

THE PRICE OF PEACE

THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN POSTWAR EL SALVADOR

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	v
Chapter 1 Political Transition and Identity Politics	1
Chapter 2 Human Rights: The Backdrop	19
Chapter 3 From Inception until the Peace Accords	35
Chapter 4 The Human Rights Movement	55
Chapter 5 After the Peace Accords	79
Chapter 6 Collective Violence, Representation and Shifting Identities	99

To these women who had lost their sons and daughters,
who was going to tell them their struggle wasn't genuine?

Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03

LOGICA REVI

‘Una crítica a la Unión Soviética
sólo la puede hacer un antisoviético.

Una crítica a la China
sólo la puede hacer un antichino.

Una crítica al Partido Comunista Salvadoreño
sólo la puede hacer un agente de la CIA.

Una autocrítica equivale al suicidio’.

Roque Dalton. En ‘Poemas Clandestinos’.

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Ralph Sprenkels
November 28, 2005.



CO-MADRES is awarded the Kennedy Foundation Award for Human Rights, 1984.

POLITICAL TRANSITION AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Introduction

El Salvador's human rights movement originated as a popular response to state-sponsored terror in the late 1970s and, after having been forced underground when full-scale war erupted, the movement played an important role both on the national stage as well as in international debates concerning El Salvador from the mid-eighties onward. The movement's work was very relevant in keeping international pressure focused on the Salvadorean government and military, a task that in the long run positively impacted on international pressure to realize demilitarization of the Salvadorean government and peace negotiations with the insurgents.

Paradoxically, the loosening of the Salvadorean military's grip on society as a consequence of democratic transition did not result in the advancement of public demands for truth and justice. During the civil war, government troops as well as the insurgents of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) were involved in violations of human rights, although on a notably different scale. It is clear that, in the post-war period, actual prosecution of crimes committed during the war would have severe legal implications for the main power holders at both the right and the left of the political spectrum. As a result, the transition was accompanied by an implicit pact of impunity between the major political contenders. The legacy of the past became a burden that neither the government nor the FMLN wanted to carry along. In their view, the obliteration of the past constituted 'the price of peace'.

In this context the human rights movement suffered a strong decline. A sweeping amnesty law proclaimed days after the Truth Commission's report was published effectively buried a large part of the movement's expectations for justice. But the official 'forgive-and-forget' policy was not the only reason for the movement's disempowerment. The very strong historical ties of the movement with the FMLN posed a dilemma as well. The FMLN leadership by and large disengaged itself from the human rights movement and its main cause of ending impunity. The movement's 'double militancy', acting on both an FMLN platform and a human rights platform, had already led to several contradictions during the war, but became virtually unsustainable in the political context of the transition. Feeling abandoned by the FMLN, the human rights movement was unable to find other political allies to bring their agenda to the fore.

Literature on post-war El Salvador pays little attention to the impact of the democratic transition on social movements or grass-roots organizing. In line with the literature on new social movements, available academic work on the human rights movement focuses on the political use of identity and its potential for engagement, generating high expectations with regard to the strength and relevance of the human rights movement, as well as its contributions in the post-war period. Romanticizing popular movements may help in obtaining much-needed international support, but it contributes little to visualizing the real challenges ahead. In fact, it tends to raise expectations that cannot be met. In the ensuing disillusionment the movement may find itself abandoned by both scholars and international funding alike.

While emphasizing the political use of strategic essentialist identities such as 'mother of the disappeared', academic analysis based on identity politics may pay too little attention to the interrelation between this specific category and another key political category in the human rights movement, that of being a revolutionary. Obviously, the human rights activists' framing of their struggle as part of a larger struggle for revolutionary transformation of society became problematic in the post-war period.

This study documents how El Salvador's transition has caused grass-roots (political) identities to shift and rearrange, a process described by many activists as painful and disempowering. Moreover, it suggests that the focus on the political use of strategic identities should not obscure

the interrelation of social movements with larger political agendas and political processes, as it is within these larger arenas of contention that the social movements acquire their meaning and significance.

Overview and research questions

For over a decade, from 1980 until 1992, the country was marred by violence and conflict. A significant part of its territory was in the hands of leftist rebels, a coalition of guerrilla organizations called the FMLN. In the years before and during the civil war, successive governments sponsored numerous atrocities. From the late 1970s until the early 1990s El Salvador held one of the worst human rights records in the hemisphere and the country became a synonym for terror in the international media. The military and security forces were responsible for the murder or forced disappearance of tens of thousands of people, making the civil war one of the worst episodes of disrespect for human rights in Latin America's recent history. It is estimated that over 75,000 people were killed during the war. As many as 50,000 of the victims were unarmed civilians, an additional 7,000 disappeared and over one million people were displaced. In all, approximately one fifth of the population was forced to leave their homes and almost two out of every hundred Salvadoreans were killed or disappeared (Montgomery, 1995).

Before and during the civil war (1980-92), different local human rights organizations rallied around human rights issues. Their activities could be viewed as a sounding board for the dramatic events that marked recent history. From the late seventies onward, Salvadorean human rights organizations were able to draw national and international attention to the ongoing human rights abuses committed by the armed forces and the right-wing death squads. As the conflict escalated, fierce political repression forced most human rights groups underground in the early 1980s. Several groups established offices in exile in countries such as Mexico. Receiving information from their people working inside the country without a public profile, the international offices distributed it to an international network, including governments and international institutions as well as organizations such as Human Right Watch and Amnesty International. Halfway into the 1980s, human rights organizations regrouped and were amongst the first to 'reclaim the streets' and resume public demonstrations of protest against the government and the army. They frequently organized public protest when somebody was captured by the army or security forces, often

obtaining official recognition of the detention and thus contributing to saving numerous people's lives. They worked with political prisoners, packed in jails by their hundreds, substantially improving the conditions of captivity. They also campaigned vigorously for peace negotiations (Stephen, 1994).

In total three 'Mothers Committees', organizations of relatives of victims of human rights violations, were founded: the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador 'Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero' (CO-MADRES), the Relatives Committee for the Liberty of Political Prisoners and Disappeared 'Marianella García Villas' (CODEFAM), and the Committee of Christian Mothers and Relatives of Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated 'Padre Octavio Ortíz - Hermana Silvia' (COMAFAC).¹ CO-MADRES was founded in 1977, CODEFAM in 1981 and COMAFAC in 1985. Towards the end of the war, their active membership ran into the hundreds, and they were able to mobilize thousands of people for public demonstrations. The Human Rights Commission (CDH-ES),² a professional resource group that specialized in documenting and denouncing human rights violations, was founded in 1978 by popular movement activists. The CDH-ES was the best staffed human rights groups during most of the war and worked in close cooperation with the Mothers Committees. Together they formed what is called El Salvador's 'historical' human rights movement.³

Human rights were an important issue in the UN-sponsored talks between the FMLN guerrilla and the government. The 1992 Peace Accords included several important human rights provisions such as the purging of the army, the creation of a national human rights counsel office and, most importantly, the creation of a Truth Commission set up by the United Nations. Hundreds of members of human rights groups worked extra-hours during one year to put their files in order and to gather additional information to present to the Commission. The Commission's report, titled 'From Madness to Hope' (*De la locura a la esperanza*), was published in 1993 and confirmed the severity and scale of the human rights abuses committed during the war. In spite of the fact that, as a part of the Peace Accords, the Commission's recommendations were binding, both the Salvadorean government and the FMLN (responsible for some of the violent acts documented in the report) largely ignored them. Instead, the government decreed a blanket amnesty law.

Disillusioned by this development, the human rights groups were initially not very successful in generating protest against the amnesty

law and the government's official 'forgive-and-forget' policy (Popkin, 2000). Even though the peace accords had created a new potential platform for respect for human rights, the transition process apparently did not bolster the strength of the human rights movement, but rather seemed to weaken it. CO-MADRES, COMAFAC, CODEFAM and CDH-ES saw popular support and membership dwindle while suffering from decreasing international (economic) support. Internal conflict surfaced in two of these human rights organizations, debilitating them further.

In El Salvador, contrary to what has been documented for example in Argentina and Chile, the loosening of the military's grip on society did not result in the advancement of public demands of truth and justice. On the contrary, the transition process witnessed the decline of the human rights movement, and with it the long-standing demands for truth and justice.

This study explores the phases and transformations the human rights movement went through since its inception in the late 1970s until the late 1990s. Specific attention is paid to the adaptation processes inside the four mentioned human rights groups after the peace accords in 1992. The central research questions are: How did post-war democratic transition affect El Salvador's human rights movement? What were the underlying (social) processes that determined the post-war development of El Salvador's historical human rights movement?

Human rights, social movements and identity politics

In the early 1990s, Latin America had more domestic human rights groups than any other part of the world (Sikkink, 1993). Already in 1981, a directory of organizations concerned with human rights discussed 220 such organizations in Latin America, compared with 145 in Asia and 123 in Africa and the Middle East combined (Wiseberg and Scoble, 1981). An undated listing published in 1990 lists over 550 human rights groups in Latin America (Wiseberg et al., 1990, in Sikkink, 1993). Additionally, an impressive international network of institutions and advocacy groups has developed over the last three decades, offering resources for local groups to draw on (Brysk, 1994a.). Publicly denouncing the gross human rights abuses inflicted upon its own people by repressive military regimes, while facing life-threatening peril of becoming the next victim because of speaking out and demanding justice, Latin America's human rights organizations and their spokespersons that worked under the dictatorships of the 1970s and

1980s gained an almost mythical aura (Agosin, 1993). Subsequently, these organizations played significant roles in the ensuing transitions towards civilian and more democratic governments in Latin America (Brysk, 1994a).

Human rights organizations are part of a generation of Latin American social movements that organized in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time that democracy had become the exception in the continent. In this wave of social movement organizing, a multiplicity of social actors successfully established their presence in Latin America's political arenas, including organizations of native peoples, feminists, Christians, pacifists, ecologists, anti-racists, mothers of the disappeared, human rights activists and homosexuals (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992). In social science literature these recent social movements have often been characterized as 'new social movements'. With most of Latin America's radical revolutionary programs defeated, many scholars of political change in Latin America shifted their interest to grass-roots activity and organizing around specific issues (Rubin, 1998). Many scholars consider that new social movements have challenged the very boundaries of what hitherto been perceived as 'politics' and the actors associated with it (Foweraker, 1995).

In politicizing what is not conceived of as political, presenting as public and collective what is conceived of as private and individual, they challenge the political arena to enlarge its own boundaries and broaden its agenda (Dagnino, 1998: 57).

One of the characteristics of Latin America's social movements, and especially human rights movements, is the important role played by women. The fact that women played a leadership role in Latin America's human rights movements has been subject of several analyses.⁴ One other important feature attributed to new social movements is that, in spite of the fact that often relatively few people actively participate in these groups, their social and political impact was very significant. This is especially the case with human rights groups that, even though their membership is usually not very large in number, were often credited with a central role in the demise of repressive regimes and the transition to democracy, especially in the countries of Latin America's southern cone (Jelin, 1994).

Over the last two decades, literature on social movements in Latin America has paid a lot of attention to the centrality of identity in political participation and mobilization. New social movements do not have the clear class base of 'older' labour and agrarian movements and strongly focus on the construction of new social and political

identities (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992). Human rights groups, together with women groups and indigenous movements, are often cited as an example of these (new) social movements involved in identity politics. The idea of identity politics is a powerful and appealing one, since it seems to provide a causal link from who you are to what role you (can) play in society. Identity politics endows individual and group actors with a strong sense of agency (Huiskamp, 2000).

Charles Hale sees identity politics within Latin America's historical development as the response to the erosion of the national-popular projects that had dominated Latin America's left wing politics from the Cuban revolution onwards. He distinguishes three categories of identity politics. The first category is that of initiatives nominally included in the national-popular political vision, but often suppressed in practice, such as women's movements and indigenous movements, which with the decline of national-popular projects were increasingly drawing out their own path. The second category is that of identities that according to Hale received little or no recognition with prior representations of the national-popular. He includes in this second group emergent identities revolving around environmental degradation and human rights activism, and, more recently, gay and lesbian identity politics. The third category encompasses 'politics in the name of people who were once privileged signifiers of national-popular projects that have lost their allure', like peasant or workers movement (Hale, 1997b: 578-80). Hale proposes to 'think about the era of "identity politics" as beginning when this particular use of the term identity became the standard, generalized idiom through which groups engage in politics with one another, the state and other powerful adversaries' (1997b: 572).

Even though some scholars warn that the differences between old and new social movements are exaggerated (Scott, 1991), an ample consensus exists that new social movements played a very important role in the political transformations Latin America has experienced over the last decades. The appeal of identity politics played a significant role in this process. Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar argue that Latin American social movements were not only able to challenge and resignify what counts as political, but also who, apart from traditional power holders, gets to define the rules of the political game. In their view, social movements have been and continue to be crucial to fostering alternative political identities and deepening democracy in the region. Latin America's social movements have 'not only sometimes succeeded in translating their agendas into public policies and in expanding the boundaries of institutional politics but also, significantly, have struggled

to resignify the very meanings of received notions of citizenship, political representation and participation, and, as a consequence, democracy itself' (Alvarez et al., 1998: 2).

Thus, new social movements theory focuses particularly on the actors' identities and on the potential contribution of movements to the larger political context of the societies they operate in. In this fashion a lot has been written about the rise and success of social movements in Latin America, but little about their possible failure and decline. Obviously, not all social movements have the same political impact. Even if general tendencies with regard to the gains of social movements in Latin America are considered to be quite positive, specific movements in specific countries may present different outcomes. Social movements often have a relatively short time span, rarely exceeding a number of decades. The period of major political relevance of a certain movement is often much shorter than that. Sidney Tarrow has extensively studied this phenomenon and attempts to explain it by the concept of protest cycles (1998). This model rests on the idea of political opportunity structure, in which social movement success depends on the group's ability to take advantage of existing political opportunities, exploiting these to forward its demands. Charles Tilly resumes Tarrow's model as follows:

'(...) successful claim making tends to stimulate new demands on the part of other actors. That happens because some actors recognize previously invisible opportunities, others emulate newly devised means of action, and still others find themselves threatened by the newcomers. Expansion of claim making occurs, according to this model, up to the point where rivals either establish themselves, rigidify their positions, exhaust their energies, destroy each other, or succumb to state repression called forth by those whose interest the claim making threatens' (2002: 105-6).

In consequence, unsuccessful claim making tends to weaken or extinguish new demands by its example. Furthermore, as political opportunities themselves change, collective action tends to change as well. This becomes particularly visible when the changes in political opportunity are sizeable and sudden, such as at the outbreak or the end of a war. Not only the impact of social movements varies, also their constituency and organization change over time. In practice, changes in opportunity also generate simultaneous alterations in the mobilization and organization of potential collective actors (Tilly, 2002: 106). The focus on opportunity structure, described as the collective of power relations that define the political context, already implies a new emphasis on

relations in political actions, shifting away from the more fixed identities and agendas of earlier social theory (McAdam et al., 2001: 14-17). Breaking away from the dominant assumption that what needs to be explained when studying social movements is the behaviour of those who mount protest, Tilly calls attention to the context in which the movements operate and the interactions in or through which they take shape. Proposing a focus on the centrality of social transactions, ties, and relations in all social processes, Tilly emphasizes the dynamic character of social movements and their interaction with society (2002).

The recent work of Charles Tilly and others has relevant implications for research on social movements in general and may also provide new clues for the study of the post-war development of El Salvador's human rights movement. Rather than focusing on the possible contribution of this movement to democratization, their work urges to place the changes in the context in which the movements operate and look for the connections and interaction between the context and the development of the human rights organizations themselves. And even though the centrality of identity in politics is an important element in this recent social theory, different from earlier studies of identity politics in Latin America, it emphasizes the dynamic character of identity formation, locating (political) identity by definition in the framework of social relations (McAdam et al., 2001: 133). This new emphasis on relations and interaction in social life opens perspectives on not only understanding the possible success of a social movement, but also on comprehending its limitations. Furthermore, it calls attention to new perspectives of social interaction that may help get a better grip on the salience of identity in the recent study of Latin America political development.

Methodology: storytelling and ethnography

Postmodernism largely swept the pretension of academic objectivity under the carpet. The researcher's role in the representation and construction of knowledge has been subject of numerous assessments. In social sciences, many now consider subjectivity to be unavoidable. Also, many authors make themselves more explicitly visible in the research they present, recognizing that the results of their inquiry are at least partially determined by their views and background. Following scepticism about subjectivity and representation, the scientific worth of interviewing individuals for social research has also been questioned, as the combined subjectivity of the interviewer and the interviewed presumably put great

potential distance between the events themselves and the results of the inquiry. In the case of ethnographically informed research critique has included concern over the anthropologist's construction of a timeless, placeless 'other' (Clifford, 1988). In consequence ethnography paid additional attention to the voices of those that are being studied. This resulted in a focus within anthropology and other social sciences on the characteristics of narrative practices. It also conduced to the now common practice of extensive citation of the interview transcriptions and field notes in ethnographic studies.

Ethnographic interviews provide a platform for storytelling. Storytelling or narrative is a performative process by which people (re)construct themselves and the world around them through the stories they tell (Bauman, 1986). It has also been defined as the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful (Polkinghorne, 1988: 1). Furthermore, 'narrative's configuration of events over time makes them important to the construction and maintenance of individual and collective identities' (Polletta in Auyero, 2002: 154). People ordinarily cast their accounts of social life as stories. These stories indicate the existence of distinct causal structures that explain events or render them meaningful. Tilly refers to this specific kind of stories as 'standard stories' and defines these as 'sequential, explanatory accounts of connected self-propelled people and events that we sometimes call tales, fables, or narrative' (2002: 26).

(...) People usually recount, analyse, judge, remember, and reorganize social experience as standard stories in which a small number of self-motivated entities interact within a constricted, contiguous time and space. (Tilly, 2002: 8)

Standard stories do essential work in social life and lend themselves to vivid, compelling accounts of what happened, what will happen, or what should happen (Tilly, 2002: 27).

In the study of Latin America's social movements (and especially human rights movements) a specific kind of storytelling called *testimonio* has become very influential over the last decades, and has been extensively commented upon in scientific publications (Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991). Testimonio appears at a time great social transformations are occurring in Latin America, to focus local, but especially international attention to the turmoil confronted by popular sectors that require urgent action and support. Some analysts view testimonio as a 'true form of popular expression', a counter hegemonic discourse produced by 'subaltern peoples on the periphery or margin' of the world order (Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991: 4, 7). The most outstanding fea-

ture of testimonio is its collective nature, meaning that the witness (the narrator) portrays their own experience as representative of a collective memory and identity (Sommer, 1991). Testimonial writing provides a new means for popular sectors to wage their struggle for hegemony in the public sphere from which they were hitherto excluded or forced to represent stereotypes by the reigning elites (Yúdice, 1991: 25). Testimonio is closely associated to the rise of identity politics in Latin America, as it provides direct and compelling links between individual and group identities and the historical development of a country (Gugelberger, 1996). One of the central themes of testimonial literature is the violation of human rights by agents of the state (Gugelberger and Kearney, 1991). Testimonios are written for a concrete political purpose. Most testimonios produce complicity, hope, and a will for action (Sommer, 1991). Political organizations, ranging from human rights groups to solidarity networks and sympathizing alternative publishers and media producers, in and outside of Latin America, promoted these texts in ways that blurred the boundaries between social science, political activism and literature (Yúdice, 1993).

Testimonio became the El Salvador's literary genre *par excellence* to address the popular struggles in the context of the social strife of the 1970s, and subsequently during the war. Salvadorean testimonios centre on the creation of revolutionary identities and government repression, or on the dramatic events of the civil war (Carpio, 1979).

Even though scholarly focus were on testimonios as published texts, many characteristics of testimonio are to be found in the storytelling of human rights activists, as documented in the interviews conducted for this study. For example, the connection between the events and the person telling the story is immediately made explicit: 'What we tell, we have lived it in flesh and blood'.⁵ They refer to themselves in group as being a '*testimonio vivo*' of the country's recent history and they view this role as a key task of their group in the present and future.⁶ The collective aspect of their experience is key to its narrative validation. As in the often cited extract of Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio,⁷ the participants of the human rights movements claim to speak for the collective grievances of an entire people. Furthermore, they often refer to public performances as giving testimonio, as a way of bearing witness to their country's plight. The people I talked to for this study sometimes also considered their participation in the interview to be a kind of testimonio.

Storytelling is a central part of social movement activity. Political organizers spend a significant part of their effort on, what Tilly calls

‘the creation and broadcast of collective standard stories that will facilitate communication, coordination, and commitment on the part of participants, allies, bystanders, and even objects of collective claims’ (Tilly, 2002: 9). Testimonio is a good example of this key social movement activity. But do stories such as those expressed through testimonio routinely reflect social processes accurately? Tilly is sceptical on this point.

In most circumstances, storytelling provides an execrable guide to social explanation. Its directly connected and self-motivated actors, deliberated actions, circumscribed fields of action, and limited inventory of causes badly represent the ontology and causal structure of most processes (Tilly, 2002: 35).

The social scientific technique of interviewing (especially in the forms we call life histories or oral histories) benefits from the readiness of humans to package memory in standard stories (Tilly, 2002: 27), but this may also be a pitfall. Historians know that, more than telling us what people actually did, ‘oral sources tell us ... what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did’ (Portelli in Auyero, 2002: 169-70). A social scientist needs to be cautious not to be dragged away by the elegance of the storytelling. As Tilly contends, ‘humans are so good in making sense of social processes after the facts by means of standard stories that skilled interviewers must spend much of their energy probing, checking, looking for discrepancies, and then reconstructing the accounts their respondents offer them’ (Tilly, 2002: 28).

It is not the idea of this study to question the truth content of testimonio or other social movement storytelling practices. Its logic is the reverse. Social movement participants often constitute the most knowledgeable inside sources to the social processes they have been part of. There is a lot to be learned from how social processes are presented by its participants. Instead of taking storytelling at face value, Tilly suggests that social scientists should tunnel under standard stories to find out more about social processes and construct what he calls ‘superior stories’, based on evidence about more adequate causal structures in social processes than those presented by standard stories (Tilly, 2002: 41). The exploration of standard stories employed by members of the human rights movement and what these stories can tell us about the underlying social processes or causal structures that determined the development of the movement, is the central methodological challenge of this text. This is an effort that by no means was reserved to the author, but that was stimulated and participated in by those interviewed.

The apparent lack of impact of the human rights movement in the post-war democratic transition were noticed by some scholars. They relate this phenomenon to the lack of independence of the movement from the revolutionary left, specifically the FMLN (Sieder, 2002). In this study the FMLN's role in the development of the human rights movement is extensively described and commented upon. Special emphasis is on how FMLN involvement played out in the post-war period, when the organizations attempted to adapt to the new context of democratic transition. This topic of FMLN involvement in human rights organizations was not spontaneously touched upon by most of the participants in this study. As a matter of fact, the stories used by most activists to represent the development of the human rights movement tended to ignore the FMLN's role altogether. However, when the researcher introduced this subject in the interview this profoundly affected the course of conversation. The stories about the role of the FMLN were usually only told when the researcher insisted and asked specific questions about it. It includes stories that, as one activist confided, 'we would probably not have told anyone a number of years ago'.⁸ These stories are conspicuously left out of the repertoire of stories that is normally used in the political activities of the human rights movement.

The material gathered for this study could thematically be divided in what is to be considered two distinct versions of the development of the human rights movement: the first one 'without the FMLN' and the second 'with the FMLN'. The two versions are difficult to reconcile in a single account of the development of the human rights movement. Especially the second version generates multiple questions about the first one. This study attempts to make sense of these two different versions in the historical perspective of the development of the movement.

The research

Most of the material for this study was gathered by ethnographical inquiry with (former) participants of the organizations mentioned above. For this purpose, during a fieldwork period of two months, the researcher conducted a total of 31 individual interviews and two group interviews with activists and relatives of victims of political persecution. Not surprisingly, most of the people that were interviewed for this study are women.⁹ In the CO-MADRES, CODEFAM and

COMAFAC women are the overwhelming majority, although some men also participate.

In line with ethical practice in anthropology this study avoids identifying particular sources by name. The interviews are identified by the name of the organization the person interviewed belongs to or used to belong to, as well as the date the interview took place. Other materials were used extensively to complement and enrich the framework laid out by the ethnographical accounts. Some of these materials were collected in the course of fieldwork and include files and publications of human rights groups, newspaper articles and photographs. The organizations that are subject of this inquiry produced a lot of written material over the years. Unfortunately the archives of these organizations are not very well kept. This is understandable as their offices were raided by the army as recently as 1989 (in the case of CO-MADRES and COMAFAC), and much of the archives were lost or destroyed. Furthermore, the documentation that is available usually does not refer to the history or development of the organization itself, but concentrates on individual cases of human rights violations. This further motivated the reliance on interviews to reconstruct an overall picture of the development of the human rights movement. The author's own previous experience of working on human rights issues in the country contributed additional information and insights.

Besides the material obtained through fieldwork, the study draws on previous studies on El Salvador's recent history. It complements ethnographical accounts with relevant information on and analysis of the context and the social processes that were taking place at the time. This additional information may help to break the isolated view or self-propelled image that ethnographical accounts based on personal interviews tend to offer. Since the 1970s, social and political scholarship on El Salvador tends to run parallel to the development of the war. Initial emphasis is on the revolutionary character of the conflict (Armstrong and Rubin, 1983). Later inquiries tend to focus more on the consolidation of the conflict, clearly defining it as a civil war (Gettleman et al, 1986). In the post-war period most scholars focus on the gains of the peace process (Johnstone, 1995), while others provide a less optimistic reassessment of the medium and long term aspect of the transition process (Spence et al., 1997).

A lot of material is available on the human rights situation in the country before, during and after the war, including yearly reports by organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Scientific inquiry into human rights violations, their causes and impact

is also available (Binford, 1996). Studies on social mobilization in the country mostly focus on the progressive Catholic church and Christian Base Communities and on rural organizing (Pearce, 1986). More recent studies have focused on women's movement (Stephen, 1997).

Even though a substantial body of literature is available on human rights organizations in other Latin American countries, and especially Argentina, the production is less in the case of El Salvador. Only two substantial academic publications that focus specifically on Salvadoran human rights groups were found during the groundwork for this research project. Both publications focus on the consequences of CO-MADRES' work for gender relations and gender politics (Stephen, 1995; Schirmer, 1993b). This study draws on their work wherever possible and relevant. Furthermore, one extensive testimonial account of a human rights activist and member of CO-MADRES is also available (Stephen, 1994) and several important biographical works exist on the figure of Monseñor Romero, who played a crucial role in the conception of the human rights movement (Brockman, 1982, 1989).

This study is structured as follows. The second chapter offers an overview of the development of the recent history with an emphasis on (dis)respect for human rights. This section helps provide the necessary context for issues and claim making related to human rights. The third chapter focuses on the development of the human rights movement before and during the war. The fourth chapter explores the nature of the relationships between the human rights organizations and the insurgents of the FMLN. Relying on critical questions and some outside materials, the researcher provides the participants of this study the opportunity for a critical evaluation of the FMLN's role in the development of their organizations. This results in a discovery of problems and contradictions that surface with force in the course of the post-war transition to peace. A lot of space is dedicated to the links between the FMLN and the human rights groups and its consequences because very little has been written about it up to now. The fifth chapter analyses the adaptation of the human rights movement to the new context of post-war El Salvador. Again the FMLN plays a prominent role as its own transformation into a political party has important implications for the human rights organizations. In the concluding chapter the question is why the FMLN played such a prominent role in El Salvador's human rights movement and how this hegemony related to the other political identities the human rights movement employed in its claim making processes. Emphasis is on the social processes that come to play in collective violence. Furthermore, the shifting identities in the

human rights movement as a result of the new context of post-war transition generated a change in how the past (the time of the war) may be represented by participants in the movement, an issue that is also subject of analysis in this study.

Notes

- ¹ The full names in Spanish are: *Comité de Madres y Familiares de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados Políticos de El Salvador 'Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero'* (CO-MADRES), *Comité de Familiares Pro-Libertad de Presos y Desaparecidos Políticos de El Salvador 'Marianella García Villas'* (CODEFAM) and *Comité de Madres y Familiares Cristianos de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados 'Padre Octavio Ortiz – Hermana Silvia'* (COMAFAC).
- ² *Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador* (CDH-ES)
- ³ Other human rights groups that operated during the war were linked to the Catholic Church: the *Socorro Jurídico*, founded in 1975, *Tutela Legal del Aroispado*, founded in 1982, and the *Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana 'José Simeón Cañas'* (IDHUCA), founded in 1985. The affiliation of these groups with the church dictated a different kind of development and organization. While the Mothers Committees and the CDH-ES explicitly profiled themselves as a social movement and as a part of a larger social movement for political change, the groups affiliated to the church focused on legal defence of human rights and did not have a popular constituency. They were subject to church authorities and did not profile themselves as a social movement. These characteristics set them aside from the popular based human rights movement this research focuses on. Even though the church groups have undoubtedly made important contributions to human rights work in El Salvador, they have not been included in this study, and will only be taken into account when relevant for (the context of) the work of El Salvador's human rights movement.
- ⁴ While some scholars regard women participation to mount to a significant shift in traditional gender roles, others emphasize that the motivation for political participation itself often draws on conservative gender roles. Organizations such as *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and CO-MADRES that initially emphasized motherhood were sometimes labelled non-feminist because observers did not see a challenge to traditional gender norms. Following this line of thought, Perelli claims that these movements put 'conservative' premises – that women are inherently apolitical, that motherhood is inviolable – to the service of efforts to account for the missing, and to bring those responsible to justice (Perelli, 1994). However, according to others, this approach has changed over the years as human rights movements themselves as well as analyses of them have started to integrate a feminist perspective with a feminine perspective (Agosin, 1993).
- ⁵ Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03. Group interview CODEFAM, 26/07/03. 'Lo que contamos, lo hemos vivido en carne viva'. The common expression in Spanish is 'vivir en carne propia', to live in (our) own flesh', while 'carne viva' refers to wounded flesh exposed. The contraction 'vivir en carne viva' seems to emphasize the aspect of having witnessed the physical mutilation inflicted by the repression.
- ⁶ Interview member CO-MADRES, 31/07/03
- ⁷ 'The important thing is that what happened to me happened to many other people also. My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people' (Burgos, 1983: 1).
- ⁸ Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03
- ⁹ Of 31 individual interviews, only 5 were conducted with men. In one group interview, 4 women and 2 men participated. In the other, 7 women and one man.



A joint Mothers Committees march in 1988.

HUMAN RIGHTS: THE BACKDROP

Introduction

El Salvador, for its small size, is often referred to as the *Pulgarcito de América*. Since its inception as a nation state after the independence struggles of the beginning of the 19th century, the country, situated along Central America's pacific coast, has primarily pursued export-oriented policies based on agricultural products, following shifts in the world market. During the colonial period and again in the 1870s, El Salvador became one of the world leading indigo producers, until synthetic dyes took over the market. The next export-boom was coffee, and in the 1960s large-scale cotton and sugar production was introduced (Dunkerley, 1988). Throughout much of the 20th century, a small privileged class, often referred to as 'the fourteen families' monopolized wealth and political power, accounting for the country's enormous economic and social inequalities (Dalton, 1989). Land distribution has been particularly disproportionate, putting most of the country's best agricultural lands in the hands of a few large landowners (Browning, 1971). Poverty has been widespread, with income very unevenly divided and ranging amongst the lowest in the hemisphere. Barry (1990) illustrated the precarious social and economic situation of the country with some figures: in 1987 the top 1 per cent of the farms occupied 71 per cent of the farmland, while the bottom 41 per cent of the farms occupied 10 per cent of the farmland. 1988 figures estimated unemployment at 50 per cent in the cities and 71 per cent in the rural areas. That same year, life expectancy at birth was 58,8 years and infant

mortality rate was 86 per 1,000 births, respectively far below and far above the average of Latin American countries (Barry, 1990).

The violent armed conflict did not come out of the blue. The most frequently cited historical antecedent of the civil war is what is known as the *matanza* of 1932, a fierce military response to popular revolt. In the middle of the dramatic effects that 1929 had on the coffee sector, discontent was sparked when General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez ousted the elected president, called off elections for local candidates and banned the recently founded Salvadorean Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Salvadoreño* - PCS). The PCS led by Augustín Farabundo Martí had expected to do well at the elections. In response to the coup, the PCS planned insurrectionary protest against the military government. However, before the protest had started, Martí and other party leaders were captured by the military and executed. In spite of fierce repression, the revolt went on, especially in the western coffee growing areas of the country. The military government responded with a murderous campaign. Estimates about the death toll range between 10,000 and 30,000 campesinos in less than a month. The terror was unleashed especially against indigenous campesinos and the social and political effects of the *matanza* would have a lasting impact. Outward manifestation of Indian identity, such as dress and language, were largely abandoned. The PCS was virtually wiped out and anticommunism became the official ideology of the ruling classes. (Anderson, 1971).

The *matanza* consolidated the alliance between the army and the oligarchy and initiated a period of 13 years of rule by Hernández Martínez. In 1944 Hernández Martínez was forced to abandon power, but after a short democratic period, military presidents ruled again in the following decades. In the 1960s, the grip of the oligarchy and the military on political activity began to slip. The opposition forces were growing and the PCS had reorganized itself with some success. As in all of Latin America, the Cuban revolution had an important impact on the left-wing opposition, while also stimulating a growing influence of anticommunism within the establishment, further nurtured by the United States' markedly anticommunist policy towards Latin America.

The 1970s

In 1972, in what is considered to be a landmark electoral process, the democratic opposition, united in a coalition led by Christian Democrats, obtained a landslide victory in the presidential elections.

The military resorted to large-scale fraud and intimidation to impose its candidate, an army colonel, in spite of the defeat. Several opposition leaders were exiled. Consequently, the Army and Security Forces began to operate in a more organized fashion to monitor and repress opposition. In 1975, a student demonstration was violently repressed, leaving dozens dead and missing. In 1976 the elections were rigged once more, and General Romero took power with the promise to intensify the repression. By this time, a strong and vocal popular movement was emerging and rising to the centre stage of opposition (Gordon, 1989).

Analysts trace much of the growth of popular organizations to the important organizing work done in previous years by progressive priests and layworkers. In the 1970s, organizing efforts by progressive sectors was changing the face of the traditionally quite conservative Catholic church, as was happening in much of Latin America. Emphasizing the Catholic Church's social responsibility, the second Vatican Council of 1964 had led the clergy into organizing efforts for the poor. Subsequently, the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia articulated the church's social responsibility even further, laying out the principles of liberation theology. The church was to practice a 'preferential option for the poor' and grant legitimacy to struggles for better wages and working conditions, and for land reform (Cabarrús, 1983). Liberation theology found its local expression in the establishment of Christian Base Communities or *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* (CEBs), throughout much of Latin America. In El Salvador some sectors (but not all) of the Catholic Church were committed to liberation theology, and the influence of these progressive sectors grew throughout the 1970s. The first CEB was founded in 1969 in Suchitoto and many followed in subsequent years, mainly in rural areas and in the marginal communities around the capital and other cities. The CEBs' goal was to work towards the creation of a 'Kingdom of God' on earth and in the present. Through religious study, reflection and action, priests, nuns and layworkers sought to eradicate the idea that poverty was the poor people's fate on earth. People were to be made aware of processes of exploitation and to cast off their sense of powerlessness (Galdamez, 1986). An estimated fifteen thousand lay catechists were trained by the mid 1970s. Before that time, the CEBs had already begun to nurture popular movements organized around demands for land, work, education and health care (Montgomery, 1995).

Clandestine guerrilla organizations began to emerge in the early 1970s, with their presence increasingly felt towards the end of the

decade. The first political-military organization, the Popular Liberation Forces (*Fuerzas Populares de Liberación* - FPL), was founded in 1970, a split off by a radical wing of the PCS. The Revolutionary People's Army (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* - ERP) was formed by dissident Christian Democrats and members of the youth section of the PCS in 1972. The Armed Forces of National Resistance (*Fuerzas Armadas de Resistencia Nacional* - FARN or RN) were founded in 1975 as a result of an internal division within the ERP. Another small armed group was formed in 1976, the Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers (*Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos* - PRTC). The PRTC was originally conceived as a regional party, but the El Salvador branch separated from sections in other Central American countries in 1980. The PCS ultimately adopted armed struggle in 1980, forming the Armed Forces of Liberation (*Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación* - FAL). (Montgomery, 1995)

Though initially the political-military organizations were quite small, popular sectors that advocated armed struggle as the only possible way to overthrow the government and implement substantial reforms extended in the course of the 1970s. Political-military organizations particularly found a lot of sympathizers and supporters in the CEBs and the popular movements. Clandestine guerrilla cells and political-military organizations started to plan and organize armed military actions, including kidnappings for ransom or political vindication. Though initially focusing on the urban areas, the political-military organizations started to operate more vigorously in the countryside towards the end of the 1970s (Hernández, 1981). Throughout the 1970s, there was a lot of disagreement between the different groups on certain strategic aspects of revolutionary struggle as well as conflicts due to power struggles within and between groups (Montgomery, 1995). Together with the secrecy of clandestine political organizing and security concerns these phenomena created strong sectarianism.

Death squads made their first appearance in 1975, when the group Anticommunist Wars of Elimination Liberation Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Anticomunistas Guerras de Eliminación* - FALANGE) made its appearance with the public pledge to exterminate all communists and their sympathizers. According to Montgomery, FALANGE and other paramilitary groups that appeared on the scene subsequently all shared the following characteristics: they were connected with certain army officers; their membership consisted mainly of off-duty members of the security forces¹⁰ and occasional mercenaries and right-wing members of the oligarchy; the groups received money

from some of the wealthiest families in the country; and they all carried the generic name death squad (1995). One of the key death squad leaders was Roberto D'Aubuisson, active in the counterinsurgency intelligence of the National Agency of Salvadorean Security (*Agencia Nacional de Seguridad Salvadoreña* - ANSESAL) and in the National Guard (*Guardia Nacional* - GN) until October 1979. Inside the headquarters of the military and security forces like the GN, clandestine detention centres were set up, where victims were kept isolated and tortured (Armstrong and Rubin, 1983). Lynn Stephen characterizes the terror of the time as follows:

The late 1970s were marked by a campaign of terror by death squads and the military against grass-roots organizations and the liberation theology sectors of the church. Every morning people in San Salvador and other urban areas were greeted by the sight of bodies exhibiting visible signs of torture and left lying on the streets. Areas on the outskirts of the city known as 'body dumps' (*cementerios clandestinos*) exhibited the evidence of the previous night's slaughter. And some of the people who were detained, the 'disappeared' were simply never seen again (1995: 811).

After having been appointed in 1977, Monseñor Romero, the Catholic archbishop of San Salvador, became the foremost spokesman for human rights and a relentless advocate for political reform (Armstrong and Rubin, 1983). Monseñor Romero was the first to publicly address state and paramilitary violence in terms of human rights abuses. His charismatic defence of the poor and his courageous denouncement of the human rights abuses made him an immensely popular figure.

On October 15, 1979 General Romero was ousted by a *coup d'état*, led by young reform-minded military officials. A revolutionary junta was installed: an unlikely combination of progressive civilians, mainly belonging to the Christian Democrat Party (*Partido Demócrata Cristiano* - PDC), young reform-minded officers and hard-line right-wing military leadership (Armstrong and Rubin, 1983). However, it quickly became clear that right-wing elements had reasserted their control over most of the army and the security forces. After a month of relative calm, repression resumed more fiercely than before by the end of November. Death squad activity in the city increased, popular movements meetings were fired at. In January 1980 the popular movements organized a large demonstration, with the objective to pay homage to those who had died in the 1932 uprising and demonstrate the strength and unity of the different popular organizations. Several hundreds of thousands of people concentrated in the streets of the capital. The crowd was shot at from the rooftops by security forces and violently dispersed, leav-

ing 49 death and hundreds injured (Montgomery, 1995). In parts of the countryside where support for the popular organizations and the guerrillas was strong, the GN, the National Police (*Policía Nacional* – PN) and the Treasury Police (*Policía de Hacienda* – PH) massacred entire families together with the local death squads. The surviving campesinos fled to the cities or to more remote areas trying to defend themselves from the security forces and paramilitary groups. The first make-shift refugee camps were formed in the most isolated and inaccessible parts of the country (Pearce, 1986). Unable to stop the terror campaign unleashed by the army and the death squads, several civilians resigned from the junta.

Political violence spirals into civil war

In 1980 the situation became even worse. By orders of D'Aubuisson, Monseñor Romero was assassinated on March 24, 1980 (Naciones Unidas, 1993). During the funeral service in San Salvador's Cathedral, the security forces again fired at the crowd from the rooftops, leaving dozens dead (Brockman, 1989). Archbishop's Romero death is often considered as the start of the civil war. During the months following his death, military and death squad terror intensified. In the city, students, schoolteachers and labour union workers disappeared from their houses or from the streets. As a result of the fierce political repression, popular organizations disintegrated or were forced to go underground. Hundreds of thousands of people fled the country looking for political exile. Also, many activists went to the mountains to join the guerrilla forces. Prominent members of human rights groups such as CO-MADRES, CDH-ES and Socorro Jurídico were killed or disappeared, and others forced into exile. Public offices of CO-MADRES and CDH-ES shut down after suffering several bombings. The urban popular movement ceased to exist as such after five members of the directorate of the joint popular opposition, the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), were captured, disappeared and found murdered and mutilated in November, 1980 (Armstrong and Rubin, 1983). In the countryside, the violence was even worse and more indiscriminate. The army systematically raided villages thought to conceal people sympathetic to the guerrillas murdering men, women and children, and burning villages to the ground. At the Sumpul river in Chalatenango, on the border with Honduras, at least three hundred people¹¹ were massacred in raid of a refugee camp, in which the several army units, the GN

and a right-wing paramilitary group called 'ORDEN' participated (Naciones Unidas, 1993).

In October 1980 the five political-military organizations groups agreed to form a common front known as the FMLN and on January 10, 1981, these joint guerrilla forces launched a nationwide military offensive hoping to spark off widespread popular rebellion and topple the government. The FMLN was able to take some of the urban centres but the better-equipped army fought back and forced the rebels to flee into the mountains. After this offensive, the guerrilla forces consolidated their influence in certain areas they called liberated zones; moving around from one place to another, always monitoring the government army's movements in the area and avoiding confrontation, thousands of civilian supporters of the rebels lived in camps or in the previously abandoned villages.

In 1981 and 1982 the military directed its principal operations specifically against these rural civilian supporters, because they considered them to be the guerrilla's source of sustenance in the conflict zones. This strategy was known as 'taking the water from the fish'. During the counter-insurgency operations, special US-trained battalions such as Atlacatl and Belloso were employed together with the existing military to massacre thousands of civilians, while burning down all houses and destroying crops and livestock, leaving entire areas of the country desolate. The El Mozote massacre is the most infamous of these operations. Between December 11 and 13, 1981, the Atlacatl battalion systematically exterminated an estimated thousand people in El Mozote and several surrounding villages located in the province of Morazán. This was the largest single massacre to occur in the Western hemisphere during the Cold War (Danner, 1993). By the end of 1982 large parts of the countryside had become virtually uninhabited and refugee camps in Honduras close to the border were overflowing with refugees. Throughout the country, and mainly around the major cities, hundreds of refugee camps were also in place.

After the terror of the late 1970s and early 1980s, growing international pressure regarding the government's human rights record eventually managed to change the violations from a genocidal to a more selective pattern towards the mid-eighties. Between 1982 and 1984 the conflict increasingly developed into a confrontation between two established armies, that of the government and that of the FMLN. From this stage of the war onwards, most casualties were caused by military confrontations between the army and the guerrilla forces. The 1984 election of US-backed Christian Democrat candidate José Napoleón

Duarte to the presidency in 1984 resulted in some improvement in human rights records. Cautiously, popular organizations once more began to establish offices and networks in the capital.

In the latter half of the 1980s the military set up various ambitious operations in failed attempts to defeat the FMLN on the battlefield. In the 1987 parliamentary elections and again in the 1989 presidential elections, the party D'Aubuisson had founded in the early 1980s on an anticommunist platform, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* – ARENA) defeated the PDC, leading Alfredo Cristiani, a representative of the right-wing business sectors, to the presidency.

The large-scale guerrilla offensive of November 1989 proved that a military solution to the conflict was very unlikely, as both sides in conflict were unable to defeat each other even in frontal confrontation. Battles were fought out all around the capital, including inside well to do residential neighbourhoods. During the offensive, the military intensified once more its persecution of popular organizations and other suspected guerrilla collaborators, and hundreds of people were murdered or disappeared (Naciones Unidas, 1993). On the third night of the offensive, a unit from the Atlacatl battalion surrounded the installations of the Jesuit University (UCA). The soldiers killed rector Ellacuría and five other Jesuit priests residing on the campus, as well as two women of the staff. Ellacuría and other staff-members had been outspoken critics of the government and the army, and well-known advocates of a negotiated solution to the war. The international reaction was one of outrage. International pressure, especially from the US, forced the government to stage a trial against an army officer. For the first time in Salvadorean history an official was judged and convicted for human rights abuses. International pressure was also crucial in the government's decision to accept peace negotiations (Doggett, 1993).

Throughout the war the FMLN human rights record was much better than the government's, but there were also some publicized cases of crimes against civilians in which the FMLN was involved, such as the Zona Rosa massacre¹² and the murder of the several mayors of rural communities that were disputed by the FMLN for military and political control (Naciones Unidas, 1993). Also, the FMLN recurrently executed 'traitors', alleged government informants in areas where the FMLN was active or alleged infiltrators in their own structures (Naciones Unidas, 1993).

Explanations of these massive human rights violations have centred largely on the impact of the infamous national security doctrine. The US actively promoted this doctrine in Latin America after the Cuban

revolution aiming at strengthening the military to be able to respond to internal 'communist' threats. In the logic of the doctrine, the army was the only possible defender of the 'patria' against the communist threat, and all violent means were justified for that purpose. The ill-reputed School of the Americas in Panama served as an important centre of diffusion of these ideas as thousands of officials of Latin America's armies took its courses on counterinsurgency training that allegedly included the unlawful interrogation and other dirty war techniques (Human Rights Watch, 1991). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the national security doctrine was extensively used by Latin American military dictatorships to justify their intervention in politics and their violent repression of the opposition. In the case of El Salvador, the US drastically increased its support for the army after the Sandinista victory in 1979, since they wanted to avoid a revolution at all cost. Mostly financed by the US, the armed forces grew from fewer than 10,000 men in 1979 to close to 70,000 in 1991. In the course of the war, the United States government sent more than six billion US dollars to the government, most of which was designated for the military. Also, the army received extensive training and advisory from the US (Montgomery, 1995). Even though nominally urging the army to improve its human rights records, many observers contend that the US military officials and undercover agents helped design and support the widespread political repression and human rights violations (Guidos Vejar, 1980). In his analysis of state violence, Stanley contends that the Salvadorean state had historically developed as a protection racket. 'The military earned the concession to govern the country (and pillage the state) in exchange for its willingness to use violence against the class enemies of the country's relatively small but powerful economic elite' (Stanley, 1996: 7).

The human rights legacy after the peace accords

After two years of talks and preliminary agreements, the government and the FMLN signed a definite peace agreement in Mexico on January 16, 1992, putting an end to 12 years of civil war. Improvement of the human rights situation was one of the key elements to be addressed in the agreements, also because of the insistence of United Nations mediators. In the words of former secretary Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the UN put 'an extraordinary focus on human rights' during the peace process (United Nations, 1995: 4). The peace accords were received with widespread enthusiasm, both within the country and abroad. In

the view of chief UN negotiator Alvaro de Soto and other officials, the accords constituted 'a negotiated revolution' (Montobbio, 1998). In return for the rebels' definite demobilization, the government committed itself to a widespread democratization process of the political system, including the political insertion of the former guerrilla forces. Simultaneously, a special *ad hoc* commission was set up to judge on military officials for their human rights violations and propose a list for purging. A UN-Truth Commission was installed to review the human rights abuses of the past and make a report with binding recommendations on how to tackle this issue. The Peace Accords also provisioned the dismantlement of the security forces, paramilitary groups and counterinsurgency battalions and the down-sizing of the army as a whole. A new civilian police, independent from the military, was to be trained and installed, with the FMLN providing 20 per cent of the new force. The judiciary was to be reformed and a national human rights counsel office was set up to monitor government dependencies on human rights performance. The implementation of the peace accords stood under the international supervision of the United Nations Observer Mission for El Salvador (*Misión de Observadores de las Naciones Unidas en El Salvador* – ONUSAL).

Most of the peace accords were successfully put into practice. Most importantly, the military's political influence was significantly reduced and the FMLN successfully incorporated into the country's existing political system. The Civilian Police and the National Human Rights Counsel became important new institutions. Within a little more than a year 'progressive forces (...) began to change the terms of political debate, the political process, and, in some measure, the political system' (Montgomery, 1995: 261). The transition to democracy opened up the political climate, establishing the rules for open, fair and competitive elections (Johnstone, 1995). International economic and political support for reconstruction and democratization efforts was strong, and many NGOs and progressive popular organizations became highly active in these fields (Boyce, 1999). The United Nations and many international observers considered El Salvador's democratic transition a blueprint for peace-building (United Nations, 1995).

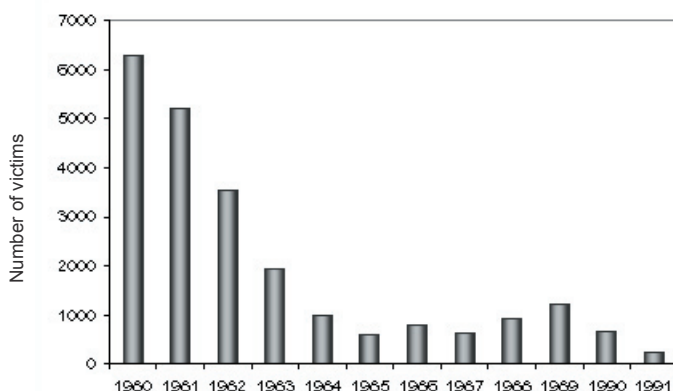
The agreements ended official political persecution, although in the years immediately following the war some politically motivated crimes were to be lamented (Popkin, 2000). But even as human rights performance dramatically improved with the end of the war, the legacy of human rights abuses was only dealt with restrictedly in the context of the peace accords. In 1992, the United Nations established a

'Truth Commission' to examine the 'acts of violence that had shaken the Salvadorean society' (United Nations, 1995). The commission's mandate was confined to human rights violations that occurred in the period between 1980 and 1991. The Truth Commission had the difficult task of documenting tens of thousands of serious violations to human rights that occurred over the course of 12 years, in a period of eight months.

In its report entitled 'From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador'¹³ the Truth Commission put information on atrocities committed in the civil war at the service of society. It confirmed that during the armed conflict the most basic human rights of thousands of men and women were systematically violated and that the army and the paramilitary groups had committed the overwhelming majority of these violations. But the FMLN could also be held responsible for several criminal acts. The report was groundbreaking in many ways. It was the first official large-scale investigation of human rights abuses in the country, and was able to draw on many sources that had not been accessible before. The report examined 24 cases in which government agents or death squads were to held responsible, including the assassination of Monseñor Romero, the El Mozote Massacre and the assassination of the Jesuits in detail. It also extensively documented 12 cases attributed to the FMLN, including the assassination of political opponents and kidnappings. Of the total of over 23 thousand denouncements received by the Commission, 45.8 per cent referred to human rights violations by the armed forces, 17.7 per cent to the security forces of the GN, the PN and the PH, 24.1 per cent to paramilitary groups such as ORDEN, 8.7 per cent to death squads and 3.7 per cent to the FMLN.¹⁴

The Truth Commission stated that 'none of the three branches of Government – judicial, legislative or executive – had been capable of restraining the military's overwhelming control of society. The judiciary was weakened as it fell victim to intimidation and the foundations were laid for its corruption. Since it had never enjoyed genuine institutional independence from the legislative and executive branches, its ineffectiveness steadily increased until it became, through its inaction or its appalling submissiveness, a factor which contributed to the tragedy suffered by the country (United Nations, 1995). Even though it also blamed the FMLN for some abuses, the report placed the weight of its analysis at the door of the government. It concluded that the state, through the actions of members of the armed forces and, or civil servants, was responsible for participating in, promoting and tolerating the

Figure 1. Number of Human Rights Violations during the Civil War



Source: Statistics of denouncements received by the UN Truth Commission, Annex to the Truth Commission Report.

operation of death squads. In one of the most controversial cases, it confirmed that D'Aubuisson had planned and ordered the assassination of Monseñor Romero. The report mentioned many of those involved in the crimes it had examined by name: army officials, death squad members and also several members of the FMLN. The recommendations included purging or debarring from public political office of those mentioned in the report, extensive judicial reform, the renovation of the Supreme Court, investigation of illegal armed groups and the creation of a repair fund for victims and their families. The commission also recommended that the cases should be brought to court, but stated that with the existent judiciary results were not to be expected. 'The question that arises is not if the culprits should be punished or not, but if it is possible or not to do justice. The sanction of those responsible for the crimes that have been described, is an imperative of the public moral' (Naciones Unidas, 1993).

The impact of the Truth Commission's report was very strong but official reactions were overall not very positive. The high command of the armed forces publicly doubted the report's credibility, and qualified it as biased and unfounded. One right-wing newspaper characterized the report as an arbitrary collection of 'every kind of tale, slander, half-truths and rumours'.¹⁶ Five days after the publication of the Truth Commission Report, the Legislative Assembly passed the General Amnesty Law for the Consolidation of the Peace that effectively buried expectations of justice, protected the culprits, and annulled any legal

proceedings related to the violations committed during the conflict. The law has been qualified as one of the most sweeping amnesty laws proclaimed in Latin America (Popkin, 2000). The Truth Commission's report did however have one notable positive result. Until its publication, President Cristiani postponed the retirement of military officials that had already been signaled by the *ad-hoc* Commission. After the Truth Commission's report international pressure to proceed with the purges became very strong and the direction of the armed forces was finally forced to retire in April of 1993 (Sieder, 2002).

The government framed its policy with regard to the past in terms of 'a clean slate' ('*borrón y cuenta nueva*') and 'forgive and forget' ('*perdón y olvido*').¹⁷ As justice was done away with, the government also ignored or rejected most of the other recommendations made by the Truth Commission over time, especially those pertaining to justice, clarification of the crimes and rehabilitation of the victims and their families (IDHUCA, 2002). Sieder describes the follow-up of the Truth Commission's recommendations as follows:

'Contrary to many of those signaled by the Truth Commission's report that managed to obtain lucrative and prestigious posts, the victims of human rights violations and their families hardly received any compensation. The Commission asked the government that they'd be compensated and that a national monument be built with the names of all those who had perished in the civil war. Nevertheless, even though a plan was made to compensate some of the relatives of those who had died in combat, this was not extended to the families of victims of human rights violations. Not Cristiani, nor his successor Calderón Sol, nor the members of the high command have ever publicly recognized the State's responsibility in the severe human rights violations. (...)The government has not proposed any programme in benefit of individuals or communities that were affected (by the violence). The government has not build a national monument and few exhumations have taken place of the many clandestine burial sites that exist throughout the country. The exhumation that has taken place at El Mozote and the monument that has been built there – under supervision of the UN - to commemorate the murder of more than 1,000 people, are a rare exception' (Sieder, 2002: 261-2).

Thus, from the point of view of the victims and their families the peace process present a large list of unsatisfied demands (IDHUCA. 2003). In spite of the decline of the historical human rights movement, the issue of the past human rights abuses is still hotly debated on the political stage. Recently, in the face of growing pressure from human rights groups, the government reaffirmed its unwillingness to persecute those

involved in war-crimes. In a press conference President Francisco Flores said he regards the amnesty law to be the 'cornerstone of peace' and concerning its possible derogation he said that 'if a chapter is opened in order to take vengeance, there will be another war' (Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, 2001). However, although in the case of El Salvador there has not yet been a lot of research on the subject, human rights observers agree that the inheritance of impunity is one of the less positive sides of transition, and that it has serious negative implications for the people and institutions involved. Until today, human rights observers describe the non-implementation of the Truth Commission's recommendations as an unfulfilled promise and the loss of a historic opportunity to transform the country. The most frequently expressed concern was that impunity may undermine democratic transition and prepare scenarios for future repression and political violence (IDHUCA, 2002, 2003; Popkin, 2000; Sieder, 2002), as was also argued in research on legacies of impunity in other Latin American countries, such as Argentina and Chile (see Barahona de Brito et al., 2002). As Popkin points out, 'the remarkable resolution of the armed conflict, including a highly successful demobilization of guerrilla forces and political reconciliation, has been rightly admired; but the obstacles to building the rule of law, an essential element for democratization and respect for human rights, has been far less tractable' (Popkin, 2000: 5).

Observers have also pondered other less positive aspects of the transition. Several analysts pointed out that the root causes of the war have not been resolved. The consolidation of democracy has proven difficult in a context where the majority of the people still suffer from lack of resources, political participation and social services (Spence et al., 1997). Binford claims that 'the peace accords didn't go as far as they should have and have not been completely complied with, mainly due to opposition by the bourgeoisie, the government and the military' (Binford, 1997: 328). Concern about burgeoning criminal and social violence has also grown. Since the end of the war, violent youth gangs called *maras* have blossomed, crime rates have surged and the country now possesses one of the highest indexes of violent crime in Latin America, with murder rates surpassing those of the civil war. (DeCessare, 1998). The government responded to this violence with increasingly repressive measures. The new civilian police human rights record leaves much to be desired. Members of the PNC have been involved in cases of organized crime and social cleansing. The National Counsel for Human Rights has been under severe criticism from the government unwilling to accept its role as a monitor, and over the last years the government

happointed national counsels with little preparation in human rights and little disposition to criticize the government. Increased political tensions between the FMLN (now the largest opposition party) and the government have also raised concerns about democratic stability. In recent electoral processes, such as in 1999, 2000 and 2003, several (isolated) incidents of political violence cast some shadows over the post-war democratic track record (Popkin, 2000).

Notes

- ¹⁰ Three different security forces operated in El Salvador at the time. The National Guard (Guardía Nacional – GN), the National Police (Policía Nacional – PN) and the Treasury Police (Policía de Hacienda - PH), all three forces depended organically from the military.
- ¹¹ Most estimates place the number on 600. See f.e. Pearce, 1986, Keune, 1995, and the Tutela Legal del Arzobispado report on the Sumpul massacre.
- ¹² In the Zona Rosa, a fashionable nightspot in San Salvador, a FMLN commando unit killed 4 unarmed US marines of the embassy's security staff as well as 9 civilians that were dining in a restaurant in 1985. See Naciones Unidas, 1993.
- ¹³ The report was released on March 15, 1993. The complete title of the report in Spanish is 'De la locura a la esperanza: La guerra de 12 años en El Salvador. Informe de la Comisión de la Verdad para El Salvador'. (Naciones Unidas, 1993)
- ¹⁴ Source: 'Análisis Estadístico de los Testimonios recibidos por la Comisión de la Verdad', Annex to the Truth Commission's report. The categories of human rights violations that have been taken into account are homicide (49,4 per cent), forced disappearance (25,9 per cent), torture (23,5 per cent) and rape (1,2 per cent). The same case may sometimes present a combination of these categories.
- ¹⁵ Source: 'Análisis Estadístico de los Testimonios recibidos por la Comisión de la Verdad', Annex to the Truth Commission's report: Denouncements received from direct and indirect sources.
- ¹⁶ El Diario de Hoy, March 19, 1993.
- ¹⁷ See El Diario de Hoy, March 17, 18 and 19, 1993, and La Prensa Gráfica of those same dates.

FROM INCEPTION UNTIL THE PEACE ACCORDS

The work the CDH did was heroic.

We exposed ourselves to all the dangers.

There were times we all felt so incredibly united because of the fear.

Interview former member CDH-ES, 03/07/03

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the development of the human rights movement from its inception up until the peace accords. Longtime activists roughly distinguish four periods of development of the movement: organization, repression, reorganization and post-war transition.¹⁸ The first period is the one of foundation, intensive organizing and public activity. This period ends in some accounts with the death of Monseñor Romero and in others with the first FMLN offensive of 1981. The next period is one of clandestine organizing. This is the period in which repression was the strongest. The most important public figures in the human rights movement were forced to leave the country, including members of groups linked to the church. Several human rights groups set up public offices in exile. The third period marks the rebuilding of the movement, after the worst repression subsided and public protest was once again a possibility, although not free of danger. This period saw growing activity until the peace accords and their implementation.

The post-war period got marked by adaptation problems of the human rights movement to the new context, an episode that will be treated in subsequent chapters. In this chapter the first three different periods are briefly characterized using some of the stories the participants of the human rights organizations told about them. These accounts are placed in a contextual framework in order to relate them to the general chronology of the development of the conflict described before.

The rise of the first human rights organizations

All human rights organizations in the country view Monseñor Romero as their most important predecessor. After his appointment as archbishop of San Salvador early 1977, Romero converted a small catholic legal assistance office 'Socorro Jurídico' into his human rights office. Socorro Jurídico became the first place where people whose relatives had been killed or disappeared went for legal help to. Romero also played an important role in the formation of the first human rights groups, such as CO-MADRES, the first Mothers Committee, and the Human Rights Commission (CDH-ES). Every week, in the nationally broadcast Sunday mass, Monseñor Romero would refer to the cases Socorro Jurídico had received and read out the names of the victims one by one.

On the evening of December 24, 1977, Monseñor Romero invited a group of women at the seminary of San José La Montaña in San Salvador to enjoy a Christmas dinner together. The women who were present had mostly been meeting over the course of two and a half years in their efforts to search for relatives who were captured by the authorities. They had also gone to Romero's office for help. That evening, Romero spoke about the worth of their cause and suggested that they form a Committee and CO-MADRES was formally constituted.¹⁹

But a kind of group effort of relatives of the disappeared had started before. On July 30, 1975, after the army had attacked a student march in the capital demanding the end of the army's occupation of the Santa Ana campus of the University of El Salvador, the relatives of those who participated in the march and had not come home, started to look for their loved ones immediately after the massacre. In hospitals, jails and morgues they met other people who were doing the same, and they started to pay visits to these institutions in groups in order to find more strength and comfort.²⁰

One of the founding members of CO-MADRES, a woman who is referred to in this study as Juana, witnessed the events that marked the beginning of the search for the disappeared. The 1975 student march which was violently repressed by the military happened in front of the hospital where she worked. She recounts the following events:

Trying to escape the gunfire several students had entered the hospital, some of them wounded and all, dripping blood. They were followed shortly afterwards by members of the National Guard, in full gear. They wanted to capture them. The nurses and other staff-members had already started to help the students to hide in the hospital, undressing some and putting them into bed as if they were patients, hiding others

in the dirty laundry cart. A small group was even hidden in the operating room. The Guards searched the hospital but were unsuccessful in finding the students. So they demanded to be led into the operating room. Hospital staff was able to prevent this on medical grounds. The National Guard left the hospital, but continued to stay posted outside the hospital exits, to see if any of those they were looking for would come out.²¹

During the massacre, some of the nurses saw a little bit of what happened outside from the hospital window. When things calmed down, Juana, in her nurses's uniform, left the hospital to go across the street to another medical unit to fetch bags of blood. She told she was terrified as she crossed the bloodstained street where the shootings had occurred.

Military personnel were cleaning up. I passed close to a truck loaded with bodies, and amongst the corpses, you could hear the moans of some who were still alive. There was a strange vehicle, like a steamroller, that had crushed several bodies against the pavement, a carpet of blood and flesh. They (the soldiers) didn't say anything on my way over, but on my way back (to the hospital) an officer stopped me, really angry. He demanded to know who had let me pass. However, he allowed me to return to the hospital with the bags of blood. Meanwhile, military personnel was hosing down the street with water.²²

At least 37 people had been killed or disappeared in the massacre (Montgomery, 1995). What Juana did not know at the time, but found out shortly afterwards was that her brother was among those that participated in the march and had not returned. Juana's mother started looking for him in jails, morgues, cemeteries, and hospitals, where she met other people involved in the same kind of search. After three months, she was mentally and emotionally exhausted and asked Juana to take it over from her. The relatives who knew each other would make an appointment to meet somewhere close to where they were going, often inside a church, because this felt the safest, and would then continue in a group from there. In the beginning there were no plans to take their effort to a more formal level, as the central idea was only to retrieve the lost relatives, either dead or alive. The relatives thought the group would dissolve as soon as that objective was reached.²³

But very few of those who disappeared during the student march were ever found. Only on one occasion, during a reconnaissance visit by some of the group to the prison of San Francisco Gotera, in the eastern part of the country, where one of the disappeared was located. Not the prison authorities, but the other inmates told the group about the young man's presence. In spite of the fact that the authorities did

not officially recognize his detention, Juana and other members of the group were able to see him and determine his identity.

We were happy we had finally found one of the boys we had been looking for. But poor thing, he was in bad shape because of the torture he had suffered (...).²⁴

That day, the group missed the last bus to the capital. Instead of staying in San Francisco Gotera, they hitched a ride with someone who took them to the city of Santiago de María, an hour and a half closer to the capital. They went to the church and adjacent rectory to find a place to sleep, and found themselves amongst many out-of-towners who were spending the night there. Here Juana met Monseñor Romero, then bishop of Santiago de María and still a relatively unknown figure in the country.

He listened to our story very closely and in the morning he insisted we should have coffee with sweetbread before travelling on. He also offered to serve as a channel to bring medication for the tortured prisoner. He had to visit the San Francisco Gotera jail every so often, because as a priest...²⁵

In the beginning the women who would form CO-MADRES were not very clear about what to do after all the hospitals, morgues, cemeteries and the prisons had been visited. But the events succeeded each other with such a speed, that there was little time for reflection. CO-MADRES were growing fast and proved to be a very effective mutual support group.²⁶ Gradually, the group that was formed more or less spontaneously after the July 1975 student massacre, transformed itself into a political collective. As new acts of violent repression occurred, new relatives would sometimes start participating in the activities. However, no medium-term strategy or work plan was thought out, not until years later.

Improvising was our strength in the early days. We met in a back-room of the office of a lawyer who supported us. A bare space with no chairs, desks or any kind of office equipment. We would sometimes just squat on the floor when we had our meetings. We borrowed equipment wherever possible. We would send out letters to the authorities as well as press releases about human rights violations and CO-MADRES activities, but newspapers hardly ever published our work. We raised money to place short ads with pictures of those who disappeared, because a few newspapers were willing to publish this information if we paid.²⁷

Some of those who joined CO-MADRES were quite sure their relatives were alive. Some of those detained by the authorities had actu-

ally been recognized officially or unofficially as political prisoners, and their lives were not in any immediate danger. Sometimes their relatives were actually able to visit them. From very early on CO-MADRES developed into a support group for relatives of political prisoners, as is illustrated in María Teresa Tula's story. Her husband was detained in 1978 in a sugarmill strike organized by the FENASTRAS labour union. He and 21 colleagues were imprisoned. When María Teresa Tula visited her husband in jail, she learned that members of CO-MADRES had been paying the political prisoners solidarity visits, bringing them food and other basic necessities. On the next visit she met one of the women of the recently formed CO-MADRES and she was invited to participate (Stephen, 1994). CO-MADRES demands were not only limited to the disclosure of the whereabouts and the fate of the disappeared, but to have justice done in the case of human rights violations. The unconditional release of all political prisoners was another of their demands. In fact, the demand was often worded in the slogan: 'freedom for all political prisoners and disappeared'.²⁸ It is to be understood that the authorities secretly held several of those who had disappeared in captivity, sometimes for extended periods of time. Thus, the line between being a political prisoner and being assassinated or having disappeared was often very thin. This is exemplified in the case of Tránsito Hueso de Ramírez. She joined CO-MADRES early 1978.²⁹ Her daughter, Lil Milagro Ramírez, a member of the RN, was detained by the security forces in 1976. Though her detention was never officially acknowledged, it was known that she was being held because other released prisoners declared having her seen and talked to her during captivity (OEA, 1978). Lil Milagro Ramírez was never found, nor was her body. It was rumoured that she had been killed right after the October 1979 coup de état, more than two years after her detention, because the National Guard, uncertain of what was to come, wanted to get rid of evidence (Armstrong and Rubin, 1983).

Captured political activists would often be detained illegally, interrogated and tortured in secluded parts of the security forces quarters, where the torture rooms and clandestine cells were located (OEA, 1978). After being held irregularly for a period time, a significant number of prisoners would be recognized as such and sent to regular jails. This would mean their lives were saved, but their liberation might still be far away. As political prisoners were filling up the jails, CO-MADRES work with the prisoners and their relatives kept on growing. This became one of the most important line of work for CO-MADRES at this time.³⁰

CO-MADRES regularly joined or organized activities together with other groups like the popular social movement or with the progressive church. Juana relates:

I remember very clearly our first march as CO-MADRES. It was impressive. We were marching together with the students, for the anniversary of the student massacre. It was a silent march, nobody made any noise. We were about 400 people, and we carried a big banner with the slogan 'enough! (*basta ya*)'. We went from the Cuscatlán park to the hospital area where we stopped to remember the massacre. From there on, we continued to the cathedral. People were writing on the walls: 'freedom for the political prisoners', 'justice and punishment for the murdered', 'the disappeared: where are they?'³¹

CO-MADRES regularly made their appearance in demonstrations or public meetings. In June of 1978, together with other popular movement organizations, CO-MADRES invaded the offices of the United Nations and the Organization of American States in San Salvador, with the objective to demand the liberation of the political prisoners and to denounce the ongoing human rights violations in the country (Gordon, 1989). Other actions in 1978 included the takeover of the offices of the Red Cross in San Salvador. Each takeover would be followed by a statement of demands that included the liberation of political prisoners and the clarification of the case of the disappeared, as well as justice for the victims and families of human rights violations. These events were staged to attract not only national but also international attention to these issues.³²

The members of CO-MADRES were inspired early on by the activities of the 'crazy mothers' in Argentina. They mainly heard about the work of the mothers and grandmothers in Argentina through visiting international delegations and journalists such as the Dutch Koos Koster,³³ who had regular contact with CO-MADRES.³⁴ The example was used by these foreign visitors to encourage the women of CO-MADRES in their struggle.³⁵ In 1978, Koster also arranged CO-MADRES contacts with Swedish officials to obtain political exile for the prisoner in San Francisco Gotera who had been captured for three years.

CO-MADRES did not really have an international support network of their own during the first years. Most of the contacts were arranged by Monseñor Romero.

Romero coordinated with the international delegations and the journalists. Romero made sure that they would come and visit us, or he would call us to meet with them in the archbishop's office.³⁶

The technical resources of CO-MADRES were limited, but they often worked together with lawyers sympathetic to their cause, especially those at the CDH-ES and Socorro Jurídico. The Socorro Jurídico office had been founded in 1975 by the Jesuit priest Segundo Montes and a group of young progressive lawyers at the Externado San José, the high school of the Company of Jesus in San Salvador. Its initial purpose was to provide assistance for the poor who couldn't afford a lawyer. In 1977, Monseñor Romero adopted the Socorro Jurídico and converted it into his human rights office.³⁷

Romero also encouraged the formation of professional human rights groups not directly linked to the church, like the Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador (CDH-ES). In 1977 and 1978 Romero organized several meetings with progressive lawyers about the human rights situation in the country. In these meetings he urged lawyers to find mechanisms to legally combat human rights violations. Several of the founding members of CDH-ES attended these meetings (Interview Tutela Legal, 04/07/03). The CDH-ES was founded on April 1, 1978 and led by lawyers such as Marianella García Villas, a woman who had been active in the moderate PDC, the main legal opposition party, and Dr. Méndez and Dr. Lara Velado, prominent lawyers also connected to the PDC. Founding members included representatives of the popular mass organizations as well. From the beginning the CDH-ES was conceived as a joint opposition effort to defend the basic human rights of the people and to denounce government violations.³⁸ Like Socorro Jurídico, the CDH-ES focussed on legal prosecution for human rights violations, as well as documentation and international denunciation of these abuses. Almost immediately after the CDH-ES was founded its political persecution began and its president Marianella García Villas was detained on May 12 and again on June 13, 1978.³⁹ She was kept hidden and isolated and was tortured on both occasions.⁴⁰ Dr. Méndez, the vice-president of the CDH-ES, suffered an attempt on his life on April 27, 1979.⁴¹

CO-MADRES links to the CDH-ES were strong from the beginning. Even before the CDH-ES was founded they had been meeting in the office of Dr. Méndez, one of CDH-ES founding members. In the beginning, this office was shared by the CDH-ES, but in 1979, CO-MADRES and CDH-ES transferred to a different building in the same neighbourhood.⁴²

Just like the members of the CDH-ES, the members of CO-MADRES had to start to look out for their own security. During one of the visits to a local prison to check on the political prisoners a found-

ing member of CO-MADRES was detained by the National Police. In response, CO-MADRES took over the San Salvador's Cathedral to demand her immediate release. After members of CO-MADRES spent several days in the Cathedral, the detained CO-MADRES activist was released by the National Police in the centre of the city, near the Cathedral. Juana relates that after she joined them inside the church and they were preparing to leave together, they noticed suspicious men wandering around the plaza in front.

We suspected that the police was intending to use her release as a bait for the rest of us, and that they had organized a stakeout in front of the cathedral. They were going to capture us as we left the church. But the sacristan led us out through a backdoor. We escaped between market stalls in the street behind the church. The police didn't see us.⁴³

On October 19, 1981, four days after the coup, the revolutionary junta had a public meeting with CO-MADRES. Days before the junta had ordered the release of all political prisoners, but none had reappeared. It was rumoured that the National Guard and other security forces killed most of the political prisoners right after the coup. The meeting manifested the impotence of the country's nominal leaders to resolve the demands of CO-MADRES, as the conservative military was unwilling to make any concessions (Armstrong and Rubin, 1983). CO-MADRES offered them a list of 276 disappeared and rejected an offer to go look for the disappeared themselves inside the military bases, as the junta could not give any basic guarantees for their safety. The only concession the junta made was that of a formal letter of permission to retrieve bodies which had been abandoned in so-called clandestine cemeteries.⁴⁴ (Armstrong and Rubin, 1983)

We went out to do this job of recovering the bodies, because it had to be done. But we didn't have any training. We would just go, armed only with hoes, shovels and pinewood coffins. We went together, CO-MADRES and CDH-ES. It was sometimes very scary, because there was often military around these dumping sites. We didn't know how they would react. We only had the letter from the junta to show, nothing else. No judges wanted to come, nobody. But we went anyway. We retrieved dozens of corpses in 'El Playón', 'la Puerta del Diablo'⁴⁵ and other places. Some bodies were identified by clothes or teeth, but most remained unidentified. We flooded the central morgue with bodies. The authorities did not know what to do with them. They started to complain. In December the junta asked us to stop. They said we had already proven that clandestine cemeteries actually existed. But they didn't do anything about it.⁴⁶

After a short period of insecurity about how the army was going to behave after the October 1979 coup, it became clear that the right-wing hardliners had reaffirmed control and repression became even worse than before. The progressive sectors of the church, the popular organizations and human rights groups, and especially rural communities became the prime victims of this new wave of violence. On March 13, 1980, the CDH-ES and CO-MADRES office suffered a bomb-attempt, as did the YSAX, the Catholic radio station that broadcast Romero's masses, and the Jesuit residency several times before.⁴⁷ (Brockman, 1989)

In a desperate attempt to put an end to the killing, Monseñor Romero gave his most famous homily on March 23, 1980. He called upon the soldiers to disobey orders if they implied violating human rights.

I would like to make an appeal in a special way to the men of the army, and in particular to the ranks of the Guardia Nacional, of the police, to those in the barracks. Brothers, you are part of your own people. You kill your own campesino brothers and sisters. And before a man may give an order to kill, the law of God must prevail that says: Thou shall not kill! No soldier is obliged to obey an order against the law of God. No one has to fulfill an immoral law. It is time to recover your consciences and to obey your consciences rather than the orders of sin. The church, defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, the dignity of the persona, cannot remain silent before such abomination. We want the government to take seriously that reforms are worth nothing when they come about stained with so much blood. In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people, I beg you, I ask you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression! (Monseñor Romero's homily of Sunday March 23, 1980. In Brockman, 1982: 217)

Romero was murdered the next day. A death squad hitman fired at him when he was saying mass at a hospital chapel. His work and his words were to become a guide for the human rights organizations in years to come.⁴⁸

The human rights movement forced underground

After Romero's death public human rights work became almost impossible. The right-wing military had taken full control over the army and the security forces, unleashing the fiercest repression.

There was terror and panic, bodies littering the side of the road, all kinds of terror, dead people all maimed and their bodies exposed on

stakes. Bodies with wigs on. Bodies that were like pregnant women, with a dress and a big belly, only inside that belly there was another head of a man sewed into the insides of the other. It was impossible to work the same way we had before. We tried, but it was too much.⁴⁹

Like before, CO-MADRES and CDH-ES were also directly targeted by government repression.

They killed several of the people who were working with us, including the daughter of one of the founders. They tortured and raped her and left her on the Puerta del Diablo. Another woman was also murdered because she was with us. She was our *compañera*, but her husband would beat her up because she supported CO-MADRES. The man was a member of ORDEN.⁵⁰ But her son had disappeared and she would support us whenever she could. Her own husband denounced her, and men from ORDEN killed her and her 4 month old child.⁵¹

Marianella García Villas, the president of the CDH-ES, barely escaped being killed on the steps of the cathedral when the security forces fired at the crowd during Romero's funeral. Her name was on the death squad hit lists that were being published in local newspapers and left as leaflets throughout the city. She went into exile to Mexico, where she set up an office and continued to direct the international work of CDH-ES.⁵² Meanwhile the intimidation of the CDH-ES in San Salvador continued:

Another way of intimidating us would be to put dead bodies at our door. In September we found three dead bodies at our front door. On October 3, (1980) they kidnapped and murdered María Magdalena. On October 25, they kidnapped our administrator, Ramón Valladares. Everybody thought there was going to be a third victim afterwards, because they had left three bodies at the door. We were all very scared to know who would be the next. Most of the staff then fled abroad, only very few stayed.⁵³

Gradually, CDH-ES and CO-MADRES went underground and started to work in a clandestine manner.⁵⁴ The two organizations had already ceased to function publicly when the first FMLN military offensive was mounted in January 1981. The offensive failed and was followed by a ferocious military counteroffensive. The remaining urban opposition forces were dismantled or dissolved.

Our form of struggle changed in 1981, because after the offensive things only got worse. We couldn't do any public denouncements or anything like that anymore, because there was a lot of military presence. We couldn't work with the cases of all the crimes that were being committed. The only thing we could do was to try and get information, nothing more. So we decided to do other things, another kind of

work. There was a lot of work to be done because of all the refugees; thousands of refugees were pouring in from the countryside, we had to try to help them, try to find food for the shelters.⁵⁵

In spite of the fact that the activities were mostly underground, repression against human rights workers continued in this period. On August 20, 1982, CDH-ES staff members América Fernando Perdomo and Saúl Villalta disappeared, together with María Adela Cornejo, a member of CO-MADRES and her daughter. On February 10, 1983, Dr. Rivera Martelli, founding member of the CDH-ES, was abducted from his clinic by a death squad and disappeared.

While in México City Marianella García Villas helped set up CODEFAM, an organization of relatives of victims of human rights violations founded on September 9, 1981, the latter started to work also cautiously inside El Salvador from 1982 onward.⁵⁶ Several exiled members of CO-MADRES established a new office in México City as well, in 1982.⁵⁷ The same year CO-MADRES was invited to become one of the founding members of the Latin American Federation of Associations of Relatives of the Disappeared (*Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos* - FEDEFAM), together with groups such as the Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the Grupo de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos de Chile. Even though the CDH-ES received international financial support since the beginning, international recognition for CO-MADRES was only slowly growing. By 1982 however, members of CO-MADRES started to receive invitations to participate in meetings in Latin America, Europe and the United States.

Our first project that was financed was in 1982. We didn't know how to write a project. We didn't know anything about that. When I was on tour in Germany, they asked me to present a project for the next day, in order to be able to give me a check for CO-MADRES (...). Fortunately, in the office where I was staying that night, there was someone who helped me. He explained how to make a project, the objectives, what you needed etc. and that night I wrote it down in a notebook. I presented it just like that, pieces of handwritten paper, and they said 'OK' (...). They gave me the check. They said: 'it is not the elaboration of the project we appreciate, but the effort you took to do it'.⁵⁸

Early 1983 Marianella García Villas clandestinely returned to her country for a visit to elaborate a report on recent human rights abuses to be presented to the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations. Her investigation included the documentation of the massacres

that had been occurring in the countryside, an issue on which little information was available.

She travelled to the area of Guazapa with her camera and her tape-recorder to see for herself what was going on. She wanted to talk to people herself. The military was killing people indiscriminately in those areas where there was guerrilla. There were massive indiscriminate aerial bombings. They even used chemical weapons. It was terrible. When Marianella was in the area, the Atlacatl battalion did another one of their operations. She couldn't escape (...). Marianella was caught. They killed like 90 people, including Marianella (...).⁵⁹

Reorganization

In 1984 the human rights situation improved somewhat. Making use of the improving political climate and the increased international pressure to respect human rights and allow human rights organizations to work, CDH-ES and CO-MADRES opened a new public office in San Salvador in March 1984 and organized a public march on March 24, to commemorate four years of Romero's death. This was the first significant public protest manifestation to occur in downtown San Salvador since the archbishop's funeral.⁶⁰ Furthermore, in 1984 the CDH-ES successfully organized its first human rights congress, while CO-MADRES obtained the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award and Marianella García Villas was posthumously awarded the Norwegian People's Peace Prize.⁶¹

In 1985, a third Mothers Committee was founded by relatives who were active in the church communities around San Salvador. COMAFAC was born on May 10, 1985, Mother's Day, as 'the best offering to our assassinated, disappeared or incarcerated sons and relatives', with the central purpose to 'denounce human rights violations', 'in the face of the harsh and painful reality of injustice'.⁶² That same year the Jesuit Segundo Montes, founder of the Socorro Jurídico, opened an investigative institute for human rights issues called IDHUCA, the Human Rights Institute of the UCA, San Salvador's Central American University (Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas – UCA).

CDH-ES and CO-MADRES started to rebuild and gain strength in this new period, while CODEFAM and COMAFAC established their presence. In this new context, the groups mainly focused on monitoring the government and army on human rights.

When we were able to work inside (El Salvador) again (...), we had a very clear objective: denouncing what was going on, obtaining

recognition for detentions and the like, saving lives that way (...). Because human rights abuses were still common and little could be done through the courts, the human rights movement developed a methodology centred around the defence of life and liberty, which it channelled in non-formal denouncements, through international networks, press conferences etc.. We also accompanied political prisoners, but the Mothers Committees did more of that.⁶³

The CDH-ES had a very good channel to the international human rights network and in this way it managed to pressure the government to clarify cases, diminish torture, free political prisoners and respect their integrity.⁶⁴

Also CO-MADRES and CODEFAM, and later COMAFAC, contributed to these international campaigns directed at denouncing human rights violations and obtaining recognition for (political) detentions.

We had a program with Amnesty International and other groups to send letters and telegrams to the Salvadorean government. Those in the government would get really angry! Imagine, receiving boxes full of letters and telegrams. In the presidential palace they used to say: 'those old bitches are at it again!' This way we could save many lives, with the help of the solidarity. Thanks to them we rescued not hundreds but maybe thousands of people alive.⁶⁵

These campaigns could be so effective because the human rights movement had managed to build up an extensive international network, one that would only continue to grow throughout the war. While the CDH-ES had a lot of connections and support within the international human rights regime, the Mothers Committees, and especially CO-MADRES had an extensive solidarity network including groups in Sweden, Spain, Canada, Italy, Australia, Switzerland and Germany, as well as a score of Friends-of-CO-MADRES Committees in the United States.⁶⁶

The Mothers Committees also resumed and intensified their work with political prisoners, frequently rallying and petitioning for their liberty. The Mothers Committees resumed weekly visits to the jails. The political prisoners were highly organized and had their own platform inside the prisons, the Committee of Political Prisoners of El Salvador (*Comité de Presos Políticos de El Salvador* – COPPES). The Mothers Committees would provide the prisoners with necessities such as soap and toothpaste. They would arrange exile for some of the prisoners who were released, and coordinate activities with the CDH-ES to provide legal counsel in general.⁶⁷

Another issue the Mothers Committees took up in the mid-1980s was against forced army draft, of which only young men from the rural

areas and poor urban neighbourhoods were victims.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the Mothers Committees rallied extensively for peace, especially after the second FMLN military offensive of 1989. They took advantage of the little political space that was available after 1984 to 'reconquer the streets' and confront the government and the military publicly. These marches and events were often tense, as the threat of violence was always there. Also, the demonstrators would be outnumbered by the military. On several occasions, members of the Mothers Committees were detained or almost detained. Some of these episodes are described below.

We went to the first (military) brigade to protest against forced drafts. We were like 300 people, 100 from CODEFAM and people from other organizations, but it was not enough. One of us had a camera and was filming. They got him first. Then we all went to hold on to this *compañero* so they wouldn't take him. So they took 31 in total, detained them. We went running and hid in a hardware store. But the owner was afraid and wanted us out. He thought the soldiers were going to throw a grenade. We escaped from there with the soldiers on our heels and got on a bus. They followed us, but we managed to get to the office of a women's organization that we worked with, and we hid there.⁶⁹

In San Miguel we went to a march together with CRIPDES,⁷⁰ and they captured one of the people who was marching with us, a crippled man. 'No', the people said, 'he is not a guerrillero, he is from a humanitarian organization'. They let him go. But they captured him again. They captured him three times. They put him in the back of a pick-up, there was the man crying. But we were like bees, around the pick-up, around the soldiers. The soldiers were hitting us with the back of the gun. 'Don't you dare touch this son of bitch!', they screamed at us, but we carried him to the bus, and there we cut the ropes with which they had tied him up. The next day we had a press conference and denounced the abuses of the army'.⁷¹

As before the war and also after 1984, the occupation of a church would occasionally be used to strengthen a demand, especially in the case of an acute crisis. For example in 1987 three members of the Coffee Union disappeared.

The mothers of the three young men were from Santa Ana. They came to visit us at the office and it was decided to have a hunger strike for the liberty of those who were captured. All the Mothers Committees joined in. The Cathedral was taken and we put up banners. But when we were at the cathedral, the PN sent a unit to get us out. The door was open and they came right in. They took the megaphones away

from us and they took the compañera Mary.⁷² We all jumped on top of them in order to get her back. Meanwhile people from the unions arrived, as well as the people from the CDH-ES and from different communities. The PN had to let go of our compañera. The PN they had to leave with the tail between their legs. We had a press conference right away to tell everybody what they (the PN) had done.⁷³

However, this hunger strike was eventually suspended because the women were getting very weak. The young men were never found.⁷⁴

Human rights activists continued to be victims of harassment and persecution by the authorities. Death threats and the like were very common. In 1985, the office of CO-MADRES was searched by the authorities and many files and photographs were stolen.⁷⁵ That same year, a member of the CDH-ES was kidnapped, tortured and subsequently incarcerated. In 1986 almost the entire staff of the CDH-ES was detained, including Herbert Anaya Sanabria, the coordinator. They were incarcerated for several months, while the Mothers Committees gave them support so they could continue their work from within the prison.⁷⁶ In 1986 three members of CO-MADRES were kidnapped and tortured for a number of days before being released. In May of 1987 a bomb exploded inside the CO-MADRES office⁷⁷ wounding two staff members and severely damaging the furnishings.⁷⁸

In 1989 there was also a crackdown on human rights groups. On October 29 the CO-MADRES office was bombed, wounding several people inside, including a US citizen who was cooperating with CO-MADRES. Two weeks later, as the FMLN had started a military wide-scale offensive, COMAFAC's office was raided and partially destroyed by the security forces⁷⁹ and the Treasury Police raided the CO-MADRES office, occupying it for several weeks.

They came in and arrested five members of CO-MADRES, and even two US citizens who were there with us. They had brought a flag of the FMLN and they took a picture of those they had captured holding the flag. They occupied the office for almost a month. When they finally left, it was a mess (...). They had to let the 'gringos' go pretty fast, but the rest were in prison for several months.⁸⁰

During and after the 1989 offensive human rights abuses increased significantly.

When we returned to the CDH after the offensive, the work started: denouncements, disappeared people, detainees, all kinds of cases. We did feel afraid because there were men in civilian clothes constantly watching the office at the time. But this really was a time of a lot of work, right until the peace accords, because a lot was going on, negotiations started, it felt like things were finally improving (...). The trial

in the case of the Jesuits was also important at the time, even though not all the military leadership that was involved actually stood trial, it felt like a milestone that there was a trial to begin with.⁸¹

The Mothers Committees also recovered from the damage and resumed their work with new intensity, focusing on supporting the peace negotiations.⁸²

Conclusions

In the period immediately before the war and during the war itself, the activity of the human rights movement was very much dictated by the dynamics of the conflict itself. Before the movement was forced underground its activism took place in the context of widespread social protest and rapidly expanding left-wing organizing effort. The prominence of human rights issues in the work of Monseñor Romero resulted in very strong links between the social movement and the archbishop on this topic. This is the reason that Monseñor Romero is considered their main predecessor by the human rights activists.

In the period between 1980 and 1984, extreme political persecution did not allow for much activity, but the movement did increase its international focus, gaining recognition and influence in international human rights circles. Human rights activists were invited to important international events and achieved recognition for example in the form of international human rights awards. The human rights movement was able to successfully forward their cause in an international framework, increasing pressure on the government to respect human rights.

In subsequent years, as death squad activity decreased and political persecution became less murderous, the human rights movement played an important role in the reconstruction of a legal and public protest movement within the country, lobbying with varying degrees of success for peace and respect for human rights, while drawing on a large international support network. In retrospect, the (former) human rights activists interviewed for this study considered that the main impact of their efforts during the war was in saving lives and in 'making the war less cruel than it was'.⁸³ This achievement was linked to their domestic presence and access to information about for example detentions immediately after these took place. Also, the fast and effective link to the international networks that supported the Salvadorean groups played a key role. Their work was very relevant in keeping pressure from within the international community focused on the Salvadorean government and military, a task that in the long run had also a positively impact on the international pressure favouring demilitarization of the government and peace negotiations with the FMLN.⁸⁴

Notes

- ¹⁸ Interview member Co-Madres, 11/07/03. Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03. Interview former member Socorro Jurídico, 14/07/03. Interview member IDHUCA, 23/06/03)
- ¹⁹ Interview CO-MADRES, 11/07/03. See also: Schirmer, 1993.
- ²⁰ Interview CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ²¹ Idem.
- ²² Idem.
- ²³ Interview CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ²⁴ Idem.
- ²⁵ Idem.
- ²⁶ Interview CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ²⁷ Interview CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ²⁸ Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ²⁹ Interview member Tutela Legal, 04/07/03. Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ³⁰ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03. See also Stephen, 1994
- ³¹ Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ³² Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ³³ Koos Koster was killed by the Salvadorean army in 1982, together with 3 other Dutch journalists, when travelling to an area controlled by the FMLN in Chalatenango. For more about Koos Koster see Aukes, Leo and Annet van Melle. 1982. Koos Koster. Bisschoppen, militairen en bureaucraten. Macht en onmacht in Latijns - Amerika. Uitgeverij Novib.
- ³⁴ Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ³⁵ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ³⁶ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ³⁷ Interview former member Socorro Jurídico, 14/07/03. Interview member Tutela Legal, 04/07/03
- ³⁸ Interview member CDH-ES, 02/07/03
- ³⁹ Comisión de Derechos Humanos, 1983
- ⁴⁰ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ⁴¹ Comisión de Derechos Humanos, 1983
- ⁴² Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 23/07/03
- ⁴³ Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ⁴⁴ Interview member CO-MADRES 30/07/03. See also Armstrong and Rubin, 1983
- ⁴⁵ El Playón and La Puerta del Diablo were the two most infamous locations used as clandestine cementeries in the late 1970s and early 1980s around the capital city of San Salvador.~

- ⁴⁶ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ⁴⁷ Brockman, 1982. Armstong and Rubin, 1983. Comisión de Derechos Humanos, 1983
- ⁴⁸ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ⁴⁹ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ⁵⁰ ORDEN stands for 'Organización Democrática Nacionalista', a right-wing paramilitary group especially active in rural areas of the country.
- ⁵¹ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ⁵² La Voz, April 1993. Also see http://users.pandora.be/zonacosta/in_dienst_van_bevrijding.htm, accessed on 22/09/03
- ⁵³ Interview former member CDH-ES, 23/07/03
- ⁵⁴ Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ⁵⁵ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ⁵⁶ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 01/07/03
- ⁵⁷ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ⁵⁸ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ⁵⁹ Interview former member CDH-ES, 23/07/03. Also see CDH-ES, 1983
- ⁶⁰ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES 23/07/03. See also CDH-ES Boletín No. 3, marzo de 1984.
- ⁶¹ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03. CDH-ES Boletín No. 3, marzo de 1984. See also Stephen, 1997.
- ⁶² Undated COMAFAC leaflet, distributed in the late 1980s
- ⁶³ Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03
- ⁶⁴ Interview former member CDH-ES, 26/06/03
- ⁶⁵ Interview member CO-MADRES 31/07/03
- ⁶⁶ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03. See also Stephen, 1997.
- ⁶⁷ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03. Group interview COMAFAC, 28/07/03. Interview member CODEFAM, 01/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03
- ⁶⁸ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ⁶⁹ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ⁷⁰ Christian Committee for Refugees and Displaced Population of El Salvador (Comité Cristiano de Pobladores Refugiados y Desplazados de El Salvador – CRIPDES). This organisation accompanied resettlement efforts of people to their places of origin that they had been forced to leave because of the war.
- ⁷¹ Group interview COMAFAC, 28/07/03
- ⁷² the director of COMAFAC at the time
- ⁷³ Group interview COMAFAC, 28/07/03
- ⁷⁴ Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03
- ⁷⁵ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03.

⁷⁶ Interview former member CDH-ES 23/07/03. Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03. See also, *La Voz de la CDH-ES*, April 1993.

⁷⁷ CO-MADRES had already acquired an office separate from the CDH-ES.

⁷⁸ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03. See also Stephen, 1994

⁷⁹ Interview member COMAFAC, 17/07/03

⁸⁰ Interview member CO-MADRES 31/07/03

⁸¹ Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03

⁸² Interview member CO-MADRES, 24/07/03. Interview member CODEFAM, 25/07/03

⁸³ Interview former member CDH-ES, 23/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03. Interview member COMAFAC, 17/07/03

⁸⁴ Interview member CO-MADRES, 31/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 23/07/03



On hunger strike in San Salvador's Cathedral.

THE HUMAN RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE FMLN

Of course the mothers were going to support the FMLN.

If their children were the combatants,

How could they not support them?

Interview member COMAFAC, 17/07/03

Introduction

During the war the government, military and right-wing media promoted a different image of the human rights groups than the one we saw emerging in the previous chapter. Ever since the founding of CO-MADRES and CDH-ES, and later CODEFAM and COMAFAC these groups were constantly accused by them as being ‘front-groups’ (*organizaciones de fachada*) for the Marxist ones of the FMLN.⁸⁵ For example, on August 3, 1987, *El Diario de Hoy* revealed that military intelligence proved the existence of links between the FMLN and ‘humanitarian groups’. According to the newspaper, a military source said that ‘the people should know (...) the true reality of the conflict that our country is suffering, but without being fooled by these false Salvadoreans, that are only causing severe damage to the population’.⁸⁶ Over the years, the CDH-ES and all three Mothers Committees spent a lot of energy in vehemently denying these accusations and, although often expressing sympathy for the FMLN, they directed a lot of effort attempting to present an image of independence.

At the time of the war, the accusation of fronting for the FMLN entailed a serious threat. It could be considered as a declaration of a ‘legitimate target’ for repression. Radical political organizing was done in a clandestine manner and information about affiliation to an armed opposition group was not revealed to outside sources. Therefore, a member of the FMLN active in a public organization would not reveal

his or her affiliation, nor would the organization recognize any organic ties with the FMLN. Consequently, in all public interaction, there would be 'a kind of self-censorship (*una especie de autocensura*) of the left and its sympathizers not to talk about the organic links between organizations and the FMLN'.⁸⁷

During one of the interviews, I asked a longstanding member of one of the Mothers Committees what the relationship between the FMLN and her organization had been during the war. She answered that there had been no relationship whatsoever. Another woman who was in the office at the time of the interview overheard our conversation. She intervened and said: 'come on', and then went on to mention some names of people who had been fulfilling leadership roles in the Mothers Committee during the war while simultaneously belonging to the FMLN.⁸⁸ The woman I was interviewing obviously felt uncomfortable and I decided to break off the interview and continue another day. This is the most extreme example, but overall I did notice that many participants became a little uneasy when I first asked about the issue of FMLN involvement, usually late in the interview. Nevertheless, after overcoming this initial resistance to talk about the issue, most participants in this study ended up talking in a very frank manner about it. When I later interviewed the woman who had intervened in the conversation I just described, she told me 'you know (...), she didn't want to tell you (...), because for many years this would have been a question only the enemy would ask'.⁸⁹

As will be widely documented in this chapter, links between the human rights movement and the FMLN factions effectively existed. This phenomenon was acknowledged for many years, not only by government intelligence sources but also by independent human rights observers. As a member of a church based human rights group told me, for anyone who had an idea of what was going on in the country, the involvement of the FMLN in the historical human rights movement was 'a public secret' (*un secreto a voces*).⁹⁰ But obviously such an acknowledgement seriously undermined the human rights movement credibility and this information was usually not publicized by people who were involved in a human rights lobby. As a consequence, links between human rights groups and the FMLN were not common knowledge on an international level.⁹¹

How did the FMLN, or different armed revolutionary factions, gain such influence in the human rights groups? The purpose of this chapter is to examine the evolution, nature and extent of the relationship between the FMLN factions and the human rights movement in

a comprehensive manner. Furthermore, some of the implications this relationship had for the development of the movement before and during the war are discussed.

The FMLN's close ties with human rights groups did not imply that this organization always practiced human rights principles with regard to its own political and military activities. In the second part of this chapter, the FMLN's little known human rights record is discussed. The human rights movement's attitude to the phenomenon of FMLN crimes illustrates some of the implications of the complex web of political loyalties that functioned during the war.

Early links between revolutionaries and human rights groups

The connection between human rights groups and the armed revolutionary groups was present in the development of the human rights movement from very early on. The story of how Francisca, a prominent member of one of the Mothers Committees, got involved with human rights activism is illustrative of this phenomenon. Before her husband was killed and Francisca became a spokesperson for human rights initiatives, she and her family lived in a small village somewhere in the rural province of Chalatenango, in the north of the country. Her husband was the head of a local farming cooperative and a member of the Christian Democrat Party. When a new priest was appointed to their local parish in the early 1970s, Francisca's husband became inspired by the teachings of liberation theology and the activity of the new popular church. He started to work as a laypriest (*catequista*) and participated in evangelization efforts in the area.⁹² In 1974 he became one of the founding members of the Field Workers Union (*Union de Trabajadores del Campo* - UTC), a peasant organization that, in close cooperation with the work of the popular church, spread rapidly through large areas of Chalatenango and San Vicente (Pearce, 1986).

Jenny Pearce describes how the UTC intensely and successfully recruited from the Christian Base Communities, that had been set up by progressive priests in different parts of the country. UTC's membership radicalized under the influence of the teachings of liberation theology. As the popular church and the peasant unions gained strength through organizing, another actor appeared on the scene. The Marxist-Leninist political-military organization FPL was developing networks in the countryside, relying on sympathetic priests and recruiting among peasant organizers (Pearce, 1986). Simultaneously, the UTC was beginning to suffer persecution from security forces and from ORDEN, the right-

wing paramilitary group. ORDEN was founded in the late 1960s by General Medrano, then head of the GN, 'to organize and indoctrinate the campesinos to develop an ideological campaign for democracy and freedom, and against communism' (Medrano in Armstrong and Rubin, 1983: 79). Its membership rose to several tens of thousands by the mid-1970s (Montgomery, 1995). ORDEN worked closely together with the security forces, forming an extensive informative and intimidatory network, seeking to discourage and repress left-wing organizing. Thus, by 1977, both the left and the right had developed important organized networks throughout the countryside. (Cabarrús, 1983)

Francisca's husband was one of the authorities' first victims in Chalatenango. He was captured, tortured and murdered by members of the local delegation of the National Guard in November 1977. His death incited violent retaliation from local UTC members against the National Guard.⁹³ Francisca and other members of the family continued to be part of the organizing efforts her husband had played an important role in. In this context, fellow organizers nominated her to participate in a local committee of relatives of victims of political violence that, echoing the CO-MADRES experience, was set up in Chalatenango in 1978 as the Committee for the Freedom of Prisoners and Disappeared (*Comité Pro-Libertad de Presos y Desaparecidos*).⁹⁴ She also started to relate her testimony of her husband's death in public events.⁹⁵ Francisca participated in several public activities, mainly in the province of Chalatenango itself. Early 1979 she went on a trip to Costa Rica, organized by the teachers union, the National Association of Salvadorean Educators (Asociación Nacional de Educadores Salvadoreños - ANDES 21 de junio), to give a testimonial account of her husband's death and other acts of political persecution her family and her community had suffered. Back in Chalatenango, Francisca's older sons could no longer sleep in the house because they figured in the GN's and ORDEN's deathlists. The UTC posted members outside the villages day and night. Every time a patrol would head towards the village, the people who felt they had something to fear, would evacuate. As repression increased, the Committee for Freedom disappeared towards the end of 1979, just before the human rights groups in the city were forced to go underground.

The violence that had been occasional in 1977 became frequent in 1978 and was widespread and spiralling out of control in 1979. Polarization between left and right became more and more pronounced, leaving no space for half-way solutions. While the popular organizations and the guerrilla groups called for revolution, the right wing military and

death squads sought the elimination of all communists, starting violent campaigns especially in places where the popular organizations had a lot of support, like in Chalatenango. When it was no longer possible to stay in her home, Francisca fled with her family to look for safety.

It was simply not possible to do human rights work in Chalatenango, when the whole world was falling apart. Before we knew it, we had to be fleeing ourselves. The death squads posted a note on our door (...). If we didn't leave the house soon, they would come for us, and wipe out the entire family. So I left with my children to look for a safer place.⁹⁶

Francisca's older sons stayed, because 'they wanted to join the guerrilla; they said they wanted to avenge their father's blood'.⁹⁷

For most of the left, revolutionary change was the only option and, as popular organizations grew and the military regime showed increasing signs of disintegration, revolution seemed to be just around the corner.⁹⁸ Also, within all popular organizations, the dominant frame of mind was that the specific goals for which they struggled were only to be realized in the context of a revolutionary change of society. UTC provided the basis for the guerrilla army that the FPL created in Chalatenango in the early 1980s. In her book on peasant organizing and guerrilla warfare in Chalatenango, Pearce extensively documented the transformation of the popular organizations into a guerrilla army and its civilian support bases. As leading members of the CEBs and the UTC were increasingly involved with the FPL, it sometimes became difficult for the grass roots to determine who was who, and what was what. Amongst the participants and sympathizers, all revolutionary organizing was viewed as in the same framework and it was referred to as 'the organization', understanding that the different organizations were closely linked and worked towards a common goal (Pearce, 1986).

Francisca began a two year odyssey of internal displacement, she and her family moving with their scarce belongings from village to village, in search of safety and a place to stay. Even while on the run, Francisca continued to be in touch with the organization, that in 1979 and 1980 evolved from UTC to FPL, integrating the FMLN in October of 1980. However, for Francisca 'it was always the same organization'.⁹⁹ When she finally settled down, she started to work as an organizer and a recruiter in her new community. This was when the organization asked her to start working for one of the Mothers Committees.

I only started to do human rights work again in 1983 when they asked me to join (one of) the Mothers Committee(s). (...) the *compañeros*

elected me. (...) Why? Because of my history. And because I already had some experience in human rights work and organizing, I think.¹⁰⁰

Popular organizations in the 1970s

In the late 1970s, the social movements, labelled by the organizers as mass movements or popular fronts, reached unprecedented growth. The combined membership of these groups was estimated at over 100,000 people towards the end of 1979 (Gordon, 1989). Montgomery confirms how influential the popular church was in creating a fertile ground for the mass organizations, contending that in the case of the *Frente de Acción Popular Unificada* (FAPU), founded in 1974, it was the first time in Latin America that a popular mass organization was a direct result of evangelization efforts sponsored by the Catholic Church. Even though the umbilical cord tying FAPU and the popular church was quickly cut, its influence would continue to be strongly felt in this organization until its dissolution in the early 1980s (Montgomery, 1995). The influence of liberation theology and progressive priests was very strong in the popular organizations. Also, several prominent members of the clandestine political-military organizations were priests or former priests (Berryman, 1984). Actually, the different popular front organizations were closely associated with the guerrilla organizations. For example, the Bloque Popular Revolucionario (BPR), of which in 1975 the UTC was a founding member, was the political wing of the FPL, while FAPU was closely linked to the RN, and the Ligas Populares 28 de enero (LP-28), to the ERP (Montgomery, 1995). The links between guerrilla groups and popular fronts were evident in the type and timing of the actions and of the popular fronts, as well as the demands forwarded (Gordon, 1989).

The popular fronts, though working on platforms and demands born from the needs of the participating sectors like peasants, workers and teachers, also responded to a strategy by the political-military organizations to involve large sectors of the population in the process of revolutionary struggle. Some of the organizations that integrated the popular fronts were founded in the 1970s, while others were existing organizations, such as unions, that had become dominated by the cadre of the political-military organizations. The leaders of the popular organizations clandestinely responded to the leadership of the political-military organizations, which designed the strategy of the popular fronts and made all important decisions concerning the organizations actions and timing of them. Furthermore, each of the different political-

military organizations controlled his or her 'own' popular movement, reproducing the sectarianism in the popular movement structure.

In personal interviews during the early 1980s, guerrilla leader Salvador Cayetano Carpio explained the line of thought that led the political-military organizations to place great emphasis on popular movement organizing. Carpio had renounced as secretary general of the Communist Party (PCS) in 1969, because he did not find sufficient support to engage in armed struggle, and went on to become the founder of the FPL.

After a long process of ideological struggle with the traditional organizations (left-wing political parties in the 1950s and 1960s) it became evident that they (...) rejected the possibility and necessity of the Salvadorean people undertaking the process of revolutionary armed struggle. They also rejected the mounting element of revolutionary violence in the struggles of broad popular masses. (...) By the end of 1969 it was very clear that El Salvador, its people, needed an overall strategy in which all methods of struggle could be used and combined in dialectical fashion. (Carpio in Montgomery, 1982: 120)

'We had to start to form the guerrillas (...) in the integral framework that conceived of a people acting and dominating all the means and forms of struggle, from the struggle for basic demands until military combat. (...) This concept led us away from the line of thinking that the guerrilla, by itself, can make a revolution; that the guerrilla isolated from the people replaces the people in its basic task of making its own transformations'. (Carpio in Armstrong and Rubin, 1983: 102)

The overall purpose of the political-military organizations, that of toppling the military government and establishing a revolutionary government in its place, was perceived to include a necessary phase of popular armed struggle. Opinions varied between the different armed groups on how, when and in what manner the final battles to defeat the military government were going to take place. But the most important groups concurred in the view that the popular movements were to transform into the catalysts of massive popular insurgency (Montgomery, 1995). In the late 1970s, the popular organizations were able to organize large strikes and demonstrations, putting great political pressure on the government, which increasingly resorted to violent repression. The popular movements were seen as making a key contribution to the debilitation of the military government (Armstrong and Rubin, 1983). The political-military organizations' relation to the popular movements was a combination of that of a (legal) political wing and a reservoir of political cadre and supporters. Popular movements were also the political-military organizations' most effective means

of recruitment. While the core of the organization was protected by strict security measures of clandestine organizing, the popular movements allowed for the organization to network and spread into new sectors of society. Popular movements were also effective in obtaining international political support on a level that the political-military organizations, because of their nature, could not.

The early human rights groups, CDH-ES and CO-MADRES, were conceived of as a part of this popular movement. Both were understood to be a kind of specialized group tasked to address political repression: CO-MADRES from the perspective of relatives of victims of human rights abuses and the CDH-ES from the perspective of national and international political work around human rights issues. Most of the founders of the CDH-ES were members of the popular organizations or lawyers sympathetic to them. The CDH-ES was explicitly set up with representatives of different popular organizations, marking the CDH-ES as one of the first popular movement organizations in which people with different political affiliations were working together on a daily basis, breaking with the sectarianism of the revolutionary organizations. Thus from the beginning representatives of the different revolutionary factions were active inside the CDH-ES.

Most of the relatives who formed CO-MADRES were participating in CEBs, especially those located in the marginal neighbourhoods in and around the capital. Almost all the relatives who started to participate in the CO-MADRES efforts were strongly influenced by liberation theology and strongly favoured revolutionary political change in the country. Through their participation in CEBs or sometimes through their professional activities, the relatives were also in contact with popular organizations.¹⁰¹ Before their husbands, sons, daughters, brothers or sisters were detained and/or disappeared, the women united in CO-MADRES had mostly been aware of their political activities and they had often participated in these same political activities.¹⁰² Thus CO-MADRES emerged within the framework of existing political organizing and considered itself to be a part of the revolutionary popular movement. Specifically, CO-MADRES coordinated its activities very closely with FAPU, an organization it incorporated as a member, although they had contacts with other popular organizations as well.¹⁰³

Ties between FMLN and human rights groups during the war

Though never publicly admitted, the relationship between the FMLN and the CDH-ES was very close, and determined the agenda of the CDH-ES to a significant extent.

The different organizations (of the FMLN) had their representation in the CDH. There were people from the ERP, the RN, the FPL and the PCS. Two representatives of each party formed a coordinating council that made most of the important decisions. Later it became one representative per party. Supposedly, each of these people were in touch with the leaders of their parties.¹⁰⁴

The affiliation with the FMLN caused the CDH-ES to have very cautious positions when cases occurred where the FMLN was involved. The CDH-ES would not usually denounce such cases attributed to the FMLN or rally around them.

During all those years of war, we only reacted to one case that was related to the FMLN. We sent out a press release to condemn the assassination of Rodríguez Porth,¹⁰⁵ but the FMLN reprimanded us. We had to leave it alone (...). You have to understand we were a militant human rights movement.¹⁰⁶

Not only the CDH-ES but also the Mothers Committees were closely linked to the FMLN. From the mid-1980s onward, these organizations and other social movements that were regrouping and forming a collection of San Salvador-based human rights and humanitarian organizations, were part of a FMLN strategy of obtaining a legal front in the city that could have national and international political impact.¹⁰⁷ The reconstruction of the social movements was seen as important because the organizations provided important political leverage, improved the climate for political opposition and peace negotiations and channelled international pressure and support. In addition, the human rights groups were able to contribute to improve respect for human rights and to save lives of people linked and civilians not linked to the FMLN.

Some of the activists who participated in the mid-1980s effort of the revolutionary groups to rebuild an urban popular movement were unable or unwilling to participate at the front. For example, two members of two different Mothers Committees said during the interviews that they had opted for activism in a human rights group because they had no desire to participate directly in armed struggle.¹⁰⁸ The different FMLN factions as well designated members from their cadre to be employed in the reconstruction of the social movement because of their specific professional or intellectual abilities.

Most of the mothers who were active in the Committees had families who had suffered the military repression of the early 1980s. In a country where political violence had been so widespread, many people had relatives who had been victims of the army or the death squads.¹⁰⁹ Many of the survivors of these families had gone underground.¹¹⁰ The mothers of the Committees often had sons or daughters who were participating in the FMLN as combatants.¹¹¹

It was not possible to publicly admit the links of the FMLN because this would expose the organizations to further persecution. It could also raise undesired questions about their work. With this logic, throughout the 1980s, as long as government persecution continued, security was a major concern for the CDH-ES and the Mothers Committees.

We would always be on guard if people would arrive without (...) ties (to one of the FMLN organizations). There was always a suspicion. We had to be careful, because they could always be spies. We had a case of a driver we had hired, who turned out to be an infiltrator. He said he had been assaulted and they had thrown him out and taken the CDH-ES vehicle, that was when we started to suspect. We fired him, saying there was no job for him because the vehicle he was going to use had been stolen. Later it turned out that he was connected to the death squads. That really gave us a scare.¹¹²

The people working in the human rights organizations had to play a double role: one related to public work and one related to the internal structure.¹¹³ Inside the organizations not everybody knew exactly how the channels to the party functioned. For example, most relatives active in the Mothers Committees knew there was a relationship with a political-military organization, but they didn't know exactly how it worked.

COMAFAC was born from the base organizations where the party was involved. The mothers were organized, they were part of the party. But they didn't call the shots, the party-line would come from above (...). How the link with the party was handled, only the direction knew. Not all the mothers really had a clear idea of who was who. That was part of the security.¹¹⁴

The close ties between the FMLN and human rights groups made it hard for the activists themselves to distinguish between what the nature or scope of their activities was, sometimes creating tension between political militancy and human rights activism. A specific member of a human rights group could at a certain point also function as a member of an armed urban guerrilla group. In a different order, the public demonstrations the Mothers Committees engaged in were designed as a form of peaceful resistance, but this was an idea that didn't always

convince those who participated in the marches. Some activists would sometimes revert to methods of protest that were more typical of the FMLN.

In one human rights demonstration, the people who had come from different communities wanted to start burning public transportation buses. Luckily there was a leader from the party who told the people just in time that they couldn't burn buses because it was a march by human rights organizations.¹¹⁵

The participants would sometimes make *mehudas* (long sticks with a bunch of nails at the end, wrapped in a ball paper, so you couldn't see the nails) to be able to defend themselves somewhat when under attack.¹¹⁶ Sometimes there would even be participants in the demonstrations who carried firearms, to the dislike of some of the relatives.

I think they really put us in danger, unnecessarily, by thinking it was necessary to carry pistols in the marches. What if someone would have started shooting at us? It would probably have been worse if one of us had fired back.¹¹⁷

Before the 1989 offensive the FMLN also asked the CDH-ES for help with the growing amount of wounded combatants (*lisiados*) whom the FMLN was treating in their camps in the liberated zones. Because military activity had been intense and it was logistically difficult to smuggle the *lisiados* out of the country, the FMLN unsuccessfully asked humanitarian entities for help. Subsequently the FMLN decided to smuggle the *lisiados* to San Salvador and take over a church in order to draw international attention to the problem while demanding a safe-conduct from the government. The CDH-ES and also the Mothers Committees were involved in this dangerous operation.

A *compañero* came to COMAFAC to look for volunteers for a dangerous task, and I agreed together with another woman. We went to get 25 *lisiados* from San Miguel and take them to San Salvador, and afterwards to the El Calvario church to have a strike to get them out to Cuba. The military stopped us on the way, with all these young men in the back of the van, and we told them that we were taking a sick person to the hospital. Luckily it was dark and they couldn't see well inside. They didn't open up the rear door. They just told us to move on. We were very lucky. We helped the *lisiados* a lot while they were in the church bringing food, washing clothes. We would go there everyday. It was not just us; the mothers from the other committees also participated. We all joined in together.¹¹⁸

When security considerations allowed it, people from the CDH-ES and other organizations would also visit the fronts and the guerrilla

camps. For example, one mother from COMAFAC relates how she went on a trip into the rural areas.

Another activity we had during the war was to visit the front to see what they needed and help them resolve some of their necessities. I went once to the front in San Vicente on the occasion of an anniversary (of the establishment of that specific front). There was a contact near the road, because we didn't know the way. But when we arrived he was asleep, he was stone drunk! We woke him up, and he said: 'Oh, please don't tell them that I had something to drink. Please don't'. He took us in a cart (a vehicle drawn by an animal, usually an ox), and we began the journey, but because he was drunk, he fell and the wheel ran over his leg. So we hoisted him on the cart and continued the trip. 'Please don't say anything', he moaned, 'because they will punish me'. When we arrived he got off the cart and pretended he was okay, and he quickly went to lie down. Maybe he told them some kind of lie. I sure hope they didn't punish the poor guy.¹¹⁹

In the case of major operations, such as the military offensives of 1981 and later of 1989, the FMLN would ask their members in different organizations to provide support. For example, in the first offensive, CO-MADRES stored up medication.¹²⁰ The 1989 offensive had a strong impact on the organizations, because this time the organizations were large and well-established structures.

Different organizations of the FMLN called on members of the CDH-ES to support activities related to the military offensive. Not everyone participated in the offensive. Other members of the CDH-ES fled the office and joined the international press in the big international hotels. Nobody wanted to stay to become cannon fodder. The office stopped functioning for almost two months.¹²¹

After the CO-MADRES office had been seized by the military, a local newspaper reported the alleged cooperation of CO-MADRES in the 1989 offensive:

US citizens detained in search of CO-MADRES house. (...) In the search a large amount of medicines was found, that presumably served to give medical attention to the groups of terrorists that attacked the capital since the night of last Saturday. A neighbour in the vicinity that witnessed the multiple detention by members of the PH told the authorities that one of the women who was captured (in the CO-MADRES installations) was exactly the one who some days ago took his vehicle from him at gunpoint.¹²²

Military press releases and local newspaper reports were reputed to have very little reliability and could easily be denied especially in the international community. But in another case, the link between one

of the Mothers Committees and the FMLN was publicly confirmed by the director of the group.

When the offensive was already going on for several days (...), this compañera Mary (the director of COMAFAC at the time of the events) appeared on television in a press conference from Guazapa.¹²³ She was dressed in military gear and everything. She said that COMAFAC had dissolved itself to integrate into the FMLN offensive. Can you believe it?¹²⁴

When the FMLN offensive failed to topple the government, the director of COMAFAC ended up going into exile to Nicaragua, and COMAFAC resumed work after the offensive, cleaning up the mess the military search of their office had caused. A COMAFAC member told me that what really happened was that 'she was caught in a combat when she went to leave food for the (FMLN) combatants, and she had no other choice but to grab a gun to defend herself'.¹²⁵

On an international level COMAFAC's public incorporation into the offensive caused some damage to the reputation of the Mothers Committees and the human rights movement as a whole.

(After the offensive) when I went to a meeting of FEDEFAM, the other organizations would ask me: what is going on with the El Salvador (Mothers) Committees? What are you thinking? This was really not good for us or for FEDEFAM. The same questions they asked me at the United Nations. What was I going to say? I didn't know what to reply. What one organization did was not the responsibility of everyone.¹²⁶

Sectarianism in human rights groups

Each of the organizations was linked to a specific faction of the FMLN, except the CDH-ES, that had members of different factions working together. The same sectarianism that persisted even when the different political-military organizations joined the FMLN was the reason that there were three different Mothers Committees essentially doing the same work, and operating with a very similar political platform. Each of the Mothers Committees had organic ties with a different faction of the FMLN. Very early on in the development of CO-MADRES and CDH-ES, there may have been some disputes about the hegemony of the political-military organizations within these groups. One member of CO-MADRES claims that:

When the political organizations saw that the work of CO-MADRES was important, they wanted to have it also. They said: why don't

we have an instrument like that? (...). What the organizations (of the FMLN) saw, is that we managed to get funding, so they were interested. That's why independence is so important for our organizations, because otherwise the political parties will come in and hoard (*acaparar*).¹²⁷

During the interviews, the members of CO-MADRES attempted to portray themselves as being more independent than other Mothers Committees, even though they also admitted they had some ties to the FMLN. Before the war, in the first years of CO-MADRES, 'people would come to visit us from the different organizations, all wanting to tell us what to do. But we always did what we wanted to do'.¹²⁸ According to most outside sources however, CO-MADRES was directly affiliated to the RN, one of the FMLN factions.¹²⁹ The affiliation of the groups to specific factions of the FMLN influenced the relationship between the different Mothers Committees, which was not always very close in spite of the similarity of their agenda.

In 1987 the different Mothers Committees formed one joint organization of relatives of victims, the Federation of Committees of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador 'Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero' (*Federación de Comités de Madres y Familiares de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados Políticos de El Salvador* 'Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero' – FECMAFAM). The formation of the federation was promoted by a cooperation agency that provided financing for the acquisition of a building for a common office of the three Mothers Committees. FECMAFAM organized some events, including some public marches and a 1988 human rights conference, but the three Mothers Committees largely continued to work independently.¹³⁰ There were continuous disagreements amongst the organizations which made cooperation difficult and FECMAFAM fell apart by the end of 1988.¹³¹ The problems mirrored the divisions between the different factions of the FMLN, which suffered from sectarianism throughout the war, even though it was to a lesser extent than the notorious sectarianism of the revolutionary organizations in the 1970s. (Montgomery, 1995)

The CDH-ES was considered by some as an example of unity of the revolutionary movement, as four of the five factions of the FMLN provided staff for the group who worked together and shared the internal decision making processes.¹³² But there were also many problems among the representatives of the different factions, and the internal disputes among different FMLN factions were sometimes reproduced within the CDH-ES, especially those between the FPL and the ERP,

the two largest factions of the FMLN.¹³³ Episodes of mutual distrust and ongoing disputes occurred. This was kept very much inside the organization and, according to its former members, did not affect the quality of the work of the CDH-ES.¹³⁴

The case of Herbert Anaya Sanabria

One controversial case in which FMLN involvement in the human rights movement became an issue of public relevance was the murder of Herbert Anaya Sanabria. In late 1986, Sanabria, the director of the CDH-ES, was imprisoned together with most of the leading staff of the CDH-ES under the accusation of belonging to the FMLN. Their imprisonment led to an intense reaction by international human rights groups. After spending 6 months in jail, Sanabria and the others were released. A few months later, in October 1987, Sanabria was murdered in front of his house by men in civilian clothes. The CDH-ES and other human rights groups accused the government and the security forces of having planned and carried out the assassination. Under strong international pressure, the government promised a full scale investigation.¹³⁵

On December 23, 1987, nearly two months after the assassination of the director of the CDH-ES, the authorities captured a young man who was sabotaging a truck. In the following five days of interrogation the man confessed of belonging to the ERP. He also confessed having participated in the killing of Sanabria, as part of the four-man urban commando unit that performed the operation. According to his account, the leadership of the ERP ordered the death of Sanabria because he was a member of the ERP who had become unreliable and was turning over information to the government. Furthermore, his murder could be blamed on the security forces, to the discredit of the government.¹³⁶

The CDH-ES rejected this version of Sanabria's killing, claiming that, as had been documented to have happened before in other cases, the young man had probably been tortured and bribed or forced to confess. Sanabria had received numerous threats before his assassination that came from the side of the security forces and death squads. The accused young man's family also denied that he could have been involved in the crime.¹³⁷ The young man furthermore retracted soon after the initial declaration, and denied involvement. Nevertheless, he was convicted of the murder and the government considered the case to be closed.

The Truth Commission included the assassination of Herbert Anaya Sanabria in its report and dedicated an extensive investigation to it. This investigation confirmed that Sanabria was indeed a member of the ERP, one of the groups of the FMLN, and that there were disagreements between the ERP and Anaya Sanabria. According to the report, the director of the CDH-ES wanted an end to the violence while the ERP was planning violent operations in San Salvador. There were certain aspects of the detained young man's declaration to the Commission that indicated his involvement in the murder, in spite of his retraction. The Truth Commission also confirmed the existence of death threats to Herbert Anaya from the security forces. It concluded that it did not have sufficient time or evidence to solve the crime (Naciones Unidas, 1983).

In 2003, Sanabria's former colleagues at the CDH-ES were also not sure of what really happened in his killing. Publicly, the CDH-ES always strongly opposed the accusation that the FMLN could be involved because of the political consequences, but some really weren't that sure that government agents had killed Sanabria.

The CDH-ES doesn't want to accept the Truth Commission's verdict on Herbert Anaya Sanabria, because it would mean accepting that there were FMLN militants operating inside the CDH-ES. But several of us believed that the ERP had done it, because we knew that Herbert had started to have problems with them.¹³⁸

Another former member of the CDH-ES said:

I don't know who killed Herbert. The theory that the Police did it has more weight, taking into account the death threats he received etc., but it is also possible the ERP did it. I know they had some differences. When he was in Morazán¹³⁹ some time before he was killed, they gave him a disciplinary punishment.¹⁴⁰

According to most people interviewed for this study, it is still unclear who killed Sanabria. The fact that his assassination could have been ordered by one of the factions of the FMLN generates inevitable questions about how relevant human rights principles were to the FMLN. Other crimes, such as the assassination of Roque Dalton¹⁴¹ or the murder in Managua of commandante Ana María – second in charge of the FPL –, which was followed by the detention and suicide of Cayetano Carpio – first in charge of that same organization –, may also produce these same questions. Even though the FMLN paid lip service to human rights principles in its international diplomatic efforts, other interests might have played a more prominent role in the FMLN's decision-making processes at different times.

The FMLN's human rights record

Little information is available on the practice of political purges within the FMLN, but the people that participated in this study said they knew of several cases, some much more clearly attributed to the FMLN than the murder of Sanabria.¹⁴² But in more general terms, what was the FMLN's human rights record like during the war? There is surprisingly little information available on this topic. The Truth Commission's report offers a handful of exemplary cases (Naciones Unidas, 1993). Even though the FMLN used human rights as a banner in its political struggle, it is clear that the respect of basic human rights was not consequently practised within the FMLN itself and in its relation to the surrounding population.

There is some discussion of whether the FMLN can technically be involved in human rights violations as the definition of human rights violation implies the use of illegitimate force by a state or agents working with the acquiescence of the state against citizens. In this reading, violent acts of the FMLN would classify as simple delinquency. Nevertheless, the FMLN was internationally recognized as a belligerent force. It controlled a portion of the country's territory; it had international representatives; and was organized in a state-like fashion. In this reading, the FMLN could also commit human rights violations. Even though the FMLN publicly declared to recognize the International Humanitarian Right, it did not however sign human rights declarations and treaties that generate legal responsibilities regarding human rights as was the case of the government. (See Naciones Unidas, 1993; Forsythe, 1989)

According to Wood, FMLN violence focused mainly on supposed government informers. Civilians thought to be informers were sometimes banned from insurgent-contested areas; if they remained they were executed occasionally after some sort of hearing (Wood, 2002). There were episodic surges in this sort of violence when alleged infiltration networks were detected. The purging took an extreme form in one of the areas controlled by the FMLN when FPL commander Mayo Sibrián executed hundreds of guerrilla combatants and insurgent peasants from the mid to late 1980s on the suspicion of being government informers. Mayo Sibrián was eventually ordered to be executed himself by a high level FPL delegation, after the leadership learned of the extent of the bloodbath from information provided by other guerrilla factions who had passed through the area controlled by Sibrián. (Wood, 2002). The FMLN sometimes used coercion to recruit combatants; and desertion was punishable by death. Civilian

supporters of the FMLN were not always free to leave a certain area, even when government repression was making permanence very dangerous. (Asociación Pro-Búsqueda, 2001)

The amount of cases of human rights violations in which the government was involved was clearly much larger than the amount of cases in which the FMLN was involved, but the FMLN had responsibility in several notorious cases, such as the execution of government affiliated mayors close to territories controlled by the FMLN, between 1985 and 1988. Other well-known cases include the 1985 massacre in the Zona Rosa and the 1989 assassinations of prominent right-wing figures such as Attorney General García Alvarado, Dr. Guerrero and Dr. Rodríguez Porth (Naciones Unidas, 1993). As a rule, FMLN violence was downplayed or denied by the human rights movement, sometimes even when members of the movement were directly confronted with it or affected by it.

We knew about some things the FMLN had done, but we would never think of denouncing this or demanding an investigation (...). In reality, looking at it in retrospect, we were accomplices to human rights violations because of silencing crimes that had occurred. If they killed him it must have been for something, we used to think.¹⁴³

These cases constitute a genre of stories that would not be told, at least not publicly, until fairly recently. The people that participated in this research, once they had overcome the initial reluctance to talk about the FMLN, presented some episodes of FMLN violence that suggest that, during the war, the FMLN's human rights record was worse than what is commonly assumed. In addition to the cases they had personally been in contact with, the people interviewed for this study also indicated that they believed there are many more cases of FMLN violence and that many of these cases were still undiscovered and would possibly never be known.¹⁴⁴

We had a woman. It took her a whole year before she was even willing to talk to us. A terrible story. For years she was a cook at a guerrilla camp, always working for the *compañeros*. She said that sometimes the *compañeros* would come into the kitchen to borrow a knife from her. She didn't think much of it. But people were disappearing, you know. One day, they came into the kitchen and said: "we need the knife because we are going to kill a pig". They took the knife and they left. Later they came back laughing. "We killed a pig, oh you should have heard how he squealed". The knife was still smeared with blood. But they didn't bring any meat. They hadn't killed a pig. It was her husband they had killed! She found out that night what had happened. They had killed him because they said he was an infiltrator. And she

couldn't say anything because she was afraid they would go after her. So she just continued cooking, but she was dead with fear. And then she heard that they were going to go after her. She had to flee. She went running in the mountains with the men following her. She went to a riverbed and hid between the stones. She could hear them coming closer. And then you know what happened? By coincidence, there was a military operation that day, and they started shooting at the guerrilleros. The army took over the area. And she just kept on hiding between the rocks. They didn't see her. She hid for several days, until the military had left, and then she managed to get out of the area. She was so afraid, so traumatized; she wouldn't talk to anyone about what happened. Until we finally managed to gain her trust.

Question: Did you make a public denouncement of the case?

Answer: No.

Question: Why not?

Answer: Who were we going to denounce it to? It wasn't possible. That wouldn't have done any good. It would only have been of profit to the enemy.

Question: What did you do then?

Answer: Nothing. We just listened to the woman. We tried to make her feel some kind of support. We tried to make her feel that she wasn't the only one who had suffered.¹⁴⁵

One of the members of a Mothers Committee explained during the interview that it was very painful for her to admit that FMLN violence had affected her own family:

It's true that in a war lives on both sides are lost. But people have to be respected. Also the enemy deserves respect. That's why I didn't like it when there were cases with the FMLN... But it is true, you know, that there were cases where the FMLN was involved. Unjust cases. My brother and his wife, they were killed by the FMLN. My children never wanted to tell me what had happened, because they thought it would hurt me too much to know that our own *compañeros* had done it. And they did it in a cruel way too, made them carve their own tombs. I only knew what happened after the war, because they didn't want to tell me. It is terrible. I'd rather forgive the National Guard that killed my husband, than to forgive the *compañeros* that killed my brothers. They are supposed to respect people. It is terrible.¹⁴⁶

In a post-war ethnographical approximation to wartime FMLN participants, Bourgois documents the existence of significant intimidation and violence in the FMLN's liberated zones. He explains that when he first worked on this topic in the early 1980s, he did not pay sufficient attention to the negative social and political consequences it

might have for the FMLN and its members to be engaged in a violent conflict, partly because he was carried away by his political sympathies. In his fieldwork in the 1980s he himself was caught up in an army sweep in the rural area and barely managed to survive. In his writing he centred on the liberating aspects of revolutionary violence, in counterposition to repressive violence of the government and its agents. When he resumed his research during the 1990s revisiting some of the same people he had worked with in the early 1980s, Bourgois was presented with a different image of violence amongst wartime FMLN followers, violence that in the course of the war often turned against its own constituency:

(...) the revolutionary movement in El Salvador was traumatized and distorted by the very violence it was organizing against. Through an almost mimetic process, the government's brutality was transposed into guerrilla's organizational structures and internal relations, as violence became a banal instrumental necessity. (Bourgois, 2001: 19).

Conclusions

The relationship between the FMLN and the human rights movement was very tight. More precisely, there were direct links between the different factions of the FMLN on the one hand and the Mothers Committees and the CDH-ES on the other. The political-military organizations composing the FMLN effectively controlled these human rights groups. Each of the Mothers Committees responded to one of the factions. Only the PCS and PRTC (the smallest organization within the FMLN) did not have their 'own' Mothers Committee. The PRTC was also the only faction that did not have a representation within the CDH-ES. The organic tie between the FMLN and the human rights movement was kept secret, but it was nevertheless common knowledge for most political observers. The mutual collaboration between Mothers Committees was common as they organized or participated in events together, but simultaneously these groups had disputes and differences related to the sectarianism of different factions inside the FMLN. This made it difficult for the Mothers Committees to work together more closely and effectively.

At specific moments in the development of the movement, the links between the FMLN and the human rights organizations played a decisive role, determining to an important extent what issues were addressed and how they were addressed. The affiliation with the FMLN affected the movement's credibility, mostly on a national level, and in occasions

internationally, as when the director of COMAFAC announced to the press that the groups had taken up arms and incorporated themselves into the FMLN to support the 1989 military offensive.

The ties of the CDH-ES with the FMLN became an issue of central importance in the case the murder of Herbert Anaya Sanabria, director of the CDH-ES. Even though there is no certainty about the authorship of his assassination, according to several sources, including the UN Truth Commission, it is a real possibility that the FMLN's ERP faction ordered the crime. The FMLN used human rights as a banner in their struggle against the government and military, but the fact that a FMLN member is a suspect in the Sanabria case raises questions about the human rights record of the FMLN itself. Apart from the report of the Truth Commission, very little information is available on this topic. It is clear that the FMLN committed much less human rights violations than its enemy, the government. However, preliminary findings suggest that the FMLN did commit a significant amount of crimes against political opponents on the one hand and against dissidents or alleged infiltrators on the other. Although in this chapter it is stressed that the FMLN indeed committed numerous crimes, this is not meant to suggest that the crimes committed by the government should be belittled or ignored. On the contrary, the human rights movements rightfully emphasized the institutionalized terror employed by the military and death squads to silence any political opposition. But, in order to understand the role claim making regarding human rights issues played in the conflict, the aspect of FMLN violence cannot be ignored. The human rights movement, even if confronted with these cases of FMLN violence in their daily work or in their close environment, largely ignored these in public discourse because of their loyalty to the FMLN. Even though this was not made explicit in this chapter, it is reasonable to assume these omissions might have affected the credibility of the movement, generating questions, both outside and inside the organizations themselves, about its lack of independence and about its character as a human rights movement.

Notes

- ⁸⁵ See for examples *Diario El Mundo*, January 9, 1988, or *Diario El Mundo*, January 5, 1988. Also see 'Press Analysis', Annex to the Truth Commissions report, 1993.
- ⁸⁶ Cited in Naciones Unidas, 1993: 301.
- ⁸⁷ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ⁸⁸ Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03
- ⁸⁹ Interview member COMAFAC, 17/07/03
- ⁹⁰ Interview former member Socorro Jurídico, 14/07/03
- ⁹¹ Idem.
- ⁹² Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ⁹³ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ⁹⁴ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ⁹⁵ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ⁹⁶ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ⁹⁷ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ⁹⁸ Interview IDHUCA, 23/06/03
- ⁹⁹ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ¹⁰⁰ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ¹⁰¹ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ¹⁰² Interview member CO-MADRES, 11/07/03
- ¹⁰³ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ¹⁰⁴ Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03
- ¹⁰⁵ Dr. José Antonio Rodríguez Porth, a well-known right-wing political analyst, was assassinated by the FMLN on June 9, 1989. At the time he was a minister in the newly appointed ARENA government.
- ¹⁰⁶ Interview former member CDH-ES, 28/07/03
- ¹⁰⁷ Interview former member international co-operation agency, 25/06/03
- ¹⁰⁸ Interview CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ¹⁰⁹ Interview former member CDH-ES, 26/06/03. Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03.
- ¹¹⁰ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 26/06/03.
- ¹¹¹ Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03
- ¹¹² Interview former member CDH-ES, 23/07/03
- ¹¹³ Interview former CDH-ES, 07/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 26/06/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 28/07/03. Interview CODEFAM, 01/07/03. Interview member COMAFAC 17/07/03. Interview former co-operation agency, 25/06/03.
- ¹¹⁴ Interview member COMAFAC, 17/07/03
- ¹¹⁵ Interview member CODEFAM, 01/07/03

- ¹¹⁶ Interview member CODEFAM, 16/07/03
- ¹¹⁷ Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03
- ¹¹⁸ Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03
- ¹¹⁹ Group interview COMAFAC, 28/07/03
- ¹²⁰ Interview member Co-Madres, 11/07/03
- ¹²¹ Interview former CDH-ES, 26/06/03
- ¹²² La Prensa Gráfica, 16/11/89
- ¹²³ The rural area controlled by the FMLN closest to the capital.
- ¹²⁴ Interview member CODEFAM, 01/07/03
- ¹²⁵ Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03
- ¹²⁶ Interview member CODEFAM, 01/07/03
- ¹²⁷ Interview member CO-MADRES, 16/07/03
- ¹²⁸ Interview member CO-MADRES, 21/07/03
- ¹²⁹ Interview member IDHUCA, 23/06/03. Interview member CODEFAM, 07/07/03. Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03. Interview Socorro Jurídico, 14/07/03
- ¹³⁰ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ¹³¹ Interview member CODEFAM, 30/07/03, Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ¹³² Interview former member CDH-ES, 01/07/03
- ¹³³ Interview former member CDH-ES, 23/07/03
- ¹³⁴ Interview former member CDH-ES, 28/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 01/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03. Interview former member CDH-ES, 23/07/03
- ¹³⁵ Interview former member CDH-ES, 03/07/03
- ¹³⁶ El Mundo, January 5 and 6, 1988. La Prensa Gráfica, January 6, 1988. El Diario de Hoy, January 6, 1988. 'Salvadorean, in Jail Talk, Tells of Assassination', by James LeMoyné. New York Times, January 8, 1988. 'Jailed Salvadorean Student Tells Disputed Version of the Killing of a Rights Activist', by Marhorie Miller, Los Angeles Times, January 9, 1988.
- ¹³⁷ See Amnesty International. February, 1988. El Salvador. Investigation into killing of Herbert Anaya.: New Developments. Document.
- ¹³⁸ Interview former member CDH-ES, 03/07/03
- ¹³⁹ The ERP's military stronghold in the Northeastern part of El Salvador
- ¹⁴⁰ Interview former member CDH-ES, 23/07/03
- ¹⁴¹ Roque Dalton, El Salvador's most famous poet, was killed in 1975 by members of the guerrilla group he belonged to, after an internal dispute.
- ¹⁴² Interview former member CDH-ES, 26/06/03.
- ¹⁴³ Interview former member CDH-ES, 28/07/03
- ¹⁴⁴ Interview member COMAFAC, 17/07/03. Group interview COMAFAC, 28/07/03. Interview member CO-MADRES, 31/07/03. Interview member IDHUCA, 23/07/03.-
- ¹⁴⁵ Interview member CO-MADRES, 31/07/03
- ¹⁴⁶ Interview member CODEFAM, 25/07/03



ATENTADO AL COMITE DE MADRES, EL DIA
31 DE OCTUBRE DE 1989 A LAS 2:40 DE
LA MADRUGADA.

The bombing of the CO-MADRES office, 1989.

AFTER THE PEACE ACCORDS

*The new slogan for after the war is:
‘every man for himself’ (sálvese quien pueda).*
Interview member CO-MADRES, 31/07/03

Introduction

If attempting to describe the activities and the development of the human rights organizations in the transition period in a similar way as has been done in the previous chapters, this chapter would be very short. The main effort of COMAFAC, CO-MADRES, CODEFAM and CDH-ES in the post-war period has been their struggle for (economic) survival as an organization, mainly dependent on international funding for small scale projects that have had little public impact.¹⁴⁷ In her work on the administration of justice in post-war El Salvador, Popkin draws attention to the lack of public impact the human rights movement had in the post-war period in spite of the opening-up of civil society and in contrast to the role human rights issues played in other Latin American transition processes.

Looking at how El Salvador has dealt with the past in comparative perspective, one is struck by the lack of visible societal demand for further truth and justice (...). At the end of the war, human rights groups called for justice but failed to develop a strategy for achieving it or maintaining the struggle in the face of a sweeping amnesty law (...). The very strength of the FMLN had inevitably impinged on the independence of some human rights groups and other actors in civil society, who were used to relying on the FMLN for leadership. (2000: 161)

Rachel Sieder adds the following observation:

The notoriety of human rights groups, that had been so marked during the civil war, descended considerably after the Truth Commission; this reflected its relative lack of independence from the revolutionary left, as well as the divisions that it suffered after the peace accords. (2002: 262)

In this chapter the development of the human rights movement after the end of the war will be discussed. In addition to the observations above by Popkin and Sieder, the previous chapters of this study provided a quite complex framework of a 'militant' human rights movement, working with a human rights agenda, but also primarily loyal to a larger revolutionary agenda. During the war this led already to several problems regarding the movement's credibility and its subsequent potential political impact, especially on a national level. The new context of the post-war period introduces a new political reality that has affected the political positioning and the alliances of the human rights movement. This adaptation process has serious implications and substantial costs for the movement as a whole.

The spirits went down

Towards the end of the war, international support for the human rights groups was at its height. During the late 1980s and early 1990s these groups, including the Mothers Committees, received significant amounts of money from international cooperation agencies. This enabled the CO-MADRES and CDH-ES to buy a house for a permanent office and to develop a score of different projects. These projects included legal assistance, communications units, financial support for relatives with acute economic problems, resources for public mobilization, small trust funds for political prisoners, medical care for people who had suffered torture or other kinds of mistreatment, day-care centres, health clinics etc. Not only economically, but also with regards to membership participation, the human rights groups were doing quite well, being able to mobilize hundreds of people for marches and the like. Initially, after the Peace Accords, the financial situation of the organizations improved further, allowing the CDH-ES to employ as many as 55 people in 1992.¹⁴⁸ Around the same period CO-MADRES employed 38 people,¹⁴⁹ COMAFAC more than 25¹⁵⁰ and CODEFAM close to 30.¹⁵¹

In 1991 ONUSAL started to function, and the human rights organizations, especially CDH-ES, set about coordinating a lot of work related to human rights monitoring with them. Simultaneously, a lot

of effort was put in putting the archives in order and processing and systemizing the information of the denouncements that had entered the CDH-ES over the years.¹⁵² The peace accords caused an enormous explosion of joy and relief for the members of the CDH-ES and the Mothers Committees, as it did for many people throughout the country. But it also generated questions about what their role should be in the new context of the implementation of the peace accords. Some members of the different human rights organizations debated whether they should be demobilized as FMLN members under the supervision of the UN, because demobilized FMLN personnel were in the context of the peace accords entitled to certain benefits such as land, money and scholarships.¹⁵³ As a result of the peace accords the political prisoners were released, which ended one of the aspects of the work that the human rights groups, and especially the Mothers Committees, had focused on. The preparation of cases for the Truth Commission was one of the key aspects of the work around the time of the peace accords. In 1992 the CDH-ES was able to present over 7,000 documented cases to the Truth Commission and the Mothers Committees presented hundreds of cases. Furthermore, the human rights organizations focused strongly on education and the promotion of human rights and the preparation for the elections of 1994, the first in which the FMLN would be allowed to participate.¹⁵⁴

Nevertheless, as the process of democratic transition unfolded, the four organizations all suffered a notable reduction in their activities. The public impact of their activities was also very limited, gaining little access to the public debate and the media. In this new context, the human rights movement did not manage to mobilize a lot of international support or gain financing for its activities either. Throughout the 1990s, in the words of one activist, 'the spirits went down little by little, until participation became sporadic'.¹⁵⁵ By 1996, the CDH-ES struggled to survive and currently financial problems continue to threaten to close its doors permanently. Towards the end of the 1990s and subsequent years, CODEFAM subsisted on projects around education on human rights and local human rights promoters, only staffing one relative of the original group. CO-MADRES currently has a staff of only two and COMAFAC is surviving without any kind of financial assistance.¹⁵⁶

The FMLN's political integration and the legacy of human rights abuses

During the negotiations between the FMLN, the government and the United Nations, the human rights organizations rallied to favour peace negotiations based on a human rights platform. But, in their own words, the organizations were scarcely taken into account in the peace negotiations.¹⁵⁷ The FMLN did not formally consult the human rights groups or other social movement organizations about the agenda or proposed contents for the peace agreements. The FMLN believed that 'the movement is ours, so consulting is not necessary and the government naturally felt the same way'.¹⁵⁸ This resulted in a situation in which 'there was no real debate about the peace accords within the social organizations'¹⁵⁹ and 'the social movement wasn't capable of influencing the peace accords'.¹⁶⁰

In the context of the implementation of the peace accords, there were indications that the FMLN had little desire for an active human rights movement.¹⁶¹ The contacts between the members of the different factions inside the human rights groups and the FMLN diminished. Some activists felt the time had come to construct a more independent human rights movement, while others felt more obligated to first live out the development the peace process would bring and the implications this would have for the FMLN's integration into the political system. There was one incident within the CDH-ES that made clear which option was preferred by the FMLN leadership:

In the months before the Truth Commission's report would come out, we put paid advertisements in the newspapers against high ranking military officials based on information we had about the human rights records of the units they had directed. One of the military officials started a judicial demand against the CDH for slander. And then we learned that the FMLN didn't agree with the publications. It generated a serious problem inside the CDH. Some people in the CDH said that it unnecessarily endangered the lives of those working at the CDH. They also said it could be counterproductive because it was a kind of interference in the negotiations (between the government and the FMLN). We had to cut it off.¹⁶²

The interests of the FMLN in the post-war period were mainly centred on the integration of the party into the mainstream political system and the participation of the FMLN in the elections.¹⁶³ The top of the FMLN suspected already from the negotiating process that little political benefit was to be expected from the Truth Commission's report, or least that if the government would have to face serious accusations,

the FMLN would not emerge unscathed from the inquiry either. In her account of the peace negotiations, Popkin describes that early on in the process, the FMLN presented a list of crimes that were to be clarified and in which justice was to be done. The government argued that impunity was not exclusive to the army and countered the list of FMLN with its own list of cases, in which the FMLN was implicated (2000: 90). A compromise in the form of the Truth Commission was finally agreed upon between the two parties to break this stalemate. But ‘despite the FMLN’s emphasis on ending military impunity and its insistence on the formation of the Ad Hoc and Truth Commissions, the parties understood that the peace process would eventually include a broad amnesty’ (Popkin, 2000: 6).

As the FMLN expected, the Truth Commission’s report included several cases attributed to the FMLN. The Commission called for justice but left it in the hands of the judiciary, after this had been reformed as part of the peace process. The report included the recommendation of a shared sanction for the military and the FMLN: those mentioned in the report were to be restricted in their access to public office in the next ten years. For the part of the FMLN this included the entire leadership of one of the factions, the ERP, for its role in the assassination of mayors, and the five-member Comandancia General, the directing organ of the FMLN consisting of the maximum leader of each of the five factions.

The FMLN, though generally welcoming the report, manifested doubts about some of the conclusions of the report, involving actions or members of the FMLN.¹⁶⁴ Especially, the ERP fraction, though not openly denying the Truth Commission’s allegations, was very dissatisfied with the report, claiming that their faction had been disproportionately scrutinized and sanctioned.

The communication secretary of the FMLN and leader of the ERP, Juan Ramón Medrano, said there was (in the Truth Commission’s report) a ‘lack of political reality’ or that there was intention to hit only one of the organizations of the FMLN in order to ‘look for contradictions’ or to break the unity of the FMLN.¹⁶⁵

Also Joaquín Villalobos, the head of the ERP fraction and member of the Comandancia General of the FMLN questioned the report in similar terms:

Joaquín Villalobos, who at first said he would be willing to be the cellmate of the military and oligarchs of the country if the judicial system was reformed, now questions the recommendation of the Truth Commission that those mentioned in the report cannot assume public

office in the next ten years. ‘We are surprised about why only one organization was focused on, and precisely almost its entire leadership’, Villalobos remarked.¹⁶⁶

The FMLN hesitated to admit its responsibility in human rights violations and the idea of the restricted access to public office of some of its prominent members generated internal conflict. Thus, even though the FMLN had announced at first that it would comply with that recommendation, it later retracted, ‘because the government was not complying with this recommendation either, so why should we’.¹⁶⁷ Understandably so, the FMLN did not seriously protest against the amnesty law either.¹⁶⁸ Many of the potentially restricted FMLN members participated in the 1994 elections and several of them won posts of public representation.

Implications for the human rights movement

The expectation of the Truth Commission report had been very high, but the report itself caused mixed reactions in the human rights movement.¹⁶⁹ On one hand the report confirmed that the government and the army committed severe and massive human rights abuses, something the organizations had been claiming all along and that, up until the Truth Commission, was never officially documented and confirmed. But on the other hand there was confusion about the cases attributed to the FMLN, especially the Truth Commission’s insistence on the possibility that Herbert Anaya was killed by the FMLN.¹⁷⁰ Also, the inclusion of cases attributed to the political violence from the left and from the right made it clear to many activists that in the transition period, justice for the military and death squads would automatically lead to claims for justice against the FMLN, in spite of wide disparity in the amount of cases attributed to each group.

It shouldn’t have been such a surprise that there were also cases of the FMLN in the Truth Commission’s report, because I knew there were cases. It really affected us though, because I don’t think there would have been such an amnesty law if there hadn’t been cases of the FMLN. But now nobody went (to jail), not from one band and not from the other. And they would have had to go through the same process. If the cases of the government had been investigated, they would have also touched upon the FMLN.¹⁷¹

Almost all the participants in this study identified the amnesty law as the main obstacle to their work and as one of the principal causes for

the decline of their organizations, as ‘aspirations were cut short’¹⁷² and it ‘cast a blanket on our future possibilities’.¹⁷³

Around the time of the Truth Commission’s report and the ensuing amnesty law, the majority of the human rights groups that were active during the years of the war experienced a drop in activity. Furthermore, politically motivated human rights abuses became scarce and first ONUSAL and later the National Human Rights Counsel took over the daily monitoring function of human rights performance that the CDH-ES had taken on itself during the war. In the words of one observer, ‘the peace accords stipulated that human rights became the responsibility of the state and thus many NGO’s lost the role that they had been playing for 12 years’ (Olsson, 2001:16).

After the publication of the Truth Commission’s report, the international agencies started slicing funds for the different human rights groups.¹⁷⁴ The diminishing financial support of the international community was one of the factors that contributed to the shrinking activities, which in turn limited the spaces and forums of the activists to gather and participate. Many of the participants in this study attribute great importance to changes in financing as a cause for post-war decline of the movement, explaining it as a change in policy related to the end of the war and the political violence.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, in the early 1990s international financing agencies entered into a phase of internal restructuring, implying a larger control over the projects and finances of counterparts, and worries about misuse of money and corruption in local groups.¹⁷⁶ The new policies affected the human rights organizations and especially the Mothers Committees that had a hard time adapting to the rising technical standards demanded for project financing.¹⁷⁷ Apart from the paralyzing effect of the amnesty law and the withdrawal of international financial support, participants in the human rights movement also forwarded some additional views regarding the drop in activity, which are, though less prominently present in each of the interviews, well worth mentioning. These explanations include the lack of political power of the majority of the victims families and psychological exhaustion:

There is little interest in doing justice because the relatives are poor, they are mostly peasants, who do not have access to the political game.¹⁷⁸

It’s hard to face the pain. It is not easy to be reminded to what happened, again and again (...). Most people want to get on with their lives and prefer to shut out the pain.¹⁷⁹

Internal conflict in human rights groups

In the context of its adaptation to the integration into the mainstream political system, 'the FMLN saw the NGO's of victims of human rights violations as a political instrument that they considered was no longer vital'.¹⁸⁰ Simultaneously, the human rights organizations began aiming to transform their relationship to the FMLN. Such a move affected the entire institutional framework of the organizations, which some saw as a near reinvention of the organization.¹⁸¹ In the cases of CODEFAM and COMAFAC the process of becoming independent occurred without fierce open disputes, but in the case of COMAFAC and the CDH-ES the process was traumatic. When, during the interview, I asked a member of COMAFAC what happened after the war with regard to the relationship of their group to the FMLN, she got up from her chair and pulled a bunch of newspaper clippings from a drawer.

'Comadres' accuse Joaquín Villalobos of usurpation', is the title of one of the articles, published on April 14, 1994, in *El Diario de Hoy*, one of the main morning newspapers. I include a direct translation of the news item, with the warning that it is not uncommon for Salvadoran newspapers editors to ignore grammar and diction conventions.

The leader of the Frente Farabundo Martí (FMLN), Joaquín Villalobos¹⁸² has been accused of usurpation, abuses and attempting to politicize non-governmental organizations by the so-called 'Mothers Committee' (COMAFAC), whose members are popularly known by the nickname 'Co-madres'. Rosa Manzano, leader of the leftist group, declared that militants of the 'Expresión Renovadora del Pueblo (ERP)',¹⁸³ integrating faction of the FMLN and under direct command of Joaquín Villalobos, took the building of the 'Mothers Committee' by force. According to the accusation, the individuals interrupted a work session of the group and demanded that the leadership be dismissed and a new one elected, that would be made up by Gladis Villalobos, María Hortensia Gutiérrez and Agustín Aristides Arévalo, all ERP militants. On Sunday April 10 the doors of the offices were secured with chains and locks by the usurpers. The denouncers signaled that their organization has realized an 'independent' work effort over the last years, which has led them to 'strong contradictions' with the ERP, that has been trying to absorb them. According to Manzano, when they questioned the Villalobos faction for this deed, they were told that 'COMAFAC was patrimony of the party'. The house, that is shared with other 'mothers committees' is located on Gabriela Mistral street. According to the denouncer, this property was bought with an European donation with the objective to function as the offices of the 'Federation of Committees of Mothers of Political Disappeared' (Fed-

eración de Comités de Madres de Desaparecidos Políticos) (sic). The leadership of COMAFAC considered that 'the takeover of COMAFAC is not an isolated problem but rather a well-orchestrated plan of takeovers of non-governmental and human rights organizations with the end to politicize them in favour of the ERP. The leader Manzano made the ERP-FMLN and Joaquín Villalobos's bodyguards, above all Raúl Vásquez alias 'Mincho', responsible 'for anything that might happen to them' and they ask the FMLN to take measures to keep the ERP from continuing to commit arbitrary acts. On the other hand, Ana Guadalupe Martínez, an important leader of the ERP, denied the accusations of COMAFAC and assured that her party 'has nothing to do with that'. 'These people that made the accusation are trying to politicize the affair (by) accusing the ERP', Martínez said and she added that 'a non-governmental institution should not take political positions as an institution, even though individuals do have this right'. Martínez lamented the incidents and assured that it concerns a 'misunderstanding'.

The next day another newspaper, *El Mundo*, carried the headline, 'ERP affirms (it has) nothing to do with COMAFAC'. Excerpts from this article read (again with apologies for the phrasing, especially in the last sentence):

Today the new COMAFAC leadership rejected the notion that the ERP (...) is manipulating their organization. Mrs. Gladis Villalobos, who clarified that she is not a relative of Joaquín Villalobos, said that the claimants were dismissed because they have committed arbitrary acts of administrative (...) character and that they have mistreated the employees (...). They added the new leadership members that didn't know why they involved the ERP as the one that had intervened in the affair, manifesting that that organization (the ERP) has nothing to do with COMAFAC.

On April 17 *El Mundo* reported that COMAFAC was receiving support in the face of the ERP takeover of their office:

A representative of Co-madres, Alicia de García, (...) clarified today that Co-madres is not the same as COMAFAC,¹⁸⁴ but that, during the war, they worked together, in the same way a CODEFAN (sic). The three Committees are (made up) of Mothers, but different. She said that Co-madres supports COMAFAC and that also CODEFAN does this (...). She added that it would be suitable (conveniente) for the FMLN to take up the issue (que el FMLN tomara cartas en el asunto) to resolve the problem with the ERP (...). She said: 'It is not possible that the old leadership of COMAFAC is dismissed because it is one of the organizations that worked the most during the war. There is no right to take away their office, because it belongs to them

and not to the ERP'. Co-madres and CODEFAN informed that (...) this day they would open the office that was closed last Sunday by members of Villalobos's security, and that they await a meeting with the FMLN for today.

'They wanted the house', this is what a current leadership of COMAFAC told me, 'the ERP wanted to take over the building (that COMAFAC was using) and put it to use for its own purposes'.¹⁸⁵ In the view of the COMAFAC leadership, they also sought to dissolve COMAFAC.

'They told us that after the peace accords, we didn't have to fight anymore. They said we should just go on home, we had done our share. One ERP leader told us: 'mothers, you don't have a reason to be anymore, because the human rights are no longer violated. You worked enough during the war, now it is time to go home'. When they saw that we didn't like it, they betrayed us. They even threatened us. This ugly man, Mincho,¹⁸⁶ he said: alright, old women (*viejas*), you are lucky, because in another era we would have emptied this machine gun on you. They went that far as to threaten us'.¹⁸⁷

According to one source, that same month Joaquín Villalobos had declared on television 'Human Rights is for Dinosaurs'.¹⁸⁸ He argued that organizations like COMAFAC did not have reason to exist anymore because, after the Peace Accords, human rights were no longer violated.¹⁸⁹ In Villalobos's view the reforms resulting from the peace accords largely solved the problem and the debt of the human rights situation.¹⁹⁰ Most of the relatives who had been involved in the organization since its foundation had a different view. They wanted to know what had happened to their loved ones and they wanted to fight for justice.¹⁹¹ The discontent sparked resistance when the ERP attempted to take over the infrastructure of the organization. Although COMAFAC leaders publicly admitted they were organically tied (*vinculado orgánicamente*) to the ERP during the war, their work was not given priority by the ERP. And now that 'the ERP was no longer interested in the defence of human rights', they wanted independence.¹⁹²

The COMAFAC delegation that went to talk to the FMLN leadership did not have positive results. They were told that this was an internal affair of the ERP, thus confirming that in the eyes of the FMLN COMAFAC was party patrimony, and that they should not make any more public announcements because these could affect the FMLN negatively in the elections.¹⁹³ The alleged ERP plan to take over COMAFAC failed because of the reaction of the leadership, the public scandal and the fact that the house was not COMAFAC's alone, but had in fact been donated by an international agency to the three Moth-

ers Committees together, including CODEFAM and CO-MADRES. COMAFAC did lose one other property to an ERP member, bank accounts were emptied and equipment was stolen.¹⁹⁴ On June 5, 1994, COMAFAC celebrated an assembly meeting to determine its future. Those that supported the ERP were a minority and left the meeting before the election of a new leadership took place. That same month, two different petitions for the formal registration of COMAFAC were presented at the Ministry of Interior, but the faction sympathetic to the ERP soon abandoned the project.¹⁹⁵

COMAFAC continued to exist, but with severe economic restraints. The fact that members of the international donor agencies that had financed COMAFAC's projects were present at the June 5, 1994 assembly as observers,¹⁹⁶ didn't do much good. COMAFAC gained independence but was left without international financial support.¹⁹⁷ Members from COMAFAC blame the ERP for the stop on international funds.

When they saw they couldn't beat us, the ERP abandoned the project (COMAFAC). Joaquín (Villalobos) blocked the relationship of COMAFAC with cooperation agencies, so we wouldn't get any funds anymore.¹⁹⁸

Also the CHD-ES had a difficult time adjusting to the new post-war context. A former member of the CDH-ES showed me a 1997 judicial resolution of a case presented against herself and other members of the CDH-ES. The petitioners were members of the CDH-ES who had accused her and several of her colleagues of the unlawful appropriation (*apropiación indebida*) of the building and other material resources that belonged to the CDH-ES. The judge assigned to the case considered that 'inside of what is (known as) the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador there have been created two groups with opposite interests, even though in the essence it is (one and) the same (protection and diffusion of human rights), but in virtue of this (opposite interests) there have been certain contradictions in the present trial'.¹⁹⁹ The resolution concludes with the dismissal of the petitioners' case because those accused of appropriation of the CDH-ES offices were able to produce the titles that legally certified them as the private owners of the building. The conflict within the CDH-ES had reached its height two years earlier when, in a similar fashion to what occurred at COMAFAC, the building was taken over by one of the disputing factions, which refused to let those part of or sympathetic to the other faction use the installations.²⁰⁰ Another former member of the CDH-ES, one of those barred from the office after the takeover, told me both factions had tried to seize the office, but the group she belonged to

was outsmarted (*nos madrugaron*). When the conflict escalated, her group proceeded to change the locks to the buildings' entrance doors. That same night however, the other faction brought in a locksmith and changed the locks again. When coming to work the next day, the first faction found they couldn't use their keys to enter the building. Moreover, the entrance was barred by two security guards with instructions to prevent them from entering.²⁰¹

Although some view the problem within the CDH-ES as the reflection of an internal problem within the FMLN, involving the late 1994 separation from the ERP and part of the RN of the rest of the organization, most of the (former) CDH-ES members interviewed for this study emphasize that at the time the internal problems in the CDH-ES were at their height the different factions of the FMLN had already lost interest in obtaining or preserving hegemony within the CDH-ES. The supposed political differences between CDH-ES members historically associated with different FMLN factions were played out mainly to forward personal interests and the struggle for power within the CDH-ES between different individuals.²⁰²

Disenchantment with the FMLN

CODEFAM and CO-MADRES had a less traumatic experience of re-adaptation to the new FMLN, but suffered nevertheless internal re-accommodation as a result of the altered relationship with the FMLN. All four groups had difficulties articulating and promoting a human rights platform adapted to the new context, and found it difficult to find ways to relate this platform to the new political context. In spite of the obvious FMLN distancing from the human rights organizations, these groups continued to look for support for their agenda within the FMLN. Meetings between the organizations and the FMLN in this new period were scarce and their outcome was usually quite disappointing for the organizations. The FMLN's lack of support for the demands of the victims and their families caused tension between the Committees and the FMLN and disenchantment amongst the relatives who were active in the Mothers Committees.

We had an appointment with people from the FMLN in the legislative assembly to talk about our demands, such as the derogation of the amnesty law (...). I was talking and this deputy from the FMLN turned around and wouldn't look me in the eyes, very impolite. When I finished he said: 'look, compañeras, the waters are still now, let's not start making waves, because then the mud comes up from the bot-

tom'. His words were like a slap in my face. I said: 'All these years it has been our hope that someone of the FMLN would get the power and would help us. This FMLN flag looks very elegant in this room, but for it to be here a lot of blood has been spilt. Thanks to this blood and thanks to all the pain of the families this flag is here now and you can be working here. So the least you can do is help the relatives. I was angry. He too. He said: 'You are impossible to talk to!'. (...) Another time we talked to another deputy, and she said, 'You're right, it's a terrible situation. We will see what we can do.' Years have gone by, but nothing has been done. It's a big disappointment that people from the left do not accompany us anymore (...).²⁰³

It's a complicated issue for the people in the Frente. Some say: why start moving what is already in the past? You have to forgive and forget. To address these cases (of the disappeared) is to stir a beehive. We had a discussion with some of the leaders. There was no interest to reopen the case. You may be part of the FMLN but, no matter how much you'd want to be part of the FMLN, as a relative you can't forget. (...) One wonders: why do they do it? Because of the blood spilled by our children, they (the leaders) are in the place that they are, they have seats in parliament and other places. If our children fought for a just cause, why abandon them? Why not restore their dignity? Because to forget and to abandon is the same thing in my mind. (...).²⁰⁴

Demands for truth and justice in the case of human rights violations had been one of the banners of the FMLN throughout the war, but were largely abandoned by the FMLN in the post-war period.²⁰⁵ In the words of one human rights activist: 'After the peace accords the FMLN decides to abandon the human rights trench, and leaves the human rights organizations dangling (colgados de la brocha)'.²⁰⁶ It is clear to most participants in this study that the main reason the FMLN abandoned the banner of the historical human rights demands of truth and justice, was fear of being prosecuted.

If the amnesty law is derogated, there is a situation in which most of the current leaders of the country would be prosecuted, including those of the FMLN. Of course they don't want that.²⁰⁷

The lack of FMLN support for the demands of the relatives of victims renders the potential for successful claim making by the human rights movement minimal in the current power relations. The government controls most of the instances of power, and the FMLN is the main opposition force capable of contesting government policies in the short or medium term. The government sticks to its policy of 'a clean slate' and the FMLN's lack of interest in touching upon the past

influenced international organizations that could otherwise provide political or economic support to the human rights movement.

People from the UN also said that the issue of the disappeared and the persecution of these responsible for human rights violations had already been negotiated by the government and the FMLN. (...) They couldn't help us anymore.²⁰⁸

Why did support become less? Why did the funding go down? The cooperation agencies listened more to the FMLN than to the relatives. The *compañeras* don't like me saying this, but the FMLN has a lot of responsibility in cutting the financing of CO-MADRES and the other Mothers Committees.²⁰⁹

The lack of support for their demands generated resentment towards the FMLN amongst most of the participants of the human rights organizations. Once the FMLN became the topic of conversation, the interview provided a space for catharsis, an opportunity to express these feelings of resentment:

The FMLN was not only a creation of the commanders. The largest part of the effort was put in by the militancy, the bases, the population that supported them, that hauled them food, exposing themselves to great danger. From the person who provided a glass of water, to the one that took up a gun, they all have the same importance as the commander. This is what they haven't valued. They think they know it all, but maybe they need some human rights training, because in these things they are very ignorant. They think they are more important. They think they don't need us anymore. I think they see us as some kind of nuisance.²¹⁰

Do you know the people from the FMLN say that this is the price we had to pay? But this is not a good answer for the relatives. A price we had to pay for what? (...) It is a convenient answer for the FMLN, but it is not acceptable for the families involved, who ask for help.²¹¹

Though recognizing the peace process brought some improvements in comparison to the war, the participants in this research manifested overall disillusionment with the results of the transition, stating that 'it not what we had hoped for'.²¹² Apart from manifesting discontent with government policies, many of the (former) activists of the human rights movement blamed the FMLN for the poor results. In stead of viewing themselves as part of the FMLN, as most had done throughout the war, participants in the human rights movement now see themselves as no longer being part of the FMLN. Some even started to question the nature of their former participation with the FMLN.

I left the FMLN (after the peace accords) because I couldn't conceive of being in a party that didn't take care off its own people, off its combatants. (...) Now I think to a certain extent, we were used; maybe not so much myself, because I think I knew what I was fighting for, even though I am disappointed. But the majority of people, the campesinos, they really didn't have much of a choice. (...) I think it's a myth the idea of widespread consciousness formation (*conscientización*) and all that (...); people were just caught between two bands, and they did what they could to survive...²¹³

Conclusions

The human rights movement performed poorly in the period of post-war transition. Even if during the war the human rights groups had to struggle with credibility issues because of their links to the FMLN, the weakening or suppression of these links in the post-war context apparently did not have positive consequences for the movement. Without the patronage of the FMLN, the groups seemed to be orphaned.²¹⁴ Also, with the end of the war, international interest (and funding) for human rights groups decreased. The FMLN's involvement in human rights violations, as irrefutably forwarded by the Truth Commission, confronted human rights activists with a largely unforeseen consequence of their key demand for truth and justice. As a result, the FMLN not only stopped its strategic behind-the-scenes way of direct the movement, but it also effectively ceased to support the movement's demands.

It might well be the case that the treatment of demands presented to the (male-dominated) FMLN leadership by the female-dominated human rights movement involved some kind of gender bias. The undertone of the stories presented here seems to suggest such a phenomenon, but further research is required in order to explore this issue. Even though the FMLN included women empowerment in its political platforms since the 1980s, women who participated in the FMLN during and after the war criticized the leadership's lack of genuine commitment to gender issues. (Vázquez et al., 1996)

The (former) members of the movement became disillusioned by these developments and felt sidetracked from the political process they had felt part of for many years. Some even expressed that they felt used or duped by the FMLN. This disenchantment with the FMLN is expressed in stories that created a very negative image of the FMLN. These stories are not devoid of a certain tone of resentment. However, we have

to remember that people who were themselves active members of the FMLN during the war now express this negative image of the FMLN in retrospect. Some manifest their discontent while even at the same time still considering themselves to be a part of this organization. Or as one member of a Mothers Committee said, she considers herself to be member of the historical FMLN, but not of the one that is functioning right now.²¹⁵ The adaptation process of the human rights movement in a post-war situation has been complicated by these issues, making it difficult to engage in effective public claim making and opening little immediate perspective for the movement to make an impact in the future. In such a context it is not surprising that the movement's membership and international support has been dwindling.

Notes

- ¹⁴⁷ Interview former member CDH-ES, 28/07/03
- ¹⁴⁸ Interview member CDH-ES, 02/07/03
- ¹⁴⁹ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ¹⁵⁰ Interview former member COMAFAC, 26/06/03
- ¹⁵¹ Interview member CODEFAM, 01/07/03
- ¹⁵² Interview former member CDH-ES, 03/07/03
- ¹⁵³ Interview member CODEFAM, 25/07/03
- ¹⁵⁴ Interview member CO-MADRES, 31/07/03. Interview member CODEFAM, 30/07/03. Interview member CDH-ES, 02/07/03.
- ¹⁵⁵ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ¹⁵⁶ Interview member CDH-ES, 02/07/03. Interview member CODEFAM, 01/07/03. Interview member CO-MADRES, 31/07/03. Interview COMAFAC, 14/07/03.
- ¹⁵⁷ Interview former CDH-ES, 01/07/03. Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ¹⁵⁸ Interview former member international co-operation agency, 25/06/03
- ¹⁵⁹ Interview member IDHUCA, 23/06/03
- ¹⁶⁰ Interview former member international co-operation agency, 25/06/03
- ¹⁶¹ Interview former member international co-operation agency, 25/06/03
- ¹⁶² Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03
- ¹⁶³ Interview member executive council FMLN, 02/08/03
- ¹⁶⁴ La Prensa Gráfica, March 16, 17, 18, 1993. El Diario de Hoy, March, 16, 17, 19, 1993.
- ¹⁶⁵ Diario Latino, 18/03/93
- ¹⁶⁶ Diario Latino, 18/03/93
- ¹⁶⁷ Interview member FMLN, 02/08/03
- ¹⁶⁸ Interview member IDHUCA, 23/06/03.
- ¹⁶⁹ Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03. Interview member CODEFAM, 25/07/03. Interview former member Socorro Jurídico, 14/07/03
- ¹⁷⁰ Interview former member CDH-ES, 26/06/03
- ¹⁷¹ interview member CODEFAM, 30/07/03
- ¹⁷² Interview member CO-MADRES, 24/07/03
- ¹⁷³ Interview member CDH-ES, 02/07/03
- ¹⁷⁴ Interview former member international co-operation agency, 25/06/03,
- ¹⁷⁵ Interview member CO-MADRES, 31/07/03, Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03, Interview member CODEFAM, 30/07/03, Interview former member CDH-ES, 03/07/03, Interview member CO-MADRES 31/07/03, Interview former member international co-operation agency, 04/07/03
- ¹⁷⁶ Interview former member international co-operation agency, 25/03/09. Also see Bickart, 1999

- ¹⁷⁷ Interview member international co-operation agency, 08/07/03, Interview member CODEFAM, 30/7/03.
- ¹⁷⁸ Interview relative, 30/07/03
- ¹⁷⁹ Interview relative, 31/07/03
- ¹⁸⁰ Interview former member Socorro Jurídico, 14/07/03
- ¹⁸¹ Interview former member CDH-ES, 28/07/03
- ¹⁸² At the time of the scandal, Villalobos was one of the most important FMLN leaders, heading the fraction that was second in size. In the course of the war Villalobos had gained a reputation as a brilliant military strategist with exceptional communication skills (Lopez Vigil, 1991). He had some of the best international contacts and was considered the most media savvy of the FMLN leaders (See <http://zena.secureforum.com/Znet/zmag/articles/june95zielinski.htm>, accessed on 12/09/03).
- ¹⁸³ As a result of the Peace Accords, the demobilization of the FMLN military apparatus had been completed in 1993. In this new context, the ERP had kept its acronym but had changed its name from Revolutionary People's Army to People's Expression of Renovation (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo to Expresión Renovadora del Pueblo).
- ¹⁸⁴ This is likely to be a reaction to terminology confusion in the *El Diario de Hoy* article quoted in the beginning of this chapter and also in a similar article in the newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* that uses the expression, 'Comité de Madres', see *La Prensa Gráfica* 14/04/94
- ¹⁸⁵ Interview COMAFAC, 14/07/03
- ¹⁸⁶ 'Mincho' was a former leader of an ERP urban command unit and part of Villalobos's security. He led the takeover of the COMAFAC building in the beginning of the crisis. (Interview member COMAFAC, 17/07/03)
- ¹⁸⁷ Group interview COMFAC, 28/07/03
- ¹⁸⁸ Interview member Tutela Legal, 04/07/03. In El Salvador the term 'dinosaurs' is employed to refer to people that are politically old-fashioned or backwards. It is commonly used both for right-wing or left-wing politicians. In El Salvador's post-war transition the term has been most intensively used by centre and right-wing politicians to refer to people within the FMLN that still hold on to the marxist-leninist teachings used before.
- ¹⁸⁹ Interview COMAFAC, 17/07/03
- ¹⁹⁰ In his Masters Thesis for Oxford University on the new National Civilian Police (Policía Nacional Civil – PNC) force in El Salvador, Villalobos explained his line of thinking in more moderate terms: 'The issue of human rights had until then been traditionally addressed with the creation of organisations of defence of the rights of the citizens against the state's abuses of power, and not in the profound reform of the state's instruments of coercive power. It is here that the project (that of the PNC) became an innovating and valid model for other countries, because impunity, corruption and the violation of human rights by the police forces is in Latin America a crucial point for the consolidation of democracy' (Villalobos, 1998)
- ¹⁹¹ Group Interview COMAFAC, 28/07/03
- ¹⁹² Pronunciamiento público COMAFAC ante el FMLN', 18/04/94

- ¹⁹³ The 1994 elections were the first ones after the war and the first in which the FMLN participated. The first round had been in March where the FMLN had come out second and the second round to define the president was due shortly.
- ¹⁹⁴ Interview COMAFAC, 17/07/03
- ¹⁹⁵ Interview member COMAFAC, 17/07/03
- ¹⁹⁶ Comunicado público COMAFAC, junio 1994
- ¹⁹⁷ Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03
- ¹⁹⁸ Interview member COMAFAC, 17/07/03
- ¹⁹⁹ The Spanish original is 'dentro de lo que es la Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador, se han creado dos grupos con intereses opuesto (sic), aunque en el fondo es uno mismo (protección y difusión de los derechos humanos), pero en virtud de ello han resultado dentro del presente juicio ciertas contradicciones'. The Source: Juzgado Octavo de lo Penal, San Salvador, June 30, 1997.
- ²⁰⁰ Interview former member CDH-ES, 26/06/03
- ²⁰¹ Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03
- ²⁰² Interview former member CDH-ES, 01/07/03, Interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03, Interview member CDH-ES, 02/07/03, Interview former member CDH-ES, 28/07/03
- ²⁰³ Interview CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ²⁰⁴ Interview member CODEFAM, 25/07/03
- ²⁰⁵ Interview former member CDH-ES, 26/06/03
- ²⁰⁶ Interview member IDHUCA, 23/06/03
- ²⁰⁷ Interview former member Socorro Jurídico, 14/07/03
- ²⁰⁸ Interview member CODEFAM, 01/07/03
- ²⁰⁹ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ²¹⁰ Interview member CO-MADRES, 30/07/03
- ²¹¹ Interview relative, 31/07/03
- ²¹² Interview member CODEFAM, 25/07/03
- ²¹³ Interview former member CDH-ES, 26/06/03
- ²¹⁴ Interview former member CDH-ES, 01/07/03
- ²¹⁵ Interview member COMAFAC, 14/07/03



March denouncing the murder of Herbert Anaya Sanabria, 1988..

COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE, REPRESENTATION AND (SHIFTING) IDENTITIES

*'We are involved in a violent situation;
the only question is: whose side are you on?'*
*FPL leaflet confirming membership of catholic priest Ernesto Barrera
to this organisation after the he died in a shoot-out
with the National Guard in 1978. In Erdozain, Plácido. 1980: 48*
*'We were part of something we believed in.
We defended the FMLN to the death.
We were part of an era (...).'*
 Interview former member CDH-ES, 28/07/03

Introduction

It is possible to divide the stories told in the interviews conducted for this study in two general categories according to their content. In the first set of stories, courageous people fight against the odds, standing up to a repressive military government to demand justice and respect for human rights. In the second set of stories, human rights groups are used by the FMLN to forward its cause and are discarded again when no longer required. Each of these two sets of stories has its own intrinsic value but both imply an analysis of the development of the human rights movement that tends to be too simple or mechanical. On the one hand, the view that the human rights groups were autonomous, courageous and principled fighters for justice and respect for human rights may accurately emphasize the groups' legitimate claims and focus attention on the government's appalling human rights record, but inaccurately frames their participation in the revolutionary movement and their loyalty to the revolutionaries' agenda. On the other hand, to simply label the human rights groups as 'fronts' may aptly describe the level of coordination with the FMLN but it obscures the fact that there were genuine human rights grievances that originated and motivated the activities of these groups and the people participating in

them. Furthermore, in the case of the Mothers Committees most of the relatives did really participate because of the desire for truth and justice with regard to the fate of family members who were victimized by the government.

Nevertheless, and especially when put together, both accounts may offer a framework for the elucidation of the decline of the organizations in the post-war period. The explanations centre on factors such as the demoralizing effect of the amnesty law, the lack of financial cooperation, the participants' mental exhaustion after the war, and, especially, the lack of support of the FMLN for the movement's demands. However, in order to understand its development and decline, it is especially important to analyse the human rights movement in the context of the larger contentious episode in which it played a role: the conflict, including the period running up to it in the 1970s, and the resolution of the conflict in the post-war period in the 1990s. In this concluding chapter the social processes that determined the development of this contentious episode will be looked at, focusing particularly on the social mechanisms that led up to the conflict and the changes that occurred as a result of the peace accords.

As we have seen, each of the two categories of standard stories can count on numerous sources to back them up. But does any single one or any combination of the two accurately reflect the development of the organizations we are studying? Tilly (2002) claims that social processes are likely to be more complex and variegated than the stories that are told about them. Storytelling cannot be disconnected from the representation of social, political and personal interests. While providing a way of making sense of certain processes and processing certain historical events, storytelling is a form of participation in the process, of setting out stakes, and drawing out identities and boundaries (Tilly, 2002). When building on the different stories on the development of the human rights movement it is important to take heed to this point in order to move beyond face value.

Both categories of stories generate relatively fixed, essentialist or idealized categories of identity. One of the reasons they are difficult to integrate is that these different political identities may sometimes be difficult to reconcile. In the first account the dominant political identity is that of the human rights activist. In the second account the dominant political identity is that of the FMLN militant.²¹⁶ The problem is that in real life identities are far from fixed but rather very dynamic, especially so in contentious politics. The constant formation and transformation of identities in the course of social interaction is

a social process in itself. Standard stories address these processes with the implicit task of fixing the movements; crystallizing the fluidity and claiming solid representation of durable values. The liability for social science is that, when using standard stories to explain social processes, the scientific explanation might end up being moulded in order to fit the standard stories. Tilly emphasizes that when looking at social processes, it is insufficient to simply register the standard stories circulating with regard to the issue under scrutiny (2002). The question that must be addressed is what standard stories can tell us about the social processes themselves, about where the processes originate, what direction they take and by which mechanisms they operate.

Social mechanisms in episodes of collective violence

Social theory about the development of collective violence is useful to help understand how all political organizing, including the development of human rights organizations, was influenced by the social dynamics of the developing conflict. Extreme political polarization was one of the characteristics in the 1970s and throughout the civil war. This polarization provided all political activity with a framework in which its meaning was shaped. As one human rights observer said: 'the only way to understand why El Salvador's human rights movement had such a hard time after the war, is to look at the past (...). I remember a mother of the disappeared, complete with her handkerchief around her head, throwing a Molotov cocktail at the US embassy. Can you imagine? In order to understand, you have to look at how it develops in a time there were no shades of gray: only black and white'.²¹⁷ Tackling the same problem of polarization, a university professor and former member of the FMLN argued that 'in the context of extreme polarization, an organization opposing the government would simply be inconceivable if it wasn't for the patronage and protection of the FMLN. Everything was born from the navel of the revolutionary movement'.²¹⁸ The only exception were those groups directly linked to the church, because 'these had another kind of power backing them up'.²¹⁹

In his analysis of collective violence, Tilly identifies polarization as the key social process in violent episodes. 'Polarization involves widening of political and social space between claimants in a contentious episode and gravitation of previously uncommitted or moderate actors towards one, the other, or both extremes' (Tilly, 2003: 21). He identifies two mechanisms that play crucial roles in collective violence: boundary activation, which consists of a shift in social interactions such that

they increasingly (a) organize around a single us-them boundary and (b) differentiate between within-boundary and cross-boundary perceptions; and brokerage, which consist of connecting two or more social sites more directly than they were previously connected. Brokerage commonly stimulates boundary activation, as local disputes between individuals or households that happen to occur across an available but not currently salient boundary become large categorical confrontations through the intervention of third parties who connect disputants with other members of their categories.

Polarization generally promotes collective violence because it makes the us-them boundary more salient, hollows out the uncommitted middle, intensifies conflict across the boundary, raises the stakes of winning or losing, and enhances opportunities for leaders to initiate action against their enemies. (Tilly, 2003: 22)

Tilly furthermore distinguishes two actors that figure prominently in episodes of collective violence: political entrepreneurs, whose speciality consists of organizing, linking, dividing and representing constituencies, and violence specialists, those equipped and trained in the deployment of violent means. In practice, both categories frequently overlap each other. (Tilly, 2003: 30)

The mechanisms of brokerage and boundary activation are easily identified in the accounts of the prewar social mobilizations that have been documented in this study. The 1970s marked a time of extensive political entrepreneurship, performed by such actors as the priests of the popular church, the clandestine guerrilla organizers and the right-wing military officers setting up the death squads. These different brokers, operating on different sides of the political spectrum, connected individuals and groups of people that were previously unconnected and rallied around an increasingly salient us-them boundary. Some of these entrepreneurs were also violence specialists, like the military and paramilitary on the one hand and the political-military organizations on the other, both working on putting into place larger bodies of violence specialists to forward their cause. These violence specialists all started to play increasingly salient roles as the conflict developed. When military and paramilitary harassment became worse and turned into beating and occasional killings, the campesinos involved in popular organizations in turn started organizing defence measures as well as retaliatory action (Pearce, 1986). Furthermore, in the course of the conflict, those brokers that could (re)establish cross-boundary connections were delegitimized (for example, the revolutionaries scorned the Christian Democrats and other reformists) or violently eliminated

(for example, Monseñor Romero), pushing for further polarization. The conflict centred around an us-them or friend-enemy distinction. On each side of the border there were individuals and groups with all kinds of different individual and group identities, but throughout the war, in episodes of political contention, the dominant identities would always be those of revolutionaries on the one side and anti-Communists on the other.

Changes in identity and representation

The social dynamics of the conflict generated a kind of political polarization that made political independence virtually non-existent in organizations composing social movements. Nevertheless, in order to avoid political repression and gain credibility for their efforts, human rights organizations had to publicly claim political independence from the FMLN. After having been forced almost completely underground in the early 1980s, social movements (led by human rights groups such as CO-MADRES) reorganized and started to 'take the streets' of San Salvador in the mid 1980s. In search of legitimacy in the face of constant accusations of fronting for the FMLN, the human rights groups created a repertoire of contention symbolically based on the identity as relatives of the murdered or the disappeared, forwarding demands that were genuinely based on the grievances of victims and their families. In this effort, the identity category of being a mother of the disappeared took a central role in human rights activism, following the national and especially international political impact of the mother of the disappeared as a symbol for the plight of a continent plagued by military dictatorships and widespread repression. Thus, the Mothers Committees actively engaged in the emerging scenario of identity politics in Latin America, while at the same time being tied to national-popular political project of the FMLN.

During the war, the involvement of the FMLN in the human rights movement resulted in a double agenda, in which the struggle to topple or weaken the government was as important or maybe more important than human rights itself. In the wartime situation there was little visible divergence between the cause of the FMLN and that of human rights, or at least possible divergence was effectively censored for the purpose of the movement itself. This changed when, as a part of the UN Truth Commission's report, the FMLN was formally signalled as being responsible for several crimes, opening the eyes of many human rights workers to the complications involved in their historical demand

for justice. The fact that the FMLN crimes were much less numerous than those committed by the death squads and government forces would not release the FMLN leadership and many rank-and-file from facing serious consequences should justice be done. Although the human rights movement formally opposed the general amnesty decreed by the government after the publication of the Truth Commission's report, it soon became obvious that the FMLN saw such a law as an inevitable necessity in order to gain political incorporation of the FMLN in the political system, one of the key elements of the peace accords. Furthermore, several FMLN leaders manifested both publicly and privately that the role of the human rights movement had been exhausted now that the peace was signed.

These events sharpened the contradictions between the human rights agenda on the one hand and the FMLN's political agenda on the other, breaking their former honeymoon. As the FMLN tacitly did away with the banner of justice in the case of the human rights violations of the past, a significant amount of members of the human rights movement was confused about what their role and political agenda should be in this new context and struggled to define loyalty to, on the one side, the principals they had worked for in their specific human rights organization and, on the other, the FMLN. This 'identity struggle' led to serious conflicts in several human rights organizations and strongly debilitated the human rights movement. The crisis lasted several years and explains in part why the movement was unable to create significant political pressure for the implementation of the recommendations of the UN Truth Commission (most have still not been implemented) or to muster up firm protest against the general amnesty law. The effects of this post-war crisis in the human rights movement are still felt today, as participation and level of resources are significantly lower than they were during the war.

Throughout the development of the war, identity boundaries remained relatively fixed, but these boundaries changed significantly after the peace accords. As a consequence of the end of violence and the incorporation of the FMLN into the mainstream political system, the former us-them boundary weakened rapidly and new political relations arose. In the new context, the human rights movement is no longer part of a grand scheme, but is largely reduced to an interest group for people directly affected by the human rights violations who share the desire for recognition for their grievances. The human rights organizations were forced to redefine their relationship with the FMLN, something that was difficult and painful for most participants

to do. Without FMLN support the participants in the organizations find themselves playing a marginal role and realize that their demands have almost no possibility of success.

As we have seen, many of the (former) activists of the human rights movement are former FMLN militants, but they now consider the FMLN, or at least its leadership, as situated in different category as themselves, on a different side of an imaginary border. The (former) human rights activists are making new distinctions between for example the powerful and the powerless, including the FMLN leadership in the former category and the relatives of victims, the historical FMLN bases or human rights organizations in the latter category. The distancing of the historic constituency of the FMLN in the context of post-war transition generates new attitudes and political identities. Now most of the participants in this research no longer portray the political development as a struggle between two groups (the government and the revolutionaries, us and them), but identify three distinct actors involved in the process: the FMLN, 'us', and the government, with the 'us' often caught in the middle. This is especially so for the post-war period, but this perception has also led to a ongoing reassessment of the war itself.

When looking back on previous contentious episodes, the current identities shaped by the new context of social interaction make an impact on what stories are told about this past episode and the way in which they are told. This is a very important point to take into account when using ethnographical fieldwork to obtain information about these episodes. For example, Leigh Binford argues that the disappointing outcome of the peace accords and transition process influenced the way former members of the FMLN now look back on that period, because they feel duped by the outcomes of the transition.

(...) I believe that analysing wartime memories and post-war sentiments requires that we study closely the social and cultural mediations through which individuals and groups come to comprehend political violence and their roles in it. In this sense I would argue that the enduring consequences of the experience of soldiering depend partly on the outcome of the conflict: the past is internalized one way when political violence serves as the seedbed for the creation of a just society; it is viewed differently when the hoped for utopia is derailed by peace agreements that preserve the unjust structures which spawned the conflict. (Binford, 2002: 180-1)

Binford goes on to argue that 'had the FMLN won a military victory, or taken power through elections soon after the peace and embarked on a process of radical social and economic reconstruction

that fulfilled at least some of the wartime promises it had made to its rural constituency', many former FMLN militants would have another view on wartime violence and the cases that now come out in the open 'would have been put to the background, forgotten, or expressed with less malice' (Binford, 2002: 182-3). Binford's assertion implicates that the way the violence of the civil war is represented in post-war storytelling is related to post-war political relations. In the framework of Tilly's social theory, what stories are told about El Salvador's civil war depends on the evolution of the political relationships that existed during the war in the post-war context.

During the war, a participant in the human rights movement would not talk about FMLN disrespect for human rights, at least not to an outside agent. Because of the changing relationship between the FMLN and the participants in the movement this gradually became possible after the war. Also, in view of the growing distance between the FMLN leadership and its former constituency and the lack of support for their causes, it is only logical that some resentment towards the FMLN should influence the way not only the present but also the past is represented. Thus it would be all too easy to simply wrap up this study with the idea that the human rights organizations constitute of groups of people that were duped by the FMLN. To focus on the groups as victims of political instrumentalization may mirror the current feelings of most of the (former) participants, but does little justice to their past options and agency.

Reassessments of revolutionary movements

Many scholars who have worked on El Salvador over the past decades made the mistake to think uncritically of the FMLN as the 'good' guys. The division of a complex process such as a revolution or a civil war in moral binaries (the struggle between 'good' and 'bad') is not very likely to render good quality social research. Such simplification merged with a bias of sympathy may lead to a situation in which social processes and their protagonist cannot live up to the (unfair) expectations scholars have contributed in creating. Progressive scholarship that dealt with transformation processes over the last decades in Central America is a good example of this phenomenon. While the transformative qualities of revolutionary organizations and their leaders were lauded and glorified in the 1980s and early 1990s, their now obvious limitations have long been a blind spot. Much of this was dictated by the friend-enemy logic of the Cold War. In the words of Bourgois, who studied

El Salvador's revolutionaries, 'the ideological morass of the Cold War affected what I was able to observe, note and write on ethnographically' (Bourgois: 2002: 228).

Castañeda's landmark book *Utopia Unarmed* provides a valuable guide for the demystification of the Latin American (armed) left (1993), but further reassessments are only timidly undertaken, and have not always been received well amongst left-wing scholars. David Stoll's work on Guatemala's civil war is the best known of these reassessments and generated a lot of controversy (Arias, 2001). Stoll took a well-known standard story about repression and resistance (indigenous rebellion against a horrifying military regime) and, through ethnographically informed research, attempted to construct a different image, one that in his view resembled more closely what had actually happened during the war in the indigenous areas of Guatemala – a people caught between two armies, and doing what it could to survive in a violent context. A guerrilla force seeking to take advantage of the representation of the horrors of political persecution and discrimination to sustain its war-effort – (Stoll, 1993). Whether Stoll's analysis provides relevant ideas for understanding what happened in El Salvador is an interesting topic for further research. I view most observations of this study point in a different direction, which was not explored Stoll's work. Even though the current stories that are told about the FMLN point in the direction of (involuntary) instrumentalization of groups of people, we saw that the current political context influences what stories are told, the way they are told and the way people situate themselves in these stories. As people reassess their own participation in the civil war, the stories do not always reflect the protagonists' actual perceptions of events when they were taking place. In this manner it is possible that a convinced FMLN revolutionary in the 1980s may now consider that they or other people were actually 'used' by the FMLN, and subsequently adjust their role in the conflict to fit that part. As is often said about former Salvadorean revolutionaries: 'the more radical they were before, the more repentant they are now'.²²⁰ In the case of the human rights movement, if we look at the (former) members' feeling of being betrayed, we may feel drawn to a conclusion of illegitimate instrumentalization of innocent people by the FMLN. But is instrumentalization of the constituency, often accompanied by imposition and abuse of power, not a characteristic of almost all political activity, independent of political creed? Do they not constitute phenomena that everyone engaged in political activity recognizes and, even though rejecting it, usually ends up accepting it as subordinate to larger goals or part of the game of politics?

Most participants in the human rights organizations were in the first place FMLN revolutionaries. The stories they now tell about FMLN involvement in the human rights movement of course provide information about what happened during the war, but show prominently how perceptions of identity in political participation became subject of a process of transformation and reassessment as well. Whether and to what extent certain groups of people are protagonist of their own transformations or are being used or instrumentalized by other political groups is one of much disputed issues in scholarship on episodes of political contention, with strongly divided perspectives from the left and the right. In the case of the representation of poor Central Americans being 'caught between two armies' it is not satisfactory to simply use this image to refute earlier romantic versions of revolutionary political organizing in the region, but attention should be given to what the salience of this representation in the ethnographic field itself may indicate with regards to shifting identities and changing scenarios of contention. Rather than 'bringing the actor back in' the analysis of the Salvadorean conflict (Grenier, 1999: xi), a focus on the dynamic processes of social interaction might be more productive in reconstructing a comprehensive picture of the dramatic episode of the civil war and its aftermath. In such an analysis the social processes and mechanisms that shape contention and collective violence should end up playing the central role they have been largely denied so far.

Identity and politics

In Charles Hale's chronology 'identity politics' is located as a new era of political activity after the one dominated by the national-popular (1997b). The case of the human rights groups showed a sharp division between two different eras in Latin American politics may be somewhat overdrawn. In El Salvador, to a certain extent, the identity politics of human rights started to play a parallel role in an ongoing national-popular project, that of the FMLN. Even though on a national level the national-popular was obviously the dominant framework, the human rights groups actively engaged in identity politics with special focus on the international level, and attempted to combine the two paradigms (national-popular and identity-based claim making) in their political development, combining a human rights platform with a revolutionary agenda, an effort that eventually turned out to be much more difficult and problematic than expected. In a comparative perspective this may account for the differentiated impact of human rights groups

in transition processes in for example Argentina and Chile, where the national-popular project had already been largely defeated, and in El Salvador and to a lesser extent Guatemala, where the national-popular paradigm outlived the 1970s and was only defeated in the 1990s.

The case of El Salvador's human rights movement illustrates how important it is to look at social movements in their political and social context. Identity is key in social mobilization, but different and variable identities may come into play in the course of the organization's development. An analysis of El Salvador's human rights movement that takes the political identities of human rights activists or the mothers of the disappeared as the sole point of departure is therefore unlikely to render plausible explanations of the problems the movement faced in the post-war period. What this study has documented is that different identities may become politically relevant in changing contexts of contention. This study calls attention to the dynamic character of political mobilization, but also shows that, even though politically constructed identities are adjusted in changing contexts of contention, this transformation process is not always a process devoid of a sense of rupture or loss. It is a process that may generate new conflicts and contradictions.

When looking at the use of identity in politics, it has to be taken into account that political identities as such are not self explanatory or self-propelling, but are shaped in the process of social interaction. The use of identity in contentious episodes does not necessarily explain the underlying forces that guide the process and may eventually determine the outcome of the claim making. Extreme political polarization such as that which occurred in El Salvador creates an undercurrent for contentious politics that, even though not always visible at first sight, may strongly influence the outcome of social processes. What most profoundly influenced the movement's development during the war was that the claim making unfolded and acquired its significance in the framework of a larger contentious episode: the armed conflict. In this light the human rights organizations were above all part of a revolutionary movement at war with the government. It is necessary to look at the human rights movement at the light of this grand process, in order to understand its development, the extent of its impact and the nature of its limitations.

In critically questioning the self-propelled character of the social movements (and social action in general) while focusing on the centrality of social interaction in the formation of all social and political identities, the work of Tilly and others prompt us to grasp that social

processes cannot be explained without taking a critical look at all the actors involved in the claim making process. Identity politics plays an important role in this model, but it rejects the prime location of its meaning in the fixed identities of self-propelled political action and places it in the dynamic interaction of politics and social life. (McAdam et al., 2001: 132-6)

While moving away from the 'national-popular' to embrace 'identity politics', a new era of research on Latin America social transformations presents fresh opportunities to innovate scholarship (Hale, 1997b) and get rid of the 'if you are not with us you are against us' paradigm of moral binaries. However, we should also be cautious that the romance of the Latin American guerrilla is not replaced by the romance of Latin American social movements. As scholars are so eager to encounter hopeful signs of progressive political transformation, often producing moralistic accounts of marginality, following Wacquant's (mock) dictate to 'spotlight the deeds of the worthy poor, exalt their striving strength and creativity, and emphasize success stories, even as they are marginal and non-replicable'. The list culminates with the prescription that 'last but not least, you shall bring good news and leave the reader feeling reassured'. (Wacquant, 2002 in Bourgois, 2002: 229)

Such 'feel-good ethnography' may serve the task of making social movements and other popular initiatives known abroad and help in obtaining much-needed international support for their efforts, but it contributes little to visualizing the real challenges ahead. In fact, it tends to raise expectations that cannot be met. Accounts echoing the moral agenda of a specific social movement may serve little purpose when the movement is symptomizing problems that do not easily fit in the standard formulas of representation employed by the movement and its promoters and that are a result of complex social processes that oversimplify the movement itself. In the ensuing disillusionment the social movement may find itself abandoned by both scholars and international funding that searched for new rays of hope while paying little attention to why the high expectations weren't met in the first place. For example, very soon after Schirmer's (1993b) and Stephen's (1994) positive accounts of CO-MADRES as a social movement, the group all but ceased to function, receiving barely enough funding to pay the phone bill and, for a long time now, no more visits from scholars.²²¹

Committed scholarship, which may include the active engagement in the political scenarios that the researcher is studying, should not keep the scholars from putting the finger where it hurts. In the long run, critical contributions may have the added-value mystification lacks. From

an academic viewpoint, critical reassessment of former contentious episodes implies a reassessment of former scholarship on the subject. While this may sometimes be a painful process, it provides fresh challenges and opportunities for the future. This is the kind of innovative scholarship Hale seems to refer to when he draws out the opportunities and challenges identity politics offer for future research:

This empirically driven, theoretically seasoned, and politically engaged work on identity politics in Latin America offers a potential source of rejuvenation for anthropology more generally.(...) The crisis of oppositional intellectuals in Latin America and the crisis of 'ethnographic authority' among US-based anthropologists run parallel to each other. Among both groups, the role of intellectuals as intermediaries who provide data on, interpret, and theorize about the subjects of identity politics, is confronting an ever more serious challenge. How intellectuals respond to this challenge becomes an analytical and political question in its own right. Deprived of easy claims to 'organic ties' with political actors 'on the ground,' deprived of fieldwork sites with docile, cooperative subjects, one common recourse in both cases is to withdraw. Yet the challenge also creates a mandate for reinvention: a call for intellectuals to develop methods and analytical categories that engender more constructive engagement with the multiple inequalities that organize the worlds we live in and study. This may at least help to prevent scenarios in which theoretical debate, though presenting itself as a few steps ahead of political practice, descends into self-referentiality. It will at least keep theory and activism engaged with each other, and in the best of cases could even produce ethnography that casts some light on the problems and opportunities that lie ahead. (1997b: 584)

As we have seen in this study, the reassessment of El Salvador's recent history is not a task confined to scientists. On the contrary, it is a process that is now actively taking place among (former) FMLN activists. It is likely we can find different reassessment processes going on in all sectors of society involved in or affected by the conflict. These reassessments are full of insights that can enrich our understanding of the civil war and the country's transition to peace. But, social scientists need to be cautious not to replace one standard story with the next. The demystification of the FMLN is a necessary process but should not take attention away from its achievements, such as the major contribution it made to the country's political transformation. This study focuses on what could be called a disappointing political development, and the tone is set accordingly. Furthermore, when put under scrutiny, collective violence is almost by definition a nasty business. However, the important lesson for the future is to see how inquiries into the recent

history can be further stripped from the dichotomy of moral binaries and from the weight of standard stories, to generate more critical and less politically polarized accounts.

How the country's past is represented today says a lot about its present. When using storytelling as a primary source, setting apart the past and the present may prove to be a complex or even impossible task. Nevertheless, this study has attempted to show that, while searching for connections between the past and the present, storytelling may provide useful insights into recent social and political developments.

The transition to peace generated a new political context. Some old opportunities for claim making disappeared, while new opportunities arose. In the context of electoral democracy, the past is a burden that the government nor the FMLN wants to carry along. In their view the obliteration of the past constitutes 'the price of peace'. After twelve years of war probably many Salvadoreans were (and still are) willing to pay this price. But this doesn't convert the past into a closed chapter. The stories about the past will continue to play an important role in the present and in political claim making. And the possible implications of acceptance of responsibility or guilt with regard to war crimes are likely to determine the course of these debates in future years. In this sense, the proper administration of justice in the case of war crimes seems not to be a realistic demand for the human rights movement. But as one of the activists told me, 'in spite of all difficulties, the movement is still here; it's weak, but it's still here'.²²² The future will determine whether its part is really finished or whether it will somehow be able to revive public interest for its original cause.

Notes

²¹⁶ The identity of being a relative or a victims is also relevant, although especially during the war there was a certain tendency to view everybody as a victims, and also to assume that almost everybody involved in the revolutionary movement has been victimized him or herself and or is also a relative to someone victimized by repression. See interview former member CDH-ES, 07/07/03

²¹⁷ Interview member IDHUCA, 23/06/03

²¹⁸ Interview university professor, 13/07/03

²¹⁹ Idem.

²²⁰ Interview human rights activist, 13/07/03

²²¹ Interview member CO-MADRES, 31/07/03

²²² Interview member IDHUCA, 23/06/03



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