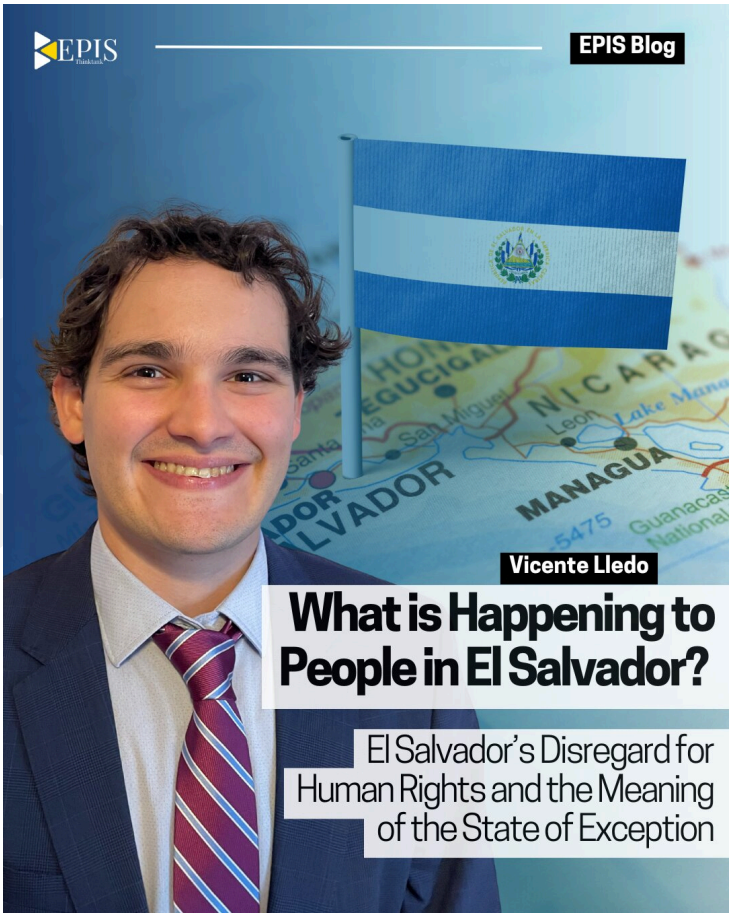
What is Happening to People in El Salvador?

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In March 2022 the president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, consolidated the power of both the judicial and legislative branches to call a state of emergency by replacing five judges in the Supreme Court with more "favourable" magistrates. Dubbing himself as the 'world's coolest dictator' Bukele and his government have committed a litany of human rights abuses under the enduring state of emergency. The state of emergency is also otherwise known as a state of exception. A concept which began in 1922 with German Jurist Carl Schmitt who later joined the Nazi Party in 1933 providing the foundation for what resulted in the legal and political exception of minorities

under his legal theories. Are historical precedents of the state of exception inseparable from its current uses?

What is the state of exception?

The state of exception is a legal concept that has been used to suspend the rights of citizens by government's since it began. In the context of El Salvador, a state of exception was called because of decades of enduring gang violence that propelled the country into the title of the world's most insecure place. As Bukele ascended to power in 2019 the year ended with 2,398 deaths. In an effort to make the country more secure, the state of exception was called. What followed were thousands of forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and the creation of a mega prison that far exceeds its maximum capacity.

Calling a state of exception penetrates a force of ambiguity, resulting in the complete suspension of the law to violate the rights of citizens. In other words, the law is completely disregarded to attain the political goals of the government. Giorgio Agamben has written extensively on the subject of state of exception. His words state that the state of exception begins through democratic means as it slowly devolves into totalitarian impunity. My view is that the use of the despot's tools will build a despot's house.

The constitutional rights of Salvadorians are sacrificed for a notion of smoke and mirrors-like security. When human rights groups ask to see the insides of the prisons, they are turned away. Arbitrary detentions have resulted in innocent people being subjected to illegal torture. Thousands are left without due process, forced to spend the rest of their life in deplorable conditions. All of this was 'legalized' as a result of the state of exception.

Behind Bukele's 85% approval rating, there is something akin to Argentina's Cold War policies in the 1970s under the military junta. During the military junta, the government of Argentina, in collaboration with right wing paramilitary groups, waged a "Dirty War" against any citizen that appeared to hold left-wing ideals. From 1976-1983 between 10,000 to 30,000 people were disappeared by the government, taken to clandestine sites to be tortured and killed. I will be careful here to provide false equivalents, no history is the same in every way, but one can only see the patterns that are appearing as totalitarian regimes like El Salvador's continue to hold power.

The government has been detaining its citizens, including renowned human rights lawyer Ruth López who had denounced the government's abuses and their lack of transparency. Ruth López is not the only one who has disappeared. Is there a balance to be made between security and human rights? El Salvador's population lives under an iron fist; the streets are silent with shadows of the arbitrarily detained. Many, including 3,000 children, are the victims of the government's miscarriages of justice. Jails are overspilling with reports that children have suffered torture and sexual abuse by the guards in the prisons. The lack of transparency on behalf of the

government reeks of what human rights organizations have been accusing it of.

Journalists and the families of the detained cannot get a hint of what is happening. The most basic human rights of people, whether they have committed a crime or not, must be safeguarded. It seems to me that all the silence speaks volumes—there are only 300 recorded deaths in El Salvador's prisons. What will we see when the curtain is lifted?

CECOT:

In the middle of nowhere in Tecoluca, San Vicente, there is the mega prison. The Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT) is another expression of the state of exception. Whether innocent or not, anybody associated with MS-13, Barrio 18, or any of the other organized crime gangs that plagued El Salvador for decades is detained there. The conditions are deplorable; people are not given enough food, they are deprived of sleep as artificial lights are kept turned on 24/7, sickness prevails among the population. When journalists asked to see the prison, they were denied entry to many parts and were only shown the place where prisoners are given 30 minutes of exercise every day. CECOT has been condemned by many, even the president of Colombia Gustavo Petro, who compared it to a 'concentration camp'.

In the prison, people's most basic human rights are replaced with torture. One could conclude that after decades of gang violence in El Salvador these people belong in prison, most do, Salvadorean NGO Socorro Juridico Humanitario estimates that a third of the people that have been detained are innocent and even those convicted do not deserve such inhumanity. The state of exception endures, people's rights are thrown aside while the innocent rot in jail alongside murderers. Too many deaths go unrecorded, people disappear. When the government is asked for transparency, they decline to comment. Is this security or totalitarianism?