

# El Salvador: A Brief History

By Robert M. Davis

Similar to other Central American nations, the written history of El Salvador usually begins with the arrival of the Spanish [conquistadors](#) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, omitting history of the indigenous societies that had populated the land for thousands of years prior. While details of the pre-Spanish societies are sparse, the evidence that has been collected points to a Mayan-like society based off of corn production and rich with hieroglyphic writing, astronomy, and mathematics. This culture was all but eradicated with the arrival of the Spanish forces and the subsequent colonization process, which transformed the country into several large plantations producing cotton and other cash crops. These plantations were owned by Europeans but farmed by enslaved indigenous citizens or slaves from Africa.

The country gained its independence from Spain in 1821, but divisions of power and wealth inequality remained similar to colonial conditions. A group of influential families (known by the people of El Salvador as "[The Fourteen Families](#)") controlled over 95% of the country's land and wealth, even though they only made up 2% of El Salvador's population. While those who hold the power have often changed in name and number, the ruling elite is still known by the working class as "The Fourteen Families."

Conditions remained stagnant until the 1930's, at which time the crash of the U.S. stock market led to [widespread revolts against coffee plantation owners](#), who had cut wages and living conditions drastically in response to the plummeting coffee prices. The state responded by systemically killing many indigenous and low-income workers across the country and establishing a police state, which remained in effect until the civil war of the 1980's.

During the 1960's, the neighboring political upheaval in Guatemala, Bolivia, and Cuba prompted new questionings of the inequalities in Salvadoran society. In order to prevent a Socialist uprising, then-U.S. President John F. Kennedy implemented foreign tax reforms towards El Salvador. However, these reforms only pushed the already destitute working class further into poverty, stemming new thoughts of revolution not only in the minds of the people but also in the theology of the Catholic Church. Dubbed "[Liberation Theology](#)," the belief system claimed that the Church's role was to attempt to correct the sins of social inequalities. Spurned by these new ideas, Christian communities dedicated to helping El Salvador's peasants sprang up across the country, especially in rural areas.

Starting in the 1970's, the ruling conservative powers added to the police state by forming what came to be known as "[death squads](#)," which were secret police forces in charge of the murder, torture, and disappearance of many teachers, union organizers, students, and others who were perceived as a threat to the government. An early victim of these death squads was [Father Rutilio Grande](#), an influential Catholic priest who openly spoke out against the police state. Grande would most certainly not be the only case of violence against clergy by the death squads: seven other Catholic priests would be assassinated in the following two years.

Arguably the most influential Catholic layperson to emerge in El Salvador was [Oscar Romero](#), who, at the time of his death, served as the Archbishop of San Salvador.

Romero, who joined the revolutionary movement after a death squad attack on a small village in his diocese, quickly became the focal point of those who turned to the church for an answer to the ongoing violence. While losing support of many other Catholic laypersons in the country and abroad, he found it with many of the peasants in the countryside and poor urban areas. He was killed on March 24 of 1980 while delivering mass. [His killer has yet to be found.](#)

At the same time of Romero's rise to prominence, the marginalized and oppressed had created an organized front to resist the powerful government forces. This organization was called the [Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front \(FMLN\)](#), named after [Farabundo Marti](#), a farmer who led the workers' revolts in the 1930's. At its core, it was a union of five different resistance groups. However, as violence spread and more workers were killed, an increasing number of peasants joined the organization. The official beginning of the civil war soon followed the FMLN's inception.

The United States, under newly-elected President Ronald Reagan, offered support to the ruling government in order to stop what it saw as another example of the spread of Communism manifested in the FMLN. While not expressively Communist as a group, many of the FMLN's influential members identified as Communists or supported measures that appeared to the U.S. as Communistic, such as land redistribution and resource nationalization. The United States consequently sent military resources and millions of dollars in aid to stop the uprising.

Human rights abuses and brutal murders against peasants and other so-called revolutionary sources increased into the tens of thousands of cases in the course of the war. U.S. aid was halted briefly after the [rape and murder of four U.S. nuns by the death squads](#). However, the cessation was short lived, and even more rampant abuses of power followed in the next few years. Mass executions of peasants took place in the villages of [El Sumpul](#), Hacienda La Pena, La Raya, and most famously [El Mozote](#), a massacre in which over 1000 villagers were killed in a three-day period.

During this time, the ruling government, military officials, and death squad leaders joined forces politically to form the [National Republican Alliance \(ARENA\) Party](#), led by reputed death squad leader [Roberto D'Aubuisson](#). U.S. aid continued uninhibited until the brutal murder of [six Jesuit priests and two housekeepers](#) by Arena's elite Atlacatl military unit. After this incident, the U.S. cut their military and economic package in half.

After agreeing to concessions on each side, the war ended with the signing of the [1992 Peace Accords](#). While providing no answer to many social problems and economic issues, it did slowly put a stop to the violence that had plagued the country. It is estimated that 75,000 people died during the war, and a war crimes commission announced in 1995 that 90% of the human rights abuses in the war were carried out by the Arena Party.

Even though the war had ended, many of the same economic problems persisted: the ARENA party was still in power, as it had "won" fraudulent elections against the new-political party FMLN. The ARENA government adopted neoliberal economic policies similar to those advocated by U.S. Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush. These policies included being the first country to sign on to the Central American Free Trade Agreement, [switching to the dollar for currency](#), and adopting the U.S. embargo against Cuba. All of these policies contributed to making El Salvador one of Central

America's poorest nations. During the 1990's and early 2000's, it is estimated that 740 unemployed or underemployed Salvadorans fled to the U.S. daily to find income.

In 2009, the country's political landscape changed significantly as [Mauricio Funes](#) became the [first FMLN President of El Salvador](#). Funes, a journalist-turned politician, promised much more moderate policies than previous FMLN candidates. While several economic projects have been created by his administration, the country still struggles with gross economic inequality and staggering unemployment.

El Salvador is a new and fragile democracy in need of support to insure that this democratic country will succeed as such. Many changes have occurred since the end of the civil war in 1992, of note is the recent election of Mauricio Funes. This provides some insight into the strengthening of the FMLN party, the improved voice and activism of the poor and perhaps the potential for a better balance in the distribution of resources as the country moves forward.

ESNA will be walking with the rural poor in their journey, one community at a time. ESNA believes that through agricultural development and the integrated scaling up of social resources such as education and health rural communities in El Salvador can significantly improve their livelihoods, and become active, engaged citizens in the creation of an improved El Salvador. We welcome you on this journey and hope you will come with us to El Salvador to discover, learn, change and be changed.