

# EL SALVADOR UNDER NAYIB BUKELE: THE TURN TO ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM

*El Salvador bajo Nayib Bukele: el giro hacia el autoritarismo electoral*

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## ABSTRACT

Nayib Bukele has been unconstitutionally re-elected as President of El Salvador. His government can rely on a hegemonic party system that presents a façade of democracy but denies opposition parties any real power. The elections followed an unparalleled subversion of democratic institutions and processes, carried out to consolidate the Central American leader's electoral autocracy. Bukele claims popular legitimacy, but he has used his rule to eliminate checks and balances, manipulate the independence of the judiciary and the state administration, and stifle press freedom. Behind his grip on authority lies a desire to achieve political and economic influence for the Bukele family and an aspiring business elite associated with it. The President has built his popularity as a political leader through the spectacularization of a state of emergency. Ostensibly a crackdown on gangs, the measure is being used to arbitrarily detain citizens and repress critical voices. Bukele manages El Salvador's security crisis not to reduce violence, but to bolster support for his regime.

**Keywords:** democratic institutions, corruption, state of emergency, media, electoral authoritarianism, El Salvador

## RESUMEN

*Nayib Bukele ha sido reelegido inconstitucionalmente como Presidente de El Salvador. Su gobierno puede confiar en un sistema de partido hegemónico que presenta una fachada de democracia, pero niega a los partidos de oposición cualquier poder real. Las elecciones siguieron a una subversión sin precedentes de las instituciones y procesos democráticos, llevada a cabo para consolidar la autocracia electoral del líder centroamericano. Bukele afirma tener legitimidad popular, pero ha utilizado su gobierno para eliminar controles y contrapesos, manipular la independencia del poder judicial y de la administración estatal, así como reprimir la libertad de prensa. Detrás de su control de la autoridad se esconde un deseo de lograr influencia política y económica para la familia Bukele y una élite empresarial aspirante asociada a ella. El Presidente ha construido su popularidad como líder político mediante la espectacularización de un régimen de excepción. La medida, que aparenta ser una guerra contra las pandillas, se está utilizando para detener arbitrariamente a los ciudadanos y reprimir las voces críticas. Bukele maneja la crisis de seguridad de El Salvador no para reducir la violencia, sino para reforzar el apoyo a su régimen.*

**Palabras clave:** instituciones democráticas, corrupción, régimen de excepción, medios, autoritarismo electoral, El Salvador



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## I. INTRODUCTION

On the night of February 4, 2024, President Nayib Bukele stepped onto the balcony of the National Palace, the building illuminated in gold for the occasion. That day, El Salvador had held presidential and legislative elections, with results that seemed to be a foregone conclusion. The vote count was still underway when Bukele got ready to declare himself the winner, after an unconstitutional re-election, and to hail the triumph of his Nuevas Ideas party. Accompanied by his wife Gabriela, Bukele addressed a jubilant crowd of supporters assembled in the square below.

Today El Salvador has broken all records, of all democracies in the entire history of the world. Never has a project won with the number of votes we have won today. And not only have we won the Presidency of the Republic for the second time, with more than 85% of the votes, but we have won the Legislative Assembly with at least 58 out of 60 legislators. This is the first time that a single party exists in a country in a fully democratic system. The entire opposition was pulverized. ... The Salvadoran people spoke, and what did they say today? The Salvadoran people said: "We want to continue on the path we are on." ... Democracy means: the power of the people, *demos* and *kratos*. ... We Salvadorans are united. There is no polarization here. Eighty-five percent of Salvadorans have voted to continue on the path we are on, in full freedom and in full democracy. We must give glory to God, because what are we if not instruments of God? God wanted to heal our country, and He healed it through a united people who decided to leave the past behind and to take the reins of their own destiny. (Redacción de El Faro 2024)

The speech is a striking example of how Bukele asserts his claim to popularity and reduces the meaning of democracy to a mandate obtained at the ballot box. His references to the unity and will of the people and to a divine mission to lead El Salvador on a path of security and prosperity have become familiar currency in El Salvador. Bukele's unconstitutional re-election is the culmination of his five years in power, a time in which he dismantled checks and balances with ruthless efficiency, undermined media freedom, and instituted a state of emergency to defeat the country's gangs. The "Bukele model" of security has made headlines around the world and helped galvanize voters into affording the President a second term. But, as I show in this article, this much-publicized measure has had a more sinister purpose than reducing El Salvador's intractable gang violence.

Bukele's quick rise to political fame began with two periods as mayor with the leftist Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). After breaking with this party, he became Latin America's youngest head of state at the age of 37, when he was first elected President in 2019. His second term, which he won despite a constitutional ban on immediate re-election, ends El Salvador's brief experiment with democracy. But Bukele's electoral autocracy

has been years in the making. To win his first mandate, the businessman and publicist capitalized on citizens' discontent with El Salvador's traditional parties, both of which had failed to resolve the country's economic and security problems and become mired in corruption. Bukele has, however, used his time in office to establish a personalistic electoral authoritarian regime.

Electoral authoritarianism can be understood as a hybrid system under which authoritarian leaders are popularly elected but subvert democratic institutions and procedures and abuse the state's administrative and economic resources (Matovski 2021). Such regimes attract citizen support in nations that have lived through deep upheavals, such as socioeconomic decline, security crises, or political dysfunction. Electoral autocrats offer to address these grievances through popular accountability and uncompromising, effective government. In societies that are desperate for stability to be restored, people rally around this option when they see no plausible alternative to it. Incumbents claim popular consent to resist pressures for democratization. Yet to maintain support for their rule, they need to kindle the conflicts that they claim to be resolving. Bukele rose to popularity by pledging to fight entrenched corruption and transform democracy into a system serving all, not just the elites. He has justified his rule as a tough, democratically mandated response to El Salvador's chronic gang violence. The marked decline in homicides and street gang activity does not seem to warrant an extension of the two-year-old state of emergency. However, to legitimize his hold on power, Bukele claims the measure is needed to prevent a return to pervasive insecurity.

In this article I argue that Nayib Bukele, aided by family members and close business and personal associates, has created an electoral autocracy to accumulate political and economic influence. The Nuevas Ideas party serves as the electoral vehicle that affords Bukele and his circle control over the state and access to opportunities for quick enrichment. However, like any electoral autocracy, Bukele's regime cannot remain in power unless it is rooted in popular legitimacy. To claim a democratic mandate, the President releases propaganda that paints a modern, tech-friendly El Salvador that can overcome its violent past. This official narrative, however, also undermines the credibility of independent media, human rights defenders, and opposition politicians. At the same time, while Bukele stresses his democratic credentials by holding multi-party elections, he removes checks on power and systematically manipulates electoral rules.

This article examines and contextualizes El Salvador's political, electoral, and human rights trends in 2023, the year preceding Bukele's unconstitutional re-election.<sup>1</sup> The text is structured into five substantive sections. The first looks at how the regime undermines institutions to consolidate its power and lim-

<sup>1</sup> This article was commissioned for the 2023 edition of the *Revista de Ciencia Política's* yearbook on Latin America.

its transparency to conceal corruption. The second considers some of the administration's economic development schemes that offer opportunities for the wealthy but do little to improve the lives of ordinary Salvadorans. The third examines how the state of emergency, ostensibly implemented to dismantle the gangs, serves to repress dissent. The fourth analyzes how the President controls the media to promote his image, spread disinformation, and attack critical voices. The final section shows how manipulations of the recent electoral process provided Bukele with a second term in office. I conclude with some reflections on his politics and its implications for Salvadoran society.

## II. INSTITUTIONS: A DEMOCRATIC FICTION

In January 2024, the President ordered the destruction of the Monument of Reconciliation, a statue that had been erected to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Peace Accords. Bukele had attacked these agreements throughout his administration and asserted that the memorial glorified this “pact between assassins of our people to share the cake” (Gellman 2024). However, the act was more than just the obliteration of a work of art designed to remember an important chapter in El Salvador's history. It also symbolized the subversion of the country's democratic institutions under Bukele's rule. Since taking office five years earlier, the Central American leader had weakened the legislature, the judiciary, and oversight agencies under the pretext of fighting corruption and restoring security.

As mayor, Bukele already displayed a governance style that would mark his later administrations, such as a proclivity for lavish infrastructure projects, extensive social media publicity, and a dislike of accountability and independent media investigations. His 2019 campaign established what would become some of the “rhetorical fingerprints” (Matovski 2021) of Bukele's electoral autocracy. He described the leading parties as “the same ones as always,” a corrupt elite that had not created a democracy for the people, and promised a future where “there is enough money when no one steals” (Artiga 2019: 16). The young politician understood how to tap into the decline in democratic attitudes. Earlier surveys had shown that a growing number of Salvadorans would support an authoritarian government if it resolved their problems (Córdova Macías, Argueta, and Rodríguez 2021). In his victory speech that year, Bukele compared El Salvador to a sick child that required bitter medicine. He vowed that he and the people would write history together, with the guidance of God (Viñas and Budasoff 2024b). The “patient” got a first taste of the bitter medicine in February 2020, when the opposition still dominated the legislature. Under the guard of armed soldiers, the President forced his way into the Legislative Assembly Chamber to strong-arm legislators—successfully, it turned out—into approving a loan for his security policy. Bukele left the premises after “God had counseled him to be patient” (Redacción de El Faro 2023). He later resigified the meaning of the events by

claiming that the security forces had not been there “to repress the people, but to support the people” (Viñas and Budasoff 2024b).

The 2021 legislative elections came on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, which the President had managed through a strict lockdown and economic assistance for low-income households. Nuevas Ideas capitalized on Bukele’s image as a tough but effective leader and secured a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly. Then, as now, the ruling party did not need opposition support to approve a state of emergency, the government budget, international loans, and public debt as well as to appoint Supreme Court magistrates, the Attorney General, and the heads of oversight agencies. On May 1, 2021, the start of the new legislative period, the Nuevas Ideas-dominated Assembly began establishing executive control over the other branches of government. The Assembly started by illegally firing the magistrates of the Supreme Court’s Constitutional Chamber. In September 2021, the newly appointed judges issued a resolution that permitted Bukele’s unconstitutional re-election in 2024. The Supreme Court has since blocked or delayed the extradition of MS-13 gang leaders who are wanted by the United States on terrorism charges (Flores 2024). The same day that the Assembly replaced the Constitutional Chamber, it also fired the Attorney General. The prosecutor’s office had been investigating government negotiations with the gangs and corruption allegations linked to the COVID-19 pandemic (Pérez 2023a; Redacción de El Faro 2023). His successor had previously worked for Alba Petróleos, a US-sanctioned subsidiary of Venezuela’s state oil company, and as a defense lawyer for an MS-13 member accused of drug trafficking (InSight Crime 2023).

In August 2021, the Assembly enacted a judicial reform law, ostensibly to rid the judiciary of corrupt judges. The law mandated the retirement of all judges aged over 60 or with more than 30 years of service. In the following months, the Supreme Court filled the vacancies with judges who, in many cases, were unqualified or regime-friendly (OUDH 2023a). For example, the new investigating judge of the emblematic El Mozote case, which concerns an army massacre perpetrated during the civil war, has put the matter on ice (Labrador et al. 2023). The overhaul is key to the extension of the state of emergency and the impunity for the abuses committed under it. In similar fashion, the Assembly passed a prosecutorial reform law that forcibly retired some 160 prosecutors (OUDH 2023a: 14). Appointments at other oversight agencies also cast doubt on the independence of the institutions. In 2023, the Assembly selected a former Nuevas Ideas legislative candidate as magistrate of the national audit court (Benítez and Velásquez 2023). Institutions with a scrutiny and accountability role, such as the Attorney General’s office, the human rights ombudsperson, the Public Access to Information Institute, and the Supreme Court, are now insufficiently funded to conduct their work effectively (Acción Ciudadana 2024a).

Since 2021, the Legislative Assembly has done little more than rubber-stamp executive initiatives with little or no discussion, often in fast-track procedures.

Nuevas Ideas legislators have not acted as representatives of their constituencies but as “scripted messengers” (Marland and Wagner 2020) who do the President’s bidding. Over three years, the Assembly approved at least 48 new laws or modifications to existing laws. The decrees bend the justice and electoral systems to meet the needs of Bukele’s political project while eroding citizens’ rights (Pérez 2023a). Examples include the declaration and extension of the state of emergency and reforms to the freedom of information law that tighten access to public records about matters such as government expenditure (Velásquez 2023). The adoption in 2023 of a public procurement law, supposedly to modernize government procurement and contracting, allows officials to participate in public tenders and opens the door to discretionary and opaque spending processes (Labrador 2023a). In these circumstances, opposition legislators have tried to at least challenge the ruling party’s practices and be open with independent media and civil society (Ávalos 2024b). As I will show in a later section, achieving even a minimum level of transparency will prove challenging in the 2024–2027 legislative period, as opposition parties will then have only a token presence in the Assembly.

El Salvador’s freedom of information law, created in 2011, was long a valuable tool for accountability. However, repeated modifications since 2021 have weakened the legislation, and Bukele co-opted the state transparency institute (IAIP) by picking pro-government commissioners (Article 19 2023). The erosion of the agency’s autonomy and enforcement powers has permitted a culture of secrecy to develop in the public sector. In violation of their legal obligations, the authorities no longer publish official records that must be available to the public without a request needing to be filed. They also block access to information by designating it as reserved (such as homicide statistics), declaring it inexistent, or simply ignoring freedom-of-information requests (Cristosal 2023b). The Legislative Assembly, for example, has declined to disclose information such as public procurement spending and suppliers, its own budgetary spending, legislators’ CVs and email addresses, and the number and roles of Assembly staffers. Journalists investigating this last item discovered that at least some of these legislative workers are content creators who were hired to make positive material about Bukele and Nuevas Ideas (Pérez 2023b).

The access restrictions also affect public information about the President’s megaprojects, including the Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT), the Pacific train and airport, the national library and stadium, and the Hospital of El Salvador. Acción Ciudadana, a transparency NGO that studied 23 major infrastructure projects, found that the government had classified information such as the planning process, costs, financing, construction companies, and contracts as reserved (Acción Ciudadana 2023). Civil society and news organizations have tried to overcome these constraints by following the social media accounts of government officials but found themselves blocked (Cristosal 2023b). The regime’s opacity makes it difficult to evaluate policies, audit public spending, and probe human rights violations. It also enables Bukele’s electoral

autocracy to maintain the credibility of its mandate by releasing publicity yet withholding potentially compromising information.

Bukele's campaign promises in 2019 featured the creation of the International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES). This anti-corruption mechanism was established in September 2019 in agreement with the Organization of American States. In the two years it was active, the Commission shared evidence of possible public corruption with the Attorney General. The cases mostly concerned the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the financing of the media it controls (Martínez Avelar, Moreno, and Chávez 2024). The organization's work ended in June 2021 after the President had tried, unsuccessfully, to obstruct its inquiries into his administration and steer its focus instead toward opposition politicians. Bukele has signaled that he will continue to weaponize the justice system for political gain. In June 2023, in his annual speech before the Legislative Assembly, Bukele announced a "war on corruption." This latest crusade would require a new penitentiary, modeled after the CECOT mega-prison, and began with the seizure of properties and assets belonging to a former President. In characteristic nationalist rhetoric, Bukele declared: "We are only accountable to Salvadorans; that is why we have been able to make the decisions that had to be made. We are not accountable to the international community. We do not bow to the countries that want to tell us how we should solve our problems when they cannot even solve theirs" (Labrador 2023b).

Bukele had vowed to personally put in prison anyone who touched a cent. Yet corruption, and impunity for wrongdoing, have become hallmarks of the regime. Its practices, some old and some new, include the propagandistic use of uncompleted public works, opaque government spending, and contracts that benefit relatives and Nuevas Ideas members (Redacción de El Faro 2023). High-level cases implicate prison director Osiris Luna, who reportedly took food packages meant for low-income families to sell them for profit, and Carlos Marroquin, the Director for the Reconstruction of Social Cohesion, who helped an MS-13 gang leader escape from prison. Carolina Recinos, Bukele's Chief of Staff, is alleged to have participated in a money-laundering scheme (Silva Ávalos 2023) and to have used her influence in a state bank to benefit her brothers (Avelar 2023). More than a dozen current or former Bukele administration officials have been included in the US State Department's "Engel List," which sanctions individuals who have undermined democracy or engaged in significant acts of corruption. The President has dismissed the allegations as interference in domestic affairs (Avelar 2023).

The situation seems no different at the subnational level. In November 2021, Bukele set up the Municipal Works Directorate (DOM) and tasked it with carrying out infrastructure projects in the municipalities. This central government agency was ostensibly created to eradicate corruption in local areas. But since its creation, the DOM has awarded contracts for more than \$335 million to businesses that lack technical expertise or have ties to members of the Bukele ad-

ministration and the ruling party (Dimas and Quintanilla 2023). There is also evidence that more than 40 towns run by Nuevas Ideas mayors have incurred debt of more than \$215 million, not for public services and projects but for illicit enrichment (Alvarado 2024). The structure that facilitates corrupt practices is based on loyalty and comprises family members, former employees, and political operators of previous governments (Redacción de El Faro 2023). The same ties sustain the Bukele administration's economic development schemes.

### III. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: CASTLES IN THE AIR

In 2024, a Radio Ambulante podcast titled *Bukele: el señor de los sueños* explored the entrepreneur's rise in Salvadoran politics. Los Sueños is the name of the exclusive residential development where the President lives with his family. But the elected autocrat is "The Lord of the Dreams" in more than one sense: the term is also a fitting description of a leader who built popular support through a narrative that inspires people to dream of a safe and modern El Salvador. As mayor of the capital, Bukele heavily publicized the makeover of a small downtown district to establish himself as a frontrunner of progress. The advertising created political capital, but throughout his time in local and central government the flashy projects have stalled, incurred debt, and served to hide continued high levels of poverty (Viñas and Budasoff 2024a).

In June 2021, the President created headlines by introducing Bitcoin as legal tender. The decision, meant to improve financial inclusion, reduce the cost of remittances, and boost tourism, would position El Salvador as the "Singapore of Latin America" (Boos and Grigera 2023). It is unclear how much the government has spent on Bitcoin purchases, the creation of an app, and the installation of cash machines (Viñas and Budasoff 2024c). Expenditure concerns aside, the cryptocurrency is not widely used by Salvadorans, who for the most part lack the means for such an investment. But this has not stopped the government from expanding its cryptocurrency project. In November 2021, it announced plans for a Bitcoin City, a tax-free zone with its own airport, powered by geothermal energy. Bukele likened it to a modern-day Alexandria, a beacon of hope for the rest of the world (Brown Araúz and Casullo 2023). In December 2023, his administration unveiled a Freedom Visa. The program invites foreign investors to "adopt El Salvador and help build a land of economic liberty" (Bastardo 2023) by "donating" \$1 million in Bitcoin or Tether in return for a Salvadoran passport.

When he ran for his first presidential term, Bukele vowed to build 15 megaprojects at an estimated cost of at least \$1,525 million (Labrador 2023a). It appears he has since postponed if not shelved many of his ambitious plans, including those for transport facilities, schools and university campuses, and hospitals (Peñate 2024). The CECOT, by contrast, was not a campaign promise but features in the publicity surrounding the state of emergency. It was apparently



deemed more suited to portraying Bukele as a capable leader. While some infrastructure projects serve his political project, the history of others shows how Bukele uses his political power for personal financial gain. One of these is Surf City, a key tourism development initiative at El Salvador's Pacific Coast.

Surf City is the poster child of the government's approach to promoting development and alleviating poverty. The area is meant to be built in and around El Zonte, a rural coastal community in La Libertad Department that is popular with local and foreign beachgoers alike. Shops in the village accepted Bitcoin before the Bukele administration formally introduced the cryptocurrency in the country. Commercial beachfront properties, typically owned and operated by foreigners or wealthy Salvadorans, have expanded. The increase in the number of foreign visitors—the figure climbed to 32% in 2023—led to a growth in tourism-related jobs (Quesada 2024).

El Salvador's dominant economic elite, associated with the coffee oligarchy, has targeted the area for rent extraction through real estate development since the 1990s. But whereas that group was driven by a technocratic vision of urban improvement, an aspiring business elite associated with Nayib Bukele sees "city spectacles"—the flamboyant publicity around urban projects—as a way to enhance its own power and wealth (Gutiérrez 2024). The President is a descendant of Palestinian immigrants who made their fortune in the textile and pharmaceutical industries as well as through retail and advertising. Racial discrimination by the old agroexport elite, however, long prevented the Bukele family from accessing major state contracts. This began to change during the FMLN administrations (2009–2019), when the family was able to obtain public contracts and use state institutions for its real estate investments (Gutiérrez 2024). For the new ruling group, land speculation and property development are a means to gain capital, even when these deals have a detrimental impact on the ecosystem and water supplies, as in the case of Surf City. The ministers of the environment, public works, and housing appear to have been appointed not for their expertise but for their loyalty to President Bukele and their willingness to sidestep regulations (Gutiérrez 2024).

Far from boosting the nation's economic development, the government's projects exacerbate existing pressures on land and resources. For the construction of the Pacific Airport, which is expected to serve visitors to Surf City, the government has acquired agricultural land through low-cost purchases or expropriations (Miranda and Chávez 2023). In the coastal villages comprising Surf City itself, jobs are often low-paid and available to a young, English-speaking workforce, since the tourism industry increasingly caters to foreign travelers and amenity migrants (Patel 2024). Tourism development displaces poor communities that cannot afford the skyrocketing costs of land and struggle to access dwindling supplies of water (Patel 2024). Land and environmental rights defenders who resist Bukele's megaprojects, such as the Pacific Airport, have been targeted under the state of emergency (Gutiérrez 2024).

The regime's modernization discourse hides an even more complex socioeconomic situation. Almost half the population experiences food insecurity, and between 2019 and 2022, extreme poverty increased by two percentage points to 8.7% (Ribando Seelke 2024). The economy depends heavily on remittances (24% of GDP) and in 2023 recorded a growth of only 2.6%, making it the least dynamic in Central America (González Díaz 2024). The reduction in crime and violence associated with the state of emergency has prompted greater domestic and diaspora investment, but foreign direct investment continues to remain low (Ribando Seelke 2024). Meanwhile, government debt exceeds 90% of GDP, and it is unclear how the country will make its debt repayments in the coming years (González Díaz 2024). The Bukele administration has tried to solve its liquidity problem by negotiating a financing program with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, discussions stalled after El Salvador rejected an IMF recommendation to remove Bitcoin as legal tender (Kinosian and Renteria 2024). Surveys indicate that Salvadorans are now more worried about the lack of jobs and the rising cost of living than about security matters. In 2023, 70% of respondents to the Jesuit University's end-of-year poll identified economic issues as the nation's main problem (IUDOP 2024a). The question is whether Bukele will choose to address these concerns through policies that genuinely improve the lives of citizens or whether he will follow the blueprint that he adopted to control gang activity: populism and publicity.

#### IV. THE STATE OF EMERGENCY: A SPECTACLE

For much of the postwar period, El Salvador struggled with gang activity and an elevated but since 2016 steadily declining homicide rate. Bukele had stated that he would confront the security situation with his Territorial Control Plan, a never-published program that asked the state to retake gang territories and engage in community-based prevention. In practice, the President leaned toward a militarized public security strategy when, on the last weekend of March 2022, gang members murdered 87 Salvadorans. In response to the killings, Bukele asked the Legislative Assembly to decree a state of emergency, which remains in place at the time of writing. The state of emergency suspends the constitutional rights to freedom of association and assembly, to counsel, to privacy in communications, and to being informed of the reason for one's arrest. Legal reforms expanded the use of pretrial detention and lowered the age of criminal responsibility for children accused of gang-related crimes from 16 to 12. The authorities have since arrested more than 77,000 people (Valencia 2024), but the lack of publicly available statistics makes it difficult to confirm possible gang affiliations or the age and gender of detainees (Viñas and Budasoff 2024d). Between 2022 and 2023, the registered homicide rate fell from 8 to 2 per 100,000 inhabitants, the lowest since the Peace Accords (Redacción de El Faro 2023).

Based on visits to former gang strongholds in 10 municipalities, analysts found that emergency rule has disrupted the groups' leadership structures and de-

mobilized much of their street-level membership. However, dozens of gang cliques remain active and extortion continues, albeit on a smaller scale (InSight Crime 2023). In previously gang-dominated communities there is a clear sense of respite, and opinion polls reveal overwhelming support for the state of emergency (IUDOP 2024a). The “Bukele model” has quickly become a household name in other places across the region that are trying to contain rising criminal violence. El Salvador’s improved security situation does not seem to justify a continuation of the state of emergency. But Security Minister Gustavo Villatoro warned that the measure would continue until the gang threat had been completely eradicated (Urbina 2024). The official’s remarks point to an electoral autocracy’s core dilemma: the risk of becoming obsolete when it fails or when it succeeds in resolving the crisis that justifies its existence. To maintain popular consent, an autocratic regime must maintain yet also appear to end the crisis that legitimizes its rule (Matovski 2021). Bukele wants to attribute his security achievements to the state of emergency. At the same time, he raises the specter of gang violence to justify extending the measure that gives him widespread support, with Salvadorans giving him a rating of 8.5 on a scale of 0 to 10 (IUDOP 2024a: 35).

The reason why the state of emergency has boosted the President’s popularity to this extent may be difficult to appreciate without an understanding of how gang violence has impacted most Salvadorans in the last three decades. The main street gangs, the MS-13 and the Barrio 18 with its rival Sureño and Revolucionarios factions, emerged in deprived Los Angeles immigrant neighborhoods. The groups developed in El Salvador after the United States increased its deportations of noncitizen gang members in the 1990s. Postwar reconstruction and disinterest in a gang policy meant that the gangs could grow in marginalized communities. As governments began targeting their members in the 2000s, the groups reacted by strengthening their leadership structures, creating systematic extortion rackets, and threatening civilians who failed to meet their demands. Forced recruitment and sexual violence intensified, and the invisible borders of gang territories made it difficult for people to study, work, or visit family. Salvadorans increasingly found that their life had become impossible and fled their homes to escape gang persecution (Wolf 2020).

Successive governments across the political spectrum pursued a *mano dura* (“iron fist”) approach to gangs and crime, typically with the intent to gain an electoral advantage. Combining joint police and military patrols with area sweeps and mass arrests, the strategy contributed to a rise in violence and transformations of the gangs (Wolf 2017). The first FMLN administration was prepared to discontinue gang suppression yet unable to make headway in social prevention. In 2012 it began secret negotiations with the gangs to achieve a reduction in homicides in exchange for improved prison conditions and other benefits. When the truce collapsed after a year, murders escalated to an unprecedented rate of 106 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 (Wolf 2024). The experience taught the gangs that they could manipulate governments by

lowering or increasing violence at will. While Bukele publicly condemned his predecessor's policy choices, in private he embraced them. As investigations by the independent news outlet *El Faro* revealed, his administration made an undisclosed pact with gang leaders to obtain electoral support and a drop in violence (Martínez, Cáceres, and Martínez 2021). The mass killings in late March 2022 were a retaliation by gangs for the breakdown of the agreement after the authorities had arrested gang members heading to Guatemala in an official vehicle (Martínez 2022).

The state of emergency has been striking in part because of the torrent of emblematic images that purport to show life in El Salvador's newest prison. Inaugurated in January 2023, its reported capacity of 40,000 individuals makes the CECOT one of the largest detention centers in Latin America (Urbina and Segura 2023). In what is clearly a performative exercise designed to demonstrate the retributive power of the state, the pictures typically show hundreds of tattooed gang members huddled together, with shaved heads and white boxers. Except for influencers who support this publicity campaign, access to the facility is heavily restricted. While the security budget has ballooned to \$2.4 billion, the Bukele administration has not improved prison conditions or invested in violence prevention and victim assistance programs (Sandoval 2024a). The government promises not only a false solution to El Salvador's violence but also a spectacle that hides the reality of the state of emergency.

The regime depicts the measure as a "war on gangs." Human rights defenders, however, have documented thousands of human rights violations, from arbitrary detention and the unlawful entry of private property to inhumane conditions and ill-treatment in detention (SSPAS 2023). Arrests are made mostly on charges of the broadly defined crimes of illicit association or membership of a terrorist organization. The adduced evidence is questionable and includes anonymous tip-offs, a "nervous appearance," or hearsay on social media. Police reports obtained by InSight Crime (2023) indicate that most people apprehended under the state of emergency are classified not as gang members but as "wannabes" (aspiring gang members) and "collaborators" (forced accomplices). By the end of September 2023, designated gang members accounted for only 42% of the more than 77,000 detainees, while 54% were collaborators and 4% wannabes (InSight Crime 2023). In practice, the state of emergency targets young and poor residents in gang-affected neighborhoods (OUDH 2023a). Dozens of environmental activists, union leaders, and journalists have also been caught in the dragnet (Sandoval 2024b), signaling that the state of emergency is being used to silence critical voices. The Supreme Court has rejected more than 4,000 writs for habeas corpus presented by the families of arbitrarily detained persons (Pérez 2023a). By contrast, the authorities secretly released at least six convicted MS-13 leaders from prison who were wanted by the United States and are now in detention in that country (García 2024).

With more than 105,000 inmates, El Salvador now has the world's highest incarceration rate—almost 2% of the population (InSight Crime 2023). El Salva-

dor's prisons have long been notorious for their squalid and overcrowded conditions, and the mass arrests have only aggravated this situation. Human rights violations in the penitentiary facilities are shocking in their scale and brutality. Detainees have severely limited access to food, water, and healthcare, and the acute lack of hygiene is making people sick. As of February 2024, human rights organizations have documented at least 235 deaths in custody because of beatings and torture or being denied medication or medical assistance (Bernal 2024). The authorities often fail to investigate the circumstances of these deaths or notify the families of the deceased. Sometimes the bodies are simply buried in mass graves (Cristosal 2023a). Individuals who die of their injuries after their release from prison are not included in the number of prison deaths (Gellman 2024). One case that illustrates the abuses under the state of emergency is that of President Bukele's former national security adviser. Alejandro Muysshondt was arrested in August 2023 after disclosing information about the regime's alleged involvement in corruption and organized crime. After his death in state custody in February 2024, Muysshondt's body was returned to his family exhibiting signs of torture and organ removal (Hernández 2024).

The arbitrary detentions are sustained by legal reforms passed between March 2022 and August 2023. The amendments follow an enemy penology, a concept whereby the criminal law is deployed against declared enemies of society or the state and denies them legal remedies (Cristosal 2023c). The Legislative Assembly extended the limit of pretrial detention to two years and created special tribunals presided by "faceless judges." The trials are closed to the public and marred by due process violations. Each proceeding involves hundreds of defendants who receive only limited legal assistance by overworked public defenders. The anonymous judges have instructions to remand people in detention regardless of any exculpatory evidence (Cristosal 2023a). An investigation by *La Prensa Gráfica* showed that, as of June 2023, the authorities released 5,158 people, 69% of whom were found to have no gang ties and 31% of whom were alleged gang members or collaborators. However, 85% of freed inmates remain in an alternative to detention and have yet to face trial (Flores, Jordán, and Segura 2023). The Jesuit University's human rights observatory concluded (OUDH 2023a) that today there are two parallel justice systems in El Salvador: one democratic, and the other governed by the state of emergency.

The measure contributes to new forms of abuse, not only in the courtroom but also in the streets. Police officers and soldiers extort working-class residents and sexually harass women in the areas they patrol, threatening them with arrest if they protest or fail to comply (Gellman 2024). These unlawful acts do not seem to tarnish the image of the security forces. The military, one of the most widely respected state institutions, has the trust of two-thirds of the population (IUDOP 2024a). Since the state of emergency provides cover for state agents to behave with impunity, it is troubling that Bukele has continued and deepened the militarization that the Peace Accords were meant to halt. In 2021 the President promised to double the number of military personnel over the next five

years, from 20,200 to 40,000 (Benítez 2022). The budget of the Armed Forces has significantly increased during his administration and is now the highest it has been since the end of the civil war (Sandoval 2024a). In the El Mozote case, the previous investigating judge repeatedly requested the opening of military archives, but the army refused to comply with the order (Labrador et al. 2023). Nothing indicates that the Armed Forces seek a political role for themselves. However, the occupation of the Legislative Assembly in 2020 and the blocking of military accountability suggest that they will serve as an instrument of repression when Bukele's popularity declines.

To justify the state of emergency, the President has quite effectively employed a dichotomic narrative that pitches "good citizens" against "terrorists" and human rights defenders (Reyes and Trejo 2024). The "terrorist" label has a performative character (Baele et al. 2019), as it influences people to perceive perpetrators of violence as immoral and boosts support for harsher penalties. Salvadorans have come to view the state of emergency more critically and adjust their routines and behavior for fear of being detained (IUDOP 2022). But 70% of the population acknowledges the measure to be the government's main achievement (FUNDAUNGO 2024). Surveys suggest that people's positive assessment of Bukele's security strategy is tied to two factors. First, two-thirds of the population have little or no interest in political news (FUNDAUNGO 2024: 11). Second, Salvadorans consume news through television (59%) and social media (59%), particularly Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube (FUNDAUNGO 2024: 12). The President understands the power of these platforms and uses them not only to promote himself but also to undermine the credibility of his opponents.

## V. MEDIA: A PERMANENT CAMPAIGN

El Salvador's relatively small independent media sector has limited reach, since pro-government media and platforms crowd out alternative voices (Oxfam 2023). The Bukele regime takes a multipronged approach to media control. On the one hand, it punishes critical outlets by withdrawing advertising revenue, a decision that has left some newsrooms in a precarious financial situation. Officials also pressure some news organizations to fire journalists or cancel programs (APES 2023a). Radio stations fear that their work can cost them the suspension of their broadcasting license (APES 2023a). On the other hand, the administration has created its own media structure that comprises a newspaper (*Diario El Salvador*), a television channel (Channel 10), and radio stations (National Radio and Cuscatlán Radio, a service of the Ministry of Defense). These outlets promote the elected autocrat, spread disinformation, and discredit individuals and groups that are critical of the regime (APES 2023a). YouTubers and pseudo-journalistic digital platforms, such as *La Britany* and *El Blog*, amplify official content and incite hatred toward adversaries of the government (Oxfam 2023).

Bukele rarely gives interviews or press conferences. He is, however, the first President of El Salvador who makes extensive use of social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter), to communicate with ministers, followers, and the international community. Bukele publicly acknowledged the power of social media when he opened his first address to the UN General Assembly by taking a cell phone photo of himself and declaring that more people would remember the selfie than his speech. Early in his administration, he garnered widespread attention for his “tweet decrees,” giving his cabinet members orders and firing state employees without regard for labor rights. Bukele is often sarcastic, for example when he used his X profile to describe himself as “the coolest dictator in the world.” At other times, he uses offensive and polarizing language that arouses strong emotions and translates into greater levels of user engagement.

In his communication strategy, the Central American leader uses personalism and spectacle to construct himself as a celebrity-like politician (Salas and Siles 2023). He comments on subjects ranging from sports to popular culture and shares personal stories to create a sense of fake proximity with his followers. Conversely, the President insults NGOs and opposition parties and chastises the media for not writing about “the good things” in his administration. Bukele’s discourse includes religious references to suggest that he is “the anointed one” to lead the nation out of its crisis (Salas and Siles 2023). Policy announcements reveal how his position has shifted over the years, from a progressive politician to a leader without ideology to a Trump-style conservative (Reyes and Trejo 2024). Through his communication, both online and offline, Bukele is “permanently campaigning” (Salas and Siles 2023) to raise his popular appeal, stay in power, and reconfigure power relations in El Salvador.

Pro-government social media accounts amplify the President’s messages. For example, in July 2023 alone, the *Diario El Salvador* published more than 20,000 X posts about the state of emergency, which had some six million views (Pérez 2023c). Government ministries and the Legislative Assembly generate extensive social network traffic, through official and personal accounts. However, these publications spread disinformation and promote affective polarization between regime supporters and opponents (Pérez 2023c). While X is not the most widely used platform in El Salvador, citizens hear about Bukele’s posts because they have become the equivalent of a newspaper headline. The sheer difficulty of accessing public information, such as law enforcement statistics or Bitcoin purchases, leaves even critical outlets with few options but to replicate what the President decides to share (Reyes and Trejo 2024).

Throughout his administration, Bukele has portrayed the media as an enemy of the people. Often, he asserts that news workers across Latin America are paid by philanthropist and Open Society founder George Soros. “In reality,” Bukele has said, “they are not journalists but political activists with an established and perverse global agenda” (Quintanilla 2024). Government officials and legislators of the ruling party reinforce his narrative by describing reporters as “trash” or alleging that they are “terrorists” and “spokespersons for the gangs

that have caused so much harm to the people” (APES 2023b: 20). The President likes to claim that “no journalist in El Salvador gets killed or put in jail” (Secretaría de Prensa 2024a). But his hate speech against independent media foments attacks against news professionals and press freedom.

Critical coverage of the Bukele regime is met with a barrage of social media attacks. These are viralized by automated bots and anonymous trolls, including from within the Salvadoran diaspora in the United States (APES 2024a). Digital harassment of women journalists is loaded with sexist, misogynist, and lesbophobic messages, while the violence against their male counterparts is sometimes homophobic or transphobic in nature (APES 2023b; APES 2024a). More generally, media workers face intimidation and defamation, restrictions on the exercise of journalism, surveillance and spying, and arbitrary detention. In 2023, after being harassed with trumped-up accusations of money laundering, the investigative newspaper *El Faro* moved its administrative and legal operations to Costa Rica (OUDH 2023b). That same year, the Journalists Association of El Salvador documented 311 aggressions against journalists, the highest figure since 2018 (APES 2024b). As a result of these attacks, at least ten journalists have fled into exile (APES 2023b).

The Bukele administration hinders independent journalism also outside of social networks. At the same time as it pressures transparency offices not to release public information, the government prevents critical reporters from attending its press conferences and interviewing its officials (APES 2023a; Article 19 2023). In 2022, the state covertly installed the Pegasus spyware on the cell phones of dozens of journalists to track them and harvest the data on their devices. After the spying scandal, many Salvadoran media workers found it harder to earn the trust of potential sources (OUDH 2023b). The state of emergency adds another layer of complications. Soldiers and police officers have attacked reporters with impunity, prevented them from accessing public buildings, confiscated their equipment, or asked them to delete their footage. The possibility of arbitrary detention has created a climate of fear that encourages self-censorship (APES 2023a). The challenge for journalists is to perform their watchdog role despite these constraints and to find compelling ways of telling their stories. This was not a minor ask in 2023, the year when the regime hatched a plan to secure Bukele another democratic mandate.

## VI. ELECTIONS: THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY

Nayib Bukele’s strategy to be El Salvador’s leader and get his family the political influence it sought originated in his stint as mayor with the FMLN. At that time, he established his anti-corruption credentials by claiming that he simply wanted to serve his country and was wealthy enough to not need to steal public money (Viñas and Budasoff 2024a). When the FMLN declined his bid to be its presidential candidate, Bukele engineered his expulsion from the party to



be able to run on another ticket. A diaspora movement that had become disillusioned with the FMLN offered him *Nuevas Ideas* as a vehicle for the presidency. Bukele and his circle, however, quickly seized control of the organization (Wolf 2024). Unable to register *Nuevas Ideas* in time for the 2019 elections, he campaigned with the *Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional* (GANU), a party that had broken away from the conservative *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA) and was tarnished by corruption and drug trafficking allegations. Despite his ties to both the FMLN and ARENA, Bukele successfully positioned himself as the antidote to an establishment perceived as dishonest and inefficient. Electoral rule-bending, campaign irregularities, and election irregularities reduced the opposition's competitiveness and virtually guaranteed the continuation of his autocracy.

Between 2021 and 2023, the Legislative Assembly pushed through a series of reforms that resulted in a major overhaul of El Salvador's electoral system. An amendment to the Electoral Code passed in March 2023 permitted legal changes in the year prior to an election, contrary to international standards. The main reform packages covered the immediate presidential re-election, voting from abroad, the reduction of legislative seats, and the system for seat allocation as well as the reduction and redesigning of municipal districts.

In September 2021, the Constitutional Chamber declared immediate presidential re-election to be lawful, provided the President request a leave of duty six months prior to the beginning of their next mandate. The decision disregarded a constitutional ban designed to prevent a resurgence of the dictatorships that El Salvador had seen in the past. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) objected to neither the ruling nor Bukele's candidacy (Iniciativa Votante 2023). The authority was unlikely to change its position once the Assembly, in January 2023, modified the Penal Code to establish a prison sentence of up to 15 years for anyone who impedes the registration of political candidates.

In September 2021, the Assembly also passed a Special Law for Voting from Abroad. For the first time, overseas voters in the United States could vote electronically (online or in voting centers) in both the presidential and the legislative elections. Previously, ballot papers had to be posted, and diaspora voter turnout had been low. Extensive government publicity, amplified by US-based YouTubers, encouraged Salvadoran immigrants to participate (Viñas and Budasoff 2024e). However, the reform establishes that votes cast by citizens with either a Salvadoran passport or a residence in El Salvador are assigned to the San Salvador department. As it stands, the norm distorts the political representation in the Legislative Assembly (Iniciativa Votante 2023).

Further reforms passed in June 2023 reduced the number of legislative seats from 80 to 60 and replaced the Hare method for seat allocation with the D'Hondt method. This change would favor *Nuevas Ideas*, the largest political party in the Assembly (Iniciativa Votante 2023). That same month, the number of municipalities was reduced from 262 to 44 and reorganized into districts of

the newly created mayoralties. Although the ruling party argued that moving geographic boundaries was required to reduce costs and bureaucracy, it presented no technical criteria for the redistricting. This gerrymandering will complicate citizens' access to public services, but it will again benefit Nuevas Ideas and make it easier for the central government to exercise control over resource-dependent local governments (Iniciativa Votante 2023).

El Salvador held presential and legislative elections in February 2024 and elections for local governments and the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN) the following month. None of the political parties and their candidates discussed their policies or participated in debates. Ignoring traditional canvassing, Bukele sought to dazzle voters with a Miss Universe beauty contest and the inauguration of the China-funded National Library of El Salvador. In social and traditional media, he campaigned on the perceived success of the state of emergency. Government ads warned: "After the peace agreements, tens of thousands of people were murdered and disappeared, millions of people were displaced, billions of dollars were lost to extortion. All this was caused by the gangs. Do not ever let that past return" (Acción Ciudadana 2024b). Similarly, the President asked Salvadorans to vote for ruling party candidates to avoid a new security crisis. "If we lose just one Nuevas Ideas legislator, the opposition will achieve its true and only plan: free the gang members and use them to come to power," he warned (Cáceres 2024).

Since its first electoral participation in 2021, Nuevas Ideas has been a personalist party that revolves around the figure of Nayib Bukele. During the most recent campaign, regime candidates for the Assembly acted as "brand ambassadors" (Marland and Wagner 2020), seeking to capitalize on the President's image to drum up support for themselves. Regime candidates also saw their campaigns bolstered by state resources for media publicity or public works. For example, in 2021 the Bukele government reduced the municipal development fund from 10% to 1.5% of the net income of the state budget before shifting the monies for infrastructure projects to the DOM. Since then, the new directorate has concentrated its resources on Nuevas Ideas-governed municipalities, including \$210 million specifically to boost the image of its mayoral candidates (Dimas 2024). Salvadorans, it was suggested, had much to gain from a victory of Nuevas Ideas. Between August 2023 and January 2024, the organization spent 96% of the \$9 million political parties expended on electoral propaganda. In the same period, the government disbursed an additional \$6 million for electoral propaganda in favor of Bukele and Nuevas Ideas (Acción Ciudadana 2024b).

Compared to 2019, the campaign spending for the 2024 elections had declined by 72%, largely because the other 11 contending parties lacked the necessary resources (Acción Ciudadana 2024b). The political opposition has been in decline during the Bukele years. ARENA and the FMLN, the dominant organizations until 2019, had not learned from past mistakes and did not field compelling presidential candidates (Ávalos 2023). Opposition parties were denied their public campaign funding and found that potential private donors had been in-

timidated into denying their support (Acción Ciudadana 2024b). Despite highly unequal campaign conditions, the opposition parties participated in the elections, in some cases to avoid being struck off the register and in others because they were convinced they should provide a check on executive power from the Legislative Assembly (Labrador 2023c). Electoral rule violations, which the TSE ignored, hampered the exercise of an informed vote and the fairness of the elections (OEA 2024a).

The campaign inequalities were reflected in voting intention polls. Bukele has become a cult-like figure whose image is plastered on billboards and buildings. As is perhaps befitting for a country led by an electoral autocrat, El Salvador's international airport features a mockup of Bukele's presidential office where passengers can take selfies (Quesada and Guillén 2024). What is more, the leader's fearmongering seemed to have had its own effect, as even relatives of people victimized under the state of emergency indicated they believed in the measure and would vote for Bukele (Valencia 2024). Surveys showed that while opposition candidates were virtually unknown, Bukele and Nuevas Ideas had a commanding lead in voter intentions. Salvadorans overwhelmingly supported his unconstitutional re-election and were prepared to back Nuevas Ideas candidates to facilitate the President's governance (CEC 2024; IUDOP 2024b). Citizens are not necessarily in favor of Bukele, but many acknowledge that they see no alternative to him and his party (Ávalos 2024a).

The elections, particularly those for President and the Legislative Assembly, were marred by irregularities. During polling hours, anomalies included the unauthorized handling of electoral materials, Nuevas Ideas members' intimidation of other party monitors and electoral observers, and the harassment of journalists (Observa El Salvador 2024; OEA 2024b). In the afternoon, Bukele gave an unofficial press conference to urge people to vote for the ruling party's legislative candidates. El Salvador's leader used the opportunity to legitimize his autocratic rule through the will of the popular majority: "If people vote for the President and for a configuration of the Legislative Assembly that is in favor of what the government does, that is democracy" (Secretaría de Prensa 2024a). The vote counting and processing descended into chaos, because the transmission system multiplied the number of processed votes or broke down completely at times (Observa El Salvador 2024). The difficulties hindered the timely publication of the election results. The extent of the electoral manipulation suggests that the regime left nothing to chance to maintain its legitimate and supposedly democratic authority.

Bukele gained 83% of the vote, at a turnout of 53% of the electorate (OEA 2024b). Before the results were official, foreign governments started congratulating him, apparently loath to stand up to a democratically elected autocrat. Nuevas Ideas scored a similarly crushing victory, obtaining 54 out of 60 seats in the Legislative Assembly as well as 26 mayoralties, plus two in coalition. The opposition suffered a bitter, though expected, defeat. ARENA and Vamos, a conservative minority party, could claim one legislative seat, respectively. Fif-

teen municipalities will be governed by regime-sympathetic parties, and only one by ARENA (OEA 2024c). For the first time in its history, the FMLN will not have representation at either level. The electoral reforms of June 2023 clearly benefited the ruling party and enable an even greater concentration of power than before. El Salvador now has a hegemonic party system that presents a façade of democracy but denies opposition parties any real power. On its last day, the outgoing Legislative Assembly passed a constitutional modification that expedites future constitutional reforms and paves the way for indefinite presidential re-election (Labrador and Barrera 2024). If many Salvadorans remain convinced of Bukele's ability to solve their problems, or at least do not mobilize against their leader, his autocracy will endure for years to come.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Salvadorans had grown disillusioned with politicians who promised but failed to reduce entrenched marginalization and violence. Nayib Bukele has obtained and maintained power by offering popular accountability and uncompromising, effective government to address their grievances. His modernization narrative has given people hope for a better future for themselves and their country. However, his populist discourse masks an intention to achieve political and economic influence for the Bukele family and the aspiring business elite associated with it. While the President may claim to be popularly elected, he is an autocrat who has dismantled democratic institutions and curtailed press freedom—with little resistance. The Central American leader has used his mandate to remove safeguards against corruption, pursue lucrative development schemes, and seek reforms that enable him to consolidate his grip on power. Bukele plays with Salvadorans' fear of renewed gang violence to maintain support for the state of emergency and his electoral autocracy. The regime, now built on an unconstitutional re-election and a hegemonic party system, is bound to endure if citizens believe in its ability to solve the country's problems.

External democratization pressures appear to be limited. In the foreign policy arena, Bukele has established diplomatic ties with China, which is interested in expanding its influence in Latin America and has committed to financing more infrastructure projects in El Salvador (Ventas 2024). The Central American nation's relations with the United States became strained after the 2021 legislative elections. Tensions heightened when Bukele officials were included in the Engel List (Redacción de El Faro 2023). The Biden administration has been troubled by democratic backsliding and corruption in El Salvador. However, it has struggled to balance these concerns with the fact that Bukele's policies are popular and seem to have helped reduce irregular migration from the country.

The 2024 US presidential election, which will see Kamala Harris run against Donald Trump, has further reduced the appetite for involvement in El Salvador's domestic affairs (Ribando Seelke 2024). Bukele's participation in the

2024 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) suggests that he is preparing for a Republican victory. He told his audience that El Salvador had defeated globalism and advocated for the re-engineering of government to rid a country of criminals and corrupt officials (Secretaría de Prensa 2024b). The gathering enabled conservatives from both sides of the border to show that authoritarian rule is spreading and constitutes a legitimate way of tackling society's problems. Given his shared proclivity for social media and fake news, a re-elected Trump would likely have a more permissive attitude toward Bukele than Harris.

El Salvador's leader has no incentive to relinquish power voluntarily. Buoyed by his renewed mandate, he can be expected to continue the crackdown on dissenting voices that began under the state of emergency. In 2021, during his annual speech to the Legislative Assembly, Bukele vowed that the political establishment would never return to power and that its ideological apparatus would be eliminated, including independent media, think tanks, and NGOs (Meléndez Sánchez 2021). Civil society had begun to crumble during the FMLN administrations. At the time, progressives looked for new ways of making a difference, and the leftist party no longer welcomed demands for structural transformations it could not deliver (Artiga 2019). Under Bukele, universities and think tanks have moderated their positions. Human rights and media organizations are attacked and discredited on social media, and people are afraid to participate in civic activities for fear of detention under the state of emergency (Cristosal 2023b).

The unsustainability of the security measure as well as the lack of economic improvements may lead to growing disenchantment with the regime. However, an electoral autocracy can sustain itself despite declining popular support. All it takes is for people not to express their discontent, because they dread instability or see no other options (Matovski 2021). Despite the official propaganda, academic, civic, and media organizations need to keep educating citizens about democracy, human rights, and the rule of law—these concepts are not mere abstractions but protect people from arbitrary rule. To reduce the appeal of the electoral autocracy, opposition groups will need to acknowledge the challenges that El Salvador faces and present citizens with credible alternatives to the solutions that Bukele offers.

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