



ARTICLE

# Hidden in Plain Sight: The In/Visibility of Human Rights in El Salvador's Prisons Under the State of Exception

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## Abstract

This article examines the social and political impacts of President Nayib Bukele's 2023 opening of a megaprison in El Salvador by analyzing his government-funded international public relations campaign. We chronicle how the design of the prison, along with policies for arresting, detaining, and prosecuting Salvadorans for alleged gang-related crimes, offers a mirage of transparency that obstructs the visibility needed to protect the human rights of Salvadorans. Our analysis places empirical accounts of conditions in El Salvador in conversation with the largely Twitter/X-based public relations campaign announcing the new prison. We show how the campaign works to justify an alarming degradation of democratic principles and practices during the current *régimen de excepción* (state of exception). Bukele rationalizes an iron-fist-style approach to gang violence while simultaneously silencing political opposition and obfuscating the expanding scope of state human rights violations. We argue that the trade-offs being made in El Salvador between increased safety for some and human rights violations for others ultimately contribute to the corrosion of democracy. Moreover, we discuss how Bukele's tough-on-crime populism simultaneously produces and exports an "authoritarian playbook" for wider regional democratic erosion in line with Bukele's model.

**Keywords:** El Salvador; state of exception; megaprison; human rights; gang violence

## Resumen

Este artículo examina los impactos sociales y políticos de la apertura en 2023 de una megacárcel en El Salvador por parte del presidente Nayib Bukele, analizando su campaña de relaciones públicas internacional financiada por el gobierno. Relatamos cómo el diseño de la prisión, junto con las políticas para arrestar, detener y procesar a los salvadoreños por presuntos delitos relacionados con las pandillas, ofrecen un espejismo de transparencia, mientras que, en realidad, obstruyen la visibilidad necesaria para proteger los derechos humanos de los salvadoreños. Nuestro análisis pone los relatos empíricos de las condiciones en El Salvador en diálogo con la campaña de relaciones públicas basada principalmente en Twitter/X que anuncia la nueva prisión. Mostramos cómo la campaña funciona para justificar una degradación alarmante de los principios y prácticas democráticas durante el actual Régimen de Excepción. Bukele racionaliza un enfoque de mano dura ante la violencia de las pandillas mientras que simultáneamente silencia a la oposición política y ofusca el alcance cada vez mayor de las violaciones de los derechos humanos por parte del Estado. Sostenemos que las compensaciones que se están haciendo en El Salvador entre una mayor seguridad para algunos y violaciones de los derechos humanos para otros en última instancia contribuyen a una corrosión de la democracia. Además, analizamos cómo el populismo de mano dura de Bukele

contra el crimen produce y exporta simultáneamente un “manual autoritario” para una erosión democrática regional más amplia, en línea con el modelo de Bukele.

**Palabras clave:** El Salvador; estado de excepción; megacárcel; derechos humanos; violencia de pandillas

On February 24, 2023, President Nayib Bukele announced the official opening of El Salvador’s new megaprison on Twitter (now X).<sup>1</sup> An edited documentary-style video filmed at night and set to percussive music offered a public dramatization of the transfer of the first two thousand inmates to the prison. It showed heavily tattooed detainees, chained at the hands and feet, wearing only white boxers and running in stress positions through rows of prison guards onto buses. The video cuts together shots of the buses driving in formation down a highway, aerial footage of the expansive new prison, and a sea of still-handcuffed prisoners sitting inside it, pressed up against one another in neat rows.

At its purported full capacity of forty thousand, the prison, called the Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo (CECOT) or Terrorism Confinement Center, has the potential to be the world’s largest carceral facility. This is striking, considering that El Salvador has only 6.6 million inhabitants—a population slightly smaller than that of Massachusetts. Despite its small size, El Salvador is now the nation with the highest rate of incarceration per capita, over double that of the United States (Vyas and Pérez 2023). As of April 2025, around eighty-five thousand people have been incarcerated during the state of exception; nearly 2 percent of the Salvadoran population is behind bars (Correal 2025).

There are many reasons for concern over El Salvador’s new approach to public safety. Human rights violations in Salvadoran prisons have been documented in multiple reports by human rights organizations (Amnesty International 2023a, 2024; Cristosal 2023; Human Rights Watch and Cristosal 2022). Although El Salvador is a signatory to both the Convention Against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Amnesty International (2023a, 4) has concluded that there is a “systemic use of torture” in Salvadoran prisons. Furthermore, Cristosal (2024a) determined, after a case-by-case analysis of complaints of human rights abuses, that “torture has become a state policy, with cruel and inhuman treatment regularly practiced in prisons and places of detention.” Thousands of Salvadorans are already living under these dire conditions, and in February 2025, Bukele advanced a proposal to accept international detainees into CECOT (Pozzebon et al. 2025). In a move that US Secretary of State Marco Rubio lauded as “an act of extraordinary friendship,” Bukele offered to house undocumented immigrants who had been convicted of crimes and deported from the United States in CECOT (Correal and Rodríguez Mega 2025). In March 2025, for an annual fee of US\$6 million paid to the Salvadoran government, the United States sent nearly three hundred people to CECOT, including undocumented Venezuelans with and without criminal convictions, and Salvadorans, including Kilmar Abrego García, who had a withholding of removal order from a US immigration judge stating that he should not be sent to El Salvador (Gellman and Bishop 2025).

A good deal of attention has been paid in academic and journalistic outlets to the sweeping changes occurring in El Salvador and how they have led to a quieting of gang violence. Less focus has been given to the practical means by which Bukele has obtained the public favor necessary to produce these changes and how his popularity persists in El Salvador and internationally despite widespread human rights violations committed by state agents against the Salvadoran public. We argue that the current situation has been

<sup>1</sup> Nayib Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, February 24, 2023, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1629165213600849920>. All tweets in this article are translated by Sarah C. Bishop.

achieved through a series of traceable rhetorical moves played out in the arena of international public relations. Using a growing dataset of empirical evidence of illegal harms occurring behind the closed doors of Salvadoran prisons, we expose the manipulation and obfuscation of information in Bukele's rhetoric. More broadly, we lay bare the relationship between the CECOT public relations campaign, democratic corrosion in El Salvador, and the implications of *mano dura*-infused international public relations for democracy in the region.

As a communication scholar and a political scientist, we draw on our disciplines and multiple datasets collected in El Salvador for our analyses. These include Bishop's oral histories with Salvadoran civilians and civil society personnel collected during fieldwork in El Salvador each year since 2020 and published analyses of government-produced media and Salvadoran country conditions (Bishop 2024, 2023, 2022), and Gellman's more than one hundred interviews and ethnographic work over sixteen years (Gellman 2017, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c), along with our combined thirteen years of experience and more than 250 cases as expert witnesses on country conditions in El Salvador in US immigration courts. This plethora of data points makes it possible for us to triangulate our familiarity with the existing academic literature on critical media studies and authoritarianism in Latin America with our fieldwork in El Salvador and insights from working on asylum cases involving claims of government corruption, police and military violence, gang violence, and other forms of persecution. Because the asylum cases often involve the submission by Immigration and Customs Enforcement attorneys of published government-produced media from El Salvador, we have also seen firsthand the impact of Bukele's media machine on immigration judges' understanding of conditions in El Salvador. In this way, our research has practical implications for Salvadorans in El Salvador and the US.

Bukele's public discourse provides a mirage of transparency while in fact precluding the visibility needed to protect the human rights of the detained. From prison design and protocol to the policies to arrest, detain, and try Salvadorans for supposed crimes, the Bukele model advances and rhetorically justifies El Salvador's current carceral state. His model offers a cautionary tale of how a government-driven communications machine can aid and abet the dismantling of democracy.

### Salvadoran democracy's uncertain past and future

President Nayib Bukele was elected in 2019 on a promise of change and has since branded himself as "the coolest dictator in the world" (Associated Press 2021). Elected at age thirty-seven as El Salvador's youngest president and known for issuing executive orders via Twitter/X, Bukele's youthful style, featuring backward baseball caps and leather jackets, has fueled a populist leadership model characterized by sustained high approval ratings (Rauda Zablah 2023). Even his swift advances toward authoritarianism have not significantly detracted from his popularity.

At the time of Bukele's first election in 2019, El Salvador scored 67 of 100 points on Freedom House's Freedom in the World classification—a score of "free" political status that the country had held since 1997, a trend that led Gellman to describe El Salvador in 2017 as "democratizing." In 2020, Freedom House demoted El Salvador's status to "partly free," with its score descending a few points each year since then, to 53 of 100 in 2024 (Freedom House 2024) and down to 47 in 2025 (Freedom House 2025). Vice President Félix Ullóa revealed plainly to the *New York Times*, "To these people who say democracy is being dismantled, my answer is yes—we are not dismantling it, we are eliminating it, we are replacing it with something new" (Kitroeff 2024). The replacement is what Meléndez-Sánchez (2021, 20) calls "millennial authoritarianism: an innovative political strategy combining traditional populist appeals and classic authoritarian behavior with a youthful and modern personal brand built on social media" (see also Meléndez-Sánchez and

Vergara 2024). The question of how one person has reversed decades of postwar democratization has implications both for El Salvador's future and for other countries struggling with similar paradigms of human insecurity and whose leaders are intently observing the relationship between Bukele's approach and his formidable popularity. In and beyond Latin America, far-right populist movements playing out largely on social media offer evidence of the widespread corrosion of democracy (Zanotti and Roberts 2021, 25–26; Pereira 2023; Gamboa 2024).

Although Bukele's bombastic communication style and audacious claims of triumph make him seem like the single-handed orchestrator of El Salvador's current backsliding, the stage was set for him long before. Profound inequality throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a civil war that played out US–Soviet Union rivalries through the proxied bodies of Salvadorans (Sanford 2003, 67–69), and a postwar period characterized by gang rule reveal the long-standing tenuousness of El Salvador's democracy. The civil war laid bare the absence of real democratic infrastructure in the country, and its aftermath included adopting benchmarks of procedural democracy that are often more effective on paper than in practice. Following the 1992 peace accords that left the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party in power, entrenched impunity, massive corruption, and the ongoing drivers of civil war conflict, including unequal access to insufficient resources, fueled new forms of violence. The first change of presidential power to the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in 2009 suggested that El Salvador could still build up its democratic infrastructure even as it was haunted by postwar obstacles.

Democracy—a regime type defined by the possibility of multiparty representation of citizen interests selected through free and fair elections—is neither static nor infallible, as Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) have pointed out in their acclaimed *How Democracies Die*. Procedures alone do not make democracy, meaning that open elections are an insufficient test of democratic robustness (Levitsky and Way 2002, 52–54). Although such erosion has been evident for some time in El Salvador (Córdova 2019), it has sharply accelerated since Bukele's 2019 election.

A former FMLN mayor, Bukele once described himself as a socialist.<sup>2</sup> But as the social scientist Jorge Cuéllar notes, he should more accurately be labeled “an opportunist” (in Peralta 2024). Seizing opportunities for personal power, Bukele has reinvented himself as a populist authoritarian leader capable of realizing people's dreams, including bringing security to areas plagued by gang domination (*Radio Ambulante* 2024; Rodríguez 2024). Bukele's administration has exhibited a range of indicators of backsliding democracy that imperil even the most basic benchmarks of El Salvador's previous democratic status (Human Rights Watch and Cristosal 2022).

Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 78) describe how democratic rot from within involves “capturing the referees”—silencing and disempowering neutral and independent adjudicators in favor of loyalists, thereby corroding democracy from within. Bukele deployed this strategy before the start of the state of exception through a series of actions that included ordering military troops into the Legislative Assembly to pressure lawmakers into alignment with his interests, ousting the attorney general, replacing all five Supreme Court justices in the Constitutional Chamber, and forcing judges over sixty years old into retirement. He has also selectively prosecuted corruption charges as a means of persecuting political opponents, including sitting and former politicians from opposition parties, effectively using the law to silence critics (US Department of State

<sup>2</sup> The leftist guerilla organization FMLN was in conflict with the right-wing ARENA during El Salvador's civil war, and both became traditional political parties after the 1992 peace accords. Bukele's creation of Nuevas Ideas in 2017 broke up a two party-dominated system.

2023). These moves protected him from retribution as he consolidated control over all branches of government through executive orders and constitutional rewrites.

Bukele has retained his popularity amid such antidemocratic measures through a public relations approach that rhetorically justifies his extremism. He frames such measures as imperative for citizens' security and lauds himself as the only one courageous enough to achieve them. As seen most clearly in his governance of the ongoing state of exception, this framing requires careful control over the kinds of information made available to the public and the power to keep other knowledge hidden from view.

### The control of public information during democratic breakdown in El Salvador

The ongoing democratic corrosion under Bukele's leadership is epitomized by the degradation of public access to accurate political information and the proliferation of misleading information on digital platforms, especially Twitter/X, amplifying Bukele's success far beyond El Salvador's borders. Bukele and his administration have cracked down on journalists' access to political happenings and their ability to question his authority (US Department of State 2022, 14–16). On Twitter/X, Bukele regularly undercuts the credibility of journalists critical of his policies; his followers respond by harassing them with thousands of social media messages using profane language and threatening sexual violence (Nóchez 2022). Such behavior models the normalization of harassment toward journalists to the public at large. Bukele's public relations strategy has prioritized the silencing of opposition to gain more narrative dominance to direct and control public opinion.

This behavior fits within the broader context of authoritarian regimes' expanding use of social media to wrest control of the political narrative away from independent voices and experts. It reveals a creative and evolving strategy for millennial authoritarian leaders to capture "referees" beyond those that exist in government office by neutralizing the power of a free and independent press (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 78). As Kalathil (2020, 33) describes, "authoritarian regimes are increasingly using digital influence operations as a method of censorship and manipulation, flooding the information space with false or misleading narratives designed to crowd out independent voices and expertise." This strategy was clear in January 2022, when twenty-two members of a leading team of Salvadoran investigative journalists at *El Faro* were found to have been targeted in a Pegasus spyware operation that infiltrated their communication systems (Scott et al. 2022). Although Bukele denied government involvement, he later baselessly accused the organization of money laundering. *El Faro* has since moved its operations to Costa Rica, citing "the dismantling of democracy, the lack of checks and balances on the exercise of power of a small group of people, the attacks against press freedom, and the shuttering of all transparency and accountability mechanisms [that] gravely threaten Salvadorans' right to be informed while considerable public resources are allotted to disseminating propaganda and disinformation" (El Faro Editorial Board 2023). By consolidating power and then using it to attack and discredit oppositional voices while investing unprecedented resources into producing and disseminating news that reflects favorably on himself, Bukele retains authoritarian rhetorical control over the country's public narrative.

Bukele's manipulation of public-facing information is central to sustaining support for his leadership, even amid clear blows to the country's democracy.<sup>3</sup> His strategic employment of Twitter/X, in particular, illustrates how he accomplishes the twofold goal of undercutting his critics while endearing himself to his supporters. Despite more than

<sup>3</sup> This was clear even before the state of exception, as when Bukele's government falsified COVID-19 statistics to prop up support for his containment measures, including the arrest of more than sixteen thousand people for quarantine noncompliance (Human Rights Watch 2020).

half of Salvadorans lacking regular access to the internet, Twitter/X has become a key tool for Bukele's messaging and day-to-day business (Esberg 2020, Mila-Maldonado et al. 2022). Mila-Maldonado et al. (2022) analyzed hundreds of Bukele's tweets, revealing how the president adapts his account to his audience to formally confront opposing political and social forces and interact directly with citizens. In the latter context, he employs his charisma and "close and positive language" to promote their integration with his beliefs (Mila-Maldonado et al. 2022, 20). The authors found that Bukele "presents an anti-systemic and critical character" toward his adversaries. But in social media posts designed to make the president appear "charismatic, representative of the people and transparent," he instead uses a "political image . . . built on the basis of empathy to connect with his followers" (Mila-Maldonado et al. 2022, 25). The authors concluded that Bukele's use of social media is constitutive of his populism.

A closer look at the mechanics of Twitter/X and the role played by fake accounts and bots takes these findings a step further, revealing the extent to which pro-Bukele support has been artificially inflated. Bukele's team has worked with troll centers to amplify his messaging and attack his critics (Bradshaw et al. 2021, 128). Paid influencers and "likely bot farms" have been tasked with tweeting tens of thousands of messages of support for Bukele to "create the appearance of authentic grassroots support" (Kinsian 2022). A secret team of social media specialists contracted by Bukele's government anonymously revealed in an investigation by Reuters that their job included tracking and reporting Twitter/X users who posted criticism of Bukele in an attempt to get their accounts suspended (Kinsian 2022). By manipulating Twitter/X's reporting feature to his benefit, Bukele's team has managed to mitigate the visibility and impact of his critics.

What is more, a 2022 International Crisis Group analysis of Twitter traffic related to Bukele's first inauguration revealed "an unmatched spike" in pro-Bukele users joining Twitter immediately following his inauguration in 2019. In a single day, nearly as many pro-Bukele Twitter accounts were created as in the entire month before.

While clearly supported by an army of bots and fake accounts, the messaging was originated by real people. For example, the pro-Bukele hashtag #QueBonitaDictadura that proliferated on these artificial accounts was first tweeted by Porfirio Chica, a public relations strategist and close adviser to Bukele, and then used by Bukele's official account only an hour later. That evening, over the course of two hours, the International Crisis Group reports, "#QueBonitaDictadura was tweeted or retweeted 4,324 times, including eight retweets from the president in a five-minute window" (Esberg 2020). Many posts included photos of the military providing services to citizens, which have since been traced back to previous tweets from Bukele's communications department. The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) Propaganda Research Project's most recent *Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation* has likewise confirmed prominent social media manipulation in El Salvador by bots and humans alike, originating from government agencies, political parties, private contractors, and individual citizens (Bradshaw et al. 2021, i).

Although there is no question that the reach of Bukele's messaging has been artificially inflated, some research suggests a public willingness to disregard the potential danger of online information manipulation. In 2022, the OII's Programme on Democracy & Technology analyzed survey data from over 150,000 respondents across 142 countries to assess internet users' perceptions of the risks associated with exposure to misinformation. OII's analysis determined that 74 percent of respondents from Latin America and the Caribbean reported concern about misinformation. When the survey data was compared to datasets designed to evaluate countries' regime types and the openness of their national media environments, respondents in closed and electoral autocracies were less likely to worry about misinformation than those in liberal democracies. The authors found that the actual prevalence of misinformation or press restriction did not increase the perception of misinformation risk (Knuutila et al. 2022). The same report also revealed that older



respondents (aged sixty-five and older) were less likely to recognize misinformation as a threat—a telling dynamic in an aging country like El Salvador, where population projections estimate that nearly a quarter of citizens will be over the age of sixty by 2050 (Knuutila et al. 2022; Avalos 2019).

By manipulating publicly available data to inflate perceptions of his successes and silence his critics, Bukele maintains popularity despite ongoing democratic corrosion. Rather than considering the control of national and international public information merely a result of democratic decline, it makes better sense to track the ways this media control itself activates and catalyzes authoritarian rule. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the implementation and public international reporting of Bukele's mass incarceration of suspected gang affiliates under the ongoing state of exception.

### Bukele's branding of the 2022–25 state of exception

The weekend of March 25, 2022 saw a record-setting string of eighty-seven gang-committed homicides across El Salvador that resulted from the unraveling of a secret pact between Bukele and the gangs in what MS-13 called a “betrayal” of Bukele's loyalty (Martínez 2022). The Monday following the homicides, Bukele successfully called on the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly to pass a state of exception, which suspends many constitutional protections, including due process, drastically increases police powers to arrest and imprison suspected gang members, and curtails the right to legal defense (Kahn 2022). As human rights organizations reacted with alarm, Bukele swung back, tweeting in English, “TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY: We have 70,000 gang members still on the streets. Come get them, take them to your countries, get them out of this ‘dictatorial and authoritarian persecution.’”<sup>4</sup> Continually renewed each month, the state of exception remains in place as of this writing, over three years since it began.

Wide-ranging reports from Human Rights Watch (2022a, 2022b), Cristosal (2024a, 2024b, 2023; Human Rights Watch & Cristosal 2022), Amnesty International (2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024), and *El Faro* (Pappier 2022; Gavarrete 2023; Barrera 2024) reveal that many of the arrest raids under the state of exception have primarily targeted poor and undereducated men with no current gang ties. Other targeted populations include deportees, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ Salvadorans. Hundreds of detainees have died from untreated medical conditions, blunt-force trauma, strangulation, and starvation, even as families send monthly packages of basic food, medicine, and hygiene to incarcerated loved ones (Barrera 2024). There have been reports of prison personnel forcing women to do sexual acts in exchange for food and medicine (Cristosal 2024b). And even after the tens of thousands of arrests, gang extortion and violence continue in and, more covertly, outside of prisons (Papadovassilakis 2023). Meanwhile, Bukele has used the state of exception as a cover to attack and incarcerate his critics, as has been the case for dozens of human rights defenders, former state officials, and journalists (Human Rights Watch 2024).

Bukele's approval ratings in El Salvador are between 80 percent and 92 percent (Martínez 2023; TResearch International 2023), reflecting a theme also visible in the United States, India, Brazil, and Argentina, where citizens are willing to sacrifice some democratic safeguards to support leaders who promise some tangible benefits (Xuereb et al. 2021). The Salvadoran public generally resents gang governance, as citizens navigate the daily insecurity that comes with threats of extortion and violence within gang territory. Since the mass arrests, many Salvadorans report feeling safer and having increased mobility in their communities, and some are no longer paying gang extortion (Martínez et al. 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Nayib Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter/X, March 28, 2022, [https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1508620719797719040?s=20&t=L5BP8Ouj7wYGp\\_T3MYvOA](https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1508620719797719040?s=20&t=L5BP8Ouj7wYGp_T3MYvOA).

In more than a dozen interviews conducted in January 2024 with Salvadorans ranging from nongovernmental organization staff to service workers, Gellman (2024a) found that the drive for safety had prepared citizens to be single-issue voters in the February 2024 election. At the same time, other interviewees—namely people with past criminal records, those with loved ones who have at some point been gang involved, and those whose family members have already been targeted under the state of exception—expressed deep concerns about the way Salvadoran security is being enacted (Gellman 2024c).

The policy governing the state of exception ensures that once an individual is suspected of being a gang member, it is almost impossible to prove otherwise. During fieldwork in El Salvador in January 2024, Bishop and Gellman heard multiple stories from people in working-class communities who had been marked as targets by police or military personnel despite no empirical evidence of gang involvement. Bukele's administration unabashedly denies the right to be free from arbitrary detention for tens of thousands of Salvadorans and is using the state of exception to amass more punitive power.

### Setting the stage for “The Largest Prison in the Americas”

Prisons usually open with little fanfare, with the most engaged portion of the population being those who will derive jobs from the industry, whether as corrections officers, administrative staff, or subcontractors. Bukele, however, launched an international public relations campaign to mark the opening of the building he branded the Terrorism Confinement Center, publicizing detailed visual and textual information about the prison's design, protocols, and purpose. The prison was billed as integral to Bukele's “war on gangs” (Hernández Liborio 2023).

In February 2023, Bukele announced the official opening of CECOT on Twitter: “This morning, in a single operation, we transferred the first 2,000 gang members to the Terrorism Confinement Center. This will be their new home, where they will live for decades, mixed up, without the power to do more harm to the population.”<sup>5</sup> This announcement connotes that every one of the two thousand transferred detainees is a gang member, even though many arrest raids under the state of exception, driven by government-imposed daily quotas, have resulted in the arbitrary detention, refusal of constitutional rights, and abuse of many innocent people with no current gang ties (Amnesty International 2024; Cristosal 2024b).

Still, Bukele continues to refer to the prison population under the state of exception as exclusively gang members, pushing this title as evidence of his success. When Voice of America referred to the first detainees transferred to CECOT as “alleged” gang members in a tweet that read, “Some 2,000 alleged gang members were transferred this Friday to the mega-prison recently inaugurated by the government of #ElSalvador,” Bukele doubled down: “The official media of the U.S. Government says that these murderers, judicially convicted of murdering thousands of Salvadorans, are ‘alleged gang members.’ Why are they publicly defending gang members? What is their interest in protecting criminals?”<sup>6</sup> The suggestion that detainees have been “judicially convicted of murdering thousands” obfuscates the reality that CECOT also houses adults imprisoned after the start of the state of exception, none of whom have yet been convicted of any crime and all of whom currently remain in indefinite pretrial detention (Cristosal 2024b; Amnesty International 2024). Meanwhile, Minister of Justice and Public Security Gustavo Villatoro confirmed to the BBC in May 2023 that the government was still in the process of “building” CECOT

<sup>5</sup> Nayib Bukele (@NayibBukele), Twitter, February 24, 2023, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1629165213600849920>.

<sup>6</sup> Nayib Bukele (@NayibBukele), Twitter, February 25, 2023, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1629612312175824897>.



prisoners' cases: "We have a commitment with the Salvadorans that [CECOT prisoners] will never return to the communities. And we are going to ensure we build the necessary cases [against them] to make sure they never return" (BBC Mundo 2023). Such a commitment is colored by the troubling pattern of falsification and misuse of evidence by state agents in El Salvador, which include multiple instances of police tampering with crime scenes to avoid their own culpability (Observatorio Universitario de Derechos Humanos 2020), planting drugs and weapons on suspects to justify arbitrary arrests (Gies 2018), and creating gang aliases on the spot for individuals with no real gang affiliation (Lemus and Cáceres 2022).

The sharp rise in the number of prisoners has overwhelmed the judicial system, effectively disallowing the possibility of fair individual hearings before impartial judges that are standard in more democratic contexts. Instead, in July 2023, the General Assembly passed a bill allowing nine hundred detainees accused of the same crime to be tried simultaneously (Taylor 2023). Moreover, although on paper Salvadoran prisoners maintained the right to a defense, a US State Department human rights report on El Salvador revealed that public defenders' caseloads had risen from an average of fifty cases per month to ninety-five cases per day, making it impossible for detainees to enact this right (US Department of State 2022, 8, 9). Under these antidemocratic conditions, Bukele's pernicious stance that every detainee in CECOT had been "judicially convicted" demonstrates his willful disregard for both the rule of law and accurate public communication.

Moreover, Bukele's announcement that CECOT will be these purported gang members' "new home, where they will live for decades, mixed up," holds significant implications for human rights. Since 2004, a practice had been in place to hold members of the two most powerful gangs in El Salvador, MS-13 and Barrio 18, in separate cells or prisons to prevent rival intergang violence and violence between gang members and civilians. Bertrand Galindo, former Salvadoran security minister, explained, "The point was that if we left them in the same facilities, with the level of violence that was occurring and the weakness of the infrastructure, the state was not going to be able to prevent them from killing each other" (Valencia 2014).<sup>7</sup>

A year into his term, and at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bukele became the first president in two decades to begin willingly mixing gang members in the same prison cells, a move widely criticized by human rights organizations (Linares 2020). José Miguel Vivanco, director of the Americas for Human Rights Watch, stated that not separating gang-affiliated detainees from one another or from other detainees showed the government's "wickedness and cruelty" (Valencia 2020). The Human Rights Commission of El Salvador stated that the practice "carries a total risk of mutinies or selective or collective murders" (González Díaz 2020).

Still, much of the news reporting on Bukele's change in procedure referenced the country's general prison overcrowding, as if the move were an inevitable reality in a national context where the prison population was already at double its stated capacity. Data from World Prison Brief in May 2022 shows occupancy level based on official capacity at 236.7 percent. Bukele's team has publicly described CECOT as a facility built to alleviate overcrowding (Government of El Salvador 2024, 86). Bukele's reiteration of his intention to mix gang members in the context of the new megaprison's ample new space reveals this practice as a deliberate strategy, knowingly acquiescing to the violence likely to result, rather than an unfortunate necessity.

As expert witnesses who testify about Salvadoran country conditions in US immigration court, we have been privy to numerous cases wherein adjudicators have considered

<sup>7</sup> Around 2016, under President Sánchez Cerén, some prison facilities began to house both MS-13 and Barrio 18 members, but the two groups were still kept isolated from each other (Valencia 2020).

whether there is evidence of the Salvadoran government's acquiescence to violence, to determine whether the case would fit within the grounds of the United Nations' Convention Against Torture. To be eligible for protection under the Convention Against Torture, an individual must show that the state is knowingly consenting or acquiescing to actions that would constitute torture. That is, state actors are aware of a high probability of violent activity, including physical pain or suffering and/or the threat of death, but do not halt it and may actively facilitate it. Indeed, the high probability of violent activity in prisons during the state of exception in El Salvador has been confirmed by a range of instances, such as a January 2025 riot in Izalco prison during which active gang members housed in a cell with retired gang members reportedly attacked each other using iron bars they had removed from their beds, resulting in at least three deaths (*La Prensa Gráfica* 2025).

The Salvadoran government's deliberate mixing of gang members with others in prison is evidence of exactly the kinds of state acquiescence to violence detailed in the Convention Against Torture. This is not a matter of negligence, lack of oversight, or mere recklessness. Rather, the Salvadoran government is signaling through the public pronouncement of this practice that it is intentionally placing suspected gang members in situations where they are highly likely to be tortured by rival members and/or to inflict violence against other Salvadorans.

Beyond the threat of gang-inflicted violence in prison, prisoners in throughout El Salvador under the state of exception are subjected to widespread abuse at the hands of corrections officers. Prison staff are responsible for beatings, waterboarding, and using implements of torture on detainees' fingers to force confessions of gang affiliation (US Department of State 2023, 5). Some Salvadoran corrections officers have historically received training about human rights, including the Nelson Mandela Rules, conflict management, and a culture of peace. But as of 2021, information on prison staff training is no longer available because, like so much political data in the context of the state of exception, it has been declared confidential (Fundación para el Debido Proceso 2022, 13).

Although human rights organizations including Tutela Legal, Cristosal, and Amnesty International work diligently to expose widespread human rights abuses in prison, Bukele's careful management of public information keeps the full scope of the violations out of view. The state of exception's prohibition on contact between detainees and the outside world effectively prevents widespread public knowledge about the abuses happening inside.

Despite proactive attempts to limit nongovernment-produced viewing of prison conditions, we know that hundreds of incarcerated individuals have died since the start of the state of exception, some after being beaten, strangled, and/or denied medical treatment (Human Rights Watch and Cristosal 2022). The Salvadoran state maintains that all prison deaths have resulted from natural causes (Avelar 2023). But in a sample of one hundred cases of prison deaths that occurred during the first year of the state of exception, Cristosal (2023, 29) found through photographic, forensic, and testimonial evidence that 75 percent of the deaths were violent, probably violent, or with suspicions of criminality on account of a common pattern of hematomas caused by beatings, sharp object wounds, and signs of strangulation on the cadavers examined. Even the deaths described by legal medical obituaries as nonviolent have, in some cases, involved cadavers showing forensic evidence of torture, demonstrating further state-sponsored complicity in concealing evidence of violence. By preventing public viewing of the widespread human rights violations, including deaths taking place in the prisons, the Salvadoran government can maintain the position that the state of exception is making El Salvador safer.

## Pageantry and subterfuge

In a triumphant thirty-one-minute video tour of the prison's facilities posted on his Twitter feed, Bukele admires the solitary confinement cells, a fully stocked armory of riot gear and weapons, and a separate building with recreational facilities for prison staff.<sup>8</sup> Professionally lit and staged press photos abounded in the days following the prison's official opening, appearing in international outlets from *Al Jazeera* to the *Washington Post* (Krauze 2023; Al Jazeera 2023). The testimony of Professor Alexander Eduvay Guzmán Molina, who was arrested on the first day of the state of exception and detained for several months, describes how prisoners with tattoos would be arranged to appear in front of group photos shot by the government to use in their public relations. "There were people with tattoos, covered in numbers and letters, and they had them stand in front to make people think they had a whole group of gang members. And everyone else, civilians like myself, they put behind the formation," Guzmán reports (*El Faro* 2023). Indeed, in the absence of a fair and impartial judicial process that would produce evidence of innocence or criminality, the visibility of imprisoned tattooed bodies has become a rhetorical stand-in for proof of the state of exception's effectiveness. The prominence of tattoos in Bukele's public relations campaign about CECOT is reflected and reinforced by legal moves to normalize and justify imprisoning anyone who fits this stereotypical demographic of a gang affiliate. According to an investigation by *El Faro*, having tattoos, even ones that have been removed, is already one of the most common reasons for arrest on gang charges (Lemus and Cáceres 2022).

Once the prison's official opening was announced, Bukele began to retweet messages of support: "The most successful reduction in murder rates in any nation in perhaps the history of the world"; "We need more presidents like @nayibbukele"; "President @nayibbukele has put an end to decades of gang violence and terrorism, effectively restoring SAFETY in El Salvador (what many said could not be done). Bukele is a Patriot who puts the interests of El Salvador's people FIRST."<sup>9</sup> These messages of support—including several in English—that appear beside images and videos from CECOT, advance the appearance of enthusiastic public support from audiences at home and abroad.

The government's billing of CECOT as the "largest in the Americas" (Cristosal 2023, 44) is in line with Bukele's other proclamations of grandeur. He promised that the hospital he would build in response to COVID-19 would be "the largest of Latin America" (it was ultimately left partly unfinished; Romero 2021) and manipulated public perception of crime statistics to assert that El Salvador is the "safest country in Latin America" (*El Salvador in English* 2022). Likewise, the creation of CECOT was announced just ten days after Bukele widely publicized the announcement that El Salvador had gone "300 days without a homicide."<sup>10</sup> This announcement willfully ignored dozens of confirmed prison deaths, fatalities during confrontations with the police or military (conveniently no longer counted among official statistics), and the growing number of individuals who had "disappeared." Clandestine graves discovered in El Salvador are deemed by Bukele's

<sup>8</sup> "Centro de confinamiento del terrorismo," posted by Nayib Bukele, YouTube video, 31:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuBjhrgYkdM>.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Stanczyk (@alexstanczyk), "The most successful reduction in murder rates in any nation in perhaps the history of the world," Twitter, February 24, 2023, retweeted by President Bukele (@nayibbukele); Mayra Flores (@mayraflores\_tx), "We need more presidents like @nayibbukele," Twitter, February 24, 2023, retweeted by President Bukele (@nayibbukele), <https://twitter.com/MayraFloresTX34/status/1629224104321552384>; Roger Stone (@RogerStoneJr), "President @nayibbukele has put an end to decades of gang violence and terrorism," Twitter, February 26, 2023, retweeted by President Bukele (@nayibbukele), <https://twitter.com/RogerJStoneJr/status/1630061937617780736>.

<sup>10</sup> Nayib Bukele (@nayibbukele), "¡Hemos llegado a 300 días sin homicidios!" Twitter, February 14, 2023, <https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1625636899401396224>.

government as matters of national security and the identities of their contents withheld from public view.

The relationship between misleading information and Salvadorans' sense of safety is key. As Chen and Xu (2017) discuss, the interaction between information manipulation and policy change under authoritarian regimes enables the appearance of the government's apparent willingness to take action—which is seen as improving citizens' everyday lives—to be used as a lever to make the public more disposed to believe that the information the government provides is trustworthy. Branding himself as invested in improving Salvadoran lives and amplifying evidence that Salvadorans believe this to be the case is central to Bukele's ability to be seen as trustworthy. This strategy is one way Bukele manages to sustain his popularity at home and abroad even in the midst of widescale democratic corrosion.

The month CECOT opened, Bukele triumphantly announced, "The Salvadoran opposition, its unions, its media, its NGOs, its experts; all came out yesterday, in UNISON, accepting the *total success* of our war against gangs."<sup>11</sup> But in an article titled "El Salvador Police Reports Contradict Bukele's Triumphalism," InSight Crime proffers details of more than a dozen reports from the National Civil Police that reveal the Salvadoran government believes more than forty-three thousand individuals profiled as gang members still remain at large in El Salvador, complicating the "total success" Bukele had announced (Valencia 2023). The increasingly widespread practice of publicizing reports that purposefully obfuscate factual country conditions advances the perception of Bukele's trustworthiness, as is clear through the lens of Chen and Xu (2017), and simultaneously leaves citizens without the information they need to gain an accurate picture of the state of exception.

Bukele's public "tough on gangs" approach, exemplified in the public relations campaign surrounding the opening of CECOT, pulls a rhetorical veil over several actions that suggest the Bukele administration's continued acquiescence to the gangs behind closed doors. Leaders in Bukele's administration have been resolute in their public communication about the government's determination to lock gang members up for life (Aleman 2023). But in fact, Bukele has a record of releasing gangs' high-ranking shot callers who are known to have committed serious violent crimes. InSight Crime revealed that between July 2021 and February 2022, the Bukele administration released four of the highest-ranking members of MS-13 from prison (Garcia 2022).

Further undercutting the plausibility of the Salvadoran government's ability to root out gang violence—and interest in doing so—are recordings of conversations between senior Bukele official Carlos Marroquín and MS-13 that were made public in May 2022 by *El Faro*. The recordings reveal that one of the gang shot callers was quietly released by Bukele's administration to show the administration's "loyalty and trustworthiness" to the gang (Martínez 2022). The data suggest that the Salvadoran government is more interested in creating an *appearance* of cracking down on violence in order to boost electoral popularity than it is in meaningfully protecting its citizenry.

A growing number of detainees are being rearrested immediately after being released on bail or after their cases are dropped, despite the fact that double jeopardy is illegal in El Salvador (Brigida 2023). These arrests give an appearance of the government's continued response to gang violence while in fact depriving of their liberty individuals whose sentences have been served or who have been found to be innocent. This disregard for existing laws further demonstrates the government's lack of interest in upholding in practice the democratic laws that exist on paper and greater interest in constructing the facade of their success.

<sup>11</sup> Nayib Bukele (@nayibbukele), "Esto tiene un nombre: ¡CAPITULACIÓN!", Twitter, February 4, 2023, <https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1622004983053811712>.

In an analysis of the Terrorism Confinement Center's design using satellite footage and published in the *Financial Times*, Christine Murray and Alan Smith calculate that if the prison were to reach its supposed full capacity of forty thousand, each prisoner would have just 0.6 meters (just under two feet) of space in shared cells—an amount the authors point out is less than half the space required for transporting mid-sized cattle under EU law (Murray and Smith 2023). Both Cristosal (2023) and Marvin Reyes, director of the Police Workers Movement in El Salvador, expressed doubt in a 2024 interview with Bishop that the prison truly has as much capacity as Bukele has touted. But the government has determined the details of CECOT's design, cost, and capacity as “under reserve,” so they are impossible to confirm (Cristosal 2023, 44). In lieu of releasing such empirical information, Bukele has instead invited more favorable attention, including offering carefully choreographed partial tours of CECOT to international influencers like the Mexican vlogger Luisito Comunica, who posted footage of his visit to his 42 million YouTube subscribers. In July 2024, Bukele invited the conservative former US congressman Matt Gaetz to CECOT; in the resulting video footage posted widely online, Gaetz stands in front of a cell of tattooed inmates and proclaims:

The people of the United States of America are very grateful for the State of Exception, and we're grateful that CECOT exists so that these criminals are not harming the people of El Salvador or harming the people of the United States. A lot of the people behind me would have found a way to make their way to the United States and harm Americans and we are grateful to President Bukele and his administration for establishing security and the state of exception.<sup>12</sup>

This highly coordinated public relations strategy is central to what Adam Isacson (2024), director of the Washington Office on Latin America's Defense Oversight program, calls Bukele's “authoritarian playbook”; by “flooding the zone” with a glut of admiring media attention, questions about what may not be visible fade in importance.

As Marvin Reyes revealed to Bishop during a 2024 interview, “Bukele . . . has brought journalists from many parts of the world and allows them to go and film and to document ‘what the prisons of El Salvador are like,’ but [CECOT] is a prison unlike the rest that are in completely inhumane conditions.” Indeed, the public look inside the prison offered in Bukele's international public relations campaign starkly contrasts with the near impossibility of seeing El Salvador's carceral spaces from any perspective other than the one offered by the government. The revoking of visitation rights for family members, attorneys, and, at times, even Bukele's own ombudsman's office (the entity responsible for investigating accusations of human rights abuses in prison) occludes the transparency that would threaten Bukele's ability to control the public narrative (US Department of State 2022, 4). The result is both prisoners' total isolation from the outside world and the world's inability to bear witness to the wide-scale human rights abuses taking place in these carceral spaces.

## Conclusion: Implications of Bukele's carceral regime in and beyond El Salvador

Bukele is using the state of exception as cover to make sweeping changes to the country's constitution and penal codes, taking advantage of the supermajority he holds in the Legislative Assembly after having ousted many of the former legislators to secure his continued authoritarian control. The opening of CECOT marks a key moment in El

<sup>12</sup> Nayib Bukele (@nayibbukele), “US Congressmen visit CECOT,” Twitter, July 21, 2024, <https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1815184818683904183>.



Salvador's alarming democratic decline. Its existence, the policies and practices used to govern it, and the multiplatform international public relations campaign Bukele developed to promote its success are representative of a national context in which the government is more concerned with consolidating power and maintaining popularity than protecting the human rights of its citizens. Minister of Justice and Public Security Gustavo Villatoro describes CECOT as "the biggest monument to justice we have ever built," but CECOT as the crowning achievement of the state of exception, when analyzed in the context of democracy and human rights, is more emblematic of the dismantling than the construction of the rule of law (BBC Mundo 2023).

Although some applaud Bukele's self-proclaimed cleanup of gang activity in formerly dangerous neighborhoods in the country, one must consider both the cost of these measures and the likelihood that superficial tactics like mass arrests can root out the gangs' decades-long rule. As we write this, hundreds of mothers and other family members are camped in makeshift dwellings outside the prisons, hoping to hear word of their loved ones inside. As they wait, they face harassment from prison officials, police, and gangs operating in the areas around the prisons, including threats from security officials that they may be arrested themselves if they do not "stop asking questions" (US Department of State, 2023, 5). In working-class communities, police and military personnel have taken over some predatory gang practices, including extortion and sexual exploitation of women and girls (Gellman 2024c). This carceral regime should not be confused with universal improvement in human security.

The state of exception clearly illustrates Levitsky and Ziblatt's description of autocrats using security threats to justify antidemocratic actions. Although Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 3) show that this most commonly occurs in subtle ways, with democracies "erod[ing] slowly, in barely visible steps," El Salvador's democratic rot has instead largely played out in highly visible, social media-based international public relations. Bukele's wielding of Twitter/X to invite global attention to highly coordinated spectacles like the opening of CECOT advances his hero narrative nationally and internationally. It also has implications for democracy around the globe precisely because of the accessibility of this public strategy to other national leaders in countries as disparate as France, Italy, Hungary, India, Argentina, and Brazil (Kaltwasser 2024; Pereira 2023; Zanotti and Roberts 2021).

International leaders from both sides of the political spectrum have lauded and attempted to emulate Bukele's brand of *mano dura*, as evidenced by Bukele-inspired efforts in Honduras and Ecuador. While politicians from Argentina, Chile, and Peru who have espoused *bukelismo* have had mixed success gaining support for and implementing copycat approaches, there is no question that the Bukele model has become "one of the most visible, popular, and influential brands in Latin America" (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara 2024, 85). This international popularity has normalized right-wing populist millennial authoritarianism as a viable alternative to democracy by reinforcing it through countless accolades across multiple platforms and reported on a global scale.

The power of the Bukele model lies not just in its physical force—that is, the militarization of the police and consolidation of authority to the executive branch that allows for the rounding up and imprisoning of entire swaths of the population—but in its narrative force. The firm hold over the global microphone that Bukele grappled for and now maintains is made possible by the rhetorical construction of a Twitter/X-based facade of broad success and manufactured support from key influential figures amplified by bots and trolls—a facade that all are forbidden to peer behind.

Once normalized in the public sphere, the harms of authoritarianism become more difficult to condemn persuasively. When privileged citizens survive the undoing of democracy personally unscathed, they become less invested in democracy as a necessary regime type. As some citizens grow accustomed to trading transparency for comfortingly repetitive news of their leader's successes, it becomes easier to comply than resist.



Security is not only about reality; it is also a game of perception. If people feel safer in their immediate environments, they might be more likely to overlook brutal stories of human rights abuses happening to others elsewhere. Such logic is hardly unique to El Salvador. It is also weaponized by right-wing populists from Donald Trump in the United States to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.

Until a more holistic approach is prioritized to address the root causes of violence in El Salvador, Salvadorans will continue to suffer a series of expensive and generally ineffective security plans that may fulfill political objectives but will not bring sustainable levels of safety. Transforming the culture surrounding gang and state violence requires more than a megaprison. The reality is that gang violence and state violence are deeply intertwined with cycles of poverty, lack of education, underemployment, systemic corruption, and impunity, not only in El Salvador but also in other countries looking to it as a model of how to improve human security. In the meantime, both domestic and international consumers of Bukele's rhetoric may be distracted by the noise of his public relations campaign to overlook the silences. We do so at our own peril.

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