistered adults had obtained voter ID cards (Montgomery 2000: 148-150). This was a major contribution of the UN to the Salvadoran democratization because these newly registered citizens would be able to vote not only in 1994, but also in the subsequent elections. Moreover, the implication of ONUSAL in the voter registration process showed how serious the international community was about a fair electoral process, which probably contributed to keeping the FMLN in the race despite the serious irregularities. It is worth mentioning that other UN agencies (UNHCR, UNDP) participated in the documentation-registration process alongside ONUSAL, which also contributed to the relative success of the process (Weiss Fagen 1996: 228-229).

Third, the presence of ONUSAL observers during the entire electoral process helped defuse tensions and limit the number of accidents. During the campaign, ONUSAL electoral officials visited many times every one of the 262 municipalities. The electoral division of ONUSAL observed more than 800 political meetings and rallies (Montgomery 2000: 151). According to Baloyra (1998: 18), the international observers had a "deterrent effect". In fact, the levels of violence during the campaign and on election day were surprisingly low considering that the electoral process came just after eleven years of civil war.

Finally, the independent quick count conducted by ONUSAL during the first round was extremely accurate and avoided a major crisis. The ARENA candidate (Calderón Sol) was very close to obtaining the 50 percent majority he needed to win a first round victory. But the projected results of ARENA and the FMLN were both wrong.

ARENA was convinced that it had obtained a first round victory, while the FMLN thought that ARENA results were clearly below 50 percent and that the ruling party would commit fraud by declaring its victory. The electoral authorities were on the verge of authorizing ARENA to claim victory when ONUSAL transmitted its quick count to the TSE and to the political parties. As Manca (1997) concludes, "the accuracy of ONUSAL projection and the credibility that the UN enjoyed with both leaderships served to avoid a clash".

Another positive contribution made by ONUSAL to the electoral process could be added to the four mentioned by Manca. The electoral division was instrumental in promoting dialogue between the major political actors in El Salvador during the campaign. ONUSAL chief of mission Augusto Ramírez Ocampo negotiated a "gentlemen's agreement" concerning electoral conduct and support for the peace process. The ONUSAL initiative aimed at controlling the aggressive rhetoric of some of the parties. The document was signed by the candidates of all the major parties (except the Christian Democrat candidate). In another meeting at the ONUSAL headquarters, the seven presidential candidates signed a declaration denouncing violence and promising to abide by the results of the elections. All these actions of the electoral division at the highest level of Salvadoran politics undoubtedly helped create a better political climate and reinforce the confidence of all the political actors in the electoral process (Montgomery 2000: 152). Weiss Fagen (Chief of Mission for UNHCR during this period) goes as far as to say that "the actual process of registration was more than reasonably fair and viewed by all parties as successful, as was the actual election process".[33] This is, in my view, an overstatement considering all the problems that rigged the electoral process. It is beyond doubt, however, that the

[33] Personal communication with the author (e-mail received on July 12 2008).

UN agencies played a positive role that allowed the elections to take place and to be deemed acceptable by the international community.

Conclusion

In this work I have exposed multiple external factors that contributed to democratic transitions in Central America. After studying the cases of Nicaragua and El Salvador, it is clear that one of the arguments of the transition paradigm (the irrelevance of external factors to the democratic transition) does not stand, at least in the context of Central America.[34] These case studies are in line with a series of recent theoretical developments that emphasize the international dimensions of democratization (Drake 1998, Gleditsch and Ward 2006, Pevehouse 2002, Schmitter 2001, Smith 2005, Whitehead 2001).

The international dimensions of the democratic transition in Nicaragua and El Salvador are visible at every stage of the process. The initiatives taken at the regional level (Esquipulas diplomatic process) and the geopolitical shifts accompanying the end of the Cold War created favorable conditions for "lancing the Central American boil" (Baker 1995). After tortuous negotiations at the regional level and with the active participation of the UN, the Nicaraguan conflict was settled through a series of agreements. The negotiations on El Salvador were mediated by the UN and a Peace Treaty was signed in January 1992.

But the implementation of these agreements was rigged with problems due to mistrust created by years of civil war. The role of the international community (and especially the UN agencies) was critical before the elections (El Salvador) or in the immediate aftermath of the elections (Nicaragua) to avoid a collapse of the peace processes during the implementation stage.

The success of the pivotal elections after a civil war is crucial for the overall success of the democratic transition. In the "founding elections" in Nicaragua and El Salvador

[34] For a more general critique of the transition paradigm, see Carothers (2002).

the international observers played a very important role. Their presence, their reports and their pressure on the Nicaraguan and the Salvadoran governments largely contributed to the success of the first democratic elections.

Our analysis has devoted a lot of space to the support of international actors to the peace processes in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The reason is that there is a close link between pacification and democratization in Central America (Arnson and Azpuru 2008, Call and Cook 2003, Ducatenzeiler and Chinchilla 2001). In fact, political exclusion, military rule, and fraudulent elections were key roots of the civil conflicts in the isthmus. The peace agreements represented a trade-off in which the guerrillas accepted to lay down their arms in exchange for participation in a democratic political system. The reforms made to the military, police, and electoral institutions after the peace agreements paved the way both for pacification and for democratization in Nicaragua and El Salvador. In the words of Joaquín Villalobos (one of the top-level FMLN commanders during the Salvadoran civil war), "El Salvador passed simultaneously from war to peace and from authoritarianism to democracy" (Villalobos 1999: 140). Hence, all the contributions made by the international community to the Central American peace processes were also supporting indirectly the democratic transitions.

The democratic transition in Nicaragua and El Salvador has undoubtedly been a success. Reasonably free and fair elections have been held regularly in these two countries since the pivotal elections. The FSLN in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador were allowed to participate in the political system as the legal opposition and their support bases have grown, which proves that the conditions for participating in the political system are now fairer. The leader of the FSLN (Daniel Ortega) was elected president of Nicaragua in the 2006 elections and, according to recent polls, the

FMLN stands a good chance of beating ARENA in the 2009 presidential elections in El Salvador.[35] Moreover, the use of violent repression by the state has disappeared and the armed forces have little influence on government policy (Leogrande 2001, Wood 2005: 190-193).

International factors have also contributed to the institutional democratization of Nicaragua and El Salvador since the first democratic elections. In fact, an emerging principle of democratic rule is now part of international law (Franck 1992, Fox 2003, Tesón 1996 34-35) and this reality carries special weight in the Western Hemisphere. In June 1991, the member states of the OAS signed the Santiago Declaration in which they reaffirmed their commitment to democracy and decided they would meet immediately and consider concrete countermeasures in the event of any suspension of the democratic rule in the Americas (Farer 1996). The Inter-American Democratic Charter (adopted in Lima on September 11 2001) shows that the principle of democratic rule has been consolidated in the region during the 1990s. Article 1 states that "the peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it" (OAS 2001). Moreover, the international supervision of elections has now become an international norm (Hyde 2006). All the elections that took place in Nicaragua and El Salvador since the pivotal elections were scrutinized by a host of international organizations, as well as international and local NGOs. Hence, the international and regional context makes a regression to an authoritarian regime in either of these countries highly improbable, contributing thus to the consolidation of democratic institutions in Central America.

However, if we look beyond the institutional surface, we discover a much more grim reality. The fragile democratic systems in Central America suffer from several

[35] http://contrapunto.com.sv/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=267 (consulted on July 26 2008).

shortcomings. The Central American democracies have been described as "hybrid regimes" (Karl 1995). On the one hand, the institutional machinery of democracy is in place. On the other hand, the quality of the democratic institutions remains weak and political democracy has not translated into effective governance.

First of all, democratic regimes have been unable to deliver security to the citizens of Nicaragua and El Salvador. The violent crime rates have exploded after the civil wars. Criminal violence is today much more widespread than during the civil war years: social violence has replaced political violence in post-war Central America (Cruz 2003: 27-33). For instance, the post-war homicide rate in El Salvador was among the highest in the world (along with Colombia and South Africa).[36]

Moreover, high levels of poverty and inequality persisted in Nicaragua and El Salvador after the democratic transition, largely because of the neoliberal policies of structural adjustment adopted by the Central American governments.

Furthermore, the democratic systems in both countries face institutional weaknesses. The absence of a center party favors the continuation of political polarization (Barnes 1998), which could be detrimental to the consolidation of democracy. More importantly, the level of corruption in Central America is high and the political parties lack credibility (Wood 2005: 194-197).

All these problems (i.e. criminal violence, persistence of socioeconomic inequality, institutional weaknesses of the democratic system) pose a redoubtable obstacle to further democratization in Nicaragua and El Salvador because the citizens of these

[36] The homicide rate in El Salvador at the height of the civil war (1982) was 55.3 per 100,000 inhabitants. In 1994 and 1995, this same rate has increased to 138 per 100,000 inhabitants. The crime levels have declined since then, but they remain very high (Wood 2005: 197).

countries gradually become disenchanted with a political system that is not able to solve their everyday problems.[37]

It would be worth looking into the impact of international factors on the quality of democracy in Central America once the formal democratic transition has been achieved. At first glance, it seems that international, regional, and US organizations (e.g. OAS and USAID) have focused excessively on the institutional dimensions of the democratic transition, ignoring the other problems that preclude further democratization (Garibay 2004: 134-135). More importantly, the neoliberal policies adopted by the Central American governments are partially the result of the pressures exerted on them by the United States and international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank (Robinson 2004). The neoliberal policies have deepened socioeconomic inequality in Central America since the democratic transitions and, by the same token, have planted the seed for an increase in criminal violence.

Hence, it may well be that democratization in Central America, which was linked at the beginning to a series of international factors, has been undermined since the early 1990s by a different set of international factors.

[37] The criminal violence is especially threatening to democracy because it erodes the citizen's support for democracy and weakens the legitimacy of the political system (Cruz 2001, Cruz 2003, Pérez 2003).

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