

# Decentralization, Local Governance, and Conflict Resolution in Latin America

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“Restoring Governance in Conflict-Affected Countries:  
Extending Hard Lessons Learned”

Washington, D.C.

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# Three Cases, Three Questions: Guatemala, Colombia, and El Salvador

- ❖ What has been the relationship between decentralization/local governance reform and conflict resolution or mitigation?
- ❖ What can we say, if anything, concretely about the impact of the reform?
- ❖ What conclusions can be drawn from these three country cases with respect to conflict resolution or mitigation?

# Benefits—or Not?

- ❖ Inclusion: Allows for citizen access, participation, and self-governance, especially for former combatants. But can produce state fragmentation.
- ❖ Division of power: Dilutes zero-sum politics, breaks up authoritarian regimes, allows for less conflictive local discussion and compromise. But it can take too long and can create fiefdoms for elites or armed groups.
- ❖ Improves state performance: Improves service delivery, quality of life, undermining rationale for taking up arms. But poor continued performance amid high expectations can erode legitimacy.

# Audience Question #1

- ❖ The president of which country made the following statement about the highly decentralizing constitutional reform in his country in 1991?:

*“[T]hrough this process, new guerilla groups will disarm themselves and integrate themselves into civil society, but also for the fact that those who continue the armed struggle who do not take advantage of this historic opportunity will find themselves isolated and will have to confront renovated institutions that are stronger and much more legitimate and representative.”*

# Colombia's Long War

- ❖ Extensive, multi-faceted conflict now decades-old
- ❖ Since 1983, decentralization and local/regional development intimately linked to the resolution of the conflict
- ❖ Decentralization began in large part as effort to promote peace.
- ❖ First seminal events: 1988 direct election of mayors. Reform linked directly to peace negotiations.
- ❖ Second: 1991 constitutional reform deepened decentralization significantly amid concerns about state viability.
- ❖ Outcome?: Increased pluralism and professionalism of local and departmental government--or assassinations and arming the guerillas.

# Audience Question #2

❖ How long is the decentralization reform law of Guatemala?

- a. 7 pages
- b. 85 pages
- c. 320 pages

# Peace in Guatemala

- ❖ After years of negotiation and reform, in 1996 Guatemalans sign peace accord ending 36 years of war.
- ❖ Extraordinary emphasis on incorporation of civil society into local government.
- ❖ Emphasis on participatory local government.
- ❖ Result of long history of repressive centralist government, state neglect, and social exclusion.
- ❖ Various decentralization provisions in peace accords, and 10 years later major legislation had been enacted to carry out the agreements.
- ❖ Outcome?: Increased space for civil society, increased local pluralism, but actual intergovernmental reform progress and participation quite limited.

# Audience Question #3

- ❖ According to many democracy theorists, when can El Salvador's democratic system be considered consolidated?
  - a. In June, with the inauguration of the first opposition (FMLN) president.
  - b. When President Obama visits the country.
  - c. It was consolidated when the third consecutive presidential election was held in 2004.

# El Salvador's Success

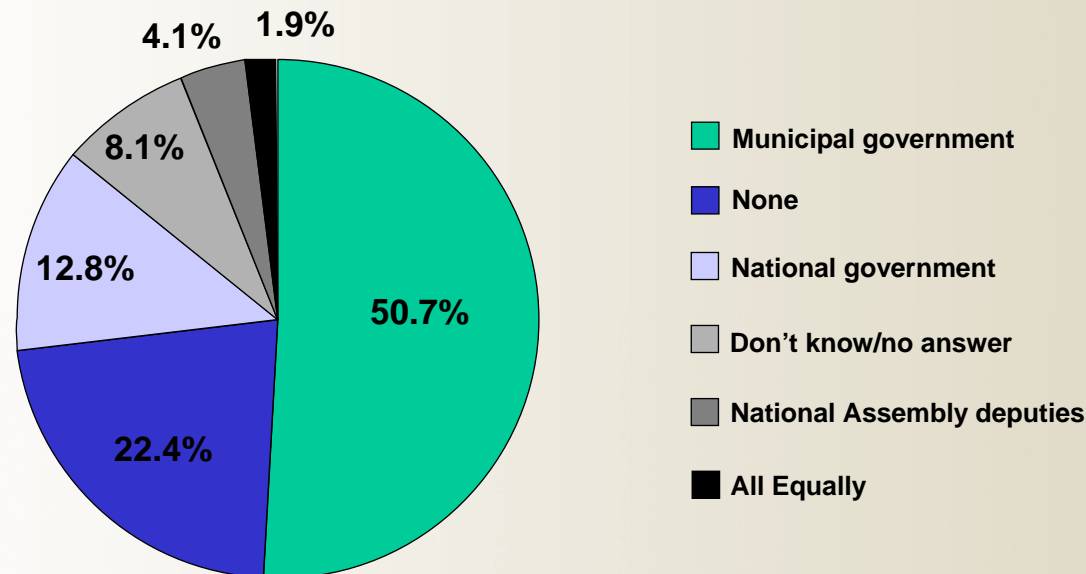
- ❖ Peace accords signed in 1992 and generally implemented.
- ❖ Elite-driven pact with no civil society participation and no mention of decentralization.
- ❖ Acceptance of the new rules of the game.
- ❖ Regular, openly contested, and reasonably fair elections since 1994 (4 presidential; 6 legislative/municipal). Latest in March this year.
- ❖ Rise of the municipal movement: Elections, COMURES, and participatory local governance.

# Results: El Salvador

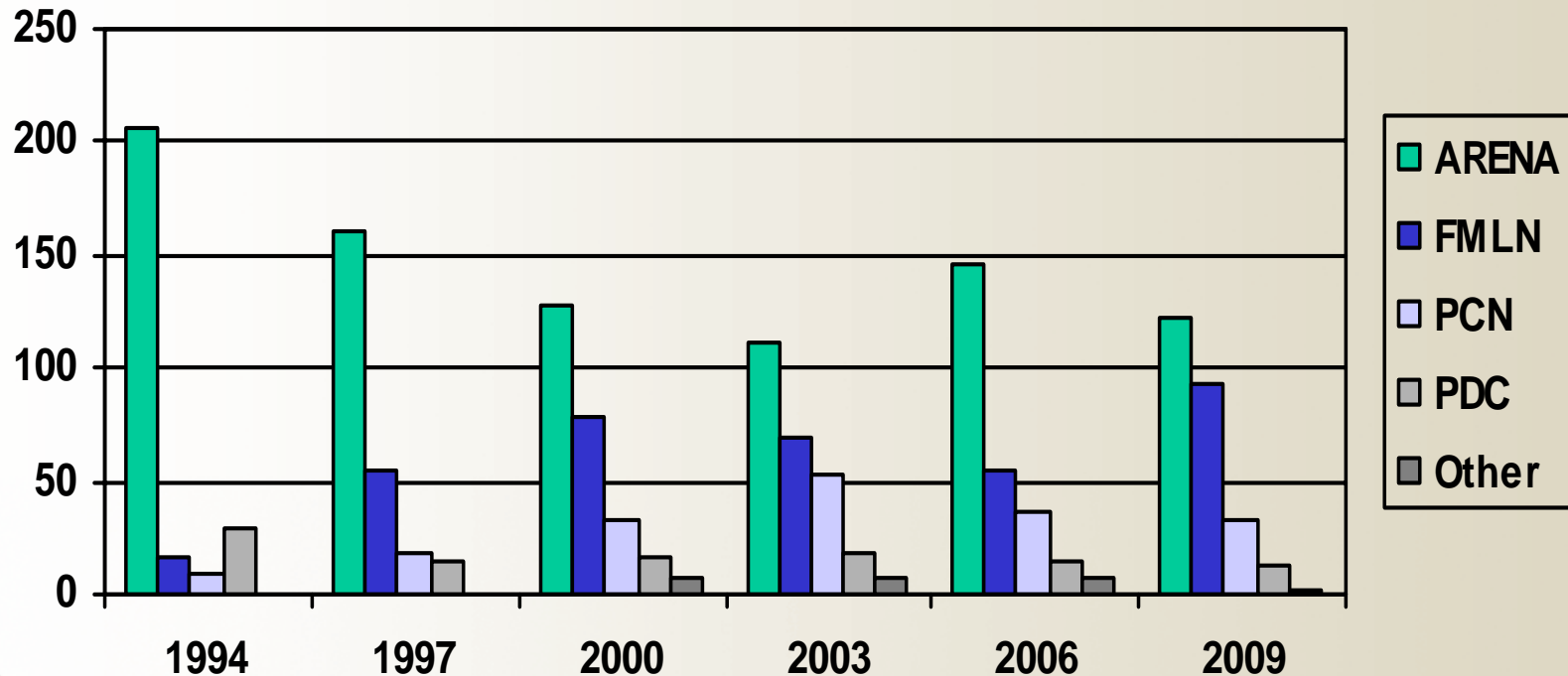
- ❖ The local arena as space for the political opposition.
- ❖ The emergence of transversal politics among national politicians: interests cutting across parties.
- ❖ Rise in political alternation among political parties.
- ❖ Creation of space for civil society access and interaction with state.
- ❖ Municipal legitimacy provides strength to the democratic system.

# The Local Arena in El Salvador: Improving Citizen Confidence

**Q: Who has been most responsive in helping your community?**



# The Local Arena: The Importance of Power



# Conclusions and Lessons: Decentralization, Local Governance and Conflict Mitigation

- ❖ Decentralization and local government development clearly viewed by political elites are essential to conflict resolution.
- ❖ Local government can help ensure political stability by helping institutionalize--nationally as well as locally--the new democratic rules of the game (the acceptance by all parties of electoral results in particular).
- ❖ Relatively more effective local governance breeds confidence in functioning of the state and also works to prevent a return to violence.
- ❖ Local governance and politics can create national systemic effects--in institutions, politics, and policy debates—that contribute to consensus-building and reconciliation.

Thank You.

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