

# Democracy Dies under *Mano Dura*

## *Anti-crime Strategies in the Northern Triangle*

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### *Introduction*

A journalist recently made an apt joke about living under President Daniel Ortega’s dictatorship: “Hi, I am from Nicaragua, and I represent your future. I am living what you will be experiencing soon enough: harassment, persecution, and threats to your lives and imprisonment,” he said to a group of Northern Triangle colleagues by way of introduction. This anecdote recalls Charles Dickens’ Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in his 1843 novella *A Christmas Tale*, where the ghost portends the demise of Ebenezer Scrooge. In this context, it portends the death of democracy in the Northern Triangle, and the dire effects of democratic backsliding.

Up until very recently, the conditions in Nicaragua were starkly different from its neighbors. The Ortega regime is a dictatorship that persecutes and detains opponents at will and with complete impunity. Nicaragua’s Northern Triangle neighbors have been democracies, even if imperfect ones. However, in 2019, the election of Nayib Bukele as president of El Salvador marked the beginning of a stark shift in the anti-crime strategy of the country and a turn toward authoritarian tendencies. The new leader opted to suspend constitutional guarantees and engage in mass incarceration in order to fight crime and gang violence, setting off alarm bells across the region, as concerns grew over democratic backsliding. The self-identified “**coolest dictator in the world**,” used his background in marketing and social media branding to propel an extreme version of *mano dura*, or “zero tolerance,” to fight crime. Three years later, Honduras and other countries have taken notice of the appeal of these tactics and are now **replicating** it, or considering it, in whole or in part. This is a slippery slope for the region and a precedent that poses a great danger to the hemisphere’s democracies.

## *Crime in the Northern Triangle*

The Northern Triangle, which encompasses El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, has had some of the highest homicide rates in the world, driven in large measure by gang violence. According to a UN Development Program and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) tracker that compiles indicators on citizen security in the region, between 2010 and 2020, more than **144,000 people** were murdered in the Northern Triangle—comprising 2.64 percent of intentional **homicides** worldwide over this time period, even though the subregion only accounts for only 0.5 percent of the global population. Fortunately, homicide rates have been on a significant **downward trend** for the past decade in all three Northern Triangle countries. All three also face complex public safety challenges and a wide array of security threats, including drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, money laundering, and extortion.

The economic and social impacts of extortion by gangs are especially relevant to the perceptions of crime in the region. In sheer financial terms, the proceeds of extortion from Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadorean businesses and individuals for 2022 is estimated to be between **\$1.14 and \$1.23 billion**, and extortion against individuals totals an estimated \$260 to \$352 million. While the financial impact of widespread extortion is undeniable, the societal impact of extortion is even more apparent. Recurrent extortion taxes, also known as *la renta*, impose a large financial burden on small businesses and marginalized populations, which in turn degrades the quality of life and leads to violence and displacement. A 2019 **study** prepared by the Foundation for the Development of Guatemala for USAID concluded that between intrafamily violence, homicides, and extortion, only the latter crime was consistently shown to have a direct effect on irregular migration to the United States. Counties in this region currently lack the capacity and resources in their security forces to properly prevent, investigate, or prosecute crime, which limits their available public security strategies.

## *Unpacking “Plan Bukele”: A War against Gangs*

El Salvador’s gangs have been notorious for their violence and widespread presence, making the small Central American country one of the **most dangerous** places outside of an active warzone. Founded by refugees from the Salvadoran civil war, the **Mara Salvatrucha** (MS-13 gang) capitalized on the crime scene in Los Angeles in the 1980s and quickly monopolized crime in vulnerable neighborhoods in El Salvador. At the time, zero-tolerance policies in the United States crowded Los Angeles’ jails with MS-13 members, and by the mid-1990s, the U.S. government began deporting some of the most violent gang members to Central America. Some estimates assess that around 20,000 gang members **returned** to the region early in the 2000s as part of this program, further worsening the security crisis in El Salvador. With weak economic opportunities in the regular job market, these gang members regrouped throughout the country and continued their criminal activities, relying on extortion and petty crime for financial sustenance. As of 2019, estimates indicate that around **8 percent** of Salvadorans were involved in one of the country’s three main gangs: MS-13, Barrio 18-Sureños, or Barrio 18-Revolucionarios.

Different administrations throughout Central America have made efforts to reduce the number of homicides, as well as MS-13’s influence, throughout the region, but two particular anti-crime strategies stand out: the use of *mano dura* and truces with gangs. El Salvador’s Francisco Flores **implemented** a *mano dura* approach as early as 2003, when he pioneered a crackdown on the gangs, soon making it evident that his strategy only **increased** extortion levels and refined criminal organization. Later,

in 2012, President Mauricio Funes also used a zero-tolerance approach before the homicide rate ballooned, forcing Minister of Defense David Munguia Payes to initiate a **truce** with the gangs for a reduction in the homicide rate. Both the *mano dura* and the truce approaches were used as political tools to decrease homicide rates, but neither has provided a sustainable solution to crime. Then, in 2018, the mayor of San Salvador, Nayib Bukele, ran for the presidency on the platform of security and stability for El Salvador.

Nineteen days after President Bukele assumed office in June 2019, he **launched** Phase I of his Territorial Control Plan (PCT), which aims to increase security in the country by first cutting communication privileges for gang members in Salvadoran prisons and by enacting heavy-handed **militarization** through the army and the National Civil Police. In his first address to the Legislative Assembly via Facebook Live, he **declared** that “while other governments executed *mano dura* or truces, Salvadorans have lived harassed, threatened, and full of fear,” (author’s translation). Yet his strategy, Plan Bukele, became a more extreme form of *mano dura* and has helped him centralize power and erode democratic systems.

The plan consists of seven phases that have been revealed ad hoc by the president, as he keeps all subsequent phases secret. Previous phases have included (1) **Preparation**, (2) **Opportunity, the Social Reconstruction of Communities**, (3) **Modernization of Security Forces**, and (4) **Incursion of Police and Military Personnel into the Territory**. The current phase, (5) **Extraction**, came into effect on November 23, 2022, and **entails** the encirclement of “large areas to extract gang members [from the communities].” A former marketing executive, Bukele first reassured the public that he would **focus** on three areas: “effective control of the prison system, interruption of financing of organized crime groups, and the strengthening of the security forces.”

Though Bukele campaigned on a tough-on-crime platform and **doubled** the number of army soldiers from 20,000 to 40,000 at the beginning of his tenure, there is now clear **evidence** that representatives of Bukele’s government were negotiating with the same gangs for a reduction in homicides ahead of the 2021 Legislative Assembly elections. In fact, before his Nuevas Ideas party won a **supermajority** in the Legislative Assembly, Bukele used the military to **intimidate** members of the assembly, and once in power he immediately made his plans clear to run for reelection despite its unconstitutionality.

While Bukele constantly boasts of the effectiveness of the Plan Control Territorial (PCT), homicide rates had been **declining** consistently in El Salvador since 2015. Yet Bukele maintained that the further militarization of Salvadorean society was needed to address the levels of crime and violence in the country. It is unclear what preceded a breakdown of the truce between Bukele and the gangs in March 2022, but the country suffered a **weekend of violence** that left 76 people dead and triggered the latest wave of anti-democratic measures taken by Bukele. His actions took another dark turn when he enacted the country’s state of emergency, or **state of exception**, using the Nuevas Ideas-controlled legislature on March 27, 2022—a measure that has now been renewed 10 times.

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The state of exception **suspended** the right to assemble, increased the period for which a person can be detained without a charge from 3 to 15 days, and granted the authorities the ability to intercept

communications without a court order. The legislature soon thereafter approved indefinite pretrial detention, decided that people who are part of a gang would be charged under anti-terrorism statutes, and allowed the government to sentence 12- to 15-year-olds to up to 10 years in jail, and 16-year-olds up to **20 years**, among other measures. In a separate **decree**, the legislature also severely restricted press freedoms related to reporting on gangs. Under these measures, close to **63,000 alleged gang members** have been arrested, according to reporting from February 2023.

**Dehumanizing images** of thousands of handcuffed detainees wearing only white shorts, packed so close together they can hardly breathe, have quickly become emblematic of Nayib Bukele's anti-crime strategy, which he often shares on his presidential Twitter account. A **millennial** and social media connoisseur, Bukele has been able to use Twitter and Facebook to spread his own political brand, which constantly **celebrates** "days with zero homicides," and to **harass journalists** who counter his narrative. Despite his near-constant attacks on democratic institutions, there has been nothing but support from the Salvadoran people, so much that Bukele consistently **boasts** an approval rating of between 80 and 90 percent (the figures should be read with caution, given that Bukele **threatens** the national media and that polls may not be independent).

What Bukele does not show on social media, however, is the true cost of this anti-crime strategy. Families of the prisoners are **forced** to pay the government \$170 per month for food and necessities. One report calculates that the government is raking in **\$17 million per month** from these fees. What the government does with the money is unknown; all information regarding prisons and public safety policy is not disclosed. This creates a financial incentive for the government to engage in arbitrary detention. After 10 months in a declared state of emergency, authorities released around **3,000 prisoners** who the president himself admitted were **innocent**. Because of the lack of data and due process, there is currently no estimate of how many of the detainees are active gang members.

As of November 2022, **90 detainees** had died in custody. Information given to the UN **Committee Against Torture** indicates that these deaths had been caused by a lack of timely medical attention, deficiencies in the supply of medicines, and homicides. The committee has called for an impartial investigation into the deaths, explicitly asking that members of the police and penitentiary staff be investigated for any possible role. Recently, the NGO **Socorro Jurídico Humanitario** filed a complaint after it discovered that four of those detained had died and were buried in a common grave without notifying their relatives. In some cases, the families continued to bring care packages to the prisons for months, not knowing their family member had died.

In June 2022, on the back of the popularity of his security policy, Bukele **announced** he would run for reelection, despite a constitutional rule against doing so. A September 2021 ruling by the country's Supreme Court, composed of justices appointed by Bukele's party, seemed to allow for that possibility. This was reminiscent of President Ortega's bid to allow reelection, which was **approved** by Nicaragua's Supreme Court in a session where opposition judges were not present. Consecutive or indefinite reelection in Latin America has historically not been a positive experience, especially where reelection is enabled by removing constitutional term limits. Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia are the only countries in the region without term limits; the first two have become dictatorships, and the latter can be described as semi-authoritarian. Consecutive reelections, generally, have also been shown to lead to a greater **concentration of power** in the president as well as less transparency and accountability.

With alarm bells ringing across the international community regarding whether El Salvador will become the next Nicaragua or Venezuela, another question for policymakers is whether or not Plan Bukele is a successful strategy to counter crime. As mentioned above, homicide rates were following a downward trend prior to Bukele's rise to power. However, a reduction in extortion rates has been a key driver in the Bukele machine. A recent **report by El Faro**, an investigative news outlet in El Salvador, argues that due to the government's intervention, **extortion** has been reduced dramatically, improving the perception of safety in the country. Communities that had been **divided** for years by invisible borders drawn by the gangs have begun to recover public spaces.

While the reduction in extortion and street violence is undeniable, assessing the long-term impacts of the Bukele model paints a different picture. The high incarceration rates that have come as a result of the PCT are unsustainable, not only in terms of capacity but also in terms of the negation of due process. Human rights organizations have concluded that among those arrested and intimidated under the state of exception are political opponents, **journalists**, and **former gang members** who had already served their sentences. According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (**IACHR**), many of those arrested have been based on "anonymous calls or assumptions about membership of criminal gangs based on a person's appearance or on where they live." The commission has also received information on the disproportionate use of force in police raids, including violence against individuals with disabilities and pregnant women. More shocking still, the IACHR received information that at least 18,215 individuals had been charged with crimes in 93 massive group hearings presided over by unidentified judges. The accused were not allowed to speak in their defense, and they were all automatically put in pretrial detention without individual assessments of their cases, with no presumption of innocence.

### *Exporting Plan Bukele*

The current extreme *mano dura* policy in El Salvador has forced gang members to escape to neighboring countries such as **Honduras**, **Guatemala** and **Mexico**, further exporting instability and crime throughout the region and expanding criminal networks and their sphere of influence. Even faraway **Chile** is concerned about the presence of Salvadoran gangs. To counter this rise in crime, the Bukele model is becoming increasingly popular not only in Central America, but also in parts of South America. In Guatemala and Honduras, citizens have held **pro-Bukele demonstrations**. The minister of public security in **Costa Rica** has said that implementing the policy of the president of El Salvador could be a "great option." The likely frontrunner in the June 2023 presidential election in Guatemala, **Zury Rios**, has also praised Bukele's security policies and has sought Bukele's campaign advice. Even politicians further away in **Chile** and **Peru** have signaled their interest in pursuing such policies.

Within the Northern Triangle, the Honduran government has gone the furthest in establishing a partial Bukele model focusing on curbing extortion. At a press conference on November 24, 2022, President Xiomara Castro outlined her own Comprehensive Plan for the Treatment of Extortion and Related Crimes, which, like Bukele's plan, invoked an expanding **state of exception**. It was initially enacted on December 6 in 162 neighborhoods of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula but has since been **extended three times**, broadening its territorial coverage.

The state of exception in Honduras forms part of the government's **broader strategy** to combat crime and extortion. However, like in neighboring El Salvador, the Honduran state of exception also

suspends or rolls back certain **constitutional protections**, including freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement, and freedom from unreasonable seizure. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has **asked** Honduras to guard against the temptation to continuously extend the state of exception that is currently active in the country, but it remains to be seen how far President Castro will go in her efforts to emulate the Bukele model.

In addition to the chilling effect from the abrogation of constitutional rights, the country's militarization is another warning sign for Honduras if Castro chooses to follow Bukele's steps. So far, **20,000** police have been mobilized across the country to enforce the state of exception. A "highly professional" (author's translation) elite special operations command known as **La Cobra** has been reactivated to fight gangs. However, it is the reinsertion of the Military Police for Public Order (PMOP) into civilian life that has heightened fears of human rights abuses in this newest iteration of crime-fighting strategies.

The initial goal of the PMOP was to **operate** as an incorruptible security force that enhances the effectiveness National Police by taking a primary role in the fight against gangs. However, the entity quickly engaged in repressive tactics, and their role in political endeavors became evident. The PMOP has been tarnished by disquieting human rights abuses since its inception. Before she was elected, Xiomara Castro herself took to Twitter to **criticize** the deployment of the military police to the streets in 2015, given that it would "terrorize the people and persecute their opponents" (author's translation). In 2013, she also **claimed** that "the Military Police is a setback for Honduran democracy."

Right before President Castro took office, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) **reported** that it had received information regarding "the involvement of military agents in murders, executions, kidnappings and arbitrary detentions against civilians." The IACHR expressed its concern that 27 political actors had been murdered during the December 2020–October 2021 electoral season. Similarly, an OHCHR **report** in 2018 pointed to PMOP abuses during political protests. At the time, the security forces shot and killed 16 people, and the report also documented the killing of 15 individuals in the run-up to the elections, including party candidates, municipal council members, and activists.

Even as recently as October 2021, it was **reported** that the Honduran Public Prosecutor's Office received 49 complaints of torture, 70 reports of cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, and 34 reports of forced disappearance at the hands of the security services. The recent **beating** of Edwin Carlos Carvajal by the police is a case in point. Carvajal, a state prosecutor, was arrested and beaten after police mistook him for a gang member while visiting his mother's house in a neighborhood of Comayagüela.

The efficacy of the Bukele model in Honduras is yet to be seen. According to Honduran police chief Gustavo Sanchez, there have been 356 **fewer homicides** since the start of the state of exception through February 20, 2023, as compared to the same period from the year prior. But just like in El Salvador, the **homicide rate** already had a downward trend in Honduras. Nonetheless, the measures taken by the Castro administration in an effort to emulate the Bukele model show that public approval, and not the desire for sustainable security, appears to be driving the pressure to increase the number detainees. This is based on her decision to enact the state of exception after the **transportation** sector protested against extortion rates in the country.

Unlike homicides, extortion numbers are neither reliable nor comprehensive, but this particular crime has an outsized effect on the general population in terms of the perception of security. Limiting the mobility of thousands of people by incarcerating them is bound to decrease activity on the streets.



From the start of the state of exception through January 27, 2023, police authorities had reported the **detention** of 8,155 persons for different crimes, but only 105 have been referred for further prosecution over extortion charges, pointing to the root problem of weak judicial institutions and processes.

With the PMOP at the helm of the war against gangs, and with further plans to **integrate** them with the National Police, it is of vital importance to assess the benefits and dangers of the militarization of Honduran communities. Thus far, there has been no effort by the administration to reform the force, provide accountability, or even root out higher leadership who remain from previous administrations with a record of having participated in human rights violations. In terms of political capital, it is clear that President Castro's position **changed** over the course of a year from a strong commitment to the dismantlement of the PMOP to ordering its continuation, deployment, and expansion. It is unclear whether she, like Bukele, will hide the negative results of the rising police state and its human rights violations behind a veil of secrecy in order to stay in power.

Finally, the case of Ecuador should be mentioned as a reverse image of the appeal of Bukele's policies. In 2022, **4,450 homicides** occurred in Ecuador, 30 percent of which occurred in the port city of Guayaquil. This was a record number of homicides for the country and a 50 percent increase compared to 2021. Against this backdrop, President Guillermo Lasso ordered a **state of exception** for the city of Guayaquil after a bomb attack attributed to organized crime killed five people in the city in August 2022. The order temporarily suspended the rights to freedom of association and the **inviolability** of domicile and of correspondence. The order was later extended, but Lasso has resisted calls to follow Bukele's playbook, going so far as to indirectly **criticize** the government of El Salvador and state that Ecuador will fight crime and provide security while respecting human rights. A **poll** conducted at the end of 2022 revealed that "crime, insecurity, violence, drug trafficking, organized crime, hit men and terrorism" were the issues the Ecuadoran public cared most about (authors' translation). However, President Lasso's approach to fighting crime has apparently not resonated with voters; he started 2022 with an approval rating of 73.5 percent and ended the year with a rating of 29 percent. While other factors likely also contributed to his falling approval rate, politicians around the region more interested in poll numbers than human rights may see this as a cautionary tale.

### *Creating a Police State*

El Salvador and now Honduras are setting the stage for entrenched militarization of a police state. In a region scarred with serial coup attempts, the legacy of authoritarianism is a troubling precedent that Central American countries should outgrow rather than lean into. Venezuela and Nicaragua both show that the co-optation of a strong police state by an autocratic leader will inject insecurity, instability, and fear among the population. In Nicaragua, which for years had largely escaped the scourge of gangs and had much lower crime rates than its Northern Triangle neighbors due to close **community contacts** with the police, President Ortega co-opted the police and used them along with paramilitary forces to violently crack down on widespread, largely peaceful protests beginning in April 2018, which left **335 people dead**. Since then, he has used the police to arbitrarily detain individuals, commit extrajudicial killings, and operate detention and torture centers as part of his violent repression of the democratic opposition, human rights activists, journalists, students, the clergy, and anyone who voices opposition to the regime.

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In Venezuela, following the 2002 coup against President Hugo Chávez, active duty and retired military officials were appointed to key positions throughout government, where they held as much as a **third** of cabinet-level positions. They also controlled many of the government's social programs and were deeply involved in massive **corruption**. At the same time, Chávez progressively sought to change the armed forces, from one sworn to be apolitical and to defend the nation to one which was "**Bolivarian**" and would respond to the interests of the government to maintain itself indefinitely in power. In furtherance of this goal, he also created the Bolivarian National Militia, a highly partisan force of **1.6 million** citizen-soldiers. The armed forces easily met the loyalty test during the massive demonstrations in 2014 and 2017 when the Bolivarian National Guard, and other elements of the security apparatus, violently repressed protesters, **killing 273 people** and **arresting** over 15,000. Juan Guaidó's appeal in April 2019 for the armed forces to shift their loyalty to him as the legitimate interim president of the country fell largely on deaf ears. The government also sought territorial and social control more broadly through Operation Liberation of the People, which was ostensibly a police-led security plan to maintain order in the poor neighborhoods of the country—but which produced thousands of **extrajudicial killings** instead. Both countries have been accused of committing crimes against humanity, and in Venezuela's case, the **International Criminal Court** opened a formal criminal investigation in November 2021.

A new adverse effect of the war against gangs has been the co-optation of crime by the same security forces charged with reducing it. Bukele's action to **weaken** the judicial system will enable the security forces to step into the vacuum that the gangs have left, especially as they become aware that prosecution will be unlikely. In May 2021, the Salvadorian president fired Prosecutor General Raúl Melara and supplanted him with a loyalist in order to **halt the prosecution** of corruption cases against administration officials and suspend ongoing investigations into embezzlement, illegal purchases, and misappropriation of funds. In Honduras, President Castro signed the "Law for the Reconstruction of the Constitutional State and so that the Facts are not Repeated" to offer amnesty to her husband, former president Manuel Zelaya. The **law**, which extends to "elected officials, employees or authorities" of the state, has been criticized by anti-corruption experts who believe it would serve as veiled impunity of other illegal acts. These corruption allegations further cemented when the Biden administration blacklisted **25 Salvadoran citizens** by placing them on the colloquially known "Engel's list" which **identifies** individuals who undermine democratic processes or engage in significant corruption in the Northern Triangle. Most notably, those listed **included** Bukele's legal advisor, the head of his political party in the legislature, and his press secretary. Setting a precedent among the highest levels of leadership will inevitably trickle down, accelerating the corruption not only of those close to the president, but also of the security forces on the ground.



Though the National Civilian Police has been loyal to President Bukele and has been instrumental in Bukele's **intimidation** schemes, the international community would be remiss not to consider the role of the security services, especially the militarized sectors, in the different coups throughout the region's history. Corruption within the security forces remains **high** and needs to be addressed urgently. As gangs are displaced from their traditional neighborhoods and extortion networks, there is significant risk that they may be simply replaced by state-sanctioned bandits.

The development of new technologies, such as spyware, further complicates the perilous democratic landscape in the Northern Triangle. Under El Salvador's state of exception, government authorities have the right to **intercept** the calls and mail of anyone they consider a suspect. Pegasus, a spyware which was used in Latin America as early as **2017**, has facilitated surveillance and intimidation across the region. This digital surveillance has not been utilized to identify gang leadership or track the thousands of extortion payments made every day. It has, however, been used by many leaders: Panama's Ricardo Martinelli to **spy** on political opponents, journalists, and union leaders; Mexico's Enrique Peña Nieto (and **continuing** under current president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, despite promises to the contrary) to monitor lawyers investigating the 2014 disappearance of 43 students; and by Bukele to spy on and **intimidate** journalists reporting on his truces with the gangs and corruption scandals plaguing his administration.

The thousands of people detained under Bukele's policies have led him to unveil a brand new **mega prison**, the Center for the Confinement of Terrorism. The initial images of the facility and its inmates have been so striking that Colombian president Gustavo Petro called it a **concentration camp**, adding later that crime reduction in Bogotá was achieved by **building universities, not jails**. Though members were first labeled as terrorists by the Salvadoran **supreme court** in 2015, the administration's rhetoric about how gangs and prisoners will **live their lives** in jail is dehumanizing, which will likely lead to more human rights violations. Even before the new prison was built, those released from the Mariona prison recount overcrowding, the use of extreme violence by the police, and torture. More concerning, while the images of suspected gang members appear constantly on Bukele's Twitter account to build his political brand, no information, much less images, have been released showing the 1,600 children that have been **arrested**. Arbitrary arrests, poor jail conditions, the use of excessive force inside prisons, and the absence of a robust rehabilitation program set the preconditions for radicalization and self-censure in an emerging fear-based society.

Central American states need to grapple with the complex situation they will create as a result of recurring states of exception. A militarized security force without strong oversight and rule of law to hold it accountable is bound to create insecurity and chaos. If states can learn anything from the history of El Salvador's gangs, it is that incarceration, without a plan for rehabilitation and economic revitalization, will only feed the cycle of organized violence seen in the region and erode away the remnants of democracy that persist.

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The trajectory of the region and the peril to democracy is captured well by another grim joke making the rounds among journalists in Central America: “The difference between President Daniel Ortega and President Nayib Bukele is that what took Ortega years to accomplish, Bukele is doing in months.”

### *The Way Out: What the International Community Can Do to Help*

The United States and the broader democratic international community have a key role to play in developing and articulating a counter-narrative to that of Plan Bukele, one which acknowledges the legitimate interests of governments in targeting criminal violence but pares back elements of El Salvador’s strategy that have proven most corrosive to human rights and democracy. The narrative should state clearly that there is no democracy without justice, and no justice without security. A *mano dura* approach, while decreasing levels of violence in the short term, will ultimately weaken the rule of law and the state’s ability to present a sustainable response to crime.

**Ensure transparency.** The phases of El Salvador’s Territorial Control Plan are not publicly disclosed, nor are the costs of the war on gangs, the costs to build prisons, and anything generally related to citizen security and national security policy. This means that the public and the press have no means of evaluating the success or failure of the Salvadoran government’s policies, a situation that contributes to democratic backsliding and hides the worst abuses. Freedom of information should be insisted upon.

**Strengthen rule of law.** Strengthening the rule of law in the Northern Triangle countries should be of utmost priority. Arbitrary arrests and detentions not only create permissive environments for human rights abuses but also deprive individuals of due process, increasing the likelihood of wrongful detentions and abuse of power. Current and former prosecutors from across the region should be gathered to strengthen countries’ capacity to effectively prosecute suspected gang members and other criminal offenders. Strengthening the legal systems in the Northern Triangle would increase transparency, decrease prison overcrowding, and protect civil society and journalists from government abuses. In addition, the separation of powers must be reestablished in Northern Triangle countries, especially in El Salvador. Having the judiciary, attorney general, and legislature all under the control of the executive is a recipe for authoritarian abuse, as seen in Venezuela and Nicaragua.

**Build law enforcement capacity.** Investing in capacity-building for law enforcement, effective training, and education, including on human rights, would also allow for arrests to be more effective while improving the system of checks and balances. Police should also be vetted for corruption and human rights abusers among the ranks, especially senior ranks. There should also be further efforts to improve analysis and knowledge of crime and violence in the region, including through technological solutions that generate evidence, information, and data to inform law enforcement. Strengthening institutions such as the **International Law Enforcement Academy** should be a priority, since it can support institutional capacity building with an emphasis on democracy, human rights, and rule of law—an important asset for projecting a counternarrative in the region.

**Tailor strategies to local communities.** Gang membership has been a mode of survival for many of the youth who live in low-income communities. With no prospects for long-term economic development, these vulnerable populations will have incentives to turn to gang membership or engage in other forms of criminal activity. The **“Place-Based Strategy,”** a collaboration between the USAID and the Department of State’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement,

combines a law enforcement plan for areas with high levels of crime with a development approach to target at-risk populations; it should be implemented across the region.

These strategies have been successful in places such as San Pedro Sula, Honduras, and should be designed and implemented at the municipal governance level, working with local political and social leaders who are closest to their communities and have a thorough understanding of the major problems affecting their populations. Local solutions should include promoting citizen participation; mobilizing the local private sector; providing entrepreneurial development assistance for young people, women, and Indigenous persons; providing vocational training; lighting public spaces; and building and rehabilitating schools, community centers, training centers, sports fields, and health centers. In addition, the Cities Summit of the Americas, which will take place in Denver, Colorado, on April 26-28, 2023, should be leveraged to convene a large group of mayors from across the Northern Triangle and beyond to discuss the problem of gangs as well as local best practices for primary and secondary violence prevention initiatives.

**Invest in rehabilitation and reintegration programs.** President Bukele has jailed 2 percent of the adult population of El Salvador indefinitely, a measure that is both unsustainable and tyrannical. President Xiomara Castro should be discouraged from following the same path. Rehabilitation and reintegration could be provided through reduced prison sentences in tandem with vocational education, psychosocial support, and other services to allow prisoners to become productive members of society in exchange for a promise not to return to crime. USAID should consider establishing programs similar to **Homeboy Industries**, which offers job and skills training to former gang members to reduce recidivism and substance abuse, improve safety, and reunify families. Other efforts should be replicated and expanded, such as the **Catholic Relief Services'** project in Salvadoran jails to use evidence-based psychosocial tools to help participants recognize and manage thoughts and feelings to transform destructive behaviors in juvenile and adult offenders.

**Support efforts to fight corruption.** Like extortion, corruption redirects capital that should go toward helping vulnerable populations. Reducing the levels of state-sponsored extortion at all levels is paramount in building trust among citizens and laying the groundwork for equal access to prosperity. President Xiomara Castro's recent request to the United Nations for a **commission against corruption** should be fully supported, and more forceful encouragement should be provided to El Salvador to reinstate the International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES) or some similar international institution. Mechanisms such as **Global Magnitsky** sanctions and the Engel List must be used in conjunction with a comprehensive approach to tackling corruption and seizing assets in the region and abroad. These topics and others should be broached in the upcoming **U.S.-Honduras Strategic Dialogue**.

**Promote economic opportunity.** The United States should prioritize efforts to roll out USAID's **Central America Regional Support Services** (CARSS), which seeks to address economic insecurity and lack of opportunity, strengthen democratic governance, reduce violence, and increase respect for human rights and a free press, among other priorities. This will help mitigate the gang problem in the Northern Triangle while simultaneously reducing irregular migration. The United States should also continue to emphasize its **"Call to Action"** for businesses and social enterprises, which could provide significant investments in the region and promote economic opportunity in a manner similar to CARSS. ■

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