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Lauren Carasik

Western New England University School of Law, Carasik@law.wne.edu

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El Salvador gripped by tension after close election

Result reflects ongoing divisions from the country's repressive past

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by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

A closely contested runoff election in El Salvador last week has set the Central American nation on edge. On March 16, El Salvador's Supreme Electoral Authority (TSE) declared former rebel commander and current Vice President Salvador Sánchez Cerén the winner by a razor-thin margin of 6,300 votes. His opponent, the right-wing National Republican Alliance Party (ARENA) candidate Norman Quijano, is attempting to delegitimize the election. He has alleged fraud, asked the TSE to annul the poll and is vowing to contest the results, including an appeal to the country's Supreme Court for a recount of all votes.

Quijano's menacing call on the military to defend the country's democracy has elicited visceral reactions for those with raw memories of the country's dictatorships, including of notorious death squads associated with ARENA. El Salvador's civil war from 1980 to 1992 claimed more than 75,000 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands. The country's postwar efforts to depoliticize and professionalize the military were vindicated when the Defense Ministry pledged to respect the results issued by the TSE, allaying fears of military involvement. International observers, including the [United Nations](#), the U.S. State Department and the [Organization of American States](#), lauded the orderly and transparent process.

This year's watershed election represents the first time a former Marxist guerrilla has been elected to the top post in El Salvador. Current President Mauricio Funes was a journalist who sympathized with Sánchez Cerén's Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) but never took up arms. While Sánchez Cerén is expected to pursue more leftist policies than his predecessor, radical policy

changes are unlikely, since the FMLN has a weak mandate and does not control the Legislature.

A divided nation

Sánchez Cerén, a former teacher and education minister, ran on a social-democratic platform promoting economic equality, inclusive political participation, education, employment and violence prevention. His anti-crime policies focus on rehabilitation and expanding educational initiatives to marginalized communities. Quijano, who is a proponent of a free-market economy, espouses a militarized *mano dura* (iron fist) approach to curb the country's pervasive gang and drug-related violence.

Sánchez Cerén has so far struck a [conciliatory tone](#), calling for national unity. But [experts](#) fear that Quijano's incendiary rhetoric and aggressive attacks could hamper efforts to unify a deeply divided nation. In the weeks leading up to the poll, Quijano warned about the potential for violence, division and instability under a left-leaning government — even invoking the turmoil in Venezuela to stoke fears and mobilize the middle class against the FMLN.

The pervasive social and economic inequality that set the stage for the bloody civil war in the '80s and early '90s still endures. The interests of the impoverished masses often collide with those of the ruling elite. But Quijano could not overcome the appeal of [social welfare programs](#) implemented under Funes' administration, which Sánchez Cerén vows to expand. The programs have helped reduce poverty and illiteracy, provide schoolbooks and uniforms, offer credit financing and technical assistance to peasant farmers, empower women through job training and domestic violence initiatives and establish community health programs that have dramatically reduced maternal and infant mortality.

Two decades after ending its bloody civil war, El Salvador is still struggling to reconcile its divided populace.

On June 1, Sánchez Cerén will take the helm of a country that faces a host of serious challenges, including security, endemic poverty, unemployment and a faltering economy. He has pledged to join Venezuela's Petrocaribe oil bloc, which provides fuel at discounted prices to member states, and to use government savings from subsidized energy costs to fund social development programs. His environment-friendly development model also emphasizes public-private partnerships and the encouragement of small business. His state-led development will likely alienate pro-business legislators who favor neoliberal economic policies and appear poised to obstruct his economic agenda.

El Salvador's intractable gang violence and narcotrafficking crimes are also inextricably tied to its troubled economy. It has among the highest murder and femicide rates in the world. A [controversial](#) 2012 gang truce that was credited for lowering the death toll [has unraveled](#) in recent months. Even during its short-lived initial success, many Salvadorans were inimical to granting leniency to gang members.

A 2012 report by the [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) found that crime in El Salvador is fueled by multiple factors such as economic stagnation, rapid urbanization, rural displacement, fragmented families and communities and income inequality. For impoverished people facing few options and little hope for economic advancement, the lure of quick money and gang membership can be hard to resist. The transnational roots of the narcotics trade demand a [coordinated regional response](#) from producing and transit countries as well as the United States, the largest drug consumer market in the world. Sánchez Cerén cannot combat these complex economic and social issues on his own.

Transitional justice

The election may also pave the way for El Salvador to finally grapple with its brutal past. The 1993 [U.N.-sponsored Truth Commission Report](#) attributed 85 percent of the violence to the U.S.-backed ruling right-wing military and only 5 percent to the FMLN insurgency. In ending the brutal conflict, El Salvador faced wrenching choices about how to move forward. [Shortly after](#) the commission's

report was issued, the right-wing-controlled Legislature rushed through an amnesty bill intended to shield perpetrators from accountability. The law has continued to obstruct justice.

But grave injustices do not remain buried forever. In December 2012, the [Inter-American Court of Human Rights](#) ordered El Salvador to investigate, prosecute and provide reparations for the massacres that took the lives of more than 800 civilians, including women and children, in the village of El Mozote. Last month, the country's Supreme Court ordered the general prosecutor to [investigate the massacre](#) of 45 civilians in the village of San Francisco Angulo by government troops in 1981.

The two courts have opened the doors for much-delayed prosecutions, but those fighting for truth and justice in El Salvador continue to experience significant setbacks. Last October, the archbishop of San Salvador, José Luis Escobar Alas, [abruptly closed the Catholic Church's Tutela Legal office](#), which houses voluminous archives of wartime abuses, had long denounced civil war atrocities, provided legal aid to the poor and demanded accountability for human rights abuses. The decision came less than a month after the [Supreme Court agreed to consider arguments](#) about the constitutionality of the amnesty law, raising concerns that the closure was politically motivated to shield perpetrators. In November, [gunmen broke into the offices](#) of the human rights organization Pro-Busqueda in San Salvador, burned human rights records and destroyed computers.

Under ARENA's tight grip on power from 1989 to 2009, El Salvador made little progress in ending impunity for wartime atrocities. Sánchez Cerén's election bodes well for a long-awaited reckoning. He has said that the amnesty is no longer "convenient," raising hopes that justice may finally prevail.

The aftermath

The State Department's affirmation that it will continue working with the newly elected president has been cautiously welcomed by those weary of U.S.

meddling on behalf of right-wing forces in Central America. Although its influence in the region is waning, Washington's continued support for Sánchez Cerén's democratically elected left-leaning government will be crucial for El Salvador's stability.

Two decades after ending its bloody civil war, El Salvador is still struggling to reconcile its divided populace. The challenges are daunting and not amenable to quick fixes. But the Salvadoran people voted clearly, albeit closely, to continue supporting the FMLN's progress toward a more inclusive and equitable democracy. Instead of fueling the politics of polarization, Quijano and his supporters should gracefully accept the will of the people, and work to unify and stabilize a beleaguered country that continues to suffer more than its share of misery.

Lauren Carasik is a clinical professor of law and the director of the international human rights clinic at the Western New England University School of Law.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.