

## **V. The Electoral Environment**

**On March 10, 1991, voters will go to the polls in El Salvador to elect 84 members of the Legislative Assembly and 262 mayors and municipal councils. A broad spectrum of political parties are participating and the FMLN rebels are planning, for the first time in the course of the war, not to carry out military actions on and around election day. However, despite the breadth of political views represented, or perhaps because of it, election-related political violence is actually greater than it was immediately prior to the March 1989 presidential elections.**

**In recent years, the social-democratic Democratic Convergence coalition and the leftist Nationalist Democratic Union (which did not participate in the 1989 elections) have periodically suffered harassment, detentions, office break-ins, and even assassinations by government forces and death squads. Recently, other serious incidents have occurred, which together underscore the tremendous obstacles facing party activists, especially on the political left.**

**a. On June 2, 1990, six members of the MPSC were arrested as they were passing out literature and talking with residents in the San Salvador working class suburb of Mejicanos. They were brought to the Mejicanos civil defense command, where they were held for two hours before being released.**

**b. On July 3, 1990 at about 10:00 p.m., armed men in civilian dress broke into the offices of the MPSC in San Salvador, stealing documents and about \$1000 from the office safe, opening desks and closets and throwing papers on the floor. The intruders stayed for about five hours, threatening with death two MPSC workers who were in the office at the time of the break-in. At 6:00 a.m. the next morning, two members of the National Guard passed by outside and looked in. The MPSC office is located about eight or nine blocks from the First Brigade barracks.**

**c. On December 12, 1990, Roberto Linares Cambara, a member of the Popular Social Christian Movement (MPSC) was detained in Zacatecoluca by soldiers of the Artillery Brigade. When the soldiers discovered that he was a member of the MPSC, they said that "all of you from the Democratic Convergence are terrorists." He was beaten and burned on his chest with cigarettes. By early March, the Armed Forces had still not announced the results of an investigation they had promised**

to carry out.<sup>124</sup>

d. On January 31 in the early morning hours, an explosive was hurled from a passing vehicle into the offices of the Democratic Convergence (CD) in Usulután. The building was damaged and a party vehicle destroyed, but no one was injured. The CD offices are located several blocks from the Sixth Infantry Brigade, which is well guarded.<sup>125</sup>

e. At about 4:30 a.m. on February 9, 1991, the offices of *Diario Latino*, a daily newspaper that had boldly covered the leftist opposition parties and social organizations since mid-1989 was set ablaze by unknown persons. The printing presses, office equipment, files and other materials were destroyed in the fire.

Prior to the destruction of the newspaper, employees had received numerous anonymous telephone threats and, according to workers, the premises were the object of constant surveillance by unknown men. On May 31, 1990, armed men in civilian dress tried to enter the facilities to capture one of the employees, but were prohibited from doing so by the other workers.

The government condemned the attack and said that the fire "could have been intentional instead of accidental"; the governmental Special Investigative Unit promised an investigation. The U.S. Embassy recommended that the paper, which had recently been approved for a \$20,000 grant from the National Endowment for Democracy, receive further emergency funding. U.S. Ambassador William Walker also commented that, "until we have an end to these kinds of cases, then I am not going to make declarations saying that there is a democratic process in this country."

f. On Feb. 19, ARENA party mayoral candidate Hilario Martín Tomasino was detained by FMLN rebels near the town of Cinquera in Cabañas province. Tomasino was reportedly released 24 hours later.

g. On February 21, Heriberto Arístides Robles García, 36, a candidate for

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<sup>124</sup> El Noticiero, Channel 6 Television, quoted in *ELBescate Chronology*, December 1990.

<sup>125</sup> In a separate incident, Democratic Convergence activist Salvador López was murdered on February 11, 1991 in Metapán, Santa Ana. Members of the Convergence did not believe that the killing was politically motivated.

**municipal council of Ciudad Delgado (a San Salvador suburb) for the Nationalist Democratic Union (UDN), and his 6-month pregnant wife, Rosario Palacios de Robles, 27, were assassinated by heavily armed men riding in a white pick-up truck near the Benjamín Bloom children's hospital. Robles García had joined the UDN in November of 1990, and in the last month had received three anonymous telephone calls telling him to leave the country. Tutela Legal said a death squad was responsible.<sup>126</sup>**

**h. On the evening of March 6, 1991, members of the UDN were putting up posters and painting UDN slogans near the Flor Blanca stadium in San Salvador when a caravan of ARENA vehicles drove by and opened fire. The vehicles were carrying ARENA party workers clearly identified by their tee shirts and vests. Mirna Benavides, 25, a candidate for alternate deputy on the national slate of the UDN, was wounded and subsequently lost an eye.**

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<sup>126</sup> Informe Semanal, 15 al 21 de febrero de 1991.