

An Evaluation of El Salvador's Gang Reduction under President Nayib Bukele

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Abstract

El Salvador, the smallest country in Central America, was once known for having one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Now, the gang organizations that once held legitimate control over the state have diminished through the rise of autocratic governing and arbitrary arrests, but at the expense of human rights and democracy. Through exploring various local Latin American sources and NGO reports, this investigation will explore the Salvadoran President, Nayib Bukele, and his autocratic approach titled *mano dura*, which has coercively incarcerated tens of thousands of people, arbitrarily and without a fair trial. Its effectiveness, however, of completely decimating the country's gangs, sparked support from neighboring countries and radical leaders eager to implement similar mass incarceration strategies to mend their state's internal instability from powerful gang and cartel organizations. The findings demonstrate a concerning relationship between the acceptance of human rights violations and the harnessing of corresponding ideas such as populist governing and Punitive Darwinism, which risk spreading throughout Latin America and becoming effective in legislation that confines the liberties and rights of the people.

Keywords: Populism, Punitive Darwinism, Mano Dura, Mass Incarceration

1. Introduction

In February 2024, El Salvador's President, Nayib Bukele, was democratically reelected—overriding the country's constitution prohibiting a second term in six different articles (Viñas, & Budasoff, 2024) despite over 100,000 citizens currently imprisoned, (Bernal, 2024) of which the youngest being a mere 12 years old. What seems more alarming is that in spite of receiving global attention for inhumane treatment within the country's terrorism center (CECOT) — a maximum security prison on the outskirts of Tecoluca, Latin American countries prioritizing crime reduction consider following El Salvador's footsteps, earning Bukele the nickname of “The World's Coolest Dictator” (Janetsky, 2024).

The son of an affluent businessman of Palestinian descent, Nayib Bukele began his political ascent in 2012 after becoming mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán—a small town on the outskirts of the capital. Although overfunding security, scholarships, and construction projects lead the town into severe debt (El Faro, 2023), Bukele would successfully run for mayor of the nation's capital in 2015, and gain prodigious social media publicity by promoting attention-grabbing public projects despite belonging to the conservative FMLN political party. Within a month of being expelled from the bipartisan party in 2017, Bukele would form his own party, *Nueva Ideas*, and run in the 2019 presidential elections as an anti-establishment populist (Gavarrete, 2024).

Promoting attention-grabbing projects and cultivating an avant-garde millennial self-image, Bukele gained prodigious social media popularity, winning him 53% of the popular vote (Bergengruen, 2024). However, Bukele's ambitious plans of renovating the capital's historic center and attracting foreign businesses/tech investors, fell short with the country's gang prevalence.

It's two largest gangs, *Barrio 18* and *Mara Salvatrucha*, or *MS-13*, date back to a Salvadoran diaspora influenced by the amalgamation of military confrontation, internal anarchy, civil wars, and poor socioeconomic conditions that motivated mass migration to the United States in the 1980's (Montgomery, 1994). However, a lack of alternatives to escape poverty and broken homes in American urban cities became a primary motivator for youth to form the notorious Barrio 18 / MS-13 gangs (Martin, 1999). The U.S. lacking new immigration reform plans, deported these gang members back to El Salvador in the thousands, increasing turmoil over the decades as Barrio 18 / MS-13 grew into the two largest rival gangs in the country (Lynch, 2008).

In the early 2000s, previous governments had attempted *mano dura* (firm hand), or tough-on-crime approaches which single handedly backfired. On the other hand, according to US officials, Bukele allegedly brokered deals with the gangs that provided financial incentives “to ensure that incidents of gang violence and the number of confirmed homicides remained low” (U.S. Treasury Department, 2021).

El Salvador's Attorney General, who had reportedly been investigating Bukele's deals with gangs, along with top judges from the Supreme Court, would be replaced in 2021 with supporting lawmakers who reinterpreted the Constitution in Bukele's favor, allowing him to run for a second presidential term (Bergengruen, 2024).

With an 84% vote, Bukele would win by a landslide, meanwhile *Nueva Ideas* would consolidate hegemonic power, winning 54 out of 60 seats in the Legislative Assembly “ despite complaints of fraud by the opposition, which recorded at least 60 anomalies during the final count of the votes” (NACLA, 2024).

However, as gang relations deteriorated, waves of murders in March, 2022, would send the country into a state of emergency that suspended freedoms of assembly and loosened arrest rules (The Guardian, 2024).

Security forces have since then raided neighborhoods where violence was once a daily occurrence, arresting more than 80,000 people in the process. Having arrested 1% of the Salvadoran population, the homicide rate has fallen to 2.4 per 100,000 individuals in 2023, but human rights organizations document hundreds of arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, and massive violations of due processes (Amnesty International, 2024). El Salvador's prison rates in comparison to the countries with the highest incarceration rates are depicted below.

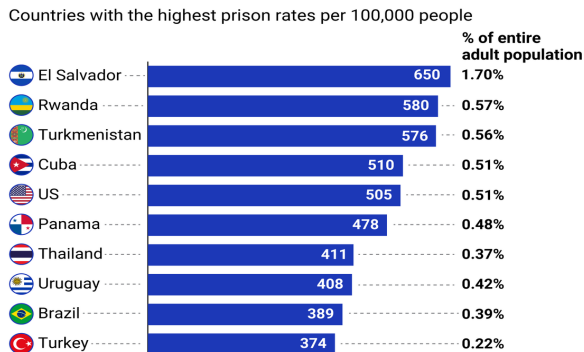


Figure 1. Highest International Prison Rates (Debinski, & Vieira, 2023)

As a result, this essay aimed to investigate the extent to which the rights of Salvadorans remain threatened, and the consequences of human right contraventions at both the national and regional level, by answering the question: To what extent does Nayib Bukele's policy of mass incarceration to combat gang violence amount to an infringement on human rights and what implications might this have for democracies in the region?

This was done by extensively looking at secondary news sources localized to Central America such as *Radio Ambulante*, *Infobae*, *Yucatán Times*, and *La Prensa Gráfica* to evaluate

the situation from a culturally relative perspective. Cultural relativism is crucial for countering cultural bias and for providing a more objective interpretation of practices within a country, region, or demographic's context. Specifically, Bukele's punitive measures were analyzed with the culturally relative perspective that high gang prevalence in the region affected nearly every aspect of Salvadoran's daily life, kept in mind. In addition to cultural relativism, El Salvador's mass incarceration was evaluated from various political theories including realism, postcolonialism, Galtung's Triangle, and liberalism. In this context, realism closely ties to Bukele's focus on state sovereignty, similar to the use of a political 'iron fist' to quickly reduce crime and homicide rates. However, liberalism was used as a counter argument in order highlight the human rights abuses occurring from within El Salvador's prison and detaining system. Further, evaluating from a postcolonial standpoint enabled a more holistic approach to the nuances of systemic poverty and other driving factors that facilitated the uprising of gangs in a postcolonial Latin American setting in the first place.

Other secondary sources include NGO reports from Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as IGO reviews from the UN General Assembly/World Bank. Although these sources can offer a form of national statistics, these organizations can also be easily criticized for condemning actions committed under state sovereignty and for being rooted in Western liberalism. That is why a primary source, in the form of an interview, was used. The semi-formal interview was conducted with a Salvadoran family in order to acquire an essential local perspective on the issue.

The developmental state of El Salvador prior to Bukele's presidency was overflowed with violence and public insecurity. Once known for having one of the highest homicide rates in the world outside of a war zone, El Salvador has witnessed a remarkable transformation since military personnel were deployed onto the streets under the state of emergency in 2022, after a spike of nearly one hundred homicides in three days.

In just a few days after requesting the state of emergency, Bukele proposed several changes to the country's criminal law amendments. Despite contravening El Salvador's obligations under international human rights law, the country's Legislative Assembly ratified multiple laws that neglect individual freedoms and liberties.

For example, on April 5, 2022 subarticle 345-C titled "Illegal Preparation of and Reproduction of Messages, Signals, Denominations or Propagandas Allusive to Maras or Gangs" was added to Article 1 of the country's Criminal Code. The law penalizes 10 to 15 years of prison against media outlets that "reproduce or transmit messages or statements created or allegedly created" by gangs that "could generate a state of anxiety and panic to the population in general" (DECRETO No. 349 from Legislativa Asamblea, 2022). Human Rights Watch said these provisions could "easily be used to target critics and journalists" (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Evidently, The Salvadoran Journalists Association (APES) documented 311 attacks, including harassment, doxxing, threats, and criminalization, against journalists in 2023, and in the first nine months of 2024, it recorded 165 more attacks (Vílchez, 2024).

Nationally, Nayib Bukele has made significant improvements and reparations regarding security and socioeconomic growth. Homicide rates have dropped from 17.8 per 100,000 to 7.8 in 2022 in comparison with the year prior (UNODC, 2024) well below the Latin American average of 16.8 (Infosegura, 2024) and since Bukele took office, the economy has steadily grown, particularly in 2021 with an 11.2% increase (WorldBank).

Amidst the construction of CECOT, a maximum security prison on the outskirts of Tecoluca, Bukele's state of emergency deployed military personnel onto the streets, transforming the state into what it is today. For locals, this means children playing soccer late into the evenings on previously known gang turf, people walking freely through neighborhoods once operated by rival gangs, and an end to extortion payments that once dismayed residents and business owners (Kitroeff, & Volpe, 2023). These changes create peace in communities once strategically operated by leading gangs who consolidated immense physical and political power.

Notably, a semi-informal interview with a family of first-generation Salvadoreans in the United States found that public opinion had shifted so dramatically in favor of Bukele that even natives who are no longer residents, and who contribute to the Salvadoran diaspora, admire Bukele's actions.

"This country needed a strong enough leader who would stand up against the gangs, and Bukele rose up to that position," said one of the interviewees. "Honestly, Bukele has been one of the best leaders El Salvador has ever seen, and he has never failed the people when they needed him the most."

The family was forced to flee the country back in 2016 to escape death threats from pressuring local gangs. This time period in particular had received major violent backlashes. Between 1998 and 2014, U.S. authorities deported almost 300,000 immigrants with criminal records to Central America to subdue growing criminal activity in Los Angeles, facilitating the growth of homicides in the Central American region (International Crisis Group), as depicted in the graph below.

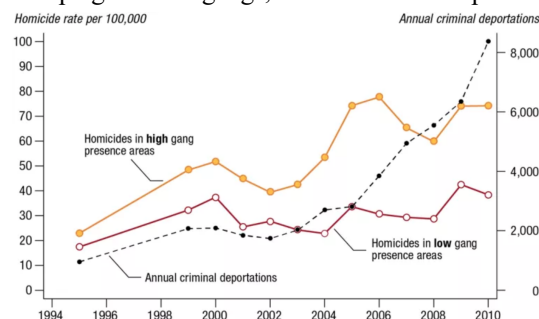


Figure 2: Homicide rates in municipalities with low and high gang presence and yearly criminal deportations from the U.S. National Civilian Police and U.S. Department of Homeland Security (International Crisis Group)

2. Galtung's Triangle

Galtung's Triangle paradigm connotes that structural violence / contradictions, including unequal access to food, education, and jobs, manifest from the latent level into physical direct violence. This can be seen between the Barrio 18 and MS-13 gangs, where resource deprivation combined with the lack of upward mobility through legitimate employment continues to accelerate Salvadoran youth into gangs (Gellman, 2022). Galtung suggests that peacebuilding — repairing relationships and reforming institutions in the long run (Conciliation Resources), is the most effective strategy against inequalities. It's possible that Bukele's mass incarceration system, though not repairing relationships between gangs, is increasing security, dismantling gangs, and allowing reform in communities once turmoiled by violence. From this perspective, these changes along with economic improvements have the potential to reduce poverty and eliminate the very inequalities forcing youth to join gangs in the first place.

3. Soft Power vs. Hard Power

An implication of revitalizing the state's economy / security is the improvement of El Salvador's international credibility, potentially enhancing international relations and trade. Increased international credibility — the trustworthiness of a country's capabilities and intentions by other countries in the international community (Jiang, 2022) strengthens the sovereignty and legitimacy of the state because of its strategicness / effectiveness in responding to severe issues that have long been drawn-out in the country and Latin America. Consequently, increased sovereignty enables a 'soft power' that can influence and change the behaviors of other countries, (Ikenberry, & Nye, 2004) making El Salvador a more legitimate political actor for its influence on neighboring developing countries in the region. For example, Argentine Security Minister, Patricia Bullrich, made a four-day visit to El Salvador to study Bukele's approach and signed a cooperation agreement (Soltys). Meanwhile, Honduras announced plans to build a mega prison for 20,000 while Ecuadorian President Noboa declared an unprecedented state of 'internal armed conflict' to repress gangs (Bergengruen, 2024).

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"Our neighborhoods used to be so unsafe that we couldn't even visit our neighbors next door in the middle of the night," said one of the interviewees. "If it weren't for Bukele, the rest of my family back home would still be living in fear."

On the other hand, Bukele has also induced hard power by coercing police forces to commit arbitrary arrests, rounding up to 3,319 minors and "depriving them of adequate food, healthcare, and contact with families or coercing them into making false confessions" (Aljazeera, 2024). Inevitably, this places national security at the cost of citizens' human rights.

Since his presidential candidacy back in 2019, El Salvador's human right index has seen a significant drop from a score of 0.76 to 0.51 (Our World in Data) due to the suspension of multiple constitutional rights under Bukele's state of emergency including freedom of association and assembly, privacy in communications, and due process protections (Gellman, 2022).

El Salvador's broad persecution and quick determination of guilty sentencing, where mass hearings and trials are reportedly held in groups up to 500 people (OHCHR), upholds a major risk to the right of fair trial. "Mass hearings and trials — often conducted virtually — undermine the exercise of the right to defence and the presumption of innocence of detainees," UN experts said in a press release on El Salvador. "The excessive use of pre-trial detention, the prohibition of alternative measures, trials in absentia and the possibility of using practices such as 'faceless judges' and reference witnesses all undermine due process guarantees."

Additionally, El Salvador's Legislative Assembly, where Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party makes up a two-thirds majority, has allowed judges and prosecutors to jail children aged 12 and above.

On March 30, 2022 the Juvenile Criminal Law replaced subarticle 15 of Article 2 with a fifth paragraph titled "Internment and prison sentence". It states: "the judge will impose a prison sentence, the maximum term of which

may be up to twenty years when committed by a minor who has turned sixteen years old and up to ten years when it is a minor who has turned twelve years old” (DECRETO No. 342 from Legislativa Asamblea, 2022). As a result, police officers and soldiers have conducted hundreds of indiscriminate raids in low-income neighborhoods and arrested 80,000 people – over 3,000 being children as of 2024 (Graham, 2024).

This legislation lowered the age of criminal responsibility for children accused of terrorist or criminal association from 16 years old to 12, and allowed prison sentences of up to 10 years (Human Rights Watch, 2022), despite El Salvador ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 (Treaty Bodies). Article 37 specifically states, “Neither capital punishment nor life imprisonment without possibility of release shall be imposed for offences committed by persons below eighteen years of age”. Ratification signifies an agreement to be legally bound by the terms of the convention, but by overriding the articles, *Nueva Ideas* is exploiting state sovereignty while neglecting its international responsibility of adhering to international law and promoting the fundamental promotion of human rights.

Detentions are based on appearance or unreliable evidence such as anonymous calls or uncorroborated allegations on social media (Human Rights Watch, 2022) therefore targeting communities that have long suffered multigenerational insecurity and lack educational opportunities with no apparent connection to gang activity. From a universalist perspective, this ignores the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically Article 9, “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile” and Article 10, entitling everyone to “full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal”.

Furthermore, minorities are most vulnerable since municipalities with the highest presence of Indigenous people are among the poorest in the country (Minority Rights Group) and Afro-Salvadorans have long suffered systemic racism and discrimination (Cruz, I., 2023). Considering these are minorities throughout Latin America who experience prejudice and inequalities, mass prisons could fuel discriminatory aggression and be an actor for structural and systemic racism throughout the region.

On April 1, President Bukele tweeted “How do we know if someone is a gang member?” posting photos of men wearing tattoos such as ‘MS13’, failing to acknowledge those who have left a gang nor recognizing the reality that individuals from low-income homes face forced recruitment. Internationally, NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International condemn CECOT for its lack of accountability for human rights violations and recommend prioritizing efforts to address the root causes of gang membership while ensuring that detainees can receive visits from their families and that negotiation with gangs is conducted transparently in accordance to the right of equal access to justice (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

For example, Ana Piquer, Americas director at Amnesty International, persisted in keeping “politicized use of the criminal process and the de facto policy of torture in the prison system from becoming entrenched, as both trends have driven up the already alarming rates of due process violations, deaths in state custody, and precariousness among people deprived of liberty”. She insisted on the international community staying “vigilant” and to “use all resources” to “halt and reverse the abuses and state violence that are jeopardizing human rights”, suggesting that Bukele’s mass prison not only erodes state law but also deteriorates rule of international law by disregarding personal freedoms and suppressing the most vulnerable. This example of NGO vigilance also reveals how although the international community can condemn human right abuses, they have limited power in addressing violations because sovereign power must ultimately be taken by the state.

Additionally, the country recently received constitutional reform. On 29 January, 2025, the Legislative Assembly revised the second paragraph of Article 248 in the country’s Constitution, enabling future reform to be ratified “in the next Legislative Assembly with two-thirds, or by the same Legislative Assembly with the vote three-quarters of the elected deputies” (Asamblea Legislativa de El Salvador, 2025). This not only removes mandated approval of two legislatures for all constitutional reforms, but facilitates nimble constitutional revision without consultation from opposition parties or the legislative ballot box (El Faro, 2025) and hence exhibits *Nueva Ideas*’s rapid consolidation of power with unchecked checks / balances.

Constitutional reform is extremely significant as constitutional law sets a state’s legal framework and evenly distributes governmental power to safeguard the interests of majority rule (United States Senate, 2021). As America’s director at Amnesty International, Ana Piquer states, “Constitutional reform must be based on broad consensus and

guarantee control mechanisms that allow the people to exercise their right to meaningful participation in public affairs. This reform creates the conditions for future amendments to respond only to the interests of those in power, without a rigorous and broad debate and without any consideration for the rights of the population,” (Piquer, 2025).

Further, the implications of Bukele’s radical ideas are their rapid spread and popularity throughout Latin America. Colombian Senator and aspiring 2026 presidential candidate, María Fernanda Cabal, asserts “The people today are desperate. Today they need a Bukele” (Lancheros, 2024). Xóchitl Gálvez, presidential candidate of Mexico proposed building a “maximum security prison” and doubling the number of public ministries, judges, and personnel in the army (Yucatán Times, 2024). Even Chile, a historically stronger democracy and safer country than El Salvador, but whose crime is rising, has a 78% approval rating for Bukele (Freeman, & Perelló, 2024).

Though Bukele’s use of hard power has reduced gang activity, and his manipulation of soft power has gained popularity, the mass prison does not facilitate nor invest in long-term impact through social upward mobility, integrate a return for prisoners to contribute to society, nor develop better living conditions and circumstances for youth to escape the poverty cycle and prevent a relapse of criminal behavior in future generations. Without investing in social reform, individuals are forced to give up personal freedoms in exchange for security where the most vulnerable fear false accusations and arrests.

4. Liberalism vs. Cultural Relativism

Bukele’s hard power approach titled *Mano Dura* for its “punitive criminal justice approach” and “tool for political gain” (Ruiz & Mackey, 2020) has received international attention for contradicting liberal ideas which, according to Professor Moravcsik, “stresses individual freedom, equal rights, economic openness, social justice, and democratic governance”.

At the 78th General Debate Session of the UN General Assembly, Bukele proposed that countries must make their own decisions and design their own systems. “No country has the right to impose its ideas or way of doing things — even less when these things don’t work in our countries.” Bukele stresses the importance of a state utilizing its sovereignty to firmly address those who threaten its survival, reaffirming the state’s legitimate right to govern itself, demonstrating a strong alignment with realism’s focus on state power, national interests, and unitary decision-making (Moravcsik, 1997).

Elsewhere, *Mano Dura* may not work for its infringement on human rights and democracy, but from a culturally relativist perspective, dismantling gangs becomes overwhelmingly appealing in Latin America for its provisions of personal safety which gangs once had legitimate control over, and many seem ready to give up universally perceived personal freedoms in exchange for much-wanted security.

However, recent years have shown an increasing acceptance of not only the right but the responsibility to intervene in the internal affairs of another state to protect human rights, just how constructivism “emphasizes social standards between states and organizations, and the perception of what is socially acceptable” (Staib, 2012). This international / socially constructed norm now acts as a form of pressure on the construction of mass incarceration systems in Latin America, undermining their cultural relevance.

5. Postcolonialism

Sheila Nair, a professor of politics / international affairs, claims that post-colonialism “highlights the impact that colonial and imperial histories still have in shaping a colonial way of thinking about the world and how Western forms of knowledge and power marginalize the non-Western world” (Nair, 2017).

This can be seen in Latin America, where approval of hard power in exchange for greater security may become appealing for a shared history of oppression, limited support from the international community, and because following human right discourse imposed / constructed by the West rather than sovereign authority taking matters into their own hands to solace the people, delegitimizes their system of governing.

In El Salvador, many of its ailments stem from colonialism / foreign intervention which had driven the country’s youth to join gangs in the first place. Spanish colonizers created destitute socioeconomic conditions for the masses

and hindered the improvement of the economy. The English would later exploit locals by controlling trade, anchoring peasant farmers to the land, causing greater debt and creating widespread poverty (Lynch, 2008). The U.S. would later seize lands for global military reach, beginning during Roosevelt's Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, denoting the US to the "exercise of an international police power" (National Archives). This created greater dependency and internal political and economic chaos to continue to spread, further instigating poverty and motivating independence, resulting in civil wars (Lynch, 2008).

Internationally, postcolonialists may argue that despite foreign aid, including \$261 million since 2021 for El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (USAID, 2023), Western policymakers fail to address structural factors like the oligarchical wealth accumulation or global monetary / capital flow that generate inequality. Often, the international community focuses only on supporting a less developed state rather than addressing the structural causes of inequality that led to the state being relatively less developed in the first place.

At the UN General Assembly, Bukele refers to these historical marks. "We tried everything that we were told was the right thing for us & it got us fighting a civil war for things far removed from us. They made us sign up for some fake peace agreements," he says, referring to the negligence of the Chapultepec Peace Accords, "but there was no peace in them, and they only enabled two different gangs to plunder the loot." Everything was done, he said, with the "support, consent, and imposition of those who proclaimed themselves to be the great defenders of human rights and democratic institutions".

6. Populism in Latin America

Acknowledging that neighboring countries face these challenges makes Bukele's populist governing all the more appealing. Populism, Professors VEDI Hadiz and Angelos Chrysogelos assert, is a "political tendency that seeks to separate 'the people' of an imagined 'heartland' from allegedly rapacious and corrupt 'elites', while asserting that the latter is responsible for the social and economic problems perceived to beset 'the people' or 'the nation'" (Hadiz, & Chrysogelos, 2017).

In El Salvador, these elites are the top 20% who hold approximately 45% of the country's income (Statista). This causes the erosion of democracies / liberal institutions, including the acquisition / taming of courts and oversight institutions, and the fabrication of laws that limit freedom of the press and civil society (FSI, 2015). These implications not only corrode public transparency / accountability of sovereign authority, but also undermine conflict of interest laws, respect for opposition, and approval from outside political actors in establishing legitimate rule.

In Latin America, democracies are being physically challenged, from protests demanding presidential resignation in Peru, a far-right movement storming Congress in Brazil, former Mexican President Obrador overhauling the nation's electoral agency, and Bukele suspending constitutional rights in his state of emergency (Casas-Zamora, 2023). Though different, these are examples of populism's substantial spread throughout the region as a result of citizens' legitimate exasperation with incessant corruption. Resentment has dismantled party systems and weakened the institutions necessary to fight corruption and create social change in peaceful ways. Consequently, this forms deeper mistrust in institutions that check power, further undermining democracy.

Casas-Zamora, the former Costa Rican vice president asserts, "To populists, the checks and balances that define a democracy are dispensable luxuries or, even worse, distortions that prevent the people's voice from being heard" (Casas-Zamora, 2023). He claims that corruption thrives where power is not checked, so for Latin America, states need more checks & balances / rule of law to prevent a vicious cycle of corruption and the infringement of human rights.

For El Salvador, defending the interest of the people means decimating its ruthless gangs, but Bukele's dictatorial method may spread populist ideas / autocratic forms of governing to neighboring states, potentially dismantling democracy throughout the region and causing illiberal governing systems to repress freedoms / liberties.

7. Punitive Darwinism

One theory that can explain Bukele's implementation of tough-on-crime policies at the expense of human rights

is Punitive Darwinism, wherein political candidates “tap into the fear of the populace to win votes” because “society favors candidates who are the ‘toughest’ against criminal actors” (Rosen, 2022). This may be because crime provokes a psychological reaction of passionate feelings against the perpetrator, where, without them, there would be less reestablishment of value and order in societies (Tyler, & Boeckmann, 1997). Utilitarianism accentuates that punitivism emanates when individuals / communities feel threatened by crime or the ineffectiveness of public institutions to control violence (Maruna et al., 2004).

Victims of criminal activity in Latin America are far more likely to support punitive Darwinist methods such as *mano dura* (Bateson, 2010). However, Rosen’s study on Colombia and Brazil argues that other economic, political, and social insecurities are the culprits for *mano dura*’s growing popularity in the region (Rosen, 2022) and data from Americas Barometer 2012 survey highlights that fear of crime is associated with increased punitiveness (Singer, 2017). Therefore, crime rates and associated fear “decrease the likelihood of support for political institutions and democracy, erode the social capital necessary for democracy to work, and favor authoritarian responses among the citizenry” (Rosen, 2022) causing *mano dura* approaches like mass prisons.

Rosen argues that neither the end of the military rule nor the peace accords following the civil war brought peace to El Salvador, but rather gave rise to rival gang powers, asserting that punitivism among Salvadorans is not associated with personal experiences with crime, but with the *fear* of crime which affects the public’s policy preferences.

8. Conclusion

El Salvador went from being one of the most dangerous countries in the world to having the lowest homicide rate in the region, indicating that the state’s mass imprisonment system is effective in reducing crime, decimating the country’s ruthless gangs, and enabling citizens to reclaim personal liberties and freedoms. However, El Salvador’s maximum security prison, CECOT, has committed numerous human rights violations to detainees including torture, abuse, unhealthy living conditions, absence of a fair trial nor a definite time on when they will be released, and disconnection from their families.

Arbitrary arrests, often occurring in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, suppress the most vulnerable and compel citizens to sacrifice their civil liberties in exchange for safety. Suggesting that CECOT is effective in increasing security, but in the long-term, mass prisons are not creating lasting impacts in society by improving social upward mobility, improving living conditions, and initiating educational programs and opportunities for youth to prevent a relapse of criminal behavior for future generations. Its *mano dura* strategy disperses populist ideas and Punitive Darwinism, undermining democracy and causing radical governing throughout Latin America.

In conclusion, although Bukele’s mass incarceration policies are effective in rapidly combating the country’s gang violence, they significantly infringe the constitutional / inalienable human rights of Salvadorans citizens because of severe arbitrary and punitive approaches. This can be seen through the coercive use of hard power dispersed throughout the criminal and justice system, which have conducted mass arbitrary / unjust arrests on vulnerable and youth populations. Punitive Darwinist approaches are shown to fuel methods of hard power, which have led to tighter media and social restrictions as well as inhumane living conditions within the prison.

As a result, Bukele’s policies have spread throughout the region. An expansion of populism across Latin America has forced democracies to be physically challenged and adopt versions of Bukele’s policies to combat their countries’ own issues. This can be explained through a shared postcolonial history of oppression / limited support from the international community. Galtung’s Triangle also reveals that inequalities / structural violence rooted in El Salvador and Latin American countries may have manifested into the physical violence dispatched by gangs.

Furthermore, a recent international seminar with the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) stressed the need to move towards developmental measures that go beyond GDP. Specifically, authorities indicated that three inhibiting factors are hindering the region’s development: low capacity for growth, high inequality / low social mobility and weak social cohesion, and low institutional / ineffective governance capacities (ECLAC, 2025).

Hence, a limitation of Bukele’s mass incarceration policies is its failure to address these very factors that not only inhibit development but promote the amalgamation of gangs in the first place. Additionally, while *mano dura*

concentrates on criminal activity, it fails to acknowledge the long-term societal and economic consequences that such policies have on the nation. If governments aspire to dismantle criminal structures and networks in the long run, more comprehensive strategies that tackle inequalities are needed. There is substantial support for reducing crime, but there must be just as much if not more interest of making investments for the people. Particularly by subsidizing in social initiatives like education and high-quality jobs which disincentivize youth from underprivileged backgrounds from joining gangs.

One example that can be used to support this is the case study of Chile. In response to crime being one of the top concerns of citizens in both developed and developing countries (Teodros, 2023), politicians strategically implement punitive or ‘tough on crime’ policies directed at the population’s fear of crime (Alberti et al., 2022). For example, prior studies have shown that increased societal preferences for retributive justice have led to higher incarceration rates in the United States and United Kingdom as politicians were led to believe that stronger punitive measures would improve their electoral chances of success (Enns, 2014; Jennings et al., 2017). However, Chile’s socioeconomic and development-centered approach systematically decreased levels of interpersonal violence in the process.

A study by Rivero-Cantillano et al. found that Chile’s homicide rates were relatively high during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the country experienced a gradual decline in the 1930s, and by the 1960s, Chile achieved its lowest level of homicide rates, averaging the current mean of OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries and falling below 2.0 homicides per 100,000 people (Rivero-Cantillano et al., 2022). Chile’s human peace index was ranked 1 in the Latin American region in a 2012 report (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2012) and it became the first country from South America to join OECD in 2010 (OECD, 2024). These indicators suggest that Chile’s history of collective social spending and economic growth correlated with a reduction in homicide rates (Rivero-Cantillano et al., 2022). In particular, the 1930s to 1960s mark a key period in Chile’s developmental growth as it concurs with the emergence of a welfare state, increased social expenditure, declined poverty rates, improvements in health and education, and an increase in suffrage (Rivero-Cantillano et al., 2022).

Alternatively, under President Daniel Noboa, Ecuador’s administration has been able to reduce the country’s homicide rate by 18% and increase drug confiscations by 30% in the past year (Primicias, 2024). Noboa’s *mano dura* approach imposed a state of emergency and its ‘*Security Block Strategy*’ which involves waves of police officers, the armed forces, and ministries of the Interior and National Defense onto the streets (Aguirre, & Muggah, 2025). Ecuador is currently seeing many parallels to El Salvador’s homicide reduction strategy with the exception that cases of extortion and kidnapping have increased drastically. Between January and September of 2024, Ecuador’s National Police recorded 2,108 kidnappings and 10,781 extortions (Loaiza, 2024) compared to 1643 kidnapping cases in the year prior (Silva, 2024).

Furthermore, Ecuador’s head of the National Police at Dinased asserted that criminal groups are diversifying into new illicit economies to ensure their survival (Aguirre, & Muggah, 2025), suggesting that rather than dismantling gang organizations, Ecuador’s crime reduction paradigm is instead pressuring gangs to find alternative economic strategies. To support this, according to police authorities, some criminals demand sums ranging from USD 2,000 to 200,000 for each victim (Primicias, 2024).

Another concern is that the *mano dura* approach of Latin American politicians could potentially transform the operational structure of gangs wherein officials are coerced into cooperating, as with the case study of cartel organizations in Mexico (Aguirre, & Muggah, 2025). Despite continuous efforts to mitigate cartel operations, cartels remain one of the country’s top employers and continue to hold a significant position of political power by bribing police officers, judges, and politicians (Council of Foreign Relations, 2025). Additionally, assassinations of journalists and public officials occur frequently, with more than thirty candidates having been killed in the 2024 elections (Council of Foreign Relations, 2025).

Ecuador is already seeing this use of hard power. For instance, the *Metastasis Scandal* in 2024, had Ecuador’s Attorney General’s Office charge 13 people, including politicians and prosecutors, who were involved in what is now known as the “largest corruption and drug trafficking case in the country’s history” (Voss, 2024).

Hence, integrating an iron fist approach could facilitate criminal networks to consolidate political power / influence that over time weakens the authority and legitimacy of governments and offsets a cyclic militaristic model that fails to address the country's systemic disparities.

Therefore, Bukele's mass prison or *mano dura* strategy indicates the need to concern over social / economic inequalities, the politicization of crime, and the role that media outlets have in raising public support for *mano dura* policies.

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