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## Ambivalent Moderation: The FMLN's Ideological Accommodation to Post-War Politics in El Salvador

El Salvador's FMLN is an oft-cited example of a rebel movement which successfully embraced electoral democracy. This article examines the ideological dimensions of this transformation. In the course of the Salvadoran peace process, the FMLN substantially overhauled its ideological orientation and associated modes of engagement with the state and the broader political system. Moderation unfolded in four subsequent stages: the resignification of revolution as a process of reform, the FMLN's rebel-to-party adaptation, the electoral consolidation of the FMLN, and the FMLN as the party in government. Over the years, while electoral politics invited public moderation, Leninist dogma continued to dominate internal party politics. This article finds that the post-war FMLN has employed seemingly contradictory ideological repertoires in parallel. This ambivalence, strongly rooted in the war, has facilitated the FMLN's electoral ascendancy. It has also strained democratic consolidation in El Salvador.

**Keywords:** rebel-to-party transformation; moderation; ideology; democratization; El Salvador

IN 1992, EL SALVADOR'S GOVERNMENT AND THE FRENTE FARABUNDO Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN – Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) insurgency agreed to end a 12-year civil war. Transformed into a political party, the FMLN became the country's leading electoral opposition to the governing right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA – Republican–Nationalist Alliance). The Salvadoran 'parties to the Peace Accords viewed

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democratization as a means to achieve peace' (Wade 2016: 71). Furthermore, the transition benefited from the fact the insurgent elites were not so dissimilar in background to the established political elites (Blair et al. 1995) and that conciliatory ideas proved more likely to attract voters than radical rhetoric (Montgomery 1995: 268). In the decades following on the peace accords, the electoral contest between ARENA and FMLN has dominated Salvadoran politics, with the FMLN frequently winning local elections in the country's largest cities. Research on post-war Salvadoran voters' preferences shows that ARENA and the FMLN both relied on the votes of their respective historical supporters as well as on attracting centrist voters to strengthen their electoral position (Azpuru 2010; Córdova Macías et al. 2015: 198–201).

The former rebels' electoral ascendancy reached new heights with Mauricio Funes's triumph at the 2009 presidential elections, making the FMLN the first former guerrilla movement in Latin American history to reach power by the ballot while having been unable to do so by armed struggle. Though the FMLN's electoral successes defy simplistic and unidimensional explanations, they have frequently been associated with the movement's capacity for moderation, which allowed it to accept democratic reform instead of revolution and to gain the trust of the wider Salvadoran electorate (Azpuru 2010; Samayoa 2003: 585). Scholars subsequently interpreted the FMLN's 2009 electoral triumph, perhaps somewhat hastily, as ushering in a 'new democratic era' (Greene and Keogh 2009: 666; also Almeida 2010b; Colburn 2009; Perla and Cruz-Feliciano 2013).

How did the FMLN's ideological transformation from a guerrilla movement into a successful political party unfold? While there has been ample discussion about the FMLN's transformation from guerrilla movement into political party (Allison 2006; de Zeeuw 2010; Luciak 2001; Manning 2008; Sprenkels 2018b), the character of its ideological reorientation has not received notable attention. Based primarily on available academic sources, complemented by non-academic sources and field experience in El Salvador, this article places the FMLN's ideological evolution on a four-decade time line, from the movement's pre-war radicalization process to its current ideological profile.<sup>1</sup> It pays particular attention to how FMLN party politics became heavily impregnated with ideological conflict. Contrary to what might be expected, moderate factions within the FMLN have actually been highly vulnerable to exclusion and

marginalization in the post-war period. Conspicuous segregation exists between the ideological underpinnings of the FMLN's public performance (generally moderate) and of internal party governance (generally hostile to moderation).

The article is structured as follows. I start with a conceptual outline of 'rebel-to-party moderation' in the fields of comparative politics and political sociology, highlighting possible complications. I then review the FMLN's ideological trajectory, from pre-war radicalization to four subsequent moderation stages: the resignification of revolution as reform, rebel-to-party adaptation, electoral consolidation and the FMLN in government. I conclude by analysing how the segregated use of ideology and the resulting ambivalent moderation affected FMLN engagement with the state. Finally, I highlight possible implications of my findings for the study of rebel-to-party transformations.

#### THE MODERATION OF FORMER INSURGENTS

Rebel-to-party transformations form a common ingredient of contemporary post-war peacebuilding (Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz 2016), and comparative politics scholars have analysed the democratizing potential of insurgent heir parties extensively (e.g. de Zeeuw 2010; Manning 2008; Sindre 2016). Though actual commitment to democratic ideals is sometimes contested, many former rebels have indeed moderated and reinvented themselves as electorally minded politicians (Deonandan 2007: 244; Mampilly 2011: 240). Post-insurgent moderation encompasses 'the reduction of maximalist demands', and 'respect for political and ideological differences ... and for a culture of negotiation and dialogue' (Torres-Rivas 1996: 30).

How does this process of moderation unfold? In-depth case studies on the political trajectories of former insurgent movements (Allison 2006; Southall 2013) demonstrate that reorientation from a revolutionary cause to electoral politics is a process fraught with quandaries and disputes. Most crucially, democratic transition entails that the former insurgents acknowledge the legitimacy of a state that they previously not only rejected, but actively and often bitterly fought. Hence, while international peace-builders may perceive that former insurgents are buying into democracy, some factions of the

movement may instead speak of betrayal or selling out to the system (Sprenkels 2018a: 329).

An influential strand of comparative politics scholarship holds that the integration of radical political parties within the democratic system produces their moderation (Tezcür 2010; Wickham 2004). Samuel Huntington refers to this as ‘participation–moderation trade-off’ (1991: 166), crucial to third-wave democratic transitions. Underpinning moderation theory is the notion that political leaders are wannabe elites, who will eventually favour personal influence over ideology. Both Alexis de Tocqueville and Max Weber suggested that democracy provided an opportunity for politicians to service not only ideas and constituents, but also, and perhaps foremost, themselves (see Linz 2006: 24). Moderation theory is heavily indebted to Italian elite theory, which focused on political processes as inter-elite affairs (Finocchiaro 1999; Michels 1962; Pareto 1991). Elite aspirations tend to foster moderation because leaders seek to consolidate political ascent by weakening previous ideological commitments in order to avoid scaring off potential voters (Tezcür 2010: 71).

To analyse moderation also requires considering its counterpart: radicalization. Both concepts connect to polarization, which Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2008: 217) define as the ‘increasing ideological distance between political actors or coalitions’. Radicalization and moderation are ideological concepts, and hence what counts as radical and moderate concerns the distance between sets of ideas and should not be misunderstood as objective qualification of these ideas in themselves (Kundnani 2012). Apart from consonance with global ideological trends, moderation acquires meaning in the light of the movement’s earlier radicalization, as evidenced in the contribution by Alice Wilson (2019).

Many insurgencies emerge as ideological projects forwarded by small groups of dedicated activists who face persecution, perceive legal political action as ineffective or impossible and see no other way forward (Selbin 2010). The process of radicalization revolves largely around the ideological construction of ‘the enemy’ and around hollowing out the ‘uncommitted middle’ (Tilly 2003: 22). In contrast, moderation revolves around the deconstruction of political contenders as enemies. As Devon Curtis and Gyda Sindre (2019) highlight in their introduction to this special issue, while previously insurgents were state enemies, peace settlements commonly imply the acceptance of state legitimacy and the integration of former

insurgents in the political system. Much of the democratic transition literature views moderation as allowing former insurgents to transform themselves from state challengers into state builders (Huntington 1991; Jarstad and Sisk 2008). Rebel-to-party moderation then occurs as part of ‘socializing ... political actors according to liberal principles’ (Peceny and Stanley 2001: 150).

The idea of rebel-to-party moderation as a process of democratization based on ideological liberalization and elite accommodation warrants several caveats. First, the emphasis on rebel-to-party moderation runs the risk of underestimating the resonance of wartime ideological heritage and symbolic capital among movement participants (Kriger 2003; Sprenkels 2018a). Second, an exclusive focus on leadership might obfuscate intra-movement ideological tensions. As Huntington (1991: 169) explained, ‘in the third wave, democracies were often made by leaders willing to betray the interests of their followers in order to achieve their goal’. And third, pre-existing political structures and practices – e.g. clientelism and nepotism – might constrain the transformational potential of rebels as electoral newcomers (Burihabwa and Curtis 2019; Sprenkels 2018a).

Post-insurgent contexts thus present three possible constraints for moderation: continued resonance of wartime ideology, intra-movement ideological tensions and contextual or structural discouragement of moderation. Leaders will have to navigate such constraints – for example, by using moderation temporarily and strategically – but without modifying ultimate goals (Sindre 2018: 25; Whiting 2018), and possibly ‘misrepresent[ing] their adherence to liberalism to appeal to international and domestic audiences’ (Peceny and Stanley 2001: 177). On the other hand, leaders might also employ radical discourse strategically, for example to appease certain factions. Rebel-to-party leaders face the challenge of dealing with ideological moderation with due care in relation to supporters and opponents.

While ideological radicalization might be difficult to shake off for the traditional insurgent support base, the armed movement-turned-political-party needs to appeal to a broader electorate potentially turned off by radical proposals. This echoes with the ‘ambivalent moderation’ Subrata Mitra (2013: 279) found among Hindu nationalists in India, who ‘go along with electoral democracy and the party’s generally moderate stance as long as it brings in the power’, but who simultaneously draw on exclusivist and extremist forms of politics to mobilize their core supporters. Ambivalence might be

further enhanced when, due to inter-elite competition, leaders need the support of the traditional base to be able to get a spot on the ballot, while also needing a broader electoral appeal to gain sufficient votes to actually get elected (Harmel and Janda 1994).

The phenomenon of ambivalent moderation thus emerges from political constraints that stimulate or reward the use of different ideological stances towards different audiences, resulting in a bifurcation or segregation of the ideological discourses – and concomitant practices – used for internal party politics and electoral politics. Though ambivalent moderation holds a strategic component, it is a multilayered phenomenon also shaped by structural and contextual factors which place limits on viable or acceptable behaviour for movement participants. By applying the concept of ambivalent moderation to the case of El Salvador's FMLN, the remainder of this article demonstrates how this concept provides a useful addition to scholarship on rebel-to-party moderation by stimulating a multi-layered understanding of how organizational and ideological legacies of the war help shape post-insurgent political accommodation, while hindering democratic consolidation.

## RADICALIZATION AND REVOLUTION

In the early 1970s, Salvadoran leftists were torn between favouring the 'soviet line' of competing in elections and the 'Cuban line' of armed struggle (Castañeda 1993; Chávez 2017). The Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL – Popular Liberation Forces) and the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP – People's Revolutionary Army), El Salvador's first two guerrilla groups, argued that electoral participation only served to legitimize the US-backed military regime (Cortina Orero 2017). The revolutionaries' key ideological tenets were the construction of the Salvadoran state as the enemy of the people, the belief in armed struggle as the only way of toppling it and 'political-ideological proletarianization' for revolutionaries to be able to offer the sacrifices required (Harnecker 1993: 91–2).

The revolutionary movement quickly took root within labour unions, student organizations, the liberation theology church and peasant communities (Byrne 1996; Chávez 2017). Its backbone was formed of political-military organizations: the FPL, ERP, Resistencia Nacional (RN – National Resistance) – an ERP split-off – and Partido

Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (PRTC – Central American Workers’ Party). Late in 1979, the Partido Comunista de El Salvador (PCS – Communist Party of El Salvador) became the fifth group to take up armed struggle. All groups embraced the Leninist notion of ‘democratic centralism’, which views the party as the embryo of the new revolutionary political order, emphasizing centralized decision-making and ‘truly iron discipline’ (Lenin 1970: 11).

Though all guerrilla groups steeped proclamations with Marxist-Leninist rhetoric, this did not mean that they held uniform ideological outlooks. The FPL, for example, inspired by Mao, advocated for a lengthy people’s war, while the ERP preferred a quick uprising to topple the regime (Byrne 1996). Facing mounting repression, the five insurgent groups formed a common front called FMLN in October 1980. Perhaps paradoxically, this move had a moderating effect on the movement. The FMLN overall authority was a consensus-based mechanism involving the leaderships of the five groups. Its strong political-diplomatic branch included several moderate social democrats (Montgomery 1995: 111). The FMLN needed support beyond the socialist bloc, which they sought and found among others in Mexico and France (Whitfield 2007: 62). Starting in 1984, the FMLN repeatedly participated in peace dialogues with the Salvadoran government. Though initially unfruitful, such talks did entail the FMLN developing more moderate demands to bring to the table (Martínez Peñate 1995), though internal debates on the validity of moderation also provoked a deep crisis within the FPL (Allison and Alvarez 2012: 96).

Furthermore, with political repression inside El Salvador receding after 1984, the FMLN set up what they called a ‘civil-political front’. Building on the revolutionary networks from the 1970s, the five groups developed strong clandestine links with civil organizations, such as cooperatives, labour unions, NGOs and student groups (Sprenkels 2005: 63–9). The FMLN called this ‘two-faced power’: while the guerrilla represented the movement’s insurgent, revolutionary face, the civil-political front represented the movement’s moderate, civilian face (Wood 2003: 167).

## THE RESIGNIFICATION OF THE REVOLUTION

In early 1989, ERP leader and FMLN directorate member Joaquín Villalobos wrote in *Foreign Policy* against fears that ‘revolutionary triumph in El

Salvador would mean the implementation of radical plans' (1989: 103). The piece, entitled 'A Democratic Revolution for El Salvador', explicitly defends 'pluralism' (Villalobos 1989: 114). Though Villalobos's position was not supported by most of the FMLN leadership, it provided a clear indication of unfolding ideological shifts (Villalobos 1989: 104).

Villalobos's democratic overtures initially coincided with a hardening of the Salvadoran regime, spurred by the 1989 electoral triumph of the FMLN's fiercest opponent, the anti-communist ARENA. Political persecution increased, the civil-political front suffered crack-downs and the FMLN launched an unprecedented military offensive in November 1989, which, among many other developments, resulted in the insurgents taking over parts of the capital city. Though the Salvadoran army eventually pushed the guerrillas back, the offensive demonstrated that a military solution was far away.

After this, international pressure on both the government and the FMLN to reach a negotiated solution mounted. The end of the Cold War, the crisis in Cuba and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in neighbouring Nicaragua all pushed the FMLN to the negotiating table. These same factors, combined with the perceived military stalemate in El Salvador and the further deterioration of the military's already abominable human rights reputation, also convinced the US, previously opposed to negotiations, to support peace (Crandall 2016: 464–6).<sup>2</sup> Wary of the war's economic impact, wealthy Salvadorans increasingly supported negotiations (Wood 2000). The position of military hardliners weakened, allowing pro-peace forces within the government and the ARENA party to prevail (Wade 2016).

Peace negotiations culminated in January 1992 and entailed the democratization of the political system (Samayoa 2003). As the FMLN prepared to participate in the 1994 elections, internal debates centred on the meaning of revolution after a hard-fought peace and in the broader global context of the post-Cold War era (Ferroggiaro 1995). The FMLN emerged from the peace process with clear intra-movement ideological tensions, with some leaders willing to overhaul the movement's ideological profile much more drastically than others.

#### THE FMLN'S POST-WAR ADAPTATION

The peace accords implied the FMLN's acceptance of the legitimacy of the Salvadoran state and of the political system in which the FMLN



was to integrate. Schematically, the ideological positions among former insurgents varied between those who considered the peace process a necessary but incomplete step in the process of the revolution, those who considered the peace process to be more or less equivalent to the revolution, and those who considered that the peace process equalled the demise of the revolution. Leadership overwhelmingly supported the first two positions, while middle cadres and rank-and-file were divided among all three positions (Ching 2016; Sprenkels 2018a). The FMLN's 1992 refoundation statute labelled its ideological character as democratic, pluralist and revolutionary, avoiding any mention of socialism or Marxism (Zamora 1998: 227).

Beyond the FMLN's ideological accommodation to peace, the former insurgents were confronted with enormous practical challenges associated with the movement's organizational adaptation to peace, which led to most sectors of the movement putting pending ideological debates on hold, awaiting more propitious circumstances. The ERP was the exception, as ideological disputes started ripping through the organization shortly after the peace accords, as Villalobos and other leaders pushed strongly to develop a centrist ideological profile (Medrano 1992), symbolized by rebaptizing the organization with a non-militant name, from Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (the People's Revolutionary Army) to Expresión Renovadora del Pueblo (the People's Expression for Renovation) (Grenier 1999: 92). Several ERP cadres rejected the new course and those most vocal among them were expelled in 1993 (Sprenkels 2018a: 105). The ERP leadership further developed the so-called 'democratic revolution' doctrine, claiming that the peace accords and their implementation actually *were* the revolution they had fought for (Medrano 1992; Villalobos 1999). The RN leadership embraced a position similar to the ERP, with its top leader describing the peace process as 'the first negotiated revolution in Latin America' (Ferrogiario 1995: 91). Most other FMLN leaders favoured the position that the peace process, though a crucially important step, did not amount to revolution (González 1992).

The FMLN participated in the 1994 election as a party of parties, with the five former insurgent groups dividing up the candidacies and territories and working in parallel to try and get as many candidates elected as possible (FLACSO 1995). Though the emerging ideological fissures conjured an ominous cloud over the movement,

the leadership settled on postponing the ideological debates until after the elections. The governing ARENA party comfortably won the elections. Overall, the electoral results were not discouraging for the FMLN, though: it became the largest opposition party.

On the day of the new parliament's inauguration, the FMLN legislative faction split in two, as seven FMLN legislators with ERP and RN backgrounds struck a deal with ARENA to take up seats in the parliament's directorate, in defiance of the position of the remaining 14 FMLN legislators, who accused the ERP and RN of betrayal. Villalobos rebutted that if the disgruntled FMLN leaders did not like democracy, they 'should go back to the mountains' (Montgomery 1995: 268). The crisis led to the ERP and the RN abandoning the FMLN by late 1994, and founding a new party called Partido Demócrata (PD – Democratic Party) (Wade 2016: 93). The PD's support for the 1995 San Andrés pact signalled unequivocally that the PD had fully accepted a post-war regime built on liberal democracy and free markets. The former ERP leaders accused the FMLN leadership of being 'archangels of dogma' (ERP 1994: 2), unwilling to accept the rules of democracy.

The FMLN meanwhile adjusted its statute to reaffirm its socialist character (Zamora 1998: 228). Economic policies nonetheless qualified as capitalist with pro-poor measures (Zamora 1998: 231). Moderation was also evident in the FMLN's stance on rural development; comprehensive land reform disappeared from its programme and efforts concentrated on debt cancellation for beneficiaries of earlier reform programmes, which included the FMLN's historical rural support base (Kowalchuk 2003).

The FMLN's first steps as a political party were conflict-ridden. Early post-war strife partly echoed historical sectarian divides by which the FPL and PCS were seen as firmly communist, and the ERP and RN as harbouring social democratic sympathies (Sprenkels 2018a). The party's ideological adjustments after the exit of the ERP and RN were vague and sometimes contradictory. The FMLN also faced growing discontent among the rank-and-file and mid-level cadres, as it became increasingly clear that the opportunities post-war politics had to offer for former insurgents were not equal for all (Ching 2016). Most markedly, a growing divide developed between the mostly urban leadership of the movement, many of whom started to progress in post-war political careers, and mostly rural rank-and-file, most of whom struggled to make ends meet. Such internal

differences contrasted starkly with the movement's original ideological postulates, which were highly egalitarian, spurring militants from different FMLN factions to accuse leaders of taking on a bourgeois lifestyle and abandoning those who sacrificed their lives for them (Sprenkels 2018a; Zamora 1998). The FMLN's post-war adaptation thus did not only revive sectarian divides among the leadership, it also strengthened tensions within different sections of the movement.

### THE FMLN'S ELECTORAL CONSOLIDATION

While the FMLN obtained more deputies and mayors in the 1997 elections than it had in 1994, the PD was left almost empty-handed. Most former insurgents viewed the moderation displayed by the ERP and RN leadership as too drastic. By eagerly embracing the system and praising former enemies, these leaders made themselves highly vulnerable to accusations of betrayal or selling out (Allison and Alvarez 2012: 103–4). Villalobos accepted a scholarship and left for Oxford in late 1995, something many interpreted as disloyal to his remaining supporters (Binford 2010: 546–7). These developments alienated a large part of the ERP's and RN's wartime support base (Luciak 2001: 81–2). The PD's experience demonstrated the limitations of moderation's electoral appeal and clarified that other aspects, like leadership reputation and the mobilization of a committed support base to staff the campaign, were also important for electoral success (Zamora 1998).

The 1997 ballot consolidated the electoral diarchy of the ARENA and FMLN which would dominate Salvadoran politics in years to come (Montoya 2018). After the ERP–RN split-off, the FMLN progressed electorally amidst a new wave of internal disputes. From 1997 onwards, the party became increasingly divided between two ideological currents: *renovadores* (renovators) and socialist-revolutionaries. The renovadores saw themselves as reform-oriented moderates and were referred to by their detractors as opportunists and sell-outs who would squander the sacrifices made for the revolution. The socialist revolutionaries saw themselves as the guardians of the FMLN's original ideological identity and were referred to as *ortodoxos* (orthodox) by the renovadores and the media. While the renovadores advocated embracing the system to reform it, the revolutionary-socialists defended the validity of 'changing the system' (Handal 2004: 21).

Both the reformists and the revolutionary-socialists were spearheaded by FPL cadres, the latter in an alliance with the former PCS structures inside the FMLN (Allison 2016; Allison and Alvarez 2012). The dispute escalated around the selection of the FMLN candidates for the 1999 (vice-)presidential ballot. After a period in which the party functioned basically as two separate structures, the socialist-revolutionaries managed to take control in 2001 and expelled the leader of the renovadores. In 2006, internal elections for candidates were formally abolished, granting the party's revolutionary-socialist leadership tight control (Puyana 2008: 222). The leadership dusted off the Leninist principle of 'democratic centralism', abandoned since the peace accords, to formalize a centralist restructuring of the FMLN (López Bernal 2016: 19). Democratic centralism meant to rein in right-wing influences and counteract internal instability (Ruano 2016: 30). The doctrine, a core element of internal regulation (Acevedo Moreno 2009), was also seen as 'favouring the cooperation of the base with the leadership' (Ruano 2016: 31).

The repeated electoral failure of post-war FMLN split-offs fed the political imaginary that dissent means demise and helped discipline the party around the revolutionary-socialist leadership (Allison 2016). The 'enemy-within' discourse against reformists justified enhanced control over the party by the 'most trusted' historical leadership and cadres (Sprenkels 2011: 26). Several other factors also helped strengthen the position of the revolutionary-socialists within the FMLN. El Salvador's post-war political polarization, nurtured at least as vehemently by right-wing ARENA as by the FMLN, strongly discouraged moderation (Silber 2011: 127; also Montoya 2015). The revolutionary-socialists furthermore obtained a powerful ally in Hugo Chávez, as Venezuelan donations controlled by the revolutionary-socialists boosted the FMLN's finances and allowed it to compete more effectively with ARENA, for example by increasing electoral campaign investments.<sup>3</sup> Party control allowed the revolutionary-socialists to provide concrete incentives to their supporters, mainly drawn from FMLN municipalities. The revolutionary-socialist FMLN leadership thus combined ideological rhetoric around a 'renewed commitment to revolutionary principles on the basis of past struggle against the state' (Allison and Alvarez 2012: 108) with commercialized campaigning and clientelist politics, which partially leaned on access to state resources.

Over the course of the 2000s, the revolutionary-socialist faction was able to transform the existence of intra-movement ideological

tensions into a justification for hierarchical control, readopting the (anti-democratic) doctrine of democratic centralism. The revolutionary-socialists' success relied on the continued resonance of wartime ideology, which allowed them to frame moderation as treason or right-wing infiltration, but also on contextual factors. However, as evidenced by the defeat of revolutionary-socialist leader Schafik Handal in the 2004 presidential election, the FMLN's perceived lack of moderation also hindered further electoral progress (Azpuru 2010: 129).

### THE FMLN IN GOVERNMENT

Paradoxically, the fact that the revolutionary-socialists successfully consolidated control over the party also allowed them the confidence and leverage to negotiate the candidacy for the 2009 presidential ballot with a moderate outsider (González 2011; Réserve 2009). Since a revolutionary-socialist candidate would probably be defeated, the FMLN leadership settled on Mauricio Funes, a renowned journalist, who proved to be a winning candidate.

As the party in government, the FMLN soon abandoned its previously vocal opposition to the country's dollarization and participation in the free trade agreement with the US. Instead, economic cooperation with the US was intensified (Young 2015). Practically speaking, the FMLN leadership's main concern was attaining effective control of the state bureaucracy, which they perceived as still being 'infiltrated' by the enemy. They also aimed to use access to the state to strengthen the party apparatus, for example by procuring employment for party militants (Montoya 2015, 2018). On the other hand, the FMLN's historical constituency, those who had fought the war, laid new claims on the FMLN to grant them access to state benefits. For those who had dedicated their lives to the revolution, it was only fair and logical that their efforts should be rewarded now that the FMLN was in power (Sprenkels 2018a). Previously the ARENA government had been able to benefit its supporters; now it was the turn of the FMLN supporters (Montoya 2015).

The alliance between Funes, and his supporters, and the FMLN proved cumbersome. In practice, the FMLN leadership and Funes often seemed to compete for influence (Sprenkels 2018a). Funes obtained favourable presidential approval ratings, while the FMLN's

popularity did not increase. Towards the end of his term, Funes attempted to set up his own political movement in a covert alliance with a former ARENA president who had fallen out with his party. However, when this project failed, Funes became the star campaigner for the FMLN's 2014 presidential ballot, headed by revolutionary-socialist Sánchez Cerén (Monche 2014). The FMLN again beat ARENA, but with such a minimal difference (0.2 per cent) that Sánchez Cerén obtained a feeble mandate and ARENA supporters vehemently contested the results and protested in the streets for days.

Policy-wise, the Sánchez Cerén administration largely continued on the path initiated by the previous administration. In 2015, Funes faced corruption charges and fled to exile in Nicaragua (Caravantes 2016). Sánchez Cerén's administration continued to antagonize ARENA strongly, launching accusations of infiltration, sabotage and even of preparing a coup (Co Latino 2015). While previously the FMLN had focused primarily on the enemies within the party, it now moved to dealing also with enemies partially inserted in the state.

Scholarly assessments of the FMLN's ideological accommodation as a government party have differed substantially. Sánchez Cerén, building on earlier ARENA policy, opted for a tough profile in public security, generating critique from human rights observers (Martínez 2017; Wolf 2017). Others signal FMLN conservatism around issues like abortion (Viterna 2012). Overall, observers find FMLN policies to qualify as moderate, though disagreements exist on the effectiveness of reform and public investments.<sup>4</sup> Sánchez Cerén's approval ratings quickly dropped, showing 'disenchantment' among voters (IUDOP 2016: 6). Sánchez Cerén's lack of popularity among the electorate and the Venezuelan crisis have also started to weaken revolutionary-socialist dominance within the FMLN.

#### MODERATION, GOVERNANCE AND THE LEGACIES OF WAR

While the FMLN addressed intra-movement ideological tensions by re-establishing factionalized hierarchical control, drawing on (the anti-democratic notion of) democratic centralism, it garnered electoral progress by a combination of moderate appeal, increased political financing and the large-scale electoral mobilization of its supporters. For a large part of the FMLN activists, more radical ideological rhetoric reminiscent of the war remained relevant to

some degree, while at the same time the activists' interactions with the party became increasingly impregnated by clientelism. The combination allowed the FMLN consistently to field a large force for electoral campaigning and to defend the vote on election day (Almeida 2010a: 320).

Since 2001, purges of reformist or 'disloyal' elements within the FMLN have occurred repeatedly, recently in the case of FMLN mayor of San Salvador, Nayib Bukele, in 2017.<sup>5</sup> Self-proclaimed 'true' revolutionaries drew on radical ideological doctrines to label reformist opponents as sell-outs. Democratic centralism provided an ideological justification to approach democratic innovators with distrust and to either keep in check or purge emerging challengers to the party's historical leadership. Post-war electoral experiences, like those of the PD and other reformists, furthermore highlighted that dissidents faced difficulties in establishing an electorally appealing party outside of the FMLN.

After taking over the government in 2009, the FMLN's revolutionary-socialists remained wary of democratization. In government, the FMLN has done little to enhance institutional checks and balances. It has even partially undermined Supreme Court's independence (Réserve 2016: 192). The previous notion of the existence of an enemy within the party that needed to be kept under control became complemented by the idea of the state as infiltrated by untrustworthy elements, most clearly evidenced with the FMLN campaign against the alleged right-wing coup plans in 2015 mentioned earlier.

Two additional developments further limited the FMLN's internal democratization. First, as elsewhere in Latin America, the increased commercialization of political campaigning required Salvadoran parties to access substantial financial resources for campaigning by developing a viable business model able to reimburse investments (Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015). A second, related, development was the revitalization of patrimonialist politics. A key advantage of the party in power was that it could draw on state resources to enhance clientelist arrangements and strengthen campaigning. Clientelism made it easier for the leadership to keep followers in check, although FMLN supporters also frequently demanded more benefits in return for loyalty (Sprenkels 2018a: 307–10; also Montoya 2015, 2018).

The FMLN's strained relationship with democratic governance ties in with its ideological heritage. Though in the post-war period the

FMLN acquired a more moderate profile, explicit ‘pro-system’ positions within the party proved vulnerable and factions with a vanguardist and anti-pluralist ideological orientation dominated (Allison and Alvarez 2012; Puyana 2008). The saliency of the ‘enemy-within’ credendum highlights the limited adherence to democratic values among core party activists. Externally, however, the party successfully maintained a relatively moderate profile, as expressed in its electoral campaigns and, later, government policy. Though campaign speeches and publicity were often explicitly hostile towards ARENA, the campaigns’ programmatic foundations and media expressions were mostly reformist and sometimes conservative (Monche 2014).

The post-war trajectory of the FMLN demonstrates that ideological narratives are not necessarily unified or consistent and do not neatly fit a binary model of moderation–radicalization. Though the ideological manoeuvring of different FMLN leaders over time suggests that their ambivalent use of moderation was partly strategic, it would be reductionist to view ambivalent moderation only as a function of political strategizing, as convictions, loyalties, emotions and historical antagonisms all weighed in. On the inside, radical ideology dominated, while, on the outside, moderate public discourse highlighting democratic reform – and emphasizing ARENA’s faults therein – helped garner sufficient votes to win the presidency in 2009 and 2014. In the post-war period, the FMLN became an ideological composite, with notions connected to socialist revolution, liberal democratization and patrimonialism all playing important discursive roles in the functioning of the party. Revolutionary and patrimonialist repertoires were employed more frequently within the party; democratic repertoires more frequently with external audiences.

## CONCLUSION

The post-war ideological accommodation of the FMLN is best understood as ambivalent moderation. While ideological moderation provided the party with electoral rewards, revolutionary ideological continuity was most effective in settling factional disputes and solidifying leadership. This paradoxical process was accompanied by pragmatic tendencies of commercialization and clientelism, additional strains on democratic consolidation. Ambivalent moderation served the FMLN because it kept open both radical and moderate



options, while facilitating access to a broad range of ideological and political resources.

Though the FMLN's incorporation into the electoral political system clearly placed the party on a path to moderation, the movement's wartime ideology continued to resonate among a large part of its leadership and historical supporters. The degree to which the movement should moderate its ideology became the key issue of internal debate, generating tensions and split-offs which eventually culminated in more radical positions gaining the upper hand, and even reinstating Leninist democratic centralism as the party's internal governance system. Political polarization and external allies, like Chávez in Venezuela, further discouraged moderation. Simultaneously, broad electoral appeal relied on the party articulating moderate ideological positions to attract centrists voters, which stimulated the FMLN to embrace moderate policies and to establish alliances with moderate external candidates (Azpuru 2010). Once in government, and in spite of the continued anti-imperialist sentiments of many supporters, the FMLN intensified cooperation with the US to try and bolster the country's economy and safeguard the interests of the large Salvadoran diaspora in the US.

Though the phenomenon of ambivalent moderation might seem to respond in part to the political strategizing of certain leaders, it was also the result of the struggles between different subgroups in the party and between different ways of interpreting politics. It unfolded in a historically charged political context. External developments, like the positioning of political rivals, or the emergence of possible allies, also influenced moderation's appeal. The FMLN's ambivalent use of divergent ideological repertoires furthermore drew on historical precedents (such as the 'two-faced power' of the 1980s).

The experience of the FMLN echoes moderation theory in that the leadership moderated its public profile in response to electoral opportunities. This confirms that rebel-to-party moderation can indeed occur when radical action has strengthened the state challenger to such a degree that radicalization becomes an obstacle to the leadership's further ascendance. However, though moderation might produce electoral rewards, it might simultaneously become a liability in intra-party disputes or in cementing loyalty among core party activists. Moderation ambivalence helps overcome such dilemmas, though at the cost of debilitating broader contributions to democratization.

The FMLN's trajectory highlights the importance of looking at rebel-to-party ideological adaptation not just as intricate and contingent, but also as potentially bifurcated and segregated. Ambivalent moderation may occur when intra-party competition favours revolutionary continuity, or even radicalization, while electoral competition favours moderation. Ambivalent moderation ties in with factors like the movement's history, intra-party competition and the broader context of democratic transition. It resonates with growing scholarly interest in the gap between backstage and frontstage politics (Auyero 2010; Schedler and Hoffmann 2016). Rebel-to-party moderation stands to develop as a contested process in which the ambivalent use of ideology potentially enables politicians to overcome the divergent ideological orientations of voters versus core activists, as well as factional differences between activists. As scholarship is acknowledging the intricate, contingent and contested nature of rebel-to-party transformations, it is fruitful to examine further how ideological accommodation interacts with intra-party and extra-party dynamics.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The author lived in El Salvador from 1992 until 2002 and from 2007 until 2010. In 2009–10, he performed over 12 months of full-time fieldwork among FMLN activists, followed by shorter research trips.
- <sup>2</sup> In particular, the 16 November assassination of six prominent Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter by the Salvadoran army caused international outrage (Whitfield 1995).
- <sup>3</sup> On Venezuela's contribution to the FMLN, see Lemus (2014, 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> Positive assessments of the FMLN in government include Cannon and Hume (2012), Clark (2015) and Perla and Cruz-Feliciano (2013). Less positive assessments include Colburn and Cruz (2014), Réserve (2012, 2016) and van der Borgh and Savenije (2015).
- <sup>5</sup> See Arauz (2017). Previous examples include Facundo Guardado in 2001, Ileana Rogel, René Canjura, and Julio Martínez in 2005, and Wilber Serrano in 2007 (see Allison and Alvarez 2012; Yañez 2014).

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