

COUNTRY FACT SHEET

EL SALVADOR

July 2007

Research Directorate
Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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1. GENERAL INFORMATION

Official name

Republic of El Salvador (República de El Salvador).

Geography

With a total area of 21,041 km², El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America. The country is bordered by Honduras to the northeast, Guatemala to the northwest, and the Pacific Ocean to the south. El Salvador boasts a tropical climate on the coast and a generally temperate climate in the uplands. It has two seasons: dry from November to April and rainy from May to October.

Population and density

Population: approximately 6.8 million inhabitants (July 2007 estimate).

Density: 326 people per km² (July 2004 estimate).

Principal cities and populations

San Salvador (capital) 510,367; Soyapango 297,183; San Miguel 282,367; Santa Ana 274,830; Apopa 211,715; Mejicanos 209,708; Nueva San Salvador 192,132; Ciudad Delgado 172,570 (2006 estimate).

Languages

Spanish is the official language of El Salvador. Nahuatl is spoken among some Amerindians.

Religions

Roman Catholic (83%); other (17%). At the end of 1992, approximately one million Salvadorans were evangelical Protestants.

Ethnic groups

Mestizo (90%); White (9%); Amerindian (1%)

Demographics (2006 estimate unless otherwise indicated)

Population growth rate: 1.72%

Infant mortality rate: 24.39/1,000

Life expectancy at birth: 71.49 years

Fertility rate: 3.12 children born per woman

Literacy rate: 80.2% of people aged 10 and over can read and write (2003 estimate)

Currency

The US dollar (USD) became El Salvador's official currency in 2001.

USD 0.86 = CAD 1.00¹

National holidays

2007: January 1 (New Year's Day), 6–9 April (Easter), 1 May (Labour Day), 10 May (Mother's Day), 5–6 August (El Salvador del Mundo Festival) (This holiday is celebrated from 1 to 6 August in the capital, San Salvador.), 15 September (Independence Day), 12 October (Discovery of America), 2 November (All Souls' Day), 5 November (First Call of Independence), 24–25 December (Christmas), 31 December (New Year's Eve).

Head of state and government

Elias Antonio Saca Gonzalez has been the president of El Salvador since 1 June 2004.

Form of government

The 1983 Salvadoran constitution instituted a democratic republic governed by a president of the Republic and a legislative assembly. The president and vice-president are directly elected by popular vote for a single five-year term. The president is both the chief of state and head of government.

Legislative structure

Unicameral legislative assembly (*Asamblea Legislativa*): 84 members are elected by universal suffrage to serve three-year terms that can be renewed.

Administrative divisions

El Salvador has 14 departments: Ahuachapan, Cabanas, Chalatenango, Cuscatlan, La Libertad, La Paz, La Union, Morazan, San Miguel, San Salvador, San Vicente, Santa Ana, Sonsonate and Usulután.

Judicial system

The judicial system is composed of a supreme court and a number of other tribunals. Supreme court judges, whose number is determined by law, are appointed by the legislative assembly.

Elections

In El Salvador, anyone 18 years and over has the right to vote. The president and vice-president are elected by direct vote for a five-year term and cannot run in the next election. The last presidential election was held on 21 March 2004. Elias Antonio Saca Gonzalez from the National Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, ARENA) was elected president with 57.7 % of the votes.

The last legislative elections were held on 12 March 2004. ARENA won 33 of 84 seats, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN) won 32 seats, the National Conciliation Party (Partido de Conciliación Nacional, PCN) won 11 seats, the Christian Democratic Party (Partido Demócrata Cristiano, PDC) won 6 seats and the Democratic Change (Cambio Democrático, CD) won 2 seats.

Defence

One year of military service is mandatory for all male Salvadoran citizens aged 18 years and older. Military service is by compulsory selective conscription of men between 18 and 30 years of age for one year. Voluntary service is open to citizens aged 16 years and older.

El Salvador has an army (Fuerza Armada Salvadoreña), a navy (Fuerza Naval) and an air force (Fuerza Aérea Salvadoreña). In August 2005, the armed forces totalled 15,500 men, of whom an estimated 13,850 were in the army, 700 were in the navy and 950 were in the air force. There were also some 9,900 members of the joint reserves. The National Civilian Police force numbered around 12,000 officers in 2005 and was to increase by 4,000 more in 2006.

In 2006, El Salvador's defence budget represented approximately 0.6 % of its gross national product (GNP). Defence expenditures in 2004 totalled an estimated USD 105 million.

Media

Article 6 of the constitution states that everyone may freely express and disseminate their thoughts whenever this does not subvert the public order or adversely affect the morals, honour or private life of others. Those making use of that right to break the law shall be held responsible for any crimes committed. With the exception of one official newspaper and certain broadcasting services, the media may not be censored or taken over by the State.

The General Superintendent of Electricity and Telecommunications (Superintendencia General de Electricidad y Telecomunicaciones, SIGET) is the government organization responsible for regulating telecommunications in El Salvador. The following daily newspapers are published in Spanish in El Salvador: *El Diario de Hoy*, with a circulation of 100,000 copies during the week and 96,000 copies on Sunday; *La Prensa Gráfica*, with a circulation of 98,000 during the week and 116,000 on the weekend; *El Mundo*, with a circulation of 58,000 during the week and 63,000 on the weekend; *La Noticia* with a circulation of 30,000; and the *Diario Latino* with a circulation of 20,000. The *Diario Oficial* is run by the government and has a circulation of 2,100 issues.

The following daily newspapers are also published in Spanish: *Diario de Oriente* [San Miguel], the *CoLatino* [San Salvador], the *Diario de Occidente* [Santa Ana].

The main news agencies in El Salvador are the National Information Centre (Centro de Información Nacional, CIN), which is run by the government, and the Central American News Agency (Agencia Centroamericana de Noticias, ACAN).

In 2003, there were approximately 1.8 million televisions, 180,000 personal computers and 550,000 Internet users in El Salvador.

United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) and Country Rankⁱ

Value: 0.729/1 (2004)

Rank: 101 out of 177 countries surveyed (2004)

United Nations Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and Country Rankⁱⁱ

Information not available

Population below the national poverty line

48.3% (2003 estimate)

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)ⁱⁱⁱ

Score: 3.9/10

Rank: 57 out of 163 countries

Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer (GCB)^{iv}

Information not available.

[Information compiled from: *The Europa World Year Book 2006 2006*, 1594-1611; *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 368-374; *Political Parties of the World 2006*, 195-198; *TI 6 Nov. 2006*; *UN 2006*; *US 15 Mar. 2007*]

2. POLITICAL BACKGROUND

President Elias Antonio Saca was elected in March 2004 for a five-year term.²

On 12 March 2000, the FMLN won the most seats in the legislative elections – 31 - while ARENA won 29 seats.³ Voter turnout was only 33 percent.⁴

In the 2003 legislative elections, the FMLN retained power in the legislative assembly when it won 31 seats and 34 percent of the votes.⁵ ARENA secured second place with 27 seats and 32 percent of the votes.⁶ Despite its second place position in the 2000 and 2003 legislative elections, ARENA still retained control by means of coalitions with the PCN and the PDC, other right-wing parties.⁷

Rivalry between the FMLN factions resulted in defections, which prevented the party from being able to use the power of veto on government initiatives that require a two-thirds' majority.⁸ In 2005, dissident FMLN members formed the Revolutionary

ⁱ The HDI is a composite measurement of human development in a country, based on life expectancy, levels of literacy and education, and standard of living. Values are: 0.800 and higher (high human development), 0.500-0.799 (medium human development) and 0.500 and under (low development index). Countries are ranked in descending order by their HDI value.

ⁱⁱ The GDI adjusts the rating of the HDI to reflect inequalities between men and women.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Transparency International CPI is based on composite survey data from 16 polls and 10 independent institutions. The data reflects the perceptions of resident and non-resident business people and country analysts. Scores range from 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (highly clean). According to their score, countries are ranked in order from least corrupt (1) to most corrupt (163).

^{iv} The Transparency International GCB is a public opinion survey used to gauge people's perceptions of corruption within their own state.

Democratic Front (Frente Democrático Revolucionario, FDR) and took a number of seats from the FMLN.⁹ In the March 2006 legislative elections, the FMLN again won a majority of the votes.¹⁰ When the FDR's leader, Schafik Jorge Handal, died in January 2006, Salvador Sanchez Ceren was appointed as head of the FMLN legislative bloc.¹¹

Violence linked to criminal gangs known as *maras* is one of the main issues facing President Saca who has developed a strategy known as the Super Iron Fist (*Super Mano Dura*) to combat gang-related violence and the high murder rate.¹² Many gang members have been arrested, but efforts have so far had little noticeable effect on the rate of violence.¹³ At the beginning of 2006, President Saca focused on his anti-crime initiative, which was intended to coordinate the efforts of various law enforcement organizations.¹⁴

El Salvador maintains close relations with the United States, and it signed the *Central America Free Trade Agreement* with the United States in December 2003.¹⁵

3. POLITICAL PARTIES

Parties represented in the legislative assembly:^v

Christian Democratic Party (Partido Demócrata Cristiano, PDC)

José Napoleon Duarte founded this party in 1960.¹⁶ Rodolfo Antonio Parker Soto was the party's candidate in the presidential elections of 1999¹⁷ and is its secretary-general.¹⁸ In addition to being represented in the legislative assembly, the PDC maintains several dozen mayoralties.¹⁹ The PDC is considered a centrist grouping²⁰ that originally claimed to be seeking a "third way" between capitalism and communism.²¹ In 2006, the party had 150,000 members and an anti-imperialist vision that advocated self-determination and Latin American integration.²²

Democratic Change (Cambio Democrático, CD)

Founded in 1987 as the Democratic Convergence (Convergencia Democrática, CD), the party changed its name to the United Democratic Center (Centro Democrático Unido, CDU) in 2000 and adopted its current name in 2005.²³ The party was launched before the 2006 election as an alliance of the CDU and the FDR.²⁴ Carlos Rivas Zamora is the leader of the FDR and Vinicio Penate heads the CDU.²⁵

Farabundo Martí national Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN)

The FMLN was founded in 1980 as the paramilitary affiliate of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (Frente Democrático Revolucionario, FDR).²⁶ After the formal cessation of hostilities in February 1992, the FMLN was recognized as a legal political party in December 1992.²⁷ Despite its alliance with the National Conciliation Party (Partido de Conciliación Nacional, PCN), the FMLN suffered another crushing defeat in

^v See Elections section above for the number of members elected from each party.

the 2004 presidential election.²⁸ Salvador Sanchez Cerén is the leader of the legislative bloc,²⁹ and Medardo Gonzalez is its general coordinator.³⁰

National Conciliation Party (Partido de Conciliación Nacional, PCN)

This right-wing party was in power from the time it was founded in 1961 until 1979 when a coup overthrew President Carlos Humberto Romero.³¹ Rafael Machuca is the party leader and Ciro Cruz Zepeda, the secretary-general.³² Rafael Machuca was the party's candidate in the 2004 presidential election.³³ The PCN won less than four percent of the votes in the 1999 and 2004 presidential elections.³⁴

Nationalist Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, ARENA)

Elias Antonio Saca Gonzalez is the president of this right-wing party.³⁵ The party was founded by a former army officer, Roberto D'Aubuisson Arrieta, in 1981.³⁶ ARENA has won four consecutive elections³⁷ and has been in power since the end of the civil war in 1992.³⁸ During his election campaign, Elias Antonio Saca promised to crack down on criminal gangs, to strive for transparent government and to promote ties with the US.³⁹ The party follows a liberal market economic policy that has included adopting the US dollar as its official currency (implemented in 2001),⁴⁰ privatization and the signing of the *Central American Free Trade Agreement* with the US.⁴¹

Other major and recent political parties not represented:

Revolutionary Democratic Front (Frente Democrático Revolucionario, FDR)

This left-wing party, created in 2005 by a group of reformists who broke away from the FMLN, contested the 2006 legislative election in an alliance with the CD.⁴² Julio Hernandez is the party's secretary-general.⁴³

Other parties:⁴⁴

Christian Social Union (Union Social Christiana, USC); Democratic Convergence (Convergencia Democrática, CD); Democratic Liberal Party (Partido Liberal Democrático, PLD); Democratic Party (Partido Democrática, PD); Democratic Republican League (Liga Democrática Republicana, LIDER); Free People (Pueblo Libre, PL); National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN); National Liberal Party (Partido Nacional Liberal, PNL); New Treaty United People (Pueblo Unido Nuevo Tratado, PUNTO); Renewal Movement (Movimiento Renovador, PMR); Social Democrat Dialogue (Concertación Socialdemócrata, CSD); Social Democrat Party (Partido Social Democrata, PSD); United Democratic Center (Centro Democrático Unido, CDU);

4. ARMED GROUPS AND OTHER NON-STATE ACTORS

According to *Political Handbook of the World*, a number of armed groups continue to operate in El Salvador, including the far-right vigilante group known as Black Shadow (Sombra Negra) and the far-left Free El Salvador Nationalist Guerrilla Forces (Fuerzas Guerrilleras Nacionalistas El Salvador Libre).⁴⁵

¹ Canada. 4 Apr. 2007.

² BBC 24 Mar. 2007.

³ *The Europa World Year Book 2006*, 1597.

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- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 371; see also *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 196.
- ⁸ *The Europa World Year Book 2006*, 1598.
- ⁹ *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 371.
- ¹⁰ *The Europa World Year Book 2006*, 1598.
- ¹¹ *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 371.
- ¹² Ibid., 370.
- ¹³ *The Europa World Year Book 2006*, 1598.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Factiva 23 Feb. 2007.
- ¹⁶ *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 195.
- ¹⁷ *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 372.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.; US 15 Mar. 2007.
- ¹⁹ *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 196.
- ²⁰ *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 372.
- ²¹ *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 195.
- ²² *The Europa World Year Book 2006*, 1606.
- ²³ Ibid., 1605.
- ²⁴ *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 372.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
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- ³⁴ *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 197.
- ³⁵ *The Europa World Year Book 2006*, 1605.
- ³⁶ *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 196.
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- ⁴¹ *Political Parties of the World* 24 Jan. 2005, 197.
- ⁴² *The Europa World Year Book 2006*, 1605; *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 373.
- ⁴³ Ibid.; *The Europa World Year Book 2006*, 1605.
- ⁴⁴ List compiled from the following sources: *The Europa World Year Book 2006*, *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, *Political Parties of the World 2006*.
- ⁴⁵ *PHW 2007 Oct. 2006*, 373.

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