The Salvadoran Civil War:

Socioeconomic, Political, and Cultural Impacts on El Salvador

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The Salvadoran Civil War, shaped by deep social and economic inequalities, international political rivalries, and political repression, tore through El Salvador for twelve years and left a profound political, cultural, and psychological impact on the country. The war erupted in 1979, amidst a polarized world divided by the Cold War, where one side advocated for capitalism and the other communism. Cold War tensions transformed El Salvador, similar to many Latin American nations, into a battleground for these tensions: the United States funneled money and weapons into the right-wing government while Cuba and the Soviet Union backed leftist insurgents[1]. However, the war addressed not only the geopolitical tensions present in El Salvador at the time but also deepened the country's social divisions. The decades of social inequality and political repression coupled with the dominance of a small ruling class created a volatile society, teetering on the brink of revolution. The war that ensued can't simply be defined as a Cold War proxy battle, but rather a culmination of decades of El Salvador's governmental repression and stark class divide.

Throughout the 1960s, an elite group called the "Fourteen Families" ruled El Salvador, with their control spanning well into the late 1970s. The group, made up of the wealthiest and most influential landowners, dominated El Salvador's politics and economy throughout the "Coffee Republic" period (1871-1930s). The Coffee Republic period refers to a period when coffee became El Salvador's primary export, driving the country's infrastructure, economic growth, and social progress. The Fourteen Families controlled nearly 60% of the country's land, including most important exports such as sugar and coffee, often mandating plantation labor. As a result, their monopolization of resources created widespread discontent among the poor and

[1] Runde, Daniel F., Christina Perkins, and Erin Nealer. "Origins of the Current Crisis." Achieving Growth and Security in the Northern Triangle of Central America. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23379.6.

indigenous populations, fueling the insurgency. The Fourteen Families used the military as its enforcer. The military brutally suppressed dissent and maintained the status of the ruling elites through fear and intimidation. This military repression didn't just mean quelling insurgency but also meant preserving the political and social systems that kept the elite in power and the masses impoverished[2].

When neighboring Honduras, fearing a Salvadoran annexation, expelled Salvadoran immigrants in 1969, the sudden influx of returnees exacerbated existing land shortages and unemployment.[3] Additionally, it made resources even more inaccessible to the general population, further deepening the inequality. These consequences directly resulted from the entrenched social and political inequality in El Salvador stemming from the Fourteen Families. In response to the mounting unrest, which included large-scale protests and strikes, the Salvadoran government increased militarization and formed paramilitary groups known as death squads to suppress growing resistance movements. These groups, trained and funded by the U.S., carried out assassinations of suspected leftist sympathizers, fueling further tensions. El Salvador's militaristic response aimed at keeping the wealth and resources in the hands of the few elite, protecting their interests, and ensuring that their power went unchallenged.

Amidst this turmoil, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a coalition of leftist guerrillas receiving military aid, training, and funding from Cuba and the Soviet Union, launched an insurgency against the Salvadoran government. The FMLN emerged in the early 1970s, named after the revolutionary leader Farabundo Martí. They held conferences to plan

[2] Ram, Susan. "El Salvador: Perspectives on a Revolutionary Civil War." Social Scientist 11, no. 8 (1983): 3–38. https://doi.org/10.2307/3517048.
[3] Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Guatemalan Civil War." Encyclopedia Britannica. Last modified January 25, 2023. https://www.britannica.com/place/Guatemala/Civil-war-years.

their insurgency and organize resistance against the Salvadoran government, strategizing against the ruling regime and mobilizing disenfranchised lower-class citizens and students. By the late 1970s, the FMLN expanded its influence by attacking military targets and relying heavily on recruits, primarily from the disenfranchised lower class and student populations, who viewed the insurgency as a way to challenge the oppressive political and social systems of the country.

In 1979, Lieutenant Colonel Adolfo Majano led a coup aimed at replacing the existing regime with a military-civilian junta, led by Majano himself. This political shift marked a major turning point, as the junta could either work to suppress or escalate the rising violence. Despite the initial promise of land reforms and social change, Majano's efforts, blocked by conservative military leaders and oligarchs that remained on his committee, failed to be realized. His inability to implement those reforms not only deepened political instability, but also solidified the FMLN's view that peaceful reform could not be achieved, leading the group to escalate their attacks, and marking the transition in the conflict to full-scale war.

By 1980, the FMLN launched into armed conflict with the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government. At the beginning of the war, the FMLN consisted of only about 5,000 fighters, while the Salvadoran military manned a 15,000-strong force supplied with weapons and advisors from the U.S[4]. The U.S. viewed the FMLN as a communist threat and therefore sought to raise the conflict's profile to an international level to obtain military aid. The U.S. provided such heavy economic support that, by 1984, the Regan administration provided over $1 billion in assistance. The U.S. involvement not only helped to provide the military resources necessary to maintain the elite's power but also enabled the government to continue to disproportionately

[4] McKinney, Cara E. (2015) "Twelve Years a Terror: U.S. Impact in the 12-Year Civil War in El Salvador," International ResearchScape Journal: Vol. 2, Article 5, pg. 4

target marginalized groups. The Salvadoran government launched a series of violent crackdowns across the country. These crackdowns not only targeted armed rebels, as they had previously, but also went after student activists, religious leaders, and labor organizers, outspoken in their opposition to the Salvadoran government and its politics.

On March 24, 1980, as the conflict escalated, the assassination of Archbishop Óscar Romero drew international attention to human rights violations in El Salvador. Romero became a vocal critic of government repression, using his sermons to advocate for the poor and condemn state violence[5]. His assassination during Mass shocked the nation, fueling mass protests and convincing many Salvadorans that peaceful resistance seemed futile. His murder turned into a catalyst for increased scrutiny of U.S. support for the Salvadoran regime, amplifying global pressure on the U.S. to reconsider its involvement in a government now becoming increasingly associated with human rights abuses.

As part of a vicious campaign against the FMLN, the Salvadoran Army's elite Atlácatle Battalion massacred 800 civilians in the December 1980 El Mozote Massacre, just months after Romero's assassination[6]. Concurrently, the FMLN intensified its violent opposition by launching coordinated assaults on government forces and military institutions. In the wake of Romero's murder, the FMLN ramped up its recruiting efforts and propaganda campaigns, using his death as further proof of the regime's cruelty. International indignation continued to grow, and both the Salvadoran and United States administrations began to face increasing diplomatic isolation for their involvement in a regime now widely associated with multiple human rights violations.

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[5] McKinney, Cara E. (2015) "Twelve Years a Terror: U.S. Impact in the 12-Year Civil War in El Salvador," International ResearchScape Journal: Vol. 2, Article 5, pg. 9

[6] Mason, T. David. Review of The Civil War in El Salvador: A Retrospective Analysis, by Leigh Binford, Hugh Byrne, Martha Doggett, Ian Johnstone, Tommie Sue Montgomery, Anna L. Peterson, William Stanley, et al. Latin American Research Review 34, no. 3 (1999): 179–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2503968, pg. 191

In January 1981, the FMLN launched its first major offensive, known as the "Final Offensive," which aimed to seize control of multiple towns in the Salvadoran countryside. In response, the U.S., under President Reagan, sent more direct aid to the Salvadoran government. In contrast to the Carter administration's limited aid, Reagan quickly approved increased military support, advisors, and assistance to El Salvador[7]. The Reagan Administration viewed the conflict as a key front in the fight against communism, justifying the aid necessary to prevent further Soviet and Cuban influence in the region. However, growing reports of human rights abuses by the Salvadoran government led to increased congressional and public opposition to U.S. involvement. The Salvadoran military, strengthened by this surge in U.S. support, ultimately repelled the offensive. Despite the failure of the Final Offensive, the FMLN's resistance remained far from over, while fighting between the government and the guerrillas would persist throughout the decade.

As the conflict escalated, the Salvadoran government prioritized strengthening its military capabilities, leading to key strategic shifts in the early 1980s. From 1981 to 1983, the government worked on increasing its conventional ground and air forces, then requested a formal U.S. assessment. U.S. Brigadier General Woerner evaluated the military and recommended three objectives: avoid defeat, gain control (of key areas), and destroy the rebels' ability to fight. With these goals in mind, the Salvadoran government, in partnership with U.S. aid, could triple its military size and improve its training. In 1983, the government launched a national campaign plan to clear rebel-controlled areas and boost public support for its military efforts. Despite facing a significantly stronger and better-equipped military, the rebels strategically avoided direct

[7] McKinney, Cara E. (2015) "Twelve Years a Terror: U.S. Impact in the 12-Year Civil War in El Salvador," International ResearchScape Journal: Vol. 2, Article 5, pg. 10

engagement and instead relied on guerrilla tactics. Although this decision led to high casualty rates, it allowed the rebels to maintain their position and effectively keep the war at a stalemate.

With neither side able to claim a decisive victory and both in an impasse, political leaders began seeking alternative solutions. Amidst mounting military efforts and a standoff with rebel forces, the 1984 election of President José Napoleón Duarte marked a key shift while he aimed to transition away from military confrontation and toward peaceful negotiations to resolve the conflict. By this point, the U.S. Southern Command ("Southcom") turned into the primary backer of the Salvadoran government, providing financial aid, military equipment, and training. In return, Duarte promised to contain the conflict and limit direct U.S. intervention[8]. While his administration sought both a decisive defeat of the FMLN and a political resolution to the war, political divisions slowed the process. Additionally, inflexibility on concessions caused these efforts to fall short. Although Duarte's attempts at diplomacy signaled a shift in approach, neither side decided they'd be willing to make significant compromises necessary to achieve peace.

As the conflict dragged on, it became clear that military force alone would not end the war. From 1983 to 1985, the Salvadoran government struggled to gain the upper hand, as the war remained in a deadlock. Though its army expanded, it lacked coordination and training to effectively combat the rebels and struggled to increase civilian support. Eventually, U.S. advisors pushed for better coordination, leading to the creation of the National Joint Coordination Committee in 1986. That same year, the government officially adopted Unidos Para Reconstruir (UPR), shifting its focus to large-scale offensives rather than occupation.

[8] "CHAPTER THREE El Salvador." In *Securing Tyrants or Fostering Reform? The U.S. Internal Security Assistance to Repressive and Transitioning Regimes,* 23-48. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg550osi.11.

The war reached a tipping point in late 1989 as tensions increased. The FMLN attempted a second “Final Offensive” in November 1989, this time targeting the capital, San Salvador, leading to brutal government repression. On November 16, 1989, an elite Salvadoran military unit, the Atlacatl Battalion, killed five Jesuit Priests, made up of a housekeeper and her daughter, along with several Spanish civilians and priests[9]. Montano, the chief who orchestrated the massacre, didn’t face charges at the hands of the Spanish court, because of his deportation to Spain from the US, solely based on the Spanish citizens’ deaths. However, evidence found on Montano from the U.N. Truth Commission for El Salvador discovered that Montano joined a core group of elite officers responsible for the November 1989 deaths, some of the most notorious crimes in El Saldavor’s history. Despite the Salvadoran government’s denials, overwhelming evidence led to widespread indignation and amplified calls for a negotiated solution.

The FMLN faced a major setback in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, cutting off crucial financial, military, and strategic aid. As a result, the FMLN's capacity to maintain large-scale offensives diminished, forcing it to seek diplomatic negotiations. In December 1991, both sides reached a truce, and in 1992, the Chapultepec Peace Accords in Mexico City officially ended the 12-year Salvadoran Civil War.

Although the peace agreement marked the official end of the war, the scars of the conflict remained deep, leaving behind political, social, and economic turmoil. More than one million people lost their homes, over 8,000 went missing, and the war destroyed entire communities. The Peace Accords laid out a framework for political reform, but progress seemed slow. El Salvador

[9] McKinney, Cara E. (2015) "Twelve Years a Terror: U.S. Impact in the 12-Year Civil War in El Salvador," International ResearchScape Journal: Vol. 2, Article 5, pg. 11

faced economic devastation, driving many to emigrate, particularly to the U.S. Violence persisted due to weakened social structures and ineffective law enforcement. Art, music, and murals became ways to process and reflect on grief and trauma, while the war's legacy continued to shape the nation's struggles with violence and inequality[10].

[10] Acosta, Pablo, Javier Baez, Germán Caruso, and Carlos Carcach. 2020. *The Scars of Civil War: The Long-Term Welfare Effects of the Salvadoran Armed Conflict.* Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/601951602080989218/pdf/The-Scars-of-Civil-War-The-Long-Term-Welfare-Effects-of-the-Salvadoran-Armed-Conflict.pdf.

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