

THESIS

THE HIGH COST OF STABILITY: SECURITY, CHARISMA, AND DEMOCRATIC
EROSION IN EL SALVADOR

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Daniela Salazar

Department of Political Science

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Master's Committee:

Advisor: Marcela Velasco

Daniel Weitzel
Carne Martin

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ABSTRACT

THE HIGH COST OF STABILITY: SECURITY, CHARISMA, AND DEMOCRATIC EROSION IN EL SALVADOR

Latin America has faced significant challenges associated with democratic erosion, including the weakening of institutions, the concentration of power, and certain restrictions on civil liberties. El Salvador, under the administration of Nayib Bukele, stands out as a relevant case due to the political dynamics that have emerged in recent years. While Salvadoran democracy has historically been fragile, recent changes have accelerated its deterioration at an unprecedented pace.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the causes of democratic erosion. My explanation is that three key factors, insecurity, leader charisma, and opposition fragmentation, have facilitated democratic erosion and the consolidation of authoritarian tendencies in this country. The central hypothesis is that these three factors have been decisive in shaping these political dynamics. Through a qualitative approach, the study will seek to evaluate this hypothesis by analyzing primary data, such as Bukele's speeches and the policies implemented under his administration, as well as secondary sources, including academic reports and reports from non-governmental organizations. Based on these premises, this research does not seek to categorically classify the Salvadoran political system but rather to explore the factors that have shaped it. This analysis will not only contribute to a better understanding of the specific case of

El Salvador but will also provide relevant insights for studying similar processes in other Latin American countries and around the world.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my country, El Salvador, the place that saw me grow and shaped who I am. I am deeply proud to be Salvadoran, and it is my hope that this work contributes, even in the smallest way, to the ongoing conversations about democracy, justice, and the future of our nation. El Salvador is a land of resilience, history, and hope, and it deserves a future where democracy and justice are not just ideals, but realities for all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
Chapter 1: LITERATURE REVIEW	1
Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY.....	10
Chapter 3: HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT.....	16
Chapter 4: INSECURITY AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY.....	22
Chapter 5: THE LEADER’S CHARISMA AND ITS ROLE IN POWER CONSOLIDATION .	34
Chapter 6: FRAGMENTATION OF THE OPPOSITION	47
Chapter 7: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS.....	55
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	59
LIST OF INTERVIEWS.....	64
APENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	65

Chapter 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Democratic Erosion: Definition and Key Factors

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2020) warn that autocracies do not emerge overnight; rather, they are gradually constructed when leaders transform democratic institutions into partisan tools. This process weakens institutional independence, tilts the political playing field in favor of those in power, and undermines democratic competition. To understand how democratic erosion occurs, it is crucial to define democracy and what its decline entails. Additionally, it is essential to explore the strategies used by authoritarian leaders to weaken democratic systems. Various scholars have examined this phenomenon, establishing a theoretical framework for analyzing democratic decline in different contexts.

Haggard and Kaufmann (2021) define democratic erosion as the gradual degradation of fundamental democratic institutions, norms, and rules—a process driven by legitimately elected governments. They identify three interconnected factors that explain this dynamic. First, social and political polarization undermines governance and trust in institutions, facilitating the radicalization of ruling parties or the rise of anti-system forces. Second, the consolidation of power by authoritarian-leaning leaders depends on their ability to neutralize legislative checks, thereby weakening the separation of powers. Finally, democratic erosion occurs gradually, allowing rulers to accumulate power without triggering an immediate reaction, making institutional damage difficult to reverse.

Levitsky (2018) complements this analysis by highlighting that public outrage against traditional parties is often a catalyst for democratic collapse, as corruption, mismanagement, and the failure to address social issues deepen the crisis of trust in the political system. In Latin America, numerous examples illustrate this phenomenon: in Mexico, the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) faced record homicide rates and corruption scandals; in Brazil, the Lava Jato operation exposed one of the largest bribery schemes in history, affecting political leaders across multiple countries in the region.

Another key factor is extreme inequality, which, while not always leading to democratic collapse, deteriorates the quality of democracy and increases perceptions of injustice. In Latin America, structural inequality affects access to power and justice, weakening the legitimacy of institutions. According to Levitsky, the weakening of traditional political parties creates a vacuum that facilitates the rise of populist and authoritarian leaders, who capitalize on polarization and public discontent.

Populism, Authoritarianism, and Popular Support

Populism plays an ambivalent role in the processes of democratic erosion. Jeremy Webber (2023) argues that populism is an essentially contested concept, as it shares elements with democracy, such as popular representation and distrust toward elites. However, populist movements often cross the thin line between democratic participation and authoritarian consolidation. One of the defining characteristics of populism is binary antagonism, in which the leader presents themselves as the true representative of the people against corrupt elites. Nely Arenas (2016) expands on this concept by exploring the relationship between charisma and populism. Although charisma is a common factor in populist leadership, Arenas argues that it is

not an indispensable requirement. What is essential is the "populist rupture," that is, the leader's ability to embody society's unmet demands and channel discontent in their favor.

Charisma is defined as an extraordinary quality attributed to an individual figure, perceived by their followers as possessing exceptional, sometimes even supernatural or heroic, abilities that set them apart from the average citizen. What is essential, according to Weber, is not the objective possession of unique traits, but the public's subjective recognition of such traits.

Michael Bernhard (1996) complements this by emphasizing that charismatic leadership often emerges in contexts of crisis or radical change, and that its success lies in the leader's ability to symbolize a rupture with the past. However, Bernhard also warns that charisma is a strained phenomenon, difficult to sustain over time unless it is institutionalized through rational-legal norms. Within this framework, charisma is not merely a matter of personality but it also reflects the social and political dynamics that make it possible and keep it alive.

Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman (2020) distinguish between two types of dictatorships. Open dictatorships rely on visible repression and the use of ideology to justify control. Informational autocracies, on the other hand, mimic democracies and employ more subtle strategies, such as covert censorship and media manipulation, to maintain legitimacy. These authors also identify four essential factors that explain popular support for authoritarian regimes. First, repression generates either fear or indignation, depending on the nature of the regime. While fear predominates in open dictatorships, in informational autocracies, repression can become counterproductive if citizens perceive it as contradicting the official discourse. Second, government performance plays a crucial role, as even in authoritarian regimes, the population evaluates the government based on its effectiveness in key areas such as the economy and

security. If the regime achieves stability and growth, it can gain support despite its democratic deficit.

Another key factor is informational manipulation. In open dictatorships, censorship and propaganda are evident, whereas in informational autocracies, manipulation is more sophisticated, using digital media and social networks to influence public opinion. Finally, political cycles and controlled elections allow many authoritarian regimes to organize fraudulent elections to simulate competition. During these processes, governments intensify propaganda and offer economic benefits to reinforce their image of legitimacy. These mechanisms enable authoritarian regimes to maintain power while minimizing the political cost of overt repression.

Institutional Instrumentalization and Opposition Fragmentation

Chacín Fuenmayor and Giancarlo Leal Orozco (2019) examine the crisis of democracy in Latin America since the 1990s, focusing on the rise of personalist leaders such as Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.

Although all of them came to power through competitive elections, their populist and authoritarian practices weakened democratic institutions. One of the key mechanisms in this process is the instrumentalization of the judiciary. In these regimes, the judicial system has been used to legitimize arbitrary decisions, eliminating its independence and turning it into an arm of the government. Additionally, indefinite reelection and restrictions on civil and political rights have been recurrent strategies to perpetuate power under a guise of legality.

The analysis of these cases reveals that democratic erosion in Latin America follows a common pattern: the concentration of power in the hands of charismatic leaders, the weakening of oversight institutions, and the manipulation of public opinion to sustain regime legitimacy. The

study of democratic erosion shows that this phenomenon does not occur abruptly but progressively, as leaders weaken institutions from within. Factors such as polarization, the crisis of traditional parties, populism, and informational manipulation play a central role in this process. Latin America is particularly illustrative, as it has been a laboratory for authoritarianism with some elements of democracy. The instrumentalization of the judiciary, selective repression, and control of information are key strategies that have enabled the consolidation of autocratic tendencies. This theoretical framework is essential for understanding democratic decline in the region and lays the groundwork for analyzing specific cases, such as El Salvador under Nayib Bukele's administration.

Theoretical Framework

This research builds on the theoretical foundations of democratic erosion and authoritarian consolidation, situating the case of El Salvador within broader debates on hybrid regimes and the mechanisms through which democratically elected leaders gradually weaken democratic institutions. Through the literature on democratic backsliding, populism, and institutional weakening, this theoretical framework establishes the conceptual basis for analyzing Nayib Bukele's government.

Democratic erosion refers to the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, often through legal mechanisms. Unlike abrupt regime collapses or military coups, democratic erosion is an incremental process that makes resistance and intervention more difficult, as it operates within the formal structure of democracy (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). The decline of judicial independence, the suppression of political opposition, and the restriction of civil liberties are some of the key indicators of this process.

On the other hand, authoritarian consolidation occurs when power becomes progressively concentrated in the executive branch, eroding institutional checks and minimizing opposition. While these regimes maintain some democratic elements, such as elections or legislative bodies, their democratic nature is weakened through the co-optation of institutions and the restriction of real political competition (Guriev & Treisman, 2020). In the case of El Salvador, Bukele's government has exhibited clear authoritarian tendencies, including control over the judicial system, the legislative assembly, and political discourse.

Key Factors in Democratic Erosion in El Salvador

Three interconnected factors contribute to democratic erosion and the consolidation of authoritarian power in El Salvador: charismatic leadership, insecurity as a tool for power accumulation, and opposition fragmentation. These elements align with broader theoretical debates on how elected leaders can manipulate crises and institutional weaknesses to concentrate power.

1. Charismatic Leadership and Populist Mobilization

Populist leaders often rely on charismatic authority to legitimize their power, presenting themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of "the people" against corrupt elites (Arenas, 2016; Webber, 2023). Bukele has cultivated a highly personalist leadership style, using social media to communicate directly with the population and bypass institutional checks, projecting himself as the sole guarantor of national stability. This aligns with Levitsky's (2018) argument that charismatic leaders capitalize on public discontent with traditional parties to justify the erosion of democratic norms.

According to Max Weber's sociological theory, charisma is conceived as a form of legitimate domination based on an extraordinary quality attributed to a leader, which generates an intense emotional connection with their followers. However, as Michael Bernhard (1996) warns, charismatic leadership is inherently unstable and highly dependent on exceptional circumstances. Its durability and compatibility with democracy rely heavily on its ability to become institutionalized. When such constraints are absent, charisma can lead to authoritarianism, as it allows for a concentration of power justified by the direct connection between leader and people. This conceptualization can be useful for analyzing hybrid regimes, where charismatic leadership becomes a vehicle to undermine institutional checks without formally dismantling the democratic structure.

In El Salvador, Bukele has turned digital platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) into key tools for constructing his narrative of fighting corruption and insecurity, reinforcing his image as an indispensable leader. This rhetorical strategy reflects historical patterns in which leaders centralize power under the justification of exceptional governance.

2. Insecurity and the Justification of Exceptional Measures

The perception of insecurity plays a crucial role in justifying authoritarian measures. Haggard and Kaufman (2021) argue that crises allow leaders to implement policies that expand executive power. Bukele's government has used the country's historically high crime rates as justification for establishing a state of exception, militarizing public security, and suspending constitutional guarantees. By framing gang violence as an existential threat (which is not to say that is not), Bukele has successfully justified mass incarceration without due process. This follows a pattern observed in other hybrid regimes, where leaders exploit public fear to weaken institutional checks and consolidate executive power (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The securitization of the

government also serves to minimize dissent, as critics of the regime's policies can be labeled as sympathizers of criminal groups.

3. Fragmentation of the Opposition and Institutional Weakening

A weak or fragmented opposition facilitates democratic erosion by failing to offer a viable alternative to authoritarian consolidation. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) highlight how political polarization and institutional decay contribute to opposition parties' inability to counteract the expansion of executive power. In El Salvador, the lack of unity and coherence among opposition groups has allowed Bukele to dominate political discourse without effective resistance, or at least not a strong one. The 2021 legislative elections granted his party, Nuevas Ideas, a significant majority, enabling him to dismantle judicial independence and pass legal reforms in his favor. As Haggard and Kaufman (2021) warn, democratic backsliding accelerates when opposition forces fail to articulate an effective response, whether due to internal divisions or government-imposed restrictions.

Causal Model: The Interaction of Key Factors

The theoretical model proposed in this research argues that charismatic leadership, public insecurity, and opposition fragmentation interact to drive democratic erosion. These elements reinforce each other in a cycle that consolidates executive power while weakening institutional checks. Charismatic leadership is used to construct narratives that justify authoritarian tendencies. Insecurity serves as an excuse for power concentration, legitimizing exceptional measures. Finally, opposition fragmentation reduces democratic accountability and enables governance with little to no restrictions.

These factors do not operate in isolation; rather, they create a feedback loop in which each one amplifies the effects of the others. For instance, increasing insecurity strengthens Bukele's charisma by allowing him to present himself as the only leader capable of restoring order. At the same time, a divided opposition fails to counter this narrative, facilitating the continued erosion of democracy.

This theoretical framework provides a structured basis for analyzing democratic erosion and the consolidation of authoritarian power in El Salvador. By situating Bukele's government within broader debates on populism, securitization, and institutional weakening, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how authoritarian-leaning leaders emerge and persist. Additionally, this approach highlights the importance of studying democratic erosion as a gradual and multifaceted process. As Flyvbjerg (2006) points out, case studies allow for a detailed analysis of complex political phenomena, generating findings that can be applied to other contexts where democratic institutions are under pressure. While El Salvador represents a specific case, the mechanisms identified, such as charismatic leadership, the use of insecurity as a political tool, and opposition fragmentation, resonate with patterns observed in other elected democracies with authoritarian tendencies in Latin America and the world.

Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY

For this research, a single-case study was determined to be the most suitable approach. A single-case study allows for a detailed and context-specific analysis of democratic erosion in El Salvador, something that might be lost in broader comparative studies. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that this approach is key to understanding complex political phenomena, as it enables an in-depth examination of the differentiated impact of authoritarian policies on specific institutions, such as the judicial system and the media. Rather than addressing general trends in the region, this study focuses on the internal mechanisms that facilitate power consolidation within an electoral-democratic regime.

Despite their limitations, case studies can be strengthened through multiple observations and the use of analytical tools such as process tracing (King, Keohane & Verba, 2021). This method allows for tracking how measures such as the state of exception and judicial reforms have affected El Salvador's democratic structure. Additionally, analyzing subunits within the country, such as judicial independence, institutional trust, and perceptions of security, provides a more nuanced understanding of the effects of these policies. In this sense, this study is both explanatory and descriptive, as it not only seeks to identify the causes and mechanisms of democratic erosion in El Salvador but also to document its manifestations and consequences.

Finally, this study aims to transcend the Salvadoran case by contributing to the broader debate on democratic erosion in Latin America. As Flyvbjerg argues, case studies not only generate contextual knowledge but can also help develop generalizable hypotheses. By analyzing El

Salvador as a representative case of authoritarian trends in the region, this study may offer lessons applicable to other countries with similar dynamics, such as Nicaragua or Venezuela.

Data Collection

To ensure the robustness of the analysis, this study will combine diverse primary and secondary data sources. Data triangulation will enhance the validity of the analysis by examining the phenomenon from different perspectives.

Primary Sources

The study incorporates official presidential speeches, both formal and informal, to analyze how Bukele constructs his political discourse in different settings. These speeches include statements from international forums, press conferences, and legislative addresses, allowing for an assessment of how his rhetoric shifts depending on the audience. Additionally, as social media is Bukele's main communication channel, discourse analysis of his posts on X (formerly Twitter) will be carried out. A representative sample of posts will be grouped topically (security, corruption, foreign relations, etc.), and public engagement metrics (likes, retweets, and comments) will be analyzed. This analysis will clarify how Bukele presents his policies and how his rhetoric is interpreted by both his followers and critics.

In addition, government policies, including judicial reforms, constitutional changes, and security measures, will be examined to evaluate their implications for democratic institutions. Beyond the state of emergency, specific policies related to judicial independence, legislative oversight, and civil liberties will be analyzed to assess the extent to which democratic erosion is becoming institutionalized. Official data will also be gathered, focusing on homicide rates, public security perceptions, and voter turnout. Public opinion polls, in addition to government statistics, will be

included to measure how the general public perceives Bukele's leadership. These surveys will help contextualize Bukele's high approval ratings and determine whether they are linked to specific policy outcomes or broader ideological shifts within Salvadoran society.

Secondary Sources

To cross-reference official narratives, this study will rely on reports from human rights organizations and international bodies, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the United Nations, and Reporters Without Borders. These organizations have extensively documented human rights violations, concerns over judicial independence, and restrictions on the press under Bukele's government.

Additionally, media coverage from both national and international outlets will be analyzed to examine how Bukele's policies are portrayed in different contexts and locations. Given that media ownership and press freedom have been contentious issues in El Salvador, this analysis will also assess the extent to which journalistic independence has been affected by government pressure. Furthermore, previous academic analyses and comparative case studies on authoritarianism in Latin America will serve as reference points to place El Salvador within a broader theoretical and regional framework. This will help determine whether Bukele's government follows established patterns of democratic backsliding or represents a novel case.

Interviews

This study will conduct interviews with Salvadoran citizens to gather qualitative insights from those experiencing Bukele's policies firsthand. To ensure a diversity of perspectives, selected participants will vary in age, profession, socioeconomic background, and political engagement levels. The qualitative interviews will focus on three main thematic axes: 1) perceptions of

security and the impact of the state of exception, 2) the construction of Nayib Bukele's political image and his use of social media, and 3) the institutional impact on Salvadoran democracy. Participants were asked about their experiences, perceptions, and future expectations regarding these topics. The full list of questions can be found in Appendix II. These interviews aim to provide bottom-up perspectives that will complement the top-down analysis of government policies and elite discourse. Responses will be thematically coded to identify common narratives and variations in public opinion.

Data Analysis

The analysis will be conducted through a thematic and chronological framework, employing discourse analysis and data triangulation. The discourse analysis will focus on Bukele's rhetorical strategies, particularly how he uses fear-based narratives to justify policies and construct legitimacy. His speeches and social media posts will be categorized under different themes, such as national security, anti-corruption discourse, and international relations. Furthermore, Interviews will be coded thematically to identify patterns in public perception. A comparison will be made between respondents' views and official government claims to highlight discrepancies or areas of alignment. Furthermore, temporal comparisons will track how Bukele's rhetoric and policy approach have evolved, particularly in response to domestic opposition, international criticism, or shifts in political strategy.

Limitations

While this study provides a detailed analysis of democratic erosion in El Salvador, it is important to acknowledge its methodological limitations. The use of a single case study, while allowing for an in-depth examination of the country's political transformation, limits the generalizability of

findings to other contexts. Even though multiple observations within the case, such as institutional, legal, and social dimensions, help mitigate this limitation, the results may not be directly transferable to countries with different political, economic, or cultural dynamics. However, given that El Salvador shares similarities with other Latin American nations experiencing democratic backsliding, the study offers insight that may be applicable to comparable contexts.

Another limitation is the reliance on official data and secondary sources, which may be biased or incomplete. For instance, government statistics on security improvements and official speeches often serve to reinforce a favorable narrative of the administration. Similarly, international reports and journalistic sources may have their own biases depending on their political stance. To address this, this study employs data triangulation, cross-referencing multiple sources, including independent investigative journalism, NGO reports, and academic studies, to ensure a more balanced and objective analysis. Nevertheless, the risk of subjectivity in interpretation cannot be entirely erased.

In addition, although interviews can enrich the research, it also presents challenges. Particularly in a politically polarized environment like El Salvador. Fear of retaliation or social stigma may lead participants to self-censor or provide socially desirable responses. To mitigate this, full anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured if they wish. Also, participants will be selected from diverse backgrounds, varying in political views, socioeconomic status, and geographic location, to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives.

Ultimately, the political landscape in El Salvador is continuously evolving, meaning some findings may become outdated as new developments unfold. Thus underscores the need for ongoing research and monitoring to fully assess the long-term implications of Nayib Bukele's

policies on democratic institutions. Despite these challenges, this study aims to provide a rigorous and balanced analysis by acknowledging its limitations and implementing methodological safeguards to enhance the reliability of its findings.

Chapter 3: HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The rise of Nayib Bukele and the evolution of El Salvador's political system cannot be understood without first analyzing the country's history of democracy and its moments of rupture. The 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords marked the end of the civil war and the beginning of a democratization process that, while allowing relatively free and competitive elections, failed to establish a robust democratic system. In the following decades, persistent corruption, institutional weakness, and the security crisis eroded public trust in the democratic model, paving the way for a political alternative that promised radical change. This chapter examines how these structural weaknesses facilitated the emergence of leadership like Bukele's and to what extent his consolidation of power represents a rupture or merely an acceleration of an ongoing process of democratic decline.

The Civil War

On January 10, 1981, insurgent forces of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) launched a large-scale military offensive against the Salvadoran government and the Armed Forces of El Salvador. This marked the formal beginning of a conflict that would last twelve years. Although the war had been anticipated by many due to the country's growing political and social crisis, its outbreak was not merely an inevitable consequence of history but rather the result of specific factors that made a peaceful resolution unviable.

According to Ignacio Martín's analysis, two key factors precipitated the civil war. First, the total closure of political space. Throughout 1980, the military-dictatorial government of the Revolutionary Government Junta, in an attempt to suppress opposition, drastically restricted

political activity through violent repression, media censorship, and repressive legislation. A State of Siege was declared, prohibiting political gatherings and limiting press freedom. Additionally, peaceful protests were criminalized under charges of “terrorism,” strikes and unions were banned, and the government authorized the unrestricted use of force against dissenters. Political persecution reached its peak with the kidnapping and assassination of six leaders of the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), an event that demonstrated the impossibility of democratic opposition operating within the system.

Second, the internal crisis of the government. The Junta not only faced armed opposition but was also internally fractured. Colonel Adolfo Majano, one of the Junta’s members, clashed with the regime’s more right-wing factions, gradually losing power. Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan’s election in the U.S. strengthened El Salvador’s far-right, which viewed military repression as the only way to contain the insurgency. The international situation further deteriorated when Salvadoran security forces murdered four American nuns, a crime that sparked global outrage and forced the Jimmy Carter administration to temporarily suspend military aid to El Salvador. Although this measure was largely symbolic, since assistance was never fully suspended, it exposed the regime’s brutality and undermined its international legitimacy.

These factors created the perfect conditions for armed insurrection. In December 1980, the FMLN publicly announced a general offensive, calling on the population to prepare. In response, the government intensified its military operations nationwide, deployed troops, and reinforced official propaganda to downplay the insurgent threat. However, on January 10, 1981, the FMLN executed a simultaneous offensive in multiple cities, demonstrating a level of organization and operational capability that took both the Salvadoran Armed Forces and the United States by surprise. Although the insurgents did not achieve immediate victory, this offensive marked the

beginning of the civil war, solidifying the FMLN as a serious military force and prolonging a conflict that would shape El Salvador's political future, perhaps forever.

The Democratic Transition: The Chapultepec Peace Accords

After twelve years of armed conflict, which left thousands dead and wounded, the Chapultepec Peace Accords marked the end of hostilities between the Salvadoran government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Facilitated by the United Nations (UN), this agreement was signed on January 16, 1992, officially ending the armed conflict and laying the foundation for the democratic transition (Álvarez & Barrera, 2016).

Following the signing of the accords, key reforms were implemented, including the demilitarization of the police, the creation of a multiparty system, and the establishment of relatively free and competitive elections. One of the most significant changes was the transformation of the FMLN from a guerrilla group into a legal political party, allowing it to formally participate in the democratic system. However, this transition was not without tensions. According to Álvarez and Barrera (2016), the party underwent not only a structural redefinition but also an ideological shift, moving away from Marxism-Leninism toward a stance closer to social democracy.

Another central objective of the peace process was the institutionalization of democratic electoral mechanisms, allowing for political competition under conditions of pluralism and relative fairness. Between 1994 and 2006, seven electoral processes took place, including five legislative and municipal elections and three presidential elections (Ramos & Loya, 2008). However, despite the opening of the political system, El Salvador consolidated itself as a bipartisan country, dominated by ARENA (the right-wing ruling party) and the FMLN (the former guerrilla

and main opposition party). Both parties captured the majority of votes in presidential, legislative, and municipal elections, limiting the growth of third-party alternatives.

Although other parties have competed in elections in the post-conflict period, in practice, the electoral system has maintained a bipolar competition model, where ARENA and the FMLN alternated power since the signing of the peace accords. This demonstrates that while the Peace Accords enabled the consolidation of a competitive electoral system, the political dynamic failed to overcome the polarization inherited from the civil war, thus solidifying a deeply ideologically divided democratic model.

Post-Conflict Violence

Despite the hope that the peace accords generated among Salvadoran citizens, violence remained one of the country's primary problems. Crime, organized crime, and drug trafficking threatened national stability, weakening democratic progress. A key factor in this crisis was the rise of youth gangs, or “maras”, which gained greater influence after the armed conflict. Since 2003, governments have implemented *mano dura* (iron fist) programs to combat them. However, by 2007, the Juvenile Justice Unit of the National Civil Police (PNC) revealed that an increasing number of minors were involved in crimes, particularly extortion. According to Ramos & Loya (2008), one of the gangs’ main strategies was recruiting children and teenagers, who were used to collect extortion payments since they faced shorter sentences compared to adults.

Although the civil war had ended, violence did not decrease. In fact, homicides increased from 8,019 in 1996 to 8,281 in 1998, surpassing the average number of annual deaths during the civil war, which was estimated at 6,330 (Garzón, Avellaneda & Montoya, 2014). In other words, peacetime violence proved deadlier than the conflict itself.

According to some post-conflict studies, the rise in criminality was linked to the weakening of state institutions, the loss of credibility in the justice system, and corruption within the government. Additionally, the lack of access to education and employment, combined with the absence of effective reintegration and social development policies, allowed gangs to expand. They became an alternative source of identity and economic support for many young people. The lack of follow-through on peace processes, coupled with social exclusion and the state's weak presence in marginalized communities, facilitated the evolution of these groups into full-fledged criminal organizations, establishing a new cycle of structural violence in El Salvador (Garzón, Avellaneda & Montoya, 2014).

Conclusions

Throughout its history, El Salvador has undergone a series of political transformations that led it to adopt an electoral democratic system. However, as examined in this chapter (and as will be further explored in the following ones), one could argue that Salvadoran democracy never fully consolidated. Its development remained trapped in a highly polarized bipartisan model, with fragile institutions and a judicial system weakened by corruption and a lack of independence.

While the crisis of representation and distrust in democracy began before Bukele, his rise to power marks a turning point. Unlike his predecessors, Bukele has managed to radically reconfigure the political system, concentrating power in the executive and dismantling institutional checks at an unprecedented speed. The capture of the Legislative Assembly, the weakening of the judiciary, constitutional changes allowing reelection, the implementation of highly controversial security policies, among other actions, have taken democratic erosion to an unprecedented level.

In this context, this research will analyze how these changes have been possible and what dynamics have facilitated the consolidation of a leadership that challenges traditional democratic principles. Because while El Salvador never had a fully stable democracy, recent transformations have altered the rules of the game, bringing the country closer to a model where the line between democracy and authoritarianism becomes increasingly blurred.

Chapter 4: INSECURITY AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY

"To some extent, violence has been normalised. For much of its history, this small country has suffered levels of murder unimaginable almost anywhere else outside of wartime, primarily due to turf battles and revenge killings by the Mara Salvatrucha (better known as MS-13), and Barrio 18, which is split into two factions."

— The Guardian, 2015

In 2015, El Salvador Became the Most Violent Country in the Western Hemisphere. With 6,650 homicides in a single year and a murder rate of 103 per 100,000 inhabitants (InSight Crime, 2015), the security crisis became the country's most urgent problem. Homicidal violence reached levels comparable to war zones, with gangs, primarily Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, emerging as central actors in the fight for territorial control and the extortion of entire communities. Insecurity ceased to be merely an issue of organized crime and became an everyday reality that shaped the lives of millions of Salvadorans.

The roots of the gang phenomenon run deep, stemming from historical, socioeconomic, and political factors that have shaped the country for decades. According to José Miguel Cruz (2009), the first Salvadoran gangs emerged in the 1960s as an urban phenomenon linked to social marginalization and industrialization. However, it was not until the 1980s, in the midst of a civil war, that these groups began consolidating in the poorest neighborhoods most affected by the armed conflict. Many of these gangs established connections with guerrilla groups, operating on the thin line between criminal activity and political struggle.

The end of the civil war in 1992 did not bring the anticipated peace. On the contrary, the country faced a new form of violence, partly driven by migration and mass deportations from the United States. Thousands of young Salvadorans who had grown up in violent neighborhoods in Los Angeles and had joined gangs were deported without reintegration plans. Upon returning to El Salvador, they found a fertile ground to replicate the criminal dynamics they had learned in the U.S.: a weak state, fragile institutions, and widespread poverty. What initially began as a youth identity phenomenon and street protection soon evolved into organized criminal structures with a presence in multiple countries.

Nevertheless, while migration and deportation were key factors, they alone do not explain the expansion of gang activity. Social exclusion, lack of economic opportunities, and a limited education system played a fundamental role. According to Cruz and Fonseca (2017), 94% of gang members do not complete secondary education, and the vast majority come from low-income families. The “maras” became a refuge for those who found neither the state nor society to be a protective network. Through violence, gangs established their own governance system in marginalized communities, replacing state authority and regulating residents’ lives under their own rules.

Failed Security Efforts

Previous governments attempted to improve El Salvador’s security situation, but their efforts were inconsistent and, in many cases, ineffective. The strategies implemented achieved some temporary progress, but over time, they weakened, and the country once again faced high levels of violence. One of the most notorious attempts was the secretly negotiated truce between Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 during the administration of Mauricio Funes (FMLN). According to research by Walter Murcia (2015), this truce had an immediate impact on the

homicide rate, which dropped from 70 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011 to 41 in 2012. In exchange for reducing violence, the government granted benefits to the gangs, such as transferring their leaders to prisons with fewer restrictions and easing visitation policies in penitentiary centers.

However, the lack of transparency in the process generated a high level of distrust among the population. According to a survey by the University Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP), 83% of Salvadorans distrusted the truce, and only 26% believed it was truly contributing to reducing violence. By 2014, the pact had significantly weakened, and homicides surged again (Murcia, 2015). When Salvador Sánchez Cerén took office in 2014, his government ended any negotiations with the gangs. Sánchez Cerén, also from the FMLN party, argued that truces not only failed to solve the problem but, on the contrary, allowed gangs to strengthen and expand their territorial control (InSight Crime, 2014).

At the same time, comprehensive approaches were promoted to address violence from its structural roots. These strategies were based on five main pillars: crime prevention, crime control, social reintegration, institutional strengthening, and victim support. While this strategy was promising, it never managed to consolidate due to the ongoing security crisis and public skepticism. Additionally, local-level prevention programs were designed to reduce crime, but a lack of coordination and resources limited their impact (Murcia, 2015).

Conversely, repressive strategies, such as the "mano dura" (iron fist) policies, focused on criminalizing gang membership and militarizing public security. However, these policies not only failed to reduce violence but, according to Cruz and Fonseca (2017), contributed to strengthening gangs by allowing them to consolidate their structures within prisons and expand their influence regionally. Trapped in a cycle of violence that seemed to have no viable solution,

Salvadoran citizens, desperate for change, found in Nayib Bukele a figure who represented an alternative to the failed security models of the past. Bukele promised to fulfill the public's primary demand: to eradicate violence once and for all.

The Security Strategies of Nayib Bukele: From Promise to Controversy

In 2019, Nayib Bukele, from the Nuevas Ideas (New Ideas) party, assumed the presidency of El Salvador with the promise of eradicating violence and restoring security in the country. A few days after taking office, he announced via the social network X a series of key strategies to combat crime, focusing on eliminating gang revenue streams, regaining territorial control in major cities, and intervening in penitentiary centers.

The first pillar of his strategy was to economically strangle the gangs. Bukele accused previous governments of financing these criminal groups and claimed that they had allocated up to 10 million dollars in negotiation attempts to reduce violence. According to data presented by his administration, approximately 80% of gang resources come from extortion, a model that has allowed these organizations to sustain their operations for years. In a conversation with BBC Mundo, analyst Martínez described this strategy as positive, as it focused on targeting the enterprises used for laundering money derived from extortion (BBC, 2019).

The second pillar of his security plan was the reclamation of control in the historic centers of major cities, places where, according to Bukele, gangs obtained much of their income by extorting merchants. He harshly criticized previous administrations for focusing operations on small communities rather than prioritizing strategic urban areas where most crimes occurred. As part of this plan, he announced the installation of security cameras and an increased police presence in these sectors.

Lastly, the third pillar focused on cutting off communications within prisons, from where, according to the government, more than 60% of homicides and extortions are ordered. Bukele promised to coordinate with telecommunications companies to ensure that signals are blocked in penitentiary centers and to carry out a "purge" of prison guards, arguing that some had been co-opted by corruption.

The Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT)

One of the most representative milestones of Nayib Bukele's security strategy occurred in 2023 with the inauguration of the Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT), a mega prison with a capacity for 40,000 inmates. This penitentiary, guarded by more than 600 members of the Armed Forces and 250 police officers, was presented as a definitive solution to isolate "terrorists" from the outside world. According to the Minister of Public Works, the CECOT is the largest prison in the Americas and features security measures that make any escape "technically impossible" (BBC, 2023). The impact of this penitentiary on crime figures has been significant. Since Bukele assumed the presidency in 2019, the homicide rate in El Salvador has experienced a drastic reduction, from 103 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 to only 2.4 in 2023.

Table 1: Homicide Rate in El Salvador (2014-2023)

(Statista, 2024.)

Year	Homicide Rate (per 100,000 inhabitants)
2014	68.6
2015	103.0
2016	81.2
2017	60.0

2018	51.0
2019	36.0
2020	19.7
2021	17.6
2022	7.8
2023	2.4

This change has transformed the perception of security in the country. This transformation has allowed citizens to move freely through areas that were previously considered inaccessible.

Small business owners who once suffered from extortion have stated that they can now operate without fear. A fifth-year psychology student recounted:

“There was more than just insecurity; there was a lot of violence directed at ordinary citizens. There were places known as areas where ‘one should never enter,’ where young people couldn’t wear certain types of clothing because it put them at risk, and businesses that disappeared because they could no longer afford to pay ‘rent.’ The most affected sectors were the poorest ones, where it was also easier for young people to join criminal groups at very early ages.”

However, the use of repression as the main security strategy in El Salvador is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it aligns with patterns identified in other countries experiencing democratic erosion. As Chacín Fuenmayor and Leal Orozco (2019) argue, the instrumentalization of the judiciary has been a recurring tactic in authoritarian regimes in Latin America, aimed at justifying repressive measures under an apparent legal framework. CECOT is not just a mass

detention center; it is also a political tool that reinforces Bukele's image as a leader who imposes order through absolute control over security.

Transformation of the Legal System

While it is undeniable that the reduction in crime has been a significant achievement, it is essential to analyze the mechanisms behind this change and its short- and long-term implications. On March 27, 2022, as part of the government's strategy to confront the surge in violence, the Legislative Assembly approved a series of reforms to the Penal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, and other regulatory laws. These modifications significantly transformed the country's judicial and penal system, establishing harsher sentences and eliminating previously existing procedural guarantees.

One of the most consequential changes was the elimination of alternative measures to detention for anyone accused of belonging to a gang or criminal group. Under this new legal framework, all suspects are automatically incarcerated, with no possibility of bail or substitute measures, leading to an unprecedented increase in the prison population. Additionally, the reforms introduced modifications to the Juvenile Penal Law, toughening penalties for minors involved in crimes related to criminal organizations. Under the new framework, adolescents aged 16 to 18 can be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison, while children as young as 12 can receive sentences of up to 10 years. Previously, the Juvenile Penal Law prioritized rehabilitation and social reintegration through measures such as counseling, family support, and supervised release. However, the government argued that gangs were actively recruiting minors to commit violent crimes and that harsher penalties were necessary. According to congresswoman Rebeca Santos, this reform sends a clear message to young people to "make responsible decisions" (Legislative Assembly, 2020).

The penal framework also became stricter for gang members and leaders. Prison sentences were increased to 20–30 years for members of these groups and 40–45 years for their leaders and financiers. Furthermore, anyone who promotes, facilitates, or collaborates with gangs can face a sentence of 20 to 30 years in prison. Additionally, the possibility of prison benefits was eliminated, meaning that those convicted of these crimes cannot request sentence reductions or reviews, regardless of their behavior or potential evidence of their innocence. While the government has defended these changes as a necessary mechanism to ensure public security, their impact has extended beyond the legal realm, affecting the country’s social and economic structure. Although the administration promotes these measures as an effective solution to the security crisis, their effects have gone beyond the penal system, impacting entire communities and raising questions about the balance between security and human rights.

The impact of the state of exception is clearly reflected in the drastic increase in the prison population. According to a BBC report, El Salvador now ranks second among the countries with the highest incarceration rates in the world, behind only the United States. *“One is the world’s largest economy, and the other is the smallest country in Latin America. And both have something in common: they top the list of nations with the highest incarceration rates in the world.”* (BBC, 2024) This means that El Salvador has more people in prison than regimes with severe restrictions on civil liberties, such as Venezuela or Nicaragua. It is worth questioning whether a country with limited resources can sustain this model in the long run without triggering a humanitarian and fiscal crisis.

Despite these drastic measures, Bukele’s approval ratings remain above 80%, according to recent polls. Political scientist José Miguel Cruz explains this phenomenon in terms of public acceptance of repression in exchange for security: *“They were so desperate over the levels of*

violence and gang control that they accepted this kind of deal with the devil.” (New York Times, 2023) This level of popularity suggests that the population prioritizes stability and security over democratic guarantees, a phenomenon observed in other countries where corrective populism has gained traction.

Economic and Social Impact of the Security Model

While the reduction in crime has generated benefits in certain sectors, Bukele’s security model also entails significant costs for both the state and society. One of the greatest achievements attributed to the state of exception has been the decline in extortion, a criminal practice that affected small business owners. Extortion, known as “*renta*”, severely restricted or even paralyzed informal commerce in many communities, and its elimination has allowed many businesses to operate with greater security. However, there are still no conclusive economic studies on whether this improvement in commercial activity has translated into sustainable macroeconomic growth. Additionally, while the reduction in homicides has been widely celebrated, mass incarceration has imposed a high fiscal burden on the state. During his visit to Costa Rica’s main prison, Bukele revealed that the government had built and equipped CECOT at a “very low” cost of \$115 million (La Prensa Gráfica, 2024). However, maintaining this facility and other prisons requires continuous investments, raising the question of whether the security model is economically sustainable in the long run.

The incarceration of thousands of individuals, most of them young men, has significantly impacted the labor market. Sectors such as construction, agriculture, and manufacturing, which rely on a large number of workers, have been affected by the lack of available labor. This reduction in the workforce could have negative effects on economic growth, particularly in activities dependent on the informal economy. Additionally, political uncertainty and the

increasing militarization of the country could raise concerns among foreign investors, who may perceive the concentration of power and the elimination of democratic checks and balances as a risk to institutional and economic stability. Although the government has promoted its security model as a guarantee for investment, international organizations have warned that the weakening of the rule of law could undermine confidence in El Salvador as an investment destination.

Social Consequences: Family Disintegration and Social Exclusion

The impact of the state of exception is not only reflected in the economy but also in the country's social structure. As previously mentioned, the mass detention of young men has not always been backed by conclusive evidence or the result of a proper judicial process. According to Amnesty International, thousands of people have been arrested based on anonymous reports or for simply living in areas previously controlled by gangs, without clear evidence of their involvement in criminal activities. As a result, numerous families have been torn apart, with women and children facing economic hardship after losing their primary breadwinner. This family separation exacerbates social exclusion and poverty, creating new vulnerabilities that could lead to cycles of violence in the future. In other words, while the state of exception has reduced street crime, it has also created a new crisis in the social structure of low income communities.

One of the most concerning effects of Bukele's security model is its impact on young people. Legal reforms have allowed minors to be prosecuted with sentences similar to those of adults, eliminating the previous rehabilitation-focused approach that promoted social reintegration. While the government has justified these measures as a way to deter teenagers from joining gangs, the lack of attention to prevention, education, and reintegration programs raises serious doubts about the long-term effectiveness of this strategy. The early criminalization of youth could lead to new generations of criminals emerging within the prison system, strengthening

organized crime structures rather than dismantling them. Without viable alternatives for labor or educational reintegration, young people serving long sentences may struggle to reintegrate into society, increasing the risk of recidivism and perpetuating the security crisis in the future.

International Reactions and Bukele's Response

Despite the reduction in the homicide rate, various human rights organizations have denounced that the measures implemented under the state of exception have generated a new form of violence: institutional violence. In June 2022, Amnesty International accused Salvadoran authorities of committing massive human rights violations, including arbitrary detentions, torture, and illegal deprivation of liberty. According to the organization's report, the state of exception and recent reforms to the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code have restricted the rights to legal defense, the presumption of innocence, effective judicial remedies, and access to an independent judge.

Amnesty International documented 28 cases of human rights violations through interviews with victims, relatives, human rights organizations, journalists, and justice system officials. The report denounces that thousands of people have been detained without meeting legal requirements, arrested without a court order or conclusive evidence. The conditions at the Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) have also sparked international controversy. According to BBC (2024), inmates live in extreme conditions: cells without mattresses or blankets, with minimal food rations consisting of rice, beans, and a hard-boiled egg. The prison, which covers an area equivalent to seven football stadiums, is surrounded by reinforced concrete walls, electrified fences, and monitored from 19 security towers. These conditions have been classified as inhumane by various international organizations. The president's security policies have ignited a global debate. Media outlets, journalists, and human rights organizations have condemned the

lack of due process as well as the conditions at CECOT. These concerns have also been expressed by political leaders, such as Colombia's President Gustavo Petro, who compared the prison to a concentration camp, highlighting the lack of rights and the extreme conditions of confinement.

In response to the criticism, Bukele has maintained a defiant stance, accusing the international community of protecting criminals while ignoring the decades of violence suffered by the Salvadoran population. In a speech, the president declared: We went from being the most insecure country in the world to the safest country on the entire American continent. And what did they say? That we are violating human rights. Whose human rights? Not those of honest people. Perhaps we prioritized the rights of honest people over the rights of criminals, that is the only thing we have done, and that is what you call violating human rights.

He also questioned the stance of international organizations and the media: I ask these organizations, these governments of foreign nations, I ask these journalists: why do you want us to be killed? Why do you want to see Salvadoran blood spilled? Why aren't you happy that in our country, blood no longer flows like it did before?

Nayib Bukele's security strategy has transformed the landscape of violence in El Salvador, drastically reducing crime and restoring a sense of security among citizens. However, the cost of this transformation has been high, with allegations of systematic human rights violations and a security model based on repression and mass incarceration. As the country moves forward in this new phase, the challenge lies in finding a balance between security and respect for fundamental rights.

Chapter 5: THE LEADER'S CHARISMA AND ITS ROLE IN POWER CONSOLIDATION

Arenas (2016) argues that charisma in political leadership is a central element of populism, allowing the leader to present themselves as the sole legitimate representative of the people against traditional elites. Webber (2023) reinforces this argument, emphasizing that populist leaders construct a narrative of “binary antagonism” in which their authority is not only based on a deep connection with the people but also on the demonization of their opponents. However, charisma is not inherently dangerous nor exclusive to leaders with authoritarian tendencies. Nonetheless, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) warn that these characteristic warrants attention in regimes experiencing democratic erosion, as it can enable leaders to justify power concentration through a discourse of exceptionalism.

In the case of Nayib Bukele, charisma has been a determining factor in his political rise and the consolidation of his government model. Using social media and communication strategies that emphasize closeness to citizens, Bukele has successfully built an image of an efficient leader capable of transforming the country without the obstacles of the traditional political system, particularly during his electoral campaign and the early stages of his administration. His discourse has emphasized the idea of a break from the past and the need for strong leadership to address the country's problems. As Guriev and Treisman (2020) point out, charisma in hybrid regimes not only reinforces the leader's legitimacy but also serves as a mechanism to divert attention from democratic erosion.

This phenomenon of leaders who challenge traditional parties is not exclusive to El Salvador. Alberto Fujimori in Peru (1990) and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1998) positioned themselves as

alternatives to the severe crisis of political representation in their respective countries. In both cases, their electoral success was partly due to public disenchantment with the traditional political system, economic difficulties, and violence, factors that facilitate the rise of populist leaderships (Montero, 2001; Shifter, 2006). Bukele follows a similar pattern, presenting himself as the only viable solution to the country's problems, which strengthens his popularity and allows him to consolidate power.

The Beginnings of Nayib Bukele: The Construction of a Political Image

Bukele's rise was not sudden. Before reaching the presidency, he had already established himself as a significant political figure in El Salvador. His career began within the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), with which he was elected mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán in 2012. During his tenure, he implemented scholarship programs for young people, improved the potable water supply system, and developed municipal infrastructure projects. In 2015, he won the mayoralty of the capital, San Salvador, where he promoted the renewal of public lighting with LED technology, the construction of community centers, and the improvement of recreational spaces (Government of El Salvador, 2024). These projects helped solidify his image as a politician invested in citizens' well-being and committed to improving their quality of life.

However, in 2017, he was expelled from the FMLN due to alleged internal disagreements with other party members. His critical stance toward the party leadership progressively distanced him from his political organization. Former party leaders claimed that Bukele never relied on the party's structures but instead built his own teams and managed independent resources with the support of his father, Armando Bukele (No Ficción, 2022). Additionally, a conflict with Xochitl Marchelli, a community leader representing the FMLN, was reported. She accused Bukele of

verbally assaulting her and throwing an apple at her during a municipal council meeting, but Bukele denied these allegations (BBC, 2019).

After his expulsion, he positioned himself as the leader of Nuevas Ideas, a movement that was initially unable to participate in elections due to registration issues as a political party. However, this did not stop his momentum. After navigating multiple legal and administrative processes, Nuevas Ideas was officially registered, and in 2019, Bukele won nearly 54% of the votes in the preliminary results (New York Times, 2019). His victory marked a turning point in Salvadoran politics, as he became the first president in over 30 years who did not belong to the two traditional parties: FMLN and ARENA.

Electoral Campaign and the Narrative of Change

One of the central elements of Bukele's campaign was his rhetoric against traditional elites and corruption. In his campaign closing speech, Bukele framed his candidacy as part of a historic struggle for social justice, stating:

This battle began when a farmer was denied his right to a decent home, when a vendor in Santa Tecla was murdered in cold blood, when a sixty-five-year-old teacher cannot retire and must continue working because she is denied the right to a dignified pension. It began when a single mother, head of household, had to work tirelessly to provide for her children everything that the state has denied them: healthcare, education, security, and a basic opportunity to get ahead. It began when fishermen and farmers could not sell their products at a fair price so that the same elites as always could become millionaires...

This battle began in our towns, in our streets, in our homes, in our families, in our history.

This battle is for every Salvadoran who has been ignored by previous governments, for

every Salvadoran who has had to migrate and leave everything behind. El Salvador has endured countless battles and hardships. But with God's help, El Salvador and Nuevas Ideas are invincible. The same old elites thought our people would never wake up; they tried to tell us that doing things right was impossible. Now they are trying to convince us that it is impossible to have a better country for ourselves, but they are still wrong. What was once impossible in El Salvador is now possible.

This inspiring speech constructs Bukele's image as the leader of a betrayed people, in direct opposition to the elites that have historically ruled the country. His narrative uses the economic crisis, insecurity, and corruption as key elements to justify the need for a break from the past and the establishment of a new political order. As Guriev and Treisman (2020) point out, charisma in hybrid regimes not only reinforces the leader's legitimacy but also serves as a mechanism to divert attention from democratic erosion.

Use of Social Media in Constructing His Image

A key factor in the consolidation of Bukele's charisma has been his strategic use of social media, particularly X. His direct communication with citizens has allowed him to project an image of accessibility and transparency, bypassing the "intermediation" of traditional media. "Without Twitter, there is no President Nayib Bukele; Americans can draw a parallel between Bukele and Trump's campaigns in how they use this social network," commented a medical student when asked about the role of social media in the president's political consolidation.

Since taking office, Bukele has used X not only as a platform to disseminate his policies but also as a space to attack the opposition and discredit those who criticize his government. An early example of this occurred in 2019, just days after assuming the presidency, when he announced a

wave of public sector layoffs via the platform. In a series of posts, he directly ordered the removal of officials linked to previous administrations:

“Ministers of Interior and Health, @marioduran1 and @AnaOrellanaB, are hereby ordered to remove Igor Fabricio Castro Ramirios, brother-in-law of Norma Guevara de Ramirios, from both his positions. He is currently working at the Ministry of Health and the National Lottery for Charity.” (Nayib Bukele on X, 2019). Within minutes, the ministers publicly responded, confirming that the order had been carried out.

In another similar post, Bukele instructed Foreign Minister Alexandra Hill Tinoco to fire Dolores Iveth Sánchez, daughter of former President Salvador Sánchez Cerén. The minister responded on the same platform: “Your order will be executed immediately, Mr. President.”

These incidents sparked divided reactions. While some supporters celebrated each dismissal as an anti-corruption measure, other analysts warned about the normalization of authoritarian practices. “What he is doing is an act of populist transparency that makes him appear as a vigilante fighting for the people, but in reality, he is undermining the rule of law, the legal framework, and the internal procedures for dismissals in each institution,” explained political scientist Rafael Molina (Barragán & Salinas, 2019). Despite the criticism, these events helped reinforce Bukele’s narrative as a redeeming leader fighting against corrupt political elites. While it is undeniable that corruption has been an endemic problem in previous governments, the way Bukele carried out these dismissals raised concerns about institutional weakening and the personalization of power.

Shaping His Image and Public Narrative

Bukele has sought to build and control his public image, projecting himself as an infallible leader. Through the social network X, he has used a direct communication style to strengthen his connection with citizens, minimizing the role of traditional media and avoiding any intermediation. His strategy has been clear, he rarely acknowledges mistakes and instead justifies his decisions with his achievements and the massive support he claims to have. This pattern has been especially evident when facing international criticism regarding alleged human rights violations. In a 2024 tweet, Bukele dismissed these accusations by comparing El Salvador's current situation with its past:

“From the world's murder capital to a ‘world-class tourist destination’ in just three years. Thank God.” The responses to this message were mostly supportive: “Something to admire, I wish all countries followed this example,” “Your story and conviction are nothing less than great!” “The Salvadoran people thank you, and the Latin American community admires you.” These comments reflect the success of his social media strategy, where he has cemented himself as a charismatic leader with a loyal base of followers who reinforce his narrative of success and transformation.

However, not everyone has been convinced by his discourse. In September 2021, thousands of Salvadorans protested against some of his most controversial measures, including the constitutional reform that allowed his reelection, the adoption of Bitcoin as legal tender, and the militarization of the country. Among the protesters' banners, messages read: “No to presidential reelection, no to Bitcoin, no to militarization, no to dictatorship!” and “Without judicial independence, there are no guarantees for the defense of human rights” (BBC, 2021). Despite the magnitude of the protests, Bukele downplayed them and delegitimized the demonstrators, accusing them of being funded by foreign interests. During his speech on the bicentennial of

independence, he stated that it was unfortunate that these groups were “protected by some friends from the international community” and that “they were financing a perverse opposition.”

Bukele also resorted to mockery as a strategy to discredit his critics. Instead of responding to accusations of authoritarianism seriously, he ironically referred to himself as “the coolest dictator in the world.” Later, while defending his administration against the protests, he insisted that his government does not suppress manifestations or protests like in countries where, according to him, real dictatorships exist. In his speech, Bukele emphasized: “Today, they fought against a dictatorship that does not exist. There were no police repressing them. There was no use of force. Nothing happened. And yet, they insist this is a dictatorship.” (BBC, 2021).

Although Bukele may argue that his government has not systematically repressed protests, the reasons behind these demonstrations, such as judicial control and militarization, are common characteristics of authoritarian regimes like Venezuela and Nicaragua. Thus, while he avoids the most overt methods of repression, he has dismantled institutional checks and weakened democratic guarantees without needing to resort to direct force.

This strategy of discrediting and victimization has been central to his political discourse. As Guriev and Treisman (2020) have pointed out, in hybrid regimes, a leader’s charisma not only reinforces their popularity but also serves as a shield against criticism, allowing them to divert attention from structural problems. Through his control of the narrative, Bukele has ensured that concerns about democratic erosion are perceived by his supporters as attempts at sabotage by his opponents or international actors with hidden agendas. His success on social media and his ability to manage public opinion have solidified an image of unquestionable leadership, despite clear signs of democratic erosion within his government.

Charisma and Reelection: The People's Mandate or a Democratic Challenge?

Bukele's charisma has not only strengthened his image as a leader close to the people but has also served as a shield to justify controversial decisions. His persuasive ability and his rhetoric of breaking with the past have been key to consolidating popular support for measures that, under different circumstances, might have faced stronger opposition. One of the clearest examples of this has been his strategy to enable his immediate reelection, despite the fact that the Salvadoran Constitution prohibited it. For decades, El Salvador maintained a clear constitutional rule that prohibited consecutive presidential reelection, a provision designed to prevent excessive concentration of power in a single person. However, with Bukele's rise to power and his near-total control over the Legislative Assembly, this principle was reinterpreted in his favor.

In May 2021, the Legislative Assembly, dominated by the ruling party Nuevas Ideas, removed the justices of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General. This move, widely criticized by the international community, was seen as a direct blow to judicial independence and paved the way for a reinterpretation of the Constitution that would allow immediate reelection. Up until that moment, Salvadoran jurisprudence had upheld that the prohibition on immediate reelection was categorical. However, the new justices, appointed by the Assembly under Bukele's control, overturned this interpretation, arguing that the prohibition did not prevent a president from seeking a second consecutive term, as long as he resigned six months before the election. This change laid the foundation for Bukele to announce his candidacy for the 2024 elections, further consolidating his power and challenging the established democratic principles in the country.

Critics and constitutional law experts have pointed out that this decision constitutes a fundamental alteration of the democratic rules of the game. Eduardo Escobar, director of Acción

Ciudadana, stated that “this ‘Constitutional Chamber’ is a group of lawyers imposed by the president, accompanying the decision of the Legislative Assembly, they were not legitimately appointed, they are not legitimately elected justices” (CNN, 2024). Similarly, Human Rights Watch has warned about the progressive elimination of checks and balances in El Salvador’s political system. According to the organization, Bukele and his party have pursued an agenda to eliminate virtually all controls over the Executive, resulting in an unprecedented concentration of power in the country’s recent history (HRW, 2021). Among the most concerning actions mentioned in their report are the removal of independent judges and prosecutors, the approval of laws granting immunity to government officials, and the repression of non-governmental organizations.

Bukele, however, has justified his reelection as a sovereign decision by the Salvadoran people. During his campaign for the 2024 elections, he repeatedly stated that change could not be achieved in just five years and that his government needed a second term to consolidate its reforms. Appealing to his support base, he insisted that his continuation in power was not a violation of the Constitution but rather a response to the will of the people. “The people have spoken,” he affirmed on multiple occasions. This argument has been central to his rhetorical strategy. By positioning himself as the executor of the people’s will rather than a leader seeking to perpetuate himself in power out of personal ambition, Bukele has managed to deflect criticism of democratic erosion in his government.

On February 6, 2024, Bukele announced his victory with a message that reinforced his image as an undisputed leader with absolute popular support: “According to our numbers, we have won the presidential election with more than 85% of the votes and a minimum of 58 out of 60

Assembly deputies. The record in the entire democratic history of the world. God bless El Salvador.” (Bukele on X, 2024).

This result was not only an electoral victory but also a show of power to the opposition and the international community. Some analysts interpreted the election as a reflection of Bukele’s total control over Salvadoran politics, where any attempt at opposition has been systematically weakened. Ricardo Zúniga, former special envoy of the U.S. State Department to Central America, described Bukele’s reelection as “a demonstration of power. They want to show that they can do it, that they have the popular support to do it, and they want everyone to resign themselves to it, no matter what the Constitution says” (New York Times, 2024).

In this context, various critics have warned that reelection and the concentration of power could intensify repression against the media, the opposition, and civil society. Throughout his administration, Bukele has used his charisma to discredit those who question him, portraying them as enemies of the country’s progress. His attacks on independent media and constant dismissals of international organizations have reinforced his narrative that criticisms of his government come from actors with hidden agendas rather than from legitimate concerns about the state of democracy in El Salvador.

Although Bukele insists that his government model remains democratic because it enjoys majority support from the population, his leadership style, based on personal charisma and the weakening of institutional checks, has brought El Salvador to an unprecedented situation in its democratic history. The line between democracy and authoritarianism has become increasingly blurred, and the country’s political future will largely depend on whether democratic institutions can withstand this concentration of power or if, on the contrary, a government model with distinctly autocratic traits becomes fully consolidated.

Charisma and the Personalization of Power

Nayib Bukele's charisma is not only reflected in his communication style or political discourse but also in the personal image he has strategically built to set himself apart from traditional leaders. From his clothing to his body language, everything appears calculated to project a modern, approachable, and accessible figure, far removed from the formalism of El Salvador's traditional political class. His attire, which varies between leather jackets, branded polo shirts, and caps (sometimes worn backward), gives him a more informal and youthful appearance, reinforcing his image as a disruptive politician. Unlike other presidents who prioritize formal attire, Bukele has cultivated a style more akin to that of a tech entrepreneur or an influencer, allowing him to connect with younger demographics and audiences who distrust conventional politicians.

This handling of his image is no coincidence but rather a key tool of his leadership. "He projects a positive image and leadership for the country, as his policies have put El Salvador on the world map," commented a merchant interviewed. His ability to control how he is perceived extends beyond his clothing, it is also evident in his oratory and how he handles political language. In his speeches, he avoids reading documents and prefers a fluid and spontaneous delivery, with strategic pauses and emphasis that strengthen his connection with the audience. Moreover, he employs parables and rhetorical figures to simplify complex problems, making his proposals easily understandable to the general public (Puig, 2024). This strategy has not only allowed him to maintain his audience's attention but has also reinforced the perception that he is a pragmatic and relatable leader, more focused on solving problems than theorizing about them.

His ability to improvise and persuade has enabled him to respond to criticism without losing control of the narrative, using irony and humor to deflect uncomfortable questions. Even when

accused of authoritarian practices, Bukele appropriates these criticisms and turns them into a rhetorical tool, such as when he dubbed himself “the coolest dictator in the world,” transforming an accusation into a political brand that reinforces his identity. However, for some Salvadorans, this strategy is merely a facade. “It’s easy to sell yourself as ‘the coolest president in the world’ to a population with limited access to education and such a weak educational system,” said a psychology student interviewed. “If you can convince people that reviving mining will give every citizen access to gold and not just the wealthiest, you can convince them of anything.”

This charisma-based leadership also carries risks. Unlike political systems built on strong institutions, Bukele’s model relies heavily on his popularity and his ability to maintain public support through a narrative of transformation. His leadership has centralized power around his persona, minimizing the role of political parties and weakening institutional checks and balances. However, excessive dependence on a single figure can create legitimacy crises in the future. In countries where charismatic leadership has been the cornerstone of power, the leader’s downfall often results in severe governance crises.

As political scientist Laura Chinchilla (BBC, 2024) points out, Bukele has justified many of his decisions by arguing that the majority supports him, which creates a dangerous precedent. “We already know from history that leaders who rely on sometimes highly fanatical majorities end up leading to extreme scenarios, even in nations with stronger institutions than El Salvador.” She emphasizes that in a democracy, majority support is not enough if it leads to the erosion of rights and the elimination of checks and balances, “Having the majority on your side does not validate a leader doing whatever they want. In a democracy, crushing minority rights in the name of the majority can never be justified.”

This concentration of power is further reinforced by the symbolism Bukele has promoted around his administration. Instead of highlighting advancements in education or healthcare, he has celebrated the construction of the world's largest prison as one of his government's main achievements. "To me, boasting about having the world's largest prison is a sign of absolute failure. I would rather compete by saying we have the world's largest and most efficient schools, not prisons. That is clearly the symbol of a failed society," the political scientist added (BBC, 2024).

This glorification of security over other aspects of national development strengthens his administration's reliance on fear and the perception of crisis. While Bukele has demonstrated exceptional skill in managing public opinion and consolidating his political dominance, the future of his government will depend on whether his model can be institutionalized or whether, on the contrary, his personalist leadership ultimately creates a power vacuum that will be difficult to fill.

Chapter 6: FRAGMENTATION OF THE OPPOSITION

One of the main factors that has facilitated the consolidation of Nayib Bukele's power has been the deep crisis of traditional political parties in El Salvador. For decades, Salvadoran politics was dominated by the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), parties that emerged as the two main ideological forces after the civil war. However, the wear and tear caused by decades of corruption, financial scandals, and the inability to solve the country's problems, both economic and security-related, eroded their credibility among voters. This political vacuum paved the way for Bukele and his party, Nuevas Ideas, who capitalized on public discontent and positioned themselves as the alternative to the old political structures.

During the years following the Peace Accords, El Salvador made formal strides toward electoral democracy. However, the process of democratic consolidation was incomplete and deeply fragile. As Ranum (2007) points out, although regular elections were held and some key institutions were reformed, high levels of violence, and growing distrust in institutions undermined democratic legitimacy. The traditional parties, ARENA and the FMLN, failed to defend or deepen the principles of the 1992 pact, limiting themselves to preserving their share of power within a clientelist system. This fueled a political culture marked by skepticism toward democracy, in which the average citizen never came to embrace the democratic model as a collective project. The disconnect between parties and the population, along with the failure to ensure security and justice, created fertile ground for populist leaders promising order and efficiency.

The Decline of ARENA and the FMLN

ARENA governed El Salvador between 1999 and 2009 under the administrations of Francisco Flores and Elías Antonio Saca. However, this period was marked by corruption scandals and unpopular policies, such as the privatization of state services and the dollarization of the economy without public consultation. During Flores' government (1999-2004), an investigation was launched into the diversion of \$10 million in donations from the Taiwanese government intended for victims of the 2001 earthquakes. In 2014, before a special commission of the Legislative Assembly, Flores admitted to having redirected these funds to ARENA party accounts (*Diario El Salvador*, 2021). Although he passed away in 2016 before the judicial process concluded, the case revealed a deeply entrenched corruption network within the party.

Elías Antonio Saca (2004-2009) not only continued these practices but also expanded the misappropriation of state funds. The Attorney General's Office (FGR) demonstrated that his administration embezzled millions of dollars from the presidential discretionary funds, further weakening public trust in ARENA.

In 2009, after a decade of ARENA's hegemony, the FMLN came to power with the election of Mauricio Funes. His campaign focused on promises to combat poverty, crime, and other consequences of the 1980–1992 civil war. With a discourse centered on transparency and social justice, he secured 52% of the vote. However, his administration was also tainted by corruption and the misappropriation of public funds. In 2016, the Attorney General's Office launched an investigation into the embezzlement of \$351 million during his tenure. In 2023, Funes was convicted in absentia and sentenced to 14 years in prison for allegedly enabling the strengthening of criminal structures in exchange for a reduction in the homicide rate. Additionally, he received an extra six-year sentence for evading \$85,000 in taxes (*The New York Times*, 2025).

According to the Salvadoran Attorney General's Office, these funds were used to finance a lavish lifestyle, which included the acquisition of 45 vehicles, 92 firearms, luxury watches, jewelry, and trips to exclusive destinations such as Disney World (*Fiscalía General de la República de El Salvador*, 2018). Disillusionment with the FMLN deepened when Funes, who had presented himself as a defender of transparency, died in exile in Nicaragua at the age of 65, without facing justice in his home country. The discrediting of both parties reinforced the perception that they were incapable of addressing the country's structural problems, leaving room for Bukele's narrative as an "anti-political" leader capable of transforming El Salvador.

However, this deterioration was not merely the result of individual scandals, but rather part of a deeper trend: the failure to uphold the Peace Accords. As Pérez Navarrete (2021) argues, the traditional parties never succeeded in building a participatory democracy or a strong civic culture. Instead of promoting transparency and inclusion, they shut the public out of decision-making processes. This betrayal of the postwar foundational pact not only weakened the legitimacy of the democratic system, but also turned the parties into structures disconnected from the everyday realities of the majority. Their failure provoked a widespread lack of hope and opened the door for the rise of leaders like Bukele, who denounced the old political order without necessarily offering an alternative democratic project.

Bukele's Strategies to Neutralize the Opposition

The opposition to Bukele has been weak, fragmented, and highly polarized. While this is largely due to the lack of cohesion among opposition parties, it is also the result of a deliberate government strategy to divide and delegitimize them. Through control of state institutions, strategic use of media and social networks, and judicial persecution of opposition figures, Bukele has weakened any potential organized resistance. One of his key methods has been deepening

ideological polarization. Instead of mitigating political divisions, Bukele has reinforced the narrative that his government represents "the people," while anyone who disagrees with him is part of the old system that "looted the country." This strategy has made it difficult to build an effective opposition coalition, as any alternative is quickly delegitimized with accusations of corruption, gang ties, or alignment with foreign interests.

Social media has been a fundamental tool in this strategy. Through X, Bukele has publicly attacked opposition figures and critical journalists. A clear example occurred on September 20, 2024, when an investigation revealed that his family had acquired 34 luxury properties and coffee plantations through family-owned businesses (*El País*, 2024). In response, Bukele discredited the journalists involved, calling them "idiots." In another post, he stated, "They know they have no arguments; they attack just to attack. Only an idiot would agree with them" (Bukele on X, 2025). These statements reinforce the narrative that any criticism comes from "enemies of the people" rather than from actors with legitimate concerns.

Additionally, Bukele has used his charisma and confrontational style to discredit those who oppose his policies. He has accused international organizations of defending gang members' rights instead of those of innocent citizens, reinforcing the idea that his government is the only one truly committed to security. As one interviewee mentioned, "Thousands of us opposed mining, and Bukele simply made a tweet calling us 'stupid' for rejecting the chance to be the country with the largest gold reserve in the world (another clear lie), opening a mine the week after the protests." This dynamic has discouraged the opposition, as any attempt at resistance is immediately ridiculed or delegitimized on social media.

In this context, the opposition faces an increasingly hostile environment for dissent. As the same interviewee stated, "We are witnessing the early stages of a dictatorship. Who knows how many

years it will last, but one thing is clear: the average Salvadoran is more than ready to welcome it with open arms.” These words reflect growing concerns about the country’s democratic future, where the erosion of institutional checks and balances and the disintegration of the opposition have left Bukele without real political competition.

This vacuum of opposition deepened in a context where Salvadoran democracy was already eroded by structural insecurity and widespread distrust in institutions. The fear of crime and violence has become so high that large segments of the population have come to accept authoritarian measures in exchange for stability, even at the cost of civil rights (Ranum, 2007).

This willingness to surrender fundamental freedoms for the sake of order is the result of years of accumulated frustration among Salvadoran citizens and reflects an authoritarian political culture that has not been overcome since the postwar period. The traditional party's failure to provide security reinforced the perception that only a strong, centralized, and vertical leadership could solve the country’s problems.

Failed Attempts at Opposition Unity

Despite Bukele’s growing power and his party’s dominance, the opposition has failed to form a unified bloc. Ideological differences and a lack of strategic coordination are among the factors that have weakened any attempt to build a viable alternative. One of the main obstacles has been the ideological fragmentation between traditional parties and new political movements. ARENA and the FMLN, historically rivals, have lost credibility and failed to articulate a common front against Bukele. This is compounded by the emergence of smaller parties, such as *Nuestro Tiempo*, which have attempted to offer a third way without significant success. The lack of consensus on a single candidate has allowed the ruling party to continue without facing strong opposition.

The opposition's failure to present a strong candidate in the 2024 elections facilitated Bukele's reelection with an overwhelming majority. In a context where the ruling party controlled institutions and the political narrative, the absence of a unified coalition made the outcome predictable. "In El Salvador, less than a week before its general elections, few doubt Nayib Bukele's reelection, let alone pay attention to the fact that his extended presidency violates the country's constitution" (*El País*, 2024). The absence of a clear strategy not only consolidates Bukele's dominance but also highlights the weakness of the democratic system in enabling power alternation.

But beyond the disarray of the opposition, there is a more structural phenomenon: the progressive dismantling of institutions responsible for ensuring accountability. As Pérez Navarrete (2021) points out, the legislative and judicial branches have offered little resistance to the concentration of power in the hands of the Executive. This institutional collapse has been made possible, in part, by the low level of citizen ownership of the state as a common good. In a country where over 70% of the population survives through the informal economy, the link between taxes, public services, and accountability is weak. This detachment has allowed government corruption to go largely unnoticed and has enabled the dismantling of democratic institutions with little significant resistance, further deepening the crisis of representation.

While Bukele has built the image of a strong and disruptive leader, the opposition has failed to consolidate a figure with the same level of connection with voters. Without clear leadership or an effective mobilization strategy, the opposition has remained scattered and disorganized, allowing the ruling party to strengthen its political hegemony without real opposition.

Opposition in Exile and Civil Resistance

The deterioration of democracy in El Salvador has led the opposition to face not only internal difficulties but also increasing persecution by the government. Bukele has not only weakened traditional parties but has also forced journalists, activists, and critics of his administration into exile. While some have left the country to continue their work without reprisals, others have turned to civil resistance to challenge the ruling party's dominance.

One of the most affected sectors has been independent journalism. In 2022, the Legislative Assembly passed a law punishing those who spread information about gangs with up to 15 years in prison, something that, according to human rights organizations, has been used as a censorship mechanism (*IJNET*, 2022). According to the Association of Journalists of El Salvador (*APES*), at least ten reporters left the country after this reform was approved, fearing prosecution. Angélica Cárcamo, president of APES, stated that El Salvador's democratic deterioration is progressing "at an accelerated pace, similar to that of Nicaragua." Additionally, the government has passed laws expanding state surveillance and granting greater power to the Attorney General's Office to monitor citizens' communications, creating a climate of self-censorship among national media outlets.

Despite repression, some sectors attempt to resist the government's measures. However, these efforts face multiple obstacles, ranging from a lack of resources to internal fragmentation. As one interviewee noted, "There really is no strong leadership in the opposition, and it doesn't look like there will be for many years." Civil resistance has taken various forms, from digital activism to sporadic protests. However, as explored in previous chapters, Bukele has publicly delegitimized and ridiculed these demonstrations, minimizing their impact and further solidifying his image among his supporters. While repression and the weakening of the opposition have allowed Bukele to exert unprecedented control over Salvadoran politics, the future of resistance will

depend on whether critical sectors can unite around a common cause and overcome the divisions that have so far hindered their ability to act.

Thirty years after the Peace Accords, what was supposed to be the beginning of a solid democracy has instead become a fragile and vulnerable system. The fragmentation of the opposition is not merely tactical or circumstantial, it is a symptom of a democracy that never fully took root in Salvadoran society. Incomplete reforms, persistent violence, and public disinterest in institutional processes paved the way for the rise of an authoritarian leadership with popular legitimacy. The Salvadoran case shows that democracy is not only lost through coups or electoral fraud, but also through the slow decay of institutions and the lack of political will to sustain democratic commitments. In this sense, the decline of ARENA and the FMLN is more than a simple political turnover, it is the symbol of a collective failure to build a strong and lasting democracy.

Chapter 7: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This research has examined the process of democratic erosion in El Salvador under the administration of Nayib Bukele, identifying three key factors that have facilitated the consolidation of authoritarian tendencies in the country: insecurity, the leader's charisma, and the fragmentation of the opposition. Through the analysis of speeches, government policies, and the political and historical context, it has become evident that while Salvadoran democracy was never fully consolidated, the current political transformation represents an unprecedented acceleration of democratic deterioration.

One of the most significant findings of this study is the central role that the security crisis has played in justifying the concentration of power. Gang violence, which has been a structural problem since the post conflict period, allowed Bukele to present his government as an alternative to the failed policies of previous administrations. Through strategies such as the state of exception, mass incarceration, and the militarization of public security, his administration has drastically reduced homicide and extortion rates. While there have been undeniable advances in terms of security, these gains have come at the cost of eliminating due process guarantees, restricting civil liberties, and consolidating a governance model based on repression and the executive branch's absolute control over other institutions.

The second key factor in democratic erosion has been Bukele's charisma and his ability to construct a political image that transcends traditional democratic institutions. Through the strategic use of social media, he has projected the idea that his government represents a break from the past and the only viable solution to the country's problems. His polarizing discourse has

reinforced the notion that any criticism of his administration comes from corrupt actors or foreign interests, weakening democratic debate and strengthening a model of personalist leadership. This phenomenon is not exclusive to El Salvador but follows a pattern observed in other populist leaders in Latin America, such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, who also used charisma to justify the centralization of power.

The third factor analyzed is the fragmentation of the opposition, which has facilitated Bukele's consolidation of power by preventing the emergence of an effective political counterweight. The crisis of traditional parties, marked by corruption scandals and the lack of leadership renewal, has allowed the ruling party to discredit any attempt at resistance. Additionally, the use of political persecution tactics, control over the judiciary, and censorship of the media have further hindered the organization of a viable opposition. Without a clear and cohesive alternative, the possibility of democratic alternation in the country has been significantly weakened.

These findings suggest that the Salvadoran case is not an isolated anomaly but rather part of a broader trend of democratic decline in Latin America. However, Bukele's case stands out due to the speed with which he has transformed the political system, leveraging a combination of structural crises and effective communication strategies. Unlike more gradual processes of democratic erosion, such as in Nicaragua or Venezuela, El Salvador demonstrates how a leader's popularity can accelerate this process within just a few years.

Beyond the analysis of these factors, it is essential to consider the long term implications of this process. Bukele's popularity has been a crucial pillar in consolidating his model of governance, but this strategy is not immune to risks. First, the stability of his administration largely depends on his ability to maintain the levels of security and economic stability he has promised the public. So far, his model has been sustained by a narrative of radical transformation, but if future

economic crises, corruption scandals within his government, or failures in his security strategy arise, his popular support could become weak. In regimes where personalist leadership is the foundation of the political system, a decline in the leader's popularity can trigger a governance crisis, especially if there are no strong democratic institutions to manage an orderly transition.

Another crucial aspect is the role of the international community in El Salvador's political trajectory. While some human rights organizations have denounced the violations of individual guarantees under the state of exception, the international response has been limited. Unlike other authoritarian governments in the region, Bukele's case has generated an ambiguous reaction, partly due to his success in reducing violence and partly due to the pragmatism of international actors who prioritize stability over democratic concerns. This raises questions about the extent to which external pressure could influence the country's political course and whether there is a threshold at which democratic erosion would provoke sanctions or more forceful responses from the international community.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of Bukele's model will depend on his ability to maintain political control without triggering an economic or institutional crisis that erodes his popularity. The absence of democratic checks and balances raises questions about the country's long-term stability, particularly in a context where power has been centralized around a single figure. While his model has proven effective in terms of crime control, its sustainability will depend on the economic and political viability of maintaining a regime based on repression.

Future research could explore what alternative approaches existed or exist to address El Salvador's security crisis. Was it possible to reduce such high levels of crime without resorting to exceptional measures such as the state of exception and the militarization of public security? Likewise, it is important to question whether the country's political and social transformation

truly required more than one presidential term to be consolidated, or if the justification for reelection is more of a power concentration strategy than a structural necessity. Finally, the Salvadoran case poses a crucial dilemma, while no government in the country's history has enjoyed such high levels of popular support, to what extent are citizens willing to trade democratic principles for stability? These questions are not only fundamental for understanding El Salvador's political future but also for analyzing similar dynamics in other countries where security has become the central issue in democratic debates.

In conclusion, El Salvador represents a paradigmatic case of how insecurity, charismatic leadership, and opposition fragmentation can facilitate the erosion of democracy in a short period. Although Bukele has managed to consolidate a high level of support, his governance model poses fundamental challenges for the country's democratic future. The key question is not only whether his administration will continue concentrating power but also what mechanisms, internal or external, could halt or reverse this process before El Salvador fully transitions into an authoritarian regime.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWS

1. Interviewee 1, medical student, 25 years old. Written response received in December 2024.
2. Interviewee 2, psychology student, 23 years old. Written response received in February 2025.
3. Interviewee 3, lawyer, 47 years old. Written response received in February 2025.
4. Interviewee 4, merchant, 55 years old. Semi-structured interview conducted in January 2025, via Zoom.
5. Interviewee 5, high school student, 18 years old. Email interview conducted in January 2025.
6. Interviewee 6, local vendor, 28 years old. Written response received in January 2025.
7. Interviewee 7, dentistry student, 23 years old. Semi-structured interview conducted in February 2025, via Zoom.
8. Interviewee 8, street vendor, 46 years old. Written response received in February 2025.

APENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

This appendix includes the guiding questions used in the interviews conducted for this research. The questions are organized thematically according to the analytical chapters of this thesis.

Insecurity and Social Problems as Justification for Authoritarianism

1. How would you describe the security situation in El Salvador before Bukele's government?
2. What impact has the state of exception had on the population and on the judicial system?
3. Do you think people genuinely feel safer now? Or is there fear of state repression?

The Leader's Charisma and the Construction of a Political Image

4. How would you describe the image Nayib Bukele projects as a leader?
5. What role has social media played in his political consolidation?
6. Why do you think he remains so popular despite the allegations of authoritarianism?
7. Do you see any similarities between Bukele and other leaders in Latin America?

Opposition Fragmentation and Institutional Weakness

8. Why do you think opposition parties have failed to present a strong alternative to Bukele?
9. How has the co-optation of the judiciary and the Legislative Assembly affected Salvadoran democracy?
10. What possible scenarios do you foresee for the future of democracy in El Salvador?