



El Salvador by Horacio N. Roque Ramírez

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El Salvador is located on the Pacific coast of Central America, between Guatemala, Honduras, and the Gulf of Fonseca, which separates it from Nicaragua. The small nation gained its independence from Spain in 1821 and from Mexico in 1823.

In the modern era, conservative governments have ruled the country, facilitating the exploitation of natural resources and the majority of the population, including the forced expropriation of lands from indigenous communities. Social standards of living have been among the lowest in the hemisphere, and the violent repression of dissident social groups (labor unions, teachers, leftist activists) has been widely reported.

El Salvador is the most densely populated country in the mainland of the Americas, with an estimated population of 6.5 million people in 2003, over a million of whom live abroad, forced out of the country as a result of a twelve-year civil war, which raged between 1979 and 1991.

The armed struggle between the FMLN (the *Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation*) and the U. S.-supported right-wing government resulted in over 80,000 deaths. A formal end to the war came with the signing of the United Nations-brokered Peace Accords in 1992, but a deep-seated culture of violence, poverty, and inequality remains today.

Traditional Roman Catholicism and right-wing military dictatorships have historically created a hostile climate for same-sex cultures and life in the country. Only in recent years have there been attempts to create a cultural, social, and political organization of glbtq people, although a semi-public social life has existed at least since the early 1970s through bars, especially in the capital city of San Salvador.

While El Salvador has no sodomy laws, violence against gay men and lesbians, and particularly against male-to-female transgendered sex workers, has been documented since the 1980s. Paramilitary death squads during the war made the situation even more challenging. In June 1984, for example, a military battalion tortured and killed 16 *travestis*. One of the clearest examples of the homophobic hostility to same-sex life is the common, derogatory use of the term "*culero*," roughly translating as "faggot."

The 1992 Peace Accords signaled the hope for a new democratic era. Minority groups in the country, including lesbians, gay men, and other members of the glbtq community, tapped into international funding sources to support human rights and social and economic development. As a result a non-governmental glbtq organization, *Entre Amigos*, was founded in 1994.

Since then *Entre Amigos* has promoted glbtq rights and spearheaded HIV and AIDS educational campaigns. It has also advocated for people living with HIV and AIDS. *Entre Amigos* has also tracked violence against glbtq people, including death threats against its executive director, William Hernández.

The organization has sponsored gay pride marches in San Salvador since 1997. In 1999, more than 700 women and men marched as a public statement of their political identities and struggle to make social space for glbtq people safer.

Still, the history of homophobic repression continues in El Salvador. Eleven transgendered people were

assassinated in 1998, bomb threats were made in 1999, and the staff of *Entre Amigos* were the target of anonymous threats in 2000. In 2001 Hernández was granted police protection, given the unresolved threats made against his life.

This pattern of "social cleansing," reminiscent of death squad activity during the war, makes openness quite a challenge for Salvadoran glbtq people.

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About the Author

Horacio N. Roque Ramírez completed his Ph.D. in Comparative Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley in 2001, and was a UC President's Postdoctoral Fellow at UCLA in 2001-2003. He has contributed to the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, the *Oral History Review*, *CORPUS: An HIV Prevention Publication*, and the forthcoming anthology, *Archive Stories: Evidence, Experience, and History* (Duke University Press). He received the 2002-2003 CLAGS (Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies) Fellowship, the 2004 Oral History Association Article Award, and has served on the advisory board of San Francisco's *Proyecto ContraSIDA Por Vida*. He teaches in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies and is affiliated with Latin American and Iberian Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara.