# Bukele's El Salvador

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Since 2019, after Nayib Bukele won the presidential election and secured a supermajority with his party, Nuevas Ideas, El Salvador has undergone a radical transformation in terms of ideology and policy. With soaring popularity, Bukele's policies have significantly altered El Salvador's security landscape, with a sharp decline in reported crime rates. According to government figures, violent crime decreased substantially, notably with homicides falling by 97.7% between 2015 and 2024.

The government's primary measures included the implementation of a state of exception that led to a massive crackdown on crime gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha gang (MS-13). The group is notorious for being an extremely violent gang originating from Los Angeles, California but having

roots from El Salvador. Bukele's approach, "*mano dura*," ('hard hand') has sidelined human rights in favour of widespread arrests and aggressive sentencing.

According to government figures, more than 83,000 people have been jailed since 2019. The Salvadoran Government has also extended prison capacities and, in 2023, it opened the Terrorism Confinement Centre called CECOT, a highly protected prison facility capable of keeping up to 40 000 prisoners. It is the largest prison in Latin America.

Bukele's administration has influenced the judiciary, enabling his re-election despite previous constitutional restrictions. He was re-elected in 2024 in a landslide—84% in a three-way race—and his approval is currently over 90%. His second term was facilitated by the Constitutional Court, making it possible for him to run again despite being theoretically barred from serving two consecutive terms.

Despite criticism from human rights groups and parts of the opposition, the policies of Bukele caught the attention of several high-profile conservatives across the Americas. In fact, Bukele has actively sought to deepen ties with the U.S. Republican Party. Bukele spoke at the 2024 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the biggest annual conservative gathering in the country. He was praised by the audience for his populist and anti-establishment rhetoric and his approach to crime and immigration were considered as an inspiration for Republicans.

With Donald Trump back in the White House, President Bukele has explored cooperation on these grounds with the new administration. Lately, Bukele actually offered a policy that would permit U.S. criminals and undocumented migrants in the U.S. to be sent over to Salvadoran prisons, including the CECOT centre, in exchange for a fee. El Salvador has, in Bukele's words, "offered the United States of America the opportunity to outsource part of its prison system."

Moreover, the Trump Administration is also exploring further cooperation with El Salvador in countering transnational gangs and illegal immigration. Both sides may benefit from their deepened ties. Bukele and the Trump Administration strive to position themselves as successful models in handling crime, illegal immigration, and "traditional democratic institutions".

In summary, Bukele's heavy-handed approach to crime has won him supporters domestically and internationally. Beyond the Trump administration, several Latin American countries with high-crime rates have also been trying to adopt some of Bukele's "mano dura" policies, like Ecuador's populist president Daniel Noboa. Bukele's regime may set a modern precedent for conservatives in the Americas in their struggle for power.

Graphic idea:

A line graph, with the area shaded below, depicting the changing homicide rate in El Salvador. The graphic below from Statista does not include

data from 2024 (which must be included of course), when El Salvador's homicide rate hit a new all-time low of 1.9 per 100,000.

Graphic source (above): https://www.statista.com/statistics/696152/homicide-rate-in-el-salvador/

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