

Rattled by French protests, Latin American governments adopt “Bukele model” to quell social unrest

Andrea Lobo
22 October 2026

On October 18, the day after as many as 800,000 students and workers marched across France against crumbling schools, budget cuts and the rising cost of living, El Salvador’s President Nayib Bukele posted a message on X, written in French, telling the French ruling class to follow his example.

“I have heard it said that France is finished, that it is too late to save it,” Bukele wrote. “But France is still as beautiful, enviable even.” His own government, he added, “overcame in one year a problem a hundred times more serious, without the means that France has. France could do it in a week.”

Bukele did not name the “problem.” The one achievement his government claims is the suppression of gang violence through a permanent state of exception, in force since March 2022, that suspends constitutional rights, deploys troops domestically, and has put more than 90,000 people in prisons infamous for torture. Human rights groups have documented between 458 and 570 deaths in state custody.

Applied to France, the formula means treating hundreds of thousands of high school students, teachers and other workers as gang members.

Bukele’s post came the same day Donald Trump declared on Truth Social that “France is burning!” and urged, “close your borders and take control, before it is too late!” Two days later, he described the French events as a “full-on revolution” that could be countered only with mass deportations.

The movement in France, which began in mid-September at a high school in the Paris suburb of Créteil, is part of an international upsurge of workers and youth. Across Europe, mass protests against austerity, inequality and war have broken out in Spain, Portugal, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Greece and Albania. In Latin America, national strikes and mass marches have confronted the governments of Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica in the past two weeks alone.

The same global capitalist crisis loaded onto the backs of the working class is producing social explosions everywhere.

Every section of the political establishment across Latin America has prepared for this moment by adopting the Bukele model, that is, normalizing states of emergency, criminalizing opposition, deploying the military, building mega prisons and building up the repressive apparatus.

In Costa Rica, on October 20, the fascistic ruling party Sovereign People’s Party (PPSO) filed a criminal complaint for sedition and public instigation against former deputy Ariel Robles for urging a student protest to camp outside the Legislative Assembly “as is happening in France and Spain.”

The student march in Costa Rica came after the PPSO forced through a cut of about US\$17.6 million to the 2027 budget of the public universities. The Legislative Assembly, with the votes of the traditional National Liberation Party, condemned Robles’ “calls to violence” by 42 votes to 6. The complaint itself acknowledges that Robles posted his message the day before the clashes in France he is accused of inciting students to emulate. What is being criminalized is the comparison itself. A week earlier, President Laura Fernández had inaugurated a megaprison for 5,100 inmates and thanked El Salvador for its technical assistance.

In Chile, Finance Minister Jorge Quiroz warned on October 21 that “when spending gets out of control, social order gets out of control too,” and that unlimited welfare states “end up like France.” Fascistic President José Antonio Kast branded the October 18 protests against his own cuts an “estallido delictual” (criminal outburst) and ordered the deportation of foreign detainees.

In Argentina, President Javier Milei answered the Paris protests on October 18 by reposting his 2024 Davos speech warning that the West was being led to “socialism”: “Will they recognize that once again I was right and they were badly wrong?”

In Colombia, President Abelardo de la Espriella warned of “zero tolerance” for blockades ahead of the October 14 national strike against his austerity measures and, hours before the marches, signed a decree allowing police to intervene without first attempting dialogue, calling it a measure against “urban terrorism.” Riot police met the peaceful marchers with tear gas, pellets, armored vehicles and detentions in at least six cities.

Mexico’s nominally “left” President Claudia Sheinbaum said on October 19 that fuel subsidies were still necessary to avoid a further increase in the cost of living, adding, “look at what is happening in various countries of the world,” referring to the French protests. Already, student protests and occupations over safety, sexual harassment and corruption have shut down in-person classes at UNAM high schools 1 and 8 in Mexico City, and students are leading heavily repressed protests over water rights in Guadalajara. This comes on top of a growing rebellion against austerity by IMSS healthcare workers, who have also faced police repression.

In Brazil, neither President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva nor his fascist challenger Flávio Bolsonaro has publicly mentioned the French protests ahead of the October 25 runoff. But both campaigns take for granted further buildup of the repressive apparatus alongside “fiscal adjustment.”

Undoubtedly, the ruling elites across the region are haunted by the memory of how the May-June 1968 student uprising and general strike in France helped spur the July student uprising in Mexico City and preceded the 1969 *Cordobazo* in Argentina and workers uprisings in Bolivia, Peru and other countries.

Bukele’s message and those from other regional leaders were addressed primarily to their respective ruling classes and foreign investors, as an assurance that the measures taken in the name of fighting crime by every faction of the political establishment are ultimately aimed at an uprising of workers and youth. As in the 1970s, the response by imperialism and the bourgeoisie is to turn to fascist, police-state rule.

Mikele spelled this out during a trip to Washington D.C. on October 14, calling on Latin American leaders to follow Trump and build “a true shield against socialism” to defend “life, liberty and property.” The slogan echoes the Shield of the Americas, the alliance Trump launched in March with regional allies modeled after Operation Condor, the 1970s coalition of military dictatorships. While ostensibly launched to combat “narcoterrorism,” the Shield’s real target is now clearly defined as the mass struggles of the working class and youth against social inequality and capitalist exploitation.

Bukele’s post, however, came as his own model shows its

limits. Under a \$1.4 billion loan program with the International Monetary Fund, his government has laid off an estimated 15,000 public sector workers since 2024. Between October 15 and 17, Bukele announced that 10,629 prisoners he now calls “casual collaborators” of the gangs could be released early, and on October 20 his security minister presented a 2027 budget that cuts more than \$25 million from the National Civil Police and freezes spending on the overcrowded prisons.

This is the old problem of “guns and butter,” where Latin American governments are strained to finance either. A report on the regional economy issued by the Bank of Spain on October 20, summarized by *El País*, found that “security” has displaced growth and development at the center of government agendas over the past four years, even as the same governments cut taxes for the wealthy. They are doing so with ever less room to maneuver.

Public debt stands at historic highs, deficits exceed 5 percent of GDP in Mexico and Colombia and reach 9.4 percent in Brazil, with interest payments alone absorbing huge chunks of the GDP. Every new police unit and prison must be paid for at the expense of social spending.

In a region so dependent on foreign capital and the world market, each new global shock will be passed on to workers through cuts and inflation. Out of the deepening crisis of world capitalism, the ruling elites on both sides of the Atlantic have nothing to offer workers and youth but dictatorship, fascism, war and relentless attacks on living standards.

The working class, which today is larger, more internationally interconnected and objectively powerful than ever before, must build a global movement, with complete political independence from every faction of the ruling class and union bureaucracy, to overthrow the capitalist profit system and establish world socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact