

52 International organizations demand an end to political persecution against Fidel Zavala

December 16, 2024– As human rights, religious, and international solidarity organizations from various countries across the globe, we call for an end to the political persecution of Fidel Antonio Zavala Pérez by the government of El Salvador.

On July 17 of this year, Zavala courageously denounced corruption, medical neglect, physical abuse, torture, and deaths at the hands of the state that he witnessed in El Salvador’s prisons. Zavala was held in pre-trial detention for thirteen months on charges of business fraud, for which he was subsequently found innocent and freed. Since his release, he has become a leading voice among formerly incarcerated people against abuses by the Bukele regime. Now, El Salvador’s Attorney General is pressuring for his case to be re-opened in an attempt to silence him as a prominent whistleblower.

As the spokesperson with El Salvador’s Community and Human Rights Defense Unit (UNIDEHC) Zavala has given video interviews on national and international news channels, detailing what he witnessed in multiple prisons throughout his detention. Zavala, through UNIDEHC, is the first person to bring a lawsuit against the General Director of Prisons and the directors of the La Esperanza and Santa Ana prisons. The lawsuit, delivered to the Attorney General’s office, details his experiences as a witness to widespread human rights abuses during the thirteen months in which he was incarcerated.

Currently, the government is carrying out a smear campaign against Zavala on official social media channels and through government aligned newspapers by publishing claims about alleged crimes for which a court has already absolved him. This attempt to defame and discredit Zavala and UNIDEHC makes abundantly clear the politically motivated nature of this case.

Zavala has already completed a judicial process during which the Third Sentencing Tribunal of San Salvador absolved him of all criminal charges. We therefore condemn the reopening of Zavala’s case following his months of outspoken leadership through UNIDEHC and the smear campaign that has accompanied this unjustifiable action.

In light of these facts, we join the calls from Salvadoran social movement and civil society groups for the Salvadoran government to:

- Close the criminal process against Fidel Antonio Zavala Pérez;
- End the media campaign aimed at discrediting Zavala;
- Investigate the abuses that Zavala and others have witnessed in El Salvador’s prisons.

The undersigned organizations reiterate our solidarity with Fidel and the countless other social movement leaders facing political persecution and intimidation at the hands of the Nayib Bukele government. We recognize that this case is part of a pattern of attacks against movement leaders who speak out against Bukele government officials and their policies, and we will continue to work to end the unjust criminalization of human rights defenders and others who courageously speak out.



Signing Organizations:

United States

1. Alma de Izote
2. American Association of Jurists, New York/Puerto Rico
3. Cal-Nev Philippine Solidarity Task Force
4. Cambridge United for Justice with Peace
5. Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN)
6. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES)
7. Colectivo La Chiltota Rebelde
8. Denver Justice and Peace Committee
9. Haiti Action Committee
10. InterReligious Task Force on Central America
11. Isthmic Solidarity Project
12. Latin American Working Group
13. Los Siempre Sospechosos de Todo
14. National Lawyers Guild, Los Angeles Chapter
15. Portland Central America Solidarity Committee
16. Provincial Council Clerics of St. Viator
17. Resistencia Comunitara
18. Rochester Committee on Latin America
19. Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Institute Justice Team (Hermanas de la Misericordia - Equipo de Justicia)
20. Solidarity-US
21. US-El Salvador Sister Cities
22. Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective - Honduras

Latin America

23. Comisión Chilena de Derechos Humanos, Chile
24. Congreso de los Pueblos, Colombia
25. Equipo Jurídico Pueblos, Colombia
26. Centro de Documentación en Derechos Humanos "Segundo Montes Mozo SJ" (CSMM), Ecuador
27. Comité Permanente por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, Ecuador
28. Colectivo Juvenil Pro Derechos Humanos "Herbert Anaya", El Salvador
29. Mesa de Línea Férrea, El Salvador
30. Movimiento de Solidaridad Social, El Salvador
31. Movimiento Universitario de Pensamiento Crítico, El Salvador
32. Movimiento de Víctimas del Régimen (MOVIR), El Salvador
33. Salvadoreños Construyendo Memoria, El Salvador
34. Unidad de Defensa de Derechos Humanos y Comunitarios (UNIDEHC), El Salvador
35. Comité de Solidaridad con El Salvador en México, México
36. Liga Mexicana por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos Limeddh, México
37. Mexicanos Unidos, México, Ciudad de México
38. RedContactoSur, Uruguay

39. Red Internacional de Cátedras, Uruguay
40. Organizacion venezolana de Juristas, Venezuela

Canada

41. Asociacion Salvadoreña - Canadiense de Mujeres (ASCADEM)
42. Asociación Salvadoreña Canadiense de Ottawa y Región de la Capital Nacional (ASCORCAN)
43. FMLN-ALCALDES Canada, Canada SK
44. Nación Salvadoreña en el Exterior, Canadá SK y Estados Unidos

Europe

45. Centro di ricerca ed elaborazione per la democrazia, Italia
46. Frente Intercontinental Ventana de la Lucha Popular Salvadoreña, Suecia
47. Ongd AFRICANDO, España
48. Ventana al Sur, Alemania
49. Informationsgruppe Lateinamerika, Austria
50. Medico international schweiz, Suiza

Australia

51. Philippines Australia Union Link, New South Wales, Australia
52. Robert Graham and The Landing, Western Australia, Australia

Statement in Solidarity with Human Rights Defenders in El Salvador

As human rights, faith, environmental, solidarity and Salvadoran diaspora groups in the United States and internationally, we express our solidarity with human rights organizations in El Salvador advocating on behalf of people unjustly detained under the State of Exception, and denounce the police harassment and surveillance against them which has markedly increased in the two years since the start of the State of Exception.

At a joint press conference on April 18, the Movement of Victims of the Regime (MOVIR), the Committee of Families of Political Prisoners in El Salvador (COFAPPES), Humanitarian Legal Aid (*Socorro Jurídico Humanitario*), the “Herbert Anaya Sanabria” Human Rights Collective, and the Committee of Relatives of Victims of the State of Exception of the Bajo Lempa detailed an alarming pattern of surveillance and police interference into their participation in street marches, protests, and rallies, as well as online harassment.

- In February 2024, Ivania Cruz, the spokesperson for COFAPPES, obtained a report from the Office of the Attorney General that details surveillance against her and her participation in human rights defense groups. The surveillance file included photos from her personal Facebook page and of marches in which she participated.
- Human rights defenders with MOVIR described having their events infiltrated and surveilled by government intelligence officers posing as journalists from fabricated news services, including at a press conference they held on July 7, 2023, after which they were followed and pulled over by police. Group leaders were threatened with arrest until legitimate journalists arrived to document the harassment.
- Members of the Committee of Relatives of Victims of the State of Exception of the Bajo Lempa denounced the arbitrary arrest and torture of 8 underage youth on November 5, 2022 following their participation in a community theater that warned of the dangers of repeating El Salvador’s history of militarized repression.
- The Bajo Lempa Committee of Victims’ Relatives also described having their buses stopped and identification cards confiscated by police while *en route* to a march on May 1, 2023.
- Socorro Juridico Humanitario denounced multiple police attempts to enter the building where they share offices with unions that are critical of the government and condemned the constant social media campaign, directed by the government, to defame their leaders and organization.

We strongly condemn these violations of the democratic rights of these human rights defenders, legal advocates and community organizers, whose work is essential to a free and just society, and of the use of state funds to surveil and intimidate them and to attempt to circumscribe the exercise of their political rights.

Since the Bukele government implemented the State of Exception in March 2022, suspending basic constitutional protections and civil liberties, nearly 80,000 people have been detained and close to 250 people have died in state custody. Pre-trial detention limits have been extended - initially from six months to two years and subsequently an additional two years - forcing prisoners to languish for years under inhumane prison conditions with no opportunity to prove their innocence. Most detainees are denied contact with lawyers or family members, in violation of the American Convention on Human Rights, to which El Salvador is a signatory. The continuation of this policy is illegal and

violates the Salvadoran constitution. The Bukele regime has also unjustly jailed political rivals, prominent environmentalists, over a dozen unionists, and other activists.

We cannot normalize the Bukele administration's attempts to criminalize human rights defenders who advocate for the rights of those unjustly detained under the State of Exception which intends to silence criticism of the inhumane and deadly policy.

Therefore, the undersigned human rights, faith, environmental and Salvadorans diaspora groups accompany the demands of these human rights defenders and call on:

1. the office of the Attorney General to ensure that its announced investigation into the targeted surveillance of human rights attorney Ivania Cruz be thorough and transparent;
2. the Inter-American Human Rights Commission to grant protective measures to spokespeople from Movement of Victims of the Regime (MOVIR), the Committee of Families of Political Prisoners in El Salvador (COFAPPES), Socorro Jurídico Legal, and the Committee of Relatives of Victims of the State of Exception of the Bajo Lempa in order to guarantee the safety of human rights defenders and their rights to free speech and freedom of association;
3. the United States government to halt security assistance to El Salvador, which is being used to target human rights defenders and perpetuate the erosion of democracy in the country.

San Salvador, 21 de Mayo, 2024

Signing organizations

United States

1. 1199 UHW SEIU, New York
2. Alma de Izote Chicago
3. Baltimore Nonviolence Center
4. Cambridge United for Justice with Peace
5. Casa Rutilio Grande
6. Centro Latino Cuscatlán
7. Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN)
8. Colectivo La Chiltota Rebelde
9. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES)
10. Denver Peace and Justice Committee
11. Dorothy Day Catholic Worker
12. Friendship Office of the Americas
13. Fuerza Mundial (Mujeres de las Américas, Maria 'Lenchita' Guardado Archive Collection)
14. Global Exchange
15. Grupo primero de abril
16. Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA
17. Hope Border Institute
18. InterReligious Task Force on Central America
19. Institute for Policy Studies, Global Economy Project
20. Kickapoo Peace Circle
21. Latin America Task Force of Interfaith Council for Peace & Justice
22. Latin American Working Group (LAWG)

23. Loretto Community Latin America/Caribbean Committee
24. MELA de San Pancho
25. Movimiento de Víctimas de Régimen (MOVIR) - USA
26. Nicaragua Center for Community Action
27. Nikkei Resisters
28. Raices Migrants (Migrant Roots Media)
29. Resistencia Comunitaria
30. Salvadorans4Democracy
31. San Carlos Foundation
32. San Francisco Committee for Human Rights in the Philippines
33. SHARE Foundation
34. Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Justice Team
35. Unite North Metro Denver
36. US-El Salvador Sister Cities
37. Voices on the Border
38. Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)
39. Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective

Latin America, Europe, Canada

40. Asociación Campesina San Jose de Miranda Santander (ASTRACASMI), Colombia
41. Asociación de Ayuda para Refugiados Centroamericanos, Germany
42. Asociación EINE WELT e. V. i. L., Germany
43. Centralamerica-Secretariate /Secretariado de Centroamérica, Switzerland
44. Centro de Documentación y Solidaridad con América Latina y África (CEDSALA), Spain
45. Centro de Investigación y Documentación LIBERARTE, Peru
46. Ciranda Comunicação Compartilhada, Brazil
47. Coalición de Movimientos y Organizaciones Sociales de Colombia (Comosoc), Colombia
48. CODECAM, Colombia
49. Colectivo del periódico El Zenzontle, Mexico
50. Comité de DDHH y Ecológicos de Quilpue, Chile
51. Comité de Solidaridad con los Pueblos - Interpueblos, Spain
52. Comite de Solidaridad Monseñor Romero, Madrid, Spain
53. Comité de Solidaridad Óscar Romero -SICSAL, Chile
54. Comité de Solidaridad con El Salvador en México, Mexico
55. Congreso de los pueblos, Colombia
56. Festivales Solidarios, Mexico
57. FMLN colectivo de Gatineau, Canada
58. Grupo America Latina Filosofia Social y Axiologia, Cuba
59. Grupo Belga Solidair met Guatemala, Belgium
60. Informationsgruppe Laeinamerika (IGLA), Austria
61. Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración (IMUMI), Mexico
62. La Monche, Chile
63. Kindermissionswerk (KMW), Germany
64. Liga Argentina por los Derechos Humanos de Mendoza-Argentina, Argentina
65. Liga Mexicana por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Limeddh), Mexico
66. Lumaltik Herriak, Basque Country
67. Medico international schweiz, Switzerland
68. Mesa Ecuémica por la Paz (MEP), Colombia

69. Mobilization against War and Occupation (MAWO), Canada
70. Observatorio Dominicano de Políticas Públicas, Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic
71. Observatorio por el Cierre de la Escuela de las Américas, Chile
72. Oficina Ecumenica por la Paz y la Justicia, Germany
73. Ongd AFRICANDO, Spain
74. Organización de comunicadores populares, Colombia
75. Red de Hermandad y Solidaridad con Colombia, Colombia
76. Red de Intelectuales y Artistas de Defensa de La Humanidad (BEL-REDH), Belgium
77. Red Europea de Comités Oscar Romero (SICSAL-Europa), Belgium
78. Servicio Internacional Cristiano de Solidaridad con los pueblos de América Latina (SICSAL) “Óscar Arnulfo Romero,” Colombia
79. Sindicato Unitario De Trabajadores del Periodismo y la Comunicación Social Del Perú, Peru
80. Territorios Democráticos, Chile
81. Ventana al Sur, Germany
82. VOCES de Guatemala en Berlín, Germany

International

83. Asociación Americana de Juristas Regional, International
84. Alianza Global Convida 20 - Comisión de Construcción de Paz, Noviolencia y Antimilitarismo (México, Chile, Colombia & El Salvador)