

El Salvador's Bukele regime stages mass show trial for nearly 500 alleged gang members

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Prosecutors in El Salvador have opened a mass trial of 486 alleged members of the MS-13 gang on charges ranging from homicide to extortion and arms trafficking. In what will be the largest criminal proceeding in the country's history, the defendants are accused of involvement in more than 47,000 crimes committed between 2012 and 2022, including an estimated 29,000 homicides.

Authorities claim they are targeting the highest ranks of the gang's leadership and insist they possess overwhelming evidence, pledging to seek the maximum sentences available under Salvadoran law.

The trial is taking place under a regime enacted through sweeping legal changes enacted during the ongoing state of emergency imposed by President Nayib Bukele, who has ruled under extraordinary powers for four years. These measures permit mass hearings, often conducted virtually, denying defendants' basic rights.

A recent legal reform will soon allow life imprisonment without parole for those convicted of terrorism, murder or rape. International observers have sharply criticized these draconian measures. "Mass hearings and trials—often conducted virtually—undermine the exercise of the right to defence and the presumption of innocence of detainees," a United Nations panel of experts warned.

Bukele, who has referred to himself as "the coolest dictator in the world," has been embraced by Donald Trump as an "incredible ally." The American would-be dictator has applauded his crackdown on gangs, amounting to martial law, and the construction of vast prison complexes. He has described El Salvador's prison system as "humane" and effective, while highlighting cooperation on immigration enforcement, including deportation agreements targeting alleged gang members.

The reality behind this rhetoric is the consolidation of an authoritarian regime. The state of emergency has suspended fundamental democratic rights and enabled mass detentions on an unprecedented scale. Human rights organizations estimate that El Salvador's prison population has surged to approximately 118,000 detainees—more than double the

system's capacity. At one point, 1.9 percent of the country's population was incarcerated, one of the highest rates globally. Bukele's government has threatened life sentences and even starvation for detainees, invoking a so-called "war on gangs" to justify these measures.

This state of authoritarian terror strips away the thin democratic façade established after the end of military rule in 1979 and the conclusion of the civil war in 1992. That façade was constructed with the complicity of the petty-bourgeois nationalist and Stalinist leadership of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which transformed itself from a guerrilla movement into a bourgeois political party. Bukele himself emerged from the section of the business elite that aligned itself with the FMLN.

The repressive apparatus now in place has extended beyond El Salvador's borders, intersecting with US immigration policy in alarming ways. The Trump administration designated MS-13 a terrorist organization and pursued agreements with El Salvador to exchange prisoners. These policies have led to the deportation of migrants—including Venezuelans—under conditions that evoke the forced disappearances of Latin America's military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s.

CECOT concentration camp: torture and extrajudicial killings

Invoking the 18th-century Alien Enemies Act, the US government has justified mass deportations by claiming an "invasion" by criminal groups. Hundreds of migrants have been detained without due process, often seized by plainclothes agents and transported to undisclosed locations. Lawyers and relatives frequently cannot determine their whereabouts, as records are altered or erased. Some detainees last year later reappeared in El Salvador's notorious Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT), effectively functioning as a concentration camp overseen by security forces with documented A history of

torture and extrajudicial killings.

The historical parallels are unmistakable. Under the US-backed dictatorship that ruled El Salvador during the country's civil rule (1979-1992), approximately 71,000 people—between 1 and 2 percent of the population—were killed or disappeared.

CECOT itself has become a symbol of repression. Human rights groups estimate that at least 238 to over 250 individuals, including Salvadorans and Venezuelans, were transferred from the US in early 2025 without charges. As many as 36 Salvadorans deported from the US remain there incommunicado.

Testimonies describe a pattern of brutality: beatings, humiliation and sexual assault. Prisoners are held in windowless cells under constant artificial light, deprived of sleep and basic necessities. Access to water is severely limited, with reports of contamination by worms and mosquitoes. Hunger strikes have been met with violent reprisals, including prisoners being beaten and dragged away “half dead.” In desperation, some detainees resorted to a “blood strike,” cutting their wrists—only to be ignored by guards and medical staff.

Internal intelligence documents further reveal that 36 percent of those detained during the state of exception had no prior criminal profile. Yet they remain imprisoned without contact with the outside world and without any meaningful opportunity to defend themselves.

The NGO Socorro Juridico Humanitario (SJH) has compiled a database showing 517 deaths of prisoners under Bukele's state of exception, with nine out of ten of them never having been convicted of any crime. About a third of the deaths were caused by violence or torture, another third by medical negligence, and for the rest the cause of death remains unknown.

The case of Kilmar Abrego García illustrates the arbitrary nature of these policies. Deported unlawfully from the United States, he became one of hundreds sent to CECOT without trial. Although later returned to the US and released by court order, his case highlights the broader system of extrajudicial detention. Bukele himself publicly refused to return him during a meeting with Trump in the Oval Office, underscoring the political alliance underpinning these actions.

The broader implications extend across the region. Bukele's model—combining mass incarceration, suspension of rights and militarized policing—is being promoted by right-wing governments in Ecuador, Honduras and Costa Rica. Trump's support reinforces this trend, normalizing a doctrine that the state may detain or even kill individuals based on suspicion alone, without due process.

Bukele has placed the country under a permanent state of exception, criminalizing civil society organizations and journalists as fronts for gangs.

As is typical of the US corporate media, little attention has been paid to the deeper roots of violence in El Salvador. These lie in a long history of extreme inequality and state repression,

driven by the interests of local elites and US imperialism. The rise of gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18 cannot be understood outside this context.

Their consolidation was a byproduct of US policies in the 1990s, particularly under the Clinton administration. Mass deportations of young immigrants—many of whom had formed small groups for protection in US cities—transplanted gang structures to Central America. One deportee recalled: “Eventually it became a gang, but initially it was just to protect each other... These kids were being treated like trash.”

The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), enacted under the Democratic Clinton administration, marked a turning point, dramatically expanding deportations and undermining due process. Combined with severe social inequality in El Salvador, these policies created fertile conditions for gang proliferation.

That inequality is itself rooted in decades of US-backed economic and military intervention. During the civil war, Washington provided more than \$4 billion in aid to the Salvadoran government, supporting a regime that employed death squads, torture and mass killings. Economic policies tied to US interests deepened poverty, promoting export-led growth while increasing dependence on imports and undermining domestic employment.

Privatization, austerity and dollarization—under both the fascistic Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party and the FMLN—further eroded living standards. By the early 2000s, a tiny elite controlled nearly half of the country's wealth. Subsequent FMLN governments, despite their leftist rhetoric, continued these policies, expanding military spending and imposing austerity measures.

Conditions have worsened under Bukele, who came to power exploiting mass anger against the ARENA party and the FMLN. Poverty increased from 22.8 percent in 2019 to 25.8 percent in 2024, driven by a 24 percent rise in the cost of living that outpaced wage increases. Social programs were slashed, with 31 out of 40 eliminated. Meanwhile, public debt ballooned from \$19.8 billion to \$32.1 billion.

These conditions will continue to push youth toward migration or involvement in criminal networks, perpetuating the cycle of violence that the government claims to combat. The current mass trial, far from addressing these root causes, represents a further escalation of repression aimed ultimately against the working class.



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