

President Bukele grabs dictatorial powers in El Salvador

Andrea Lobo**6 May 2021**

Last weekend, the president of El Salvador, 39-year-old Nayib Bukele, consolidated his control over all branches of government by replacing the judges of the Constitutional Court and the attorney general, who had opposed his power grab.

Exploiting mass opposition to the austerity and social inequality presided over by the parties that ruled El Salvador since the end of its civil war in 1992—the far-right National Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the ex-guerrilla Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)—Bukele has been able to secure massive votes.

His party, New Ideas (NI), won a two-thirds supermajority of 58 seats in the unicameral Legislative Assembly in the February 28 elections. This compared to 14 seats for ARENA and only four for the FMLN. Moreover, New Ideas won 58 percent of all mayoral races. By gaining control of the Constitutional Court and attorney general's office, Bukele has removed the last institutional checks on his power.

Throughout his term, Bukele has also cultivated support in the National Police and military by attacking opposition parties for resisting massive loans to build up the security forces. This culminated on February 9, 2020 with a military occupation of the Legislative Assembly led by Bukele.

He has also exploited a sharp drop in homicides during his term—which was due to a multitude of factors—to insist on granting greater powers and resources to the police and military, despite their long record of death-squad activity.

Imitating Trump and other fascistic forces, he has sowed hostility toward an amalgam of all shades of political opposition together with gang members, journalists, some figures of the local business elite and the Jewish billionaire George Soros.

His surge in popularity is tenuous and largely based

on a one-time \$300 pandemic stipend last year, an unfinished new hospital for COVID-19 patients, and the administration of almost 1 million vaccine doses, a much faster rollout than in neighboring Central American countries.

El Salvador, however, saw the largest increase in official poverty in 2020 across Central America, according to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America. This has been reflected in an exponential increase this year in Salvadoran migrants detained at the US-Mexico border. Moreover, the entire Central American isthmus is seeing a devastating surge in the pandemic.

A section of the media and political establishment internationally have denounced Bukele's assault on "democracy." Luis Almagro, head of the Organization of American States and Washington's main coup organizer in the region, claimed that Bukele "could go down the road of Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia."

However, Bukele has only exposed the façade of democracy that US imperialism and the local oligarchy imposed following the end of the civil war in 1992. The opposition to Bukele's actions from sections of the ruling elite is the result of fears that he will only inflame social anger, alienate certain business groups or lean too much on China, which has provided most of El Salvador's vaccines.

As Bukele has repeatedly made clear, the shift toward dictatorship in El Salvador is aimed against working class resistance to the diktats of finance capital.

In fact, he hired the same ultra-right Venezuelan politicians involved in the US-backed regime change operations against President Nicolas Maduro to run the New Ideas electoral campaign, as reported by the right-wing outlet Globovisión.

In dismissing the country's top judges, the New Ideas legislators pointed to rulings preventing Bukele from decreeing economic reopenings without legislative approval during the pandemic. "They are basically taking away our power to re-start the economy," declared Bukele at the time.

The reopenings, ultimately backed by all political parties, were carried out after a meeting with a faction of the country's traditional oligarchs headed by the billionaire Roberto Kriete, the richest Salvadoran. These are the same long-time backers of the political parties Bukele claims to oppose. Nonetheless, the president announced that he had reached a "consensus with a very representative group of the great national business leaders."

In an interview with *Diario El Salvador* this week, Kriete backed Bukele's handling of the pandemic and called on him to use his new powers to go on the offensive: "Modernize the banking laws, modify the Commercial Code, modify everything that has to do with incentives ... eliminate bureaucracy, eliminate procedures and really give a chance to the business sector, local as well as foreign."

The Bukele administration has also acquired immense loans, incurring interest payments to the financial vultures that are expected to absorb up to 35.6 percent of the country's tax revenues this year. The ruling elite will do everything possible to place the full weight of these costs upon the backs of the working class.

In preparation for mass repression, Bukele has used the pre-trial hearings over the 1980 El Mozote massacre to reassure the police and military. With an estimated death toll of 1,000 civilians, this was the largest single massacre in Latin America during the 20th century. The atrocity included troops throwing babies in the air for target practice as part of the fascist operations against left-wing opposition to the US-backed military-controlled dictatorship.

The Bukele administration has blocked any judicial access to the secret military files regarding the El Mozote massacre. Last September, with demeaning hostility toward the Salvadoran masses, he "declassified" files on national television that turned out to be copies of files already made public and lacking any relevant military information.

In a separate media stunt, he visited El Mozote in December to promise economic aid and rant against the

former administrations as well as the lawyers of the victims for allegedly profiting from the massacre. He traveled to El Mozote on one of Kriete's helicopters.

On April 22, the US Embassy in El Salvador reaffirmed its support for the Bukele administration, reporting that the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) had donated \$431,911 worth of protective and hospital equipment to El Salvador, in addition to \$25 million in other US donations. "For more than 50 years, SOUTHCOM has focused its efforts on developing ties and strengthening its alliance with El Salvador," the embassy report states.

President Joe Biden himself, as a US Senator, had feigned opposition to unqualified military aid to the Salvadoran junta, only to then "broker compromises to ensure that funding was approved, such as his 1983 'amendment to require that training of Salvadoran troops by U.S. trainers be carried on outside of El Salvador,'" as reported recently by the Intercept.

During a closed-door meeting on Monday with foreign diplomats, Bukele compared opponents of his takeover of the Constitutional Court to "the tens of millions of people who thought it was fine to burn Jews in an oven" in Nazi Germany. This comment, which sparked widespread condemnation, can only be interpreted as an expression of callous indifference to the historic crimes of fascism.

The pandemic as well as the hurricanes and droughts, exacerbated by climate change that have ravaged Central America, have exposed the inability of capitalism to meet the most basic needs of the working masses. The response of both the Salvadoran ruling elite and US imperialism is a headlong drive toward dictatorship.



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