El Salvador
(1944)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance

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Conflict Summary:

The authoritarian and eccentric General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez became president of El Salvador after a military coup overthrew the freely elected government of Arturo Araujo in 1931. After ordering the killing of thousands of peasants and political dissidents during his first two terms, Martinez suspended the constitution in early 1944 and declared he would serve a third without an election. An armed revolt by dissident military and other elite elements that April was quickly crushed, but, on May 5, students organized a general strike that crippled most of the economy and civil society. Mass rallies formed spontaneously and nonviolent protesters stormed the National Palace. Humiliated and isolated, Martinez fled to Guatemala on May 11.

Political History:

At the beginning of the twentieth century the major export of El Salvador was coffee and most of the plantations were controlled by a small oligarchic clique of families, a legacy of Spanish colonialism. The local indigenous Pipil people had long been decimated by abuse and disease, and their diverse self-sustaining farming economy had long been overrun by the same militarized system of export agriculture that was pervasive throughout the Spanish Empire from the fifteenth century onward. Called encomienda, vast acreages were gifted by royal fiat to a recipient that could collect taxes from anyone who lived there and force them into working for a new export economy, starting with cacao, followed by indigo, and relatively recently coffee. As the Spanish Empire in the Americas collapsed, Salvadorans established political independence but retained the hierarchical, stratified, and exploitative economic and social order that had developed under colonial rule. El Salvador declared independence from Spain in 1821 as part of a Central American federation and, following a brief occupation by Mexico, declared independence as a separate nation in 1823.

General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez became president of El Salvador after a military coup overthrew the freely elected government of Arturo Araujo in 1931. The Salvadoran legislature confirmed Martinez as president the following year, and he was elected to a four-year term in 1935 and a six-year term in 1939. A shrewd dictator and a hero of the political right, he

would stay in office longer than any previous Salvadoran president. He was also a theosophical mystic that gave sermons to his officers and strung colored lights thorough San Salvador to keep away pox. Martinez had affection for Italian and German fascism, but strategically joined El Salvador to the Allies during the Second World War to win American favor.

Martinez did not meddle overmuch into the Salvadoran business interests of domestic and foreign elites and used state power to protect their position. Immediately upon seizing the presidency, he squashed a peasant revolt that had arisen against powerful plantation families. In what became known as la mantanza ("the slaughter"), as many as 30,000 workers and peasants who were labeled as "communists" were murdered. At the same time, Martinez did make some concessions to win over support in rural areas, such as the Mejoramiento Social ("social improvement") welfare program and following through with a tepid land redistribution scheme initiated by Araujo. He encouraged loyalty in the army and among public servants by paying them relatively well in a poor country and building roads and other infrastructure. He also censored the media, banned political opposition, abolished local elections, rigged national elections, and severely repressed dissidents.

When Martinez raised the export tax in 1943 the weary distrust among oligarchic landowning elites over his modest land reform efforts and eccentric ways turned to conspiracy and opposition. After he openly violated the constitution by declaring that he would serve a third term without holding elections, an armed revolt broke out on Palm Sunday, 1944, led by intellectuals, business leaders, and disloyal segments of the military. While top members of the regime leadership were at home for Holy Week, the strategic First Infantry and the Second Artillery regiments of San Salvador and Santa Ana garrison seized the state radio station, and took control of the Air Force, and Santa Ana's police headquarters and telegraph offices. Santa Ana was bombed from the air as civilians there rallied, overthrew, and then replaced their city council. However, General Martinez was able to put down the rebellion with his remaining obedient military units. Martial law, including a police curfew, was declared in effect and savagely enforced. Reprisals against rebels and suspected rebels began right away and lasted for weeks in a highly public and distressing campaign of repression.

Strategic Actions:

Members of the clergy were among those first to speak out against the tortures and executions of suspected rebels. Working people such as shopkeepers and taxi drivers joined them quickly. On 24 April, students joined them by going on strike and distributing flyers that called for a general strike in hospitals, courts, public works, and transportation. The flyers were typed out one-by-one in a chain-letter fashion: each recipient of a flyer was expected to create and distribute ten more. Bus and taxi drivers joined in, the schools shut down, an organizing committee formed, and the general strike was on.

By 2 May health professionals entered the fray when they demanded amnesty for political prisoners by delivering to Martinez a memo to this effect drafted by a coalition group of physicians. Martinez burned the memo. Physicians joined the student strike, as did other professionals such as dentists, pharmacists, lawyers, banking employees, and engineers. At this time the strike committee made a series of strategic calculations: the movement would openly reject violence against agents of the state and would focus instead on the general strike in the transportation and medical sectors to maximize disruption of the regime. The movement also decided that it would not organize any street demonstrations so as to deny police opportunities for violence. These decisions were summed up in a motto, “a strike with our hands at our sides.” The strike committee had made a revolutionary commitment to nonviolent action.

Rallies arose naturally and against the strategic forethought of the movement leadership. On 5 May a large crowd became disappointed and agitated when the local priest of the Church of the Rosary failed to arrive to say mass. The crowd then moved throughout the city to spread the general strike and encouraged all shops to close.

Police unwittingly provoked a major demonstration a few days later, after a local officer shot a teenage boy dead in the street. Thousands gathered outside the boy’s home that night and at his funeral the next morning. The strike committee created a 50-strong nonviolent peacekeeping force to monitor the crowd and stop reprisal killings against the police. The crowd left the funeral for a plaza opposite the National Palace. Five government officials

resigned inside the Palace and called on their colleagues to join. The crowd invaded the building within a few hours, but found it abandoned.

In response to such pressure, Martinez stepped down on 9 May when the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador accepted his resignation, but the strike continued until he fled the country on 11 May 1944. His radio addresses attacking the rich and praising the poor had not stopped the general strike. Martial law had been disobeyed, and attempts by police to force workers to return to their jobs and to force shops to reopen were only partially successful. Military leadership had lacked confidence that their troops would open fire on their own unarmed friends and neighbors, and so there was no assault on the strikers. Sirens and fireworks sounded the end of the Martinez regime. On his way out, the brutal and erratic Martinez is reported to have said, "The curtain has fallen. I have played my last chess game. I shall devote my life to agriculture and spiritual activity in theosophy." The new acting president, General Andres Ignacio Menendez, ordered amnesty for political prisoners, declared freedom of the press, and began planning for general elections. The strike was then called off.

Ensuing Events:

The return of democratic rule did not bring stability and thus was short-lived. The chaotic political situation during the rest of the decade gave way to the reconsolidation of the alliance between the military and landowning elites who were determined to forestall any genuine democracy. Beginning with the presidency of Major Oscar Osorio (1950–56) and Lt. Col. José María Lemus (1956–60), the country suffered under a series of authoritarian rulers, tempered only slightly by decent economic growth. The 1960s saw a series of military coups and rapid population growth which failed to match that of the economy. Increased corruption, repression, and a growing shift to export crops at the expense of domestic food consumption resulted in increasing unrest. The 1970s saw growth in both nonviolent resistance—led by progressive Catholic clergy, trade unionists, students, and peasant organizations—against the military government as well as an armed resistance by a coalition of Marxist-Leninist guerrilla groups which became known as the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN). Killings of oppositionists by government forces and allied right-wing death squads grew dramatically.

A coup against military dictator Gen. Carlos Humberto Romero in 1979 in response to growing unrest brought to power a military-civilian junta nominally dedicated to reforms, but the repression only increased. The nonviolent resistance movement, despite a series of large-scale general strikes and other actions, was largely destroyed by the U.S-backed regime by 1981. Many nonviolent activists and progressive political leaders joined in an alliance with the guerrillas and the country collapsed into full-scale civil war. Later in the decade, after nearly 80,000 deaths—primarily civilians at the hands of the U.S.-backed regime and its allies—there was a rebirth of nonviolent civil society activism in the late 1980s. Combined with protests in the United States against U.S. support for the repression and a stalemate in the armed struggle, a peace agreement was signed between the government and the FMLN which ended the fighting.

A series of democratically-elected but conservative governments followed, but—without the death squads and other repression—progressive civil society organizations once again emerged. In 2009, FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes was elected president.

For Further Reading:

- Lakey, G. (1987). *Powerful peacemaking: A strategy for a living revolution*. New Society Press: Baltimore. pp. 37 – 41.
- Patricia Parkman, *Nonviolent Insurrection in El Salvador: The Fall of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez*. Tuscon: U. of Arizona Press, 1988
- *Time Magazine*, Archive 22 May 1944 http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,796613,00.html