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From Reform to Weaponization

Anti-corruption and Autocratization in El Salvador

ABSTRACT This article examines how an anti-corruption surge contributed to El Salvador's democratic decline. While it was not the sole driver of that process, we argue that a wave of high-profile prosecutions in the 2010s played a critical role in delegitimizing established political elites, creating the conditions for Bukele's rise to power and his subsequent assault on democratic institutions. Once in office, and especially after securing sweeping electoral victories, Bukele and his allies dismantled core institutional checks, including the judiciary and public prosecution, and suspended civil liberties under a prolonged state of emergency. Anti-corruption mechanisms were not only neutralized, but also repurposed to target political opponents. By tracing political dynamics and institutional transformations over the past decade, we demonstrate that El Salvador's anti-corruption surge served as a catalyst for political change and unleashed forces that eroded democratic institutions and the autonomy of oversight bodies. These findings speak to ongoing debates on the consequences of anti-corruption surges and the vulnerability of democratic institutions to political capture. **KEYWORDS** anti-corruption, autocratization, El Salvador, prosecution, courts, political capture

In February 2024, 42-year-old Nayib Bukele was re-elected for a second five-year term as president of El Salvador. Despite some allegations of abuse and fraud, the official results made it clear that his election was nothing short of a landslide: Bukele received nearly 85% of the votes, and the party he founded less than seven years earlier, Nuevas Ideas, took 54 of the 60 seats in the Legislative Assembly. On election night, Bukele bragged on social media that the sheer size of his victory represented "The world record in all of democratic history."¹

Bukele's re-election was the culmination of a meteoric political trajectory that started 12 years earlier when he took office as mayor of the small municipality of Nuevo Cascatlán, at age 29, running on the left-wing ticket of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN). Three years later he was elected mayor of the nation's capital, San Salvador, and then in 2019 to the country's top political office, this time running on the ticket of the right-wing party Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (GANA). Bukele's rise marked a seismic shift in El Salvador's political landscape, breaking the country's postwar, largely bipartisan order that had been dominated by the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) and the leftist FMLN (Meléndez-Sánchez 2021).

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Bukele's re-election five years later was also unprecedented, because it openly defied a constitutional ban on consecutive presidential terms. In effect, it topped off a series of actions that subverted the rule of law and quashed the opposition in the years leading up to 2024. Key developments included the removal and replacement of Constitutional Chamber justices and the prosecutor general in 2021, the declaration of a state of emergency in 2022 that suspended civil rights and led to thousands of arbitrary detentions, and the enactment of electoral reforms designed to entrench Bukele's political dominance. Following his re-election, Bukele persuaded a compliant legislature to amend the constitution to extend the presidential term and permit indefinite re-elections. By then, El Salvador had already experienced significant erosion in democratic institutions, and, unsurprisingly, had been classified by the V-Dem Institute as an electoral autocracy since 2021.

After nearly 30 years of democracy, how did this transformation unfold? We argue that El Salvador's autocratization was catalyzed by an anti-corruption surge that contributed to a scenario of generalized distrust in the political elites that once governed the country, facilitating the election of the "world's coolest dictator," as Nayib Bukele called himself in 2021 (Youkee 2021).

While acknowledging that anti-corruption was not the sole driver of El Salvador's illiberal turn, we show that it unleashed forces that ultimately turned not only against itself, but more broadly against the foundations of liberal democracy. After taking power, and particularly after 2021, Bukele's government acted to neutralize the anti-corruption arsenal wielded against the administration and to instrumentalize it against political adversaries, further accelerating democratic erosion.

Prosecutorial and judicial actions against corruption often generate public disillusionment with political elites and institutions, as high-profile investigations expose the systemic nature of malfeasance (Poertner and Zhang 2024). Such shocks can fuel electoral volatility, with voters punishing established parties and turning to outsider candidates or emerging elites who promise to clean up politics. In many cases, these figures cultivate a personalistic leadership style, positioning themselves as the sole agents capable of delivering renewal and bypassing discredited political institutions (Gehrke and Yang 2025). What initially appears as political renewal, however, often empowers actors who view independent accountability institutions as political threats and ultimately fail to deliver on their reformist promises (Zhang 2024). In contexts marked by elite collusion and fragile institutions, anti-corruption surges can trigger defensive responses from those whose interests are threatened (Bowen 2022; Da Ros and Taylor 2022; Ginsburg 2023; González-Ocantos et al. 2023; Klačnja and Pop-Eleches 2022). And once in office, newly empowered elites have strong incentives to impose political control over prosecutors and courts.

In this article, we examine how the interplay between political reactions and shifts in public opinion facilitated the erosion of checks and balances in El Salvador. The reactions followed a dual logic: first, neutralization, aimed at limiting the autonomy and capacity of judicial actors to pursue politically sensitive cases; and second, weaponization, whereby oversight institutions are repurposed to shield ruling elites and target adversaries. This

pattern reflects a strategic recalibration in which anti-corruption drives are first tolerated or even instrumentalized, but later curtailed once their political costs and legal risks to incumbents outweigh their benefits. Ultimately, the cycle of criminal accountability is shaped not only by institutional strength but also by the strategic interests and vulnerabilities of political actors capable of influencing, rewriting, or undermining the judicial rulebook.

The Salvadorian case shows that anti-corruption surges may unintentionally trigger significant political and institutional reactions that weaken democratic institutions, notably by reversing recent gains in the autonomy of oversight agencies and the judiciary. It also reflects broader patterns observed across Central America, where similar efforts have sparked backlash from entrenched elites, as seen in Guatemala and Honduras (Schwartz and Isaacs 2023). Unlike its neighbors—where international commissions played a central role—El Salvador’s high-profile investigations were initiated by domestic institutions, albeit with strong external support.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. In the next section we set the stage by briefly outlining the political and institutional context in El Salvador prior to the anti-corruption surge of the mid-to-late-2010s. We then examine the surge itself—its drivers, mechanisms, and outcomes—focusing on the sharp increase in prosecutions of high-profile political figures, including former presidents, a former prosecutor general, and other influential elites. Next, we address how the anti-corruption surge contributed to El Salvador’s sharp illiberal turn, with particular attention to the Bukele government’s strategic dismantling and repurposing of anti-corruption tools. We conclude by comparing the Salvadorian experience to recent political developments in other countries in Latin America and reflecting on what these dynamics reveal about the complex relationship between anti-corruption efforts and democratic resilience.

THE POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE PRIOR TO THE ANTI-CORRUPTION SURGE

Judicial Institutions in the Postwar Settlement

For most of the twentieth century, El Salvador was under authoritarian rule. This began to change in the 1990s. The Chapultepec Peace Accords of 1992 ended a brutal civil war between the government and the leftist FMLN guerrilla coalition, a conflict that killed roughly 2% of the population and forced a quarter into exile (Seligson and McElhinny 1996). During the war, leftist parties were banned, and the military held veto power over key policies (Williams and Walter 1997). The accords sought to dismantle these authoritarian legacies by replacing the old security apparatus with a civilian police force, restructuring judicial and electoral institutions, and legalizing the FMLN as a political party. Although these changes marked an important step toward greater political openness, their implementation was uneven. Soon after, the conservative ARENA-led legislature passed an amnesty law shielding wartime crimes from investigation, limiting accountability for past abuses (Bowen 2017:132).

Judicial reform, a core element of the postwar settlement, aimed to strengthen independence and reduce military influence. A 1992 constitutional change introduced nine-year terms for Supreme Court justices, leading to a complete renewal of the court in 1994. The newly appointed justices were seen as more competent and ideologically diverse, though still susceptible to political pressure (Dodson and Jackson 2003:235). In the decade after the accords, as Popkin (2010) notes, the judiciary proved more resistant to reform than the police or military. Around the turn of the century, domestic and international pressure spurred reforms that strengthened the National Council of the Judiciary, giving it greater authority over appointments and introducing merit-based promotion criteria and accountability mechanisms (Bowen 2017:137). These reforms resulted in sanctions against 57 judges, including 27 removals, though none faced formal punishment for corruption-related offenses (Dodson and Jackson 2003:237).

Although these reforms modestly enhanced judicial oversight, the structure of appointments meant that partisan dynamics and legislative bargaining continued to limit judicial and prosecutorial independence. El Salvador's unicameral legislature retains a central role in appointing Supreme Court justices and the Prosecutor General, with both positions requiring the support of two-thirds of the Assembly. Supreme Court appointments are made from lists proposed by the National Council of the Judiciary and the national lawyers' association, while the prosecutor general is nominated and elected directly by the legislature. ARENA and the FMLN together held most seats from 1994 until the disruptive 2021 election (Figure 1). Because neither party had an outright majority, appointments to top judicial posts were contingent on agreement between sizeable factions of both parties.

The high appointment threshold favored candidates who could appeal to a broad range of political interests, especially justices seeking reappointment after their nine-year

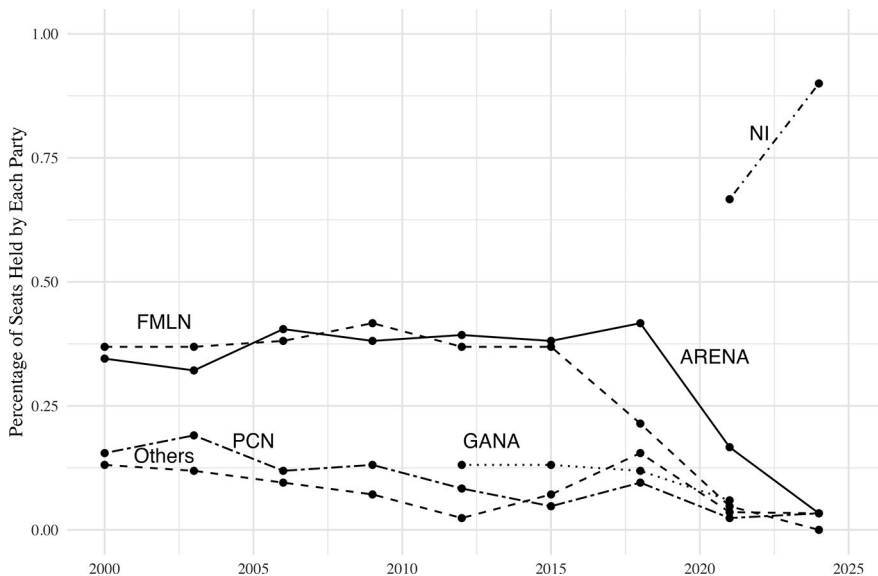


FIGURE 1. Representation in the Legislative Assembly, by party, 2000–2024. Source: Data from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal of El Salvador.

terms. As a result, political influence over the courts and prosecution service rarely followed a winner-take-all logic. At the same time, while the nine-year terms are longer than in most Central American countries (Bowen 2017), the staggered appointment cycles still encouraged justices and candidates to align with prevailing partisan interests and anticipate shifting political dynamics at the time of (re)appointment. Prosecutors general, with shorter three-year terms, often faced similar pressures; yet since the 1990s, only Miguel Ángel Cardoza Ayala (1996–2003) has been reappointed.

Persistent threats, corruption, and political meddling undermined efforts to further strengthen the rule of law, leaving accountability institutions only partially reformed and still fragile. The failure of the 2000s *mano dura* (iron fist) policies, which were endorsed by the Supreme Court (Martínez-Barahona and Linares-Lejarraga 2011), to curb organized crime further deepened the security crisis. As a result, despite these institutional reforms, the Salvadoran judiciary and prosecutorial services remained susceptible to interference, not only from elected officials but also from economic elites and organized crime (Bowen 2017:3).

Power Alternation and the Growth of Judicial Autonomy

In the first two decades after the peace accords, El Salvador's political landscape was shaped by successive ARENA presidencies. The party maintained its popularity by promoting tough-on-crime policies in response to persistently high levels of violence (Holland 2013). It went on to win the presidential elections of 1994, 1999, and 2004, with the FMLN as its main opposition. Up to 2021, ARENA and the FMLN remained the largest parties in the Legislative Assembly (Figure 1), maintaining robust organizations, clear socioeconomic representation, and relatively well-defined policy platforms.

The 2009 presidential elections were a turning point in El Salvador's democracy: the FMLN won the presidency for the first time (Colburn 2009). Breaking from the practice of nominating a party loyalist, the FMLN had chosen a moderate journalist, Mauricio Funes, whose victory marked a peaceful transition of power from the right-wing ARENA, long linked to civil war forces and business interests, to a leftist party born from the former guerrilla movement. While moderating its earlier positions, the FMLN ran on a reformist platform, and in his inaugural speech Funes pledged to fight corruption, pointing to practices under his ARENA predecessors (Labrador 2012).

Although some analysts contend that ARENA's record on corruption compared favorably to other Latin American incumbents (Azpuru 2010:114), the party relied on clientelist networks, particularly in the countryside—networks that the FMLN also began to develop, to broaden its electoral base (Sprenkels 2019). Later investigations also implicated ARENA in large-scale corrupt deals with businesses, political actors, and organized crime. Given the appointment rules described above, ARENA's significant share of seats in the Legislative Assembly during the FMLN presidencies (2009–2019) allowed it to retain considerable influence over both the prosecutorial service and the judiciary.

This alternation and fragmentation of political power contributed to expansion in judicial independence, enhancing the courts' ability to constrain government powers, and improving the overall quality of criminal and civil justice. As Bowen (2017:26) reminds us in her careful analysis of judiciaries in Central America, relative judicial independence is not sufficient for democratic rule of law. Still, despite the legacies of civil war and authoritarianism, El Salvador's rule-of-law rankings in the 2010s were similar to and in some cases better than neighboring Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua (World Justice Project 2022).

The courts' growing assertiveness triggered pushback from other branches of government. One prominent example was Decree 743 of 2011, which required unanimous voting for decisions of the Supreme Court's Constitutional Chamber. Introduced by opposition-aligned parties, including ARENA, GANA, and some smaller parties, the measure was approved by the Legislative Assembly and ratified by President Funes, despite opposition from his own party (*El Faro* 2011).² One motive for this overreach attempt were rumors that the Constitutional Chamber would review the country's amnesty law, which provoked a strong reaction from conservative deputies (Witte-Lebhar 2012). In response, the Constitutional Chamber ruled that the decree failed to meet the voting threshold for constitutional changes and was thus unconstitutional. This episode of inter-branch conflict underscores how the political context and existing rules, such as the high thresholds required for judges' nominations, did not prevent the courts' from exercising a substantial degree of independence, despite majoritarian legislative support and presidential backing for the measure.

The following year, another significant clash erupted between the Legislative Assembly and El Salvador's highest court. After unfavorable 2012 election results (Figure 1), an FMLN–GANA coalition pushed the outgoing assembly to appoint an extra slate of justices, bypassing the norm of selecting only five per legislature—a practice last breached in 2006 (Witte-Lebhar 2012). This triggered a months-long standoff with the Constitutional Chamber, which this time declared both the 2012 and 2006 appointments unconstitutional. The Assembly appealed to the Central American Court of Justice, which ruled against the Chamber, briefly leaving El Salvador with two competing Supreme Courts (Aguilar and Vaqueranor 2012). The impasse ended only after President Funes brokered a deal to renominate the replaced justices.

These episodes highlight both the court's relative autonomy from the elected branches and the high stakes of judicial decisions for the Salvadorian political elites. The resulting inter-branch tensions, combined with growing independence in the prosecutorial sphere, set the stage for the anti-corruption drive of the mid-to-late-2010s.

THE ANTI-CORRUPTION SURGE: ORIGINS AND RESULTS

Laying the Groundwork for the Surge, 2009–2015

Until the 2010s, El Salvador had little experience with effective anti-corruption enforcement or high-profile prosecutions. The shift in power from ARENA to the FMLN spurred investigations and prompted reforms to strengthen anti-corruption laws. Key

initiatives of the Funes administration (FMLN, 2009–2014) included the 2011 Public Information Access Law, the Government Ethics Law, the 2013 Special Law for the Recovery of Illicit Assets, and the establishment of a Government Ethics Tribunal to investigate allegations of civil service misconduct. These regulations favored more comprehensive investigative and prosecutorial strategies to uncover corruption. Alongside domestic efforts, international organizations such as the Organization of American States and the UN exerted pressure for reform and provided crucial funding. The resulting institutions would shape the major investigations and prosecutions that followed.

The first signs of the coming anti-corruption surge emerged, driven partly by domestic political dynamics and institutions, and partly by external factors. One of the external factors was the Cablegate scandal of 2010, which erupted an year after the election of Mauricio Funes with the disclosure of U.S. diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks. The leaked documents revealed damaging information on ARENA's political operations. In addition to details of former president Antonio Saca's personal enrichment and how he used the office to benefit his family businesses, one cable mentioned a kickback scheme in the Ministry of Public Works and allegations of illegal transfers to ARENA deputies to keep them loyal (U.S. Department of State 2009). The cables also suggested factional conflict within the party, as some of the disclosures came from Saca's internal rivals. As we will see, Saca reappeared on investigators' radar a couple of years later.

Another important precedent was the investigation, starting in 2013, of former president Francisco Flores (ARENA, 1999–2004). While scrutinizing alleged misconduct and money laundering in the privatization of the geothermal energy company LaGeo to Italian multinational ENEL, the Prosecutor General's Office discovered evidence that Flores had embezzled USD 10 million from the Taiwanese government through a bank account in the Bahamas.³ The funds had reportedly been intended for reconstruction efforts and to assist victims of the 2001 earthquake, as well as to support the Salvadoran government's fight against organized crime. The evidence was released following consultations with the U.S. Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network. The money had been transferred to Flores' personal bank accounts close to the end of his term in office.

The Funes government pressed for investigations of Flores, leveraging media appearances and sharing evidence with the Legislative Assembly (Lemus and Valencia 2013). This campaign led to parliamentary hearings in January 2014, just ahead of the presidential elections (BBC 2014). Five months later, the Prosecutor General's Office formally charged Flores with embezzlement, illicit enrichment, and disobedience of authority, and sought his detention (AFP / *El Faro* 2014). El Salvador was joining a growing list of countries in Latin America and beyond that had former heads of government facing trial on corruption charges (Da Ros and Gehrke 2024). After months on the run and with an INTERPOL notification, Flores turned himself to a judge. He then underwent a series of pretrial detentions and releases, alternating between house arrest, the hospital, and prison. In January 2016, a month after a judge ordered that he stand trial, Flores died.

The Funes government enjoyed high popularity (Figure 2). However, as Funes distanced himself from the FMLN, tensions grew. The party's leaders, shaped by their militant and disciplined cohesion during the conflict, became resentful of Funes's pragmatic approach and

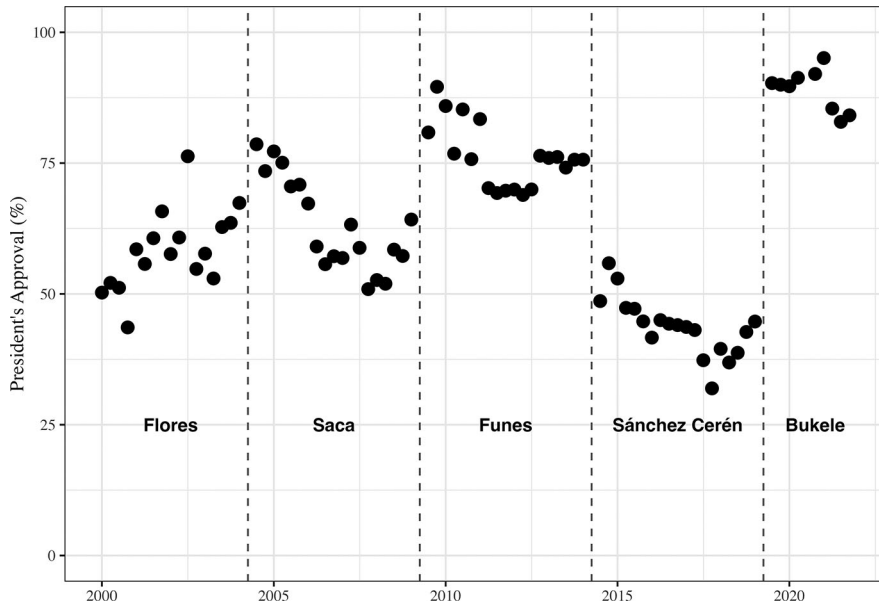


FIGURE 2. Presidential approval ratings in El Salvador.
 Note: Presidential approval ratings by quarter, using data from the Executive Approval Project (Carlin et al. 2025).

his alliances with former adversaries, including ARENA politicians. Despite this internal rift, the FMLN succeeded in electing Funes’s successor, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, in 2014, by a razor-thin margin. A former FMLN commanding general and Funes’s vice president, Sánchez Cerén won 50.1% of the vote, over ARENA candidate Norman Quijano’s 49.9%.

Though the FMLN administrations were quite successful in reducing poverty (Young 2021), this did not boost public approval for Sánchez Cerén (Figure 2). His narrow win, fragile legislative base, and low approval ratings left his government vulnerable. Despite these challenges, the 2015 legislative elections did little to change the balance of power, with both FMLN and ARENA retaining their seats (Figure 1). Another notable outcome of the 2015 elections was the rise of Nayib Bukele, who won the mayoral race in the capital, San Salvador. Bukele’s rise to national prominence further weakened Sánchez Cerén’s position, as he openly criticized the president despite still being a member of the FMLN, worsening the latter’s already precarious political standing.

In power since 2009, the FMLN also became a target of concerted anti-corruption campaigns by the opposition. With some of its leaders facing corruption allegations, ARENA turned around and accused the FMLN-led government of corruption in extensive social media campaigns and grassroots movements (Goodfriend 2019). This reflected the mid-2010s *zeitgeist* in Latin America, with opposition parties across the region using similar strategies, influenced by the revelations of the Lava Jato (Car Wash) investigation, the global rise of anti-establishment rhetoric, and increasing social media reach.

Against this backdrop, the executive’s public commitment to anti-corruption remained strong. In 2015, the Salvadoran authorities intensified their collaboration with

the UN Office on Drugs and Crime to strengthen the prosecutorial system, including a dedicated anti-corruption program. This was partly a response to increased media attention and the public debate surrounding the aforementioned scandals. In practice, until then, most prosecution efforts had rather limited implications. Between 2014 and 2017, numerous cases did not advance in the courts: over 5,000 cases of judicial and executive corruption were archived, and more than 500 expired under the statute of limitations (Andrade 2020:243).

The Meléndez Era and the Anti-corruption Surge, 2016–2019

The anti-corruption efforts clearly intensified under Prosecutor General Douglas Meléndez, who took office in January 2016. A career prosecutor (experience not officially required for the post), Meléndez had served under ARENA presidents, founded El Salvador's first Anti-Corruption Unit in 2001, and helped draft reforms to the Code of Criminal Procedure that curtailed police authority in investigations, giving more responsibility to prosecutors. Meléndez was the top choice of ARENA, GANA, and the Partido de Concertación Nacional (PCN), but not of the governing FMLN (Arauz, Labrador, and Rauda Zablah 2016). Instead, the FMLN backed Miguel Ángel García Argüello, the judge overseeing the criminal case against former president Francisco Flores, though some in the party favored reappointing Luis Martínez, who enjoyed support from influential businessmen and the sympathy of parties like GANA and PCN (Diario 1 2015). At that time, Nayib Bukele, the newly elected mayor of San Salvador, was an exception in his party for his support for Douglas Meléndez; he openly denounced Martínez as “a gangster, very corrupt, [and] the worst of the worst” (quoted in Markham 2016). ARENA deputies were reportedly surprised when the FMLN ultimately accepted their top choice, enabling the opposition to secure the appointment of its preferred candidate for prosecutor general despite the two-thirds voting threshold (Arauz, Labrador, and Rauda Zablah 2016).

On taking office, Meléndez prioritized internal reforms in the Prosecutor's Office to preserve his authority and avoid an internationally mandated anti-corruption commission like Guatemala's CICIG, which had just helped convict former president Otto Pérez Molina. Speaking at the Wilson Center in 2018, he explained: “We had to decide whether to investigate ourselves or rely on an international body. . . . We chose to investigate ourselves, because if we had pursued creating an international organization, we would still be debating it today” (Meléndez Ruíz 2018).

At the start of his term, Meléndez was tasked with pursuing open cases against former president Flores and a former minister of public works, along with more than 200 allegations filed by the Funes administration against preceding ARENA governments. His caseload quickly grew to include 30 open investigations for illicit enrichment against three former presidents (Flores, Saca, and Funes), deputies in all the main political parties, and former speaker of the Legislative Assembly Sigfrido Reyes, a high-ranking member of the FMLN (Arauz 2016). To set up an anti-corruption unit equivalent to that of neighboring Honduras and Guatemala, Meléndez received substantial support and funding from foreign governments and international organizations. Under the

Obama administration, the U.S. government even provided bulletproof vehicles for the Group Against Impunity, a team of prosecutors handpicked by Meléndez (Murray and Renteria 2018).

In January 2016, during Meléndez's first month in office, a judge ordered that former president Flores stand trial for corruption. (He would die a month later, as noted above.) That same month, the Supreme Court ruled that former president Funes would also face trial for money laundering. In August 2016, Meléndez invited the press to a raid on Funes's home as part of an investigation into businessman Miguel Menéndez Avelar. This highly publicized event included Meléndez sharing his own photos of the raid on social media, featuring Funes's guns, cars, and artworks.

By 2016, the Car Wash investigation into money laundering and corruption, initiated in Brazil in 2014, had also reached El Salvador. Following plea bargains in Brazil, executives of Odebrecht, then one of Latin America's largest construction conglomerates, disclosed damaging information about the financing of Funes's 2009 presidential campaign. The judiciary responded swiftly, taking up the case brought against Funes by prosecutors. In November 2017, a court convicted Funes of embezzling state resources and ordered him and his son to repay nearly half a million U.S. dollars to the Salvadoran government. In 2018, Meléndez's office accused the former president and several members of his inner circle of embezzling USD 350 million. By that time, Funes was living in Nicaragua, where he had been granted asylum (Goodfriend 2019).

Recordings leaked from Meléndez's office also implicated Funes in providing perks to Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha 13, the country's two largest gangs, during his government's mediation of a truce between them (Cruz 2019; Daugherty 2016). The truce reduced homicides rates in 2012 and 2013, but crime began to rise again in 2014 (see Figure 5, later in the article). Later-released message exchanges revealed that Funes maintained a close relationship with former prosecutor general Luis Martínez (2012–2015) after his presidency, particularly between 2015 and 2016.

In February 2016, a month after issuing similar rulings against Flores and Funes, the Supreme Court ordered former president Elias Saca to stand trial for illicit enrichment. The following month, it ordered his arrest. Expelled from ARENA in late 2009, Saca had founded GANA and finished the 2014 presidential elections in third. In 2016, he and several close aides were placed in pretrial detention on charges of embezzling USD 246 million in public funds, USD 116 million of which he allegedly misappropriated himself. In 2018, while the cases were still pending, Saca confessed to some of the charges and, in agreement with prosecutor general Douglas Meléndez, received significant leniency: he would serve only a third of the projected 30-year sentence. Saca was eventually convicted in September 2018, and by early 2019 the Specialized Unit of Asset Forfeiture had seized some of his assets.

Criminal investigations and legal actions soon extended beyond former presidents to some of the country's most powerful political parties. In 2016, the Supreme Court agreed to hear charges against ARENA, still the major opposition party, and several of its former leaders, alleging corrupt activities that cost the Salvadoran state USD 34 million.

Prosecutions also reached Luis Martínez, who served as prosecutor general from 2013 to 2015 (Murray and Renteria 2018). Investigations into his tenure began shortly after Meléndez assumed office, reflecting his broader effort to reform the Prosecutor General's Office. Luis Martínez was eventually charged on three fronts: first, for illegally disclosing the private conversations of former priest Antonio Rodríguez (for which Martínez would be sentenced in 2018); second, for bribery, procedural fraud, and breach of duties; and third, for embezzlement, unlawful negotiations, bribery, forgery, failure to investigate, money and asset laundering, and aggravated forgery for receiving monthly payments (USD 10,000–20,000) from Funes's and Sánchez Cerén's administrations while in his role. Martínez was first arrested eight months after leaving his role as prosecutor general (Andrade 2020:38–41).

Alongside their intense anti-corruption efforts, Salvadoran prosecutors and judiciary demonstrated notable independence from the political class on another front, unexpectedly reversing the 1993 Amnesty Law, which had pardoned crimes committed during the civil war, in 2016.

Yet, this assertiveness raises an important question: Why would politicians from both ARENA and the FMLN back the appointment of a prosecutor general who would later pursue some of their most powerful leaders and the parties themselves? For ARENA, the calculation may have been straightforward: supporting Douglas Meléndez was a way to weaken the FMLN presidency, with the expectation that prosecutions would primarily target those in power and, in El Salvador's predominantly bipartisan system, benefit the opposition. The party may have seen little risk to itself, as Antonio Saca had been expelled years earlier and somewhat aligned with Funes during his presidency.

For the FMLN, supporting Meléndez was partly a gamble rooted in its weak political position. Lacking the votes to block his appointment, the party may have assumed that prosecutions would target ARENA and its allies, not figures in government. This proved a serious miscalculation. Meléndez quickly expanded investigations to include senior FMLN politicians, sitting deputies, and former president Funes; the party had overestimated its ability to shield its own leaders and underestimated the prosecutor's willingness to pursue cases across the political spectrum.

Still, elected officials appeared to draw some lessons from the Meléndez years. Despite speculation about his reappointment, after weeks of closed-door negotiations the Legislative Assembly opted against him, instead selecting Raúl Melara, another candidate largely backed by the main opposition party, ARENA (Renteria 2018). As a result, Meléndez left office in January 2019. A year earlier, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had granted precautionary measures to him and his family, citing threats tied to his investigations of senior politicians, former officials, business leaders, and criminal groups. While he delivered notable results against high-profile corruption, his tenure remains controversial, marred by allegations of conflicts of interest, favoritism toward friends and relatives, and the unexplained disappearance of dozens of seized weapons (Lemus 2019).

Institutional Distrust and Discontent with Democracy

The intense anti-corruption surge during Meléndez's tenure did little to bolster trust in the institutions spearheading it. In the 2018 World Justice Poll, only 13% of Salvadorans

said they trusted prosecutors, judges, and magistrates, while 73% said that most or all members of the judiciary and prosecutorial staff were corrupt (World Justice Project 2022). This reflects a broader distrust in government, a point also emphasized by Meléndez-Sánchez (2021:29). Similar patterns have been observed in Argentina and Costa Rica following the judicial punishment of former presidents (Poertner and Zhang 2024). It is also consistent with research showing that corruption scandals erode trust in political institutions and leaders (Ares, Breitenstein, and Hernández 2019) and that social media use—salient in mid-2010s El Salvador—can amplify this effect (Guriev, Melnikov, and Zhuravskaya 2021).

Crucially, this erosion of trust in public institutions was closely linked to growing discontent with democracy in El Salvador. Drawing on public opinion data, we find that in 2009, following FMLN’s first victory and the successful transfer of power from ARENA, 75% of Salvadorans preferred democracy over other forms of government (Figure 3). By 2018, that share had plummeted to just 25%, a stark contrast to 2009 and well below the Latin American average of 54%. This means that as Salvadorian authorities prosecuted corruption and exposed political elites’ truces with criminal groups, public support for democracy was severely undermined.

During the anti-corruption surge, tolerance for authoritarianism was closely associated with perceptions of progress in combating corruption (Figure 4). Citizens who perceived little or no progress were far more likely to tolerate authoritarian rule, whereas those who saw substantial progress remained the least tolerant. Among citizens reporting only some,

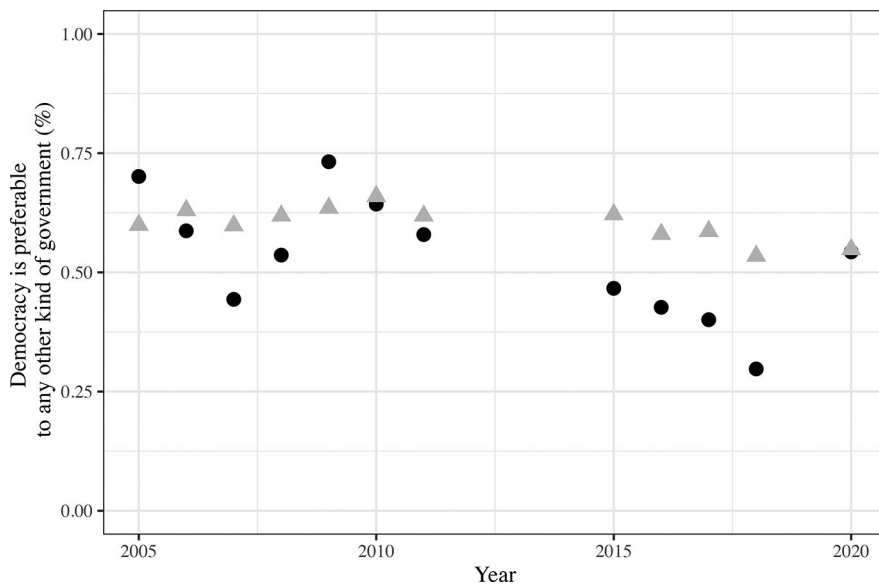


FIGURE 3. Citizens’ support for democracy in El Salvador, 2005–2020.

Note: The black dots represent Salvadoran data; the gray triangles show the average across all Latin American countries. This chart is based on individual-level data from multiple rounds of AmericasBarometer for the years in which the survey was conducted in El Salvador.

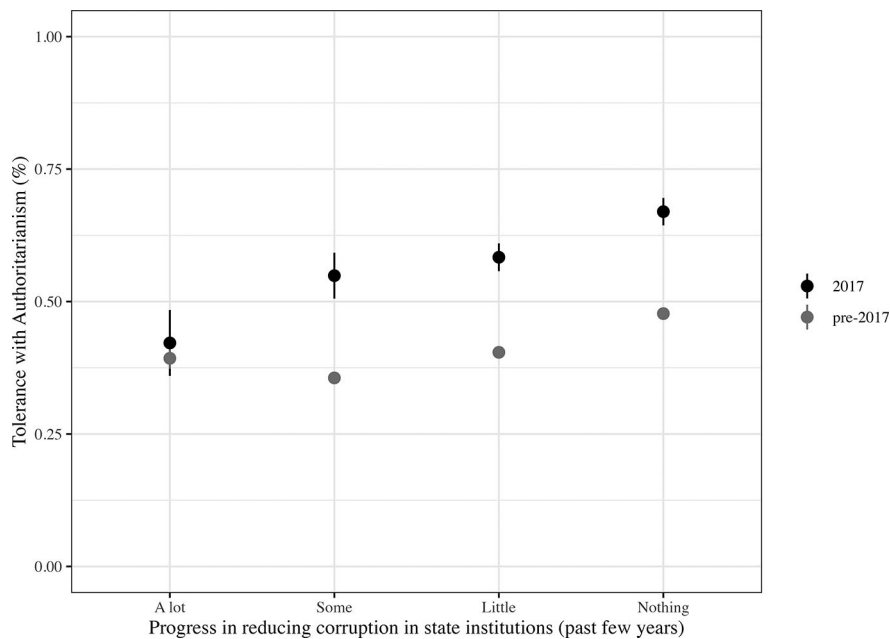


FIGURE 4. Salvadoran citizens' tolerance for authoritarianism, versus perceived progress on reducing corruption.

Note: Authors' analysis using individual data from various rounds of AmericasBarometer for representative samples of the Salvadoran population. Tolerance for authoritarianism is measured as the proportion of citizens who are either indifferent between democracy and autocracy or who express a preference for autocracy.

little, or no progress, tolerance for autocracy rose by more than 10 percentage points compared to the 2005–2016 period.

Hopes that the anti-corruption surge would translate into an anti-incumbent boost for ARENA proved short-lived. The party made some gains in the 2018 legislative elections (Figure 1) as the FMLN collapsed, but ARENA's momentum evaporated in the 2019 presidential race. Bukele won outright with 53% of the vote, leaving ARENA's and the FMLN's candidates far behind. The anti-corruption drive had moved faster and cut deeper than expected, ensnaring leaders from both major parties and opening the door for Bukele's rise without the backing of a traditional party machine.

THE RISE OF BUKELE AND THE EROSION OF INSTITUTIONAL CHECKS

Before the Power Grab: Bukele's Early Presidency

Nayib Bukele's rise to power in 2019 is a compelling case of political transformation fueled by a potent blend of anti-establishment sentiments and personalistic appeals (Gehrke and Yang 2025). As noted by Call (2019), "his anti-corruption campaign struck a nerve in a country where three former presidents have recently been indicted for corruption and one was in jail." One of Bukele's hashtags on Twitter, #DevuelvanLoRobado ("return what you stole"), encapsulated the motto of his presidential campaign

(Gressier 2020). Bukele's public appearances are always carefully staged and curated for social media.⁴ He framed any attacks against his platform as proof that those in the system wished to maintain the status quo and "continue to steal." To add symbolism to his victory, Bukele made a public appearance with Thelma Aldana, the former prosecutor general of Guatemala, renowned for her successful prosecutions of both the president and vice president in 2015 (Call 2019).

While Bukele capitalized on the anti-corruption surge to position him as a champion of clean government (Meléndez-Sánchez 2021), his promises in this area lacked credibility. This was already evident in scandals involving misuse of funds during his tenure as mayor of Nuevo Escatlán and of San Salvador. As president, Bukele used the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext to issue a series of executive decrees and bypass procurement laws. The administration concealed details of emergency expenditures from auditors and legislators, as the Salvadoran press continued to report numerous instances of malfeasance (Gressier 2020).

In his first 23 months as president, while he governed with a Legislative Assembly in which he lacked a majority—ARENA held 42% of the seats, and FMLN held 21%, at the start of the term (Figure 1)—Bukele did not moderate his stance or attempt to build a workable coalition through incentivizing negotiation or deputies' defections to his party. Instead, he relied on executive decrees and on leveraging public opinion to pressure the legislature. Dada (2023:154) reports that "the day he took office from the hands of the president of the Assembly was the last time Nayib Bukele shook hands with any member of the opposition."

On the anti-corruption front, there were some early signs of accommodation, particularly with the president's allies.⁵ In July 2019, shortly after the elections in which GANA served as Bukele's electoral vehicle, Saca received another favorable ruling: the Second Criminal Chamber of San Salvador cleared him of money laundering charges (Andrade 2020:33–36).

Oversight agencies continued to act against Bukele's political adversaries. In January 2020, Sigfrido Reyes, one of FMLN highest-ranked officials, was also charged and issued an arrest warrant by the Prosecutor General's Office for misuse of USD 6 million and money laundering (Labrador 2020). Investigations also unveiled troubling connections between high-ranking officials from FMLN and ARENA and El Salvador's largest organized criminal groups. In February 2020, Prosecutor General Raúl Melara publicly accused senior members of both parties of negotiating with gang leaders for their political benefit. Among those implicated were Benito Lara and Aristides Valencia, FMLN deputies who had been minister of justice and minister of interior, respectively, in the Sánchez Cerén administration. A video released by *Insight Crime* further exposed Valencia as having offered USD 10 million in micro-credit loans while negotiating with a criminal organization (Martínez d'Aubuisson and Martínez 2016). The scandal also ensnared prominent ARENA politicians, including Ernesto Muyschondt and Norman Quijano (the runner-up in the 2014 presidential elections), both of whom were accused of bribing gangs to manipulate electoral outcomes in favor of ARENA.

In February 2020, in one of his most theatrical and overtly authoritarian moves, Bukele ordered the military and police forces to surround the Legislative Assembly in an attempt

to pressure legislators into approving a loan for security investments. Bukele entered, took the president of the Legislative Assembly's seat, and silently closed his eyes to pray. The square outside was filled with supporters, to whom he later said, "I talked to God, and God told me: patience. . . . In some months we will take over this Assembly. Why force it now even if the Constitution grants you the right to do so?" (Dada 2023:155). He doubled down on portraying himself as anti-establishment, even while he was the president. The administration skillfully leveraged citizens' discontent with the political establishment through intense mobilization and engagement on social media. Ahead of the 2021 legislative elections, he repeatedly criticized the electoral courts overseeing the process, accusing them of enabling electoral fraud, further cementing his anti-system narrative.

This rhetoric resonated especially strongly because it intersected with another source of deep public frustration: rampant violence and the state's chronic inability to curb organized crime. For years, El Salvador ranked among the world's most violent countries, and the failure of successive governments to tackle organized crime dominated national debate. Weyland (2003) argues that perceptions of crime and violence can generate political effects like those of an economic crisis. Since the end of the Civil War, El Salvador has had one of the highest homicide rates globally. After stabilizing around 60–70 per 100,000 inhabitants in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a short-lived gang truce mediated by the FMLN lowered it to about 40 in 2012–2013 (Figure 5). However, homicide rates surged again in 2014 during a tightly contested presidential election, peaking in 2015–2016. The trend reversed thereafter, with rates falling below 10 per 100,000 in 2022—a tenth of the rate in 2015.

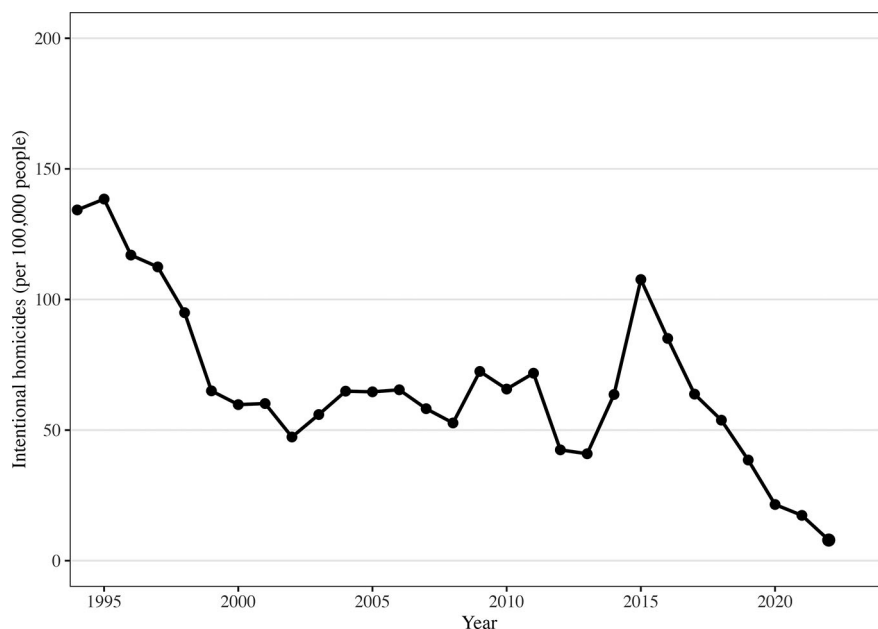


FIGURE 5. Homicide rates in El Salvador, 1994–2022.

Note: Number of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, based on International Homicide Statistics from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

Bukele's pledge to reduce homicide rates dramatically boosted his popularity, which peaked at 90% in 2020 (Figure 2). His administration's success in this area was a key achievement, enabling him to fuse anti-corruption and anti-organized crime agendas and leverage his popularity to bolster his grip on power. As Dada (2023:156) observed, *pandillas* (criminal organizations) served Bukele in somewhat the same way as the Sendero Luminoso served Alberto Fujimori in providing an excuse for his self-coup in Peru a few decades before.

Autocratization and the Capture of Accountability Institutions

The resounding victory of Nuevas Ideas, which captured two-thirds of the Assembly in the legislative elections of 2021, marked the end of a system dominated by two major parties that had lasted nearly three decades, and opened the door to sweeping institutional change. Within hours of convening, Bukele's allies launched a swift and decisive institutional takeover: they ousted all justices from the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court, including its president, and removed Prosecutor General Raúl Melara (Dada 2023:155–56). On June 30 of that year, the legislature appointed five additional justices to the Supreme Court, bringing the total to 10 newly appointed out of the 15 justices (Cáceres and Lazo 2021). These moves marked a major step in a rapid and coordinated effort to bring El Salvador's oversight institutions under firm executive control.

Recognizing that independent oversight agencies could be a source of threat, Bukele acted decisively to shield himself and his government from scrutiny, and he weaponized these institutions against his opponents. On its second day in office, the new legislature made government officials and businesses immune from prosecution for all procurement and contracting activity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This move came just in time to protect many members of Bukele's government, including those in the Health Ministry (Alvarado 2021).

These early protections were coupled with a broader retreat from transparency, including legal changes that weakened access to public information (Hernández 2021). The International Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador—established to fulfill a campaign promise made by Bukele and modeled after similar experiences in neighboring countries—proved limited in scope and short-lived (Indacochea and Estrada 2021). Following the power grab of May 2021, his administration moved quickly to dissolve the commission (Reuters 2021).

This was followed by escalating attacks on the judicial system at large, with the Assembly advancing legislation to remove one-third of all judges and numerous prosecutors (Human Rights Watch 2021). In September 2021, the justices newly appointed to the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court rewarded the president by allowing his re-election bid, despite the explicit constitutional prohibition. Again, oversight institutions were not simply neutralized but also weaponized against political opponents. The pro-Bukele Legislative Assembly wielded its investigative powers aggressively, focusing on figures from previous administrations (Dada 2023).

Working in concert with the Assembly, the newly appointed prosecutor general, Rodolfo Delgado, pursued high-profile cases. For example, ARENA politician Ernesto Muyschondt, former mayor of San Salvador, was charged with corruption and placed under house arrest (Reuters 2021). In 2023, former president Funes was convicted again, this time for making illicit agreements with criminal organizations. Meanwhile, credible evidence linking Bukele's government to organized crime leaders was left untouched, a stark sign of the accelerating collapse of accountability (Martínez, Cáceres, and Martínez 2021).

In 2022, the Legislative Assembly deepened the illiberal turn by declaring a state of emergency, restricting constitutional guarantees and enabling police to arrest people without judicial orders while extending pretrial detention periods. Amnesty International (2023) estimated that, within a single year, more than 66,000 people were arrested and 132 were killed under state custody. Authoritarian measures also extended to the surveillance of investigative journalists and members of civil society organizations by means of Pegasus, powerful military-grade spyware (Jones 2022).

Changes to electoral laws further entrenched Bukele's hold on power, facilitating his re-election and giving his party an overwhelming legislative majority. In the lead-up to the 2024 elections, the government consolidated 262 municipalities into just 44 and reduced Legislative Assembly seats from 84 to 60. The result was decisive: Nuevas Ideas, led by Bukele's cousin, won 54 out of the 60 legislative seats and 28 of 44 mayoralties, with allies in other parties securing another 15 mayoralties—while Bukele himself secured a landslide re-election with 85% of the vote.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The rise of Nayib Bukele and the collapse of El Salvador's democratic institutions have drawn significant attention. While some accounts highlight the role of anti-corruption efforts in paving the way for Bukele's election (Gressier 2020; Meléndez-Sánchez 2021), few shed light on how and why these efforts gained momentum and how they shaped political developments over time.

This study addresses that gap by showing how a surge in anti-corruption efforts transformed the political landscape and ultimately contributed to a backlash that undermined democratic institutions. In doing so, it explores the implications of theories of accountability and elite backlash, which, because they are often developed in broader comparative contexts, tend to leave the causal mechanisms abstract or only partially illustrated. By tracing the interaction of institutional reforms, prosecutorial strategies, public opinion, and political reactions in practice, we show how an anti-corruption drive intended to strengthen accountability instead had democracy-undermining effects. It also highlights the agency of political actors in reshaping and repurposing accountability agencies and points to the broader risk that anti-corruption surges in fragile democracies may fuel political volatility and empower personalistic leaders.

The present case does not allow us to specify the full range of conditions under which such dynamics occur. In some circumstances, anti-corruption surges may enhance

democratic accountability, while in others the reactions they provoke may weaken democratic safeguards. What this case offers, therefore, is not definitive theory testing but a probe into underlying mechanisms. It provides thick description that clarifies how the elite-backlash pathway unfolded in practice, illustrates the contingencies that shaped it, and suggests hypotheses for future comparative inquiry. In this way, the case adds nuance to existing theoretical arguments by showing how broader claims about political accountability and democratic resilience can be refined through close attention to the political reactions, public opinion, and institutional dynamics within a single, critical setting.

As we have shown, El Salvador illustrates how an anti-corruption surge and personalistic rhetoric can drive significant shifts in power dynamics, raising critical questions about their long-term implications for the resilience of democratic institutions. After a period in which its courts and prosecution services gradually started to become more assertive, the mid-to-late-2010s saw a surge of high-profile prosecutions. Both of the major parties that had dominated Salvadorian politics for decades found many of their top leaders under investigation and being arrested, which eventually led to a collapse of the country's party system. This echoes the breakdowns seen in Italy in the 1990s and Venezuela in 1999 (Della Porta and Vannucci 2007; Perelló and Navia 2022). It is no coincidence that in El Salvador, as in those cases, the party system's collapse cleared the path for the rise of a populist outsider. In El Salvador, however, this pattern unfolded even more rapidly and with a severity rivaling that of Venezuela.

Comparable dynamics have emerged in neighboring Guatemala and Honduras, where internationally backed anti-corruption commissions (CICIG in Guatemala and MACCIH in Honduras) drove unprecedented investigations into sitting presidents, ministers, and business elites. Despite their initial popularity, these efforts also eroded party systems, creating openings for leaders to exert control over oversight institutions. In Guatemala, the backlash came with the dismantling of CICIG in 2019 by anti-establishment President Jimmy Morales and the substantial deterioration of democratic institutions that followed (Schwartz 2024). This included the legislature's refusal to swear in the duly re-elected head of the constitutional court, Gloria Porras, whose rulings had often challenged entrenched political and economic interests. After the surprise 2023 victory of reformist Bernardo Arévalo, prosecutors allied with entrenched elites tried to suspend his Semilla party, raided party offices, and sought to overturn the results; he ultimately took office, in January 2024, only after Constitutional Court interventions and sustained civic mobilization (Meléndez-Sánchez and Perelló 2024).

Similarly, in Honduras, MACCIH's mandate was allowed to expire in 2020 under President Juan Orlando Hernández, ushering in an environment that shielded elites from accountability, rolled back anti-corruption laws, and intensified the intimidation and co-optation of oversight bodies. Across countries, the political backlash opened institutional gaps and enabled a retrenchment in democratic and accountability practices, though in both cases there is evidence that the setbacks may be reversible.

El Salvador's trajectory also bears similarities to recent political developments in Brazil. In both Brazil and El Salvador, anti-corruption institutions were strengthened by

left-wing political parties that were anti-establishment in a former moment (PT in Brazil, FMLN in El Salvador), and that were later themselves engulfed in corruption scandals (Da Ros and Gehrke, this issue). Over time, both PT and FMLN ascended to power and pushed for anti-corruption reforms. Anti-corruption then gained momentum in a time of weak and divided government as legal actors pushed the limits of criminal law to enforce anti-corruption reforms. But in so doing, the legal actors tainted the most politically relevant forces with corruption, paving the way for otherwise fringe actors (Jair Bolsonaro and Nayib Bukele) to try to “kick away the ladder” and throw out the baby of democracy with the bathwater of anti-corruption.

But Bukele’s grip on power is stronger than Bolsonaro’s was, allowing him to push autocratization much further than the former Brazilian president. While Bolsonaro ultimately coalesced with various sectors of the traditional political elite to curb the impetus of anti-corruption institutions, Bukele never properly yielded to the previous establishment and never limited himself to containing the workings of independent institutions. Bolstered by significant electoral victories, he co-opted the anti-corruption arsenal more severely, both using it to shield his entourage from oversight and weaponizing it against his opponents. Thus anti-corruption became a tool for further executive aggrandizement and illiberalism.

Unsurprisingly, as he moved from his first to his second term in office, he switched his focus from the war on crime back to the fight against corruption. He did so while still maintaining the “iron fist” posture that had won him enormous popularity. Later in 2023, for instance, the government moved toward the construction of the Centro de Confinamiento de la Corrupción (Corruption Confinement Center), a mega-prison that will deliberately be sited close to the Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo (Terrorism Confinement Center), arguably the largest prison in the Americas. Inaugurated in early 2023, it currently houses about 70,000 people, all arrested since early 2022, when a state of emergency was declared to enable Bukele’s war on gangs (BBC 2023).

El Salvador’s recent history shows that, while anti-corruption sentiments resonate with the public and can spur demands for greater accountability, the enhanced autonomy of oversight institutions may also prompt elected officials to tighten their control over the judiciary—a dynamic with relevance far beyond this case (Ginsburg 2023; Schwartz 2024). El Salvador’s political trajectory underscores the risks facing democratic institutions, particularly when they are already fragile. Further comparative research could help clarify the conditions under which these dynamics emerge and how societies can foster genuine accountability and transparency while safeguarding democratic institutions against capture. ■

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NOTES

1. "De acuerdo a nuestros números, hemos ganado la elección presidencial con más del 85% de los votos y un mínimo de 58 de 60 diputados de la Asamblea. El récord en toda la historia democrática del mundo. Nos vemos a las 9pm frente al Palacio Nacional. Dios bendiga a El Salvador." Twitter post, February 4, 2024 (<https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1754307883586494722>).

2. GANA was founded in 2010 by former president Antonio Saca (2004–2009) and other ARENA dissidents, following the party's electoral defeat in 2009 and internal turmoil that led to Saca's expulsion.

3. The original investigation of malfeasance in the privatization of the energy sector led to the indictment of former Economy Minister Miguel Lacayo and 20 other people.

4. For a detailed background on Bukele's political trajectory, see Labrador (2022). Bukele shares key traits with the wave of authoritarian populists who rose to power in the 2010s in countries similarly affected by high homicide rates and major corruption scandals, including Duterte in the Philippines (Garrido 2022) and Bolsonaro in Brazil (Hunter and Power 2019).

5. For a discussion of how court decisions may facilitate political accommodation in anti-corruption processes, see Da Ros and Gehrke (2025).

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