

CLALS WHITE PAPER SERIES | NO. 1

Religion and Violence in Latin America

The El Salvador Gang Truce and the Church

What was the role of the Catholic Church?

by Steven Dudley

MAY 5, 2013



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Religion and Violence in Latin America

This white paper is one of a series produced by American University's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies' multi-year project of research and structured dialogue on religion and violence in Latin America. In light of the consequences of criminal violence for the region's democracies, the project seeks to better understand how religious actors are responding today, when they are less prominent than during the previous period of political, largely state-sponsored violence. Fresh research on Brazil, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru allows comparative analysis between different countries as well as past and present. These studies will be published as a scholarly volume.

Project white papers aim to bridge and catalyze dialogue between scholarly and policy communities, religious practitioners and human rights activists. They are designed to inform the ongoing efforts of religious leaders, policymakers and advocates in civil society who seek effective strategies to diminish violence in contemporary Latin America and empower its victims.

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Abstract

El Salvador and its Central American neighbors are experiencing a terrible tide of criminal violence. Homicide rates are some of the highest in the world. This scourge of violent crime is a major concern of policymakers both in the region and in Washington, DC. Indeed, through regional security initiatives the U.S. government has invested more than \$500 million in violence reduction programs during the last five years. European development agencies and international NGOs, similarly, have privileged violence reduction in their programs of financial and technical assistance to El Salvador and neighboring countries. Until recently, however, no policy initiatives seem to have made a significant dent in the problem. This paper addresses one development that has been portrayed in some circles as game-changing, and that now constitutes a critical point of reference for violence reduction programs going forward. The truce among rival gangs in El Salvador worked out in March 2012, which has held since that time, has reduced homicides to half their previous levels. The paper examines in particular the widely held belief that the Catholic Church “brokered” that truce in light of the wider set of actors actually responsible and considers the various ways that religion may have an impact on contemporary violence in the region.

Introduction

The truce was brokered by an ex-guerrilla and former congressman, Raúl Mijango, and a military chaplain, Bishop Fabio Colindres. They had negotiated in secret for months prior to the announcement under the auspices of the country's security minister, retired Army General David Munguía.

In March 2012, El Salvador's two largest street gangs, the MS-13 and the Barrio 18 – whose fighting across a four-country region had left thousands dead – signed a truce. In return for stopping the nearly constant bloodshed between them in that country, the Salvadoran government agreed to transfer 30 of the gangs' leaders from a maximum-security facility to other prisons around the country, increased visitation rights and removed the military from various jails. There were reportedly other concessions, but these were not made public nor are they confirmed. The government has since pushed for more social and economic programs for the gang members in order to better integrate them into Salvadoran economic life away from the criminal activities that currently sustain them.

The truce was brokered by an ex-guerrilla and former congressman, Raúl Mijango, and a military chaplain, Bishop Fabio Colindres. They had negotiated in secret for months prior to the announcement under the auspices of the country's security minister, retired Army General David Munguía. And in the weeks after the truce came to light, they claimed they had worked independently of the government. As it turned out, Mijango had long been a consultant for Munguía, while Colindres, because of his role as a military chaplain, had a close relationship with the security minister. The government later accepted that it had “facilitated” the process but has consistently tried to keep its distance.

This is understandable given that the gang truce could be, in many ways, a political time bomb. Swapping homicides for better prison conditions is a dangerous proposition – a de facto nod that the gangs' violent ways had secured them enough political capital to negotiate with the government at the highest levels. The gangs remain very unpopular. They have no formal political representation and have done little to develop a coherent political platform. Their strength relies on numbers – there could be as many as 65,000 active members – and their willingness to use force, which they often employ to victimize the weakest and most defenseless in their communities.

Colindres' role was particularly controversial because he is a bishop, a member of

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the Church hierarchy. His participation was, in essence, a nod from the country's Catholic Church that brokering this truce was in the interest of El Salvador, despite misgivings from some of his colleagues. It seemed to help legitimize the process to the public and the country's elite. Colindres is from the Church's more conservative wing, thus his participation may also serve as a means to involve the business community in what is an ongoing process.

The Bishop said he had decided to participate without consulting the Catholic Conference of Bishops, the collective body of the hierarchy, and that he was motivated by the Church's long-standing humanitarian role, specifically in improving the conditions for prisoners. However, the Church's role appears to be more symbolic than real. Colindres was not Munguía's or Mijango's first choice, and the negotiators openly stated that they needed a Church representative in order to legitimize the truce. The Conference of Bishops, while it voiced its support of its Bishop initially, has stayed mostly quiet since and even, to a certain extent, distanced itself from Colindres, leading many to believe there is a deep divide within the Church over how to deal with the truce.

There are many other factors in play that have led to divisions within the Church over Colindres' decision to participate in the truce. Colindres appears content to play this small, even symbolic role. Others in the Church would like to play a more active role in shaping the truce and implementing the programs to sustain it; or, at the very least, establish conditions upon which the Church will participate. Colindres has isolated himself and the process with the gangs, keeping the rest of the Church at arm's length. The Bishop seems oblivious to the possible political consequences for the Church should the truce unravel, and the Church seems powerless to stop him from participating.

This paper attempts to untangle Colindres' and the Church's role in the truce. Despite its success in lowering homicide rates by half – a remarkable accomplishment by any measure – and moves into the next phases of implementing job training and other economic programs, the truce is not universally popular. Polls show most people are skeptical of the gangs' intentions and the truce's possible consequences, particularly as they relate to the country's political future. The international community is also divided. The United States government has expressed concern, while the Organization of American States has sent emissaries to facilitate the ongoing process.

The paper starts by exploring the history of the Church in El Salvador's multiple violent conflicts to date. It then looks closely at the gangs, their history and development in the country. Finally, it delves into the Church's past and current work with gangs and its attempts to broker a truce between them. The story is still developing, so this paper is as much a chronicle as it is an analysis.

I. The Church and Violent Conflict in El Salvador

The Church in El Salvador is, in many ways, a reflection of the polarized country it inhabits. El Salvador is a country of inequalities, most notably the unequal distribution of land and wealth. This Central American nation was famously called the country of the 14 families. The description was not far from the truth. Going back to the colonial days, the country's land was concentrated in the hands of a few families who used it to service the cacao, indigo, and later, the international coffee markets. The country's monoculture economy gave these families outsized influence in the government, which in turn backed them with state security forces. By the early 1900s, for instance, coffee plantations were assigned National Guard units.

For its part, the Church had institutional and progressive wings. The institutional wing aligned itself with the political and economic powers, even during long spells of dictatorships and rigged elections. Meanwhile, the Church's more progressive wing reached out to the disenfranchised. In the 1930s, the Catholic Church began advocating a "social Catholicism" which encouraged priests to tackle problems, such as poverty. Among its chief advocates was Luis Chávez y González, the Archbishop of San Salvador from 1939 to 1977. In the 1950s, Chávez encouraged the formation of cooperatives and sent priests to study Canadian models. His work also contributed to what would become the Christian Democratic Party in 1960, and laid the groundwork for the next, more radical phase of the Church's participation in the country's struggles.

As was the case in many parts of Latin America, El Salvador was fertile ground for what would become known as "liberation theology." In addition to the naked inequalities, the priest to laity ratio was an estimated 10,000 to 1. So it was that during the late 1960s and early 1970s – inspired by Vatican II and the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellín – priests in rural areas began creating Christian Base Communities (Comunidades Eclesiásticas de Base – CEBs). Hundreds of CEBs emerged and trained thousands of religious laymen to preach the "preferential option for the poor."

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The CEBs were caught up in an increasingly violent dynamic. The military began arresting and torturing their lay members and some priests. It expelled numerous foreign clergy that it said were fomenting the CEBs and the work of radical priests. In response to the increasing repression, members of the Christian Democrat youth party formed the core of what would become the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP). Other guerrilla groups also emerged. Together, they would eventually form a coalition of five groups known as the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN).

The country's civil war had begun and clergy found themselves in the middle. In 1979, at the second Latin America Bishops' Conference in Puebla, Mexico, the liberal wing of the Church reiterated its support for the core tenets of liberation theology, in spite of the calls of John Paul II and others to cease their depictions of Jesus as a "revolutionary." Inside El Salvador, a similar debate was playing out concerning the role of the Church. In 1977, a Salvadoran priest, Rutilio Grande, was killed under mysterious circumstances. San Salvador's new archbishop, Oscar Romero, a soft-spoken priest who his colleagues believed would maintain a centrist line, refused to appear with government officials in public until they did an investigation into the murder. It was the beginning of a more radical, publicly critical path for Romero. Soon he was condemning the government's repressive tactics on his weekly sermons broadcast live on the radio.

The fact that Romero could take such a hard line was a result of the way in which the Church operates in El Salvador. It is more horizontal than hierarchical. Its clergy takes its cues from the Vatican and the Conference of Bishops, but the individual bishops have relative autonomy. Thus Romero's decision to criticize the government, the political elite and the military was made without the consent of the conference. Not surprisingly, as Romero's critique of the country's governing elite sharpened, his support among the Church hierarchy dissipated.

Among those who backed Romero were the Bishops Gregorio Rosa Chávez and Arturo Rivera y Damas. The three faced an uphill battle. On the one side, John Paul II was calling for the Church to help the poor but via charity, in the style that would later make Mother Teresa an international Catholic hero. On the other side, priests urged the Church to get more directly involved in politics by helping with the armed rebellion spreading across this tiny nation. Romero tried to push for unity,¹ but his calls for justice were getting too loud for the radical right. Fittingly, in his last sermon, on March 24, 1980, he called on the military to stop "killing your own fellow peasants."² The next day, the archbishop was assassinated. However, this tension – between those in the Church who advocate for fundamental social change in

¹ Tombs, David, "Archbishop Romero and Reconciliation in El Salvador," in *Latin America between Conflict and Reconciliation*, Ed. Martin Leiner and Susan Flamig (Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Reprecht, 2012).

² Berryman, Phillip, *Liberation Theology: Essential Facts about the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond*, Temple University: Philadelphia, 1987, p. 2.

the political and economic system via direct action, and those who see the Church responsibilities as more spiritual and charitable – remained. Indeed, throughout the civil war, members of the clergy played important roles on both sides of the conflict. Some openly sided with the repressive government. Even though it was clear right-wing elements connected to the political party ARENA were behind the murder of Romero, much of the Church hierarchy maintained its support for that party.

On the other side, Catholic priests and missionaries were paying a heavy price for their “preferential option for the poor.” In December 1980, two Maryknoll missionaries, along with two colleagues, were assassinated by security forces. In November 1989, six Jesuit priests and their two caretakers were beaten, dragged from their sleeping quarters, and shot on their front lawn by right-wing death squads and security forces.

This violent history of the Church marked its members and non-members alike. For good or for bad, it was often assumed that slain clergy had taken a political position that led to their demise. Salvadoran right-wing press helped create this image via inflammatory headlines and false accusations. But it was also this sacrifice, this bloodshed, which gave the Salvadoran Church its moral authority, especially amongst the poor and those who considered themselves victims.

The Church remained divided, even as Rivera y Damas, who was named San Salvador’s Archbishop in 1983, tried to calm the storm. Tensions diminished in 1992, when the government and the FMLN signed a peace accord. The Church played a small role in this process as well as in the creation of a truth commission that followed. But debate over what role the Church should take amidst violence and socio-economic inequalities continues. For some, the quest for peace continues to be a largely spiritual one obtained more via prayer than direct political intervention. For others, it is a hands-on mission, one that involves acting on important Church beliefs in public policy debates. The gang truce offers another opportunity to see this debate play out in real time.

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II. The Rise of Gangs

During the country's civil war, one in six Salvadorans were displaced from their homes. Many moved to the United States where they took up residence in cities, notably Los Angeles. There they found a competitive job market and the cutthroat social dynamics. The city was littered with street gangs, among them the Mexican Mafia and the 18th Street gang. For some Salvadoran youth, the situation was oppressive, and they sought refuge in the gangs. Initially, it was the 18th Street gang. In contrast to the Mexican Mafia, which restricts membership to Mexican nationals, the 18th Street gang, or Barrio 18, was more open. But other Salvadorans created their own gang, which gave homage to their country. They called themselves the Salvatruchas, which, loosely translated, means “street smart Salvadorans.”³

For years during the 1980s, the two gangs – the Barrio 18 and the Salvatruchas – coexisted on the streets of Los Angeles. They went to the same parties, attended the same schools. The two eventually became part of a larger alliance of gangs known as the Sureños, which is led by the Mexican Mafia. To this day, they both have to pay tribute to the Mexican Mafia, or the “Señores,” as they are known. In homage to the Señores, the Salvatruchas tacked the number 13, as M is the 13th letter in the alphabet, to their name and became the Mara Salvatrucha 13 or MS-13. The two gangs also grew, especially the Salvatruchas, as their population increased during the 1980s. They integrated former rebels into their ranks and became brutally effective at controlling and usurping territory.

Sometime in the early 1990s, though, a rift emerged between the two gangs. The origins of this rift are not clear, but what started as a fight between small factions quickly engulfed portions of the city and then the region where both groups operated. Members of each gang were jailed as their fighting spilled into view of the authorities. It was inauspicious timing. The United States passed an immigration reform law in 1996, which expanded the categories for which an immigrant could be deported.

³ For a detailed look at the MS-13 origins, see, Logan, Sam, *This is for the Mara Salvatrucha: Inside the MS-13, America's Most Violent Gang*, Hyperion: New York, 2009.

In the years that followed, the flood of ex-convicts to the region was unprecedented. El Salvador alone received 40,429 ex-convicts between 2001 – 2010, many of these gang members.⁴

The new arrivals brought with them a blend of style – baggy clothes, tattoos, bandanas – bravado and international affiliation that was appealing to the Salvadoran youth. They were not just a gang. They were a brand, like the Nike shoes that had been arriving en masse after the war. The MS-13 and Barrio 18 took advantage of this status and began usurping local gangs' power. They found fertile ground for their expansion.

At the time, El Salvador was struggling with its transition from war to peace. Following the country's brutal civil war, it took years to sort through the carnage, reestablish government institutions and adjust to a new reality: the country was suddenly more urban than rural. Demobilized fighters searched for jobs while the government pushed for increased free market economic policies. The peace agreement allowed for the FMLN to form part of the new police force, but it was years before they were fully integrated. Unemployment and crime soared. Families struggled to adjust to city life, small street gangs emerged, and San Salvador became one of the deadliest places on earth.⁵

The spread of these gangs at first took the Salvadoran government by surprise. When it realized it could not easily control them with traditional enforcement, though, it turned to more repressive measures. In 2004, Tony Saca was elected on the security platform of “mano dura,” or “hard line.”⁶ The essence of his policy was rounding up suspected gang members en masse and jailing them for prolonged periods. These policies, however, were not effective. In fact, they seemed to strengthen the gangs. The prison population tripled to over 27,000 – an estimated one-third of which were gang members – and prison authorities, in an effort to stop the deadly fighting between the Barrio 18 and MS-13, separated them into different jails.⁷

There, the gang leaders could reassert control over their members from the relatively safe environment of the prisons. They could also coordinate criminal activities, such

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⁴ United States Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, “2010 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics,” August 2011, pp. 97 – 101. http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/2010/ois_yb_2010.pdf

⁵ In 1995, the murder rate peaked at an astounding 139 per 100,000 inhabitants. In contrast, El Salvador had the world's second highest rate of 71 per 100,000 people in 2011, after Honduras.” U.S. Department of State, “Travel Warning,” January 23, 2013. http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_5871.html

⁶ It was a regional trend. Honduras and Guatemala also implemented new laws. The subsequent population explosion in the jails crippled these prison systems and led to a proliferation of crime emanating from the jails themselves.

⁷ For more on this evolution post-*mano dura*, as well as gang activity in general, see Steven Dudley, “Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: Transportistas, Mexican Cartels, and Maras,” in *Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle*, Ed. Cynthia J. Arnson and Eric L. Olson, 18 – 61 (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, November 2011). http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/LAP_single_page.pdf

Their fight with the government has also evolved. Gangs have become more calculating and political.

as extortion and kidnapping. Government authorities had little control over many of these prisons, which in some cases were old schools and factories. The government, seemingly blind to these effects, implemented “super mano dura,” effectively amplifying the previous efforts. However, this only accelerated this process of gang consolidation. According to the police, gang membership, for instance, is now close to 65,000.

The violence around gang activity is multilayered. Gangs fight one another for patches of territory where they can extort everyone from shop owners to public transport and private delivery companies. They are increasingly fighting for control of drug distribution points as well. In the last few years, they have obtained more sophisticated weaponry and grenades, which they use to battle authorities or enforce their “tax code” on the locals.

Their fight with the government has also evolved. Gangs have become more calculating and political. They have allied themselves with non-governmental organizations that often advocate on their behalf. They have formed associations that work for better conditions in the jails. They have infiltrated community associations where they live and possibly control the voting of the residents. They have also organized coordinated attacks on public transportation systems and threatened to boycott elections in an attempt to influence current anti-gang laws and future anti-gang legislation.

This apparent turn toward politics coexists with a broader view of the gangs as a criminal phenomenon primarily bent on securing short-term profits in low-level operations. This is a shortsighted and shallow view that only begins to address the complexity of the gang issue or the ways in which this issue can be resolved in the long term. But the gangs reinforce this image by recruiting ever-younger members and targeting the most vulnerable to further their ends. Thus, any negotiation with them or attempts to reintegrate them into society will inevitably face strong opposition from a society that is conditioned to see them in this narrow way.

III. Gangs and the Church

But the reality is that the Evangelical churches have a higher standing in gang culture in El Salvador than the Catholic Church. The Evangelicals have more gang programs, and there is a tacit understanding that when a gang member enters an Evangelical rehabilitation program, he or she is off limits. The same cannot be said of the Catholic Church.

The gangs' relationship with the Catholic Church is complicated. Most of the members come from Catholic families, but they carry with them (and often on their bodies in the form of elaborate tattoos) conflicted ideas about religion. While the Church represents family and tradition, it is also a representation of the status quo, exclusion and repression. It is, in many ways, a reflection of their own larger dilemma: they see themselves as both victims and victimizers. In an interview, Barrio 18 leader Carlos Mojica said that gang members are spiritual in their own way.

"There are some who question our belief in God," Mojica said. "Because of the way of life we have. We don't think anyone can question what is in our hearts. In reality, we are the only ones who know what is inside us."⁸

Mojica, who is known as "Viejo Lin" and leads the Sureños faction of the Barrio 18 in El Salvador, typifies these contradictions. He is in jail for murder, including the mutilation of three women.⁹ Still, he has a tattoo of Jesus Christ that covers two-thirds of his chest, which he says is "my feeling" ("mi sentir"), or "what I believe."

Mojica said the Church had also sacrificed for El Salvador and played a role in its conflicts. He later said, almost as if rehearsed, that priests had been killed for being "communists" and practitioners of liberation theology.

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⁸ Author interview, October 27, 2012, Coyutepeque Penitentiary, El Salvador. Unless indicated, all other citations from this source are from this interview.

⁹ *El Faro*, "Estos son los 30 pandilleros trasladados del penal de máxima seguridad," March 22, 2012. <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201203/noticias/8075/>

Father Antonio Rodríguez and those who work with him, see most in neighborhoods like Mejicanos as victims, even the gang members themselves. He says there is “no line between the victims and the victimizer.”

To some extent this is because, much as during the civil war, the Catholic Church has been of two minds when it comes to the gang question. At the top, the Church has sided with the governmental policy of *mano dura*. But on other levels, it created programs to give legal assistance and advocate for better conditions in the prisons. These are not geared specifically to gang members, but there are some indirect benefits for them.

Catholic Relief Services, a United States-based organization, has also designed prevention and rehabilitation programs. The most notable of these rehabilitation programs is run by Father Antonio Rodríguez. He is a Spanish national who has been in El Salvador since 2000. He has seen the gangs grow and evolve, and he has watched in disgust as the government has employed increasingly hard line policies. Rodríguez is also the author of what many believe is the first attempt to create a gang truce.

Rodríguez’s parish is in Mejicanos, a gang stronghold in San Salvador. Beginning in the early 2000s, Rodríguez started a rehabilitation program for former gang members. The program integrates members who renounce their affiliation with the gang. The role suits him and his theological approach. Rodríguez is a Passionist priest who, in his congregation, emphasizes the sacrifices of Christ as a means to salvation. This includes how he approaches even the most violent of gang members, who he says can all be forgiven for their sins, especially as they embrace the teachings of Jesus Christ.

“We have limits with regards to forgiveness,” he explained. “As they get close to Jesus, these limits begin to recede.”¹⁰

This question of forgiveness is essential in any peace and reconciliation process, but carries particular weight with regards to the gangs. In contrast to the guerrillas – or even their rivals in the government, the military and the right-wing death squads – where ideology is perceived to play a role in their actions, the gangs are seemingly devoid of political meaning. In principle, they act as they do for self-preservation, which, in the case of El Salvador and elsewhere, has become a pretext for rabid expansion and extreme violence against their rivals and the civilian population. Forgiveness comes easier from those who have clearer justifications for their actions. The gangs, however, have no clear justification.

However, some, such as Rodríguez, and those who work with him, see most in neighborhoods like Mejicanos as victims, even the gang members themselves. He says there is “no line between the victims and the victimizer.” They are, he believes, not just victims of vicious crimes by rival gang members and security forces, but also victims of the “most vicious capitalist system I had ever encountered in my life.” The lack of jobs, family structure, and basic necessities are what leads them down a path toward a gang. To Rodríguez, the gang members deserve a helping hand, not a stern slap.

¹⁰ Author interview, October 26, 2012, San Salvador, El Salvador. Unless indicated, all other citations from this source come from this interview.

“There is not violence because there are gangs,” he says. “There are gangs because there is violence.”

Rodríguez’s approach is openly political, though not in a partisan sense. He says he has the obligation to ask the hard questions about the violence and the policies that he believes lead to them. In this he represents the action-oriented wing of the Catholic Church in El Salvador that stretches back to the Archbishops Chávez, Romero and Rivera y Damas, and to the days when liberation theology shaped perception and action on the ground in this country. This influence is apparent. Rodríguez quotes from Romero when he talks. And like Romero, he speaks most often about the victims, which he believes “lead us all to salvation.”

Rodríguez’s approach caught the eye of the FMLN, which had by 2009 transformed itself into a political party with a strong presidential candidate, Mauricio Funes. After Funes won the election, his administration asked Rodríguez to work with them. His official capacity was as part of a commission to look for children who had been disappeared during the war, but Rodríguez said he used his post to test the waters with the gangs about a possible truce. The year was 2009, and violence was reaching unprecedented levels. The government was becoming desperate, and open, to new approaches to the gang question.

In this regard, Rodríguez said he worked closely with members of the Funes administration to develop a plan: 1) negotiation; 2) truce; 3) dialogue. He saw the Church as a mediator in the talks. In Rodríguez’s mind, other groups – civil society, media, gangs, victims, government – would all be part of the process. Talks began and had some progress, Rodríguez said, but quickly fell apart for reasons that are not clear. Rodríguez blames the Funes administration, which he says turned its back on some of his allies, including Hato Hasbún, the president’s first secretary, and Manuel Melgar, the security minister.¹¹ As Melgar and Hasbún became isolated, Rodríguez became isolated. Rodríguez made matters worse by openly contradicting Funes in a meeting.

Funes began to return to a hard line approach. Military personnel were sent into the prisons. Gang members were tortured. Privileges and visits were cut. A new anti-gang law went before Congress, and in September 2010, the gangs organized an armed strike of the public transport system to protest the government’s actions, which paralyzed close to half of the buses in and around San Salvador. One bus was burned and prisons in various parts of the country erupted in riots. Cornered and discredited, the gangs turned to Rodríguez, who read their joint statement to the public.

“We are ready to make a commitment to society so that together we can create a better country,” he read, in what can only be seen now as a preview of negotiations to come. “We are calling on the Church, private business, non-governmental organiza-

¹¹ Even before Melgar – who is a former FMLN guerrilla – assumed his position in the administration, the United States government pressured to have him isolated from the Funes administration because of his alleged participation in attacks on U.S. personnel during the country’s civil war.

“There is not violence because there are gangs. There are gangs because there is violence.”
— Father Antonio Rodríguez

tions and society in general to create, together, a real project, restructuring the jails so the prisoners have job training and can help their families; so we can reduce the general lack of productivity, and we can stop the extortion and crime that emanate from the jails; to create technical vocational training centers where all poor youth have access; to bet on prevention and rehabilitation of gang members and together find solutions that reduce the violence.”¹²

The government dismissed Rodríguez from his post. The Church hierarchy was stunned but remained largely silent. The Archbishop of San Salvador said there would be a commission that would investigate the matter, but no investigation was ever made public. For his part, Rodríguez was unbowed.

“No one told me to read that press release,” he told *El Faro* in an interview shortly after the incident. “I read it because of the contact I had with some rehabilitated youth who I believe when they say they are ready to change.”¹³

Still, Rodríguez looked naïve. Even worse, to many it appeared as if Rodríguez was condoning the gangs’ violent actions. Parts of the Church distanced themselves from him. And renewed dialogue between the government and the gangs, mediated by the Church, appeared remote.

¹² Accessed via the blog “Hombres contra la violencia” at: <http://hombrescontralaviolencia.blogspot.mx/2010/09/comunicado-de-las-mara-ms13-y-la.html>

¹³ *El Faro*, “Este gobierno también creyó en diálogo con los pandilleros,” September 17, 2010. <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201009/noticias/2487/>

IV. The Truce

“I saw the gang policies not only as inefficient but as counterproductive. The more you repress, the more they reproduce.”
— Congressman Raúl Mijango

In November, 2011, the Funes government made some significant shifts in its security team. Gone was Melgar, the controversial Security Chief who had been a nearly constant source of tension between the U.S. and Salvadoran governments; in was David Munguía, a retired army general who'd been Defense Minister for Funes. The selection of Munguía appeared to signal a shift towards an even harder line. (Funes later selected another former army general to head the police.) Munguía, who has political aspirations, promised to lower the homicide rate by 30 percent. Funes backed him, in what appeared to be the beginning of another *mano dura* offensive.

However, behind the scenes, Munguía, via a former guerrilla and congressman named Raúl Mijango, was already meeting with the gang leaders. Mijango is a peculiar blend of insurgent, businessman and political operative. Mijango got involved in politics with the CEBs when he was a teenager. He later became an urban commander for the ERP wing of the FMLN. After the war, he served in Congress for the FMLN but left the party during an internal fight.

Mijango wrote two books, one about his time in the guerrillas, the other a novel that was based, in part, on his own post-war experiences. This included being arrested and charged with running a propane gas-theft ring. All charges were later dropped, but the book, which recounted life inside a Salvadoran jail, gave him some credibility with the gangs. In the midst of his various lives, Mijango became what he calls “half of a consultant” for the Defense Ministry. The ministry and Mijango appeared to agree that the hard line approach was a mistake.

“I saw the gang policies not only as inefficient but as counterproductive,” he explained later. “The more you repress, the more they reproduce.”¹⁴

It was with these credentials, he says, he began talking at length with the gang leaders about a truce even before Munguía was named Security Minister. The talks

¹⁴ Author interview, October 25, 2012, San Salvador, El Salvador. Unless indicated, all other citations from this source are from this interview.

In sum, brokering a truce with the gangs came with considerable political risk, so Mijango and Munguía wanted to make it seem as if the government had not participated, but merely facilitated the final logistical efforts (i.e., the prison transfer and improved conditions) to make the truce possible.

centered on stopping the homicides. In spite of estimates to the contrary,¹⁵ both Munguía and Mijango believed that the gangs were responsible for the majority of homicides in El Salvador. This differed from the positions of Rodríguez, Hasbún and Melgar, who believed that the majority of homicides were the result of organized criminal activity. In return for fewer homicides, the gangs wanted better prison conditions and an end to the hard line policies that led to their mass incarceration.

Although that seems like a simple swap, there were problems with this approach. First, making seemingly senseless homicides the center of an exchange was a tricky proposition that could send the wrong message to the gangs. At its heart, it is a question of political capital. By negotiating homicides, the gangs would feel that they could, whenever they needed to build their political capital, increase the murder rate. The gangs had already, to a certain extent, employed this approach, most notably in the lead up to the truce, when they threatened to disrupt municipal elections, forcing the government to capitulate to their demands earlier than it had wanted.¹⁶ It is a Pandora's Box that may be impossible to close.

Second, there is a potentially high political cost to negotiating with the gangs. The gangs have a practiced manner of describing how their condition led them into criminality that seems almost rehearsed. And, although some accept this description on its multiple levels, most of the Salvadoran populace perceive the gangs as predators and themselves as victims of their crimes.¹⁷ Moreover, most of the general populace does not trust the gangs, as evidenced by the polling after the truce.¹⁸ The negotiators would have to recast the image of the gangs, but that would take time and assistance.

In sum, brokering a truce with the gangs came with considerable political risk, so Mijango and Munguía wanted to make it seem as if the government had not participated, but merely facilitated the final logistical efforts (i.e., the prison transfer and improved conditions) to make the truce possible. This position was clear during the months after the truce was announced, when the government denied any involvement in the brokering of the deal. It was not until results, in the form of significantly lower homicide rates, did any government authority accept that it had played any role in the process but even so has attempted to maintain a certain distance.¹⁹

¹⁵ Prior to the gang truce, Instituto de Medicina Legal estimated in the early 2000s that gangs were responsible for between 3 and 25 percent of murders. Police claimed it was closer to half. See: Sonja Wolf, "Street Gangs in El Salvador," in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011).

¹⁶ *El Faro*, "La nueva verdad sobre la tregua entre pandillas," September 11, 2012. <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201209/cronicas/9612/>

¹⁷ The Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) noted in 2010 that the perception of crime and victimization in El Salvador rose with the number of gangs in the community. See LAPOP, "Culture política de la democracia en El Salvador, 2010," November 2010, p. 91. <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/es/2010-culturapolitica2.pdf>

¹⁸ *La Prensa Gráfica*, "Tregua entre dudas," March 7, 2013. <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/Tregua-entre-dudas>

¹⁹ *InSight Crime*, "Govt-'facilitated' Gang Truce in Salvador Sets Dangerous Regional Precedent," March 29, 2012. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-president-denies-negotiating-with-gangs>

Still, at the beginning, Mijango and Munguía knew that the process would require some sort of institutional authority, a legitimizing force for the talks to coalesce around something other than the gangs' word that they would stop fighting. The government negotiators also understood that the elites, the business community and the public at large had to believe there was something more than just a simple quid pro quo that consisted of trading lower homicides for better prison conditions, especially with the gangs' motives unclear, and the long history of violence and victimization of these sectors. So the negotiators turned to the Church, which, for them, had maintained enough broad-based support to bridge these various gaps and plug these political holes.

When asked why they chose the Church to help in the process, the negotiators have danced around this subject. The government's chief negotiator Mijango focused on what he called the "moral authority" the Church held in El Salvador and its experience in mediating conflict in the country. He also drew on what he said was a shared understanding of the Church's longtime role in El Salvador. "There is a recognition of the Church's role as an institution that had mediated the conflicts that we have suffered as a society," Mijango explained. "No one has the moral authority the Church has in this society."

There is, of course, some truth to this, but the decision to include the Church seemed more like a ploy than a strategy. For the negotiators, and possibly the gangs themselves, the focus was not on drawing from that "moral authority" to establish firm ground upon which to build the peace, but on using that "moral authority" to calm a cynical populace, and convince a skeptical business community to participate. The distinction is critical. In one scenario, the Church, as an institution is a protagonist, a creator and participant in the construction of peace. In the other scenario, the Church is a figurehead, a prop.

To most observers, the Church seems to be more of the latter: a symbolic actor that provides the negotiators with enough political capital to push the process forward and gain the initial trust of the populace while the process consolidates.

"I think I need to be frank," Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chávez told *El Faro*. "The question is: as the Church, are we legitimizing [the truce] or are we doing something more?"²⁰

Moreover, Mijango and Munguía understood that the Church might also facilitate the business and international support to make the truce sustainable. This is a sentiment some in the business community share.

"There are some businessmen that, if you put someone from the Church in front of them, it's as if you disconnected part of their brain: they stop asking questions," one businessman told *El Faro*.²¹

²⁰ *El Faro*, "Funes se vuelve a desmarcar de la tregua entre pandillas," September 17, 2012. <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201209/noticias/9671/>

²¹ *El Faro*, "La nueva verdad sobre la tregua entre pandillas," September 11, 2012. <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201209/cronicas/9612/>

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For their part, the gangs' agenda was less clear. Mojica said that the majority of the gang members were Catholic and that this influenced their decision about whether to include the Church. He said they were also influenced by the fact that members of the Church had given their lives during the Salvadoran civil war, and that they had played a role in "conflict resolution." He mentioned liberation theology but claimed ignorance as to what it meant aside from illustrating that the Church has always been "concerned with injustices."

Mijango added that the gangs were tired of dealing with government interlocutors and political parties who they felt had betrayed them. This was reflected in the document the gangs emitted following the truce in which they said the political class "only made things worse."²² They felt the Church gave the process a "serious" nature, he said.

"The Church gave [the gangs] a lot of confidence," Mijango added.

At least some Church authorities seemed to realize how Mijango and Munguía might be using the Church. Mijango told *El Faro* that he and Munguía spent all of December looking for a representative from the Church.²³ The first candidate was the Archbishop of San Salvador, José Luis Escobar Alas. After Escobar declined, they asked Bishop Rosa Chávez, who also said no. They then went to Rafael Urrutia, the head of the Miramonte Parish, and he declined as well. None of them explained why.

"Not one bishop wanted to step up [ningún Obispo se motivó]," Mijango said.

Finally, they approached Bishop Fabio Colindres. Colindres was an interesting and, as it turns out, propitious choice. He was a very different figure than Father Rodríguez or Bishop Rosa Chávez. He is the military chaplain in San Salvador and, before the talks, had had little contact with jails and gang leaders. But as has become clear, he has cachet with the Salvadoran elites and the business community. He was also willing to take a personal risk that could affect his standing in the Church and the larger community. For Mijango and Munguía, he could not have said yes fast enough.²⁴

"The Monseñor arrived when we'd already advanced a lot [in the talks]," Mijango told *El Faro*. "And he arrived to fill a critical credibility gap."

Gang leaders welcomed Colindres in the talks that were occurring in the maximum-security facility in Zacatecoluca. Mijango, who had been discussing these possibilities with the gangs since at least December, played the role of one-time social

²² Communiqué: "Los voceros nacionales de la Mara Salvatrucha MSX3 y Pandilla 18," March 19, 2012. http://www.elfaro.net/attachment/395/comaras.pdf?g_download=1

²³ This story was recounted to *El Faro* in detail by Mijango and Munguía in, "La nueva verdad sobre la tregua entre pandillas," September 11, 2012. (<http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201209/cronicas/9612/>) However, Mijango would not reconfirm the details to InSight Crime investigators, and Munguía did not consent to an interview.

²⁴ In an interview with the author, Colindres disputed *El Faro's* timeline, and said Mijango did not approach him, Munguía did. He added that the three men talked and saw their mutual interests overlapping, which is why they decided to move forward with the plan.

outcast who understood the difficulty of being marginalized. Colindres played the role of spiritual guide. More importantly, he carried an implied legitimation by the Catholic Church.

The two men made a positive impression, and the truce was signed in March. In return, the government transferred 30 gang leaders to other prisons. This was, in part, so the gang leaders could enforce the ceasefire and see their families on a more regular basis. They also agreed to remove some military personnel from the jails.

The transfer of prisoners leaked to the press, specifically to *El Faro*, who broke the story the next week.²⁵ These transfers and changes in the jails were accompanied by rumors that the government had paid the gangs to stop fighting. There is no evidence to back this up, but soon rumors of gang leaders' families purchasing large screen televisions added fuel to the fire. The government spent the next several weeks distancing itself from the talks.²⁶

Meanwhile, Colindres took center stage, claiming he had brokered the truce.²⁷ This, he says now, was a role that he did not want. He says he wanted his actions to be a "silent humanitarian action."²⁸ Significantly, he appeared to have become involved on his own, without consulting other members of the Church hierarchy or attempting to include them in the process, which is discussed in detail in the following section. The fact that this was a personal choice, however, did not mean it was interpreted as such. Indeed, for the negotiators, the government, the gangs and the Salvadorans in general, Colindres was the Church, which meant that the Church must be backing the truce. This de facto reality has infuriated many in the Church hierarchy and has led to a split amongst the Salvadoran clergy.

Over the next several months, something unexpected happened: the truce worked to lower the violence. Homicides, in particular, dropped dramatically. Although the exact numbers remain in dispute (police and Public Forensic Institute numbers differ slightly), the overall trends are undeniable. The first hundred days after the truce was signed showed a 50 percent decline in homicides.²⁹ Subsequent reports showed the trend of homicides maintaining their 50 percent drop.³⁰

²⁵ *El Faro*, "Gobierno negoció con pandillas reducción de homicidios," March 14, 2012. <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201203/noticias/7985/>

²⁶ *InSight Crime*, "El Salvador Denies Negotiating with Gangs," March 19, 2012. <http://www.insight-crime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-denies-negotiating-with-gangs>

²⁷ *InSight Crime*, "Church Brokered El Salvador Gang Truce: Bishop," March 21, 2012. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/church-brokered-el-salvador-gang-truce-bishop>

²⁸ Author interview, October 29, 2012, San Salvador, El Salvador. Unless indicated, all other citations from this source are from this interview.

²⁹ *InSight Crime*, "100 Days into Gang Truce, El Salvador Sizes Up Security Gains," June 18, 2012. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/100-days-into-gang-truce-el-salvador-sizes-up-security-gains>

³⁰ There remain some who continue to question the statistics, most notably Douglas Farah, who, in a paper for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the number of disappeared through mid-2012 had doubled compared to the same period in 2011. See: Farah, "The Transformation of El Salvador's Gangs into Political Actors," for the CSIS, June 21, 2012. http://csis.org/files/publication/120621_Farah_Gangs_HemFocus.pdf

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United States government officials have privately expressed concern about the dangerous precedent the truce sets.

Despite these encouraging statistics, the truce is very unpopular. In a poll released in July 2012 by the Technological University of El Salvador, 58 percent of respondents said they had “no confidence” in the truce, 26 percent said they had “little” confidence, and only 13 percent said they had “a lot” of confidence.³¹ A more recent poll in February 2013 had similar numbers, with 69 percent saying they did not trust the gangs would hold their end of the deal.³²

United States government officials have privately expressed concern about the dangerous precedent the truce sets.³³ This fear was perhaps most clearly delineated in a paper by Douglas Farah for the Center for International and Strategic Studies in which Farah says the gangs were, “Surprised and pleased with the results of the negotiations.”

“Their leaders are beginning to understand that territorial control and cohesion make it possible for them to wring concessions from the state while preserving the essence of their criminal character,” he wrote. “They are already discussing backing certain candidates for local and national office in exchange for protection and the ability to dictate parts of the candidate’s agenda.”³⁴

However, the Salvadoran government, sensing something of a political victory with the dropping homicide rates, quickly began to reposition itself. It opened the doors for the Organization of the American States and the United Nations to observe and participate in some meetings with gang leaders to see how they could help. And the government eventually admitted it had “facilitated” the process.³⁵ In a way, this was related to the coming presidential elections, as both Funes and Munguía positioned themselves and their parties for 2014.

The institution that had a harder time dealing with its participation in the pact, however, was the Church.

³¹ Centro de Investigación de la Opinión Pública Salvadoreña, “Resultados de la encuesta LVI de opinión pública 20, 21, y 22 de julio 2012,” Universidad Tecnológica de El Salvador. http://www.utec.edu.sv/utec_news/2011/BOLETINENCUESTA5624dejulio2012.pdf

³² *La Prensa Gráfica*, “Tregua entre dudas,” March 7, 2013. <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/Tregua-entre-dudas>

³³ Author interviews with various State Department officials, December 2012.

³⁴ Farah, Douglas, “The Transformation of El Salvador’s Gangs into Political Actors,” the Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 21, 2012. http://csis.org/files/publication/120621_Farah_Gangs_HemFocus.pdf

³⁵ *InSight Crime*, “Govt-‘facilitated’ Gang Truce in Salvador Sets Dangerous Regional Precedent,” March 29, 2012. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-president-denies-negotiating-with-gangs>

V. The Church and the Truce

The gang truce put the Church in a difficult position. In the public eye, it aligned the institution with a visible and unpopular actor. For the more enlightened, the gangs are an unfortunate socio-economic phenomenon that has left thousands of youth marginalized; for many more, they are an illegal irregular army that preys on the most vulnerable population. The gangs are not strong supporters of the Church's work and their acts contradict most of what the Church teaches. If the Church espouses the cause of this volatile actor, it risks alienating its most powerful backers and its most fervent followers.

However, many others believe the Church must act on this issue. The negative consequences of the gangs' activities, as well as those of the government's hard line response to these criminal acts, have devastated Salvadoran society. Many in the Church, including Colindres, believe its mandate is to foster peace by assisting the most downtrodden and marginalized. And the Church's years of work in prisons provided a rationale for Colindres to participate in the truce.

Still, it is important to note that the decision to participate was not made by the Church's hierarchy. The Church's organizational structure is hierarchical but also horizontal. While it has institutions, such as the Catholic Conference of Bishops, that steer the Church's message – and others, in particular the Pope, who have the ability to sanction those that veer too far from its course – its individual bishops are somewhat autonomous. Colindres, for example, said he had decided to participate in the gang mediation process on his own, something his colleague, Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chávez, confirmed.

Colindres says he accepted the invitation on purely religious grounds, and he cites two reasons. First, Colindres emphasized the role the Church has played in advocating for the poor and disadvantaged. In El Salvador, this role includes advocating for better conditions and care for prisoners. Specifically, it was what Colindres called a "health concern": Colindres says he saw terminally ill prisoners who were not getting the right care and that the relatives of these prisoners were clamoring for better medical attention. He further links this concern for the poor to assisting conflict resolution.

“The fundamental motive, apart from my interest as a man of faith, is a humanitarian concern for those who have passed, etc. It’s that I know the reality. As military chaplain, I have been suffering with one policeman dead and one soldier dead per week. They and their families kept asking me, ‘What are we going to do?’”
—Bishop Fabio Colindres

“The Church understands very well, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta and John Paul II said, the reactions, the feelings and the heart of the people. And above all, it can identify the suffering of the people. In this way, the Church is a specialist in mediating the conflicts,” he explained in an interview with the author.

“I prefer to move in line with the great universal Church...which is a line that naturally outweighs any personal or private position when we talk about the common good and peace.”

Colindres also cited the role the Church has played in mediating conflicts. In the case of the gangs, he says the Church helped put the gang leaders from the different factions into the same room, then carried the “petitions” the gang leaders made to the government leadership to consider. This statement is at odds with the fact that Mijango played this role well before Colindres was added to the negotiating team.

The second major reason that Colindres cited to justify his participation was that he felt personally connected to what was occurring with the gangs through his relationship with the families of the military and police personnel who were dying in fighting them. As a military chaplain, Colindres had contact with the highest levels of the armed forces and the police. His office, in fact, is in a military barracks in San Salvador. At least part of these military and police hierarchies seemed to have bought into the idea that something different needed to be done to quell the violence, even if it involved a messy deal with the gangs.

“The fundamental motive, apart from my interest as a man of faith, is a humanitarian concern for those who have passed, etc. It’s that I know the reality,” he said. “As military chaplain, I have been suffering with one policeman dead and one soldier dead per week. They and their families kept asking me, ‘What are we going to do?’”

Within the Church, there was a clear notion that Colindres had made a personal decision to participate in the truce. Numerous Church officials spoke of it as such, cloaking it in humanitarian terms and connecting it, as Colindres did, to the Church’s work in prisons. However, the reality was that it was impossible to separate Colindres’ personal decision from the Church. And Colindres was not interested in making that separation.

“No bishop represents himself,” he said. “Every bishop represents the apostles and has been sent by Christ himself so it’s not right to say that a bishop represents himself and, if he does, he does it outside of the Church. The Church does not work on an individual or a personal basis. It only has power in the way that it is attached to the head, which is Christ, and the larger, universal community of those of us who believe in Christ. So I would be outside of Church lines if I would say that what I am saying and what I am doing is my doing alone. I don’t have a [personal] reason for being. We walk together as a Church. We are the church and our actions only have meaning in the way in which we are acting as a Church and within the doctrine of the Church.”

The Church hierarchy seemed to understand that Colindres' participation was a de facto nod from the institution for the truce. But Colindres did not present it to them in this way when he met with them shortly after the transfer of the prisoners to their new jails. In that meeting, Colindres reportedly talked of his participation in strictly personal and humanitarian terms, emphasizing the role of the Church in its work in prisons.³⁶

The Papal Nuncio's office followed this by hosting a press conference in which the Church hierarchy expected Colindres to repeat what he had said in the private meeting. The Pope's emissary in San Salvador, Luigi Pezzuto, accompanied Colindres, as did Raúl Mijango, in their first joint appearance after the signing of the pact. Instead, Colindres claimed that the Church had mediated the truce.

"The terrain was ripe. We were surprised that they were the first in understanding the need for an accord. They realized they are part of the problem but also part of the solution," he told the press.

Even if it was in disagreement with Colindres' decision and his public posturing, the Catholic Bishops' Conference emitted a press release days later stating that it supported Colindres' efforts. The Conference emphasized the humanitarian aspect of the Church's work in the jails and asked Salvadorans to "open their minds."

"Unanimously, the Conference of Bishops of El Salvador reiterate our support for the pastoral work in the jails for the prisoners and the members of the gangs," Conference President Archbishop Escobar Alas read in a statement to the press.³⁷

After that press release, both the Bishops' Conference and the Papal Nuncio disappeared from public view. It is not clear what happened internally, but part of the Church seemed resentful of Colindres, especially since he did not seem interested in including the rest of the Church in the process. During the first weeks of the secret talks, he did not include the Bishops' Conference. And in the weeks following, he had little contact with them, according to Church officials who said that for a time he stopped attending conference meetings.

The rift escalated, and was reinforced by rumors that Colindres was positioning himself to be named El Salvador's first Cardinal, something Colindres firmly denied. A more plausible explanation might be that he is jockeying to be named Archbishop of San Salvador, the most powerful position in the Salvadoran Catholic Church.³⁸ For his part, Colindres said that others were seeking to sabotage his efforts because they were jealous.

³⁶ Op cit., *El Faro* "La nueva verdad..."

³⁷ *InfoCatólica*, "La Iglesia Católica pide el respaldo de los salvadoreños a la tregua entre las maras más peligrosas," April 9, 2012. <http://infocatolica.com/?t=noticia&cod=11577>

³⁸ *La Prensa Gráfica*, "Rosa Chávez y Colindres concelebran misa," December 29, 2012. <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/el-salvador/social/8713-rosa-chavez-y-colindres-concelebran-misa>

“It seems like a good initiative. And it was supported at two different times: in a press release from all the bishops and then the archbishop in a press conference. But I thought the process would have a more inclusive dynamic that would take advantage of the Church’s experience and capacity. However, what happened later is that after the announcement of the process, the Church has not been informed or involved.”— Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chávez

“I can’t say if there are people who are sabotaging the process but I do feel that there are interests that are not seeking to help or understand the process that we are doing,” he explained. “One of the motives is political. The other is ego, and this is the worst of all because the human element in this is huge.”

Parts of the Church also began to publicly question Colindres’ solo initiative and wonder aloud whether the Church had been used by Mijango and Munguía.

“The Church is not participating,” Rodríguez said. “We have reduced the Church to one person who doesn’t even have the support of the Church.”

Complaints also came from the Conference of Bishops. Colindres, it appears, has not put any conditions on his participation and appears content to allow Mijango to steer the substantive part of the process. What’s more, Colindres has not included the Church in his actions or attempted to integrate other parts of the Church in the process going forward. This has widened the chasm between him and the rest of the Church.

“It seems like a good initiative,” Rosa Chávez told *El Faro*. “And it was supported at two different times: in a press release from all the bishops and then the archbishop in a press conference. But I thought the process would have a more inclusive dynamic that would take advantage of the Church’s experience and capacity. However, what happened later is that after the announcement of the process, the Church has not been informed or involved.”

However, Colindres bristles at these contentions, especially that the Church has been used. For him, it is enough to be acting within one’s conscience and in good faith. Inclusion is not part of his mandate. And judging others’ motives is not part of his *modus operandi*.

“This type of assertion startles me in the sense that the Church has always acted in a humanitarian way and for the common good,” he said. “Whatever it believes is necessary. If someone thinks to use the Church or believes they are using the Church as a puppet for their own ends this would, in the end, be on the conscience of the person who was doing it. What I can tell you is that the Church will not lend itself, nor has it lent itself, to this end. The Church is simply acting in a conscious and correct way for the common good and for the most needy.”

Regardless of their perceptions of the role the Church has played in the truce, Colindres and the Church are connected in this process. Perhaps in part because of this, as the process has consolidated, the two have sought to reconcile, or at least looked for some type of middle ground. In November, numerous churches participated in a “Day of Peace,” to support the truce.³⁹ In December, Colindres and Rosa Chávez celebrated mass together.

³⁹ *La Prensa Gráfica*, “Iglesias celebrarán en San Salvador jornada por la paz,” November 14, 2012. <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/Iglesias-celebraran-en-San-Salvador-jornada-por-la-paz>

In March, Father Antonio Rodríguez, the same priest who designed the earlier truce, joined the effort to strengthen the process. This came just days after one gang member who had joined his Church in the Mejicanos neighborhood had been killed by suspected members of the Barrio 18 gang. In an email exchange with the author, Rodríguez seemed more amenable to what the truce represented, characterizing it as a “reduction in homicides” that could convert into a full-fledged “peace process.”⁴⁰

“I have not joined the truce,” he said, referring to the gangs’ agreement amongst themselves to stop fighting. “I am joining the effort to reduce homicides and criminality.”

Rodríguez described himself as a “mediator” for the various strategies. Undoubtedly that includes the multiple positions within the Church, which Rodríguez said is still split between the political and the practical wings of that institution. The political wing, he said, is pushing for the Church to maintain its distance from the process, driven, in part, by personality clashes. The practical side – which he considers himself a part of – is participating because of the incredible potential the truce has to reduce the violence in El Salvador. He added that some eight bishops were sending priests to work “under the table” with the process.

However, these overtures have not led to a fuller rapprochement from the Church hierarchy. While the truce has progressed, the Church has remained divided, and Colindres continues to act without any further public backing from the Bishops’ Conference or other parts of the Church. Even Rodríguez emphasized that he was very aware of the possible pitfalls in the process and would maintain his critical stance towards certain aspects of it.

“I am taking part (in the process) despite my criticism, doubts, questions,” he said in the email exchange.

The government, meanwhile, has designated 14 municipalities as “peace zones” (municipios santuarios). In these zones, the gangs have promised “crime free” areas to facilitate the implementation of the social and economic programs for gang and non-gang members alike. The government, with the help of Colindres and the Organization for American States, has also created a non-governmental organization to begin channeling funds into social and economic programs for the gangs. And it is trying to line up donors to help fund rehabilitation programs and employers to do job trainings.

In March, the government started sending delegates to Washington, DC to get more international support for the truce. Mijango, Colindres, Munguía and President Funes himself all made trips to the U.S. These efforts culminated in a public speech Funes made at an event in mid-April hosted by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank in which Funes called the truce an “opening.”

⁴⁰ Father Antonio Rodríguez, email message to author, May 1, 2013.

These next phases are critical. The truce has held but appears fragile. The government is pushing for programs but struggling to organize these efforts and convince donors to move quickly. Time is a factor but the means by which the government has gotten this far have been ad hoc and ill-planned, making the next phases even more difficult.

“We saw in the truce an opportunity for our country,” he told a standing-room-only crowd at a World Bank auditorium in Washington, DC. “The truce is not the solution, but it creates a different environment to try to find other solutions that are more profound, integral, and structural.”⁴¹

Yet there are already problems and many hurdles to overcome. Extortions in El Salvador continue and may even be on the rise.⁴² Murders allegedly related to gang activity, including several in the country’s first “peace zone,” have shaken confidence in the gangs’ ability to hold their members in check and honor the truce.⁴³ Polls show that the public’s confidence is still low and trust in the gangs is scant. The gang leaders’ public posture is that of peace, but those living in gang areas say extortions continue apace.⁴⁴

Those running job training and micro-lending programs already in motion – many of them with non-gang members – worry that the new money coming in will go unevenly towards gang-heavy programs. Veteran social workers also wonder how they will integrate rival gang members into these programs. Analysts are speculating that the gangs will begin to exert the considerable political capital they have gathered during this process. Throughout this time period, the gangs have not renounced their way of life and some worry they may simply be using this as a period of recuperation and reorganization.

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The government needs help, but a divided Church does not appear ready to step into the chasm on a more institutional level. To be sure, the way government negotiators handled the Church’s participation – as virtually an afterthought and as a way to fill a critical credibility gap – and used it to legitimate its efforts with the gangs without fully integrating its members may backfire. Colindres’ participation may have, in other words, bought the government time but not necessarily created a firm base for future cooperation needed to sustain the process.

⁴¹ Mauricio Funes, speech to World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, April 19, 2013.

⁴² *InSight Crime*, “‘Rising extortion’ Signals Trouble for El Salvador’s Gang Truce,” March 18, 2013. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/rising-extortions-trouble-salvador-gang-truce>

⁴³ *InSight Crime*, “Is Uptick in Murders Eroding El Salvador Gang Truce?” February 21, 2013. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/vengeance-killings-undermine-el-salvador-gang-truce>

⁴⁴ *El Faro*, “Si me van a zampar preso, que también zampen a Mauricio Funes y a Munguía Payés,” March 11, 2013. <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201303/noticias/11312/>

VI. Conclusions

The Catholic Church in El Salvador has a tumultuous history. It has long been stuck between warring sides in a country marred by inequalities and violence. It has been internally divided by what role it is supposed to take amidst these longstanding conflicts. On the one side, there are advocates of direct, political action that address perceived injustices. On the other are proponents of spiritual, humanitarian deeds that address basic human necessities.

The latest debate about which path the Church should take occurred after Bishop Fabio Colindres, a military chaplain, took part in an effort to develop a truce between the two largest street gangs in El Salvador who were responsible for a large portion of the violence in this country. The truce, which took effect in March 2012, has halved the murder rate in one of the most violent countries on the planet. In return, the government transferred 30 gang leaders to other prisons and promised social and economic programs to begin what it hopes will be the beginning of the end of their gang issues.

But striking a deal with the gangs is a tricky issue. Many Salvadorans and outside observers question the truce as a good long-term strategy to curb the violence and integrate the gang members into society. Critics, which include some members of the Church and the United States government, among others, believe this truce could set a dangerous precedent and give the gangs an increased political role that is based on the perverse notion that more homicides equal more political capital. The gangs are also very unpopular and do not seem to represent much beyond themselves and their immediate families.

The convoluted, opaque way the Church became involved in this process is troubling, and the exact role that Colindres played is unclear. The government seemed to go to the Church as a way to plug a political and moral gap when the gangs were ready to sign a truce but the government was not ready to take ownership of it. They asked at least two others in the Church hierarchy, as well as a prominent capital priest, who all said no. Colindres, however, said yes.

The Church now finds itself implicated in a process that it is not ready to take institutional ownership of, despite its initial successes.

From the beginning, the Bishop has claimed that he was concerned with the conditions inside the country's prisons but also said that he, and his civilian counterpart in these talks, Raúl Mijango, were mediators. He says he is motivated by "humanitarian" concerns but also that he has personal connections to many of those affected by the gang problems, specifically the military and the police who were being killed in the fight to contain the gangs themselves. But he has also acted independently from the Church hierarchy, distancing himself from Church leaders even while claiming to represent the Church as a whole.

The contradiction has put the Church in a difficult position. The Church now finds itself implicated in a process that it is not ready to take institutional ownership of, despite its initial successes. After initial support, the Conference of Bishops and the Papal Nuncio have gone largely silent. Many people speculate about rifts inside the Church that range from the personal to the political to the religious.

Colindres continues to participate, albeit without the public backing of his colleagues and seemingly oblivious to their concerns that the process remains opaque and exclusive. He traveled to Washington, DC in April with Mijango to sell the truce to the U.S. government and the international donor community. He continues to shuttle messages of goodwill between the gangs and the private sector. And he remains a credible interlocutor, particularly for the Salvadoran military.

However, inside and outside of the Church, there is the perception that Colindres, and by extension the Church, was used by Mijango and Security Minister David Munguía, who engineered the strategy and the talks, to legitimize these efforts. These critics include some of Colindres' colleagues who worry that the actions of one man may tarnish the Church's image and are not representative of the Church's position on this matter. In these critics' eyes, the Church is nothing more than a puppet, even though its role could and should include a more hands-on approach to the actual construction of the agreements and the implementation of the accords.

For his part, Colindres defends his actions and says the naysayers are jealous of his role. It is a role he seems to embrace even as the truce moves into its next phase: the creation of peace zones where the gangs say they will ban homicides and extortion by their members, and the government says it will implement social and economic programs. Ironically, the government's callous use of the Church and Colindres' isolation from its hierarchy may play a role in the truce's undoing. Neither the government nor Colindres can implement the next phase of the truce without the backing of institutions like the Church. However, at this point, that fence may be too hard to mend.





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