

# The perisistent legacy of the salvadoran civil war

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Between 1980 and 1992 El Salvador was embroiled in a bloody civil war, the roots of which can be traced to struggles engendered by extreme inequality in Salvadoran society. The country was marked by economic disparity with 78 percent of the land owned by the wealthy class that made up only 10% of the population. Communist party efforts to redistribute income and land had been thwarted since the 1930s. Right from the beginning, the government had been ruthless in suppressing communist movements, starting with the La Matanza Massacre of 1932, which resulted in the deaths of 10, 000 Salvadoran peasants.

Worsening economic crises in the 1970s led to rising political unrest. The military seized complete control of the government in 1979 and attempted to brutally quash political protests leading to left-wing guerrilla groups coming together to form the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The U. S., already fighting the Cold War, feared a communist takeover in its neighborhood became increasingly entangled in the country's conflict. Although the U.

S. played an important role in ending the civil war and promoting human rights, U. S. intervention in El Salvador during the Cold War exacerbated the country's conflict, damaging the fabric of the society and the economy, and creating hardships which persist. The U.

S. was instrumental in bringing the civil war to a closure; after the war, U. S. involvement shifted towards making the peace durable and addressing human rights abuses. Ten years into the conflict, there seemed to be no light at the end of the tunnel.

Although Jose Napoleon Duarte, who presided over the country during the 1980's, had left office in 1989, the new government that succeeded him failed to bring peace. However, the tide began to turn in 1989. The United States under newly elected President George H. W. Bush changed tack in El Salvador (Rabasa 82).

With the Cold War coming to an end, the global threat of communism had dwindled and the U. S. no longer felt the need to fight communists in every country. The U. S.

was now trying to find a way to end the conflict, as opposed to its previous attitude of not negotiating with the FMLN. The administration sent Vice President Dan Quayle to El Salvador to negotiate a peace offer (Rabasa 83). As a part of the Chapultepec Peace Accords, the U. S. Justice department and military helped disband the Salvadoran National Guard, the Treasury Police, and the National Police (Jones 24). These were the three military-controlled internal security forces that were responsible for many of the human rights abuses that occurred during the civil war (Jones 24).

Moreover, these groups were responsible for suppressing FMLN guerrillas, labor and peasant organizations, religious workers, political opponents, the media, and human rights monitors (Jones 31). Dismantling the security apparatus of the government was a major challenge for the U. S. as it involved over 80, 000 security forces (Jones 31). Furthermore, the Salvadoran Government reduced their military by almost ?(Jones 32).

Most importantly, 20% of the newly established police force, the National Civilian Police, was composed of former FMLN combatants, 20% were

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composed of the former National Guard, and the remaining 60% were new recruits, who had no history of combat(Jones The United States recognized that lasting peace required not only settlement among all the parties but also demilitarizing the state and establishing a non-partisan security system. By dissolving the security forces that had been responsible for brutally suppressing the FMLN and by constituting a new security system that incorporated members of both sides, the United States helped build confidence in the peace accord. The U. S. also helped promote human rights in El Salvador.

U. S. helped reform El Salvador's Military College, making it mandatory for all graduates to attend a course that emphasized human rights (Jones 32). Also, the National Civilian Police placed great importance on human rights by creating a doctrine which included institutional guarantees to protect against human rights abuses in the future (Jones 29). In addition, the United States helped establish a Truth Commission to investigate human rights abuses during the war and remove those responsible from positions of power (Jones 33).

By stressing human rights, the United States ensured that the foundations for both stable peace and a thriving democracy were in place. While the military officers had been given amnesty and could not be prosecuted, the U. S. at least made certain that the perpetrators would not continue to hold power, thus advancing human rights. However, while torture and extrajudicial killings declined, crime rates soared (Jones 24). Thus, the gains from establishing human rights were offset by the ineffectiveness of the police force in containing crime.

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The U. S. may have helped bring the civil war to a close, but its military support of a repressive regime and unwillingness to negotiate with the FMLN prolonged the conflict. Due to the extreme disparity between the rich and the poor, hostilities had long been brewing in the Salvadoran society. These simmering tensions broke out into a full fledged civil war in 1980 with a group of communist guerrillas fighting the military government. As a part of the broader Cold War, the U.

S. had been involved in counterinsurgency in El Salvador since the 1960s, but it stepped up its efforts during the civil war (Haessler 40). In the early 1980s, the Reagan Administration became increasingly involved, making El Salvador one of its primary foreign policy concerns (Gwertzman). Secretary of State George Shultz was insistent that U. S.

aid to El Salvador was crucial just like the Soviet aid to the guerillas was crucial for the guerillas (Gwertzman). If the U. S. were to stop sending supplies, but the Soviets continued, then El Salvador would “ obviously fall” (Quote by Shultz) (Gwertzman). Through the course of the war, the U. S.

ended up providing \$6 billion to military and economy of the Salvadoran government (Gale Arnson). By making counterinsurgency in El Salvador a priority, the United States started to increasingly intervene in the country's affairs. The economic and military assistance from the United States enabled an unpopular and repressive regime to remain in power for an extended period of time and to inflict enormous damage on the populace. Most notable was the El Mozote Massacre in 1981 which left 143 victims dead, most of which were children (Gale Arnson). The U.

S. denied that they financially supported these massacres that Salvadoran armies carried out (Gale Arnson). The United States administration was so focused on counterinsurgency that it refused to recognize that its intervention in El Salvador was prolonging the conflict and facilitating large scale massacres. The U. S. also refused to consider any negotiations with the communist insurgents.

Secretary Shultz put down the opinions of those trying to seek negotiations, stating that they were only inviting the insurgents to “ shoot their way into government”(Quote by Shultz) (Gwertzman). The FMLN tried to settle negotiations again in 1989, but the Reagan Administration in the U. S. was unwilling to agree to the terms of the FMLN (Rabasa 80). Caught up in the Cold War, the United States was unyielding in its antagonism to the communists.

Thus, Cold War considerations overrode any chance for negotiated peace in El Salvador, which further dragged out the civil war. The protracted civil war displaced many Salvadorans, caused severe economic problems, and led to a dramatic increase in violent crime. Hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans emigrated between 1980 and 1992 (Gale Gall). Only a few would return in the years following the war (Gale Woodward). Consequently, communities were torn apart and the country was deprived of productive workers.

While El Salvador was once the most industrialized nation in Central America in the 70's, the long and brutal civil war removed them from that position (Gale Gall). Infrastructure was badly damaged (Gale Woodward) and exports decreased during the war (Dobbins 72). After the war, even with U. S.

economic assistance, El Salvador's agricultural exports decreased to 14% in 1995 and then to 10.3% by 2005 (Gale Woodward).

Moreover, the standard of living for Salvadorans still remained low after the civil war (Gale Woodward). There was a steep rise in inflation, doubling to 20% and fall in workers' wages (Gale Woodward). By damaging infrastructure, displacing people, and reducing exports, the conflict crippled the economy, with long-lasting impact. The hobbled economy was a major reason why, even after the hostilities ended, peace failed to return. There was a huge increase in crime rates after 1992.

(Gale Woodward). Drug trafficking, kidnappings, and assassinations became prevalent in the country (Gale Woodward). Homicide rates nearly doubled between 1992 and 1994 and reached 139 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in 1997, the second highest in the world at the time (Jones 37). Strikingly, homicide deaths in 1995 were higher than the average number of the deaths during the civil war (Jones 37). Thus, the average Salvadoran faced a higher risk of violent death in the post-war era than when the actual conflict was taking place.

One-third of the perpetrators of these crimes were former members of the armed forces, internal security forces, or FMLN (Jones 36). Many of these combatants had failed to find jobs, even with reintegration efforts (Jones 36). With the struggling economy unable to provide productive employment, former combatants were forced to turn to a life of crime. While the U. S. helped end the civil war and promote human rights, it ultimately damaged the economy and society of El Salvador.

Violent crime, a legacy of the civil war, remains rampant—the homicide rate reached a record of 102 per 100, 000 in 2015 (World Bank). In turn, crime inhibits businesses from investing and is the chief impediment to social and economic development. As a result, the country suffers from persistently low levels of economic growth—real GDP growth averaged just 1. 9% between 2010 and 2016, the lowest among central American countries (World Bank). El Salvador’s sluggish economy might receive a setback if the present U. S. administration decides to revoke the temporary protected status (TPS) to 200, 000 Salvadorans living and working in the United States, a result of the civil war (World Bank). These Salvadorans send money back, which is an important source of funds for El Salvador (World Bank). Deprived of these remittances, El Salvador’s already anemic economy might be in jeopardy for the future. Works Cited Reference Sources “ El Salvador.” Junior Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations, edited by Timothy L.

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