
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

CIVIL SOCIETY IN A POSTWAR PERIOD: Labor in the Salvadoran Democratic Transition*

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Abstract: This research note seeks to offer some resolution to the theoretical disagreements over how democratization affects civil society, specifically in a transition toward democracy that occurs through pacted settlements of an armed internal conflict. Using a comparative study over time of the labor movement in El Salvador, the authors demonstrate that while unions of the political center and left have weakened since the signing of the Salvadoran Peace Accords, independent labor groups show higher levels of organizing and right-leaning unions have maintained nearly constant levels of organizing. But the labor movement has become atomized because unions have been unable to redefine their once-common political goals to adopt other unified stances in the postwar period. The data show that the unions that have relinquished excessively politicized stances or never claimed them are the ones that survive and sometimes grow in the postwar environment. These findings have implications for the nature of the emerging Salvadoran democracy and the economic well-being of its citizens.

From El Salvador to South Africa to Cambodia, peace accords have sought to bring an end to civil strife and state repression and to place those

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countries on a path toward reconciliation and democratic rule. The actors involved have hammered out a preliminary “blueprint” of the rules and institutions necessary for a stable transition to a long-lasting democracy. Such pacted agreements often include specific details on establishing or reconfiguring democratic rules and rights as well as specifying the roles of the essential state institutions and actors (such as the military, the police, and the judiciary). Yet in these accords, one set of actors often goes unmentioned. This set of actors—civil society—is often influential in pushing for a negotiated end to armed conflict but can be either an obstacle to democratization or a facilitator of it.¹ While pact makers outline specific expectations for many of the emerging structures, they generally fail to address how their reforms might affect the realms and channels of participation of voluntarily organized groups of citizens. In short, peace accords give little indication of what pact makers expect or desire from civil society during democratization.

In such postwar societies, what is the anticipated impact of a transition to democracy on the organized participation of citizens? Little is known on this subject in postwar settings, but among scholars of democratization more broadly, one finds basic disagreement on this question. Some argue that a successful transition to democracy enhances participation. Whereas authoritarian regimes are explicitly designed to close channels of political participation and to suppress political mobilization and dissent, democratization opens new opportunities for the articulation of citizens’ demands and frustrations. When this long-awaited opening of political space occurs, it may lead to an explosion of citizen involvement. Such an explosion can produce conflict between civil society and the state. By exerting too much pressure on the state and raising unrealistic expectations among citizens, this burgeoning may threaten to destabilize the emerging democracy. Scholars employing this perspective have proposed that elites structure society so that organizations like unions will be incorporated into political parties in order to reduce the number of actors competing for resources and access to the state.²

Other analysts contend that transitions to democracy may have a

1. The exception in this regard is that labor unions are usually included in socioeconomic pacts aimed at revising economic policies. Such pacts are generally forged well after the democratizing accord on rules, institutions, and actors. For a comparative discussion of such social pacts in Latin America, see Lechner (1985, 29–44). For an in-depth study of pacts in the Venezuelan case, see Karl (1987). We use the term *civil society* here to signify “the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules.” This definition is taken from Diamond (1996, 228).

2. This argument is most notably presented in Huntington (1968). The need to control participation through incorporation or institutionalization of groups in civil society into political parties is known as Huntington’s argument of “democratic distemper.”

demobilizing effect on the institutions of civil society. They argue that after spending years struggling against an oppressive government, organizations find it difficult to regroup and promote activity around new goals that are often nonpolitical. According to this perspective, organizational activity will crest and diminish as groups functioning in a democracy for the first time find the emerging rules of the participatory game more confusing than those of authoritarianism, view the state as co-opting their interests, or express frustration on having to compete with political parties for scarce resources. Such sentiments may lead to disillusionment with democracy and to the eventual disbanding of organizations (see O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986).

Do groups in civil society disappear, or do they continue participating when a repressive political system is displaced by democratization? This question is important because an accurate understanding of the new status and activity of citizens' organizations may yield much information about the resilience of emerging democracies in Central America, Eastern Europe, and Africa.³ In the extensive literature on democratization, scholars initially focused on state actors and institutions. More recently, however, scholars of democratic transition and consolidation have increasingly come to recognize that the consolidation of these democracies hinges on the role and development of civil society. As Larry Diamond, the editor of *Journal of Democracy*, has argued, "It is now clear that to comprehend democratic change around the world, one must study civil society. . . . Understanding civil society's role in the construction of democracy requires more complex conceptualization and nuanced theory. . . . We need to specify what civil society is and is not, and to identify its wide variations in form and character" (Diamond 1996, 228). Moreover, analysts must also identify whether and at what levels citizens participate, how they articulate demands, and through which channels they interact with the state. These are key points because under a democratic regime, citizens' organizations may fill a number of roles: they may act as a system of checks and balances on the state, serve as a learning ground for democratic principles, provide outlets for the articulation of unrepresented demands, stimulate participation in the political process, and bolster the economic livelihood of their members.

While civil society is now widely accepted as a linchpin of democratic consolidation, the question remains unresolved as to what form and character civil society will take after democratization. Several scholars have

3. The most notable is Pateman (1970). For a general conceptual discussion of participation by civil society after democratization, see O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986). For case-specific arguments about the participation of groups in civil society, see Canel (1992) and Cardoso (1992), both in Escobar and Alvarez (1992). The continuing importance of civil society in post-transition democracies is underscored in Mainwaring, O'Donnell, and Valenzuela (1992) and in Linz and Stepan (1996).

argued that different modes of transition are crucial determinants of whether democratization will succeed, which constraints the new democratic regime will face, and issue areas such as civil-military relations and economic performance.⁴ But few have focused on how modes of transition are likely to shape the role and level of participation of civil society.

This research note seeks to offer some resolution to the disagreements over how democratization affects civil society, specifically in cases of transition toward democracy that occur through pacted settlements of an armed internal conflict.⁵ We present here a study comparing the arena of union activity and its level and intensity in El Salvador during the authoritarian regimes of the 1970s and 1980s with the current state of labor groups after the peace accord, in the democratization of the 1990s. El Salvador was chosen as a rich case of a pacted, war-ending accord that was coupled with arrangements designed to institutionalize democratic rule. Given the widespread attention that scholars have paid to the peace process and the transition to democracy in El Salvador, it is surprising that civil society and unions in particular have been largely neglected.⁶

THE SALVADORAN CASE

On 1 May 1990, some eighty thousand workers marched through the dilapidated streets of San Salvador to celebrate International Workers' Day (May Day). This demonstration, the largest in civil society in ten years, revealed the growing strength of an urban labor movement that had been less active than the agricultural sector in the 1960s and early 1970s and was severely repressed by the government in the 1980s.⁷ In the first three years of the war, more than five thousand unionists were killed, and in the ensuing years, thousands more were detained, tortured, or forced into hiding.⁸ Although workers marched that day in 1990 for standard labor demands such as relief from the rising cost of living and an end to massive layoffs of public employees, the march displayed an evident political focus. Workers

4. Particularly notable is Agüero (1992) in Mainwaring, O'Donnell, and Valenzuela (1992).

5. These cases are a subset of what Terry Karl has termed *war transitions*. See Karl, Maphai, and Zamora (n.d.). See also Call (1998).

6. Among the more promising works available on the topic are Guido Béjar (1995), Arriola Palomares and Candray Alvarado (1994), and Anner and Quinteros (1994). While all three present excellent empirical data, none contains a theoretical basis for discussion. For a theoretical discussion of civil society in Central American transitions more generally, see Vilas (1996).

7. For background information on union organizing prior to the civil war, the foundational work is Menjivar (1979). See also Bollinger (1987) and Lungo (1987).

8. The fact that the regime targeted unionists indicates that they were viewed as a potentially threatening force and demonstrates the strength and mobilizing power of the union movement in the 1980s in El Salvador. The same may also be said of the peasant organizations, the women's movement, and some sectors of the Catholic Church.

were also demanding the right to organize, an end to human rights abuses, and a negotiated ending to the (now liberalized) authoritarian regime⁹ and civil war that had taken an estimated seventy-five thousand lives.

The 1991 cease-fire and the 1992 Salvadoran Peace Accords marked a hopeful end to the civil war as well as the beginning of democratization. El Salvador's mode of pacted transition has been buttressed by an active civil society that contributed significantly to breaking down six decades of authoritarian rule and to opening space for the negotiated agreement between the right-wing, military-supported ARENA government and the leftist guerrilla forces of the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional).¹⁰ Throughout the war and subsequent breakdown of the regime, labor was a dominant sector of civil society in El Salvador, reinforced by increasing acceptance of a neoliberal economic model. Within civil society, labor occupied the dominant position together with the peasant organizations in the early 1980s and subsequently with the women's movement, the churches, and refugee organizations in the latter half of the 1980s and into the early 1990s.¹¹

Yet despite the important role played by civil society in pushing for a pacted settlement and an end to the war, it received little attention in the peace accords. The only mention of social organizations appeared in Section 8, under "Forum for Economic and Social Consultation":

A forum shall be established in which representatives of the Government, labor and the business community shall participate on an equal footing for the purpose of working out a set of broad agreements on the economic and social development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants. . . . Among other things, the Government shall propose to the Forum for Economic and Social Consultation that existing

9. By the time the Salvadoran civil war ended, the regime in power could have been accurately categorized as either "liberalized authoritarianism" or "a limited democracy." We have chosen to use the first label because the apparatuses that upheld the repressive rules of the regime (such as the security forces and national police) were still in place until after the signing of the peace accords. And as Terry Karl has pointed out, the presence of elections and limited participation constitutes "electoralism" but does not in itself justify labeling a regime as "democratic." See Karl (1986).

10. Karl has provided an excellent overview of the peace process, arguing that the Salvadoran civil war ended in a stalemate (Karl 1992). On the peace process, see also Muncz (1993), Stahler-Sholk (1994), and United Nations (1993).

11. Civil society was able to claim such strength in El Salvador during the war for three reasons. First, because an absence of true competition and alternatives had discredited the electoral realm as a legitimate means of representing citizens' interests, civil society took over the role of representing demands and meeting needs. Second, much of civil society (including organized labor) owes its inception to the logistical and financial support of the FMLN, which often used groups in civil society as its political "front"; similarly, ARENA supported groups in civil society on the political right. Third, the civil war caused a high degree of politicization in the country, a situation that lends itself to group formation and mobilized activity on both ends of the political spectrum. For more on civil society in El Salvador during the war, see González (1991) and Foley (1996).

labor legislation be revised in order to promote and maintain a climate of harmonious labor relations, without prejudice to the unemployed and the public at large.¹²

Beyond the indication that the pact makers considered it necessary to provide for a revision of the labor code, it is entirely unclear what role they intended civil society to play in the emerging democracy, how it was to be structured, and through what channels it would act. We do not wish to ascribe intention to the pact makers, but we are interested in the effect of their negotiated accords on civil society.

El Salvador has an extremely circumscribed democratic tradition. Except for a short spurt of growth and electoral success in the late 1960s and early 1970s, opposition political parties did not become widespread at the national level until the late 1980s. The entire political spectrum did not participate freely in elections until 1994. Are unions now playing the dominant role in representing workers' demands and meeting their needs, or have political parties or the state taken over that function? Over the twelve-year civil war, Salvadoran labor unions were highly politicized. One labor sector often mounted demonstrations to protest the authoritarian regime or worked in conjunction with the FMLN, while a smaller sector actively supported the ruling government. Have unions now turned their attention back to more traditional labor issues, like wage increases or job security, or have they continued to focus on the political system itself? Have unions continued to participate at the same frenzied levels as under military rule? Have they moderated their activities, or have workers ceased to organize altogether?

To ask these questions in different terms, how does a change in the political environment affect citizens' organizations? Organization theory claims that groups like unions can avoid "organizational death" and may be capable of outliving a change in their political environment (in this case, when a pacted agreement brings an end to war and a move toward democratization).¹³ The explanation offered is that organizations can be highly flexible entities when their survival is at stake. On observing changes in the political rules, organizations respond accordingly, even though it may necessitate dramatic changes in the organization, its membership, or its goals. Supposedly, organizations can identify and subsequently react to the changes wrought by democratization (the opening of political space, new rules, the emergence of a contested electoral realm, an end to repression) and the end of civil war (a lessening of terror, a decline in politicization, new avenues for a nonviolent resolution of conflict). If so, then organizations can adjust their behavior and expectations to ride out the waves of uncertainty

12. See United Nations, *El Salvador Agreements: The Path to Peace* (San Salvador: Department of Public Information, UN Observer Mission in El Salvador, 1992), 83–84.

13. The most useful theoretical work on environmental change and organizational adaptation is March (1988).

that characterize regime transitions.¹⁴ In El Salvador, the first environmental change of interest here came with the program of political liberalization of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) in the mid-1980s, which provided an opening for increased labor organizing. A second change occurred in the international political environment in the late 1980s: the end of communism in the Soviet bloc and the cold war. These developments had profound implications for the Salvadoran political environment. On one side, the decade-long justification of the United States for funding the Salvadoran government in their "war against communism" no longer applied. On the other side, the FMLN's infrequent supply of weapons from Cuba and Nicaragua and indirectly from the Soviet Union came to a halt. Once available international support, particularly from USAID and European nongovernmental organizations, declined as funding organizations redefined their priorities to favor Eastern European social groups. An even more dramatic change occurred in the early 1990s, when the civil war ended and democratization coupled with an emergent neoliberal economic system changed nearly all the societal rules and norms that Salvadorans had accepted.¹⁵

No sector of civil society could have anticipated these changes in social environment as much as labor. As workers, their jobs and their ability to participate in civil society were linked inextricably to the economic and political changes affecting El Salvador. Thus the potential costs and opportunities have been high for unions. Whether, how, and to what extent unions are surviving this period of uncertainty in El Salvador will have far-reaching effects on the quality and stability of the country's democracy as well as on the economic well-being of Salvadorans.¹⁶

LEVELS OF UNION ORGANIZING

Among theorists and politicians, little consensus exists about what happens to organized participation following a transition toward democ-

14. On uncertainty of rules and norms as a defining characteristic of a transition in political regime (in this case from authoritarianism toward democracy), see O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986). In El Salvador, it was not until the final stages of the peace negotiations that such uncertainty began to exist amongst the general populace. Citizens were unclear about whether to follow the rules of the outgoing authoritarian regime or the possibly burgeoning democratic regime.

15. Much disagreement exists over the timing of the beginning of the transition toward democracy in El Salvador. Some date it in the early 1980s, when the authoritarian regime liberalized and began to allow limited participation and hold regularly scheduled elections. Others would place the start of democratization at the end of 1989, when it became clear that the United States was no longer willing to fund the Salvadoran government and military under the same set of authoritarian rules. We agree with those espousing a third opinion: that democratization did not begin until the final stages of the peace negotiations in the early 1990s (see Stahler-Sholk 1994).

16. On the linkages between unionization and economic development, see Arriola Palomares (1994).

rary. One finds virtually no mention of the cases in which civil society is also confronted with a postwar situation. Whereas Samuel Huntington (1968) argued that democratization will likely lead to a participatory boom, Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter (1986) suggested paradoxically that participation will crest and diminish after a transition. This contradiction pervades the literature in part because scholars, embroiled in theoretical debates, have failed to do the simple task of counting. Carole Pateman asserted, "most theorists have been content to accept Giovanni Sartori's assurance that the inactivity of the ordinary man is 'nobody's fault' and to take the facts as given for the purpose of theory building" (Pateman 1970, 100). Yet without an actual tally of the varying number of organizations and participants over time, analysts cannot accept human inactivity as a given, much less identify the variable producing the supposed inactivity. Therefore while the ensuing sections of this research note address the qualitative transformations of unions, this section seeks to outline the quantitative shifts in Salvadoran labor groups and their membership wrought by changes in their environment.¹⁷ The results are somewhat incomplete but will surprise some, given that certain numbers challenge the widely accepted assumption that organized participation declines significantly or disappears following democratization. This "head count" of unions over time will serve as a first step toward understanding the status of labor during postwar democratization.

How can levels of organized participation be gauged? This question is vital because how one measures participation derives directly from how one defines it. This study uses three principal measurements that will be taken together to indicate the degree to which unions participate: the number of organizations, the numbers of members, and the amount of union activities. We thus define union organizing numerically in terms of collectivities, affiliation, and action. Ideally, labor organizing should also be defined and measured in terms of the intensity of the activities, the influence of the unions, and the commitment of the workers. Unfortunately, such quantitative data are not available for Latin American labor sectors, although subsequent sections will address some of these issues qualitatively.¹⁸

Where possible, data were collected for union organizing in three periods: the prewar period of façade democracy (prior to 1980); the liberalizing but still repressive authoritarian regime coupled with civil war

17. In organization theory, this approach is known as "population ecology." It predicts deaths over births of organizations, discusses organizational survival, and stresses the importance of the environment in studying populations of organizations. According to this model, the hallmark of success is survival and adaptation of organizations through a process of selection. See Carroll (1984) and Hannan and Freeman (1977).

18. In this study, the terms *labor participation*, *labor organization*, and *labor organizing* are used interchangeably. In the few instances where the term *mobilization* is unavoidably used, it is meant to signify levels of organized activity.

(1980–1992); and the current period of reconciliation and democratization (1992 to the present).¹⁹ A review of overall unionization figures during these three periods yields relatively stable rates of affiliation. As table 1 demonstrates, unionization rates as a percentage of the economically active population (EAP) have varied narrowly between 2.5 and 5.6.²⁰ The absolute number of those affiliated with unions has risen from a low of 55,000 in 1978 to a current high of 118,000. The number of unions has varied between a low of 92 in 1982 to a high of 127 in 1975–1976. A more detailed analysis of the data, broken down according to sectors and political affinity, indicates that more fluctuation has occurred than the numbers indicate at first glance.

Unionization in the manufacturing sector experienced the most dramatic decline, while construction displayed the largest increase. Union affiliates in the manufacturing sector accounted for 27 percent of the total unionized workforce in 1986 but only 13 percent in 1994. Over the same period, unionization in construction rose from 42 percent of the total to 70 percent. Unionization in the service sector remained relatively stable.

19. The quantitative evidence presented in this research note was compiled from statistics from the Salvadoran Ministry of Labor as well as from interviews with union leaders. A few caveats on the data are in order. First, it is extremely difficult to collect data on organizations under authoritarian rule. Military rule instills fear in the population, which leads citizens and organizations to “cover their tracks.” During the height of the repression, most groups took protective measures by keeping neither membership records nor minutes of meetings. Opposition newspapers also protected clandestine organizations by not reporting on them or not disclosing the names of participants. In other instances, journalists attempted to give more legitimacy to opposition forces by inflating their estimates of how many people attended protests and rallies. Second, the only consistent source of data on unions in El Salvador over time is the national Ministerio de Trabajo y Provisión Social. Yet statistics from the INE (the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas within the labor ministry) count only those organizations that have *personalidad jurídica*, a legal status that organizations obtain by registering their existence with the state. The state therefore does not count illegal public-sector “associations” as unions. If the public sector were incorporated into the data, it would likely soften (although not eradicate) the decline of the political left and the center. Third, a selection bias inevitably exists toward groups that survive because of the obstacles involved in tracking the death of organizations. It is almost impossible to locate past leaders of organizations that have disbanded and to reconstruct accurately the life and death of a defunct group. Also, much uncertainty exists as to whether, how often, and how reliably data centers “clean” their lists and purge them of dead organizations. Much like the stories about individuals who have been dead for years but still receive pension checks or appear on voter lists, many organizations may continue to be counted long after they have ceased to function.

20. In determining unionization rates, one is left to ask, “unionized as a percentage of what?” Using the economically active population (EAP), as we have done here, is considered an international standard and the most accurate statistic available. But the EAP has its limitations. A more accurate measurement might take as a point of reference the total number of unionizable workers. Yet in El Salvador, the unemployed, informal-sector workers, and public employees cannot unionize, which is the reason the rate of unionization appears to be so low.

TABLE 1 Salvadoran Unionization Rates as a Percentage of the Economically Active Population, 1975–1994

Year	Number of Unions	Number of Union Affiliates	Economically Active Population	Union Affiliates as a % of EAP
1975	127	63,545	1,281,000	4.96
1976	127	64,986	1,317,000	4.93
1977	124	76,085	1,353,000	5.62
1978	119	55,211	1,389,000	3.97
1979	123	65,591	1,425,000	4.60
1980	124	71,062	1,461,000	4.86
1981	125	71,091	1,506,400	4.72
1982	92	60,332	1,551,800	3.89
1983	124	78,194	1,597,200	4.90
1984	120	69,215	1,642,600	4.21
1985	94	78,532	1,688,000	4.65
1986	97	91,230	1,892,000	4.82
1987	98	72,668	1,955,000	3.72
1988	99	70,815	2,016,795	3.51
1989	103	72,769	2,078,590	3.50
1990	96	71,224	2,140,385	3.33
1991	99	60,960	2,202,180	2.77
1992	101	55,697	2,263,975	2.46
1993	103	74,274	2,320,000	3.20
1994	113	118,000	2,380,000	4.96

Source: Data from the Ministerio de Trabajo y Provisión Social, El Salvador.

Why the dramatic rise in unionization in the construction industry? The primary reason is that the 6 percent growth rate of the Salvadoran economy has gone largely into erecting new office buildings and dwellings in the postwar period. But the boom in construction alone does not explain the dramatic rise in unionization in this sector. Other factors are at play here as well. Construction is virtually the only sector in El Salvador that operates under a closed-shop system. As the leader of a major labor federation explained, “If you aren’t in a union, you don’t get a job.”²¹ Given the fact that construction projects are relatively short-lived, construction companies have found it easier to hire labor for new projects through a union. They can thus avoid costly and time-consuming hiring processes and can give preferential treatment to conservative unions.

An analysis of unionization corresponding to political affinity²² indi-

21. Authors’ interview with Felix Blanco, leader of the CTS and diputado representing the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), 24 Jan. 1996. All translation of interviews was done by the authors.

22. *Political affinity* is defined here as those unions having an articulated ideology or political project, which in the Salvadoran case corresponds to the political right (the PCN and ARENA), the center (the PDC), and the left (FMLN).

cates that the sectors tied most closely to a specific political project have suffered the most dramatic setbacks in levels of affiliation. Throughout the war, two major political blocs coexisted within the labor movement. The center unions, organized under UNOC (Unión Nacional Obrero-Campesino), were committed to a counterinsurgency project funded by AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development). The leftist unions, whose funding and political agenda were linked to the FMLN, sought a radical societal transformation. Both these labor factions have experienced significant decreases in their membership. The right-leaning unions, largely free of direct links with political parties and the government, have shown a relative degree of stability since 1989.²³ The unions of the independent sector have evidenced marked growth since the signing of the peace accords.²⁴

Having established that labor organizations have not disappeared in significant numbers during the postwar democratization, we now want to understand how their levels of activity—as measured in terms of strikes, protests, and collective contract agreements—may have changed over time. The data also demonstrate continuing (although fluctuating) activity among unions. The information summarized in table 2 indicates that the number of workers covered by collective contracts since the El Salvadoran Peace Accords has neither increased nor declined dramatically (except in the construction industry). The data on strikes give the first impression that such activity was erratic during the war and declining since 1992. But these statistics are far from accurate, given that the Ministerio de Trabajo y Provisión Social records only “legal strikes” and excludes most strikes from such official recognition. For example, while the ministry registered only ten strikes in 1993, nongovernmental observers counted thirty-three strikes (Anner and Quinteros 1994, 6).

The best available measure of the level of activity and politicization of the Salvadoran labor movement is participation in the annual International Workers’ Day (May Day) marches. These data show great fluctuation over the last decade, but it may be generalized that when levels of labor membership increase in the politicized leftist and center sectors, corresponding levels of labor activity increase dramatically. For example, when levels of leftist union affiliation peaked in 1986, participation in the march reached a new high for the war years. Union activity levels reached an all-time high in 1990, when leftist and center unions combined their organizing efforts following their electoral loss to the right-wing ARENA.

23. The largest of the right-leaning organizations, the CGS (Central General Sindical), was once closely tied to the PCN. But with the decline of the PCN and the lack of a corporatist tradition in ARENA, the CGS has remained politically independent on the whole.

24. By “independent,” we are referring to those unions that are not affiliated with a federation or confederation. This label does not necessarily imply that they are completely independent of political ideology, but the correlation between independent and nonideological unions is high.

TABLE 2 *Collective Contracts, Strikes, and May Day Participation among Salvadoran Unions, 1975–1994*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Workers Covered by Collective Contracts</i>	<i>Number of Collective Contracts</i>	<i>Workers Involved</i>	<i>Participants in May Day</i>
1975	63,153	14	2,902	
1976	60,355	5	25,910	
1977	63,447	19	32,879	
1978	75,521	29	7,169	
1979	85,145	103	29,432	
1980	54,589	42	13,904	
1981	70,559	15	5,324	
1982	67,508	4	373	
1983	112,502	15	2,680	
1984	66,603	36	26,311	10,000
1985	102,216	54	30,336	20,000
1986	63,331	54	18,251	50,000
1987	44,250	25	3,963	16,800
1988	43,647	36	4,405	20,000
1989	64,056	31	50,937	15,000
1990	66,447	20	3,914	80,000
1991	61,471	26	4,129	10,000
1992	66,542	47	127,365	
1993	92,872	36	105,041	
1994		12	4,162	7,000

Sources: Data provided by the Ministerio de Trabajo y Provisión Social, El Salvador, Proceso, and Estudios Centroamericanos (ECA).

Depending on how one interprets these data, Huntington and O'Donnell and Schmitter were either partly right or partly mistaken. The postwar democratization in El Salvador has led to neither a boom nor a bust in overall labor organizing. Some unions have diminished significantly, while others have grown. The data uphold O'Donnell and Schmitter's claim that political mobilization (activity) of groups in civil society declines as a country democratizes—but levels of union affiliation do not. Our head count of organizations provides a preliminary indication of how democratization may affect civil society, but there is clearly more involved in these organizational fluctuations than the numbers indicate. Many unions have survived and adapted to the changes in their environment, but only by moving away from politics.

WHY THE DECLINE OF UNIONISM ON THE LEFT AND IN THE CENTER?

For years during the Salvadoran civil war, leftist labor groups served as the strategic rear guard for the guerrillas while the center labor unions functioned as the mainstay of the U.S. counterinsurgency program.

Their levels of funding, activity, and affiliation ranked higher than those of most of the rightist and independent unions throughout the war. Expectations ran high that labor groups would be able to sustain such levels of organizing in the postwar period, but they have not. The number of workers affiliated with unions on the political left and center decreased by more than half between 1988 and 1994. Why have these unions declined so rapidly in the postwar period? Scholars using organization theory would suggest that it was the groups' youth and rigidity or the competition for resources and members that led to the organizational decline. Such elements did not exist in El Salvador. Instead, four environmental and strategic factors account for the disintegration of the leftist and center unions.

First, the strategy of politicization adopted by many leftist and center unions rendered those organizations unprepared for the changes in society brought on by democratization and the end of the war. The authoritarian period, particularly the civil war years, was a highly politicized phase for social organizations. Circumstances encouraged unions to become politicized. The leader of one Christian Democratic union stated outright, "We were obligated to politicize ourselves."²⁵ Some political factions chose to exploit the situation further by encouraging unions to radicalize in support of the revolutionary or counterinsurgency movements. The center labor groups, organized through UNOC, were not interested in traditional unionism. They sought instead to provide a social base for the Christian Democrats and the U.S. program of counterinsurgency.²⁶ Likewise, the goal of the unions associated with the FMLN was not to pursue "bread and butter" unionism but rather to wear down the regime. As the FMLN labor attaché argued, "With the dictatorship, it was difficult to have a simply economic strike. Everything transcended to a political level."²⁷

In the context of authoritarianism and civil war, political parties and unions made strategic decisions. By bringing international attention to human rights abuses by the regime as well as occasionally paralyzing the country with national strikes, unions undoubtedly helped bring about a negotiated settlement to the war. But precisely because they were so adept at the political struggle, they were not ready for what was to follow.

As mentioned, the 1970s and early years of the war brought repression on labor unions and hurt their levels of affiliation and activity. As the

25. Authors' interview with Felix Blanco, leader of the CTS and diputado representing the Partido Demócrata Cristiano, 24 Jan. 1996.

26. Authors' interview with Amanda Villatoro, former leader of UNOC, 24 Jan. 1996. Regarding U.S. funding of UNOC (through AIFLD), a U.S. government official stated, "our political goal was balancing the [FMLN] guerrillas, indisputably, trying to defeat them." Authors' interview in January 1996, San Salvador.

27. Authors' interview with Francisco Martínez, former leader of the Unidad Nacional de los Trabajadores Salvadoreños and current FMLN "labor attaché," 23 Jan. 1996.

United States stepped up military aid to El Salvador, it also began a parallel program aimed at bolstering a viable political center (through the Christian Democrats) and opening political space for social groups to maintain a semblance of democracy. From 1984 to 1986, leftist unions together with the FMLN chose to take advantage of the Christian Democrats' liberalization to build a broad nonconfrontational movement. They formed the *Unidad Nacional de los Trabajadores Salvadoreños* (UNTS), which unified leftist workers and brought in independent (politically nonaligned) groups like the *Central de Trabajadores Salvadoreños* (CTS). Figures show that levels of union affiliation and activity reached a high in 1986. But the FMLN was already planning a new approach. According to its leaders, passive demonstrations—no matter how large they might be—were not enough to provoke a radical transformation of the regime. An “insurrection” was needed, if not to topple the government, then at least to achieve significant changes through negotiations. To prepare for what was to become the November 1989 offensive, the FMLN chose to radicalize their sector of the labor movement. In the words of leftist labor leader Francisco Martínez, “We created activists for sabotage and mobilizations, not for sustained organizational activity.”²⁸

Nonconfrontational and well-attended demonstrations were replaced with violent marches involving as few as two hundred labor activists. They set up roadblocks and threw Molotov cocktails at the police, paralyzing much of San Salvador. Less radical center organizations like the CTS decided to withdraw from the UNTS. Participation declined in the remaining UNTS unions to only the most militant workers. As a leader of the CTS explained, “We were in the UNTS for eight months, and we withdrew because it was too politicized, radicalized—they had demonstrations where they burned buses.”²⁹

The data show a decline in activity and levels of leftist labor organizing from 1987 to 1989. At the same time, center labor groups were suffering a crisis of their own. Their support for José Napoleón Duarte and the *Partido Demócrata Cristiano* (PDC) did not translate into improved living conditions for their members. AIFLD funding dramatically increased during this period and thus achieved its goal of dividing and weakening several important leftist unions, but it also tended to corrupt UNOC leaders.³⁰ For example, AIFLD's lack of financial oversight on the millions of dollars given to UNOC in the late 1980s created a rumored opportunity for UNOC leaders to misuse the funds. As one U.S. government official explained, “In order to have corruption in these unions, you need a corrupter and a cor-

28. *Ibid.*

29. Authors' interview with Blanco, 24 Jan. 1996.

30. For additional information on AIFLD's role in El Salvador, see Montgomery (1995, 191–95).

ruptee—we were the former and UNOC was the latter.”³¹ Rumors of financial mismanagement, compounded by what some viewed as unwelcome U.S. involvement in their organization’s political agenda, splintered the UNOC coalition.³² Thereafter, union membership and organized activity on the political left and in the center began to decline.

By 1990 two important developments were affecting the politicized stances of labor unions. First, the right-wing ARENA party had defeated the PDC both in the electoral realm and in the number of party members. The PDC was shrinking rapidly. Second, the FMLN offensive of 1989 made it evident that the armed conflict had reached a stalemate and that the government would have to negotiate more than just the terms of the FMLN’s surrender. With the political center defeated at the polls and the left realizing that an outright military victory was unlikely, groups in the two labor sectors changed their strategies toward supporting a pacted settlement to the war. At that point, the largest demonstration since the start of the war occurred. At least eighty thousand workers participated when many leftist and center unions joined forces on International Workers’ Day in 1990 to clamor for negotiations (see table 2).

The 1992 Peace Accords significantly altered the environment in which labor was to function. Labor leaders, having achieved their political goal, had to confront the challenge of how to begin to improve the basic social and economic conditions of their workers—an issue that had taken a backseat to political goals throughout the war. What they soon realized was that the political instruments (or institutions) that they created during the war were inadequate for such an undertaking. Amanda Villatoro, leader of UNOC during the 1980s, claimed, “For UNOC, the peace accords signaled a new stage. UNOC was born with the war and because of the war, and it had to die with the end of the war.”³³ Although labor leaders recognized that these old institutions had served their purpose and should be discarded or radically altered, to date they have not been able to create new labor forces that can meet the challenges of participating in a democratizing postwar society.

This inability to adapt during the period following the accords applies to the unions of both the political center and the left. Some acknowledged their loss as part of a greater struggle. The FMLN labor attaché explained their strategy, “In 1986 . . . , the idea was to create a strong group of the masses that could mobilize for the struggle and to radicalize the move-

31. Anonymous interview with a U.S. government official, Jan. 1996, San Salvador.

32. Accounts of UNOC’s mishandling of AIFLD funds were outlined to us in two anonymous interviews with different subjects in January 1996. On the splintering of UNOC, one asked, “Who is going to belong to a coalition, to pay dues to it, if they know the leaders are abusing their positions?”

33. Authors’ interview with Amanda Villatoro, 24 Jan. 1996.

ment to prepare them to take up arms [for the 1989 offensive]. We had to confront the birth of UNOC and the destruction of the unions [by AIFLD's parallel 'phantom unions']. From 1986 onward, our objective was the insurgence." When asked if he considered the politicization and radicalization of the movement to have been a strategic error, the labor attaché replied, "No. Some see it as an error, but I think that it was right. It was part of the general plan [of the FMLN]." ³⁴ Although cognizant that their strategy of politicization might lead to an eventual weakening of their labor groups, the leaders of the FMLN and its corresponding labor supporters chose to place their political goals above all else.

The second factor leading to the decline of leftist and center unions was that political parties and elected leaders did not prioritize labor issues in the immediate postwar period. Among leftist unions, the level of politicization was so high that labor leaders had come to depend on party leaders for guidance and direction in their daily tasks. When this input was no longer forthcoming from the parties, leftist unions found themselves with little direction and few capable leaders of their own. In the case of the FMLN, for a period of nearly three years after the war, the party was concerned with nonlabor issues: legalizing their party, preparing for the 1994 elections, implementing the peace accords, and dealing with growing internal divisions. Thus the FMLN leaders virtually abandoned the unions. By 1994 growing tensions within the FMLN developed into a complete split, with the splintered Resistencia Nacional (RN) and the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) distancing themselves from the stances of former labor allies. ³⁵ Leaders Joaquín Villalobos and Eduardo Sancho (Fermán Cienfuegos) have even questioned the need for trade unions in a postwar society. ³⁶ Only since 1995 has the FMLN begun to evidence renewed interest in labor and labor issues. Such interest has been manifested largely in terms of proclamations rather than actions. It is still too early to tell what effect, if any, this approach may have on leftist unions.

A third factor in the decline, particularly of center unions, was overreliance on international funding. The dramatic reduction in international support for labor organizing during postwar democratization has severely effected the Salvadoran labor movement. Throughout the 1980s, the leftist

34. Authors' interview with Francisco Martínez, 23 Jan. 1996.

35. The RN (Resistencia Nacional) and the ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo) were both founding members of the FMLN. The RN had long been viewed as a more moderate, social-democratic tendency. The ERP was considered more militaristic but less ideologically defined. It often shifted from one political extreme to another on the left end of the spectrum. As the end of the war approached, ERP leaders such as Joaquín Villalobos began promoting a more centralist position and found common cause with the RN.

36. See Villalobos (1992). The ERP never had much presence in the union movement, unlike the RN, which was highly involved in mobilizing labor behind its revolutionary project. Current union support for these organizations is virtually nonexistent.

and center unions were particularly dependent on foreign funding. While the rightist Central General Sindical (CGS) acquired most of its funds from union dues, the center Central de Trabajadores Democráticos (CTD) and the leftist Federación de Asociaciones y Sindicatos Independientes de El Salvador (FEASIES) and the Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (FENASTRAS) received well over half of their funds from "international cooperation."³⁷ For example, the U.S. government's AIFLD project greatly expanded in El Salvador in the mid-1980s to accomplish specific political objectives: to build a social base to support the Duarte regime (through UNOC), and to counterbalance labor organizations (mainly the UNTS) with strong ties to the guerrillas. The organization and problems of workers themselves were only secondary objectives of AIFLD. As a result, when U.S. interest in Central America fell off with the end of the cold war and the beginning of several democratization processes in the region, AIFLD's funding of center unions declined dramatically. In El Salvador, the AIFLD project was terminated in late 1996.³⁸

Yet some instances also indicate a spiral effect in which international funding bodies reduced their levels of cooperation not out of a lack of funds but in reaction to corruption, internal divisions, and changes of political orientation within the labor movement. Such reductions in funding only abetted dispersion among unions. Perhaps the best example was FENASTRAS, the largest and strongest labor organization on the left throughout the war, which received over 90 percent of its budget from European sources. In 1993, despite increasing support from Europeans, infighting and financial improprieties among leaders (instigated by the strategic errors, changes in environment, and corruption noted) caused a 40 percent decline in membership. In response to this internal dissension, European sources cut off all funding of FENASTRAS in 1994. After this dramatic curtailment, FENASTRAS lost over half of its remaining members. In this case, the reduction of international funding did not initiate but only aggravated the decline of what was once the most important leftist labor federation in El Salvador.³⁹

The fourth and last factor was that unions were confronted not only with shifting political rules and the end of a civil war but with a changed economic environment. The late 1970s and 1980s had witnessed govern-

37. Taken from authors' polling of individual unions in 1993.

38. Authors' interview with Clemente Hernández, AIFLD Director in El Salvador, 29 Jan. 1996, San Salvador. For more background information on the AIFLD project in El Salvador, see Norton (1985).

39. Data on FENASTRAS were compiled from the Salvadoran Ministry of Labor and the authors' interviews and archival research. Canadian, Dutch, Norwegian, and Danish labor organizations have all stated that they are interested in continuing project cooperation in El Salvador, but they are waiting for signs of renewed unity and effectiveness within the labor movement.

ments throughout Latin America encouraging the adoption of neoliberal economics by privatizing public companies and creating free-trade zones within their borders. El Salvador jumped on the neoliberal bandwagon in the late 1980s. The unions that had long focused on mobilizing in the streets around politics, thereby neglecting to organize in the workplace around traditional labor issues, were particularly unprepared for the changes brought on by the new economic model. Neoliberalism promotes small government and market forces above all, and unions are viewed as monopolies that inhibit the smooth functioning of a proper market economy. According to this doctrine, for regional economies to grow, flexible (meaning nonunion) labor markets are considered a necessity. In El Salvador, this approach has meant the loss of more than fifteen thousand public-sector jobs (mainly via Government Decree Number 471 in 1995). As a result, public-sector labor organizations were greatly weakened. Furthermore, opening the economy has created a boom in export-processing plants (*maquiladoras*) at the expense of domestic industry. Maquiladoras are well known for union-busting, whereas unions in the domestic industry have been less difficult to organize.⁴⁰ Although the politicized labor sectors on the political left and the center were unprepared and therefore hurt by this change in the economic system, unions on the political right have also felt the adverse consequences.

WHY HAVE THE RIGHT AND INDEPENDENT SECTORS SURVIVED?

Despite the environmental changes and strategic decisions that have damaged leftist and center labor groups, right-leaning and independent unions have not suffered a decline in organizational levels in El Salvador's postwar democratization. Independent unions, which accounted for only 7.4 percent of all union affiliates at the peak of political polarization during the war, accounted for 53.1 percent of the total by 1994. In that year, almost sixty-three thousand unionized workers were classified as independent, compared with less than seven thousand in 1986.

Four strategic and environmental factors explain these unions' ability to adapt to the changing political system. First, they represent unions that either focused strictly on bread-and-butter union issues (largely true of the CGS unions) or at least did not become excessively politicized (usually the case with the newly declared independent unions). Thus when the war ended, these unions were in a better position to focus on economic and social issues.⁴¹ A clear case of the survival ability of newly declared indepen-

40. The reason is that export-processing plants depend on a large mass of cheap labor (which often accounts for more than half of costs). The slightest increase in wages and benefits dramatically influences profit margins. In domestic industries, wages often account for less than a tenth of costs, providing unions with greater possibilities for negotiating.

dent labor organizations is the electric workers association, ATCEL (Asociación de Trabajadores de la Comisión Ejecutiva Hidroeléctrica del Río Lempa). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Salvadoran electric company workers were organized in STECEL (Sindicato de Trabajadores de Empresa de la Comisión Ejecutiva Hidroeléctrica del Río Lempa) and led some of the largest and most politicized labor struggles in Salvadoran history. Throughout that time, STECEL was affiliated with FENASTRAS and consequently with FAPU (Frente de Acción Popular Unificada), which was connected in turn to the RN. As a result of their strike activity and political ties, STECEL was the target of much repression. Following the second general strike of 1980, which they led, some thirty members of the union were killed, and the entire eleven-member executive committee was jailed for over four years. The union was permanently dissolved via a government decree. When workers were finally able to reorganize as ATCEL in the middle to late 1980s, they did so cautiously, concerned about becoming too politicized. While sympathetic to the political left, members chose to keep their distance from the UNTS. Leaders spent most of their time visiting work centers throughout the country and attending to members' basic needs and concerns. ATCEL is now considered an independent union and one of the strongest labor organizations in the country.⁴²

Second, right-leaning unions have not experienced a significant crisis in the postwar period because much of their readjustment had taken place earlier. The faction that we have labeled as "the union right" represents El Salvador's corporatist union tradition. Promoted by the military governments of the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PNC) of the 1960s, this model first encountered difficulties in the 1970s. For example, the CGS was founded in 1958 and peaked in the 1960s with the rise of the Central American Common Market. As El Salvador's clearest example of the corporatist union tradition, it is what Hector Dada Hirezi refers to as "*sindicalismo desde el estado*." For a time, the CGS alliance with business and government paid off. As GDP rose by an average 14 percent between 1960 and 1966, the industrial workforce grew and so did real wages. But the pie was not as evenly divided as hoped,⁴³ nor was job creation able to keep up with demand. The model entered into crisis. The CGS suffered its first split in 1968 and then a second one in 1972, after the collapse of the CACM. In 1974 the CGS lost about half its members when several unions split to form the

41. Whether they have been successful or not in attaining these new goals is another story. In this sense, postwar difficulties for these unions may have more to do with economic factors than with political determinants.

42. Authors' interviews with various STECEL and ATCEL leaders and members, including Héctor Bernabe Recinos, July 1989.

43. On average, the participation of salaries between 1959 and 1968 never exceeded 20 percent of the value added in the industrial sector. See Molina Arvalo (1988, 76).

leftist FENASTRAS federation. Weakened and lacking an effective strategy, the CGS remained on the sidelines during most of the highly politicized 1970s—at least until the 1979 October coup, when the CGS took one of its most political and risky positions to date. Together with FESINCONTRANS (Federación de Sindicatos de la Industria de la Construcción, Similares, Transporte y de Otras Actividades), it backed the Revolutionary Proclamation of the Armed Forces. Both organizations were subsequently marginalized and then excluded from decision making with the governing junta. The CGS's brief experiment with political participation came to an end, and it pursued bread-and-butter unionism for the remainder of the decade. Accustomed to having friends if not allies in government, the CGS had to adjust further when the Christian Democrats won the presidency in 1984, and rightist unions found themselves out of favor with the government and related sources of funding.⁴⁴

Third and perhaps most important, much of the rightist unions' strength comes from the construction sector. Due to the closed-shop nature of the industry, these unions have been able to capitalize on El Salvador's postwar construction boom. Between 1992 and 1994, the number of union-affiliated construction workers more than tripled. Of the fourteen unions belonging to the right-leaning CGS, one construction workers' union (the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Construcción y Conexos Salvadoreños, or STCCS) accounts for 79 percent of the total membership. At the same time, some 55 percent of the independent sector comes from the construction industry. Economic indicators anticipate a decline in the construction industry that will likely be reflected in a corresponding decline in the unionization rates of right-leaning and independent unions.⁴⁵

Finally, a part of the "growth" of the independent sector is attributable to organizational flight. In recent years, some of the most prominent unions from the political center and the left have concluded that it was necessary to depoliticize in the postwar era and consequently have declared themselves independent of preexisting labor federations.⁴⁶ An important example on the left of the political spectrum includes workers of the public water company, organized in SETA (Sindicato de Empresa de Trabajadores de la Administración Nacional de Acueductos y Alcantarillados), who have chosen to leave FENASTRAS and have not joined any other federation to

44. We are indebted to Simon Henshaw, U.S. Embassy labor attaché, for his insights on this argument. Authors' interview with Henshaw, 19 Jan. 1996, San Salvador.

45. "Porqué baja el PIB? Alto crecimiento pero . . .," *La Prensa Gráfica*, 23 Jan. 1996.

46. Important examples on the political left include SETA and SICAFE (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria del Café), which chose to disaffiliate from FENASTRAS and to date have chosen not to join any other federation. In the center, unions such as the SUTC and SIPES never belonged to a federation previously but were active members of UNOC. With the decision to disband UNOC, these organizations were still considered independent as of 1994. They later decided to form a new "apolitical federation" named FUGTS.

date. At the union's assembly meeting in February 1996, workers demanded that their leaders spend more time dealing strictly with their own concerns rather than with political matters or even the problems of other labor sectors. In the center, unions like SUTC (Sindicato Unión de Trabajadores de la Construcción) and SIPES (Sindicato de la Industria Portuaria de El Salvador) never belonged to a federation but were active members of Christian Democrat-inspired labor coalition, UNOC. With the decision to disband UNOC as of 1994, these organizations were still considered independent. They later decided to form a new "apolitical federation," the Federación Unión General de Trabajadores Salvadoreños (FUGTS). In sum, the decline of unions on the political left and center does not necessarily signify organizational death for all those groups. It does, however, reflect a growing tendency among some Salvadoran unions to depoliticize and focus on daily socioeconomic issues. Others have undergone a radical transformation or have declared themselves "unattached" to a particular party or federation and are now classified as "independent" by the Ministerio de Trabajo y Previsión Social. This gain for the independent sector is registered by the ministry as a loss for the leftist and center unions. But as discussed in the preceding section, this reclassification of unions is only one of several explanations of the decline of leftist and center labor.

On closer examination, some 85 percent of the growth of the independent sector and almost all of the growth of the right-wing sector has resulted from the expansion of the construction workers' unions. The remaining growth of the independent sector is predominately due to organizational flight from center or left-leaning labor organizations. Despite the pressures of democratization, some right-leaning labor groups have survived and at times adapted to their changing political system.

CONCLUSION

The central question remains, does organized participation of citizens increase after democratization, as argued by Huntington, or does it decrease and demobilize, as O'Donnell and Schmitter have proposed? Unfortunately, the answer is not as clear-cut as either hypothesis suggests. The Salvadoran case demonstrates that as groups become less politicized in the wake of democratization, they leave behind much unoccupied public space. This space, which originally served organizations well under the dictatorship, is then repossessed by the state and political parties or labeled as "not useful" or "inaccessible" by the organizations' leaders. The transition in El Salvador led to a paradoxical situation for civil society. Unions and their affiliates are more numerous now than during the authoritarian prewar or civil war stages (as Huntington predicted), yet unionists perceive that the emerging democracy may be less participatory and representative overall (as O'Donnell and Schmitter predicted). Our research suggests that

both theories may be operating at too general a level. By generalizing about levels of participation across civil society, these scholars have missed the peculiarities that occur within civil society. For example, politicized unions are likely to respond differently to a change in their political environment than those that focus only on bread-and-butter labor issues. Understanding the fate of civil society following a transition to democracy thus requires analyzing the mode of transition and examining different sectors within civil society.

War transitions may pose different obstacles to civil society than nonwar transitions. In El Salvador, the transition toward peace and limited democracy has created much confusion and dispersion within the labor movement but has not brought about its complete demise. Extremely politicized labor groups, mainly those linked to the FMLN and the Christian Democrats, entered into profound crises as a result of the dramatically altered political environment ushered in by the peace accord. Yet base-level unions and labor organizations that did not become highly politicized, mainly those in the rightist corporatist tradition, have survived and in some cases grown. In sum, the theories of Huntington and O'Donnell and Schmitter prove inadequate for capturing these complex dynamics in civil society.

This study of El Salvador, a country that has experienced a democratic transition combined with a negotiated end to civil war, offers several hypotheses that should be explored in analyzing other "war transitions" such as those in South Africa, Mozambique, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. First, the exigencies of war leave some sectors of civil society especially unprepared to function after the conflict. Those who survived and expanded under authoritarianism and civil war often lose under democracy, and previous losers may now flourish. Second, a negotiated settlement creates space for civil society but also reaffirms the leading role of elites and parties and the marginalization of civil society because pacts are arranged by elites according to their interests. Third, a negotiated settlement means the absence of outright victory and thus a plurality with which to begin cultivating a culture of bargaining rather than exclusion. Fourth, political transitions mean financial challenges for civil society because the end of war dries up many funding sources, and organizations find themselves competing not only for members but for funds from domestic and international sources. Fifth, while the political system may become more democratic after a war transition, civil society may retain undemocratic characteristics. Within organizations, equality, consensus-building, and the rule of law are usually sacrificed during a war.

Finally, a war itself has four effects. First, it fosters an imperative of creative organizing that contributes to developing leadership within civil society. Second, war often creates a situation of impunity for corruption within groups in the state and civil society because of the absence of effec-

tive accountability during wartime. Third, war cultivates the wrong kind of organizational skills for operating during peacetime, such as secrecy, lack of transparency, and lack of record-keeping. Fourth, war can leave civil society bereft of leadership, either through death at the hands of combatants or through emotional exhaustion.

Our research accounts for the paradoxical increase in union participation coupled with the decrease in the extent to which the members of the labor movement feel able to participate. The data show that union numbers do not equate with union strength or influence. In the new Salvadoran legislature elected in 1997, the FMLN has twenty-seven seats,⁴⁷ and the Partido Demócrata (PD) has one. Among these twenty-eight legislators (*diputados propietarios*), only one comes from a union background.⁴⁸ The political right has one labor-linked legislator, and the PDC has none. The former Salvadoran legislature (1994–1997) was equally devoid of labor representation. As for channels for participation in the new democratic government, most unionists view the Foro de Concertación Económica y Social and the the Comisión Tripartita (government-business-labor), provided by the peace agreement, to have been co-optive rather than cooperative ventures. The secretary-general of one labor federation explained, “What is missing is more participation in the realm of *concertación*—for the government to consult more with social organizations about laws. Instead they now get us together and say, ‘the government is going to do this,’ have coffee, take a picture, and that’s it. We have learned what democracy is and how to maneuver in it, but we can’t participate in it. It is like learning a new language but not being allowed to speak it.”⁴⁹ These expectations often result in disillusionment with the nascent democracy on the part of citizens, in this case, the workers.

Further research is needed to confirm whether our findings apply to other sectors of civil society in El Salvador. Our preliminary research indicates that similar post-transition participation trends may be present elsewhere in Salvadoran civil society, namely among peasant organizations and women’s groups. Nor is it clear that the findings of our research apply to other cases of war transitions. The combined mode of transition in the case of El Salvador—a democratic transition coupled with a negotiated end to civil war—may limit its applicability in cases with disparate modes of

47. In 1994 the FMLN won twenty-one seats in the legislature. But on the day that the new parliamentarians were sworn in, seven deputies from the RN and the ERP split off from the FMLN. Under the leadership of Eduardo Sancho and Joaquín Villalobos, this group later helped to form the Partido Demócrata, which went on to participate on its own in the 1997 election.

48. The FMLN, however, does count two *suplentes* (alternates) to the legislature who are unionists.

49. Interview with an anonymous Salvadoran labor leader, Jan. 1996, San Salvador.

transition, such as Brazil or Argentina. Yet some evidence exists in the non-civil war case of Chile that similar patterns of post-transition participation have occurred there within civil society, particularly among labor and women's organizations (see Fitzsimmons 1995). In other kinds of war transitions, as where victory in civil war or external aggression is involved, civil society may undergo altogether different processes of adaptation or organizational death.

The Salvadoran experience also points to the importance of the broader international context. Democratization in the era of neoliberal reform has left labor less space than earlier waves of democratization permitted. Faced with adapting to a postwar, post-authoritarian climate and deepening economic neoliberalism, the Salvadoran labor movement is currently experiencing one of its most difficult transitions ever. Of the survivors of the highly politicized labor sectors, some have now chosen to steer clear of all political struggles and focus strictly on the needs of their members. But moving from one extreme to the other may be equally unhealthy in leaving labor unequipped or unwilling to participate in the now important political process. The Salvadoran government is beginning to consider legislation that may affect the future of labor, such as the privatization of basic services and pension schemes as well as legislative reforms guaranteeing greater labor-market flexibility and an increase in nonunion labor. Unions must respond if they are to endure. The strategy of depoliticization that ensured their survival into the 1990s may now lead to their demise in the coming decade. Ultimately, how transitions affect unions and whether they can respond to the constraints imposed by dual transitions to democracy and to peace will long affect both the quality of lives of workers and the quality of the emergent democracy.

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