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SPECIAL ANALYSIS

EL SALVADOR: Election Outlook

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The voter turnout on Sunday could be substantial, but neither of the two leading contenders--junta President Duarte's liberal Christian Democrats and Roberto D'Aubuisson's ultraconservative National Republican Alliance--appears to have better than a remote chance of gaining a majority. Thus, the balloting will likely lead to intense rivalry by both parties to form a ruling coalition in the new constituent assembly.

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Although the extreme left and its foreign supporters will denounce the results, their failure to stop the election will be a severe psychological blow. This would be magnified by a large voter turnout and by wide acceptance of the result as legitimate. Such an outcome would reduce international and domestic support for the guerrillas and threaten their already fragile unity.

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Nevertheless, the election presents additional challenges to the stability of the ruling structure. A reformist administration headed by the Christian Democrats has the best chance of reaching a political settlement with the insurgents, but for this reason it will remain vulnerable to a military coup. A regime dominated by ultraconservatives would heighten polarization, alienate international backers, and ultimately face a greater guerrilla challenge more strongly supported by foreign governments.

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Mechanics and Atmospheric

The balloting, which will end a half century of governments dominated by the military, is for a 60-member constituent assembly. It will be empowered to appoint a provisional government, draft a new constitution, and set dates for subsequent presidential elections.

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Interest appears high among the estimated 1.5 million voters. To enhance turnout, the nonpartisan Central Elections Council is permitting voters to cast ballots at any of 300 polling stations. Measures have been taken to protect voter anonymity because of guerrilla threats.

Insurgent propaganda has complicated the junta's effort to give the election credibility abroad, but at least 20 nations and the OAS are sending official observers. They will be given military protection and permitted to witness the balloting at any location they choose. The Central Elections Council, meanwhile, has instituted measures to prevent fraudulent voting and irregularities in the tabulation.

The Campaign

The major competition--too close to call--pits the reformist record of the Christian Democrats against the personal and nationalistic appeal of D'Aubuisson. He has used substantial funding and simple law-and-order themes to extend his party's appeal beyond its natural constituency of rightist military officers, landowners, businessmen, and peasants aligned with the old order. His promises of swift victory over the guerrillas apparently have been persuasive with both urban and rural workers, who increasingly suffer the economic effects of insurgent violence.

In contrast, the Christian Democrats have until recently been content to rely on their political organization and record of reforms. Concerned, however, that their appeal is being eroded by the right wing's constant reminders of escalating guerrilla attacks and continuing economic deterioration, they are publicly insinuating D'Aubuisson's involvement in the assassination of Archbishop Romero in 1980. They have also designated junta President Duarte--whose personal popularity is unrivaled--as their candidate for provisional president, and he has accepted.

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Four other parties are fielding candidates in each of the country's 14 departments. Of these, the old center-right National Conciliation Party--which held power from 1962 until the overthrow of General Romero in 1979--retains significant support and is likely to be most prominent in any coalition government. [redacted]

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Conflicting signals from National Conciliation Party leaders, however [redacted]

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[redacted] underscore the uncertain nature of postelection maneuvering. The campaign's bitter invective will further complicate efforts to form a coalition. [redacted]

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The Military

Relations between the military and the Christian Democrats have deteriorated during the campaign. The Christian Democrats are upset by the armed forces' refusal to share responsibility for the economic disarray and the continuing violence. They also are upset that some military elements are supporting D'Aubuisson. [redacted]

The generally conservative officer corps fears that a reformist civilian government would threaten its independence and prerogatives. Although the military is enjoined from participating in the election, at least some elements are likely to facilitate rightist balloting while hindering voters suspected of being unsympathetic. [redacted]

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Possible Results

If the turnout is substantial and the balloting appears fair, the most stabilizing outcome would be a Christian Democratic alliance with moderate elements from one or more of the rightist parties. Such a result would reduce the military's concerns about its institutional survival and would receive strong backing from at least some Western democracies. [redacted]

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Such support might persuade the leftist insurgents to moderate their demands for a power-sharing arrangement and a restructuring of the military. In time, the armed forces might even be encouraged to engage in a dialogue with the left that could eventually establish the basis for a political settlement. [redacted]

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A landslide victory by the Christian Democrats would increase strains with the military, which would be apprehensive about efforts to impose civilian control over the armed forces and to make concessions to the guerrillas. Although the military has shown itself willing to continue supporting democratic processes as long as its critical interests are not threatened, civilian initiatives of this kind would increase the chance of a coup. [redacted]

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A D'Aubuisson-dominated government would cause reform programs to be abandoned, indiscriminate counter-terrorist violence to intensify, and world opinion to be overwhelmingly negative. Such an outcome would repudiate Western support for peaceful political evolution and human rights. Over the long term, only the extreme left would benefit. [redacted]

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