



Director of  
Central  
Intelligence



# The Election Outlook in El Salvador

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THE ELECTION OUTLOOK  
IN EL SALVADOR

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THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS.

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

We believe that the 28 March elections in El Salvador will take place on schedule. Although a sudden shift in the balance of power between the military and guerrilla forces, or a military coup, could result in cancellation or postponement of the vote, neither appears likely.


The vote is for a 60-member constituent assembly that, on paper at least, will have the power to reconstitute the political system completely. The assembly will be empowered to draft a new constitution, appoint a new provisional government to replace the present junta, and set dates for subsequent elections.

The "quality" of the voting on 28 March will be highly significant. An election process perceived by most Salvadorans and foreign observers as legitimate could provide a turning point for El Salvador. The legitimacy of the electoral process, of the assembly, and of the political reforms it could set in motion will depend, however, on such factors as voter turnout, the impact of violence, the manner in which the election results are tabulated and announced, and international perceptions of the process.

The guerrillas will try to disrupt the election with an escalating series of military assaults and assassinations. They will probably try to knock out electrical power and take over towns. They will attack military outposts and interdict highways. We believe, nonetheless, that the guerrillas are incapable of seizing and holding simultaneously a large number of small towns or even a major city. Nonetheless, they have the capability to launch widespread disruptive and violent actions during the election period.

The violence will inevitably cause some voters to stay home, but it is possible that the guerrilla campaign will prove counterproductive. The extreme left and its international supporters will undoubtedly denounce the election no matter what the outcome.

If the turnout is large and the electoral result is widely accepted as legitimate, a blow could be dealt to the extreme left, isolating it and undermining its internal support. The chances for success may be enhanced by indications of increasing popular interest in the elections,



[REDACTED]

by the presence of a large and diverse group of foreign observers, and by the government's promise to hold fraud-free elections. Other factors, in particular the threat of extreme leftist violence, will make such a positive outcome uncertain, however.

It appears unlikely that any of the three major parties will emerge with an outright majority in the assembly. While the Christian Democrats are likely to win the largest number of seats, anything less than a majority would leave them vulnerable to the conservative parties.

A Christian Democratic victory would be a strong affirmation of the balanced political strategy the government has followed over the last two years. It would also validate the Salvadoran military's efforts to work with progressive civilians. A Christian Democratic landslide, however, could exacerbate strains between the party and military leaders.

There is a chance that a coalition between Roberto D'Aubuisson's ultrarightwing National Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the conservative National Conciliation Party (PCN) could emerge. A government dominated by D'Aubuisson would be highly destabilizing; it would remove moderate leaders from the political scene, isolate El Salvador internationally, and probably boost the strength and credibility of the guerrillas.

The most stable outcomes would be a narrow Christian Democratic victory or a Christian Democratic coalition with the PCN. If the Christian Democrats miss by only a seat or two, they could probably strike a deal with individual PCN or other representatives. If Duarte needs more than a few additional votes to form a majority, however, his only likely remaining alternative would be to form a coalition with the PCN.

The Salvadoran military will probably continue to support democratic processes as long as its critical interests are not threatened. It would, however, move swiftly to prevent any civilian challenge to its corporate identity and prerogatives. It would also seek to exercise a veto over any negotiations between a civilian government and the guerrillas.



## DISCUSSION

### The Electoral Process

1. With only about two weeks remaining before the 28 March elections in El Salvador, campaigning is accelerating and violence is at high levels, as groups across the political spectrum become more preoccupied with the promise and perils of the vote. The stakes are high for the political parties that have fielded candidates and for the insurgent groups that are trying to disrupt or abort the voting through sabotage, intimidation, and guerrilla actions. The stakes are high, too, for the military, which has stood at the apex of political power in El Salvador for the last 50 years, but which has promised to hold and honor the elections and open the political system to broader participation. Leaders of all these groups probably recognize that the electoral process has already begun to alter the country's political landscape, and that developments over the next few weeks could result in decisive changes in the balance of political forces.

2. Salvadorans are scheduled to vote for a constituent assembly that, on paper at least, will have the power completely to reconstitute the national political system. The 60-member assembly, with representatives to be elected from each of the country's 14 departments (see map), will be empowered to draft a new constitution, to appoint a new provisional government to succeed the present four-man junta, and to set dates for presidential and other elections. Its formal authority will be so sweeping that it could confirm or enlarge the junta, replace it with another, appoint an interim president, or convert itself into a parliament. Thus, if the elections are conducted without major scandal or disruptions, the assembly will become the official governing power in El Salvador soon after the votes are counted, and the country will come under the rule of popularly elected officials.

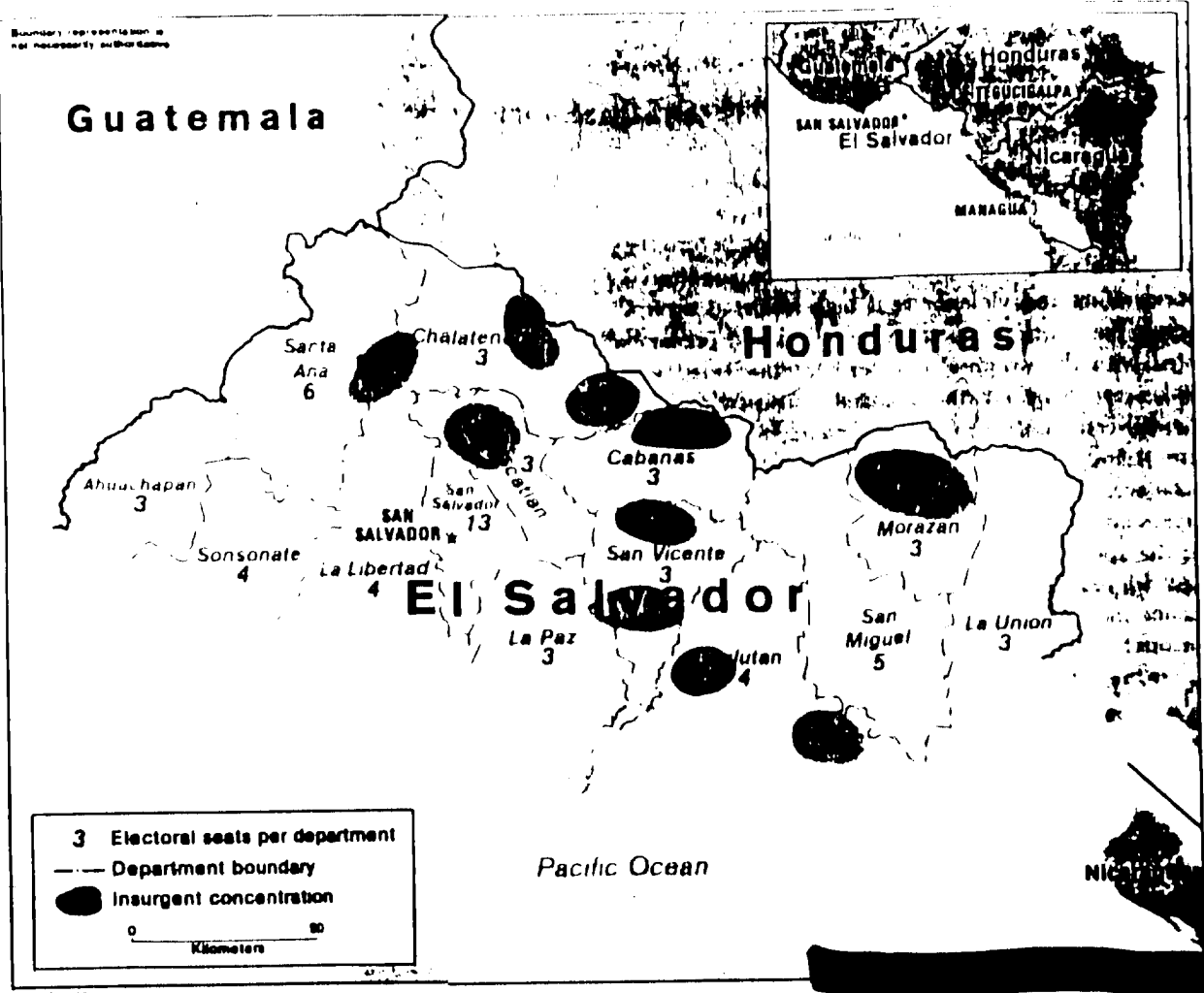
3. The "quality" of the voting on 28 March—measured by the presence or lack of fraud, the size of the vote, the impact of violence, the manner in which the results are tabulated and announced, and other intangibles—will be highly significant. An election process perceived by most Salvadorans and foreign

observers present as legitimate could provide a turning point for a nation that long has been wracked by political fragmentation and polarization, and since 1980 by savage civil war. It could also deal a major blow to the extreme left, isolating it and undermining its sources of internal support. Legitimizing elections would strengthen US interests and bolster democratic forces in Central America and elsewhere in the region, while reducing the appeal of violent methods and groups. If, however, the elections are seriously marred by violence, fraud, or low turnout, the legitimacy of the process would be undermined.

4. The credibility of the elections will depend significantly on their fairness and absence of major fraud. They have been planned and will be supervised by a three-man elections council, one member of which was appointed by the governing junta, and the others chosen by the junta from lists submitted by the Supreme Court and the political parties. The election law provides for poll oversight committees composed of party representatives who may observe the voting and the counting of ballots. The government has also indicated that international observers may do the same. Elections council chairman Bustamante claims that 300 polling places with 4,500 voting tables will be open. The government intends to set up voting stations in 230 of the country's 261 municipalities and to provide protection.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The election council has taken pains to prevent fraudulent voting and irregularities in voting tabulations. Each ballot is numbered for purposes of ballot inventory control, and only those properly validated are counted. The voter tears off the number before voting, marks the party of his choice on the ballot, and drops it into the ballot box. As the balloting proceeds, officials at each voting table fill out report forms. Upon closing of the polls, the ballot boxes are broken open, votes counted, and the results entered on report forms. The ballots and the form—which is signed by elections council representatives and witnessed by poll watchers—are sealed in a pouch, which is then carried to the departmental elections council. From there pouches are sent to council headquarters in San Salvador. Furthermore, at the time the form is signed, the voting table officials send a telegram with the results to the central council. The telegram, however, will not be official, only the form represents the official count. The council will use the telegrams on election night to announce preliminary results. We expect that the extreme left will try to disrupt these processes. The extreme right may also attempt to do so.





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5. For many Salvadorans and foreign observers, the size of voter turnout on 28 March will also be a key measure of the election's legitimacy. Approximately 1.5 million people—excluding those under 18 and in the military—are theoretically eligible to vote, though the number who have the necessary identity cards will be smaller. Many people throughout the country, however, have lined up to acquire proper documentation. Others, including rural women who have little need for identity cards, probably will not get them and will not be able to vote. Thus, the requirement for proper documentation, although it will help to minimize fraud, will also tend to reduce the size of the vote.

6. Furthermore, the guerrilla and front groups have a major campaign under way to discredit and nullify

the elections. They hold that the process is intrinsically fraudulent because they are not represented, and claim that voting will be manipulated by the government. The strategy of the extreme left to disrupt the elections and keep voters from the polls is meant in part to provide it with potentially powerful propaganda to use later in debunking the results. The left hopes to keep large numbers from voting and then to claim that they abstained voluntarily because they are in its camp. Unless turnout is broadly perceived to be high, that position will be credible to many in El Salvador and in influential sectors in other countries.

7. Criticism of the elections could also center on claims that voter turnout on 28 March compares unfavorably with past Salvadoran elections. Official statistics show that between 41 and 68 percent of



[REDACTED]

eligible voters cast ballots in the two congressional and two presidential elections between 1962 and 1977, but many of the votes were forged. The actual turnout in those elections was probably between 35 and 45 percent. In the 1978 congressional elections, in which only one minor party opposed the government, nearly a third of the votes counted are believed to have been fraudulent. The official figures for past elections, though inflated, could be used by the extreme left and other critics of the elections to claim that this month's elections had a comparatively small turnout and therefore lacked legitimacy.

8. We lack reliable data about the voters' awareness of and interest in the elections and about their preferences and likely choices. Opinion polls in El Salvador have been based on small samples and may be highly biased because of the voters' fears, the disruptions of the last few years, and improper sampling methods. One group of pollsters found, for instance, that many people would not answer their doors, much less state to strangers their political preferences and intentions. Any assumptions based on past party, personality, or philosophical preferences would also be highly questionable because of the distinct possibility that events since 1979 have dramatically reshaped old attitudes. Thus, there is little basis on which to predict either the size of the turnout or the outcome of the vote.

9. Despite past electoral fraud, violence, threats from the left, and other reasons for uncertainty, countervailing forces could contribute to a large turnout. The government has taken a number of steps that should facilitate voting. Electoral laws have been revised so that citizens—many of whom have been displaced by revolutionary violence—may vote outside their home departments. In response to guerrilla threats to kill those who vote, the government has also stipulated that personal identity cards will not be stamped and that invisible, instead of indelible, ink will be used to mark voters' thumbs both to ensure against multiple voting and to preserve their anonymity. The Catholic Church hierarchy has repeatedly supported the elections and enjoined the populace concerning its "moral obligation" to vote.

10. [REDACTED] suggests that popular interest in the elections is growing as the parties intensify their campaigning and step up spending. With three major parties and a few minor ones competing, voters are

presented with the types of clear choices that tend, in other political settings at least, to increase turnout. Junta President Jose Napoleón Duarte, leader of the Christian Democratic Party, and Roberto D'Aubuisson, the rightwing ARENA party leader, represent diametrically different philosophies, styles, and values. As they and their parties become more active over the next two weeks, previously undecided and apathetic voters probably will be stimulated to vote. Interest in the election may already have risen in recent weeks because there has been less guerrilla-inspired violence than expected.

11. The legitimacy of the elections should also be enhanced by the presence of a large and diverse group of foreign observers. So far, about 20 governments have indicated that they will send observers, and there will also be a large contingent of media representatives from the United States and other countries, as well as visitors from independent political and labor groups from Europe and Latin America. The recent vote by 19 members of the Organization of American States to send observers marks a significant break with the majority's preference over the last several years to avoid appearing to line up with the United States on controversial issues that involve the internal affairs of member states. The OAS vote—with three abstentions (Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, and Grenada), no dissents, and four countries, including Nicaragua, absent—demonstrates an increasing resolve by member states to resist external subversion and to support efforts to stem the spread of regional violence.

### The Political Parties

12. *Christian Democratic Party (PDC)*. Founded in 1960, Duarte's progressive reform party grew rapidly over the next dozen years. Its support, centered in San Salvador and the major provincial cities, has been derived in large part from Duarte's enduring popularity. In 1972 Duarte ran for the presidency in a coalition with the social democratic party of Guillermo Ungo, who was the vice-presidential candidate that year and is now head of the far left's political front group. Though they won a plurality of the vote, the results were overturned by the military and the Christian Democrats were forced underground or into exile until late 1979.

[REDACTED]

13. Since then, Christian Democratic leaders have worked hard with support from international Christian Democratic movements—especially Venezuela's ruling COPEI party—to rebuild cadre and grassroots support. Although there is no [REDACTED] of the depth of the Christian Democrats' support, the party is a genuinely national one that in the past, at least, has attracted voters from diverse backgrounds and interest groups. Christian Democrats serve as mayors of many towns across the country, and others are department governors. It is Duarte, however, who remains the party's greatest asset. He probably is the best known and most respected political figure in the country, even though his standing may no longer translate automatically into votes for the party and its assembly candidates.

14. The Christian Democrats are handicapped, however, by their participation since early 1980 in the present government, which has been beleaguered by soaring violence and steady economic deterioration. Economic activity fell by about 10 percent in 1981, matching the previous year's dismal performance. As losses mount and businesses fail, unemployment hovers around 35 percent in the cities and is higher in the rural areas. The widespread perception that the government is unable to contain the guerrillas or to end the violence has contributed to a continuing serious flight of capital and to a 15-percent drop in real investment in 1981. Regardless of the election outcome, we believe that prospects for improvement in the economy remain bleak.

15. The Christian Democrats' chances on 28 March could be significantly affected by a serious generational split it has suffered over the last few years. Some of the best and brightest of the younger generation of party leaders joined with the extreme left in late 1979 and 1980 after Duarte moved to ally the party with the military. At 56, Duarte's age and long visibility in public life could work either strongly for or against him and the Christian Democratic candidates for the assembly. He could be seen alternatively as a relic of the past and the scapegoat for failed policies and turmoil, or as a familiar and trusted father figure. On balance, the fact that most of the Christian Democratic leaders are in their forties and fifties probably works to their disadvantage in a country where in the late 1970s about 88 percent of the people were under 40.

16. [REDACTED] indicates that leading Christian Democrats are increasingly concerned about their election prospects. They [REDACTED] fear that rightwing parties may win a majority of assembly seats and form a coalition that would dictate national policy changes. [REDACTED] characterized the party's campaigning as lackluster, and said that its support had precipitously declined in one department that had once been solidly behind the party. He complained that the Christian Democrats have been unable—perhaps for security reasons—to organize mass meetings. Party officials are also convinced that senior military leaders and regional troop commanders are secretly assisting the rightwing parties.

17. *National Conciliation Party (PCN)*. Like the Christian Democrats, the PCN has existed for 20 years and still commands the allegiance of many traditional and conservative voters, though its support probably has dwindled significantly since it left office. The party is no longer directly tied to the military establishment, with which it ruled from 1962 through October 1979, but still probably maintains solid support with retired and active-duty military, business, and middle class voters and with rural peasants previously accustomed to its paternalism. The party has moved over the last two years to broaden its support and shed its old rightwing, promilitary image. The present party leader, Raul Molina, has publicly claimed that the PCN is a centrist party, and he reportedly has approached the Christian Democrats concerning the possibility of an alliance. There are increasing signs that after the elections the PCN could be in position to tip the balance of power by choosing either of the other major parties as a coalition partner.

18. *National Republican Alliance (ARENA)*. The ultrarightwing ARENA is the personal vehicle of former Army major Roberto "Bobby" D'Aubuisson. It was founded in late 1980 and has grown so rapidly through nationalistic appeals and by attracting former PCN stalwarts that it has outpaced all of the minor parties combined, and is now challenging the PCN for the conservative vote. Some analysts even suspect that it has already surpassed the PCN. [REDACTED] claimed that ARENA was making "great strides" and that it had acquired "momentum." There is [REDACTED] to support his claim, and concern has been

[REDACTED]

growing among Christian Democratic and PCN leaders in recent weeks that ARENA is experiencing a surge in public opinion. ARENA's appeal is based on the charismatic and youthful leadership of the 38-year-old D'Aubuisson, and on the simplistic law and order solutions that he proposes for El Salvador's complex problems.

19. D'Aubuisson's platform is strongly influenced by his antipathy for the Christian Democrats and the agrarian and other reforms they have enacted in cooperation with the military. In a televised appearance last month, for example, he once again accused the Christian Democrats of being "the right wing of the Salvadoran Communist Party" and of being "traitors" directed by international Marxist forces. He often describes Duarte and his colleagues as "watermelons"—green on the outside, and red inside. His slogan, "El Salvador will be the tomb of the reds," and his promise to liquidate the insurgents in short order are probably intended to recall the savage "matanza" of 1932, when the military put down a small Communist Party uprising by massacring more than 10,000 peasants. D'Aubuisson seems to command the almost blind loyalty of his subordinates.

20. D'Aubuisson's reputation for violence has been well established over the last few years. He is widely believed to have been involved in the assassination of Archbishop Romero in March 1980 and to be a key leader of rightwing death squads that have been responsible for thousands of murders in recent years. In 1980 he was arrested by the junta for organizing a coup attempt, and had his US visa revoked after threatening a US deputy assistant secretary of state and accusing him of "playing the Communist game." D'Aubuisson has been highly critical of US policy in Central America and, if he gains power, would be likely to seek military and other support from non-US sources. He probably has some clandestine support in the Salvadoran military, and will benefit from the help of regional commanders on 28 March. He also reportedly receives lavish funding from conservative Salvadoran exiles.

21. *The Small Parties.* Three rightwing parties have also fielded candidates and one on the left may also be running. One or two are believed to have pockets of support and thus may be able to win a few seats. Their chances may be enhanced by the propor-

tional representation system that will be used to apportion assembly seats. The extreme rightist *Popular Orientation Party* (POP) is headed by retired general Jose "Chele" Medrano, a hero of El Salvador's war with Honduras in 1969 and the mentor of Roberto D'Aubuisson. He no-doubt still has the backing of some traditional rightwing elements and of some peasants. The *Renewal Action Party* (PAR), headed by Ernesto Oyarvide, has attempted to attract voters from the non-Christian Democratic left who otherwise are unrepresented in the elections.

[REDACTED] he would like to offer his party's presidency to former junta member Adolfo Majano, who for a time was the leader of progressive military officers. It is not certain, however, that the PAR has met all the requirements set out by the elections council and may be disqualified. The rightist *Salvadoran Popular Party* (PPS) is small, inconspicuous, and strongly opposed to the Christian Democrats. The *Democratic Action* (AD) party is a small, center-right party that was founded last year and so far has not attracted visible signs of popular support.

#### The Outlook for the Election Process

22. We believe that the 28 March elections will take place on schedule. Though a sudden shift in the balance of power between the military and guerrilla forces or a military coup could result in cancellation or postponement of the vote, neither appears likely. Military leaders—notably junta Vice President Gutierrez and Defense Minister Garcia—continue to just behind the scenes, but there is broad consensus in the military that it and the country are most likely to benefit from the elections. Even the most cynical and aggressive military leaders who favor D'Aubuisson's approaches or other rightwing methods seem to recognize that the legitimacy and ultimate survivability of the military institution are best served by opening the political system to a civilian government that has international support and legitimacy.

23. Though some guerrilla leaders [REDACTED] are concerned that large-scale violence over the next two weeks could be counterproductive, major assaults in various parts of the country undoubtedly will be mounted. The guerrillas will probably try to orchestrate their campaigns so that they build momentum and achieve maximum effectiveness on election week.

[REDACTED]

end. There will be a higher than usual chance that Duarte, president of the elections council Bustamante, senior government and military leaders, and perhaps even foreign representatives and observers will be targeted for assassination. The guerrillas plan to attack military outposts, take over towns, interdict major roads and lines of communication, and sabotage the economic infrastructure. They may place high priority on efforts to knock out electrical power in large areas of the country. Increased cooperation among the insurgent factions and continuing support from Cuba and Nicaragua—which are also determined to discredit the elections—have increased the potential of the extreme left.

24. If violence is widespread and well coordinated it could severely affect turnout and undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process. Much will depend on how effectively the military can defend critical installations, lines of communication, and voting places. On balance, however, we believe that the insurgents are incapable of seizing and holding simultaneously a large number of small towns or even a major city, and that a basic shift in the military balance is unlikely during the election period. Moreover, even amid considerable violence on election day it is possible that Salvadorans will react indignantly—as voters in other Latin American countries have in similar circumstances—and vote in large numbers. That possibility is perhaps buoyed by the unique resiliency and resourcefulness in the Salvadoran national character, which could prove even more formidable than the threats and assaults of the far left.

#### The Outlook for a One-Party Majority

25. It appears at present unlikely that any of the three major parties will emerge with an outright majority in the assembly after 28 March, and thus control the new government, though the Christian Democrats are likely to win the largest number of seats. A victory by them would constitute a strong public affirmation of their political strategy which combines reforms, opposition to the extreme right, and determination to defeat the extreme left. In addition, a victory by Duarte's party probably would result in increased support for it and a new government from international Christian Democratic parties and groups, labor organizations, and Latin American governments.

26. Ironically, a commanding victory by any of the three major parties could create more problems than it would solve. A Christian Democratic landslide, for example, could exacerbate strains between the party and some military leaders. General Garcia and other leading conservative officers would be highly concerned that a strong Christian Democratic assembly would launch constitutional and other reforms that they could not accept. Indeed, a landslide victory would probably cause some party leaders to push aggressively for "communitarian" and other reforms they have long advocated. Under such circumstances, the chance of a coup by conservative military officers would increase significantly. If Duarte's party wins a landslide, there is even a small chance that such officers would try to mount a coup immediately.

27. A win by D'Aubuisson's ARENA party would be even more destabilizing. Most Christian Democrats, General Gutierrez, and many others from the political center and democratic left would go into hiding or exile, many of them literally fearing for their lives. The Catholic Church hierarchy would be greatly concerned about the likelihood of greater waves of counterterrorist violence, and prelates would speak out despite their fears that they would become targets of assassination. International opinion would be resoundingly negative, and El Salvador would become even more isolated than it has been. For the United States, and other strong supporters such as Venezuela, such an outcome would be a repudiation of their backing for peaceful political evolution and for human rights. US positions elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean probably would also be damaged. If D'Aubuisson actually carried out policies like those he has advocated, his government would be likely soon to face a much more powerful guerrilla challenge, openly supported by a number of foreign governments.

#### The Outlook for a Coalition Government

28. Even the Christian Democrats' own early and optimistic election forecasts had them winning only about 35 seats, and since then party leaders have become increasingly concerned that support has diminished. Thus, they may now be considering coalition possibilities in the event they fail to win a majority in the assembly. If they miss by only a seat or two, the Christian Democrats could probably strike a



deal with individual PCN or other representatives. If Duarte needs more than a few additional votes to form a majority, however, his only likely remaining alternative would be to form a coalition with the PCN. He might have to negotiate with PCN leaders even as ARENA was also trying to woo them. Though many PCN leaders distrust the Christian Democrats, we believe that under most circumstances they could be persuaded that a government dominated by D'Aubuisson would be calamitous.

29. There is a chance, nonetheless, that an ARENA-PCN coalition could emerge, particularly if D'Aubuisson's party were to win a plurality. Despite efforts by PCN leaders to transform the party's image, the rank and file are probably deeply conservative. D'Aubuisson might be able to suborn some PCN leaders and elected assembly delegates through intimidation or promises of large financial payoffs. The prospects for such a coalition and the implications for relations with the United States and other countries would be much the same as those discussed in paragraph 27.

30. A Christian Democratic-PCN coalition after 28 March would be one of the most stabilizing possible outcomes of what will, after all, be an interim government. It would probably enjoy the strongest support from within the military, and would considerably broaden the legitimacy of the present military-Christian Democratic alliance. Even some of D'Aubuisson's partisans would probably be persuaded to cooperate with such a government once the heat of the campaign had passed. Such an alliance would be vulnerable to more extreme propaganda attacks from the far left because the PCN is associated with the conservative, military-dominated governments of the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, if the election process is widely seen as legitimate and honest, such a government would probably stand a good chance of maintaining broad international support. For their part, most of the Christian Democratic leaders would probably have few qualms about forming a coalition with the PCN if it were the only means of their staying in power, though they would have to tone down and even

abandon some of their pet programs. A few, however, probably including junta member Morales F. would be likely to be forced out or would leave.

### The Outlook for the Military

31. Despite the reservations of many top officers, including General Garcia, the military is likely to continue supporting democratic processes as long as its critical interests are not threatened. The military would, however, move swiftly to prevent any challenge by a civilian government to its corporate identity and prerogatives. Virtually all officers believe, for instance, that they collectively should retain the right to choose their own leaders, to remain under the command of a uniformed defense minister, and to maintain control over decisions relating to internal security and defense. Under most circumstances, furthermore, nearly all military leaders would seek to exercise a veto over negotiations between a civilian government and the guerrillas. A strong majority of commanders could also be expected to try to curtail what they consider excessive reformist zeal by the elected assembly, especially if a left-of-center majority emerges. In addition, military leaders will seek to uphold their influence over time by supporting the candidacies for high office of retired colleagues and by collaborating with conservative and wealthy exiles.

32. Through its 50 years in power the Salvadoran military has been nationalistic and institutionally independent. Unlike the military castes in neighboring countries, it never came under the strong influence of the United States, nor did it or any other elements in El Salvador ever have to deal with invading or occupying US forces. Those unusual attributes of autonomy and nationalism, combined with the military's willingness since 1979 to work with left-of-center civilian politicians, indicate that it is a strong institution. Unlike many other, more dependent military forces in less developed countries, it is probably one that is capable of surviving and working over the long term for constructive political and economic change in El Salvador.

