“There will be no elections in Jucuaran!”

Observing El Salvador’s 1991 Elections

By Antonio Gonzalez, June 8, 2018

In November 1990 I came across a notice “Request for Proposals to Observe the Legislative Elections in El Salvador” from US Agency for International Development (USAID), the infamous US government agency that while ostensibly funding development projects has too often been linked to US destabilization operations in developing countries, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean.

“They would never fund SVRI right?” I asked SVRI President Andy Hernandez. “Might as well try,” Andy responded. “What do we have to lose?” So, I promptly applied for the grant…and was approved.

Little did I know that upon receiving approval notification from AID, SVRI would be threatened withdrawal of future support from the ARCA Foundation who had recently funded our El Salvador voter registration project. ARCA a staunch critic of the US intervention justifiably hated AID.

But let’s see, lose $25,000 from ARCA in exchange for gaining $125,000 from USAID to do exactly what we wanted to do? After checking with our progressive Salvadoran contacts, who urged us to take the AID grant, we did.

One must ask why would the US government fund a group that was against US policy in El Salvador? For political cover is probably the correct answer. AID was probably funding a bunch of “bad guys” and SVRI was probably the sole progressive group that got funded.

This corresponded to the Bush administration’s new approach (different from Reagan’s) to Salvador in which they supported negotiations instead of war with the FMLN. Of course, by negotiation Washington, DC meant disarm and surrender. DC would soon learn that FMLN surrender was out of the question.

The Election Observer grant came in the nick of time as SVRI-El Salvador’s voter registration partnership (July-Dec 1990) with Camino a la Paz (CaPaz) was running on fumes. With little funding we knew the CaPaz volunteer base would soon tire. We had needed a miracle and got one.

As seamlessly as possible we concluded the voter registration project and converted the CaPaz network into a support team for the observer delegations.
We moved quickly to assemble the team. SVRI named me Mission Director with Armando Villarreal as Deputy Director. We brought on Javier Torres, an organizer from Arizona and Ignacio Perez a longtime SVRI consultant to move in-country.

Fidel Moreno a crack Chicano/Native American videographer from Colorado somehow found out about us and successful lobbied his way onto the team. By January the team was in Salvador, taking over the CaPaz office while retaining the senior Salvadoran personal that had not been absorbed by one of the progressive electoral campaigns.

Luis Monge for example transitioned from CaPaz Director to one of the senior campaign staff of the Popular Social Christian Movement (MPSC).

In the US SVRI quickly issued invites to all the major national Latino organizations as well as the Latino Members of Congress.

Our Central America groundwork over the last four years paid off as Congressman Bustamante of San Antonio, TX and Richardson of Santa Fe, NM sent representatives as well as the National Association of Hispanic Publications, National Council of La Raza, Hispanics in Philanthropy, Cuban American Committee, Congressional Hispanic Caucus and Texas Hispanic Senate Caucus. Academia and labor too were represented with delegates from UTSA, Cal State LA, UT PANAM, CSUN, and International Ladies Garment Workers Union. And of course, Radio Latino from NPR sent a correspondent.

By February 16 the first SVRI Observer mission of ten or so delegates had arrived in country and begun to work. By March 3 the second SVRI Observer mission arrived in country. At full strength SVRI had 31 US observers plus Salvadoran supporters in country.
SVRI Observers
(partial list)

Tamara Crail
Office of US Rep Bustamante,
Washington, DC

Jose Cruz
Cuban American Coalition, Miami, Fl

Rita DiMartino
Vice Chair, NY Republican State Committee, NCLR Board,
New York City, NY

Rita Elizondo
Director, Congressional Hispanic Caucus,
Washington, DC

Mario Garcia
TX Attorney General’s Office and UT PANAM,
Edinburg, TX

Antonio Gonzalez
SVRI LAP Director and Mission Director,
Los Angeles, CA

John Huerta
Civil Rights Lawyer,
Los Angeles, CA

Betty Kirkendall
Hispanics in Philanthropy and San Francisco Chronicle
San Francisco, CA

Antonio Orea
Manager, International Ladies Garment Workers Union
Los Angeles, CA

Armando Villarreal,
SVRI Consultant and Mission Deputy Director,
Corpus Christi, TX

Jose Pletz
National Association of Hispanic Publications,
San Antonio, TX

Dr. Avelardo Valdez
UTSA
San Antonio, TX

Hon. Eliseo Solis
County Commissioner
Lubbock, TX

Sam Taylor
Office of Rep. Bill Richardson
Sante Fe, NM

Javier Torres
SVRI Consultant,
Tucson, AZ

Rick Vela
Hispanic Caucus of Texas Senate, Austin, TX

Linda Yanez
Proyecto Libertad,
Brownsville, TX

Dr. Rudy Acuna, CS Northridge
Ron DiNicola, Attorney, Los Angeles, CA
Andy Hernandez, SVRI President, San Antonio, TX
Fidel Moreno, Videographer, Boulder, CO
Rita Moreno, SVREP Organizer, Los Angeles, CA
Ignacio Perez, SVRI Consultant, San Antonio, TX
Dr. Gloria Romero, Cal State LA, Los Angeles, CA
But by late January 1991 the electoral process instead of bringing a democratic and peaceful climate polarized El Salvador even more. While the civic allies of FMLN launched legislative and municipal campaigns, the government rejected peace negotiations, and the Bush administration stood aloof.

This resulted in systematic human rights violations against leftists of various stripes on the campaign trail: murders, assaults, threats, arrests, and so on. The FMLN promptly withdrew from the elections leaving their civic partners the MPSC, the MNR and the Democratic National Union-UDN exposed.

Unbeknownst to SVRI and its Salvadoran civic allies the FMLN had never been fully united around competing in the elections. The People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP), the Communist Party (PCS), and the Armed Forces of National Resistance (FARN) favored an immediate electoral strategy but the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), and the Central American Revolutionary Workers Party (PRTC) didn’t believe it was time. These differences papered over in 1990 blew wide open in 1991 as the elections approached and government repression intensified.

In truth, the facts on the ground showed that an election strategy was premature as the Bush Administration and the Salvadoran military government was not ready to seriously negotiate the peace and guarantee democratic participatory elections, not yet.

Just look at the facts that the initial SVRI observer delegation learned upon arriving on Feb 16, 1991:

- Jan 23: unknown assailants massacre 15 peasants at El Zapote village outside San Salvador;
- Feb 9: the offices of Diario Latino in San Salvador, the main progressive daily paper, were fire bombed;
- Feb 20: A candidate of the National Democratic Union and his wife were assassinated in San Salvador;

SVRI called out all these abuses and massive irregularities in the national electoral list (el padrón electoral) and classified the pre-election climate as unfair and undemocratic.

As the campaigns wound down and closed with “cierre” rallies SVRI dutifully went to as many as possible. We had rules not to travel at night, had clearly marked vehicles with big white “Observador Electoral Oficial” signs and wore SVRI Election Observer T-shirts. We used the buddy system always traveling in groups of at least two.

That’s why it was so unnerving when a gunman assaulted one of our teams in San Miguel in eastern Salvador. As our Cherokee left a “Convergencia” (the electoral coalition of MPSC and MNR) rally an armed man appeared on the side of road and emptied his handgun into the SVRI vehicle carrying four observers! Miraculously, no one was hit. Juan Maldonado, SVRI Board Chair told me “we could hear the bullets rattling around”. But a tire was blown out. Wisely the driver didn’t stop and the Cherokee limped home on a metal rim.
As was customary in response to the above aggressions (and many more) the FMLN struck back launching a national offensive on March 5, 1991, just three days after the 2nd SVRI observer delegation arrived on March 2.

Since SVRI’s offices were in the upscale San Salvador colonia “Escalon” as was the hotel where most of our delegation was staying we were trapped in a combat zone. While nearly all of us hunkered down and waited for the battle to take its course our Videographer Fidel Moreno and Organizer Javier Torres ran off to film the battle. This was ridiculous on the face of it since it was 2am in the morning and pitch black as the guerrillas blew out the lights for the neighborhood.

Moreno and Torres quickly caught up with the FMLN and the Armed Forces rapid response unit who were in the middle of a firefight. Dumb luck saved Moreno and Torres as they ducked into a house to get cover from the bullets that happened to be the FMLN’s field headquarters. Resourceful if nothing else Moreno turned on his camera sound and interviewed the guerilla commander by candlelight. The interview with ambient sound (gunshots) is the opening scene of the Delegation Video “Un Solo Pueblo…Un Solo Sueno.”

After the interview the commander put Moreno and Torres in the basement for the rest of the night. By dawn the guerrillas had vanished (as usual) and the SVRI “wildmen” walked back to the office, disheveled but none worse for the wear.

On Election eve we split up and deployed into our Departments. SVRI sent fourteen teams into Usulutan, La Union, San Miguel, Morazan, San Vicente, Cuscatlan, La Paz, San Salvador, Chalatenango, La Libertad, Sonsonate, and Santa Ana.

As can be expected Election Day was peaceful or at war depending on when one went. In its “zonas de control” the FMLN prevented elections from taking place. Of course, this meant the army sent in troops and battles ensued. Two of our teams ran into firefights: Valdez and Romero in Chalatenango, and Maldonado and Rita Moreno in La Union. Both reported harrowing experiences: nightlong bombardments, being caught in crossfires. We were lucky no one got hurt.

Maldonado and Rita Moreno drove right into a firefight. Caught in a cross fire they somehow escaped. Moreno told me “I could feel my knees buckle.” Valdez and Romero hunkered down in their Chalatenango lodging while the FMLN assaulted an army base with mortars, automatic weapons fire, grenades and such. The army responded in kind. The fight lasted from dusk until dawn. They slept little.

Two of our teams confirmed non-elections in Morazan (Villareal and Fidel Moreno) and Usulutan (Kirkendall and I).
In Usulutan Kirkendall and I attempted to observe in Jucuaran, a mountain top village. We were met by a snarling FMLN patrol at a “reten” or roadblock near the top of the mountain. A combatant approached our stopped vehicle and said simply “no va a ver elecciones en Jucuaran” — “there’s not going to be elections in Jucuran” and motioned us to turn back. We obeyed.

An aside: one gets used to war I suppose. Salvadorans were so accustomed to bombings, assault-rifle fire, mortars and such they would argue amongst themselves as to the distance and type of weapons used. It was tragi-comical. An attack would occur in the distance, Salvadorans would go outside, listen, then opine. “Si hombre ese fue un tepezcuintle a 2 kilometros,” “voz sos loco, ese fue una lanzacohete a 5 kilometros” and on and on. [yeah man that was a homemade guerilla mortar at 2 kilometers…you’re crazy that was an army rocket launcher at 5 kilometers]

In Government controlled zones the elections occurred without incident and the pro-government parties ARENA, Christian Democrats, PCN (the Armed Forces party) won big.

Of course, this outcome was baked into the process. With hundreds of thousands of voter-files mysteriously gone missing and high-profile campaign assassinations, fire bombings, assaults on left campaign rallies, and threats to left candidates, the pro-Convergencia voters got the message. They stayed home in droves allowing pro-government voters to dominate.

Surprisingly after we all got back to San Salvador and had a chance to rest and debrief it turns out our local allies were pleased with the outcome. They had set up an electoral coalition called “Convergencia Democratica” or the Democratic Convergence which had won eight (8) Assembly seats compared to none before. After five national elections since 1984 (when the US forced the dictatorship to start holding “demonstration” elections) “the revolution finally had a presence in the National Assembly,” they said.

SVRI for its part denounced the elections as a sham “not free and not fair” and rejected the results. I suppose USAID was not very happy with us as the other USAID funded groups all endorsed the outcome as a “festival of democracy” as did the Bush Administration.

Little did we know as we returned to the US that the peace process and prospects for free and fair elections did in fact move forward with the deeply flawed electoral process of 1991.
Notes

Note 1
In 1997 SVRI changed its name to WCVI -the William C. Velasquez Institute and the Latin America Project-LAP was renamed InterMestic Initiatives-IMI.

Note 2
Deploying observer teams on overnight visits in El Salvador proved to be quite challenging. There are few hotels once one gets out of metropolitan San Salvador. Hilariously, our teams often ended up lodging in brothels! Fortunately, I found the Hotel Espana in Usulutan. Small, quaint with good food. Right downtown and most importantly with good room air conditioners and ceiling fans. Eastern Salvador is so hot and humid that one needs both in good working order...simultaneously.

Note 3
Funniest story of the trip. At the delegations first complete group meeting in country, the group started with introductions. Since Armando Villareal, Andy Hernandez, Javier Torres, and I all were delegation or "mission" officers, we were introduced as such. "Armando Villareal, Mission Deputy Director" and so on. Mario Garcia from Edinberg, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley became incensed since Mission, Texas is their arch-rival in high school football -a big deal in Texas. Garcia raised his hand and protested, "Hey, por que tantos de Mission? Why not some more from Edinberg?" The group cracked up and his compadre Juan Maldonado explained it delicately, whispering in his ear. To which red-faced Mario said "Oh...never mind" and sat down. Didn’t say much for rest of the trip. LOL.

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Antonio Gonzalez is President of WCVI and SVREP since 1994. A native of Los Angeles Gonzalez was the first Coordinator of the Latin America Project in 1987.

As an undergraduate at UT San Antonio Gonzalez founded the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) on campus in 1980. As a graduate student in Latin America History at UC Berkeley during 1981-83 Gonzalez volunteered for the magazine Nicaragua Perspectives at the Nicaragua Information Center. During 1984-87 he was on the national board of the Nicaragua Network.

Over the years Gonzalez has visited Central America some 30 times. He is currently releasing the Tales of Central America series on a twice weekly basis.

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