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THESIS

**BREAKING THE DEMOCRATIC FABRIC: ASSESSING
THE IMPACT OF GANG VIOLENCE IN EL SALVADOR**

by

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September 2023

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**BREAKING THE DEMOCRATIC FABRIC: ASSESSING THE IMPACT
OF GANG VIOLENCE IN EL SALVADOR**

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ABSTRACT

El Salvador's democracy has historically struggled with two main issues: corruption and gang violence. President Nayib Bukele's election in 2019 ushered in what many Salvadorans believed would be a new political era, eliminating those concerns and strengthening democracy. This research explores how Bukele manipulated gang violence through collaboration with them to expand his power and thus initiate democratic backsliding in the country. It first uses qualitative research methods to examine the history of gangs and gang violence in El Salvador and its previous impact on the country's democracy. It then employs the comparative analysis method to assess Bukele's current gang control tactics and the evolution of traditional street gangs. This research finds that Bukele's practices suggest multiple indicators of democratic backsliding in El Salvador. The study highlights the causes for concern among the international community about the spread of Bukele's influence, specifically in other Latin American countries and the United States, and makes recommendations for the international community to help ensure democracy thrives in El Salvador.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ARENA	Alianza Republicana Nacionalist/Nationalist Republican Alliance
CABEI	Central American Bank for Economic Integration
CARSS	Central America Regional Support Services
CIMA	Center for International Media
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
GAN	Grand Alliance for National Unity
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PNC	Policia Nacional Civil
OAS	Organization of American States
OHCHR	UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
TCO	Transnational Criminal Organization
UN	United Nations
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence and corruption have permeated El Salvador's democratic history, and the recent deviation in the country's political landscape has drawn increased attention from the international community.¹ Although onlookers see the drastic decline in gang violence as a positive development, the country shows democratic backsliding, too.² At the helm of the deconsolidation is President Nayib Bukele. A polarizing figure who empathized with citizens' grievances regarding increased government corruption and lack of security, he campaigned on promises to end corruption and gang violence. In the end, Bukele manipulated the gangs and their violent tactics to gain more political power and weaken the democratic traditions promised to the citizens of El Salvador.³ This research examines the relationship between Bukele and the gangs, its contribution to his autocratic rise, and the fall of democracy.

To better understand the history of El Salvador and the declining trends in its democracy, this thesis relies on qualitative research methods to illustrate the beginnings of democratic backsliding based on the five arenas of democracy presented by Linz and Stepan. These arenas include "a free and lively civil society, a valued political system, rule of law, state bureaucracy, and institutionalized economic society."⁴ Scholars also argue that the same arenas contributing to the birth of democracy also play a role in

¹ Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez, "Latin America Erupts: Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2021): 19–20, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0031>.

² Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez, "Bukele Has Defeated El Salvador's Gangs—for Now. How? And What Does It Mean for the Region?," *Lawfare* (blog), March 28, 2023, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/bukele-has-defeated-el-salvadors-gangs%E2%80%94now-how-and-what-does-it-mean-region>.

³ Meléndez-Sánchez.

⁴ Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7.

democratic deconsolidation, typically at the hands of the citizenry.⁵ Accordingly, this research applies such concepts to El Salvador's past and present state.

As a newer democracy, El Salvador historically struggled to build and maintain a democracy because of intensified gang violence, an unstable and inequitable economic system, mistrust in the political system, and a lack of regard for the effective rule of law. Even so, several democratic traditions existed, such as the right to due process, checks and balances, and the freedom of the press.⁶ Although transparency in governance was inconsistent, multiple arrests for corruption by political leaders and a ban on negotiations with gang members to preserve democratic norms produced some consequences.⁷ Flawed as democracies are, El Salvador's history showed that preserving democracy remained a priority.

Nonetheless, the ban did not stop Bukele from illegally negotiating with gangs and circumventing the rule of law to gain more political power, beginning democratic backsliding in El Salvador.⁸ Negotiations resulted in a drastic drop in homicides, and thus, El Salvadorans felt safer in their communities. Their trust in the government grew as Bukele appeared to uphold his campaign promises. This immense civilian support allowed Bukele to control the legislative and judicial branches of government by establishing majority rule in the legislature with elected members from his self-made political party. The legislature authorized the removal of Supreme Court justices, prosecutors, judges, and the attorney general investigating Bukele for his illegal actions while subsequently voting to remove the previously unconstitutional ban on presidential

⁵ Milan W. Svobik, "Polarization versus Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 23–24, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039>.

⁶ José Miguel Cruz, "Fighting Gangs to Dismantle Democracy: How Anti-Crime Policies Have Contributed to the Authoritarian Drift in Central America," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 29, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2022): 45–50, <https://bjwa.brown.edu/29-1/fighting-gangs-to-dismantle-democracy-how-anti-crime-policies-have-contributed-to-the-authoritarian-drift-in-central-america/>.

⁷ Miguel Meléndez-Sánchez, "What's Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?," *Lawfare* (blog), April 11, 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/whats-behind-spike-violence-el-salvador>.

⁸ Cruz, "Fighting Gangs to Dismantle Democracy," 53.

reelection.⁹ With control over all three levels of government and continued civilian support, Bukele seems destined for reelection in 2024, and fear over the stability of El Salvador's democracy intensifies.

Because of his stronghold on the government, Bukele undermined democratic traditions and civil liberties in El Salvador. A state of exception enacted to stop a rise in gang violence derailed the right to due process. Arbitrary arrests, including thousands of children and innocent civilians, result in overcrowded prisons that limit the detainees' availability for competent legal counsel. At the same time, restrictions on the freedom of the press disallowed any news outlet to investigate and report on his actions.¹⁰ Bukele claims, and many of his supporters believe, that these actions are necessary to combat increased gang violence. Instead, gang violence has become the scapegoat for democratic backsliding.

Bukele's actions are not only a cause for concern for democracy in El Salvador but also in Latin America. Other countries in the region also take note of Bukele's tactics, praise his initiatives, and explore ways to implement his methods in their respective countries.¹¹ The continued constitutional and human rights violations against El Salvador's citizens undermine democratic traditions and thus intensify the migration of Salvadorans to countries such as the United States.¹² Therefore, this thesis recommends that the international community focus on fighting corruption in El Salvador and encourage politicians and security forces to uphold the rule of law and constitutional decrees, emphasizing accountability. Reinstating the traditional democratic institutions disbanded in El Salvador would also encourage investment from more countries and private companies to ensure prosperity for those in the region.

⁹ "El Salvador: Legislature Deepens Democratic Backsliding," Human Rights Watch, November 1, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/11/01/el-salvador-legislature-deepens-democratic-backsliding>.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *"We Can Arrest Anyone We Want": Widespread Human Rights Violations Under El Salvador's "State of Emergency"* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022).

¹¹ Meléndez-Sánchez, "Bukele Has Defeated El Salvador's Gangs."

¹² National Security Council, *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2021), 5.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The processes that transformed El Salvador from the “murder capital of the world” to nearly murder-free deserve some attention.¹ In 2015, El Salvador had the world’s highest murder rate, averaging 103 homicides for every 100,000 citizens, its most deadly year since the civil war ended in 1992.² The key perpetrator was Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), one of the world’s most notorious street gangs. The gang capitalized on El Salvador’s weak state institutions, deep social divides, and socio-economic disparity to carry out its criminal activities. After outsider presidential candidate Nayib Bukele—a 37-year-old populist who vowed to end the two-decade-long trend of political corruption and citizen discontent—won in 2019, the 2022 homicide rate dropped almost to zero amid a worrying decline in democratic practices.³ Whether Bukele can maintain this change while adhering to democratic institutions is of utmost concern to the international community.

The reduction in violence has challenged democratic consolidation. A plummeting murder rate in El Salvador resulted from secret and illegal negotiations with gang leadership in exchange for better prison conditions.⁴ The deal also protected gang members from extradition to the United States on terrorism charges, culminating in a state of emergency that eliminated due process, human rights, and free press in the country. Warrantless raids and mass arrests ensued. Security checkpoints throughout the country arrested nearly 64,000 citizens, including 1,600 children, all suspected gang members.⁵ The newly expanded detention period has increased from 72 hours to almost

¹ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2020), 2.

² International Crisis Group, 2.

³ International Crisis Group, 34.

⁴ Roberto Valencia, “El Salvador Arrests Thousands but Gangs Keep Their Guns,” *InSight Crime* (blog), July 26, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/news/el-salvador-arrests-thousands-gangs-keep-guns/>.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “*We Can Arrest Anyone We Want*”: *Widespread Human Rights Violations Under El Salvador’s “State of Emergency”* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022), 1.

15 days, and the restrictions on legal defense have raised concerns from the local and international communities.⁶ These developments indicate the dilution of El Salvador’s democratization.

Running for reelection in 2024, Bukele has continuously tested the limitations of El Salvador’s democratic institutions.⁷ Reelection—a feat considered unconstitutional before Bukele’s political party, Nuevas Ideas, gained majority control of the country’s legislative assembly and overturned the ban on a second term—was just the beginning of undermining democracy.⁸ In addition, Bukele and his legislature worked to eliminate checks and balances, ousting existing Supreme Court justices, the attorney general, and several prosecutors and mayors, replacing them with those with close ties to the president.⁹ Though El Salvador claims free and fair elections, research indicates that the presence of MS-13 members outside polling places contributed to Bukele’s allies’ landslide victories.¹⁰ Neither checks and balances nor the citizens of El Salvador have held Bukele accountable for his actions up to this point. Therefore, additional backsliding will likely happen.

In this context, although no longer operating like a traditional street gang, MS-13 members have become political criminals due to their collaboration with Bukele. The gang now has little concern for rival gangs poaching on their territory or extorting small businesses and citizens. Instead, the gangs have manipulated the people of El Salvador to

⁶ International Crisis Group, *A Remedy for El Salvador’s Prison Fever* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2022), 9.

⁷ According to Schmitter and Karl, the citizens who participate in fair and honest elections that result in majority rule, through the work of cooperation between different political arenas, conducted mostly by elected representatives who follow the rule of law are democracy’s most important feature. For an in-depth review of democracy, see Philippe C Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl, “What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not,” *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (1991): 75–88, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0033>.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, “El Salvador: Legislature Deepens.”

⁹ Human Rights Watch.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, 6.

believe that the country is safe, the homicide rate is falling, and Bukele is their future.¹¹ This thesis examines the declining political conditions and democratic rights resulting from the state's attempts to address the violence perpetuated by El Salvador's gangs.

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the impact of gang-related violence on democracy in El Salvador?

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provides a framework for democratic legitimacy, which assists in explaining why and how democracies backslide. Also, it provides a framework for understanding how gangs and gang violence affect democratic deconsolidation. With ever-growing concerns regarding the weakening of democracies in Latin America, notably El Salvador, understanding how the growing violence contributes to this process is vital.¹² Significant gaps in the literature exist in understanding a gang's role in the democratic landscape. Some scholars do not typically categorize gang violence as political or systemic, viewing it as a more criminal than political activity.¹³ Thus, this review bridges the gap between gang violence and democracy.

1. Defining Democracy

In the literature on democracy as a construct, the importance of citizens recurs. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan present five arenas of democracy that work in tandem with each other: free and lively civil society, valued political society, rule of law, state bureaucracy, and institutionalized economic society.¹⁴ Within these five arenas, the

¹¹ Douglas Farah and Marianne Richardson, *Gangs No Longer: Reassessing Transnational Armed Groups in the Western Hemisphere* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2022).

¹² Clare Ribando Seelke and Joshua Klein, *El Salvador: In Brief*, CRS Report No. R47083 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022).

¹³ Nicholas Barnes, "Criminal Politics: An Integrated Approach to the Study of Organized Crime, Politics, and Violence," *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 4 (December 2017): 967–87, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592717002110>.

¹⁴ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 7.

importance of citizens is evident. For a free participatory civil society to exist, “self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests.”¹⁵ Activist groups like those supporting women’s rights, religious groups, student organizations, and police supporters, who value and advance the rights of the ordinary citizen within society, are essential. Linz and Stepan emphasize that ordinary citizens are a critical component of democratic governance. They support these movements through voting, physical protests, the heckling of authorities, or their “expression of their opposition to specific measures.”¹⁶ These events combined can be supporters or catalysts for regime change; they can build a democratic regime or destroy one.¹⁷ In this way, citizens are integral to democracy.

Other critical scholars of democracy, including Philippe C. Schmitter, Terry Lynn Karl, and Robert A. Dahl, also emphasize the importance of citizens within a democracy. Schmitter and Karl argue that citizens are the “most distinctive element in democracies.”¹⁸ For Dahl, who believes that democracy is a “system of control by competition,” citizens must work to influence the government, “the policy agenda and to help determine the outcome of policy debate.”¹⁹ In this way, citizens play a crucial role in who is elected and how well democracy works during their reign.

Secondly, a political society must be present for a democracy to consolidate itself. For Linz and Stepan, the concept of political society includes elements such as: “political parties, elections, electoral rules, political leadership, interparty alliances, and legislatures.”²⁰ Scholars repeatedly emphasize free, fair, and honest elections in the

¹⁵ Linz and Stepan, 7.

¹⁶ Linz and Stepan, 8.

¹⁷ Linz and Stepan, 8.

¹⁸ Schmitter and Karl, “What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not,” 5.

¹⁹ Michael Bailey and David Braybrooke, “Robert A. Dahl’s Philosophy of Democracy, Exhibited in His Essays,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 6, no. 1 (June 2003): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.6.121901.085839>.

²⁰ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 8.

literature. According to Schmitter and Karl, elections are a crucial component of the democratic process that allows citizens to express their beliefs, opinions, and concerns through a political party, group, or specific territory.²¹ They argue that all members of the democracy—including different political parties, candidates, associations, and movements—must cooperate.²² Contrarily, Schmitter and Karl present a vital point that citizens must use the freedoms democracy affords them to work together, understand and acknowledge similar needs, and resolve differences without solely depending on their elected officials. Such citizen involvement highlights that democracy entails more than years of struggle in campaigning for elections and reelections between candidates, and the candidates' real work is serving the citizens who elect them.²³ Candidates must do more than thank the voters during their acceptance speech; they must also affirm citizens' support through their actions.

The literature on democracy shows an overwhelming consensus on the importance of citizen accountability. As with Linz and Stepan, several scholars agree that citizens' responsibility to hold government officials liable for their actions and uphold the rule of law must counterbalance their influence on government.²⁴ According to Schmitter and Karl, "modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives."²⁵ Democracy allows the citizens the power to vote out those who do not serve their needs, and majority support demonstrates whose needs prevail.

Economic interactions, like citizen relations, play a significant role in democratic success. To conclude the discussion of these five arenas, Linz and Stepan assert that "a lively and independent civil society, a political society with sufficient autonomy . . . and a

²¹ Schmitter and Karl, "What Democracy Is . . . and Is Not," 6.

²² Schmitter and Karl, 7.

²³ Schmitter and Karl, 7.

²⁴ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 10.

²⁵ Schmitter and Karl, "What Democracy Is . . . and Is Not," 4.

rule of law” are “much more likely to be satisfied if a bureaucracy useable [sic] by democratic leaders and an institutionalized economic society exist.”²⁶ In Latin American countries, an influential state bureaucracy can be challenging to achieve because of weak institutions that characterize much of the territory; taxing capacity is low, and the state shows little respect for citizens’ rights and basic entitlements.²⁷ According to Barbara Geddes, “strong evidence supports the argument that economic development increases the likelihood of democratic politics.”²⁸ Schmitter and Karl enhance this argument, believing democracy can only thrive when civil rights are respected by everybody, in addition to economic development.²⁹ Finally, Schmitter and Karl note that although democracies may be more or less economically efficient than other types of governments, the research shows that a more stable economy correlates with a more stable democracy.³⁰ Therefore, a robust economic state and strong citizen influence prove crucial to democracy’s success, characteristics lacking in El Salvador.

These scholars highlight the elements of a functioning democracy essential for understanding what is happening in El Salvador. Is it slipping in its consolidation? Although El Salvador demonstrates that democracy can thrive when citizens vote out old regimes that do not align with their values and elect new ones that do, those citizens still need to hold newly elected officials accountable for their actions and insist on maintaining their civil rights.³¹ Drawing on the polarity of President Nayib Bukele, whom many El Salvadorans believed understood their preferences, citizens must decide whether his administration’s actions are worth the price of democratic backsliding.

²⁶ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 10.

²⁷ Linz and Stepan, 11.

²⁸ Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (June 1999): 140, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.115>.

²⁹ Schmitter and Karl, “What Democracy Is. . . and Is Not,” 8.

³⁰ Schmitter and Karl, 13.

³¹ Human Rights Watch, “El Salvador: Legislature Deepens.”

2. The Process of Democratic Backsliding

This section examines theories on how the arenas that make a democracy legitimate can also pave the way to its demise. Nothing guarantees a consolidated democracy continues except its support by citizens and elected officials. Robert Dahl makes this case when outlining democracy's success, advising "that it is important that ordinary citizens hold democratic opinions but that it is essential that (political) elites do."³² Taking democracy for granted and failing to respect those beliefs and cultures provides the foundations for democratic backsliding. Authoritarianism blooms in weak democratic conditions. Therefore, efforts from both citizens and elected officials must be strong to keep democracy thriving. In their final statement addressing the rise of authoritarianism in democratic governments, Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way warn that "no democracy can be taken for granted."³³ They further caution that "Countries who [sic] suffer from little to no democratic tradition, weak institutions and rule of law, underdeveloped private sectors and civil societies, and feeble oppositions" are those most susceptible to autocracy.³⁴ By these criteria, El Salvador's democracy seems at risk.

Citizens and elections are two critical aspects of a legitimate democracy, yet they can also de-legitimize democracy. According to Milan W. Svobik, two types of democratic breakdowns are typical: executive takeovers, the majority, and military coups, the minority. As with El Salvador, executive takeovers occur when democratically elected "authoritarian populists," who gain significant popular support from voters, seize controlling power after being elected.³⁵ Absent intent, what can start democratically can end autocratically.

³² Bailey and Braybrooke, "Robert A. Dahl's Philosophy of Democracy," 110.

³³ Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0004>.

³⁴ Levitsky and Way, 52.

³⁵ Svobik, "Polarization versus Democracy," 21.

Many reasons may account for the change in the democratic status quo. First, as Svolik posits, perhaps voters and civil society do not value democracy or do not know democratic concepts.³⁶ According to Geddes, the most substantial support for an authoritarian regime comes from those who receive government-controlled communications and lack the education and internal resources to resist authoritarianism.³⁷ In contrast, the weaknesses in democracy come from citizens who do not follow politics or value their personal views and beliefs against autocracy.³⁸ Therefore, education and critical thinking about democracy and its importance to society are necessary to help keep its institutions in place.

Svolik argues for the need to reconsider citizens' role in the deconsolidation of democracy. Although much past literature contends that autocrats are the cause, some scholars disagree with the specifics.³⁹ Dahl states that polarization within civilian society threatens democracy, as citizens who are less educated on democracy allow for polarization to overcome traditional democratic values.⁴⁰ In contrast, Linz and Stepan contend that the lack of civil consensus and suspicion or distrust in the leaders drives crisis.⁴¹ Although elections seemingly act as a self-defense mechanism for democracy, they can trend toward self-destruction. As Svolik argues, in areas with high polarization, voters will tend to elect officials who campaign for their interests, regardless of the political party or democratic traditions.⁴² If citizens are not cautious and polarization reaches extreme levels, the elected officials might amass sufficient power to eliminate the necessity for future elections, thereby undermining the foundation of democracy itself.

³⁶ Svolik, 21.

³⁷ Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 2 (May 1989): 319, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111150>.

³⁸ Geddes and Zaller, 342.

³⁹ Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy," 31.

⁴⁰ Svolik, 23–24.

⁴¹ Svolik, 23–24.

⁴² Svolik, 24.

Citizen discontent extends even further because criticism of governments grows harsher when expectations for democracy rise. Robert Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk believe that although scholars typically view democracy as the most legitimate form of government, citizens may lose trust that the government will address the most critical issues and preferences, driving support for populist candidates; however, populist support does not predict the immediate death or collapse of democracy.⁴³ Populist support, as Levitsky and Way maintain, would present the case, though, where it is vital for those elected populist leaders to adhere to the primary, traditional democratic institutions and for the citizens to maintain their interest in holding elected officials accountable for their actions.⁴⁴ Lacking accountability, such broad public support makes it easier for these elected officials to undermine democracy. The El Salvadoran state appears to suffer from such citizenship. According to Human Rights Watch, populist leader Nayib Bukele straddles the line between traditional democracy and autocracy.⁴⁵ Elected democratically, Bukele's trending authoritarianism, unintentionally supported by El Salvadoran voters, could be the beginning of the end of democracy in El Salvador.

Democratic backsliding is a gradual process. Typically conducted from the inside, it does not follow one linear path and produces more uncertainty than clarity. However, the overall process in and of itself follows a traditional three-step pattern.⁴⁶ First, illiberal leaders gain enough public support to capture the executive branch, typically through elections. Second, reinforcing functions such as capturing state institutions and suppressing opposition happen. Lastly, the transition to autocracy begins.⁴⁷ El Salvador exemplifies all three steps in the pattern, which this thesis will examine.

⁴³ Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0049>.

⁴⁴ Levitsky and Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism," 60.

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch, "El Salvador: Legislature Deepens."

⁴⁶ Aníbal Pérez-Liñán and Eduardo Pagés Jiménez, *Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Resurgence in Latin America* (Chicago: Kellogg Institute for International Studies, 2022), 2.

⁴⁷ Pérez-Liñán and Jiménez, 2.

3. Violence and Democracy

The relationship between violence and democracy is complex, as violence can spark the rise *and* fall of democracy. Civil wars can lead to democratization when states require the opposition to accept defeat and the importance of democratic procedures, establishing democracy.⁴⁸ In times of military coups, violence can bring down democracy and produce autocracy.⁴⁹ Although democracy, theoretically, aims to exclude violence by expressing personal views and deliberative processes, sometimes it still happens. Conflict is inevitable, but democratic institutions must respond to violence with proper recourse.⁵⁰ An inappropriate response could allow for violence to overwhelm and threaten democracy's existence.

Violence can stem from the grievances of disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Just as citizens use elections to change the democratic status quo of traditional candidates or political parties, violence, too, can challenge the same status quo.⁵¹ According to Veri and Sass, grievances heightened by the government's failure to address them can be "due to political affiliation, ethnicity, or socio-economic status."⁵² Veri and Sass's research states that democracy does well in more economically and socially stable countries and features more violence than other forms of government. The opposite can also be true in the literature, as less successful democracies, often less economically and socially stable, suffer more from violence. Finally, Veri and Sass believe more grievances, repression, and marginalization will follow from a failure to redistribute wealth, resources, and equality.⁵³ With proper democratic traditions, citizens

⁴⁸ John Schwarzmantel, "Democracy and Violence: A Theoretical Overview," *Democratization* 17, no. 2 (April 2010): 224, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510341003588641>.

⁴⁹ Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy," 20.

⁵⁰ Schwarzmantel, "Democracy and Violence," 222.

⁵¹ Francesco Veri and Jensen Sass, "The Domestic Democratic Peace: How Democracy Constrains Political Violence," *International Political Science Review*, May 13, 2022, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121221092391>.

⁵² Veri and Sass, 3.

⁵³ Veri and Sass, 4.

will raise objections to exist without violence. Elected officials must remedy those objections before violence erupts, or they need to address a wide variety of issues when it does.

Violence affects all democracies in one way or another. Yet in his book, John Keane states, “the generalized use of violence contradicts the spirit and substance of democracy.”⁵⁴ Whether violence occurs through inaction or collusion, Keane presents “ten rules for democratizing violence.”⁵⁵ His first, which discusses the importance of understanding the “motives and context of the violence,” underscores the importance of democratic leaders empathizing with the grievances behind the violent actions. To combat violence, democratic leaders often adopt tunnel vision and view it as good or bad, but controlling violence requires addressing the underlying concerns.⁵⁶ For those countries that are less socially and economically stable, governments must focus on those issues instead of just lessening the impact of violent actions.

How states remain democratic depends on how their institutions respond to the violence. According to Linz, past literature fails to focus on the implications of decisions on the democratic process and acting political system.⁵⁷ Depending on the actions governments take, for instance, enacting a “state of emergency” or “state of exception” can hasten democratic backsliding by restricting civil liberties and allowing repression by police, armed forces, and other security groups supporting the government.⁵⁸ Keane’s second rule offers an argument that stresses the importance of exercising caution when enacting zero-tolerance or crackdown policies, similar to a state of exceptions.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ In his book, *Violence and Democracy*, author John Keane presents ten rules for democratizing violence in his final chapter. For more, see John Keane, *Violence and Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 182.

⁵⁵ Keane, 165.

⁵⁶ Keane, 167.

⁵⁷ Juan J. Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 57.

⁵⁸ Linz, 57.

⁵⁹ Keane, *Violence and Democracy*, 172.

According to Human Rights Watch, El Salvador represents this case as it enacted a state of emergency in response to rampant gang violence in March 2022 that abrogated many civil liberties and human rights of its citizens.⁶⁰ Thus, governments must consider the outcomes before taking action, especially when the goal is maintaining democracy.

Linz stresses the importance of the decision-making process by leaders when negotiating with violent actors. Governments that deal with the perpetrators instead of stopping and addressing the violence exercise poor judgment.⁶¹ To Linz, such decisions, among others, can undermine “the legitimacy, efficacy, and effectiveness of a government.”⁶² As mentioned, citizens must hold political leaders accountable for their actions to uphold the government’s legitimacy. When these negotiations occur, or political leaders support violent actors through coalitions or pardons, they must also prevent future situations requiring enacting legislation.⁶³ In El Salvador, negotiations with gangs to reduce homicides have been ongoing since 2012, but the legislature declared gang negotiations illegal in 2016.⁶⁴ This law forces leaders to find alternatives to gang violence, but whether its actions are legitimate and reflect democratic values remains unclear.

Much of the analysis on violence and democracy focuses on the impacts of violence, insurgency, and corruption within Latin America. Although many democracies, specifically those in Latin America, are democratically elected, they tend to behave undemocratically. According to Nicolas M. Somma, “semidemocratic [sic] regimes or new democracies may deeply intermingle with organized violence, insurgency, and corruption, creating stable equilibria that benefit the most powerful players and therefore

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch, “El Salvador: Legislature Deepens.”

⁶¹ Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 57.

⁶² Linz, 58.

⁶³ Linz, 57.

⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 29.

resist transformation attempts.”⁶⁵ Somma believes challenging some traditions does not necessarily constitute becoming a full-fledged authoritarian government.⁶⁶ His argument contradicts Keane’s third rule, which calls for resistance against the drift to authoritarianism by holding politicians, judges, police, and the military accountable for their actions against violence when sacrificing civil society’s freedoms. The movement toward authoritarianism may describe El Salvador, as indicated by Human Rights Watch, because although its democracy and institutions remain, the current actions and enacted state of exception by President Bukele constantly challenge democratic norms.⁶⁷ However, El Salvadorans have yet to voice their displeasure and express their views on the importance of maintaining democracy.

4. The Impact of Gang Violence on Democracy

Gang violence’s impact on democracy is commonly understudied since much of the literature views gang violence as criminal, not political. However, many criminal organizations work to gain significant political authority through collaborative and dueling relationships with governments through violence.⁶⁸ In what he terms “criminal politics,” Nicholas Barnes maintains that violence from gangs, cartels, mafias, and other criminal organizations is a form of state-building, even in democratic states.⁶⁹ The distinction between criminal and political violence has been hard to pinpoint because many state and non-state actors form alliances to defeat common enemies.⁷⁰ Examining gangs’ impact on democracy is vital.

⁶⁵ Nicolás M. Somma, “Insurgency, Political Violence, and Democracy in Latin America,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 62, no. 2 (May 2020): 137, <https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2019.65>.

⁶⁶ Somma, 137.

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch, “El Salvador: Legislature Deepens.”

⁶⁸ Barnes, “Criminal Politics,” 967.

⁶⁹ Barnes, 968.

⁷⁰ Barnes, 969.

According to Jose Miguel Cruz, the state directly contributes to criminal violence, though not as its sole cause. As non-state criminal organizations seek political legitimacy, they partner with the state.⁷¹ The state corruptly allows non-state actors to use violence against groups viewed as threatening, including rival gangs, gays, immigrants, drug dealers, impoverished towns, or remote areas.⁷² In response, state actors look to advance their political power by instituting nationwide crackdowns against the violence they allow, thus establishing their legitimacy.⁷³ Cruz states that it is misleading to think that democracy erodes because the state has disappeared when, in reality, the state plays a behind-the-scenes role.⁷⁴ Thus, violent actors and the state work together to achieve their desired goals.

In Keane's "ten rules of democratizing violence," rule four deals directly with Cruz's observations. In it, Keane calls for preventing the "privatization of the means of violence."⁷⁵ By privatization, Keane refers to outsourcing violence to "gangster figures," like those in gangs and cartels, to employ against civil society for political gain.⁷⁶ Although violence on the streets demonstrates this outsourcing, gang-negotiated truces and pacts with the state can also illustrate it. Latin American states often formally negotiate with gangs in exchange for reducing their presence or achieving a perceived reduction in violence.⁷⁷ This privatization through negotiation is what the gangs wanted all along, forcing the state's hand to show its willingness to lessen the violence.

In another article, Cruz and Angelica Duran-Martinez discuss truces and negotiations with criminal gangs when they are integral to the typically weak social and political order. Likewise, these authors assert that as "an alternative to costly wars and

⁷¹ José Miguel Cruz, "State and Criminal Violence in Latin America," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 66, no. 4 (November 2016): 375, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-016-9631-9>.

⁷² Cruz, 388.

⁷³ Cruz, 388.

⁷⁴ Cruz, 388.

⁷⁵ Keane, *Violence and Democracy*, 176.

⁷⁶ Keane, 177.

⁷⁷ Barnes, "Criminal Politics," 976.

police crackdowns,” a violence prevention strategy often employs gang truces.⁷⁸ The authors argue that the use of gang truces in multiple Latin American countries has reduced homicides “when (a) they directly involve the state as an administrator of incentives to reduce violence and (b) criminal organizations have achieved organizational cohesions and leadership that facilitate territorial control and strategic dependability.”⁷⁹ Their argument contradicts the consensus among scholars that the long-term impact of negotiations and truces did not address the root causes of violence and gangs.⁸⁰ Evident in the case of El Salvador, previously enacted gang truces provide short-term reductions to gang violence but fail to address the underlying issues of its origin.

Although the state expects a gang truce to reduce violence, it does not consistently lower criminal activity. As many criminal organizations derive their legitimacy from violence, the visibility of the violence may decline, but not its use.⁸¹ The political cost of gang truces has also been extremely high. Many political elites do not comment on their participation in negotiations to protect their standing, limiting the literature.⁸² Although Cruz and Durán-Martínez state that truces and pacts are viable strategies, the risks and implications need further study.⁸³ Therefore, this research examines the dangers and consequences of current pacts with gangs in present-day El Salvador and their correlation with democratic backsliding.

Compared to Cruz and Durán-Martínez, Chris van der Borgh takes a different stance on gang truces. Although he agrees that increased military and police presence do

⁷⁸ José Miguel Cruz and Angélica Durán-Martínez, “Hiding Violence to Deal with the State: Criminal Pacts in El Salvador and Medellín,” *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 2 (March 2016): 198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343315626239>.

⁷⁹ Cruz and Durán-Martínez, 198.

⁸⁰ Cruz and Durán-Martínez, 198.

⁸¹ Cruz and Durán-Martínez, 201.

⁸² Cruz and Durán-Martínez, 198.

⁸³ Cruz and Durán-Martínez, 207.

not curb gang activity alone, the truces only modify gang control.⁸⁴ During the ceasefires, the state aimed to complement the negotiations with increased social prevention projects that would reduce youth recruitment by the gangs and lessen the socio-economic strain on citizens who typically gravitate toward gangs for reprieve; though, those initiatives suffered more during the truces than not.⁸⁵ Since gangs have proven increasingly adaptable to state-enacted policies over the years, van der Borgh opines that the best approach would combine repression, accommodation, and prevention to gain a stronghold on gang violence.⁸⁶ Multiple scholars concur that gang truces and pacts in collaboration with gang reduction strategies and socio-economic improvements in a democratic society successfully reduce violence.

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research presented here has two purposes: first, to determine whether the newly elected government in El Salvador is undergoing democratic deconsolidation, and second, to identify the gang's role in this process. This thesis will then provide an analysis using two approaches to understand the past and current state of democracy in El Salvador and the impact gangs have throughout the country's democratic processes.

Using El Salvador as a case study of democratic backsliding because of gang negotiations, the research here first applies qualitative research methods to understand the theoretical concepts of democracy, democratic backsliding, and violence to determine whether these frameworks apply in its political history and current political state. Research within this thesis also applies the democratic concepts outlined by Linz and Stepan, in concurrence with the literature from Dahl, Schmitter, and Karl, and relates those distinguishing notions to understand El Salvador's current model. The study here also analyzes the elements of democratic backsliding presented in the research by Linz,

⁸⁴ Chris van der Borgh, "Government Responses to Gang Power: From Truce to War on Gangs in El Salvador," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe*, no. 107 (2019): 17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26764790>.

⁸⁵ van der Borgh, 18.

⁸⁶ van der Borgh, 19.

Geddes, Svolik, Veri, and Sass, compared to the tactics used by Bukele's administration to understand processes occurring in the country.

Second, this thesis uses a comparative case study analysis of recent events in El Salvador, including the election of populist candidate Nayib Bukele, the March 2022 bouts of gang violence, and the current state of exception responses to determine the impact of gangs on politics. Concluding by analyzing scholarly work from Barnes, Cruz, and Melendez-Sanchez on gang violence and mitigation strategies to illustrate the implications of Bukele's responses to democracy in El Salvador, it then makes recommendations to the international community to assist policymakers in their continued relations with the El Salvadoran government.

D. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Chapter II overviews El Salvador's history following the end of the civil war in 1992. This chapter illustrates the normalization of violence at the beginning of its democratic processes. It also closely examines the origins and inner workings of the gangs of El Salvador while outlining the previous gang mitigation strategies implemented by former El Salvadoran presidents. Chapter III emphasizes the polarization within El Salvador leading up to the 2019 presidential election, stemming from the citizens' discontent with the government's handling of gangs, which resulted in the election of populist president Nayib Bukele. The chapter highlights the growing concerns associated with democratic backsliding in present-day El Salvador, driven primarily by illegal gang negotiations. Chapter IV outlines how Bukele and the gangs have worked together to undermine El Salvador's previously existing democratic traditions. The chapter includes an in-depth analysis of the transformation of El Salvadoran gangs from traditional street gangs to political criminals because of negotiations with the state. Chapter V analyzes the recent actions of President Bukele and the growing concerns of democratic backsliding in the country by using the multiple frameworks presented in the literature review. The final chapter also outlines the implications of democratic backsliding in El Salvador for other Latin American countries and the United States.

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II. THE VIOLENT HISTORY OF EL SALVADOR

Violence can impact democracies in many ways. Civil war can jumpstart democratization for a country, whereas violence from outside threats can assist in dismantling existing democratic institutions.⁸⁷ Both occurrences held significance in the context of El Salvador, since the conclusion of its civil war marked the inception of a prolonged process where gangs and violence became deeply ingrained in its societal fabric. This chapter explores the historical backdrop of violence in El Salvador and the initial government endeavors to address and mitigate it.

A. BIRTH OF EL SALVADORAN GANGS

Violence dominated El Salvador for the latter half of the 20th century, as its gangs acquired enhanced skills during their time in the United States.⁸⁸ From 1980 until 1992, the country endured a civil war following years of military rule.⁸⁹ Fleeing conflict, nearly one million Salvadorans sought refuge in the United States. This migration fostered the birth of two major street gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 (18th Street Gang), in and around Los Angeles, California. In response, then U.S. President Bill Clinton signed several laws that increased the scope of deportable offenses and resulted in an influx of El Salvadorans returning to their home country.⁹⁰ Once home, deportees entrenched in gang culture, in a new setting of political and socio-economic divides,

⁸⁷ Schwarzmantel, “Democracy and Violence,” 2.

⁸⁸ For an in-depth historical background on El Salvador prior to 1990, see Richard Haggerty, ed., *El Salvador: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 1990).

⁸⁹ The El Salvadoran Civil War began with the formation of the opposition alliance of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which formed a guerilla army to oppose the government and right-wing paramilitary forces. The war ended with the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords, which marked the beginning of El Salvador’s democratic transition, followed by democratic consolidation endeavors. For in-depth research on the war, see Belisario Betancur, Reinaldo Figueredo Planchart, and Thomas Buergenthal, *From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001).

⁹⁰ Diana Roy, “Why Has Gang Violence Spiked in El Salvador?,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 4, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/why-has-gang-violence-spiked-el-salvador-bukele>.

allowed the gangs to flourish.⁹¹ El Salvador was fertile ground for the evolution of MS-13 and Barrio 18.

The deeply ingrained normalization of violence within El Salvador posed a formidable challenge, making its mitigation arduous. A new democracy with a history of violence, El Salvador lacked effective political and social arenas at that time—two main requirements for democratic consolidation—making strategizing against gangs’ rapid growth virtually impossible.⁹² Increased efforts toward addressing the severe political and socio-economic problems were necessary for their democracy to thrive. Yet, the Salvadoran authorities failed to do so as they focused on militarizing the police and building legitimacy within a weak government—a strategy that did not eliminate the threat of gangs. The gangs’ involvement in “illicit drug sales, extortion, prostitution, homicide, and the illegal movement of drugs, people, and arms across borders” allowed them to thrive.⁹³ With violence so normalized, gang life became attractive and enticing to those searching for financial stability and a sense of belonging.

B. GANG RECRUITMENT

Gangs recruit people seeking social identity. The “search (for) emotional support, belonging, identity, respect, and social status” ends when the gang takes in one as one of their own.⁹⁴ Life in a gang filled the void of one’s weak family structures, fueled by domestic violence, and opened a possible exit from marginalization and poverty.⁹⁵ According to the United Nations, vulnerabilities existed in El Salvador due to geography, demography, weak criminal justice systems, a history of conflict and authoritarianism,

⁹¹ Sonja Wolf, “Street Gangs of El Salvador,” in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*, ed. Thomas C. Bruneau, Lucía Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 49.

⁹² According to Crisis Group Latin America Report, El Salvador was “a country in a post-conflict transition, with weak state institutions, deep social divides, and high poverty levels (that) provided perfect conditions for gangs to take root among marginalized young people.” International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 6; Bruneau, “Introduction,” 8.;

⁹³ Bruneau, “Introduction,” 3.

⁹⁴ Wolf, “Street Gangs of El Salvador,” 50.

⁹⁵ Wolf, 50.

population displacement, and deportation.⁹⁶ As El Salvadoran anthropologist Juan Jose Martinez D'Aubuisson stated, "The *maras* (gangs) are important when you have nothing, when you are born dead."⁹⁷ Gangs brought people back to life.

Although gang members may feel belonging eliminates them from marginalization, society identifies them as an ostracized group of citizens expressing grievances through violence. As Thomas Bruneau states, "violent crime is often attributed to economic factors."⁹⁸ Like many other Latin American countries, poverty was widespread in El Salvador. In 2004, for example, 47.5% of El Salvador's 6 million population lived in poverty, with 19% living in extreme poverty. The unemployment rate was 5.5%.⁹⁹ Joining a gang was a way for many to fund their existence and evade poverty.

Tackling a group such as MS-13 posed a severe challenge for a new democracy like El Salvador. Given their geographical proximity to other Latin American countries, such as Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, where gangs prospered and the drug and human trafficking trade drove economies, it proved challenging to fence off such activity from El Salvador's interior.¹⁰⁰ The criminal justice system in El Salvador, unstable and illegitimate before the end of the civil war, needed a complete overhaul to combat the gangs.¹⁰¹ However, political corruption and the normalization of violence and conflict challenged that transition.

Violence and brutality were familiar to the people of El Salvador coming out of brutal authoritarian rule. Aggression became the conventional way to settle societal

⁹⁶ Theodore Leggett, *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire* (Vienna: UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007), 14–20.

⁹⁷ Sofia Martinez, Chris Toensing, and Kjell Olsson, *Life under Gang Rule in El Salvador* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018), 6, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/life-under-gang-rule-el-salvador>.

⁹⁸ Bruneau, "Introduction," 9.

⁹⁹ Bruneau, 7.

¹⁰⁰ Bruneau, 8.

¹⁰¹ Bruneau, 9.

disputes between rival gangs, security forces, and the public.¹⁰² Access to firearms was universal, and knowledge of their usage was commonplace.¹⁰³ As gangs often required murders to initiate new members, the ease of obtaining a gun, and mastery of proper techniques following years of war and internal conflict, allowed for a simple transition into gang membership.¹⁰⁴ Violence was part of El Salvador's culture.

C. EARLY GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO GANG VIOLENCE

Following the end of the civil war in 1992, although gangs existed, the state did not perceive them as overwhelming. According to a 1993 survey, nearly 50% of citizens in urban areas claimed to have a gang presence in their neighborhoods, yet the government did not prioritize lowering that number.¹⁰⁵ Instead, the new government's first phase (1992—1996) focused on rebuilding security forces, not on the causes of gangs and crime. With that phase completed, the government sought ways to combat gang activities. Secondly, modifications to the penal legislation laid the groundwork for upcoming repressive policies (1996—2003). Those policies (2003—2014) would become zero-tolerance policies, which is the third stage addressed later in this chapter. The final phase (from 2014—2019) against gang suppression in the decades following the civil war focused on gang prevention and rehabilitation measures.¹⁰⁶ This next section examines all four stages and their impact on El Salvadoran society.

Multiple political parties in El Salvador executed the four phases of gang responses. Historically, El Salvador maintained the typical two political party structures representing their democracy from the end of the civil war until 2019.¹⁰⁷ During that

¹⁰² Wolf, "Street Gangs of El Salvador," 54.

¹⁰³ Wolf, 53.

¹⁰⁴ Bruneau, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁰⁵ José Miguel Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side of Gang Suppression in Central America," in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*, ed. Thomas C. Bruneau, Lucía Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 140.

¹⁰⁶ Heidrun Zinecker, *From Exodus to Exitus: Causes of Post-War Violence in El Salvador* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2007), II.

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 1.

time, the left-wing FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) and the right-wing ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacionalist/Nationalist Republican Alliance) contributed to the balance of power between the country's Legislative Assembly and the presidential office.¹⁰⁸ FMLN and ARENA opposed each other on various political, social, and ideological grounds. Although ARENA appealed to the more affluent, business elite citizens of El Salvador—those who lived in gated communities and could distance themselves from the gang violence—FMLN supporters lived in the more urban areas, surrounded by gang control and violence. This separation explained why controlling the epidemic of gang violence was not a top priority of the current ARENA administration and remained problematic.¹⁰⁹

El Salvador employed many methods to combat the increase in gang activity. After 1992, the El Salvadoran government focused on instilling democratic regimes and reviving security forces.¹¹⁰ Then, until 2003, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that focused on gang prevention and rehabilitation strategies became responsible for El Salvador's approach to gang violence but failed to lessen gang recruitment and influence. However, that situation changed when ARENA President Francisco Flores implemented the new *Mano Dura* or “strong hand” approach, similar to the United States' zero-tolerance policies against crime.¹¹¹ This approach included oppressive police tactics, enhanced sentencing, and mass incarcerations, resulting in crowded penitentiaries that became recruitment hubs, training centers, and communication points for leaders (ranfla) and those on the outside.¹¹² Gangs engaging in turf wars made prisons part of their territorial control.¹¹³ Police could detain anyone who displayed the physical features of gang membership, like the infamous MS-13 tattoos, hand signals, manner of dress, and

¹⁰⁸ International Crisis Group, 3.

¹⁰⁹ International Crisis Group, 3–4.

¹¹⁰ Zinecker, *From Exodus to Exitus*, II.

¹¹¹ Bruneau, “Introduction,” 11.

¹¹² Roy, “Why Has Gang Violence Spiked in El Salvador?”

¹¹³ International Crisis Group, 10.

physical appearance.¹¹⁴ The passage of the Anti-gang Act (*Ley Antimaras*) made gang membership illegal and carried a two to five-year prison sentence. Controversially, this sentence applied to anyone over the age of twelve.¹¹⁵ Some believed these practices violated human rights and failed to address the underlying causes of gang violence, and opposing government members, judges, and legislatures called for the government to focus on prevention and rehabilitation and thus opposed the Anti-gang Act.¹¹⁶ From a legislative perspective, El Salvador took measures to counter the gangs' influence.

Mano Dura was an effective policy enacted to help strengthen public support for the right-wing ARENA political party before the upcoming election.¹¹⁷ Indeed, approximately 80% of El Salvadorans supported *Mano Dura*, and 60% believed it was effective in combatting gangs.¹¹⁸ This support translated into support for ARENA, which won reelection in 2004. For the first time in its short democratic history, the government tried to reduce violence, and the public responded positively.

Mano Dura remained the country's gang strategy after Flores left office. Newly elected ARENA President Antonio Saca's measures may have resulted in many detentions and arrests (nearly 19,275 during the first year), but cases overwhelmed the judicial system, causing the dismissal of 95% of them.¹¹⁹ The new president attempted to mollify El Salvadoran citizens with mass arrests to tamp down gang violence. Again, it worked. The El Salvadoran people, who lived in constant fear and intimidation by gangs, applauded the efforts.¹²⁰ Citizen support for the government was at an all-time high

¹¹⁴ While many in MS-13 are known for their archetypal tattoos and slang speak, their time incarcerated in El Salvadoran prisons altered that stigma. Leaders within the prison system told members to forgo tattoos, slang, and particular manner of dress to avoid future conflict with security forces. Now, many members of MS-13 are mixed into El Salvadoran society and can be deemed unnoticeable. Martinez, Toensing, and Olsson, *Life under Gang Rule in El Salvador*, 10.

¹¹⁵ Wolf, "Street Gangs of El Salvador," 58.

¹¹⁶ Wolf, 58.

¹¹⁷ Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side," 148.

¹¹⁸ Cruz, 148–49.

¹¹⁹ Wolf, "Street Gangs of El Salvador," 59.

¹²⁰ Wolf, 59.

during the anti-mara policies in place during 2003–2006, and the government developed legitimacy.¹²¹ ARENA’s quest to maintain control of El Salvador’s democracy made this legitimacy crucial, as its people believed that elected officials were fulfilling their promises.

Mano Dura was popular with citizens but did not lessen the violence. Homicide rates rose from six to seven per day between 2003 and 2004.¹²² Increased citizen support for *Mano Dura* motivated the government to continue combatting gang violence, and thus, *Super Mano Dura* was enacted soon into Saca’s term. An enhancement that still included repressive police tactics, *Super Mano Dura* introduced additional legislative enhancements, police raids, and the creation and deployment of anti-gang squads.¹²³ What the citizens believed worked only got stronger.

A glaring difference between *Super Mano Dura* and *Mano Dura* was the addition of two supporting policies: “*Mano Amiga*” (Friendly Hand) and “*Mano Extendida*” (Extended Hand). *Mano Amiga* focused on prevention efforts, such as increased educational campaigns and after-school programs, for youths who were at risk for crime, gang violence, drug addiction, and teenage pregnancy. *Mano Extendida* centered on aiding those formerly detained gang members who were being rehabilitated and reintegrated into society with the ability to secure an education and employment within society.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, these programs received only 20% of available funding, while much of the remaining funds went to increased law enforcement efforts and prison expansion. Moreover, youth participation in the programs fell short of expectations, leading to their stalling.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Cruz, “Government Responses and the Dark Side,” 149.

¹²² Wolf, “Street Gangs of El Salvador,” 59.

¹²³ Wolf, 60.

¹²⁴ Wolf, 61.

¹²⁵ United States Agency for International Development, *Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment* (Washington, DC: USAID Bureau for Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, 2006), 54.

Mano Amiga and *Mano Extendida* showed ARENA's willingness to respond to the grievances of El Salvadorans who wanted to address socio-economic issues. Unfortunately, politicians enacted these programs only to retain political support and remain in power. ARENA supporters who lacked the necessary skills to run the programs nevertheless received hefty salaries and grooming to become the party's future leaders. This corruption did not significantly lessen the socio-economic problems that turbocharged gang violence and recruitment.¹²⁶ Like *Mano Dura* and *Super Mano Dura*, these programs exposed political parties using policies to further their interests and gain voters in upcoming elections without improving their circumstances.

Though initially popular with citizens, *Mano Dura* and *Super Mano Dura* failed to deliver lasting results. Between 1999 and 2009, gang violence nearly doubled because of these policies.¹²⁷ Despite the high arrest and detention statistics, those numbers allowed more gangs to increase cohesion while behind bars. Gangs could then reorganize and adapt to the new threats and challenges from the government.¹²⁸ Once released, as most were, the gang members had stronger bonds, intensified training, and orders to fulfill from incarcerated gang leadership.

D. THE 2012 GANG TRUCE

ARENA's two failed gang reduction strategies opened the door for FMLN to win the first post-civil war presidential election. Homicides had spiked by 2011, and the government searched for a new approach. Newly elected FMLN President Mauricio Funes' answer was a ceasefire or a truce between the rival MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs and the El Salvadoran government.¹²⁹ Facilitated by General Munguia Payes, the minister of justice and public security, and mediators Raul Mijango, a former FMLN guerilla, and Fabio Colindres, head of the military district, the truce required many secret

¹²⁶ Wolf, "Street Gangs of El Salvador," 61.

¹²⁷ Roy, "Why Has Gang Violence Spiked in El Salvador?"

¹²⁸ Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side," 153.

¹²⁹ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 17.

prison meetings with incarcerated gang leadership.¹³⁰ In exchange for the ceasefire, which included “inter-gang killings, murders of civilians and attacks on security services,” the gangs demanded a reversal of the *Mano Dura* policies.¹³¹ Gang leaders wanted enhanced rehabilitation programs for former inmates, improved prison conditions, transfers to laxer and gang-friendly prisons, and constrained police tactics.¹³²

The gang truce was experimental, and the risk initially paid off. Within 24 hours of the ceasefire, homicides in El Salvador dropped by nearly 50%.¹³³ Daily homicides, once averaged fifteen per day, dropped to five. These levels remained steady for almost a year and a half.¹³⁴ The decrease, however, was short-lived. By 2014, gang leaders understood their influence over politicians and sought to bring them back to the negotiation table to increase their demands. Violence and homicide rates began to rise as rival gang members needed a way to settle almost two years’ worth of scores.¹³⁵ Essentially, the ceasefire backfired.

As the secret prison meetings between Funes and gang leaders would suggest, President Funes did not publicly declare the truce as an official governmental policy.¹³⁶ Many political leaders from both FMLN and ARENA wanted to avoid association with the truce for fear of declining public support.¹³⁷ Polling revealed that nearly 75 percent of citizens did not trust the truce after it became public.¹³⁸ Although the homicide rate fell, disappearances increased, and discrepancies in actual homicide statistics from the

¹³⁰ International Crisis Group, 17.

¹³¹ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 8.

¹³² Meléndez-Sánchez, “What’s Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?”

¹³³ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador’s Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 17.

¹³⁴ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 8.

¹³⁵ Meléndez-Sánchez, “What’s Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?”

¹³⁶ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador’s Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 17.

¹³⁷ International Crisis Group, 17.

¹³⁸ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 8.

PNC (*Policia Nacional Civil*) could not be corroborated.¹³⁹ Funes and his administration slowly distanced themselves from the truce, and it eventually ended. The failed ceasefire came at an inopportune time for FMLN, as the party struggled for political support going into the 2014 presidential election.¹⁴⁰

However, FMLN narrowly won the 2014 presidential election. President-elect Salvador Sanchez Ceren took office and promised not to make any agreements with gangs while quickly reverting to the *Mano Dura* tactics. Sanchez Ceren not only implemented repressive police tactics but also advised PNC officers to carry their firearms off-duty, as many gang members began targeting police due to the policies.¹⁴¹ Gang leadership was sent back to the maximum-security prisons in order to restrict communication with other gang members.¹⁴² This communication rupture, which limited gang leadership's ability to provide orders to the outside, gave reason for the gangs to retaliate. In 2015, just a year after Ceren's reverted approach, El Salvador saw the deadliest year in the country's reported history, prompting the Supreme Court to declare gangs as terrorist organizations.¹⁴³

The label of terrorists closed negotiation channels between the state and the gangs. Desperate to avoid the makings of another truce, the legislature made any gang negotiations a crime, punishable with 5 to 15 years in prison, and began to arrest those involved in the 2012 truce.¹⁴⁴ Attorney General Douglas Melendez, a key figure who enabled the 21 arrests related to the ceasefire, admitted that while facilitating the truce

¹³⁹ Meléndez-Sánchez, "What's Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?"

¹⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 2.

¹⁴¹ Marcus Aleman, "Homicides in El Salvador Reach Record as Gang Violence Grows," AP News, April 9, 2015, <https://apnews.com/article/a2b50958a59d4a84932fcf3b9f2847d8>.

¹⁴² David Gagne, "El Salvador Moves Gang Leaders Back to Max-Security Prison," *InSight Crime* (blog), March 27, 2017, <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/el-salvador-moves-gang-leaders-back-to-max-security-prisons/>.

¹⁴³ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 7.

¹⁴⁴ Joshua Partlow, "El Salvador Arrests People Who Pushed for Peace in Gang War," *Washington Post*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/05/el-salvador-arrests-people-who-pushed-for-peace-in-gang-war/>.

itself was not a crime, authorities committed crimes during the ceasefire.¹⁴⁵ Sources claimed nearly \$2 million in prison funding was used for illegal favors for incarcerated gang leaders.¹⁴⁶ Some of those favors included fast food, band performances, video games, electronics, and exotic dancers.¹⁴⁷ The government punished those involved in the truce, including police officers and government officials, to communicate its intolerance for this behavior.¹⁴⁸ Although the government made negotiations illegal, the truce's effects reverberated. The year following the negotiation breakdown proved to be the worst yet for El Salvador.

E. THE FORMER MURDER CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

After averaging 105 homicides per every 100,000 residents in 2015, El Salvador, a country the size of Massachusetts, became the “murder capital of the world.”¹⁴⁹ Evident by multiple failed government policies and an ill-executed gang truce, many government officials believed the gang threat was “a war they cannot win.”¹⁵⁰ Coming off a narrow win in the 2014 elections, FMLN desperately sought ways to maintain citizens’ trust and support while focusing on diminishing the strain of gang violence in the country.

In response, President Sanchez Ceren launched the *El Salvador Seguro* campaign (Safe El Salvador) in 2015, a departure from past administrations’ illegitimate gang truces.¹⁵¹ The plan was a municipal-based strategy focused on at-risk communities affected by heightened gang violence and activity levels. The government deployed police forces to violence-prone areas and those with a volume of extortion cases. Although the goal was an increased security presence, citizens did not embrace it because

¹⁴⁵ Partlow.

¹⁴⁶ Partlow.

¹⁴⁷ Partlow.

¹⁴⁸ Partlow.

¹⁴⁹ Roy, “Why Has Gang Violence Spiked in El Salvador?”

¹⁵⁰ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador’s Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 10.

¹⁵¹ International Crisis Group, 27.

of repressive policies. Public trust deteriorated as the police targeted at-risk youth.¹⁵² Communities could not see the program's benefits of repressive policing and enhancing shared spaces when citizens barely had enough clean water and food.¹⁵³ Government approaches only exacerbated the gang problem, which was widespread.

Gang affiliation was prevalent in El Salvador, a country with only 6.7 million people.¹⁵⁴ An International Crisis Group report from 2020 estimates roughly 60,000 active gang members were dispersed across 94% of the municipalities in El Salvador.¹⁵⁵ Accounting for the number of close relatives and associates of those members, who rely on gang activity for financial support, the number of citizens with gang affiliation may have been as high as 500,000.¹⁵⁶ With the gangs responsible for nearly 50% of all recorded homicides, gangs far outnumbered the roughly 38,000 police and military officers fighting them.¹⁵⁷

Violence was not the only threat presented by the gangs. Extortion accounted for 80% of the gang's income and threatened businesses and owners daily.¹⁵⁸ Neighborhood shops, stalls, and vendors paid *la renta*, or protection money, to the gangs in return for security in their territories. Most places complied, as failure likely resulted in death.¹⁵⁹ With so many, from political elites to everyday business owners, affected by gang control, El Salvador's government had to find a way to control the violence and mitigate the circumstances that allowed the gangs to flourish.

¹⁵² International Crisis Group, 27.

¹⁵³ International Crisis Group, 22.

¹⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 1.

¹⁵⁵ International Crisis Group, 2.

¹⁵⁶ International Crisis Group, 6.

¹⁵⁷ International Crisis Group, 6.

¹⁵⁸ International Crisis Group, 6.

¹⁵⁹ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 3.

Major political parties regularly financed MS-13 during their election campaigns in exchange for votes.¹⁶⁰ According to multiple media sources and testimony from the prosecution's office, before the 2014 presidential election, FMLN and ARENA paid approximately \$350,000 to gangs for persuading voters in their territories to align with their party.¹⁶¹ For some lawmakers, financially supporting the gangs for election purposes was inevitable because politicians needed safe access to enter gang territory and organize rallies. Others believed discussions between the gangs and the government were necessary for peace. Although most politicians did not publicly admit to their dealings with gangs, gangs amassed extraordinary powers within the political climate.¹⁶²

Gang leaders learned through the 2012 truce that the more control they had over the homicide rate, the greater their political influence. As gang expert Juan Martinez D'Aubuisson advised, "Since 2012, the gangs and the state communicate through deaths."¹⁶³ Although the murder rate continuously declined after 2015, violence remained a concern in the country. In 2012, 49% of El Salvadorians cited security as their leading issue, which quickly escalated to 62% in 2018.¹⁶⁴ This issue proved crucial in the upcoming 2019 presidential election.

F. CONCLUSION

Significant unintentional consequences have resulted from the previous government responses to gangs. First, the police and military forces increased violence against the gangs during the *Mano Dura* and *Super Mano Dura* policies, forcing them to negotiate with security forces. Research reveals that in exchange for protection, gang members would financially support police officers. Second, the focus on prevention and rehabilitation took a back seat during these policies and did not produce the positive

¹⁶⁰ International Crisis Group, 10.

¹⁶¹ International Crisis Group, 10.

¹⁶² International Crisis Group, 10–11.

¹⁶³ Seth Robbins, "El Salvador's Gangs Send Message in Blood," *InSight Crime* (blog), December 16, 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/news/el-salvadors-gangs-send-a-message-in-blood/>.

¹⁶⁴ Meléndez-Sánchez, "Latin America Erupts," 20.

results the government sought. Finally, the mass incarceration of gang members, while temporarily lessening the violence, only afforded gangs greater political power and increased collaboration in prisons.¹⁶⁵

The El Salvadoran government failed to address the underlying grievances of its citizens, including socio-economic and security concerns. It focused only on short-term responses to guarantee election victories. With these policy failures, broken promises, corruption, and public mistrust of FMLN and ARENA, the 2019 presidential election proved pivotal for holding El Salvador's leaders accountable for their actions. Salvadorans could voice their concerns through ballots; they only needed the right candidate. This next chapter explores how the government's previous strategies disrupted the traditional political party structure of the country and its formal democracy.

¹⁶⁵ Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side," 153.

III. BEGINNINGS OF DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN EL SALVADOR

Plagued with corruption and failed gang suppression policies of previous regimes, El Salvadorans lost faith that their leaders could implement law and order.¹⁶⁶ With the 2019 Presidential election looming, their cynicism presented an optimal condition for an outsider candidate such as populist Nayib Bukele, the former mayor of San Salvador, to garner support. Bukele ran a non-traditional, social media-based campaign that resulted in a landslide victory against ARENA and FMLN candidates.¹⁶⁷

Immediately after taking office, Bukele, however, began to undermine the democratic processes that brought him to power. Bukele enacted his “Territorial Control Plan,” a seven-phase gang suppression policy, which laid the groundwork for him to weaken the rule of law and valued political system within El Salvador’s democracy, two significant arenas found in Linz and Stepan’s framework.¹⁶⁸ Bukele’s plan was similar to past presidents, with one exception. While former presidents received government support for their plans, Bukele did not.¹⁶⁹ Exerting his displeasure with the country’s legislative and judicial systems, Bukele used his war on gangs to manipulate the voting public into ushering his self-made political party into the legislative majority. With majority power in both the executive and legislative branches, Bukele gained support for removing judges and prosecutors, taking control of all three branches of government. Limited checks and balances now leave Bukele with immense power in all three levels of government, and El Salvador faces a slow democratic decline.¹⁷⁰ The chapter delves

¹⁶⁶ Meléndez-Sánchez, “Latin America Erupts,” 21.

¹⁶⁷ Meléndez-Sánchez, 21.

¹⁶⁸ Paola Nagovitch, “Explainer: Nayib Bukele’s Territorial Control Plan,” Americas Society/Council of the Americas, February 13, 2020, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-nayib-bukeles-territorial-control-plan>.

¹⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 16–17.

¹⁷⁰ Jonathan Blitzer, “The Rise of Nayib Bukele, El Salvador’s Authoritarian President,” *The New Yorker*, September 5, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/09/12/the-rise-of-nayib-bukele-el-salvadors-authoritarian-president>.

into Bukele's ascent to authority and his role in contributing to the erosion of democracy in El Salvador.

A. A PARADIGM SHIFT: THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

On February 3, 2019, 37-year-old Nayib Bukele won the three-way battle to become the sixth president of El Salvador with 53% of the vote. For the first time in El Salvador's history, the presidential election winner in the post-civil war era in El Salvador did not come from either FMLN or ARENA.¹⁷¹ Bukele ran under the minority party label Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU) as he could not register his party, Nuevas Ideas (New Ideas), in time.¹⁷² The failure of the previous regime, led by ARENA and FMLN, to effectively solve El Salvador's most prominent problems of government corruption, poverty, and violence as parties in power for three decades played into their losses.

The rise in citizen discontent led to an easy victory for Bukele. Before the election, 78% of Salvadorans stated that their politicians did not represent them, while 62% saw the elections as a waste of time, saying the country would never change.¹⁷³ Bukele, with his hand on the pulse of the people, used that knowledge to run on an anti-establishment platform that catalyzed those frustrations and promised citizens a fresh start.¹⁷⁴ He was an outsider candidate in terms of the political system but a growing influencer in the social realm.

Bukele took a non-traditional approach to the election. He chose not to attend presidential debates or participate in media interviews. Instead, he ran a social media-based campaign focused heavily on an anti-corruption initiative. Bukele empathized with the public's distrust of ARENA and FMLN, as many in the country believed those two

¹⁷¹ "El Salvador," Freedom in the World 2020 Country Report, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2020>.

¹⁷² International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 3.

¹⁷³ Meléndez-Sánchez, "Latin America Erupts," 20.

¹⁷⁴ Meléndez-Sánchez, 20.

parties increased government corruption and drove violence in the streets. Three of Bukele's four predecessors faced serious corruption charges. Funes, the former FMLN President responsible for the 2012 truce, had since fled to Nicaragua seeking asylum from pending charges of embezzling \$351 million during his presidency. Former Arena President Tony Saca (2004-2009) is serving a 10-year sentence for embezzlement and money laundering of nearly \$300 million of public funds. Another former Arena president, Francisco Flores (1999-2004), was also charged with embezzlement and misuse of public funds but passed away while on house arrest. Running on slogans of "Give us back what was stolen" and "There is enough money when nobody steals it," Emphasizing his desire to end corruption, Bukele established a contrast with past leadership and cultivated trust and credibility with the public.¹⁷⁵

From insider to outsider, Bukele originally belonged to FMLN as a mayor of San Salvador. There, he focused mainly on social issues, such as redeveloping a historic center, sponsoring a children's orchestra, and building libraries. He failed to take a harsh stand against violence in a likely attempt to remain popular and prevent any political controversy or divide.¹⁷⁶ Bukele's identity as a political outcast grew during his bid for the presidency when he openly criticized the party, leading to his dismissal.¹⁷⁷ In this way, he made it known that he was not a typical, corrupt politician but an outspoken leader who was not afraid of other political elites. Bukele stood out as a markedly distinct candidate from his predecessors, a factor that resonated with the populace and drew their strong support.

Bukele's youthfulness and modern personal brand attracted young voters who were typically not seen at the polls. He routinely used Twitter and Facebook to draft his political narrative and communicate with young, impressionable voters who previously

¹⁷⁵ Gene Palumbo and Elisabeth Malkin, "Nayib Bukele, an Outsider Candidate, Claims Victory in El Salvador Election," *New York Times*, February 4, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/03/world/americas/salvador-bukele-election.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Palumbo and Malkin.

¹⁷⁷ Palumbo and Malkin.

were less involved in politics.¹⁷⁸ He would share memes and discuss sports and popular culture. His polished look of slim-fit clothing, slicked-back hair, a styled beard, and aviator sunglasses made him incredibly recognizable.¹⁷⁹ Sometimes, he delivered his victory speech in denim jeans, a backward baseball cap, and a black leather jacket, exclaiming: “Today we have turned the page on the postwar period,” in an apparent attempt to appeal to the youth.¹⁸⁰ Bukele was not a typical presidential candidate, and it paid off in the election. He represented changes all citizens wanted to see, and they hoped that he would deliver on his promises.

B. BUKELE’S GANG VIOLENCE STRATEGY

Addressing the issue of gang violence required Bukele to adopt a novel approach distinct from the strategies employed by previous administrations. He aimed to address the grievances of his electors, take an uncompromising approach to crime, and strengthen the public infrastructure without negotiating a gang truce.¹⁸¹ Once coming into power, Bukele immediately enacted the “Territorial Control Plan,” a multi-phase national security strategy. Bukele was not transparent and never released a physical copy of the document. However, he publicly stated on Twitter that the plan contained seven phases, with the last one reserved for an emergency if the other stages fail.¹⁸² Currently, only phases one through five are public. He has relied solely on tweeting about his plan while posting pictures and videos of increased security forces and mass gang arrests online to prove its success.¹⁸³ Like his presidential campaign, Bukele relied on social media to

¹⁷⁸ Meléndez-Sánchez, “Latin America Erupts,” 23.

¹⁷⁹ Meléndez-Sánchez, 22–23.

¹⁸⁰ Charles T. Call, “The Significance of Nayib Bukele’s Surprising Election as President of El Salvador,” Brookings Commentary, February 15, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-significance-of-nayib-bukeles-surprising-election-as-president-of-el-salvador/>.

¹⁸¹ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 10.

¹⁸² Nagovitch, “Explainer.”

¹⁸³ Carlos Martinez, “‘I’ll Bring Down the Deaths for You,’” *El Faro*, March 27, 2020, https://elfaro.net/en/202003/el_salvador/24154/%E2%80%99CI%E2%80%99II-Bring-Down-the-Deaths-for-You.htm?st-full_text=all&tpl=11.

tout his successes as president and gain support from El Salvadorans; however, much of his plan resembled those of the previous regimes that he distanced himself from.

Bukele's first phase, "Preparation," enacted initiatives comparable to the Mano Dura and Super Mano Dura approaches to gang suppression of previous regimes. After determining which 22 municipalities within El Salvador had the most elicit gang activity, Bukele increased military and police presence in those areas.¹⁸⁴ He hoped that the increased occupation and surveillance would lessen the financial sources for the gangs. Like the previous repressive policies, this phase also called for mass detentions. Within the first two months of Phase One, police arrested 5,000 suspected gang members, and Bukele's efforts seemed eerily similar to past responses.¹⁸⁵ Bukele, who aimed to set himself apart from past presidents, did not appear to be addressing the voters' grievances.

In addition to mass detentions to control gang violence, Bukele focused on gaining more control over communications within the prison system to block orders from gang leaders held inside.¹⁸⁶ He declared a state of emergency in all 28 prisons within the country. Inmates stayed in their cells, and intense cell phone jammers blocked any signal that could reach them. Bukele then relocated thousands to maximum-security prisons and began constructing a new 40,000-capacity site.¹⁸⁷ By building prisons instead of universities, his tactics mirrored those of former presidents. This continuation did not alleviate grievances and the public's feeling of marginalization.

Bukele's next phase aimed to tackle the socio-economic factors contributing to gang violence. Phase Two, "Opportunity," addressed the looming concern of at-risk populations within El Salvador who turn to gang activity for financial stability and employment opportunities.¹⁸⁸ In this phase, the state created the Unit for the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric group, whose purpose was "to tackle the underlying

¹⁸⁴ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*

¹⁸⁵ Nagovitch, "Explainer."

¹⁸⁶ Nagovitch.

¹⁸⁷ Nagovitch.

¹⁸⁸ Nagovitch.

conditions that prompt young people to join gangs, such as social exclusion, economic marginalization, scarce job opportunities and lack of access to sports and recreation.”¹⁸⁹ Addressing the glaring socio-economic concerns of many El Salvadorans, the Bukele administration publicly acknowledged this phase as the most important of the plan. The Unit for Social Reconstruction of the Social Fabric was declared permanent, with its mission to remain ongoing—a vast and significant difference from the increased security presence of Phase One, which was deemed temporary.¹⁹⁰ However, Bukele’s administration failed to support this initiative financially, as other security-focused phases took funding priority, and this gap remains a problem.¹⁹¹ Bukele understood the need to improve poor socio-economic conditions but did not act on it. His lack of transparency shows how he undervalues the political system.

The ensuing three phases of Bukele’s strategy focused on strengthening security forces to confront gang activities proactively. Phase Three, “Modernization,” and Phase Four, “Incursion,” aided the police and military forces responsible for Phase One.¹⁹² For legitimacy, Phase Three called for modernizing the equipment used by these forces, including small unmanned aerial surveillance (sUAS) or drone capabilities, night vision equipment, and video cameras. It also called for newer uniforms, patrol vehicles, ballistic vests, and weapons for those on patrol. According to Bukele’s Twitter posts, the incursion phase aimed to increase the number of officers on patrol from 20,000 to 40,000.¹⁹³ With that added support, Phase Five, “Extraction,” could succeed. The Extraction phase aimed to “surround large cities and extract the terrorists hiding within

¹⁸⁹ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 12.

¹⁹⁰ International Crisis Group, 12.

¹⁹¹ International Crisis Group, 13.

¹⁹² Nagovitch, “Explainer.”

¹⁹³ Brian Avelar and Nathaniel Janowitz, “El Salvador Is Trying to Control MS-13 by Doubling Its Army,” *Vice*, July 30, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7ekb4/el-salvador-is-trying-to-control-ms-13-by-doubling-its-army>.

the communities, without giving them the slightest possibility of escape.”¹⁹⁴ By creating an army instead of jobs, Bukele promoted the narrative that attacking gangs took precedence over addressing the root causes.

As with most security plans, Bukele’s Territorial Control Plan was expensive and required loans and approval from the Legislative Assembly to allow its implementation. Executing the first four phases was estimated to cost \$575 million.¹⁹⁵ Bukele was marginally successful initially, securing a \$91 million loan from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), which declined his original request of \$158 million. He then requested an additional \$109 million loan, an amount needed to begin the “Modernization” phase, bringing the total for the first four phases to \$200 million. After going to the Legislative Assembly for the vote in February 2020, the majority leaders in ARENA and FMLN, who did not support funding the plan financially or politically, strongly opposed him. Regardless of previous attempts to curb gang violence, FMLN and ARENA did not support Bukele’s agenda, and he was unsuccessful in securing funding.¹⁹⁶ With control limited to the executive branch, Bukele realized the necessity of garnering additional support across other branches of government.

Democratic traditions frustrated Bukele’s agenda, as he had control of the executive branch, but his political foes still controlled the majority vote in the Legislative Assembly. Furious at their disapproval, he claimed that the two parties had a vested interest in allowing violence in their country and called for an emergency weekend session of the Legislative Assembly.¹⁹⁷ Although he indicated that any delegate who failed to attend was against the constitutional order, most members did not show up. In what many critics called an authoritarian move, Bukele ordered security forces to

¹⁹⁴ Gerardo Arbaiza, “El Salvador’s Bukele Scales up Anti-Gang Push with New Deployments,” Reuters, November 23, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/el-salvadors-bukele-scales-up-anti-gang-push-with-new-deployments-2022-11-24/>.

¹⁹⁵ Nagovitch, “Explainer.”

¹⁹⁶ Nagovitch.

¹⁹⁷ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 16.

overtake the Legislative Assembly, where he took the chair's seat.¹⁹⁸ His violation of the democratic traditions of majority rule and checks and balances between the legislative and executive branches of government highlighted Bukele's willingness to further his objectives. As Dahl stated, political elites needed to uphold the values of democracy to avoid backsliding, yet Bukele did not.¹⁹⁹ Instead, he pushes the system's boundaries, jeopardizing its integrity and stability.

The international community began to fear that Bukele was responsible for El Salvador's democratic backsliding. The United States, the European Union, the Organization of American States, and the United Nations refused to condone Bukele's actions in the legislature. The Human Rights Watch called Bukele's use of the armed forces to occupy the assembly "an exhibition of brute force."²⁰⁰ Bukele, whose Twitter bio once read "the coolest dictator in the world," denied the international claims that the move was toward dictatorship, saying that if he wanted to be a dictator, he would have assumed complete control already.²⁰¹ His takeover of the legislature garnered much support from El Salvadorans, who were less concerned about Bukele not securing his funding yet more enthralled by his willingness to fight for his people.²⁰² This support proved crucial in the upcoming 2021 midterm elections.

C. THE IMPACT OF GANG VIOLENCE ON THE 2021 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

Despite his anti-democratic moves, the linkages between bouts of gang violence and advances in Bukele's political endeavors took shape during the midterm elections. In April 2020, shortly after Bukele's takeover of the Legislative Assembly, MS-13 members

¹⁹⁸ International Crisis Group, 16–17.

¹⁹⁹ Bailey and Braybrooke, "Robert A. Dahl's Philosophy of Democracy," 110.

²⁰⁰ Scott Neuman, "Troops Occupy El Salvador's Legislature to Back President's Crime Package," NPR Latin America, February 10, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/10/804407503/troops-occupy-el-salvadors-legislature-to-back-president-s-crime-package>.

²⁰¹ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 16.

²⁰² Neuman, "Troops Occupy El Salvador's Legislature."

assumed responsibility for killing 85 people who had no apparent gang affiliations.²⁰³ Although some analysts believed these attacks were the gang's response to the splintering of gangs in prison, which limited their ease of communication, others thought it was the first of many small attacks to bolster Bukele's political agenda to gain funding approval for his Territorial Control Plan.²⁰⁴ To do so, he needed support from the Legislative Assembly, which he could not acquire with FMLN and ARENA still in control. Thus, Bukele sought to manipulate influence from the gangs to orchestrate a crisis, aiming to pave the way for the electoral victory of his own political party.²⁰⁵

Such bouts of gang violence were strategically driven by political motivations, serving as tools for exploitation. According to a U.S. Treasury statement regarding Bukele's relationship with the gangs, "gang leadership also agreed to provide political support to the Nuevas Ideas political party in the upcoming (midterm) election."²⁰⁶ Violent outbreaks from the gangs aimed to polarize voters in El Salvador into believing that removing corrupt ARENA and FMLN members from the Legislative Assembly was necessary to allow Bukele the ability to implement his strategy to combat gang violence effectively.

Bukele emerged as the clear winner of the 2021 election. Nuevas Ideas, Bukele's self-made political party, gained a super-majority in the Legislative Assembly after receiving immense citizen support in the polls.²⁰⁷ By winning 61 of the total 84 seats, former political powers ARENA and FMLN lost majority power and the ability to push

²⁰³ Meléndez-Sánchez, "What's Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?"

²⁰⁴ Steven Dudley and Alex Papadovassilakis, "How El Salvador President Bukele Deals with Gangs," *InSight Crime* (blog), October 1, 2020, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/el-salvador-president-bukele-gangs/>.

²⁰⁵ Farah and Richardson, *Gangs No Longer*, 11.

²⁰⁶ Christopher Sherman, "U.S. Treasury: El Salvador Government Negotiated with Gangs," AP News, December 8, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/nayib-bukele-el-salvador-gangs-c378285a36d55c18f741c3f65892f801>.

²⁰⁷ Will Freeman and Lucas Perelló, "In El Salvador, Broken Promises Have Forced the Establishment Out," *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/02/el-salvador-legislative-assembly-election-nuevas-ideas-nayib-bukele-fmln-arena-corruption/>.

back on Bukele's initiatives.²⁰⁸ This victory, aligned with removing unsupportive Supreme Court justices, the Attorney General, and prosecutors and replacing them with his constituents, instilled fear in many. These actions built the foundation for Bukele's executive takeover and presented a looming threat to democracy in El Salvador.²⁰⁹ "Democracy is on the edge of the abyss," declared Jose Miguel Vivanco, executive director of the Americas division of Human Rights Watch.²¹⁰ However, because citizens endorsed Bukele's non-democratic approaches through democratic elections, he cannot take all the blame.

The United States and the Biden administration publicly voiced displeasure at the recent actions of Bukele. Vice President Kamala Harris had "deep concerns" for the state of El Salvador's democracy after the removal of Supreme Court justices and the overturned ban on presidential reelection.²¹¹ Secretary of State Antony Blinken disagreed with his removal of then-Attorney General Paul Melara, who actively led an investigation into Bukele's alleged agreement with the gangs to garner support for the midterm elections by bolstering violence.²¹² Once Bukele received word, he quickly removed Melara from office and replaced him with a close confidant. Likewise, he dismantled Melara's special prosecutions unit and scrapped its investigation.²¹³ Blinken believed Melara and his team were "fighting corruption to combat crime in both the

²⁰⁸ Freeman and Perelló.

²⁰⁹ Anna-Catherine Brigida and Mary Beth Sheridan, "El Salvador's Leader Wins Control of Legislature in Midterm Vote; Critics Fear Rising Authoritarianism," *Washington Post*, March 1, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/salvador-bukele-legislative-midterm-election-authoritarian/2021/02/28/5f2ac302-77c9-11eb-8115-9ad5e9c02117_story.html.

²¹⁰ "El Salvador Court Rules Presidents Can Serve Two Consecutive Terms," BBC News, September 4, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-58451370>.

²¹¹ Seth Robbins and Alex Papadovassilakis, "Ousting of El Salvador's Top Prosecutor Imperils Rule of Law," *InSight Crime* (blog), May 3, 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/news/ousting-el-salvador-top-prosecutor-imperils-rule-of-law/>.

²¹² Robbins and Papadovassilakis.

²¹³ Robbins and Papadovassilakis.

United States and El Salvador.”²¹⁴ Bukele, who ran on an anti-corruption platform, did not want his corruption exposed, as he needed citizen support to succeed.

Now poised with power and support in all three levels of government, Bukele needed to ensure his ability to maintain control over the executive branch for an extended period. As of September 2021, Bukele became eligible to be the first El Salvadoran president to seek reelection, as his newly appointed Supreme Court has reversed the ban on back-to-back presidential terms.²¹⁵ “The state ceased to be at the service of the people and passed to be at the service of one person,” said FMLN Legislative Assembly member Anabel Bellosso.²¹⁶ Now in the minority, FMLN assembly members could only watch Nuevas Ideas alter the guidelines of their democracy to fit Bukele’s vision for the country.

D. CONCLUSION

Through democratic elections, Bukele orchestrated an executive takeover and began the process of democratic backsliding in El Salvador. Nuevas Ideas’ supermajority rule in the Legislative Assembly gives him the legislative backing necessary to implement his plans without recourse. Bukele’s removal of opposing Supreme Court justices and prosecutors only expands his reach into all three levels of government, lessening the valued political system deemed necessary for a thriving democracy.²¹⁷ A high approval rating, thanks partly to his prolonged reduction of violence, foreshadows his impending reelection.²¹⁸ Though Bukele may appear as though he amassed this power on his own, increased speculation from the international community suggests that

²¹⁴ Robbins and Papadovassilakis.

²¹⁵ BBC News, “El Salvador Court Rules Presidents Can Serve Two Consecutive Terms.”

²¹⁶ BBC News.

²¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, “El Salvador: Legislature Deepens.”

²¹⁸ Nelson Renteria, “Majority of Salvadorans Approve of Bukele’s Leadership, Poll Shows,” Reuters, December 15, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/currencies/majority-salvadorans-approve-bukeles-leadership-poll-shows-2021-12-15/>.

an illegal negotiation with gangs accounted for his victory.²¹⁹ The following chapter explores how Bukele circumvented the rule of law to negotiate with gang leaders to advance his political objectives of staying in power and undermining democracy.

²¹⁹ Meléndez-Sánchez, “What’s Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?”

IV. THE SALVADORAN MARAS: FROM GANGS TO POLITICAL CRIMINALS

Nayib Bukele's first year in office was the least violent year for El Salvador in the previous two decades.²²⁰ El Salvador became one of the least violent countries in the Latin American region. While 2021 was a record-low year for homicides, with only 17.5 per every 100,000 habitants, 2022 saw substantially lower rates at 7.8.²²¹ This record drastically changed a country once labeled the "homicide capital of the world" and begged the question of how Bukele achieved his campaign promise so quickly.²²² Although he and his administration cited his Territorial Control Plan as the leading cause of decreased violence, investigative reporting uncovered alleged gang negotiations that had transformed the gangs into collaborative state-sponsored groups, otherwise known as political criminals.²²³ These negotiations have produced conditions that assist Bukele in deconsolidating democracy in El Salvador.

Bukele once again used the manipulation of violence to exploit existing democratic traditions. Bouts of gang violence in March 2022, the deadliest three days the country had ever seen, highlighted how employing gang violence can hasten democratic deconsolidation.²²⁴ By unleashing fury on the streets, the gangs again used violence to capture the government's attention and return Bukele to the negotiating table.²²⁵ In response, Bukele enacted a state of emergency with the support of a newly elected

²²⁰ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 19.

²²¹ Peter Appleby et al., "InSight Crime's 2022 Homicide Round-Up," *InSight Crime* (blog), February 8, 2023, <https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2022-homicide-round-up/>.

²²² Meléndez-Sánchez, "What's Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?"

²²³ Criminal politics is when "non-state armed groups (develop) variously collaborative and competitive relationships with the state that have produced heightened levels of violence in many contexts and allowed these organizations to gather significant political authority." For more on his definition, and why he believes that the topic of criminal politics needs more research and study, see Barnes, "Criminal Politics," 967.

²²⁴ Roy, "Why Has Gang Violence Spiked in El Salvador?"

²²⁵ Meléndez-Sánchez, "What's Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?"

legislature that eliminated human rights and due process for El Salvadorans for over a year.²²⁶ Similar to the past bouts of gang violence in 2020 and 2021, Bukele has illustrated more authoritarian-like control every time gangs displayed heavy force.²²⁷ Though achieving a historic reduction in violence, Bukele has managed to transform the gangs into political criminals that contributed to the erosions of El Salvador's democracy. This chapter outlines the recent transformation of El Salvadoran gangs and their impact on democratic deconsolidation.

A. THE DECLINE IN HOMICIDES: GANG NEGOTIATIONS OR GOVERNMENT POLICIES?

Amidst a pre-existing decline in homicides, Bukele's rise in popularity coincided with a shifting landscape in El Salvador. Although homicide rates declined before Bukele assumed the Office of the President, they drastically dropped during his first year, making it the least violent year for the country in the past four presidencies.²²⁸ The average homicide rate was 9.2 per day in May 2019, one month before Bukele took office. By May 2020, the PNC reported only 64 total murders, an average rate of 2.1 per day, making it the month with the fewest murders since the end of the civil war in 1992.²²⁹ El Salvador unprecedentedly reported 26 days without any murders from June 2019 to June 2020.²³⁰ The enhanced security approaches Bukele's administration

²²⁶ Human Rights Watch, "El Salvador: Sweeping New Laws Endanger Rights," Human Rights Watch, April 8, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/08/el-salvador-sweeping-new-laws-endanger-rights>.

²²⁷ Farah and Richardson, *Gangs No Longer*.

²²⁸ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 19.

²²⁹ Eddie Galdamez, "El Salvador Homicide Rate from 2010 to 2023," El Salvador INFO, March 1, 2023, <https://elsalvadorinfo.net/homicide-rate-in-el-salvador/>.

²³⁰ These numbers are produced by El Salvador's National Police (PNC) and cannot be corroborated. Some news media outlets do not rely solely on these numbers, as what many believe them to be gang-related homicides, are instead logged as disappearances or missing persons cases. Gang members have taken to burying their victims in mass graves instead of leaving the bodies on the streets, also potentially causing discrepancies in the numbers. For more see: Nelson Renteria, "In El Salvador, Discrepancy over Deaths and Mass Graves Alarms Critics," Reuters, August 3, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/el-salvador-discrepancy-over-deaths-mass-graves-alarms-critics-2022-08-03/>.

adopted during his first year appeared to have worked. His approval ratings rose to nearly 90%, and El Salvadorians felt safer in their communities.²³¹ Although these drastic changes merited celebration, understanding how and why these changes took place proved crucial to the foundation of El Salvador's democracy.

An undocumented arrangement with the gangs could have influenced Bukele's success in curbing violence. Rumors of a possible informal understanding between government officials and gang leadership began swirling a year into Bukele's presidency.²³² El Salvadoran investigative news outlet *El Faro* posted an article in August of 2020 that published transcripts of phone calls, audio files, text messages, surveillance photographs, and other materials gathered during an investigation by former Attorney General Raul Melara into an alleged illegal gang pact. Most notable were photographs and surveillance footage of Carlos Marroquin, the head of the Social Fabric Reconstruction Unit (the unit responsible for Phase Two of the Territorial Control Plan), and Osiris Luna, El Salvador's Director of Prisons, facilitating meetings with incarcerated senior gang leadership.²³³ The pact appeared to be informal. Gang members agreed to lower the homicide rate in exchange for better prison conditions, including cell phones and prostitutes, scaling back anti-gang operations within municipalities, and increasing employment opportunities for former gang members.²³⁴ The demands were uncannily similar to those negotiated with gang leadership during the 2012 truce under former President Funes. The media and the international community accused the Bukele administration of negotiating with terrorists and failing to uphold the rule of law, thus increasing attention toward democratic backsliding.²³⁵

²³¹ Paola Nagovitch, "Nayib Bukele's First Year in Office," Americas Society/Council of the Americas, May 28, 2020, <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/nayib-bukeles-first-year-office>.

²³² Seth Robbins, "Evidence of Gang Negotiations Belie El Salvador President's Claims," *InSight Crime* (blog), August 24, 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/news/evidence-of-gang-negotiations-belie-el-salvador-presidents-claims/>.

²³³ Robbins.

²³⁴ Sherman, "U.S. Treasury."

²³⁵ Sherman.

Carlos Marroquin’s presumed involvement in the negotiations was a longstanding allegation by media outlets. When Bukele was mayor of San Salvador (2015—2018), the police identified Marroquin leaving a local Pizza Hut after speaking with the MS-13 gang leadership.²³⁶ Media later uncovered that Bukele’s administration negotiated with gangs who controlled the region near the Historic Center of San Salvador.²³⁷ He wanted to revitalize the center by relocating many street vendors who crowded the streets and limited pedestrian access to local businesses. Moving the vendors required approval from the local gang faction, who initially asked Bukele for \$100,000 to allow it.²³⁸ Unwilling to pay in cash, Marroquin stepped in and offered the gangs front-of-the-line access to government assistance programs in exchange for their approval.²³⁹ Marroquin was crucial in facilitating this previous agreement and brought his successes to the negotiating table. Expressing their concerns regarding the illegal negotiations and corruption, the United States Department of Treasury sanctioned Marroquin (and his counterpart Luna), which will be discussed later in this chapter.²⁴⁰

The revitalization project of the Historic Center of San Salvador was a massive economic success. Bukele and City Hall managers relocated nearly 3,000 vendors from the main square, making the once chaotic streets accessible to foot traffic.²⁴¹ Local cafés, bars, and stores garnered more customers and revenue, while the street vendors still had access to areas where they could sell their goods.²⁴² The gang’s approval of this project, a marker of the social change that spiked Bukele’s popularity during his presidential campaign, proved that gang cooperation could help catapult his political career.²⁴³ The

²³⁶ Dudley and Papadovassilakis, “How El Salvador President Bukele Deals with Gangs.”

²³⁷ Dudley and Papadovassilakis.

²³⁸ Dudley and Papadovassilakis.

²³⁹ Dudley and Papadovassilakis.

²⁴⁰ Sherman, “U.S. Treasury.”

²⁴¹ Dudley and Papadovassilakis, “How El Salvador President Bukele Deals with Gangs.”

²⁴² Dudley and Papadovassilakis.

²⁴³ Dudley and Papadovassilakis.

negotiations showcased Bukele's ability to circumvent the rule of law, allowing the gangs to receive access to government assistance over the marginalized communities that needed it. Bukele failed to represent those who voted him into power yet pledged allegiance to those who could help further his political endeavors.

Bukele, who criticized previous administrations for negotiating with gangs during his campaign, denied the allegations of a gang agreement and attributed the decrease in homicides to his Territorial Control Plan. However, others credited evolutions in gang culture.²⁴⁴ After the 2012 truce ended, the gangs decided to end the intense fighting over local control by dividing the territory, reducing unnecessary killings.²⁴⁵ Generational turnover also affected the decrease in gang violence. The truce only provided advantages for gang leadership in prison. Mid-level leadership taking orders from prison still lived in poverty and did not benefit from any agreements. Those mid-level leaders wanted to increase extortion efforts to enhance their financial well-being, resulting in less focus on perpetrating violence.²⁴⁶ Alternatively, it is plausible that the gangs themselves, rather than Bukele's efforts, independently decreased the level of violence.

After the midterm election, gangs engaged in another vicious outbreak. In 72 hours between November 9 and November 11, PNC recorded 46 homicides. Twenty-two were on November 10 alone, the worst recorded day of the year. Yet, on November 12, no homicides allegedly took place, and the killings ceased.²⁴⁷ Bukele credited his Phase Three and Phase Four efforts of increased military patrols for quickly ending the violence.²⁴⁸ Although he publicly claimed that disagreements between rival gangs sparked the violence, victims had no links to gang activity, as leaders in prison gave the

²⁴⁴ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 28.

²⁴⁵ International Crisis Group, 26.

²⁴⁶ International Crisis Group, 28.

²⁴⁷ Robbins, "El Salvador's Gangs Send Message in Blood."

²⁴⁸ Robbins.

“green light” to include civilian casualties.²⁴⁹ According to an analysis by *InSight Crime*, which routinely interviews gang members and police, this violence was another outburst from the gangs to secure Bukele’s attention and improve prison conditions.²⁵⁰ Although his plan was influential in securing the arrests of many gang members, it did not stop the violence; it narrowed it to just a few days.

With so many factors involved in understanding homicide statistics, the recent seven-year decline in homicides in El Salvador had no clear explanation. Many experts believed that regardless of the difference in political ideology and presidential initiatives, “homicides go down only if the gangs decide so.”²⁵¹ Instances such as the five-day killing spree in April 2020 and another in November 2021 that left 85 and 46 dead, respectively, indicated that gangs could unleash their violence just as much as they can withhold it.²⁵² This pattern would prove true again in March 2022, when gangs launched deadly attacks to summon Bukele to the negotiating table.²⁵³

B. THE MARCH 2022 ATTACKS

Bukele’s Territorial Control Plan did not quell the gangs’ violent grip on history; instead, violence resurfaced to capture his attention. The international community once again raised concerns over Bukele’s anti-gang strategy when gangs murdered at least 87 people over three days in March.²⁵⁴ On March 26 alone, they killed 60 people, marking the deadliest day since the end of the civil war. Most victims had no affiliation with either

²⁴⁹ Laura Jordan and Edwin Segura, “The Most Violent Days of the Year in El Salvador,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, November 12, 2021, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Los-dias-mas-violentos-del-ano-en-El-Salvador-20211111-0105.html>.

²⁵⁰ Robbins, “El Salvador’s Gangs Send Message in Blood.”

²⁵¹ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 24.

²⁵² Meléndez-Sánchez, “What’s Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?”

²⁵³ Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez, “Bukele Has Defeated El Salvador’s Gangs—for Now. How? And What Does It Mean for the Region?,” *Lawfare* (blog), March 28, 2023, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/bukele-has-defeated-el-salvadors-gangs%E2%80%94now-how-and-what-does-it-mean-region>.

²⁵⁴ Meléndez-Sánchez, “What’s Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?”

MS-13 or Barrio 18, limiting the possibility of linking the attacks to gang rivalry.²⁵⁵ Nevertheless, several researchers claimed that the violence communicated the gangs' displeasure with the recent arrests of leaders and their desire to reopen negotiations with Bukele.²⁵⁶ According to a police spokesperson who talked to *El Faro* following the attacks, it was a "message written in blood. The gangs are sending a forceful message: They are in charge. They are saying that they can increase or decrease homicides when they see fit."²⁵⁷ Once the gangs had the government's attention, the violence ceased. The April, November, and March killings stopped as quickly as they started. The weekend following the March attacks, PNC reported only two murders, solidifying gang supremacy in controlling violence over all others.²⁵⁸ The gangs conveyed a powerful message through their actions, demonstrating their continued dominance that undermined Bukele's perceived level of power.

Although the gangs displayed a high level of force, Bukele had the upper hand. Before the 2021 midterm elections, Bukele's administration reportedly agreed to repeal a set of anti-crime laws, improve prison conditions, and resist extradition of certain MS-13 leaders to the United States if the gangs could aid Bukele in securing Nuevas Ideas supermajority in the legislature by keeping the violence low.²⁵⁹ His high approval rating, hovering around 85% because of the continued decrease in homicides, played a significant role in his party's landslide election wins.²⁶⁰ The gangs used the March attacks to remind Bukele of the decline and ensure he fulfilled his promises. However,

²⁵⁵ Roy, "Why Has Gang Violence Spiked in El Salvador?"

²⁵⁶ According to sources, Bukele's government officials invited two brothers to a meeting and provided them with transportation. The two gang members were arrested on their way to the meeting, and no new negotiations occurred. International Crisis Group, *A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever*, 9.

²⁵⁷ Meléndez-Sánchez, "What's Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?"

²⁵⁸ Mary Speck, "El Salvador Needs Long-Term Solutions to End Cycles of Violence," United States Institute of Peace, April 6, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/04/el-salvador-needs-long-term-solutions-end-cycles-violence>.

²⁵⁹ Meléndez-Sánchez, "What's Behind the Spike of Violence in El Salvador?"

²⁶⁰ Meléndez-Sánchez.

the victory of Nuevas Ideas gave Bukele control of the legislative and judicial branches, which limited his need to continue to satisfy gang leadership.

C. THE MARCH ATTACKS: A MESSAGE TO THE UNITED STATES

Moreover, the gangs sent a message to someone other than Bukele: the United States. The March attacks provided more evidence of how much political influence the gangs have in El Salvador. To continue to persuade Bukele to circumvent the rule of law, the gangs used the March attacks to dissuade the United States from prosecuting MS-13 leadership on terrorism charges. In response to the illegal negotiations between Bukele and the gangs, during which his administration agreed to prevent the extradition of MS-13 leaders to the United States, the U.S. Department of Treasury imposed financial sanctions on Marroquin and Luna, the critical figureheads in Bukele's gang pact.²⁶¹ Those sanctions froze Marroquin and Luna's assets in the United States and denied U.S. citizens from completing transactions.²⁶² Fearing that Bukele would extradite these leaders to the United States to help his constituents, MS-13 did not want Bukele to disregard his part of the deal and thus responded with violent attacks to prove their grip on power and control.²⁶³

The United States previously characterized MS-13 as a Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO). In December 2020, however, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted 14 of the highest-ranking MS-13 leaders, the *Ranfla Nacional* (national board of directors), on terrorism-related charges.²⁶⁴ This prosecution is the second time the United

²⁶¹ Seth Robbins, "US Blacklists El Salvador Officials, Bolstering Accusations of Gang Pacts," *InSight Crime* (blog), December 9, 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/news/us-blacklists-el-salvador-officials-bolstering-accusations-gang-pacts/>.

²⁶² Robbins.

²⁶³ Dudley and Papadovassilakis, "How El Salvador President Bukele Deals with Gangs."

²⁶⁴ "MS-13's Highest-Ranking Leaders Charged with Terrorism Offenses in the United States," Office of Public Affairs Press Releases, January 14, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/ms-13-s-highest-ranking-leaders-charged-terrorism-offenses-united-states>.

States brought terrorism charges against an international street gang.²⁶⁵ *Ranfla Nacional* is said to have directed the violence and criminal activities of MS-13 gang members worldwide for over two decades. The indictment “charges the defendants with conspiracy to provide and conceal material support to terrorists, conspiracy to commit acts of terrorism transcending national boundaries, conspiracy to finance terrorism and narco-terrorism conspiracy in connection with the defendants’ leadership of the transnational criminal organization over the past two decades from El Salvador, the United States, Mexico and elsewhere.”²⁶⁶ This indictment targeted the command-and-control structure of one of the world’s most notorious gangs, exemplifying a robust stance on the United States’ commitment to combat the expansion of gang violence and influence.²⁶⁷

The U.S.’ efforts to indict MS-13 on terrorism highlighted the attention the gang has wielded for its political goals. The indictment charged that these members used violence “to obtain concessions from the government of El Salvador, achieve political goals, and retaliate for government actions against MS-13’s members and leaders.”²⁶⁸ The indictments also alleged that the group conducted specialized training, extorted money to use to purchase rocket launchers, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along with other weapons, and used acts of violence to spread fear in neighborhoods in El Salvador, the United States, and other countries, such as Mexico and Guatemala.²⁶⁹ This approach holds significance for neighboring countries in the region, as it sets a precedent for tackling gang-related issues and safeguarding democratic institutions.

²⁶⁵ MS-13 leader Armando Eliu Melgar Diaz (a.k.a. “Blue” or “Clipper”) was indicted by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2020. Diaz was charged with “material support to terrorists,” with additional racketeering (RICO) and narcotics trafficking charges. For more on this indictment, see Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan, “Third Generation Gangs Strategic Note No. 31: MS-13 East Coast Program Command and Control (C2), Cliques, & Geographic Distribution,” *Small Wars Journal*, September 8, 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/third-generation-gangs-strategic-note-no-31-ms-13-east-coast-program-command-and-control>.

²⁶⁶ Department of Justice, “MS-13’s Highest-Ranking Leaders.”

²⁶⁷ Department of Justice.

²⁶⁸ Department of Justice.

²⁶⁹ Seth Robbins, “6 Reasons Why the U.S. Charged MS13 Leaders with Terrorism,” *InSight Crime* (blog), January 15, 2021, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/ms13-leaders-terrorism/>.

The U.S. Department of Justice claimed that the drastic increase in homicides in 2015 that made El Salvador the homicide capital of the world was a message from *Ranfla Nacional* to prove they were the ones in control. *Ranfla Nacional* blamed the United States for the breakdown of the 2012 truce because it pressured the El Salvadoran government to end the ceasefire to keep financial relief packages intact.²⁷⁰ History seems to have repeated itself, as some believe the March 2022 murders were the gang's response to the extradition request. Eleven of the 14 indicted MS-13 leaders served time in El Salvadoran prisons.²⁷¹ Despite El Salvador declaring gangs as terrorist groups, Bukele refused to extradite them to the United States because of his pact with gang leadership for lessening violence to increase his support. To pledge his allegiance further to gang leadership, Bukele released four 11 indicted members from prison between June 2021 and February 2022.²⁷² One of those men, Elmer Canales Rivera, a.k.a. "Crook" or "*El Viejo*," was reportedly removed from prison in Marroquin's attempt to prove his trustworthiness and loyalty to gang leaders. Sources suspect Rivera of hiding in Guatemala, while the other three fugitives' whereabouts are unknown.²⁷³ These actions illustrate Bukele's reluctance to collaborate with the United States and his readiness to prioritize adherence to the gang truce over upholding the rule of law.

D. BUKELE'S CONTROVERSIAL RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY

Bukele's responses to March's violence signal further democratic backsliding. On March 27, the Legislative Assembly and Bukele instituted a 30-day state of exception in response to the violence, immediately drawing attention from the international community. The Legislative Assembly approved a series of measures that "allow judges to imprison children, restrict freedom of expression, and dangerously expand the use of

²⁷⁰ Robbins.

²⁷¹ Carlos Garcia, "Are MS13 Leaders Wanted for Extradition to U.S. Free in El Salvador?," *InSight Crime* (blog), April 1, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/news/ms13-leaders-extradition-us-free-el-salvador/>.

²⁷² Garcia.

²⁷³ Mistler-Ferguson, "New Revelations Herald Grim Future for El Salvador's Security."

pretrial detention and counterterrorism legislation.”²⁷⁴ Such actions demonstrate Bukele’s failure to prioritize the well-being of El Salvadorans by undermining their fundamental human and democratic rights, thus eliminating the free and lively civil society that helps El Salvador’s democracy flourish.²⁷⁵

Bukele’s state of exception allowed the El Salvadoran government to amend laws and sentencing guidelines to restrict youth and current gang members from leaving that life to rejoin society after rehabilitation. On March 30, “the Legislative Assembly lowered the age of criminal responsibility for children who may be accused of belonging to ‘terrorist groups or any other criminal gang’ from 16 to 12 years of age.” Children ages 12 to 16 can now be sentenced to up to 10 years in prison for these crimes, while children ages 16 and older can serve up to 20 years.²⁷⁶ These changes concerned the United Nations and their partners, as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as anyone under 18. The United Nations has also asked participating countries not to set the age of criminal responsibility for a child under 14.²⁷⁷ Instead of investing money into gang-prevention programs for youths, which provide outlets for juveniles to avoid joining gangs, Bukele’s administration made it easier to incarcerate them.

Bukele’s administration also targeted the adult population by passing amendments that increased the sentences for adult gang members. Belonging to a gang has been considered a terrorist act in El Salvador since 2016. The Salvadoran definition of terrorism includes “violent or inhumane methods with the express purpose of instilling terror, insecurity, or alarm within the population” or to “assume the exercise of powers that belong to the sovereignty of the states or systemically affect the fundamental rights of the population or part of it.”²⁷⁸ Those convicted of leading a “terrorist” gang can face sentences between 20 to 45 years in prison, a drastic step up from the previous 14 years.

²⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch, “El Salvador: Sweeping New Laws.”

²⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch.

²⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch.

²⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch.

²⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch.

Membership in “terrorist” gangs and supporting gangs now carries a sentence of 20 to 30 years in prison, up from the previous 3 to 5 years.²⁷⁹ As noted with the previous *Mano Dura* and *Super Mano Dura* policies, a prison system overpopulated with gangs adversely affects its functionality and increases gang collaboration and recruitment.²⁸⁰ Increased sentences ensure longer incarcerations for gang members and prison system overcrowding for a substantial amount of time.

The state of exception suspended due process protections granted to citizens under the Salvadoran constitution, which remains the case. Protections included “the right to be informed about the reason of arrest, to remain silent, and to legal representation, and the requirement that all people detained be taken before a judge within 72 hours.”²⁸¹ Bukele authorized the national police “to conduct warrantless raids and mass arrests.”²⁸² The military and police set up nationwide checkpoints that derailed due process. They took those labeled as having a gang affiliation—either through appearance, social background, or criminal past—into custody until they could prove their innocence.²⁸³ A police officer told an El Salvadoran mother whose son was detained, “We can arrest anyone we want.”²⁸⁴ Many citizens felt it was a crime to be poor, and “unlawful association” or the belief that they received financial support from gang members was a leading charge for arrest.²⁸⁵ Bukele publicly touted his administration’s hard work in enhancing gang prevention through addressing socio-economic problems and pursuing rehabilitation

²⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch.

²⁸⁰ According to reports, El Salvador’s prison system was already incredibly congested. As of December 2020, prisons were 136% over capacity, with some six times over maximum capacity. For more see: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Situation of Human Rights in El Salvador* (Washington, DC: Organization of American States, 2021).

²⁸¹ Human Rights Watch, “*We Can Arrest Anyone We Want*,” 83.

²⁸² Jeff Abbott, “The Other Americans: Authoritarianism Deepens across Central America,” *The Progressive Magazine*, April 7, 2022, <https://progressive.org/api/content/459bde7e-b677-11ec-8d07-12274efc5439/>.

²⁸³ Abbott.

²⁸⁴ Human Rights Watch, *We Can Arrest Anyone We Want*, 59.

²⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch, 83.

efforts, but he exacerbated the crowded prison system by arbitrarily arresting potential, former, and current gang members due to social status.

The high arrest rate created several burdens for the legal system. Courts had to have virtual hearings for crimes related to terrorism and unlawful association.²⁸⁶ The situation limited the citizen's right to challenge pretrial detention, presently declared indefinite after not being allowed to exceed 12 months for less serious crimes and 24 months for severe crimes.²⁸⁷ Judges, prosecutors, and lawyers, facing an incredibly high workload, often appeared in court without defendants. Most public defenders only met with defendants a few minutes before trial and struggled to deliver an ample defense, as authorities have routinely denied prison visits.²⁸⁸ Private attorneys faced many challenges, including restricted access to criminal files and defendant information.²⁸⁹ The limited prospect of presenting a sufficient defense eliminated the citizen's right to due process.

Bukele's actions also undermined the democratic tradition of press freedom. Journalists faced restrictions such as disallowing them from reporting on gangs and activities that might induce panic and anxiety for citizens.²⁹⁰ Any journalist who criticized Bukele's policies was deemed a member of a terrorist group and faced penalties of up to 15 years in prison.²⁹¹ Meanwhile, government-run media channels published reports aimed to discredit the reputations of independent outlets.²⁹² Citizen Now and Access Lab reported that the administration utilized Pegasus, a spyware software inflicting mobile devices and

²⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch, 84.

²⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch, 57.

²⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch, 84–85.

²⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch, 86.

²⁹⁰ Karla Arévalo and Alejandra Arredondo, "'We Are Not Going to Censor Ourselves,' Say El Salvador Journalists," VOA, May 5, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/we-are-not-going-to-censor-ourselves-say-el-salvador-journalists-/6560235.html>.

²⁹¹ Human Rights Watch, "El Salvador: Sweeping New Laws Endanger Rights."

²⁹² Human Rights Watch, *We Can Arrest Anyone We Want*, 42.

computers, on El Salvadoran journalists and civilians.²⁹³ According to the Center for International Media (CIMA), “(the) media are frequently a central focus of attack by leaders working to undermine democratic freedoms in their pursuit of control.”²⁹⁴ Bukele dismantled democratic freedoms through the power conferred by his elected supporters in the legislature under the guise of suppressing gang violence.

Bukele has since extended the state of exception twelve times. Overall, police have arrested nearly 64,000 citizens since the March 2022 violence.²⁹⁵ Many charged do not have gang affiliation, and approximately 1,600 detainees are children.²⁹⁶ According to a Human Rights Watch Report for 2022, over 2,900 cases of human rights violations occurred, including 90 improperly investigated detainee deaths.²⁹⁷ With no media allowed to report on these numbers and alert the El Salvadoran citizens of his true actions, Bukele now controlled the entire government and the entire population. As Geddes and Zaller stated, government-controlled communication limits the ability of citizens to think critically and resist the threat of authoritarianism; thus, El Salvador’s democracy seems likely to be the victim.²⁹⁸

El Salvador has gone from having the highest homicide rate in 2015 to the highest incarceration rate in 2023.²⁹⁹ In February, Bukele opened the 40,000-capacity Terrorism Confinement Center, hoping to ease the strain on an already stressed prison system, as

²⁹³ Howie Shia, “El Salvador: Hearing on Abuse of Pegasus Spyware to Be Held by Inter-American Commission on Human Rights,” Amnesty International, March 15, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/03/elsalvador-pegasus-iachr/>.

²⁹⁴ Kate Musgrave, *Tipping Point: Democratic Erosion and the Assault on Press Freedom* (Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance, 2021), 2.

²⁹⁵ This data is current, as of March 2023. Meléndez-Sánchez, “Bukele Has Defeated El Salvador’s Gangs.”

²⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch, “*We Can Arrest Anyone We Want*,” 1.

²⁹⁷ Human Rights Watch, “El Salvador: Events of 2022,” in *World Report 2023*, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/el-salvador>.

²⁹⁸ Geddes and Zaller, “Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes,” 319.

²⁹⁹ Nelson Renteria and Sarah Kinoshian, “El Salvador Opens 40,000-Person Prison as Arrests Soar in Gang Crackdown,” Reuters, February 1, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/el-salvador-opens-40000-person-prison-arrests-soar-gang-crackdown-2023-02-01/>.

nearly 2% of the adult population in El Salvador is behind bars due to his war on gangs. Bukele profited off his collusion with criminal actors for his political gains.³⁰⁰ Bukele's approval rating hovered near 90 percent. Homicides were at historically low levels. El Salvadorans felt safer in their communities.³⁰¹ Jose Miguel Cruz states, "Once institutional controls are removed, and the rule of law is weakened, criminals and populist leaders increase their collaboration to dismantle democracy."³⁰² Bukele's exchange of safety for human rights has not seemed to slow down his trajectory for reelection in 2024. Manipulating the desperation of El Salvadorans to escape the clutches of gang violence in exchange for support, the prospects of continued democratization in El Salvador seem bleak.

E. CONCLUSION

The gangs of El Salvador transformed from traditional street gangs into more sophisticated political criminals with the state's assistance. President Bukele ignored the rule of law by illegally negotiating with gang leadership, but his tactics differed from those previously used. The gangs expected Bukele to return to the negotiating table after deadly bouts of violence in March 2022, but Bukele refused. Instead, the state engaged in some of the harshest crackdowns on gangs the country has ever experienced and seemingly thwarted them. Yet, the decline in homicides has wounded El Salvador's democracy into a slow bleed that has dripped onto neighboring Latin American countries and even into the United States. The concluding chapter will closely examine the concerns of democratic backsliding within El Salvador and the broader international community.

³⁰⁰ Cruz, "Fighting Gangs to Dismantle Democracy," 53.

³⁰¹ Meléndez-Sánchez.

³⁰² Cruz, 53.

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V. ANALYSIS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The research within sought to fill the gap in the literature regarding the impact of political and criminal violence from gangs on democracy in El Salvador. A generally understudied topic, gang violence and the government's responses to violence have impacted democracy in El Salvador in several ways. By using democratic means, President Bukele has undermined El Salvador's fundamental democratic values and is slowly ushering in autocratic ones. Although democratic backsliding may produce limited concerns to El Salvador, the effects of democratic backsliding extend beyond their borders and into Latin America and the United States. Multiple Latin American countries have looked to adopt similar strategies implemented by Bukele, while the United States faces the reality that migration increases from states under authoritarian rule. This chapter outlines Bukele's growing electoral authoritarianism and the concerns and recommendations for the international community.

A. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

El Salvador, a country that struggled to establish robust democratic traditions, a strict rule of law, and equality after the end of the civil war, became not only a breeding ground for gangs but also for authoritarian rule.³⁰³ Beginning with the election of President Nayib Bukele, indicators of El Salvador's democratic backsliding include his circumvention of the rule of law by illegally negotiating with gangs. The state's negotiations helped him establish control over the legislative and judicial branches of government, thus limiting checks and balances and gaining support for his controversial responses to gangs and their violence. Those responses have greatly weakened due process, violated citizens' human rights, and restricted the press freedom that would have exposed citizens to his undoing of democracy, as discussed below.

³⁰³ Meléndez-Sánchez, "Latin America Erupts," 20.

As the previous chapters reveal, many recent events outline democratic backsliding in El Salvador. First, citizens contributed to the democratic decline in El Salvador through polarization during the 2019 presidential election.³⁰⁴ Although the citizens of El Salvador are not solely responsible for the country's democratic backsliding, they played an essential part in the process. Bukele achieved the office of the presidency through democratic elections. According to Linz and Stepan, civilians' distrust of leaders can pressure the status quo, allowing a routine election, a safeguard for democracy, to begin its destruction.³⁰⁵ Salvadorans followed that path by embracing outsider candidate Bukele, whom they believed could stem the unending gang violence and resolve plaguing socio-economic issues. They abandoned the problems of past leaders who only offered them more of the same.³⁰⁶ His landslide victory in the 2019 presidential race showcased the El Salvadoran public's susceptibility to a candidate who empathized with their concerns and promised to eliminate government corruption plaguing the country.³⁰⁷ Though unintentional, democracy began to backslide in El Salvador through democratic means.

Second, this research finds that the gang's influence and increased violence drove the recent democratic backsliding. Violence, in general, can contribute to both the rise and fall of democracy.³⁰⁸ El Salvador has proven this phenomenon because its democracy arose from the violence of the civil war, but gang violence dismantled it. Bukele's illegal negotiations with gang leadership to lessen gang violence showed his willingness to circumvent the rule of law for political gain. According to Jose Miguel Cruz, democracy erodes when the state plays a behind-the-scenes role in gang violence.³⁰⁹ Bukele achieved that role as many investigative outlets and the U.S.

³⁰⁴ Svolik, "Polarization versus Democracy," 31.

³⁰⁵ Svolik, 23–24.

³⁰⁶ Meléndez-Sánchez, "Latin America Erupts," 20.

³⁰⁷ Meléndez-Sánchez, 20.

³⁰⁸ Schwarzmantel, "Democracy and Violence," 224.

³⁰⁹ Cruz, "State and Criminal Violence in Latin America," 388.

government believe that he had illegally negotiated with gangs during his tenure as mayor of San Salvador and before the midterm elections that allowed Nuevas Ideas to gain the supermajority.³¹⁰ Bukele's disregard for the rule of law by negotiating with gangs for his political gain undermined an integral component of democracy.

Third, this research finds that his immense popularity has allowed him to concentrate power in all three levels of government, which undermines the democratic institutions established to balance power. His extensive public support, garnered from a drastic decrease in homicides through his illegally negotiated pact with gangs, allowed Bukele to gain enough public trust to boost his political party, Nuevas Ideas, making them the supermajority in the legislative assembly. Salvadorans extensively supported Bukele and his party and voted to erase the lingering memory of past ARENA and FMLN leaders. Democracy in El Salvador appeared strong. Citizens elected more officials they believed understood their grievances and would address their concerns. Yet, Bukele amassed enormous power in the executive and legislative branches, a problem of a democratic society as it threatens the integrity of checks and balances.

Fourth, as this research illustrates, Nuevas Ideas' supermajority intensified Bukele's stronghold on El Salvador's democracy and induced backsliding for the foreseeable future. With enough legislative support, Bukele reversed the constitutional ban on presidential reelection, opening the door to a potential 2024 presidential victory and continued control over the executive branch.³¹¹ Many backsliding processes in El Salvador have taken place in similar countries in Latin America. For countries in the region that have previously fallen under authoritarian rule, removing constitutional term limits triggered the initial slide. In the appropriately titled report, *Democracy Dies under Mano Dura*, the authors explain that "consecutive or indefinite reelection in Latin

³¹⁰ Mary Beth Sheridan and Anna-Catherine Brigida, "U.S. Accuses El Salvador of Cutting Secret Deal with MS-13 to Tamp down Killings," *Washington Post*, December 8, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/08/salvador-bukele-gangs-sanctions/>.

³¹¹ Anna-Cat Brigida, "Bukele's Re-Election Bid Fuels New Concern in El Salvador," *Al-Jazeera*, September 20, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/20/bukeles-re-election-bid-fuels-fresh-concern-in-el-salvador>.

America has historically not been a positive experience, especially where reelection is enabled by removing constitutional term limits.”³¹² Dictatorships typically result from the removals, which have also been “shown to lead to a greater concentration of power in the president as well as less transparency and accountability.”³¹³ One can only assume the outcome of Bukele’s reelection bid because El Salvador repealed constitutional term limits.

To capture all three levels of government, Bukele extended his power to include the judicial branch. With unanimous support from his constituents in the legislature, Bukele removed the attorney general investigating his alleged gang pact and Supreme Court justices, prosecutors, and lower-level court judges who did not endorse his rhetoric.³¹⁴ Bukele has since seated loyalists in all three levels of government, eliminating checks and balances and the essential democratic component of competition between interparty alliances, which, as Levitsky and Way present, make El Salvador extremely susceptible to autocracy.³¹⁵

Bukele’s responses to gang violence represent a fifth indicator of democratic backsliding. Appropriate government responses to gang violence are essential for the maintenance of democracy.³¹⁶ The previous history of El Salvador showed that gang truces and negotiations only work temporarily and do not address the root causes of gang and gang violence, which include socioeconomic concerns such as poverty and civil rights. According to Linz and Stepan, this situation has been difficult for many Latin American countries, including El Salvador, which have struggled with weak state institutions that do not respect civil rights and basic democratic entitlements, including

³¹² Christopher Hernandez-Roy and Rubi Bledsoe, *Democracy Dies under Mano Dura: Anti-Crime Strategies in the Northern Triangle* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2023), 4.

³¹³ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 4.

³¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, “El Salvador: Legislature Deepens.”

³¹⁵ Levitsky and Way, “The New Competitive Authoritarianism,” 63.

³¹⁶ Schwarzmantel, “Democracy and Violence,” 222.

social and economic equality.³¹⁷ Veri and Sass assert that more grievances, repression, and marginalization will exist in less stable democracies that do not adequately distribute wealth, resources, and equality, thus increasing violence.³¹⁸ The latter is true for El Salvador, which has historically struggled with violence and poverty. Bukele and his administration have consistently allocated more funding to the repressive tactics of his Territorial Control Plan, not those addressing the intense socio-economic issues that increase gang recruitment and marginalization within communities.³¹⁹ As this research finds, the government allocated most of the funding to the repressive and aggressive gang control tactics outlined in his plan, further leading El Salvador into the deconsolidation of democracy.

Bukele's responses to the March 2022 violent attacks produced the most consequential elements of democratic backsliding in the country. His enactment of a year-long state of exception continues to derail many democratic processes outlined in the constitution. According to Linz, enacting a state of emergency or exception can intensify democratic backsliding as it restricts many civil liberties and allows for continuous repression from police and security forces.³²⁰ Bukele's abolishment of the right to due process, the right against arbitrary arrest, freedom of the press, speech, and association have all constrained the civil liberties and human rights of many El Salvadorans. Under the guise of gang control, these restrictions highlight Bukele's march toward authoritarianism.

Finally, Bukele has successfully undermined government transparency and accountability, two essential elements that produce democratic deconsolidation, according to Levitsky and Way.³²¹ Multiple scholars state that authoritarian populism, polarization, and tests of traditional democratic values do not necessarily result in a full-

³¹⁷ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 11.

³¹⁸ Veri and Sass, "The Domestic Democratic Peace," 4.

³¹⁹ International Crisis Group, *Miracle or Mirage?*, 13.

³²⁰ Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 57.

³²¹ Levitsky and Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism," 60.

fledged authoritarian government if the citizens can hold the government accountable for their actions.³²² For the El Salvadorans who voted for Bukele to eliminate the gang threat, their candidate is completing his intended task. However, Bukele's lack of initiative in addressing the underlying conditions that make violence prevalent and instead use the violence for his political gain has changed the framework of El Salvador's democratic government for years to come.

In sum, this thesis finds that several factors highlight Bukele's rise to autocracy. His immense popularity predicts his reelection and control of the executive branch for an extended period. Collaboration with gangs has helped establish a supermajority in the legislative and judicial systems, which he will likely maintain after his reelection. Law enforcement and military support appear unwavering, and the government encourages their repressive tactics. Bukele's penetrating restrictions on the freedom of the press have recently ousted the popular El Salvadoran investigative news outlet *El Faro* to Costa Rica, limiting citizens' exposure to needed information about their corrupt government.³²³ Without this information, the citizens cannot objectively elect their next president.

El Salvador, rated "partly free" by Freedom House, faces widespread corruption from Bukele's illegal gang negotiations that have weakened the rule of law and other vital democratic traditions.³²⁴ President Nayib Bukele has manipulated a war against gangs into a war against democracy. Through democratic elections and citizen support, Bukele initiated an executive takeover. He has taken control of the government's executive, legislative, and judicial branches while eliminating checks and balances and the separation of powers. A continuous state of exception has been put in place, dismantling due process and many freedoms given to El Salvadorans. A lack of transparency from the government and limitations on the freedom of the press limits the

³²² Foa and Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," 16.

³²³ "El Faro Moves to Costa Rica," *El Faro*, April 13, 2023, <https://elfaro.net/en/202304/opinion/26805/El-Faro-Moves-to-Costa-Rica.htm>.

³²⁴ Freedom House, "El Salvador," *Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report*, 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2023>.

exposure of El Salvadorans to the undoing of their democracy, thus increasing his popularity and foreshadowing an impending presidential reelection victory.

B. BUKELE’S DOMINO EFFECT IN LATIN AMERICA

Bukele’s reach and popularity extend farther than the borders of El Salvador. Though yet to be set in motion, Costa Rica, Chile, and Peru have all expressed interest in pursuing security policies similar to Bukele’s.³²⁵ Pro-Bukele demonstrations have taken place in the neighboring Northern Triangle countries of Honduras and Guatemala during Bukele’s visits to the nations.³²⁶ Zury Rios, a presidential candidate in the 2023 Guatemalan presidential elections, consulted with Bukele for campaign advice and publicly praised his security policies. Gaining mass popularity on social media, Rios emulated Bukele’s unconventional campaign approach and became a member of his inner circle.³²⁷ If elected, the relationship between Bukele and Rios foreshadows similar backsliding in Guatemala’s democratic system.

In December of 2022, Honduran President Xiomara Castro implemented her “Comprehensive Plan for the Treatment of Extortion and Related Crimes,” allowing for a continuously extended state of exception like Bukele’s.³²⁸ As Hondurans lose approximately 18 billion lempiras (about \$737 million) annually to extortion fees by MS-13 and Barrio 18 factions, many within the country have called for more action against the groups. With the state of exception comes some suspensions to constitutional protections, such as “freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement, and freedom from unreasonable seizure.”³²⁹ As with the case of El Salvador, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has expressed concern over the

³²⁵ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 6.

³²⁶ Will Freeman, “Nayib Bukele’s Growing List of Latin American Admirers,” *Americas Quarterly*, February 16, 2023, <https://americasquarterly.org/article/nayib-bukeles-growing-list-of-latin-american-admirers/>.

³²⁷ Freeman.

³²⁸ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, *Democracy Dies under Mano Dura*, 5.

³²⁹ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 6.

continuation of the state of exception in Honduras to protect against the emulation of the Bukele model and its promotion of democratic backsliding.³³⁰

Honduras models Bukele's behaviors in several ways. Contrary to her previous stance against the deployment of the military police, which Castro once said was a "setback for Honduran democracy," 20,000 police have been mobilized to enforce the state of exception.³³¹ Honduran police have historically received many complaints from the Honduran and international communities regarding human rights violations against citizens. Although the Honduran police claim fewer homicides have happened since the state of exception, homicides already decreased in recent years, just as in El Salvador.³³² In a parallel manner, public approval paves the way for Honduras' growth as a police state, forming doubt around the certainty of the stability of its democracy.³³³ As Bukele's influence continues to extend across the Americas, the enduring impact of his leadership becomes increasingly evident, even as the region grapples with these evolving dynamics.

C. IMPLICATIONS OF EL SALVADOR'S DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING FOR THE UNITED STATES

Latin America has a strong legacy of authoritarianism, which has historically driven migration from those countries to the United States. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, governments led by an authoritarian leader "will inject insecurity, instability, and fear among the population," increasing the possibility for displacement.³³⁴ In the case of El Salvador, Bukele's approach to lessening violence and consolidating power, though currently successful, only weakens the rule of law and strengthens autocracy, prompting its citizens to seek refuge in the United States. The effective rule of law and increased chances of socio-economic prosperity essentially assist the United States against the risk of irregular migration and criminal violence

³³⁰ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 6.

³³¹ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 6.

³³² Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 6.

³³³ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 6.

³³⁴ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 7.

across borders.³³⁵ As authoritarianism expands in Latin America, the potential for its influence to extend into the United States becomes a valid concern. Thus, homeland security experts must track this trend and devise strategies to mitigate these concerns.

The Biden Administration has implemented strategies to address these concerns for El Salvador and other countries. In the summer of 2021, the Biden Administration released the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America. Led by Vice President Kamala Harris, the desired end state of this initiative is “to promote a democratic, prosperous, and safe Central America, where people advance economically, live, work, and learn in safety and dignity, contribute to and benefit from the democratic process, have confidence in public institutions, and enjoy opportunities to create futures for themselves and their families at home.”³³⁶ The United States aims to address the long list of root causes of irregular migration, giving the citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras reason to believe they can live in prosperity in their own homes rather than abroad.³³⁷ Recognizing progress’s complexity and non-linear nature, the U.S. government acknowledges the need for sustained effort, involving collaboration with other nations and international organizations to pursue these shared goals.³³⁸

The strategy has five pillars requiring the United States to restore, use, and maintain diplomacy with Central American countries, implement sanctions and visa revocations, and increase assistance to specified foreign aid programs.³³⁹ These five pillars include:

Pillar I: Addressing economic insecurity and inequality,

Pillar II: Combating corruption, strengthening democratic governance, and advancing the rule of law,

³³⁵ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 10.

³³⁶ National Security Council, *U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes*, 5.

³³⁷ National Security Council, 5.

³³⁸ National Security Council, 6.

³³⁹ National Security Council, 6.

Pillar III: Promoting respect for human rights, labor rights, and a free press,

Pillar IV: Countering and preventing violence, extortion, and other crimes, perpetrated by criminal gangs, trafficking networks, and other organized criminal organizations,

Pillar V: Combating sexual, gender-based, and domestic violence.³⁴⁰

Each pillar has unique requirements for success, although advancement in one can significantly benefit another.³⁴¹ Looking ahead, the United States' imperative lies in fostering collaborations with international entities, governments, and private sector actors, resulting in a more prosperous and stable region that not only fortifies democratic values but also enhances the overall quality of life for its citizens.³⁴² These efforts hold particular significance for Latin America, as they bear the potential to catalyze positive transformations, bolster stability, and invigorate democratic principles across the region.

In short, the strategy focuses on the long-term socio-economic, security, and governance challenges those Latin American countries face.³⁴³ Widespread poverty throughout the region limits improved living conditions. The absence of job creation leads to limited and precarious employment opportunities, causing an influx of those seeking work in the United States.³⁴⁴ Increased crime, extortion, and gang violence, combined with the absence of government responses, significantly increase migration rates. Salvadorans and Hondurans are routine victims of widespread sexual and gender-based violence and impulsive acts like the recent bouts of gang violence in El Salvador, which result in “significantly higher migration intentions.”³⁴⁵ Government institutions and the rule of law have grown weak as institutions routinely fail to implement effective

³⁴⁰ National Security Council, 6.

³⁴¹ National Security Council, 6.

³⁴² National Security Council, 6.

³⁴³ Peter J. Meyer, *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy*, CRS Report No. IF11151 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022).

³⁴⁴ Meyer.

³⁴⁵ Meyer.

strategies to combat socioeconomic and security concerns.³⁴⁶ Doubts regarding democratic regression in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are pertinent, while historical precedent does not necessarily dictate outcomes. El Salvador can reverse its trajectory towards autocracy by promoting equitable elections, pursuing essential legal measures against corruption, and prioritizing societal engagement, thereby reducing the imperative for its citizens to seek refuge in the United States.³⁴⁷

Unfortunately, democratic backsliding and increased corruption halts the current progress of the U.S. root causes strategy. From illegal gang negotiations to the ousting of many prominent government officials at all levels, Bukele ran on an anti-corruption platform but has partaken in corruption schemes throughout his tenure as the president of El Salvador. U.S.-based companies are reluctant to invest in countries such as El Salvador because corruption is a “disincentive for investment.”³⁴⁸ The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has suspended funding to Guatemala after the firings of special prosecutors investigating corruption within the government. It redirected funding meant for El Salvador after Bukele and his Nuevas Ideas-led legislature voted to remove judges, prosecutors, and the attorney general.³⁴⁹ The Partnership for Central America, a non-profit organization launched to help increase the strategy’s effectiveness, has pulled out of events in Guatemala and needs more engagement in El Salvador. The Biden Administration has asked for increased funding to support efforts in the region, but both parties question the plan’s effectiveness, and implementation has stalled.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁶ Meyer.

³⁴⁷ Pérez-Liñán and Jiménez, *Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Resurgence*, 2.

³⁴⁸ Ted Hesson, Daina Beth Solomon, and Matt Spetalnick, “Analysis: Corruption in Central America Frustrates U.S. Plan to Tackle Migration ‘Root Causes,’” Reuters, June 3, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/corruption-central-america-frustrates-us-plan-tackle-migration-root-causes-2022-06-03/>.

³⁴⁹ Hesson, Solomon, and Spetalnick.

³⁵⁰ Hesson, Solomon, and Spetalnick.

Undoubtedly, corruption is a substantial driving factor in the growth of authoritarianism in the Latin American region, and Bukele's El Salvador is not distancing itself from that narrative. The United States has taken increased steps in identifying corruption to ensure the success of democratic procedures in the region. Known as the "Engel List," the report designates "foreign persons who have knowingly engaged in actions that undermine democratic processes or institutions, significant corruption, or obstruction of investigations into such acts of corruption in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua."³⁵¹ This declaration is a crucial step in one of the Biden Administration's key moves to combat regional corruption, a driving factor for increased migration to the United States.³⁵² The actors named to this list are ineligible for visas and thus admission into the United States, leaving their current visas or any other entry documentation revoked or canceled. The names in this list include three of Bukele's government officials and the husband of Honduran President Castro.³⁵³ Although these designations limit bilateral relations between countries in the short term, the list intends to deter other foreign government officials from future transgressions and signifies the United States' increased efforts to counteract growing authoritarianism in the region.³⁵⁴

D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

El Salvador remains a member of many international groups, including the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS). Although Bukele withdrew from the anti-corruption accord with OAS in 2021, El Salvador's memberships in these

³⁵¹ Department of State, *Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors Report* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2022), <https://www.state.gov/reports/section-353-corrupt-and-undemocratic-actors-report-2022/>.

³⁵² Matt Spetalnick, "Dozens of Central American Officials Added to U.S. Corruption Blacklist," Reuters, July 21, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/dozens-central-american-officials-added-us-corruption-blacklist-2022-07-20/>.

³⁵³ Ana María Méndez Dardón, "Engel List: What Is the United States Telling Central America?," Washington Office on Latin America, July 21, 2022, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/engel-list-what-is-the-united-states-telling-central-america/>.

³⁵⁴ Katharine Valencia, "The significance of the Engel list: against corruption and in defense of democracy," *Justicia en las Américas* (blog), July 8, 2021, <https://dplfblog.com/2021/07/08/the-significance-of-the-engel-list-against-corruption-and-in-defense-of-democracy/>.

international organizations restore optimism that the country can reverse its democratic backsliding.³⁵⁵ The power, influence, and proximity of the United States should translate into increased efforts to work with the international community to develop a pro-democratic Central America.³⁵⁶ The increased public attention and admiration of Bukele and El Salvador is an ideal place to start.

In a top-down approach, the international community should focus on increased efforts to fight corruption in El Salvador through economic sanctions and publicly identifying corrupt individuals. These efforts will obtain citizens' trust and lay the groundwork for strong democratic traditions. It will encourage politicians and security forces to uphold the rule of law and hold them accountable for their actions.³⁵⁷ Global Magnitsky sanctions from the U.S. Department of Treasury—which, as previously noted in this research, have already been applied to two critical constituents of Bukele's gang pact—and the Engel List are necessary avenues taken by the United States to continue combatting corruption, foster accountability, and increase democratic norms within El Salvador.³⁵⁸

The need to bolster the rule of law in El Salvador, a key focus for the United States and the international community, requires maintaining due process, addressing abuses of power, and enhancing the legal system to restore the separation of powers and safeguard democracy.³⁵⁹ As a vital component of a legitimate democracy, the government should maintain due process while limiting abuses of power, arbitrary detentions, and human rights violations.³⁶⁰ The legal system in El Salvador needs improvement. One possible option is joining current and former regional prosecutors to

³⁵⁵ Nelson Renteria, "El Salvador Ends Anti-Corruption Accord with OAS, Dismaying U.S.," Reuters, June 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/salvadoran-attorney-general-ends-anti-corruption-accord-with-oas-2021-06-04/>.

³⁵⁶ Cruz, "Fighting Gangs to Dismantle Democracy," 54.

³⁵⁷ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, *Democracy Dies under Mano Dura*, 11.

³⁵⁸ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 6.

³⁵⁹ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 11.

³⁶⁰ Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, 10.

prosecute suspected gang members and criminal offenders effectively.³⁶¹ El Salvador must restore the separation of powers by ensuring free and fair elections. Having the “judiciary, attorney general, and legislature under the control of the executive is a recipe for authoritarian abuse,” and the United States and the international community should maintain their stance against corrupt government officials by imposing sanctions.³⁶² Reestablishing these institutions would decrease the threats to democracy arising from removing term limits and supermajority requirements for passing legislation.³⁶³ In turn, these actions will offset authoritarian shifts in El Salvador.

Transparency is crucial for safeguarding citizens’ freedoms within a democracy, a facet currently deficient in El Salvador. Details of Bukele’s Territorial Control Plan are not public. The remaining phases of the plan are unknown, and this ambiguity does not afford citizens knowledge of his intentions. Neither the costs of his war against the gangs nor his Terrorism Confinement Center have been disclosed, as Bukele failed to provide this information to the media.³⁶⁴ Preserving press freedom in El Salvador opens avenues for enhancing transparency, ensuring that the public and journalists can freely report on and explore the successes and failures of government policies.³⁶⁵ Independent voices of investigative journalistic outlets like El Faro, academia, human rights advocates, and others must educate citizens on government policies and voice their grievances.³⁶⁶ Prioritizing press freedom will cultivate missing democratic norms within El Salvador.

The absence of transparency in El Salvador extends beyond Bukele’s strategy and is also evident in his prison system management. Prison overcrowding needs to be addressed, with less of a focus on building additional housing and more on rehabilitation,

³⁶¹ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, *Democracy Dies under Mano Dura*, 11.

³⁶² Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 10.

³⁶³ Pérez-Liñán and Jiménez, *Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Resurgence*, 10.

³⁶⁴ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, *Democracy Dies under Mano Dura*, 11.

³⁶⁵ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 10.

³⁶⁶ Pérez-Liñán and Jiménez, *Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Resurgence*, 10.

education, and reintegration efforts.³⁶⁷ Increased transparency from the Bukele administration would greatly intensify this practice, primarily if increased funding were allocated to Phase Two of his Territorial Control Plan to help youth with the educational programs and services to prevent gang recruitment. In addition, USAID can work to provide funding to programs and organizations that can assist former gang members with educational services, substance abuse programs, family reunification, and mental health support.³⁶⁸ By emphasizing democratic values such as fostering economic stability, the root causes of instability in El Salvador can be effectively addressed.

The international community should unite to promote economic opportunity for the Central American region. Through efforts such as USAID's Central America Regional Support Services (CARSS), the United States can work to provide increased funding for bilateral missions "related to economic insecurity and inequality, governance, and transparency, anti-corruption, the rule of law, human rights, labor rights, free press, climate change, and crime and insecurity, including gender-based violence."³⁶⁹ Additionally, the newly released "Call to Action" plan and the Partnership for Central America have received nearly \$4.2 billion from the private sector to promote the region's economic prosperity.³⁷⁰ Combining these two efforts can be crucial to eliminating the economic inequalities in El Salvador by promoting infrastructure development, community service opportunities, mentorship, and paths toward future employment.³⁷¹ Through this approach, the international community can assist El Salvador, initiating efforts to tackle the socio-economic underlying factors contributing to its instability.

³⁶⁷ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 10.

³⁶⁸ Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 10.

³⁶⁹ "Central America Regional Support Services Contract," U.S. Agency for International Development, March 17, 2023, <https://www.usaid.gov/node/469476>.

³⁷⁰ "Fact Sheet: Vice President Harris Launches Next Phase of Public-Private Partnership for Northern Central America," The White House, February 6, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/02/06/fact-sheet-vice-president-harris-launches-next-phase-of-public-private-partnership-for-northern-central-america/>.

³⁷¹ The White House.

E. FINAL THOUGHTS

Bukele's influence is slowly spreading to a growing list of neighboring countries that support and implement his policies and tactics at home. Although the threat of authoritarianism in El Salvador and beyond is growing, diligent effort can reverse it. The international community's response to Bukele could be a turning point for democracy in El Salvador and the region—proving that while democracy is flawed, it is resilient, and autocrats are not infallible.

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