



# El Salvador: Authoritarian Actions and U.S. Response

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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. The 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 the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Since May 2021, government harassment of civil society, independent media, and the opposition has increased, prompting U.S. concern.

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. On May 2, Secretary of State Antony Blinken [called](#) President Bukele to express concern about the dismissals and democratic backsliding. High-level visits, including that of U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [Administrator Samantha Power](#); the [reprogramming](#) of U.S. foreign aid from supporting government agencies to supporting civil society; and two State Department reports to Congress identifying Bukele officials as corrupt have reiterated U.S. concerns. 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 New Ideas party was not yet eligible 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 the conservative National Republican 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. 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 legislature in an

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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.

## Legislature Removed Checks on Presidential Power

On May 1, 2021, the National Assembly deputies elected in February took office. Unlike the outgoing legislature, the 84-seat National Assembly is now dominated by New Ideas (56 seats), GANA (5 seats), and allied parties (3 seats). 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. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, the [U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), and the European Union have criticized the legislature's actions for violating judicial independence.

Since May, Bukele, the legislature, and the attorney general (who [reportedly](#) worked for a [U.S.-sanctioned subsidiary](#) of Venezuela's state oil company) have shut down investigations into corruption in the Bukele government while harassing and arresting government opponents. Bukele [ended](#) cooperation with an Organization of American States-supported international commission against impunity. The National Assembly passed a law granting [immunity from prosecution](#) to anyone involved in pandemic spending and created a commission to investigate corruption in past governments; the commission has resulted in [arrest orders for former FMLN officials](#), including former President Salvador Sánchez Cerén. The Bukele government has [deported foreign journalists](#), threatened civil society groups with lawsuits, and sought to [limit international support](#) for government critics. The legislature has supported Bukele's controversial policy proposals, including initiatives to [adopt bitcoin](#) as a form of legal tender and to [double the size](#) of the army. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has [expressed concerns](#) about El Salvador's decision to adopt bitcoin due to the currency's vulnerability to money laundering but has continued negotiations for a roughly \$1 billion loan to the country.

## U.S. Policy Actions and Concerns

The Biden Administration has made [combating corruption](#) a key part of its national security strategy and its [strategy](#) to address the root causes of migration from Central America. Special Envoy for the Northern Triangle Ricardo Zúñiga [expressed U.S. concerns](#) with Bukele during a May visit, as have USAID Administrator Power and [Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland](#). In May, the State Department [declassified](#), pursuant to P.L. 116-260, a report to Congress on corrupt Northern Triangle officials that listed five current and former Salvadoran politicians. In July, the State Department [released](#) a list of officials subject to visa restrictions for corruption or undemocratic actions pursuant to Section 353 of P.L. 116-260; the list included 14 Salvadoran officials, including Bukele's Cabinet chief, legal adviser, and labor minister.

Many in Congress are monitoring events in El Salvador and U.S. policy responses. Congress is assessing the Biden Administration's \$861 million FY2022 request for assistance to Central America. The House-passed version of the FY2022 State and Foreign Operations appropriations measure (H.R. 4373) would provide \$860.6 million in assistance for Central America but would withhold 75% of any assistance to those countries' central governments until nine conditions are met. H.Rept. 117-84, accompanying H.R. 4373, recommends providing \$95 million in development assistance for El Salvador but no foreign military financing. Congress is likely to oversee USAID's recent shift in funds to support civil society, the use of visa restrictions and potentially financial sanctions on Salvadoran officials, human rights conditions, and the status of El Salvador's IMF loan negotiations.

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

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