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El Salvador

Nayib Bukele's Turn to the Far Right

Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez

Advertised as 'the largest and most influential gathering of conservatives in the world', the 2024 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) featured appearances by some of the most prominent champions of the international far right, including the likes of Nigel Farage, Javier Milei, and Donald Trump. Yet perhaps the most effusive welcome of all was reserved for the president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele.[1] After taking the stage to a standing ovation, Bukele delivered a speech befitting the occasion: he railed against global elites (including 'George Soros and his cronies'), boasted that globalism had been defeated in El Salvador, and warned that those same 'dark forces' were 'taking over' the United States. 'Put up the fight', he beseeched the American conservatives in the audience, 'and you will have your country back'.[2] The speech reflected – and cemented – Bukele's status as a 'new hero on the right'.[3]

It also marked the culmination of a striking political transformation. A little over a decade earlier, in 2012, Bukele had launched his political career as a self-styled 'radical progressive leftist'.[4] Seven years later, he won the presidency as an anti-establishment populist with no clear ideological orientation. Only after becoming president in 2019 did Bukele begin to shift towards the (far) right.

[1] A. Gómez Licón, 'El Salvador's President Gets Rock-Star Welcome at Conservative Gathering outside Washington', Associated Press, 22 February 2024. https://apnews.com/article/cpac-nayib-bukele-trump-conservative-dc454b92a57fad8907b376b6eacf5b7e

[2] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), YouTube video, 23 February 2024. www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOFErQLbd8k

[3] K. Linthicum, 'Inside the Growing Cult of El Salvador's Nayib Bukele, Latin America's Political Star', *Los Angeles Times*, 25 July 2023. www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-07-25/growing-cult-of-nayib-bukele

[4] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Speech to the Legislative Assembly, 2021. www.presidencia.gob.sv/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Discurso-a-la-nacion-en-la-AL-2021.pdf

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TABLE 4.1 *Nayib Bukele's electoral results*

Year	Election	Candidate	Party	Share (%)
2012	Mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán	Nayib Bukele	FMLN-CD	51.7
		Tomás Rodríguez	ARENA	46.7
2015	Mayor of San Salvador	Nayib Bukele	FMLN-PSP	50.4
		Edwin Zamora	ARENA-PDC	47.1
2019	President of El Salvador	Nayib Bukele	GANA	53.1
		Carlos Calleja	ARENA-PCN-PDC-DS	31.7
2024	President of El Salvador	Nayib Bukele	NI	84.7
		Manuel Flores	FMLN	6.4

Source: Data are from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. Only the top two candidates are included for each election.

What explains Bukele's transition from self-proclaimed leftist to far-right standard-bearer? In this chapter, I argue that Bukele should be understood first and foremost as a populist.[5] And in the tradition of many of Latin America's most notable populists – including Argentina's Juan Perón, Brazil's Getulio Vargas, and Peru's Alberto Fujimori – Bukele has skilfully adapted his ideological appeals in response to evolving incentives, challenges, and opportunities. In other words, Bukele came to embrace (far) right positions because, beginning during his first presidential term, doing so constituted a rational – and remarkably effective – political strategy.

As the mayor of Nuevo Cucatlán (see Table 4.1), Bukele's leftist rhetoric allowed him to become a rising star in the notoriously dogmatic Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) – and to win the party's nomination for mayor of San Salvador, arguably the second most coveted elected office in the country. But with this nomination secured, and particularly as he began to eye a presidential bid, Bukele's incentives changed. For reasons I describe below, by 2016 the FMLN leadership had signalled that it would not allow Bukele to be the party's presidential candidate in 2019. Moreover, Salvadorans were beginning to grow increasingly disenchanted with the political establishment embodied by the FMLN and the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). With the FMLN blocking his presidential ambitions, and

[5] I broadly adopt the definition of populism as a 'thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 8). My analysis of how Bukele has deployed populist ideas into a cohesive – and evolving – political narrative fits nicely into the 'populist myth' framework developed in Casullo (2019).

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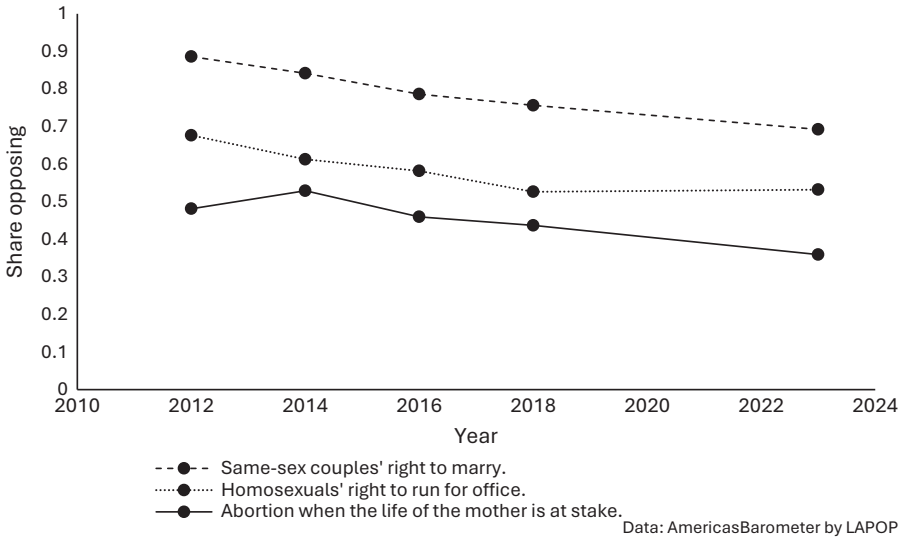


FIGURE 4.1 Share of Salvadorans opposing abortion and LGBTQ+ rights (2012–2023).

sensing an opportunity to appeal to disenchanted voters, Bukele embarked on what I refer to as his 'populist turn': he abandoned much of his leftist rhetoric, split from the FMLN, and redefined his message primarily around a populist anti-establishment narrative. This strategy set the stage for Bukele's landslide victory in 2019.

Upon being elected president, Bukele's objectives shifted once more. In a bid to concentrate power under the executive, Bukele declared open war on institutions of horizontal accountability. To help bolster and sustain his popular support, he adopted punitive anti-crime policies and conservative positions on social issues like abortion and LGBTQ+ rights (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Especially as a result of his *mano dura* security policies, the Salvadoran president soon attracted – and increasingly embraced – new allies and admirers among the international far right, as well as new enemies among NGOs, left-leaning governments, and the international press. These shifts were not only compatible with Bukele's populist narrative, which remained at the core of his rhetoric, but in fact helped support and legitimize it. This was Bukele's 'right turn'. In short, I argue that Bukele came to embrace (far) right positions gradually and strategically in response to specific – and fairly mundane – political incentives.

Below, I describe each stage of Bukele's transformation in greater detail. My focus is on the period between 2012 (when Bukele first ran for elected office) and the end of 2023 (when he was entering the final months of his first presidential term). In the final section of the chapter, I briefly discuss how two subsequent events – Bukele's re-election to an unconstitutional second term and

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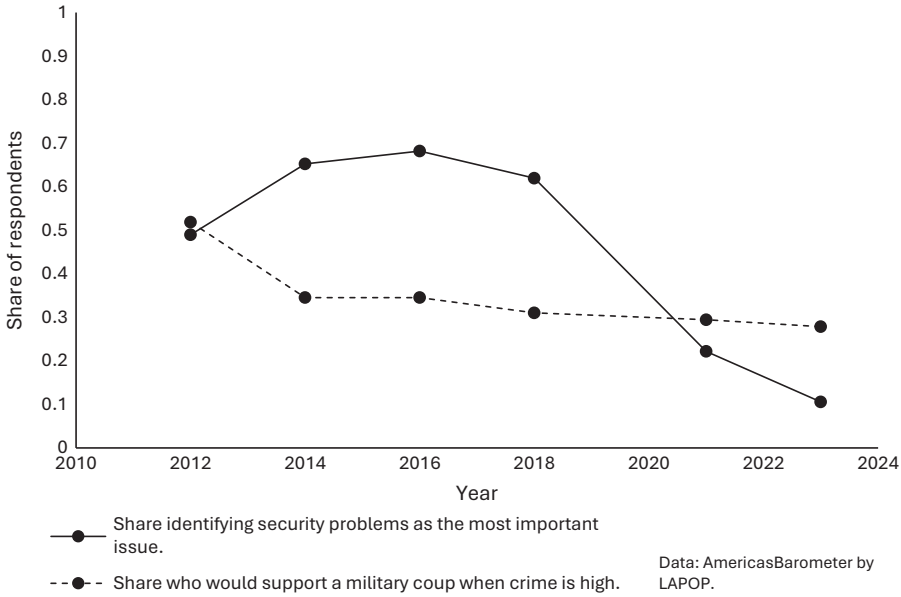


FIGURE 4.2 Salvadorans' attitudes towards crime (2010–2023).

the return of Donald Trump to the American presidency – have helped consolidate both Bukele's turn to the far right and El Salvador's descent into authoritarianism.

4.1 THE SALVADORAN (FAR) RIGHT BEFORE BUKELE

Between the mid 1980s and the late 2010s, the history of the Salvadoran right was, by and large, the history of one party: ARENA. During the early 1980s – a period when widespread reforms promoted by a succession of military juntas and the rising FMLN guerrilla insurgency threatened the shared interests of economic elites, (para)military officers, and other right-wing actors – ARENA emerged as 'a political expression of right-wing extremism' (Wade, 2016, p. 29). However, by the end of the decade, the party had moderated, abandoned many of its more extremist appeals, and refocused its agenda on three core prongs: security, neoliberal market policies, and social conservativism. This platform helped ARENA secure the presidency in 1989 and remain in power until 2009, when the FMLN won the presidency for the first time.[6]

Once in the opposition, ARENA (and, by extension, the Salvadoran right) experienced two processes that would reshape Salvadoran politics and help lay

[6] On ARENA's history and evolution, see Loxton (2021) and Wade (2016).

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the foundations for Bukele's rise. First, ARENA lost the so-called granitic unity (Loxton, 2021, p. 126) that had helped it establish a near-monopoly over partisan right-wing politics. Most notably, after the presidential defeat of 2009, the party's leadership accused President Antonio Saca (2004–2009) of having betrayed ARENA's principles and swiftly expelled him. Saca and his closest allies, including several ARENA deputies, then formed a new centre-right party, the Grand National Alliance (GANA).[7]

Second, and more importantly, ARENA began to experience a silent ideological crisis. Before winning the presidency in 2009, the FMLN had fiercely opposed ARENA's conservative and neoliberal agenda. This constant clash between the (ruling) right and the (opposition) left helped define ARENA's ideology and cement the party's brand for a generation.[8] But after 2009, the two parties began to converge. Once in power, the FMLN largely favoured policy continuity over the far-reaching progressive reforms it had championed while in opposition. Consider the two issues that most preoccupied Salvadorans during this period: the economy and crime. On the economic front, FMLN governments left ARENA's neoliberal policies largely untouched (Ching, 2022, p. 559). And on the issue of crime, except for a short and ill-fated gang truce negotiated by President Mauricio Funes (2009–2014), the FMLN opted to adopt and expand the *mano dura* policies introduced by the previous two ARENA presidents (Aguilar Vásquez et al., 2023, pp. 160–161). Between 2009 and 2019, then, ARENA, a quintessential right-wing party, found itself in the unexpected and unwelcome position of serving as the main political opposition to two successive administrations that had promised to rule from the left – and claimed to do so – but that in fact appeared to govern from the centre right.

As a consequence of its internal divisions and its (involuntary) programmatic convergence with the FMLN, ARENA's brand as the undisputed standard-bearer of the right quickly diminished. To make matters worse, beginning in 2014, a string of high-profile corruption investigations plagued both ARENA and the FMLN, leaving many voters with the impression that the two parties were similar not only in their policy positions but also in their political modus operandi.[9] By 2018, more than 80 percent of Salvadoran voters said they agreed with the statement that 'the parties of the left and right criticize each other a lot, but really they are the same thing'.[10] Within a year, Bukele would

[7] On the Saca split and the emergence of GANA, see Galeas and Galeas (2012).

[8] On party brands and brand dilution, see Lupu (2015).

[9] O. Pocasangre, 'Why El Salvador's Multi-Party System Is on the Brink of Collapse', *El Faro*, 24 February 2021. https://elfaro.net/en/202102/columnas/25273/Why-El-Salvador%E2%80%99s-Multi-Party-System-Is-On-the-Brink-of-Collapse.htm

[10] Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), 'Encuesta sobre el proceso electoral 2018', Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador, 2018. www.uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/INFORME-144.pdf, p. 38. For an alternative view, see Perelló and Navia (2022).

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leverage these conditions to win the presidency and 'upend the ARENA-FMLN duopoly' (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021, p. 27).

4.2 THE LEFTIST MAYOR: NUEVO CUSCATLÁN (2012–2015)

In 2011 Bukele was chosen as the FMLN's candidate for mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán, a small municipality eight miles outside of San Salvador. The then thirty-year-old had never competed for public office and was largely unknown to the public. Like any other left-leaning politician with national ambitions, Bukele thus needed both to establish his reputation among Salvadoran voters and to secure the backing of the FMLN – which, together with ARENA, still dominated electoral politics.

Bukele sought to establish himself first and foremost as an innovative and highly effective administrator who could find practical solutions to his constituents' most tangible needs. Most of the projects through which Bukele aimed to improve the 'quality of life' of Nuevo Cuscatlán citizens were relatively small in scale, including, for example, '[free health] clinics, scholarships and the construction of cultural and recreational spaces' (Roque Baldovinos, 2021, p. 241). Bukele also focused on improving access to and delivery of public services, particularly drinking water and trash collection. Bukele also launched a 'security model' that combined community policing, new technologies, and crime prevention strategies.[11] These and other municipal projects established Bukele's initial reputation as a 'centre-left' mayor 'committed to improving the living conditions of the most vulnerable' (Roque Baldovinos, 2021, p. 241).

While he focused on high-impact municipal projects in Nuevo Cuscatlán, Bukele became an increasingly outspoken participant in broader debates on the national scale. It was during this period that Bukele most often spoke of himself – and the issues of the day – in traditional ideological terms and declared himself a 'radical progressive leftist'.[12] As he explained in a 2012 interview:

> I identify with the left, which is those of us who believe that the state must guarantee opportunities for all: health, education, productive infrastructure. To sustain that we must tax private business, the people who have the most, with the end of subsidizing and carrying out the projects necessary for everyone to have the same opportunities.[13]

[11] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 22 July 2014. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/491767828010512384

[12] N. Bukele, Speech to the Legislative Assembly, 2021. www.presidencia.gob.sv/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Discurso-a-la-nacion-en-la-AL-2021.pdf

[13] J. J. Dalton, 'Nayib Bukele: Soy de izquierda radical', *Contrapunto*, 3 September 2012. https://web.archive.org/web/20121011085434/http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/partidos/nayib-bukele-soy-de-izquierda-radical

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'"The right", added Bukele, "believes in the law of the jungle, that there should be no rules and that business owners [should] do whatever they want, because in the end business owners will generate a surplus that will reach the poor."'[14]

Bukele railed against right-wing economic policies ('The neoliberal model only brings inequality, poverty, and debt'[15] and against ARENA and 'the oligarchy', which, he claimed 'had so hurt El Salvador')[16] and now 'yearn[ed] to reclaim political power' from the FMLN.[17] In contrast, he noted, without the FMLN 'our people would not be free'.[18] Bukele also publicly campaigned for Salvador Sánchez Cerén, the 2014 FMLN presidential candidate;[19] constantly critiqued the Salvadoran right (particularly ARENA and the business elites); and cheered on leftist candidates and governments across the region.[20] In since-deleted tweets, Bukele heaped praise on Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega,[21] shared inspirational Che Guevara quotes,[22] and wrote that the left – represented by a photograph of Argentina's Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Chile's Michelle Bachelet, and Brazil's Dilma Rousseff – was Latin America's path to the future.

During his time as mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán, Bukele also positioned himself as a progressive on social issues. In 2014, Bukele said he believed that 'the civil rights issue of our time is the LGBTQ+ community'. 'I want to be on the right side of history', he added, comparing the LGBTQ+ community's efforts to obtain equal rights with the abolitionist and feminist movements in the United States. 'Truly, I am an ally', he continued. 'I would like us to change society'.[23] Additionally, in a since-deleted 2013 tweet, Bukele appeared to distance himself from 'pro-life' abortion activists. Referring to the high-profile case of a twenty-two-year-old Salvadoran woman who was denied access to an

[14] Ibid.

[15] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 12 June 2014. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/477293888663584768

[16] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 21 February 2014. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/436950461783220224

[17] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 21 February 2014. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/436954305619582976

[18] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 10 October 2012. https://web.archive.org/web/20210831141717/https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/256217441112293376

[19] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), YouTube video, 12 January 2014. www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmMac2eaW-0

[20] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 30 June 2013. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/351502826855333888; https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/402163455370608640; https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/404063471018733568

[21] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 3 January 2014. https://web.archive.org/web/20200521080023/https:/twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/419285585279602688

[22] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 9 June 2012. https://web.archive.org/web/20210503003906/https:/twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/211607998957752320; https://web.archive.org/web/20200521081353/https:/twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/213391336219484160

[23] ElSalvadorG.com (@ElSalvadorG), 'Nayib Bukele habla sobre el Respeto a la Diversidad Sexual en El Salvador', Youtube Video, 21 November 2014. www.youtube.com/watch?v=edHsVm4xhVM

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abortion even though her life was at stake, Bukele asked: 'Why don't those who "defend life" defend Beatriz's right to live? Maybe they defend fanaticism, which is different'.[24] Such explicitly progressive appeals were never a central component of Bukele's rhetoric. Nonetheless, they were noteworthy and unambiguous statements, especially coming from a rising politician in a traditionally conservative society (see Figure 4.1).

Between 2012 and 2015, this was the first iteration of Nayib Bukele that Salvadorans were introduced to: in broad strokes, a highly effective and popular mayor who was unafraid to 'speak truth to power' and who, particularly via his online presence, positioned himself squarely on the left on economic, social, and partisan issues. Given the context, combining effective governance with leftist rhetoric was a particularly fruitful strategy. First, his good management of Nuevo Cuscatlán turned Bukele into one of the most visible and popular mayors in the country – no small feat for the mayor of a small municipality in a country that, at the time, remained deeply polarized along party lines. Simultaneously, his vocal commitment to left-wing ideas helped Bukele's stock rise within the FMLN, which, at the time, retained its virtual monopoly on electoral politics on the left: the party was still 'the only expression of the left in El Salvador', per Bukele's words.[25] Bukele's strategy soon paid off, allowing him to secure the FMLN's nomination for mayor of San Salvador – a common launching pad for presidential bids.

4.3 THE POPULIST TURN: SAN SALVADOR (2015–2018)

As he moved from Nuevo Cuscatlán to San Salvador, Bukele continued to place visible, effective, and popular municipal projects at the core of his governing strategy. Bukele's landmark policy in San Salvador was 'Una Obra X Día', roughly translating to 'one public work per day'. Many of Bukele's most popular accomplishments involved building or restoring public spaces. In particular, Bukele was able to clean up San Salvador's overcrowded and crime-ridden city centre, a task that had long vexed the capital's mayors. Doing so was no small feat: it involved relocating thousands of street vendors into formal markets, restoring the city centre's built environment, and reducing violence in an area rife with inter-gang turf wars (Roque Baldovinos, 2021, p. 242).

Above all, however, this was a period during which intra-party politics and evolving public attitudes provided Bukele with powerful incentives to shed his leftist rhetoric, break with the FMLN, and embrace populism.

[24] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 18 April 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20230101132219/https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/324982191882911745

[25] J. J. Dalton, 'Nayib Bukele: Soy de izquierda radical', *Contrapunto*, 3 September 2012. https://web.archive.org/web/20121011085434/http://www.contrapunto.com.sv/partidos/nayib-bukele-soy-de-izquierda-radical

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In 2012, and again in 2015, the FMLN had given Bukele the best, if not the only, viable path to electoral victory in Nuevo Cuscatlán and San Salvador, respectively. But by 2016, Bukele stated publicly that the FMLN leadership would not allow him to run for president on the party's ticket. 'I view it as almost impossible', said Bukele. 'It is more likely that I choose not to run for personal reasons', he added, 'than for the … party to change a decision it has already made'.[26] According to one analyst, the party had refused to even consider Bukele as a vice-presidential candidate (Roque Baldovinos, 2021, p. 242).

This development had major implications for Bukele's aspirations: were he to seek the presidency, he would not only have to run outside of the FMLN, but also *against it*. In other words, Bukele would have to devise a strategy to defeat both the partisan right (ARENA) and the partisan left (the FMLN) – something no presidential candidate had come close to accomplishing in El Salvador's modern political era.

But popular attitudes had also evolved in the short time since Bukele first ran for office: Salvadorans were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the two major parties. Between 2012 and 2017, the share of Salvadorans who said they supported the FMLN declined from 26.4 (the most out of any party) to 16 percent. Meanwhile, the share of voters who said they did not support *any* political party climbed from 49.4[27] to 64 percent.[28] By 2018, 84.9 percent of Salvadorans thought that at least half of all politicians were involved in corruption and only 17.1 percent said they trusted the political parties.[29] And more than 80 percent of Salvadorans said they agreed that ARENA and the FMLN were 'really the same thing'.[30]

Against this backdrop, Bukele began to shed his FMLN identity almost as soon as he had secured the party's nomination for San Salvador. In September 2014, during his first major event as candidate, Bukele launched 'Nuevas Ideas' (or New Ideas), a 'citizen consultation' that would serve as the

[26] R. Valencia, S. Arauz, and C. Martínez, 'Nayib Bukele: "Mi candidatura presidencial por el FMLN la veo como casi un imposible"', *El Faro*, 10 July 2016. https://elfaro.net/es/201607/el_salvador/18929/Nayib-Bukele-%E2%80%9CMi-candidatura-presidencial-por-el-FMLN-la-veo-como-casi-un-imposible%E2%80%9D.htm

[27] Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), 'Encuesta de evaluación del año 2012', Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador, 2012. https://uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/informe131.pdf, p. 11.

[28] Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), 'Evaluación del país a finales de 2017 y perspectivas electorales para 2018', Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador, 2017. https://uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/BOLETIN_118-1.pdf, p. 7.

[29] Numbers based on the 2018 wave of the Americas Barometer by Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP).

[30] Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), 'Encuesta sobre el proceso electoral 2018', Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador, 2018a. www.uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/INFORME-144.pdf, p. 38.

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foundation for his municipal campaign platform.[31] At the event, Bukele stood at a podium emblazoned with the Salvadoran shield, flanked by Salvadoran flags and against an imposing blue backdrop displaying the words Nuevas Ideas. There was no mention of the FMLN, and the overabundance of blue hues drew an implicit but powerful contrast with the Frente's ubiquitous red branding.[32] The event set the tone for Bukele's stint as mayor of San Salvador: even if Bukele was running on the FMLN ticket, he would not be an FMLN mayor.

Nor would Bukele continue to position himself as a leftist. During his first twenty-eight months as mayor of San Salvador, for example, Bukele wrote 1,719 tweets. None of them explicitly mention neoliberalism, the oligarchy, or structural economic reform. There are no mentions of abortion and only one passing mention of LGBTQ+ rights. Mentions of 'left' and 'right' were few and far between. In Nuevo Cuscatlán, Bukele had regularly taken to Twitter to cheer on the region's leftists (and lightly mock their right-wing rivals). But after arriving in San Salvador, Bukele rarely commented on ideological debates at home or abroad – at least not in traditional ideological terms.

Instead, Bukele redirected his attention towards the Salvadoran establishment. During his time as mayor of San Salvador, 16.6 percent of his tweets mentioned establishment actors (compared to 9 percent from his time as mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán), including ARENA, the FMLN, the media, business elites, and courts and prosecutors. Bukele tweeted about the establishment 408 times, almost four times as often as he tweeted about economic or security issues (105 and 103 tweets, respectively). The number of tweets about projects and accomplishments in San Salvador – nominally at the core of Bukele's political strategy – also paled in comparison (254).

In these 408 tweets, Bukele began to craft a quintessentially populist narrative: he framed all establishment actors, and particularly ARENA and the FMLN, as indistinguishable elements of a morally corrupt elite that sought to protect its own interests at the expense of the people. Examples abound: 'The FMLN should build ARENA a monument', he mockingly tweeted;[33] 'The only thing that's missing is for many in the FMLN to start singing [the ARENA anthem] and put on [ARENA] vests';[34] 'One thing I have noticed', he wrote in another tweet, '[is that] the FMLN and ARENA can be totally on the same page

[31] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 29 September 2014. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/516733350976167936

[32] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Facebook, 29 September 2014. www.facebook.com/nayibbukele/photos/a.153155838103949/689111807841680/

[33] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 3 July 2017. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/881990189798875136

[34] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 6 September 2017. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/905553563794989057

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on something. As long as it doesn't benefit the people'.[35] Bukele repeatedly accused the FMLN of forming pacts with ARENA[36] and siding with the oligarchy.[37] He took to referring to the FMLN simply as 'ARENA 2.0' – and 'anyone who doesn't see it', he added 'is because they are either for ARENA 1.0 or for ARENA 2.0'.[38] 'Apparently there is no difference between ARENA and the FMLN', he lamented. 'How sad politics is in my country'.[39]

Bukele relentlessly mocked, denounced, and villainized the establishment that ARENA and the FMLN epitomized under this new populist narrative. He routinely referred to *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* – the country's two main newspapers – as 'pamphlets' of the ruling class.[40] He accused the members of the Legislative Assembly, then led by FMLN stalwart Lorena Peña, of being 'cowards' eager to harm 'the people' but unwilling to hold establishment elites accountable.[41] He accused the attorney-general of working for 'the same ones as always' instead of for 'the people'[42] and warned that the country's electoral tribunal had lost all credibility.[43] He labelled all of his establishment critics 'thieves, murderers, and losers'.[44] He accused the 'same ones as always' of having 'pillaged' the people and '[leaving] them without medicines, without schools, without jobs'.[45] 'They will try to destroy any attempt for our country to belong to everyone', Bukele warned his followers.[46]

In short, beginning in 2015, Bukele abandoned his leftist positions and fully embraced an ideologically ambiguous, quintessentially populist narrative. Where he had once railed against conservative elites and right-wing ideas,

[35] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 8 September 2017. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/906339309573345280
[36] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 15 October 2017. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/919570794367012864
[37] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 10 September 2017. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/906943634297249792
[38] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 3 March 2018. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/970082777763893248
[39] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 6 September 2017. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/905544855736209409
[40] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 3 May 2015. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/594941813984657408;https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/775162215045427200
[41] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 4 February 2016. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/695436483088388096
[42] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 16 February 2016. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/699756238846885889
[43] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 16 March 2018. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/974826484991975425
[44] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 26 July 2016. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/758059070804758528
[45] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 29 April 2018. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/990634162334904321
[46] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 18 February 2016. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/700380233149460480

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Bukele now drew little distinction between the Salvadoran right and the FMLN-dominated left: both were part and parcel of a 'corrupt and bureaucratized political class' (Roque Baldovinos, 2021, p. 102) that had conspired with economic elites to harm and subjugate the Salvadoran people. Narrative battlelines were redrawn: an ideological and partisan contest between left and right was eclipsed by a Manichean struggle between a deprived, unredeemed people and a depraved, irredeemable establishment. As befitted this new battle, Bukele no longer sought to present himself as a leftist (or indeed as a traditional ideologue of any kind), or as merely an effective administrator who could deliver tangible results, but rather as an authentic representative of the Salvadoran people who could vindicate 'the population's exhaustion, disenchantment, hopelessness, and indignation' (Roque Baldovinos, 2021, p. 102). This was Bukele's populist turn.

It proved to be a winning strategy. The populist turn helped the presidential hopeful accomplish three key objectives. First, Bukele rewrote the logic of electoral competition in his favour. By portraying ARENA and the FMLN as twin enemies of the people, and by de-emphasizing traditional ideological cleavages, Bukele successfully began reframing the 2019 presidential election as a contest not between left and right but between the people and its morally bankrupt oppressors: in other words, Bukele transformed what might have been a difficult three-way race into a much more favourable up-or-down referendum on the status quo.

Second, the strategy helped Bukele position himself as the best-qualified candidate to meet the growing demand among voters for an alternative to the ARENA–FMLN 'partyarchy' (Roque Baldovinos, 2021):[47] a politician of undeniable anti-party credentials (he was, after all, willing to disparage even his own party), who did not speak in the traditional ideological language of ARENA and the FMLN, and who had delivered results in Nuevo Cuscatlán and San Salvador while 'the same ones as always' had failed to solve the country's most pressing problems.

Last but not least, the strategy helped Bukele free himself of the FMLN. In October 2017, with roughly six months remaining in his mayoral term, the party's Ethics Tribunal voted to expel Bukele.[48] As Roque Baldovinos (2021, p. 243) notes, the FMLN's decision ultimately provided Bukele with two major boosts. First, it allowed him to overcome a crucial legal hurdle: if Bukele had voluntarily left the party to run on another ticket, El Salvador's recently enacted laws against party-switching could have prevented him from registering his candidacy. Second, Bukele's expulsion from the FMLN greatly bolstered his populist, anti-establishment credentials. Despite building his political career

[47] On partyarchy, see Coppedge (1994).

[48] S. Arauz, 'FMLN expulsa a Nayib Bukele y este se declara "independiente" en un tuit', *El Faro*, 11 October 2017. https://elfaro.net/es/201710/el_salvador/21010/FMLN-expulsa-a-Nayib-Bukele-y-este-se-declara-

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within the FMLN, Bukele leveraged his expulsion from the party to perfect his image as an outsider. Bukele was no longer a mere ally in Salvadorans' plight against the political establishment: he was, like them, a victim.

4.4 THE RIGHT TURN: BUKELE'S FIRST PRESIDENTIAL TERM (2019–2024)

In October 2017, less than a week after being expelled from the FMLN, Bukele announced that he would run for president in 2019.[49] Doing so, however, required him to find a new party and register his candidacy on short notice. Initially, Bukele announced that he would form his own party: Nuevas Ideas (New Ideas, NI), a name repurposed from his San Salvador campaign platform.[50] But, predicting that Nuevas Ideas would be unable to clear a series of legal prerequisites in time for the election, Bukele began to explore an alternative strategy: launching a candidacy through one of a handful of small, pre-existing parties. Bukele ultimately secured his nomination through GANA, the party founded by Saca and his allies after the 2009 ARENA schism. At the time, GANA was nominally a centre-right party, but in practice operated as 'a sort of non-ideological "party for hire"' (Loxton, 2021, p. 157).

On the presidential campaign trail, Bukele's appeals were dominated by the anti-establishment populism he had embraced in San Salvador. Table 4.2, for example, shows that 25 percent of Bukele's tweets during the campaign mentioned establishment actors. This strategy allowed Bukele – already the undisputed frontrunner – to seal his victory by successfully framing the 2019 election as a referendum on the deeply unpopular political class embodied by ARENA and the FMLN.

As he entered the presidency in June 2019, Bukele's objectives again evolved in a predictable direction. The central goal was no longer to obtain formal political power but to maximize and sustain it over time. Though widely popular, Bukele faced a legislature dominated by ARENA and the FMLN, courts and prosecutors that had gained significant independence over the previous decade, a constitutional ban on re-election, and other meaningful sources of horizontal accountability on the presidency. His relationship with GANA, meanwhile, was little more than an alliance of convenience, and, with legislative and local elections scheduled for 2021, his own party remained embryonic.

To navigate these challenges, Bukele expanded, complemented, and updated his populist narrative in at least four notable ways, which I examine in turn. First, Bukele began to attack not only the *actors* that constituted the political

[49] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Facebook video, 20 September 2017. www.facebook.com/nayibbukele/videos/1460613727358147/

[50] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 25 October 2017. www.facebook.com/nayibbukele/videos/1469791213107065/

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establishment but also core *institutions* of horizontal accountability. Second, Bukele adopted conservative positions on social issues (particularly on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights) and began to incorporate Christian rhetoric into his populist narrative. Third, and perhaps most famously, Bukele declared war on the country's criminal groups, abandoning the more balanced approach he had advocated in Nuevo Cuscatlán and San Salvador in favour of punitive *mano durismo*. Finally, Bukele began to align himself with the international far right and to promote common anti-globalist tropes. Together, these four changes constituted Bukele's rightward turn.

It was a strategy that helped Bukele consolidate power in at least two important ways. First, it brought him into closer ideological and programmatic alignment with the average Salvadoran voter. As I describe in more detail below, most Salvadorans viewed religion as important and self-identified as Christian. Abortion and LGBTQ+ rights were widely unpopular – or, at a minimum, deeply polarizing – issues. At the same time, an overwhelming majority of Salvadorans viewed security as the most important issue facing the country. It seems likely, therefore, that Bukele's decisions to incorporate Christian rhetoric into his populist narrative, move toward the right on social issues, and adopt a hard-line approach to crime were motivated at least in part by a desire to bolster and sustain his public support.

Second, Bukele's right turn allowed him to update and revitalize the populist narrative as circumstances evolved. Bukele built his original populist brand by framing ARENA, the FMLN, and the political establishment as the central enemies of the Salvadoran people. With his landslide 2019 victory – and especially after his party swept the 2021 legislative and local elections – these enemies had been virtually eliminated. But the right turn allowed Bukele to recast the populist narrative around two new enemies: the domestic 'pest' of criminal gangs and the 'dark forces' of globalism.

For these reasons, the right turn helped Bukele maintain his popularity, legitimized the concentration of power under the executive, and contributed to sweeping electoral Bukelista victories in 2021 and 2024.

4.4.1 'Pantomime Democracy'

Beginning on the presidential campaign trail, Bukele began to frame El Salvador's political system writ large as a 'false democracy' that amounted to little more than a façade erected by 'the same ones as always' to advance their anti-majoritarian interests.

This was a subtle but consequential extension of Bukele's populist narrative: what stood between the people and their redemption was no longer merely a cabal of self-interested elites but rather a set of formal political institutions. These institutions – and particularly those related to Salvadoran democracy's horizontal or counter-majoritarian dimension – were little more than weapons of elite domination. Undoing them was a mandate of historical proportions.

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'For 200 years', said Bukele in June 2021, 'democracy was a pantomime. We had elections, yes, but when politicians got to power, they forgot about the people.'[51] This was because, he explained, 'in our country there was always a powerful group behind the government, an invisible government that no one elected'. ARENA and the FMLN were merely 'two sides of the same coin', Trojan horses through which elites had weaponized left–right ideologies to 'divide the people' and legitimize their democratic pantomime. Underneath the façade of formal electoral competition, this 'powerful group' had controlled every branch of the Salvadoran government, sinking Salvadorans in 'crime, corruption, inequality, and poverty' to 'increase the privileges of a few'. 'Was that democracy? Of course not!' 'For the first time in our history, we Salvadorans are truly taking the reins of our own destiny', he announced. 'We are building a real democracy. We are not building a false democracy like the one installed by the forces of the status quo.'

Bukele attacked, undermined, and eventually captured or dismantled virtually every institutional check on the executive.[52] In February 2021, Bukele's party and its allies won a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly. In May, a few hours after the new legislators were sworn in, Bukele used his supermajority to pack the constitutional court and replace the attorney-general. By November, Bukele had forced a third of the country's judges into retirement. These blows against the judiciary allowed Bukele to undermine another crucial check on the presidency: the constitutional ban on presidential re-election. In September 2021, the new constitutional court – hand-picked by Bukele – issued a controversial ruling that cleared the path for him to seek re-election in 2024. During his first two-and-a-half years in power, Bukele also reduced and centralized funding for municipal governments; restricted access to public information; increased the executive's control over sixty-nine autonomous or semi-autonomous agencies; and named loyalists to head nominally independent accountability bodies, including the electoral tribunal, the financial oversight court, and the human rights watchdog.

Bukele framed each move against institutions of horizontal accountability as a necessary step in 'building a real democracy': checks and balances were, under Bukele's narrative, obstacles to the realization of the people's will. For example, in May 2021, as his coup against the judiciary was unfolding, Bukele tweeted: 'The people are now represented. And those representatives must

[51] The quotes in this paragraph are from N. Bukele, Speech to the Legislative Assembly, 2021. www.presidencia.gob.sv/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Discurso-a-la-nacion-en-la-AL-2021.pdf

[52] This and the next three paragraphs draw directly from M. Meléndez-Sánchez, 'La ultraderecha en El Salvador: El peculiar caso Nayib Bukele', Friederich Ebert Siftung, November 2023, pp. 6–7. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/chile/20675.pdf

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deliver to the people. That's all, it's called DEMOCRACY. In 200 years, our people have not savoured it, [but] now we do'.[53]

4.4.2 'An Instrument of God'

As Table 4.2 suggests, Bukele has generally used religious rhetoric sparingly. But the *role*, if not necessarily the *frequency*, of religious appeals changed during Bukele's first term as president: he began to use religion strategically to frame his populist crusade not only as morally just but also as being aided – and indeed guided – directly by God.

Most tellingly, Bukele began to brand himself explicitly as 'an instrument of God in our new history' (Aguilar Vásquez, 2022, p. 172) – going as far as to imply that he could communicate directly with God, who in turn guided him in his battles against 'the same ones as always'. This was a direct relationship with God that Bukele and his allies habitually emphasized during moments of crisis or amid conflicts with his political adversaries (Aguilar Vásquez, 2022, pp. 170–171).

The most high-profile example of this pattern took place in early 2020. For several weeks, Bukele and the opposition-held Legislative Assembly had been in a standoff related to his security initiative, the Territorial Control Plan. Bukele eventually threatened to dissolve the legislature. On 9 February, surrounded by soldiers and police officers, Bukele forced his way onto the Assembly floor and sat on the speaker's dais, ready, it appeared, to carry out his threat. Instead, Bukele paused: 'The decision we will make today, we will put in God's hands', he announced.[54] Bukele then closed his eyes, lifted his hands over his head, and sat in silent prayer for several seconds. In that moment, with the eyes of the country upon him, Bukele claimed that he had spoken to God: 'I asked God directly', Bukele soon told a crowd of his followers gathered outside the legislature. 'And God said to me: patience. Patience. Patience'.[55] But, Bukele added, 'if these scoundrels don't approve the Territorial Control Plan this week, we will convene here again on Sunday, we will once again ask God for wisdom, and we will tell him: "God, you asked us for patience, but these scoundrels don't want to work for the people."' 'God is wiser than us', he concluded over the crowd's loud objections. 'One week. One week. One week. No people who have disobeyed God have ever triumphed'.[56]

Bukele also began to express support for conservative social values: to defend a sort of 'religious morality' (Aguilar Vásquez, 2022, p. 173). For

[53] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 1 May 2021. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1388548278992744455

[54] Revista Factum (@revistafactum5138), '9F: El retorno de los fusiles – Cap. 4 (final): Con los fusiles y Dios', YouTube video, 12 February 2021, min. 10:59. www.youtube.com/watch?v=bucoj5_xX5k

[55] Ibid., min. 13:14. [56] Ibid., min. 14:44.

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example, in a March 2020 interview, when asked about his views on abortion, Bukele explained that he opposed interrupting pregnancies even in cases of rape,[57] adding that he 'would never kill anyone . . . especially not someone who is defenseless'[58] and that abortion rights constituted 'a great genocide'.[59] The following year, when rumours spread about the contents of a proposal to reform the constitution, Bukele clarified that he would veto any reforms 'related to the right to life (from the moment of conception), to marriage (maintaining only the original design, [between] a man and a woman) or to euthanasia'. Salvadorans 'need a constitution that brings us into the future', he added, 'but always maintaining our principles and our faith in God as the force that guides all of our actions. Because El Salvador will only be able to make progress if He wills it'.[60]

Bukele most likely embraced this 'religious morality' at least in part because he could expect it to be widely popular among Salvadorans (see Figure 4.1). In 2018, 82.8 percent of Salvadorans said that religion was 'very important' in their lives, 85.6 percent of respondents identified as Christians of various denominations, and 72.5 percent said they attended religious services at least once a month.[61] More than three in four said they disapproved of same-sex couples' right to marry, and only 9.7 percent expressed strong support for 'homosexuals' right to run for office'. In other words, most Salvadorans were, or at least claimed to be, deeply religious and predominantly conservative.[62] Bukele's emphasis on Christian rhetoric and his shift towards the right on social issues almost certainly helped him consolidate his support among this electorate.

4.4.3 The War on Gangs

If religion and social issues provided Bukele with a straightforward opportunity to strengthen his popularity, no single issue had the potential to jeopardize it as much as crime. Though homicide rates were on the decline by the time Bukele

[57] La Mega 92.7 (@LaMegaHonduras), 'Residente y Bukele / Entrevista Completa', YouTube video, 24 March 2020, min. 55:16. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fd8tTaMMleY

[58] Ibid., min. 57:29. [59] Ibid., min. 63:03.

[60] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Facebook, 17 September 2021. www.facebook.com/photo.php?%20fbid=410998683718274

[61] Notably, 45.9 percent identified as Catholic and 35.5 percent identified as Evangelical (IUDOP, 'Los salvadoreños evalúan el cuarto año de Gobierno de Salvador Sánchez Cerén y opinan sobre el pasado proceso electoral', Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador, 2018. www.uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/Bolet%C3%ADnPoselectoral2018.pdf, p. 24).

[62] Unless otherwise noted, data from this paragraph are based on the 2018 Americas Barometer wave, available online at www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/about-americasbarometer.php. There is, however, some evidence that abortion was a more divisive issue. In a different 2018 survey, Salvadorans were nearly evenly divided on whether they would support abortion to interrupt an unviable pregnancy or when the mother's life is at stake. Yet 72 percent said they would *not* support abortion in a hypothetical scenario in which an underage girl was raped by a relative (IUDOP, 'Los salvadoreños', p. 23).

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became president, the *maras* remained a powerful threat: operating in (and exercising effective control over) much of the country's territory, they ran extortion schemes and continued to inflict significant violence upon a large portion of the population. The year before he was elected president, more than 60 percent of Salvadorans said security issues were the most important problem faced by their country (see Figure 4.2).

In San Salvador, Bukele had advocated for a progressive approach to security. His 2015 platform identified 'social vulnerabilities' as the root cause of crime and vowed to improve security in the capital by 'giv[ing] its inhabitants more and better opportunities'.[63] 'The solution to insecurity is education, culture, and inspiration', wrote Bukele in a September 2015 tweet. 'The rest is like trying to stop the sea with a wall of sand'.[64] In a 2017 interview, he spoke eloquently about the importance of rebuilding the country's 'social fabric' and articulated a firm critique of hard-on-crime approaches:

> Here in San Salvador, the vast problem that we have cannot be tackled by police . . . You have a social problem. . . . But right now we're just thinking that [gang members] are sociopaths that are wanting to kill so we have them arrested all [sic]. But that won't solve the problem . . . we have to understand that . . . our social fabric is ripped, and we have to rebuild it again. And if we want to rebuild it then we have to understand the problem that we have, which is not a violence problem: [violence] is a consequence of our problems, which is huge, huge, huge inequality and social destruction of the fabric that makes our society work.[65]

During the first three years of his presidency, Bukele's security approach included three main components. The Territorial Control Plan, focused on law enforcement, aimed to strengthen and modernize El Salvador's coercive apparatus (with a strong emphasis on the role of the military) and to gradually regain state control over gang territories. But, along with the Territorial Control Plan, Bukele emphasized a 'root-causes' approach that echoed his strategy in San Salvador. For example, his presidential platform noted that crime 'must not be treated exclusively from the optic of fighting crime, because it is a social problem in which a lack of opportunities and life options produce a vicious cycle of poverty, crime, and violence'.[66] 'Organized crime and criminal groups will be combated', the document stated. 'But special emphasis will also be given to the lack of opportunities that derive from the exclusionary economic model that has been in place in the country'.[67]

The third – and arguably most consequential – component of Bukele's early anti-crime strategy unfolded behind closed doors: Bukele and his team engaged

[63] Nuevas Ideas, *Nayib 2015: Plataforma de Gobierno Municipal San Salvador*, 2015, p. 10.
[64] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 4 September 2015. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/639960729433473024
[65] BBC, 'The Real Story: Tackling Urban Violence', BBC Sounds, 6 January 2017. www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p04mwrz6
[66] Nuevas Ideas, *Plan Cuscatlán: Seguridad*, 2019, p. 1. [67] Ibid., p. 32.

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in extensive negotiations with the country's main gangs, expanding on a strategy they had first embraced in San Salvador. According to journalistic reports and US court filings, Bukele and the gangs struck a series of agreements through which, in broad terms, the gangs lowered homicide rates and provided Bukele and Nuevas Ideas political support in exchange for special privileges for incarcerated gang members, a reduction in repressive policing tactics, and the possibility of more permissive legislation.[68] Thanks in large part to this pact, homicide rates fell from 53 per 100,000 in 2018 – the year before Bukele became president – to 18 per 100,000 in 2021 (The World Bank, n.d.).[69]

Then, in March 2022, Bukele's gang pact collapsed. When the MS-13 launched a wave of retaliatory homicides – murdering eighty-seven people over the course of seventy-two hours – Bukele responded with what would amount to 'one of the most intensive crackdowns against criminal organizations ever recorded in Latin America'.[70] On 27 March, Bukele and his legislative allies declared a national state of emergency, suspended a wide range of constitutional rights, and began conducting mass arrests. Soon, Bukele's legislators also approved reforms that 'instituted harsh new sentencing guidelines for gang-related crimes, lowered the age of criminal responsibility from 16 to 12, and introduced a gag rule banning journalists from spreading "gang messages"'.[71]

The crackdown transformed Bukele's rhetoric. As Figures 4.3 and 4.4 show, Bukele's attention turned almost exclusively to the gangs, which he began to attack with the same intensity he had previously reserved for the members of the establishment. Bukele referred to gang members as 'terrorists',[72] 'murderers',[73] 'idiots',[74] and 'Satan worshippers'.[75] He boasted that incarcerated gang

[68] See, e.g., C. Martínez, G. Cáceres, and Ó. Martínez, 'Gobierno de Bukele negoció con las tres pandillas e intentó esconder la evidencia', *El Faro*, 23 August 2021. https://elfaro.net/es/202108/el_salvador/25668/Gobierno-de-Bukele-negoci%C3%B3-con-las-tres-pandillas-e-intent%C3%B3-esconder-la-evidencia.htm) and the September 2022 indictment in United States of America v. Vladimiro Antonio Arevalo-Chavez et al., especially pages 17–19, available online at www.justice.gov/usao-edny/press-release/file/1354326/dl?inline=

[69] These homicide data, originally collected by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), are available online via the World Bank at 'Intentional homicides (per 100,000 people) – El Salvador', *World Bank Open Data*.https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5?locations=SV

[70] M. Meléndez-Sánchez, 'Bukele Has Defeated El Salvador's Gangs – for Now. How? And What Does It Mean for the Region?', *Lawfare*, 27 March 2023. www.lawfaremedia.org/article/bukele-has-defeated-el-salvadors-gangs-now-how-and-what-does-it-mean-region

[71] Ibid.

[72] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 14 April 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1514495577760882696

[73] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 27 March 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1508257956424413184

[74] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 28 March 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1508599543264428038

[75] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 27 March 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1508257956424413184

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members would not see 'even a ray of sunlight'[76] and threatened to stop providing them with food.[77] He mocked the idea that gang members should have human rights.[78] Through this rhetoric, Bukele villainized and dehumanized the gangs, drawing a clear dichotomy between the 'pest'[79] they represented and the 'common' and 'honourable citizens' who made up the true Salvadoran people.[80] Gang members, said Bukele, had murdered, extorted, and terrorized the Salvadoran people. Now, thanks to the crackdown, the people could finally 'enjoy their rights'.[81] 'When you catch a wolf, you save the sheep', read one tweet.[82]

As Aguilar Vásquez and colleagues (2023), Brown Araúz and Casullo (2023), and others have noted, this rhetoric marked a qualitative shift in the orientation of Bukele's populist narrative: its central enemy was no longer the establishment, but rather the country's criminal gangs. In other words, Bukele no longer identified a powerful elite as the people's main enemy. Instead, the populist crusade became a campaign to cleanse the population of the 'pest' of gang members. Put differently, if Bukele's war-on-establishment populism most resembled the leftist populism of a Hugo Chávez or Rafael Correa, then his new war-on-gangs populism more closely mirrored the logic of the xenophobic populism of European far-right parties (e.g., Mudde, 2007, pp. 69–73).

At any rate, the emergence of a new enemy helped reinvigorate Bukele's populist appeal. By March 2022, Bukele and his allies controlled virtually all public institutions, while ARENA and the FMLN had been reduced to minor parties. If populist appeals are only as powerful as the enemies they invoke, then the traditional political establishment presented Bukele with increasingly

[76] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 27 March 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1508103206232113164

[77] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 4 April 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1511116017913558630 8

[78] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 24 August 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1562566573839519744

[79] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 28 March 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1508586960448802820

[80] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 3 December 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1598966208459509760

[81] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 16 April 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1515438083784822788

[82] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 24 October 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1584429209229078533. Bukele's attacks on 'the same ones as always' were eclipsed by this anti-gang rhetoric – and began to focus increasingly on how the old establishment had tolerated (if not enabled) the rise of the gangs and now opposed the war against them. Beginning on 27 March 2022, for example, 47.9 percent of the tweets in which Bukele mentioned the establishment also mentioned security issues, compared to only 14.4 percent of tweets before the state of exception began. In one tweet, Bukele went as far as to suggest that the gangs had served as the old establishment's 'armed flank' (N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 3 April 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1510776783116902406).

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limited fuel for his populist narrative. By contrast, in the gangs Bukele found a fresh, powerful, and much-despised foe.

Above all, however, the crackdown strengthened Bukele because it succeeded in curbing crime. By March 2023 – a year after the crackdown began – Salvadoran authorities had arrested more than 70,000 people (equivalent to over 1 percent of the population), homicides and extortions had plummeted, the gangs were virtually 'disarticulated'[83] and more than 85 percent of Salvadorans said they supported the crackdown.[84]

4.4.4 'We Are Not Your Colony'

Bukele's shift to the right soon spilled over into the international arena. Bukele's choice to align himself with the international right was a fundamentally defensive and reactive tactic, triggered above all by growing criticism from 'globalist' actors. The international right provided Bukele with a ready-made arsenal of allies, tropes, and narrative devices with which to effectively reframe and counter these criticisms. Moreover, Bukele's rightward turn abroad proved to be a natural – and useful – extension of the populist narrative: the Manichean logic of populism was easily adapted to frame foreign critics as enemies of the Salvadoran people, a move that, in turn, helped strengthen and reinvigorate Bukele's populist appeal at home.

By late 2021, Bukele's authoritarian manoeuvres were drawing criticism from a wide range of international actors, including NGOs, multilateral organizations, the international press, and left-leaning governments. Bukele responded by framing his international critics as meddlesome bullies who wanted to conspire with domestic elites to undermine the sovereignty and best interests of the Salvadoran people (Brown Araúz & Casullo, 2023, p. 103). In his 2021 Independence Day speech, for example, 'Bukele accused the "international community" of "financing a perverse opposition who does not care if it harms children and the elderly"' (Brown Araúz & Casullo, 2023, p. 103). Online, the Salvadoran president frequently mocked the international community,[85]

[83] C. Martínez, and E. Lemus, and Ó. Martínez, 'Bukele Government Dismantled Gang Presence in El Salvador', *El Faro*, 3 February 2023. https://elfaro.net/en/202302/el_salvador/26694/Bukele-Government-Dismantled-Gang-Presence-in-El-Salvador.htm

[84] Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (IUDOP), 'La población salvadoreña opina sobre la continuación del régimen de excepción 2023', Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, San Salvador, 2023. https://uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/La-poblacion-salvadorena-opina-sobre-la-continuacion-del-Regimen-de-Excepcion.pdf

In El Salvador – and in Latin America as a whole – crackdowns have generally failed to dismantle criminal groups. For an explanation of why Bukele's crackdown succeeded, see Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara (2024).

[85] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 17 January 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1483194959897190 59

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disparaged its supposed hypocrisy,[86] and warned it not to meddle in El Salvador's private affairs.[87] These attacks were increasingly tinted with far-right tropes and undertones. International human rights advocates, read one September 2021 tweet, 'would rather impoverish the Salvadoran people, as long as they can achieve their political objectives and promote their globalist agenda'.[88] On several occasions, Bukele accused George Soros and his Open Society Foundations of financing an international campaign to discredit his government.[89]

Bukele's evolving relationship with the United States government is particularly illustrative of these trends. During Donald Trump's first term in office, Bukele appeared to take great pride in his good relationship with the United States.[90] In September 2019, when Trump appointed a new ambassador to El Salvador, Bukele extended him an effusive welcome and noted that 'our [countries'] priorities are the same and for that reason we will achieve great things together'.[91] By December, Bukele would boast that 'our relationship with the United States [is] in its best moment'.[92]

But this relationship quickly soured with the arrival of the Biden administration – particularly as Democrats in Congress and the White House, expressing concerns about some of Bukele's authoritarian actions, moved to cut military support for El Salvador.[93] By December 2021, Bukele had gone on the offensive: 'It is clear that the interests of the United States government have nothing to do with democracy, in any country', he wrote.[94] '[It] does not accept collaboration, friendship, or alliance. It is complete submission or nothing'.[95] In February 2022, when a group of US senators introduced legislation to

[86] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 12 September 2021. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1437175820028633096

[87] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 2 May 2021. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1388705685689540615

[88] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 10 September 2021. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1436519453177663493

[89] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 1 October 2020. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1311824901884596224; N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 2 May 2021. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1388899941666467840

[90] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 24 July 2019. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1154189845142605824

[91] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 1 September 2019. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1168272562230583297

[92] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 2 December 2019. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1201673675486846976

[93] J. Goodman, 'US Cuts Military Aid to El Salvador Amid Intense Lobbying', Associated Press, 28 December 2020. https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-honduras-el-salvador-lobbying-nayib-bukele-c9c7813cbe556943b2f31faa8199d5cf

[94] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 8 December 2021. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1468756047586369541/

[95] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 9 December 2021. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1469006407127244802

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'mitigate potential risks' to the US financial system posed by El Salvador's adoption of bitcoin,[96] Bukele's response was equal parts sardonic and pugnacious: 'OK boomers', he tweeted. 'You have 0 jurisdiction on a sovereign and independent nation. We are not your colony, your back yard, or your front yard. Stay out of our internal affairs'.[97] Bukele's jabs increasingly riffed on right-wing tropes: 'US taxpayers should know that their government is using their money to fund communist movements against a democratic [sic] elected government in El Salvador', he wrote, in English, in December 2021.[98] In January 2022, Bukele retweeted a *New York Post* article about shoplifting in the United States: 'Is there a deliberate plan to destroy the United States from within?'.[99]

Bukele's right turn abroad intensified after March 2022. The war on gangs drew Bukele widespread international attention – both positive and negative. When human rights organizations and the international press began to report on widespread human rights abuses at the hands of Salvadoran authorities,[100] Bukele again went on the offensive. He claimed that human rights advocates 'want to see our people bleed to death, that is their business model',[101] accused his international critics of conspiring with the gangs ('now the Salvadoran people will know who has been behind the blood their families and friends have spilled'),[102] warned that foreign politicians 'want our country to return to a past of death and destruction',[103] and attributed negative press coverage to the 'Open Society media'.[104] At the same time, Bukele's hard-on-crime

[96] Foreign Relations Committee, 'Risch, Menendez, Cassidy Introduce Legislation to Mitigate Risks of El Salvador's Adoption of Bitcoin', United States Senate, 16 February 2022. www.foreign.senate.gov/press/rep/release/risch-menendez-cassidy-introduce-legislation-to-mitigate-risks-of-el-salvadors-adoption-of-bitcoin

[97] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 16 February 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1494066643625988107

[98] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 12 December 2021. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1470128278962937862

[99] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 31 January 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1488200080544997377

[100] For two notable examples, see Human Rights Watch, '"We Can Arrest Anyone We Want": Widespread Human Rights Violations Under El Salvador's "State of Emergency"', 7 December 2022. www.hrw.org/report/2022/12/07/we-can-arrest-anyone-we-want/widespread-human-rights-violations-under-el and N. Kitroeff, 'In El Salvador, the President Cracks Down on Civil Liberties, and Is Beloved for It', *The New York Times*, 28 April 2022. www.nytimes.com/2022/04/28/world/americas/el-salvador-bukele-gangs.html

[101] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 1 April 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1510034419163271168

[102] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 11 April 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1513721850785775617

[103] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 13 September 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1569571839512289281

[104] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 3 April 2022. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1510774785227296786

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approach held natural appeal among international conservatives and, as his CPAC appearance underscores, Bukele began to actively foster and embrace his new status in right-wing circles.

By the end of 2023 – as Bukele was embarking on the final months of his first term in office – the Salvadoran president, once a self-proclaimed leftist, had established himself as one of the most prominent figures of the international far right. Indeed, by this time, Bukele had adopted at least four common characteristics of the populist radical right: he (1) attacked counter-majoritarian institutions; (2) adopted religious rhetoric and conservative positions on social values; (3) drew increasingly on anti-globalist tropes; and, perhaps most notably, (4) embraced punitive populism, espousing attitudes towards gang members whose logic closely echoed the xenophobic populism of many European right-wing parties (Mudde, 2007, pp. 69–73).

However, as the discussion above has illustrated, this right turn was strategic and piecemeal. Bukele adopted these far-right positions not as a result of a cohesive agenda, a far-sighted strategy, or a guiding set of ideological commitments. Nor was Bukele's transformation a case of cultural backlash against progressive ideas, actors, or policies – a recurring theme in this volume.[105] Rather, Bukele's transformation was the cumulative result of many tactical responses to evolving political incentives, challenges, and opportunities. For this reason, Bukele's right turn was also partial and selective. He skilfully embraced right-wing positions when doing so could help him consolidate power and bolster his public support. But when these objectives were best served by other means, Bukele was equally adept at staking out centrist (or even leftist) positions.

Two important developments during his first term help illustrate this point. The first is pension reform. In December 2022, Bukele announced a pension reform that increased monthly retirement payments by 30 percent for most recipients, raised the return rate on retirement savings by one percentage point, and allowed El Salvador's pension administrators to invest 100 percent of their holdings in government bonds. This reform package was, at least on paper, progressive and redistributive. Not only did it increase benefits for all but the highest-earning Salvadorans, but it also paved the way for what would be, in practice, a nationalization of El Salvador's pension system: measures, in other words, that would be difficult to reconcile with a pure far-right agenda.

[105] During El Salvador's pre-Bukele era, culturally progressive ideas were primarily advanced by feminist, pro-environment, and LGBTQ+ rights groups within civil society. The FMLN, meanwhile, historically sought to strike a balance between publicly advocating for some culturally progressive causes without isolating an overwhelmingly conservative electorate. On the whole, compared to many other countries in the region, the salience and advancement of progressive cultural causes in El Salvador remained stunted. This agenda therefore played a negligible role in Bukele's rise, as evidenced by the limited appearance of language related to values in his online rhetoric during – and, indeed, since – that time (see Table 4.2).

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Crucially, Bukele turned to the left on pension reform because doing so could help address an important challenge: how to continue financing his heavily leveraged, cash-strapped government in the short term without resorting to more austere measures that could cut into his public support.[106]

The second aspect of Bukele's presidency that highlights his strategic ideological versatility concerns the economy. During his first term, Bukele began to promote a vision for El Salvador's economic development that Marroquín Parducci (2023, p. 85) has memorably described as a 'Central American techno-utopia': 'a technological future of great illuminated highways, beaches that welcome tourists, an army that delivers justice, a huge prison that punishes any threat, and cryptocurrencies that make everyone rich'. This was a vision that deftly blended right-wing and leftist ideas. Cryptocurrencies, foreign investment, and law-and-order values were among its central components. But the 'techno-utopia' model also called for the state to play an outsized role in directing the country's development. And Bukele framed the vision in terms of progressive goals, such as 'help[ing] provide financial inclusion to thousands outside of the formal economy'[107] and reducing transaction costs related to remittances, a key source of support for low-income Salvadorans.[108]

This extraordinary track record of ideological adaptability highlights another central claim of this chapter: that *populism* has been the constant and defining characteristic of Bukele's political discourse. On his path to the presidency, Bukele framed domestic elites as the central enemy of the Salvadoran people. By the beginning of his first term, these attacks on domestic elites had expanded to include institutions of horizontal accountability. The populist narrative then evolved to encompass two new villains – domestic 'undesirables' (i.e., the gangs) and 'globalist' international elites – and to embrace religious rhetoric. In ideological terms, these changes meant that, on the whole, Bukele veered sharply to the right during his first term. But populism remained the guiding principle and defining characteristic of Bukele's legitimation strategy throughout.

4.5 FROM RADICAL TO EXTREME RIGHT? RE-ELECTION, DONALD TRUMP'S RETURN, AND THE HARDENING OF THE SALVADORAN REGIME

Shortly after the period upon which I focus in this chapter, two developments ushered yet another stage in Bukele's evolution: his re-election to an unconstitutional

[106] G. Labrador, 'Gobierno usará la reforma de pensiones para financiarse hasta las elecciones 2024', *El Faro*, 20 December 2022. https://elfaro.net/es/202212/el_salvador/26621/Gobierno-usar%C3%A1-la-reforma-de-pensiones-para-financiarse-hasta-las-elecciones-2024.htm

[107] N. Bukele (@nayibbukele), Twitter, 5 June 2021. https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1401327906178191366

[108] C. Nugent, 'El Salvador Is Betting on to Rebrand the Country – and Strengthen the President's Grip', *Time*, 1 October 2021. https://time.com/6103299/bitcoin-el-salvador-nayib-bukele/

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second term in 2024 and the return of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in 2025.

Bukele was re-elected in February 2024 with almost 85 percent of the vote. His party, meanwhile, won almost complete control of the Legislative Assembly, securing fifty-four of sixty seats. Bukele's overwhelming popularity – bolstered in no small part by the successful gang crackdown – and the weakness (as well as unforced errors) of ARENA, the FMLN, and other opposition parties contributed to these resounding victories (Perelló & Navia, 2024).[109] But, as I have noted elsewhere, Bukele 'had rewritten and circumvented the rules of the game to tilt the electoral playing field decisively in his favour' well before election day: in addition to violating term limits – the Salvadoran constitution has long barred sitting presidents from seeking re-election – Bukele and his allies gerrymandered the electoral map to favour Nuevas Ideas and systematically abused the powers of the state to disadvantage their rivals (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2024). The ensuing vote count, too, was riddled with irregularities.[110]

In practice, the 2024 election did little to change the balance of power: by the time it arrived, Bukele already held the presidency, boasted a legislative supermajority, and exercised de facto control over the courts and all other institutions of horizontal accountability. Nonetheless, Bukele's willingness to tilt the electoral playing field in his favour marked a clear hardening of the Salvadoran regime: it not only cemented El Salvador's descent into competitive authoritarianism, but also signalled that Bukele may be prepared, if necessary, to fully undermine the vertical (and not just the horizontal) dimension of democracy. More generally, Bukele's re-election raised concerns that his second term would see a deepening of the 'crackdown on dissenting voices that began under the state of emergency' (Wolf, 2024, p. 315), as well as fresh efforts to further extend Bukele's time in office (Perelló & Navia, 2024, p. 12).

The return of US President Donald Trump to the White House in January 2025 exacerbated these concerns. In Trump, Bukele found a natural ally with a much weaker normative commitment to democracy and to human rights than his predecessor. The result has been a hardening of both El Salvador's competitive authoritarian regime and Bukele's right turn, as evidenced by three major developments during the first six months of Trump's second term.

In March 2025, Bukele and Trump reached an agreement to send immigrants deported from the United States to the Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT), El Salvador's notorious – and secretive – megaprison. Despite a US court ruling blocking the move, the Trump administration soon deported more

[109] M. Meléndez-Sánchez, 'How the World's Most Popular Dictator Wins', *Journal of Democracy Online*, 5 February 2024. www.journalofdemocracy.org/elections/how-the-worlds-most-popular-dictator-wins/

[110] R. Gressier and G. Labrador, 'Chaos in El Salvador Legislative Recount Fuels Opposition Accusations of Fraud', *El Faro*, 15 February 2024. https://elfaro.net/en/202402/el_salvador/27251/Chaos-in-El-Salvador-Legislative-Recount-Fuels-Opposition-Accusations-of-Fraud.htm

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than 200 immigrants – including at least 137 Venezuelans – to be imprisoned in the CECOT indefinitely and without due process.[111] Although the Trump administration initially claimed that most of the prisoners were members of the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua, the Salvadoran MS-13, or other criminal organizations, independent investigations found that almost none of those deported had criminal records or other known links to those groups.[112] These developments marked a stunning 'transnationalization of El Salvador's state of emergency'.[113]

During the first months of 2025, Bukele also intensified his efforts to repress dissenting voices. Most notably, on 18 May, authorities arrested Ruth López, a prominent human rights activist and anti-corruption lawyer.[114] Her organization, Cristosal – El Salvador's most high-profile human rights organization – soon pulled its entire staff from the country.[115] *El Faro* – the country's most prominent investigative newspaper – followed suit after its leaders uncovered a plot to arrest them.[116] During this period, authorities also arrested at least half a dozen other high-profile activists, lawyers, and critics. The arrests amounted to a qualitative escalation in the regime's repressive tactics. In the words of two of the exiled *El Faro* reporters, 'May and June [of 2025] marked the great exodus of Salvadoran journalists and human rights and environmental activists. A growing exile had been trickling since Bukele came to power but had never been as massive and evident as it is now'.[117]

Finally, in late July 2025, Bukele's legislators approved a series of constitutional reforms that completely abolished term limits on the presidency and extended the length of the presidential term from five to six years. The reforms also replaced El Salvador's traditional presidential run-off system with a single-round contest.[118] The move appeared designed to extend Bukele's tenure indefinitely.

[111] National Immigration Law Center, 'Tracking the CECOT Disappearances', 2025. www.nilc.org/resources/tracking-the-cecot-disappearances/

[112] E.g. 'About 90% of Migrants Deported to El Salvador Had No US Criminal Record', Bloomberg News, 9 April 2025. www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-04-09/about-90-of-migrants-sent-to-salvador-lacked-us-criminal-record/

[113] M. Paarlberg, 'El Salvador, Trump, and the Transnational State of Exception', *Center for International Policy*, 15 May 2025. https://internationalpolicy.org/publications/el-salvador-trump-and-the-transnational-state-of-exception/

[114] E. Peralta, 'El Salvador Arrests Prominent Human Rights Lawyer', *NPR*, 19 May 2025. www.npr.org/2025/05/19/nx-s1-5403891/el-salvador-arrest-prominent-human-rights-lawyer/

[115] A. Salcedo, 'Facing Threats, Leading Human Rights Group Exits El Salvador', *NPR*, 17 July 2025. www.npr.org/2025/07/17/nx-s1-5471570/facing-threats-leading-human-rights-group-exits-el-salvador/

[116] Ó. Martínez and C. Martínez, 'A First-Hand Account of a Salvadoran Exodus', *El Faro*, 15 July 2025. https://beta.elfaro.net/en/spotlight/a-first-hand-account-of-a-salvadoran-exodus/

[117] Ibid.

[118] S. Peñate, 'EN VIVO: Reformarán Constitución para extender período presidencial a seis años y permitir la reelección indefinida', *El Diario de Hoy*, 31 July 2025. www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/reformas-a-la-constitucion-asamblea-presidencia-de-republica/1234122/2025

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Bukele serves as a case study of how a savvy far-right politician, when boosted by high levels of popular support and a permissive international environment, can accelerate democratic backsliding and consolidate authoritarianism. Indeed, as recent developments suggest, El Salvador is likely to continue its downward slide into authoritarianism as long as Bukele remains in office. The country's competitive authoritarian regime had already hardened significantly a little more than a year into his second term. Especially if Bukele's popularity declines to the extent that the ballot box is no longer a reliable avenue to remain in power, or if serious challengers emerge from within the ranks of the opposition, the Salvadoran regime is likely to begin resembling a purer form of authoritarianism.

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Appendix: Additional Tables and Figures

TABLE 4.2 *Number of tweets by topic during different periods (percentages in parentheses)*

	Pre-mayorship	N. Cuscatlán	San Salvador	Pre-presidency	Presidency
COVID	0	0	0	0	1637
	(0)	(0)	(0)	(0)	(19.3)
Economy	0	169	105	103	830
	(0)	(5.1)	(4.3)	(6.4)	(9.8)
Establishment	11	300	408	404	1301
	(7.4)	(9.0)	(16.6)	(25.0)	(15.4)
International	0	304	135	110	703
	(0)	(9.1)	(5.5)	(6.8)	(8.3)
Left–right	1	58	18	12	22
	(0.7)	(1.7)	(0.7)	(0.7)	(0.3)
Public Works	10	251	254	155	939
	(6.8)	(7.5)	(10.3)	(9.6)	(11.1)
Religion	4	24	47	51	421
	(2.7)	(0.7)	(1.9)	(3.2)	(5.0)
Values	0	3	3	12	94
	(0)	(0.1)	(0.1)	(0.7)	(1.1)
Security	0	80	103	87	1203
	(0)	(2.4)	(4.2)	(5.4)	(14.2)
Total tweets	148	3333	2462	1614	8473

Note: 'Pre-mayorship' includes tweets before 1 May 2012; 'N. Cuscatlán' includes tweets between 1 May 2012 and 30 April 2015; 'San Salvador' includes tweets between 1 May 2015 and 30 April 2018; 'Pre-Presidency' includes tweets between 1 May 2018 and 31 May 2019; and 'Presidency' includes tweets between 1 June 2019 and 31 December 2023. Individual tweets may be included in more than one dictionary category.

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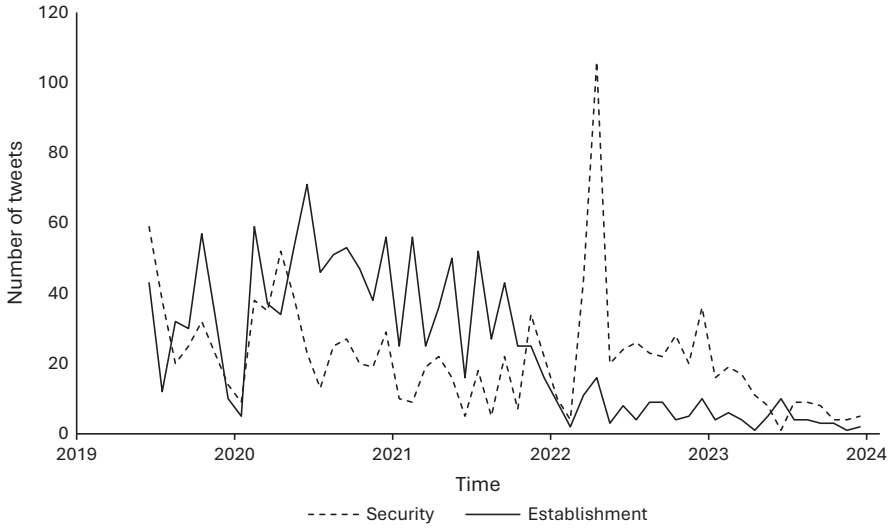


FIGURE 4.3 Number of Bukele tweets about security and the establishment over time.

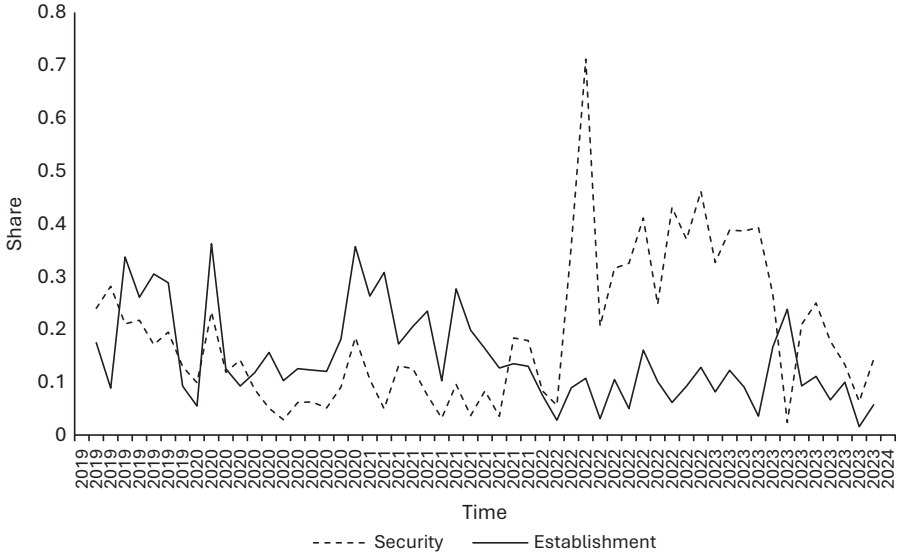


FIGURE 4.4 Tweets about security and the establishment as a share of all Bukele tweets.

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