

BUKELISMO AND THE ILLUSION OF BUKELISMO

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the rise of “Bukelismo” in El Salvador as a paradigmatic case of bottom-up executive aggrandizement. Exasperated by decades of violence perpetrated by organized crime and the failures of liberal democracy to curb its territorial control, the Salvadoran electorate consciously sacrificed constitutional checks and balances in favor of an “efficient” autocracy. This resounding security success catalyzed immense regional admiration across Latin America, stimulating emulation attempts that remain constrained by the preservation of democratic institutions. Highlighting the factors driving the failure of such partial measures throughout the rest of the continent, the study advocates for the pragmatic adoption of a *Mano Suave* approach to contain, as far as possible, the violence perpetrated by criminal networks.

KEYWORDS: Autocracy; Organized Crime; *Mano Dura*; *Mano Suave*.

INTRODUCTION

From the early 2000s to the opening months of 2022, two violent transnational criminal organizations—MS-13 and Barrio 18—held coercive and informal control over El Salvador’s territory. In 2018, these organizations fielded approximately 60,000 active foot “soldiers,” with an additional 500,000 individuals indirectly linked to their criminal network (Bompan 2018). After two decades under a liberal-democratic framework defined by systemic institutional failures, pervasive corruption, and even State collusion in gang abuses (Wetterskog 2026), criminal dominance effectively ended with the implementation of the State of Exception in March 2022, an authoritarian method enacted by the duly elected autocrat, Nayib Bukele (2019-present)¹. Maintaining extraordinary public approval, consistently hovering near ninety percent in independent surveys (LPG Datos 2026; Olivares 2026), Bukele represents a radical departure from traditional models of executive governance. This staggering popular endorsement coexists with a systematic dismantling of liberal-democratic institutions, throwing into sharp relief a deep-seated friction between Salvadoran public opinion and constitutional systems of checks and balances.

Contrary to international narratives that view El Salvador’s popular democratic backsliding as a sudden, post-2022 occurrence, the roots of democratic fatigue in the country run deep. Long before Bukele’s initial presidential victory in 2019, the Salvadoran electorate exhibited profound disillusionment with traditional political parties and the liberal-democratic paradigm itself². His governance strategy effectively capitalized on this systemic exhaustion. With a cooperative supermajority in the Legislative Assembly (56 out of 84 seats) secured through free legislative elections in 2021, the administration initiated a swift legal process of executive aggrandizement. This process—widely embraced by Salvadoran public opinion—was marked in May 2021 by the unilateral restructuring of judicial power through the replacement of independent judges with loyalists. Backed

by an unchecked legislative monopoly and the subsequent severance of the separation of powers, *de facto* constraints on executive action were effectively removed.

Domestically, both national political dissidence and international condemnation regarding rule of law violations have been weaponized to create a cohesive union between the public and Bukele against these framed “public enemies,” driven by a powerful populist us-versus-them propaganda (Ramirez-Ångman and Andersson-Costa 2024, 24). The entrenched popular delegitimization of constitutional democracy was thereby amplified by presidential rhetoric, which frames any defense of constitutionalism as a defense of criminal sovereignty. The remarkable domestic efficacy of Bukele’s security regime has triggered a wave of ideological emulation across Latin America, signaling a systemic crisis of democratic legitimacy across the continent and prompting regional politicians to adopt Bukele’s rhetorical strategies and punitive methods (Suazo-Rivas 2025).

This study examines the origins and stabilization of the process of popular delegitimization of democracy in El Salvador, while offering critical comparative leverage to understand the broader regional drift toward illiberal presidentialism, deeply influenced by the so-called *Bukelismo*. Thus, El Salvador serves as a paradigmatic and extreme case of executive aggrandizement: a political laboratory where democratic institutional mechanisms have been systematically utilized to unravel governmental constraints with overwhelming popular endorsement, shifting public opinion in neighboring countries and inducing leaders to actively praise, adopt, and promise to replicate his “efficient” authoritarian methods.

DEMOCRATIC EXHAUSTION AND “EFFICIENT” AUTOCRACY

The Electoral Foundations of a Total Executive Aggrandizement

In El Salvador, the collapse of normative support for democratic constitutionalism was not a sudden reaction to the March 2022 *Régimen de Excepción* (still ongoing); rather, it represents the culmination of long-term institutional decay. As Perelló and Navia (2022) observe—using baseline data from the

Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) collected on the eve of the 2019 presidential election, which represented Bukele's first national electoral contest—only 31% of the Salvadoran electorate believed that democracy was the most desirable form of government. Crucially, this percentage was predominantly concentrated among the partisan base of Bukele's traditional rivals.

While Bukele immediately capitalized on this systemic democratic exhaustion, his campaign for the 2019 presidential election did not explicitly promise the erosion of the constitutional democratic order. The definitive pivot toward executive hegemony occurred after the attempted military coup d'état of February 2020 (so-called *Bukelazo*), which was widely condemned by the UN, NGOs, political opposition parties, and the Salvadoran Supreme Court, which issued an unconstitutionality ruling to thwart the declared insurrection (Corte Suprema de Justicia 2020). As a result, when the electorate granted the administration a legislative supermajority in 2021, it was not an unthinking vote; it was a conscious public validation of an autocratic evolution. With the newly reshaped legislature on his side, Bukele gained the political leverage needed to sweep out independent judges. By packing the courts with loyalists, he fundamentally neutralized the country's system of checks and balances.

Thus, the demand-driven concentration of executive power found its vehicle in Bukele, who overtly justified the subordination of the judiciary by precisely appealing to the expectations of the populace: “Defending the judicial shakeup the next morning, he [Bukele] added that ‘seventy-five percent of the Salvadoran people voted in free elections for the change we are now seeing.’ Indeed, polls suggest that over 70 percent of Salvadorans support Bukele's dismissal of the attorney-general and judges” (Meléndez-Sánchez 2021, 19)³.

Furthermore, public approval of the Bukele presidency consistently exceeded the 84% threshold between May 2021 and the inception of the *Régimen de Excepción*. Crucially, this high popularity was maintained during the phase of a stable, “non-exceptional” autocracy, as evidenced by regular independent polling data from LPG Datos and CID Gallup. The driver of this democratic exhaustion is

self-evident: the historical co-presence of democracy and criminal sovereignty drove public opinion toward perceiving the separation of powers and constitutional guarantees as mechanisms that institutionalize the impunity of criminal terror. Because the domestic populace historically associated the separation of powers and procedural constitutionalism not with civic protection, but with the institutionalized safeguard of a ruthless, omnipresent criminal network, the Salvadoran electorate did not merely tolerate the subversion of constitutional democracy; they actively engineered its replacement with a grassroots, more “efficient” autocratic system.

Analytically, the transition of *Bukelismo* from its pre-emergency phase to the post-2022 carceral state is quantitative rather than qualitative. The enforcement of the *Régimen de Excepción* did not mark the birth of Salvadoran authoritarianism; it merely represented the quantitative scaling up of state coercion to execute mass detentions. The electorate had already completed the qualitative work of dismantling constitutional democracy during the free 2021 legislative elections. For this reason, once the active phase of the *Régimen de Excepción* concludes, the transition will once again remain strictly quantitative, bringing an end to the high volume of emergency arrests without altering the structural, highly centralized autocratic architecture already locked into place.

Theory. Cohesion Through the Shared Threat: The Anti-Democratic Populism

Despite the widespread sense of security achieved through the structural collapse of the *pandillas*’ territorial supremacy, public anxiety regarding a potential resurgence of organized crime remains highly prevalent (InSight Crime 2023, 46). The constant demands of the UN and NGOs for the restoration of constitutional guarantees and judicial independence—which *de facto* implies reinstating the informal criminal order—exacerbate this fear, which is masterfully integrated into a populist, binary narrative of state defense by the executive. International pressure to restore due process and civil rights is systematically reframed by state media as a clear initiative to restore criminal sovereignty. This rhetorical strategy transforms external condemnation into a powerful domestic asset. By

categorizing every actor calling for a democratic return under a single, totalizing label of “defenders of criminals,” the administration constantly reinforces the cohesion between the public and the executive against these framed “enemies of the people.” As Ramirez-Ångman and Andersson-Costa (2024, 24) highlight:

In President Bukele’s speeches, he consistently uses rhetoric that undermines the legitimacy of different external groups. There is frequent and repeated delegitimization of the “others”, in which “they” take on different forms. [...] This standpoint is strongly reflected in Bukele’s rhetoric, as he openly and firmly criticizes everything from public media, rival politicians, the international community and NGOs. When addressing the establishment or the different forms of “others”, Bukele uses intense language and expressions that might evoke strong emotional responses from his audience, portraying them as corrupt thieves who are incapable of governing. Seen consistently in his statements, Bukele takes every opportunity to demonize the elite, as well as establish a moral distinction between him, the people and these “others”. Bukele’s discourse, when addressing external actors, does overall take on a nationalistic undertone, portraying himself as the defender of the nation against these external threats.

Condemnations of his authoritarian leadership—emanating especially from the UN and NGOs, with a consistent role also played by the media, academic literature, and political opposition parties—inadvertently fuel a massive populist us-versus-them narrative. This dynamic exacerbates the “democratic trauma” fostered by decades of coexistence between democracy and a parallel criminal state; conversely, it bolsters trust in autocracy and in the figure of the “philosopher king” as the sole viable path toward a functional society. Among Bukele’s most solemn addresses targeting this “democratic threat,” the most prominent include his June 2024 inauguration speech for his second presidential term and his June 2025 speech marking the anniversary of his presidency. In June 2024, he declared: “The opposition, which is numerically insignificant but rabid, continues to defend an institutionality, a democracy, as they call it, that only left us with murdered children, mothers,

grandparents, friends, and brothers with impunity. We, on the contrary, decided to create our own recipe” (quoted in Revista Factum 2024). This us-versus-democracy delegitimization was further escalated the following June: “Democracy, institutionality, transparency, human rights, the rule of law—they sound good, they are great ideals in reality, but they are terms that, in reality, are only used to keep us subjugated” (quoted in Forbes Centroamérica 2025). Godoy (2025, 518) even argues that the humiliating carceral images of the *Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo* (CECOT)—a maximum-security prison complex engineered specifically for the confinement of high-risk *pandilleros*—constitute a highly calculated visual language designed to provoke “enemies of the people” in order to translate their backlash into popular legitimacy: “Like their real counterparts, those images also went viral, highlighting how the choreography of Bukele’s carceral regime offers a visual language to attract attention and condemnation as the predicate for its justification.”

By flattening the entire spectrum of democratic dissent into a monolithic us-versus-them cleavage of “defenders of criminals,” the administration effectively binds the public and the executive into an unbreakable, cohesive alliance against anyone who demands a democratic return, harnessing this shared existential threat to secure an uncontested autocratic consensus. Whether the subject to be despised takes the form of an enemy (Violante 2021) or assumes other guises of “abjection” (Kristeva 1980), opposition to the Other is the most immediate way the self constructs itself and recognizes a distinct identity against the outside. When contempt for the Other is shared, it bestows the same identity upon different subjects, who consequently form an indissoluble bond founded on common repulsion. While critics define Bukele as a “dictator”, Salvadorans view him as a “hero”.

BEYOND EL SALVADOR: THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTAGION OF BUKELISMO

Popular Pressure and Emulative dynamics

Since the all-out gang crackdown in El Salvador, the Latin American political landscape has undergone a profound and evolving metamorphosis. *Bukelismo* has transformed into a benchmark ideological

current—a legacy that political parties and public opinion must inevitably reckon with, and one that is already driving dynamics of emulation across neighboring countries. Far from being a leader supported strictly within his domestic borders, “Nayib Bukele, the elected autocrat who runs El Salvador with an iron fist, continues to be by far the most admired leader in the region” (The Economist 2024).

Numerous regional leaders and politicians now overtly praise his methods, particularly as an electoral strategy, promising *Mano Dura* measures and railing against NGOs, accusing them of protecting criminals instead of victims.

Grassroots demonstrations in his support are multiplying, while political delegations line up to visit the CECOT to show their citizens a willingness to “Bukelize” their own countries. Even in nations led by administrations that reject this model—such as the progressive governments of Mexico (Morena), Brazil (Partido dos Trabalhadores), and Guatemala (Movimiento Semilla)—popular demand has begun to fuel fierce pro-Bukele opposition forces. “The rise of the Bukele model is notable not only because of its apparent effectiveness, but also because of its extraordinary popularity. Across Latin America and beyond, politicians, commentators, and citizens have called on their governments to ‘learn from Bukele’” (Suazo-Rivas 2025, 6). This transnational fascination with *Bukelismo* emerges as the epiphenomenon of a profound crisis of legitimacy within liberal democracy. The widespread consensus for hyper-presidential solutions demonstrates the growing normalization of a governance model that stands in structural opposition to the foundational pillars of constitutional democracy.

As a result of this public pressure, institutional initiatives of partial emulation (though unsuccessful) have rippled throughout Latin America. The fragmented replication of specific policy components—ranging from penal aesthetics to infrastructural expansion—is systematically mapped in the table below.

TABLE 1. The Propagation of Bukelismo in Latin America

Country	Leader (Party, Political Alignment)	Mechanisms of Emulation
Honduras	Xiomara Castro (<i>Libertad y Refundación</i> , Socialist)	Implementation of recurring, localized states of emergency; planned (but unexecuted) construction of a national maximum-security prison complex modeled after the CECOT (2022–2026).
Ecuador	Daniel Noboa (<i>Acción Democrática Nacional</i> , Libertarian Right)	Implementation of recurring, localized states of emergency; partial territory militarization; engineering of a national maximum-security prison complex modeled after the CECOT. Introduction of the aesthetics of penal spectacularization (2024–present).
Peru	Dina Boluarte, José Jerí, José María Balcázar (<i>No official party affiliation / Congressional Bloc</i>)	Implementation of recurring, localized States of emergency (2023–2026).
	Keiko Fujimori (<i>Fuerza Popular</i> , Populist Right)	Electoral platform and governance agenda built entirely on the <i>Mano Dura</i> paradigm, alongside a pledge to construct national maximum-security prison complexes modeled after the CECOT (commencing presidential term in July 2026).
Panama	José Raul Mulino (<i>Realizando Metas</i> , Conservative Right)	Decree of <i>Mano Dura</i> policies: increased street-level militarization and controls (2024); official announcement of a national maximum-security prison complex modeled after the CECOT (2026).

Costa Rica	Rodrigo Chaves, Laura Fernández Delgado (<i>Partido Pueblo Soberano</i> , Populist Right)	Initiation of a national maximum-security prison complex modeled after the CECOT (2026).
Paraguay	Santiago Peña (<i>Partido Colorado</i> , Conservative Right)	Decree of <i>Mano Dura</i> policies across the entire Eastern Region of the country: increased street-level militarization and controls (2026); complete prison isolation for gang members (2023–present); implementation of the aesthetics of penal spectacularization (2023–present).
Chile	José Antonio Kast (<i>Partido Republicano</i> , Populist Far-Right)	Policy endorsement regarding the construction of a national maximum-security prison complex modeled after the CECOT (2026).
Argentina	Javier Milei (<i>La Libertad Avanza</i> , Ultra-libertarian Right)	Intergovernmental agreement establishing a joint security framework task force (2024); implementation of the aesthetics of penal spectacularization (2024–present).
Colombia	Abelardo De La Espriella (<i>Defensores de la Patria</i> , Far-Right)	Electoral platform and governance agenda built entirely on the <i>Mano Dura</i> paradigm, alongside a pledge to construct 10 national maximum-security prison complexes modeled after the CECOT (commencing presidential term in August 2026).

A Predictable Securitization Failure

The growing diffusion of the “Bukele model” across Latin America constitutes an unprecedented systemic rupture, capable of reshaping the region’s political ecosystem and securitized governance

paradigms within a matter of years. However, the premature failures of these partial emulation attempts—which left criminal sovereignty intact (InSight Crime 2026)—highlight the severe limits of replicability within the contemporary Latin American landscape. This reveals that the model’s efficacy does not stem merely from frontal coercive offenses and punitive crackdown endeavors, but rather relies on specific institutional prerequisites that remain uniquely Salvadoran.

Indeed, the success of the Salvadoran experiment is predicated upon an absolute carceral stranglehold made possible by the long-term subordination of the judicial, legislative, and military apparatuses to the executive branch. This institutional verticalization enables the deployment of a State of Exception that radically inverts the presumption of innocence; mass incarceration has effectively achieved criminal neutralization because prolonged detention precedes, rather than succeeds, judicial adjudication. Conversely, in the aforementioned nations, the persistence of constitutional checks and balances and judicial independence results in swift mass releases of detainees. If the entire state apparatus fails to align cohesively—and over the long term—toward the same *Mano Dura* trajectory, institutional fragmentation inevitably precludes any prospect of success.

Crucially, this institutional fragmentation compounds the inefficacy of *Mano Dura* when intersected with the macroeconomic variable tied to the nature of organized crime: the immense financial capital of drug cartels fuels systemic corruption capable of penetrating the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and penitentiary systems, thereby neutralizing the coercive power of the State. If even Salvadoran State organs—including independent judges, politicians, and police forces—had historically suffered from systemic corruption prior to the state purges orchestrated by Bukele, then in nations where the economic leverage of transnational cartels is vastly superior, the complete co-optation of the state apparatus becomes virtually inescapable⁴. In structurally vulnerable environments, any isolated military offensive is ultimately destined to fracture against the superior financial infiltration capabilities of major cartels.

Furthermore, a strategy of frontal repression conducted without a capillary and clear military superiority over the armed wings of criminal networks—unlike Bukele’s *Mano Dura*—is devoid of the enforcement dominance requisite to disassemble them.

CONCLUSION: ALL OR NOTHING, WHAT FUTURE FOR LATIN INSTITUTIONS?

The success of Nayib Bukele’s *Mano Dura* stemmed from a high-stakes electoral gamble. Driven by decades of a democracy perceived as ineffective and inert, citizens took the immense risk of handing the keys of power entirely to the executive branch, accepting the dismantling of the system of constitutional checks and balances and the very real possibility of ending up with a tyrannical regime akin to Maduro’s. This autocratic transition from below—which now commands even wider and more entrenched support—was viable because the initial consensus was broad enough to fracture the constitutional rule of law through its own internal mechanisms.

However, this formula is not replicable across the rest of the continent. Although popular pressure drives many regional leaders to evoke the “Bukele method” in Latin American countries—unlike El Salvador’s domestic landscape—citizens lack the social cohesion required to abandon constitutional democracy, which constitutes the *conditio sine qua non* for the “Bukele method”. Indeed, the Salvadoran “efficient” *Bukelismo* relied on an autocratic shift founded on an overwhelming electoral mandate, where voters granted the executive a crushing legislative majority explicitly deployed to tear down the democratic architecture from within; across the rest of the region, no such systemic alignment exists toward pro-Bukele politicians. Since full emulation mechanisms can only be implemented within an autocratic system, the pressure from populations sufficiently unwilling to embrace an autocratic shift has resulted in partial emulative dynamics, which prove even more harmful than *Mano Suave* policies construed as strategies of negotiation with organized crime⁵.

In the long term, such failures are destined either to revert to soft approaches or to generate cyclical political oscillations alternating between *Manos Suaves*—whether overtly or covertly—and ephemeral

surges of partial *Manos Duras*. Since Latin American citizens are unprepared to deconstruct their democratic systems to embrace autocracy, the least detrimental alternative lies in the acceptance of *Mano Suave* policies. Latin American leaders should therefore abandon the propagandistic deceptions of scenic *Manos Duras*, which serve purely electoral purposes. Ceding *de facto* sovereignty of criminal organizations through *Mano Suave* strategies is a morally painful concession; however, adopting *Manos Duras* which deeply diverge from the Salvadoran baseline remains an even more counterproductive expedient. Although it does not eliminate systemic abuses, the *Mano Suave* stands out, by default, as the sole mechanism capable of containing violence as far as possible, while leaving intact the structure of constitutional democracy that citizens refuse to relinquish.

Concerning the future of Latin American political trajectories, since citizens are reluctant to accept the high risks of autocracy to attain a total *Mano Dura*, the *Mano Suave* emerges as the sole rationally viable path. Partial *Mano Dura* measures are bound to escalate retaliatory violence by organized crime or, at best, grant no more than a marginal decrease.

NOTES

¹ El Salvador's *Régimen de Excepción* is a total criminal crackdown deployed through the suspension of constitutional rights, resulting in over 90,000 arrests (Cornejo and Quehl 2026). However, the broad scope of these measures has inevitably ensnared an unquantified number of innocent individuals. During a 2024 visit to Costa Rica, Bukele publicly pledged that every single innocent person wrongfully arrested would be released (Univision Noticias 2024).

² Bukele secured 53.10% of the vote, comfortably surpassing the absolute majority threshold required to avert a second-round runoff. Carlos Calleja of the right-wing ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance) stalled at 31.72%, while Hugo Martínez, representing the leftist FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), suffered a severe defeat, capturing a mere 14.41%.

³ The baseline survey was conducted by the Centro de Estudios Ciudadanos (CEC) at the Universidad Francisco Gavidia (UFG) in San Salvador. Although the original online repository hosting the results is no longer accessible, the survey's dataset and findings remain heavily documented and verified within the literature, as evidenced by its extensive utilization in key studies such as Meléndez-Sánchez (2021).

⁴ Until the rise of Bukele, El Salvador was structurally corrupted. The traditional political parties were systematically involved in high-profile corruption scandals, money laundering, and collusion with criminal organizations. Penitentiaries served as operational command centers and recreational hubs for the *pandilleros*, featuring prostitution, parties, and the autonomy to leave the premises at will. Law enforcement frequently operated as active participants within the illicit operations of the *pandilleros*. Furthermore, during the 2004–2009 era of frontal repression, the efficacy of these measures was severely undermined by the judiciary, which ordered the release of 91% of detainees (Jesús-Escano, McDowall, and Pridemore 2025, 5).

⁵ Even El Salvador's own history—following more than a decade of *Mano Dura* policies constrained within the framework of constitutional checks and balances—demonstrates that a frontal, aggressive approach merely exacerbated the security crisis compared to the Gang Truce (Jesús-Escano, McDowall, and Pridemore 2025).

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