

Report to USAID on the Preliminary Orientation Seminar for the Newly Elected Legislative Assembly in El Salvador from the Consortium for Legislative Development

After consultation with the leadership of each major political party, discussions with Ambassador Walker and USAID/El Salvador, the Consortium for Legislative Development organized a preliminary orientation seminar for El Salvador's newly elected Legislative Assembly. The seminar took place June 20 - 22, 1991.

Background

The March 1991 elections in El Salvador significantly changed the face of the Legislative Assembly. The elections were marked by ARENA's failure to win an absolute majority in the Assembly and the election of a large number of new members with little previous legislative experience. At the same time, this election and the status of the peace negotiations placed the Legislative Assembly in a position to play an unprecedented role in shaping the future of El Salvador. The Assembly will be faced with crucial decisions in the implementation of any negotiated settlement. These factors made it clear that the newly elected Assembly would greatly benefit from a preliminary orientation seminar held shortly after the members took office. The need identified was for a program designed to address fundamental constitutional, procedural, and organizational questions facing the Assembly.

Goals and Objectives

The goals of the preliminary orientation seminar were to provide El Salvador's newly elected legislators with training in fundamental legislative processes, to provide an opportunity to discuss the role of the Assembly in the El Salvadoran system, and to acquaint the members with the legislative development efforts of USAID/El Salvador. The seminar accomplished these goals by focusing on the following objectives: 1) providing the members a thorough overview of the Legislative Assembly's structure, organization, and functions; 2) providing information regarding the organization, staffing, and resources necessary for legislative operations; 3) providing a non-partisan setting for a dialogue regarding the role and function of the legislature and legislators in a democratic society.

Program Description

USAID/El Salvador, representatives of all the parties, and the Junta Directiva were consulted in the planning of the program in order to insure an appropriate level of sophistication. The organizers met several times with the Junta and consulted widely with party leaders to obtain suggestions as to program

content and to identify presenters. The Official Mayor of the Assembly was consulted closely on all logistic and protocol matters and provided invaluable assistance in these areas. Where at all possible, the seminar employed Salvadoran, Central American, and other Latin American presenters. All presenters spoke Spanish. All of the presentations were made in a context that was relevant to the attendees and by individuals who were seen as professionals and peers. The presenters included the President of the Guatemalan Congress, the Majority Leader of the Costa Rican legislature, and a Florida State Senator, among others. The panel format was employed to offer different points of view and to encourage audience participation.

Day one consisted solely of late afternoon registration and a reception/dinner designed to draw attendees to the seminar for the full day following. This and all meals occurred without formal speeches at the suggestion of the Assembly leadership in order to permit the deputies time to talk among themselves.

Day two began with an overview of the roles of a national legislature and the Legislative Assembly specifically in the areas of policy making, budget formation, and oversight. The second panel focused on the role of a national legislature in representing a broad political spectrum and in developing a democratic consensus. This was followed by a presentation covering legislative procedure under the Assembly's current rules and a comparative view of rules from other systems. A final panel on day two covered the mechanics of the legislative process: bill drafting, introduction and passage; the role and function of committees; opportunities for development of staff and other resources.

Day three commenced after an informal breakfast with a discussion of the national budgetary process and its function in the setting of national priorities, again with both a Salvadoran and a comparative perspective. A final panel focused on the role of the individual legislator in such areas as constituent services and relations with local government.

A press release was distributed by the Legislative Assembly and The Center for Democracy immediately prior to the event. Press coverage was permitted of the opening and closing sessions and TV cameras were allowed to pan the room without recording the discussions. The panel discussions themselves were closed to the press. At the conclusion of the program, all deputies and panelists in attendance received certificates in recognition of their participation. Panelists' food, lodging, transportation, and other expenses related to attendance were covered, but they received no stipend or other payment.

Debriefings with the President of the Assembly, members of the Junta Directiva, party leaders, and rank and file members among the 133 deputies and alternates in attendance produced extremely favorable reviews of the Seminar.

Problems Encountered

The most potentially troubling problem surfaced six days before the seminar when a representative of the Christian Democrat Party faxed a memorandum to The Center for Democracy stating the intention of its deputies to boycott the seminar if Adolfo Rey Prendes was not removed as a panelist. This placed the Center in the difficult position of allowing one party to veto a speaker or having a potentially serious disruption of the seminar with the possibility of bad publicity. The Center used its contacts with the U.S. Embassy and its relationships within the PDC to avert a disruptive public boycott. A group of PDC deputies did not attend that part of the panel when Rey Prendes spoke but returned for the rest of the presentations all without any disruption. The Center was later informed by a source within the PDC that the pressure for a highly publicized boycott came from those who believed the Assembly was not a democratic institution under the present rules and organization. They advocated a boycott to deliver this message to U.S. policy makers.

Another problem surfaced in the planning of the seminar. On the final planning trip a meeting took place with the technical committee which had been designated by the President of the Assembly to deal with the AID assistance program. However, in a subsequent meeting with the President and the Junta Directiva, they made it clear that the seminar planning should remain under direct control of the Junta and that the technical committee had not communicated with them about the seminar. Therefore, the President and the Junta found it necessary to review and make changes in a program already approved by the committee. These suggested changes were made and the program finalized in a subsequent meeting.

These incidents illustrate the political sensitivity of large seminars involving the entire legislative body of a sovereign state. Each step along the way, the leadership had to be consulted and made a partner. Opposition not reflected in the leadership had to be dealt with in order to insure full participation. Constant communication with the Assembly regarding the program was essential to the ultimate success of the program. A high degree of political credibility cultivated during the Center's election observation mission and relationships formed with El Salvador's political leadership by Center President Allen Weinstein made it possible to overcome these problems.

Location

Party representatives suggested holding the seminar at a location outside of San Salvador in order to provide a sense of separation from day to day activities and distractions. The Tesoro Beach Hotel, convenient to the airport and San Salvador, was selected as the only hotel outside of the city with adequate facilities. The site was an important factor in the highly successful social interchange among deputies from different parties at the conclusion of each day. This would have been much less likely at a site in the city where some deputies would have spent evenings at home.

Organization

The seminar was organized and carried out by the Center for Democracy on behalf of the Consortium for Legislative Development. The Center assumed primary responsibility for the substantive organization of the seminar and worked closely with the leadership of the Legislative Assembly and USAID/El Salvador in all phases of the program. The Center made extensive use of its network of contacts and relationships with policy makers in the region to enlist respected panelists. Funds were provided by USAID/El Salvador and the Consortium for Legislative Development in equal parts.

List of Attachments to Report

1. Agenda
2. Detailed Budgets (2)
3. Press Releases (2)
4. Official notice of invitation
5. Letters from party leaders in support of the seminar (4)
6. List of attendees
7. Certificate of attendance