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## El Salvador (1979 - 1992)

In the 1980s El Salvador suffered one of the most intense civil wars in contemporary Latin American history. The conflict between the guerrilla insurgents grouped together in the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the U.S.-backed government had historic roots in the social inequalities generated and maintained under the country's oligarchic "coffee economy."

In the latter half of the 19th century, El Salvador became a major producer and exporter of coffee. The expropriation of indigenous lands for coffee plantations led to a highly skewed land distribution and an economy highly vulnerable to the fluctuations of commodity prices in the world market.

The world economic crisis of the early 1930s precipitated a peasant revolt, led by the Salvadoran Communist Party, which was brutally crushed by the state. This event ushered in five decades of military-dominated authoritarian regimes. In the 1970s, several leftist political organizations emerged and in 1980 they coalesced into the FMLN, named after the communist leader Farabundo Martí who was killed during the *matanza* (massacre) of 1932.

In 1979, General Romero was ousted in a coup led by younger army officers who installed a military-civilian junta that sought to combine agrarian reforms with severe repression. In January 1980, the largest popular demonstration in El Salvador's history was fired upon by paramilitary forces. In March 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated, and the people who gathered at his funeral again were fired upon. Yet the junta also initiated an agrarian reform program and nationalized banking and the marketing of coffee and sugar. Seeking to overthrow the government, in 1981 the FMLN launched a series of coordinated military attacks across the country.

In 1984, José Napoleon Duarte won the presidential election to become the first civilian president since 1931. His government continued to receive support and military aid from the United States government, which regarded the FMLN as a communist threat backed by the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the Cuban government. In 1989, Alfredo Cristiani of the rightist National Republican Alliance (ARENA) won the presidential elections. Soon thereafter, the FMLN launched a nationwide offensive, mounting the strongest challenge to the government in 10 years of civil war. The military stalemate and the government's human rights abuses, coupled with the end of the cold war, shifted US policy away from counterinsurgency measures towards support for a negotiated peace.

In September 1991, the UN brokered a peace agreement between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN, and in January 1992 the accord was signed by both sides at the Chapultepec castle in Mexico City. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration activities were implemented under UN supervision, and the FMLN was recognized as a legitimate political party.

### *Print Resources*

Boyce, James K., ed. (1996) *Economic Policy for Building Peace: The Lessons of El Salvador*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Byrne, Hugh (1996) *El Salvador: A Study of Revolution*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

Montgomery, Tommie Sue (1995) *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace*. Boulder: Westview.

Whitfield, Teresa (1995) *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuria and the Murdered Jesuits of El Salvador*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Wood, Elisabeth Jean (2003) *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

#### *Online Resources*

PBS. *Enemies of War*.

BBC. *Country Profile: El Salvador*.

Human Rights Watch. *The Report of the United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*.

#### *Timeline*

1979 - military-backed death squads intensify repression

1980 - five left-wing guerrilla groups coalesce to form FMLN; Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador assassinated

1984 - José Napoleon Duarte becomes first civilian president since 1931

1989 - ARENA candidate Alfredo Cristiani elected president

1991 - UN brokers peace agreement between the El Salvador government and

1992 - peace agreement signed at Chapultepec castle in Mexico City; FMLN recognized as a legitimate political party.

1993 - Truth Commission publishes findings

1994 - ARENA candidate Armando Calderon Sol elected president

1999 - ARENA candidate Francisco Flores elected president

2000 - in parliamentary elections, FMLN wins largest number of seats

2004 - ARENA candidate Tony Saca elected president