

# A peace built on forgetting demobilised combatants in post-war El Salvador

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“During those days the atmosphere in the barracks was heavy. Despite the talks in which our chiefs explained to us the impact of peace and presented different options for our future, I knew that my life was about to change, as if all of a sudden I was to become an orphan: the army had been my father and the Acahuapa battalion my mother. I couldn't imagine being turned into a jobless civilian overnight.” (Castellanos Moya 2001, p. 12)

The peace agreements signed on 16 January 1992 put an end to the internal armed conflict that had been ravaging El Salvador since 1980. The confrontation between the government, supported politically and militarily by the USA and the revolutionary guerrillas of the Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN) resulted in 80,000 deaths, of which two-thirds were civilian, and a million displaced persons in a country with an area of 20,000 km<sup>2</sup> and 5.5 million inhabitants. The agreements made plans for the end of armed hostilities, a calendar for the demobilisation of the two sides, and political and institutional reforms, as well as measures for transitional justice. Generally speaking, the agreements attempted to provide a political solution to the conflict, since they enabled the guerrilla group that had become a political party to participate in the elections. Furthermore, they did not modify in any way the economic regime or the distribution of wealth or property – they only outlined individual measures for the redistribution of land to former combatants on both sides, as well as to certain civilian populations in conflict zones (Arnson 1999; Karl 1992; Wood 2000).

The agreements also constitute a text on national reconciliation that, through mechanisms of investigation and recognition, attempted to shed light on the most serious human rights violations committed during the conflict. Yet the logic underlying the peace negotiations needs to be compared with the rationale for violence during the civil war. Focusing the terms of the agreements on the future evolution of the fighting forces restricts memories of the conflict to former combatants from whatever side, as opposed to the victims who were equally involved. Nonetheless, this focus does not necessarily signify that peace in the post-conflict society is built upon the memory of the heroes who once fought each other and who have today become reconciled. In the second phase the memorialising the former combatants has in turn been subsumed by the continuity of the political confrontation that was at the heart of the conflict in the first place, but that is now expressed at the ballot box. For this reason the success of the negotiated resolution of the civil war is to a very large extent built upon acts of omission, on forgetting both the victims and the combatants, and upon the impossibility of mobilising this identity in post-war El Salvador, which is still plagued by extremely high levels of violence in spite of the effective end of armed confrontations.

The strange success of the Salvadoran peace process

After the civil war, instead of addressing the rationale for violence, it was concealed by the necessities of reconciliation. Whether in terms of the percentage of combatants compared to the total population, or the number of deaths, the civil war in El Salvador was the deadliest contemporary internal armed conflict in Latin America, along with that in Nicaragua that took place during the same period of time. It was indeed comparable to American Civil War. As demonstrated by all the studies on violence during the Salvadoran civil war, the vast majority of losses were due to the actions of the army or death squads in the regions where the guerrillas were active (Comisión de la Verdad 1993; Seligson and McElhinny 1996; Wood 2002). The forms of violence linked to the civil war appeared to be aimed at repressing opponents, especially those in the cities, through arbitrary detentions and executions and including massacres of entire villages by the army. Subsequently the violence spread to target the entire population in rural zones where the conflict centred, in particular by using scorched earth policies and forced displacement to make people flee to refugee camps in Honduras. In certain cases the guerrilla forces responded by organising and mobilising this same populace, and sometimes by forcing it return to certain combat regions (McElhinny 2004). Finally, in the last years of the conflict, when negotiations had begun, the confrontations were extended geographically and reached the capital and its outskirts through different offensives by the guerrilla forces. Whereas the impact of these actions particularly in reports in the media and the army's response (by massacring Jesuit priests at the Central American University and bombing working class suburbs and shanty towns in the capital) weighed heavily on these negotiations, they did not substantially modify the nature of the violence, or that of its targets.

For this reason, the studies mentioned indicate the extent to which the victims of this violence were principally the inhabitants of the rural regions where the conflict was centred.(1) There was no distinction among the victims in terms of gender, religion or ethnic origin(2) but the agricultural professions, very poor individuals (such as day labourers), very rich individuals (landowners), and the youngest age groups were over-represented. In fact, the greatest discriminating element, in particular with respect to Nicaragua, appears to be the victims' political party sympathies or ideological positioning; and most of them were from the extreme left.

#### The terms of the peace agreements

Yet in spite of a strong desire for reconciliation by all Salvadorans, the main provisions of the peace agreements signed in January 1992 concerned the future of the two armed parties, the army and the guerrilla forces. The agreements of January 1992 between the government and the FMLN, which were the result of a negotiation process started nearly two years before, integrated all the previous partial agreements that addressed political reforms, human rights, and the role of the UN in the negotiations. The 1992 agreements primarily dealt with the demobilisation and demilitarisation of the two belligerents. This was largely because of political and military power relations at the close of the conflict, both between the guerrilla forces and the government and, within the latter, between civilians and the army. The government had to cut the number of soldiers in the army by half, disband the anti-insurreccional battalions and the different bodies of military police, and place the intelligence services under civilian authority.

The guerrilla forces had to hand over their weapons and demobilise according to a precise calendar. At the end of this process they could become a political party in order to participate in the elections. The creation and constitution of a new civilian national police force symbolised the new state of peace: no longer part of the army, it was placed under the

command of the Minister of the Interior and assigned specific tasks of maintaining order. It also included former soldiers and guerrillas, but they were in a minority compared to new recruits who were not taken on if they had participated in the civil war.

Even though the initial calendar has not been respected and the process has been punctuated by unforeseen incidents demobilisation is going well, and includes, on the one hand, more than 15,000 members of the FMLN, including 8,500 combatants and nearly 2,500 wounded and disabled ex-servicemen, and on the other hand, more than 30,000 soldiers, including all the members of the anti-insurreccional battalions and military police units.

This demobilisation has been accompanied by a reintegration programme, which foresees either the possibility of a scholarship and training to create a company or a loan or finally, participating in the land transfer programme, which, on a case by case basis, makes small estates available for purchase under favourable conditions for the purpose of farming. The latter programme has a particularly strong symbolic dimension. It aims at responding, albeit partially, to one of the historical demands of the guerrilla forces: land redistribution in a country marked by a very high concentration of agrarian property in the hands of a socio-economic elite (Cardenal 2002; Wood 2000). Its beneficiaries are not limited to former combatants but also include civilians, the *tenedores* (literally "those who hold [the land]"). In reality, these are farmers with no land who had occupied the land with no title deeds and farmed it in the conflict zones. They constituted the essential social foundations of the FMLN. Their inclusion in this programme was a central demand of the guerrilla forces during the negotiations. For this reason, the former guerrilla forces consider it indispensable, seeing in it both the achievement of some of their demands and a form of material reward for their combatants and social bases. It would transform those who supported the revolution into free farmers and landowners who would no longer be subjected to a latifundium regime nor be compelled to migrate temporarily to other regions in the country, as was the case before the war.

In the end, this was nearly the only concrete measure of redistribution, or even of social and economic reform, contained in the 1992 agreements. Its symbolic importance has turned it into a central element in the process of building a collective identity for former guerrillas, achieved thanks to the negotiated outcome of the conflict and projected onto the peace arrangements. However, implementing the programme has been hampered by many delays and difficulties, all of which in different ways call this new identity into question. In practice the programme is thus based not on distribution, but on the acquisition, at a preferential interest rate, of land voluntarily put on the market by its owners.<sup>(3)</sup> The farming models are conceived in terms of individual farms, with no incentive to groups to set up cooperatives or agrarian unions. More broadly speaking, it has been designed so that former combatants (re)turn to farming – but because of the time they spent in the war, or because they are young, few of them have really been farmers in the past. Finally, while farming was one of the foundations of the Salvadoran economy, the destruction of the infrastructure during the war modified this situation. The general context in which former combatants have to produce and sell is also extremely unfavourable to them.

Because of the exemplary success of the peace process from the institutional and partisan points of view, the main actors in the peace process to some extent lost sight of the difficulties involved in this land reform programme, and therefore, the reconstructions of identities that may be linked to it. The agreements were conceived as a demilitarisation process that would

enable the effective democratisation of the political regime, for which the best proof would be the FMLN's participation in the elections as a transformed political party.

The first elections after the signing of the peace agreements (March 1994), augured well for the success of the transformation of an armed confrontation into political partisan rivalries: the FMLN became the main opposition to the party that had been in power since 1989 (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* – ARENA). This state of affairs was to be confirmed regularly in all subsequent elections. In the legislative elections the FMLN gained ground and stabilised at around 35 per cent of the votes, equal to ARENA and marginalising the other political groups. In the presidential elections ARENA won by a large margin. In the municipal elections the FMLN won over and retained the main cities in the country, including the capital.

El Salvador thus appears to be one of the cases in which there has been a negotiated resolution to an internal armed conflict in which the central rift of the armed confrontation has been transformed into an intense polarisation around the ARENA/FMLN opposition, but in a stable party political system, with no return to armed confrontation and no danger of calling civilian institutions into question (Garibay 2005; Martí and Figueroa 2006). However, because of this institutional success, we have lost sight of the limited power of the agreements of 1992 and of the inadequate implementation of their provisions in favour of former combatants. This success has also rendered inaudible the protests made by the former combatants in the post-war period. For these reasons, post-conflict Salvadoran society is in a paradoxical situation: party politics is still sustained by the context of the civil war, with frequent recourse to a rhetoric of war and violence, but from which the figure of the former combatant is excluded. It seems that the memory of the civil war, which is maintained by political parties, is disconnected from the individual trajectories of those that participated in it. Maintaining the memory of confrontation to keep the spectre of war at a distance: the paradoxical construction of partisan politics

The two parties that dominate the Salvadoran political scene today were born in the civil war: one as a guerrilla force (FMLN); the other as a counter-revolutionary political project conceived by the economic elite (ARENA).<sup>(4)</sup> Both proclaim their continuity with the war and mobilise these original references or symbols. Despite internal developments and generational changes, the initial matrix is employed during electoral campaigns and at party conventions.

In the side by side formulation of their identity markers, the two parties go about reconstructing histories that are centred on their founding points of reference.<sup>(5)</sup> ARENA continues to employ its initial ideological cement of nationalistic and very anti-communist rhetoric. The party asserts that it is "the result of the great struggle of the Salvadoran people against Marxist-Leninist aggression"; it constructs its political vision in its "ideology of freedom, in the will of the Salvadoran people, and unites in defence of its objectives, which are subjected to disinformation and attacks by the Communists, Socialists, Christian Democrats, and other useless idiots"; it "recognises the Salvadoran armed forces as the only armed force of the people" and, in its principles, it "is opposed to all doctrines that defend class struggle and it defends the democratic, republican, representative system, in opposition to the ideological penetration and permanent aggression of international Communism". In this presentation, the end of the armed conflict is only alluded to briefly, although ARENA leaders fully participated in it. The continuity between the initial project of creating the party and the current situation, and thus the permanent nature of its ideological foundations, is continually

highlighted, whereas the political situation in the country has changed radically over the years.

Meanwhile, the FMLN presents itself as the result of a progressive process of unification of the different revolutionary organisations that started with the offensive of January 1981, the true beginning of the civil war, and has continued until today. The continuity between the armed organisation and the party is strongly asserted. But the idea of striving for united action is promoted more strongly than the ideological context of the party's creation. Although the FMLN was a guerrilla force in the 1980s "The intensification of the war, the increasing intervention of the government of the United States in the war, and the new emergence of the social struggle were objective factors that accelerated the unification process". When the FMLN had become a party in the 1990s, it is described as follows:

The strength of the FMLN lies in its unity and intensification as well as in the conviction of those who, from inside and outside the country, continue to view the party as the longings and hopes of the people and as the main factor of the democratic and revolutionary changes that our country needs.

Finally, this presentation is concluded with the invocation to "unite even further in the struggle for power".

Recourse to this rhetoric has not subsided since the signing of the agreements. During the 2004 presidential election campaign, violently anti-Communist speeches from the 1980s by Roberto D'Aubuisson were broadcast during the final meeting of the ARENA candidate and the activists present repeated the party hymn several times, which concludes "Motherland, yes, Communism, no, El Salvador is the grave in which the Commies will be buried". In response, the leaders of the former guerrilla forces recalled the connections between the founder of the ARENA party and the death squads. They regularly celebrate the central role of the war years in their militant trajectory. Likewise, during the funeral of Shafick Handal, who died in January 2006, he was recalled much more as the historical communist activist, or guerrilla commander than as the negotiator and party leader who was elected to the legislative assembly several times and stood as a candidate in the 2004 presidential election.

The two parties refer to the partisan and activist identity of the years of armed confrontation.<sup>6</sup> During the electoral campaigns the discourse on mobilisation makes reference to the war, the offensive, the victory, and the open confrontation. But the use of this rhetoric by the leaders of the two parties is adapted to a situation of peace: indeed, while the leaders make use of it to galvanise their own activists, they criticise their adversaries' use of it in their attempts to delegitimise them, in the name of peace. The municipal elections in the capital in March 2006 stirred up a great deal of tension because the FMLN won a narrow victory over its adversary by only 44 votes. During the 10 or so days between the vote and the definitive announcement of the results, the two parties organised demonstrations and resorted to mutual accusations for the purpose of intimidation. Once the official announcement was made the ARENA candidate finally recognised his defeat, while at the same time denouncing the practices of the FMLN, which he accused of attempting to influence the counting process through violent, armed demonstrations.

Demobilised combatants, discontented rehabilitated soldiers, and forgotten disabled ex-fighters: the impossibility of constructing a collective identity of former soldiers and guerrillas

The rhetoric of violence from the civil war period by both main political parties is constructed upon an abstract vision of violence that is reduced to the confrontation between the two factions and leads to the negation those who actually fought during the war: the former soldiers and guerrillas. As already mentioned, the 1992 agreements included plans for setting up reintegration programmes that stake out a specific place for the former combatants in post-war society. However, the programmes have been slow to take off and functioned poorly at the start. This has led to intermittent protests by former combatants. But this reconstruction of their identity is much less founded upon the figure of the former heroic combatant than upon that of the reintegrated individual who cannot in fact find a place in the new post-conflict society. In a certain way, the parties contribute to breaking up these mobilisations, either by delegitimising them or by co-opting the protestors. And unlike what happened in Nicaragua or in other post-conflict situations, there were no intermittent armed remobilisations of demobilised former combatants.

Former soldiers eliminated from the ranks of the army and erased from the country's memory

As is common in demobilisation processes, the army incorporated a great number of new recruits in the final months of the conflict, in order to prepare for possible demobilisation.<sup>(7)</sup> The number enlisted in the army increased by 10 per cent per year during the final years of the conflict (according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook, 1990, 1991 and 1992), there were nearly 40,000 soldiers in the Salvadoran army in 1989, 55,000 in 1991, and 60,000 in 1992). The dissolution of the military police units *Policia de Hacienda*, *Policia Nacional* and *Guardia Nacional* and anti-insurreccional battalions taught and trained by US military aid programmes, and the demobilisation of their troops appear to be the most visible and symbolic moments in this process, because these different units have been either the main forces responsible for the repression, or were directly engaged in the fight against the guerrilla forces. This process was concluded by the dissolution of the anti-insurreccional battalions in February 1993, earlier than planned in the initial calendar. Half of those enlisted in the army had been demobilised one month later.

Nonetheless, the relatively rapid demobilisation of the soldiers does not prove that the process was successful. Part of the forces in the military police units and anti-insurreccional battalions, in particular the best trained soldiers, were integrated into the army or the new civilian police force.<sup>8</sup> Most of the soldiers who were demobilised were the most recent recruits; those who were the least well integrated into the military institution. These individuals benefited from reintegration programmes, but under training and assistance conditions that were much more precarious than those for the former guerrillas. Aside from a few specific actions, neither the army, nor the government, nor ARENA as a political party really mobilised to help with the reintegration of demobilised former soldiers.

This relative lack of interest can also be explained by the fact that for ARENA and for the army, the true heroes of the war are the ranking officers who had been at the head of fighting units. However, the demobilisation process does not directly affect the officers because the agreements do not specify what would be done about them apart from stipulating that two commissions were to be set up. The ad hoc commission, made up of three independent civilian experts, was supposed to check on the officers' human rights record during the war. The report submitted to the government in September 1992 listed roughly one hundred high ranking officers and requested they be discharged from the army.

The *Comisión de la Verdad* was mandated to investigate the most serious crimes committed during the war. Its report, which was made public in March 1993, established that the army had committed 80 per cent of the crimes it investigated. Going beyond its initial mission, the *Comisión de la Verdad* published the list of people it found to be responsible and recommended discharging them from the army, in the case of military personnel, or banning them from running for office, in the case of civilians (Comisión de la Verdad 1993). Faced with this situation, the ARENA party and the government defended these officers, whom they presented as the victims of the peace process. Since this outcome was not foreseen by the peace agreements, they perceived their possible punishment to be all the more unfair, because it would not affect the leaders of the FMLN.

Once these commissions had completed their work, the government and the party in power passed an amnesty law in the name of national reconciliation that was explicitly aimed at avoiding any legal proceedings against the high command of the army. In spite of countless protests, in particular by the UN observer mission, and also the US government, the Salvadoran government did not modify its line of action, but ultimately agreed at the end of December 1993 that the officers incriminated be granted early retirement from the army.

Far away from these power struggles, some demobilised former soldiers organised demonstrations on several occasions in 1994 and 1995, occupying public buildings to demand that the reintegration programmes function better. These demonstrations, organised by the *Asociación de Desmovilizados de las Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador* (Association of Demobilised Armed Forces Members – ADEFAES), were severely repressed by the government. The former soldiers who participated in these demonstrations were accused by the government or the ARENA party of positioning themselves outside the institutions, of creating disorder, and of resorting to violence, thus employing a rhetoric close to the one that had been used during the war against the guerrilla forces. Several of their leaders were prosecuted and the association did not survive for very long.

These former soldiers' will to adopt a collective post-war approach to revamp their image in post-war El Salvador based on their experiences as demobilised soldiers was thus very rapidly delegitimised by the very leaders for whom they had fought, which very quickly deprived them of political leverage, but also of any legal and material resources for their actions. This was a very strong warning signal for other associations of demobilised armed forces. One can add to this situation the fate of the former paramilitary organisations, in particular the civil defence patrols, which were not recognised in the peace agreements and whose members were not eligible for reintegration programmes.

In addition to the delegitimation of former soldiers who mobilised to obtain their rights under the peace agreements, there was a gradual reduction in policies directed at former combatants. The mission of the Secretary for National Reconstruction (Secretaría para la Reconstrucción nacional), which was set up when the peace agreements were signed with the aim of coordinating and centralising government action in the reconstruction of the country, was totally reoriented after the devastating passage of hurricane Mitch in October 1999, followed by the earthquakes in 2001. The entire institutional plan of action was no longer envisaged as one dealing with the structural necessities of a post-conflict situation, but as one attending to the immediate needs following a natural catastrophe, in which former combatants obviously no longer had a place.



International pressure was required to put the question of former combatants back on the agenda through the very specific situation of the wounded or disabled ex-combatants. In 2002 on the 10th anniversary of the signing of the peace agreements the UN recalled that the only point not resolved in the agreements was precisely the situation of such persons. Despite some reluctance, in particular by the leaders of ARENA, the government has negotiated with associations of disabled veterans to reform the law concerning a disability compensation fund provided for in the agreements, but hitherto implemented to only a very limited extent. In order to highlight its importance, this consultation was organised by two of the negotiators of the peace agreements.

The attention given to this question demonstrates that today, among the former combatants, only the disabled are helped by a specific programme. In addition, these negotiations are carried out directly with disabled veterans' associations, explicitly to avoid both what the government understands as a politicisation of the question (that is, a dialogue with the FMLN, thereby making a connection with the civil war) and any possible signs of protest by the associations.<sup>(9)</sup>

This growing lack of interest by ARENA in the future of former soldiers is also justified by the changing social composition of the party leadership. Since the end of the 1980s, the party has been led mainly by entrepreneurs, merchants, and especially financiers, thus marginalising the landowners who were closer to the army officers. For this reason, among the teams ruling the party, but also in successive governments, soldiers or former soldiers have been progressively edged out of the central positions in which political decisions are made, and confined to the corridors of the Ministry of Defence. The rapid renewal of party heads, executives, and even some of the ARENA activists has all contributed to marginalising the direct protagonists of the war, and in particular the army. (Nonetheless, continuity was maintained with the figure of its founder, in ideological opposition to the FMLN, on the basis of what the latter represented when it was a guerrilla force.)

The fragile condition of former guerrillas

Within the FMLN a gradual eclipse of the figure of the former guerrilla is also manifested in a more subtle way. In the FMLN, unlike ARENA, the standing of former combatants, regardless of their rank, increased greatly during the initial transformation of the organisation. Those who fought were supported by activists as election candidates and party leaders at the national, regional or local level, without taking into consideration their experiences and skills. The FMLN assisted in the implementation of reintegration programmes through the creation of foundations intended to centralise and coordinate different forms of aid and to make it easier to distribute this aid to former guerrillas.

As a result of this action, former members of the FMLN have acquired – proportionally to the number of demobilised combatants – more benefits from the reintegration programmes than former soldiers, although there are fewer of them in the land transfer programme (see note 3). Moreover, the organisation was quickly to benefit from new reintegration programmes for specific categories of combatants such as officers and the wives and children of combatants. In this way, nearly all of the former FMLN combatants are eligible for some kind of reintegration programme, whereas only two-thirds of demobilised army soldiers receive such aid.

Subsequently, the FMLN has assisted in the reintegration process, in particular thanks to the action of its National Assembly members, as seen in its support of farmer groups seeking

cancellation of the debts incurred when loans were distributed within the framework of the land transfer programme (Kowalchuk 2003). Generally speaking, through its parliamentary action, the FMLN remains the political party that is the most concerned about and active on behalf of the future of former combatants.

However, as is the case for former soldiers, but less painfully, the transformation of the former guerrilla force into a beneficiary of reintegration programmes has brought about a shift in identity and, more broadly, in the collective identity of those who participated in guerrilla actions. Here again, a distinction must be made between ranking officers and ordinary combatants.

The officers of the guerrilla army, many of whom have become officers in the political party, continue to flaunt their past combat actions in internal struggles in their organisation. This allusion is always made either when unity is being celebrated, or at times of internal crisis in the party and it can be brandished from time to time against the youngest generations of leaders who did not participate in the guerrilla forces. Membership in armed organisations and military responsibilities is still put on show in candidates' manifestos or CVs during election campaigns. The fact that the highest ranking leaders in the party are the same people who had high political and military responsibilities in the guerrilla forces contributes to maintaining this point of reference. Nevertheless, due to changes in the party, other modes of internal legitimisation are progressively emerging, which are linked more to an individual's experience as a political officer in the party, or as a mayor or national representative.

As far as the rank and file are concerned there is a great deal of tension, and mobilisations outside the party are developing, especially in the former regions of conflict. For a number of former guerrillas, reintegration through the land distribution programme is proving to be extremely difficult because of difficulties linked to the reintegration programmes and the general breakdown of farming (given weak infrastructure and trade networks). However, even if the FMLN is the partisan group that has done the most for former combatants, it is also true that it considers that it must have priority in overseeing this action, in particular in the zones where it was present during the war.

Initially, the FMLN saw in this strict supervision a means of action against the government, which had centralised the reconstruction programmes. In this context the groups of former guerrillas seeking organisational autonomy to make the reintegration programmes would run better were perceived by the party as setting up a source of potential division. For this reason, relations between the FMLN and the former reintegrated guerrillas are far from cordial. In some regions, their local organisational capacity and attitudes in the party's regional offices has made it possible to commend them for their mobilisation while respecting their autonomy (Foley 1996; Silber 2004; Wood 2003). But in other regions, the tension is so intense that it leads to major rifts, which result in dissociations with the FMLN, or even a vote of rejection (Binford 1997).

Following the government example, the party has recently made a shift in how it interprets this question, a change greatly affected by a UN demand in 2002. The most recent actions and claims have been made not for former guerrillas as a group, or even for reintegrated guerrillas, but for wounded and disabled ex-fighters. For this reason, the image that is carried onwards from this period of war is one who has been a physical victim and, on behalf of whom specific actions should be taken.

The FMLN is the only party that defines an institutional place in its leadership organisation for former combatants as such. But in a group that was constituted around the idea that all its members had participated in the armed struggle, there is no particular reason to give this form of representation to the veterans. Now the image of the veteran is wholly absorbed by the particular figure of the wounded and disabled former fighter and the party's Articles of Association offer a place in its National Council for one of their representatives. And this specific focus constitutes nearly the only theme on which the party continues to work today in favour of its former combatants, albeit with the same strong impulse to oversee their actions.

Likewise, in the programme presented by the party during the 2004 presidential elections, one of the very rare evocations of the period of the armed struggle concerns the demands of disabled ex-fighters (without specifying their condition); while underlining the party's role in supporting their mobilisation, the FMLN "recognises that the peace agreements have not been completely fulfilled as far as the people wounded in the aftermath of the armed conflict are concerned, and observes that what has been obtained for them has been achieved thanks to their organised struggles, supported by the FMLN" (FMLN 2004, p. 47).

#### Political violence, social violence

Yet this paradoxical shift in the image of former combatants in post-war El Salvador, be they soldiers or guerrillas, cannot be interpreted simply with regard to the party's or government's leadership strategies, which attempt to ignore reminders that important provisions of the peace agreements are yet to be made concrete, notwithstanding the fact that these very agreements have prevented new conflict from arising and have made it possible to set up a confrontational yet pacific partisan system.

The marginalisation of former combatants must also be understood in line with changes in post-war Salvadoran society. The period of the civil war, which was marked by a high level of political violence, was also a moment in which the various actors then present had recourse to forms of violence that appeared to be justified or accepted in the name of imminent revolutionary victory for the guerrilla forces or the war against the threat of Communism to the army, whether this meant internal liquidations or purges, violence committed against women and children, or even violence aimed at individuals or families. While the army was the main perpetrator of this violence, the guerrilla forces were also involved. Meanwhile, in post-conflict society, these forms of violence are now shown for what they were (Binford 2002; Bourgois 2002a, 2002b). But it is all the more difficult to have them recognised as such and treated collectively since the peace process was constructed first of all on the marginalisation of victims, and then on that of former combatants.

In addition, the economic strategies chosen by the government of ARENA (liberalisation, an open market system, the development of the assembly industry, and dollarisation) have not enabled it to return to sustained growth, but have instead deepened existing inequalities and contributed to a massive flow of migration towards the USA. Although armed hostilities have not resumed, the country is hit by extremely high levels of violence that are linked to criminality and delinquency. Indeed, for a comparable period of time the number of homicides has been greater since the signing of the peace agreements than that during the civil war. Like its Central American neighbours, El Salvador is plagued by the presence of *maras*, extremely violent youth gangs that fight each other and live off extortion, racketeering, and assassinations (Faux 2006).

This violence is not directly linked to the armed conflict. Unlike other countries that have gone through a negotiated demobilisation processes, especially Nicaragua, this is not a case of the armed remobilisation of former combatants, or a shift toward delinquency and crime by former soldiers or guerrillas. The participation of young people in *maras* can be explained by the large-scale economic migration of Salvadorans to the USA, the participation of some of them in criminal gangs in the neighbourhoods of North American cities, and then the reproduction of these practices in their country of origin when they are deported. In most cases, the adolescents that join the *maras* did not directly live through the civil war period – it is more their parents who may have been victims of, and sometimes participants in, this war. But the development of these gangs, with a very high murder rate, contributes to maintaining a high level of violence and delinquency and therefore a very strong feeling of insecurity among the people.

In a context marked by great social violence, it is even more difficult for former combatants to construct a collective identity founded on their past experience, even if their experience is more structured by political violence. This is all the more true since the economic and social crisis has very rapidly wiped out the rare benefits linked to the reintegration programmes. For most of the reintegrated demobilised combatants, whether they are former guerrillas or soldiers, as for most of their fellow citizens, the only possibility perceived to be viable now is illegal immigration to the USA.

## Notes

(1). The survey carried out by Seligson and McElhinny (1996) consisted in asking those surveyed if people in their family had been killed during the civil war. The different factors taken into consideration correspond to the person surveyed, not to the victim, with the presupposition of a very close relationship.

(2). Unlike in neighbouring Guatemala there is no socially visible Indian population in El Salvador. Farming structures during the period when it was a Spanish colony favoured more significant racial mixing. But it was especially the explicitly anti-Indian orientation of the repression of the revolt of 1932 that led to a situation in which the Indian populations could no longer openly insist upon their origins, because this was likely to lead to repression. The guerrilla forces made no specific appeals to the Indian populations. In addition, there is a great majority of Catholics in the country. The sectors of the Catholic Church engaged in liberation theology profoundly influenced commitment to the guerrilla forces. In spite of this, however, repression was not anti-Catholic.

(3). The agreements initially planned for 50,000 beneficiaries and a redistribution of more than 160,000 hectares. Seven years after the peace agreement was signed, the number of beneficiaries was estimated by official sources to be 33,846, including 7,807 former soldiers, 5,264 former members of the FMLN, and 20,775 *tenedores* (El Salvador government (n.d.) for nearly 100,000 hectares of land redistributed, about 7 per cent of arable land in the country.

(4). The ARENA party was created in 1981 by a group of entrepreneurs and landowners who sought to have their interests represented in the legislative assembly against the orientations of the guerrilla forces, but also against the vague reforms of the civilian and military junta that

was then in power. Many of its founders, especially its first president, Roberto D'Aubuisson, had participated in the death squads. This legacy has never been denied.

(5). In both cases I compare here the history of the parties as presented by them on their websites. See respectively for ARENA (n.d) and FMLN (n.d.) For a deeper analysis of the history of the Salvadoran political parties, see Artiga (2001).

(6). It is definitely a question of militant identity that each party proudly demands, especially in speeches by leaders to militants and members. In other spheres, such as in internal relations in the parties or in relations with other parties, this reference is less common.

(7). The future of the army was the Gordian knot of the negotiations (de Soto and del Castillo 1994). For this reason the exact extent of the demobilisation was not officially endorsed until a few days before the final agreement. But by 1989 it was clear that if the negotiations were successful, the army would see its numbers reduced. In April 1991 the negotiators agreed that the army would not be disbanded but that it would be placed under civilian control and its actions would be limited to the traditional role of protection, and that a civilian police force would be created. In September it was officially decided that the military police units would be disbanded.

(8). The government justified this decision by the need to respond to widespread crime. An agreement in December 1992 between the government and guerrilla forces authorised a greater contingent of former police officers and soldiers in the new police force than originally anticipated. This was on condition that the new recruits were trained by the new police academy. However, entire units of the former military police were integrated with no real control.

(9). This concerns the "Benefits law for the protection of those disabled and incapacitated by the armed conflict" (see Revista Vértice 2002).

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