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El Salvador: The FMLN After the November 1989 Offensive

Summary

The Marxist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) failed to spark a popular insurrection or inflict a crippling blow on the Salvadoran armed forces with its November 1989 offensive, but it did achieve some notable political gains. The intensity and duration of the fighting probably has caused many Salvadorans--particularly the elite, who previously were more insulated from the war--to question the government's ability to provide for their most basic requirement: security. The FMLN leadership, although still divided on the utility of negotiations in the wake of the offensive, probably believes its demonstration of military capabilities will raise doubts internationally about San Salvador's ability to win the war and will translate into greater leverage over the government in any future talks. The rebels also have benefitted from apparent Army complicity in the Jesuit murders, which have damaged San Salvador's credibility and could threaten critical foreign support if the guilty are not brought to justice. [redacted]

Militarily, the FMLN emerged from the offensive weakened but not defeated, and apparently has kept many of its regular forces intact. A number of factors--

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including the absence of the anticipated popular insurrection, heavy casualties, and shortages of food and medicine--have hurt insurgent morale and contributed to increased desertions. Moreover, the Army's current thrust into rebel strongholds will further hinder FMLN military plans in the near-term. Nonetheless, the insurgents apparently are reevaluating their strategy in light of their political gains, and they retain sufficient forces and arms to maintain military pressure on the government and periodically grab international attention. They are most likely to try to do this through economic sabotage, assassinations, smallscale raids, and harassment rather than another all-out offensive on the same scale as their November effort. [redacted]

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FMLN Objectives and Motives

Evidence from [redacted] indicates the rebel offensive that began on 11 November was a major undertaking that involved months of preparation, including expanding the support infrastructure in the capital, pre-positioning large quantities of munitions, and intensive recruiting. Although the FMLN claimed the offensive was provoked by the death of a leftist labor leader in a 31 October bombing, we believe the operation was an important component of the insurgents' long-term strategy to seize political power, either directly or by forcing the government to make sweeping and destabilizing concessions. Their November action was consistent with the strategic vision outlined in [redacted] which predicted that various international and domestic political developments would make 1988-89 the optimum time for pressing an all-out military offensive and inciting a popular insurrection. [redacted] the FMLN believed clandestine political organizing, propaganda activities, and low-risk military operations would generate increased antigovernment sentiment and popular support for an insurrection--to be sparked by the offensive--that would topple the government. [redacted]

The FMLN's decision to launch the offensive probably also was motivated by concerns about its declining military and political standing. Steady pressure by government forces on rebel bases during the past year resulted in heavy insurgent casualties. The insurgents' "election offensive" in March 1989--coordinated attacks on military and civilian targets and intensive propagandizing intended to disrupt balloting--was an abject failure, as voters turned out en masse despite rebel calls for a boycott. In addition, the government's rejection of

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insurgent proposals during peace talks last autumn [redacted] hardened the resolve of some commanders to proceed with the attack plan. By late October both the FPL and the ERP--the two dominant FMLN factions--were ready to abandon the talks and proceed with the offensive. [redacted]

Rebel leaders also probably felt some urgency to boost the FMLN's image abroad. They almost certainly viewed the sweeping changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as a harbinger of eroding international support for their cause. Indeed, [redacted] that Moscow recently had pressed the FMLN to curtail military activities and seek a negotiated settlement instead. [redacted]

Despite rebel claims that the offensive was a tactic to gain leverage in future negotiations with the government, there are numerous indications that the FMLN leadership--at least initially--envisioned it as an extraordinary operation that would topple the government. Unlike most insurgent "offensives," which generally consist of coordinated harassment of military targets and economic sabotage, the November action was noteworthy for its scope, intensity, and audacity. The rebels' principal focus was the capital, but they also initiated heavy fighting throughout much of the country, including the departments of Santa Ana, San Miguel, and Usulutan. The FMLN employed the majority of its manpower, drawing down forces in its northern bases and maintaining little, if any, effective reserve. Already having intensified forced conscription during the months prior to the offensive, the insurgents further swelled their ranks by impressing civilians once the fighting was underway, [redacted] In addition, they pressed some members of their urban front groups into combat. [redacted]

Chronology of the Offensive

The offensive began on 11 November, when some 2,000-2,300 rebels launched coordinated attacks, principally in the capital. Attempts to assassinate President Cristiani, Vice President Merino, and the president and vice president of the Legislative Assembly all failed. Similar efforts to kill the military leadership had been preempted a few days earlier when police raided an FMLN safehouse in San Salvador and arrested the plotters. [redacted] the insurgents also planned to overrun several key military units--the main Air Force base at Ilopango Airfield, the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 6th Infantry Brigades, the Military Engineers Detachment, and the Arce and Atonal Immediate-Reaction Infantry Battalions--during the initial phase of the offensive. Although fighting around some of these bases was intense, none was captured or destroyed. [redacted]

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The pace of the fighting slowed when the insurgents withdrew into working class neighborhoods in northern and eastern San Salvador soon after the offensive began. [redacted] indicate the FMLN leadership expected working class Salvadorans to rise up and support them. The rebels forced some residents to help them dig in, but many civilians fled during lulls in the fighting. The insurgents' move into the densely populated suburbs also permitted them to use the civilian population as a shield against the government's superior firepower, but the Army, relying principally on infantry forces, succeeded in ousting the rebels within a week. [redacted]

The FMLN, however, continued to keep government forces off-balance--and remained in the media spotlight--through a series of bold, unexpected actions, such as the seizure of the Sheraton Hotel. On 29 November, insurgents infiltrated some of San Salvador's affluent western suburbs, where many US officials reside. A US diplomat was temporarily taken hostage and the residence of a senior US official was destroyed. [redacted]

Although by early December the Army had pushed the majority of rebel forces out of the capital, large concentrations of insurgents remained poised outside San Salvador and other major cities, threatening a second wave of attacks. The Army, inhibited by exaggerated reports of rebel reinforcements--a concern bolstered by the discovery that Managua had shipped SA-7 surface-to-air missiles to the FMLN--and fixated on the strategic significance of the capital, remained in a largely defensive, reactive posture. US [redacted] support eventually encouraged the High Command to dispatch several battalions against the massed insurgents. This campaign has not to date resulted in any dramatic gains, but has forced many insurgents back into hiding and continues to disrupt their plans. [redacted]

Results of the Offensive

The rebels' clearest victory was in the war of perceptions. They demonstrated a military prowess that has boosted their credibility and focused international attention on El Salvador. The FMLN probably believes its offensive helped depict the war as "unwinnable," bolstering the argument that US assistance to the government has been ineffective and encouraging additional international pressure on San Salvador to make concessions during future negotiations. [redacted]

Government ineptitude and the rebels' own superior propaganda network helped the FMLN in its battle to shape domestic and international opinion. Initial public and international reaction to the offensive was largely negative towards the FMLN. Archbishop Rivera y Damas condemned the

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attacks, for example, and announced his skepticism towards rebel calls for dialogue. When the government clumsily attempted to censor information about the offensive, however, the FMLN's radio broadcasts became a key source of information for many Salvadorans. As the fighting dragged on, familiar FMLN propaganda themes--most notably charges of indiscriminate bombing by the Air Force--acquired greater currency. While [redacted] indicates these allegations were greatly exaggerated, the FMLN recognized the potency of these charges and, according to the defense attache, rebels were observed after some aerial attacks moving bodies to the target areas and spraying buildings with machinegun fire to simulate the effects of indiscriminate strafing. [redacted]

The murder of the six Jesuit priests and two women on 16 November marked a critical turning point in international perceptions of the offensive. Attention, particularly in Washington and other foreign capitals, shifted from the insurgent-initiated violence to the murders, which evoked memories of the rampant human rights abuses of the early 1980s and cast the government as ineffectual at best, and, at worst, openly repressive. Insurgent propaganda was able to capitalize further on charges of government repression as a result of searches and arrests directed at churches or religious groups in San Salvador suspected of supporting the FMLN. [redacted]

In addition, the offensive altered domestic perceptions about the government's credibility and authority. The rebels' seeming ability to operate with impunity throughout the capital no doubt shook the faith of many Salvadorans--particularly those directly affected by the fighting--in the government's ability to provide for their security. Such a lack of confidence will not only contribute to elite emigration, capital flight, low investment, and other practical problems, but in the long run also could [redacted], undermine the democratic process and hinder efforts to build a political consensus. [redacted]

Despite these gains, the FMLN also suffered some important political and military setbacks. Salvadorans' failure to rise up in a popular insurrection or to voluntarily support the rebels in any significant numbers indicates the FMLN's popular support is not broad enough to pose a serious political challenge to the government. The exposure of many urban front group members--both by participating in combat and through information provided by [redacted]--probably has, for the time being, crippled the FMLN's political apparatus in the capital. The insurgents emerged from the offensive weakened by heavy casualties--the Salvadoran Army claims some 1,600 rebels killed and over 1,000 wounded, compared to about 500 killed and 1,300 wounded for the government--as well as poor morale and desertions. [redacted]

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The FMLN's military losses may be offset somewhat by other factors, however. Most casualties appear to have been poorly-trained urban commandos and new recruits rather than regular insurgent forces, and renewed forced recruitment already has helped offset these losses, [redacted] In addition, the insurgents appear to have sufficient arms and munitions to continue operations, and, [redacted] Havana has agreed to increase supply shipments [redacted]

Outlook

Despite the offensive's military shortcomings, the FMLN leadership recognizes the potential for exploiting its political gains and appears already to have reevaluated its strategy. In the next few months, the insurgents probably will emphasize negotiations coupled with military actions, such as sabotage, ambushes, harassment, and assassinations. Rebel success in assassinating a key official--such as President Cristiani or Chief of Staff Ponce--could dramatically weaken public confidence in the government and promote greater political instability. [redacted]

While a second largescale offensive cannot be ruled out, most rebel commanders probably now see their military objective as an adjunct to a political solution rather than a decisive defeat of government forces. Cuba and Nicaragua aside, most of the FMLN's foreign patrons--citing the offensive's military shortcomings--probably will encourage them to pursue a negotiated settlement. Nonetheless, the rebels no doubt believe continued military activity--particularly high profile actions in the capital--is necessary to strengthen their bargaining position. If they employed sufficient numbers of their recently acquired SA-7 surface-to-air missiles--and achieved a greater degree of accuracy than demonstrated thus far--the rebels may even attempt to assault a major military base. [redacted]

Talks are unlikely to yield tangible results until one side either alters its key objective or opts to make dramatic concessions--both unlikely developments in the near term, in our view. There is no evidence to indicate that the FMLN has altered its view of negotiations as a tactical device to undermine Washington's and San Salvador's resolve and to boost its own international credibility. Meanwhile, at least one senior rebel commander reportedly still favors an exclusively military strategy and may mount independent operations. [redacted]

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