

# THE TRIUMPH OF FEAR

*HOW NAYIB BUKELE DISMANTLED EL SALVADOR'S GANGS  
& BECAME THE MOST POPULAR AUTOCRAT IN THE WORLD*

Jeremy Giles  
Master in Public Policy 2024



**HARVARD** Kennedy School

Advisor: Yanilda González

April 2024

# THE TRIUMPH OF FEAR

*HOW BUKELE DISMANTLED EL SALVADOR'S GANGS*

*& BECAME THE MOST POPULAR AUTOCRAT IN THE WORLD*

Jeremy Giles

Master in Public Policy, 2024

Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Policy Analysis Exercise

Faculty Advisor: Professor Yanilda González

Seminar Leader: Professors Kathryn Sikkink and Zoe Marks

This report reflects the views of the author and does not imply endorsement by Harvard University or any of its faculty.

© 2024 Jeremy Giles. All rights reserved, except as granted to the President and Fellows of Harvard College in the PAE Non-Exclusive License. Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Public Policy.

Front cover: A senior member and spokesman of the Barrio 18 Sureños gang poses for a portrait at an undisclosed location in El Salvador. (Courtesy of © Moises Saman)

Back cover: Nayib Bukele stands to the side of the podium in the Hall of Honor in El Salvador's Casa Presidencial. (Courtesy of © Fred Ramos)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	3
About the Author.....	3
Prologue.....	4
Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction.....	7
<i>The Fall</i> .....	7
<i>Why El Salvador as a Case Study</i> .....	8
<i>Report Overview</i> .....	8
Methodology.....	10
<i>Qualitative Interviews</i> .....	10
<i>Quantitative Data</i> .....	10
Gang Diplomacy (2019-2022).....	12
<i>The Rise of Bukele</i> .....	12
<i>The Maras</i> .....	13
<i>Plan Control Territorial (Phases 1-4)</i> .....	16
<i>Secret Negotiations</i> .....	18
Régimen de Excepción (2022-Present).....	23
<i>State of Exception</i> .....	23
<i>Legal Reforms</i> .....	24
<i>Plan Control Territorial (Phases 5-6)</i> .....	26
<i>Previous Mano Dura Strategies</i> .....	27
Measurable Effects.....	29
<i>Homicides</i> .....	29
<i>Metrics of Violence</i> .....	32
<i>The Gangs Disappear</i> .....	35
Costs and Considerations.....	38
<i>Mass Incarceration</i> .....	38
<i>Human Rights</i> .....	42
<i>One-Man Rule</i> .....	43
<i>Democracy and Dehumanization</i> .....	46
Implications and Conclusions.....	47
<i>Interrogating Paradigms</i> .....	47
<i>Exportability</i> .....	49
Recommendations.....	50
Appendices.....	52
<i>Appendix A: Terms and Acronyms</i> .....	52
<i>Appendix B: Interviews</i> .....	53
<i>Appendix C: Disclaimers</i> .....	54
Bibliography.....	55

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Yanilda González for her patient guidance and insightful feedback throughout this project. I am also grateful to Professors Kathryn Sikkink and Zoe Marks for their invaluable counsel and direction. Thank you as well to Professor Yuri Zhukov for teaching me how to tell a compelling story with data and a map. I am grateful for the Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation for their financial support that made this project possible. Lastly, thank you to everyone involved in this project who invited me into their worlds to share their stories with me.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy Giles is a John F. Kennedy Fellow and Master's in Public Policy candidate studying at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Before coming to Harvard, he served as a Special Forces officer in the U.S. Army. Jeremy has led elite teams and operations in México, South America, and Africa. He also spent a summer at Innovations for Poverty Action where he led interviews in migrant shelters in México and conducted research for a project on unaccompanied children from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Jeremy holds a B.A. in history from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



... the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism.

**GIORGIO AGAMBEN**

*Stato di Eccezione, 3*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In less than a decade, El Salvador has gone from the murder capital of the world to having one of the lowest homicide rates in the western hemisphere. In 2015, the country descended into a level of violence not seen since the Civil War and homicides reached 105 per 100,000 people. By the end of 2023, the murder rate had plunged to just over 2 per capita and the government, led by President Nayib Bukele, was a year into one of the most aggressive anti-gang crackdowns ever seen.

Bukele has imprisoned people on a massive scale, suspended constitutional guarantees, and radically transformed El Salvador. Amidst a chorus of allegations of human rights violations and unconstitutional behavior, Bukele has garnered tremendous popular support and won an unprecedented second term as president. However, the crackdown has also obscured the complicated and splintered reality of Bukele's security strategies. There remains considerable ambiguity about the elements that make up his security model and the measurable impacts it has had in El Salvador. This report seeks to lift this veil of ambiguity.

The central research question of this report is: What does Bukele's security model really consist of and how can we understand its impacts and potential costs? The project was also motivated by two secondary questions of interest: 1) What are the conditions and elements of Bukele's model that increase the likelihood of reducing violence, weakening gangs, and improving security? 2) How does Bukele's model differ from previous *mano dura* approaches adopted in El Salvador?

Below is a summary of the investigation's key findings:

- **There is no singular Bukele security model. His approach to gang violence includes two periods of highly distinct strategies: gang diplomacy (2019-2022) and mass incarceration (2022-present).** Following a brutal three-day killing spree by *Mara Salvatrucha 13* in late March 2022, Bukele abandoned three years of gang negotiations and decisively embarked on a strategy of gang repression, beginning with the declaration of the *régimen de excepción* and followed by legal reforms that enabled mass arrests, prolonged detention, and incarceration without trial.
- **El Salvador is experiencing the lowest levels of violence in the country's history. However, changes to government reporting protocols and data compiled from civil society organizations and other government sources suggest that the Bukele**

**government has undercounted homicides by 20% annually on average.** Government figures show that since 2016, homicides have declined drastically and at a consistent rate. This decline began before Bukele and continued steadily during gang negotiations and also since the declaration of the *régimen de excepción*. While government homicide figures are the most reliable source of base data, the categorical exclusion of prison homicides, deaths resulting from clashes with security forces, and clandestine graves, invites us to interrogate and amplify the data.

- **Bukele's *régimen de excepción* differs dramatically from previous *mano dura* approaches in extent and scale of repression, concentration of power, and weakened state of the gangs.** While Bukele's crackdown is similar to past *mano dura* policies, there are several key differences. Bukele confronted a declining gang ecosystem which provided his administration a unique avenue to disrupt the gangs' command and control and aggravate their hierarchical divisions. In parallel, Bukele generated political and institutional support and consolidated power such that when the gangs pushed back, he had the ability to respond with the unrestrained force of the state.
- **The gangs in El Salvador appear to have been almost entirely dismantled since the declaration of the *régimen de excepción*.** Bukele's crackdown constitutes one of the most aggressive anti-gang crackdowns ever seen in Latin America. A common refrain now is, *there are no longer gangs, just gangsters*. Government data claims two-thirds of the country's gangs are now behind bars and qualitative sources suggest the gangs have nearly vanished.
- **Bukele has consolidated, co-opted, and centralized power to an unprecedented extent.** Through a masterful communications strategy and bold executive maneuvering, Bukele has removed any semblance of political opposition and institutional resistance. The Legislative Assembly, Supreme Court, and even the Attorney General's office have transformed from independent bodies into virtual extensions of the Bukele administration. Bukele has orchestrated an unprecedented second term as president and through a series of reforms has turned El Salvador into a one-party state.

# INTRODUCTION

## *THE FALL*

In March 2022, three years into the presidency of Nayib Bukele, a vehicle from El Salvador's bureau of prisons (*Dirección General de Centros Penales*) was stopped at a police checkpoint in the western state of Ahuachapán. The driver was a government chauffeur, and the four passengers were senior members of La Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS13). They were headed to the Guatemalan border for a clandestine meeting orchestrated by Bukele's director of prisons, Osiris Luna. The meeting never took place. The police detained everyone in the car.<sup>1</sup>

MS13 called the incident a "betrayal" and issued Bukele an ultimatum to release their senior members. Carlos Marroquín, one of Bukele's ministers, said to his gang contact, "I already told Batman [Bukele's codename] there are 72 hours to respond." Marroquín was Bukele's director of *Reconstrucción del Tejido Social* and had been a principal liaison in the government's gang negotiations for at least three years.<sup>2</sup> He was infuriated, at Osiris Luna for his poor handling of the operation and at MS13 for not looping him in. "I don't know why you trusted other people brother," Marroquín lamented. He told his contact that Bukele responded defiantly and said, "they are not threatening me."<sup>3</sup>

MS13 responded with a wave of killings the next weekend. Sixty-four people were killed on the second day, the deadliest in El Salvador's post-civil war history.<sup>4</sup> Gangs had regularly used violence "to cause fear and intimidation, to influence government conduct, and to retaliate against the government." Authorizing a wave of murders (opening the valves) or targeted killings (green lights) was nothing new.<sup>5</sup> But this time, the murders were indiscriminate.

At 8:00pm on March 26, Bukele took to social media, "I ask the [Legislative Assembly] to declare immediately a régimen de excepción, in accordance with article 29 of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Principal sources: Marvin Reyes, interview by author, San Salvador, 10-January-2024; Carlos Martínez, "Audios de Carlos Marroquín revelan que masacre de marzo ocurrió por ruptura entre Gobierno y MS," *El Faro*, 17-May-2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202205/el\\_salvador/26175/Audios-de-Carlos-Marroqu%C3%ADn-revelan-que-masacre-de-marzo-ocurri%C3%B3-por-ruptura-entre-Gobierno-y-MS.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202205/el_salvador/26175/Audios-de-Carlos-Marroqu%C3%ADn-revelan-que-masacre-de-marzo-ocurri%C3%B3-por-ruptura-entre-Gobierno-y-MS.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Initially named *Unidad de Intervención Comunitaria*. See: Luis Canizalez and David Ernesto Pérez, "PNC perfiló a Carlos Marroquín como colaborador del Barrio 18," *Revista Elementos*, 7-March-2023, <https://revistaelementos.net/miscelanea/pnc-perfilo-a-carlos-marroquin-como-colaborador-del-barrio-18>.

<sup>3</sup> Carlos Martínez, "Audios de Carlos Marroquín revelan."

<sup>4</sup> Nelson Rauda, Jimmy Alvarado, Gabriela Cáceres, Daniel Reyes, and Óscar Martínez, "Las víctimas del día más violento del siglo," *El Faro*, 3-Apr-2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202204/el\\_salvador/26107/Las-v%C3%ADctimas-del-d%C3%ADa-m%C3%A1s-violento-del-siglo.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202204/el_salvador/26107/Las-v%C3%ADctimas-del-d%C3%ADa-m%C3%A1s-violento-del-siglo.htm).

<sup>5</sup> *United States v. Arevalo-Chavez, et al.*, CR-22-429 (Eastern District of New York, 2022): 13-14, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/press-release/file/1569726/download>.

Constitution.”<sup>6</sup> Around midnight, the assembly convened and within hours approved the measure. After three years, the administration’s secret strategy of negotiating with the gangs was over. This marked the pivotal shift in Bukele’s security approach. In one weekend, Bukele decisively abandoned gang diplomacy and adopted a strategy of overt gang repression and mass incarceration.

### *WHY EL SALVADOR AS A CASE STUDY*

In just five years, Nayib Bukele has radically transformed El Salvador. He has debilitated the political opposition, negotiated with gangs, and consolidated immense power. Bukele has driven homicides to historically low rates, made Bitcoin a legal currency, and made El Salvador the most incarcerated country in the world. He has reshaped the judiciary, suspended constitutional rights, and built the world’s largest prison. Bukele has dismantled the gangs, defied the constitution, and is the most popular leader in Latin America.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the region, politicians are increasingly looking to Bukele’s approach and proposing similar security measures in their own countries. In Honduras, Xiomara Castro declared her own state of exception and militarized public security.<sup>8</sup> In Ecuador, Daniel Noboa announced the construction of two maximum-security prisons designed by the same company behind El Salvador’s mega-prison. “For all the Bukele lovers,” Noboa joked, “it’s the same jail.”<sup>9</sup> As both a political figure and the new face of the iron fist security model in Latin America, Bukele has generated unparalleled influence that extends well beyond the borders of El Salvador and the horizons of Central America.

### *REPORT OVERVIEW*

This report examines the distinct security strategies Bukele has employed and analyzes their impacts and costs. The report argues there is in fact no “Bukele model” and that such oversimplification falsely attributes El Salvador’s decline in gang violence solely to Bukele’s strategy of mass incarceration and gang repression. To make this argument, the report proceeds in four parts.

---

<sup>6</sup> Nayib Bukele (@nayibbukele), X (formerly Twitter), 26-March-2022, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1507901269138194433>.

<sup>7</sup> Latinobarómetro, “Latinobarómetro 2023” (2023), <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp>.

<sup>8</sup> Secretaría de Seguridad Honduras (@SSEGURIDADHN), “1/1 Les compartimos la publicación en la Gaceta de este día, sobre los barrios y colonias que entran en Estado de Excepción a partir de este martes 6...” X/Twitter, 5-December-2022, <https://twitter.com/SSEGURIDADHN/status/1599811820059267072>.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Noboa in Sucre TV Online, “En Exclusiva: Entrevista con Daniel Noboa Azín, Presidente del Ecuador,” 4-January-2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4837JNTBc5c>.



Part one explores Bukele's first three years as president and analyzes his strategy of gang diplomacy. This section provides background on the gangs as criminal organizations as well as a brief account of Bukele's rise. Part one also details the architecture and implementation of the first four phases of *Plan Control Territorial*.

Part two explores the next two years of Bukele's presidency and analyzes the *régimen de excepción*. This section details in constitutional terms what the *régimen* entails and elaborates on the significant and often overlooked legal reforms that were passed in its wake. Part two also explores phases 5-6 of Plan Control Territorial. Finally, part two considers what makes the *régimen* different from previous *mano dura* policies.

Part three examines the effects of Bukele's gang diplomacy and the *régimen de excepción* in quantitative and qualitative terms. This section analyzes government homicide data, the violent deaths categorically excluded, and offers perhaps a more accurate estimate of homicides under Bukele. Finally, part three assesses the impact of Bukele's two strategies on the country's three principal gangs.

Part four analyzes the costs of Bukele's security strategies using quantitative and qualitative data. This section examines government data on detentions and incarceration and explores the consequences of the *régimen de excepción* on human rights. Part four also explores the transformation of the country's political landscape, the state of independent democratic institutions, and the apparent permanence of the *régimen de excepción*.

Part five provides a summary of the project's conclusions and their implications both in El Salvador and in the region. Finally, this report concludes with several policy recommendations.

# METHODOLOGY

## *QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS*

The author conducted interviews with twenty-one individuals, most of which took place in El Salvador. The persons interviewed consisted of Salvadoran academics, journalists, civil society leaders, and political officials, as well as leading American academics, journalists, and international human rights advocates. Nineteen of the interviews are attributed by name and two are on-background, at their request. The interviews were semi-structured and the majority were conducted in Spanish.

The principal qualitative sources on Bukele government's gang negotiations include a U.S. criminal indictment, investigative reporting from Salvadoran outlets, leaked government communications, and prison records. The main sources on Plan Control Territorial were Bukele's speeches and social media. The principal sources on the régimen de excepción were legislative decrees and subsequent legal reforms. To better understand elements of popular support for Bukele and his approaches to security, the project also leveraged data from independent polling organizations.

## *QUANTITATIVE DATA*

One of this report's main lines of effort was understanding violence and repression in quantitative terms at the highest level of granularity possible. The project uses homicide counts and rates as the leading indicators for measuring societal violence. It additionally interrogates government methodology for recording homicides and aims to complicate these figures to reveal a more accurate picture of violence under Bukele.

One of the fundamental challenges of conducting data analysis in Bukele's El Salvador is that government data after March 2022 is extremely limited and difficult to access. Through information requests to El Salvador's *Instituto de Medicina Legal* (IML) the author was able to obtain panel data from 2013 to 2021 for annual homicide counts by municipality and monthly homicide counts at the national level. This also enabled the author to conduct statistical analysis to analyze the associated effect of Plan Control Territorial's targeted force deployments.

Information requests submitted by the author to the *Policía Nacional Civil, Fiscalía General de la República* (FGR), and IML for 2022 and 2023 data were rejected.<sup>10</sup> Several interviewees indicated the same experience, suggesting the government has effectively sealed all data post régimen. The project therefore went to great lengths to collect and corroborate data from civil society organizations, statements from cabinet members, social media postings from key agencies, as well as anonymous sources—and thus compile panel data for monthly homicide counts from 2022 to 2023.

Given questions on how the government counts homicides, the project compiled data from a range of government reports and civil society sources on three categories of violent deaths now excluded from homicide figures. The report used this data to develop more accurate homicide estimates for the Bukele years. Considerable effort was also made to collect prison data and detention data from diverse sources. Lastly, the project mapped geospatial data with GIS software and developed comprehensive data visualizations that aim to provide the highest degree of fidelity and granularity to the evolution of violence and state repression in El Salvador in the last decade.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Information requests: PNC-UAIP-51-2024, PNC-UAIP-124-2024, 19-UAIP-FGR-2024, and UAIP/21/80/2024(3) yielded the response: “information classified as reserved.”

<sup>11</sup> All visualizations in this report are by the author. Figures developed in R and mapping done in ArcGIS (Basemap source: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Foursquare, FAO, METI/NASA, USGS).

## GANG DIPLOMACY (2019-2022)

### *THE RISE OF BUKELE*

The election of Nayib Bukele in February 2019 ended thirty years of two-party rule in El Salvador and ushered in the country's first president since the eighties from neither the FMLN (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*) nor the right-wing ARENA (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*). Through a conventional lens, Bukele's political career began in 2012 as the mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán, but his political origins may also be traced to when Bukele took over his father's advertising agency at just 18 years old.

Nayib's father, Armando Bukele, was the son of Palestinian immigrants and a highly successful entrepreneur.<sup>12</sup> Though often referred to as a political outsider, Nayib grew up in an upper-class family, attended elite private bilingual schools, and led a privileged childhood. Both his father and uncle were close with the founders and leaders of the FMLN, and in the late nineties, his father's advertising agency was becoming increasingly involved in the FMLN's media strategy.<sup>13</sup> Within a year of Nayib taking over the agency, FMLN lost its second presidential election in a row and hired the agency to fully manage its account. Over the next decade, Nayib managed the agency and developed key relationships with FMLN leadership. Then, according to Bukele, while working on their 2012 campaign, he proposed to one party leader that he run as the FMLN candidate for mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlan.<sup>14</sup>

Bukele went on to win the election in the small residential town of 8,000. Three years later, he ran for mayor of the nation's capital, a city of over 300,000, and won. Bukele's first two years as mayor of San Salvador were the deadliest in its history, recording a stunning 946 homicides. Bukele was just 33 years old and far from the traditional ex-guerrilla FMLN candidate. However, in time, "his relationship with the FMLN leadership and some party cadres began to strain." The mayor's seat in San Salvador was seen as a stepping stone to the presidency, and in late 2017, as Bukele began signaling his desire to run, "the relationship finally broke down."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Bukele in El Faro, "Discurso de toma de posesión del presidente Nayib Bukele," 1-June-2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ-pYFYF8yM>.

<sup>13</sup> Jimmy Alvarado, Gabriel Labrador, and Sergio Arauz, "El clan Bukele que gobierna con Nayib," *El Faro*, 7-June-2020, [https://elfaro.net/es/202006/el\\_salvador/24512/El-clan-Bukele-que-gobierna-con-Nayib.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202006/el_salvador/24512/El-clan-Bukele-que-gobierna-con-Nayib.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Bukele in ITV El Salvador, "Nayib Bukele anuncia su candidatura para presidente en 2019," 16-October-2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxBTCx0Yay0>.

<sup>15</sup> Alvarado, Labrador, and Arauz, "El clan Bukele que gobierna."

He was expelled from the party and within days launched an independent campaign for president.<sup>16</sup>

Bukele created a new political party from scratch (*Nuevas Ideas*) and, because it was not officially registered in time for the election, ran under the center-right party GANA, described by the Salvadoran political scientist Carlos Schmidt-Padilla as “one of the most corrupt parties the country has ever seen.”<sup>17</sup> Bukele’s campaign focused on social renewal and said very little of iron-fist crime policies. He won the 2019 election with 53% of the vote and became the youngest president in the country’s history.<sup>18</sup>

### *THE MARAS*

The criminal organizations that have dominated El Salvador for decades trace their origins not to the historic center of San Salvador, but to Los Angeles neighborhoods like Pico-Union and Westlake.<sup>19</sup> In the 1980s, thousands of Salvadoran refugees fled the country’s civil war and settled in southern California at a time when street gang culture and the crack epidemic were rising to a crescendo.<sup>20</sup> Many young Salvadoran refugees formed their own groups called *maras*. In the 1990s, police task forces and immigration authorities began targeting gang members for criminal deportation, leading to a wave of return migration to El Salvador.

Many deported members reconstituted their gangs once back in El Salvador and revived origin names like Clinton Park and Hoover Street, though many of the future generations of gang members “couldn’t even point to California on a map.”<sup>21</sup> El Salvador, having just emerged from a twelve-year civil war that claimed more than 75,000 lives, was fertile territory for the formation and proliferation of street gangs which grew year by year.

The most well-known gang to emerge was *Mara Salvatrucha 13* (MS13). The other two principal gangs were *Barrio 18 Sureños* (18S), and *Barrio 18 Revolucionarios* (18R). MS13, the largest of the three, has been recently estimated at over 78,000—with around 30,300 *homeboys* (official members), 4,500 *chequeos* (apprentices), and 43,300 *colaboradores* (support network). Meanwhile, 18S is estimated at 21,000—with around 11,300 *homeboys*, 200

---

<sup>16</sup> Bukele in ITV El Salvador, “Nayib Bukele anuncia su candidatura.”

<sup>17</sup> Carlos Schmidt-Padilla, interview by author, Zoom, 21-December-2023.

<sup>18</sup> Tribunal Supremo Electoral de El Salvador (TSE), “Escrutinio final 2019: Resultado de la elección presidencial,” 7-February-2019, <https://info2024.tse.gob.sv/2019/escrutinio-final/presidencial/index.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson, interview by author, Antiguo Cuscatlan, El Salvador, 8-January-2024.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Dudley, *MS13: The Making of America’s Most Notorious Gang* (New York: Hangover Square Press, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Óscar Martínez, *Los muertos y el periodista* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2021), 89.



chequeos, and 9,500 colaboradores; and 18R is estimated at just under 20,000—with 11,500 homeboys, 600 chequeos, and 7,500 colaboradores.<sup>22</sup>

All three of these “highly visible, symbolic, and ritualistic”<sup>23</sup> gangs are organized into hierarchical structures starting at the lowest level with street-level cliques (*clicas/henglas*), which are organized under umbrella groups called programs (*programas/tribus*). Each clique controls a turf of one or several zones of operation (*canchas*), which usually consist of numerous neighborhoods or developments. With MS13, programs report up to the *Ranfla en las Calles* (leadership not in prison), who in turn report to the *Ranfla en los Penales* (senior incarcerated leadership), and above all is the *Ranfla Nacional*.<sup>24</sup> The term *ranfla* is similarly used by 18S and 18R to denote a gang’s senior-level leadership.

Despite comparisons to Mexican and Colombian cárteles, El Salvador’s gangs are profoundly different. A U.S. government official remarked that MS13’s designation as a transnational criminal organization by the Treasury in 2012 was “just to leverage powers and by no means considers the maras and cárteles to be in the same league.”<sup>25</sup> The gangs in El Salvador are highly diffuse organizations whose principal units of action are neighborhood-based street gangs. Their membership is extremely young, poor, and from marginalized neighborhoods. “They are not warriors, they are not soldiers,” Salvadoran anthropologist and journalist Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson argues. “They don’t know how to follow orders, they don’t really know how to use weapons, they don’t know strategy or tactics, they can’t even set up an ambush.”<sup>26</sup>

The gangs are largely not involved nor even essential to the regional drug trade. Geographically, El Salvador is an unnecessary detour off international drug trafficking land routes. While sophisticated transnational criminal organizations like Clan del Golfo, Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, and Cártel de Sinaloa derive revenue from illicit trafficking, the Salvadoran gangs generate revenue through extortion (*renta*). Citing access to wiretapped phone conversations, an *El Faro* report estimated that rank-and-file gang members earned no more than \$60 a month and referred to the gangs as a “mafia of the poor.” The report argued that their “criminal sophistication and global reach has been overstated” and

---

<sup>22</sup> Policía Nacional Civil (PNC), “Apreciación de Las Pandillas ante Coyuntura del Régimen de Excepción,” 1-September-2023; David Reyes Palacios in “1966th Meeting, 75th Session, Committee Against Torture (CAT),” United Nations (UN), 18-November-2022, <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k12/k12wprqq8r>.

<sup>23</sup> Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson, interview by author.

<sup>24</sup> Vast majority of the *Ranfla Nacional* is also in prison.

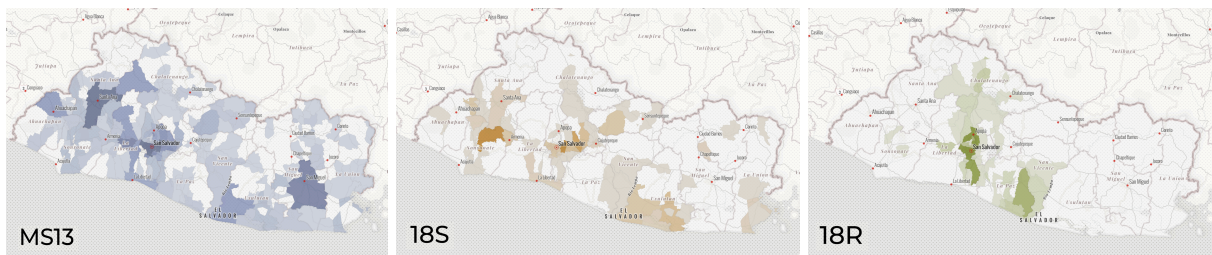
<sup>25</sup> U.S. government official, interview by author, Zoom, 7-March-2024.

<sup>26</sup> Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson, interview by author.

estimated the annual earnings of MS13 to be \$31 million.<sup>27</sup> Sinaloa's estimated annual revenue is \$3 billion.<sup>28</sup>

While much has been written about the maras that have operated for decades in El Salvador, no open-sourced maps exist to illustrate their territorial disposition on the national scale. To address this gap, the author obtained a dataset collected by El Salvador's national police (*Policía Nacional Civil*) from an anonymous source that details every single MS13, 18S, and 18R clique that police intelligence were tracking as of late 2017. The data depicts the gang and program affiliation of each clique, describes what areas they control, and details their zones of operation along with geographic coordinates. After cleaning and reorganizing the data, the author mapped all 580 gang cliques as individual points and then used point-in-polygon analysis to translate this data into gang distribution by municipality.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 1.1: Gang clique distribution by municipality



The analysis demonstrates that less than two years before Bukele took office, MS13 had the most expansive geographical presence, followed by 18S and 18R. MS13 consisted of 363 cliques, organized into 48 programs, with zones of operation in 135 total municipalities. By comparison, 18S consisted of 108 cliques, within 22 programs, and zones of operation in 53 municipalities. 18R consisted of 109 cliques, within 15 programs, and zones of operation in 41 municipalities. While the data precedes Bukele's presidency, interviews with multiple journalists and academics indicate that gang territory in El Salvador is a highly entrenched phenomenon and unlikely to change drastically from year to year. "The gangs have been operating in the same places for decades," said journalist Carlos García.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See: Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson, interview by author; Óscar Martínez, Efrén Lemus, Carlos Martínez and Deborah Sontag, "Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador," *The New York Times*, 20-November-2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/world/americas/el-salvador-drugs-gang-MS13.html>.

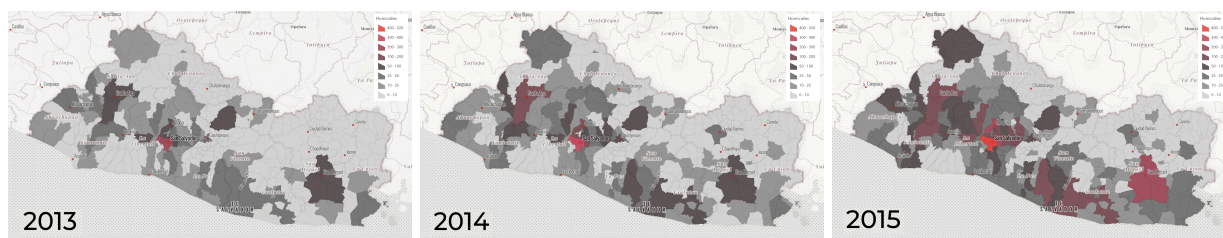
<sup>28</sup> June Beittel, "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations," CRS #R41576, 07-June-2022, 25, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41576.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> PNC "PANDILLAS A NIVEL NACIONAL (COMPLETO)," 5-August-2017.

<sup>30</sup> Carlos García, interview by author, Zoom, 21-December-2023.

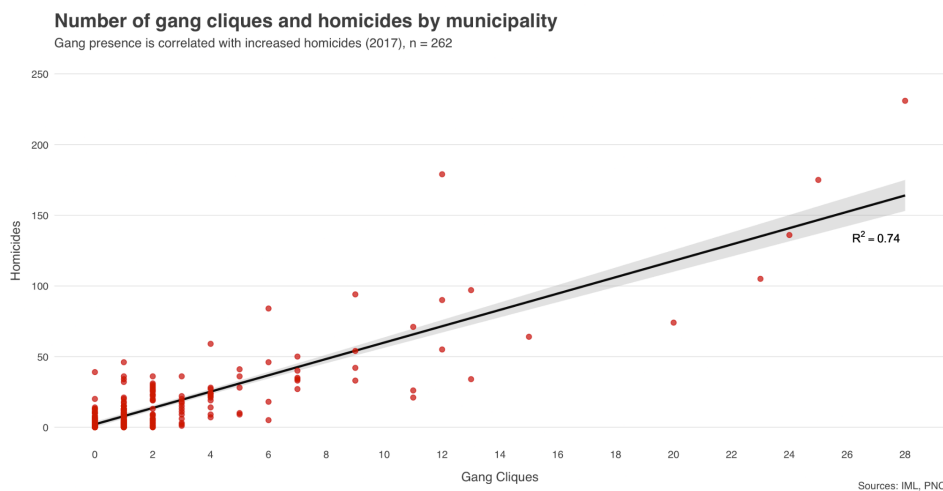
It is also useful to put this gang distribution data into conversation with municipal homicide data. Figures 1.1. and 1.2 allow us to appreciate through a visual and geospatial lens, the mapped relationship between gang clique distribution and the 2013-2015 homicide spike.<sup>31</sup>

Figure 1.2: Homicides following the collapse of the 2012 gang truce, by municipality



We can also analyze this data in more empirical terms. Figure 1.3 illustrates that in 2017, the year in which the gang data was collected, there exists a linear and statistically significant relationship between these variables. An increase in the number of gang cliques in a given municipality was associated with an increase in that municipality's homicide count. For every additional gang clique, a municipality saw an additional 6 homicides.

Figure 1.3



### PLAN CONTROL TERRITORIAL (Phases 1-4)

Within three weeks of Bukele's inauguration, he announced the launch of a multiphased anti-crime initiative called *Plan Control Territorial* (PCT).<sup>32</sup> PCT would consist of six phases,

<sup>31</sup> IML, "Reconocimientos Realizados por Médicos Forenses del Instituto de Medicina Legal, Practicados a Personas Fallecidas en Hechos de Violencia (Homicidios)" (2013-2015 and 2017 reports). Obtained through information request UAIP/21/80/2024(3), 22-January-2024.

<sup>32</sup> Bukele (@nayibbukele), "A esta hora, reunidos con el Gabinete de Seguridad. Jueves a las 0:00 horas comienza nuestro plan contra la delincuencia: PROYECTO CONTROL TERRITORIAL," X/Twitter, 19-June-2019, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1141238625667047424>.

each building upon the last, with the addition of an emergency seventh phase, which Bukele called, “a final phase that we hope will not be necessary.”<sup>33</sup> Throughout Bukele’s presidency, there has been a notable ambiguity surrounding PCT, particularly on the ordering of phases and the actions and interventions each entailed. Whether this ambiguity was by strategic design, or a signal of the plan’s improvisational nature is uncertain, it has been an undeniable feature.

The first phase, Preparation, launched in June 2019 was budgeted at \$31 million<sup>34</sup> and aimed to seize control of twelve key municipalities<sup>35</sup> and cut all lines of communications to and from the prisons.<sup>36</sup> Ten of these municipalities were in or around San Salvador, and the remaining two were the country’s second and third largest cities. Out of 262 total municipalities in the country, the twelve selected accounted for over 30% of the nation’s homicides that year.<sup>37</sup> Preparation involved joint force security deployments of 2,500 police and 3,000 soldiers to retake key areas from the gangs. Additionally, it added 300 corrections officers to prisons, transferred high-risk inmates to high security prisons, and cut off all lines of communication to the gangs’ incarcerated leadership.<sup>38</sup> This included telephone, internet, and cell signal and rooting out contraband cell phones and clandestine messaging.<sup>39</sup>

Phase two of PCT, Opportunity, launched in early July 2019, was budgeted at \$91 million and focused on weakening gang recruitment through community-centered crime prevention initiatives spearheaded by Marroquín’s agency. “It doesn’t help if we detain 50 gangsters, and the same day, they recruit 100,” said Bukele. Signaling his frustrations with the judiciary and a sign of the reforms to come, Bukele elaborated, “and of the 50 detained, 20 or 30 are freed by judges.”<sup>40</sup> He also announced the addition of five new municipalities to the government’s territorial control targets.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Bukele in Gobierno de El Salvador, “Inicia la FASE 4 del Plan Control Territorial,” 20-July-2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9Ki7Z2fNYs>.

<sup>34</sup> Bukele in Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador, “‘Oportunidades’, segunda fase del Plan Control Territorial contra las pandillas,” 2-July-2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYUOb5ejzks>.

<sup>35</sup> Apopa, Ciudad Delgado, Colón, Ilopango, Mejicanos, San Marcos, San Martín, San Miguel, San Salvador, Santa Ana, Santa Tecla, and Soyapango.

<sup>36</sup> Bukele (@nayibbukele), “La FASE 1 (PREPARACIÓN) continuará por 30 días más. La reforzaremos con 1,000 elementos (500 de la @FUERZARMADASV y 500 de la @PNC\_SV). Además, incluiremos los...” X/Twitter, 23-June-2019, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1142901989661130753>.

<sup>37</sup> IML, “Reconocimientos Realizados por Médicos,” (2019 report).

<sup>38</sup> United States v. Arevalo-Chavez, et al., CR-22-429: 14-17.

<sup>39</sup> Osiris Luna Meza (@OsirisLunaMeza), “Este día detuvimos a un Reo mientras salía con Orden de Libertad, en razón que llevaba 13 manuscritos (wilas - Órdenes e informes de la pandilla hacia...” X/Twitter, 5-July-2019, <https://twitter.com/OsirisLunaMeza/status/1147336312866951168>.

<sup>40</sup> Bukele in Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador, “‘Oportunidades’, segunda fase del Plan.”

<sup>41</sup> Ahuachapán, Sonsonate, Usulután, La Unión, Cojutepeque.

Phase three, Modernization, was announced in late July 2019 and entailed a \$210 million dollar investment in the country's security apparatus, consisting of strategic mobility equipment (helicopters, armored vehicles, all-terrain vehicles), surveillance and drones, medical equipment, and tactical equipment (night vision, body armor, weapons). Bukele also announced the five final targeted municipalities, bringing the total to twenty-two.<sup>42</sup>

Bukele rolled out the first phase of PCT without obstruction and secured financing for phases two and three from Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica, a multilateral development bank. However, in January 2020, the legislature—still composed largely of FMLN and ARENA members—rejected the resolution to approve the \$109 million loan. In response, Bukele called an extraordinary weekend session in early February, where less than a fourth of the members attended. With hundreds of supporters gathered around the Legislative Assembly, Bukele entered the chamber escorted by soldiers in full tactical gear. He sat in the chair reserved for the President of the assembly, bowed his head, prayed, and said, “I think it is very clear now who is in control of the situation.”<sup>43</sup> The following day, the President of the Legislative Assembly called Bukele's actions an “attempted coup.”<sup>44</sup>

Phase four, Incursion, launched in July 2021 signaled a militarization of public security by dedicating 10,000 soldiers “exclusively to citizen security” to enable joint security forces to penetrate and assert control in gang controlled areas.<sup>45</sup> Bukele also tasked his defense minister with doubling the size of the armed forces in five years, from 20,000 to 40,000. The next phase of Bukele's PCT, phase five, would not be launched for over a year.

Salvadoran academic and security consultant Luis Enrique Amaya makes the case that “there is no strategy nor written public policy” and that PCT is a product “more of improvisation than integrated planning.”<sup>46</sup> Juan Pappier of Human Rights Watch (HRW), argued, “I think Bukele carries out whatever policy comes to his mind and calls it the next phase of Plan Control Territorial . . . it's just branding.”<sup>47</sup> Veronica Reyna of *Servicio Social Pasionista* (SSPAS), contends that PCT instead, “was an attempt to explain the reduction in homicides,” as a sort

---

<sup>42</sup> Chalatenango, Sensuntepeque, San Francisco Gotera, San Vicente, Zacatecoluca. See: Bukele in Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador, “‘Modernización’, tercera fase del Plan Control Territorial contra las pandillas,” 30-July-2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8aU3tTNoKE>.

<sup>43</sup> Bukele in Canal 12 El Salvador, “Militares en la Asamblea Legislativa,” 10-February-2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGsmr-7Rtw0>.

<sup>44</sup> Mario Ponce, “(Video) Presidente de Congreso salvadoreño denuncia ‘intento de golpe de Estado’,” *La Nación*, 11-February-2020, <https://www.nacion.com/el-mundo/politica/video-presidente-de-congreso-salvadoreno/8985fdc0-385c-42eb-b048-0551862ba31f/video/ssdfs>.

<sup>45</sup> Bukele in Gobierno de El Salvador, “Inicia la FASE 4.”

<sup>46</sup> Luis Enrique Amaya, interview by author, Zoom, 6-December-2023.

<sup>47</sup> Juan Pappier, interview by author, Zoom, 1-December-2023.



of “cause and effect,” when all along the government had been secretly negotiating with the gangs.<sup>48</sup>

### *SECRET NEGOTIATIONS*

“You cannot understand the success of Bukele’s approach,” argues Salvadoran political scientist José Miguel Cruz, “without taking into consideration that he has negotiated with the leaders of the gangs.”<sup>49</sup> In November 2021, MS13 leader Élmer Canales Rivera (alias Crook de Hollywood) was quietly released by the bureau of prisons (DGCP) from the maximum-security prison Zacatecoluca. Crook had 40 years left on his sentence and had recently been notified of an international warrant (INTERPOL Red Notice) for his extradition to the United States. Days later, Bukele’s director of Tejido Social, Carlos Marroquín, drove Crook and his girlfriend across the Guatemala border.<sup>50</sup>

“I got Viejo [Crook’s codename] out, brother, as a way of helping all you guys and to show my loyalty and trust,” Marroquín said months later in a conversation with an MS13 contact. “I personally went to get him, and I took him to Guatemala myself.”<sup>51</sup> In an email sent out to other agencies by the DGCP, Crook was listed among nearly thirty inmates released that day. Every inmate had a motive for release listed, apart from Crook, whose corresponding section was blank.<sup>52</sup>

Well before Bukele, the gangs’ monopoly on violence had endowed them with certain political leverage with governments and politicians. The concept of negotiating with gangs was anything but novel. The deal was simple, says Amaya, “the government gets a reduction in homicides and support during political campaigns and in exchange delivers privileges to the incarcerated gang leaders.” One of the most emblematic examples of gang negotiations was the 2012 gang truce (*tregua*) during the presidency of Mauricio Funes. The multi-party pact was a truce between MS13 and their principal rivals 18S and 18R, with the FMLN acting as mediators. A U.S. indictment stated, the gangs would “enter a truce to reduce homicides . . .

---

<sup>48</sup> Verónica Reyna, interview by author, San Salvador, 10-January-2024.

<sup>49</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

<sup>50</sup> See: Roman Gressir, “PNC supo de la liberación ilegal de Crook desde noviembre de 2021,” *El Faro*, 26-October-2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202210/el\\_salvador/26443/PNC-sup-o-de-la-liberaci3n-ilegal-de-Crook-desde-noviembre-de-2021.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202210/el_salvador/26443/PNC-sup-o-de-la-liberaci3n-ilegal-de-Crook-desde-noviembre-de-2021.htm); Carlos Garcia, “La huida de Crook: de la Escal3n a M3xico,” *El Faro*, 11-July-2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202207/el\\_salvador/26263/La-huida-de-Crook-de-la-Escal3n-a-M3xico.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202207/el_salvador/26263/La-huida-de-Crook-de-la-Escal3n-a-M3xico.htm); United States v. Arevalo-Chavez, et al., CR-22-429 (Eastern District of New York).

<sup>51</sup> Carlos Martínez, “Audios de Carlos Marroquín.”

<sup>52</sup> Roman Gressir, “PNC supo de la liberación ilegal de Crook.” Note: In 2023, the government began conspiring with an ex-18S leader in México to arrange for CJNG to capture Crook and return him to El Salvador for \$1 million. However, in November Mexican forces captured Crook and flew him to Houston. The U.S. is now in custody of six high-level MS13 leaders, more than one-fifth of the Ranfla Nacional.

in exchange for transfers to less secure prisons, improved prison conditions, conjugal visits, cash payments, and other benefits and privileges.”<sup>53</sup> Homicide rates following the truce fell by nearly 40%.<sup>54</sup>

However, in late 2013, the truce fell apart and the country descended into a period of historic violence. In 2016, the Sanchez Cerén administration announced there was “no longer space for dialogue”<sup>55</sup> and launched strict measures in the prisons and an offensive in the streets, which ended up killing “the majority of clique leaders,” according to Juan José Martínez. He adds that around this time the gangs began incorporating fewer numbers of official members and the ranks of chequeos and colaboradores began to swell.<sup>56</sup> The three gangs then called on their members “to stop all types of homicide nationwide.”<sup>57</sup> Schmidt-Padilla argues that one of the main impulses for the 2016 internal truce was that gangs face diseconomies of scope, “they are not really good at both waging war and collecting extortion.”<sup>58</sup>

The next substantial negotiations between the gangs and national political leaders would take place during the 2019 election. After Bukele won, three MS13 leaders from the Ranfla Nacional “secretly met numerous times with representatives of the government inside Zacatecoluca and Izalco prisons and elsewhere,” according to the U.S. indictment. One of them was Borrromeo Henriquez (alias Diablito de Hollywood), considered the most powerful member of the Ranfla Nacional. Another was Crook.

Bukele’s principal agents in the negotiations were Osiris Luna, director of prisons (DGCP), and Carlos Marroquín, director of Tejido Social. According to the U.S. indictment, Bukele’s government arranged meetings in penitentiaries and hospitals and regularly brought in leadership from the Ranfla en las Calles. Gang leaders were escorted by prison officials, “wore masks and long sleeve shirts to hide their tattoos and identities,” and were given badges “identifying them as intelligence or law enforcement officials.”<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> United States v. Arevalo-Chavez, et al., CR-22-429: 14-17. See also: 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 (2016): 197–210. doi: 10.1177/0022343315626239.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Katz, Eric Hedberg, and Luis Enrique Amaya, “Gang truce for violence prevention, El Salvador,” *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* vol. 94, 9 (2016): 660-666A. doi: 10.2471/BLT.15.166314

<sup>55</sup> Gerson Chávez, “Presidente no descarta ‘estado de emergencia’ por violencia,” *El Mundo*, 8-March-2016, <https://diario.elmundo.sv/Sin%20categoría/presidente-no-descarta-estado-de-emergencia-por-violencia>.

<sup>56</sup> Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson, interview by author.

<sup>57</sup> *Associated Press*, “El Salvador: pandillas ofrecen parar homicidios,” 26-March-2016, <https://apnews.com/general-news-8ef8e48699ce4a68b02c4be7800e74dc>.

<sup>58</sup> Carlos Schmidt-Padilla, interview by author.

<sup>59</sup> United States v. Arevalo-Chavez, et al., CR-22-429: 14-17

The gangs negotiated with the government for less restrictive prison conditions, reduced sentences, visits to civilian hospitals for fake medical treatment, and a refusal to extradite leaders to the U.S. In exchange, gang leaders would “reduce the number of public murders,” thus “creating the perception that the government was reducing the murder rate.” The indictment also states that MS13 leaders agreed to direct “members, friends and relatives of members, and residents of neighborhoods under MS13 control, to support Nuevas Ideas candidates in the 2021 [legislative] elections.” Bukele’s party went on to win a two-thirds majority in that election.<sup>60</sup>

A report from *Redacción Regional* found that in the three years of Bukele’s negotiations with the gangs, the government authorized 749 transfers of gang members to public and private hospitals under the pretext of medical care just out of Zacatecoluca. Nearly two-thirds of the transfers were for leaders of MS13 (including Diablito de Hollywood), and the remaining transfers were evenly between leaders of 18S and 18R.<sup>61</sup>

While elements of Bukele’s gang diplomacy resemble the gang truce, there are two critical differences and potential lessons Bukele may have learned from the collapse of the 2012 truce. Cruz argues that with Funes, it was “a truce between gangs facilitated by the government,” whereas with Bukele, the negotiations were bilateral.<sup>62</sup>

A second difference, highlighted by Amaya, is that with Bukele, the negotiations were shrouded in secrecy. With Funes, the negotiations were generally known. With Bukele, “he was very clear, no one could talk, the lines of communication were cut,” Amaya said, “we lost our sources, our contacts in the gangs, they said we cannot talk, we cannot talk about anything.”<sup>63</sup> Bukele’s government also benefited from establishing control and isolation measures in the prisons in PCT phase one, which severely restricted incarcerated gang leaders from communicating at will with the street.

In El Salvador, argues Cruz, “once you negotiate with the gang leaders, you are able to control the whole dynamic of violence.” Two variables enable this “Salvadoran phenomenon,” the hierarchical organization of the gangs and the country’s criminal ecosystem. “The leaders are

---

<sup>60</sup> See: United States v. Arevalo-Chavez, et al., CR-22-429: 14-17; Carlos Martínez, Óscar Martínez, Sergio Arauz, and Efren Lemus, “Gobierno de Bukele lleva un año negociando con la MS-13 reducción de homicidios y apoyo electoral,” *El Faro*, 3-September-2020, [https://elfaro.net/es/202009/el\\_salvador/24781/Gobierno-de-Bukele-lleva-un-año-negociando-con-la-MS-13-reducción-de-homicidios-y-apoyo-electoral.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202009/el_salvador/24781/Gobierno-de-Bukele-lleva-un-año-negociando-con-la-MS-13-reducción-de-homicidios-y-apoyo-electoral.htm).

<sup>61</sup> Carlos García, “Las 749 Salidas de Pandillas de Zacatraz,” *Redacción Regional*, 25-October-2023, <https://www.redaccionregional.com/749-salidas-de-pandilleros-de-zacatraz>.

<sup>62</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

<sup>63</sup> Luis Enrique Amaya, interview by author.

able to control their troops, their soldiers, and their organization,” Cruz argues. Unlike with other countries, in El Salvador “you have these two or three organizations that are able to dominate the whole criminal landscape.”<sup>64</sup> Cruz suggests that two factors that enable this level of control are El Salvador’s small size (21,041 sq km)<sup>65</sup> and an extremely high level of urbanization (75% of the population lives in cities).<sup>66</sup>

Bukele’s clandestine gang diplomacy preceded a consistent reduction in homicides and a landslide win for *Nuevas Ideas* in the 2021 legislative elections. There are also indicators that the negotiations sowed tensions within the gangs between incarcerated high-level leadership and gang members on the street. One 18S leader remarked, “it seems like the ranflas negotiated with the government for their own benefits behind the backs of the street.”<sup>67</sup>

There were also signs that the negotiations were falling out of favor among some administration officials, particularly Gustavo Villatoro, Bukele’s minister of justice (*Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública* or MJSP). Marrouqín remarked to his MS13 contact, “everyone else is interested in this thing failing and no longer moving forward or working.”<sup>68</sup> But Reyna’s hypothesis is that Bukele “killed the negotiations on purpose,” arguing that a president like Bukele would not allow one cabinet member to fracture such critical lines of negotiation. Through this lens, Reyna frames the first four phases of PCT and their emphasis on security force capacity building as a means of preparing the terrain. “I’m not going to go to war,” she argues, “without enough soldiers.”<sup>69</sup> Cruz frames the collapse as a “strategic mistake” by MS13 and suggests the gang simply “did not anticipate that Bukele would react so capriciously.”<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

<sup>65</sup> UN, “El Salvador: General Information” (2024), <https://data.un.org/en/iso/sv.html>.

<sup>66</sup> UN, “World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision,” (2018).

<sup>67</sup> Carlos Martínez, Óscar Martínez, Efrén Lemus, “Gobierno conspiró con líder pandillero para recapturar a Crook a través de un cártel mexicano,” *El Faro*, 26-January-2024, [https://elfaro.net/es/202401/el\\_salvador/27224/gobierno-conspiro-con-lider-pandillero-para-recapturar-a-crook-a-traves-de-un-cartel-mexicano](https://elfaro.net/es/202401/el_salvador/27224/gobierno-conspiro-con-lider-pandillero-para-recapturar-a-crook-a-traves-de-un-cartel-mexicano).

<sup>68</sup> Carlos Martínez, “Audios de Carlos Marrouqín.”

<sup>69</sup> Verónica Reyna, interview by author.

<sup>70</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

## RÉGIMEN DE EXCEPCIÓN (2022-present)

### *STATE OF EXCEPTION*

Article 29 of El Salvador's Constitution grants the government authority to temporarily suspend six articles of the constitution and declare a régimen de excepción, "in cases of war, invasion of territory, rebellion, sedition, catastrophe, epidemic or other general disaster, or serious disturbances of the public order."<sup>71</sup> The subsequent article defines 30 days as the maximum period, after which the government may prolong it by decree. The final article establishes that rights shall be reestablished "when the circumstances that motivated the suspension of constitutional guarantees disappear."<sup>72</sup>

When the régimen de excepción was first declared in March 2022, following the three day wave of killings, the justification was "an increase in violent events throughout the national territory by criminal structures, which endangers life and the physical integrity of the population."<sup>73</sup> In March 2024, when the homicide rate was one of the lowest in the hemisphere, the justification was, "the need to continue taking actions that allow us to firmly combat [criminal] organizations that constitute the enemy and the most serious threat."<sup>74</sup> As of the close of this investigation, Bukele's régimen de excepción has been approved a total of twenty-four times and remains in effect.<sup>75</sup> A "provisional and exceptional measure," in the words of Agamben, has been effectively transformed into "a technique of government."<sup>76</sup>

The régimen de excepción is neither a piece of legislation, a document of public policy, nor a security strategy or model. In its simplest form, it is a prolonged suspension of four constitutional rights and guarantees:

- *Article 7 (para. 1)* - Right to free assembly and association.
- *Article 12 (para. 2)* - Right to legal counsel and to know why you are being detained.
- *Article 13 (para. 2)* - Maximum pre-trial detention period of 72 hours.

---

<sup>71</sup> Régimen de excepción as a juridical term has been translated as regime of exception, state of exception, and state of emergency. However, for fidelity to the language and to how Salvadorans refer to it, the author has decided to use the term in its original form as well as the shorthand *régimen* in this report..

<sup>72</sup> Constitución de la República de El Salvador, Art. 29-31 (1983, revised 2014).

<sup>73</sup> Asamblea Legislativa de El Salvador, Decreto 333 (27-March-2022).

<sup>74</sup> Asamblea Legislativa, Decreto 964 (8-March-2024).

<sup>75</sup> Asamblea Legislativa, Decreto 333, Decreto 358, Decreto 396, Decreto 427, Decreto 454, Decreto 476, Decreto 503 (14-September-2022), Decreto 530, Decreto 569, Decreto 611, Decreto 644, Decreto 661, Decreto 687, Decreto 719, Decreto 738, Decreto 765, Decreto 797, Decreto 815, Decreto 843, Decreto 865, Decreto 88), Decreto 906, Decreto 933, Decreto 946, Decreto 964.

<sup>76</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2.



- **Article 24** - Right to privacy of correspondence and the prohibition of interference and intervention in phone conversations without a judicial order.

### *LEGAL REFORMS*

Since the régimen was first declared, Bukele and the Legislative Assembly have also been highly active in passing reforms to enable mass detentions and prolonged incarceration. Within three days of the régimen de excepción, Bukele signed the following five major reforms into law:

- **Decreto No. 337** (reform to penal code)
  - Increases prison sentence to 20-30 years for gang membership (previously 3-5).
  - Increases prison sentence to 40-45 years for gang leadership (previously 6-9).
  - Increases prison sentence to 20-30 years for anyone that helps a gang or receives indirect benefit from a gang (previously 1-3).
- **Decreto No. 338** (reform to drug enforcement law)
  - Increases prison sentence to 20-30 years for drug crimes by a gang member.
- **Decreto No. 339** (reform to criminal code)
  - Removes all pre-conviction detention limits for any gang related crime and any crime committed by a gang member (unlimited detention without trial).
  - Prohibits alternatives to detention for any gang related crime and any crime committed by a gang member.
- **Decreto No. 341** (reform to counterterrorism law)
  - Defines gangs as terrorist organizations.
  - Increases prison sentence to 15-20 years for any gang member with the aim of conducting an act of terrorism (previously 5-12).
  - Increases prison sentence to 30-40 years for any gang leader with the aim of conducting an act of terrorism (previously 10-15).
- **Decreto No. 342** (reform to juvenile justice law)
  - Mandates imprisonment of minors who are gang members or who committed a gang related crime (20 year prison sentence for minors 16-18 years old, 10 year prison sentence for minors 12-16 years old).

- Removes pre-conviction detention limits for any minor gang related crime and any crime committed by a gang member (unlimited detention without trial).

Within the next month, Bukele signed two more decrees:

- **Decreto No. 349** (reform to criminal code)
  - Criminalizes production or reproduction of gang messages, signs, or propaganda (social media included) with a prison sentence of 10-15 years.
- **Decreto No. 357** (law for the construction of prisons)
  - Facilitates rapid construction of Bukele's mega-prison CECOT later that year.

Well before Bukele became president, there were laws that enabled the government to arrest and detain people for gang related crimes and gang association. In 2004, just one year into Francisco Flores' *Plan Mano Dura*, the government detained more than 19,000 people. However, 91% of those detained were released "almost immediately" and 86% were ultimately acquitted for lack of evidence. Additionally, the temporary emergency measure that enabled many of these arrests, the 2003 Anti-Gang Law (*Ley Anti Mara*), was struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.<sup>77</sup>

"In the past," Cruz argues, "you still had independent courts, they still had their autonomy, and they were able to say to the executive and security forces, you're not going to cross this line."<sup>78</sup> This illustrates a stark contrast with Bukele's *régimen de excepción*, whereby pre-trial detention is permitted virtually without limit and the country's judicial branch no longer exists as an independent body. It makes sense therefore, that Cruz frames Bukele's recent crackdown approach as "a continuation and expansion" of *mano dura* policies with one critical difference: Bukele is in complete control of the judiciary. A year after the *régimen* was declared, the Legislative Assembly issued another subtle decree that gave the Attorney General (FGR) the authority to conduct mass trials:

- **Decreto No. 803** (special provision for processing gang defendants)
  - Empowers the FGR to group defendants "belonging to the same criminal structure" into single judicial proceedings<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho, "Medidas gubernamentales con relación a la criminalidad atribuida a las pandillas (Plan Mano Dura - Leyes Antimaras - Plan Súper Mano Dura)," in *Informe: Justicia Penal Juvenil El Salvador en 2004* (31-January-2005): 28, <https://www.fespad.org.sv/informe-anual-sobre-justicia-penal-juvenil-el-salvador-2004>.

<sup>78</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

<sup>79</sup> Asamblea Legislativa, Decreto 803 (27-July-2023).

The régimen de excepción, argues Cruz, should be understood as “the unfettered power of the security forces and the government to detain and imprison anyone.”<sup>80</sup> Reyna echoed this sentiment, submitting that “there is no independent attorney general, no independent judicial branch, nor independent legislative assembly.” Bukele’s strategy has evolved into “a model for the concentration of power,” which Reyna argues is arguably “more of a political strategy than a security model.”<sup>81</sup>

Amaya contends that “the régimen is not a parallel measure, it is not a fifth column, nor an appendix that’s attached in a strange way.” Rather, he says, “it is an integral part” of Bukele’s wider approach. Amaya, who proposed that the régimen de excepción may have been premeditated, alludes to an inseparability of the régimen with PCT’s Extraction phase. This is supported by one of the extension decrees, which referred to the Extraction phase as “a public policy that, together with the régimen de excepción, enables the continuation of efforts to eradicate this criminal phenomenon.”<sup>82</sup>

#### *PLAN CONTROL TERRITORIAL (Phases 5-6)*

Phase five of PCT, Extraction, was launched in November 2022 and was the first phase launched following the declaration of the régimen. “We have been at war against the gangs for eight months,” Bukele began his announcement. “And we are winning in a way that all the experts said was impossible.”<sup>83</sup> The focus of Extraction was a cordon and search strategy, area by area, to apprehend gang members and their collaborators. It came only three months before the opening of the country’s mega-prison *Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo* (CECOT).

Phase six, Integration, was launched in September 2023 and, like phase two, focuses on anti-poverty and societal integration initiatives, rather than direct confrontation with the gangs.<sup>84</sup> While the exact details remain opaque, phase six entailed the creation of a new directorate of national integration (*Dirección Nacional de Integración*), headed curiously by anti-poverty advocate Alejandro Gutman.

---

<sup>80</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

<sup>81</sup> Verónica Reyna, interview by author.

<sup>82</sup> Asamblea Legislativa, Decreto 644.

<sup>83</sup> Bukele in Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador, “Extracción’, quinta fase del Plan Control Territorial contra las pandillas,” 24-November-2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxfNlaKOMAc>.

<sup>84</sup> Luis Enrique Amaya, interview by author.

Phase seven is an unnamed emergency phase that Bukele has loosely referred to as “a final phase that we hope is not necessary.”<sup>85</sup> No other details have been disclosed to date.

### *PREVIOUS MANO DURA STRATEGIES*

Bukele’s régimen de excepción is distinct from previous mano duras in the following ways:

- 1) **Secret negotiations:** preceding the crackdown were three years of bilateral gang negotiations whereas previous pacts were regularly leaked.
- 2) **Consolidation of power:** during the negotiations Bukele amassed unbridled political power, freedom of maneuver, and institutional support.
- 3) **Immediate repression:** when the negotiations collapsed and the gangs responded with three days of record violence, Bukele responded rapidly and forcefully and took the gangs completely by surprise, such that they didn’t even fight back.
- 4) **Mass incarceration:** Through the régimen de excepción and a series of sweeping legal reforms, Bukele has absolutely dwarfed the arrest and imprisonment efforts of any previous mano dura effort in both severity and duration.

Heavy-handed internal security models have been tried before in El Salvador with dubious success.<sup>86</sup> The most emblematic cases were Flores’ Plan Mano Dura and Antonio Saca’s *Plan Súper Mano Dura*. While the a term has been used in the literature to refer to a range of measures and approaches, Harvard political scientist Alisha Holland offers perhaps the most precise conceptualization of mano dura as, “a trio of criminal justice reforms that promote discretionary crimes, constrict due process, and involve the military in policing.”<sup>87</sup>

Interviews with journalists, academics, and members of civil society support the claim that Bukele’s gang negotiations and repressive crackdown are hardly novel approaches. According to Reyna, “it’s the same formula, create new crimes, increase sentencing, large scale imprisonment, arbitrary detentions.” Security, she argues, has always been used as a populist mechanism to generate political popularity, Bukele’s not unique in that.<sup>88</sup> Cruz argues, however, that Bukele’s reforms are different, particularly regarding due process. In the past, Cruz says, there was often a sort of “revolving door” dynamic. “The police detained a lot

---

<sup>85</sup> Bukele in Gobierno de El Salvador, “Inicia la FASE 4.”

<sup>86</sup> Sonja Wolf, *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (University of Texas Press: 2017).

<sup>87</sup> Alisha C. Holland, “Right on Crime?: Conservative Party Politics and Mano Dura Policies in El Salvador,” *Latin American Research Review* 48, no. 1 (2013): 46, doi: 10.1353/lar.2013.0009.

<sup>88</sup> Verónica Reyna, interview by author.

of people, those people went through due process to some extent, then they were free and liberated two days after when there was no basis for imprisoning them,” Cruz suggests.<sup>89</sup>

Amaya contends that the difference between Bukele and past *mano duras* is in “the forms in which the ideas have been implemented and operationalized.” Amaya points to both the pace of political action and the extent and severity of repression. “We haven’t seen anything like it,” he said. Bukele has almost unlimited power and control over the national assembly, Amaya argues. No previous president, he says, “has had the budget, nor the speed to approve laws” like Bukele. In the past, “If a president wanted to build a prison like [CECOT], just the discussion in parliament would have taken years.”<sup>90</sup>

Another major distinction from past *mano dura* strategists is Bukele’s open rebuke of the international community, the domestic press, and the United States. Bukele has posted screenshots on his social media of his WhatsApp conversations with the U.S. *charge d'affaires*,<sup>91</sup> suggested that the Organization of American States “no longer [has] a reason to exist,”<sup>92</sup> has called Salvadoran journalists “trash,”<sup>93</sup> and has openly mocked international human rights organizations.

---

<sup>89</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

<sup>90</sup> Luis Enrique Amaya, interview by author.

<sup>91</sup> Bukele (@nayibbukele), “False accusations? Is it false that Jean Manes asked me to release Neto Muyshondt (captured in video giving tens of thousands of U.S. dollars to gang...,” X/Twitter, 9-December-2021, [https://twitter.com/nayib\\_bukele/status/1469045510442864642](https://twitter.com/nayib_bukele/status/1469045510442864642).

<sup>92</sup> Bukele (@nayibbukele), X/Twitter, 9-June-2022, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1535057918923788288>.

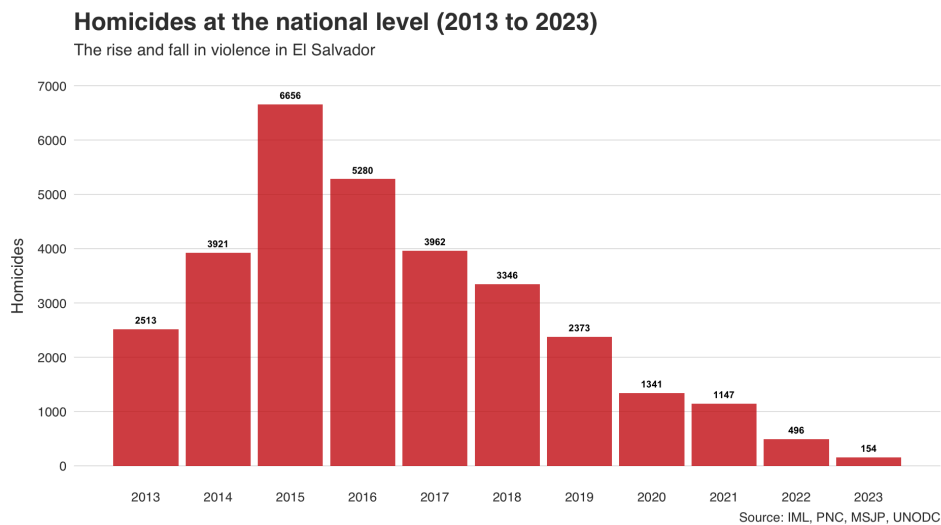
<sup>93</sup> Bukele (@nayibbukele), X/Twitter, 11-Apr-2022, [https://twitter.com/nayib\\_bukele/status/1513591841656127488](https://twitter.com/nayib_bukele/status/1513591841656127488).

# MEASURABLE EFFECTS

## HOMICIDES

Two months before Bukele was elected president in 2019, a nationwide survey found that the number one priority Salvadorans felt the next president should focus on was security.<sup>94</sup> While there are a range of indicators through which one can attempt to assess security, violence, and crime, homicide is widely believed to be the most reliable metric. In their book on the very subject, Daly and Wilson argued, “there is less reporting bias in police files and government statistics on homicide than in the records of any lesser manifestation of conflict.”<sup>95</sup> The UNODC has framed homicide as “the most categorical and calculable” crime statistic<sup>96</sup> and as “a robust indicator of levels of security within States.”<sup>97</sup> In 2015 and 2016, El Salvador recorded more homicides than any other country in the world.

Figure 3.1



Analysis of annual, monthly, and municipal level data from 2013 to 2023 reveals that homicides have dropped precipitously and at a relatively consistent rate since the 2015 spike. This decrease in homicides has occurred under two different presidencies and under different internal security strategies. While innumerable articles in the international press have framed the decline in violence as a result of Bukele’s crackdown, the régimen de excepción

<sup>94</sup> Centro de Estudios Ciudadanos, “Bukele y las Personas Decididas a Ir a Votar Suben en la Nueva Encuesta UFC,” (19 2018): <https://www.disruptiva.media/bukele-y-las-personas-decididas-a-ir-a-votar-suben-en-la-nueva-encuesta-ufg>.

<sup>95</sup> Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, *Homicide* (New York: Aldine, 1988) 11-12.

<sup>96</sup> UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2013* (Vienna, 2014), 9.

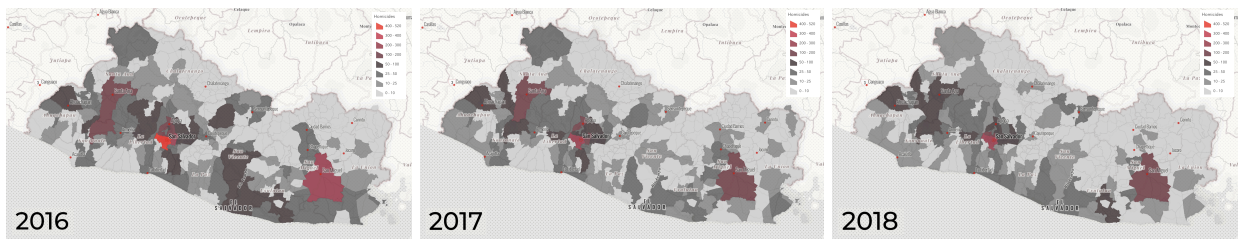
<sup>97</sup> UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2011* (Vienna, 2011), 9.

was only declared in 2022. In the past eight years, there are three contiguous periods in which homicides declined under different conditions and policy contexts. Using disaggregated homicide data at the municipal level, we can also visualize these dynamics at a more granular level for at least two of the periods.<sup>98</sup>

### Post 2015 spike in violence (Cerén) - 2016 to 2018

- Homicides declined by 50% (mean annual reduction of 16%)

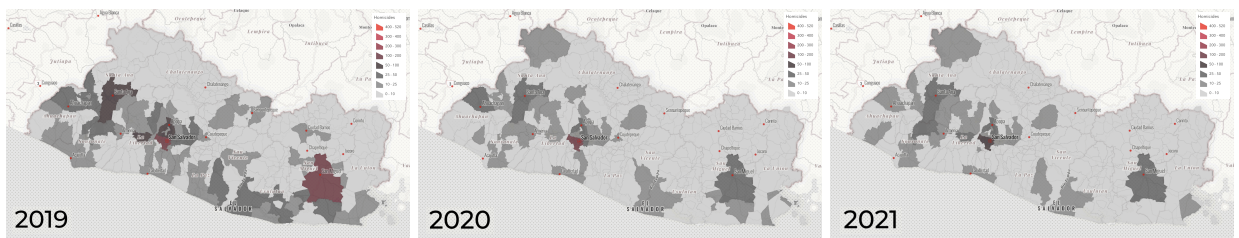
Figure 3.2



### Gang diplomacy (Bukele) - 2018 to 2021

- Homicides declined by 52% (mean annual reduction of 26%)

Figure 3.3



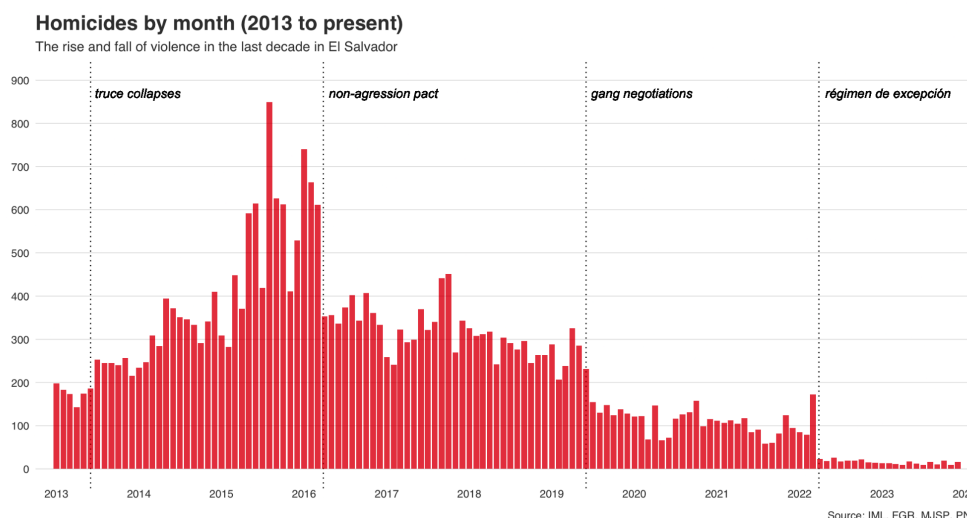
### Régimen de excepción (Bukele) - 2022 to 2023

- Homicides declined by 67% (same for mean annual reduction)

While this report was unable to gather municipal level homicide data for 2022 and 2023, the author was able to compile monthly homicide figures at the national level from January 2013 to December 2023. These figures allow us to visualize the steep decline in violence during the régimen with even more temporal specificity. They also provide another lens through which we can examine all three periods of declining violence together.

<sup>98</sup> IML, “Reconocimientos Realizados por Médicos,” (2016-2021 reports).

Figure 3.4



Framing that positions Bukele’s aggressive gang crackdown of arbitrary detention and mass incarceration as being the sole period of declining homicides is a fundamental misreading of the realities of violence in El Salvador.

This report has focused on defining Bukele’s approach to security as two distinct strategy periods: gang diplomacy and the *régimen de excepción*. However, it also recognizes that throughout both periods, Bukele unveiled all six phases of PCT. Though many frame it as more of a public-facing security narrative than a genuine security strategy, PCT nonetheless merits analysis. One of the central interventions of PCT was concentrated security force deployment to 22 of the country’s 262 municipalities. From 2013 to 2021, these targeted municipalities accounted for 40% of the country’s total homicides. San Salvador alone recorded more homicides than the next two municipalities combined.<sup>99</sup>

As violence declined during Bukele’s first three years in office, one might surely ask if PCT had any measurable effect. A year into PCT, a Crisis Group report that included rigorous analysis on this very question, “found no evidence” that municipal selection had an effect on their homicide rate. The authors used a fully saturated difference in differences (DiD) model, using the per capita municipal homicide rate as their dependent variable.<sup>100</sup> However, this project conducted a similar analysis and arrived at different findings.

With an additional year and a half of data, this report aimed to holistically assess the effectiveness of PCT’s targeted security force deployments, from first implementation to the

<sup>99</sup> IML, “Reconocimientos Realizados por Médicos” (2013-2021).

<sup>100</sup> International Crisis Group. “Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador,” Latin America Report, no. 81 (8-July-2020), <https://icg-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/081-miracle-or-mirage.pdf>.



régimen de excepción. Did being selected as a priority PCT municipality have an associated effect on that municipality's number of homicides? Given that the data is longitudinal and that the municipalities selected were more violent than those not selected, this analysis used a Fixed Effects Model that controlled for these differences. The dependent variable was the annual municipal homicide count, while the independent variable was whether a municipality was prioritized during PCT. The results of this analysis indicate that being selected as a PCT target municipality was associated with an annual reduction of 14.5 homicides per year.<sup>101</sup>

Figure 3.5: Fixed effects model

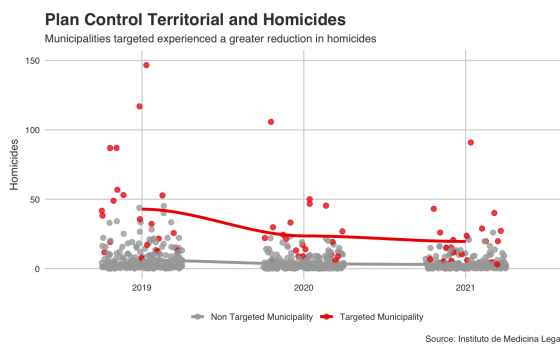
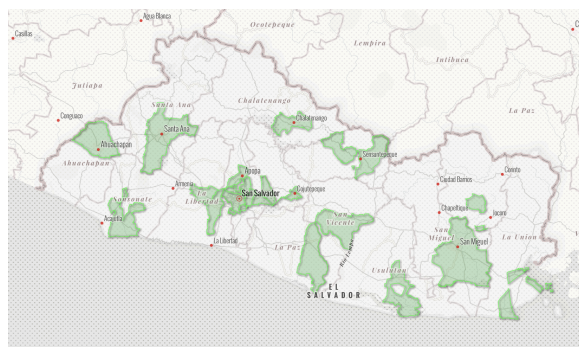


Figure 3.6: Municipalities targeted in PCT



Since 2015, El Salvador has experienced a dramatic and consistent decline in homicides. This decline has continued during Bukele's presidency, both during the three-year period of gang diplomacy and a subsequent and ongoing period of gang crackdown and mass incarceration. However, as Oxford political scientist Stathis Kalyvas argues, "the absence of a certain kind of political violence is not necessarily peace as typically implied but, rather, a different type or types of political violence."<sup>102</sup>

### *METRICS OF VIOLENCE*

When we examine government data on homicides and use it as a metric for understanding with the closest proximity the reality of violence, it is important to consider how the Salvadoran government has changed how it counts homicides in recent years.

The first statistic that is omitted from Salvadoran government homicide data is homicides in prison.<sup>103</sup> It is unclear when the government stopped including these figures, if they ever did,

<sup>101</sup> Note: se = 3.8, t = -3.81, p < 0.001

<sup>102</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Landscape of Political Violence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, eds. Erica Chenoweth, Andreas Gofas, Stathis Kalyvas (Oxford University Press, 2019), 28.

<sup>103</sup> A homicide behind bars is an equally valid indicator of societal violence as a homicide on the street. Respected datasets that exclude prison homicides (see: FBI) only do so for jurisdictional reasons.

but detailed data provided by *Socorro Jurídico Humanitario* indicates that deaths and homicides in prison have increased dramatically under the régimen de excepción. According to their data, of the 235 people who died in prison during the régimen, nearly 40% (91 total) died by homicide, making it the leading cause of death. The next most frequent cause of death was “negligence due to lack of medical attention,” which accounted for nearly 30% of deaths. In Bukele’s first two years in office, the number of total prison deaths was only 16.<sup>104</sup>

The second violent death statistic that is no longer counted as a homicide is persons killed in clashes with the police or military—inclusive of shootings, patrols, and operations by state security forces. The PNC refers to these incidents as “illegitimate aggressions” or “legal interventions,”<sup>105</sup> which therefore fall outside the realm of intentional homicide. However, others argue that one only needs to look at the 2014 extrajudicial police killings in San Blas to consider that, at least in many cases, “when the police say ‘clashes’ it probably means ‘massacre.’”<sup>106</sup> Since the PNC began separating these figures from homicides in July 2019,<sup>107</sup> they have recorded 452 people killed in clashes with state security forces.<sup>108</sup>

In the U.S. indictment there is careful mention that in the negotiations with the Bukele government the gangs agreed to reduce the number of “public” murders and added that “MS13 leaders continued to authorize murders where the victims’ bodies were buried or otherwise hidden.”<sup>109</sup> Marvin Reyes, leader of the police union (*Movimiento de Trabajadores de la Policía Nacional Civil*), recounts that as the homicide numbers were dropping in Bukele’s first years in office, “we began to find unmarked and clandestine graves where the gangs would bury their victims.”<sup>110</sup> Starting in May 2021, the interagency roundtable that

---

<sup>104</sup> Socorro Jurídico Humanitario, “Personas fallecidas en Centros Penitenciarios El Salvador durante el Régimen de Excepción (act. 30DICIEMBRE2023),” 30-December-2023 (provided to author). Prison deaths from 2014 to 2020 derived from DGCP, “Fallecidos Procesados y Condenados,” annual reports 2014 - 2018, obtained from information request UAIP/OIR/0378/2019, 31-October-2019; “Fallecidos Enero 2020 - 15 Febrero 2021,” obtained from Anexo resolución solicitud 0022-2021, 15-March-2021.

<sup>105</sup> See: PNC, “Apreciación de Las Pandillas”; Casa Presidencial (@PresidenciaSV), “Estas son las estadísticas comparativas que la @PNC\_SV le presenta al Presidente @nayibbukele . Los colores azul y gris representan a 2018 y...,” X/Twitter, 16-July-2019, <https://twitter.com/PresidenciaSV/status/1150984680491147264>.

<sup>106</sup> Óscar Martínez, *Los muertos y el periodista*, 24.

<sup>107</sup> Casa Presidencial (@PresidenciaSV), “Estas son las estadísticas.”

<sup>108</sup> Compiled from: Observatorio Universitario de Derechos Humanos, *Informe anual 2022*, (2022), [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jFs4fc-agAROVBYlb9yCuQN\\_VtdD4pem/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jFs4fc-agAROVBYlb9yCuQN_VtdD4pem/view); Villatoro in Bryan Avelar, “La embestida de Bukele contra las maras suma más de 170 muertes en El Salvador,” 31-January-2023, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-01-31/la-embestida-de-bukele-contra-las-maras-suma-mas-de-170-muertes-en-el-salvador.html>; Williams Sandoval, “30 muertes violentas de pandilleros en El Salvador en lo que va de 2023,” La Prensa Gráfica, 1-September-2023, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/300-muertes-de-pandilleros-en-El-Salvador-en-lo-que-va-de-2023-20230831-0079.html>.

<sup>109</sup> United States v. Arevalo-Chavez, et al., CR-22-429: 14-17.

<sup>110</sup> Reyes, interview by author.

tabulates homicides (*Mesa Técnica*) began counting these clandestine graves separately.<sup>111</sup> Since 2021, the government has recorded 171 unmarked graves.<sup>112</sup>

Figure 3.7

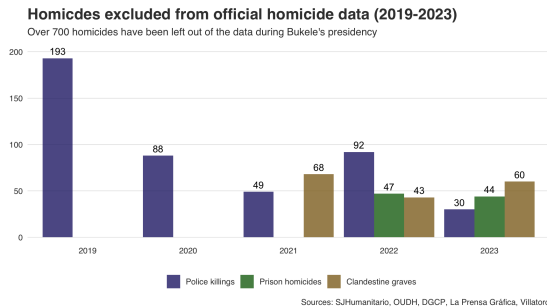
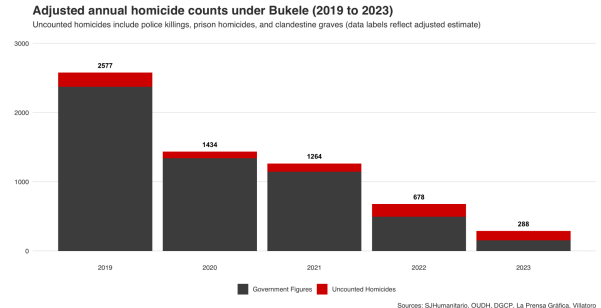


Figure 3.8



Given the changes to Bukele government's methodology for counting homicides and the quantitative data available, this report estimates that during Bukele's presidency annual homicides have been undercounted by 20% on average. Bukele has claimed to have reduced the number of homicides from to just 154 in 2023, achieving a homicide rate of 2.4. This report estimates that El Salvador's real homicide rate is 4.5 and that the real number of homicides in 2023 was 288. This report therefore finds the homicide rate was undercounted by 47% (up from 27% in 2022, and 9% in 2021).

Given doubts about the fidelity of government data, we can also look to non-government sources to assess the dynamics of violence in El Salvador. One of the highest quality real-time data sources on political violence is the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). Data collected by ACLED valuably provides us an uninterrupted, non-government sourced, granular picture of the geographic distribution of violence from 2018 to present. This open-source data illustrates a marked and visible decline in violent events and fatalities during Bukele's presidency, during both periods of gang diplomacy and the régimen de excepción. In a largely pre-Bukele period, fatalities decreased by just 7%. During Bukele's gang diplomacy and first years in office, fatalities declined by an average of 32% per year. During the régimen, fatalities fell by an average of 57% each year.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>111</sup> See: Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, "Estado de los derechos humanos en 2021," Editorial 23-March-2022, <https://noticias.uca.edu.sv/editoriales/estado-de-los-derechos-humanos-en-2021>; David Bernal, "Autoridades decidieron excluir personas halladas en fosas clandestinas de cifras de homicidios," La Prensa Gráfica, 11-November-2021, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Mesa-Tecnica-decidio-excluir-osamentas-de-cifras-de-homicidios-20211110-0090.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Data compiled from: Williams Sandoval and Edwin Segura, "Número de osamentas encontradas incrementó en año 2023," La Prensa Gráfica, 12-February-2024, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Numero-de-osamentas-encontradas-incremento-en-ano--2023-20240211-0060.html>; IML, "Reconocimientos Realizados por Médicos" (2021-2023 reports).

<sup>113</sup> ACLED, "Curated Data: Latin America & the Caribbean (29-March-2024). Using 2018-2019 to measure pre-Bukele, 2019-2021 to measure gang diplomacy, and 2021-2023 to measure the régimen.

Figure 3.9: Violent events pre-Bukele

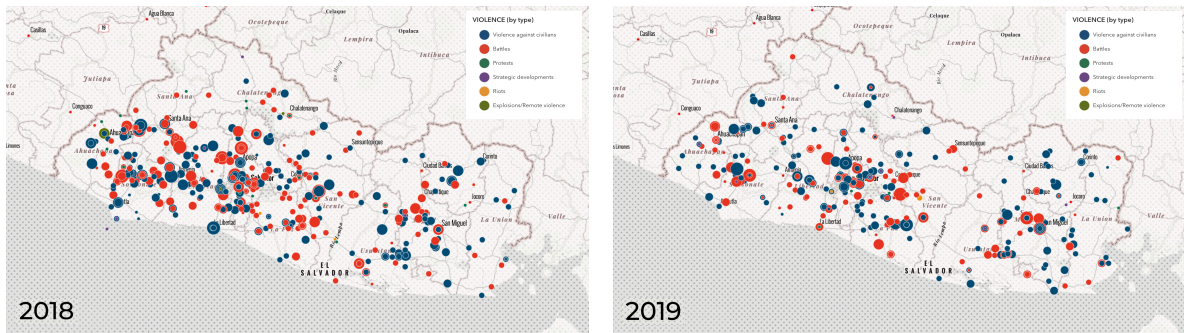


Figure 3.10: Violent events during Bukele's gang diplomacy

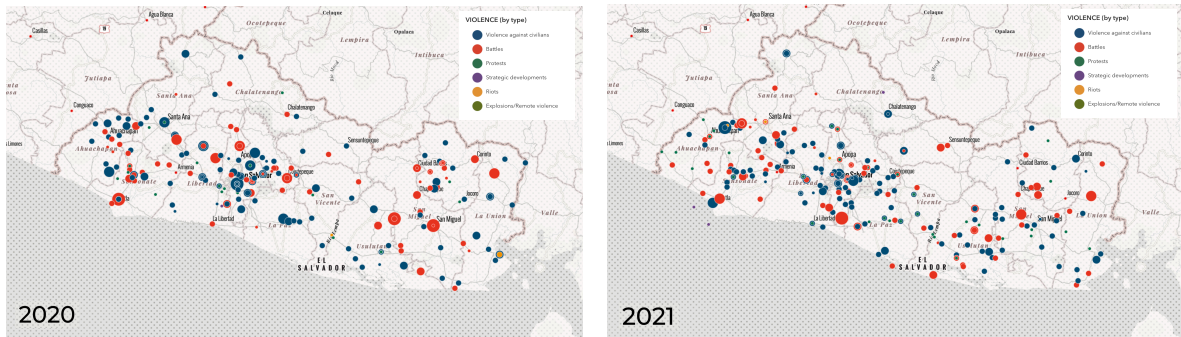
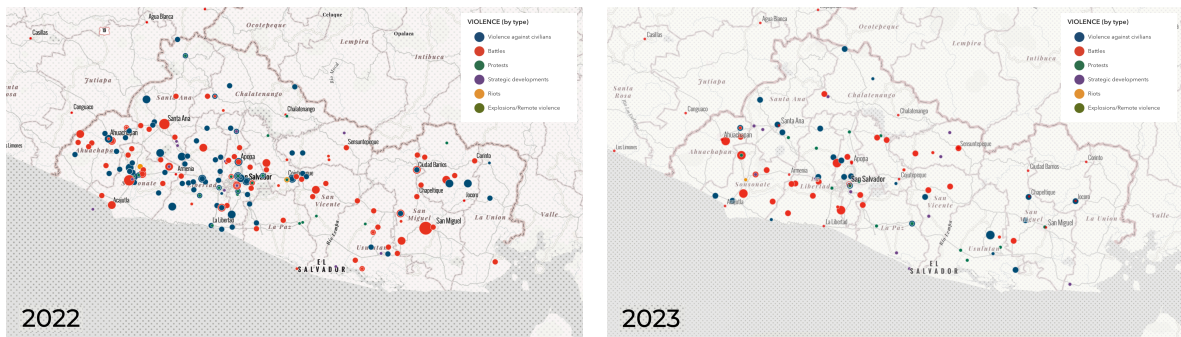


Figure 3.11: Violent events during Bukele's régimen de excepción



## THE GANGS DISAPPEAR

By 2019, Bukele claimed his government estimated the country had between 60,000 and 70,000 gang members, “obviously there’s not a census,” he added<sup>114</sup> By late 2022, the deputy director of the PNC briefed a United Nations committee that the total number was estimated at 118,000.<sup>115</sup> Less than a year later, an internal PNC intelligence document placed the figure at 120,187.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Bukele in Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador, “Oportunidades, segunda fase.”

<sup>115</sup> David Reyes Palacios in “1966th Meeting, 75th Session, Committee Against Torture (CAT),” UN, 18-November-2022, <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k12/k12wprqq8r>.

<sup>116</sup> PNC, “Apreciación de Las Pandillas.”

And yet, despite supposed gang membership in the hundreds of thousands, Bukele's detainment of 40,000 alleged gang members in just three months was met with no resistance.<sup>117</sup> The gangs "didn't even fire a single shot," commented Amaya.<sup>118</sup> Cruz argues that Bukele's years of gang diplomacy and negotiations "allowed him to reduce the possibility of a backlash from the gangs."<sup>119</sup> This claim is supported by an interview with a veteran gang member in *El Faro* that suggested "the gang chapters operating throughout the country had become disconnected from their leaders in prison" and that Bukele's government had effectively "isolated the leaders." When the crackdown came in late March, "the gangs received no guidance from their leaders to organize themselves to face off with the state."<sup>120</sup>

In the wake of the *régimen de excepción*, multiple interviews with local journalists, academics, and civil society leaders have suggested that the gangs have been virtually dismantled. "The gangs are dismembered," argues Amaya. "We don't know if they exist or what form of existence they have, but they are no longer what they used to be," he said. "I think in this country there are *marreros* but not necessarily *maras*."<sup>121</sup> PNC intelligence estimates support this argument. According to an internal document from late 2023, more than 77,000 gang members had been captured, which it assessed as 64% of the country's gang population. More than half were identified as *colaboradores*, 40% as *homeboys*, and 1,230 were gang leaders (*cabecillas*). The PNC document estimated that 67% of MS13 was now in prison, while the figure was 65% for 18S and 54% for 18R.<sup>122</sup>

The report also suggests that many gang members have fled El Salvador following the *régimen*, detailing that countless leaders and even rank-and-file are simply "out of the country." Gang leadership has given orders to "keep weapons in hiding for now" and permit tattoo removal among its members.<sup>123</sup> This suggests that most gang members are either in prison, in hiding, or have fled the country. There are also questions about to what extent the incarcerated gang leadership is even giving orders anymore. One veteran gang leader said, "the street soldiers believe their leaders sold them out."<sup>124</sup>

---

<sup>117</sup> Asamblea Legislativa, Decreto 427.

<sup>118</sup> Luis Enrique Amaya, interview by author.

<sup>119</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

<sup>120</sup> Carlos Martínez, Efrén Lemus, and Óscar Martínez, "Régimen de Bukele desarticula a las pandillas en El Salvador," *El Faro*, 3-February-2023, [https://elfaro.net/es/202302/el\\_salvador/26691/Régimen-de-Bukele-desarticula-a-las-pandillas-en-El-Salvador.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202302/el_salvador/26691/Régimen-de-Bukele-desarticula-a-las-pandillas-en-El-Salvador.htm).

<sup>121</sup> Luis Enrique Amaya, interview by author.

<sup>122</sup> PNC, "Apreciación de Las Pandillas."

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> C. Martínez, Lemus, and Ó. Martínez, "Régimen de Bukele desarticula."

Ten months into the régimen de excepción, reporters from *El Faro* visited some of the most emblematic gang-controlled communities and concluded the gangs had been “dismantled.” They spoke to residents, community leaders, teachers, and religious leaders who told them that the gangs had “disappeared” and that “everything feels so calm.” Gang divisions that previously cut through towns and neighborhoods were dissolving and fragmented communities were reclaiming communal spaces for the first time in decades. Residents also expressed a certain trepidation, though, “we think that if they let those people out, then blood will be spilled here.”<sup>125</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> C. Martínez, Lemus, and Ó. Martínez, “Régimen de Bukele desarticula.”

# COSTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

## MASS INCARCERATION

By the end of 2019, the PNC had detained 39,062 people. It was a slight increase from the year prior which saw 36,690 detentions. Bukele was six months into his presidency and had already launched the first three phases of PCT, one of which focused on regaining control of key territories from the gangs and another which focused on better-equipping government security forces. However, in 2020, Bukele's first full year in office, something interesting happened. The PNC recorded detaining 29,793 people.<sup>126</sup> And in 2021, the PNC recorded even fewer detentions: 27,095.<sup>127</sup> These figures indicate that the first three years of Bukele's presidency, and the first four phases of his PCT security strategy, saw a 25% decline in detentions by the nation's security forces. In Bukele's first few years in office, daily detentions fell from 100 per day to less than 75. This would all change drastically, however, in March 2022.

Figure 4.1

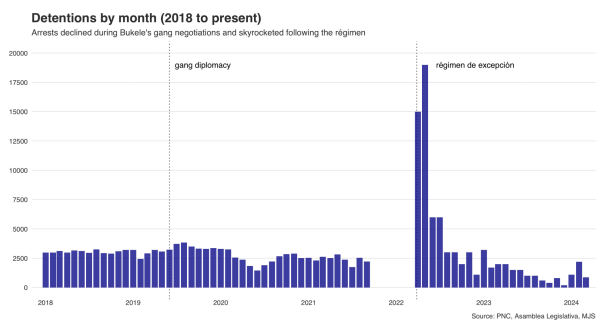
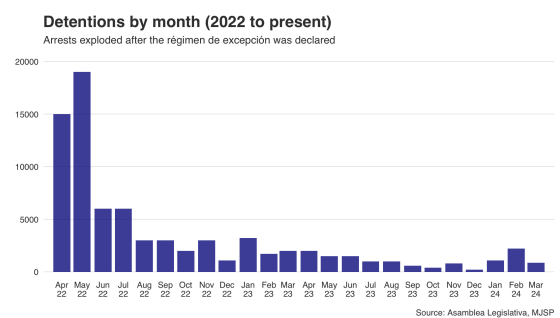


Figure 4.2



Within the first two days of the régimen de excepción, security forces detained more than 570 people.<sup>128</sup> In the next two months, they would detain 34,000 (approximately 560 detentions per day).<sup>129</sup> Two years into the régimen, the Bukele government has recorded more than 78,000 detentions.<sup>130</sup> However, more than half of these detentions occurred within just the

<sup>126</sup> PNC, Resolución Final C-343-2021, Anexo Detenciones 2018-2021, Information Request, 10-August-2021, <https://transparencia.pnc.gob.sv/download/resolucion-final-c-343-2021>.

<sup>127</sup> Presidencia de la Republica de El Salvador, "El incremento de capturas en 2021 está vinculado con la implementación de la fase 4 del Plan Control Territorial por parte del Gobierno del Presidente Nayib Bukele," Press Release, 6-November-2021, <https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/el-incremento-de-capturas-en-2021-esta-vinculado-con-la-implementacion-de-la-fase-4-del-plan-control-territorial-por-parte-del-gobierno-del-presidente-nayib-bukele>.

<sup>128</sup> PNC El Salvador (@PNCSV), "Presentamos a más de 40 pandilleros de un total de 576 capturados por el alza de asesinatos, como una muestra de las operaciones realizadas desde ayer...", X/Twitter, 27-March-2022, <https://twitter.com/PNCSV/status/1508265124779503619>.

<sup>129</sup> Asamblea Legislativa, Decreto 396.

<sup>130</sup> Asamblea Legislativa, Decreto 964.



first three months of the régimen. Not long after, detention numbers returned to pre-régimen de excepción rates, and have dipped even further to historic lows.

In 2020, the DGCP had a total design capacity of just over 27,000 prisoners, across its then-29 penitentiaries.<sup>131</sup> Since then, however, Bukele has completed two major prison infrastructure projects that have dramatically increased the nation's penitentiary capacity. First, a year before the régimen de excepción, the government completed the expansion of *La Esperanza* prison (also known as *Mariona*), increasing its capacity from 3,266 to 10,000.<sup>132</sup> Second, and most notably, Bukele's government built the mega-prison CECOT in the wake of the régimen, which in addition to being "the largest prison in all of the Americas," promised a capacity of 40,000 inmates.<sup>133</sup> However, an investigative report by *La Prensa Gráfica* suggested that CECOT is only designed to hold 20,480 inmates.<sup>134</sup> This suggests that as of this report, El Salvador's total penitentiary capacity is approximately 58,078 inmates.<sup>135</sup>

A month before Bukele was elected, there were nearly 40,000 people incarcerated in El Salvador. By the end of 2021, two years into Bukele's presidency, that number had declined to just over 36,000. However, in the wake of mass detentions and two years of the régimen the number of people incarcerated has skyrocketed. This report estimates that by the end of 2022, there were more than 91,000 people behind bars.<sup>136</sup> In late 2023, Villatoro, the minister of MJSP, remarked in an interview the nation's prison population was "more or less" 100,000 people.<sup>137</sup> This report estimates that by the end of 2023, there were 103,529 people incarcerated in El Salvador.<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> DGCP, "Existencia de Internos en el Sistema Penitenciario al 31-12-2020," Anexo resolución solicitud 0007-2021, 9-February-2021, <https://www.transparencia.gob.sv/institutions/dgcp/documents/414328/download>.

<sup>132</sup> Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública, "Inauguran Fase II del Centro Penal La Esperanza," 12-June-2021, <https://www.seguridad.gob.sv/inauguran-fase-ii-del-centro-penal-la-esperanza>.

<sup>133</sup> Bukele (@nayibbukele), "El Salvador ha logrado pasar de ser el país más inseguro del mundo, al país más seguro de América. ¿Cómo lo logramos? Metiendo a los criminales en la..." X/Twitter, 1-February-2023, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1620969718235398144>.

<sup>134</sup> Carlos García, "Radiografía al CECOT desvela su verdadera capacidad y falta de talleres," *La Prensa Gráfica*, 23-July-2023, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Radiografia-al-Cecot-desvela-su-verdadera-capacidad-y-falta-de-talleres-20230721-0076.html>.

<sup>135</sup> DGCP, "Estadística Penitenciaria al 08/Febrero/2021," in Anexo resolución solicitud 0009-2021, 2-February-2021: <https://www.transparencia.gob.sv/institutions/dgcp/documents/415753/download>.

<sup>136</sup> See: DGCP, "Estadística Penitenciaria al 08/Febrero/2021;" Ministerio de Seguridad (@SeguridadSV), "Desde que dio inicio el #RégimenDeExcepción, hemos capturado a más de 58 mil terroristas. No nos vamos a detener en esta #GuerraContraPandillas hasta..." X/Twitter, 21-November-2022, <https://twitter.com/SeguridadSV/status/1594733148637892608>; Villatoro in Frente a Frente TCS, "FAF 4 DE ENERO 2023," 4-January-2023, <https://www.facebook.com/frenteafrenteTCS/videos/531061745720841>.

<sup>137</sup> Marcelo Rochabrun, "El Salvador Is Imprisoning People at Triple the Rate of the U.S.," *Bloomberg*, 12-September-2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-12/el-salvador-jails-1-6-of-population-in-crime-crackdown>.

<sup>138</sup> See: Asamblea Legislativa, Decreto 906; Claudia Espinoza, "7,000 personas han sido liberadas durante el régimen de excepción, informa ministro de Seguridad," *La Prensa Gráfica*, 22-August-2023, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/>



Figure 4.3

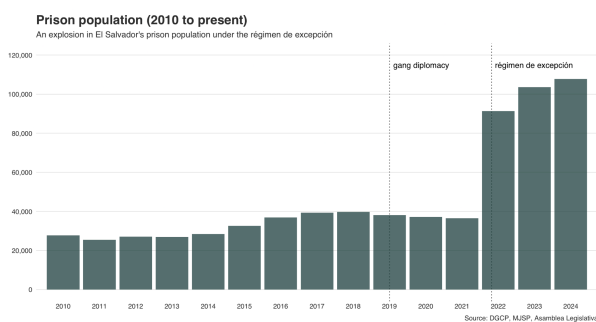
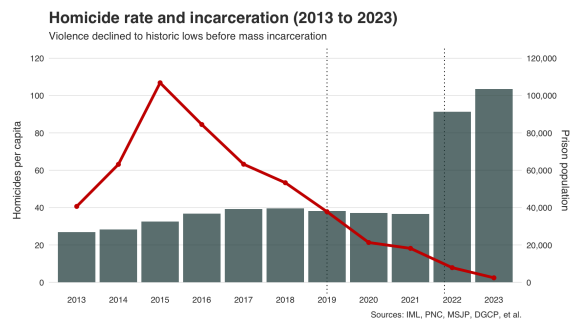


Figure 4.4



Per capita, this makes El Salvador the most incarcerated nation in the world, with over 1.6 percent of their population in prison. This is a rate more than twice that of countries like Cuba (0.8) and Rwanda (0.6), and more than four times that of countries like the United States (0.4).<sup>139</sup> This staggering figure also puts the country's prison system at over 140% capacity.

While CECOT is presented as the public-facing image of the Salvadoran prison system—a state-of-the-art prison with maximum control of the population—it is critical to realize that Bukele's famous mega-prison is likely holding only about 12% of the country's total prison population. The remaining 88% of those detained are in prisons like Izalco (more than 8,307), La Esperanza, and Ilopango. "There's CECOT . . . and then there's the penitentiary system," contends Reyna. CECOT is part of the government's "marketing campaign," she says, "it's the only one that lets in journalists and influencers . . . tell me how many journalists have visited Mariona and Izalco." Most cases SSPAS receives alleging abuse and human rights violations are from these two prisons, she says. And in these prisons, Reyna says, "what we have heard is that there is truly a logic of torture and permanent abuse." In La Esperanza, she says, they have heard reports of executions and even unmarked graves inside the prison.<sup>140</sup>

An important consideration when we examine incarceration dynamics during the presidency of Bukel, is to approximate the recorded justification for detention. Using official data for 2021 as our pre-régimen de excepción sample, we find that of 27,095 total detentions, 30% were profiled gang members, 37% were individuals with possible gang affiliations, and 34% were people with no gang affiliation.<sup>141</sup>

[elsalvador/Ministro-de-Seguridad-informa-que-7000-personas-han-sido-liberadas-durante-el-regimen-de-excepcion-20230822-0044.html](https://elsalvador.com/es/ministro-de-seguridad-informa-que-7000-personas-han-sido-liberadas-durante-el-regimen-de-excepcion-20230822-0044.html).

<sup>139</sup> See: U.S Census data and DOJ, "Prisoners in 2022 - Statistical Tables," Bureau of Justice Statistics, November 2023; World Prison Brief, "Cuba: Overview"; Rwanda Population and Housing data and U.S. Department of State, "Rwanda 2022 Human Rights Report."

<sup>140</sup> Verónica Reyna, interview by author.

<sup>141</sup> Presidencia de la Republica, "El incremento de capturas."

No comparable data has been released by the government for any period after March 2022, however, the reporting outlet *El Faro* obtained a sample of 690 cases from the period immediately following the declaration of the régimen—a period in which more than 48,000 people were detained. From this sample, we find that 67% had police records as gang members, 9% had police records as gang collaborators, and 9% did not have a police record as either gang members or collaborators and were charged under ambiguous criteria such as “nervous,” “suspicious appearance,” “anonymous complaint,” or “tattoos.”<sup>142</sup> Reyna states that most cases that SSPAS receives for individuals detained are young boys and men between the ages of 18 and 35, mostly from “poor, excluded, and marginalized neighborhoods” and “zones where there has been a historic gang presence.”<sup>143</sup>

There appear to be no sound estimates or approximations of what percentage of those currently detained are detained without proper cause. Any attempt at such analysis requires a level of access to data which is unimaginable at this stage. Reyna makes the case that “100% or close to 100%” of those detained during the régimen have been detained in a way that is “completely arbitrary and illegal.” Therefore, she argues, “the innocent people are all the people that have been detained who have not been proven guilty.”<sup>144</sup>

A key element that has enabled these detentions to swell the country’s prison population has been the state’s expanded ability to hold detainees for prolonged periods without trial. Though *habeas corpus* and due process are enshrined in the constitution,<sup>145</sup> the vast majority (89%) of those captured during the régimen de excepción have been sent to penitentiaries “while the authorities determine if there are sufficient reasons to try them.”<sup>146</sup>

In addition to Bukele’s concentration of power and the use of the police and military to make arbitrary detentions, Reyna argues that the third pillar of the régimen de excepción is the legal reforms that have enabled the government to imprison people for prolonged periods of time without proof. “The police can say, ‘look we got a call or we have information that says

---

<sup>142</sup> Efrén Lemus and Gabriela Cáceres, “Los expedientes ocultos del Régimen: cientos de arrestos por ‘nerviosismo’ y ‘ficha policial,’” *El Faro*, 7-August-2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202208/el\\_salvador/26318/Los-expedientes-ocultos-del-Régimen-cientos-de-arrestos-por-“nerviosismo”-y-“ficha-policial”.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202208/el_salvador/26318/Los-expedientes-ocultos-del-Régimen-cientos-de-arrestos-por-“nerviosismo”-y-“ficha-policial”.htm).

<sup>143</sup> Verónica Reyna, interview by author.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Constitución de la República de El Salvador, Art. 11-12.

<sup>146</sup> Jaime Quintanilla and Daniel Valencia, “Captúrenlos a todos: la verdadera historia del régimen de Bukele,” *Redacción Regional*, República Finquera, 12-September-2022, <https://www.redaccionregional.com/militarismo/la-verdadera-historia-del-regimen-de-bukele>.

you are a member of MS13' and that's it, you're going to be detained," suggests Reyna. "It's effective in terms of reducing crime . . . but it is not the least bit legal."<sup>147</sup>

Of all the government ministries, the bureau of prisons has been one of the least transparent, suspending and denying access to previously available data even before the régimen—when most other ministries began suspending access. "We have very little information about what is happening in the prisons," contends Cruz, "it is a huge black hole." He argues that the nature of Bukele's mass and prolonged incarceration makes the security situation very tenuous. Cruz contends that "the dynamics in prisons have an impact on the criminal landscape," and so he asks, "at what moment is what's happening in the prisons going to have an impact in the streets?"<sup>148</sup>

### *HUMAN RIGHTS*

Five months into the régimen de excepción, Bukele's Vice President told a reporter, "in any war there are innocent victims."<sup>149</sup> When asked about the unintended consequences of Bukele's crackdown, Juan Pappier said, "I don't know if they're unintended . . . I think [Bukele's] government is well aware that innocent people are being detained, that innocent people are being abused, that innocent people have died, and perhaps they have decided that's not too important."<sup>150</sup>

The main human rights violations HRW has seen, according to Pappier, include arbitrary arrests, forced disappearances, cases of torture, and children being detained. Pappier cited mass hearings of 500 people on Zoom where attorneys have ten minutes to mount a defense for the group as a collective.<sup>151</sup> Reyna echoed this claim, saying that there have been countless instances of "20, 30, 100, 200, 400" detainees being processed by the FGR and sent before a judge in a single audience.<sup>152</sup>

Within days of the régimen being declared, says Reyes, "the leadership of the PNC promised Bukele they were going to capture 1,000 gang members per day." In a typical bureaucratic fashion, PNC police chiefs tasked each region with fulfilling a quota that individual patrols were expected to meet. When patrols returned to the station empty-handed, Reyes said, the

---

<sup>147</sup> Verónica Reyna, interview by author.

<sup>148</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

<sup>149</sup> Angeline Montoya, "Felix Ulloa, vice president of El Salvador: 'There are innocent victims in every war,'" *Le Monde*, 15-August-2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/15/felix-ulloa-vice-president-of-el-salvador-there-are-innocent-victims-in-every-war\\_5993680\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/15/felix-ulloa-vice-president-of-el-salvador-there-are-innocent-victims-in-every-war_5993680_4.html).

<sup>150</sup> Juan Pappier, interview by author.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Verónica Reyna, interview by author.

chief would tell them to “get out on the street and you can come back when you've captured two.” The quota in effect forced police officers to round up innocent people that didn't have anything to do with the gangs, Reyes argued.<sup>153</sup> Examples include the mass detentions in Espíritu Santo, “the island without gangs,”<sup>154</sup> and Bajo Lempa, a poor and remote region of fishermen and agricultural workers.<sup>155</sup> The government also unveiled an anonymous hotline where everyday citizens can report suspected gang members.<sup>156</sup>

Cristosal's Rina Montti expressed that she often hears, “I used to be afraid of the gangs, now I'm afraid of the police.” Most cases that Cristosal gets now are related to abuses by the government and security forces, whereas pre-Bukele nearly all were gang related.<sup>157</sup> Many families who have had their sons, brothers, or cousins taken away under the régimen de excepción nevertheless defend it, says Juan José Martínez. “They think they are the only ones. The parents tell me, ‘No, the régimen is great, they just took our son by mistake.’”<sup>158</sup>

### *ONE-MAN RULE*

Danielle Mackey, a journalist at *The New Yorker*, remarked, “oftentimes the narrative you see in the foreign press about the régimen de excepción is that Bukele has fixed the gangs but at what cost.” Violence has stunningly dropped, yet there's a dark side, an unfortunate cost, repression, erosion of democracy, due process, etc.<sup>159</sup> “I think the narrative should be the other way around,” Mackey suggests, who frames the Bukele model more as a political strategy than one of security. “Bukele has been seeking power ever since he was mayor.”<sup>160</sup>

“The whole strategy of Bukele,” suggests Juan José Martínez, “to concentrate power in just one man is an old idea, it's what Castro did, what Chavez did . . . and all the military dictators

---

<sup>153</sup> Marvin Reyes, interview by author.

<sup>154</sup> See: *La Isla*, directed by Amada Torruella (2023: *The New Yorker*), <https://www.newyorker.com/video/watch/the-new-yorker-documentary-la-isla-women-speak-out-after-mass-arrests-in-el-salvador>; Carlos Martínez, “Las 22 capturas en El Espíritu Santo, la isla sin pandillas,” *El Faro*, 9-August-2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202208/el\\_salvador/26319/Las-22-capturas-en-El-Espiritu-Santo-la-isla-sin-pandillas.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202208/el_salvador/26319/Las-22-capturas-en-El-Espiritu-Santo-la-isla-sin-pandillas.htm).

<sup>155</sup> Natalia Alberto, “Un huracán de detenciones arrasa con el Bajo Lempa,” *Revista Factum*, 2022, <https://www.revistafactum.com/detenciones-bajo-lempa>.

<sup>156</sup> PNC El Salvador (@PNCSV), “Vamos a ganar esta #GuerraContraPandillas, pero necesitamos de tu ayuda. Llama al 123 para dar información sobre terroristas,” X/Twitter, 7-June-2022, <https://twitter.com/PNCSV/status/1534383049428938758>.

<sup>157</sup> Rina Montti, interview by author, San Salvador, 17-January-2024.

<sup>158</sup> Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson, interview by author.

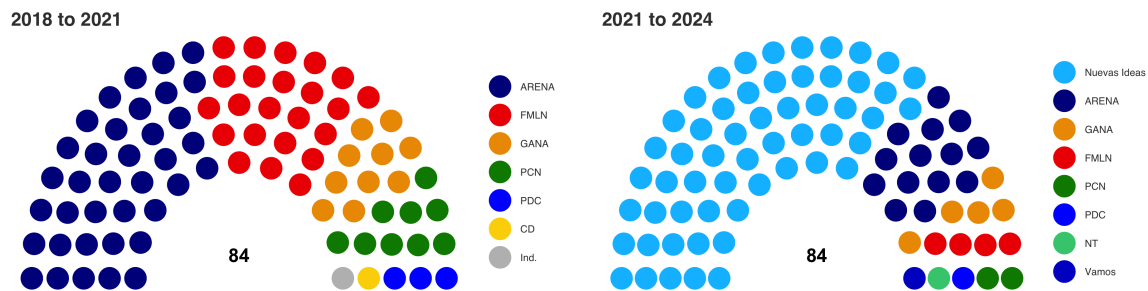
<sup>159</sup> See: Gustavo Flores-Macías, “The Costs of El Salvador's Crime Crackdown,” *Foreign Affairs*, 20-March-2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/central-america/bukele-costs-salvadors-crime-crackdown>; Will Freeman and Lucas Perelló, “The Drop in Crime in El Salvador Is Stunning, but It Has a Dark Side,” *The New York Times*, 8-February-2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/08/opinion/el-salvador-bukele-election.html>.

<sup>160</sup> Danielle Mackey, interview by author, Zoom, 12-December-2023.

that we had in El Salvador in the seventies.”<sup>161</sup> After Bukele stormed into the legislative assembly in February 2020, the country’s Constitutional Court (the nation’s highest) rebuked Bukele’s actions as putting at risk the government’s republican, democratic, and pluralistic character and forcefully ordered him to “abstain from using the Armed Forces contrary to their constitutionally-established purposes.”<sup>162</sup> While Bukele agreed to obey the order he remarked soon after that this was evidence that “the system protects itself. And that is how things stay the same.”<sup>163</sup>

Tensions with the Constitutional Court continued to rise after they challenged several of Bukele’s pandemic measures as unconstitutional. In response to these challenges as well as growing accusations of autocracy, Bukele remarked, “If I was a dictator I would have shot all of them or something like that . . . save a thousand lives, change five.”<sup>164</sup> The Constitutional Court is comprised of five judges. In March 2021, legislative elections were held and Bukele’s Nuevas Ideas party won 56 seats and secured a two-thirds majority in the chamber, dramatically changing Bukele’s political landscape.<sup>165</sup>

Figure 4.5: Bukele secures a majority in the Legislative Assembly



Within 24 hours of being sworn in, the new legislative assembly voted to remove all five justices on the Constitutional Court, fired the country’s independent Attorney General (FGR), and replaced them all with Bukele loyalists. In September, the newly packed court creatively

<sup>161</sup> Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson, interview by author.

<sup>162</sup> Sala de lo Constitucional, "6-2020 Inconstitucionalidad," 10-February-2020, <https://www.derechoynegocios.technosal.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/6-2020.pdf>.

<sup>163</sup> Bukele (@nayibbukele), X/Twitter, 10-February-2020, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1226985094344212483>.

<sup>164</sup> Bukele in Noticias Telemundo, "Así responde presidente de El Salvador a quienes lo llaman dictador | Noticias Telemundo," 11-August-2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EtDa2ncAmmE>.

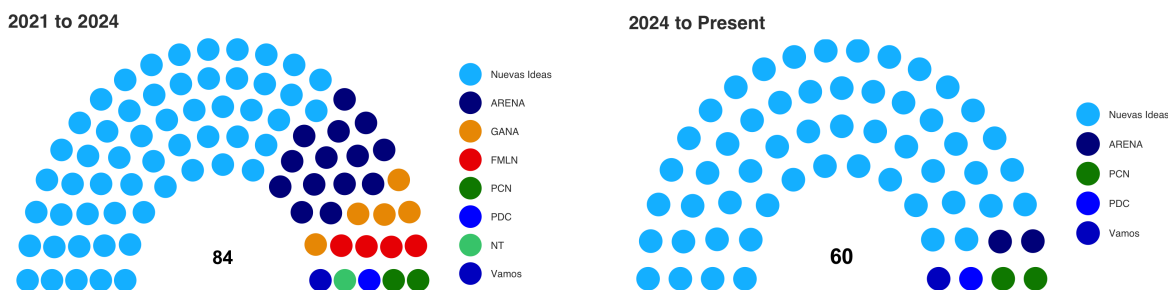
<sup>165</sup> TSE, "Escrutinio final 2018: Resultados de asamblea legislativa," 4-March-2018, <https://www.tse.gob.sv/2018/escrutinio-final/asamblea/index.html>; "Escrutinio final 2021: Resultados de asamblea legislativa," 28-February-2021, <https://www.tse.gob.sv/2021/escrutinio-final/asamblea/nacional>.

ruled that a president was not prohibited from seeking a second term so long as they did not hold office within six months before the start of the new presidential term.<sup>166</sup>

In November 2023, Bukele declared his candidacy for the 2024 presidential election. A month later, and precisely six months before the next presidential term, the legislative assembly granted Bukele a leave of absence to focus on his campaign and designated Bukele's secretary, Claudia Rodríguez, as acting President. In February 2024, Bukele received over 84% of the vote for president and will begin his second term in June.<sup>167</sup> A nationwide survey conducted less than a month before the election found that 17% of respondents viewed Bukele running for a second term as unconstitutional.<sup>168</sup>

An often overlooked but critical element of Bukele's legal reforms is a pair of bills passed in 2023 with staggering implications for political power. The first bill reformed the country's electoral code and reduced the number of seats in the Legislative Assembly from 84 to 60.

Figure 4.6: Second transformation of the Legislative Assembly (2024)



The second reform consolidated the county's municipalities and reduced the number of elected municipal councils from 262 to just 44. The reforms had immediate and dramatic implications and enabled Bukele's party to secure an even larger majority in the Legislative Assembly in the 2024 election.<sup>169</sup>

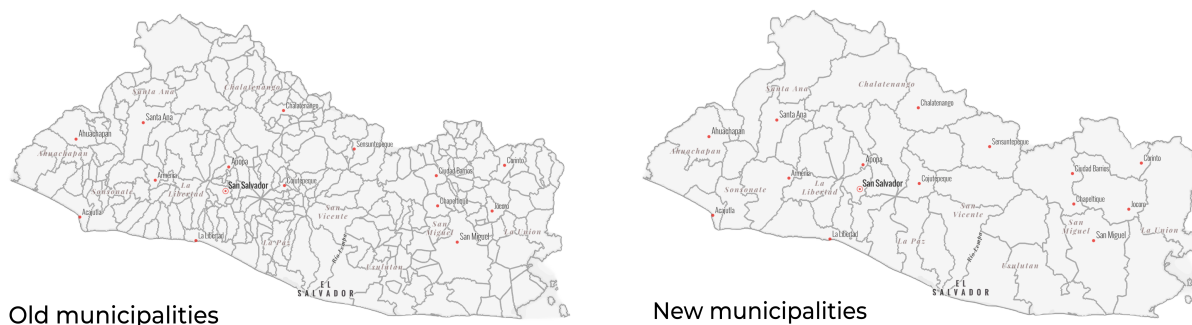
<sup>166</sup> Art. 88 prohibits successive presidential terms and calls for an insurrection if the article is violated. However, the Constitutional Court ruled Art. 152 prohibits a president to run only if they held the office within six months of the new term. See: Sala de lo Constitucional, "1-2021 Pérdida de derechos de ciudadanía," 3-September-2021, <https://www.jurisprudencia.gob.sv/portal/apls/2021/09/1-2021PerdidaDerechosCiudadania.pdf>; Asamblea Legislativa, "Asamblea Legislativa otorga licencia a Presidente Bukele," Press Release, 1-December-2023, <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/13025>; Constitución de la República de El Salvador, Art. 88 and 152.

<sup>167</sup> TSE, "Acta de escrutinio final de la elección de presidente y vicepresidente de la República de El Salvador para el periodo 2024-2029," 9-February-2024, <https://www.tse.gob.sv/elecciones-2024/actas-escrutinio-final>.

<sup>168</sup> Centro de Estudios Ciudadanos, "VI Encuesta de Humor Social y Político: "Estos son los datos, no se enojen," 15-January-2024, <https://www.disruptiva.media/vi-encuesta-de-humor-social-y-politico-estos-son-los-datos-no-se-enojen>.

<sup>169</sup> Asamblea Legislativa, Decreto 755, "Refórmase el Código Electoral" (6-June-2023); Decreto 762, "Ley Especial Para la Reestructuración Municipal" (13-June-2023).

Figure 4.5: Reduction of municipalities under Bukele



### *DEMOCRACY AND DEHUMANIZATION*

When pressed early on in the régimen de excepción about how long it would go on for, Bukele replied, “You can't do chemotherapy forever, we agree, but if you're suggesting we suspend the chemotherapy before we eliminate the cancer then that's totally absurd.”<sup>170</sup> Bukele has repeatedly leveraged a narrative that frames the gangs as a cancer and his forceful measures as bitter medicine. Reyna contends this isn't something new, it is a “vocabulary and a discourse” of dehumanization that harkens back to Saca and Flores, and it “has the effect of conditioning the population to be more open to repressive policies and inhumane treatment, and even killings and torture.”<sup>171</sup>

And for all the criticism he receives abroad, the situation is starkly different in El Salvador. Even just a year into the régimen de excepción, Bukele's approval had risen from 80 to 92%, support for the régimen had increased from 74 to 92%, and the number of respondents that felt the security situation had improved had increased from 73 to 96%.<sup>172</sup> “The people are not really interested in democracy, freedom of the press, separation of powers,” said Juan José Martínez. “They never understood it, they never bought it, they were all excluded from that.”<sup>173</sup>

<sup>170</sup> Bukele in Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador, “Presidente Nayib Bukele anuncia que intensificará la guerra contra las pandillas,” 28-June-2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJwqDJIL7zw>.

<sup>171</sup> Verónica Reyna, interview by author.

<sup>172</sup> TResearch International, “El Salvador: Aprobación Gobierno,” June 2023, <https://www.tresearch.mx/post/sv-aprobacion-gobierno>.

<sup>173</sup> Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson, interview by author.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### *INTERROGATING PARADIGMS*

Two years into the régimen de excepción, Bukele responded to a somewhat critical BBC reporter by saying, “We took the recipes from the OAS, we took the recipes from the UN, we took the recipes from the European Union, we took the recipes from the United States . . . none of the recipes worked.”<sup>174</sup> Academics, politicians, intellectuals, and civil society organizations have long made the argument that the only lasting solution to gang violence lies in addressing the structural forces that give rise to gangs. Just two years before Bukele took office, Sonja Wolf wrote, “reductions in gang violence and crime will come only by ending the social marginalization that leads youths into gangs, and this in turn demands a restructuring of Salvadoran society, including its power relations and socio-economic inequalities.”<sup>175</sup>

The reality of the past decade in El Salvador, however, forces us to reconsider this traditional argument. Both quantitative and qualitative data point to a reduction in gang violence under approaches and conditions that had very little to do with addressing marginalization, inequality, or reconfiguring social power dynamics. The conditions under which homicides have declined under Bukele include a three-year period of gang diplomacy as well as an ongoing two-year period of mass and prolonged incarceration.

Just as with rebel groups, negotiating with criminal organizations is fraught with legal barriers, ethical dilemmas, and public scandal. However, Bukele’s period of gang diplomacy shows that in a criminal ecosystem monopolized by just a few groups, secret negotiations can be strategically effective not only in reducing violence in the short term but in eroding the strength and capacity of the gangs in the near future—with an especial emphasis on creating and exploiting divisions within the organizations themselves.

Bukele also invites us to reconsider the conventional argument that *mano dura* policies do not work. The principal argument, says Amaya, was not moral or ethical, it was a technical one, that “with time they had a rebound effect.” However, this argument is incorrect, he says. “Bukele has demonstrated that yes, *mano dura* can work and whoever wants to minimize or not recognize that it is having success is making a mistake,” he argues.

---

<sup>174</sup> Bukele (@nayibbukele), “My full answer to the BBC: Mi respuesta completa a la BBC;” X/Twitter, 19-February-2024, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1759770508847939768>.

<sup>175</sup> Wolf, *Mano Dura*, 4.



Bukele's régimen de excepción is associated with a series of outcomes that also run counter to the dominant literature on the effect of mass incarceration on prison gangs. Benjamin Lessing, one of the foremost academics on the subject, empirically demonstrated that "massive increases in incarceration, driven in part by severe but poorly targeted anti-gang crackdowns, preceded unprecedented expansions of prison gangs' power on the streets" and beyond a certain inflection point "further incarceration—even if crime-reducing—ultimately erodes the state's legitimate authority."<sup>176</sup> However, in the case of Bukele's régimen de excepción, the period of sharply rising incarceration appears to have preceded continued quantitative declines in violence as well as qualitative declines in the gangs' capacity and capability to project power on the street.

The final paradigm to reconsider is the value of integrated security models. "Bukele forces us to think about the importance of holistic strategies," Amaya argues, "and if documents of public policy and sophisticated models are really necessary." Bukele's approaches to security are not encapsulated in any written document that lays out a policy framework with theories of change, lines of effort, and metrics of success. Amaya suggests there may be virtue in that ambiguity. "I have seen documents that pretend to be integral strategies and imagine enormous quantities of actions and demand the participation of a range of institutions and a ton of money," says Amaya. "And in the end, they can't even really be implemented." Oftentimes these integrated strategies simply "bite off more than they can chew."<sup>177</sup>

Security analysts Alejandro Hope and Jaime López-Aranda called this obsession with integrated security policies in México, *la mentada estrategia*. Hope and López-Aranda argue that the inherent nature of big, whole-of-government security strategies is fundamentally static, while the problems produced by highly complex and distinct organized crime ecosystems evolve intrinsically. They contend that decades of ambitious, holistic, and centralized security strategies have not yielded the desired results and that a more effective response may simply be to "try many things and fail in a lot of attempts, ideally, learning in the process."<sup>178</sup>

---

<sup>176</sup> Benjamin Lessing. "Counterproductive Punishment: How Prison Gangs Undermine State Authority." *Rationality and Society* 29, no. 3 (2017), doi: 10.1177/1043463117701132.

<sup>177</sup> Luis Enrique Amaya, interview by author.

<sup>178</sup> Alejandro Hope and Jaime López-Aranda, "La mentada estrategia," *Letras Libres*, February 2016, 36-38, <https://letraslibres.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/convivio-hope-mex.pdf>.

## *EXPORTABILITY*

In the wake of the régimen de excepción, anytime a country in Latin America experiences escalating crime, there is invariably a conversation about “the Bukele model.” However, the discussion rarely includes Bukele’s period of gang diplomacy and almost always solely focuses on the more recent strategy of gang repression. Further, the conversation rarely considers the stark differences between El Salvador and other countries in Latin America and the region.

El Salvador is the geographic size of New Jersey. Even Honduras is more than five times that, Ecuador is larger by a factor of ten, Colombia and Peru by over fifty, and México by nearly one hundred. For the last thirty years in El Salvador, three principal street gangs have dominated the whole criminal ecosystem. They’ve had little to no involvement in the international drug trade and their revenues are principally derived from extorting bus drivers. “That’s not even the situation in Honduras,” Cruz contends, which has a myriad of different criminal actors, given trafficking routes. Cruz argues countries like Ecuador, México, and Brazil are infinitely more complex and possess far more sophisticated and developed criminal organizations.”<sup>179</sup>

Bukele’s three years of gang diplomacy and two years of mass incarceration preceded an undeniable decline in violence. However, as Hope and López-Aranda argue, given the infinite diversity and adaptability of different organized crime, the idea that there can be a “perfectly geometric strategy that attends to the phenomenon of crime from all angles” is deeply flawed. “To pretend that one can find a single formula to resolve the problems of national public security is to use a mallet when what is needed is a scapula.”<sup>180</sup> “Everyone is talking about Bukele’s model and that it is going to be successful there,” said Cruz, “and that is just a fantasy.”<sup>181</sup>

---

<sup>179</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

<sup>180</sup> Hope and López-Aranda, “La mentada estrategia.”

<sup>181</sup> José Miguel Cruz, interview by author.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this report's findings, the author makes four policy recommendations:

## 1) *CONTAIN BUKELE'S INFLUENCE*

*Illuminate El Salvador as a unique phenomenon*

El Salvador may be a small regional player, but it has generated an outsized appeal that should be contextualized. The gangs are different, the country is smaller, and the situation was and is completely distinct from the conditions in countries like Ecuador, Haiti, and even neighboring Honduras. More effort in research and reporting should be invested in defining and illuminating El Salvador as an incredibly unique ecosystem and security phenomenon. Bukele has demonstrated the viability and effectiveness, both tactically and strategically, of negotiating with gangs. Yet in discussions of Bukele, his negotiations with the gangs are traditionally framed solely through a lens of corruption and ethics. More nuanced framings will be critical in steering countries desperate for rapid security solutions away from rashly adopting Bukele's recent repressive measures.

## 2) *ENCOURAGE POSITIVE INCREMENTAL ACTION*

*Improve the human rights situation*

The mass incarceration of over 100,000 people is the most glaring human rights offense in El Salvador and should be the top priority. Bukele has claimed to have released 7,000. Efforts should be made to encourage the Bukele government to continue these processes. Foreign governments and international organizations should incentivize Bukele to develop a serious and systematic framework to distinguish and process different categories of people currently under detention and awaiting trial. Any process to release people will need to be gradual in terms of daily numbers yet developed with the intent to use it as an iterative model.

This line of effort should appeal to Bukele as an image-conscious leader to take minor but meaningful action. Release efforts should prioritize those with *cartas de liberación* followed by innocent non-gang members detained under the régimen.

## 3) *AVERT TOTAL AUTHORITARIAN SHUTDOWN*

*Generate positive channels for diplomatic influence*

The very nature of Bukele's consolidation of power presents significant concerns about what might transpire if he were to fall out of public favor. There needs to be a strategy that accounts for this and steers him away from total repression options. Efforts to publicly discipline, chastise, and shame Bukele have been ineffective and he has proven exceptionally effective at responding to criticisms from international organizations and foreign governments.

External actors in the political and diplomatic sphere should develop private bilateral lines of communication built on a diplomatic incentive structure that appeals to Bukele's self-identity as a leader. These efforts should also explore lines of informal and multilateral diplomatic influence—outside of traditional institutions e.g., OAS—that incorporate leaders like Claudia Sheinbaum and Bernardo Arevalo and deepen backchannel relations.

#### 4) *HIGHLIGHT SYMPATHETIC CASES OF THE INNOCENT*

##### *Civil society based social media pressure campaigns*

Public forms of protest in response to the régimen de excepción are infrequent and most of the citizenry are reluctant to engage in overt forms of civic protest. However, international advocacy organizations should explore partnerships with Salvadoran civil society organizations to develop social media campaigns that humanize innocent victims of the régimen. Salvadorans view the negative effects of the régimen as ambiguous, impersonal, or seemingly isolated. This line of effort should aim to make particularly sympathetic cases come to life on an individual level, and in a way that is ideal for mass distribution on social media. Bukele has an exceptional preoccupation with social media and any remotely viral content regarding El Salvador and especially his government will attract his attention.

# APPENDICES

## *APPENDIX A: TERMS AND ACRONYMS*

cabecilla	gang leader
chequeo	gang apprentice
clica	clique; street-level unit
colaborador	support network (e.g., taxi driver, lookout)
hengla	clique; street-level unit (usage with 18S and 18R)
homeboy	official gang member
programa	program; manages cliques
ranfla	senior-level gang leadership
tribu	program; manages cliques (usage with 18S and 18R)

---

18R	Barrio 18 Revolucionarios
18S	Barrio 18 Sureños
ARENA	Alianza Republicana Nacionalista
CECOT	Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo
CJNG	Cártel de Jalisco Nueva Generación
CSJ	Corte Suprema de Justicia
DGCP	Dirección General de Centros Penales
FGR	Fiscalía General de la República
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional
GAN	Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional
IML	Instituto Medicina Legal
MJSP	Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública
MS13	Mara Salvatrucha 13
PCT	Plan Control Territorial
PNC	Policía Nacional Civil
SSPAS	Servicio Social Pasionista

## *APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWS*

### **Academia**

José Miguel Cruz, Florida International University

Luis Enrique Amaya, Global Initiative (GI-TOC)

Carlos Schmidt-Padilla, University of Pennsylvania

Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez, Harvard University

Jocelyn Viterna, Harvard University

### **Civil Society**

Rina Montti, Cristosal

Verónica Reyna, Servicio Social Pasionista

Antonio Palacio, Socorro Jurídico Humanitario

Jorge Rodríguez, Observatorio Universitario de Derechos Humanos

Marvin Reyes, Movimiento de Trabajadores de la Policía Nacional Civil

Jose Maria Tojeira, Rector of Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (1997-2010)

### **Politics and Government**

César Reyes, Alianza Republicana Nacionalista

Mauricio Ernesto Vargas, Alianza Republicana Nacionalista

Esmeralda García, Alianza Republicana Nacionalista

International security consultant, anonymous

U.S. government official, anonymous

### **Journalists**

Carlos García, InSight Crime

Danielle Mackey, The New Yorker

Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson, Universidad Nacional del El Salvador

### **International Organizations**

Juan Pappier, Human Rights Watch

Ken Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch (1993-2022)

## *APPENDIX C: DISCLAIMERS*

### **Assumptions**

This report operates under the assumption that the interviewees were honest and candid. The author has no reason at the time of writing this to question this. Where possible, the information provided by the interviewees was cross-checked with information from other interviewees, open-source data, reporting, and sources available to the author.

### **Limitations**

This report has two main limitations with qualitative data: One, the author was unable to interview members of Bukele's administration or political party, despite several efforts at communication. Two, the only party officials and elected representatives the author was able to interview were from the political party ARENA, despite several attempts to interview members of both FMLN and Vamos.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Due to the sensitivity of this topic, a few interviewees requested to not be recorded or identified. While this may affect the credibility of their statements, the author feels that this anonymity enabled these particular sources to provide more open and candid opinions and perspectives that were acutely valuable to this report. This project was funded by Harvard University's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, which provided \$2,000 dollars for the author to conduct field research in El Salvador.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Alberto, Natalia. "Un huracán de detenciones arrasa con el Bajo Lempa." *Revista Factum*, 2022. <https://www.revistafactum.com/detenciones-bajo-lempa>.
- Alvarado, Jimmy, Gabriel Labrador, and Sergio Arauz. "El clan Bukele que gobierna con Nayib." *El Faro*, 7 June 2020, [https://elfaro.net/es/202006/el\\_salvador/24512/El-clan-Bukele-que-gobierna-con-Nayib.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202006/el_salvador/24512/El-clan-Bukele-que-gobierna-con-Nayib.htm).
- The Armed Conflict and Location & Event Data Project. "Curated Data: Latin America & the Caribbean (9 February 2024)." <https://acleddata.com/download/19657/?tmstv=1698151978>.
- Asamblea Legislativa de El Salvador (Asamblea Legislativa). "Asamblea Legislativa otorga licencia a Presidente Bukele." Press Release. 1 December 2023. <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/13025>.
- . "La Ley Anti Maras." *Decreto No. 158*. 2003. <https://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2016/10410.pdf>.
- . [régimen de excepción decrees]: *Decreto No. 333* (27 March 2022). Subsequently extended by: *Decreto No. 358* (24 April 2022); *Decreto No. 396* (25 May 2022); *Decreto No. 427* (21 June 2022); *Decreto No. 454* (19 July 2022); *Decreto No. 476* (16 August 2022); *Decreto No. 503* (14 September 2022); *Decreto No. 530* (14 October 2023); *Decreto No. 569* (15 November 2023); *Decreto No. 611* (14 December 2022); *Decreto No. 644* (11 January 2023); *Decreto No. 661* (14 February 2023); *Decreto No. 687* (15 March 2023); *Decreto No. 719* (12 April 2023); *Decreto No. 738* (16 May 2023); *Decreto No. 765* (14 June 2023); *Decreto No. 797* (11 July 2023); *Decreto No. 815* (9 August 2023); *Decreto 843* (12 September 2023); *Decreto No. 865* (11 October 2023); *Decreto No. 888* (7 November 2023); *Decreto No. 906* (6 December 2023); *Decreto No. 933* (9 January 2024); *Decreto No. 946* (9 February 2024); *Decreto No. 964* (8 March 2024).
- . [post régimen de excepción reforms/laws]: *Decreto No. 337*, *Decreto No. 338*, *Decreto No. 339*, *Decreto No. 341*, *Decreto No. 342*, *Decreto No. 349*, *Decreto No. 357*, *Decreto No. 803*.
- . [2023 municipal and legislative reforms]: *Decreto No. 755*, "Refórmase el Código Electoral" (6 June 2023); *Decreto No. 762*, "Ley Especial Para la Reestructuración Municipal" (13 June 2023).
- Associated Press*. "El Salvador: pandillas ofrecen parar homicidios." 26 March 2016. <https://apnews.com/general-news -8ef8e48699ce4a68b02c4be7800e74dc>.
- Beittel, June. "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations," *Congressional Research Service*, R41576. 7 June 2022, 25. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41576.pdf>.



David Bernal. "Autoridades decidieron excluir personas halladas en fosas clandestinas de cifras de homicidios," *La Prensa Gráfica*, 11 November 2021. <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Mesa-Tecnica-decidio-excluir-osamentas-de-cifras-de-homicidios-20211110-0090.html>.

Blitzer, Jonathan. "The Rise of Nayib Bukele, El Salvador's Authoritarian President." *The New Yorker*, 5 September 2022.

Bukele, Nayib. (@nayibbukele). "La FASE 1 (PREPARACIÓN) continuará por 30 días más. La reforzaremos con 1,000 elementos (500 de la @FUERZARMADASV y 500 de la @PNC\_SV). Además, incluiremos los..." X (formerly Twitter), 23 June 2019. <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1142901989661130753>.

———. (@nayibbukele), "Solicito a la @AsambleaSV decretar hoy mismo REGIMEN DE EXCEPCION, de acuerdo al artículo 29 de la Constitución de la República," X (formerly Twitter), 26 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1507901269138194433>.

———. (@nayibbukele), "A esta hora, reunidos con el Gabinete de Seguridad. Jueves a las 0:00 horas comienza nuestro plan contra la delincuencia: PROYECTO CONTROL TERRITORIAL," X (formerly Twitter), 19 June 2019, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1141238625667047424>.

———. (@nayibbukele), "Hoy en la madrugada, en un solo operativo, trasladamos a los primeros 2,000 pandilleros al Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo (CECOT). Esta será..." X (formerly Twitter), 24 February 2023, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1629165213600849920>.

———. (@nayibbukele), "False accusations? Is it false that Jean Manes asked me to release Neto Muyschondt (captured in video giving tens of thousands of U.S. dollars to gang ...)," X (formerly Twitter), 9 December 2021, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1469045510442864642>.

———. (@nayibbukele), "El sistema se auto protege. Y así, es como las cosas siguieron igual... x.com/CorteSupremaSV...," X (formerly Twitter), 10 February 2020, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1226985094344212483>.

———. (@nayibbukele), "My full answer to the BBC: Mi respuesta completa a la BBC:," X (formerly Twitter), 19 February 2024, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1759770508847939768>.

———. (@nayibbukele), "El Salvador ha logrado pasar de ser el país más inseguro del mundo, al país más seguro de América. ¿Cómo lo logramos? Metiendo a los criminales en la...," X (formerly Twitter), 1 February 2023, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1620969718235398144>.

———. (@nayibbukele), "Esta basura, sobrino de un genocida, dice que: 'Las pandillas cumplen un rol social NECESARIO El Salvador'. Y que 'si quitás a las pandillas, habría...,'" X (formerly Twitter), 11 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1513591841656127488>.

- . (@nayibbukele), "Queda claro que el Ministerio de Colonias de Washington, también conocido como la OEA, ya no tiene ninguna razón de ser," X (formerly Twitter), 9 June 2022, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1535057918923788288>.
- Canal 12 El Salvador. "Militares en la Asamblea Legislativa," YouTube, 10 February 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGsmr-7Rtw0>.
- Canizalez, Luis and David Ernesto Pérez. "PNC perfiló a Carlos Marroquín como colaborador del Barrio 18," *Revista Elementos*, 7 March 2023, <https://revistaelementos.net/miscelanea/pnc-perfilo-a-carlos-marroquin-como-colaborador-del-barrio-18>.
- Casa Presidencial. (@PresidenciaSV). "Estas son las estadísticas comparativas que la @PNC\_SV le presenta al Presidente @nayibbukele . Los colores azul y gris representan a 2018 y...," X (formerly Twitter), 16 July 2019, <https://twitter.com/PresidenciaSV/status/1150984680491147264>.
- Chávez, Gerson. "Presidente no descarta 'estado de emergencia' por violencia," *El Mundo*, 8 March 2016, <https://diario.elmundo.sv/Sin%20categoría/presidente-no-descarta-estado-de-emergencia-por-violencia>.
- Centro de Estudios Ciudadanos, Disruptiva, and Universidad Francisco Gavidia. "Bukele y las Personas Decididas a Ir a Votar Suben en la Nueva Encuesta UFG," (19 2018): <https://www.disruptiva.media/bukele-y-las-personas-decididas-a-ir-a-votar-suben-en-la-nueva-encuesta-ufg>.
- . "VI Encuesta de Humor Social y Político: "Estos son los datos, no se enojen," 15 January 2024, <https://www.disruptiva.media/vi-encuesta-de-humor-social-y-politico-estos-son-los-datos-no-se-enojen>.
- Constitución de la República de El Salvador. (1983, revised 2014), <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/sites/default/files/documents/decretos/69A06B07-4F30-4F0E-8FB1-D664A3E6D8CC.pdf>.
- Cruz, José Miguel. "Gangs and Criminal Governance in El Salvador." *Crime, Violence, and Justice in Latin America*. Edited by Carlos Solar and Carlos A. Pérez Ricart. New York: Routledge, 2022.
- . "Police Legitimacy and Hybrid Security Orders in Central America," *Social Forces*, 100, no. 4 (June 2022): 1833–1855. doi:10.1093/sf/soab087.
- . "State and Criminal Violence in Latin America." *Crime, Law, and Social Change*, 66 (2016): 375–396. doi: 10.1007/s10611-016-9631-9.
- Cruz, José Miguel 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 (2016): 197–210. doi: 10.1177/0022343315626239.
- Cruz, José Miguel, Jonathan D. Rosen, and Yemile Mizrahi. "The Long Arm of the Gang: Disengagement Under Gang Governance in Central America." *Criminology*, 61 (2023): 929–956. doi: 10.1111/1745-9125.12352.

Daly, Martin and Margo Wilson, *Homicide* (New York: Aldine, 1988).

Dirección General de Centros Penales (DGCP). "Estadística Penitenciaria al 08/Febrero/2021," in Anexo resolución solicitud 0009-2021, 2 February 2021: <https://www.transparencia.gob.sv/institutions/dgcp/documents/415753/download>.

———. "Existencia de Internos en el Sistema Penitenciario al 31-12-2020," 31 December 2020. Anexo resolución solicitud 0007-2021. <https://www.transparencia.gob.sv/institutions/dgcp/documents/414328/download>.

———. [prison death data 2014-2020]: "Fallecidos Procesados y Condenados," annual reports 2014 - 2018, obtained from information request UAIP/OIR/0378/2019, 31 October 2019; "Fallecidos Enero 2020 - 15 Febrero 2021," obtained from Anexo resolución solicitud 0022-2021, 15 March 2021.

———. "Población privada de Libertad en el sistema penitenciario, por año, en periodo 2009-2019, desagregada por sexo y condición jurídica (condenada o procesado)." Anexo resolución solicitud 0059-2020. 7 July 2020. <https://www.transparencia.gob.sv/institutions/dgcp/documents/369876/download>.

———. "Cantidad de población penitenciaria desagregada por sexo, edad y centro penitenciario, para los años 2015 a 2020." 4 March 2020. <https://www.transparencia.gob.sv/institutions/dgcp/documents/351602/download>.

———. "Visita Técnica a la Penitenciaría de Angola." Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública de El Salvador. 15 November 2019.

———. "Visita Técnica de Prisiones, Inteligencia e Investigación." Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública de El Salvador. 13 December 2019.

Dudley, Steven. *MS13: The Making of America's Most Notorious Gang*. New York: Hangover Square Press, 2020.

El Faro. "Discurso de toma de posesión del presidente Nayib Bukele," YouTube, 1 June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ-pYFYF8yM>.

Fiscalía General de la República El Salvador. Departamento de Estadística, Dirección de Análisis, Técnicas de Investigación e Información. "Delitos 2002-2020 (dep,mun)."

———. "Estadísticas: Homicidios Intencionales: Estadísticas Año 2023 y 2022." Equipo Operativo de Homicidios. 2024. <https://www.fiscalia.gob.sv/estadisticas>.

———. "Reporte Mensual de Homicidios Conciliados del Mes de Diciembre de 2014," Departamento de Estadística. 2014.

Flores-Macías, Gustavo. "The Costs of El Salvador's Crime Crackdown," *Foreign Affairs*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/central-america/bukele-costs-salvadors-crime-crackdown>.

Freeman, Will and Lucas Perelló. "The Drop in Crime in El Salvador Is Stunning, but It Has a Dark Side," *The New York Times*, 8 February 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/08/opinion/el-salvador-bukele-election.html>.

Frente a Frente TCS, "FAF 4 DE ENERO 2023," Gustavo Villatoro interview, 4-January-2023, <https://www.facebook.com/frenteafrenteTCS/videos/531061745720841>.

Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho. "Medidas gubernamentales con relación a la criminalidad atribuida a las pandillas (Plan Mano Dura - Leyes Antimaras - Plan Súper Mano Dura)," in *Informe: Justicia Penal Juvenil El Salvador en 2004* (31 January 2005): 28, <https://www.fespad.org/sv/informe-anual-sobre-justicia-penal-juvenil-el-salvador-2004>.

———. "Situación de la desaparición de personas en El Salvador 2019-2022." 21 June 2023, <https://www.fespad.org/sv/situacion-de-la-desaparicion-de-personas-en-el-salvador-2019-2022>.

Espinoza, Claudia. "7,000 personas han sido liberadas durante el régimen de excepción, informa ministro de Seguridad," *La Prensa Gráfica*, 22 August 2023, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Ministro-de-Seguridad-informa-que-7000-personas-han-sido-liberadas-durante-el-regimen-de-excepcion-20230822-0044.html>.

García, Carlos. "Las 749 Salidas de Pandillas de Zacatraz," *Redacción Regional*. 25 October 2023, <https://www.redaccionregional.com/749-salidas-de-pandilleros-de-zacatraz>.

———. "Radiografía al CECOT desvela su verdadera capacidad y falta de talleres," *La Prensa Gráfica*, 23 July 2023, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Radiografia-al-Cecot-desvela-su-verdadera-capacidad-y-falta-de-talleres-20230721-0076.html>.

Gobierno de El Salvador. "Inicia la FASE 4 del Plan Control Territorial," YouTube, 20 July 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9Ki7Z2fNYs>.

González, Yanilda. *Authoritarian Police in Democracy: Contested Security in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Gressir, Roman. "PNC supo de la liberación ilegal de Crook desde noviembre de 2021," *El Faro*, 26 October 2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202210/el\\_salvador/26443/PNC-sup-o-de-la-liberaci3n-ilegal-de-Crook-desde-noviembre-de-2021.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202210/el_salvador/26443/PNC-sup-o-de-la-liberaci3n-ilegal-de-Crook-desde-noviembre-de-2021.htm)

Holland, Alisha C. "Right on Crime?: Conservative Party Politics and Mano Dura Policies in El Salvador." *Latin American Research Review* 48, no. 1 (2013): 44–67. doi: 10.1353/lar.2013.0009.

Hope, Alejandro and Jaime López-Aranda. "La mentada estrategia," *Letras Libres*, 36-38, February 2016, <https://letraslibres.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/convivio-hope-mex.pdf>.

- International Crisis Group. "A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever." *Latin America Report*, no.96, 5 October 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/96-remedy-el-salvadors-prison-fever>.
- . "Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador." *Latin America Report*, no. 81, 8 July 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/81-miracle-or-mirage-gangs-and-plunging-violence-el-salvador>.
- Instituto Medicina Legal (IML), Corte Suprema de Justicia de El Salvador. "Reconocimientos Realizados por Médicos Forenses del Instituto de Medicina Legal, Practicados a Personas Fallecidas en Hechos de Violencia (Homicidios)" (individual annual reports from 2013 to 2021). Obtained through IML information request UAIP/21/80/2024(3), 22 January 2024.
- ITV El Salvador. "Nayib Bukele anuncia su candidatura para presidente en 2019," YouTube, 16 October 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GxBTCx0Yay0>.
- Katz, Charles, Eric Hedberg, and Luis Enrique Amaya. "Gang truce for violence prevention, El Salvador," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* vol. 94, 9 (2016): 660-666A. doi: 10.2471/BLT.15.166314.
- Kalyvas, Stathis N. "The Landscape of Political Violence." In *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism*, eds. Erica Chenoweth, Andreas Gofas, Stathis Kalyvas (Oxford University Press, 2019).
- Kitroeff, Natalie. "El Salvador Decimated Its Ruthless Gangs. But at What Cost?" *The New York Times*, 9 April 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/09/world/americas/el-salvador-gangs.html>.
- Labrador, Gabriel. "El FMLN abre la puerta grande a Nayib Bukele," *El Faro*, 20 August 2014, <https://elfaro.net/es/201408/noticias/15839/El-FMLN-abre-la-puerta-grande-a-Nayib-Bukele.htm>.
- Latinobarómetro."Latinobarómetro 2023." 2023. <https://www.latinobarometro.org/latContents.jsp>.
- La Nación. "(Video) Presidente de Congreso salvadoreño denuncia 'intento de golpe de Estado,'" 11 February 2020, <https://www.nacion.com/el-mundo/politica/video-presidente-de-congreso-salvadoreno/8985fdc0-385c-42eb-b048-0551862ba31f/video/ssdfs>.
- Lemus, Efren and Gabriela Cáceres, "Los expedientes ocultos del Régimen: cientos de arrestos por "nerviosismo" y "ficha policial," *El Faro*, 7 August 2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202208/el\\_salvador/26318/Los-expedientes-ocultos-del-Régimen-cientos-de-arrestos-por-“nerviosismo”-y-“ficha-policial”.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202208/el_salvador/26318/Los-expedientes-ocultos-del-Régimen-cientos-de-arrestos-por-“nerviosismo”-y-“ficha-policial”.htm).
- Lessing, Benjamin. "Counterproductive Punishment: How Prison Gangs Undermine State Authority." *Rationality and Society* 29, no. 3 (2017): 257–97. doi: 10.1177/1043463117701132.
- Lessing, Benjamin and Graham Denyer Willis. "Legitimacy in Criminal Governance: Managing a Drug Empire from Behind Bars," *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (2019): 584–606. doi:10.1017/S0003055418000928.

Luisito Comunica, "Así viven criminales en la prisión más estricta del mundo | El Salvador CECOT," YouTube, 7 February 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69qKUoGhoQ>

Luna Meza, Osiris (@OsirisLunaMeza). "Este día detuvimos a un Reo mientras salía con Orden de Libertad, en razón que llevaba 13 manuscritos (wilas - Órdenes e informes de la pandilla hacia...," X (formerly Twitter), 5 July 2019, <https://twitter.com/OsirisLunaMeza/status/1147336312866951168>.

Mackey, Danielle. "A Boundless Battlefield. What Happens When a Barrio 18 Soldier Tries to Leave the Gang." *The Intercept*, 17 November 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/17/el-salvador-barrio-18-MS13-leave-gang>.

———. "The 'world's coolest dictator' rounded up 60,000 people in a supposed crackdown on MS13. A shrimp farming community is fighting back." *Business Insider*, 27 December 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/one-family-the-true-cost-of-ms13-crackdown-el-salvador-2022-12>.

Martínez, Carlos. "Ahora creo que está muy claro quién tiene el control de la situación," *El Faro*, 10 February 2020, [https://elfaro.net/es/202002/el\\_salvador/24006/Ahora-creo-que-est%C3%A1-muy-claro-qui%C3%A9n-tiene-el-%20control-de-la-situaci%C3%B3n%E2%80%9D.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202002/el_salvador/24006/Ahora-creo-que-est%C3%A1-muy-claro-qui%C3%A9n-tiene-el-%20control-de-la-situaci%C3%B3n%E2%80%9D.htm).

———. "Audios de Carlos Marroquín revelan que masacre de marzo ocurrió por ruptura entre Gobierno y MS." *El Faro* (17 May 2022): [https://elfaro.net/es/202205/el\\_salvador/26175/Audios-de-Carlos-Marroquín-revelan-que-masacre-de-marzo-ocurrió-por-ruptura-entre-Gobierno-y-MS.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202205/el_salvador/26175/Audios-de-Carlos-Marroquín-revelan-que-masacre-de-marzo-ocurrió-por-ruptura-entre-Gobierno-y-MS.htm).

———. "Las 22 capturas en El Espíritu Santo, la isla sin pandillas," *El Faro*, 9 August 2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202208/el\\_salvador/26319/Las-22-capturas-en-El-Espíritu-Santo-la-isla-sin-pandillas.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202208/el_salvador/26319/Las-22-capturas-en-El-Espíritu-Santo-la-isla-sin-pandillas.htm)

Martínez, Carlos, Efren Lemus, and Óscar Martínez. "Régimen de Bukele desarticula a las pandillas en El Salvador," *El Faro*, 3 February 2023, [https://elfaro.net/es/202302/el\\_salvador/26691/Régimen-de-Bukele-desarticula-a-las-pandillas-en-El-Salvador.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202302/el_salvador/26691/Régimen-de-Bukele-desarticula-a-las-pandillas-en-El-Salvador.htm).

Martínez, Carlos, Óscar Martínez, Efren Lemus. "Gobierno conspiró con líder pandillero para recapturar a Crook a través de un cártel mexicano," *El Faro*, 26 January 2024, [https://elfaro.net/es/202401/el\\_salvador/27224/gobierno-conspiro-con-lider-pandillero-para-recapturar-a-crook-a-traves-de-un-cartel-mexicano](https://elfaro.net/es/202401/el_salvador/27224/gobierno-conspiro-con-lider-pandillero-para-recapturar-a-crook-a-traves-de-un-cartel-mexicano).

Martínez, Carlos, Óscar Martínez, Sergio Arauz, and Efren Lemus. "Gobierno de Bukele lleva un año negociando con la MS-13 reducción de homicidios y apoyo electoral," *El Faro*, 3 September 2020, [https://elfaro.net/es/202009/el\\_salvador/24781/Gobierno-de-Bukele-lleva-un-año-negociando-con-la-MS-13-reducción-de-homicidios-y-apoyo-electoral.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202009/el_salvador/24781/Gobierno-de-Bukele-lleva-un-año-negociando-con-la-MS-13-reducción-de-homicidios-y-apoyo-electoral.htm)

Martínez, Óscar. *Los muertos y el periodista*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2021.

Martínez, Óscar and Juan José Martínez d'Aubuisson. *The Hollywood Kid: The Violent Life and Violent Death of an MS13 Hitman*. Translated by John B. Washington and Daniela Ugaz. New York: Verso Books, 2019.

Martínez, Óscar, Efrén Lemus, Carlos Martínez and Deborah Sontag. "Killers on a Shoestring: Inside the Gangs of El Salvador," *The New York Times*, 20 November 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/21/world/americas/el-salvador-drugs-gang-MS13.html>.

Martínez d'Aubuisson, Juan José. *A Year Inside MS13: See, Hear, and Shut Up*. Translated by Natascha Uhlmann. New York: OR Books, 2019.

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

Melnikov, Nikita and Carlos Schmidt-Padilla, and Maria Micaela-Sviatschi. "Gangs, Labor Mobility and Development," National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 27832 (September 2020), doi: 10.3386/w27832.

Ministerio de Seguridad (@SeguridadSV). "Desde que dio inicio el #RégimenDeExcepción, hemos capturado a más de 58 mil terroristas. No nos vamos a detener en esta #GuerraContraPandillas hasta...," X (formerly Twitter), 21 November 2022, <https://twitter.com/SeguridadSV/status/1594733148637892608>.

Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Pública. "Inauguran Fase II del Centro Penal La Esperanza," 12 June 2021, <https://www.seguridad.gob.sv/inauguran-fase-ii-del-centro-penal-la-esperanza>.

Montoya, Angeline. "Felix Ulloa, vice president of El Salvador: 'There are innocent victims in every war,'" *Le Monde*, 15 August 2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/15/felix-ulloa-vice-president-of-el-salvador-there-are-innocent-victims-in-every-war\\_5993680\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/15/felix-ulloa-vice-president-of-el-salvador-there-are-innocent-victims-in-every-war_5993680_4.html).

Noticias Telemundo. "Así responde presidente de El Salvador a quienes lo llaman dictador | Noticias Telemundo," YouTube, 11 August 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Etda2ncAmmE>.

Observatorio Universitario de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas. *Estado de Derechos Humanos en El Salvador*. (Multiple: 2020, 2021, 2022).

Papadovassilakis, Alex. "El Salvador's (Perpetual) State of Emergency: How Bukele's Government Overpowered Gangs." *InSight Crime* (December 2023): <https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/El-SalvadorsPerpetual-State-of-Emergency-How-Bukeles-Government-Overpowered-Gangs-InSight-Crime-Dec-2023.pdf>.

Presidencia de la Republica de El Salvador. "El incremento de capturas en 2021 está vinculado con la implementación de la fase 4 del Plan Control Territorial por parte del Gobierno del Presidente Nayib Bukele," Press Release, 6 November 2021, <https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/el-incremento-de-capturas-en-2021-esta-vinculado-con-la-implementacion-de-la-fase-4-del-plan-control-territorial-por-parte-del-gobierno-del-presidente-nayib-bukele>.

- PNC El Salvador (@PNCSV). "Presentamos a más de 40 pandilleros de un total de 576 capturados por el alza de asesinatos, como una muestra de las operaciones realizadas desde ayer...," X (formerly Twitter), 27 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/PNCSV/status/1508265124779503619>.
- . "Vamos a ganar esta #GuerraContraPandillas, pero necesitamos de tu ayuda. Llama al 123 para dar información sobre terroristas," X (formerly Twitter), 7 June 2022, <https://twitter.com/PNCSV/status/1534383049428938758>.
- Policía Nacional Civil de El Salvador (PNC). "El 2023 fue el año más seguro en la historia del [sic] El Salvador." Press Release (3 January 2024): <https://www.pnc.gob.sv/el-2023-fue-el-ano-mas-seguro-en-la-historia-del-el-salvador>.
- . "Apreciación de Las Pandillas ante Coyuntura del Régimen de Excepción," Subdirección de Inteligencia, 1 September 2023.
- . Resolución Final C-343-2021, Anexo Detenciones 2018-2021, Information Request, 10 August 2021, <https://transparencia.pnc.gob.sv/download/resolucion-final-c-343-2021>.
- . "PANDILLAS A NIVEL NACIONAL (COMPLETO)," 5 August 2017. Obtained through anonymous source.
- Quintanilla, Jaime and Daniel Valencia. "'Captúrenlos a todos': la verdadera historia del régimen de Bukele," Redacción Regional, República Finquera, 12 September 2022, <https://www.redaccionregional.com/militarismo/la-verdadera-historia-del-regimen-de-bukele>.
- Raleigh, Clionadh and Roudabeh Kishi and Andrew Linke. "Political instability patterns are obscured by conflict dataset scope conditions, sources, and coding choices." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 10, no. 74 (2023). doi:10.1057/s41599-023-01559-4.
- Rauda, Nelson, Jimmy Alvarado, Gabriela Cáceres, Daniel Reyes, and Óscar Martínez. "Las víctimas del día más violento del siglo," El Faro, 3 April 2022, [https://elfaro.net/es/202204/el\\_salvador/26107/Las-victimas-del-dia-mas-violento-del-siglo.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/202204/el_salvador/26107/Las-victimas-del-dia-mas-violento-del-siglo.htm).
- Revista Elementos (@RevElementos). "'Cualquier disidencia es traición': así justifica @fulloa51 el ocultamiento que hace el Gobierno de @nayibbukele de información básica para todos," 8 July 2022, <https://twitter.com/RevElementos/status/1545472648599273472>
- Rochabrun, Marcelo. "El Salvador Is Imprisoning People at Triple the Rate of the U.S.," Bloomberg, 12 September 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-12/el-salvador-jails-1-6-of-population-in-crime-crackdown>.
- Sala de lo Constitucional. "6-2020 Inconstitucionalidad," 10 February 2020, <https://www.derechoynegocios.technosal.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/6-2020.pdf>.
- . "1-2021 Pérdida de derechos de ciudadanía," 3 September 2021, <https://www.jurisprudencia.gob.sv/portal/apls/2021/09/1-2021PerdidaDerechosCiudadania.pdf>.



- Secretaría de Prensa El Salvador. "'Extracción', quinta fase del Plan Control Territorial contra las pandillas," 24 November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxfNlaKOMAc>.
- . "'Oportunidades', segunda fase del Plan Control Territorial contra las pandillas," YouTube, 2 July 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYUOb5ejzks>.
- . "'Modernización', tercera fase del Plan Control Territorial contra las pandillas," YouTube, 30 July 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8aU3tTNoKE>.
- . "Presidente Nayib Bukele anuncia que intensificará la guerra contra las pandillas," YouTube, 28 June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJwqDJIL7zw>.
- Secretaría de Seguridad Honduras (@SSEGURIDADHN), "1/1 Les compartimos la publicación en la Gaceta de este día, sobre los barrios y colonias que entran en Estado de Excepción a partir de este martes 6...," X (formerly Twitter), 5 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/SSEGURIDADHN/status/1599811820059267072>.
- Sucre TV Online. "En Exclusiva: Entrevista con Daniel Noboa Azín, Presidente del Ecuador," YouTube, 4 January 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4837JNTBc5c>.
- Socorro Jurídico Humanitario Para El Salvador. "Personas fallecidas en Centros Penitenciarios El Salvador durante el Régimen de Excepción." 30 December 2023. Dataset provided to author courtesy of the organization.
- Tribunal Supremo Electoral de El Salvador. "Escrutinio final 2018: Resultados de asamblea legislativa," 4 March 2018, <https://www.tse.gob.sv/2018/escrutinio-final/asamblea/index.html>
- . "Escrutinio final 2019: Resultado de la elección presidencial," 7 February 2019, <https://info2024.tse.gob.sv/2019/escrutinio-final/presidencial/index.html>.
- . "Escrutinio final 2021: Resultados de asamblea legislativa," 28 February 2021, <https://www.tse.gob.sv/2021/escrutinio-final/asamblea/nacional>.
- . "Acta de escrutinio final de la elección de presidente y vicepresidente de la República de El Salvador para el periodo 2024-2029," 9 February 2024, <https://www.tse.gob.sv/elecciones-2024/actas-escrutinio-final>.
- Torruella, Amada. *La Isla. 2023: The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/video/watch/the-new-yorker-documentary-la-isla-women-speak-out-after-mass-arrests-in-el-salvador>.
- TResearch International. "El Salvador: Aprobación Gobierno," June 2023, <https://www.tresearch.mx/post/sv-aprobacion-gobierno>.
- United Nations. "1966th Meeting, 75th Session, Committee Against Torture (CAT)," 18 November 2022, <https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k12/k12wprqq8r>.
- . "El Salvador: General Information," UN Statistics Division, 2024, <https://data.un.org/en/iso/sv.html>.

- . "World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision," File 21: Annual Percentage of Population at Mid-Year Residing in Urban Areas by Region, Subregion, Country and Area, 1950-2050," Population Division (2018), [https://population.un.org/wup/Download/Files/WUP2018-F21-Proportion\\_Urban\\_Annual.xls](https://population.un.org/wup/Download/Files/WUP2018-F21-Proportion_Urban_Annual.xls).
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. *Global Study on Homicide 2011*. Vienna, 2011.
- . *Global Study on Homicide 2013*. Vienna, 2014.
- United States Department of Justice. "Prisoners in 2022 - Statistical Tables," Summary, Bureau of Justice Statistics, November 2023. [https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/p22st\\_sum.pdf](https://bjs.ojp.gov/document/p22st_sum.pdf).
- United States Department of State. *El Salvador 2022 Human Rights Report*. 2022.
- . *Rwanda 2022 Human Rights Report*. 2022.
- . "Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors Report: 2021." 86 Federal Register 36174 (8 July 2021).
- . "Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors Report: 2023." 88 Federal Register 48280. 26 June 2023.
- United States Department of Treasury. "Treasury Targets Corruption Networks Linked to Transnational Organized Crime." Press Release, 8 December 2021.
- Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas. "Estado de los derechos humanos en 2021," Editorial 23 March 2022, <https://noticias.uca.edu.sv/editoriales/estado-de-los-derechos-humanos-en-2021>.
- United States v. Arevalo-Chavez, et al. CR-22-429. Eastern District of New York, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/press-release/file/1569726/download>.
- Valencia, Roberto. "Hay cero posibilidades de que las pandillas se debiliten con el modelo actual de prevención." *El Faro*, Sala Negra, 25 October 2017. <https://elfaro.net/es/201710/salanegra/21038/Hay-cero-posibilidades-de-que-las-pandillas-se-debiliten-con-el-modelo-actual-de-prevención>.
- . "La cena de Navidad en la megacárcel de Bukele." *BBC News Mundo*, 29 December 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c0wyrd22zgqo>.
- Wim Savenije. *Maras y Barras: Pandillas y violencia juvenil en los barrios marginales de Centroamérica*. San Salvador: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 2009.
- Wolf, Sonja. *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador*. University of Texas Press: 2017.
- World Prison Brief. "Cuba: Overview," *Institute for Crime & Justice Policy Research*. Birkbeck, University of London, 2020. <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/cuba>.

