

YALE-UN ORAL HISTORY

Ruben Zamora
James Sutterlin, Interviewer
July 24, 1997
San Salvador, El Salvador

James Sutterlin: This is a Yale interview in San Salvador, El Salvador, on July 24, 1997 with Ruben Zamora in his office in the National Parliament. The interviewer is Sutterlin.

Mr. Zamora, thank you very, very much for agreeing to participate in this Yale program. If I may, I would like to put a number of questions to you regarding your perceptions, especially of the United Nations' role in bringing peace to El Salvador. The UN role, as I understand it, in the El Salvador part of the peace process can be seen in four parts. First, as mediation, second, as verification/ peace keeping, third as democratization and fourth as economic development. What I would like to do, to the extent that we have time, is to get your perception of the success/failure record of the performance of the UN and how it was perceived in El Salvador, from your point of view. If I could, I would like to start first with the question of mediation. As I understand it, you were actually involved with some of the very first contacts when Duarte was President, at that time. Did you see or did you perceive any continuity in the negotiating process from that stage through the stage where the United Nations became, in effect, the principal mediator?

Ruben Zamora: I see the extent of continuity in the sense that we could say the first part, I mean the dialogue between the FLMN/FDR and Duarte's program, was a sort of a

preparatory step. Preparatory in the sense that introduced Salvadorian society to the idea of dialogue and negotiation. You have to remember that from the very beginning, the fact that one side just talking to the other side amounted to treason. In fact Duarte was accused of treason when he started dialogue by Mr. Cristiani's party. But that is to say how was the party formed. In that sense, I would say that all the dialogues, prior to the negotiation, I mean dialogues during the Duarte period in the negotiation, second part, prepared the ground; prepared society for that; legitimized the idea of dialogue and allowed different social forces in Salvadorian society to mobilize sectors toward a peace agreement. For me that was the most important achievement and the link between the two processes. Because in terms of results -- practically there was no substantial report in the first part except in some humanitarian measures -- exchange of prisoners, truce and that sort of thing.

JS: Did you perceive any connection between the Contadora process and this local process here in El Salvador?

RZ: Of course. I see that the Contadora process was another of the efforts to introduce the idea, the legitimacy of the idea of dialogue as an instrument for solving conflict. Because it was an effort from the international community. Although Contadora's effort was more geared toward the case of Nicaragua than El Salvador, it was, for us, very important. Because from our perspective, I mean I was one of the leaders of the FDR, at that time, we saw Contadora as one of the allies of the possibilities

of pushing forward this process in El Salvador. We were talking basically the same language.

JS: That's interesting, because I understood that the FMLN always felt that the Contadora process was aimed partly against it.

RZ: It was a very ambiguous relationship between the FMLN and Contadora. Because, on one hand, the FMLN appreciated that Contadora was a very, very important instrument for stopping invasions or a greater aggression against the Sandinista government. And the Sandinista government was sort of a crucial part of the FMLN strategy not only politically but in military terms in strategic or logistical terms. In that sense, the FMLN, you can see – never, never issued any statement against Contadora. But on the other hand, because Contadora was basically an effort of governments, among governments toward governments, the FMLN felt excluded in the case of El Salvador. That's why it had worries or I would say misgivings about the role of Contadora. I can say that because Mexico was present – Mexico was playing a leading role in Contadora, and the relationship between FDR, FLM and the Mexican government was quite good, I would say extremely good, at that time, in fact, the Vice Minister of Foreign Relations, the Vice Secretary, the Under-Secretary of Foreign Relations of Mexico was in charge of all the Contadora effort on the part of the Mexicans, we had, I would say, an excellent way of communication and way of pushing forward initiatives and ideas.

JS: When the United Nations became involved, actually there was a point where both the FMLN and the Cristiani government requested that the Secretary-General of the United Nations become involved in order to maintain the continuity of the negotiations between the two sides. You mentioned legitimacy. Would you say that one of the important contributions of the United Nations was to afford legitimacy to the FMLN as a negotiating partner?

RZ: Not so much. Because, already everybody knew that any negotiation whatever that was going to play any role had to take into account the FMLN. Otherwise, no negotiation was possible without the government or the FMLN. What I would say is that what the United Nations provided was a greater measure of legitimacy to the whole process of negotiation – not to the parties who were involved in it but the process, itself. That means as soon as we saw the United Nations involved in it – people started to say, “Oh, my God, this is going to be a serious effort.” That was a very important thing. Besides that, the other important thing was that the United Nations was the only acceptable intermediary party between the two.

JS: To continue with the United Nations. Also, was it your impression that the United Nations played an important role in providing ideas, concepts? For example, the framework agreement that emerged from the Geneva talks that took place, they were the first ones, really. Was it your perception that this could hardly have happened without the ideas put in by Pérez de Cuéllar and by de Soto?

RZ: I think that all along the process, I think that the United Nations played not just the role of being the intermediary – really the mediator – for the two sides. They never acknowledged, officially, that role. Both sides never accepted that they were playing that role. But, in fact, they were playing a role between mediator and arbiter. That means the amount of input that they were able to put into the process of negotiation as new ideas or correcting some ideas was quite substantial, I would say. In some aspects, it was more important, in others it was less important. Let me say, for instance, in the terms of the way the national civilian police was organized, I think that issue, organizing of the Civilian Police, the input of the United Nations was crucial. On the question of how to deal with the Truth Commission, and the Ad Hoc Commission, the role of the United Nations was crucial in terms of providing content – not just the pushing forward of the idea – but content. In the question of COPAZ, the internal supervising unit in implementation of the agreement I think was another element. From my knowledge of the process, I would say those were the most important areas in which the United Nations played an important role.

JS: That's interesting. Especially that that you mention the Truth Commission. Because the UN – first of all – you associate that with the United Nations as something that was under the UN auspices. Right? Even though the UN was not directly involved in it.

RZ: It was obvious that in the end, the fact that the Truth Commission was accepted – in the way it was accepted – was to a great extent the effort of the United Nations

because at the beginning, it seems to me, it was almost impossible to get that. First because there was absolute reluctance on the part of the government to accept the Truth Commission at all. Secondly, because the FMLN was very keen on bringing just internal acts to that commission and not external acts. Thirdly, I would say that it was crucial – the role of the United Nations – in terms of a certain ambiguity in the way it was drafted that allowed the Commission to decide or to do something that never was clearly discussed, for instance, the question of naming. It was one of the fundamental elements. The way it was arranged, or presented, gave Cristiani the room to see that he could achieve, later on, that no name was going to be made. That means that Cristiani was able to talk to the military, who were the most adamant against any naming – but to be able to talk to them and convince them to accept the Commission. Because later on names were not going to appear. But on the other hand, the way it was drafted and developed, allowed the FMLN to know that names were going to be there. You know, that sort of thing with another mediator with fewer skills, the process, itself, would have been practically impossible.

JS: I wanted to ask to what extent do you think the results of the Truth Commission – it took quite a long time for them to be implemented – and Boutros-Ghali, the next Secretary-General pushed, pushed with repeated reports to the Security Council and so forth, to what extent was that necessary in terms of democratization, or the reintegration of society, the results. Because it was a sharp report.

RZ: Yes, but I think it was a fundamental report. I don't see that we could have made all the advances that we already have made if the question of the past had not been solved in the way it has been solved. Because we have to see the result or the effect of the Truth Commission not only in terms of the negative reactions that it developed. There was some but not very much; I would have expected more. For me, the most important thing was that to some extent it settled quite a lot of questions. Therefore, nobody is introducing those questions into the political debate. Because the problem of the past is that unless you settle your account with the past, the past is becoming always the present in a destabilizing way. Imagine that was very, very important. Besides that, even if some people got mad about it, it was well paid [worth it].

JS: You can see it has obvious relevance to Bosnia and to Africa, at this point. That's why we are very interested, from the UN point of view, on that. I also wanted to ask in this connection about land redistribution. Because that was another very difficult aspect of the settlement and in the end – not in the end – but after the peace agreement was signed, the UN sent a mission under Mr. Goulding to see if the UN could help to develop a formula, which, in fact, Boutros-Ghali did do. I think this is the formula that was ultimately followed in the redistribution of land. How important was that? How did you perceive that?

RZ: I tend to see the question of land redistribution not in terms of an agrarian policy – as such it was not important – the most important part of that intent of the agreement is more on the political side. Why? Because the peace agreement never was intended to be

a process of discussing socio-economic change. When socio-economic issues were introduced they were mostly those issues that were directly related to the war. We have to look at the question of land distribution in that way. Because if we look at it in terms of an agrarian policy – agrarian reform or whatever – it is a total failure. By now almost half of all the people who received land no longer are cultivating that land. It was a disaster in terms of an agrarian policy. But in my perspective, never it was an agrarian policy. It was a device to solve the problem of thousands and thousands of ex-combatants to whom you had to give something. I mean it was more a socio-political question than a socio-economic question. In that sense, I would say it was basic, the question of land distribution to ex-combatants, to the people who were the base of the guerilla movement, is not an issue in our society. In that respect, redistribution of land as agrarian reform was a disaster, but it was not an attempt at agrarian reform.

JS: That was exactly my next question, the whole question of the reintegration of both the army, which was reduced, and of the FMLN's forces. The land was important in that respect.

RZ: It was important in terms of preventing a destabilizing issue, not in terms of solving a problem. That is a completely different thing. Because it never solved the problem. To a great extent, a lot of the problem of delinquency, common delinquency that we have now, comes from the war directly. Really. Especially because in balance, the ex-combatants of the guerillas came out much better than the ex-soldiers in terms of attention and programs and everything. First, because they were fewer than the others.

Secondly, because the FMLN took care of them to a great extent. The army never took any care at all of its ex-soldiers. On the contrary, they tried to get rid of them as soon as possible and pocket a lot of the money, the colonels, and so on. That difference, makes a lot of the delinquency problem that we have now, maybe one of the most serious problems of our society, is directly linked to all those ex-soldiers and ex-policemen. The only thing they knew in life was to shoot. Before they were shooting at soldiers – now they are shooting – taking money from people. That is a problem.

JS: In this sense, the integration has not been very successful.

RZ: No, not very successful. That's why I insist that if we look at the peace agreement as a political device it is very useful. Why? Because problems that usually are the problems that vex you after the peace have been prevented. The problem, as a political problem, the problem of the ex-combatants, in the first two or three years, created political unrest does so no longer. In a political agenda, that problem no longer exists. But if we look from a wider perspective of socio-economic change, oh my God, it doesn't work. We cannot ask the peace agreement, when there are political issues, to solve problems that truly in the negotiation were not possible to solve. My point is that we have to see the limits – otherwise the problem with the peace agreement is that some people believed that the peace agreement is the wonder of the world. It is not. And other people think that nothing has changed – it is the same thing. It is equally wrong.

JS: Let me just, in that connection, raise the question of human rights. Because this was a social issue, really, and it is covered in the peace agreement. The UN actually took an initiative it had never taken anywhere else in monitoring observance of human rights. Two questions. How much do you associate the greater protection of human rights with the UN efforts here because ONUSAL carried them on. Secondly, to what extent has that contributed to the reintegration of society in El Salvador?

RZ: Let me first point to something that seems to me the originality of the Salvadorian situation in that respect. Because it is not only that the United Nations took human rights monitoring in a very specific way, but that it took it even before the conflict finished.

JS: That's right.

RZ: It seems to me that this order of things was an absolutely crazy thing to do. Before the war was finished already the United Nations was monitoring because this was the first agreement. And for me there, the contribution of the United Nations is substantial. It is one of the substantial contributions. Why? First, because of the fact that the agreement was made on human rights was a step forward. Because, to some extent, it started to establish in this country the principle of accountability on human rights. It didn't exist. Historically, in this country the military were never responsible for human rights violations; always they were made in the name of combating communism and therefore were good. You see, that sort of mentality. The fact that it was accepted that a

third party could monitor and so on, introduced the question of accountability. It was one of the first and most important levers against impunity on the part of the military.

Second, it seems to me that the agreement had a very important effect on the population. Because the fact that people have started to see the white cars going around – it says to the people – look, there is somebody here to whom I could go. They could not go to the judges, judges are corrupt in this country by definition – social definition. They could not go to the police because they were principally responsible for the human rights violations. They could go to certain offices of the church. But the church is limited. But the fact that an international organization decided to be inside the country – not only in San Salvador but moving around, my God, changed a lot for me. When I realized how important that became – when I read a news clip that appeared in the newspaper – that a lady was assaulted by some robbers, and when they started to ask for the money, she said to them “Look, you cannot do that, because I am going to complain to the United Nations.” Then the robbers, the muggers, left her. This is incredible, I said. Probably it is a very strange case, but it gives you an indication that this lady doesn’t think about the police. She says, “I am going to complain to the United Nations.” That for me was the other very important point. And thirdly, it was a technical point but it was very important – the fact they started to patrol with the police and started to have a lot of participation and so on in the police academy and so on. The program inside the army that was a very, very important program because it was done very intelligently by the United Nations, quietly, under this Spaniard who was involved in that, I don’t remember the name. But it was very important. In that sense, it seems to me that it was a very positive attitude.

JS: You mentioned the fact that the UN people were moving around. I want to go back a little bit earlier in the history of ONUCA because ONUCA was supposed to control the movement of arms or soldiers across the borders, which apparently it didn't do. But on the other hand, you agree, it did not.

RZ: I was almost impossible.

JS: But on the other hand, did simply the presence of these UN people on the rivers and so forth accustoms the population to seeing UN blue helmets?

RZ: But never were the blue helmets here. No, no, never. In fact, it was clear from the beginning that we not going to have that sort of official military presence. And probably it was more efficient because it was not an official military presence because the population looked at the United Nations not as a military force but more as a sort of civilian force helping us.

JS: I want to go now to a political question. That is the role of Cuba. The Secretary-General and, I believe, the FMLN – the Secretary-General wanted to bring Cuba and the Soviet Union and the United States directly into the negotiations. He felt that they were controlling figures, so to speak. What was the view here? What was your perception of that? How important was the Cuban role or, for that matter, the Russian role?

RZ: I think that the Russian role was important in quieting the U.S. Of course the Secretary-General knew that he couldn't do anything unless the United States government was giving him space and the possibility to do it. It seems to be it was absolutely clear in this case. The fact that we had Pickering as the US Ambassador to the United Nations was a great help. Because he already had been Ambassador in the country; he knew about the country and had a clear vision about the whole thing and could be very important.

JS: His reputation was good?

RZ: Yes, his reputation was good. The problem there, the way I see it, is that in the State Department, Bernie Aronson, although he was in favor of a peace agreement, the peace accords were liberal. Therefore, his preoccupation was the Soviet Union in El Salvador. The fact that he was able to deal with his counterpart in the Soviet Foreign Ministry and that they reached an agreement was good. Not just because it meant anything here – it didn't mean a lot, almost nothing – but it was very important to give assurance to the United States to accept something and to put pressure on their own side here in order to move the government and the army toward this agreement. The role of Cuba was more crucial in all these things. Of course, Cuba played a more direct political role and was playing an important logistical role for the FMLN, not very much in the terms of arms but in terms of keeping people there, allowing a facility for the FMLN people to move around to meetings and so on and so forth. In that sense, I think that the fact that the Cubans accepted the process of negotiation – it was not a major problem. In

fact, my perception is that in terms of accepting the negotiations, the FMLN was more advanced than the Cubans, themselves. To some extent, the FMLN had to convince, a little bit, the Cubans about the need for a political settlement. I remember, in that period, quite a few conversations with the representative of the Cuban party and the government, too. They were very skeptical about negotiation. Once and again they keep repeating something like saying, "Look, the only time we negotiate is when we are strong during the struggle." That sort of thing. That's why my perception was that the FMLN was more flexible, more advanced, in accepting the idea than the Cubans of agreements.

JS: The FMLN then was not discouraged when Shevardnadze came here and, in fact, more or less, allied himself with the United States? There were a number of letters that were signed jointly by Baker and Shevardnadze.

RZ: No, because it was not very important. You know, the role of the Soviet Union, I keep repeating all the time, is very important for the United States but not for us. Because we knew what the Soviet Union was doing here. In that sense, Shevardnadze and the other guy signed everything together, good. We knew that the Cubans were quite independent from the Soviet Union regarding to El Salvador, besides. In that sense, there was the sort of thing that say, "Look, let's allow them to talk together and so on. No problem!" It's good because if they are more or less sure about the outcome that the Soviet Union is not going to intervene, that will help that the United States going to put pressure on the army and Cristiani to achieve what we want to achieve. That was the sort of thing – the way we thought. A little bit cynical, but I want to be realistic.