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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

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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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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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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I am fortunate to have worked with Alex Holzman and the outstanding editorial team at Cambridge University Press; they have made this a better book. Thanks also to Peter Lange, who was editor of the series when the book was under review. His insightful comments helped to improve the book. Research assistance from Ethel Brooks, Stephen Brown, Catalin Cretu, Matt Golder, Bridget Longridge, and Rodrigo Mardones was invaluable.

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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

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

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Abbreviations

UNITA	National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WNLA	Witwatersrand Native Labour Association
WPGWU	Western Province General Workers Union

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