

Ex-Salvadoran rebels seek power through ballot box

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SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador— El Salvador's former guerrillas, behind the bespectacled, moderate face of a former TV journalist, could take power for the first time since the nation's civil war in elections Sunday that threaten to uproot two decades of conservative rule.

Mauricio Funes, plucked from outside the ranks of the rebel group-turned-political party Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, would become the latest in a wave of leftist leaders to take power in Latin America at a time of uncertainty over how President Barack Obama will approach the region.

Funes, 49, promises to crack down on big businesses which he claims have long evaded taxes with government complacency and hopes to capitalize on discontent with two decades of conservative Arena party rule that has brought economic growth and stability to the Central American country but done little to redress social inequalities.

Funes faces Rodrigo Avila, a former police chief with a boyish grin who is trying to bring the Arena to its fifth straight presidential victory. Recent polls put Funes ahead of Avila, but many voters were undecided after the most polarizing campaign since the 12-year civil war that killed 75,000 people.

Avila, 44, warns that an FMLN victory would send El Salvador down a communist path and threaten the country's warm relations with the United States. Those ties saw El Salvador keep troops in Iraq longer than any other Latin America country and become a hub of regional cooperation with Washington against drug trafficking. The country sends most of its exports to the United States, and its economy depends on billions of dollars sent home by 2.5 million Salvadorans who live in America.

The Obama government has assured Salvadorans it will work with any leader elected — a marked departure from the Bush administration, which in 2004 suggested that an FMLN victory would hurt ties.

But U.S. ties with some leftist leaders remain tense, including Venezuela's fiery Hugo Chavez and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, who lashed out last week at the United States for holding back aid over an election dispute.

Funes has met with top U.S. officials and hopes to start off relations fresh if he becomes Latin America's first leftist president since Obama took office.

He promises to respect a free trade agreement with the United States and keep El Salvador's dollar currency. He also has made a point of reaching out to Latin America's moderate leftist leaders, especially Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

That has not reassured many Salvadorans with bitter memories of the leftist insurgency. Television broadcasts have been flooded with campaign ads warning that a Funes victory would turn El Salvador into a Venezuelan satellite and emphasizing long-standing ties between the FMLN and Chavez.

"We don't want communists in this country," said Jose Daniel Avila, a 65-year-old retired pilot of no relation to the candidate. "Look what's happened in Nicaragua and Venezuela. Those are not examples to follow."

Venezuela's Chavez, who frequently raises the ire of U.S. officials by voicing support for Latin America's leftist candidates ahead of elections, said Sunday that his government is not taking sides in the election.

He said that while strengthening relations "wasn't possible" with El Salvador's current president, Tony Saca, Venezuela wants to broaden its relations with El Salvador "whoever wins."

Saca himself said he was encouraged by the turnout and was confident that the presence of international observers would guarantee a fair election.

"The result is going to be close," he said, adding that Salvadorans should not celebrate any victories until the Supreme Electoral Tribunal confirms the official results.

Pro-government newspapers prominently reported demands from Republican congressmen that if the FMLN wins, the Obama administration reconsider Temporary Protection Status granted to tens of thousands of Salvadorans after 2001 earthquakes. But Rep. Howard Berman, the Democratic chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, quickly put out a statement insisting he was certain the election outcome would not affect the permits.

Many Salvadorans want change after two decades of Arena rule. Fuel and food prices have soared, while powerful gangs extort businesses and fight for drug-dealing turf, resulting in one of Latin America's highest homicides rates.

"What has Arena brought us in 20 years? They've only come to power to steal. Only the oligarchs are going to vote for Arena so they can protect their privileges," said Humberto Chavez, 73, a retired school teacher, talking over a woman next to him, who shook her finger and kept exclaiming, "That's not true!"

Avila has tried to address these mounting frustrations, promising 50,000 subsidized homes and incentives for companies that hire young workers.