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Salvadoran Elections

March 1982

Background: In March 1981, President Duarte of El Salvador initiated an open democratic electoral process by appointing an independent elections council to oversee procedures for the election of a Constituent Assembly in 1982 that would set the stage for a presidential election in 1983. To insure the widest possible representation following the Constituent Assembly election on March 28, seats will be allotted proportionally to the political parties on the basis of the votes in each district. The assembly will have broad responsibilities. It is expected to draft a new constitution, to establish the ground rules for the 1983 presidential election, and to appoint an interim president who will form a provisional government until the 1983 elections.

Electoral procedures: Traditionally, Salvadoran elections have been tainted by ballot rigging, intimidation, or other frauds during the voting--or simply set aside afterward. In 1972 the opposition leader Duarte clearly won the election but was arrested, beaten, and exiled by the military. Measures to preclude such abuses on March 28 include:

- Registration, ballot preparation, and vote counting procedures modified to conform with tested practices of modern democratic societies;
- A pledge by the Salvadoran Government and military to secure polling places and to protect all citizens wishing to vote;
- A decision that members of the military and security forces may not vote; and
- Invitations to outside observers from the Organization of American States (OAS) and foreign countries to monitor the openness and fairness of the election.

Electoral participation: Parties of all political persuasions were invited to compete in the elections. The traditional parties of the right, center, and left, including Socialist and Communist parties, all of whom were eligible under the previous electoral law, were offered automatic eligibility upon completion of simple registration procedures. Newly formed parties are participating by meeting routine procedural requirements. Six political parties are on the ballot. They represent a broad spectrum of political and economic programs from traditional free enterprise to cooperative socialism; all parties stress achievement of peace.

Broad popular support: El Salvador's major peasant unions, including the Salvadoran campesino union representing 110,000 farm workers, have endorsed the elections, as have most labor, business, professional, and religious organizations. On February 17, the Salvadoran Bishops' Conference stated their conviction that "the elections, in spite of the abnormal circumstances, are a peaceful

way for the people who have said no to violence to have the opportunity to express their will. This could be the beginning of a solution to the armed conflict."

Opposition from the far left: Despite President Duarte's repeated invitation to the "armed opposition" to participate in the elections, the FDR/FMLN--the guerrillas and their political organization, including the Social Democratic and Communist parties--refused. They have pledged to sabotage the election, including threats to mine the roads on election day. They propose instead that broad negotiations be held on restructuring the government and the military.

OAS resolution: On December 10, 1981, the OAS passed a resolution endorsing this electoral process in El Salvador. The vote was 22-3 (Nicaragua, Grenada, and Mexico voting against).

Foreign observers: A substantial number of countries, as well as the OAS, plan to send observer teams. The US team is headed by Senator Nancy Kassebaum and includes two US authorities on election procedures who have advised the Salvadoran Government on electoral procedures.

US position: The US supports the elections as a major step enabling El Salvador to progress toward a free democratic system. In July 1981, the US offered its good offices to assist the government and the FDR to begin discussions of the conditions under which the latter might join the electoral process, including such issues as security of candidates and equal access to the media. The FDR rejected the offer. The elections will not end the war, but they can give the Salvadoran people an opportunity to choose their own representatives freely and fairly. The US, therefore, supports the broadly based groups in El Salvador which favor giving the people an opportunity to experience and develop democracy. The force of elections offers more hope for Salvadorans than the force of arms.