The Salvadorean insurgency

why choose peace?

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When the Peace Agreement in El Salvador was signed in January 1992, it was commonly said to be a consequence of the end of the Cold War. Conspiracy theorists went even further and said that the peace in Central America was the result of a direct agreement between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. However, this is belied by the fact that internal conflicts have since become more predominant. Harris and Belly’s research suggests that of the 101 armed conflicts identified in the world between 1989 and 1996, 95 were internal disputes. The ‘end of the Cold War’ explanation of peace in Central America is therefore too superficial and mechanical. A conflict as bloody, long and complex as El Salvador’s in the 1980s could not have been so abruptly and successfully solved by external factors. The external factors played a role, but were not as important as is thought. The crucial question about how peace was reached in El Salvador is how and why the protagonists of the conflict changed.

Understanding the case

In its effects, duration and dimensions, the war in El Salvador and Central America more broadly was Latin America’s Vietnam. Between the armies and guerrilla groups of Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador, 400,000 people were involved, 250,000 died and millions were displaced in a conflict spanning more than a decade. During that time, the United States remained silent in the face of genocide in Guatemala, installed military bases in Honduras, supported the government of El Salvador both militarily and financially, armed the Contras, mined Nicaraguan ports and invaded Panama.

The conflict in Central America was connected to the struggle to overturn the authoritarian political models the US had long supported. With the exception of Costa Rica, democratic life was unknown in Central America. The reasons why these societies chose

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violence as the path towards change are more complicated; the question here is how they stopped it and, specifically, how changes inside the Salvadorean insurgency took place.

Some answers

The Salvadorean insurgency was a pluralist political coalition

The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) comprised five armed groups, all of which had political wings that were as important as their military structures. This means that even when they were under intense pressure, they had organized social groupings functioning openly. The FMLN had a close alliance with two non-armed political movements that were in favour of the democratic process: one social democrat and the other 'social Christian.' This alliance was known as the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR). Despite seeming relatively weak in comparison to the FMLN’s organizational strength, these two movements and their leaders, together with the moderate guerrilla groups, created a correlation of forces that favoured a negotiated settlement. The FMLN-FDR alliance agreed on a strategy of finding a negotiated solution to the conflict in 1982, ten years before the peace agreement was signed.

All the guerrilla groups defined themselves as Marxist-Leninist, but only the Communist Party and some militants active in other organizations could be considered Marxist in the fullest ideological sense. The other groups adopted ideological extremism in reaction to the authoritarian regime. Even though the conflict pitted an authoritarian reality against a potentially authoritarian project, part of the insurgency’s legitimacy came from its unmistakable potential to substitute its project with a democratic one. The political life of the FMLN was always intense, influential and never isolated or unconnected from the reality of the country, which made it politically pragmatic in spite of the ideological rhetoric and radical use of violence. When the four guerrilla groups were created during the 1970s, they adopted the Marxist-Leninism typical of the Latin American left at that time. However, towards 1980 they joined forces and created an alliance with the FDR based on a liberal democratic programme. With the continuation of the war between 1984 and 1985, they again took up Marxist programmatic ideas. Towards 1990, when they were in a strong position again, the more moderate tendency was again able to promote a liberal democratic project, and this programme made negotiations viable and helped bring peace to El Salvador.
A context of democratic influences prevailed

For reasons of legitimacy, choice and self-interest, the FMLN-FDR was in contact with a broad spectrum of non-Marxist countries, forces and political leaders; however, those contacts were also possible because there was enough tolerance of the insurgency and belief in its potential transformation and the viability of negotiations. The Franco-Mexican declaration, which recognized the FMLN-FDR as a representative force in 1981, placed the insurgency in a position where agreements, language and strategies were different to the doctrinal ideological project that had made any agreement unfeasible. Mexico, Paris, Madrid, Stockholm, Caracas, Panama and the contacts with the US that always existed facilitated the political hegemony of moderate groups and leaders. Mexico became more important than Havana, and it could be said that many FMLN leaders identified more with the Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party than with Marxism. Relations with Moscow and the socialist countries were important only for one of the five groups with the FMLN, the Communist Party.

Each group within the FMLN took a different stance on prolonged warfare, insurrection, strategic offensives, revolution, democracy and negotiation. Many of the more doctrinaire groups within the guerrilla coalition were militarily conservative, with more interest in preserving and accumulating power than pursuing bold military strategies. Conversely, those with less ambitious political goals tended to propose more offensive military strategies. Thus the Communist Party was always the weakest militarily while the People’s Revolutionary Army (ERP, a social Christian guerrilla group) was the most liberal politically and the strongest and boldest militarily. This created a preferential relationship between the ERP and the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, who had similar tendencies. Havana, which was instrumental in providing support for waging war because it saw the conflict in Central America as a line of defence against Reagan’s policies, thus also came to favour the ERP without taking into account their ideological dissimilarities. In this way, material support favoured the same moderate insurgent groups that saw Europe and Mexico as their political rearguard. This demonstrates another reason not to see the Central American wars and their resolution purely through the lens of the Cold War. The Central American governments signed the Esquipulas regional peace agreements in 1987, 1988 and 1989 against the wishes of Reagan’s government, and the coalition of the Salvadoran guerrillas signed the Peace Agreement without Cuba’s blessing.

The violence had rules and it gave clear messages

Some scholars refer to violence as a model of exchange that the protagonists choose rationally out of a repertoire of options built from the history and culture of a society. Political violence can be thought of as a type of communication mechanism (or language) between two actors. For this article, this is a very useful theoretical tool and a crucial point of debate. A large part of the discussion about violence understandably focuses on ethical issues, but it is often forgotten that violence is a real act and that the way it is used opens or closes spaces to ideas and possible understandings.

An actor that has greater legitimacy and moral and political advantage is more inclined to use violence in a way that transmits messages so that the exchange becomes constructive. Terrorism, massacres and torture transmit messages that impede understanding, while noble acts and compassion transmit constructive messages. It is less a matter of which actor using force is materially stronger, but who has the moral advantage in the use of force. In the Salvadorean case, it was the insurgency that held greater legitimacy, not the authoritarian regime, which reacted disproportionately to resistance to its political model in a way that only escalated the violence. While it did make serious mistakes, the insurgency used violence as a political mechanism to consolidate its moral advantage. This translated into treating prisoners well, shunning revenge and respecting humanitarian law. For example, when the army committed the most awful massacres and killings in 1980-81, the insurgency reacted by treating its thousands of prisoners well. If they had decided to take revenge, the conflict could not have been resolved.

The guerrilla’s regulated use of violence caused the government army to respond. This change emerged in informal local agreements, on issues such as respecting each side’s supporters and sometimes accepting implicit territorial limits. In November 1990, US Ambassador William Walker dared to visit a guerrilla-controlled area and speak with FMLN combatants. This led the FMLN to approve an unconditional and unilateral ceasefire that, though rejected by the army, sped up the signing of the peace agreements a few weeks later. While there were serious human rights violations in El Salvador, there were also many efforts at self-regulation of violence. The political defeat of the army took place when it murdered six Jesuit priests in November 1989; while in 1980 this would have been celebrated, in 1989 it just undermined morale. The first agreement signed was on human rights. Reactive and vengeful violence runs counter to messages of peacemaking and democratization.
The coalition of the guerrillas was strong and considered itself so
In 1984-85, the US provided its most significant military assistance to the Salvadorean army. However, within a few months the moderate sectors of the insurgency had found a military response that preserved the existing balance of power. If the FMLN had been weakened militarily, the most doctrinaire groups would have gained the upper hand, because their idea of aligning the final result with their ideology and pursuing a maximalist outcome made more sense in a situation of weakness. In 1984, there were massive desertions from all the armed groups, so they decided to teach Marxism on the fronts to reintroduce the ideas of a Cuban-style socialist revolution or a Communist Party like Vietnam’s. A sector of the National Resistance group put forward a democratic programme, but its proposal was rejected and copies of the document were even burnt. This ideological upsurge even affected the ERP, but its military capability enabled that ideological stage to pass, and the group proposed a strategic offensive to create the basis for negotiation. This offensive took place in November 1989, and it included battles in the capital and in the most important cities for two weeks. Then, in November 1990, the guerrillas launched another offensive, using surface-to-air missiles to defeat the army’s air capability. The negotiations took place after these two offensives.

In El Salvador the FMLN was strong both militarily and politically. This gave the FMLN a position of strength during negotiations and the capacity to run in elections during peacetime. However, the fact remains that peace cannot only be negotiated with political and military strength. The nature of the group is a significant factor in its choice of options. It is arguable that any kind of weakness tends to privilege ideological rigidity over pragmatism.

Before the signing of the peace accords, there were real political changes
Between 1931 and 1982, El Salvador was ruled by six generals, four colonels and seven civil-military juntas. The changes of government took place by means of seven coups and six elections. Only two of the elections were even vaguely contested: in the other four, a colonel was the sole candidate once, another colonel claimed victory with 95 per cent of the vote and the other two elections were fraudulent and started the conflict. The war proved that militarism was the cause of this confrontation; democracy and civil power thus began as part of a military doctrine of counter-insurgency, but the magnitude of the war gave them real value. In the 1982 elections, Álvaro Magaña (in whom the military had confidence despite his civil status) was elected President by a constituent assembly. But thereafter political parties started to gain real power and elections became more transparent. The army became relatively weaker in the political arena while still unable to defeat the insurgency militarily. By around 1990, half the insurgency’s members were working in politics and the other half waging war.

The democratic changes that took place before the Peace Agreement were partial and imperfect but felt tangibly by the insurgency. This gave credibility to the idea that working politically in a context of peace was more beneficial than continuing war. The Peace Agreement made the judiciary independent, created a civil police force with the participation of both former guerrillas and former members of the military, purged the military and constitutionally separated political and military power, strengthening the democratic transition.

Learning from the Salvadorean experience
It must be noted that this article is only a partial explanation of the end of the war: it did not seek to explain how and why the authoritarian right opted for democracy. Accounting for the transformation of established power is as important as the understanding the transformation of the insurgency.

The starting point for our conclusion is to understand that peace is only possible if it is understood that violence is a real act. Comprehending the nature of the conflict and its actors allows us to differentiate between appearance and reality. What many people have failed to understand is that the FMLN’s origins gave it its potential for democratic change. The internal and external actors who intervened to transform the FMLN did not credit the ideological discourse with too much importance and knew where to apply their influence, strengthening the pragmatic visions that the insurgency had always had the potential to develop. The systematic pressure to respect human rights made violence, as a language between the actors, productive. They moved from an unregulated violence to a regulated violence to a negation of the violence. Finally, the tangible changes that took place made people think that peace was a risk worth taking.