

The Dark Side of the “Bukele Model”

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I will be direct and brief. Members of Congress, I thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony from exile and for your interest in understanding the consequences of the erosion of rights in my country. The consequences of granting unchecked power to a single individual lead to a government where public affairs become secret, and where institutional power is replaced by the president's family.

El Salvador is no longer a safe place for those of us who practice journalism, understood as a profession that seeks accountability from public power. Today, the systematic persecution of any critical or dissenting voice has become normalized. The times of prisons with political prisoners have returned, of surveillance against those who think differently, of armed men arriving at civilians' homes to intimidate and instill fear. Concrete cases: I was infected with Pegasus along with 3 Salvadoran colleagues; the outspoken lawyer Ruth López was imprisoned; and I received multiple messages from state agents persuading me to leave my country on May 21 of last year.

We are living in times of political thuggery and repression against anyone who challenges President Bukele or his interests. There is data and documented evidence of all this, compiled by colleagues and civil society organizations that are now paying the price for standing by their principles.

El Salvador is a small country, and its civic and political space is small as well. I have been a journalist for 25 years and have covered political issues; President Bukele himself was once my source, and I have used my reporting to uphold journalism as a public service. Today, in power, he is the main generator of hatred and insults against the press: the Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES) has documented nearly 15,000 insults, mainly from government supporters and officials, directed at male and female journalists.

Today, in his seventh consecutive and illegal year in power, he considers us his enemies. And it makes sense: the press is what records that El Salvador has lost the possibility of alternation in power in the short and medium term. The president himself has said that he will consult God and his wife about whether to remain in office for ten more years, regardless of or in violation of the Constitution.

Reports of all kinds and using different methodologies conclude that El Salvador is no longer a democracy. The Chapultepec Index of Freedom of Expression ranks El Salvador at just 24 out of 100 points, in the “High Restriction” category, below Cuba for the first time in the history of the index. Only Nicaragua and Venezuela surpass us in the persecution of journalists.

In four years under the state of exception, a series of legal traps have been put in place to criminalize journalism: El Faro, APES, Cristosal, and many other organizations have gone into exile, along with hundreds of valuable individuals from El Salvador's civic space.

El Faro has been accused of money laundering by President Bukele; APES is described as a club of criminals. The press is persecuted for doing its job: exposing his pacts with gangs, the inexplicable growth of wealth among his family circle, and reporting countless human rights violations.

Although people speak of a safe country, there are no freedoms or rule of law. Any tourist can walk around without fear of robbery or kidnapping, but there is a dark side: there is no full freedom, and that makes El Salvador as "safe" as North Korea or Nicaragua.

Beneath the surface there is a great deal of fear: 6 out of 10 Salvadorans are afraid to express political opinions; more than fifty journalists are in exile for fear of arbitrary arrest; more than one hundred human rights defenders have left the country due to fear and intimidation from security forces that use the state of exception to detain anyone based on how they dress, if they appear nervous, or simply to meet quotas.

The state of exception in force since March 2022 is the excuse to kill freedoms and eliminate rights. Under its cover, more than 90,000 people have been detained without a warrant or due process. Thirty thousand of them have no ties to gangs.

Human rights organizations such as Cristosal have documented evidence of systematic torture, sexual violence against women and minors, and at least 500 deaths in state custody. There are records of 234 cases of political persecution and 86 political prisoners.

The regime has not only imprisoned gang members. It has imprisoned farmers, community leaders, union members, journalists, and human rights defenders. We have documented this. And we have been persecuted for documenting it.

The recent approval of the Foreign Agents Law is the latest instrument of that persecution. Designed to financially suffocate independent media and civil society organizations, it forces them to register in a state system and subjects every international transfer to burdensome withholdings. APES is being denied its right to organize in El Salvador, and we are being denied formal registration as an association.

El Salvador needs the world to see what we have seen from within: a state that has turned repression into a model of governance and uses security as an excuse to silence those who challenge it.

Thank you.

Sergio Arauz, April 2025