

Proxy President

José Napoleón Duarte's election last year was hailed by many as the beginning of an era of democracy in El Salvador and a stunning triumph for U.S. policy. The search for an elusive center begun under the Carter Administration had finally ended. The Reagan Administration could at last claim to have found an untarnished ally in its war against "communist subversion," and Congressional opposition to extending military aid crumbled.

Eight months later, Duarte appears to be less an ally of the United States than an instrument of U.S. policy. He has had remarkable success in lobbying Congress to approve dramatic increases in military aid and to drop all binding conditions on its appropriation. But at home, Duarte is at the mercy of forces beyond his control.

The National Assembly is dominated by extreme right-wing parties determined to block reforms. Most recently, the Assembly slashed the executive branch's budget, eliminating the commissions that had been investigating corruption and human rights abuses and causing Duarte to complain that he can barely afford to light the presidential palace. By his own admission, Duarte has no authority or influence over the judiciary, whose members are appointed by the Assembly for five-year terms and are controlled by the far right. His inaugural pledge to punish those responsible for political assassinations remains unfulfilled, and 1985 has started with an alarming increase in death squad activity.

The armed forces, El Salvador's traditional guarantor of political stability and economic privilege, continue to set the parameters of civilian power. Duarte's skill in procuring millions in military aid is critical to the war effort. But his two rounds of peace talks with the guerrillas in 1984 sent shudders through the military and nearly resulted in a December coup. The armed forces have since set such strict limits on the scope of those talks that they may never resume in a useful way.

Duarte's only chance for broadening the powers of his presidency is through a Christian Democratic victory in the elections scheduled for March 31. At stake are all sixty seats in the National Assembly, as well as 231 mayoral posts. But even the optimists in Duarte's camp predict that his party will pick up only two to three seats at best, not enough to break the right wing's hold.

The U.S. government, which contributed close to \$1 million to Duarte's presidential campaign through C.I.A. channels, might be expected to place its hopes, if not its money, on the Christian Democrats. But in a recent meeting with a visiting U.S. delegation, a high-ranking official at the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador expressed the opposite view. A continued Christian Democratic minority in the Assembly would preserve a system of checks and balances, he said. "Duarte will have to learn how to make compromises with the business community, the military and the political parties of the right."

Indeed, U.S. policies are partly responsible for Duarte's declining popularity and his party's grim prospects in the upcoming elections. U.S. pressure has brought Reaganomics to El Salvador, in the form of benefits to large landowners and exporters and deep cuts in government spending at the expense of the poor. Duarte and his party have paid a high political price for those U.S.-imposed policies, designed to placate the right. Protesting a wage freeze that began in 1981, labor unions organized several successful strikes last year, only to see their gains erased by rising consumer costs. In addition, the failure of the peace talks has frustrated those who voted for Duarte in 1984 as the "peace candidate."

Meanwhile, the war continues. Increasingly heavy bombing is driving civilians from guerrilla-contested zones in ever greater numbers. Refugee camps inside El Salvador and in neighboring countries now house hundreds of thousands of them. U.S. officials predict that within two years the war will be over, the guerrilla threat reduced to a "nuisance." But if Duarte continues to rule as a reluctant proxy for the right and if negotiations with the left are not resumed, El Salvador's war is probably just beginning. JANET SHENK

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