

Salvadoran soldiers invade Congress as president warns of imminent “social explosion”

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The president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, carried out a military occupation of the Legislative Assembly on Sunday to demand at gunpoint that legislators allow his administration to negotiate a \$109 million loan to buy helicopters, a warship, surveillance and other military expenditures.

Seven months into his first term, Bukele is doing away with the “democratic” trappings of an oligarchic and semi-colonial regime whose political institutions were established by a US-sponsored military junta.

The thinness of bourgeois “democracy” in El Salvador was made apparent by the heavily armed soldiers lined up behind the legislative benches as the president sat at the front podium to give legislators “one week” to approve the negotiations. Anti-riot police stood along the exits.

Bukele then walked outside, where about 5,000 supporters were gathered, with many demanding to flog the legislators. Inciting a fascistic atmosphere, with soldiers still behind him, he proclaimed: “I have asked God, and God told me: patience, patience, patience.”

While appealing to his supporters to wait until the 2021 elections to settle accounts, he declared that “if we wanted to press the button, we would only need to press it” to have the soldiers drag the legislators out. “Blood is on their shameless hands. This loan was due last year; the funds were due to be applied to our police and soldiers.”

Bukele had unilaterally convoked an extraordinary session for Sunday, tweeting last week: “If the legislators don’t attend, they would be breaking the constitutional order and the people will have the power to invoke Article 87 of the Constitution,” which refers to the right to “insurrection with the sole task of

reestablishing the constitutional order.”

Most legislators were not present, and many reported harassment by state forces. The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) said that the military “sieged” the homes of at least 12 of their deputies, while several deputies of the far-right National Alliance (ARENA) told reporters that police and soldiers knocked on their doors to deliver a “verbal order” to attend the session.

The FMLN and ARENA together hold a majority in Congress and oppose Bukele’s loan request on the basis of immediate political calculations. Representing different factions of the Salvadoran ruling class, both parties have strongly backed the build-up of the state forces. For instance, the FMLN and ARENA continue to collaborate on a bill to hand amnesty for war criminals during the country’s civil war (1980-1992), which would set the stage for new state crimes.

The response of the White House and the Salvadoran military, which operates in daily communication with the Pentagon, suggests that Sunday’s stunt was carried out with the approval of the Trump administration.

On Saturday evening, Minister of Defense René Merino, who is close to the US embassy and was trained by the US Naval War College, released the following statement: “We reiterate to our good citizens that we will honor the oath to obey the president of the Republic and commander in chief of the armed forces in all occasions and risks, even at the cost of our lives.”

US Ambassador Ronald Johnson only tweeted a call “for all parties of the state and all Salvadorans to work and talk in search of consensus and to keep calm.” However, the head of the Organization of the American States, Luis Almagro, who backs US policy in the

region, tweeted late on Saturday: “I held a phone conversation with the Salvadoran foreign minister [Alexandra Hill]. She voiced the respect of her country’s government for the Constitution and institutions and reaffirmed the commitment of the government of president Nayib Bukele with the policies of security that have produced positive results.”

The Bukele administration is a US puppet regime, with the president vowing repeatedly that the US is his “most important partner.” The requested loan is meant to finance the third stage of the “Territorial Control Plan,” which is ostensibly aimed at reducing violence and crime in close coordination with Washington. Amid scarce information on the plan, Bukele told media last year: “It has seven stages. The last one is an emergency stage. We can’t describe every stage or give details since it’s a security process.”

Even though a timeline has not been announced, Sunday’s events are a sign of urgency. In an interview Monday with *El País*, Bukele said, “El Salvador is one of the few countries in Latin America where people are not protesting in the streets, because there is social tranquility, but not tranquility regarding crime.” He added: “In El Salvador all the conditions are there for a social explosion, but if it doesn’t happen it’s because I asked the people to be calm.

When pressed about the events Sunday, he added: “If I were a dictator or someone who doesn’t respect democracy, I would have already taken control over everything.”

These statements constitute an acknowledgement that his government, at the behest of US capital and its Salvadoran partners, is preparing for a fully-fledged dictatorship in anticipation of an imminent uprising. Sunday’s show of force constituted a coercive warning to the different factions of the Salvadoran ruling elite to fall into line in prioritizing these preparations.

Gang violence is a major source of unrest among Salvadoran workers and impoverished youth who can’t afford hiring private guards. But far from protecting workers’ lives, Bukele’s plan is aimed at preparing to violently crush opposition against the poverty and inequality that give rise to gangs.

Bukele’s use of the 1983 constitution is significant. Separate provisions allow the executive to declare a “regime of exception” and suspend constitutional warrantees, while the articles cited by Bukele allow for

“insurrections” to restore them. It effectively provides arguments for the ruling class to reimpose a dictatorship under different scenarios.

The constitution was created by a US-backed military junta, which set up a Constituent Assembly led by Roberto D’Aubuisson, the founder of ARENA and a death-squad leader trained by the US School of the Americas. While this military leadership continued to rule de facto and killed over 30,000 people in the following decade, the façade of a “civilian” government was used by US imperialism as a cover to continue its collaboration. After the 1992 peace accords with the FMLN guerrillas, this “democratic” veneer also facilitated the implementation of brutal IMF-dictated privatizations and social austerity, including under two FMLN administrations.

All over the world, the ruling class is responding to growing social unrest against austerity, inequality and war by invoking the fascist and authoritarian forms of rule of the 20th century. Facing the threat of deadly military repression like that used against the protests mentioned by Bukele in Chile, Ecuador and Honduras, workers and youth in El Salvador need to mobilize independently of all factions of the national bourgeoisie as part of an international political movement against capitalist exploitation.



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