Have Oppositional Outsiders Gotten Into the Game?

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The following two essays refer to the small Central American nation of El Salvador.
Have Oppositional Outsiders Gotten Into the Game?
Civil Society and Political Society in Post-War El Salvador

This paper explores two concepts, "civil society" and "political society," that are important for understanding political developments in postwar El Salvador. While much attention has been paid to "civil society" in wartime and postwar El Salvador (including popular organizations, experiments in partial community self-management, and international linkages that grew out of war-era social movements) and significant study has been devoted to the analysis of election results in post-1992 "political society," less attention has been focused on the distinction and relationship between "civil society" and "political society." This partial neglect has resulted in insufficient scholarly answers to questions such as: Why is it that in a nation with a moderately strong "civil society," especially in former conflict zones, less than half of the population voted in the March 1999 presidential election—even when the two major candidates in that election represented the two major forces that were at war from 1980 to 1992?

My paper suggests that while Salvadoran "civil society" (in its various forms) has been moderately vibrant since the early 1970s (though perhaps weaker than expected in the conditions of post-1992 postwar democratization), "political society" in "party-centered" El Salvador has been relatively stuck and/or stagnant. Furthermore, in the former conflict areas that provide the clearest test for postwar Salvadoran democratization (one locale of which has been the focus of my empirical research), the links between leaders and organizations in "civil society" and in "political society," while multiple and present, have only been partly developed.

Civil Society and Political Society

A recent textbook of Walzer’s definition of uncoerced human space” (Walzer 1995, Potter et al. elaborated...
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To develop this suggestive analysis, my paper is divided into the following sections. First, I provide definitions of “civil society” and “political society” and present the major challenge for democratization in post-war El Salvador. Second, I plot political trends in El Salvador from the early 1970s onward, with special attention to the post-1992 period of reconstruction and partial democratization. Next, I discuss reasons for optimism and reasons for pessimism on the question of the development of a stronger civil society-political society nexus. This part of the paper draws on my empirical research of community and political participation in the former conflict area of northeastern Chalatenango in the summer of 1998 (and during two brief visits to El Salvador in 1999, including observation of the March presidential election). In this part of the paper, I also draw on national survey data collected by researchers at the University of Central America (UCA) in San Salvador. Finally, I briefly comment on the prospects for civil society-political society relations in El Salvador by looking at the different pictures provided by local-level analysis and global economy-level analysis and at the mixed results of the most recent national elections in March 2000.

Civil Society and Political Society

A recent textbook on democratization follows Walzer’s definition of “civil society” as “the space of uncoerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interests, and ideology—that fill this space” (Walzer 1995, 7 in Potter et al. 1997, 4). As Potter et al. elaborate: “Examples of relational
networks distinct from the state include unions, social movements, co-operatives, neighborhoods, [and] societies for promoting particular interests” (Potter et al. 1997, 4). Sharing this starting point, Booth and Richard (1998) suggest that civil society needs to be further sub-divided into “formal group activism” (i.e. “membership in unions, civic associations, cooperatives, and professional groups”) and “communal activism” (i.e. involvement in “self-help groups and activities at the local level”). Their findings suggest that “formal group activism” has a much stronger association with systemic democratization than does “communal activism” (Booth and Richard 1998). Responding to Putnam (1993), Foley and Edwards, as cited in Booth and Richard (1998), identify two different ways that civil society has been defined. “Civil society I... fosters patterns of civility in the actions of citizens” while “civil society II... energizes resistance to a tyrannical regime.” Consistent with this definition of “civil society II,” many students of transitions to democracy have argued: “The ‘resurgence’ of civil society is crucial to explanations of transitions from authoritarianism to liberal democracy” (O’Donnell, et al. 1986 in Potter 1997, 28).

But while civil society might be a powerful anti-authoritarian force, strong civil society itself is not sufficient for political representation in a situation of electoral democracy. As many political scientists have noted, political parties play a uniquely important role in representative democracy because they are “located in both state and society” (Potter et al. 1997, 27). One of the early influential advocates of political parties argued: “[P]arties are the special form of political organization adapted to the mobilization of majorities. How else can the majority get organized? If democracy means anything at all it means that the majority has the right to organize to take over the government.” (Schattschneider 1942, 208, in Greenberg and Page 1993, 255). In this view, strong civil society and social movements are insufficient for creating and ensuring a democratic society. So, this paper makes the fundamental dis-
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distinction between civil society and political society. "Political society" might be defined as the institutions (such as political parties) and processes (such as elections) that are part of both state and society and in which and through which citizens may (or may not) be represented. "Political society" includes formal political activities at the national, provincial, and municipal levels of government.

One of the major challenges for democratization in postwar El Salvador is to bring civil society and political society closer together so as to bring oppositional outsiders into the political game. The 1992 Peace Accords and the transition to a competitive electoral system that included the disarmed revolutionary movement, the FMLN, created the conditions for the possible joining of oppositional civil society and political society. Lamentably, while post-1960s Salvadoran civil society has been relatively strong, especially in former zones of conflict, and the Salvadoran political system has been characterized as "party-centered," the nexus between these two areas of participation and representation has been rather weak in the post-1992 postwar period. While this general trend may have been halted or even reversed in the March 2000 legislative and municipal elections, a topic to which I will briefly return in my conclusion, the challenge for Salvadoran democratization is clear: how can political parties help to make historical oppositional outsiders "visible" in the postwar political system?

Regarding political parties, Baloyra (1998) argues that postwar El Salvador is a "party-based democracy." Responding to skeptics of political parties, Baloyra asserts that "Politics driven by party control and competition... presupposes a system requiring networks of grass-roots activists that are no less representative than those of civil society. In short, politics as a system of parties is not necessarily less democratic than politics as social movements (1998, 26-27)." While Baloyra's assertion is theoretically true, low voter turnout in the 1997 legislative and municipal elections and in the 1999 presidential elections
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(reporting in the next section of this paper) suggest that party "networks of grass-roots activists" are insufficiently extensive and/or relatively ineffective in postwar El Salvador.

The disjuncture between civil society and political society has been identified by various commentators. Following the 1999 elections, González wrote that the social organizations have not been able to establish a fruitful relation for their own interests with the political parties. . . [resulting in] a divorce between civil society and the party system (emphasis in the original).” González argued that the keys to advancing democratization in El Salvador are to be found in the organization and participation of civil society and in the renewal of the political class” (1999, 234). On a similar note, Moreno wrote of the major opposition party: “Either the FMLN continues to distance itself from the grassroots sectors and thus contributes to the distancing of politics and politicians from society at the cost of its own erosion as a party or it sticks with the grassroots sectors” (1999).

**Schematic History of Post-1972 El Salvador**

From 1972 until 1992, much of the civil society activity in El Salvador was oppositional and not part of political society, which was generally exclusionary and often repressive. After two decades of the growth of tyranny, opposing civil society, the Peace Accords in 1992 created the conditions for the possible joining of civil society and political society. El Salvador has been moderately strong from the early 1970s onward, including high levels of community participation and partial self-management in zones of greatest conflict. Political society, on the other hand, became somewhat stronger after the end of war in 1992, marked by a higher level of political integration of historical oppositional outsiders in conflict zones. After 1997, however, political society seemed to stagnate with shockingly low voter turnout in the presidential elections in March 1999.

There have been opposing civil society 1960s onward. The 1980s opposition Alegria 1987, López Stephen and Tula as well as studies of populations from the 1991, Edwards and Morgan 1991, Thomas Gatehouse 1995, and a growing number of studies of civil society in El Salvador. Boyce, ed., 1996, Macias 1996). My own reinterpreted commissioned to address the formal participatory, partly of people that have come from the official government be meaningful political processes a negotiated settlement (Le•

One test of such relative strength of participation in elections: for reconciliation elections in 1994, the national percentage of people with votes 50% of total register. presidential election a 5%-7% decline in the year 24 (Baloyra-Herp 1996, 40-41; Montgor 1997, 52-53). In the 1999 presidential elections, UCA for 40% (ECA Editorial J 153; Rice 1999). Survey the trend: the percentage "much trust" in the pol...

One test of such political integration (and the relative strength of political society) is citizen participation in elections. In the first major "reconciliation election" in postwar El Salvador in 1994, the national participation as a percentage of people with voter cards was 53%-57 % (48%-50% of total registered voters) in the first round presidential election held on March 20 with a 5%-7% decline in the second round held on April 24 (Baloyra-Herp 1995, 50-52; Córdova Macías 1996, 40-41; Montgomery 1995, 264; López-Pintor 1997, 52-53). In the 1997 legislative and municipal elections, UCA estimated the turnout at only 40% (ECA Editorial 1997, 183). In the March 1999 presidential elections, the third major election of the postwar period, the turnout was estimated at between 35% and 40% (ECA Editorial 1999, 153; Rice 1999). Survey results help to explain this trend: the percentage of Salvadorans who have "much trust" in the political system declined from 25.8% in 1994 to 16.7% in 1999 (Cruz 1999, 211). To sum up: Participation and trust in Salvadoran political society weakened from 1994 to 1999.

Optimism and Pessimism about the Civil Society-Political Society Nexus

Declining voter turnout notwithstanding, an examination of civil society and political society in postwar El Salvador suggests at least three reasons for optimism. These include the sustenance of a moderately strong civil society in former conflict areas (McElhinny 1999); the non-violent political society competition between major wartime antagonists (since 1997 the right wing ARENA and the center-left FMLN have reached virtual parity in their control of national legislative seats and both control a significant number of municipalities); and the presence of civil society institutions that continue to fulfill both their war-era role of encouraging community participation, enabling partial community self-management, and representing historical outsider communities along with their new postwar roles of encouraging participation in political society processes and institutions. This section will comment on this third reason for optimism: the presence of "political NGOs," such as the Coordinating Committee of Rural Communities in Development (CCR), that help to link partly self-managing communities,
“communal activism” civil society, with more formal citizen involvements in political society. These civil society organizations began as representatives of wartime repopulated communities and have expanded to include community organizing in some non-repopulated communities. Two examples of how these organizations explicitly link civil society and political society include encouraging community-level participants to become involved in formal politics and the circulation of leaders between these civil society organizations and formal politics. These linkages have helped oppositional outsiders to be more “visible” in the postwar political system.

In the northeastern Chalatenango region, CCR—the Coordinating Committee of Rural Communities in Development—has been the leading community organization promoter in FMLN-sympathetic communities for more than ten years. In 1998, CCR reported working with 55 communities in 12 municipalities of northeastern Chalatenango. Among the objectives of CCR are training community leaders, including women and young people; assisting relationships with sister communities in foreign countries; helping to administer popular schools; supporting community health care promoters; fighting for the rights of injured veterans and elderly people; helping to “legalize” communities; and facilitating the flow of mostly non-governmental development assistance to communities. CCR has helped communities to fulfill some of the functions traditionally associated with official government. The most prominent examples are elected local self-management institutions, popular education and community health care.

As a regional community-building organization, CCR also suggests the potential for building upon local community self-management to increase the integration of historical oppositional outsider communities into the formal political institutions of democratizing El Salvador, that is to link civil society and political society. Notably, the first speaker at the CCR 10th anniversary assembly in June 1998 was the coordinator general, and soon-to-be FMLN national coordinator, of the CCR and the FMLN national committee. CCR’s accomplishments were also noted by the FMLN, which listed its achievements among the speaker’s points of the 1998 FMLN congress. In short, CCR has assisted communities and political parties to be more visible and involved in the political process, and has helped oppositional outsiders to be more “visible” in the postwar political system.
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Chalatenango region, Committee of Rural Movement—has been the organization promoter in societies for more than interested working with the objectives of northeastern leaders, including NGOs; helping schools; supporting voters; fighting for and elderly people; and facilitating non-governmental communities. CCR has some of the functions with official institutions are important examples are community councils, popular health care.

building organizational for building management to internal oppositional the formal political of El Salvador, that is political society. Notable 10th anniversary the coordinator gen-
eral, and soon-to-be presidential candidate, of the FMLN party. Local FMLN mayors were also among the special invitees at this event. Most of the CCR coordinators were also delegates to the FMLN national convention in August 1998. Furthermore, CCR's 1998 annual report not only listed its achievements in community-building, training of local leaders, and linking partly self-managing communities, it also noted its involvement in national-level politics, including organizing events at the National Assembly to demand the pardon of agrarian debt, the transfer of six percent of the national budget to the municipalities, and the reform of laws for protection of orphans and the elderly. In other words, CCR assists both the organization of local communities and the involvement of those organized communities in national party politics.

In contrast to "political NGOs" like CCR (with its links to the FMLN party), some NGOs in northeastern Chalatenango (such as Plan Internacional and ADEL) are politically non-partisan. With regard to democratization in post-war El Salvador, both political and non-political NGOs can assist the community-building that is necessary for the advancement of historically excluded individuals and communities. I would emphasize, however, that while politically "neutral" organizations might ably assist in cooperation among rival political forces at the departmental and national levels (Moreno 1997: 83-115), organizations such as CCR are in a unique and vital position to help bridge the gap between local community self-management and formal party politics.

One way that CCR links self-managing community institutions, such as the locally elected "informal" community councils, with formal government is by blurring the lines between the unofficial "oppositional outsider" institutions and the official government. This helps to join "communal activism" civil society with more formal political society. For example, two important former CCR presidents were directly involved in formal politics in 1998, one as head of the FMLN party in Chalatenango and the other as the FMLN mayor of the municipality of Los Ranchos. An example of the CCR/FMLN "revolving door" swinging in the other direction is the former FMLN mayor of Los Ranchos, who has been a member of the last two CCR elected governing councils. In some communities, such as Los Ranchos, the parallel governments—"unofficial" community councils and the "official" mayor's office and municipal council—have very close relationships. In Los Ranchos, the mayor's spouse is president of the community council and in 1998 there was one Los Ranchos man who was an elected member of both the mayor's council (part of "official" government) and of the community council (part of "unofficial" community self-management). 3 While this kind of overlap raises questions about future community representation and governmental functions (Will community councils become redundant in FMLN electoral strongholds? What about individuals in these communities who are not FMLN partisans?), presently it seems to assist the integration of "oppositional outsider" communities into the political mainstream, a positive development for Salvadoran democracy.

Another example of civil society/political society fusion that deserves further study are the
community councils called ADESCOs in departments like Morazán that, much like directivas in Chalatenango, have links to the mayor’s office and official government bodies like the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health (Oberholtzer 1999). Also, there are non-political parties that have directly contributed to electoral participation. The Iniciativa Ciudadana (Citizenship Initiative) movement went so far as to be part of Hector Silva’s winning political coalition in the 1997 San Salvador mayoral contest. Finally, town meetings, cabildos abiertos, held by municipal mayors have allowed some civil society communal activists to become more involved in political society. All of these are promising examples of a growing civil society/political society nexus.

Still, there are also many reasons for pessimism about the future of civil society-political society relations in postwar El Salvador. These include: declining participation in political society (reported above); higher levels of “communal activism” than of “formal group activism”; a national executive that is not committed to the joining of civil society and political society; the failure of the main party of oppositional outsiders, the FMLN, to effectively join oppositional civil society and political society; and the low public opinion of political society.

Regarding the efforts of the main opposition party, the FMLN, to join civil and political society, the biggest setback occurred in the internal wrangling over who would be the FMLN presidential candidate in 1999. The potential of the summer 1998 FMLN convention to help further join civil and political society was initially promising. For example, most officers of CCR, the civil society organization representing historical oppositional outsiders in Chalatenango, were delegates to the convention. But the FMLN’s internal conflicts exacted great costs. After the first two 1998 conventions divided and deadlocked between “reformist” and “orthodox” factions, the third party convention finally settled on FMLN secretary general, Facundo Guardado, leader of the “reformist” wing, as the FMLN’s presidential candidate. But by this time, the damage had been done. Many of the delegates, members of grassroots civil society organizations, were seriously disillusioned with party leadership. As one commentator stated, “By the third congress, no one cared any longer what happened.” This disillusion led to greater civil society-political society disjuncture. As Moreno concluded, the FMLN ticket that emerged from this struggle “sharpened internal divisions and turned large sectors of Salvadoran society away from the FMLN. (Swedish 1999, 5, 14)

Regarding low public opinion of political society, an UCA poll taken one month before the presidential elections in March 1999 was revealing. 53% of those surveyed believed that “no matter who wins the elections, things will stay the same.” (In a similar pre-election survey in February 1997, only 36% strongly agreed and 14% partly agreed with this view. IUDOP 1997) In 1999, almost 42% expressed little or no interest in voting (IUDOP 1999). As noted above, only 16.7% had “much trust” in the political system. Thus, the victory of the ARENA candidate, Francisco Flores, in the low turnout 1999 election did little to deepen Salvadoran democracy.

It is also worth mentioning the level of analysis. On this point, the prospects for a more active and participatory political society may not be as my analysis of the data suggests. But given the newness in 1999 and the successes of civil society-political society oppositional outsiders, even the FMLN failed to live up to the promise of majority interest.

The March 2000 Legislative and Municipal Elections: A New Struggle

The most recent elections, legislative and municipal, provide reasons for pessimism. On the negative side, the electoral turnout was very low, with only 23.9% of voters choosing to cast their votes. In a similar positive side, the election of 31 FMLN deputies, 28 FMLN mayors, and 29 for ARENA and the independents suggests not only the cycling back of El Salvador’s political system but also the continued representation in the legislative and municipal system and that ARENA, like the FMLN, will continue to be a major player. The more promising phenomenon is the FMLN’s electoral and factional fights that led to the strike of public servants and the 1999 presidential election.
It is also worth noting here the significance of level of analysis. From the local-level vantage point, the prospects for a stronger civil society-political society nexus seem somewhat hopeful, as my analysis of the postwar role of CCR suggests. But given the sorry showing of the FMLN in 1999 and the seeming deterioration of civil society-political society linkages, where will oppositional outsiders go? From a global-level vantage point, the prospects seem even grimmer. Unfortunately, the global economy’s straitjacketing of a small dependent economy like El Salvador’s makes it quite difficult for national political parties of a social democratic persuasion like the FMLN to become viable representatives of majority interests and preferences.

The March 2000 Legislative and Municipal Elections: A New Beginning?
The most recent elections in El Salvador, the legislative and municipal elections of March 2000, provide reasons for both pessimism and optimism. On the negative side, turnout remained very low, with only 37 percent of registered voters choosing to cast ballots and polls continuing to show high levels of citizen cynicism. On the positive side, the electoral success of the FMLN—31 seats in the National Assembly (compared to 29 for ARENA) and triumphs in most of the biggest municipalities in the country, including San Salvador—suggest that historical oppositional outsiders continue to have some kind of formal representation in the new Salvadoran political system and that ARENA’s hyper neo-liberalism will continue to be challenged (Spence 2000). Even more promising from the perspective of the civil society-political society nexus is the argument that the FMLN electoral success was partly attributable to civil society mobilization, including the strike of public health workers, that forced FMLN political leaders to mute the internal party factional fights that had debilitated them in the 1999 presidential elections. If civil society can con-
continue to lead political society in this way in the future, the prospects for representative democracy in El Salvador will brighten.

Notes
1. It is, of course, challenging to measure the strength of "civil society." Studies in the early 1990s found mixed results for Salvadoran civil society on longitudinal and comparative measures. What is clear is that Salvadoran oppositional civil society grew significantly from the 1990s onward, that the number of NGOs in El Salvador grew significantly in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, and that community-based citizen participation in local municipal assemblies was greater in El Salvador than in other Central American nations in 1994. (Blair et al., 1995 and Seligson and Córdova Macías 1995). A 1998 study found that current participation and civic engagement were greater in areas that had been under FMLN control during the war compared to areas of war-time government expansion and control (McElhinny 1999).

2. While the 1994 turnout rate was higher than in subsequent Salvadoran elections, it was significantly lower than the turnout in the "reconciliation elections" in other comparable nations. Voter turnout in early 1990s "reconciliation elections" in Angola, Cambodia, Mozambique, and Nicaragua were all above 85% (López-Pintor 1997, 52-53).

3. The discussion of CCR in this section of the paper is taken directly from my longer case study-based paper on postwar participation in northeastern Chalatenango (Leaman 2000). CCR is the Chalatenango offshoot of CRIPDES (Christian Committee for the Displaced). A comparable "political NGO" operating in Morazán and San Miguel is PADECOMSM.

4. This summary is based on the CCR Annual Report, "Memory of Labors," for the period from June 1997 to June 1998, distributed at the CCR assembly in Guarjila on June 22, 1998.

5. This information was gathered in interviews with two community council members in Los Ranchos and with the parish priest in Arcatao, July 1998.

6. Spence (2000). This paper's emphasis on the partial disjuncture between civil society and political society is not intended as a complete explanation for the increasing rates of voter abstention in postwar Salvadoran elections. Other factors—including continuing technical problems and voter obstacles in the election system; the rather tepid presidential campaign in 1999; and internal party divisions—surely have contributed. For a longer view of voter turnout in El Salvador, see Baloyra-Herp (1995, 48-56).

References


NGO“ operating in ECOMSM.

ECCR Annual Report, funded from June 1997 to assembly in Guarjila in interviews with residents in Los Ranchos and July 1998.

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