



# Safeguarding El Salvador's Transition to Peace and Democracy: A View from the Cultural and Political Magazine *Tendencias* (1991-2000)

La transición a la paz y la democracia en El Salvador: una mirada desde la revista cultural y política *Tendencias* (1991-2000)

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**Abstract:** This article examines the role that the cultural and political magazine *Tendencias* (1991-2000) played in El Salvador's transition to peace. Specifically, it studies how *Tendencias*'s contributors tackled some of the key issues of the transition—the failure to reform the economy, the undermining of the peace process by economic and political elites, and the inability of the FMLN to respond to the new political situation—and argues that the magazine served as a counter to El Salvador's culture of ideological entrenchment. By fostering democratic and rational-critical discussion, *Tendencias* opened up a new “public sphere” for El Salvador and gave voice to a vibrant and tenacious intellectual culture that has often been overlooked.

**Keywords:** *Tendencias*; Public sphere; Print media; Transition to peace; El Salvador.

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza el papel que la revista cultural y política *Tendencias* (1991-2000) desempeñó durante la transición a la paz en El Salvador. En particular, estudia cómo los contribuyentes de la revista abordaron varios de los problemas principales de la transición —la falta de reforma económica, las socavaciones del proceso de paz por parte de la élite económica y política, y la incapacidad del FMLN para adaptarse a la nueva situación política— y argumenta que la revista ayudó a contrarrestar la ideologización de la cultura salvadoreña. Al promover la discusión crítica y democrática, *Tendencias* inauguró para El Sal-

vador una nueva “esfera pública” y dio voz a una cultura intelectual dinámica y perseverante que tiende a quedar en el olvido.

**Palabras clave:** *Tendencias*; Esfera pública; Periodismo; Transición a la paz; El Salvador.

The peace that was secured in El Salvador through the signing of the 1992 Peace Accords came at a heavy cost. Twelve years of civil war (1980-1992) had left the country devastated. Some seventy-five thousand lives had been lost; and over a million people had been displaced. That peace could finally be achieved after such a bloody and protracted war was certainly cause for jubilation and hope. But given the tense political climate of the time, it was also cause for vigilance. Nothing could be taken for granted—not the cessation of political violence, not the complete disarmament of the opposing factions, and not the implementation of the judicial and electoral reforms that had been agreed upon. The transition to peace and democracy was a fragile process, and ensuring its survival became, for many, the most important goal.

But if peace and democracy were to flourish, and not just survive, it was imperative to create a space for public debate and democratic will-formation, where a conception of the general good could be reached and could function as a check on the powers of government. What was needed, in other words, was what Jürgen Habermas called “the public sphere”, a virtual space between the state and society in which individuals could, on equal footing and in an unrestricted fashion, discuss and argue about matters of common interest, and from there form something approaching democratic opinion and consensus. For Habermas, the public sphere is where communal deliberation and argumentative persuasion replaces ideological seduction and the arbitrary decision of the authoritarian establishment, and where political decisions become subject to review before the court of public opinion.<sup>1</sup> In El Salvador, decades of state repression and censorship had precluded the possibility of such a space. But with the arrival of peace, a number of intellectuals took it upon themselves to create one. That space was the cultural and political magazine *Tendencias*, which was published monthly out of San Salvador from July 1991 to February 2000.

Driving *Tendencias* was a pluralist vision that sought to incorporate into critical discussion a variety of opinions, or “tendencies”, about matters that were of common concern during El Salvador’s democratization process. Although the members of the editorial team had been associated with certain political, usually leftist, groups during the armed conflict, the magazine itself did not belong to any political ideology, movement, or group. It was not conceptualized as a mouthpiece for any political program, and nor was it associated with one. On the contrary, what it sought was to counter the ideological hardening that had stunted the country’s intellectual and cultural life, and

<sup>1</sup> Habermas develops his theory of the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). A useful summary of the concept can be found in his “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article” (1974).

to help Salvadoran society transition from a culture of ideological entrenchment to one of democratic and rational-critical discussion. For the contributors of *Tendencias* and its editorial team, peace did not just mean securing a ceasefire: it involved building a common culture and an always provisional consensus about what was of benefit to all. For *Tendencias*, bringing together a plurality of views was a means of safeguarding El Salvador's hard-won peace.

But not all was plain sailing. For one thing, to publish a monthly magazine in a country as economically and socially devastated as postwar El Salvador was no easy task. Faced with chronic financial strains, a distrustful reading public, and an undeveloped publishing infrastructure, *Tendencias* struggled to stay afloat.<sup>2</sup> Its editors knew from the beginning that their task would be a difficult one. They also knew that it might be dangerous. A magazine that invited discussion of the politics of the transition, that dared to scrutinize the national culture, and that affirmed the constructive value of art—which the far Right had always vilified as subversive—would inevitably entail reprisals. Not surprisingly, El Salvador's political and economic establishment subjected the magazine to constant pressures and threats aimed at suffocating it. Old authoritarian habits would not die so easily.

Nevertheless, *Tendencias* persisted. Over the course of nine arduous years, it remained true to its purpose as a space for analysis, debate, and critique. In the words of its editor, Roberto Turcios, *Tendencias's* mission was to “hacer un ejercicio crítico, buscando el rigor de la independencia frente a los poderes políticos y económicos. Hacerlo, además, con libertad, creatividad y entusiasmo, comprometidos con el país, con su gente y con apego al pluralismo” (1996a: 4). By insisting on these prerequisites—independence, rigor, creativity, and openness—*Tendencias* served as a counterforce to the powers that threatened the integrity of the peace and democratization process. Against the political establishment's façade of optimism, *Tendencias* was a voice of salutary skepticism, a refusal to prematurely accept that the officially declared peace had mended the fracturedness of Salvadoran society.

This essay probes precisely into this dynamic. In what follows, I will examine how *Tendencias* deployed its critical energies to safeguard the peacebuilding process against the corruption and shortsightedness that dominated El Salvador's political culture. Given the complexity of the transition period and the limited scope of this article, I will focus only on some of the political issues that most concerned *Tendencias's* contributors. These include the failure to reform the economy to alleviate social inequality, the undermining of the peace process by economic and political elites, and the inability of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) to respond to the new political situation.

Ultimately, this article seeks to further our understanding of El Salvador's intellectual life during the transition to peace, a topic which has received scant attention from

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<sup>2</sup> On the difficulty of keeping *Tendencias* afloat, see Turcios (1998).

scholars.<sup>3</sup> What is valuable about *Tendencias* is that it offers insight into the issues and debates that concerned Salvadoran and Central American intellectuals, academics, artists, and citizens. That the magazine lasted as long as it did, and that it circulated at a mass scale by Central American standards, reaching a print run of 5,000, attests to the sudden blossoming of interest in cultural and political matters in the years following the peace accords.<sup>4</sup> Silvia L. López describes the moment like so:

Books, books, books—that is a striking feature of postwar culture in El Salvador. The explosion of fiction is palpable on university campuses, in the newspapers, in the proliferation of presses both small and artisanal, and in the weekly political and literary magazines (2004: 85).

In this context, *Tendencias* stands out as a space where those who held faith in the possibility of peace reconfigured their political commitments to fit the needs of the democratic process. By studying the magazine, we come closer to understanding the vibrant and tenacious intellectual culture that strived to shape El Salvador's future.

## GENESIS AND SCOPE OF *TENDENCIAS*

Before probing into *Tendencias*'s critical engagement with the peacebuilding process, it is worth discussing its genesis and scope and the context in which it emerged.

*Tendencias* first appeared as the monthly bulletin of the Programa Regional de Investigación Sobre El Salvador (PREIS).<sup>5</sup> It was published under this aegis from July 1991 to October 1992, with each issue bearing the following statements:

PREIS es una iniciativa académica para la investigación económica y social sobre El Salvador, cuyas actividades comenzaron en marzo de 1989.

[...]

El Equipo de Investigación está constituido por un grupo interdisciplinario de profesionales nacionales y extranjeros que trabajan coordinadamente las temáticas priorizadas, con el propósito de obtener resultados de investigación y formación relevantes para la reconstrucción y el desarrollo del país (*Tendencias* 1991a: 11).

As an academic initiative, PREIS focused on four main research areas: “historia”, “cooperación externa”, “sociedad civil”, and “tierra, población y medio ambiente”. Consistent with the bulletin format, the issues published during this period are short—initial ones consist of 10 pages; subsequent ones, of 20—and are largely

<sup>3</sup> Exceptions to this are Robin Maria DeLugan, Silvia L. López, and Tania Pleitez Vela, who have made important incursions into the cultural and intellectual sphere of postwar El Salvador.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow the print run figure from López (2004: 90).

<sup>5</sup> The editorial board for the first thirteen issues was composed of Deborah Barry, Roberto Codas, Breny Cuenca, Víctor González, and Roberto Turcios. The editor was Horacio Castellanos Moya. And the assistant editor, after the seventh issue, was Guillermo Mejía.

made up of social scientific reports, conference presentations, and extracts from larger research projects. The focus is for the most part informative and analytical. In the first six issues, most articles do not bear any authorial signatures, which suggests that they are the product of a collaborative, or institutional, effort. The overall tone of this initial phase of *Tendencias* is one of academic authority and expertise aimed at shaping public policy during the transition to peace.

Gradually, *Tendencias* broadened its scope. After the seventh issue (February 1992), it became less academic and more oriented toward commentary and debate. The range of topics expanded to include issues such as education, artistic culture, women's rights, Salvadoran immigration, and the role and development of journalism in a postwar society. The magazine's layout was revamped and stylized with frontispieces, photographs, and illustrations. As the number of contributors grew, *Tendencias* had to expand its page count to eventually become a full-fledged cultural and political commentary magazine, much like *Nexos* in Mexico, or *The Atlantic* or *Harper's Magazine* in the US. The fifteenth issue (November 1992) was the first to appear without any institution ties to PREIS and with a reshaped editorial board that had historian Roberto Turcios as editor in chief ("director"), writer Horacio Castellanos Moya as editor ("subdirector"), and historian Breny Cuenca as managing editor of special issues ("coordinadora de ediciones especiales") and, later, as co-editor.<sup>6</sup>

The objectives of *Tendencias*, in its revamped form, are laid out in a letter from the editors:

Estamos comprometidos en convertir a *Tendencias* en una revista nacional que sea espacio propicio para la confluencia plural. [...] Uno de nuestros propósitos es participar en la creación de una nueva opinión pública, porque creemos que su protagonismo destacado es imprescindible para la democracia. Uno de los estorbos para la gestación de la opinión pública es el autoritarismo, ese modo tan extendido y tan fecundo para reproducir las perversidades del poder. En cambio, un proceso que se construye y enriquece desde las visiones diversas y contrarias que tratan de incidir en las decisiones públicas, puede convertirse en un factor de transformación del país y de disuasión para la arbitrariedad y la

<sup>6</sup> Breny Cuenca, prior to her involvement in *Tendencias*, published several scholarly articles on the geopolitics of El Salvador. In 1992, she published an important study titled *El poder intangible: La AID y el estado salvadoreño en los años ochenta*. In 2009, she was appointed as the first secretary of culture under the FMLN presidency of Mauricio Funes. Roberto Turcios, for his part, prior to his tenure as editor of *Tendencias*, served as a researcher for the inter-governmental organization Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO). In 1993, he published *Autoritarismo y modernización: El Salvador, 1950–1960*, a highly cited work that was republished in 2003 by the state-run Dirección de Publicaciones e Impresos. After *Tendencias* ceased publication, he went on to serve in various educational and development projects in El Salvador. As for Horacio Castellanos Moya, his popularity as a writer of international renown has made his professional trajectory more known. During the armed conflict, Castellanos Moya worked in Mexico City as a press agent for the guerrilla effort. In 1989, he published *La diáspora*, an unflattering novelistic account of El Salvador's revolutionary movement that caused something of a stir. As peace was being secured, he returned to El Salvador to participate in the peacebuilding effort by working as a journalist and editor.

corrupción. [...] La guerra fue una expresión extrema del choque de creencias, valores e intereses. Con la negociación, ahora se presenta un marco favorable para superar la realidad mortal de la guerra y la violencia inherente al autoritarismo, pero las creencias, valores e intereses diversos no se esfumarán. Al contrario, si se ha de consolidar el pluralismo y la libertad podrían intensificarse. Ante esa perspectiva es que aspiramos a contribuir al debate libre, al intercambio de propuestas y opiniones entre políticos, especialistas y ciudadanos. Reconstrucción apuntaría así no sólo al orden económico, también al social, al político, al cultural, a nuevas modalidades de comunicación y de opinión pública. Supondría un desmontaje de toda la ramificación del poder autoritario, con su mecánica productora de una verdad totalitaria y de la exclusión económico-social, para configurar participativamente una nueva verdad, una rica y variada pluralidad nacional (*Tendencias* 1992b: 3).

The editors had no illusions that the signing of the Peace Accords offered a clean slate on which to rebuild the nation. They knew all too well that hardened ideologies still lingered, in both the Left and the Right, and that any further reliance on them offered little promise. What the Accords provided instead, in their view, was an opportunity to engage in a new kind of praxis, one of collective deliberation and reasoned critique.

Moving *Tendencias* in this critical direction was risky but necessary. At war's end, El Salvador's print and broadcast media was controlled by an oligarchy that supported the military and the far Right. The two main newspapers, *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*, answered to the Right and did not adhere to journalistic ethics or standards. Nor did the Telecorporación Salvadoreña (TCS), which owned the television networks that controlled 85 to 90 percent of the nation's viewing audience.<sup>7</sup> Political and economic issues that were of concern to the citizenry were warped to seem as if the Right-wing government, controlled by the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party, had fully complied with the terms of the Accords, when in fact it hadn't. The few outsider media outlets that attempted to counter the media establishment were often subject to advertiser boycotts, which made it extremely difficult for them to survive, or for new ones to emerge. This was not merely about market competition. Rather, it was a deeply political effort to stifle any spaces for truthful reporting and open discussion of the country's sociopolitical realities.<sup>8</sup>

All this made of *Tendencias* a particularly risky enterprise. Still fresh in the memory of its editors and contributors was the February 1991 arson attack against *Diario*

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of El Salvador's dominant media outlets, see Ladutke (2004: 32, 70).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to *Tendencias*, another important outsider media outlet was the weekly newspaper *Primera Plana*, which was edited by Horacio Castellanos Moya. Although it lasted for only ten months (42 issues, published from 16 September 1994 to 14 July 1995), it was praised for its strong critical bent and for its unblinking assessment of the country's sociopolitical realities. Although its journalists were mostly leftist, they did not shrink from scrutinizing leftist politics and leaders. *Primera Plana* has been credited with introducing serious investigative journalism to El Salvador (Ladutke 2004: 71-72). For a discussion of the "aventura libertaria" that was *Primera Plana*, see Castellanos Moya (1996).

*Latino*, a small but long-standing newspaper that had taken a critical and “pluralist” turn. The *Diario Latino* had originally been politically conservative, but after suffering a financial crisis and being rescued by its workers in 1989, it took on a polemical tone and added a literary supplement, titled “Tres Mil”, that included the work of writers and intellectuals who had become personae non gratae to the political and economic establishment. The paper and its contributors thus became the target of threats and intimidation, and ultimately a firebombing.<sup>9</sup>

Even after the Peace Accords had been signed, death squads continued their activities; and threats against journalists, writers, and intellectuals remained a regular practice. With corruption deeply entrenched in the government, the arbitrary and often violent restriction of expression was a peacetime reality that writers and intellectuals had to contend with.<sup>10</sup> And yet despite the known dangers of practicing free expression, a good number of Salvadoran journalists and intellectuals eagerly contributed to *Tendencias* and its mission.

Still, for all the optimism driving the magazine, a sense of uncertainty always haunted it. In this respect, *Tendencias* is very much a product of its time. The climate in which it emerged, marked as it was by the negotiations and signing of the Peace Accords, was teeming with enthusiasm and hope, but also with an awareness that the ugliness of the past was lurking and could resurface at any moment. A description in *Tendencias* of the celebrations that took place in San Salvador following the signing of the Accords captures precisely this ambivalence. It describes how crowds filled the historical center, and how the FMLN, at the Plaza Cívica, and ARENA, at the Plaza Libertad, assembled to celebrate just one block from each other:

Apenas a una cuadra de distancia, los enemigos –hasta ese momento irreconciliables– aragon, bailaron, bebieron.

Catarsis colectiva, parranda popular, todo en el filo de la navaja: la eventualidad de que una chispa encendiera pasiones acumuladas y el carnaval terminara en carnicería.

Pero nada pasó.

Ambos bandos demostraron que pueden ser expertos en seguridad.

Lo nuevo, en realidad, sucedió en la Plaza Cívica. Las gigantescas banderas del FMLN, en las fachadas de Catedral y del Palacio Nacional, fueron la expresión más elocuente de la nueva época.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the *Diario Latino*, see “Reseña histórica de *Co Latino*”; Pleitez (2012: 236-237); and Murray (1995: 159). In addition to *Tendencias* and *Diario Latino*'s cultural supplement, there were several other periodicals during the transition to peace dedicated to literature, art, and politics, or what is generally known as “periodismo cultural”. For the most part, these were short-lived efforts that succumbed to political pressures, financial strains, and lack of distribution. With the exception of *Cultura*, the state-run publication, these periodicals have not been digitized or archived, which has made it difficult for scholars to study how El Salvador's cultural and intellectual life played out during the peacebuilding process. For more on El Salvador's “periodismo cultural” during the transition to peace, see Pleitez Vela's highly illuminating and useful study, *Literatura. Análisis de situación de la expresión artística en El Salvador* (2012: 225-243, 353-357).

<sup>10</sup> On the threats to free expression in postwar El Salvador, see Ladutke (2004: 55-64).



Centenares de militantes rebeldes, exultantes en su indumentaria (pañuelos, camisetas y gorras con las siglas y los colores del FMLN), se paseaban sin esconder su algarabía. Incluso cruzaban la cuadra para incursionar en la concentración del partido Arena en la Plaza Libertad.

Comandantes guerrilleros lanzando sus discursos y consignas desde la tarima ubicada frente al Palacio Nacional, las dos radios rebeldes transmitiendo abiertamente desde el corazón de la capital: imágenes impensables hace pocos meses, evidencia de la precipitada e impredecible dinámica política nacional (*Tendencias* 1992a: 1, 8).

The feeling that everything was “en el filo de la navaja”—that even the smallest slight or discourtesy could bring back the bloodshed—was, of course, defining. But the fact that things didn’t devolve, and that peace was preserved, was evidence that former antagonists could commune. For *Tendencias*, it was also evidence that its pluralist objective was not just a pie in the sky: it was a proven possibility, even if it stood on a knife’s edge.

## TENDENCIAS AND THE TRANSITION TO PEACE AND DEMOCRACY

That peace was standing on a knife’s edge was clear to *Tendencias* from the very beginning. The negotiations between the FMLN guerrilla front and the right-wing ARENA government had been carried out under a shroud of secrecy that made it difficult for outsiders to assess the viability and promise of the peace being forged. Still under the auspices of PREIS, the editors of *Tendencias* noted that “La confidencialidad propia de las negociaciones impide visualizar con precisión los elementos que han entrampado el proceso de paz” (*Tendencias* 1991b: 1). Thus, only conjectures were possible. In a column aptly titled “La coyuntura”, the editors did what they could to evaluate the negotiations based on the fragmentary information available.<sup>11</sup> One of the main concerns to emerge from this column was that the government, the military, and the economic elite—the power brokers of El Salvador—would obstruct the implementation of the terms of the peace agreement:

Si bien el proceso de negociaciones está avanzando hacia un nuevo acuerdo político nacional, ese avance todavía no se traduce en una situación consolidada. Resulta difícil valorar la capacidad de veto que algunos sectores ultraconservadores vinculados al partido gobernante y a la institución castrense tendrían de cara a un acuerdo de paz. El fin de la Guerra Fría, al que se refirió el presidente Cristiani en su discurso de Nueva York, aún no es comprendido por ciertos dirigentes políticos y militares, quienes continúan expresando que el conflicto salvadoreño es producto de “la expansión comunista” (*Tendencias* 1991c: 2).

The PREIS team reports that the economic elite is pressing the government not to succumb to the demands of the FMLN. This elite would, of course, prefer that the

<sup>11</sup> The column appears in the first six issues of *Tendencias* (July 1991-January 1992). It spans the months during which the negotiations took place and were finalized.



economic status quo remain intact. Against such shortsightedness, the PREIS team insists that El Salvador's economic future will be both "difícil y alarmante": "difícil", because technical innovations and globalizing forces no longer allow for business to run as usual; and "alarmante", because half the population is floundering in poverty. Pragmatic yet principled, the team maintains that "No es que el acuerdo político deba resolver el problema de la pobreza, pero sí que lo pueda prever y encarar razonablemente" (*Tendencias* 1991d: 1).

It was only after the Peace Accords had been signed, on 16 January 1992, that it became clear what the real threats to peace and democracy would be. As *Tendencias's* editors had anticipated, one of these threats was the failure to restructure El Salvador's economic system. The Accords had done many things well: they had successfully implemented constitutional, judicial, and electoral reforms that encouraged broader participation from citizens and recognized the FMLN as a political party; they had also dismantled the military and formed a new national civil police force. But where the Accords fell short was in laying down provisions for reforming the country's economic system, which was poised to perpetuate the very problem that had caused the civil war in the first place: widespread inequality.

How this critical shortcoming in the negotiations occurred was made clear in *Tendencias* by cultural and economic geographer Deborah Barry. According to Barry, the negotiations took place at two different tables—one which was official, and another which was less so. At the former table were representatives from the ARENA government, the FMLN, and the UN. The focus here was on ending the war and achieving political stability. At the latter table, the focus was quite different. There government finance ministers and World Bank representatives sought to reach "acuerdos macroeconómicos sobre la manera de transformar la economía a través de un Programa de Ajuste Estructural" (Barry 1992: 6). This other table, in other words, sought to neoliberalize the country through development loans—or "structural adjustment programs"—from the World Bank that required the cutting of social provisioning, the liberalizing of finance and trade, and the privatizing of public institutions and assets. Although both tables were concerned with the future of the country, their aims, Barry explains, were mutually inconsistent. Critical of the incoherence that resulted from this, Barry concludes: "Por más mesas que existan, el país es uno y requiere una visión integral. Urge romper la 'doble visión', la 'esquizofrenia' entre lo político y lo económico heredada de las dos mesas de negociación" (1992: 7). So while the negotiators of the Accords were working to channel the hopes and enthusiasms of that historical moment into political reconciliation, the economic elite was surreptitiously redesigning the economic landscape to its favor.

By 1998 it was more than evident that the economic elite had succeeded in its enterprise. In an article titled "La misma derecha", Roberto Cañas López, a Salvadoran economist and former FMLN militant and peace negotiator, argued that the Right remains more or less the same as it was during the war years, only now it is more powerful and versatile in its ability to adapt to the new global economy. He explains that

the incorporation of powerful business executives into government posts and affairs of state has generated “una simbiosis entre el Estado y la élite económica que anula la autonomía que el primero debe tener” (Cañas López 1998: 29). The result has been a government that advances the agendas of the economic elites, to the detriment of social welfare. No longer dependent on military dictatorships, these elites have figured out how to make the democratic system work to their advantage. Socially, the results have been devastating, and have been largely ignored by the government and its market-oriented administration. As Cañas López explains, “Estos sectores muestran su autocomplacencia por lo bien que va la economía, pero no quieren ver que algo tenebroso se oculta tras las cifras macroeconómicas: la pobreza y la miseria que se expresan en variadas y múltiples formas” (1998: 30-31).

It did not escape *Tendencias*'s editors that certain sectors of the Right had sought to undermine the peace process from the very beginning. In an article published three months into the ceasefire, Guillermo Mejía and Horacio Castellanos Moya called attention to the “crisis en el cumplimiento de los acuerdos de paz” (1992: 7). They noted that leaders of the FMLN had been the target of threats and attacks—another “guerra sucia” they called it—of which the military and the government denied any involvement. Unlike the dominant media, *Tendencias* closely monitored and investigated these aggressions, as well as the FMLN's response to them and the government's dismissal of the entire matter. Over the course of various articles and reports, *Tendencias* tallied 25 murders of members of the FMLN in the first two years of peace: four occurring in 1992, and twenty-one in 1993. One case in particular attracted national and international attention, that of FMLN leader and candidate for the National Assembly Darol Francisco Velis Castellanos, who had been killed on 25 October 1993 in front of his two-year-old daughter while dropping her off at a day care center.

With one suspicious murder after another, with the government refusing to comply with the Peace Accords, with the FMLN frayed by internal squabbles, and with UN observer groups wavering in their duties, the peace that had been secured was at risk of disintegrating. Indeed, it seemed as if the wartime climate of insecurity had returned. Breny Cuenca describes what the so-called “peace” had become:

Los incumplimientos han preparado el espacio a la crisis. El resurgimiento de los escuadrones de la muerte, la aparición de un Frente Revolucionario Salvadoreño (FRS) que se presenta como una disidencia del FMLN, el aumento de los asesinatos y atentados políticos, los rumores de golpe de estado, parecieran remontarnos al clima de los 70, con sus aterradoras perspectivas (1992b: 15).

Cuenca insists that it is in everyone's interest to abide by the democratic process, for it is the only rational way of dissuading those last holdovers of authoritarianism.

Although it remained murky who exactly was attempting to undermine the peace process, one thing was certain: it had something to do with the far Right. Guillermo Mejía and Castellanos Moya, in their probing of the crisis, noted that

Analistas independientes y personeros de distintos partidos coinciden en señalar que el gobierno del presidente Alfredo Cristiani estaría bajo una fuerte presión por parte de sectores de extrema derecha, quienes se opondrían al cumplimiento de los acuerdos (1992: 8).

As a result, the Cristiani government did little to investigate the murders. Rather than view them as a threat to peacebuilding, it dismissed these murders as acts of common crime, or delinquency, that had nothing to do with the politics of the civil war and transition. The dominant news outlets, controlled as they were by the Right, echoed rather than investigated this claim.

As a counter to the government's "code-switching" gambit and the dominant media's connivance, Guillermo Mejía warned that "El crimen político pareciera imponerse nuevamente en el horizonte de la nación" (1993-1994: 5).<sup>12</sup> To call these murders "political violence" was significant, for it highlighted the fact that the culture of repression and the violence of the civil war had not ended with the ceasefire: both were very much alive. Roberto Turcios put it bluntly: "El proceso de fundación democrática enfrenta dos adversarios directos: en primer lugar, la cultura del autoritarismo, y en segundo lugar, el pasado inmediato de guerra. Los dos son factores del pasado que siguen presentes en la actualidad" (1993-1994: 21).

Of special concern to *Tendencias's* contributors was the problem of the massive number of "desmovilizados", or former combatants, from both the military and the guerrilla, who had been neglected by the politics of the peace process. The Accords had mandated that these individuals receive a package that included either a small parcel of land, a loan, vocational training, or equipment to build a new home. They had also mandated that special benefits and services be given to combatants who had been disabled by the war. The intention was to provide these individuals with economic opportunities, and to facilitate their reintegration into Salvadoran society. Although the mandate was a daunting one, the government demonstrated little interest in seeing it through. In fact, rather than fulfill its obligation to these ex-combatants, the government embarked on a campaign to discredit their demands and protests.

Several articles in *Tendencias* attest to this. Of particular concern here was a protest that took place on 20 May 1993, in which the government's smear campaign was especially evident. Former combatants of both the military and the guerrilla had united to demand the compensation that was promised to them. Their protest, however, was violently repressed by the National Civil Police riot squad, leaving one person dead. In *Tendencias*, David Rivas and Guillermo Mejía offered an assessment of the situation:

Mutilados, devaluados, olvidados, los que una vez fueron condecorados o vitoreados como héroes de guerra, ahora integran un contingente de personas tratadas como indeseables.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Moodie uses the term "critical code-switching" to describe the depoliticizing of crime during the transition. For an analysis of this process, see chapter 2 of her book *El Salvador in the Aftermath of Peace: Culture, Uncertainty, and the Transition to Democracy*. For a study on the investigations and media coverage of the murders of FMLN members, see Ladutke (2004: 162-171).

Paradójicamente, estos miles de lisiados, ex-miembros del Ejército y ex-guerrilleros, constituyen el más claro ejemplo de reconciliación desde la firma de los Acuerdos de Paz, en enero de 1992.

Su unidad no fue un simple pacto de caballeros. Se consolidó a partir de la muerte del ex-combatiente Santos Martínez, el pasado 20 de mayo, cuando pretendían ser escuchados por el gobierno a través de una manifestación por las calles capitalinas.

Las balas y los palos con que fueron recibidos por los policías antimotines a su llegada a Casa Presidencial demostraron, en cambio, el rechazo de que son víctimas estos discapacitados, en su mayoría jóvenes y de extracción campesina (1993: 11).

The mainstream media portrayed the National Civil Police as the upholder of order and peace, and the ex-combatants as “delincuentes” who were part of a crime wave sweeping the country. The reality, though, was different. The National Civil Police, as soon as it was founded, had become the source of numerous human rights violations; and the ex-combatants, for their part, were merely demanding what they were entitled to under the terms of the Peace Accords.

An article by Thirza Ruballo, titled “El resentimiento de los ‘héroes’”, rescues the stories of these ex-soldiers who have been left out in the cold. Through interviews with these men, it becomes clear exactly who these so-called “delincuentes” are: they are veterans, many of them disabled, who had devoted their lives in the service of a country that has now abandoned them. Having once considered the military to be their family, and their commanders to be their “segundos padres”, they now feel as if “nos tiraron a la calle” with no means or skills to provide for themselves. And what is more, they are now deemed to be criminals by the government they once served. Privy to the irony of their predicament, one ex-soldier explains:

Cuando estábamos de servicio nos mandaban a maltratar y golpear a los sindicalistas que luchaban por reivindicaciones justas, argumentándonos que eran comunistas que atentaban contra los intereses de la patria, y ahora que nosotros demandamos nuestros derechos también se nos acusa de delincuentes (Ruballo 1994: 11).

Ruballo’s article powerfully counters the government and the mainstream media’s claim that the protesters, and their Asociación de Desmovilizados de la Fuerza Armada, are manipulated by recalcitrant guerrillas. Ultimately, what came of the government’s failure to fulfill its commitments to former combatants was a new class of underserved and forgotten citizens who became deeply disillusioned with their government.

For *Tendencias*, what all these contraventions amounted to was a “capturing” of the peace process by forces on the Right.<sup>13</sup> This became especially blatant in the Primer Foro Internacional de Cultura de Paz that was held in San Salvador, from 16 to 18 February 1994. The event had been organized and sponsored by UNESCO, with

<sup>13</sup> I borrow the term “captured” from Christine J. Wade, whose book *Captured Peace: Elites and Peacebuilding in El Salvador* (2016) offers a penetrating analysis of how political and economic elites commandeered the peace process to strengthen their control of the country.

support from the ARENA government. While *Tendencias* praised the forum's effort to promote "la sostenibilidad democrática a través de la educación y la cultura", it also noted that the event was "marcado por la sospecha de ser realizado un mes antes de las elecciones generales" (*Tendencias* 1994: 17). The suspicion that the forum was a political ploy was buttressed by the fact that the FMLN—a chief component in the securing of peace—had not been invited to participate. The event thus seemed to be designed to play ARENA up as the sole champion of peace.

Still, despite the controversy, *Tendencias* published a portion of one of the keynote addresses that was given there, and followed it up with a criticism of the forum by Schafik Jorge Handal, general coordinator of FMLN.<sup>14</sup> In his article, Handal lamented that the forum was really "una especie de premio" that was given to a government that had failed to fulfill its obligations under the Peace Accords. He also objected that the forum had been made an accessory to ARENA's electoral campaign. The timing of the event had effectively given the government "un barniz de abanderado de la paz que no puede aceptarse si al mismo tiempo los acuerdos, los compromisos, no están siendo ejecutados" (Handal 1994: 22). UNESCO, Handal further contended, had faltered in its duty by endorsing the event under such exclusionary conditions. Impugning the pro-ARENA bias of the event, he reminded readers that from the very beginning of the war, the FMLN had been calling for peace: "Nosotros estuvimos demandando buscar una solución negociada a la guerra desde el año 81 mismo, cuando estalló el conflicto en su forma más dimensionada" (Handal 1994: 22).

Although discussion and scrutiny of the ARENA government are a constant in the pages of *Tendencias*, it does not mean that the FMLN was exempt from criticism. On the contrary, numerous articles turned their critical energies toward the FMLN, denouncing its failures but also proposing correctives. The most incisive of these are those of Breny Cuenca. A keen observer of the transition process, Cuenca noted early on that the FMLN, as a coalition of five different guerrilla organizations, would have to undergo a "readecuación" to make headway in the new political and economic landscape. For Cuenca, the question facing the FMLN was this: whether to be or not to be—"ser o no ser"—a unified left-wing political party. As a coalition of groups that pulled in different directions, and without any unifying agenda, the FMLN was becoming less and less of a political force. Cuenca warned that within the new democracy "la presencia del FMLN se ha ido diluyendo", which is lamentable, since it is precisely at this crucial moment that the country needs "de todos sus políticos imaginación y propuestas para el futuro". This was a formidable problem, to be sure, but Cuenca nevertheless harbored hope, for as she explains, the FMLN "parece dispuesto a dar su batalla democrática" (Cuenca 1992a: 15-16).

Two years into the transition, that hope would be put to the test, as the FMLN remained divided by internal squabbles and power struggles. Such divisiveness came to a head in 1994, as the first postwar and newly democratic Legislative Assembly was

<sup>14</sup> That keynote address was David Escobar Galindo's "Los fundamentos de la cultura de paz".

convening. In a reckless act of defiance, two leaders of the FMLN took seats in the legislature's governing council against the party's majority vote, which had designated two other leaders for those seats. Outraged by this undemocratic power play, and by the fact that it took place publicly at a moment of such political and historic significance, Cuenca charged:

¿Por qué, por ejemplo, los cinco partidos del FMLN escenificaron el espectáculo de sus luchas intestinas precisamente el día en que, por primera vez en la historia del país, se instalaba una Asamblea Legislativa totalmente pluralista?

¿Por qué nadie pensó en lo que esperaba «la gente», o por lo menos, esos 375 mil ciudadanos que apoyaron a la izquierda en las recientes elecciones, muchos de ellos esperanzados en que sus representantes proyectarían nacionalmente (en discurso y actitudes) la voluntad de auspiciar una nueva forma de hacer política en el país? ¿Por qué no se tuvo en cuenta el significado simbólico que la instalación de la nueva Asamblea Legislativa tenía en relación al cambio de un régimen autoritario hacia la fundación democrática? (1994: 19).

The FMLN itself, through its disarray, had effectively compromised the very democracy that had cost so much to achieve.

In the constructive spirit of the magazine, Cuenca offers three hypotheses to help make sense of—and ultimately help resolve—the FMLN's fragmentation and lack of political coherence:

Primero, pensar, por ejemplo, que el FMLN no ha entendido todavía la importancia del Poder Legislativo, dado que en su ideario tradicional el «asalto» al poder era literalmente la destrucción del Estado, para instaurar otro, en donde la diferenciación e independencia de los tres poderes, entre ellos el Legislativo, no existía como un factor fundamental. Otra opción posible: el FMLN no se preocupa por las cuestiones simbólicas; en este caso por sintetizar y proyectar su propio aporte histórico al proceso de cambios democráticos, enlazando críticamente su pasado, el presente y el futuro, como parte de la construcción de su identidad. Una tercera posibilidad: el FMLN está tan enfrascado en sus luchas intestinas que tiene totalmente oscurecida su perspectiva nacional. Esta última hipótesis sugiere que la profundidad de las diferencias entre los partidos del FMLN, les impide evitar el estallido de sus conflictos, aún con el costo de avasallar la sensibilidad de la ciudadanía que depositó su voto (1994: 19-20).

So it was not just that the political and economic elites on the Right had captured the peace. It was also that the FMLN had failed to modernize itself and adapt to the new political system. The consequences of this failure were dire, for without the FMLN as a viable opposition party, the democracy that had long been hoped for risked arriving stillborn. What was at stake, in other words, was not just the implementation of the Peace Accords, but the very possibility of holding the incumbent government to account, of engaging in reasoned debate at the legislative level, and of protecting minority institutions and groups against the authoritarian forces that continued to lurk in the economic and political establishment.

But the problems persisted. By 1999 the FMLN seemed to have lost its will to fight, and as a result it lost the presidential election. This was the appraisal made by Cuenca



in an August 1999 piece titled “Ética para la izquierda”. There, she explains that during the civil war, the FMLN had been a “torrente de vitalidad” that had brought together, to great effect, a diversity of people and ideologies. But ever since the arrival of peace, the FMLN, as a party, has fallen ill—“ha estado muy enfermo. Grave”. It couldn’t let go of its “pulsión autodestructiva”. The illness, for Cuenca, was essentially an ethical one: “el espíritu burocrático egoísta, la estrechez de miras, el olvido de la aberrante miseria en que se debate el país como imperativo de la acción política, el discurso fácil, la desfachatez, las zancadillas, la arrogancia”—all these have dampened the FMLN’s original vitality and have left it crippled (1999: 38).

Although the FMLN seemed to have given up, Cuenca continued to insist that the party’s total collapse could be avoided. And for this, it was necessary to “conocer la naturaleza de sus males” (1999: 38). For despite everything, the FMLN still showed some signs of vitality whenever it opened itself to debate and sought to further democratize its workings. Hopeful, she concluded the following: “Cuando la torre de Babel concluya, el FMLN estará listo para actualizar su proyecto histórico y darse una brújula certera para el siglo XXI, sin olvidar «que no hay doctrinas absolutas e infalibles sino solamente la búsqueda obstinada del mejoramiento de la condición humana»” (1999: 38).<sup>15</sup>

This oscillation between hope and frustration with the FMLN recurs throughout *Tendencias* and is especially poignant in the contributions by Roberto Turcios. Like Cuenca, Turcios admires the energies, vision, and imagination that had once driven the FMLN and had enabled it to shift the country toward democracy. But he laments the rapidness with which that original vitality had dissipated in the context of peace, where self-interest and fragmentation have overtaken left-wing politics.

El esplendor con que terminó la guerra fue relativamente fugaz. Aquella altura de miras parece reemplazada por la fragmentación y la parálisis. La capacidad para forjar entendimientos y negociar, ahora está sometida a las estrategias parciales; la energía para crear rumbos nacionales, se encuentra subyugada por los intereses particulares.

El final negociado de la guerra implicó una capacidad de imaginación y de entendimiento que no se repetirá fácilmente. Además, como amplió la libertad de acción para todos los sectores, es conveniente no dejarse dominar por el dramatismo al compararlo con la fragmentación y particularidad que privan en la actualidad. De todas maneras hay una constatación elocuente: antes se pudo crear un gran acuerdo nacional; ahora, lejos de vislumbrarse una posibilidad parecida, hasta los pequeños convenios parecen quimeras (Turcios 1996b: 4).

As a coalition of various groups, the FMLN had always contended with inner divisions, but ultimately cooperation, enthusiasm, and optimism prevailed and made it possible to channel those heterogeneous energies into the common goal of national liberation and democracy. But in the postwar period all that had changed, for what now prevailed in the FMLN was disarray and discouragement:

<sup>15</sup> The quotation that Cuenca cites is by Albert Camus, from an editorial he published on 24 November 1944, in the French resistance newspaper *Combat*. The passage can be found in Camus (2007: 122).



Pero las filas de la izquierda no están dominadas por el entusiasmo. Los que hemos participado en sus aventuras sabemos que hay desconcierto, desánimo e incluso amargura. Para decirlo rápidamente, la renovación previsible no se ha operado.

La división de la izquierda tomó desprevenidos a muy pocos. En cambio, es sorprendente que en el curso de tres años perdiera una parte considerable de su empuje y vigor (Turcios 1995: 4).

Rather than seek great reforms or initiatives, the FMLN's leadership now limits itself to issues of less consequence and to the day-to-day work of government. It has narrowed its horizons and has reduced politics to mere drudgery. As a result, Turcios contends, there is a risk that the opportunity for making real, substantive changes in the country might be missed:

La memoria de la guerra y la negociación se encuentra extraviada en un laberinto de asuntos menores. Y no es que el país se encamine con rapidez a un desfiladero, sino que puede perder una oportunidad para poner al día la rezagada estructura institucional del Estado (1999: 6).

El Salvador's political life has hit a roadblock of apathy and conformism. The possibility that the country might move into "otra etapa histórica", as Turcios puts it, seems to become increasingly remote.

Whereas the notion of a "proyecto de nación" once inspired the FMLN's ideological steadfastness, the realities of democracy now require moderation and flexibility. Citing Karl Popper, Turcios explains that when a problem is solved to universal satisfaction—in this case, the negotiation and securing of peace and democracy—many new problems are created (1996b: 4).<sup>16</sup> This should not be lamented. For what it means is that a readjustment of habits and behaviors is in order. In the context of El Salvador, it means that working within a democracy and working to establish one are two different things: the former required ideological fervor, and even extremism; the latter now requires compromise and rational-critical discussion. In this spirit, Turcios offers a suggestion:

tal vez sea necesario bajar las expectativas de una idea como la del «proyecto de nación»; tal vez, aunque sea más modesto, resulte más realista pensar en la posibilidad de acuerdos para problemas específicos, en cuya creación intervengan todos los actores interesados en el tema. Si se pudo conseguir un acuerdo para la educación, también se podría lograr otro para la política exterior, o para el combate de la pobreza, o para un desarrollo ecológicamente sostenible (Turcios 1996b: 4).

Real change was still possible—there was evidence of it. And even if it had to be achieved step by step rather than through full-scale revolution, it was still worth the

<sup>16</sup> Turcios cites from Karl Popper's *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (2002: 474).

effort. The progress made thus far in the transition still held many possibilities for the Left. As Turcios explains, “El éxito de la transición es la antesala de la plena vivencia democrática y de la gobernabilidad. La izquierda podría ser uno de sus soportes más sólidos cultivando una vocación nueva de poder” (1995: 4). But for this to happen, the Left needed the kind of the sober realism that could serve as an antidote to the ideological myopia and resignationism plaguing its political leadership. The proposals and energies were there—“En El Salvador existen actores con suficientes energías para producir otro viraje histórico”—but what was needed was a breaking down of the rigid ideologies that still characterized the political culture (Turcios 1999: 6).

## CONCLUSION

Throughout its nine-year run, *Tendencias* maintained a battered but unbroken hope that a new political culture was possible in El Salvador. That it persisted as long as it did is proof of this. Ultimately, the magazine succumbed to the financial difficulties that had always dogged it.<sup>17</sup> But during its nine-year run, the magazine opened up a space for freedom of expression in a country where such a space had once seemed to be a utopian idea. From its academic origins to its general-interest format, *Tendencias* came to occupy a preeminent position in Central America's cultural and intellectual life.<sup>18</sup> It sought change at a time that was ripe for social reconciliation and inclusiveness in the national building process. Viewed as a whole, it provides a long-arc view of the outer narratives and inner workings of El Salvador's transition to peace, and is a testament to the vigorous, and indeed courageous, intellectual culture that sought to regenerate its war-torn society.

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<sup>17</sup> The last issue to be released (February 2000, issue 80) offered no indication that the magazine would cease publication. By that time, *Tendencias* had a website: <www.tendencias.net> (announced for the first time in April-May 1998, issue 69). It's possible that the website might have offered some explanation, but that site no longer exists.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that *Tendencias* received international recognition in 1998, when Roberto Turcios was awarded the Premio Brasil de Periodismo for his contribution to journalism and for fostering free press in El Salvador through his work with *Tendencias* (*Tendencias* 1998).

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