



El Salvador: Authoritarian Actions Threaten Democracy

Updated May 19, 2021

On May 1-2, 2021, the newly seated National Assembly of El Salvador, now dominated by President Nayib Bukele's New Ideas party, [dismissed](#) the five magistrates on the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court and the attorney general and replaced them with allies of the president. Since taking office in 2019, Bukele has capitalized on the traditional parties' unpopularity to concentrate power in the executive. The recent dismissals, enforced by the police, reportedly occurred in retaliation for the attorney general's [investigations of corruption](#) in Bukele's cabinet and court rulings that Bukele [violated the constitution](#) in ruling by decree during Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Biden Administration officials and some Members of Congress have expressed concerns about democracy in El Salvador, which is located in the "[Northern Triangle](#)" region of Central America that is a primary source of unauthorized migration to the United States. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [called](#) President Bukele to express concern about the dismissals. On May 17, according to press reports, the State Department [sent](#) a "nonpublic report to Congress" identifying Northern Triangle politicians suspected of corruption that included five Salvadoran officials, including the head of Bukele's cabinet and his former minister of security. On May 19, the House Foreign Affairs Committee reported H.Res. 408, urging the Salvadoran government to respect the country's democratic institutions.

Democratic Backsliding

On June 1, 2019, Bukele, a businessperson and former mayor of San Salvador, took office for a five-year presidential term after winning a [first-round victory](#) as an outsider standing for the Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU) party. His newly formed New Ideas party had not yet qualified to field candidates. Born in 1981, Bukele is the first president to come of age politically after the 1980-1992 civil conflict and the first presidential candidate in 30 years to win without support from either the conservative National Republic Alliance (ARENA) party or the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) party.

Bukele has governed as a populist, using [social media](#) to communicate with supporters, make policy declarations, purge officials, and attack opponents and journalists. Through 2020, Bukele battled with the legislature and the Supreme Court over funds he sought for his security plan and his aggressive enforcement of a pandemic quarantine. In February 2020, Bukele [ordered the military](#) to surround the

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11658

legislature in an effort to intimidate legislators into approving an anti-crime bill. He [ignored and criticized](#) Supreme Court rulings for him to respect constitutional rights and legislative decisions during the pandemic. Although Bukele remained popular, critics warned about his authoritarian tendencies and possible [ties to organized crime](#). In February 2021, New Ideas and its allies [won a supermajority](#) in parliamentary elections.

Since Bukele took office, the Committee to Protect Journalists has [spoken out](#) regarding threats against media outlets. Freedom House has downgraded El Salvador from [free](#) to [partly free](#) in its annual assessment of political rights and civil liberties.

May 2021: Legislature Dismisses Supreme Court Judges and Attorney General

On May 1, 2021, the National Assembly deputies elected in February took office. Unlike the outgoing legislature, in which ARENA and the FMLN held the majority of seats, the 84-seat National Assembly is now dominated by New Ideas (56 seats), GANA (5 seats), and allied parties (3 seats). Rather than discussing their agenda, New Ideas deputies hastily presented charges against and [dismissed](#) the Constitutional Court magistrates for inhibiting the government's pandemic response. On May 2, legislators dismissed the attorney general for having ties to ARENA. According to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, both actions [violated accepted principles](#) for removing judicial sector actors. The legislators swore in replacements through a process that reportedly violated procedures outlined in [Article 186](#) of the constitution and have since passed a law granting [immunity from prosecution](#) to anyone involved in pandemic spending.

The U.N. Secretary General and High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the European Union issued statements calling the legislature's actions a violation of judicial independence. In response to international condemnation, Bukele reportedly [stated](#), "we're cleaning our house and this isn't your responsibility."

U.S. Policy Concerns

The Biden Administration [is requesting](#) \$861 million in FY2022 to begin implementing its [proposed](#) four-year, \$4 billion plan to address the root causes of migration from Central America. The Administration reportedly intends to [limit](#) direct aid to governments. On May 4, Vice President Kamala Harris, who is leading diplomatic efforts to address migration issues with Central America and Mexico, [criticized](#) the Salvadoran legislature's actions and said "we must respond." Special Envoy for the Northern Triangle Ricardo Zúñiga [expressed U.S. concerns](#) with Bukele during a mid-May visit to El Salvador. The recent reported [declassification](#) of a report to Congress pursuant to P.L. 116-260 on corrupt Northern Triangle officials listing five current and former Salvadoran politicians could further strain relations. Some [analysts](#) have urged the Administration to pursue a collective response at the OAS by invoking the [Inter-American Democratic Charter](#), which would result in the Permanent Council convening to discuss the situation.

Congress is closely following events in El Salvador and considering policy responses as it assesses the Biden Administration's FY2022 budget request. Some Members of Congress have called on the Administration to consider policy responses ranging from [fostering dialogue](#) in El Salvador to [reassessing U.S. assistance to judicial institutions](#) now controlled by Bukele allies, potentially including the OAS-backed International Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador, which worked closely with the former attorney general. Some Members also have asked the Administration to consider targeted sanctions, such as [revoking the visas](#) of those involved in the dismissals. Some Senators are urging the Administration to [oppose](#) international financing for the Bukele government if it fails to respect democracy, judicial independence, and the rule of law, which could [delay or derail](#) a \$1 billion International Monetary Fund loan the Bukele government has been negotiating.

See CRS Report R43616, El Salvador: Background and U.S. Relations, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

Author Information

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.