

## Tales from Central America, Vignette 6

# “CAN YOU COME TO DC...RIGHT NOW?”

## Mobilizing “SuVoto 94” in El Salvador!

By Antonio Gonzalez

Much had happened since SVRI’s last interaction with El Salvador.

- The “Convergencia Democratica/Democratic Convergence” had won eight (8) National Assembly seats in the tortured legislative election that SVRI observed in March 1991;
- The Faramundo Marti National Liberation Front ( FMLN) and Government had negotiated Peace Accords signed in Jan 1992; and
- The US Congress had ended military aid to the Salvadoran Army which had shrunk by 70%, while the National Guard, the National Police, and the FMLN Armed Units had been dissolved.

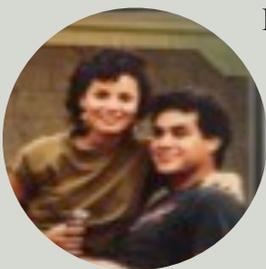


Ruben Zamora FMLN-  
Convergencia Presidential  
Candidate in 1994

Moreover, the US had a Presidential Election in November 1992 in which the incumbent President Bush had lost,

a rarity in American politics. Thus, the US President who ended the US sponsored “low intensity wars” in Nicaragua and El Salvador was tossed by American voters in their first opportunity. Ironic no?

SVRI had moved on, figuring the US wars against Central America were over. Since August 1991 we had initiated a multi-year, binational US-Mexico organizing and advocacy project.



Alma Martinez and  
Antonio Gonzalez  
1992

Personally, I had fallen in love with an amazing “Angelena” who I met in late 1988 upon my return to Los Angeles from San Antonio (where I had lived for most of the previous decade). We married in Oct 1991 (we’re still married, with two daughters Sara Francine and Ysabel Patricia).

Hence, I was caught off-guard when longtime colleague Rick Swartz called me in summer 1993 and said, “can you come to DC...now?” to which I replied “Why, it will cost an arm and a leg?” Swartz replied, “because you can get a big grant to help the grassroots in the Salvadoran presidential elections.” That got my attention.



**Rick Swartz,**  
Washington, DC

I took an expensive first-class redeye flight and met the next day with Dick McBride, Deputy Director of USAID. Yes, believe it or not, AID was again interested in funding SVRI in El Salvador. \*Except now it was being run by Democrats instead of Republicans. McBride was a well-known international development aid specialist with ties to the new Clinton Administration.

More importantly McBride was an avid supporter of the Salvadoran Peace Accords and had relationships with sectors of the FMLN, who in turn had ties by marriage to Rick Swartz who was married to a Salvadoran who was related to certain FMLN leaders. Funny how things work in DC.

McBride's offer to SVRI was simple: Help Salvador's broad civic left learn how to play the election game. Elections and electioneering seems natural and simple to Americans but back then it was like speaking Greek to most Salvadorans. Of course, indirectly anything to help poor people get into the electoral process would help the FMLN, which had converted into a political party, compete for the Presidency in the March 1994 elections.

For SVRI it was too good to be true. Our whole purpose was to empower the excluded. In the US that meant ethnic and racial minorities (for us with a Latino focus). In Salvador it meant the poor -who represented 80% of the population.

The problem though was the timeline. It was very tight due to statutory deadlines. I basically had to turnover a very sophisticated proposal in days to McBride.

On the flight home I racked my brain. Who could I get to run this program given my newlywed status and the reality of having my hands full with the "US-Mexico" project?

I called my long time "consigliere" Lalo Valdez to discuss. Valdez and I had been friends going back to 1978 -when he was a rookie professor at UTSA and I was a student leader.

We couldn't come up with someone who fit the job profile:

- experienced enough to run a million-dollar budget with a big staff;
- available immediately; and
- crazy enough to go to El Salvador which while no longer in civil war was still a violent, impoverished, and embittered place.

The next day the phone rang and all I heard was Lalo's voice "Nacho Perez!" The name immediately clicked in my mind. "Of course! Nacho!"



Ignacio Perez San Antonio, TX and  
MPSC President Ruben Zamora

Nacho Perez was OG. Original Gangster, which to us meant a historic Chicano leader of the Willie Velasquez generation. He was an experienced administrator and affordable housing developer. He was an unreconstructed wild man. He had forgotten more than I know. He had a well-known interest in Central America. And he was always available for the next adventure.



**Ricardo Castanon**  
SVREP Consultant  
San Diego, CA



**Armando Villarreal**  
SVRI Consultant  
Corpus Christi, TX



**Hon. Eliseo Solis**  
former Lubbock County  
Commissioner



**Javier Torres**  
SVRI Consultant  
Tucson, AZ

It took one phone call and Nacho was on board. Together Lalo Valdez, Nacho and I finished the proposal and submitted it that week. It was promptly approved by AID's McBride.

At that time this project grant was bigger than anything SVRI had handled so we hired a professional accounting firm to manage the funds, federal reports and so on. Neither Andy Hernandez nor his sister in law Annette Avina -our CFO, trusted SVRI to manage the funds.

Within weeks of receiving the funds we assembled the rest of our team. Armando Villarreal and Javier Torres who had worked on the CaPaz and election observer projects in 1990-91 returned. Now former Lubbock County Commissioner Eliseo Solis and SVREP consultant Richard Castanon from San Diego joined the team as well. SVRI-El Salvador systematically hired Salvadoran support staff and opened offices in San Salvador and San Miguel.

CaPaz, the vehicle that we had helped create in 1990 was revived with the usual suspects from the Revolutionary National Movement -MNR and the Popular Social Christian Movement -MPSC involved: Luis Monge was our lead.

Different than in 1990 money was not problem. Money, we had. Our problem was capacity, meaning we needed a much bigger organization to reach the hundreds of thousands of voters that our budget enabled.

So SVRI reached out to dozens of unions, civic groups, women's groups, youth groups offering to train and fund them along with CaPaz (the organization we had founded for a voter registration drive in 1990 together with the MNR and the MPSC) in a massive voter registration and education program.

Especially important were the civic groups informally linked to the various factions of the FMLN. Over the years we had come to understand that MNR and MPSC (now aligned in the "Convergencia Democratica") were associated with the Armed Forces of National Resistance and the People's Revolutionary Army. The National Democratic Union was aligned with the Communist Party of El Salvador. ASPAD (Asociacion Salvadorena para la Paz y el Desarrollo-Salvadoran Association for Peace and Development) and ISD (Iniciativa Social para la Democracia -Social Initiative for Democracy) were aligned with the Popular Liberation Forces -the most influential wing of the FMLN. In fact, we learned that nearly every civic group was historically aligned with one FMLN faction or another.

At the end of the day some 20 civic groups including CaPaz accepted SVRI training and funds in conducting Phase I of the program which was voter registration.

It should have been easy. But it wasn't. We had money, relationships, experience which all availed to nothing when dealing with hardliners in the FMLN (which was more divided than many realized at the time) who viewed us as fronts for the FARN and ERP. Indeed, the FPL (ASPAD/ISD) felt they should control all the money and declined to receive funding from SVRI. Instead they sought and received their own funds from AID -though hardly as much as they wanted.

El Salvador was like that. Even in victory. Even in unity, there was always a divisive/sectarian side. They even had a running joke in leftist social circles: what do you get when five Salvadorans meet? The answer: three organizations.

Nevertheless, by October 1993 we were up and running with some 20 organizations including Capaz under contract. In total SVRI hired and trained some 400 full time coordinators from the twenty groups who engaged in a massive door to door canvassing campaign utilizing 6,000 volunteers in at least ten departments, visiting 149,000 households with registration and voting information (250,000 voter education calendars). It was a beautiful, inspiring project.

Though it had its modalities.

One of those modalities was fear. Marginalized and impoverished communities had been the object of open repression by the government and its death squads for generations. They were suspicious of strangers at their doors. So, we had to do special trainings and work thru neighborhood elders to get anointed before entering these barrios.

The fear worked both ways too, as most of our organizations had never even remotely thought of canvassing barrios they didn't know. They were scared too. It took extra training, more supervision and special tactics, like playing music, visiting only in peak daylight hours, putting the women canvassers up front, and so on to make it work.



**Robeto Canas**  
**FENASTRAS**

The notion of fear was brought home during one weekend BBQ or “parrillada” we held after canvassing in San Salvador to show our appreciation to the canvassing teams. We must have had 100 personnel at the headquarters. Music was blasting, the pupusas, sausages and chicken on the grills smelled great. Someone brought out a bottle of Tick-Tock the potent Salvadoran aguardiente and started passing it around.

Thirty minutes later the guys started pulling off their t-shirts and pulling up their pant legs. We thought what’s up? They were comparing bullet wound scars!! Nearly all the men had been shot at one time or another during the last fifteen years. We were speechless and just let it play out. Probably that barbeque and “scar-off” did more to build trust among us and free the canvassers from their “fears” than anything we could have thought up.

The war had ended as of Jan 31, 1992, more than a year earlier. The Army was dramatically cut down to size and the FMLN guerrilla force was gone -though it was often whispered that everyone knew that weapons caches had been strategically stashed away...just in case.

Yet the violence in the ether in Salvador was still there and would be until the March 94 elections proved to the rebels and their supporters that they would be accepted into society as full partners with full guarantees of safety, opportunity and justice.



**Salvador Sanabria**  
**CaPaz Consultant**

Incidents abounded. One of our colleagues Salvador Sanabria, was assaulted at a stop light while in his car. He and well-known unionist Roberto Canas of the left union FENASTRAS had obviously been targeted by ARENA-linked thugs.

But it wasn’t all political. Nacho Perez witnessed a police raid at a disco he was frequenting. No reason. Nothing was going on. The police descended on the disco and arrested all the female stage dancers. Nacho bet that none them went to jail...

In yet another example: our San Salvador office was robbed on payday. Twice. Somehow the word got out that a lot of cash was changing hands every two weeks. Hmm we wondered how the robbers knew. It was an inside job of course. We had to dramatically enhance our security policies bringing in armed guards. We were being “Salvadoranized!”

But that’s how Salvador was in the early days of peace, still acting like it was at war. Lawless and violent on the edges. Prone to abuse of power at the most personal level.

The same was true for AID in El Salvador. Though Clinton Democrats like Dick McBride now ran AID in DC, cold warriors still abounded in Salvador and they were not happy about SVRI and others controlling millions of dollars and openly working to incorporate heretofore excluded communities into the presidential elections.

Indeed, AID El Salvador constantly sought to steer us away from grassroots work in marginalized communities and groups associated with the FMLN. It became a daily tug of war. But in-country SVRI Rep's Nacho Perez and Armando Villareal stuck to their principles. SVRI had a clear mandate from Dick McBride that was memorialized in our proposal and contract. We weren't campaigning or advocating for any party or candidate. We were scrupulously nonpartisan. We had even included some right-wing groups among our contractors. They turned out to be some of our most diligent and effective canvassers.



**Ruben Zamora**  
FMLN-Convergencia Presidential  
Candidate in 1994

In 1993-94 with our vast network of organizations and canvassers SVRI was positioned to conduct a far more extensive observer effort than in 1991. But the still Republican-controlled USAID El Salvador mission rejected our application out of hand!

As the voter registration campaign converted into a get-out-the-vote campaign the partisans kicked up in earnest. Ruben Zamora, the darling of the civic left, was the candidate of the FMLN and the Convergencia Democratica. Zamora was an amazing charismatic speaker and candidate. He was energetic and convincing, but he was swimming upstream.



**Roberto D'Aubuisson**  
ARENA

The governing ARENA party was well oiled machine now adept at elections having won the previous Presidential and the last three Legislative elections. Of course, they abused the powers of incumbency and patronage outrageously, were openly corrupt ...and were closely tied to Salvador's bustling evangelical church movement. In truth, ARENA was a fascist party founded by the father of the infamous "escuadrones de muerte" death squads Roberto D'Aubuisson

Alternatively, once SVRI partner-organizations got used to door to door canvassing in marginalized "colonias" we realized we were the only game in town. No other parties or organizations went into these "colonias" -except occasionally we saw evangelists usually "Pentacostals".

As Election Day March 10, 1994 approached things got intense. Incidents of intimidation and violence against FMLN candidates abounded. But the FMLN's formidable military apparatus had converted to politics and gave it an impressive campaign operation.

On March 10, 1994 FMLN-Convergencia Candidate Ruben Zamora tripled the vote that the Convergencia Democratica had won in the 1991 Legislative Election and gained ten times the vote won by Guillermo Ungo in 1989's Presidential Election.

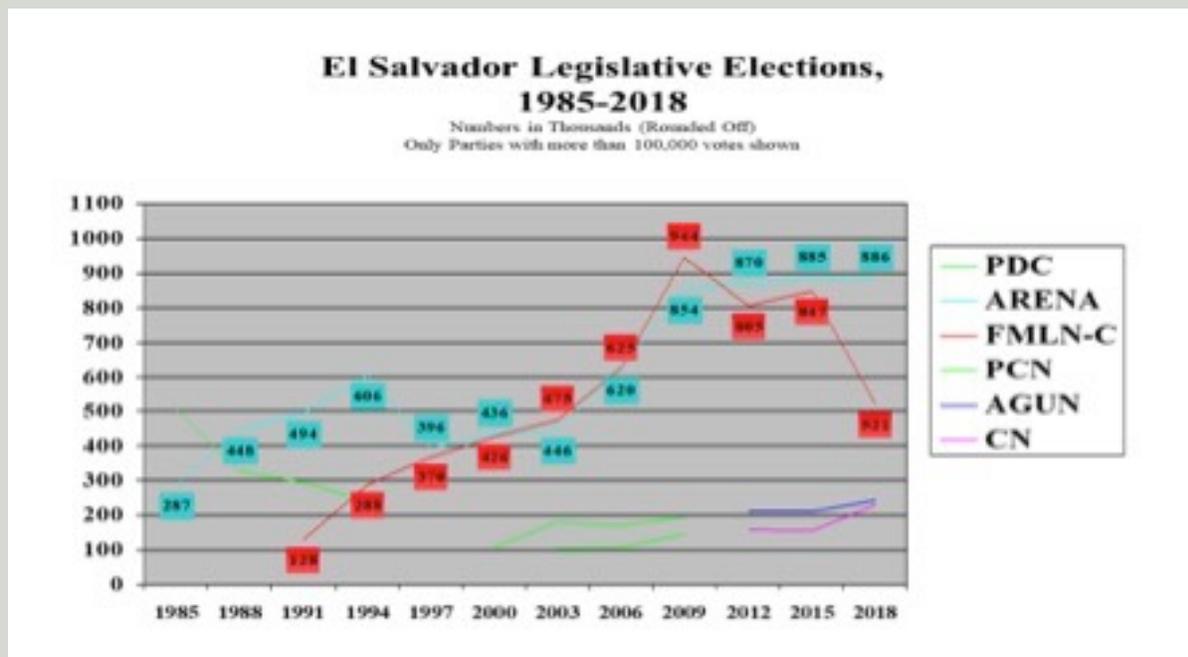
Still the 1994 election was not close. ARENA's candidate Armando Calderon Sol won handily over Zamora by 67% to 32%, massively outspending the FMLN. The ARENA campaign rhetoric was largely one of anti-communist redbaiting.

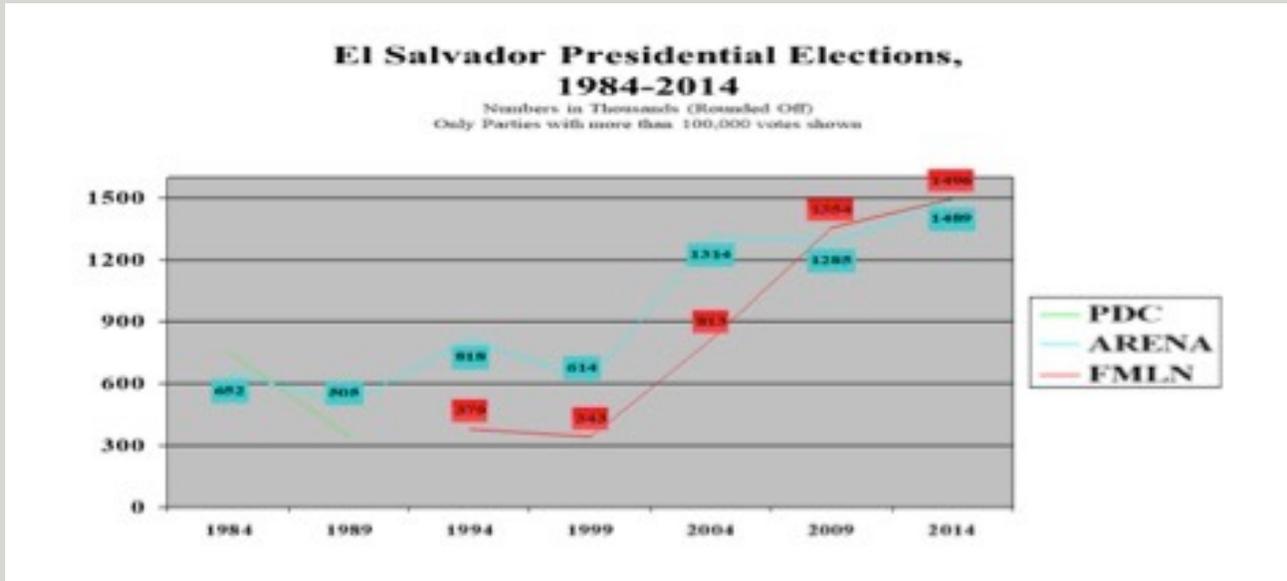
It's likely that persistent problems of bad voter lists, exclusionary registration and voting laws, and displacement suppressed the left's vote by hundreds of thousands. And much of the natural base of the FMLN was still doubtful about the fairness of an ARENA government supervised election.

This would be proven out by subsequent presidential elections in which the FMLN more than doubled (2004) and then quadrupled (2009) its vote as its base elbowed their way into the electorate.

Despite the outcome the dye was cast in 1994. The FMLN was now the second political force in the country causing the Christian Democrats (PDC) and Armed Forces Party (PCN) to wither away.

By 1997 the FMLN was basically tied with ARENA in the National Assembly and by 2009 the FMLN had defeated ARENA for the Presidency and was re-elected in 2014. Simultaneously they became the most important party in the National Assembly.





I hope those that lost so much during the 1979-92 civil war take some solace over the ultimate outcome. The Salvadoran people heroically resisted a 13 year, \$3.5 billion US -financed “low intensity war” that killed 75,000 people and displaced more than a million, as well as a fifty-year military-oligarchic dictatorship and came out of it with a tie (the Peace Accords). Then they persisted to win the Peace.

Set in historic context, SVRI’s Latin America Project represented the most important expression of US Latino participation in the movement to support El Salvador’s historic aspirations for justice, human rights, democracy and peace.

We were proud to demonstrate in practice that US Latinos, especially Mexican Americans, continue to carry the “political gene” of solidarity with the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean and of resistance to racist or interventionistic US policies whether at home or abroad.

The 1994 election cycle would mark the end of the Latin America Project’s “Central America” era though it continued to mount occasional activities in the region on a case by case basis through the present.

Going forward SVRI-LAP would focus on InterMestic issues like NAFTA, the War on Drugs, Immigration, the Embargo on Cuba, and Climate Change. These experiences will be the subject of future “Tales”. Stay tuned.

## 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: After the March 1994 elections SVRI-El Salvador continued to operate for another year providing follow-on training and capacity building services to the organizational network that had conducted the "Su Voto 94" project. Coincidentally as we wound down the operation we began to receive anonymous death threats -it was time to go.

Note 3: Subsequently, some of SVRI's Salvadoran partners like Silvia Barrientos and Luis Monge went on to be elected to the National Assembly. Unfortunately, others like Miguel Lobos were murdered. El Salvador continues to be a bittersweet place showing both developmental progress side by side with serious problems of crime and inequality despite the best efforts of FMLN progressive Presidencies and Legislative pluralities. The ARENA hard right continues to be a serious obstacle to popular democracy and equitable development.

Note 4: During 1997-2018 the FMLN has been the #1 or #2 party in the National Assembly but never the majority. The FMLN won the Presidency in 2009 and

2014. They benefited from the rise of left parties throughout Latin America during the 1998-2014 period. In 2006 for example the majority of Latin America's population were ruled by elected socialist or social democratic Presidents. However leftist rule has suffered losses during 2012-2018 as economic crisis and corruption has soured voters' attitudes in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. And US backed coups dethroned democratically elected left governments in Paraguay and Honduras. Left rule in Nicaragua and Venezuela appears to be in trouble as well. Conversely, Mexico and Colombia appear to be on verge of left Presidential victories.

Note 5: Perhaps the biggest consequence for US Latinos of America's low intensity war in El Salvador was the creation of a massive Salvadoran American community fueled initially by a million war refugees. Now more than two million strong the Salvadoran community is now the fourth largest Latino subgroup after Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Cuban Americans. It comprises the Latino majority in the Washington, DC area and is the 2nd largest Latino subgroup in the greater Houston and Los Angeles Metro regions. Central Americans are now in elective office in federal or state legislatures or local offices in California, Texas, Maryland, Virginia, and Florida.



About the author: 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. [agonzalez@wcvl.org](mailto:agonzalez@wcvl.org) @AGonzalez1217 [www.wcvl.org](http://www.wcvl.org)\*