

The first presidential term of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador

A Post-Neoliberal Project in the Backyard of
the United States, Part I

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5 Years of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador: A Post-Neoliberal Project in the Backyard of the United States

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On June 1, 2024, Nayib Bukele commenced his second term as president of El Salvador. His sudden rise and radical reordering of the post-1992 establishment of the small, densely populated Central American republic baffled many analysts. It is important to highlight his achievements and attempt a definition of his project of rebuilding the Salvadoran state.

His core goal is apparently building and stabilizing a new national coalition that redefines political sides, the established rules and power balances of parliamentary democracy established since the end of the Civil War, all while asserting a global and regional role by projecting a special soft power, presenting his handling of internal security as a model to be emulated.

In this two-part series, I will examine Bukele's attempts to build a national and international coalition to support his efforts in nation-building. In this first part, I will attempt to explain the antecedents of his presidential term in Salvadoran history, his political development, and the course and success of its anti-gang campaign, focusing on the effects on his regime's internal and external support.

I. Introduction

Caught between three other Central American republics, marked by prominent and active volcanos of the same number, El Salvador lies along the Pacific seaboard of the tropical land bridge between North and South America. The nation was born in the wake of the dissolution of the Central American Republic in 1843 as one of the smaller, but densely populated and thus influential ministates of the new Central American system.

Like others in the region, it was among the „losers“ of the 20th century. The coffee monoculture seriously curbed economic opportunities, while a population boom emerged that ballooned the number of its inhabitants from 2 million in 1950 to over 6 million as of today, in a country the size of the Észak-Dunántúl of Hungary, or Massachusetts in the U.S.

With a rigid oligarchy isolating itself from popular demands that elsewhere assembled the welfare states of the Cold War era in the West, the country sunk into the horrors of civil war by the 1980s, launched by the Soviet-backed Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, FMLN).¹ The region was a source of existential fear for many Americans, especially conservatives, exacerbated by the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in neighboring Nicaragua. The tough „rollback“ policies of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush stalled the rebellion, which was also crippled by the fall of the Soviet world system and the subsequent end of massive handouts. (Regarding the extent of foreign support: such a small player as Socialist Hungary contributed too, with assault rifles and medical assistance to the FMLN).

The conflict was settled in the 1992 Chapultepec Accords, with the left-wing group becoming a legitimate political party after laying down arms. Since then, the country underwent a neoliberal transformation, assembled a reasonably solid constitutional state, and managed peaceful power transitions between the center-right Nationalist Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, ARENA) and the now-democratic FMLN.²

What caused the eventual unraveling of this consensus? The core weakness was the country did not manage to restore the fabric of its society and offer a new social pact after the ravages of the war. Thus, the turbulence did not stop with the end of official hostilities.

One of the most prominent signs of this was the rising gang problem from the second half of the 1990s. According to contemporary analysts, most of these new criminal organizations arrived back in the country from the huge Salvadoran refugee communities of U.S. cities created during the Civil War.³ In this sense, the problem of

the uprooted masses and their socio-economical disintegration “boomeranged” back to the country.

By the 2000s, the country’s murder rate was skyrocketing again. The centre-right ARENA government, the winner of the post-war consensus tried to crack down gangs from 2003, through the policies of the “Mano Dura” (Iron Fist), then modifying, upgrading it to “Super Mano Dura” after objections of the constitutional courts. The mass arrests did not bring the coveted stability and drop in crime.⁴ The Societal dissatisfaction brought down the ARENA government with the election of the FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes in the presidential elections of 2009.

The FMLN attempted to bring unorthodox solutions by negotiating a “truce” with the gangs in 2012. However, it fell apart after 15 months due to the inability of the government to fulfill the material demands made by the gangs, primarily the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), which dominates two-thirds of organized crime in the country. In the aftermath of the failed truce, another crackdown followed, slowly bringing down the murder rate of the country but not stopping the encroachment of the gangs on daily life.⁵

In Salvador, the problem was exacerbated by the financial pressure of the gangs on society. While other “chapters” of the gangs in neighboring countries switched to other income sources, the MS-13, at the moment of the election of Bukele, still lived off petty extortion of citizens.⁶ The gang problem drove the crippling of the economy, redirecting national income to criminal organizations and wooing tourists away while compelling Salvadorans to emigrate at an accelerating rate. In 2019, 90,000 citizens of the small country were detained at the U.S. border as illegal immigrants, while internal migration, away from gang-controlled territories, relocated as many as 455,000 people.⁷

The unraveling of the situation come from a split in the FMLN. This was the moment where Nayib Bukele stepped into the spotlight, and started to accentuate his own, characteristic imaginations to redeem the Salvadoran situation.

II. Pink Tide Apprentice to a Conservative Turn: The Early Career of Nayib Bukele

The Bukele family is a classic example of affluent interwar Middle Eastern immigrants into Latin America. Communities from Mediterranean countries were regularly moving into the region through the trade routes crossing the Atlantic. The great-grandfather of Nayib Bukele arrived in El Salvador in 1921 as a merchant from Palestine. The family is originally Palestinian Christian, although the father of Bukele converted to Islam, an accusation that was held against Bukele too during his first presidential bid.

Bukele was born to relative wealth in 1981, and his father was a successful businessman. The young Nayib got into politics at 31, with a bid for mayor in Nuevo Cuscatlán, a small suburb of the capital, San Salvador. What is peculiar but also very informative compared to his present views and alliances is that he was then a member of the FMLN, the aforementioned left-wing alliance originating in the Civil War. According to certain rumors, he was an adherent of Chávez in his youth; whatever the case, it is clear that the FMLN was then a force of reform in Salvadoran society and politics after the domination of ARENA.

The victory of the party in 2009 in the presidential elections was a sign that El Salvador was following the “Pink Tide” reform wave originating in the early 2000s. Bukele was just following this trend, associating himself with the party. He was nevertheless obviously committed ideologically. As a mayor, he received funds from oil companies controlled by the Venezuelan state and already, as a mayor, negotiated with the gangs as the FMLN has done since 2012. He was also left-of-center in the case of LGBT rights and abortion, considering the policies of El Salvador – no gay marriage and a total abortion ban since 1998.⁸ His party was straying strongly to the left and to the side of anti-U.S. Latin American parties, establishing diplomatic relations with China in August 2018 and supporting rapprochement with criminal organizations.

It needs to be noted, however, that the FMLN was historically an umbrella organization of people from various backgrounds. Originally, it involved a group from a 20th-century Latin American political invention, “liberation theology,” Catholics seeking broad societal transformations.⁹ After the end of the civil war and the introduction of the group as a political party into the life of El Salvador, the group underwent several transformations, giving voice to people of widely varying backgrounds.

One of the new elite groups that sought better representation and voice in political life was precisely the new entrepreneurs of the service sectors, which dominated political life since the decline of the traditional agro-industrial sector. This is the new elite group in which the Bukele family is situated. In this sense, the party was at once a first ideological experience but also an accidental vehicle to the public sphere for Nayib Bukele. The party, in the end, could not integrate him and his new approach to politics.

The main feature of breaking out of this group of politically average figures was building a direct connection with voters. Being an outsider in the party, he felt that it was a necessity and an opportunity at the same time. After Nuevo Cuscatlán, he stepped into the spotlight as mayor of San Salvador, the capital city, winning elections in 2015. He used his power to deliver demonstrative infrastructure refurbishments, such as renovating the Central Market in the historic center of the city.

According to journalist investigations, he had already conducted negotiations with gangs at the time through Carlos Marroquín, head of the “Agency for the Restoration of Social Fabric,” in order for his projects to be undisturbed.¹⁰ His outsider approach, getting visible results to voters and the rapprochement of the FMLN with gangs amalgamated here.

After being ejected from the FMLN, he soon founded a new party, Nuevas Ideas, building on his popularity as a mayor. He failed to register it in time before the general elections of 2019 and then ran under the flag of a party called Grand Alliance for National Unity (Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional, GANA).¹¹ He ran on issues that highly concerned society after decades of post-war political rule: corruption and the gang problem, promising iron fist policies against criminal organizations.

Both were similar to FMLN approaches. Naturally, the demolition of corrupt elites was a classic FMLN callword. As for the hard-line policies, since the unraveling of truces with the gangs in late 2015, the FMLN government pushed hard to curb gang activity and managed to bring down the murder rate by 50%.¹² Bukele simply promised a more capable execution of this task. His method of spreading his message helped, too, utilizing the power of social media to mobilize voters, while it needs to be noted that El Salvador has, even in regional comparison, a low density of internet access for citizens, with only 33% of people in the countryside having Internet access as of 2021.¹³

Bukele won the elections in February 2019 with a comfortable margin and was inaugurated on June 1. He was heralded as a pro-Western, pro-free market leader by the global media, but his methods of dealing with the gang problem were not expected to deliver the radical results that, in the end, were achieved. In the following presidential term, Bukele radically changed the trajectory of Salvadoran society and the political system and dealt with great powers much more ambiguously than was expected.

All this was made possible by his apparently overwhelming success in keeping a grip on El Salvador's gravest problem. Moreover, he communicated this success in a way that made his electoral coalition an overwhelming one in the country. In the following, I will summarize how his security policies made a bigger-than-expected impact on El Salvador, what kind of steps were followed in rebuilding El Salvador, and how this situated him in the international system both in terms of state- and party-level relations.

In all this, I will argue that Bukele brings a new quality to Salvadoran and Central American politics, forging a coalition both at home and abroad to advance his ideas on a new type of state-led, development-oriented nation-building. I will also point out the weaknesses and potential pitfalls of his model, from international backlash to the perils of hyperpersonalized leadership.

III. Breaking Out of a Chaotic Cycle – Bukele and the Gangs

In the first year of Nayib Bukele's presidency, the murder rate in El Salvador was 38 people out of 100,000. After five years, it now stands at 2.4 per 100,000, less than 10% of the rate in 2019, and the second lowest in the Western Hemisphere, after Canada.¹⁴ The data is occasionally called into question by some organizations, citing the

undisclosed nature of the government's data gathering, but it is generally accepted that the country achieved a level of internal security like never before.

While, of course, it is not a foregone conclusion that the country will maintain in this situation in the long term with these policies, the first term of Bukele is unquestionably successful in this regard. The imposition of public security was also the first step on the road for the young president to assert his internal and international credibility and get his project of national development going in an environment of relative safety. The crackdown on the gangs served not only the popular matter of public security but also the real and demonstrated capability of the state to steer the nation in a coherent way.

This demonstrates an important feature of Latin American conservative projects: in order for the conservative policies to take effect, the state has to be made capable of actually executing these policies. Since the 1980s, conservative governments in Latin America mostly gave up ground to the free market and non-governmental organizations in the name of economic betterment and the rejection of inefficient redistributionism, but now, it is frequent that conservatives actually strengthen the state's hand. We have seen this process in the case of Javier Milei's centralizing policies in Argentina, and we have another example here with Bukele's crackdown.

It has to be noted that the specific methods of Bukele's crackdown are a matter of debate. Bukele generally presented his approach as just another but now an effective occasion of the "mano dura" policies of previous administrations. Since his inauguration, the internal security services rounded up thousands of suspects and executed a heavy presence in public spaces.¹⁵ However, for at least the first year of Bukele's rule, there are claims that the president actually preserved the classic method of the FMLN to negotiate with gangs through the first half of his term. Through this, keeping them at bay, not by enforcing laws, but by assuring them relative safety and security in exchange for keeping murders down.

The extent and nature of Bukele's agreement with the gangs will surely be a matter of research and debate in the academic community, but there is apparently solid evidence of the existence of informal agreements, including audio recordings of cabinet members about the truce and the favors offered to some high-level gang members. Bukele apparently tried to walk a fine line between the radical reorganization of the state and his very limited resources to do this.

Parallel with these moves, there was an actual crackdown on rank-and-file members of the gangs, filling El Salvador's prisons. In 2018, the prison population was just under 40,000, and there was already an overcrowding of the capacities of the penal system of the country estimated to be 27,000. During the first year of Bukele's presidency, this actually decreased to around 37 000, but then rose again to no less than 105 000.¹⁶

In this almost 2-year period, the classic “mano dura” methods prevailed, with the initiation of the “Territorial Control Plan” on June 20, 2019. First, the occupation of 17 important urban and rural communities commenced, coupled with the total lockdown of prisons, the jamming of radion communication included. This was followed by the launch of the “Unidad para la Reconstrucción de la Tejido Social,” the “Unit for the Reconstruction of Social Fabric.”¹⁷ This is an institution tasked with providing opportunities for economically disadvantaged groups, especially youth, with new infrastructure, educational, health, and entrepreneurial opportunities.¹⁸ Phase 3 followed by just doubling down security, this time buying new equipment for security forces. Now, the program is in its 6th phase, this time again with a social focus, “Integration.”¹⁹

The program was unprecedentedly successful, for some even suspiciously so. According to a poll, the ratio of people feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods dropped to 57% from 78% in a mere two months. Throughout 2019, the murder rate dropped by a whopping 44% from 38 to 21 homicides by 100,000 inhabitants.²⁰ The team of the Crisis Group think tank called into question the methods of Bukele, pointing to the fact that the murder rates dropped not only in the zones under heavy police lockdown but throughout the country.²¹

While it is important to point out the effect of the isolation of prisons (which housed a part of the leadership of gangs), there is evidence of at least moderate discussions with gangs. A 2019 November and a 2020 April murder spree²² proved that the groups have not lost their capability to strike, meaning that the security measures are not the only ones that keep society safe. Still, security by and large held, murders, and emigration dropped, along with the rise of perception safety.

Bukele’s approach proved that he can achieve a level of stability in the country, coupling heavy-handed methods with negotiations. The president had to struggle with political opposition to keep his grip on the country while battling the gangs, which obviously soured him and the electorate against the opposition.

While the gang problem was initially stabilized, Bukele committed one of the highest-profile mistakes in February 2020 with an ill-fated attempt to strongarm the country’s legislative assembly to accept a loan from the Central American Bank of Economic Integration (CABEI). It was to be the second part of a US 200 million loan package, of which a package of 91 million USD was already accepted by the Legislative Assembly.²³

It is customary to pressure lawmakers with political maneuvers inside the established rules, but Bukele has chosen a rather blunt and misfiring tactic: parading the country’s military in the chambers of the legislative assembly and temporarily dismantling the personal security details of lawmakers, replacing them with the same military men. Not only was this a rather counterproductive tactic, but a weak one.

While this move is widely touted as a mark of Bukele's authoritarianism,²⁴ it arguably showed much more his political inexperience and limited political influence. He was clearly ready to strongarm other institutions of the power share mechanism of El Salvador. Aside from the tour de force, nothing substantial happened; the legislative did not accept the loan, and the president never again attempted to pressure lawmakers with the military.

The other big political problem for Bukele in relation to the security situation was the investigation of his negotiations with gangs initiated by the Attorney General of the country, Germán Arriaza, in November 2019 and continued by the next holder of the post, Raúl Melara, from 2020 May. The institution published its findings in September 2020, presenting evidence of secret negotiations between the executive and the gangs. At instances, criminal group leaders were allowed special visits to the supposedly isolated prisons, and government officials visited too to negotiate with imprisoned leaders of gangs.²⁵

However, the disclosures came way too late to have any serious political impact. The electoral support of the security project overwrote questions about the legality of specific methods.

In February 2021, Bukele's party triumphed in the legislative elections. Not counting his allies, his own party, the Nuevas Ideas (New Ideas, NI), won 66% percent of the popular vote, having a comfortable supermajority. The methods were questioned again, some claiming that following the accords with the government, in places gang members were posted at polling stations and ordered people to "vote N,"²⁶ which is an allusion to both the Nuevas Ideas and the president's given name at once.

The elections still went through without any international backlash, and radical reshuffling followed. In May 2021, the Attorney General was ousted by Bukele, effectively ending the probe. The CABEL loan was voted for by the new Assembly, too, including the US 109 million in a bigger, US 730 million loan package. The new government, in the end, took care of the gang problem, eventually getting the problem under total control. This also suggests that even if Bukele negotiated with gangs, it was for the sake of winning time.

In the end, it did not result in a broken security situation but in the success of a total crackdown. Talks between gangs and the government ended around early 2022. Because of this on March 25, 2022, the gangs struck, killing 87 civilians in 3 days. The president, now having a firmer grip on the country well after the legislative elections, promptly installed a state of exception in the country. The new system placed the control of the population totally in the hands of security personnel. The right to assembly and private communication was suspended, and the security services could place a person into detention for 72 hours without any formal legal basis. Later, the

press was prohibited from transmitting “gang propaganda,” an umbrella term for anything that could be deemed as information beneficial to criminal groups, and this law was in circulation until November 2023.²⁷ All of this was sanctioned by the congress of the country, with the power of the new supermajority.

The crackdown has been surprisingly successful in the last two years. It obviously meant a large relocation of people. The prison population ballooned to 77,000 by the end of 2022 and around 105,000 by the end of 2023, according to InSight Crime. Alongside the overfilling of prisons, new prison projects were announced, like a “mega-prison” capable of holding around 40,000 people.²⁸ The “classic” physical control of the population, so far, succeeded. Think tanks, like Crisis Group and the analysts of InSight Crime,²⁹ repeatedly warned that the project of mass incarceration is unsustainable, projecting a gang backlash or other social turmoil resulting from the heavy-handed policies of the state. Still, to date this has not been the result, with the murder rates of the country as low as 1,6 per 1000 people, the second-lowest in the Western Hemisphere – if we are to believe Bukele’s official declarations.

The El Faro outlet, one of Bukele’s staunchest critics in the press (since then relocated to Costa Rica, blaming government persecution),³⁰ acknowledged the major success of the mass incarceration.³¹ Analysts attributed the success of the crackdown to the fact that Bukele caught the gangs in a critical stage: their old leadership was behind bars, still directing their groups, but they were losing faith because of the heavy-handed methods of the state. New leadership was yet to form.³² Using this crisis period, the Salvadoran government managed to crack the gang problem and keep violent crime low ever since.

The alliance-building of Bukele greatly benefitted from his heavy-handed crackdown on gang members. Viral videos of the spectacle of Salvadorian inmates filling the massive spaces of prison institutions, as a sign of the ultimate success of law-and-order policies, provided Bukele with a huge social media boost. His heavy-handed approach gained him traction, especially among American conservatives. The handling of the gang problem alluded to the law-and-order approach of many conservatives and the idea of getting the migration to the U.S. under control via stabilizing El Salvador.

In contrast to this, other critics emphasized the danger of wrongful arrests, accusing the Bukele of human rights violations.³³ All commentators note, however, that the state of exception enjoys overwhelming support from Salvadorans who support the president. Indeed, Bukele’s approval rate has never fallen under 80%. The 2024 presidential elections were a predetermined case – Bukele easily won with more than 85% of the votes.³⁴ Moreover, he enjoys praise from all across the continent, reaching across political lines of divide.

The president of neighboring Honduras, Xiomara Castro, who is left-wing, has already introduced a Bukele-style heavy-handed policy against the gangs.³⁵ After the second inauguration, Milei's Argentina sent the Minister of Interior, Patricia Bullrich, to take a formal study trip to El Salvador.³⁶ Given the relative regional power of the two countries, this was an unprecedented sign of the prestige of El Salvador's model. Even the Biden administration, a staunch critic of the administration, toned down its attacks by 2024, apparently crediting El Salvador with the success of curbing emigration numbers.³⁷

IV. Bukele's Success and Unfinished Business

Nayib Bukele's government managed to mount an unprecedented turnaround in Salvadoran public safety. Combining negotiations with a heavy-handed approach, the young president managed to build a huge electoral coalition, stabilizing his power over the state and, finally, dealing a crippling blow to gangs with the state of exception. This helped him to have a stable interior and an international coalition behind his back in order to realize his model. But it must be noted that he still has a long way to go.

At the end of 2023, the University Institute of Public Opinion (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública IUDOP) conducted a poll on Salvadorans' perceived safety. More than 90% felt safe, and the same amount said that the security situation was better than a year before.³⁸ However, the responders agreed that security is not the country's top problem anymore. The economy took first place. This also means that Bukele's security success is only part of the story.

The other big question of long-term stability is that of the dependence on Bukele's capabilities as a president. He is quite young, in his early 40s. Age is not a problem. However, he already had to modify the constitution to run for a second term, which generated backlash in the international community. He can't base his model solely on his long-term rule; he must build an elite following his example and the institutional capacity to achieve a long-lasting effect, where his personality, change of popularity, and specific decisions do not affect the political heritage of his system.

Bukele has a long way to go regarding these two fields. The second part of this analysis will examine the early attempts in his first term to make progress in this field, and the effects of his personalized style on the trajectory of the country, with specific regard for the consequences of it for the country's interior and exterior alliances.

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Endnotes

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