

## **WRITTEN TESTIMONY**

**Submitted to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**U.S. House of Representatives**

**Hearing: “Transnational Repression: Trends and Policy Approaches”**

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### **A Tale Foretold**

My name is Héctor Silva Ávalos. I am a Salvadoran journalist living in exile in the United States since 2021, when I had to leave my country to protect myself and my family from persecution by the government of President Nayib Bukele. The harassment, including threats of issuing an arrest warrant, prosecution for money laundering, smearing campaigns and massive digital attacks, started in 2019 when I published a story linking Bukele with a Venezuelan oil money scheme tied to the Maduro regime<sup>1</sup> and, later, after a second story revealing that El Salvador’s Attorney General, imposed by Bukele, was an employee of a company linked to that same scheme<sup>2</sup>. Those companies have been investigated by federal authorities in the United States and several Venezuelan and Salvadoran officials that embezzled money from them have been sanctioned<sup>3</sup>.

In September 2022, I testified before this Commission for the first time<sup>4</sup>, just five months after the government of President Nayib Bukele launched a state of exception in El Salvador. At the time, more than 50,000 people had already been detained, many without warrants, legal counsel, or the opportunity to appear before a judge. Reports of torture, in-custody deaths, and arbitrary arrests were already circulating from civil society and international organizations. The figures were alarming, but so too was the political message: dissent would be punished, and impunity would reign.

That testimony ended with a warning: “The abuses of the Nayib Bukele regime in El Salvador are not a passing threat to Salvadoran democracy and the stability of Central America. What is happening in my country... is the dawn of an authoritarian government whose ultimate goal is to perpetuate itself in power.”

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<sup>1</sup> Silva Ávalos, Ávalos, Alvarado, Baires Quezada. “Nayib Bukele recibió USD 1.9 millones de Alba Petróleos.” Connectas. September 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Silva Ávalos, Campos, Valencia. “Investigación revela que fiscal impuesto trabajó para Alba Petróleos.” La Prensa Gráfica, Infobae. August 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Silva Ávalos. “PDVSA Subsidiaries in Central America Slapped With Sanctions.” InSight Crime. March 2019.

<sup>4</sup> [https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/humanrightscommission.house.gov/files/documents/STATEMENT%20HECTOR%20SILVA%20AVALOS\\_Final%20.pdf](https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/humanrightscommission.house.gov/files/documents/STATEMENT%20HECTOR%20SILVA%20AVALOS_Final%20.pdf)

Today, three years later, I return to this Commission to submit a new testimony—not to revisit that warning, but to document what has since become reality. What began as domestic authoritarianism has crossed borders. It has evolved into a campaign of transnational repression, one that now targets Salvadorans living in exile—including myself—and even reaches into the territory of the United States.

## **I. Persecution via Consulates: Transnational Repression in Practice**

In early May 2025, a social media account tied to Salvadoran state intelligence operatives published false police bulletins claiming I was subject to an arrest warrant and should be detained if I entered a Salvadoran consulate in the United States. These publications included not only disinformation about my legal status, but also sensitive personal details: my passport photograph, photos of my immediate family, and a U.S. address I had used while living and working in Washington, D.C.

That address had only been shared with one Salvadoran government office: the consulate in Silver Spring, Maryland.

A subsequent investigation confirmed that the arrest warrant was entirely fictitious. The personal and family information displayed in social media, however, was authentic, and clearly extracted from official government databases—accessible only to Salvadoran institutions. This was no error. It was a message.

I was not alone. That same day, at least two other Salvadoran journalists and three human rights defenders were similarly targeted. In one documented case, a Salvadoran woman who had fled the country due to political persecution was harassed in her home in another Latin American country by personnel linked to the local Salvadoran consulate<sup>5</sup>.

These are not isolated incidents. Since 2019, and with greater intensity under the state of exception, the Salvadoran government has deployed harassment campaigns against critics at home and abroad. Now, those campaigns rely on the weaponization of diplomatic and civil registry data, and on the abuse of consular infrastructure.

This strategy is neither spontaneous nor disorganized. Journalistic investigations have identified a key figure behind this apparatus: Police Inspector Carlos Roberto Hernández, widely known by his alias Chirriplín<sup>6</sup>. Hernández, an officer within the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, is reportedly in charge of a unit tasked with monitoring political opponents, journalists, and civil society leaders<sup>7</sup>. Public reporting suggests that his network includes officials embedded within the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://x.com/berthamariaD/status/1878836602941661382>

<sup>6</sup> Martínez, Labrador. “Salvadoran President’s Office Ordered Espionage Against Journalists and Political Opponents.” *El Faro*. September 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Silva Ávalos. “Las mujeres a las que persigue Nayib Bukele en El Salvador.” *Prensa Comunitaria*. June 2025.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and civil registry offices who operate across the consular system in the United States.

Let me be clear: this is transnational repression. It is conducted by Salvadoran state agents using state resources, directed at Salvadoran nationals living lawfully in other countries—including the United States. It constitutes a violation of international norms and raises serious concerns for U.S. sovereignty.

This Commission is well aware of how repression begins to move across borders. In the case of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, it started with surveillance and online harassment—efforts by the Saudi Arabian government to monitor and intimidate him after he fled his country. We all know how that story ended. I am not suggesting that El Salvador is at that point. But the pattern is recognizable: intelligence services surveilling critics abroad, weaponized personal data, and diplomatic institutions repurposed to export fear. If left unchecked, these early tactics can evolve into something far more dangerous—not just for Salvadorans, but for democratic norms everywhere.

Even U.S. lawmakers have not been exempted. In a 2023 congressional hearing, Representative Norma Torres publicly confronted Secretary of State Marco Rubio<sup>8</sup> about Bukele's repression, noting that she herself had been the subject of attacks and disinformation campaigns originating from accounts connected to Salvadoran officials.

## **II. The Crackdown Deepens**

While repression has extended outward, it has also intensified inside El Salvador.

In recent months, the government has moved beyond mass detentions to directly target high-profile figures in the country's legal, civic, journalistic, and environmental communities.

In March 2024, Ruth López, a leading Human Rights defender and Bukele critic, was arrested on charges widely condemned as politically motivated<sup>9</sup>.

Enrique Anaya, a prominent legal scholar and columnist, was also arrested after publicly criticizing the government's legal maneuvers.

Alejandro Henríquez, an environmental lawyer, and José Ángel Pérez, a priest and environmental activist, were arrested following escalating threats related to their environmental defense work.

The case of Alejandro Muyshondt<sup>10</sup>, a former national security advisor imprisoned under opaque charges, and who died in state custody in 2023, remains unresolved and symbolic of the regime's turn against former insiders.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://appropriations.house.gov/schedule/hearings/budget-hearing-department-state-and-related-programs>

<sup>9</sup> McCann Ramírez. "El Salvador Arrests and Disappears Prominent Human Rights Attorney." Rolling Stone. May 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch. "El Salvador: Experts Question Account of Death in Custody." October 2024.

Meanwhile, El Salvador's independent press has been gutted by surveillance, raids, spyware, and exile. El Faro, the country's most recognized investigative outlet, was forced to legally relocate abroad in 2023. More than forty journalists have left the country since March 2022, according to the Asociación de Periodistas de El Salvador.

This is not public security policy. This is systematic political persecution.

### **III. State Capture and Corruption: The Alba Petróleos Connection**

The authoritarian turn in El Salvador is inextricably tied to corruption—particularly through the networks of Alba Petróleos, a PDVSA-backed energy firm tied to Venezuelan capital and investigated in the United States<sup>11</sup> for laundering hundreds of millions of dollars across Central America.

Rodolfo Delgado, El Salvador's current Attorney General, previously served as legal representative for companies linked to Alba Petróleos. Financial records and internal documents show that President Bukele himself received \$1.9 million from Alba Petróleos between 2011 and 2013, when he was launching his political career.

High-level Bukele officials, including Carolina Recinos, the current Chief of Cabinet, also received deposits from Alba-linked entities<sup>12</sup>. José Luis Merino, who operated Alba's financial networks and was previously singled out by then Senator Marco Rubio<sup>13</sup> for ties to organized crime, was a key backer of Bukele's political rise. Both Merino and Recinos have been sanctioned by the United States Government.

Bukele's authoritarian rise is also related to his pact with the MS13 and Barrio 18 gangs<sup>14</sup>, which from 2019 to March 2022 facilitated his first electoral victory in the presidential elections, and helped him reduced homicides in the country in exchange for granting benefits to gang leaders and shielding them from extradition<sup>15</sup>, as recently reported by U.S. and European media. To prevent and discourage journalistic publications that reveal details of this pact in El Salvador, Bukele has threatened journalists who have reported on it with imprisonment. Today, most of these journalists are in exile<sup>16</sup>, exposed to transnational repression by the Salvadoran regime.

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<sup>11</sup> United States State Department. Venezuela-Related Sanctions. <https://www.state.gov/venezuela-related-sanctions/>

<sup>12</sup> Silva Ávalos. "¿Quién es Carolina Recinos, la poderosa funcionaria salvadoreña acusada por desmanejos y corrupción". Infobae. October 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Senate Hearing 114-740. "Corruption, Violent Extremism, Kleptocracy, and The Dangers of Failing Governance." June 2016. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg27955/html/CHRG-114shrg27955.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Miller, Rotella. "Delay, Interfere, Undermine: How El Salvador's Government Impeded a U.S. Probe of MS-13." ProPublica. June 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Olivares. "Trump administration trying to dismiss MS-13 leader's charges to deport him." The Guardian. May 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt. "Bukele's crackdown pushes top Salvadoran journalists to flee." The Washington Post. May 2025.

These links illustrate a pattern: authoritarian consolidation in El Salvador has been enabled by corrupt financial structures, organized crime, gangs, political protection, and dismantled oversight. The same institutions now used to repress—Attorney General's Office, Supreme Court, and security forces—have all been captured or repurposed.

#### **IV. Conclusion: From Warning to Reality—and the Role of the United States**

When I testified in 2022, I said Bukele's regime was not a temporary deviation—it was a project. That project has now been consolidated. Bukele has been re-elected in defiance of El Salvador's constitution. The Supreme Court and Attorney General's Office are fully controlled by loyalists. Civil society is under siege. Journalists and legal experts are jailed or exiled. And repression now reaches Salvadorans even in the United States.

This is what authoritarianism looks like in 2025: opaque, digital, financed by foreign capital, and executed through the consulates of a U.S. ally.

The United States must act:

- Expand Global Magnitsky and Engel List sanctions to include those responsible for transnational repression and financial corruption.
- Condition assistance on measurable progress in judicial independence, freedom of expression, and protection for civil society.
- Support Salvadoran journalists and rights defenders in exile—those who still resist.

Repression does not stop at borders. And democracy must not either. Thank you.