

El Salvador's 2019 Elections

February 6, 2019

On February 3, 2019, Nayib Bukele, a 37-year-old former mayor of San Salvador and candidate of the Grand Alliance of National Unity (GANU) party, won El Salvador's presidential election. Bukele garnered 53% of the vote, well ahead of Carlos Calleja, a business executive running for a conservative National Republican Alliance (ARENA)-led coalition, with 31.8%, and Hugo Martínez, a former foreign minister of the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), with 14.4%. Bukele's first-round victory occurred amid relatively low voter turnout (44.7%) during a peaceful electoral process observed by the Organization of American States and others. Bukele is set to succeed Salvador Sánchez Cerén (FMLN) as president on June 1, 2019, and serve a single, five-year term. Bukele's election ends 10 years of FMLN government.

Who Is Nayib Bukele?

Nayib Bukele served as mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán (2012-2015) and San Salvador (2015-2018) for the FMLN. Prior to entering politics, Bukele worked in family businesses started by his late father, a prominent Salvadoran of Palestinian descent who backed the FMLN financially beginning in the early 1990s. Throughout his political career, Bukele has used **social media** to connect directly with voters, a new phenomenon in Salvadoran politics. As mayor, he **revitalized** the historic center of San Salvador and engaged at-risk youth in violence-prevention programs. In 2017, the FMLN expelled him for criticizing the party's leadership. Bukele tried to create his own political party, but El Salvador's electoral court did not approve the new party's registration in time to appear on the ballot for the 2019 presidential election. Bukele then joined the GANU party and became its presidential candidate.

Bukele led the race from start to finish, despite releasing few specific policy proposals until late in the campaign and opting not to attend debates. His personal popularity appeared to overcome GANU's reputation for corruption (its founder, former president Tony Saca, is in prison). In fact, Bukele ran on an anti-corruption campaign and called for the establishment of an **international anti-corruption commission** in El Salvador similar to the U.N.-sponsored International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). It is unclear how close Bukele's ties to GANU will be once he takes office and how he will compose his Cabinet.

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Why Is Bukele's Victory Significant?

Considered a [youthful outsider](#), Bukele is the first person in 30 years to be elected president of El Salvador without the backing of the FMLN or ARENA. Polarization between the FMLN, a party formed by former guerillas after the signing of peace accords, and ARENA, a party aligned with the military, has been the primary dynamic in Salvadoran politics since the civil conflict (1980-1992). Tension between current FMLN President Sánchez Cerén, once an FMLN high commander, and the ARENA-dominated legislature has hindered efforts to address the country's significant fiscal and security challenges. (See CRS Report R43616, *El Salvador: Background and U.S. Relations*.)

The scale of Bukele's victory demonstrated voters' [dissatisfaction with the apparent corruption](#) in both major parties. The attorney general's office has brought corruption cases against the past three Salvadoran presidents. Francisco Flores (ARENA, 1999-2004) passed away while awaiting trial for allegedly embezzling donations from Taiwan destined for earthquake relief. In 2018, former President Saca (ARENA, 2004-2009) pled guilty to charges of embezzling some \$300 million; he is serving a 10-year prison sentence. Former President Mauricio Funes (FMLN, 2009-2014) received political asylum in Nicaragua after prosecutors found evidence he embezzled some \$350 million in public funds.

Potential Implications for El Salvador and Its Relations with the United States

For more than a decade, El Salvador has had the lowest levels of growth and investment and the highest homicide rate in Central America. Bukele's supporters hope his business experience and relative political independence can help change the country's trajectory, but his lack of support in the National Assembly (GANA has 10 of 84 seats) could present governing challenges. Critics have questioned how Bukele intends to pay for the many infrastructure projects, including a new airport and railway line, included in his recently announced "Plan Cuscatlán." As mayor of San Salvador, Bukele demonstrated a willingness to negotiate certain issues with gang leaders. Bukele has vowed [not to adopt militarized anti-gang approaches](#) but has not clearly defined his proposals for addressing the country's gang problem.

President-elect Bukele has said he will seek to maintain close relations with the United States and to give Salvadorans hope so they will be able to envision a future in their country rather than migrating to the United States. His willingness to tackle corruption could bolster bilateral cooperation on one of the central objectives of the [U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America](#). Bukele also could shift El Salvador's foreign policy into closer alignment with the United States. He has [criticized repression in Venezuela and Nicaragua](#), a significant departure from the current government's position. Likewise, he has said he will [revisit](#), but may not reverse, the Sánchez Cerén government's August 2018 decision to abandon relations with Taiwan in favor of China, a move the [Trump Administration sharply criticized](#). Migration is likely to remain an irritant in bilateral relations, given the difficulty of reducing migrant flows in the short-term and Bukele's intention to advocate for Salvadoran migrants in the United States, such as the roughly 200,000 nationals whose [Temporary Protected Status \(TPS\)](#) (relief from removal) is scheduled to expire in September 2019.

Looking ahead, the 116th Congress may consider the type and level of foreign assistance to provide to El Salvador and the other Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala and Honduras); how to work with the Bukele government to address security, economic, and immigration issues; and how to continue the last attorney general's recent successes in combating corruption.

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