



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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El Salvador 1979–92

Executive Summary

The Salvadoran Civil War began in 1979 when a leftist guerilla movement sprang up in El Salvador following leftist victories in neighboring Central American states of Guatemala and Nicaragua. The United States viewed this war as a central front in the Cold War and supplied the Salvadoran Army. El Salvador's government fought a guerrilla army called the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).¹ Three FMLN factions originated in the Communist Party of El Salvador.

The root causes of the conflict were economic. A polarized political system emerged from El Salvador's colonial past in which a small group of economic elites held political power based on agricultural exports.² This political monopoly resulted in exclusive politics, and when limited elections were held in the 1960s, the elections were influenced and controlled by the elite. The Communist Party of El Salvador won the elections with a platform of land reform, redistribution of wealth, and an end to human rights abuses. The military-backed incumbent government refused to accept the results. The land-owning elite blocked the land reform, which threatened their economic well-being. Additionally, the government suppressed working-class protests and leftist movements. By April 1980, a leftist guerrilla army had taken shape and began engaging government forces in the rural regions of El Salvador.

During the war, political violence was common throughout El Salvador.³ Between 1980 and 1981, the Salvadoran military used bombings, assassinations, and arrests to silence political rivals and, in 1980, murdered dozens of teachers, university officials, and students in an effort to stifle reform sentiment.⁴ According to the Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador ("Truth Commission for El Salvador"), throughout the entire conflict, 85 percent of human rights violations were attributed to the military, compared to the 5 percent attributed to the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.⁵

By 1990, the government and guerrilla forces were at a stalemate. Over the 13 years of the conflict, the political situation in El Salvador improved with movement toward a more open democracy and more frequent and freer elections. The war, however, was fought largely on economic grounds. Negotiations begun in 1984 were successfully concluded when the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front signed the Geneva Agreement in 1990. Further UN-mediated negotiations between FMLN leaders and government officials resulted in the Chapultepec Peace Accords, which were signed in Mexico City on January 16, 1992.⁶ Under the terms of the Chapultepec Accords, the role of armed forces was sharply reduced, the military was restricted in size, and more basic democratic institutions (such as independent judicial councils) were established. By February 1992, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front dissolved its military branch and officially became a political party. The end of the conflict diversified Salvadoran economic institutions and reduced the power of the country's tiny, wealthy, elite class over national politics and policy.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

Yes. By the 1990s, the population was fundamentally homogeneous based on cultural identity and language, and 89 percent of the population identified as mestizo.⁷ Additionally, El Salvador no longer had an ethnically or linguistically distinct Indigenous population, as it was quickly assimilated into Hispanic culture.⁸ While Salvadorans largely identified with this national culture, Salvadoran society had stark contrasts in wealth distribution and poverty, and tensions in the country were based on economic grievances rather than identity issues.⁹

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No → Yes. At the beginning of the conflict, the elite and the military middle class ran an unpopular government through a civilian-military junta based on economic oligarchy.¹⁰ Fifty-eight percent of the population lived in rural areas, most as full-time estate workers called *colonos*.¹¹ Estate landowners increased the use of seasonal workers over permanent workers, decreasing the number of *colonos* employed by between 60 and 95 percent during the 1960s and resulting in widespread economic hardship.¹² The elite oligarchy, which heavily influenced elections, was unpopular due to economic hardship in the lower classes at the onset of the civil war. During the conflict, the Reagan administration pushed for a legitimate government through free elections. By 1982, a constitutional assembly drafted a new constitution and provided the framework for presidential elections, and the Christian Democratic Party captured a plurality vote in the first free elections in 1982.¹³ Although the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front was barred from the elections, more than 1.5 million voters turned out, while the electoral commission and US Department of State estimated there to be around only 1.5 million eligible voters.¹⁴ Therefore, democratic elections with such high turnout affirm that 85 percent of the country saw the newly reformed government as legitimate.

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

No. Guerrilla activity was common in Chalatenango, Cabañas, Morazán, Cuscatlán, San Vicente, and Usulután.¹⁵ The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front also employed terrorist tactics in major cities and operated out of the rural areas where most of the population lived.¹⁶

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. Cuba, Nicaragua, and the USSR supported the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. Havana and Managua were areas where FMLN leadership could hold strategic meetings, and the rebels used the Gulf of Fonseca and Nicaragua to transport weapons and train soldiers.¹⁷

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

Yes. The Salvadoran military was developed and had experience before the civil war. Fighting in the war with Honduras in 1969 demonstrated that the Salvadoran military institutions followed the state's power structure and acted like a modern military.¹⁸

Outcome

Government defeat. The government of the wealthy elite class of El Salvador that was in power at the start of the conflict was removed. In 1989, the FMLN party conducted offensive operations in major cities in El Salvador, pushing back government troops and, later, in 1990 and 1991, carried out a strong insurgency campaign.¹⁹ This success gave the FMLN party strength during negotiations. The conflict ended when the Salvadoran government agreed to security sector reform, and in exchange, the rebels would demobilize and reintegrate into civilian life.²⁰ The agreement transformed the FMLN party into a political party after the civil war. The peace accords demilitarized Salvadoran society and eliminated the old power of the state apparatus that controlled the country from the early 1900s.²¹ The peace accords also included electoral and judicial reforms that transformed the Salvadoran state and allowed the FMLN party to participate in elections.²² The Five Factors Model would have predicted government loss.

EL SALVADOR 1979–92	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	YES
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO → YES
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	YES

Endnotes

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2. DeRouen Jr. and Heo, *Civil Wars*, 340.
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5. DeRouen Jr. and Heo, *Civil Wars*, 337.
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7. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, *El Salvador: A Country Study*, Department of the Army Pamphlet 550-150, 2nd ed., ed. Richard A. Haggerty (US Government Printing Office, November 1988), 53.
8. Haggerty, *El Salvador*, 54.
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13. Haggerty, *El Salvador*, 44.
14. Chris Hedges, "Salvador's Turbulent 1982 Vote," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 7, 1984, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1984/0307/030750.html>.

15. Joaquín M. Chávez, “How Did the Civil War in El Salvador End?,” *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 5 (2015): 1784–97, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/120.5.1784>.
16. Chávez, “Civil War,” 1784–97.
17. Mike Allison, “El Salvador’s Brutal Civil War: What We Still Don’t Know,” *Al Jazeera*, March 1, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/3/1/el-salvadors-brutal-civil-war-what-we-still-dont-know/>.
18. Haggerty, *El Salvador*, 202.
19. Chávez, “Civil War,” 1784–97.
20. Chávez, “Civil War,” 1784–97.
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22. Chávez, “Civil War,” 1784–97.



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