



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

State of Exception in El Salvador

Monday, September 12, 2022

12:00 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Virtual via Cisco WebEx

Rep. Christopher H. Smith

Excerpt of Remarks

Good afternoon, and thank you, Co-chair McGovern, for convening this hearing focusing on the current state of civil and political rights in El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele.

I think we all can agree that President Bukele has failed to live up to the expectations many observers had of him as signaling a fresh break from the past and the traditional, corrupt parties of Left and Right which until his rise had dominated Salvadorian politics since the death of José Napoleón Duarte.

Part of that expectation was due to the fact that he has been difficult to pin down politically – was he a Center-Leftist who was

elected Mayor of San Salvador as a member of the FMLN, or was he a Center-Rightist who ran for President with the backing of GANA, traditionally a party of the Right whose members had separated themselves from the death-squad tainted ARENA Party?

In truth is, he is neither. He is at his core a populist, who seems to meld Right and Left issues – a tough on crime social conservative and an economic progressive. In a different context, one might liken him to a Peronist.

Thus Bukele continues to confound.

He remains popular among many in El Salvador for bringing down crime, though as we shall hear, that comes at a cost of detentions authorized under “State of Exception” powers.

Indeed, there is much to question about his Presidency, which seems at times to be driven by whimsey – grounding fiscal policy in the Bitcoin, for example, which has aura of folly about it, given the erratic nature of cryptocurrency.

But that said, I do wonder why we are focusing on El Salvador and not its neighbor Nicaragua, where the abuses of rights are far, far more advanced and egregious.

While Bukele should be condemned for bullying the other two branches of government – he had the military surround the legislature in an effort to force lawmakers to pass his anti-crime bill in 2020 – the

Salvadorean people in their wisdom responded by granting him a supermajority in the parliamentary election the following year. While one may not like the results, El Salvador still is a democracy.

In contrast Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega has descended into dictatorship, and one redolent of totalitarianism.

Opposition leaders Felix Maradiaga and Juan Sebastian Chamorro, whose wives bravely testified at our hearing in July of 2021, remain in jail, under “[horrific conditions](#),” according to their lawyer, Jared Genser.

Ortega also continues to oppress indigenous people like the Rama, as well as Afro-Nicaragua Kriol. Indeed, their plight will [only get worse](#), if Ortega’s madcap plan to build a canal across Nicaragua funded by Communist China to compete with Panama ever comes to fruition, as their land will be expropriated.

And, most tellingly, he has sought to crush the independence of the Catholic Church, which is the one nationwide institution strong enough to resist Ortega’s authoritarian over-reach.

Ortega’s arrest of brave Catholic bishop [Rolando José Álvarez](#) last month while shutting down Catholic radio broadcasts signaled a new, chilling low in Ortega’s efforts to consolidate power.

Or, one might look at Venezuela, where more than six million people who fled the country due to its extreme mismanagement and leftist devolution are refugees, according to USAID, with some 7 million

people in need of humanitarian assistance within the country in order to survive.

Or we could look at Cuba, the granddaddy of all failed states of the Latin American Left, where minors – children really, some as [young as 14](#) – who participated in protests against the Communist dictatorship are imprisoned, with prosecutors asking for sentences of over 20 years.

In sum, while of course there is value in taking a close look at what is happening in El Salvador under the existing “State of Emergency” and perhaps coming up with suggestions to better ensure that civil and political rights are respected while the country continues to combat crime, we should not forget that there are other countries in the hemisphere deserving far greater scrutiny.

For my part I hope to bring light to bear on the ongoing situation in Nicaragua during the days that remain in this Congress.

I look forward to your testimony. Thank you.