

El Salvador

Response to Information Request Number:	SLV01006.ZSF
Date:	August 23, 2001
Subject:	El Salvador: Information on the Federación Cristiana de Campesinos Salvadoreños (FECCAS), Christian Federation of Salvadoran Peasants
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Death squads / Extrajudicial executions / Guerrilla warfare / Killings / National liberation movements / Peasant movements / Political activity / Security forces / Trade unions

Query:

What was the Federación Cristiana de Campesinos Salvadoreños (FECCAS), Christian Federation of Salvadoran Peasants, and what was its role as a political protagonist and as a target of human rights violations?

Response:

The Federación Cristiana de Campesinos Salvadoreños (FECCAS), Christian Federation of Salvadoran Peasants, was a peasant union that had its origins in the rural organizing begun in 1964 by the National Union of Christian Workers (UNOC), a group related to the Christian Democratic Party. In 1969, FECCAS became a separate, more militant entity that mobilized for agrarian reform and education for the poor. It grew rapidly in tandem with the Christian Base Communities (CEBs) headed by progressive Catholic priests inspired by liberation theology. Some FECCAS organizers were Delegates of the Word, lay Catholic preachers linked to the Jesuit Order in El Salvador. FECCAS was strong initially in the town of Aguilares north of San Salvador, and in the north-central department of Chalatenango and the central-eastern department of San Vicente, and eventually expanded throughout the country during the first half of the 1970s (Stanley 1996, p. 95, 111; Bonner 1984, p. 69; Montgomery 1995, p. 91, 105-106; Armstrong and Shenk 1982, p.82; Williams and Walter 1997, p. 88).

In April 1974, FECCAS, along with the smaller Unión de Trabajadores del Campo (UTC), Union of Rural Workers, based in Usulután and San Vicente, joined with a number of urban labor federations to form a broad opposition organization called the Frente de Acción Popular Unificado (FAPU), United Popular Action Front, which advocated revolution to end anti-democratic rule. In early 1975, FECCAS and the UTC allied to become the FECCAS-UTC (Stanley 1996, p. 96; Dunkerly 1985, p. 100).

During 1974, FECCAS became increasingly radicalized, "transforming itself from a social movement into a semi-clandestine revolutionary political party" (Stanley 1996, p. 95).

In July 1975, FECCAS-UTC, as well as the teachers union, Asociación de Educadores Salvadoreños (ANDES), Association of Salvadoran Educators, withdrew from the FAPU to form, along with some student and slumdweller groups, the Bloque Popular Revolucionario (BPR), People's Revolutionary Bloc, commonly known as El Bloque. The BPR was formed during the occupation of the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador by these groups to protest a massacre of student demonstrators by Salvadoran troops. The BPR was principally a rural-based organization, while the diminished FAPU continued as an urban-based federation. By 1979 the FECCAS-UTC provided the bulk of the membership of the

BPR. With 60,000 to 80,000 members, the BPR was the largest of the opposition organizations and had the capacity to stage massive demonstrations and marches (Stanley 1996, p. 96; Armstrong and Shenk 1982, p. 73-74; Bonner 1984, p. 69).

The BPR, the most radical of the mass organizations, was allied with and acted as a front group for the Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (FPL), Popular Forces of Liberation, the largest and most radical of the five left-wing guerrilla groups that would combine in 1980 to form the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation. The political ideology of the FPL and the BPR was Marxist (Stanley 1996, p.96; Dunkerly 1985, p. 100; Bonner 1984, p.69).

FECCAS was a target of repression by government forces from the time its organizers began mobilizing peasants in the mid-1960s. The emergence of Christian-based rural movements, in fact, was a principal reason why the Salvadoran military in the late 1960s established the Organización Democrática Nacionalista (ORDEN), Democratic Nationalist Organization (ORDEN), an 80,000-strong, rural paramilitary and vigilante network "widely recognized as one of the precursors of the 'death squads' of the late 1970s and 1980s," according to Americas Watch (Armstrong & Shenk 1982, p. 77, 101; Americas Watch 1991, p. 5, 83; Stanley 1996, p. 121).

During the 1970s, ORDEN units frequently participated with the military and security forces, especially the rural-based National Guard, in killings of unarmed government opponents, particularly members of FECCAS. Sometimes, FECCAS members would be denounced by ORDEN, leading to blacklisting and firings. If those identified as FECCAS did not cease opposition activities, they were usually attacked by combined National Guard and ORDEN forces and killed. Bodies on occasion were found decapitated or otherwise mutilated. Other times, the National Guard, backed by ORDEN and army infantry units, would conduct "search and destroy" operations through an entire area where FECCAS was known to be organized, causing thousands of rural dwellers to flee. A period of particularly severe repression occurred in October 1977, when FECCAS-UTC initiated a campaign for higher rural wages. The National Guard and ORDEN cracked down, with a number of military occupations of towns and farms, seven killings and three rapes in Chalatenango alone (Stanley 1996, p. 95-96, 116; Armstrong and Shenk 1982, p. 100-114; Dunkerly 1985, p. 114-116; Latin America Political Report May 1979 and October 1979).

The repression against FECCAS worked in favor of the FPL, which had been trying since the early 1970s to radicalize worker, peasant and student groups. As government violence increased, the FPL found that repression became a highly effective rallying cry. Increased government repression also worked for the FPL in the sense that it moved nonviolent organizations such as FECCAS toward armed struggle. During the late 1970s FECCAS, pressed by the FPL, incrementally became armed in a process that was known as "pistolización." FECCAS then began to form militias that were used as FPL guerrilla auxiliaries. Some analysts, such as U.S. journalist Christopher Dickey, suggested that the FPL was manipulating FECCAS even as FECCAS members were being systematically killed by the National Guard and ORDEN (Stanley 1996, p. 115-116; The New Republic November 1983).

FECCAS disappeared in the first years of the 1980s as, in the words of Human Rights Watch, "In practice, virtually all labor activity was eviscerated by the slaughter of union organizers during the early 1980s." Numerous FECCAS organizers who managed to survive, as well as many rank and file, joined the ranks of the FPL and other guerrilla groups comprising the FMLN. (Human Rights Watch 1991, p. 27; ECA October 1992).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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