

The Donald Trump of Central America

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President Nayib Bukele is El Salvador's Donald Trump. His hard-right bluster and media-centric populism threaten to deal a devastating blow to the country's once-mighty left.

El Salvador's new president, Nayib Bukele, has only been in office since June, but already he has the world's attention. Deemed a "[millennial president](#)" in the international press for his social media savvy and aversion to neckties, Bukele's term kicked off a dizzying parade of scandal and spectacle that is already drawing [Trump comparisons](#).

A 38-year-old millionaire of Palestinian descent with a background in advertising, Bukele's election unseated the party of the former leftist guerrillas, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), who fought the US-backed military dictatorship to a draw during a twelve-year civil war (1980-1992). The FMLN governed El Salvador from 2009-2019, ousting the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party, which had ruled the country for twenty years. While the FMLN oversaw major gains in social investment and inclusion, it failed to restructure the country's highly dependent, unequal, dollarized economy, and was [successively weakened](#) over its two terms by pragmatism and compromise amid escalating right-wing destabilization and a deteriorating geopolitical climate.

Bukele, a former FMLN mayor, was [expelled](#) from the party in 2017 for ethics violations. He ran an insurgent presidential campaign with the conservative GANA party — which splintered from ARENA in 2010 — framing himself, savior-like, against a corrupt political class. In his inauguration speech, Bukele [claimed](#) to have "turned the page" on El Salvador's postwar period. Unfortunately, his personal brand of post-ideological populism has revealed an all too familiar reactionary agenda.

The administration's first few months have been marked by improvisation, with signature FMLN programs like the Women's City service centers in an [uncertain limbo](#). But while Bukele appears to favor publicity over policy, some disturbing tendencies are emerging.

Bukele has embraced an authoritarian persona, performatively [barking orders on Twitter](#) to his ministers, who promptly respond, "Right away, Mr. President." His mass firings of public employees, harassment of journalists, and repressive security crackdown have drawn concerns from human rights advocates, and his scraping subservience to the United States and deference to the private sector suggest that far from the "New Ideas" his campaign promised, Bukele intends to further entrench the same militarized neoliberal policies that have ravaged Salvadoran society for decades.

A Familiar Routine

On the campaign trail, Bukele claimed to transcend partisanship, but his centrist façade showed immediate cracks. One of his first presidential acts was to order, [via Twitter](#), the removal of the name of the infamous Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, who led the 1981 Mozote massacre, from a San Miguel military barracks. He then fired former FMLN guerrilla commander Jorge Meléndez from the Interior Ministry, citing his alleged involvement in the 1975 murder of revolutionary poet Roque Dalton. But Meléndez was also behind the FMLN operation that brought down Monterrosa's

helicopter during the war.

This first ambivalent gesture was followed by an all-out war against the FMLN and its legacy, which Bukele [deemed](#) “the most disgusting thing that ever happened to our country.” In his first week in office, Bukele [abolished](#) five FMLN presidential secretariats, including the anti-corruption and transparency secretariat, the technical and planning secretariat, and the social inclusion secretariat, which promoted LGBT and women’s rights and coordinated reparations for victims of the Mozote massacre, firing some four-hundred employees.

Bukele singled out additional public sector workers [on Twitter](#), ordering their dismissal for alleged family ties to high-profile FMLN politicians. His intel was spotty: one worker was identified as the brother of FMLN legislator [Lorena Peña](#), whose siblings were all killed during the civil war; another, the son of the FMLN education minister, had held his job for the last twenty years. To date, [over one-thousand](#) public employees have been fired, with some seven-hundred positions eliminated entirely. [Dozens](#) of suits have been filed over the mass dismissals.

Despite Bukele’s public anti-nepotism crusade, the new president was quick to install [his own relatives](#) in the administration. Bukele appointed his uncle as trade and investment secretary — who promptly [proposed](#) extending the work-day to ten hours — and his brother will lead the National Sports Institute, though he will not be receiving a salary. His sister-in-law and cousin are also serving in the new government.

Bukele has seamlessly pivoted, taking his campaign rhetoric about the corrupt political class and turning it now against public sector workers. In a recent [rant](#), he criticized state employees as “lazy,” declaring that “labor rights mean the right to work, not to laze around,” and complaining that many “don’t do anything, they shield themselves with a collective contract.”

Fake News

In addition to the FMLN and public sector workers, Bukele quickly made enemies of Salvadoran journalists. During his campaign, Bukele rejected interviews with domestic media and refused to participate in live debates with his opponents, speaking instead to foreign press and addressing his followers via Facebook Live. As a candidate and as president, he has personally [singled out](#) adversarial investigative reporters on Twitter. Furthermore, Bukele’s family capital is rumored to be behind a host of sympathetic digital tabloids like [La Britany](#), which sprouted in the lead-up to his presidential bid.

On June 18, El Salvador’s Roundtable for the Protection of Journalists issued a [statement](#) condemning the new administration’s disregard for press freedom, denouncing the “lack of press conferences open to questions from all media, blockage of journalistic coverage, statements stigmatizing journalists and the media, defamation campaigns on social media against particular journalists, lack of openness to press scrutiny, and other signs against the creation of an adequate environment for normal press operations.”

Especially troubling has been the targeted harassment and vitriol unleashed by the president’s online supporters against perceived critics, especially women. The Salvadoran Association of Journalists has [denounced](#) mass attacks and threats against women journalists on social media, in one case instigated by a retweet from the president himself.

After that incident, the Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative issued an [alert](#) calling for “an end to the attacks and insults on social media from people close to the government cabinet. In particular, we call on President Nayib Bukele to assume this responsibility, respecting

the right to freedom of expression, and to generate the necessary guarantees so that journalists can exercise their labor without fear of facing reprisals and attacks.”

Repression

The issue of public security was largely absent from Bukele’s campaign. Nevertheless, he has made an anti-gang crackdown the centerpiece of his nascent presidency. El Salvador’s current crisis of gang violence and extortion, decades in the making, has its origins in the United States, but it feeds on the vast inequality and impunity that structures Salvadoran society. Bukele’s repressive, militarized approach harkens back to the darkest days of US-backed ARENA governance, and promises only to further criminalize poor, young men and radicalize gang members, inevitably escalating the violence that plagues working-class Salvadoran communities.

In the national prison system, Bukele ordered an [“indefinite” state of emergency](#), imposing a 24-hour lockdown; these measures were subsequently [struck down](#) in the courts. Mass transfers have initiated to house inmates from rival gangs to be [housed together](#), a likely recipe for bloodshed. In addition, Bukele called for the recruitment of three-thousand new troops to the Armed Forces to [“help us fight crime](#),” accelerating the creeping militarization of public security that human rights defenders have long denounced as a violation of the 1992 Peace Accords. More troubling still, the administration [announced](#) it will no longer include victims of alleged confrontations with state security forces in the official homicide tally, nor bodies discovered in clandestine graves.

These actions have been accompanied by thinly veiled threats of extermination from the president. On July 2, Bukele wrote on [Instagram](#): “I want to send a message to the gangs: We don’t want deaths. We don’t want to attack you. So stop killing, dismantle that rotten structure, go home. You have nothing to do there. What future do you have left? Death or prison. What is the life expectancy of a gang member? Twenty-five years? We are going to dismantle, the gangs will be extinguished. You all know what we are going to do. Leave them before you are extinguished with them.” Bukele’s bellicose bravado on social media was followed by a government publicity campaign declaring: “Don’t lose your life in the gangs. It’s easy to enter, but the only exits are jail or death.”

Bukele’s haste for results and taste for spectacle have heightened the risks of collateral costs. After a June 28 bus robbery, during which two women were allegedly raped, Bukele took to Twitter to [direct the manhunt](#), fuming: “*Malditos*, we’re after them, they won’t escape.” After the Ministry of Security announced the suspects’ apprehension to the press, Bukele — violating the separation of powers — [ordered](#) their solitary confinement in maximum-security prison pre-trial. Shortly thereafter, the Office of the Attorney General [clarified](#) — also via Twitter — that no charges pertaining to the incident had been filed against the detainees, whose only charges were resisting arrest.

Foreign Policy

In the presidency, the FMLN drew Washington’s ire for opening diplomatic and trade relations with Cuba and the South American anti-neoliberal bloc, allying the country with Latin America’s progressive “Pink Tide.” Under Bukele, El Salvador’s foreign policy has taken a hard right turn.

The new administration [reversed](#) the FMLN’s support for Venezuela in the OAS, [cut diplomatic relations](#) with the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in favor of the Moroccan occupation, and was one of only seven nations to [vote against](#) the Convention on Violence and Harassment in the International Labor Organization. In a recent [economic forum](#), Bukele declared, “We have gone from a pro-Chavista government to a pro-investment government,” announcing to international investors that “dinner is served” and that “the Salvadoran workforce is quick to learn and likes to work.”

Most notable, perhaps, is Bukele's unconditional submission to the United States. His first major presidential address was given not in El Salvador but Washington, DC to the Heritage Foundation. In that [speech](#), Bukele promised limited government, positioned private foreign investment as the motor of development, and assured the guardians of imperial capital that El Salvador wanted no US aid.

As Salvadorans face violence, extortion, and desperation on both sides of the US-Mexico border, Bukele has refused to advocate for migrants' rights. After the tragic deaths of Óscar and Valeria Martínez, the Salvadoran migrant father and daughter drowned in the Rio Grande, drew international attention to the crisis, Bukele [absolved the US of responsibility](#). Instead, his administration has embraced the State Department line, sternly [warning](#) Salvadorans against migrating.

The Opposition

As Bukele's administration takes shape, the FMLN is still struggling to recover from its devastating electoral defeat and general loss of credibility as viable agents of change in El Salvador.

The [2018 midterms](#) left the party reduced to historic lows in the legislature and city halls across the country, followed by a dismal 14 percent showing in the 2019 presidential election. In the wake of these appalling results, the party leadership called for early internal elections, vowing that no senior members of the political commission would seek a post. At last, it seemed, the aging *comandancia* would allow a new generation of militants the chance to lead.

It was not to be. Since the 1990s, a social-democratic "renovadores" faction of the FMLN has sought to dispute the leadership of the prevailing orthodox socialist faction. Former Vice President Óscar Ortiz (2014–2019), the leading voice of the *renovadores* and a member of the political commission, refused to abstain from the internal elections. Instead, he launched a bid for FMLN Secretary General and won.

Ortiz's victory was a final rebuke of the troubled outgoing leadership, which had failed to respond decisively to the 2018 midterm losses and appeared increasingly out of touch with both the FMLN base and the public at large. But Ortiz, whose camp promises a more conciliatory relationship with Bukele, represents a move to the right for the party whose statutes still proclaim a socialist horizon.

At the same time, the traditional party of Salvadoran capital, ARENA, is divided in its approach to the Bukele administration. While Bukele campaigned against ARENA as a paragon of corruption, El Salvador's elites stand to gain considerably from his [business-friendly proposals](#), which include public-private partnerships for mega-projects and investment incentives. Four ARENA legislators were recently [sanctioned](#) by the party leadership for voicing support for the administration.

With both the FMLN and ARENA divided, Bukele's agenda faces uncertain resistance in the legislature, leaving the country's social movements to shoulder the burden. Already, the president has provoked [outcry](#) from environmental groups after he ordered the expediting of all environmental permits currently pending before the Ministry of Agriculture. Mauricio Sermeño, president of the Salvadoran Ecological Union (UNES), [declared](#) that "President Nayib Bukele has shown himself to be the principal environmental threat to El Salvador." In an [open letter](#), anti-impunity, human rights, and historical memory organizations have called on the president to reinstate the reparations for war crimes victims that was discontinued with the dissolution of the Social Inclusion Secretariat, and to open the military archives to lawyers and judges overseeing war crimes prosecutions. The movement coalition ASGOJU, the Salvadoran Alliance for Governability and Justice, [called](#) for Bukele to enact progressive tax reform instead of neoliberal austerity. And feminists fighting the

criminalization of abortion are [demanding](#) the state abandon the retrial of 21-year-old Evelyn Hernández, whose murder conviction following a 2016 miscarriage was recently vacated by the Supreme Court.

The Post-Postwar

Bukele's first months in office appear to confirm that his project, while not led by the traditional oligarchic bourgeoisie, has capital's interests at heart. Posing as an inevitable, civilizing force of progress, Bukele threatens to depoliticize a society with a long history of militant struggle. His victory comes amid a right-wing resurgence across the Americas, and represents an enormous challenge for the Salvadoran left, which enters this new period of struggle with a tremendously diminished and diluted political vehicle.

Bukele's unconditional surrender to the insatiable imperial demands for land and labor comes as Salvadorans are being brutalized daily on both sides of the US-Mexico border. For all his youthful charisma and messianic self-regard, Bukele's agenda of austerity, foreign investment, and militarization offers nothing to those migrants. Indeed, it can only reproduce, if not worsen, the precarious conditions from which they flee.

Bukele's declaration of the end of El Salvador's postwar period echoes Fukuyama's notorious claim to the end of history in the 1990s. In fact, the structural inequities that provoked the armed conflict and the legacy of its violence remain painfully unresolved. History has a way of reasserting itself, and El Salvador's struggle for justice is far from finished.

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