

El Salvador: Results Versus Norms in a Troubled Democracy

by R. EVAN ELLIS

El Salvador's charismatic young president Nayib Bukele has succeeded in achieving what seemed for many Salvadorans unattainable: freeing the country from two decades of extortion and violence at the hands of the gangs: Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio-18. The country's homicide rate has fallen from more than 100 per 100,000 to 7.8 per 100,000 last year, one of the lowest in the region. Small shops no longer have to pay extortion. Fear of being in public spaces has fallen, and public life has returned to Salvadoran towns.

Bukele has achieved these astonishing results by using a political supermajority to run roughshod over democratic procedures and human rights protections in the country. El Salvador had become disillusioned by decades of corruption, violence and insecurity, and the failure of democratically elected governments to address the problems afflicting citizens. In March 2021, they gave Bukele's "New Ideas" party and its allies an overwhelming majority of 61 of 84 seats in El Salvador's National Assembly. Bukele has used that legislative power to weed out opponents and install his loyalists in the judicial system that enforces the laws and interprets the constitution.

He used that authority to impose a state of emergency in March 2022, which he has continued to renew, and which gives the police, military and other government institutions extraordinary authorities. In this framework, Bukele has cowed the gangs into submission by imprisoning more than 71,000 Salvadorans, one percent of the country's population, on infractions such as

suspicion of gang membership. He has mounted an aggressive social media campaign, imposed harsh prison conditions to further intimidate the gangs, and is building a new 40,000 person mega-prison to indefinitely contain those his government rounds up. His government's new laws permit mass trials of up to 900 Salvadorans at a time, eliminating most paths for establishing individual innocence. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has documented 6,400 incidents of abuse, and 174 deaths in Salvadoran prisons since the crackdown.

After two decades of domination of the country by the gangs, the vast majority of Salvadorans prioritize the apparent good results Bukele has achieved over inconvenient issues of democratic process and the protection of rights. The young and charismatic Bukele, aided by his direct and quirky social media outreach to Salvador's equally young population, currently enjoys approval ratings of more than 90 percent, by far the highest in the region. In July, El Salvador's

running for two consecutive terms, Bukele can run again and be re-elected.

While the substantial reduction of gang influence, extortion and murders is a laudable achievement for Salvadorans, Bukele's successes carry enormous risks for the region.

■ *Risks of Success*

In El Salvador itself, the perpetually renewed state-of-emergency has created a *de facto* police state, with authorities continuing to round up thousands on suspicion of gang membership, from having a tattoo to being denounced or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Bukele's crackdown has already extended to media restrictions and threats of criminal investigations of news media outlets such as *El Faro* that question his actions. Numerous journalists have felt obliged to leave the country. Most Salvadorans seem disposed to "keep their heads down," enjoying the increased security, while reassuring themselves that the authorities are not after them, but others who "had it com-

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Supreme Court, filled with Bukele loyalists, adopted a highly questionable legal position that, although the country's constitution forbids a president from

ing to them."

Over the long term, as occurred with the first "Mano Dura" (iron fist) approach to then newly-emerging gangs in

2004, repression and incarceration risks transforming those targeted into something even more dangerous. If the prior generation of repression accelerated gang recruitment in prison and national level coordination, the current abandonment of civil liberties risks incubating a generation seeking vengeance against an authoritarian state that killed or abused their gang “brothers,” and with little compassion for collateral damage to the population that stood by as it happened.

Beyond El Salvador, Bukele’s policies threaten to both expand gang violence, and encourage authoritarian solutions in a region already profoundly skeptical of the ability of democracies to deliver results. Bukele’s gang crackdown has already displaced gang members to neighboring countries such as Honduras, where they arrive embittered, and with profound economic needs.

At the same time, Bukele’s perceived success and associated popularity has attracted widespread attention across the region from countries suffering from their own problems of violence and insecurity. Xiomara Castro’s Libre government in Honduras has followed Bukele’s lead, imposing her own state of emergency and gang crackdown in 162 Honduran cities since September 2022. In Ecuador, where drug-fueled violence between the Choneros and rival gangs has exploded both in prisons and in the streets, a high profile candidate in that nation’s August 20 snap elections, Jan Topic, has advocated a Bukele-style crackdown. In Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Chile, among others, the Bukele model for responding to violence has become a significant theme of public discourse.

■ *Relations with Washington*

Bukele’s trajectory also continues to adversely impact US relations. The young president, buoyed by his self-perceived success, popularity and political empowerment, has become increasingly non-cooperative, and harsh and defiant in his rhetoric against the United States

and its expressions of concern over violations of human rights and civil liberties. Bukele’s actions feed into a broader trend in a region under great socioeconomic stress, of regimes on both the left, such as Nicaragua, and the right, such as Guatemala, leveraging their control of institutions to suppress democratic voices and checks and balances and perpetuate themselves in power. It also reinforces the appeal of the People’s Republic of China, which is not only advancing its commercial position and political and security engagement with the region, but whose own approaches to government and technology put the achievement of security and other results over individual rights and democratic expression.

■ *Beyond the Gangs*

While Bukele’s popular support will almost certainly catapult him to an unconstitutional second consecutive term in El Salvador’s February 2024 elections, it is then that his ephemeral recipe for success may begin to unravel. Beyond eliminating the impediment of gangs and insecurity, and leveraging cryptocurrency and surfing tourism,

sanctions, as it has against Bukele officials in the past.

Bukele’s courtship of the PRC as an alternative to the US, including multiple infrastructure projects, will not do much to put food on the table for Salvadorans if the country’s access to US markets weakens. While the country has expanded sugar exports to the PRC in recent years, its capabilities to grow traditional exports to the PRC market as an alternative are limited, including the China knowledge of its export promotion organization Proesa. A study by the Central American Integration Bank (BCIE) highlights the persistent inability of Central American states to substantially benefit from trade with the PRC, even after establishing diplomatic relations.

Ironically, as Salvadorans become accustomed once again to safe streets, if the president’s thus far vaguely defined concepts for developing the nation’s economy under deliver, security will no longer be enough to buoy Bukele’s popularity. How Bukele leverages his continuing domination of Salvadoran institutions and authoritarian impuls-

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Bukele’s roadmap to sustain and transform El Salvador’s economy is remarkably ambiguous. He is more noted for his integration of family, rather than economists and other technocrats, into his government. El Salvador’s dollar-based economy is heavily reliant on the United States through both trade and remittances—something that could become a vulnerability if the US imposes

es against his next opponent (whether the press, Salvadoran businesspersons, Washington or someone or someplace else), will define the next chapter in his legacy in a form likely much less positive than the current one.

■ *The Path Forward*

Despite the many legitimate concerns over the path that Bukele is taking

in El Salvador, it would be counterproductive for the US to concentrate its response on criticizing or sanctioning him and his government. Doing so would be ineffective and counterproductive. Other governments in the region, perceiving Bukele's success, would see such a US response less as a beacon of democracy, but more as US bullying and evidence that policy proscriptions from the relatively wealthy and secure US were not relevant to their problems.

Such a posture would also likely make Bukele even more defiant and push him into closer cooperation with the Chinese and other authoritarian actors. By contrast to regimes in the region with a more explicitly leftist-populist, anti-US orientation, Bukele—with as much as a quarter of El Salvador's population living in the United States and propping up the economy through sending remittances—does not necessarily seek to move the country in an anti-US direction. Nonetheless, his combination of perceived success, popularity, and youthful arrogance means that he will probably move in that direction if pushed.

The United States should recognize Bukele's successes, and their benefits to the Salvadoran people, both liberating the country from two decades of gang violence and insecurity, and in creating the foundation for future development.

The United States should focus its engagement with the Bukele government on five axes: (1) minimizing the deleterious effects of the current approach to gangs on the rights of Salvadorans, (2) strengthening Salvadoran democratic institutions, (3) working with the country on “what comes next,” (4) representing the lessons of El Salvador's experience, and (5) positioning the US more strongly as the engine for Salvador's future.

To minimize the harms arising from the country's current approach, with the Salvadoran government's concurrence, the US can provide additional resources to strengthen El Salvador's judicial system, prison capacity and management, other government institutions, and the

capabilities of the news media and civil society. Doing so implies navigating a fine line between not endorsing actions that violate civil liberties, yet being seen by the Bukele government as seeking to reduce the harmful byproducts of his successes, not undercutting him.

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tutions more broadly through expanded training and technical resources for government administration, planning and other government institutions, balanced with greater support to civil society programs including those of the media and NGOs. As with the approach to the judicial system, such support should seek to preserve a plurality of democratic voices in El Salvador, while not being perceived as funding an opposition to Bukele and his programs.

As El Salvador's improved security situation makes the country increasingly attractive to investment and economic activity, the US should step up with support for economic and developmental planning, respectful of Bukele's prioritization of areas such as cryptocurrency where it may have concerns, seeking to reduce risks and make innovative concepts viable wherever possible. Doing so will also help channel China's own contributions in productive ways, so that the country's developmental agenda is not hijacked for PRC benefit.

As with other “success stories” such as Colombia, the representation of the lessons of El Salvador's triumph over gangs and security will be strategically important for the US and the region, as much as for El Salvador itself. Again,

the US must walk a fine line. Bukele's interest in working with the US to have a common narrative is driven by his interest in having the hemisphere's major power amplifying, not contradicting his claims. To that end, the US should work respectfully with Salvador to both understand and explain what happened in the country, emphasizing the balance

between innovative approaches and lessons learned, grounded in respect for democracy and human rights, even when extraordinary circumstances may temporarily require exceptional measures.

Finally, the US should work with El Salvador to leverage reduced tariff access for Salvadoran goods into the US through the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), and the role of the US as El Salvador's main source of remittances, to promote further Salvadoran development and prosperity through expanded trade flows, supporting investments and financing.

El Salvador, bound to the US by ties of commerce, family, and geographic proximity, has achieved remarkable progress against gangs and insecurity. It is a story of success but with great hidden costs. The US, through a respectful, balanced approach to the country, can help shape whether that story ends in triumph, or mutual recrimination and tragedy.

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