

How Populism Succeeds in EL Salvador

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Abstract

This thesis examines the rise and consolidation of populism in El Salvador through the political ascendancy of Nayib Bukele. The study analyses how Bukele's discourse, institutional strategies, and media presence reflect core populist characteristics, including anti-elitism, direct appeals to "the people", and the erosion of traditional checks and balances. The thesis understands populism as an ideology and political strategy used to gain and maintain political power. Populist leaders often emerge as political outsiders who challenge established political party systems and present themselves as alternatives capable of solving the problems of the majority. An explanation of why people turn to populist leaders and abandon traditional, long standing political parties is provided. Populism operates differently depending on the country and leader who use it. This thesis conducts the case study of El Salvador, in which the polarised party system was disrupted by Nayib Bukele, an agent of power consolidation not seen in the country since the 1970s.

Introduction

Electorates in many democracies turn to political outsiders who challenge the political establishment and system; these leaders are recognised as populist leaders. Populism has been present since the 19th century but became popular due to the emergence of populist leaders worldwide. The debate over the true meaning of populism is not only a consequence of the multidisciplinary nature of research; even political scientists disagree on the nature and utility of the concept. The social theorist W. B. Gallie defines populism as an essentially contested concept in which the proper use inevitably involves disputes about its proper use (1996). While different scholars contest the essence and usefulness of the concept, other scholars use it without providing a definition, populism has been categorised as a type of political discourse, ideology, leadership, or political strategy. Populism attaches to other strong ideologies.

Populism is versatile because it is an ‘empty heart’ concept lacking a commitment to key values (Taggart 2000, 4). Compared to other ideologies that contain either an implicit or explicit focus on key values such as liberty or social justice, populism lacks this, making adaptable to different ideals (Taggart 2000, 4). As a result, populism can be found in the natural position of an adjective attached to other ideas that fill the space of the empty heart of populism (Taggart 2000, 4). Perhaps populism is an empty heart concept; it has a basic anti-elitism, which is adaptable and seeks to portray a small group of elites as enemies of the people. Scholars currently refer to two concepts of populism: the ideational approach and the political strategic approach, both applicable to the case study of populism in Latin America (LATAM).

Scholars who adhere to the ideational approach of populism debate what exactly populism is: a discourse, a thin-centred ideology, or something else (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017, 29). The debate over the true meaning of populism goes beyond political scientists, as

different social sciences such as criminology, economics, history, and sociology have their own meanings and interpretations of populism (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017, 29). The ideational approach reduces populism to a common and minimal core, seeing it as a political discourse that posits a cosmic struggle between a ratified “will of the people” and a conspiring elite (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017, 514). For the ideational approach to be successful, populism sees politics as a struggle between the forces of good and evil, leading to the existence of populism wherever there is an ideology of popular resentment against the order imposed in society by a long-established, differentiated ruling class believed to hold a monopoly on power, generating a relationship between elites and the masses (Taggart 2000, 11). The ideational approach’s morality is to set an opposition between the people and the elite. Regarding populism’s adaptability, the ideational approach categorises populism as a “thin” or “thin-centred” ideology, which does not possess the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency as “thick” or full ideologies (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017, 31). The ideational approach of populism is centred around the opposition between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, emphasising the division in society and offering guidance on how to conduct politics.

Alternatively, the scholar Kurt Weyland challenges the ideational approach as it excludes an important element of populism, which is the leader. The political strategy approach not only focuses on what the leader says, but also what they do to pursue and sustain political power (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017, 50). The aim of the populist leader is to portray himself as the only person who can fix the problems that the governing elite have caused. The leader is an important element for populism to mobilise the masses, as “the people” is a large group that cannot govern a country or act on its own; therefore, it relies on an outstanding leader who provides direction and mobilises followers towards the goals that the leader identifies as the “general will” of the people. The most common approach to

mobilise people has been the appeal to the ‘silent majority’, a claim populists use to speak for the majority. The notion of the ‘silent majority’ invokes certain attributes of ‘the people’ that give them the claim to be heard over the clamouring minority (Taggart 2000, 93). However, to connect with the people, the leader needs to be charismatic and develop a direct connection with them to mobilise and unite them against a common enemy, which is the elite.

The case study of this thesis is El Salvador, a small country in Central America corresponding to the region of LATAM. Populism has been present in LATAM since the 1930s, which is why many scholars categorise the region as “the land of populism” (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). The scholar Carlos de la Torre is widely recognised for presenting and analysing populism in LATAM, which is successful in the region due to high levels of inequality, especially the conflict between upper and lower classes. The populist narrative consists of the promise of inclusion and democratisation of the current system due to inequality. The start of populism in LATAM aimed to include excluded groups into the system as a product of colonisation. When the majority of citizens were eligible to vote the populist narrative evolved to provide solutions to socio-economic inequalities.

Perhaps people receive a short-term solution with a populist leader, it becomes a costly benefit, as once the leader is in power, they slide the regime towards an authoritarian one by concentrating power in the executive. The leader, by having control of Congress and implementing constitutional reforms, concentrates power in the executive to apply their populist policies, such as removing civil liberties in exchange for security enforcement, while also not wanting to leave power and using institutions to favour his party in winning elections.

Juan Perón is an example of classical populism that took place around the 1930s and 1940s with the crisis of the oligarchical order that combined liberal-inspired institutions such as division of powers and elections with patrimonial practices and values in predominantly

rural societies (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). As expected, institutional and decision-making processes excluded most of the population from politics and the public sphere, meaning that power was concentrated in the hands of elites. At this stage, the elite was already established, and classical populism in Latin America consisted of the inclusion of excluded masses into the political system (de la Torre 2014). Besides including excluded groups such as women, the slide towards authoritarianism came into effect as Perón concentrated power in the executive.

Around the 1990s, populism evolved into neo-liberal populism, where most people had the right to vote and there were already organised political parties. At this stage, the populist leader ran as a political outsider and gained support when there was a failure, such as an economic catastrophe that led to high levels of inflation; in this scenario, the political outsider blamed traditional politicians, arguing that they had appropriated the people's sovereignty and led the country into economic chaos (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). In other cases, the political leader used a personalistic party to challenge the political establishment, such as Bucaram in Ecuador (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Political parties and elites were no longer only presented as out of touch with people's needs and desires; rather, a sentiment of hostility emerged, portraying them as enemies of the people.

Around the 2000s, radical populism emerged, which consisted of bringing back old leftist utopias of socialism and revolution but with an innovative twist: instead of advocating violence, leaders promoted the revolutionary role of constituent power (Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). The use and promise of constitutional assemblies gave radical populists support, as the idea was that, with participation from social movements and citizens, new constitutions would be drafted (Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). However, the goal of such assemblies was also to concentrate power in the executive by removing checks and balances (de la Torre 2014). Inspired by Cuba, radical populism relied on state

intervention in the economy to distribute wealth and reduce poverty and inequality (de la Torre 2014). At this stage, the populist leader portrayed foreign elites such as the US as stealing resources while representing domestic political parties as out of touch with people's needs.

El Salvador, under its current president Nayib Bukele, reflects the characteristics of populism in LATAM. El Salvador experienced a civil conflict due to oppressive military dictatorships that worked closely with the small oligarchy, which were the owners of coffee and cotton plantations that then was exported. Another factor was high inequality levels, where a small oligarchy was wealthy while the rest of the population had limited opportunities for upward mobility. A further element was the division of the Catholic Church, where liberation theology influenced people to view armed struggle as a way to liberate themselves from an oppressive regime. The civil war became a Cold War battleground in which the military was aided by the US and opposition guerrilla movements by the Soviet Union. The conflict became one of the deadliest in Central America and ended in 1992 with the peace accords, which marked a democratic transition, including separation of powers, free and fair elections, and human rights protections. But another legacy was a strongly polarised party system composed of ARENA (right) and FMLN (left), which together dominated electoral politics.

The two-party system remained stable until 2019, when Nayib Bukele campaigned as a political outsider and successfully won the elections. By that time, Salvadoreans had accumulated frustration towards the traditional parties due to corruption and gang violence. Poverty remained high, and while elites became richer, the working class became poorer. When the state failed to provide opportunities for upward mobility, alternatives such as gangs became attractive for survival and protection.

After 20 years of ARENA in power, marked by corruption and limited opportunities, people shifted to the FMLN seeking change. However, during its ten years in power, corruption increased, gang violence peaked, and poverty persisted. Both parties failed to govern effectively, generating frustration and leading Salvadorans to seek an alternative, allowing Bukele to succeed as a political outsider.

The Salvadoran case fits the populist narrative in Latin America, as Bukele has concentrated power in the executive and reformed the constitution to narrow the playing field for the opposition. To control gang violence, Bukele invoked a state of emergency allowing mass arrests without due process. While this reduced homicide rates, it also resulted in human rights violations, wrongful incarcerations, and persecution of opposition figures. Despite these issues, many citizens accept these measures due to the reduction in violence. Currently, Bukele has implemented reforms allowing indefinite re-election, and opposition parties face significant disadvantages. Under these conditions, El Salvador can be characterised as a competitive authoritarian regime.

Chapter 1 Populism and its Impact for democracy

Voters, support for political outsiders has become increasingly popular since the 2000s. These political outsiders challenge the political establishment and the system by blaming the elites for the poor conditions in which many people live. These candidates, known as “populists”, polarise people into two groups, “the real people” and “the elites”, gaining support from those who are frustrated with the current system and who aspire for a better future. Although populists may win their first election democratically, they often grow fond of power and do everything possible to remain in office, eventually turning the democratic regime into an authoritarian one.

I. Defining Populism

Political scientists use the term populism due to the rise of populist leaders across the world, particularly in Europe and the Americas. Populism is not a new concept; it has been on the radar since the 19th century, but it lacks a precise definition. Because populism does not have a clear definition, it becomes a contested concept, which leads to endless disputes about its proper use. As different scholars contest the essence and usefulness of the concept, some scholars use it without a specific or clear definition, while others define it as a type of political discourse, an ideology, a style of leadership, or a political strategy, among others (Mudde 2017, 29). The debate over the true meaning of populism goes beyond political scientists, as criminologists, economists, historians, and sociologists have their own interpretations of populism (Mudde 2017. 2017, 29). Populism ambiguity makes it an adaptable and flexible concept, fitting with different strong ideologies.

Populism is ambiguity has tempted scholars to use it without providing a definition and for it to be present in different ideological styles of government. Populism versatility is that it is an ‘empty heart’ concept, lacking commitment to key values (Taggart 2000, 4).

Compared to other ideologies that contain either an implicit or explicit focus on key values, such as liberty or social justice, populism lacks such conceptual anchors (Taggart 2000, 4). Thus, populism can be found in the natural position of a noun that attaches to other ideas that become the adjective that fill the space at the empty heart of populism (Taggart 2000, 4). Populism thus can be present in different scenarios, such as radical populism, which consists of governing with old leftist utopias of socialism and revolution, with an innovative twist of performing a revolutionary role through constituent power (de la Torre 2017, 200). Other sub-types of populism have been developed in Latin America, such as classical and neo-liberal populism. The empty heart of populism makes it an adaptable concept that attaches to different ideologies to fulfil its gap.

Regularly populism has the common idea of anti-elitism, as it is a way to organise against the established political, economic, and media elites who are seen as stealing power from ordinary citizens. The ideational approach to populism presents the conflict between the people and the elite. The word “ideational” refers to the concepts and ideas which are important for any type of causal analysis. For scholars who adhere to the ideational approach to populism, there is a debate over what exactly populism is: a discourse, a thin-centred ideology, or something else (Mudde 2017, 29). The scholar Cas Mudde introduces the ideational approach to populism, focusing on four key concepts: ideology, the people, the elite, and the general will (Mudde 2017, 29). The ideational approach reduces populisms to a common and minimal core, seeing it as a political discourse that posits a cosmic struggle between the “will of the people” and a “conspiring elite” (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017, 514). For the ideational approach to be successful, populism sees politics as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, leading to the existence of populism wherever there is an ideology of popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a long-established, differentiated ruling class believed to hold monopoly power (Taggart

2000, 11). While the elite are portrayed as corrupt and self-enriching, people, in their desperate need to overcome their problems as a product of these elites, aim to challenge the political establishment. For Cas Mudde populism is an ideology “that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2017, 30).

The ideational approach sets an opposition between the people and the elite. Elitism shares the Manichaeian distinction between the people and the elite but adopts an opposite view regarding the morality of each of these entities (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017, 30). This can lead the people to assume that the elite come from the same group as the people and have willingly chosen to betray them by privileging the special and inauthentic intellectuals of the elite over those of the people (Mudde 2017, 30). That is why, in many cases ethnic minority leaders like Alberto Fujimori (Peru) are considered more “authentic” representatives of the people than leaders with a more common socio-economic status or majority ethnic background.

The ideational approach to populism suggests that it is not a fully developed ideology, but rather one that has the common idea of fighting a corrupt elite. Populism is a “thin” or “thin-centred” ideology, which does not possess the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency as “thick” or full ideologies such as liberalism (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017, 31). That said, the ideational approach to populism is centred around the opposition between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”. That is why populists often emphasise division in society and offer to “drain the swamp” (a phrase from Donald Trump 2016), while offering few specific views on political institutions and socio-economic issues (Mudde 2017, 31). As problems accumulate over time, populists emphasise them to create an opposition between

the people and the elite while claiming to represent the general will of the people. Populism relies heavily on the idea of confrontation with an evil and self-enriching elite.

Overall, the ideational approach of populism is widely accepted due to its adaptable and context-dependent nature. Its ‘empty heart’ and “thin-centred” ideological character allow it to attach itself to stronger ideologies and take diverse forms across time and place. Yet, despite its flexibility, populism consistently centres on a moral distinction between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, claiming to embody the general will of the people against a perceived immoral establishment. This capacity to simplify complex political realities into a struggle between virtue and corruption ensures populism’s enduring relevance in modern politics. Ultimately, populism adapts itself depending on the crises and discontents of each moment while maintaining its core appeal as a voice for the people against the elite.

II. Populism as a political strategy

The success of populism relies on the leader and their appeal to the vast majority of the people. Scholars like Kurt Weyland present populism as a political strategy which not only focuses on what the leader says, but also on what they do to pursue and sustain political power (Weyland 2017, 50). For a populist leader, democracy is the process of appealing to the majority. The aim of the populist leader is to portray themselves as the only person who can fix the problems that the governing elite has caused.

For the political strategy approach to be successful, there are two key components: ‘the people’ and the leader. The people are important because they are flexible, just as populism itself (Taggart 2000, 92). Populism requires devices that are themselves malleable, and ‘the people’ is just such a device (Taggart 2000, 92). Populists use this term because the people are numerous and form the majority, which leads to greater legitimacy for those who speak in their name. The fundamental element when populists use ‘the people’ is that a rhetoric of unity against the evil elites is portrayed (Taggart 2000, 92). People in a country

are divided due to different beliefs, regional identities, and their own interests, but when a populist leader refers to them, they are presented as a unified entity devoid of fundamental divisions (Taggart 2000, 92). However, the populist likes to play a double game, using, “the People” to embody unity against the evil elites, but also “the people” to mean the “real people”, the more carefully defined favoured group of citizens whose views are shared by the leader.

The “people” are too large a group to govern a country or act on their own, so this role falls to an outstanding leader who provides direction and mobilises followers towards the goals that the leader identifies as the “general will” of the people (Weyland 2017, 50). The most common approach to mobilise the people has been the appeal to the ‘silent majority’, a claim populists use to speak for the majority. The notion of the ‘silent majority’ invokes certain attributes of ‘the people’ that give them the claim to be heard over the clamouring minority (Taggart 2000, 93). The silence from the majority comes from a range of low- to middle-income workers who pay taxes and quietly get on with life, with no inclination to become involved with the minority (elites), who are the self-interested and upper-class individuals (Taggart 2000, 93). The majority of the working class feel that they do not have a voice in politics, and because there are regional fault lines in societies that reflect different interests, it is hard for ‘the people’ to rule a country for themselves. The leader becomes the solution for that large group that has been silenced by the system, as he presents himself as the only person who can fix all the problems.

Many successful populist leaders confirm the expectation that they are “just like us”, someone of the people, by having a humble background (Müller 2016). However, populist leaders like Bukele and Trump challenge such a description as they come from the upper class, fitting into the minority category. For a populist leader to connect with common people, even if they are from the upper class, he must have a charismatic leadership (Müller

2016). A charismatic leader builds a personalistic connection with the people and presents themselves as embodying the general will of the people. For example, the populist Hugo Chávez used slogans like “Chávez is the people” and “Chávez, we are millions; you are also Chávez” (Müller 2016). The general idea of a personalistic connection is that the leader guides the people in identifying the common enemy and presents themselves as the person who alone can fix politics.

With the evolution of social media, the leader has a personal and direct connection with citizens. Through the use of social media, the leader seeks to cut out the middleman, to rely as little as possible on complex party organisations and intermediaries like the media, between citizens and politicians (Müller 2016). The goal is for the leader to be portrayed as the only one representing the interests of the people by communicating directly with them. That is why populists criticise media for providing misinformation and working closely with the elites. For example, Bukele, during his 2019 presidential campaign, did not engage in a series of live TV and radio interviews. All his campaign proposals and attacks were communicated on his X (Twitter) and Facebook accounts, as he claimed that this allowed him to have a direct connection with Salvadoreans and engage with them through comments. When a populist leader is successful within a political party, the support and party platform are centred around the populist leader. For example, in the French party system, the personality, leadership, and style of Marine Le Pen were key to the development of the National Rally party, leading it in a highly authoritarian manner and concentrating power in himself (Taggart 2000, 78). Thus, in the political strategy approach, leadership relies on a charismatic and personalistic bond between the leader and the people, where direct communication is important.

The political strategy approach of populism relies on a personalistic leader who combats the established “political class” and tries to rise above it (Weyland 2017, 56).

Another important element of the political strategy is the power leaders use to influence and sustain their authority (Weyland 2017, 57). Here is where the large number of people who support the populist becomes important, as they rely on popular support to achieve power, leading a political party to become an electoral vehicle to win an election democratically. Additionally, once a populist is successful and manages to concentrate power, a common feature is the use of authoritarian strategies to remain in power. The use of charismatic leadership is to inspire loyalty among followers, encouraging them to respond to the leader, who becomes the guide of ordinary citizens (Taggart 2000, 101). As the leader secures long-lasting support, the common appeal is that the enemies of ‘the people’ become their enemies, and the leader is the only one capable of taking them down. For example, Bukele, in his first presidential campaign, presented the two traditional political parties as enemies due to the violence the country was facing and high levels of corruption among their representatives. Once in power, the narrative continued as Bukele incarcerated what he called corrupt officials who needed to answer to ‘the people’, while he attacks the opposition. The importance of maintaining loyalty from the people is to legitimise the leader’s power and use it to delegitimise opponents.

Populism as a political strategy is the dynamic relationship between a charismatic leader and “the people”. The ability of the leader to frame themselves as the representative of the majority and protector against corrupt elites allows populists to maintain legitimacy and mobilise continuous support. Through personalistic and direct communication, often facilitated by modern media, populist figures bypass traditional institutions and reshape democratic processes to their advantage. The endurance of populist movements in democratic contexts depends on the bond between the leader and his followers, where loyalty to the leader is synonymous with loyalty to themselves.

III. Populism and Polarisation

Polarisation is another fundamental element in the success of populism, becoming the primary cause of the division between the people and the elite. At its most basic level, political polarisation refers to political values and attitudes that have moved away from a central, moderate positions and migrated towards extreme position (Churcher 2025). In many cases, political polarisation happens frequently in two-party systems. In such cases, political polarisation embodies the tension between binary political ideologies and partisan identities. However, there is a new form of polarisation that is connected to specific social issues and institutional concerns (Churcher 2025). This leads to political polarisation occurring at different sub-levels, such as elite polarisation and popular polarisation (Churcher 2025). In terms of populism, popular polarisation is the one influencing the tensions between the people and the elite. Popular polarisation happens due to different factors such as political activism, electoral policies, in-group biases, and mass media or media bubbles (Churcher 2025). The reason these factors are considered contributors to political polarisation because they are influential in shaping a person's adoption of extreme perspectives and views towards the political system they live in.

The media is an influential factor in shaping people's perspectives, generating radical ideas about politics and dividing people. A theory that explains how the media shapes people's political perspectives is Chomsky's propaganda model, which emphasises how news bias is provided to the public through five filters.

Instead of strong censorship, media bias occurs through five ingredients that shape news filters: (1) the size, concentrated ownership, and profit orientation of the mass media; (2) advertising as a license to do business; (3) Sourcing of mass media news; (4) Flak and enforcements; and (5) anti-communism as a control mechanism (Herman and Chomsky 1988).

Chomsky's propaganda model elaborates on how the media filters the news to manufacture public consent in favour of elite economic and political interests, creating bias that leads to polarisation. For example, people who consume news from FOX News are known to lean towards Republican ideology, compared to those who consume content from CNN. This evolves into polarisation, in which individuals question the moral legitimacy of one another. Additionally, Chomsky emphasised that, at times, the media shapes news based on elite interests, which populist leaders exploit to their benefit and use to portray such channels as "fake news". For example, Trump categorises certain news channels as "fake news media" that work closely with Democrats, while claiming that the real news of his administration comes from his posts on Truth Social. This becomes a factor of polarisation, as the leader claims to have the facts for the people while the media is seen as working based on the interests of the elites, creating a divide between facts and bias. At one point, this becomes dangerous, as people begin to believe what the leader says, including the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories that further deepen division. However, Chomsky's propaganda model is based on traditional media, such as newspapers, TV, and radio, as when Chomsky wrote it there was no digital media, which has since become an influential cause of political polarisation.

Currently, people engage in politics through social media platforms, which provide a direct way of interacting with political content, as users can follow leaders who represent their interests. An important consideration of social media is algorithms, as they determine the content people consume by adapting to their preferences. The digital environment disperses power across multiple platforms while reinforcing ideological echo chambers through algorithmic personalisation (Perra and Rocha 2019). For example, if a person is conservative, their feed will be dominated by content that reflects that ideology (e.g. Fox News content on their X and Facebook). Some of Chomsky's filters still apply in the social

media context. Flak has evolved into a more direct phenomenon, leading to online harassment campaigns (e.g. boycotting a political party) or influencer-led movements that seek to promote change or radicalised ideas (e.g. Charly Kirk). Finally, the anti-communism filter has shifted towards key issues that are specific and central to people, such as security, migration, nationalism, and identity in politics. These debates often trigger emotional rather than rational responses, polarising society and reinforcing extreme ideological attachments, which can lead to anti-establishment sentiments. Another important element of social media is that anyone can publish information without factchecking, which can turn it into a tool for the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation.

Populism relies on conspiracy theories that demonise the elites and highlights the dangers surrounding them (Taggart 2000, 105). Through conspiracy theories, populists bring together various elite groups such as bankers, politicians, intellectuals, and captains of industry, making it a short step to claim that they combine as part of a broader plot (Taggart 2000, 105). The leader plays an important role in uniting all enemies into one group and presenting them as those who conspire against the public for personal interests. For a conspiracy theory to be successful, the leader needs to find resonance with disgruntled sections of the population (Taggart 2000, 105). Conspiracy theories provide an incentive for individuals to join the populist movement in order to challenge whatever conspiracy they believe has been working against them (Taggart 2000, 105). For example, if a country faces a severe unemployment problem where the majority of people can barely afford food, they may easily fall into a conspiracy theory that the government has taken public money for luxurious holidays for its cabinet. The conspiracy theory gains credibility among the masses due to dissatisfaction with poor economic performance, leading them to turn to populists in search of a solution, thereby generating popular polarisation.

The leader, knowing how to appeal to the masses through conspiracy theories, is responsible for determining who the real people are and who the common enemy is which is the elite, polarising society into two camps. For populism, polarisation is a political tool used to demarcate frontiers between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and to define communities as moral orders (Palonen 2009). The two groups are separated by a frontier, particularly between those who advocate for the common good and those perceived as self-interested. This evolves into a political frontier that creates a point of identification and confrontation within the political system, where consensus is found within each political camp itself (Palonen 2009). As a result, ordinary people, despite their different values, beliefs, or political views, unite under the group that the populist identifies as representing the ‘general will of the people’, while perceiving the current establishment as responsible for their grievances. The desire of the people to overcome their problems, and to assign blame to actors such as the elite, leads them to set aside rational choices in favour of those who best represent their interests and promise to punish the “corrupt” elite.

Political polarisation functions as a central mechanism through which populism achieves political mobilisation. Media bias, misinformation, and algorithm-driven digital media increase polarisation by encouraging emotional and identity-based political attachments rather than rational choices. Populist leaders exploit these conditions by presenting themselves as the authentic representatives of ‘the people’, while delegitimising elites and institutional actors through the use of conspiracy theories. By framing politics as a moral struggle between citizens and corrupt elites, populism transforms society into political frontiers divided into irreconcilable camps. This dynamic polarises society and makes it easier to recruit individuals into populist movements.

IV. Why people support populist leaders

Populist leaders have general proposals for specific issues that people has found resentment towards, but they do not offer policies on how to fix complex issues such as the economy. For people to support the leader at extreme levels, the leader relies on emotional appeals, and resentment is the emotion they target to motivate people to join their movement. The use of dirty campaigns aims to transfer hatred among the people towards the elites in order to persuade them to join the movement (Bank et al. 2017). For it to resonate with the people, leaders need to think big by using the right type of resentment that connects with the masses. For example, Trump used anti-immigrant resentment in the two elections he successfully won. Hate turns the masses against the government and the so-called elites, presenting the whole process as corrupt (Bank et al. 2017). The leader is responsible for challenging the status quo that people resent, and then people follow him as he reflects the interests of the majority. In other words, voter anger explains the rise, development, and support for populist leaders.

Resentment, being the main driver for people to follow a populist leader, means that populism, in a very abstract way, is the embodiment of a primal political reaction of the ruled against the rulers (Taggart 2000, 109). For it to become a political movement, it needs to be structured through and against the process of representative politics (Taggart 2000, 110). In some sense, this means that populism needs to challenge the current political establishment that has failed to reflect the people's interests, while simultaneously reflecting the popular support of the majority in order to have legitimacy. Recently, populist movements have become protest parties that focus on representing minorities, especially those who feel silenced. However, they aim to represent low- to middle-income segments of society who work daily to "survive" and feel resentment towards the government because they do not see any benefits for themselves and believe that the elite still profit from their work. These are

sources of anger that aim to challenge the rulers, and people seek political outsiders as solutions to punish politicians for their failed policies.

Finally, populism is successful when political parties and governments are out of touch with their voters. This allows populists to gather support, as many people feel disconnected from a political system that has failed to address key issues, generating frustration and anger. This scenario creates space for a political outsider who communicates directly through social media and television with strong charisma, disrupting or even take over established political party systems (Bank et al. 2017). People then begin to see such a figure as a viable alternative for change. Appeals such as Trump's references to "the silent majority" and "the forgotten Americans" become tools for populist leaders to establish a connection with the people and mobilise them to achieve power. Part of the success of populism can therefore be attributed to the failure of traditional politicians, who are perceived as prioritising their own interests and agendas over the common good, leading the public to feel that their culture is at risk.

V. populism and Authoritarianism

Populist leaders take advantage of popular support to concentrate power. Tyrants are often defined as cruel and oppressive rulers, but in the case of a populist leader, that definition can be too simplistic. Rather, we might understand a tyrant in this context as a ruler supported by the people who desire results (Ginsberg 2021). This reflects how a populist leader can be both elected and supported. Historically, in times of difficulty, there is often an appeal in someone who emerges and claims, "I alone can fix it all". When people are angry, they seek someone to blame for their problems, and in such scenarios, this is often the elite. Charismatic leadership tends to arise in times of distress and hardship, as it promises to overcome a sense of crisis and moral decline (Taggart 2000, 102). When the leader presents themselves as one of the people, shares their enemies, and assigns blame for misfortune, this

can provide a sense of relief for individuals seeking solutions, regardless of how undemocratic those solutions may be. The desire for short-term solutions allows charismatic leaders to achieve power and succeed, but for their solutions to be implemented effectively, they rely heavily on a centralised government. This can lead to semi-authoritarianism, as seen in Ecuador under Correa, or fully authoritarian regimes, as in Venezuela (Taggart 2000, 102). Populism relies on simple, risky, and short-term solutions; by weakening institutionalism, it allows the leader to adopt populist policies more easily, effectively dictating the fate of the regime. For example, commerce and free trade may be protected by the constitution, but Chávez centralised power to amend the constitution and implement socialist policies as short-term economic solutions. Without control over the legislature, he would not have been able to amend the constitution in favour of his populist policies.

There is a type of authoritarian regime that populists have used to achieve power which differs from traditional forms such as single-party rule or military dictatorship, commonly seen before and during the Cold War period. Venezuela under Chávez was considered an CA regime before the it became a fully authoritarian one with Maduro. Analysing Chavez Venezuela closely, the regime held open elections every six years, its legislature rotated, and representatives were elected through an open electoral process. These democratic procedures create a form of legitimacy for the ruling party, yet elections remain compromised. The explanation for such a system is that populism is often associated with competitive authoritarianism (CA), as it weakens liberal institutions (Cinar and Kose 2024). Competitive authoritarianism was notably developed by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way in their 2010 work on hybrid regimes. From this, we can extract the following definition of competitive authoritarianism:

Competitive authoritarian regimes are civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents. Such regimes are

competitive in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents. Competition is thus real but unfair. (Levitsky and Way 2010, 5)

Competitive authoritarianism is a hybrid regime that combines key characteristics of democracy with authoritarian practices (Levitsky and Way 2010, 5). While it maintains formal features of a liberal democracy, such as elections, media freedom, and citizen participation, it lacks a genuinely level playing field, placing the opposition at a structural disadvantage (Levitsky and Way 2010, 6).

To illustrate this, consider a football (soccer) final. Two teams reach the final after a long tournament, and the match is played in a neutral stadium with equal support to ensure fairness. However, imagine that the referee consistently makes decisions that favour one team, such as awarding a doubtful penalty that ultimately decides the game. Although the winning team can claim victory within the rules, the outcome is shaped by bias, limiting the other team's real chances of success. Similarly, in a political context, opposition parties may formally compete in elections, but if institutions are biased in favour of the ruling party, the competition is not genuinely fair. As a result, incumbents maintain power while using elections as a symbolic mechanism to legitimise their rule.

Under competitive authoritarianism (CA), a regime is hybrid in which democratic institutions exist, but corruption and selective enforcement lead to unfair competition that allows the ruling party to remain in power. In CA, there is an uneven playing field that undermines the principles of "free and fair elections" and "civil liberties" (Levitsky and Way 2010, 6). Some aspects of this uneven playing field include unequal access to media and financial resources, which have a major impact between elections and call into question whether elections are truly free and fair (Levitsky and Way 2010, 6). At this stage, competitive authoritarianism functions when the leader has concentrated power by

influencing all branches of government, such as through corrupt judges, and by using institutions under their control to persecute the opposition, for example through the attorney general's office.

Simultaneously, some actions taken by the government that skew the playing field may not be perceived as violations of civil liberties, as the populist leader can effectively communicate to the public that such actions are meant to protect them (Levitsky and Way 2010, 6). For example, when a populist government shuts down a newspaper, it is clearly a violation of civil liberties, as it restricts freedom of expression. However, the leader may argue that the newspaper's owner is involved in drug trafficking and that the outlet was used for money laundering. At this stage, the populist has concentrated power and can use institutions such as the attorney general's office to construct and present a case to the public. As a result, the public may perceive this act as protection rather than a restriction of their liberties, when in reality the intention is to silence criticism and intimidate the opposition to ensure the government remains in a favourable position, selective enforcement is an important element of competitive authoritarianism.

The difference between competitive and non-competitive authoritarianism is that cases such as Cuba and China, although they hold elections, cannot be considered competitive authoritarian regimes. In these systems, all power and decision-making are concentrated in the executive, and a single political party dominates elections. This means that formal democratic institutions exist only on paper and not in practice when evaluating fully authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010, 7). Furthermore, in fully authoritarian regimes, fear prevails, as people fear the leader, who maintains control through repression. To achieve this, repression of opposition candidates becomes necessary to ensure favourable electoral outcomes, forcing opposition figures to remain under the radar, while journalists who do not align with the government are often imprisoned or tortured (Levitsky and Way

2010, 7). Therefore, in fully authoritarian regimes, the ruling party holds a monopoly over state resources and uses severe repression to maintain control.

Compared to fully authoritarian regimes, in CA constitutional channels exist through which opposition groups can compete in a meaningful way for the executive and other elected branches of government (Levitsky and Way 2010, 7). Usually, when populist movements achieve power, they do so democratically and maintain popular support for a significant period, meaning that they do not initially rely on repression to centralise power. In competitive authoritarian systems, elections are held regularly, often respecting constitutional term limits, and opposition parties are not formally excluded from participation. Another important distinction is that opposition activity remains above ground, with party offices, candidate recruitment, and organised campaigns, and not all journalists and politicians are persecuted by the state, unlike in fully authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010, 7). In some cases, it may even be beneficial for the ruling party to maintain an opposition, as weak or fragmented opposition groups can damage their own credibility and indirectly strengthen the populist leader.

What separates competitive authoritarianism from democracy is the absence of genuinely free elections, broad protections of civil liberties, and a reasonably level playing field. Corruption is the core element of competitive authoritarianism: although institutions exist and there is space for opposition, the system is designed to favour the incumbent ruling party in winning the executive and securing a legislative majority. This allows the executive to amend the constitution and overcome political gridlock, keeping power centralised. Civil liberties may exist in general terms, but they can be selectively restricted when the populist leader sees it necessary to implement policies, such as limiting property rights. Competition is therefore limited, as the opposition's chances of winning remain low, preventing the system from being considered a true democracy.

Authoritarianism becomes the means through which the populist leader remains in power, while competitive authoritarianism provides legitimacy for that permanence. If a leader relied solely on fully authoritarian methods, they could remain in power indefinitely through fear and repression, but without legitimacy. However, populism depends on the idea that the leader represents the general will of the majority, the “real people”. Without this narrative, even a charismatic leader cannot effectively mobilise the masses. Therefore, the leader requires a democratic façade to claim support from the majority and avoid being perceived as a dictator, and competitive authoritarianism provides this framework. For example, supporters may argue that the leader is not a dictator because elections are held and the public continues to elect them over the opposition. In this way, competitive authoritarianism provides both the authoritarian foundation to secure power and the democratic appearance necessary to sustain the populist narrative.

Overall, populism operates in two stages: first as a political strategy to win elections by mobilising the masses, and then through authoritarian practices to secure and maintain power over time. However, rather than relying solely on full authoritarianism, populist leaders tend to adopt competitive authoritarianism, as it allows them to win elections through a seemingly democratic process while implementing authoritarian measures. This results in a hybrid regime in which the leader can justify and legitimise their success while maintaining the populist narrative that they have the support of the people through supposedly “free and fair” elections.

VI. How to interpret populism

The chapter provides common characteristics of populism, especially how it can be understood as either an ideology or a political strategy, as scholars tend to treat each distinction as independent rather than interdependent. Populism is difficult to define, as it is not a fully developed concept, and scholars present it as an ideology, discourse, or political

strategy, or even use it without a clear definition across different social sciences, which challenges the creation of a general definition. However, what can be done is to interpret populism in a way that is accessible for the audience to understand what is meant by it when applied to the case study of El Salvador. For this research, the following interpretation of populism will be used: an adaptable concept that portrays the idea of polarising society into two camps, “the real people” versus “the elite”, which the leader uses as a political strategy to win and achieve power by embodying the general will of the people.

This interpretation challenges what many scholars argue, but instead of separating the ideational and political strategy approaches, it combines them, as both complement each other. There has not been a successful populist leader who excludes the idea of polarising society between the real people and the elite, as it consists of confrontation and the embodiment of the masses; without it, the core idea of populism is lost. However, populism is not a strong concept, as it remains an “empty heart” that can adapt to stronger ideologies, allowing the leader to adopt those they consider most suitable to connect with voters. For example, radical populism occurs when the leader adapts socialist policies and ideologies to their style of leadership. Furthermore, as previously discussed, populism emerges when there is a sense of dissatisfaction with the political system in which people live, and the charismatic leader exploits this sentiment, using it as a strategy to present themselves as the only person capable of solving current problems, mobilising the masses through voter anger.

The idea of populism leading a regime into authoritarianism was excluded, as it is considered a consequence of populism that occurs when the leader concentrates power, although in some cases leaders leave office democratically. Ultimately, the leader is human, and when they gain popular support and achieve power, they may become unwilling to release it, particularly as populism often requires a centralised government for the effective

implementation of its policies. To centralise and secure power, the leader may use CA to create a political playing field that favours his party.

Chapter 2 Populism in Latin America and El Salvador Historic Background

Populism leads to a polarised society between two antagonistic camps, “the real people” and “the elite”, serving as a political strategy for a charismatic leader to achieve power. Populism occurs in Latin America in different forms and contexts. History has produced different types of populism who have been successful in Latin America. However, the majority of populist leaders in Latin America have slid democratic regimes into authoritarian ones by concentrating power in the executive. El Salvador is an interesting case study, as the country practised democracy in the early 1990s after the deadliest conflict in Central America, which served as a Cold War Battleground. The peace accords laid the foundations for a new, transparent, democratic system accompanied by a strongly polarised political party system.

I. Populism in Latin America

Populism is not exclusive Latin American, it appears across the globe, in Europe as is the case of Hungary, and in the US with the rise of Donald Trump. However, Latin America (LATAM) is recognised as the “land of Populism” as it has been present in the region since the 1930s and still persists (de la Torre 2017, 195). However, populism in LATAM is not static; its ideals and forms vary between contexts and the charismatic leader, leading to three different types of populism that have happened in the region: classical, neo-liberal and radical (de la Torre 2017, 195). There is a common characteristic for the development of populism in LATAM. Populist began with the promise of inclusion and democratising the current system

due to inequality, and once the leaders are in power, they slide the regime towards an authoritarian one by concentrating power in the executive.

To understand populism in LATAM it is important to understand the conditions of the region, especially the socio-economic inequality where the majority of people live in an underprivileged position. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) categorises Latin America and the Caribbean as the world's most unequal region, where the highest earning ten percent make on average 12 times more than the poorest ten percent, to an extent that one in five citizens of LATAM is poor (Bachelet 2024). The data reflect the inequality gap in LATAM, and this leads people to live in a daily survival mode on selling products informally on a public bus, for them, to have money for one meal at home. Others take measures to work illegally in a desperate need to have income or food, like joining cartels or gangs' organisations, committing robbery, and working in the informal sector. The so-called survival mode creates a sense of being excluded from the system, generating discontent. From a low-income perspective, discontent is rooted in structural inequalities along with a perceived lack of economic opportunities, creating frustration among residents, leading to negative attitudes towards the government and the desire to change politics (Cuadrado-Roura, Kourtiti, and Nijkamp 2025). Due to the inequality gap, people feel abandoned by and excluded from the system; due to their limited possibilities, they think that the people in the highest sector of the population (the elite) control a system that favours their personal interests while common people are limited and suffering from it.

The uneven socio-economic problems in the region have allowed populism to be strong and successful. Social inequality in LATAM did not happen when democracy was introduced and practised in the region; it has a long historic background from the colonising period of Spain and Portugal which excluded indigenous communities from the system and received uneven treatment. With the passage of time the races got mixed, creating a new form of

categorising people between Mestizos for those who had mixed European and LATAM roots, and Indigenous people. Mestizos were incorporated in the system. The initial roots of populism in LATAM date back to the 1930s and 1940s with the crisis of the oligarchical order that combined liberal-inspired institutions such as separation of powers and elections with patrimonial practices and values in predominantly rural societies (de la Torre 2017, 196). As it was to be expected, institutional and decision-making processes excluded most of the population from politics and the public sphere, meaning that power was concentrated in the hands of the elites.

The different processes of urbanisation and the general crisis of paternal authority opened the doors for populist leaders to emerge (de la Torre 2017, 196). At this stage the elite was already established and classical populism in Latin America consisted of inclusion of the excluded masses into the political system (de la Torre 2014). At this stage the populist leaders, like Juan Perón from Argentina, fought against electoral fraud, expanded the franchise, and embodied the values and traditions of the nation while fighting those of foreign elites (de la Torre 2017, 196). Then, more people were incorporated into the system and favoured the populist leader, as a gesture of gratitude for including them. Excluded segment like women and indigenous communities were included into the system, however Peron after winning the elections concentrated power and led the regime towards authoritarianism. For example, when he won the first election in 1946, Peron said the following: “We have given the people the opportunity to choose, in the cleanest election in the history of Argentina, between us and our opponents. The people have elected us, so the problem is resolved. What we want is now done in the Republic of Argentina” (de la Torre 2017, 198). This means that Perón and the classical populist leaders used the principle of democracy to include and gather support from the masses, but in reality, they refused to accept the constraints and limitations

of liberal constitutional principles that served to constrain power, guarantee political autonomy of civil society, and assure pluralism through equal voting rights to all citizens.

The region experienced neo-liberal populism around the 1990s, where most people had the right to vote and there were already organised political parties. The narrative changed from its predecessor that argued that people were excluded from the system. At this stage the populist leader ran as a political outsider and gained support when there was a failure such as an economic catastrophe that led to high levels of inflation; in this scenario the political outsider blamed traditional politicians, arguing that they had appropriated the people's sovereignty and led the country into economic chaos (de la Torre 2017, 199). In other cases, the political leader used their personalistic party to challenge the political establishment, such as Bucaram in Ecuador (de la Torre 2017, 199). Political parties along with the elites were presented as enemies of the people that were out of touch with their needs and desires, generating resentment among the masses. One example is Alberto Fujimori, former populist leader and president of Peru, and he illustrates neo-liberal populism (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1



The New York Times (Chan 2024)

The picture of Fujimori shows a typical populist leader, reflecting how masses support him, and he is wearing traditional clothing of Peru, popular in the poor sectors of the

country, commonly Peruvians of indigenous backgrounds. In the 1990 when he was elected, his populist narrative was a rejection of the white political elites (de la Torre 2017, 199). At the start of the campaign Fujimori appeared as a political outsider and as the third-place contestant in opinion polls; the right-wing coalition candidate one day, when asked about his opponent Fujimori, replied “But nobody knows that chinito (little Chinese guy)” (de la Torre 2017, 199). Instead of prejudicing his popularity, it helped Fujimori as the next day he opened a rally in Lima (Peru’s capital) with the following phrase: “Here we are, the chinitos and cholitos” (poor mestizos), giving roots to the confrontation between a white elite (blanquitos) and the non-white people (chinitos and cholitos) (de la Torre 2017, 199). The opposition tried to delegitimise Fujimori, because of his Japanese ancestry and he had difficulties speaking Spanish; and opposition parties brought the anti-immigrant argument saying that he was not a real Peruvian. However, Fujimori managed to position the traditional political parties as enemies of the people as they were racist and self-interested, and it was summarised into one slogan: “A president like you” (de la Torre 2017, 199). Neo-liberal populism, where most people were eligible to vote, is the appeal to the majority by creating a confrontation with the minority elite for the bad economic performance, then it offers different policy tools to help the people with their economic progress.

Compared to classical populism that aimed at including excluded groups and used nationalistic and statist policies, neo-liberal populism shrank the size of the state and opened economies, usually by privatising what predecessors had nationalised (de la Torre 2017, 199). The use of these policies was against liberal principles as they were implemented in an extremely harsh and severe way; however, in the case of Peru it helped to bring down inflation. For example, inflation declined from 7,650 to under 40 percent between 1990 and 1993 (de la Torre 2017, 199). However, at this stage of neo-liberal populism it is unpredictable if the regime will last or not, because if they had the legislature it was going to

be easy for them to implement the policies, but if they did not have the legislature in their favour, they could get impeached and removed from office. Neo-liberal populism explains how, in times of crisis, the leader appealed to the majority and used the neoliberal approach to solve economic issues, which is highly correlated with inequality.

The third popular populism that appeared in LATAM is radical populism, which recently has been exemplified by Hugo Chávez's movement in Venezuela. However, Chávez is not the only populist leader that fits into this category, as around 2010 LATAM was suffering from a phenomenon known as the pink tide, in which left socialist political parties were winning elections in different countries. The Pink tide gave birth to radical populist leaders such as Rafael Correa (Ecuador) and Evo Morales (Bolivia). The rebirth of the left and populist leaders in LATAM can be explained by three factors that will be elaborated shortly; however, they still touch the theme of economic inequality in the region. Radical populism consists of bringing back the old leftist utopias of socialism and revolution but with an innovative twist: instead of advocating the use of violence, the leaders advocated for the revolutionary role of constituent power (de la Torre 2017, 200). At this stage the revolutions are carried out in the name of democracy, a contested concept; in this scenario leaders interpret it in substantive rather than procedural terms (de la Torre 2014).

For Chávez, his idea of advancing democracy was to replace the unresponsive institutions of liberal democracy with new direct forms of participatory democracy. Now, the use and promise of constitutional assemblies was a bonus that gave them support, because the idea was that, with the participation of social movements and common citizens, they were going to draft new constitutions (de la Torre 2017, 200). However, the goal of such constitutional assemblies was to establish a different kind of democracy that included different groups, but it also concentrated power in the executive for the president to have control while removing checks and balances (de la Torre 2014). Inspired by models of Cuba

and going against the principles of liberalism, radical populism relied on state intervention in the economy with the intention of distributing wealth and reducing poverty and inequality (de la Torre 2014). That is why Chávez, by exploiting the selling of natural resources, conducted various social programmes aiming at bringing more affordable resources and giving houses to the poorest sectors of the country; Constitutional reforms gave power to Chávez to nationalise industries that gave more employment to the people. Radical populism consisted in a participatory manner to expand citizens' rights and use socialist policies to reduce the inequality gap. Chavez by concentrating power and ultimately using competitive authoritarianism the Chavismo movement remain present in Venezuela.

Radical populism was popular in LATAM for three reasons. One was that traditional political parties and the institutional framework of democracy were in crisis (de la Torre 2017, 200). Political parties at this stage were perceived as instruments of local and international elites that implemented policies that advanced their interests, especially neoliberal policies that increased inequality. Political outsiders like Chávez appeared with the promise to remove corrupt politicians and political parties, with a new system that is participatory and was going to implement policies that would distribute income evenly. The second factor that explains the rebirth of radical populism is the widespread popular resistance to neoliberalism in LATAM (de la Torre 2017, 201). At this phase it became popular for socialist movements in public parks to aim at educating citizens about how neoliberalism was responsible for the low-income inequalities a country is suffering, and also to organise protests against regimes. Socialism became an opportunity for equal distribution compared to neoliberalism, where wealth was kept in the hands of the few.

The final reason radical populism was popular in LATAM was that citizens perceived that politicians and neoliberal elites had surrendered national sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the US government (de la Torre 2017,

201). For example, Ecuador, in a desperate need to overcome hyperinflation, in 2000 adopted the US dollar as its currency; however, the exchange with the local currency (sucre) increased inequality. In this scenario, people thought that foreign organisations dictated the fate of the country and turned to leaders who promised to advance the interest of the people while promising to build a multipolar world to detach from the influences of the US. These three factors combined to lead the masses to seek alternatives that would reflect their interests.

Therefore, LATAM can be considered the “land of populism” as it has been present in the region since the 1930s in three different subtypes: classical, neo-liberal and radical. Populism appeared in different context in LATAM with the common feature of challenging the political establishment responsible for the disgraces the majority of the people suffered. What facilitates populism in LATAM is high levels of inequality which the vast majority of the population suffer, creating a sentiment of anger towards a failed and corrupt political system that limits their possibilities of progress and benefits from their disgrace. At the beginning populism happened to include marginalised groups into the system by making them participate in the democratic process. When the vast majority of the population had the right to vote, populism evolved into targeting people’s anger to challenge the political establishment and people saw the leader as an opportunity to overcome their unequal position in the social ladder. Perhaps, while the populist leader implemented policies that offered inclusion and social programmes, they tend to slide the regime into an authoritarian one as they concentrated power in the executive to implement their policies and used that power to remain in office.

As populism is an adaptable concept, it appeared in a radical manner that adopted old leftist and socialist utopias; now it is the opposite with the case of Nayib Bukele and Javier Milei who have turned to be right-wing populist leaders. Meanwhile, as the inequality gap in LATAM remains high, bringing complex problems such as insecurity, unemployment and

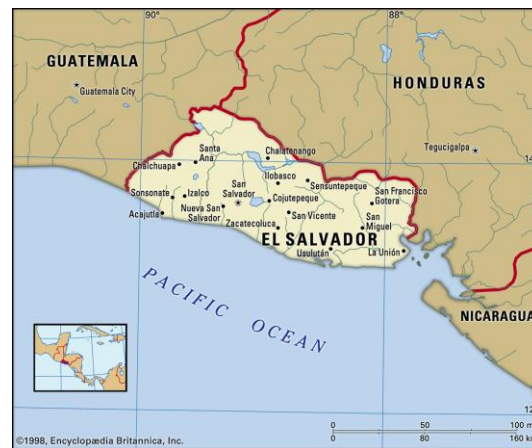
instability, populist leaders will continue to emerge and capture public support easily, as it is the only solution ordinary people see to fix their problems and succeed, while simultaneously punishing the elites responsible for their disgraces.

II. El Salvador Military State Background

El Salvador, under President Nayib Bukele, is returning to a military state, which used to rule the country before the 1980s. The military state was one of the factors that detonated a civil war, fought with the intention of democratising the country and provide human rights to all citizens. It is important to elaborate on the context of El Salvador, as technically it is a new democracy that took shape around 1992. The country's history explains how the current political system is a legacy of the civil war and how the war led to a strong polarised political party system highly unlikely for a political outsider like Bukele to emerge. Understanding El Salvador's background gives context to the country while simultaneously explaining the different roots of the political system and how the 1983 Constitution introduced liberalism and democracy to El Salvador.

El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America, neighbouring Honduras, Guatemala, and a small portion of Nicaragua. The Pacific Ocean forms the country's primary coastline (Fig. 2). Among the seven Central American countries, El Salvador is the most densely populated in the region, and although it has a small territory, it is an agricultural country in which coffee and cotton were the main resources it exported (Flemion 2019). The country's official language is Spanish, and it has a presidential republic composed of an executive, judiciary, and a unicameral legislature as its political system (Flemion 2019). The independence of El Salvador from Spain occurred on the 15 of September 1821, along with the other Central American countries, and it became a fully independent republic in 1841 (Flemion 2019).

Fig 1.



(Flemion 2019).

Independence in 1841 was the beginning of a new republic and of the country's military state. At that time, El Salvador, like most LATAM countries, had an alliance between the military high command, the Catholic Church, and the economic oligarchy controlling the country's wealth (Muysondt et al., 2020). The military gained control of the government of El Salvador, as a development common across Latin America. As countries became independent, the military was the only institution that had an ongoing presence across all the territory; there was at least a soldier or a guard in every area, in a sense reflecting the presence of the state. As a result, it was the only institution respected by the population and capable of establishing and maintaining order in the newborn republics (Muysondt et al., 2020).

The government of the country, composed of a single institution, brought both positive and negative consequences for El Salvador. In terms of economic and infrastructure development, El Salvador was in a better position under the military than when it became a democracy. For example, during the military governments most of the roads were built, telecommunications were introduced, and around 1964 two government TV channels were created with the purpose of being educational, so children with limited access to schooling

could benefit. For the first and only time, El Salvador had a train system to transport coffee and cotton while also maintaining stability for its production. The most recognised dictator, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, investment in infrastructure was significant, and modernising the country was his priority. Additionally, his government is considered the least corrupt in El Salvador's history, to the extent that he managed to pay off all the external debt. Many social programmes were created during the military governments that distributed food and homes to the poorest families.

Despite most of the progress in El Salvador being attributed to the military governments, there was a fundamental problem there was no democracy and the regime was oppressive. Under the military governments there were elections, but they were purely symbolic; there was always a clear winner, the military, and the only candidates allowed to compete were high-ranking officials (Muysondt et al., 2020). Another important consideration was that most of the time the military governments were removed from office through force, such as coups or military juntas created to overthrow governing militaries and replace them with another military officer (Muysondt et al., 2020). Given what was said previously, the political regime suffered from a lack of popular legitimacy, which forced it to systematically face opposition through the intensive use of repression (Martín Álvarez 2010, 9). The rotation of military elites concentrating power created social distrust towards the system, as wealth was concentrated in one group of people working closely with the economic elites, and there were no real chances for El Salvador to experience a different style of government responsive to the population.

Another common feature of this period was oligarchic control of resources under the military governments, which contributed to a large inequality gap that later turned into social struggle between high- and middle-income sectors and low-income groups (Muysondt et al., 2020). Throughout the twentieth century, a primary-export economic structure was

established, based on the concentration of land ownership and income in the hands of a small economic elite (Martín Álvarez 2010, 8). With the military controlling the police and working closely with the oligarchy, there was indiscriminate repression of popular mobilizations to defend oligarchic interests (Martín Álvarez 2010, 8). Coffee was the main export model and generated inequality in El Salvador, especially by the 1970s when social struggle was at its peak: while 86% of the population worked in the farming sector and received only 24% of the generated revenue, just 2% of the population received 46% of that revenue (Martín Álvarez 2010, 8). Even when sugar cane and cotton were introduced to diversify agriculture, low incomes persisted as most of the earnings remained in the hands of the oligarchy. Poverty and inequality reached extreme levels, with people working two or three low-wage jobs to afford food. The social picture was dire: children needed to work, could not afford basic clothing, and opportunities for progress were almost non-existent. These high levels of poverty contributed to the rise of extremist thinking among university students from middle- and lower-income backgrounds, creating a simplified belief that all rich individuals were bad and all poor individuals were good (Muysondt et al., 2020). The inequality gap facilitated the growth of revolutionary sentiment.

Overall, the military governments in El Salvador were a legacy of the colonial period and were perceived as the only institution capable of ruling the country due to their presence across the national territory. The military governments contributed to a social narrative in which being rich was perceived negatively and being poor positively, alongside a growing sentiment to transform the regime into a representative system, where revolutionary sentiment strengthened and armed struggle increasingly seen as the only way to confront structural violence.

III. The birth of the revolutionary sentiment in El Salvador

With Salvadorean society mostly living in poverty sustained by a repressive government, revolutionary sentiment gained strength. It started among universities and Catholic schools with the teaching of Marxism and the theology of liberation expanded by the communist branch of Catholicism. From the previous section, the distinction between the rich and the poor had already created a communist and socialist resentment that facilitated the guerrilla's cúpulas to recruit people in rural areas who wanted change.

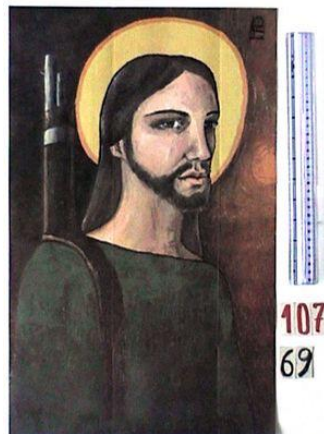
The Catholic Church during the colonising period was one of the most influential institution, which established what actions were considered morally good and bad, and worked closely with the government to advance the interests of the state and influence people. However, the military did not consider that, due to the different social roles and political struggles in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Catholic Church became divided (TIME 1968). The Church divided into two spectrums in LATAM due to an internal crisis that was both political and spiritual, leading to extremes of rebellion and reaction. A minority of radical priests argued that the Church must embrace revolution, even Marxism, to survive (TIME 1968).

The rupture in the Catholic Church, to which most Salvadoreans at that time adhered, helped the guerrilla movements to recruit people. The different congregations of the Catholic Church had schools, universities, and social missions in rural areas that helped the guerrillas recruit younger generations. The schools and priests under the Jesuit congregation were the principal influence encouraging younger generations to consider joining the revolutionary movement, and those schools were the origins of the Salvadorean guerrillas (Muysondt et al., 2020). At a time when poverty rates were high, their advocacy was for a more equal economic system that would promote equality in access to resources and open opportunities

for development. However, such advocacy went out of control in the sense that it became radical and incited people to use violence by applying and teaching the theology of liberation.

The theology of liberation transmitted the idea that if a human being is harmed or threatened, he has the right to defend himself using the same methods through which he is repressed (Muysondt et al., 2020). A significant responsibility for the conflict in El Salvador is attributed to the interpretation of the theology of liberation mixed with Marxism and the thesis of legitimate violence (Muysondt et al., 2020). They also used symbolism, as there were priests carrying weapons, references describing Jesus as the first revolutionary in the world, and even drawings of Jesus carrying a large weapon (Fig. 4). This led to a divided society between those who believed in a conservative Church and those who believed in a revolutionary one, creating confrontation with the establishment and within the Church itself.

Fig. 4



Another ingredient of the conflict was the Cold War period that dominated LATAM and at that moment created a boom of revolutionary counterculture that was prevalent across the region (Martín Álvarez 2010, 10). The reference that many young Latin Americans saw as an example of social and political change through armed struggle was the victory of the Cuban Revolution (Martín Álvarez 2010, 10). The Soviet Union never hid its interest in expanding communism, and it saw different civil conflicts and social struggles in LATAM as an opportunity to implement communism. That is what happened around the 1970s in Nicaragua, when guerrilla movements removed the dictator Somoza and the socialist party

gained control (Muysondt et al., 2020). Additionally, from the Cuban Revolution, the creation of guerrilla groups and the subsequent seizing of power through armed struggle became acceptable solutions in the eyes of those who wanted to decrease poverty, inequality, and end political authoritarianism in the region (Martín Álvarez 2010, 10). Another important element that gave birth to revolutionary movements was Marxism-Leninism (Martín Álvarez 2010, 11).

The Marxism-Leninism exported by the Soviet Union and available in El Salvador's universities was not the Marxism taught to young Salvadoreans by the high guerrilla commanders. Their view of Marxism was influenced by late 1970s "Western Marxism", including the works of Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, and Louis Althusser, whose writings were influenced by economists aligned with Trotskyism such as Ernest Mandel. The works of Lenin and the thoughts of Che Guevara were also sources for the version of Marxism-Leninism from which the first militants of the Salvadorean guerrilla drew (Martín Álvarez 2010, 11). From these influences, activists developed basic ideas and assumptions about how the system operates. Firstly, the state's lack of autonomy was viewed as an expression of ruling-class interests, especially those of the land-owning oligarchy (Martín Álvarez 2010, 11). This also led to the idea that the fake democratic system was a way for the oligarchy to hide its power while simultaneously benefited the military.

Finally, it led to the strong belief that it was impossible to achieve social justice within the framework of capitalism leading a significant amount of people to criticise the government's functioning and its reforms. Consequently, they wanted to advocate for the construction of a socialist society and view armed struggle as the only way to obtain power and transform El Salvador into a socialist-communist country. All the elements above gained force as young people were recruited, and in the decade of the 1970s the first guerrilla movements were born due to revolutionary sentiment and beliefs.

IV. The Birth of Guerilla Movements and the FMLN

Around the 1970s, when the class confrontation was already high, two guerrilla movements appeared: the Farabundo Marti Liberation Forces (FPL) and People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). They invoked the socialist mentality of armed struggle and, with the help of the Jesuits, promoted the idea of liberation from an oppressive government through legitimate violence, which made them popular. Later two other guerrilla movements also appeared, the Communist Party (PCS) and Revolutionary Party of Central America (PRTC), which also had the objective of liberating El Salvador and establishing a Marxist dictatorship.

The FPL was one of the most significant guerrilla groups in El Salvador because of its large members. The founding members of the FPL were union workers and university workers, all of whom were members of the Communist Party (PCS) (Martín Álvarez 2010, 12). The General Secretary of the PCS, Cayetano Carpio, promoted the division within the PCS, which became the root of the creation of the FPL (Martín Álvarez 2010, 12). Carpio's main argument was that the PCS strategy of penetrating the union movement and relying on peaceful political struggle had reached its limit, and violence was the only way to shift the regime (Martín Álvarez 2010, 12). One influence behind this stance was the government repression of the teachers' strike in February 1968, which occurred in response to educational reforms implemented by the military. The strike was also supported by university students and the student association, who joined the teachers in protest. The repression carried out by the state against protesters was abusive and cruel, resulting in the assassination of two union workers and the imprisonment of at least thirty movement leaders (Martín Álvarez 2010, 12). This act of violence changed perceptions of the state, leading teachers and university students to consider violence as a response to state abuses and as a path to liberation.

The ERP roots were mainly among university students of social-Christian background (Martín Álvarez 2010, 13). The two main influential leaders were Joaquín Villalobos and Rafael Arce Zablah, both UES students and union members who participated in the student mobilisations of 1969, founding the ERP around 1970, almost simultaneously with the FPL (Martín Álvarez 2010, 13). With the support of the revolutionary priest Miguel Ventura, they established a presence in northern Morazán, especially in rural areas where Christian base communities had already been organised, facilitating recruitment (Martín Álvarez 2010, 13). Compared to the FPL, the ERP also recruited secondary school students, mostly from progressive Catholic schools, with the José Celestino Castro Institute serving as a key recruitment centre.

The RN, a third guerrilla group, emerged around May 1975 as a result of a split within the ERP (Martín Álvarez 2010, 14). This division followed the assassination of two comrades, Roque Dalton and Armando Arteaga, who were accused, without sufficient evidence, of endangering the organisation and being CIA infiltrators (Martín Álvarez 2010, 14). Later, around 1976, further disagreements with ERP leadership regarding party strategy and combat methods led to the creation of the Revolutionary Party of Central America (PRTC) (Martín Álvarez 2010, 14). The PRTC was smaller than other guerrilla groups and aimed to operate across Central America as a regional revolutionary force.

Finally, the PCS was the last group to militarise, as it initially believed democratic struggle was the path to removing military governments. However, by April 1977, in response to intensified repression and electoral fraud, the PCS began militarising its structures (Martín Álvarez 2010, 14). These events discouraged militants from pursuing democratic change, as the regime continued manipulating the system to remain in power.

Although five guerrilla movements emerged, fragmented struggle was less effective than unified action. The Cuban government, acting as mediator between the Soviet Union and

Salvadorean guerrillas, promoted unification. Meetings were held in Havana, and in mid-1979 negotiations began to establish a coordinated platform (Martín Álvarez 2010, 16). Despite ideological differences, particularly the PRTC's opposition to Cuban authoritarianism, efforts continued. In 1980, Fidel Castro hosted a decisive meeting and told the guerrilla leaders: "Either you fight together or you will be defeated." On 10 October 1980, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) was formed. This created a unified and powerful guerrilla structure that later transformed into a major political party after the war.

Fig. 2

Guerilla groups that became the FMLN



(Muysondt et al., 2020).

V. *The civil conflict and the Origins of Arena*

Many scholars outside El Salvador argue that what started the open conflict in the country was the “Final” national-scale offensive of the FMLN held in 1981, but that was the justification for the open fire. In a serious and domestic analysis, what marked the start of the Civil War in El Salvador was the murder of the Archbishop of San Salvador, Monsignor Óscar Arnulfo Romero, on 24 March 1980 (Muysondt et al., 2020). It is not a secret that Romero was a progressive priest of the Church, and he was popular due to his speeches against the military and his advocacy to end repression. Romero helped the guerrilla

movements to grow and get stronger as his speeches in poor communities portrayed the military and the elite as enemies of the people. However, Romero had the right to express his discontent against the government, especially because at that time there was persecution by the military against the Church, as they saw the progressive Church as a threat to the regime (Domingo, Domingo, and Mirow 2018, 10).

On 10 January 1981, the FMLN launched the famous “final” national-scale offensive, which many recognise as the beginning of the open armed civil conflict. The objective of the FMLN was to enter the capital city and strategic military locations to defeat the armed forces and remove them from power (Muysondt et al., 2020). However, the FMLN underestimated the Salvadorean army. They believed it would be similar to the recent insurrection in Nicaragua, where in six months the government was overthrown, but El Salvador was more prepared than the Nicaraguan forces (Muysondt et al., 2020). However, El Salvador is a developing country, meaning it did not have sufficient military supplies for a prolonged war. The President of El Salvador then decided to travel to the United States to request financial and military assistance. Ronald Reagan had just been elected, and President Carter was about to leave office. Reagan supported the Salvadorean government with bullets and military supplies to fight the guerrillas (Muysondt 2020).

One of the biggest transformations of the Civil War was the breakdown of the relationship between the oligarchy and the military governments. For the first time in many years, the oligarchy was forced to engage directly into politics, as they could no longer rely on the military (Muysondt et al., 2020). The individual responsible for convincing the oligarchy to enter politics was Roberto D’Aubuisson, who involuntarily became the leader of the right wing in El Salvador under the principle of representing the excluded majority (Martín Álvarez 2010, 10). D’Aubuisson is a remarkable example, as he transitioned from being a high-ranking army commander associated with death squads to becoming a well-

known and popular politician who held that “The most powerful weapon of a free man is his vote” (Martín Álvarez 2010, 10). He believed in democracy and in mobilising people to remove the establishment through electoral means rather than armed struggle.

At that time, the oligarchy and small businessmen were affected by the 1980 land reform implemented by the military, which increased state control over land and agricultural production (Muysondt et al., 2020). D’Aubuisson connected with patriotic businessmen and argued that the country needed to advance its interests democratically rather than through violence and military intervention. A small organisation gradually emerged that reflected national identity and became the roots of ARENA (Muysondt et al., 2020). This placed D’Aubuisson in a vulnerable position, as he became a target of threats from the left and from the ruling PDC government, which detained him due to political rivalry. In 1982, once he was free D’Aubuisson said the following: “The fault is not of those who make mistakes, the fault lies with the absent individuals; that is why we are here saying present for the homeland! The fight continues and the homeland lives.” Shortly after, ARENA was formally founded, encouraging citizens to join in order to save the country (Muysondt et al., 2020).

After the 1983 elections parties collaborated to democratise the country. The new Constitution of 1983 aimed to establish democratic legacy, exclude armed groups of pursuing power by stating that political parties were the legitimate route to authority, and introduce measures such as presidential term limits (Muysondt et al., 2020). Military force was still used to suppress the FMLN, and although the country began building a path towards democracy, these efforts were late because the conflict was already strong.

VI. The peace accords and a new democracy in El Salvador

The year 1989 is key because it was when El Salvador started to take the initial steps towards a ceasefire and a peace agreement that would end a 12-year civil conflict. The impact of the conflict left a high number of deaths, an economy in ruins, and a polarised society in

which hate and division led the country to violence and death. Additionally, in 1989 El Salvador had the first democratic president elected without foreign interference. That became the window for a government that would work to achieve peace and establish a democratic state in which democracy, human rights protections, and a less repressive military would compose the new regime.

The first ingredient for El Salvador's peace was the election of ARENA candidate Alfredo Cristiani, who was elected due to the accumulation of deadly events, as people in the country saw him as the best choice to bring peace (Muysondt et al. 2020). There are two elements explaining why Cristiani was successful in signing the peace accords in 1992. First, he was elected democratically without foreign interference, he was the leader the majority of Salvadoreans wanted, and he did not have a military past. Such circumstances marked the end of a military era that had controlled the government and made him the first civilian president. The second element is that the government of Cristiani committed in promoting and working for peace from day one of his administration (Muysondt et al. 2020). His presidency took steps towards making peace happen through negotiations and by approaching the guerrilla movements to achieve a ceasefire without increasing violence. The leadership of Cristiani combined with the leadership of the FMLN made peace possible in the country.

The second ingredient for peace was the geopolitical shift occurring between 1985 and 1991. With the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, Soviet foreign policy priorities were redefined, as the USSR sought to reassign its already depleted economic resources and channel them towards domestic needs (Martín Álvarez 2010, 29). The USSR renounced exporting revolution and stopped providing military solutions to regional crises, instead seeking negotiated exits to armed conflicts in cooperation with the United States. In the case of El Salvador, in 1990 the Soviets repeatedly insisted that the FMLN negotiate with the government in the presence of the United Nations and suggested that if the US stopped

supporting the government, the FMLN would need to abandon arms (Martín Álvarez 2010, 30). The fall of the Soviet Union later revealed, through Russian media, how citizens had been suppressed by the government, leading some segments of the FMLN to realise that such a communist state was not a solution for the country (Muysondt et al. 2020). This also sent a message that the FMLN would have less support, and to the Salvadorean military that US assistance would not last forever.

Peace negotiations began in 1990 and concluded in 1992. Initially, segments within both the government and the FMLN believed they could still win the war and were reluctant to negotiate. However, D'Aubuisson spoke with Cristiani and his party, helping them realise that negotiations were necessary and that the FMLN needed inclusion in democratic life. Both parties agreed to hold negotiations on 4 April 1990, with the United Nations acting as mediator (Martín Álvarez 2010, 22). The US, along with Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela, supported the ceasefire initiative. In May 1990, the first negotiation meetings took place in Caracas, Venezuela. The agenda was divided into two parts. The first included political agreements on the armed forces, human rights, electoral and judicial systems, constitutional reforms, economic and social issues, and UN verification (Martín Álvarez 2010, 22). Once a ceasefire was declared, a second phase would address guarantees for reintegrating FMLN members into political and civilian life (Martín Álvarez 2010, 22).

On 26 July 1990, both parties met again in San José, Costa Rica, and agreed not to violate international human rights treaties (Martín Álvarez 2010, 22). That commitment was the first significant step in reaching negotiations. From that moment on, the UN Secretary-General played a key role by offering to undertake a verification commission of the agreements and by proposing that changes be made to the agenda negotiated in Caracas (Martín Álvarez 2010, 22). One of the issues in the negotiations was the role of the armed forces, which became the main obstacle in the process. The FMLN insisted on the

disappearance of the armed forces, the dissolution of immediate reaction battalions and intelligence organisations, and the prosecution of officers responsible for human rights violations (Martín Álvarez 2010, 22). As the Salvadorean Constitution had to be amended through two legislatures, and the FMLN did not want to wait for two assemblies, so the reforms needed to be passed before May 1991. On 27 April 1991, the Mexico Agreement was signed, contemplating reform of the armed forces and the creation of a civilian National Police independent from the military (Martín Álvarez 2010, 23). Reforms also included strengthening electoral institutions, creating a human rights ombudsman, establishing a Truth Commission, and restructuring the Supreme Court (Martín Álvarez 2010, 23). High-level appointments would require a two-thirds majority, ensuring dialogue between political parties and preventing concentration of power within the executive.

This meant new changes in the Constitution in El Salvador, such as an independent entity responsible for elections no longer appointed by the president. Another important legacy was that the Supreme Court, Attorney General, and the election commission magistrates would no longer be selected with a simple majority, which had previously been possible when the executive controlled enough deputies conforming a simple majority. Instead, they were to be chosen with a two-thirds majority, forcing the executive to dialogue with other political parties to appoint officials in other branches. The main idea of the FMLN was that the executive should not concentrate power, creating checks and balances so that the tyranny experienced under military governments would not happen again.

For negotiations to move forward, an ad hoc commission was created, which reached agreements to purge the military high command involved in human rights violations and secure the participation of the FMLN in the future Civic National Police, in exchange for guerrilla groups giving up their demands to become part of the armed forces (Martín Álvarez 2010, 23). Negotiations continued in December to discuss sensitive issues such as the

reduction of the armed forces and the transfer of land ownership to former FMLN combatants (Martín Álvarez 2010, 23). Another important element discussed was guaranteeing that FMLN members could reintegrate into civilian life (Martín Álvarez 2010, 23). That is why the amnesty law was created, to pardon both parties so they could reincorporate into political and civilian life. With all points discussed, on 31 December 1991 the Second New York Act was signed, putting an end to a war that had lasted twelve years. On 16 January 1992, a solemn ceremony for the signing of the peace treaties was held in Chapultepec, Mexico, ending the war and giving a new start to El Salvador.

Overall, the peace accords marked a new start for El Salvador. The deadliest conflict in Central America came to an end after many atrocities, and the country became a democracy with checks and balances in which the executive no longer held excessive power. The peace accords, along with the 1983 Constitution, marked a new start for El Salvador to advance its interests through the spectrum of democracy, protect the human rights of all individuals, and no longer be vulnerable to a dictatorship. As a legacy, when the FMLN was allowed to become a political party, it contributed to a polarised political party system. The tendency was straightforward: if ARENA won the executive, the FMLN held a significant portion of parliament, forcing negotiations to overcome gridlock. However, in 2021 that tendency came to an end when Bukele won a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly and used it to amend the Constitution and concentrate power.

Chapter 3 Nayib Bukele

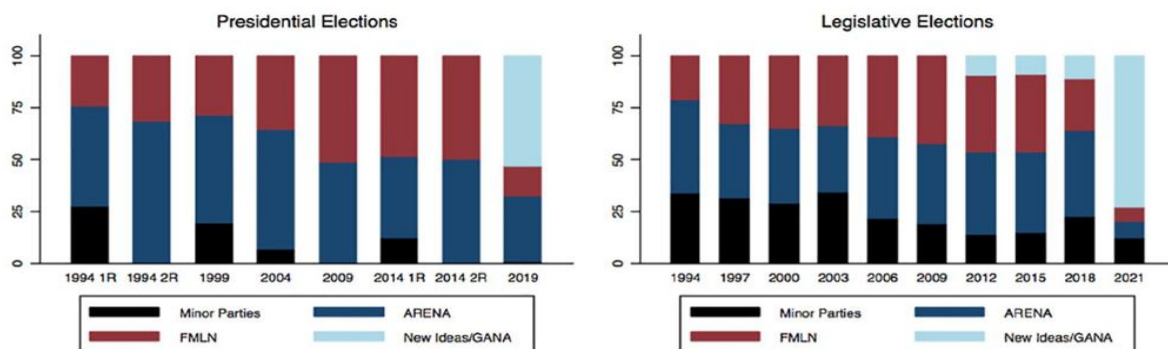
After the peace accords, El Salvador developed a strongly polarised party system between ARENA and the FMLN. Under both political parties they controlled the executive and Congress; however, social problems emerged during their periods in government, including, corruption, poverty and gang violence. After 30 years of failed policies, the population

accumulated resentment towards the two traditional political parties, which led to them search for alternatives. It was in this context that Nayib Bukele emerged as a political outsider. Bukele’s narrative was simple: to challenge the two traditional political parties by portraying them as corrupt, while simultaneously offering a new way of doing politics.

I. Polarised political party system

The peace accords signed in Chapultepec, Mexico marked the transition towards a country beginning to practise democracy, in which the left (FMLN) and the right (ARENA) formed an institutionalised and ideologically polarised party system (Perelló and Navia 2022). Both political parties consistently received a combined majority of votes in presidential and legislative elections. From the peace accords until 2019, Arena won the presidency four consecutive times (1989-2004), while the FMLN won the presidency twice (2009 – 2015). Figure 4 shows the structure of the party system in El Salvador.

Fig.4

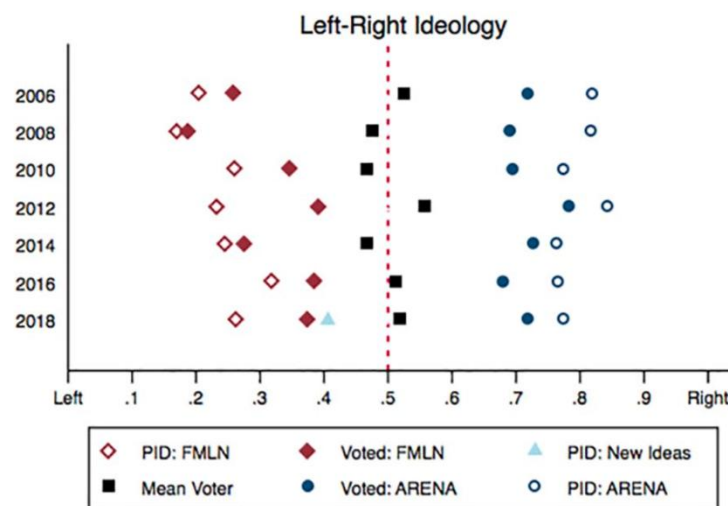


Source: Perelló and Navia 2022

Figure 4 shows how the major political parties, combined, received 90% of the votes in presidential and legislative elections. A close analysis reveals a trend in whichever political party won the executive did not have a majority in Congress. For example, if ARENA was successful in winning the presidency, it did not have a majority in Congress, forcing it to negotiate with the FMLN and other smaller parties to pass laws and overcome political

gridlock; the same scenario applied to the FMLN. The phenomenon of each party not having control in the legislature was random, with the absence of data, it can be presumed that voters split their ticket with minority parties to check over the other branch. However, a condition after the civil war was the strong partisan sympathy between ARENA and FMLN, like a brotherhood relationship that they are similar like having mass support, but they hate each other. El Salvador had a very polarised electoral environment, and this is expressed in figure 5.

Fig. 5



Perelló and Navia 2022

The plot graph shows how after the civil war the left-right ideological self-placement by partisan and past vote in presidential elections (Perelló and Navia 2022). FMLN and ARENA partisans are in both extremes of the ideological scale where the median voter is partially non-existent in the centre as most of the voters basically choose a party platform. The shift was evident in 2010 and 2012 when the FMLN won its first presidential election. Although the mean voter moved left before the 2015 election, the 2016 and 2018 elections showed a more centrist trend. However, the party system remained ideologically polarised until Bukele's party, New Ideas, emerged as a centrist contender in 2018 (Perelló and Navia 2022). A high polarised electoral environment leads to the characteristics that for a candidate

to successfully win the presidency he would either compete with ARENA and FMLN, and almost impossible for a political outsider especially with his own new political party to be successful. The explanation for Bukele to be successful is the distrust traditional political parties generated due to political fragmentation and political gridlock that both parties used to block the executive to gain a competitive advantage.

Political gridlock was strong in EL Salvador, as both political parties held opposing ideologies, leading each side to block the executive so that their party platform could appear more attractive in public opinion. This resulted on a fragmented government where the policies that the majority of citizens desire ended up not being enacted. This is common to see in highly polarised liberal democracies, where each political party aims to undermine its opponents for their party to gain more votes, That conflict of self-interest along with the lack of governability explains the frustration of Salvadorans towards liberal democracy on a divided government.

The governing period of ARENA between 1989 and 2009 became an opportunity for the upper class to consolidate power. Its political agenda was based on neoliberal policies, whose economic model made remittances from Salvadorans living abroad the main inflow of cash, creating an economy oriented towards consumption (Roque, 2021). The economic system promoted by ARENA made the maquila industry model successful, characterised by low wages and companies producing their goods in El Salvador, alongside accumulation by dispossession (a capitalist practice of accumulating wealth by privatizing public assets and dispossessing peoples from their assets) (Roque, 2021). Examples of this included the privatisation of the national bank so that large high income families could control the financial system, as well as the privatisation of the pension system through the AFP. As expected, the economy in El Salvador performed poorly during the 20 years ARENA was in power, recording the lowest growth rate in Latin America (Roque, 2021). This poor economic

performance led to a high level of inequality between wealthy and poor sectors, with most of the population remaining in the lowest sector. When El Salvador adopted the US dollar as its national currency in 2000, instead of decreasing inequality, it increased it, as the exchange rate with the local colón was 8 colones for a dollar, leaving people with less money on their savings.

When the executive shifted in 2009 to the FMLN, its candidate Mauricio Funes, a respected journalist and never involved directly in politics, was able to attract votes from beyond the party's traditional base, including the middle-income sector, younger generations, and conservative voters who were frustrated with the corruption and elitism of ARENA (Roque, 2021). The FMLN government, following a socialist agenda, managed to increase investment in social programmes and improve the quality of public services, but it failed to transform the underlying economic structure of society (Roque, 2021). To make matters worse, many government officials, including President Funes himself, were involved in corruption scandals widely reported in the media. The failure of both political parties to reduce poverty became a key factor influencing Bukele's victory in 2019.

Beyond poverty, what generated further discontent towards the two traditional political parties were high levels of corruption and violence. Two ARENA presidents, Francisco Flores (1999–2004) and Antonio Saca (2004–2009), misappropriated state funds (Perelló and Navia, 2022). Flores died under house arrest after being found guilty of embezzling foreign aid, while Saca, after pleading guilty, was sentenced by a local court to 10 years in prison for misappropriating US\$30 million. President Mauricio Funes (2009–2014), from the FMLN, embezzled more than US\$350 million and fled to Nicaragua (Perelló and Navia, 2022). While ordinary people were living in poor conditions, politicians were becoming rich using taxpayers' money, generating resentment towards both political parties and democracy itself.

Another factor that generated distrust towards the political parties was the escalation of violence to extreme levels. When a system fails to provide opportunities and people feel marginalised, they begin to seek alternatives to secure basic needs. One such alternative was social violence, which led to the rise of gang organisations in the country (Roque, 2021, p. 237). Gang formation intensified around the year 2000, when the state was perceived as failing to provide support and opportunities. Over time, gang recruitment and organisation expanded, establishing three main groups: Mara Salvatrucha (MS), Barrio 18, and Rebelde 13, which engaged in violent conflict to control territory across El Salvador.

Although the conflict was primarily between gangs, they also challenged the monopoly of state security forces in significant parts of the country, negatively affecting the daily lives of a large portion of the population (Roque, 2021, p. 237). Gangs used fear to intimidate communities through murders and extortion. By around 2015, during the FMLN government, the state attempted to suppress them using force, but in retaliation, gangs escalated the homicide rate to 105 per 100,000 inhabitants, turning El Salvador into the world's murder capital (Perelló and Navia, 2022). Violence reached such a scale that gang-related deaths surpassed those of the civil war, becoming an issue that most Salvadorans urgently wanted to resolve.

With civil security becoming the central political issue, former president Mauricio Funes sought to reduce homicide rates and surprised both the country and the international community by negotiating a gang truce (Roque, 2021, p. 237). The truce was straightforward: gangs would reduce murders and extortion in exchange for improved prison conditions and visitation privileges. However, instead of producing long-term solutions, violence persisted and public anger increased. When details of these privileges were leaked in 2016, it was revealed that gang members had access to televisions, mobile phones, internet, parties, and even prostitutes within prison facilities.

From this perspective, prisons ceased to function as punishment or rehabilitation centres and instead became spaces from which gang leaders could continue to direct criminal activity. This situation contributed to the perception that the state and human rights organisations were protecting criminals while ordinary citizens suffered. Another consequence of the truce was that it normalised extortion and legitimised gang leaders as political actors capable of influencing the government (Roque, 2021, p. 237). At this stage, the FMLN government attempted to use state force to suppress gangs, but gangs had developed such control that any attempt to confront them resulted in increased waves of violence.

By 2018, an accumulation of frustration towards the political establishment and the peace accords had grown, as democratisation had increased inequality and failed to resolve structural problems such as gang violence. Public satisfaction with democracy declined to 37% in 2018, generating two dominant perceptions among the population. First, many Salvadorans believed that democracy had failed to deliver the prosperity promised in the peace accords, as a small group of politicians and Families continued to enrich themselves while the country became poorer. Second, both political parties came to be seen as betraying the nation, abandoning their ideals and values in favour of personal gain while neglecting the primary concerns of the population.

When such resentment becomes widespread, it fuels a desire to punish the established parties and seek alternatives. This sentiment was captured in a popular phrase: “We tried both political parties, and they failed to meet our demands and are corrupt. We need change now!” (CHV Noticias 2024). This environment made it easier for a political outsider to succeed, particularly one capable of connecting with public emotions. It was in this context that Nayib Bukele emerged as a strong candidate to lead the country. The failure of the two-party system

to deliver effective solutions explains both the discontent with democracy and Bukele's rise to power.

II. Nayib Bukele and path to the presidency

Nayib Armando Bukele Ortiz formally entered politics in 2012 by becoming mayor of a small-town municipality named Nuevo Cuscatlán under the FMLN (Roque, 2021, p. 239). He became a very recognisable individual in the country due to his performance as mayor, carrying out numerous social projects made possible through his relationships with Salvadoran businessmen and the financing of ALBA, a strategic partner of the FMLN, which received funds from the Venezuelan government under Nicolás Maduro for social programmes (Roque, 2021, p. 239). Due to this, Bukele became known as a young businessman with a centre-left profile, whose commitment was to improve the conditions of the most vulnerable people in the country through clinics, scholarships, and the construction of cultural and recreational spaces (Roque, 2021, p. 239). Bukele had connections that facilitated his entry into politics, as he was the son of a well-known businessman of Palestinian origin, Armando Bukele, a personal friend of Shafik Handal and considered, until his death in 2018, a businessman very close to the FMLN (Roque, 2021, p. 239). However, Bukele was not from a low-income background; rather, he was a member of a very wealthy family, challenging the general populist narrative of someone who comes from a humble background.

The success of Bukele in Nuevo Cuscatlán in delivering social programmes and communicating them effectively allowed him to rise within the FMLN, and he became an ideal candidate due to the following: he donated his mayoral salary for scholarships, poured funds into construction projects, and tripled the number of patrol officers on the streets to improve security, while documenting these actions on YouTube and television ads

(Bergengren, 2024). In the public eye, he became the candidate everyone wanted, and the FMLN's key figure to win a major municipality.

In 2015, he ran for mayor of the capital city, San Salvador, and won a close race (Bergengren, 2024). Becoming mayor of the capital city served as an important step in his presidential career. As mayor, he continued to promote attention-grabbing public projects, including the construction of an upscale market and an effort to install lighting in every corner of the capital to combat crime (Bergengren, 2024). Bukele used social media, especially X (Twitter) and Facebook, to communicate all his actions, which became the main source of information for the majority of Salvadorans branding him as a young, charismatic politician interested in advancing the interests of Salvadorans.

Bukele always had the ambition of becoming president of El Salvador especially for the 2019 election, but the obstacles were the high-ranking officials of the FMLN who saw him as a threat to the party's authority (Roque, 2021, p. 239). This limited his prospects to such an extent that he was not even considered for the vice-presidential candidacy, as Bukele openly criticised the party's leadership while crafting a parallel political brand with his own party symbols, while he was still a member of the FMLN (Bergengren, 2024). For the FMLN leadership, seeing how Bukele could challenge their authority, their preference was for a candidate loyal to them.

The electoral law of El Salvador included mechanisms to prohibit "political defection", so for Bukele, resigning from the FMLN was not an option if he wanted to run as a presidential candidate; he needed to be expelled (Roque, 2021, p. 241). In order to be expelled from the FMLN, he initiated a series of attacks against the party's leadership and publicly criticised President Sánchez Cerén. This angered the party, and during an incident in a municipal meeting, when Bukele threw an apple at a member of the municipal council, the party finally initiated a disciplinary process against him (Roque, 2021, p. 241). A simple admonition

would have prevented him from competing for public office; however, in an incomprehensible mix of naivety, rigidity, and clumsiness, the FMLN's ethics commission decided to expel him (Roque, 2021, p. 241). Bukele took advantage of the expulsion to build a narrative in which he presented himself as the victim of the FMLN's leadership, because he defended the interest of Salvadoreans. He became an attractive candidate for the masses.

Within a month of being expelled from the FMLN, Bukele launched his own political party, Nuevas Ideas, and ran in the 2019 presidential election as an anti-establishment populist. Compared to his opponents, his campaign did not rely on travelling across the country or participating in electoral debates; instead, social media and traditional media channels were his main tools to connect with the electorate and transmit his message (Bergengren, 2024). In an interview with the TIME magazine, Bukele stated that the success of his campaign was largely attributed to the use of X and other social media platforms, as he could control the campaign from his phone, describing it as "a way to reach the population directly without going through the press filter" (Bergengren, 2024).

For Bukele to compete in the elections was a long process, as established political parties attempted to block him and prevent Nuevas Ideas from participating by not accepting the signatures of his new party to be enrolled for the elections. Eventually, the GANA political party allowed him to run, and Bukele began to develop his populist narrative. Using the recent corruption scandal involving former FMLN president Mauricio Funes, which had generated widespread public anger, Bukele managed to connect it with corruption scandals within ARENA to reinforce his narrative that both parties were part of a corrupt political class responsible for the country's problems (Roque, 2021, p. 243). Instead of directly attacking the elite, his campaign slogan was "Los mismos de siempre" ("The same as always"), which helped create a common adversary (Roque, 2021, p. 243). By portraying both political parties as enemies of the people, the electorate became polarised. "The people"

were constructed in opposition to a bureaucratised and corrupt political class, finding representation in a young leader with no association with the failures of traditional parties (Roque, 2021, p. 244). This delegitimised the FMLN, which began to be perceived as “ARENA 2.0”, and allowed Bukele to gain support from centrist voters and those disillusioned with the FMLN.

The attack on ARENA continued in order to attract right-wing voters. In the 2019 election, the ARENA candidate was Carlos Calleja, the son of a businessman who owned the largest supermarket chain in El Salvador (Roque, 2021, p. 244). Although he had strong financial backing and support from the media and the high class, Calleja was perceived as a weak candidate. Despite his education and experience living in the United States, he lacked political experience and, to make matters worse, did not speak Spanish fluently, often speaking with a strong American accent and mixing English with Spanish (Roque, 2021, p. 244). Taking advantage of this, Bukele employed another strategy by using influencers, YouTubers, and online activists to delegitimise his image. As a result, Calleja was portrayed as a weak candidate compared to Bukele and as someone who would prioritise the interests of the small high-class elite.

Bukele success in reaching the presidency is attributed to his communication strategy, which relied on digital media and emotion driven messaging to polarise Salvadorans. His efforts to position the two traditional political parties as a common enemy enabled him to gain support across the country and appeal to a broad segment of the population. This Bukele to presented himself as the voice of the silent majority within the post-conflict political system. He offered solutions to popular demands such as inclusion, security, and a prosperous future for all Salvadoreans (Roque, 2021, p. 245).

As he emerged as an alternative to the failed traditional parties, many people perceived him as a saviour who would govern in the interest of the majority. In an effort to punish the

traditional political parties, voters supported Bukele. Without the need for a second round, Bukele won the 2019 presidential election with 53% of the vote, becoming the youngest president of El Salvador at the age of 37 (Bergengren, 2024). This marked the end of the two-party system in the executive and the beginning of a new political chapter for the country.

III. Nayib Bukele and COVID-19

Having successfully won the presidency, the populist narrative continued, as Congress was composed of ARENA and FMLN deputies. This represented an obstacle for Bukele for two reasons: first, it prevented him from implementing his agenda on social programmes, and second, it constrained his ability to participate in a re-election process. His aim was to challenge the existing political establishment by portraying them as enemies of the people, along with the Supreme Court and the Attorney General that worked closely to advance the interest of the elite. Finally, days before the COVID-19 outbreak, Bukele attempted to use the armed forces to pressure Congress to approve funding for his government, marking his first authoritarian move.

Bukele's presidential term began on 1 June 2019 which historically has taken place in the convention centre of El Salvador with the deputies being witnesses. However, Bukele challenged this tradition and created significant controversy by organising the transfer of power in the historic centre of the country, in a public park, in front of "real" Salvadoreans (Roque, 2021, p. 246). Holding such an event in a public space had many logistical implications, but it was entirely legal and became a strategy for Bukele to transmit the message that, from day one, he would govern hand in hand with the people. As the ceremony took place in a public setting, it became a trap for ARENA and the FMLN, as Bukele mobilised his supporters, exposing opposition politicians to boos and public anger, while simultaneously demonstrating the frustration of the majority (Roque, 2021, p. 246). The entire event was marked by criticism of the political establishment and celebration of a new

leader for the country, representing Bukele's first populist move as president. His speech followed, which was brief and lacked concrete policy proposals, but he invoked an oath between the government and the public, aiming to convey that citizens were willing to make sacrifices to advance their interests (Roque, 2021, p. 246). In this way, Bukele's narrative of portraying the deputies as obstacles began to gather strength, leading people to perceive them as blocking the president.

Although Bukele had won control of the executive, his aim was to govern without major checks and balances. His strategy consisted of portraying Congress as an enemy of Salvadoreans and communicating this through both social media and traditional media. Many scholars attribute Bukele's success primarily to his social media strategy; however, this was particularly effective for engaging Salvadorans living abroad, especially in the United States and Italy. Within the country, controlled press conferences and emergency broadcasts through television and radio were necessary, as El Salvador is a developing country in which only around 30% of the population has stable employment, meaning that not everyone has access to social media. The Salvadoreans leaving abroad had a good perception of Bukele due that they engaged directly through his social media accounts. Simultaneously, Salvadoreans living abroad influence their relatives in El Salvador to support and vote for Bukele.

The first months of Bukele's government were marked by efforts to reveal corruption from previous administrations. His administration focused on releasing confidential information, similar to the Epstein files, exposing details about relatives of FMLN politicians who held public positions with high salaries (Roque, 2021, p. 247). This generated indignation among Salvadorans and contributed to branding Bukele as a transparent politician. Another strategy of his administration was that orders from Bukele were communicated through his personal Twitter account (Roque, 2021, p. 247). Given the legacy

of corruption from previous administrations, Bukele aimed to distance his government and political party from such practices. By making his decisions public, he aimed to demonstrate that his government was transparent and accountable, and that the old way of doing politics was now in the past.

Another key strategy to brand his government was the launch of his security programme, “Plan de Control Territorial” (Territorial Control Plan) (Roque, 2021, p. 247). The plan aimed to regain control of areas dominated by gangs and was structured in three phases: (1) reassert control over prisons and cut off communication between incarcerated gang members and those outside; (2) create opportunities for young people through education and recreational spaces to prevent gang recruitment; and (3) secure funding to progressively dismantle gang structures. Data at the time showed a real reduction in crime, particularly in homicide rates (Roque, 2021, p. 247). This helped increase Bukele’s popularity and allowed him to pressure Congress to approve the first phase of the plan. However, while phase one was approved, the remaining phases were rejected due to concerns regarding the national budget and feasibility. For example, the proposal included the acquisition of a warship to address gang activity in urban settings, which led Congress to reject the funding. Faced with this blockage, Bukele reacted strongly and proceeded to take an authoritarian step.

The afternoon of Sunday, 9 February 2020, is now part of El Salvador’s history, known as “9F” or “El Bukelazo” (Peña and Barrera, 2023). For this action, Bukele used Article 167(7) of the Constitution in his favour, which allows ministers to call for an emergency session of Congress to address urgent matters. However, the situation did not constitute a genuine emergency, and only 31 out of 84 deputies attended (Roque, 2021, p. 248). He also called on his supporters to gather outside Congress as a means of protest and pressure, suggesting that failure to approve the funds could justify invoking popular insurrection against an unresponsive government (Roque, 2021, p. 248). As most deputies did not attend, and

following direct orders from Bukele, the army seized the Congress building (Peña and Barrera, 2023). Soldiers equipped with rifles, helmets, and bulletproof vests occupied the premises before Bukele entered the legislative chamber, known as the Blue Room, where laws are debated and approved. Surrounded by military cadets, Bukele sat in the chair of the Speaker of the Assembly and prayed (Peña and Barrera, 2023). After finishing his prayer, he stated, “Now I think it is clear who is in control of the situation” to the deputies (Peña and Barrera, 2023).

Shortly afterwards, he left the chamber and returned to address the crowd outside, escorted by soldiers. He told the public that God had asked him for patience and that he would give legislators one more week to approve the \$109 million requested for his security plan. The event left an unforgettable image: soldiers and police effectively controlling the Congress of El Salvador. The images below illustrate this moment.



The “9F” was the first failure of the Bukele administration and undermined his reputation, as he essentially attempted a coup through the use of the armed forces, which were responsive to his orders regardless of their legality. By early March 2020, however, people had largely forgotten Bukele’s failed coup due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which boosted his popularity once again. During this emergency crisis, Bukele demonstrated his ability to reinvent himself in the face of adversity (Roque, 2021, p. 248). The pandemic almost came as a gift to Bukele, as it provided the perfect opportunity to politically weaken

his opponents and to break his campaign promises (Roque, 2021, p. 248). In an effort to demonstrate efficiency, and even before powerful countries such as the United States and Italy took drastic decisions to stop the spread of COVID-19, Bukele implemented strict and controversial measures, including closing the borders so that no one could enter or leave the country and imposing quarantine on travellers.

He managed to convince the majority political party in Congress, ARENA, to grant him a state of emergency that gave him the power to restrict constitutional liberties, such as freedom of movement, and also authorised the army and health authorities to remove people from their homes if they were suspected of having the virus (Roque, 2021, p. 248). Under this emergency power, El Salvador implemented one of the strictest quarantines in the world. It involved forcing people to remain in their homes under the threat of sending non-compliant citizens to detention-based quarantine centres. According to information gathered by Human Rights Watch, these quarantine centres resembled concentration camps, becoming overcrowded and exposing people to a higher risk of infection (Roque, 2021, p. 249). Instead of serving as a measure to control the spread of the virus, the quarantine became a tool for Bukele to establish a repressive regime, with police and military forces enforcing the “sovereign” power of the president over the population, like king authority (Roque, 2021, p. 249). Thus, the state of emergency, rather than being used in accordance with guidance from the World Health Organization on how to contain the virus, became a blank cheque for Bukele to impose his authority and policies, while also enabling corruption, as he had the ability to reserve public spending during emergencies.

With the evident misuse of the state of emergency and growing international concern over human rights violations committed by the executive, as well as the misuse of public funds, Congress refused to ratify an extension of the state of emergency for another 30-day period (Roque, 2021, p. 249). This led to further conflict between the branches of

government, which in turn increased Bukele's popularity ahead of the 2021 mid-term elections. President Bukele argued that the right to life of the population was above any legal rule or decree, which led him to violate the rulings of the Supreme Court to the greatest extent possible (Roque, 2021, p. 249). The rulings of the Supreme Court angered Bukele, who attempted by all means to reinstate the state of emergency. From that point, Bukele began testing the limits of the legal framework, using his legal team within the executive to interpret constitutional provisions in his favour, such as Article 167(5), which states that "if Congress is not in session, the executive can invoke a temporary state of emergency". However, these attempts ultimately failed, as Supreme Court rulings prevented their implementation. Although the Supreme Court was acting as a check on executive power, many Salvadorans did not perceive it in this way. Instead, they viewed a president attempting to protect their lives, while the other two branches of government, perceived as corrupt, were obstructing him and prioritising economic interests over public safety.

The measures Bukele adopted to control the pandemic, which he communicated effectively through social media, weekly public emergency broadcasts, and the distribution of economic support and food, helped him present himself as a leader who defended and protected the health and lives of Salvadorans against a corrupt political and economic elite composed of opposition politicians and businessmen. As a result, Bukele's approval rating reached 90%, the highest recorded in Salvadoran history (Roque, 2021, p. 249). The reduction in COVID-19 cases around September, for which the government claimed credit, was used to promote the administration as one of the most successful in controlling the pandemic globally. This narrative explains why Bukele and his party entered the mid-term elections with strong popularity and the expectation of gaining significant representation in Congress, although not necessarily a majority.

In this context, what ultimately enabled Bukele to achieve a supermajority in Congress was ARENA, particularly, its deputy, Ricardo Velázquez Parker, who, 20 days before the election, presented an initiative to impeach and remove Bukele from office (Deutsche Welle, 2021). This initiative was supported by several FMLN deputies and some members of ARENA. Bukele immediately reacted on social media, claiming that the “so-called defenders of democracy want to remove the leader of the people” and that their intention was to benefit themselves politically in the mid-term elections. This provoked a reaction among Salvadorans, with many expressing that they would protect their president. As a result, voters mobilised in support of Bukele’s party, which won 56 out of 84 seats, a sufficient majority to amend the constitution.

Overall, when Bukele first won the presidency, he did not control Congress, which to some extent kept him within legal limits, but also acted as a barrier to his political agenda. This led him to attempt a form of institutional confrontation, including the use of the armed forces to pressure the legislature to approve funding for his security programme. Although this attempt failed and temporarily reduced his popularity, the pandemic significantly boosted his public support. He was successfully portrayed as the protector of the population, while the opposition was portrayed as indifferent and driven by economic interests. However, the decision by an ARENA deputy to propose Bukele’s impeachment shortly before the election led to a defensive reaction among the population, leading voters to support Bukele’s party and grant him the majority in Congress. With a weakened and fragmented opposition, Bukele’s effective communication strategy and strong appeal to the public enabled him to consolidate control over the legislative branch.

IV. Bukele and Authoritarianism

After winning the elections, the newly elected Congress began legislating on 1 May. Bukele did not present any initiatives until his loyal deputies had gained control of Congress.

The newly elected assembly, which for a long time had been composed of either ARENA or FMLN majorities alongside smaller political parties, where the executive was forced to negotiate, came to an end. Bukele, now with his party holding a supermajority, had the opportunity for his laws and projects to be approved quickly. However, at this stage, Bukele had other priorities, which were to concentrate power in the executive and secure a “legal” re-election process for the 2024 presidential election.

Not wasting any time, in the first plenary session of Congress, which was called minutes after the swearing-in of the new assembly, the loyal deputies removed five magistrates of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General. May 1st, 2021, became a key date in El Salvador’s history, as all that had been fought for and negotiated in the peace accords effectively came to an end, and the last institutional checks and balances were eliminated. To justify the removal of the five Supreme Court judges, the narrative followed by Bukele’s cabinet was that they had issued rulings in the past that violated the Constitution, particularly by blocking the work of the Ministry of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alvarado, Lazo, and Arauz, 2021).

Formally, in that session, the magistrates were accused of “converting the Constitutional Chamber into a superpower” above the other branches of the state by issuing “arbitrary and discriminatory rulings” and violating “the separation of powers of the organs of the state, and concretely, those of the executive” (Alvarado, Lazo, and Arauz, 2021). The next step after such removal, with limited justification, was to appoint new magistrates, as such an important branch could not be left empty. Article 135 of the Constitution states that “the list of candidates for the Supreme Court should come from the National Council of the Judiciary, which should submit 30 names for consideration” (Alvarado, Lazo, and Arauz, 2021). However, in a highly expedited and irregular process, the House leader of Bukele’s party presented five candidates, bypassing the constitutional procedure (Alvarado, Lazo, and

Arauz, 2021). As expected, the new Supreme Court was composed of individuals loyal to Bukele, and this branch no longer represented a threat to his administration.

On the same Saturday night, after the removal of the judges, the next target was the Attorney General. Without justifying Bukele's loyal deputies' decision to remove the Attorney General, Raúl Melara was indeed controversial. The Constitution in article 177 states that no individual with party affiliation or financial contributions to a political party should hold such position. In Melara's case, it was proven that he had been affiliated with ARENA and had made financial contributions, meaning that his appointment by Congress in 2018 was already controversial. Even though Melara had formally resigned from the party, his previous affiliation raised concerns about selective prosecution and bias in favour of ARENA.

When presenting the argument for his removal, the proposal stated that "there was clear proof of association with ARENA" (Alvarado, Lazo, and Arauz, 2021). The relationship between the Attorney General's office and Bukele had been characterised by confrontation, as Melara had filed appeals to the Supreme Court regarding the misuse of emergency powers and had not taken legal action against individuals that Bukele wanted to be persecuted. Another important consideration was that, at the time of his removal, Melara had two significant investigations open against the Bukele administration. One concerned the Ministries of Health and Treasury regarding the handling of pandemic funds and purchase processes (Alvarado, Lazo, and Arauz, 2021). The second involved secret negotiations between Bukele and the MS-13 gang, which had been revealed through a journalism investigation (Alvarado, Lazo, and Arauz, 2021). Melara represented a potential threat to Bukele, as these investigations could have damaged his public image and, to some extent, put his presidency at risk. Once Melara was removed, Rodolfo Delgado, a lawyer loyal to

Bukele, was appointed as Attorney General, effectively turning the office into an instrument for prosecuting political opponents.

Bukele argued that the actions carried out by the deputies of his party represented the will of the Salvadorean people, suggesting that citizens supported the removal of these officials. This was partially true, as the narrative during the pandemic, where Bukele portrayed himself as protecting public health while other branches blocked him, had generated significant resentment. However, the removal of magistrates and the Attorney General was not necessarily the top priority for Salvadoreans, who expected economic and security solutions from the government without major constraints. Reactions from the international community quickly followed, expressing concern about the state of Salvadorean institutions and the manner in which these removals were carried out. Bukele responded on his X account with the following statement: “To our friends in the international community: We want to work with you, do business, travel, get to know each other, and help out when we can. Our doors are open wider than ever. But with all due respect: We’re cleaning out our house and that is none of your business” (Alvarado, Lazo, and Arauz, 2021). Bukele described the day of the removals as the true independence day, claiming that after 200 years, El Salvador had finally achieved real independence, free from foreign influence and corrupt politicians. This marked a turning point, as Bukele consolidated power, and El Salvador began to resemble a more centralised executive system rather than a liberal democracy, with the executive gaining control over all branches of government.

With a Supreme Court composed of loyal magistrates, it was predictable that rulings would favour the executive’s consolidation of power. On Friday, 3 September, the Court issued a resolution declaring consecutive re-election legal, authorising Bukele to run for a second term in 2024 (Gavarrete et al., 2021). In the ruling, the magistrates argued that it should be “the people” who decide whether a president remains in office, and that the

Constitution was outdated and needed to adapt to new changing times (Gavarrete et al., 2021).

However, the Constitution explicitly prohibits re-election in three separate articles. Article 154 states: “The presidential period shall be of five years... without the person who exercised the presidency being able to continue in their functions one more day” (Gressier and Sanz, 2022). Article 248 prohibits amendments that would alter “the exercise of the presidency of the Republic” (Gressier and Sanz, 2022). Article 88 declares that “the principle of alternation in the office of the presidency of the Republic is indispensable for the maintenance of the established form of government and political system. Violation of this norm makes insurrection an obligation” (Gressier and Sanz, 2022). In order to formally comply with constitutional requirements while allowing Bukele to run again, the Court ruled that he would need to resign from office five months prior to the election, to avoid a technically consecutive term (Gavarrete et al., 2021). A year later, during the annual Independence Day speech, Bukele announced that he would seek re-election, arguing that the people should ultimately decide whether a president remains in office. Bukele symbolically resigned in September 2023, leaving a loyal person in charge, while continuing to communicate through social media and public broadcasts as acting president. With a successful narrative focused on reducing gang violence (elaborated in the next section), he was able to compete in the electoral process “legally”.

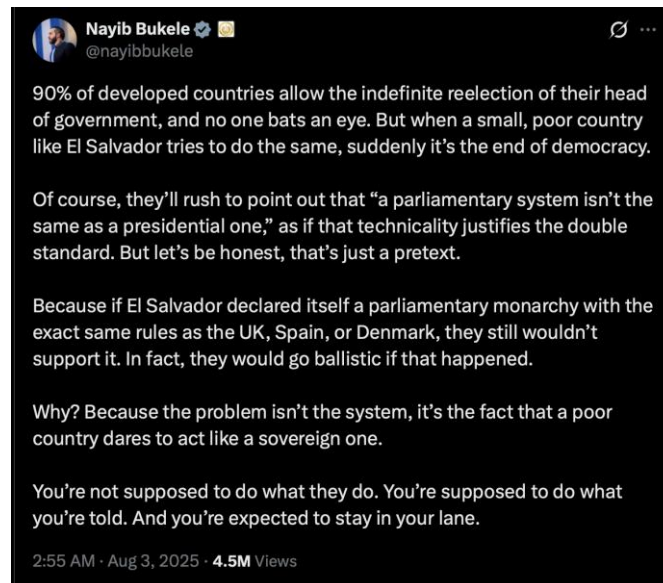
The election held on 4 February 2024 was particularly special, as presidential and parliamentary elections were held simultaneously for the first time in many years. Traditionally, to avoid any favouritism towards the ruling party, presidential elections were held every five years, while legislative and municipal elections occurred every three years. It was unusual for both elections to coincide. Another important factor was that the magistrates of the Electoral Tribunal (TSE) were not loyal to Bukele, forcing him to seek alternative

ways to secure a legislative majority. To achieve this, Bukele and his deputies reformed the electoral system by eliminating mechanisms that favoured minority representation and reducing the number of deputies from 84 to 60, to increase the likelihood of Bukele's party to maintaining control of Congress (Labrador, 2023). Just eight months before the elections, Congress approved these changes through an expedited process. Although the system remained based on proportional representation, the traditional Hare quota method was replaced with the D'Hondt formula, which tends to favour larger parties (Labrador, 2023).

While this change may appear minor, it had a significant impact on congress composition. For example, in 2021, with 84 deputies and the Hare quota method, Bukele's party secured 56 seats, representing 66.7% of Congress. Under the new system, with 60 seats and using the same vote distribution, Bukele's party would have obtained 50 seats, increasing its control to 83.3% (Labrador, 2023). This reform enabled Bukele to secure a stronger majority and further concentrate power in Congress. The TSE applied these rules, as they had become law, and allowed Bukele to run for re-election, as it had been authorised by the Supreme Court, meaning that "legally" they could not oppose it.

The outcome of the 2024 election, combined with Bukele's personal image and the new electoral framework, resulted in his party winning 54 seats, more than enough to amend the Constitution. Two days after the start of his second term, in an interview with Tucker Carlson, Bukele stated that he would not run for a third term, as the Constitution did not allow it. However, on the 1st of August 2025, Congress approved a constitutional reform eliminating term limits and extending the presidential term from five to six years (Regalado, Correal, and Yuhas, 2025). Bukele's party argued that these changes would empower voters by removing constraints on their ability to choose their leaders. Deputy Ana Figueroa, who presented the initiative, stated: "It is the people who decide, as many times as they wish, whether to continue supporting the path of transformation that our nation is experiencing."

Another argument for the reform was economic, as holding fewer elections would reduce public expenses. As a result, the current presidential term was shortened so that elections could be held in 2027 simultaneously with congress elections, reducing costs by joining them into a single electoral event. Bukele's reaction to international criticism regarding these reforms was through the following tweet:



With the justification of being an independent country, and that the people will be the ones who choose how long someone can be president, he has effectively perpetuated himself in power. As a classic Latin American populist leader, Bukele, under the justification of giving power to the people to decide who should be president, along with the argument of saving public money, has concentrated power in the executive, in a manner similar to what Hugo Chavez did in Venezuela. By presenting himself as the voice of Salvadoreans, who will always fight to advance their interests, Bukele has democratically gained power in congress and used it to advance his personal interests of remaining in power and governing without constraints.

V. State of Emergency

Bukele, in 2020, in order to put measures to combat the expansion of COVID-19, used emergency powers, which he liked. However, due to human rights violations and the abusive use of such powers, Congress removed them. In a sense, Bukele liked the state of emergency because it is a way to temporarily remove constitutional rights from people and concentrate power in the executive for decision-making. Perhaps, Bukele already has control of Congress, with the state of emergency he could incarcerate people without respecting the due process, turning it into a tool to silence opposition and install fear in society about the consequences of being against the regime. The state of emergency was later used by Bukele to control the problem of gang violence. After a spike in homicides in 2021, he asked Congress to approve the state of emergency to combat the crime wave, and it has remained in place in El Salvador since that year.

Gang violence is a structural problem rooted in inequality, as people needed to provide food for their families and felt excluded from a system in which they never saw any real opportunity for progress. The problem of gangs has its roots in the United States, where in Los Angeles, California, around the 1980s, MS-13 and its rival Barrio 18 were formed (Roy 2022). Salvadoran refugees who fled the country during the civil war joined organised crime due to three main factors: forced recruitment, the search for protection, and a lack of economic opportunities.

After former President Bill Clinton signed a series of laws expanding deportable offences, tens of thousands of Salvadorans were expelled, and their gang networks gained strength within El Salvador, becoming an alternative for younger generations to obtain “easy money” during the post-war chaos (Roy 2022). During the ARENA government, the policy to combat gangs was known as “Iron Fist”, which consisted of repressive police tactics, tougher sentencing, and mass incarceration (Roy 2022). However, there was a problem with

this approach, as different human rights organisations in El Salvador condemned such measures, arguing that gang members deserved a second opportunity and better prison conditions. Due to pressure from human rights organisations, some gang members were released before completing their sentences or avoided imprisonment altogether under claims of police brutality. As a result, Salvadoran prisons, which were already overcrowded, became centres for gang recruitment and training, leading to an increase in homicides that doubled between 1999 and 2009 (Roy 2022). Gangs gained control over territories in densely populated urban areas and continued expanding across the country.

The peak of violence occurred during the FMLN administration. As previously mentioned, in 2012 President Funes attempted to control homicides by establishing a truce with gang groups, which temporarily reduced violence, although extortions remained normal (Roy 2022). By around 2015, the state aimed to suppress the gangs, but in retaliation, gangs escalated the homicide rate to 105 per 100,000 inhabitants, making El Salvador the world's murder capital and the deadliest country in the Western Hemisphere (Perelló and Navia 2022). The truce not only granted benefits to gang members in prison such as televisions, access to prostitutes, better meals, and communication with the outside through mobile phones, but also turned prisons into operational centres where leaders of organised crime could give orders. No major improvement was achieved during the second term of the FMLN regarding murders, missing individuals, or public atrocities such as burning buses with people inside. This led security to become the top priority of the Bukele administration, as people had suffered enough from gang violence.

In 2019, just two days after being sworn into office, Bukele launched his "Territorial Control Plan". It produced some results, as homicide rates appeared to decrease, although bodies were disposed of in clandestine graves, increasing disappearances while officially reducing murder statistics. At this stage, Bukele did not yet have emergency powers, and

such success can be attributed, like his predecessors, to a truce with MS-13 and Barrio 18. According to a journalistic investigation by El Faro and the former Attorney General Raúl Melara, the deal consisted of keeping homicide rates low and out of public attention in exchange for improved prison conditions and increased job opportunities for gang members outside prison (Martínez, Cáceres, and Martínez 2021). During the campaign period, presenting gang members grouped together in prison gave the impression that the government had full control. Ordinary citizens mainly saw the results, reduced homicides and more control over prisons, elements previous administrations lacked. Around 2024, in an interview conducted by El Faro with a gang leader, the individual revealed that part of the agreement was to gather support for Bukele and encourage people to vote for Nuevas Ideas in the 2021 mid-term elections. With the truce intact, murder rates remained low around five per week and Bukele secured electoral support.

The truce collapsed in March 2022, when more than 87 people were murdered in a single weekend, the deadliest killing spree since the civil war (Bergengruen 2024). The gangs intended to send a clear message to Bukele that they still had control. Bukele's response was to impose a new and strict "Iron Fist" strategy. With support from loyalist deputies, he declared a 30-day state of emergency, restricting freedoms and allowing arrests without warrants and detention without trial (Bergengruen 2024). The military was deployed across gang-controlled areas, police raided homes, and individuals were detained in schools, workplaces, and on the streets. The defence minister claimed to arrest up to 1,000 people per day. A reporting phonenumber encouraged citizens to anonymously report suspected gang members. However, this system was often misused, as people reported others due to personal conflicts, leading to wrongful detentions. For example, some people denounced business rivals or called in neighbours to settle petty scores. These measures spread fear across

society, as individuals could be arrested based on appearance, clothing, or tattoos unrelated to gangs. Arrest quotas imposed on security forces further led to indiscriminate detentions.

The results of the state of emergency are mainly measured by the reduction in homicide rates. According to government data, homicides dropped by half in 2022 and by more than 70% in 2023 (Bergengruen 2024). This success is attributed to the mass incarceration of gang members, which disrupted communication and criminal activities such as extortion and drug trafficking (Papadovassilakis 2023). As gangs weakened, their territorial control diminished, and neighbourhoods previously dominated by gangs became militarised and controlled by the state.

The second phase of the strategy included the construction of the CECOT mega-prison, capable of holding more than 40,000 individuals (Bergengruen 2024). Conditions in this prison are extremely harsh, including no mattresses, constant lighting, limited food (two meals per day), and no privacy. The prison worldwide famous when the Trump administration sent “illegal” immigrants from Venezuela to EL Salvador. Despite criticism, many Salvadoreans supported these measures, seeing them as justified punishment for the atrocities committed by gangs. For many victims, harsh punishment represented justice. As a result, people were willing to exchange civil liberties for security when violence reached extreme levels.

Ultimately, Bukele followed a similar pattern to previous administrations by first negotiating with gangs and later applying repressive measures when the truce collapsed. Whether the state of emergency was planned in advance or was an improvised decision, its results in reducing homicide rates are undeniable. At this stage, Salvadorans prioritised security over civil liberties, accepting the trade-off as necessary. This explains why Bukele continues to maintain high levels of popularity in El Salvador.

VI. Competitive Authoritarianism and State of Emergency

The state of emergency has brought better security to El Salvador, and many Salvadoreans would rather live under a state of emergency than under a democracy. However, the state of emergency has also become a tool for Bukele to narrow the playing field of the opposition in order to secure his victory in upcoming elections. As explained in section IV Bukele managed to change the electoral rules and the Constitution to participate indefinitely, but instead of moving towards a fully authoritarian regime, Bukele opted to maintain an opposition and hold elections freely. The state of emergency, becomes a way to threaten the opposition, maintain a military presence in the country, and use available institutions to benefit his movement while undermining any alternative opposition. This has been observed recently in El Salvador in four respects: strongman narrative, political prisoners, narrowing of political funding, and abuse of human rights. With this, the playing field is narrowed to favour Bukele's political party, leading to minimal probability for an opposition political party to be successful for congress and the executive.

As Chávez did at some point in Venezuela, Bukele is using a strongman narrative, especially through the armed forces of El Salvador. Part of this strategy has been that, in press conferences, social media, and different methods of advertisement, he aims to portray the military as a friend of the people and as a fundamental element for the country's security. This has led to a situation in which Salvadorans have normalised, and even come to like, seeing the military in the streets, as they perceive it as a source of security. However, this leads to mob rule, as military units can randomly detain individuals, suppress peaceful protests, and even take away the merchandise of the informal sector by force. By 2026, El Salvador will enter its fourth year under such a state, in which people have normalised this behaviour.

The military has been very responsive to Bukele, which is not surprising, as he has provided economic bonuses and granted them the control over the streets it had before the civil war. However, the Salvadoran population is easy to distract for two reasons. The first is the lack of education; according to the latest census conducted by the government of El Salvador, the highest level of education completed by 29.3% of the population is only first grade (BCR, 2024). The second reason is that Salvadorans are generally comfortable with short-term solutions or basic benefits (such as receiving free eggs every month). With a society that is relatively uneducated and easy to impress, Bukele has been using a “bread and circuses” strategy, derived from the Latin phrase *panem et circenses*. This concept is used in political contexts in Latin America, where a leader generates public approval not through excellence in public service or policy, but through distraction, diversion, or satisfying immediate and basic needs of the population. For example, through improved security, he has satisfied a large segment of the population. Additionally, he has inaugurated a new public library in San Salvador donated by China, renovated public schools, reconstructed the city centre, which has become a major tourist attraction, and every December he organises a free Christmas village in the city centre.

Through such initiatives, Salvadoreans perceive an effective and working government, while overlooking the poor conditions of the healthcare system, the weak performance of the economy, the increasing cost of living and Bitcoin gamble, and, importantly, Bukele’s aim of concentrating power. People are satisfied with Bukele with relatively minimal improvements beyond security, and they view him as a strong leader who advances their interests. This explains why Bukele’s approval ratings remain high.

To maintain high public approval and undermine the opposition, Bukele has used the state of emergency to selectively arrest and suppress political opponents. Under direct orders from Bukele, the Attorney General and various institutions have targeted former presidents,

opposition deputies, NGO members, and independent journalists. Their main “mistake” has been speaking publicly about the illegalities and corruption of the Bukele administration, which in some cases is argued to surpass the corruption of previous ARENA and FMLN governments combined. The Bukele government has used state resources to place the opposition in a disadvantaged position, particularly by instilling fear. A clear message was sent on 18 May 2025 with the arrest of Ruth López, an independent lawyer working on anti-corruption and justice within a human rights organisation named Cristosal (Labrador, 2025). It is not surprising that Bukele targeted Cristosal, as it has exposed human rights violations and supported low-income families with relatives unjustly detained. Ruth López publicly denounced these abuses and corruption on multiple occasions (Labrador, 2025). At a certain point, her actions became uncomfortable for the government, and she was arrested under questionable charges, with her trial information remaining private.

The message to the opposition and journalists is clear: remain silent, do not complain, and if you raise your voice, there will be consequences. Like Ruth López, many individuals have been arrested and categorised as political prisoners. Under such conditions of fear, it becomes difficult for anyone to challenge Bukele or actively participate in opposition movements, leaving him in a highly disadvantaged position. Institutions have, to some extent, become instruments for prosecuting opposition figures, and the state of emergency has facilitated arrests and questionable legal processes, as individuals no longer fully enjoy civil liberties.

Another move by Bukele and his loyalist deputies was to eliminate public funding for political parties, known as “political debt”, which was established under Article 210 of the Constitution. This system allocated funding to political parties based on their electoral performance, ensuring a more level playing field. In El Salvador, where political donations are limited compared to developed nations, this mechanism was essential for maintaining fair

competition between major and minor parties. By eliminating this funding, the opposition has been left in a critical financial position. For the 2027 elections, Bukele and his party benefit from state resources and have effectively been in a permanent campaign since 2019. In contrast, opposition parties are underfunded, and in some cases, their campaign houses have been taken by the state under allegations of misuse of public funds. Donations are also likely to decrease, as individuals may fear legal consequences for supporting opposition groups. Without access to “political debt”, opposition parties lack of the resources to campaign effectively, resulting in an uneven electoral competition where Bukele’s party holds a clear advantage.

As mentioned previously, the Bukele administration has committed human rights abuses, not only through arrests without warrants or due process, but also through forced displacement and the use of torture within prisons. Organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented these violations. For instance, out of approximately 73,000 arrests during the first year of the state of emergency, around 16,000 involved children attached to indiscriminate raids (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Prison conditions have deteriorated significantly, with poor access to water and food, leading to deaths of detainees. Families often do not have access to information regarding the whereabouts or condition of their detained relatives, and in some cases, are not even able to recover their bodies. Mothers and families who protest for information are frequently suppressed by police or military forces.

Bukele has publicly dismissed human rights organisations, claiming they are influenced by external actors such as George Soros, portraying them as acting in bad faith against El Salvador. This narrative has influenced public perception, leading many Salvadorans to believe that only a small number of innocent individuals have been wrongly

detained and that such sacrifices are necessary for security. This has contributed to the normalisation of mob rule and the acceptance of human rights violations.

El Salvador is currently operating under a form of competitive authoritarianism, where all state institutions are effectively controlled by Nayib Bukele. This has narrowed the playing field for the opposition, limiting their chances of success in future elections, while allowing constitutional changes that enable Bukele's continued rule. The state of emergency plays a crucial role in this system, as it removes civil liberties such as freedom of speech and association, making arbitrary arrests easier and facilitating the prosecution of political opponents. Fear has become a central element in El Salvador under the state of emergency. Individuals are less likely to support opposition parties when they know the state has the power to detain or target them. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult for new leadership to emerge and challenge Bukele.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

The analysis presented through the thesis demonstrated the main characteristics of populism and how it behaves in LATAM. Populism is not a new concept, but the rise of different populist leaders globally has made the concept gain popularity. People appeal to populist leaders as a product of failed policies within government that people aim to overcome. There are two common types of populism scholars currently use: the ideational and strategic approaches, which a leader uses to achieve and maintain power. However, populism has been present in LATAM since the 1930s; using the case study of El Salvador, the thesis aimed to provide an explanation of why people turn to populist leaders and how it is a threat to a liberal democratic regime.

Populism is a concept hard to define, as it is contested, and scholars question the usefulness and essence of populism. However, the thesis evaluates two common approaches scholars use to analyse populist leaders, which are the ideational and political strategy approaches. The ideational approach sets an ideology in which society is ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. But populism is an adaptable concept due to its lack of commitment to key values, which makes it adaptable to other ideologies that contain an explicit or implicit focus on key values. That leads the ideational approach to be defined as a “thin” or “thin-centred” ideology that is based on the opposition between “the pure people” and “the elite”. The political strategy approach emphasises what the leader says and does to pursue and sustain power. But both definitions of populism cannot be excluded and instead complement each other; that is why we can interpret populism as an adaptable concept that portrays the idea of polarising society into two camps, the “real people” vs “the elite”, which the leader uses as a political strategy to win and achieve power by embodying the general will of the people.

With an interpretation of populism, the thesis then aimed to analyse populism in LATAM. The main factor explaining why populism is popular in the region is the high levels of socio-economic inequality, where the majority of the population lives in an underprivileged position. In fact, populism first appeared in the region with the purpose of including excluded groups such as indigenous communities and women into the system by granting them the right to vote. However, a common tendency of populism in the region is to slide the regime into an authoritarian one through constitutional reforms that concentrate power in the executive.

From around the 1990s onwards, populist leaders ran as political outsiders and gained support when there were failures, such as economic catastrophes, as a product of the elite.

With this, neo-liberal populism was born with the intention of presenting traditional political parties as enemies of the people and using neo-liberal policies to decrease inflation. It then evolved into radical populism, commonly associated with Hugo Chávez, former president of Venezuela. Radical populism consists of bringing back old leftist utopias of socialism and revolution with an innovative twist: instead of advocating the use of violence, leaders advocated the revolutionary role of constituent power. Both types of populism slide the regime into authoritarianism by implementing constitutional reforms that concentrate power in the executive and reform the electoral system in favour of the ruling party. To an extent, populism in LATAM ends up in CA, which narrows the playing field of the opposition for the ruling party to be successful and enables the use of institutions to persecute the opposition. The tendencies of populism in LATAM are reflected in the case study of Nayib Bukele.

El Salvador is an interesting case study because it can be categorised as a recent liberal democracy, as it began practising it in 1992 when the peace accords were signed to end a 12-year civil conflict. The origin of the civil war has its roots in the 1970s, when El Salvador was ruled by a military dictatorship that worked closely with the oligarchy to advance their interests, especially in the monopoly of coffee and cotton exports. Besides the lack of democracy in El Salvador and the abuses of the military, 86 per cent of the population was living in poverty, where opportunities for progress for such group was almost non-existent. With a state that could not be removed democratically, armed struggle became an alternative to overcome the oppressive regime. With the Catholic Church divided and the Cold War period influencing various revolutionary movements across LATAM, alongside the success of the Cuban Revolution, a strong guerrilla movement was formed, the FMLN. The government, with the help of the US, counterattacked the guerrilla movements and this led to a deadly conflict. In 1992, the peace accords were signed and represented new changes for El

Salvador: strong electoral institutions, a reformed and transparent judicial system, and the practice of human rights under a new constitution.

A key important element as a product of the civil war is that the FMLN, starting as a guerrilla movement, was allowed to become a political party and compete in elections, creating a strongly institutionalised and ideologically polarised party system. Under such circumstances, it was almost unpredictable for a political outsider to be successful, as both political parties received 90 per cent of the votes. However, with a highly polarised society, both political parties aimed at undermining each other's performance, leading to political gridlock that resulted in 30 years of failed policies that did not address the main concerns of Salvadorans: poverty and gang violence. At one point, people were desperate to have economic policies that would allow them to move up the social ladder while simultaneously controlling gang violence, of which the vast majority of Salvadoreans were victims.

Nayib Bukele's political career started as mayor of a small municipality named Nuevo Cuscatlán and then made the jump to the capital city; his development projects were communicated through the media, where people saw a charismatic young leader interested in the good of Salvadoreans. When he was expelled from the FMLN, Salvadorans perceived Bukele as someone whom the traditional parties wanted to attack, as he did not want to defend the interests of the corrupt political parties. With high levels of corruption among traditional political parties and a lack of governability, Bukele won the 2019 elections as people decided to break their strong political loyalties for a leader who promised short-term solutions for El Salvador.

Bukele's first year and a half in government had a problem: he did not have control of Congress, as the majority of the seats were held by ARENA and FMLN deputies. This led the executive legal team to seek alternatives within the constitution to advance their agenda, but they failed to such an extent that in February 2020, Bukele attempted to carry out a coup.

Such a coup failed and damaged Bukele's image, as the population rejected such behaviour from the president. However, the COVID-19 pandemic boosted his popularity, as people perceived a leader who was fighting the two corrupt political parties in order to protect Salvadoreans from the virus. With the use of a state of emergency, the executive abused it to such an extent that there were reports of human rights violations, leading Congress to remove it.

To make things worse, 20 days before the elections, an ARENA deputy presented an impeachment petition, which led people to vote for Bukele's party in order to protect the leader who reflected their interests. With that, in February 2021, Bukele won a supermajority in Congress. Part of Bukele's strategy was to portray himself as a victim of the two traditional political parties in order to gather support for his movement in the 2021 mid-term elections.

With Congress composed of Bukele's loyalist deputies, he has used them to benefit himself and implement CA in El Salvador. The first move was to remove the Attorney General and Supreme Court judges and replace them with people loyal to Bukele. With this, he has concentrated power to amend the constitution without major constraints, enabling him to participate in an indefinite re-election process. Another reform was to replace electoral formulas that favoured small parties with a more majoritarian one, favouring his party and narrowing the playing field for the opposition to be successful. With such moves, we can state that the common characteristic of populism in LATAM is the use of CA.

The final major achievement of Bukele was to provide a short-term solution to the violence generated by gangs by invoking a state of emergency that consists of mass incarcerations and the removal of civil liberties. Although the state of emergency has led to a reduction in homicide rates and the presence of gangs on the streets, there have been human rights violations, innocent people incarcerated without due process, concentration of power in

the executive, and persecution of the opposition. In a sense, the state of emergency has been a tool that has facilitated the implementation of CA, as the opposition can remain visible, but with the threat that the state can arrest an individual for opposing the ruling party without due process, who would compete against Bukele under such circumstances. Salvadorans overlook the authoritarian measures taken under the state of emergency and prefer to live under such conditions, as they are satisfied with the short-term security solutions it provides, which was one of the main issues the majority wanted to overcome.

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