

# Human rights complaints mount against Bukele's state of exception in El Salvador

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Last week, human rights organizations in El Salvador issued a joint report that includes over 4,500 human rights complaints against the security forces during the ongoing “state of exception” launched 10 months ago by the government of President Nayib Bukele, ostensibly in a “war against gangs.”

The complaints are mostly of arbitrary detentions, as Bukele openly boasts of having detained almost 63,000 “terrorists,” or 1 percent of the population, without a fair trial. The report also cites “harassment, threats and battery.” One of the organizations, Cristosal, has recorded at least 102 deaths of inmates during the regime of exception.

The Salvadoran ombudsman, moreover, has gathered evidence of hundreds of cases of torture, while Human Rights Watch accessed an official database of 1,082 children detained, as of August 2022.

The state of exception authorizes troops and police to make warrantless searches and arrests, including of minors as young as 12. It also allows mass trials and trials in absentia, includes 45-year prison sentences for suspected gang members and suspends democratic freedoms, including freedom of speech and the press. As the country approaches a total of 100,000 inmates, Bukele inaugurated this month the largest prison in the world with a capacity of 40,000.

In a country smaller in size than the US state of New Jersey, the massive scale of the roundups is comparable to those carried out by the military dictatorships in Central and South America during the 1970s and 1980s.

Moreover, these policies have been accompanied by an avalanche of fascistic propaganda by officials and most of the media glorifying the security forces and portraying impoverished youth as “rats” and “terrorists.”

In this context, polls show that the state of exception is supported by almost eight in every 10 Salvadorans, with similar numbers feeling “safer,” and the measures have reportedly reduced the number of homicides and other crimes. Recent investigative reports have found that the largest gangs, Barrio 18 and MS13, have been “dismantled” as functioning organizations in the communities surveyed.

The popular support for these policies is partly explained by the fact that workers and small shop owners in El Salvador have faced decades of daily terror and killings by gangs, which have connived with state authorities to profit from “taxes,” drug trafficking, and robberies.

At the same time, only one or two generations ago, a series of brutal military dictatorships backed, armed and trained by the United States, and a subsequent “civilian-led” regime plagued by death squads, massacred tens of thousands of left-wing youth, workers and peasants. The lack of mass opposition from below against what is clearly the establishment of another dictatorship can only be explained by the political bankruptcy of the organizations that claim to be “left.”

When elected to power, the official “left” composed of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) quickly abandoned its reform promises to oversee IMF austerity measures, while maintaining El Salvador as a cheap labor platform for transnational corporations. Ultimately, the ex-guerrilla FMLN dropped any opposition to US imperialism, whose brutal domination over the course of a century engendered the economic conditions that have proven to be so fertile for gangs and criminal activity.

While Bukele was expelled from the FMLN, and has since exploited the widespread hatred for all the political forces involved in the civil war (1980-1992), and heading the governments since to refashion himself as an “anti-establishment” figure, he offers no real alternative. This is demonstrated by three facts.

First, his key campaign promise of ending impunity for the crimes committed during the civil war, like the Mozote massacre by the military, has largely been abandoned.

Second, several media reports have found that part of the leadership of the gangs has remained unscathed and moved temporarily to rural areas and neighboring countries. Amid worsening poverty under the boot of a police state, and countless youth unrelated to the gangs now locked away with actual gang members and far from their studies and work, conditions could again be ripe for a violent resurgence of the same gang structures.

Third, and most importantly, as demonstrated by his “let it rip” policies during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Bukele has little concern for the actual safety and lives of the Salvadoran people. The regime of exception responds to the pressing demands by the American ruling elite to establish a “safe corridor” to connect the North American supply chains with the cheap labor and natural resources in Central and the South America.

But this “safety” doesn’t refer to protecting workers and their families, but rather protects the foreign capital investments, factories, products and profits from the workers, even if initially this takes the form of crushing the extortion-seeking gangs.

These corridors are urgently needed by US imperialism as it tries to “near-shore” production and consolidate a North American economic platform to compete against its rivals, including China, Russia and the major European powers.

Any challenge from below that may disrupt these plans will be met by deadly repression. There are indications that the Bukele regime is already using the state of exception to crack down on social opposition. The Development Association of the rural community Santa Marta on Monday denounced the “arbitrary detention” for over a month of five of its leaders under the regime of exception. Those arrested had led protests against mining corporations.

The official poverty rate has jumped to one-third of the population, while 21.4 percent of Salvadorans would like to emigrate, according to a recent IUDOP poll. Such desperate economic conditions will eventually lead to an eruption of the class struggle.

The influential US think-tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published last December a report titled “Advancing U.S. Nearshoring Priorities in Central America with Special Economic Zones.” The report indicates that providing investors “inviting macroeconomic environments” is the first challenge for these nearshoring plans.

“Investors and governments must therefore seek out geographically defined areas, where rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and regulatory stability and predictability characterize the landscape,” the report indicates. Moreover, it proposes a network of US-dominated special economic zones (SEZ) with tax and regulatory incentives where management can rule unimpeded.

The CSIS report focuses in on El Salvador, where Washington has successfully pressured the government to halt plans for a Chinese-dominated special economic zone. The report says this project is troubling because it would mainly benefit China-based investors while “sidelining many U.S. and European companies.”

“With geopolitical considerations front and center, supply chains and the global investment landscape are likely to become less global and more regional,” the report concludes.

While the report describes China as a “nondemocratic competitor,” the corporate incentives and suppression of the class struggle that the CSIS proposes are incompatible with democratic forms of rule. At the same time, this competition will inevitably drag Central America into the maelstrom of a third world war.

Any hypocritical criticism by the Biden administration against Bukele is part of its pressure campaign to pull the country away from China. But even as Bukele attempts to balance ties with US imperialism and China, Washington has become more openly supportive of Bukele’s state of exception.

Human Rights Watch analyst Juan Pappier noted to CNN that, while there was initial criticism of Bukele’s measures by the White House, “more recently we have observed ambiguous positions.” This was confirmed by the response of Biden’s State Department to CNN.

“El Salvador and the United States have a personal interest in making sure these violent criminals remain off the streets,” a spokesperson said, while unconvincingly claiming “grave concerns about human rights violations, arbitrary detentions and

deaths.”

Just as in El Salvador, ruling elites across Latin America are prepared to subordinate every social policy to creating “inviting macroeconomic environments” to compete for foreign capital, especially as the crisis of global capitalism worsens.

Governments identified as part of the misnamed “Pink Tide” and openly right-wing regimes alike are emulating Bukele’s repression and implementing their own militarization strategies.

On November 24, only hours after Bukele launched a new phase of his “war,” the supposedly “left” President Xiomara Castro in neighboring Honduras announced an ongoing national state of emergency and military deployment to “suspend constitutional rights where needed.” These are the same security forces that have repeatedly killed protesters and local leaders like Berta Cáceres who opposed the regime installed by the US-backed 2009 coup.

Throughout 2022, the right-wing administration of Guillermo Lasso in Ecuador declared four states of exception in different regions, including one against a national strike in June.

Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador has enshrined into the Constitution the permanent presence of the military on the streets and created a new National Guard that has already been deployed against migrant workers and strikers.

Colombia’s pseudo-left President Gustavo Petro announced last week a US\$1.1 billion purchase of military equipment. “Colombia’s forces will be better prepared, more modern, interoperable and adapted to the new realities in the national and regional context,” his defense minister boasted. These are the same security forces that killed thousands of civilians in the 2000s and used live ammunition against mass demonstrations in 2021. In December 2022, Petro renewed troop deployments to Putumayo, where only a few months earlier the military massacred 11 civilians and tried to cover it up by moving the bodies.

Chile’s pseudo-left President Gabriel Boric has kept the military deployed under a state of exception to repress the indigenous population in the south, while Brazil’s Workers Party President Lula da Silva has promised massive investments in the military and protected leading military officials who were behind the January 8 fascist coup attempt.

Finally, the US-backed coup regime of Dina Boluarte in Peru has employed a state of emergency, the military and live ammunition to crush mass demonstrations ultimately driven by opposition to the policies subordinated to the mining transnationals and Wall Street.



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