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EL SALVADOR: Assassination of Archbishop Romero

//The assassination of Archbishop Romero--the most influential figure in the country--could provoke widespread violence and further the government's process of survival.//

The killing, unquestionably the work of rightwing terrorists, is likely to provoke violent reprisals by the extreme left and could touch off a popular insurrection. Reaction to the assassination also may split the coalition government, already weakened by dissension over the military's failure to curb rightist violence. Regardless of guilt, the military will at least stand accused of having inspired the shooting, and the US--because of a perceived association with the military--may also share the blame. The ultraconservative opposition would view the possible collapse of the ruling junta as a way to drive the civilians from the government and engineer a restoration of repressive military rule.

Known as the champion of the poor, the Archbishop had been the nation's most articulate critic of repression and social injustice, and had recently stepped up his denunciations of violence by the security forces and the right. He also came close to endorsing the alliance of extreme-left organizations as a political alternative.

//Much will depend on the government's handling of the funeral procession, the first opportunity for a massive demonstration of popular sentiment after the killing. Any overreaction by the security forces in such a tense situation could trigger an uprising in the streets of the capital, followed by other revolts in rural areas.//

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