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El Salvador's President Bukele arrests 1 percent of population in four-month "state of exception"

The president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, last week celebrated his police and military having arrested "50,000 terrorists" in the first four months since his declaration of a "state of exception," which suspended democratic rights.

Tens of thousands of mostly young workers are being detained arbitrarily, processed in mass hearings of up to 500 defendants at a time, and forced to sleep on the floor in packed cells in a pandemic and with little food. Dozens are reportedly being beaten to death.



Soldier patrolling Parque Cuscatlán in San Salvador; heavily armed police stopping drivers in San Salvador; soldiers and police deployed in San Miguel; a soldier polices a bus terminal in Apopa (Fuerzas Armadas de El Salvador)

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Across neighborhoods, parks, bus terminals, commercial areas, and beaches, heavily armed troops and police are constantly harassing workers, enforcing an atmosphere in which anyone could be detained for any reason and at any time. Plagued by death squads, these repressive forces kill over 200 civilians yearly—the US equivalent of 10,200 people—and leave three dead for every injured in the average engagement.

Such a state of authoritarian terror has fully lifted the thin veils of “democracy” placed by US imperialism over the Salvadoran state after the supposed end of the dictatorship that ruled for half a century until 1979 and the end of the civil war in 1992. This façade was established with the connivance of the petty-bourgeois nationalist and Stalinist leaders of the FMLN guerrilla movement, which transformed itself into a ruling bourgeois party within which Bukele and the clique around him rose to prominence, including many former military officials in charge of massacring FMLN combatants, workers and peasants.

Claiming to be waging a “war on gangs,” Bukele and his cabinet threatened to implement life sentences and even starve those arrested. During the state of exception, the official number of detainees accused of belonging to gangs grew from 16,000 to 66,000, while human rights organizations say that there are over 76,000 detainees in the country—about 1.2 percent of the country’s population.

The state of exception was declared and approved by Congress, where Bukele’s party holds an absolute majority, immediately after 87 people were killed between March 25 and 27, with many bodies left on the street. After months of recording many days without any murders, the wave of killings seemed suspiciously orchestrated to justify a ready package of autocratic laws and a military and police offensive against working-class youth.

The Congress revised the Penal Code to include 45-year prison sentences for supposed gang members and 10-to-15-year jail sentences against any media outlet that “shares and transmits messages that originated or presumably originate from gangs.” The term “presumably” means that anything goes.

As inflation increases poverty levels, austerity is used to finance public debt payments that have doubled in the last decade, and COVID-19 causes mass death and illness, the state of

exception cannot be seen as anything other than a preemptive crackdown by the state apparatus in the context of a global resurgence of mass struggles by the working class, most starkly shown in Sri Lanka.

Bukele's popularity, based largely on the lower crime statistics, is becoming increasingly fragile, as his government bows to the national and international financial elites with more than \$1.4 billion of scheduled interest payments this year. This amounts to more than three times the budget for public hospitals in the middle of a pandemic.

Any illusion that the Bukele government cares about the safety of the Salvadoran people should be dispelled by the nearly 27,000 people that have died due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than seven times the official death count, according to a recent study.

The University Observatory of Human Rights (OUDH) declared: "Not every detainee is a gang member; innocent people have been captured." It reported that the human rights ombudsman had received, as of June, 231 complaints of a refusal to provide the location of a detainee. "These are potential cases of short-term forced disappearances," the OUDH explained.

The organization Cristosal, moreover, has documented the killing of at least 63 people captured, with many presenting signs of beatings.

On August 9, a group of several hundred relatives of detainees and supporters protested in San Salvador demanding an end to the "arbitrary" arrests and the freeing of the innocent. Relatives insist that detainees "are not being given a chance to demonstrate their innocence." Many have left behind children without their main source of protection and sustenance.

Cristina de Guevara told Efe, "This is tearing apart the hearts of so many mothers and families who are suffering. In my case, they took my husband, a hard-working and responsible man."

In one case, Rosa Mejía, a 70-year-old woman, was arrested based on claims that she sold drugs. Two weeks later, a judge set her free, but after eight minutes, the police held the woman and her family at gunpoint and re-arrested her, disregarding the judge's orders.

She pleaded that it would “be better to be murdered” than go back to prison because she was being deprived of food and prescribed medicines. Rosa remains locked away.

The Biden administration has made clear that its restrained criticisms of San Salvador as a “democracy in decline” and corruption allegations are only aimed at coercing Bukele to halt the ongoing rapprochement with China and have nothing to do with his authoritarian measures. In November, the long-time top US diplomat in El Salvador, Jean Mannes stepped down, saying, “Why would I stay here if we don’t have a partner at this time?”

But not only has the US military continued its operations in El Salvador, Washington has explicitly encouraged an even more brutal “war on gangs.” The US Department of Treasury sanctioned several Salvadoran officials last December, alleging that through “covert negotiations” the “Bukele administration provided financial incentives to Salvadoran gangs MS-13 and 18TH Street Gang (Barrio 18) to ensure that incidents of gang violence and the number of confirmed homicides remained low.”

The Bukele government responded in kind, and Washington listened. Bukele’s Defense Minister René Francis Merino Monroy, who was trained at Fort Benning and the US Navy War College and fought with US troops in Iraq, has been the point man of this “war.” As a rather veiled but clear show of support for the well-advanced state of exception, the Pentagon sent a delegation of the New Hampshire National Guard in June to reaffirm its state partnership directly with Merino and meet with the US military group and country team stationed in El Salvador.

The Salvadoran Army used a civil disturbance display by its special security brigade to show off its preparations to protect capitalist rule. In a news briefing by the Southern Command, Maj. Gen. David Mikolaities declared, “El Salvador is a key strategic partner in Latin America. It was really important to reset the relationship. ... I can’t wait to see how the next 20 years unfold.” Another US commander said, “It was good to see the different parts of government coming together to support a partner nation.”

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