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El Salvador: Christian Democratic Party in Decline

Summary

El Salvador's ruling centrist Christian Democratic Party faces an uphill battle against the rightist ARENA party to win the presidential election next March. Over the past three years, the Christian Democrats have seen much of their popular support dissipate in the face of charges of corruption and administrative mismanagement. Their perceived inability to resolve the key issues facing the country--especially the nine-year old insurgency and economic problems--has provided an opening for ARENA to win over a significant portion of the Christian Democrats' electoral base. Growing popular disenchantment with the Christian Democrats and serious party infighting contributed to their defeat by ARENA in the legislative election last March, and led to a major split in the party in September.

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The Christian Democrats are not likely to make a strong showing in the March 1989 election unless they unify and energize their campaign effort, reclaim their electoral base in the rural areas, and stem the loss of support to the left and the right. Loss of the presidency probably would further fragment the party and signal the weakening of the political center in El Salvador. Unless the Christian Democrats can overcome internal divisions and rebuild their electoral base after the election, the party may cease to be a major political force. [Redacted]

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The Setting

The Christian Democratic Party, which had never held power until 1984, has been largely unsuccessful in making the transition from government critic to efficient executor of policy. Although the party enjoyed a majority in the Legislative Assembly prior to the election last March, it was unable to build a consensus on such crucial issues as economic policy and how to end the war against the insurgents. Polls taken since 1985 show that the failure to address these issues effectively--especially in the midst of rising unemployment and inflation--helped erode support for President Duarte and his party, and contributed to their loss of the legislature in the March 1988 election. The Christian Democrats also were uncompromising in their attempts to force through their own agenda--often on contentious issues such as land reform. Partly as a result of these heavy-handed tactics, previous legislative sessions were often marred by walk-outs, high absenteeism, and boycotts by the opposition.

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Other factors have contributed to the slow but steady decline in the party's popular standing. Its failure over the last three years to live up to campaign promises to provide jobs and end the war has hurt its popularity with its key supporters--peasants and workers. Many Salvadorans believe the Christian Democrats have neglected them and have not done enough to improve the security situation in the capital or the countryside, according to US Embassy reporting. The majority of Salvadorans, according to a recent poll, want a new party in the executive branch. [Redacted]

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The party generally has suffered from poor organization and a lack of leadership, in our view. [Redacted]

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[redacted] The inability of the party hierarchy to function smoothly during periods when Duarte is incapacitated and the lack of a clear successor as party leader have fueled growing internal discord and factionalism.

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The Christian Democrats, who have no clear ideology, also have failed to articulate a political platform with which they can attract support. When the party was voted into office in 1984, Duarte had a mandate for populist economic, political, and social reforms which he never was able to fulfill. Presidential candidate Chavez Mena, however, has hinted publicly that he may be willing to abandon some of Duarte's reformist agenda, probably hoping to attract some business support, but he has failed thus far to address the security situation--cited by some 43-percent of voters as the second most serious problem facing the country.

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Fissures in the Party

Duarte's failure to impose discipline on the party intensified personal and factional disputes in 1985, when many Christian Democratic leaders began to position themselves for the next presidential contest. After two years of maneuvering, two major factions emerged; one headed by Julio Rey Prendes, former Minister of Culture and Communications, and the other by Fidel Chavez Mena, the former Minister of Planning. This open bickering between Rey Prendes and Chavez Mena contributed to the party's defeat by ARENA in the March legislative election.

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The Christian Democrats' defeat heightened the rancor between the two groups because each blamed the other for the loss. Each faction held a separate convention and nominated its own presidential candidate. After the Salvadoran Central Election Council ruled that Chavez Mena was the legitimate candidate of the Christian Democrats, Rey Prendes followed through on his earlier threat to leave the party. He announced in September that, in alliance with a small, center-right party, he has formed the Authentic Christian Movement.

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Rey Prendes' departure may be a net gain for the Christian Democrats, many of whom reportedly resent the intimidation and coercion he had used to influence party members. His credibility among party leaders was severely damaged by the Christian Democrats' loss to ARENA last March; the US Embassy reports that Rey Prendes hand-picked 58 of the party's 60 candidates. According to US Embassy reporting, even some of Rey Prendes's close followers see their political fortunes as tied to the Christian Democratic Party and may be reluctant to join his new party. Allegations that Rey Prendes has tolerated the corrupt

activities of his inner circle hurt his image with the Salvadoran public, and democratic labor leaders have said they would not support a Christian Democratic ticket headed by Rey Prendes.

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Chavez Mena apparently believes he has a good chance to win without the support of the Rey Prendes faction. He probably calculates that strong endorsements from democratic labor and support from the party's rank and file will offset Rey Prendes's attempts to undermine the Christian Democratic ticket. Chavez Mena's confidence was boosted, according to the US Embassy, when Duarte--who until recently had been reluctant to endorse him because of past personal differences--indicated he is now willing to campaign for him. Chavez Mena, [redacted] also may believe that past US support for Duarte and the party will benefit him in the election and compensate for his lackluster style. [redacted]

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Chores Ahead

By selecting a prominent businessman, Dr. Francisco Barrientos, as his running mate, Chavez Mena probably hopes he can revitalize the campaign, overcome voter disenchantment with the Christian Democrats' endless feuding, and recapture support lost to ARENA--particularly from the business community. Relations between business leaders and the Duarte government have been strained, however, because businessmen believe that the Christian Democrats have ignored their needs by pursuing populist policies that have stalled economic recovery. As a result, most businessmen remain more willing to back ARENA's campaign financially, according to US Embassy reporting. Barrientos is not a member of the Christian Democratic Party and is virtually a political unknown, but his reputation for honesty and his respectability within the business community may help Chavez Mena to attract some support from the private sector. [redacted]

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Chavez Mena also must work to overcome the perception that he is too close to the United States. US Embassy reporting indicates that ARENA has been successful in portraying the Christian Democrats and their candidate as tools of the United States by playing up the close ties between the government and Washington. Moreover, Chavez Mena has made only feeble efforts to refute public allegations by ARENA and others that his campaign is being funded secretly by the United States. [redacted]

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Until the most recent election, the Christian Democrats had been able to take the center and the moderate left for granted, but ARENA has made inroads with these voters. Specifically, ARENA spent the last four years organizing on the local level and using party resources to provide a wide range of services to lower income voters in the countryside, thus eroding the

Christian Democrats' base. ARENA's high profile programs have paid dividends, in our view, contributing to its ability to win control of 179 of El Salvador's 262 municipalities, many of them former Christian Democratic strongholds. The ruling party's failure to match ARENA's spending, especially in rural areas, has allowed its opponent to retain momentum. [REDACTED]

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The Christian Democrats also face some competition from the leftist Democratic Convergence, although it poses less of a threat than the right. Convergence leaders are seeking support largely from students, leftist labor, and peasants by promising to end the war, although it is hindered by organizational and funding problems. As long as the Democratic Convergence refuses to renounce its ties to the insurgents, however, most traditional Christian Democratic supporters probably will be reluctant to back the leftist ticket. [REDACTED]

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Prospects

We expect a relatively smooth election process, although given the volatile nature of Salvadoran politics and past patterns of political extremism, there is a chance for violence by the left or the right. Current polling data suggest that ARENA now is best positioned to win in free and fair balloting, and, in our judgment, is not likely to sanction violence in the preelection period. Nevertheless, individual extremists could resort to such methods if they perceive the Democratic Convergence is gaining political ground. As in the elections last March, however, delays or disputes in the balloting, and the usual minor polling irregularities probably will spark charges of fraud and possible violence. Moreover, any delay in the final count after the first round of voting may lead to attempts by one or more of the parties to "steal" the election by tampering with the ballots. The insurgents, in turn, would be quick to cite such tampering as public justification for any attempts on their part to boycott or disrupt the balloting in a second round. [REDACTED]

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The failure of one candidate to win a majority in March could produce a situation that favors a compromise between Chavez Mena and Rey Prendes. If Chavez Mena comes in second behind ARENA, he and other party leaders may be more willing to make concessions to Rey Prendes in return for his cooperation on the second ballot, which would take place in April¹. Nonetheless,

¹ In accordance with the Salvadoran constitution, if no candidate receives an absolute majority--50-percent or higher--the two leading vote getters will face each other in a run-off, which must be held within 30-days of the first round. The Christian Democrats defeated ARENA in a run-off in the 1984 election. [REDACTED]

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the highly personalistic nature of Salvadoran politics and the unwillingness so far to compromise for the good of the party would make an arrangement between Rey Prendes and Chavez Mena difficult to broker. Even with the Christian Democrats reunited, however, we believe they would have problems winning on a second ballot. Most of the small moderate and rightist parties in our judgment, would be more likely to cast their lot with ARENA presidential candidate, Alfredo Cristiani, whose victory would give ARENA more patronage through its control of the executive, judicial, and legislative branches.

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Longer Term Implications

Unless the Christian Democrats can overcome serious internal divisions and rebuild their popular base after the election, the pro-US party could lose its standing as a major political force. A decisive defeat at the polls most likely would precipitate even more factionalism and hasten the total fragmentation of the party. Compounding these difficulties is the imminent passing of Duarte from the political scene. He has been the Christian Democrats' major spokesperson for moderation and has gained international prestige and support for El Salvador's budding democratic process. If the party makes a reasonably strong showing in the election, however, party leaders in the post-Duarte era would at least retain a foundation on which to rebuild a consensus for future elections.

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For his part, Rey Prendes probably is overestimating the electoral strength of his new party. Personally, however, he will be in a strong political position whether the Christian Democrats win or lose. Failing a deal with Chavez Mena on his terms, Rey Prendes could, as Vice President of the Legislative Assembly, be the political spoiler by blocking Christian Democratic legislation, giving the majority ARENA party even tighter control of the 60-member body. Moreover, if his Authentic Christian Movement places third in the election--ahead of the leftist Democratic Convergence--it would win a seat on the powerful three-member Central Elections Commission. Although he is not popular and is not likely to develop a strong political following, Rey Prendes probably believes that his position in the Assembly will ultimately give him greater influence and position him well for future elections.

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A Christian Democratic defeat at the polls probably would signal some loss of US influence in El Salvador because ARENA has adopted a more nationalistic stand, in part to exploit popular discontent with the perceived slow progress of the US-backed counterinsurgency program. Moreover, the reduction of the centrist Christian Democratic role to that of a divided opposition party, could, over the longer term, encourage political extremism on both the left and the right.

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