

**Sr. Presidente Nayib Bukele**

Presidente de la República  
 Alameda Doctor Manuel Enrique Araujo No 5500  
 San Salvador, El Salvador

April 13, 2022

Dear President Bukele:

We are gravely concerned about the weakening of democratic institutions in El Salvador. In particular, we are disturbed by the set of measures recently approved in response to the sharp increase in murders ostensibly committed by gang members.

After a total of 62 murders were recorded from different parts of the country on March 26, the population woke up the next day to learn that a State of Exception had been put into effect. Since then, police and army troops have been deployed in gang-controlled areas, resorting to unnecessary and excessive use of force. More than 5,747 people have been detained without a warrant, and there have been reports of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Security forces are combing through poor communities and neighborhoods, searching the pockets of students, and mass arresting real or suspected gang members. All the while, journalists are told they are prohibited from reporting.


Recent legislative actions are a real threat to freedom of association and movement—and to democracy itself. Punitive reforms approved on March 30 raise sentences for gang membership to up to thirty years for adults and ten years for children as young as twelve. Lawmakers have authorized judges to rule over proceedings anonymously. They also increased the military budget which, even adjusted for inflation, was already above its civil war peak. Another law, hastily approved April 5 and denounced by critics as censorship, broadly criminalizes news reporting on gang activities. Like some repressive campaigns of the past, opposition will likely be criminalized because these measures can easily be deployed against dissidents.

The people of El Salvador have made great sacrifices to build a democratic system of government. Tens of thousands fought and died for a democratic El Salvador during the civil war; one million people had to flee as refugees to escape the massacres and other armed violence. Measures implemented by your government over the past three years mark a move away from democracy: militarized repression, the state surveillance of journalists and dissidents, and political persecution.

We urge your government to

- immediately end the State of Exception, which is an instrument of repression and social control that dangerously limits constitutional rights
- protect the rights of those apprehended by law enforcement: revoke the newly-imposed 15-day administrative detention, ensure that detained suspects are not physically harmed, and that they are given a fair trial under the presumption of innocence
- reinstate the freedom of assembly and association, freedom of the press, and the right to legal assistance
- end the public slander against human rights organizations that is circulating on social media

Sincerely,

  
 Brian J. Stefan Szittai  
 Co-Coordinator

  
 Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Rodolfo Delgado, Fiscal General de la República ~ via email & US mail  
 Carmen Milena Mayorga de Monterrosa, Ambassador of El Salvador in Washington, DC ~ via email & US mail  
 Julissa Mantilla Falcón, Rapporteur for El Salvador, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email & US mail  
 Brendan O'Brien, Charge d'Affaires of the United States Embassy in San Salvador ~ via US mail  
 US State Department - El Salvador Desk ~ via email  
 US Senators Brown & Portman and US Representatives Beatty, Brown, Gibbs, Gonzalez, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Ryan ~ via email

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**The following people hereby urge you to take action on this matter as indicated in this letter:**