

El Salvador

Period of democratic transition: 1992–1994

Pro-democracy civic movement: not present

El Salvador was ravaged by civil war between 1980 and 1992. Tens of thousands of deaths, most attributed to the military and death squads, occurred as the state battled the left-wing insurgency headed by an umbrella group known as the FMLN. Actors on both sides were aided and abetted by outside powers, and the civil war became one of the major cold war proxy conflicts of the 1980s. A democratic transition occurred between 1992 and 1994, when a UN-sponsored mediation process resulted in peace accords that brought the FMLN into mainstream politics and sent the soldiers back to the barracks. Political violence declined markedly (though not entirely) after the signing of the 1992 accords.

In the years prior to the peace accords, El Salvador held legislative and presidential elections, the results of which were generally recognized internationally but had excluded leftist groups with substantial support in the population. Military and economic elites dominated the machinery of state decision making. Several factors combined to push the civil war toward resolution, including the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and a peace process propelled by both regional leaders and the UN. Internal factors included a 1989 FMLN offensive that failed but convinced the Salvadoran military that indefinite stalemate was likely, economic stagnation that led to elite dissatisfaction, and the brutal murder of six Jesuit priests, an incident that galvanized international opposition to continued support for the Salvadoran military.

Pluralistic democratic practice has been largely consolidated in El Salvador. The primary political antagonists of the civil war, the ARENA (National Republican Alliance) and FMLN, remain the main political movements, with ARENA holding the presidency throughout the postconflict period.