

El Salvador

Pre 20th Century History

The Olmec Boulder, a stone sculpture of a giant head found near Chalchuapa in western El Salvador, is evidence of Olmec presence in the region from at least 2000 BC. The step-pyramid ruins at Tazumal and San Andrés show that the Maya also lived in western El Salvador for over 1000 years. Groups that inhabited the eastern part of the country included the Chorti, Lenca and Pokomam.

When the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, the country was dominated by the Pipil, descendants of Nahuatl-speaking Toltecs and Aztecs, both Mexican tribes. The Pipil probably came to central El Salvador in the 11th century, just after the Maya dynasty collapsed. Their culture was similar to that of the Aztecs, with heavy Maya influences and a maize-based agricultural economy that supported several cities and a complex culture including hieroglyphic writing, astronomy and mathematics.

Spain's claim was staked by the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado, who arrived in the area in 1525. The Spanish developed plantations of cotton, balsam and indigo. Throughout the 1700s agriculture boomed, but a group of 14 elite European families maintained control of most of the land, which was farmed by enslaved indigenous people or slaves imported from Africa.

Father José Matías Delgado organized a revolt against Spain in 1811, but it was quickly suppressed. Napoleon's invasion of Spain the following year increased the impetus for reform, and El Salvador eventually gained independence in 1821. This did not alter the dynamics of land ownership, an issue at the core of an unsuccessful rebellion by indigenous peoples in 1833, led by Anastasio Aquino. In 1841, following the dissolution of the Central American Federation (formed between El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua), El Salvador became a sovereign independent nation.

Modern History

In the second half of the 19th century, synthetic dyes undermined the indigo market, and coffee took main stage in the economy. By the 20th century, 95% of El Salvador's income came from coffee exports, but only 2% of the population controlled that wealth. Intermittent efforts by the poor majority to redress El Salvador's social and economic injustices were met with severe repression. The first popular movement for change followed the stock-market crash of 1929 and the subsequent plummet in coffee prices. In January 1932, the military responded to an uprising by peasants and indigenous peoples by systematically killing anyone who looked Indian or who supported the uprising. In all, 30,000 people were killed. The leader, Martí, was arrested and executed; his name is preserved in the FMLN (Frente Martí Liberación Nacional).

By the 1960s El Salvador's failing economy and severe overpopulation drove hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans to cross illegally into Honduras seeking work. In 1969, allegations of Honduran

mistreatment of Salvadoran immigrants were raised just as a World Cup soccer match between the two countries was being played. National rivalries and passions escalated to a ridiculous level that resulted in El Salvador invading Honduran territory and bombing its airports. The conflict, known as *de Fútbol* (the Soccer War) lasted less than 100 hours, but relations between the two neighbours were hostile for over a decade.

During the 1970s the population suffered from increased landlessness, poverty, unemployment and overpopulation. Politics became polarised and was conducted by way of coups and electoral fraud. In 1972, the military arrested and exiled the elected president and installed their own candidate in power. Guerrilla activity increased, and in response 'death squads' formed, murdering, torturing or kidnapping thousands of Salvadorans.

In 1979, a junta of military and civilians overthrew the president and promised reforms that were never met. Opposition parties banded together under the party name *Federación Democrática Revolucionario*. The successful 1979 revolution in Nicaragua encouraged some Salvadorans to take up armed struggle. The 1980 assassination of a popular archbishop, Oscar A Romero, sparked an armed insurrection.

FMLN guerrillas gained control of areas in the north and east of El Salvador. The Reagan Administration, unnerved by the success of Nicaragua's socialist revolution, donated huge amounts of money to the Salvadoran government, and the military retaliated by decimating villages, causing 300,000 citizens to flee the country (official estimates are one third of this figure). In 1982, the extreme right ARENA party took power and death squads began targeting trade unionists and agrarian reformers.

In April 1990, United Nations-mediated negotiations began between the government and the FMLN, and finally, on January 16, 1992, a compromise was signed and a ceasefire took effect. The FMLN became an opposition party, and the government agreed to various reforms, including dismantling the death squads and replacing them with a national civil police force. Land was to be distributed to citizens and human rights violations to be investigated. During the course of the 12-year war, an estimated 75,000 people were killed, and the US government donated a staggering 6000000000.00 billion to the Salvadoran government's war effort, despite knowledge of atrocities carried out by the military. In March 1994, Calderón Sol was voted president, amid allegations of electoral fraud.

While some of the reforms outlined in the peace accords were implemented (most notably the land-transfer program), many Salvadorans consider the current situation to be no better now than it was before the civil war. Unemployment, poverty, disgruntled ex-combatants and a proliferation of guns in the country has led to high homicide rates - just one of the reasons why approximately 20% of Salvadorans now live abroad.

Recent History

In March 1997, the FMLN gained a greater percentage of the population than its direct opponent, although since then politics has been dominated more by the parties of the right, especially Arena. The presidency is held by Francisco Guillermo Flores Pérez since June 1, 1999.

Flores' first test came on January 13, 2001, when a major earthquake touched off a mudslide that buried the middle-class neighbourhood of Las Colinas, a suburb of San Salvador. Surrounding impoverished shantytowns were also devastated. Flores had ignored environmentalists trying to block development of Las Colinas' sandy, unstable hillsides; his decision may have left 1200 dead and 250,000 homeless. The rebuilding cost the equivalent of more than half of the country's yearly budget. Elections in March 2004 were won by Flores' successor, former broadcaster Tony Saca, also of the conservative ARENA party, which has been linked to right-wing death squads during the civil war.
