Forging Democracy from Below

The transition to democracy in both El Salvador and South Africa poses two puzzles. Why did the powerful and fervently antidemocratic elites of these countries abandon death squads, apartheid, and other tools of political repression and take a chance on democracy? And why did these two protracted civil conflicts prove amenable to resolution via negotiated transitions to democracy, in contrast to other civil wars whose resolution through negotiation appears so elusive? *Forging Democracy from Below* shows how popular mobilization – in El Salvador led by an effective guerrilla army supported by peasant collaboration and in South Africa led by a powerful alliance of labor unions and poor urban dwellers – transformed elite economic interests, thereby forcing elites to the bargaining table, and why both a durable settlement and democratic government were the result. Using interviews with both insurgent and elite actors as well as analysis of macroeconomic data, Elisabeth Wood documents an “insurgent path to democracy” and challenges the view that democracy is the result of compromise among elite factions or the modernizing influence of economic development.

Elisabeth Jean Wood teaches comparative politics and political economy at New York University. She has done fieldwork for many years in rural El Salvador as well as in South Africa. Her research in El Salvador was supported by the U.S. Institute of Peace and the MacArthur Foundation. Her South Africa research was carried out as a Scholar of the Harvard Academy of International and Area Studies. Professor Wood's next book is an ethnographic account of peasant insurgency in Usulután and Tenancingo, El Salvador.
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Forging Democracy from Below

INSURGENT TRANSITIONS
IN SOUTH AFRICA AND
EL SALVADOR

ELISABETH JEAN WOOD

New York University
To my parents
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Preface

Forging Democracy from Below is about how the sustained mobilization by poor people in both El Salvador and South Africa transformed the political economy of their countries and convinced hitherto recalcitrant elites to negotiate an end not only to civil conflict but also to authoritarian rule. I argue that this enduring insurgency was the principal reason for the political pacts that led to democracy in these two unequal societies. Evidence supporting the argument draws on methods from both political economy and ethnography.

I began this book as an investigation of El Salvador’s unusual insurgent path to democracy. But if El Salvador were the only polity whose transition to democracy followed this route, the argument would be of limited interest and, indeed, less persuasive for that reason. My explanation of democratic transition in El Salvador would be more compelling if other cases had followed a similar path. Moreover, if forging democracy from below is to stand as a particular mode of transition, other cases should populate the category.

I therefore took up a perhaps unlikely case for comparison, that of South Africa. If the transition to democracy in South Africa, a country different from El Salvador in many respects, was nonetheless similar in its principal features to that of El Salvador, the argument for a path to democracy from below would be much more persuasive than if a more similar country followed a similar route. In the latter case, a similar path to democracy could be the result of any of a large number of similarities not stressed by the democracy-from-below interpretation proposed here. Testing the argument against such an apparently different country would help to distinguish between general features of the path from below and its local variations.
My argument concerning El Salvador focuses on two key claims. First, largely as a result of the sustained support of insurgent peasants that undergirded the military capacity of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), the guerrilla force became a necessary party to any enduring resolution of the civil war. Second, ongoing unrest and the counterinsurgency reforms that attempted to counter it together reshaped elite interests, perceptions, and opportunities, with the result that elites long resistant to even mild reform decided to negotiate an end to the war and to take their chances on the vagaries of electoral competition. In the years before the civil war, no one would have imagined the Salvadoran elite sitting down at the bargaining table with representatives of subordinate classes to negotiate a transition to democracy.

South Africa offers striking parallels. First, mobilization, particularly by labor unions but also by township residents, sustained a deepening political crisis for well over a decade, bringing into existence an insurgent counter-elite, the African National Congress (ANC), without whose agreement there would have been no political settlement. Second, as unrest continued, economic elites pressed for fundamental political reform and negotiations with the ANC, a defection from the ruling alliance that crucially undermined continued support for apartheid.

Note to the Reader

Given the substantial degree of political tension and uncertainty surrounding the themes of this study – political mobilization and violence, coercive labor relations, the distribution of property rights, and clandestine collaboration with the FMLN – most of the Salvadorans interviewed for this study preferred to remain anonymous. For this reason, in characterizing interviewees I list only their status (government official, peasant organization leader, etc.) and the year the conversation occurred. Although interviews with South Africans were much less sensitive, I follow the same procedure for those interviewees.

Throughout this book, my interviews with informants are italicized; quotations from other sources are not. In addition, the Spanish campesino (literally, of the countryside, campo, frequently translated as “peasant”) is used to refer to residents engaged in agricultural activities (except, of course, landlords of substantial property who hire significant numbers of wage laborers) or (when used as an adjective) to organizations in which they participate. Thus a campesino may be a landless day-laborer, a
permanent wage employee, or a farmer working a smallholding. This usage reflects the residents’ own vocabulary and, more important, their nearly universal aspiration to work their own land. When distinctions between those agriculturalists who engage primarily in work on their own plots, on those of others, or on a mix of employment are necessary for the argument, I make them explicitly.
Acknowledgments

This book reflects a decade-long political and economic study of the civil war in El Salvador. The work began in 1987, when I visited the town of Tenancingo to research the return of residents displaced by violence. I made a number of subsequent brief trips to follow that community’s evolution. Beginning in September 1991, I carried out sixteen months of fieldwork in the war-torn province of Usulután, followed by a series of short trips to document later events. While detailed analysis of peasant insurgency in El Salvador based on those years of fieldwork is reserved for a separate book (Wood 2000), I draw as needed on that material for the argument presented here.

My investigation took me to South Africa on three trips of varying duration. In 1997 I spent several months there during my initial exploration of the comparison with El Salvador that resulted in this book. I returned to South Africa briefly in 1998 and for three months in 1999 to gather further material and present my initial findings to South African researchers.

One accumulates many debts in ten years of research. Principal among these debts is that to the residents of the field sites in El Salvador for their willingness to describe their history and that of their communities through the years of the civil war. Such fieldwork in the midst and immediate aftermath of civil war is difficult; I am especially grateful to the shelter and counsel provided by Sister Elena Jaramillo of the parish of Jiquilisco, by Ana Karlslund in Santiago de Maria, by the staff members of COMUS in San Francisco Javier, and by Madre Ivonne and the staff members of FUNDASAL in Tenancingo. Their experience and wisdom saved me many an error (or worse) and made both possible and pleasurable my stays in the contested communities of El Salvador.

I am also grateful to the many persons interviewed in San Salvador and...
Acknowledgments

other urban areas, particularly the landlords of Usulután and Tenancingo for sharing their experiences and perceptions of the war. My thanks also go to government officials in the various reconstruction, land reform, and land-transfer agencies, to several officers of the Salvadoran Armed Forces, to the field commanders of the Popular Revolutionary Army (the guerrilla force active in the Usulután field sites) and to those of the Popular Liberation Forces (the force active in Tenancingo), to the members and staff of the FMLN working on land transfer and reconstruction, to the staff members of the United Nations Mission in El Salvador, to Michael Wise, Ana Luz de Mena, and María Latino of the United States Agency for International Development, and to the directors and staff of the Salvadoran Foundation for Development and Low-Income Housing.

I am grateful as well to those I interviewed in South Africa, who ranged from trade union officials to business executives, leaders of business organizations, academics, representatives of various political parties, and government officials.

The individuals interviewed chose to share their perceptions and data with an academic researcher in the hope of collaborating in a work that would document and analyze troubled periods of their national histories. I can only hope this book proves worthy of their trust and aspirations.

Many individuals and families in South Africa extended to me not only their collegial collaboration but also the hospitality of their homes. I am particularly grateful to David Lewis, Terry Kurgan, Jillian and Christopher Nicholson, Lael Bethlehem, Emilia Potenza, Charles Meth, and Francis and Lindy Wilson. For hospitality in San Salvador, I thank David Holiday, Corina Dufka, Tom Gibb, Melinda DeLashmutt, and Francisco Altschul.

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Finally, a most heartfelt thank you to Sam for everything.
Abbreviations

AHI Afrikaner Commercial Institute
AIFLD American Institute for Free Labor Development
ANC African National Congress
ANSESAL Salvadoran National Special Services Agency
ANSP National Academy of Public Security
ARENA National Republican Alliance
AZAPO Azanian People’s Organization
BCM Black Consciousness Movement
BPR Popular Revolutionary Block
CBM Consultative Business Movement
CEA-COPAZ Special Agrarian Commission to COPAZ
CODECOSTA Coordinator for Development of Cooperatives
CODESA Convention for a Democratic South Africa
COMUS United Municipalities and Communities of Usulután
CONARA Commission for the Restoration of Areas
CONFRAS National Confederation of Federations of Agrarian Reform Cooperatives
COPAZ National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace
COSAG Concerned South Africans Group
COSATU Congress of South African Trade Unions
CUSA Council of Unions of South Africa
DNA Department of Native Affairs
ERP Popular Revolutionary Army
FAN National Anti-Communist Front
FAPU United Popular Action Front
FECCAS Christian Federation of Salvadoran Peasants
FENACOA National Federation of Agrarian Cooperatives
## Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FMLN</td>
<td>Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation</td>
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<tr>
<td>FOSATU</td>
<td>Federation of South African Trade Unions</td>
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<td>FPL</td>
<td>Popular Liberation Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>FUSADES</td>
<td>Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>IFP</td>
<td>Inkatha Freedom Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>INCAFE</td>
<td>National Coffee Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISTA</td>
<td>Salvadoran Institute of Agrarian Transformation</td>
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<tr>
<td>MEA</td>
<td>Municipalities in Action Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>MIPLAN</td>
<td>Ministry of Planning and Coordination of Economic and Social Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MK</td>
<td>Spear of the Nation, the armed force of the ANC Alliance</td>
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<td>MPNP</td>
<td>Multiparty Negotiating Process</td>
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<td>NEDLAC</td>
<td>National Economic Development and Labour Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEF</td>
<td>National Economic Forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>NMC</td>
<td>National Manpower Commission</td>
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<td>NUM</td>
<td>National Union of Mineworkers</td>
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<td>ONUSAL</td>
<td>United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador</td>
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<tr>
<td>ORDEN</td>
<td>National Democratic Republican Order</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAC</td>
<td>Pan-Africanist Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCN</td>
<td>National Conciliation Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDC</td>
<td>Christian Democratic Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNC</td>
<td>National Civilian Police</td>
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<td>PRN</td>
<td>National Reconstruction Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRUD</td>
<td>Revolutionary Party of Democratic Unification</td>
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<tr>
<td>RENAMO</td>
<td>National Resistance of Mozambique</td>
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<tr>
<td>SACOB</td>
<td>South African Chamber of Business</td>
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<tr>
<td>SACP</td>
<td>South African Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>SACTU</td>
<td>South African Congress of Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>SASM</td>
<td>South African Students Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>SASO</td>
<td>South African Students Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>SASOL</td>
<td>South African Synthetic Oil Limited</td>
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<tr>
<td>SRN</td>
<td>Secretariat of National Reconstruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSC</td>
<td>State Security Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCS</td>
<td>Salvadoran Communal Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>UDF</td>
<td>United Democratic Front</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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### Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UNITA</td>
<td>National Union for the Total Independence of Angola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WNLA</td>
<td>Witwatersrand Native Labour Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPGWU</td>
<td>Western Province General Workers Union</td>
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