

Election of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador signals further shift to US imperialism

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Last Sunday, El Salvador lived one of its most quiet and dull presidential elections since the end of the 12-year civil war in 1992. All candidates advanced an anti-corruption rhetoric to cover up their support for the same right-wing policies of social austerity and militarization at the behest of the local oligarchy and US imperialism.

The overwhelming victory of Nayib Bukele, the 37-year-old former mayor of the capital, San Salvador, was chiefly an expression of the popular loathing toward the traditional ruling parties and political forces associated with the bloody civil war whose economic and social devastation is still deeply felt today—the far-right Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the ruling guerrilla movement turned bourgeois party, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

Bukele, who ran on the ticket of the Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU) party, received 53 percent of the votes, enough to avoid a second round. The multi-millionaire businessman, Carlos Calleja, leading the coalition topped by ARENA, received 31.8 percent of the vote, while the former FMLN foreign minister Hugo Martínez won 14.4 percent.

The abstention rate of nearly 50 percent, more than 10 percentage points more than the last presidential elections in 2014 and the highest since the 1990s, reflected the growing political gap between workers, peasants and youth, and the entire ruling elite. In the last five years, the FMLN lost more than 1 million votes, and ARENA three-quarters of a million votes.

The Salvadoran and international media have promoted Bukele for years as a “new” and “cool” leader and worked to distance him from the leadership of the FMLN and from ARENA, which was founded by death-squad leader Maj. Robert D’Aubuisson and ruled the country for two decades.

Back in 2016, *Foreign Policy* (part of the *Washington Post* group, owned by Jeff Bezos) listed Bukele as one of 15 top “decision-makers” in the world for placing street lights, gentrifying downtown El Salvador, and removing a skating ban. On Sunday, the German *Deutsche Welle* featured

Bukele’s comment that, “The two groups that created the war still want to keep governing, and what’s more, they’re corrupt.”

Far from an “anti-corruption outsider,” however, Bukele was expelled from the FMLN as recently as 2017 for “slandering” the leadership and allegedly violently attacking a local, female official. After failing to register a new party last year, he joined GANA, a recent split-off from ARENA founded by former president, Antonio Saca, whose successful presidential bid in 2004 was financed with millions stolen from Taiwanese donations for the reconstruction of the country after the devastating 2001 earthquakes. Last September, Saca pleaded guilty to embezzling and laundering more than \$300 million of public funds during his administration.

Beyond providing a new façade for the same rotten establishment, Bukele’s rise reflects the ongoing shift of the Latin American bourgeoisie away from the “pink tide” governments in the last two decades, of which the FMLN formed a part. This process has been marked by a sharp move to the right and a geopolitical shift behind the drive by US imperialism to reassert its hegemony in the region, particularly against growing Russian and Chinese influence during the last two decades.

Partly due to these pressures, Bukele centered his campaign on the promise of a Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES), modeled on the “anti-impunity” commission in Guatemala, backed by the UN.

Using half-truths such as “There will be enough money when nobody steals,” Bukele has sought to cover up his refusal to impinge upon the property and billions of profits plundered from Salvadoran workers by foreign and domestic capital. At the same time, Washington has demanded the creation of a CICIES since Guatemala agreed to its own commission (CICIG) in 2006 and Honduras (MACCIH) in 2016.

The US has heavily sponsored such efforts as window dressing for these corrupt, semi-colonial governments and as political tools to pressure local elites to strictly adhere to US

financial and geopolitical interests. After the Guatemalan president, Jimmy Morales, pledged his opposition to establishing diplomatic ties with China, for instance, the Trump administration silently tolerated the expulsion of the CICIG last August.

That same month, facing constant financial defaults and a slowing economy, the FMLN government felt compelled to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan and recognize Beijing, which committed to a three-year assistance program of \$150 million and a donation of 3,000 tons of rice. At the same time, discussions are ongoing about selling the inactive La Union container port to Chinese companies, including permission to build a major free trade zone.

The Trump administration responded by temporarily pulling out its ambassador, Jean Manes, who had previously declared, “The expansionist strategy that China has in the region is alarming, not just economically, but also militarily.”

Bukele himself has criticized the decision by the FMLN administration to break ties with Taiwan and recognize Beijing as the sole legitimate government of China, promising to “review that deal, but we will not necessarily break relations with China.”

The administration of the outgoing president, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, has continued to recognize Nicolás Maduro as the president of Venezuela, against the military coup being orchestrated by Washington to hand over power to CIA asset Juan Guaidó, who has already congratulated Bukele on his victory. For his part, Bukele has called Maduro and Nicaragua’s president Daniel Ortega “dictators” and indicated that his new party, unlike the FMLN, is “not bound to these governments.”

However, as the crisis of global capitalism deepens—a process accelerated by the US trade and economic war against China—and spurs the crisis of bourgeois rule in El Salvador and across the region, fears are growing in the ruling class that new parties based on “anti-corruption” platforms constitute a very limited palliative.

For instance, the *Forbes* magazine for Mexico, where the recently-elected president, the “anti-corruption” demagogue Andrés Manuel López Obrador, is already facing mass social unrest, wrote on Monday, “In the end, the picture of El Salvador and the young Bukele is the same as in the other countries of Latin America with minor nuances ... The risk: that these faces that come to oxygenate politics don’t fulfill the expectations of change and, on the contrary, end as ‘stained’ as the traditional parties and politicians.”

As soon as Bukele takes office on June 1, he will face an anemic economic growth largely dependent on remittances from migrants living in the US, a growing exodus of migrants seeking to escape widespread poverty and gang

violence, and the plans by the Trump administration to rescind the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and deport hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans.

The Foundation for Economic and Social Development (Fusades) reported recently that out of the 91,000 Salvadoran youth entering the job market each year, only 12,400, or 13.6 percent, find a formal job.

The most recent census shows that the average monthly salary in El Salvador is \$300, but 64 percent of Salvadoran workers make less than this amount. Oxfam reports that multi-dimensional poverty affects 53 percent of the population. The UK-based charity reported, back in 2014, that 160 Salvadorans owned more than \$30 million in assets and collectively controlled the equivalent of 87 percent of the GDP. This inequality, particularly as a result of the boom in the stock markets since, is undoubtedly much higher today.

At the same, the Bukele administration will face higher borrowing rates, a public debt equivalent to 70 percent of GDP and growing pressure by the IMF to implement new, regressive tax policies and social austerity. The percentage of GDP spent on health and education has already fallen below 2009 levels, when the FMLN came to power, while the 2019 budget already allocates \$1.8 billion for debt servicing and \$1.6 billion in total for health and education.

The most common proposal for El Salvador made in recent months by US-based think tanks is the creation of new tax-free economic zones, perpetuating the place of El Salvador in the global capitalist economy as a cheap-labor platform ruled by a handful of increasingly rich oligarchs. Most Salvadoran exports are currently produced in 17 free-trade zones concentrated in textile “maquiladora” sweatshops owned by US, Korean and Taiwanese capital.

Amid a growing resurgence of the class struggle and radicalization of workers and youth internationally, the Salvadoran working class can only fight against this super-exploitation and the staggering levels of inequality by extracting the essential lesson of the bloody defeats of the revolutionary struggles following 1979: it can only oppose imperialism by building an authentic socialist and internationalist party—a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—and waging an intransigent struggle for its political independence against all pro-capitalist and nationalist parties like the FMLN, the trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists.



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