

A Comparative Study of Civil Registries Nicaragua and El Salvador

by Enrique Saltos

From a total absence of citizen's registration to sophisticated and highly protected data collections, civil registry systems comprise a wide range of options, each of which is usually associated with a specific political system. Military and hard-line regimes have always chosen accurate identification systems, while democratic countries, like the U.S. and Canada, have typically rejected such schemes on principle, or implemented sophisticated and protected systems, such as in Norway and Finland. The fact remains that the implementation of any civil registration system is a subject of intense debate.

Advantages and disadvantages of the civil registration system cannot be comparably measured across all countries. In developing nations like Nicaragua and El Salvador, where an individual's legal identity can change as a result of cultural practices, the advantages far surpass the disadvantages. It is, however, necessary to adopt an integral and comprehensive law to protect citizens' rights and data.

Few systems can enhance the democratic and economic life of a country like a central, computerized civil registry and identification system. Among the principal advantages are:

- It allows a coherent and broad national integration by clearly defining citizenship.
- It incorporates a single national civil registry database. Centralizing this information makes universal data distribution possible. Decentralizing field operations simplifies and unifies procedures.
- It allows a regulated and safe exchange of valuable information with other international public, and private organizations, in accordance with the law.
- It boosts the country's economic and financial life by giving all citizens full access to credit, land tenure, and public and private contracts.

- By guaranteeing positive identification, it provides security to the banking system.
- It provides instant access to vital statistics allowing more accurate and effective planning in the fields of education, health care, social security, construction, police, and judicial systems.
- It provides secure, accurate, and immediate information to the police, judicial and immigration services.
- It allows the instant delivery of information on birth, marriage, and other individual certification independent of the individual's place of birth and residence.
- It allows the development of a permanent and highly accurate voter registration system.

Despite all of these benefits, civil registries have been underestimated and their improvement and update long deferred, especially in Latin America. Nicaragua and El Salvador are the basis of this short study because they share the same history, culture, structure, and common identification problems. Although the two countries had opposing political systems in the early 90s, similar solutions were applied using completely different implementation methods.

Nicaragua

By 1993, Nicaragua, a country of 129,494 square kilometers and 3.9 million people in 1990, had 143 municipal civil registries, all administratively autonomous and working with different forms and procedures. The only link between the different offices was the National Council of Municipalities, a nongovernmental and highly politicized organization. In 1993, the government decided to reform the civil registry structure by centralizing all files in a computerized database and creating a direc-

Table 1: Civil Registry Problems

#	Description	Nicaragua	El Salvador	Comments
1	Decentralized Municipal Civil Registries	Yes	Yes	Each municipal civil registry was autonomous, under the command of the Major, who was often politically biased
2	Forgery of documents to avoid conscription	Yes	Yes	Especially during the war, changing birth dates or names
3	Destruction of civil registry books during the civil war	Yes	Yes	Both countries suffered this problem, more so in Nicaragua
4	Forgery of documents to open banking accounts, obtain credit, buy/sell properties, cheat emigration services or the police, cross borders, obtain a clean identity, etc.	Yes	Yes	This problem was more serious in El Salvador, but had a large impact on the economic life of both countries
5	Difficulty in access to certifications and demand for them in all types of administrative processes	Yes	Yes	People had to travel to their place of birth to obtain certifications

Table 2: Characteristics of the New Civil Registry and Identification Document

#	Characteristic	Nicaragua	El Salvador
1	Dependency as a directorate	From the Central Election Commission, under the executive branch	RNPN, an autonomous body,
2	Technology	Computerized	Computerized
3	Identification card	High security, AFIS based	High security, IFES based
4	Administration	Centralized, under the CEC	Centralized, under the RNPN
5	Development stage ID card fully issued	Partially implemented, being implemented. El Salvador has recently begun to capture data from the Municipal Civil Registries	ID card and administrative procedures
6	Data protection law	Yes: both laws need amendments to guarantee full citizen's data protection	Yes: both laws need amendments to guarantee full citizen's data protection
7	Capture of data	Centralized capture in Managua for copies of books. The type of capture adopted proved susceptible to errors and citizen's complaints	Direct capture of data in the civil registry offices
8	Delivery of the ID card	1993	Not yet started
9	Finishing of issuance of the ID card	1996: The issuance of the ID card was tied to Election Day, a plan that was not accomplished and caused errors and serious problems	N/A
10	International support and financing	Spanish: Nicaragua got more international support than El Salvador, although it was restrained by very strict clauses imposed by the Spanish agency	USAID
11	Implementation	First ID card issuance, second civil registry implementation	First database and civil registry implementation, second ID card issuance

torate of civil registration under the Electoral Tribunal (*Tribunal Supremo Electoral - TSE*). At that time, the tendency in Latin America was to create electoral commissions as a fourth power of the state, including civil registration as one of their components. Nicaragua used this path for the centralization of its civil registries, confirming by doing so the inefficiency of this approach.

Emerging from a bloody civil war and the rule of a pro-communist regime, the central administration in Managua had lost control of its municipal components. The civil registries especially, suffered severe damage during the war.

At least 30 municipalities lost their books, and all went through a process of deliberate alteration of names and birthdays in those registries of citizens of conscription age. Fear of enlistment in the army caused some families, particularly from the middle class, to pay for the elimination or alteration of civil registry books. Others had false data entered in the civil registry books to enable them to get a passport and a false identity. Finally, in the last stages of the conflict, the regime seems to have ordered the alteration of records to benefit some of its most controversial members. When the government of Violeta Chamorro decided to transform the civil registry, the prospect was anything but satisfactory.

El Salvador

With 21,041 square kilometers and 5.5 million people in 1990, El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America. Its 262 municipalities and civil registries were autonomous and

decentralized until the creation of the National Registry (*Registro Nacional de Personas Naturales - RNPN*) in 1998. The aim of the RNPN was to achieve accurate and unique identification of citizens by implementing a centralized database and the issuing a new ID card (*cedula de ciudadanía*) bearing all the benefits and technical securities that a fingerprint matching system can provide.

Conclusion

The new system of civil registration is not finished in either of these countries and the governments lack the money to fulfill the expectations placed on these systems. The administrative and computerized system in Nicaragua remains incomplete and faces strong challenges in the provision of adequate service. In El Salvador, the system is just beginning and the lack of funding has threatened adequate implementation from the outset.

The methodology adopted by Nicaragua, implementing the identification document prior to the administrative structure of the registry, tying the issuance of the card to election day, and putting the civil registry under the election authority, has failed and should be avoided in El Salvador and other countries pursuing similar systems. □

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