

9-23-1998

## Monitoring Elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua

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### Recommended Citation

Spence, Jack (1998) "Monitoring Elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol14/iss1/6>

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## Monitoring Elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Bing Chen for his efforts over many months to put this event together.

# Monitoring Elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua

*Jack Spence*

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I would like to thank Bing Chen for his efforts over many months to put this event together. He first invited me in early 1993. While I was in El Salvador last year, it seemed that Jimmy Carter might attend. By this fall Chen had managed to nail Fred's [Frederick Gamst's] and my shoes to the floor, and then pursued peripatetic Padraig [O'Malley] with a barrage of faxes over Southern Africa.

I observed the February 1990 elections in Nicaragua as a member of both the Latin American Studies Association observation team and that of Hemisphere Initiatives, a group with which I have worked. In El Salvador I headed the Hemisphere Initiatives team. I visited Nicaragua five times during the electoral period, and for El Salvador, for once my academic calendar coincided with Salvadoran history. A sabbatical in the last academic year allowed me to be there during the electoral period.

I should say by way of comparison with Fred Gamst's presentation about Ethiopia that Nicaragua and El Salvador are ethnically and linguistically homogeneous societies in which the conflicts that led to war were based on class divisions and ideology. The main exception to this general pattern would be the geographically isolated Atlantic coast region of Nicaragua, which is ethnically and linguistically complex and has about 10 percent of the country's population. In El Salvador the indigenous population that survived into this century was largely destroyed or driven underground in 1932 when the government and landowners slaughtered people they suspected of participating in a revolt against coffee plantation owners.

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## **Background of Elections in Nicaragua and El Salvador**

The chronology handed out summarizes events in those two countries with an emphasis on elections and international negotiations. To refresh your memories: in Nicaragua, the leftist Sandinistas overthrew a long-standing, U.S.-supported dictatorial family, the Somozas, in July 1979. By 1981, the Reagan administration was financing and organizing a war of counterrevolutionaries (contras) to do away with the Sandinistas.

In El Salvador in 1979, several leftist guerrilla groups that coalesced in 1980 into the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN), and a broad array of militant grassroots groups threatened to overthrow a military government, which was replaced in October of 1979 by a reformist civilian military government. This government, however, was not willing or able to stop human rights abuses, which in fact rapidly escalated. Despite high levels of human rights abuses, including the assassination of the archbishop in

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March 1990, the Carter administration increased military aid in 1980. By April the country was in a civil war, the government pitted against the FMLN guerrillas. The first Reagan administration (1981–1984) then made quantum leaps in that aid and supported elections to legalize the government as well as to convince congressional critics that aid was going to a democracy. The FMLN and the civilian left boycotted the first several rounds of these elections.

Throughout the 1980s wars raged on in both countries. They created enormous social and physical destruction, considering that they employed aerial bombing to a relatively limited extent. Some 75,000, mostly civilians, were killed in El Salvador, a country the size of Massachusetts with a population somewhat smaller at 5 million. Fifty thousand were killed in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and in the 1978–1979 war that toppled Somoza, in which he employed numerous air attacks on urban centers, another 25,000 to 30,000 died. By way of contrast, the United States, with eighty times the population of Nicaragua, had fewer casualties in Vietnam than the number of those in either Nicaragua or El Salvador, and the United States was traumatized. It is impossible to find adults in either Nicaragua or El Salvador who have not lost friends or relatives, and in rural areas the losses were much greater. Economic losses were mammoth. One billion in capital, roughly one year's gross export earnings, left El Salvador in the early 1980s. In Nicaragua the economy declined some 24 percent in the late 1980s, and in 1988 the inflation rate was 30,000 percent, too high to measure accurately. The economy was in free fall and chaotic, far worse than the war-damaged Salvadoran economy.

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### **The Peace Process Elections**

In both countries, as illustrated in Table 1, their 1979 break with past authoritarian governments had been followed by elections and new constitutions, the 1984 election in Nicaragua and a series of elections in El Salvador. But these elections had not been accepted as legitimate by the armed opposition in each country, by several civilian politically conservative anti-Sandinista groups in Nicaragua, and until the 1989 election, by exiled civilian leftist groups in El Salvador.

The two elections in question, that of 1990 in Nicaragua and March 1994 in El Salvador, were part of a peace process in each country. In Nicaragua the war was not over and the contra army remained in the field, but conservative political groups, including conservatives who had previously been in the civilian leadership of the U.S.-supported contras, agreed to participate if the electoral processes were free and fair. They had refused to participate in the 1984 election.

In El Salvador, the war was over but the elections were a key part of the implementation phases of the peace process. They were the first in which the FMLN guerrillas would participate. In both countries, they were the first ever in which all political groups from left to right would be represented and in which there would be no military candidate. Were they not perceived as being free and fair elections, legitimating elections, the peace processes would have been gravely, perhaps mortally, wounded.

As part of the guarantee for these "peace process" elections, 1990 in Nicaragua and 1994 in El Salvador, there was extensive outside observation of the elections, particularly by the UN, and in Nicaragua by the Organization of American States (OAS) as well. While this now seems commonplace, at the time, Nicaragua, in 1990, had far and away the most thoroughly and extensively internationally observed election ever. Since then, election observation has been a growth business. Between the OAS and the UN

there were 900 election day observers in Nicaragua for some 4,000 polling places, plus another 1,500 invited and uninvited observers representing governments to small church groups. More important, several dozen UN and OAS observers, and a half dozen other small groups including the Latin American Studies Association, Hemisphere Initiatives, and the Carter Center, watched the entire electoral process from the negotiation of the ground rules to voter registration to the campaigns. For example, every campaign rally had international observers. It was really the first time that election observation was taken to mean something more extensive than the few days surrounding an election.

An essential difference between the two elections, however, was that while the parties considered the UN and other outside observers to be, in a sense, a guarantor for free and fair elections, or at least a mediator and relatively impartial witness, the U.S. position in Nicaragua in 1989 was that only the ongoing presence of the contra army would put sufficient pressure on the Sandinistas to have a free and fair election. That is, the Nicaraguan election not only was held during a war that seemed to be dwindling down, but the threat was that if the elections results were “wrong,” the United States and the contras would continue the war.

At issue, then, is the extent to which these two elections contributed to the peace process in their respective countries. To what extent did they contribute to a process of democratization? And to what extent did international observation contribute to these contributions?

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### **Contributions to the Peace Process**

It is clear that the elections contributed to both of these processes and were necessary, but not sufficient, elements to each process. Had the elections been a blatant fraud, both countries would have been very different. It is virtually certain that Nicaragua would have plunged back into a re-escalated war. It is harder to say that about El Salvador, which was twenty-six months into an implementation of a peace treaty at the time of the election, but it is far from inconceivable that at least portions of the FMLN would have restocked their military supplies.

I would also argue that although a necessary part of the peace process, the elections were, among other necessary parts, a relatively minor part, and in each case the results of the election, more than the fairness of the electoral process itself, may have enhanced the peace process. This is a negative, though hypothetical, judgment to make on the election's contribution, as “who won” is not supposed to be an element in deciding whether it was free and fair.

Of more importance to the peace process are agreements about stopping fighting, laying down arms, and providing security guarantees, which usually also imply some economic promises, to those most closely involved in the fighting. This was not accomplished in Angola, for example, where the “peace process” elections proved to be but a brief interlude in a war even more destructive than those in Central America.

Of course, it had not been accomplished in Nicaragua either. But in that case the electoral candidate backed by the United States and by the contras, Violeta Chamorro and her thirteen-party UNO coalition, won, and the Sandinistas honored the results and insisted that there would be no purge of the country's military, no replacement of it by the contras. Had the results been the other way, it is far from clear that the Bush administration, the contras, sectors of Chamorro's coalition, to say nothing of Jesse Helms,

**Table 1**  
**Chronology of War and Elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua**

Year	El Salvador	Nicaragua	U.S./International
1931, 1978	1932 slaughter of insurrectionists; military runs government for large landowners.	U.S. appointed military head; Somoza takes over, murders nationalist Sandino.	
1979	Coup; "liberal" military civilian junta takes power.	Sandinistas oust [son of] Somoza.	Carter distances United States from Somoza, Salvadoran military.
1980	Archbishop assassinated; civil war begins.	"Moderates" quit government.	Carter backs "new" Salvadoran govt; cool relations with Nicaragua. Reagan elected
1981	FMLN final offensive fails.	U.S. contra war begins.	"Covert" aid to contras, massive aid to Salvador through 1980s
1982	Constituent Assembly elections/FMLN boycotts		CIA actions in Nicaragua discovered; Congress protests.
1983	New constitution; in war, FMLN gains; U.S. military aid up; helicopters.	War escalates.	Latin peace process under way; over nonmilitary contra aid.
1984	Duarte elected; failed talks with FMLN.	Ortega and Constitutional Assembly elected; civilian rights boycott.	Reagan reelected; aid to Salvador no longer contended; peace process thwarted.
1985	Centrist Christian Democrats win assembly election.	Economic plunge begins; Soviet helicopters in war.	
1986	War grinds on.	War grinds on.	U.S. Congress votes \$100 million military aid to contras in June. Iran contragate scandal engulfs Reagan administration.
1987	War grinds on.	War grinds on.	Arias peace treaty
1988	ARENA wins assembly election.	Tentative peace moves	Bush elected.
1989	FMLN changes negotiation stance/ARENA's Cristiani elected/Tet offensive; Jesuits assassinated.	Election campaign conservatives participate in UNO coalition; UN and OAS observe but contra war goes on at lower level.	In Nicaragua Bush keeps the contras at war to guarantee free elections. In December U.S. invades Panama.
1990	Peace negotiations begin.	Chamorro and UNO elected in February; military headed by Humberto Ortega; contra war ends.	

Year	El Salvador	Nicaragua	U.S./International
1991	Peace negotiations conclude December 31.	Contra land takeovers; UNO splits.	
1992	Treaty signed; implementation crises; modest economic growth.	Land takeovers; more UNO splits; economic crisis	Clinton elected; Senator Helms offensive on Nicaragua.
1993	Election of century campaign begins; modest economic growth.	Mass protests, unemployment, land crises	
1994	ARENA wins presidency. Assembly and municipal elections/ FMLN finishes second.	Constitutional crisis over power of president/ Sandinista divisions	Helms, chairman of Foreign Relations Committee
1997	ARENA loses ground, FMLN gains in assembly and municipal elections.	Alemán defeats FSLN Ortega for president and wins control of assembly in tarnished elections.	Continued Helms pressure on U.S. "citizen" land claims in Nicaragua; declined U.S. presence in El Salvador

Under the Salvadoran 1983 Constitution, assembly and local elections are held every three years, presidential elections every five years; no successive terms for presidents. Under the Nicaraguan 1987 Constitution, all presidential, assembly, and municipal elections coincided every six years, with reelection permitted. In 1995, presidential terms were for five years with no successive terms, other terms four years. Both countries employ proportional representation for assembly elections.

would have accepted the results and brought the war to an end — though I must admit that Bush would have faced increasing difficulties in getting Congress to appropriate funds for the contras.

Had the FMLN won the election in El Salvador, it is not clear that the military, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, or, according to interviews of major coffee growers conducted by sociologist Jeffrey Paige, powerful business sectors would have been prepared to accept the election. I would not say that war would have broken out in that event, but short of that, there would have been an increase in death squad activity, the military would have pressured the incoming government in numerous ways, and there would have been massive capital flight.

As it stands, the post-electoral period and post-peace treaty period in El Salvador has been tranquil (relative to Nicaragua, not relative to Massachusetts) because a detailed treaty, however filled with crisis points and watered-down implementation, made at least minimal provision for laying down arms and for providing for ex-combatants, with considerable U.S. and international aid to back it up. However, it is important to note here that during the election campaign and since the election, five prominent members of the FMLN have been gunned down. There have been no arrests. Though the government has been quick to assert that these people have been victims of El Salvador's intensive crime wave, no one in the government has been similarly gunned down.

In Nicaragua, and despite a very clean election and results the contras wanted, the country has been plagued for four years by numerous armed bands of contras making not only economic demands but high-level political demands (the minister of defense Humberto Ortega should be fired and so should the minister of the presidency, Chamorro's son-in-law Antonio Lacayo), demands which have been loudly echoed in Washington by Senator Helms — actually, it is not clear who is echoing whom.

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### **Have Elections Contributed to Democratization?**

Again yes, in the sense that blatant frauds would have done the reverse. But taking any definition of democracy even slightly more ample than simply requiring regularly scheduled elections with open campaigning and accurate vote counting, the elections were but one piece in a complex puzzle of democratization. In El Salvador, despite extensive international observation, nudging, and lobbying, the elections were not conducted very well.

In addition, in El Salvador, up until four months ago [August 1994] the entire Supreme Court was selected for five-year terms by the majority party in the assembly, and the Supreme Court in turn selected the lower court judges and controlled their budgets. That this system has recently been changed is not the result of the “elections of the century” but rather of the FMLN's insistence on judicial reform in the peace negotiations.

With several thousand instances of human rights abuses, the court and police systems have had two successful prosecutions in fifteen years involving military defendants, and one of those was overturned by an amnesty law passed literally hours after a UN-selected Truth Commission mandated under the accords had named names in notorious cases of human rights abuses. [That remains true in October 1998.]

In both countries, the military retains virtual administrative and budgetary autonomy from the legislature. The assembly can veto a budget bottom line, but can't, or won't, examine its components. That is changing in Nicaragua. In El Salvador it is politically inconceivable that there would be a civilian minister of defense. Though the peace process drastically reduced the size of the armies in each country, in El Salvador all the officer corps remain but with relatively few troops to command.

My point here is not to fault the elections and their results for not changing all of this. Democratization is a process, and it would not be fair to charge any election with the whole job. Rather it is to say that the electoral process has made only small contributions in other institutional areas and that the international spotlight shines brightest only on election day — after that the U.S. president, at least if happy with the results, can declare that X and Y countries have joined the democratic team.

Did the electoral process in its own terms contribute to democratization? First, it should be noted that whether these two elections would be part of the democratizing process was and remains a contested issue. The Sandinistas claim that the 1984 election was democratic; what was undemocratic was that the United States and the contras did not accept the results. The conservative governing party ARENA in El Salvador makes similar claims about the seven elections that preceded the 1994 election.

In terms of conduct, the Nicaraguan election gets much better grades than the El Salvador election. Though turnout was considerably higher in both countries than in previous elections, the voter registration and voting processes in El Salvador effectively excluded several tens of thousands of potential voters and did so with a heavy bias



against the poor, particularly those in former war zones. Voter registration was legally cumbersome, particularly for peasants without birth certificates, time-consuming, expensive, and geographically inconvenient for many. So was voting, and there was much confusion at polling places, resulting in some 25,000 to 80,000 who showed up with voting card in hand being unable to vote. At least 80,000 who attempted to register never received a card.

In a country in which pre-election surveys showed high levels of cynicism about the electoral process among a substantial minority of the population — more than one-third said that the elections would be fraudulent; fewer than a third said that they would be free and fair — the election, despite a higher turnout of voters who could vote, did not do much to allay cynicism.

In Nicaragua these processes were a model of efficiency and fairness under the administration of the Supreme Electoral Council, as they had been in 1984. The campaign, however, was one in which a foreign power was an open, if legal, contributor to one of the sides.

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### **Did the Observers Make a Difference?**

Yes. In Nicaragua, while there were many campaign complaints from both sides about harassment, complaints that shared the distinction of being most difficult to verify, the contenders in general agreed that the observers headed off crises and built some faith in opponents in the Electoral Commission, which they conceived of as being controlled by the Sandinistas. What aided this process was when the Democrat Jimmy Carter and the Republican Eliot Richardson, who was working with the UN, themselves gave good preliminary grades to the conduct of voter registration and the general conduct of the election campaign period. (Had the results come out the other way, the effects of the UN, and Richardson, and Carter giving the election a good grade would have placed some constraints on Bush's actions.)

In El Salvador, the outside observers, in the months before the election, clearly helped to improve a flawed process. For several months, for example, the UN observers were providing most of the rural transportation for electoral authorities during the registration process, an action that clearly exceeded the UN terms of reference. Many more people would have been excluded from voting.

There are, however, costs and limits. In El Salvador, I would estimate the costs of financing international observation on election day only (counting air fares, housing, food, and ground transportation) to amount to at least \$2 per vote cast. For those who make the minimum wage in El Salvador (and many make less), that amounts to half a day's wage. The entire election, counting campaign, administration, and observation costs, was far more expensive than that.

The UN style is to be as obvious as possible. It wants people to know that they are being observed. But in a poor country, the wealth such a style involves, plus the high salaries paid to UN observers, creates some resentment among poor and rich — the poor for obvious reasons, the rich because the UN observers drive up the cost of high-end housing. There is also an understandable nationalist sentiment: Who are these outsiders to grade us? In Nicaragua, after I was introduced at a social event as an election observer, a Nicaraguan brightly welcomed me and said he looked forward to seeing me in the United States the following year. When I asked why he would be visiting the United States, he said he hoped to come to observe election procedures in Chicago.

Finally, though the UN had a seasoned team of observers in the months preceding the election, its massive election day team — and this would be true for the OAS in Nicaragua as well — included many people who had little observing experience and no background in the country, although, unlike other election observation teams, a majority spoke Spanish. When troubles arose in El Salvador, they were less than clear about what they should do.

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## **The Prospects**

Progress has been made. The elections were procedurally excellent in Nicaragua and mediocre in El Salvador with its bias against the poor. Turnout was excellent in Nicaragua, only fair in El Salvador — but on a par with the United States. Reform of the Supreme Court has begun in El Salvador with consensus building in the assembly; in Nicaragua, after some years of division and stalemate, the assembly seems to have fashioned a working majority, ironically including Sandinistas, which is providing some stability. In Nicaragua, there is a tradition of grassroots participation between the elections.

Without international observation the next time, however, it is not clear to me how El Salvador will improve its electoral procedural behavior, though there is a chance that there will be reform in this area, at least legislated if not implemented.

The main concern for each country takes opposite directions. The UNO coalition of thirteen parties had one thing in common: dislike of the Sandinistas. It is now badly divided, if it can even be said to exist. The governing system has barely governed, and economic growth has been nonexistent. Unemployment is extremely high. In both countries crime, violent crime, is at shocking levels. Jesse Helms will likely cut off all aid to Nicaragua. In Nicaragua, despite the civic virtues of the election, I believe, after four years of no progress, there is deep cynicism among the electorate. The governing system is fragmented and just barely a system. A right-wing, authoritarian anti-Sandinista is the current front runner for the 1996 election. In short, were there an election tomorrow, I would predict a drastic reduction in turnout and an electoral result that would either be a one-person authoritarian president or a continuation of political fragmentation so extreme as to make the country barely governable.

In El Salvador we have the opposite of fragmentation. Quite apart from the ongoing presence of death squads, apparently now also tied to drug running, the rightist ARENA has just won, by a commanding margin at all levels, its second consecutive election. Though it got but 44 percent in the assembly election, it has a working majority and confronts an opposition divided into three or four parties, the larger ones of which, including the FMLN, are in the process of dividing. It won 68 percent of the presidential runoff vote, and with a winner-take-all system in municipal elections, it has undivided control of municipal councils in 80 percent of the municipalities despite winning 44 percent of the vote. It is also the party that 99 percent of the wealthy people in the country support, which outspent its opposition in the election campaign by extremely large margins. A one-party state may be on the horizon.

These futures, should they come to pass, are not entirely the product of the very destructive wars, but they are in no small part shaped by them. The wars have ended and elections have been held, but reconstruction, economic well-being for the majority, reconciliation, and a deep-seated democratization with incentives to participate at the grassroots remain distant goals. ❀

*This speech was originally delivered at the Distinguished Lecture Series, University of Massachusetts Boston, December 12, 1994.*

## Reflections on Elections and Peace Four Years Later

When asked in October 1998 to draft a brief postscript to the foregoing speech on elections and peace, I was discomfited to note that I had concluded the December 1994 lecture with several forthright predictions that are now hard to ignore.

Since the lecture, both Nicaragua and El Salvador experienced another major election round, while Nicaragua also held two regional elections in its two theoretically autonomous, ethnically diverse Atlantic Coast regions. Presidential, National Assembly, and municipal elections, including direct mayoral elections for the first time, took place in Nicaragua in October 1996. El Salvador had National Assembly and municipal elections in March 1997, and presidential elections will be held in March 1999.

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### El Salvador

My predictions that El Salvador might be headed toward a one-party state have so far happily proved to be off the mark. The rightist ARENA party suffered a major decline in March 1997, going from 39 to 28 seats in the assembly and polling 35 percent fewer votes than it had in 1994. By contrast, the up-and-coming former guerrilla group, the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN), despite a major party split in the year following the 1994 elections, improved its vote by 28.5 percent and almost tied ARENA with 27 seats. The balance of 29 seats was divided among seven other parties, still leaving ARENA with a working majority in spite of facing major difficulties for votes that require more than a 50 percent majority, for example, ratification of international agreements. More impressive, the FMLN moved from winning fourteen tiny municipalities of 262 in 1994 to fifty-three in 1997, including the capital city and five of the next six largest cities. A former rural guerrilla force, it demonstrated real urban vote-getting prowess.

ARENA's decline was owing to several publicized, though unproven, heavy contact internal fights, a president widely perceived as weak, and a sharp economic decline following several years of growth. Its vast resources for campaigns, however, make it the strong favorite for next year's presidential elections. Its control of government remains firm.

Nevertheless, El Salvador continued to suffer from mediocre electoral processes. Because a poorly administered system has rules that make voting and registering much more difficult for poor rural voters, it is biased in ARENA's favor. For example, ARENA has buried proposals that would permit people to vote in their own neighborhood rather than travel to distant locales. There are no controls or even records kept on campaign financing. Incumbents can abuse state power to a degree unimaginable in the United States, for instance, mounting government-paid-for television advertisements promoting a government agency that are actually thinly disguised campaign propaganda.

On the other hand, the more serious doubts about electoral democracy in El Salvador passed a sterner test in 1997. I felt that the right would not accept an FMLN victory in 1994, but did not have to worry about that theoretical possibility. The proof of the

honesty of a system is not demonstrated as much in an election in which those who run the system are likely, with a fair vote, to win easily, as in 1994. In March 1997 one might have predicted that ARENA, which clearly was not going to lose control of the state, would stoop to fraud as the results were going to be close, but there was little evidence that it did.

It can also be said that peace has held in El Salvador, and fair elections have made a contribution to it. But El Salvador at peace is more dangerous than when it was at war, with its homicide rate some forty times that of the United States, one year topping even Colombia in world rankings. This violence is no doubt related to the war — high levels of postwar unemployment, a male population broadly skilled in the use of weapons, rampant and untreated post-traumatic stress disorder.

Other aspects of the transition to peace and full participation democracy have not been impressive. Voting turnout was 17 percent lower than in 1994 and remains at mediocre levels, and between elections political participation in citizens groups is extremely low by U.S. standards. The judicial system, despite having the best Supreme Court ever, has been very slow to rid itself of corrupt and incompetent judges throughout the system. A brand-new police force, although certainly better than the old human rights abusers, has itself been accused of corruption, abuse of authority, and incompetence and has been engulfed by a volcanic increase in crime.

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## Nicaragua

I predicted an electorate, made cynical by a policy that since the end of the war had been subjected to a crisis over every major fundamental issue a national government might face, would not turn out to vote as it had, in very high numbers, in the previous two post-Somoza elections and that it would likely elect Arnaldo Alemán, a rightist populist with authoritarian tendencies, as president. They turned out in high numbers, but they elected Alemán.

On the other hand, I did not anticipate that the legislature would, before the 1997 election, pass a series of constitutional amendments and laws which would limit the strong presidential powers in Nicaragua, making it difficult for an authoritarian. The president's controls over making international agreements, appointing heads of the military and members of the Supreme Court, for example, are sharply limited by legislative strength and, in the case of the military, institutional authority.

I also did not anticipate that Nicaragua's best government institution, the Supreme Electoral Council, would be subjected to a series of legal changes, budgetary pressures, and mandated politicization that would make it considerably less effective and result in a 1997 election day process marked by irregularities and significant chaos. This was in sharp contrast to the model elections it administered under intense international scrutiny in 1984 and 1990. The changes required the Supreme Electoral Council to appoint as regional electoral authorities, rather than professional staff, people nominated by political parties, to train the appointees, and at the same time, to implement a new photo ID system, all with a reduced budget. It performed well, but a greatly expanded electorate, high turnout, and lack of experience and shenanigans resulted in long delays in vote counts, recounts, and missing ballots.

I also did not anticipate that the Sandinistas, the former left ruling party, would

undergo a split and, subsequent to the election, suffer a major political crisis when its leader, former Nicaraguan president and 1997 candidate Daniel Ortega, would be publicly accused of sexual abuse by his stepdaughter.

Eight years after the end of the war, armed groups are still making semipolitical demands despite all predictions that they would fade away once their favorite candidate, and friend, Alemán was elected. The economy remains in a mess with unemployment rates at staggering levels for the eighth consecutive year and little new investment despite Alemán's election. The court system, at some levels, remains politicized, and the two large parties have been agreeing to tinker with the electoral rules in their favor, not that of the small parties.

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Though the conditions in almost all areas save crime are better in El Salvador — and crime is pretty bad in Nicaragua — each country has had a measure of success in mounting legitimating elections with results recognized by the opposition, which contributed to an end to their wars. But each country retains significant remnants of its authoritarian and corrupt pre-1980 past, sometimes manifesting themselves in new institutional clothing. It must also be said, however, that the military institution in each has gone through major change. In Nicaragua, civilians across a wide political spectrum and the Chamorro government agreed to a military law professionalizing and regulating the military, including the manner of selecting its top command. Its numbers and budget are 20 percent of what they were in the 1980s, and there is no draft. The El Salvador military has a distinctly lower profile and even the FMLN points to the success of military reform, in contrast to the country's slowness of reform in civilian areas.

Neither country has overcome the damage and scars of the wars in which their societies were shredded and their economies damaged or, in the case of Nicaragua, devastated.

El Salvador's economy is in better shape because many more Salvadorans left for the United States during the war and send much more money home. That is, this economic benefit has come at the expense of ripping the fabric of the society. This country did a relatively good job of holding the Salvadoran economy together during the war and an even better job of tearing Nicaragua's apart.

The chief obstacle to promoting peace and transition to democracy in each country is that broad sectors of the population have little faith or stake in the government systems because the peace process and electoral democracy have done little of direct relevance to alleviate their poverty-stricken conditions. Solving that problem is far beyond the expertise of international electoral observers.

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### **Addendum**

The above reflections were written in October 1998. I write these lines on December 20, 1998. In November Central America was devastated by hurricane Mitch, with damage in Nicaragua and Honduras by far the heaviest. Relief workers estimated some 10,000 dead in the two countries and damage that would take, assuming very large

international help, more than a decade to repair. Every year there are headlines about hurricanes, but this was the worst of the century in the region. To call it a natural disaster, however, disguises the human, political element. Agricultural policy for centuries has favored a few owners of very large estates at the expense of the rural majority. Land shortages force people to live up the sides of mountains. Money shortages force them to use trees for cooking fuel. Deforestation follows, so heavy rains cause erosion. A major storm creates a mud slide, and mud slides can move much faster than a human, or a horse, can run. Whole villages were wiped out. It is not clear what this will mean politically for Nicaragua, but the Alemán government, suspecting Sandinista mayors were exaggerating the dangers as the rains poured down, minimized the danger and damage. When this blunder was clear, it attempted to control relief funds.

Nicaragua's last quarter century of suffering is of Old Testament proportions. In 1972 Managua suffered a massive earthquake with more than 20,000 killed. Somoza, the dictator, used aid funds to his own benefit. The 1978-1979 war against Somoza left tens of thousands dead and an economy so ruined that the United Nations declared that under "the best of circumstances," recovery from the war would not be complete until the end of the century. Rather than the best of circumstances, the Reagan administration financed a war against the Sandinistas that lasted ten years. Economic ruin far exceeded that of the prior war. Nature brought a major hurricane in 1988. Deforestation brought several years of drought. Then there was a tidal wave and volcanic eruptions. With the end of the millennium a year off, Mitch arrived. ❁