

El Salvador: Before the War

Long before the Spanish conquest of the early 16th century, the territory that is now El Salvador was home to various indigenous peoples. Some of the most ancient tribes - including the Pocomam, Chortí and Lenca - were related to the Maya. Others resembled the Aztecs of Mexico, the most predominant being the Pipil, a subgroup of the Nahuatl who migrated to Central America around 3000 B.C.



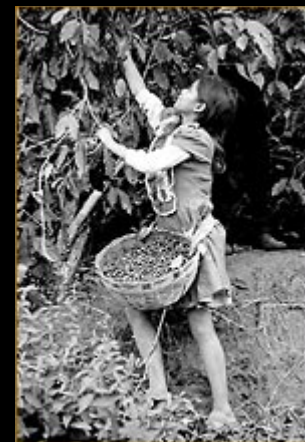
Pipal artwork

Beginning around the 11th century, the Pipil established a flourishing civilization in the area they called Cuscatlán, "land of the jewel." They developed vast agricultural lands and several urban centers, and they staunchly defended their culture. When Pedro de Alvarado, a lieutenant of Hernan Cortes, arrived in 1524 to explore the land, he met strong resistance from the Pipil and was forced back into Guatemala. Two Spanish expeditions followed, and the Pipil finally succumbed to the dominating force of the conquerors.

Soon realizing that the colony they named El Salvador (the savior) did not promise much in terms of gold and silver, the Spanish set about developing El Salvador's sole exploitable resource: land. The Europeans' appropriation of the land that sustained the indigenous people resulted in the rapid decline of the Pipil civilization. Intermarriages between whites and Indians further changed the make up of the indigenous races.

Cash Crops

The Spanish instituted the widespread cultivation of a single lucrative export commodity, beginning with cacao in the latter half of the 16th century. In the 18th century, the cultivation of indigo (a plant used in natural dyes) reaped great profits and elevated the colonial capital of San Salvador in the eyes of the Spanish. When Napoleon conquered Spain in 1808, Salvadorans moved toward independence from the weakened Spanish Empire.



Young woman picking coffee beans

© Steve Cagan

Coffee cultivation and exportation began to dominate the Salvadoran economy in the latter half of the 19th century, signaling the beginning of El Salvador's modern history. As coffee growers acquired land for large plantations, the indigenous

people were displaced, creating larger gaps between the rich and the poor. This gave way to a legacy of the landed and the landless - an economy in which laborers could be hired and fired at will without consideration of working conditions or a livable wage.

With the drop in coffee prices during the 1930s depression, coffee growers laid off workers and reduced wages even further. Desperate to ensure their survival, the campesinos (farmers) began to organize under such leaders as Agustin Farabundo Marti. For the first time, opposition political parties emerged in El Salvador.

The Rise of the Left

When Marti led an insurrection of the rural poor in 1932, the army responded by killing 30,000 people, targeting those who wore traditional dress or spoke indigenous languages, in what became known as "la matanza." For the following 50 years, every president was a military officer, and the military dominated the country. A small land-owning elite controlled the economy and the mostly rural majority lived in poverty as agricultural laborers.

In the 1960s, on the heels of revolution in Cuba, the United States encouraged reform in El Salvador by creating the "Alliance for Progress." The Alliance supported the formation of opposition political parties and urged land reform - a reform resisted by both the socio-economic elite and the military rulers.

As opposition groups organized and grew stronger, so too did official repression on the part of the government. "Death squads" began assassinating "subversives" in an effort to curtail antigovernment activities and protests. Unarmed antigovernment demonstrators were fired upon by the military on two separate occasions. Flagrant ballot manipulation by the government continued, especially during presidential elections. By the early 1970s, several small guerilla groups had formed, believing change would only come through armed struggle. In the 1972 presidential elections, a center-left coalition reportedly won, until the government imposed a three-day news blackout and subsequently announced Colonel Molina the victor.

The Making of a Martyr

When the government stole the election of 1977 yet again, demonstrators gathered in the main plaza of San Salvador. They were soon surrounded by security forces who shot into the crowd. Shortly thereafter, a rural priest, Father Rutilio Grande, was assassinated. In response, Monsignor Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, called for an investigation, urged popular demonstrations and led a memorial mass attended by more than 100,000 people.

As information about the situation in El Salvador began to reach the international community, the United States government pressed the Salvadoran government to head off unrest. In 1980, after President Carter announced a \$50 million aid package to support reforms - including \$5 million in military aid - Archbishop Romero urged the U.S. to cease all military assistance to El Salvador. One month later, Archbishop Romero ended his Sunday sermon with this plea: "I beseech you, I beg you, order you in the name of God, stop the repression." Romero was assassinated the following day. Six months later, a full-scale civil war had begun.

El Salvador: Civil War

Not long after the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Romero, peaceful rallies turned violent as police opened fire on the crowds. News footage of unarmed demonstrators being gunned down on the steps of the National Cathedral turned the eyes of the world to El Salvador, a tiny country in conflict.



Slain Archbishop Oscar Romero

The desire to prevent the kind of leftist takeover seen in Cuba and Nicaragua motivated the United States to get involved. Human rights - a cornerstone of President Carter's foreign policy - also propelled the U.S. to action. Not only the general level of violence, but also the murders of American citizens affected U.S. relations with El Salvador. In December 1980, four American churchwomen were raped and murdered. The U.S. responded by cutting off aid to El Salvador, but only very briefly, pending an investigation. Then, in 1981, two American land reform advisers were gunned down in the Sheraton Hotel in San Salvador. The U.S. Congress subsequently decided to disburse aid only as improvements in the Salvadoran human rights situation became evident.

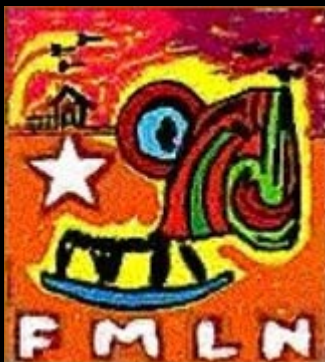


Photo © Mike Oso

Guerillas Unite

Simultaneously, the opposition strategy of the Salvadoran left was coalescing. In 1981, leftist parties organized with guerrilla groups to coordinate their efforts against the government, uniting to form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación or FMLN). Their counter offensive began in January 1981. Though the FMLN offensive failed on several fronts, they retained certain military strongholds and helped to focus international attention on El Salvador. In August 1981, France and Mexico formally recognized the FMLN as a "representative political force" and called for a negotiated settlement between the warring factions.

The 1980 election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States changed American policy in El Salvador dramatically. The new U.S. administration worried about Communist expansion in Central America and viewed the El Salvador military government as a potential barrier against Communism. The Reagan administration substantially increased both military and economic aid to El Salvador.

The civil war raged on in El Salvador, fueled by U.S. aid to the Salvadoran military. The government harshly repressed dissent, and at least 70,000 people lost their lives in killings and bombing raids waged against civilians throughout the countryside. The country's infrastructure had crumbled, and the nation appeared to be no closer to its goals of peace, prosperity and social justice than when the process began. Then, in 1989, the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter at the University of Central America shocked the international community into action.



Truth Revealed

With continuing reports of atrocities and murders in El Salvador, the U.S. Congress no longer accepted the State Department's assurance that things were getting better. Speaker of the House Tom Foley created a special task force to monitor El Salvador's investigation of the murders. Congressman Joe Moakley of Massachusetts was selected to head up the investigation. During his research and visits to El Salvador, Congressman Moakley encountered a massive cover-up, deep problems with the Salvadoran armed forces, conspiracy and lies, which led him to challenge U.S. policy. He discovered that from a very high level, the armed forces of El Salvador had been responsible for the murders of the Jesuits. His investigation also led to the conclusion that certain levels of the U.S. government had known about the situation long before the task force was created.

[Moakley's report](#) revealed the cruel injustice of the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government, setting in motion an international process to end the war. Both sides of the conflict in El Salvador approached the United Nations for help in negotiating a settlement. The United Nations sponsored talks, which culminated in the January 1992 signing of the Peace Accords, ending 12 years of civil war.

"In examining the staggering breadth of the violence that occurred in El Salvador, the Commission was moved by the senselessness of the killings, the brutality with which they were committed, the terror that they created in the people, in other words the madness, or locura, of the war."

— Reinaldo Figueredo, UN Truth Commission



FMLN post-election celebration
© Jeremy Bigwood

The Peace Accords dictated that the FMLN surrender their weapons to U.N. Forces, and that 102 Salvadoran officers be dismissed. Considered to be the most successful U.N.-brokered agreement in the world today, the majority of the Accords have been followed.

El Salvador: After the War

“Unjust economic, social and political relationships within El Salvador and between El Salvador and the world's economic powers contribute to hunger, violence, poverty and environmental destruction. A large percentage of Salvadorans still struggle to meet their basic needs, while the country's historically skewed wealth distribution has worsened.”

—Michael Ring, director, U.S. El Salvador Sister Cities

Turmoil in El Salvador has been replaced with peace. The agreement brokered by the United Nations, has generally been a success. Land has been transferred to citizens, human rights violations investigated, death squads have been dismantled, a national civilian police force has been put into place, and formerly armed revolutionaries - the FMLN - have become integrated into government and civilian life.



Monument to those who died in
the Mozote massacre
© Mike Oso

While many of the reforms outlined in the United Nations Peace Accords were successfully implemented, many Salvadorans consider their current situation to be no better now than it was before the civil war. Half of the six million Salvadorans are unemployed. Poverty and the proliferation of guns have led to high homicide rates - 12 times higher than murder rates in New York ^{*}. Lack of environmental protection laws has resulted in pollution, trash and sewage problems. Less than three percent of the country remains forested due to the heavy cultivation of coffee, sugar and cotton.

Life in El Salvador



Maria, founder of Committee of Mothers of the Disappeared (COMADRES)
© Mike Oso

Indirectly we're responsible for a lot of damage that's been done in that country.... We've spent \$6 billion down there helping to destroy the place... we should spend a couple of dollars putting it back together again.

- Congressman Joe Moakley

By the 20th century, 95 percent of El Salvador's income came from coffee exports, but only 2 percent of the population controlled that wealth.

The people live as appendages to coffee growers. During coffee season everyone goes out to harvest coffee. Children wake up and go off with their mothers, fathers, uncles, brothers and sisters into the coffee groves. A family will cooperate trying to fill up the 25-pound bags that are called "arobas." They might get six colonnes, maybe \$0.70, for filling up a 25-pound bag. On a good day they could fill up maybe eight or ten of those bags, and that would be an extraordinary amount of money. What would that be? Well, it might be seven dollars.... The problem is that this coffee season might last six or eight weeks, and then the rest of the year is a scramble.

- Father Dean Brackley



Man with an "aroba" filled with coffee beans

© Steve Cagan

Today El Salvador's major industries, other than coffee, are: textiles, sugar, beverages, petroleum, chemicals, fertilizer, textiles, furniture, light metals and cotton. The largest source of income however, is money sent from Salvadorans who have left the country. Approximately 20 percent of Salvadorans now live abroad. With harsh immigration laws in North America, many have lost their lives in the process of emigrating.

El Salvador has the highest level of environmental damage in the Americas, leaving its lush, volcanic beauty and the health of its residents in jeopardy. The disastrous flooding from Hurricane Mitch in 1998 was primarily a result of erosion due to deforestation. Many of the country's river systems suffer from pollution, and some experts fear that at the current rate of destruction, the country will run out of drinking water in less than 15 years.



Elections

In 1994, El Salvador held its first elections that included candidates of the FMLN and other parties. The ARENA party, originally formed by rightist military officers and landowners, won the presidency. In 1997, in El Salvador's second free and open elections, the FMLN won 45 percent of the popular vote and leadership of key cities including the capital San Salvador, thus becoming the second most powerful political party in the country. In 1999, El Salvador elected another president from the ARENA party, Francisco Flores, a former professor of philosophy who vowed to tackle the country's two most daunting

challenges: economic development and crime.

On March 13, 2000, the FMLN won 31 seats in the single-chamber parliament against the ruling ARENA's 29. This was the first time in its 11 years in power, that the rightist party was defeated in legislative and municipal elections. The FMLN also kept the capital, where Mayor Hector Silva was reelected. The FMLN's supporters rose to the occasion, holding the biggest celebration by the left since the end of the bloody civil war.

Former Defense Minister Jose Guillermo Garcia and former National Guard chief Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova were cleared November 6, 2000 of responsibility for the deaths of the four American churchwomen who were raped and killed by soldiers in 1980. Tried in the U.S., a federal jury in Florida said there was not enough evidence linking the retired generals to the slayings.

The [United States returned](#) to El Salvador in 2000 establishing an anti-drug trafficking military base at the international airport in Comalapa to replace facilities lost when the U.S. left the Panama Canal in 1999. The FMLN opposed the action, fearing U.S. intervention in the country's internal affairs.

For more on El Salvador today, [read Michael Ring's perspective](#).