



The End of the Peace Accords?

How President Bukele Restoring the Political Role of the Military and Police Further Threatens Democracy and Peace in El Salvador

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Introduction:

Since taking office in June 2019, El Salvador's president, Nayib Bukele, has demonstrated a systemic disregard for constitutional law, democratic governance, and the separation of powers. In his latest power grab, on May 1, 2021, legislators from his political party, New Ideas, illegally ousted members of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General in what is widely considered a technical coup against the country's judicial branch.

But throughout his presidency, Bukele's successful maneuvers to consolidate power in the hands of the executive have also depended on increasing the role of the armed forces and police in Salvadoran politics in an alarming reversal of national post-war agreements. Relatedly, his reliance on a militarized approach to public security, including as demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, has raised urgent concerns regarding human rights.

The objective of this report is to document violations by the Armed Forces of El Salvador (FAES) and the National Civilian Police (PNC) under the command of President Bukele of limitations placed on them by the Constitution of the Republic and by the 1992 Peace Accords, as well as to suggest recommendations for U.S. policy.

Context:

In 1992, the government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), then a *guerrilla* force, signed a United Nations-brokered peace agreement that brought an end to twelve years of civil war and many decades of military dictatorships.

As [Human Rights Watch wrote](#), in summarizing the landmark 1993 [United Nations' Truth Commission report](#), "The Truth Commission - and the Salvadorans

who came forward to testify - confirmed what human rights organizations in and outside El Salvador had reported for a decade: that the Salvadoran armed forces and death squads bore principal responsibility for the murder, disappearance and torture of Salvadoran civilians. A full eighty-five percent of the cases denounced to the Truth Commission involved state agents, paramilitary groups, or death squads allied with official forces. Five percent of the cases were attributed to the FMLN."

Police and Military Reforms under the 1992 Peace Accords

The 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords ushered in a series of important reforms to reduce both the size and the scope of the Armed Forces of El Salvador (Fuerza Armada de El Salvador, FAES), as well as to eliminate several other security forces altogether. Among the reforms:

- Modification of the doctrinal principles of the Armed Forces, making their sole purpose the defense of national sovereignty and territorial integrity.
- Reduction of troops and dissolution of the other public security bodies responsible for grave human rights abuses during the war.
- Constitutional reforms subordinating the Armed Forces to civilian power.

The Peace Accords also created a new National Civilian Police (Policía Nacional Civil, PNC) to replace the old security forces. These new police force would strictly adhere to a doctrine of Human Rights and Democracy, be civilian in nature, and be separated from all partisan activity, among other changes. The creation of a civilian police force represented a significant change, given that the police had historically been under the command of the military.

The blurring of the lines between police and military began under President Flores' "[iron-](#)

[fist” anti-gang strategy](#), which was launched in 2003, and has [increased since](#). With [intensive collaboration](#) from the United States, the size of the Armed Forces and their role in public security have both [grown in recent years](#), prompting significant concerns from human rights organizations in El Salvador and internationally.

Human rights abuses by Salvadoran military and police have continued, including [femicides](#) and [extrajudicial killings](#). There have also been investigations into death squad factions operating [within the armed forces](#) and [within the police](#). Recent reports indicate that denunciations of abuse of force have [continued under President Bukele](#).

But what has changed significantly under Bukele is the repeated trampling on the Peace Accords’ explicit prohibitions on the involvement of the armed forces and of the police in partisan or political affairs, putting human rights defenders on high alert.

President Bukele has repeatedly trampled on the Peace Accords’ **explicit prohibitions** on the involvement of the armed forces and of the police in **partisan or political affairs**.

As Manuel Escalante, Assistant Director of the Human Rights Institute at the University of Central America José Simeón Cañas (IDHUCA) [explains](#), “In our social history, the Armed Forces as a political actor has been one of the reasons why we ended up in a war. It has been one of the reasons why some political liberties have been curbed or limited. So certain restrictions or limitations on [the military’s] participation in such public issues should be understood as geared toward peace.”

During Bukele’s presidency, the police have also been subjugated to military command on at least one documented occasion, in violation of the Constitutional (*see page 5*).

Undermining the Peace Accords: The Discourse Behind the Actions

Since coming to office, President Bukele has consistently tried to rewrite history, painting the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), founded by the architect of the Salvadoran death squads, Roberto D’Aubuisson, and the FMLN as conspiratorial forces, rather than the mortal enemies they were throughout the war and ideological opponents they remain today. Thus far, this strategy, combined with a “post-war” rhetoric, appears to have been effective in siphoning political support from the FMLN, which held the presidency for two periods (2009-2014, 2014-2019) prior to Bukele’s election.

One of the most dangerous claims Bukele made recently was that Peace Accords themselves [were a “farce.”](#) This assertion, made while speaking to survivors of the horrific 1981 massacre at El Mozote, committed by U.S.-trained soldiers and, as was [recently revealed](#), in the presence of U.S. officers, directly contradicts the tangible and significant achievements of Salvadoran society towards peace, transparency, and democracy.

But Bukele’s undermining the 1992 Peace Accords has not been limited to rhetoric. In his consolidation of power, Bukele’s

Bukele’s Minister of Defense and Director of the National Civilian Police have **repeatedly violated the limitations the Peace Accords impose**

Minister of Defense, René Merino Monroy, and Director of the National Civilian Police, Mauricio Arriaza Chicas have on repeated occasions violated the limitations the Peace Accords place on their institutions.

Authoritarian Tendencies

1. Painting his critics as enemies of the state

Soon after taking office in 2019, President Bukele participated in a traditional ceremony to celebrate his new role as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces during which asked military officials to take an oath to defend the motherland from “internal and external enemies” as well as to declare their loyalty to “their president.” This [uncommon demand](#) drew criticisms from civil society and early concerns about the politicization of the armed forces by the president.

President Bukele reiterated this disturbing framework [during a speech to the Armed Forces](#) on May 7, 2021, when he stated: “As Commander in Chief, and in the name of the Salvadoran people whom I represent as President, I want to reiterate our gratitude for your help in saving our country from our external and internal enemies.”

“The attacks now are not (only) external, but also internal,” he continued. “These few voices who attack the Armed Forces (...) are a small minority making a lot of noise. They like to criticize because they don’t do anything and at the end of the day, they envy the courageous men and women who are working for our country.”

Noted human rights leader David Morales, former Human Rights Ombudsman of El Salvador, [responded that](#) “the concept of the ‘internal enemy’ has been used in Latin America to perpetuate genocides and atrocities, like the massacre of El Mozote” and has been used for “political

persecution” and to “turn the armed forces against their own people.”

2. “Yes, Mr. President”: President Demands Public Loyalty from Public Officials

Shortly after his inauguration on June 1, 2019, Bukele issued a series of tweets ordering his newly appointed functionaries to fire hundreds of public sector employees accused by the president of having ties to the previous FMLN and ARENA administrations. Though these orders blatantly violated labor rights, administration officials simply responded by tweeting, “Yes, Mr. President,” serving to publicly demonstrate the extent of the President’s power and the obedience he expected. Today, members of his administration continue to tweet, “Yes, Mr. President,” in response to orders.

A Failed Coup Attempt and the Role of the Police and Armed Forces

The 2020 military takeover of the Legislative Assembly, which has come to be known in El Salvador as a failed coup attempt against the legislature (2018-2021), was a direct attack on the Peace Accords.

On February 9, President Nayib Bukele, accompanied by members of the PNC and the FAES, commandeered El Salvador’s Legislative Assembly in an attempt to intimidate lawmakers into approving an international loan to fund the third phase of his national security plan known as the “Territorial Control Plan.” Outside the legislature, snipers perched above government buildings. [Reports surfaced](#) that military officials were deployed to “round-up” legislators at their homes, as legislators from both ARENA and the FMLN parties [later confirmed](#). Military officials were also seen outside of the FMLN’s National Convention which was taking place that day.

Outside of the Legislative Assembly, President Bukele, flanked by soldiers, the Minister of Defense, and the Director of the PNC, addressed thousands of supporters who gathered in response to calls for a “popular insurrection” made by the president days prior. On the day of the action, government vehicles were reportedly [transporting supporters of Bukele’s New Ideas party](#) to the Legislative Assembly.

Following a rousing speech in which he reminded the population of their right to “insurrection,” the president entered the legislature accompanied by a military detachment where he gave a national address from the seat of the President of the Legislative Assembly, the equivalent of taking the dais from the Speaker of the House or Senate Majority Leader, to condemn those legislators who refused to attend the extraordinary legislative session that he had illegitimately convened.

The president’s unconstitutional aggression [prompted immediate condemnation](#) from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Union, Amnesty International, national and international human rights organizations, and from members of the United States Congress.

While the Armed Forces and the PNC have continued to commit violence in the post-war period, these forces have generally remained neutral with regards to political disagreements between the governing party and any opposition parties since the signing of the 1992 Peace Accords.

This has [changed](#) under President Bukele, with both the Minister of Defense and Director of the PNC having publicly attested to being a [united front](#) with the president.

As online news outlet *El Faro* [reported in](#) November 2020, “The police, like the Army, have demonstrated since February 9, when

they accompanied the military takeover of the Legislative Assembly, that they are acting under directives from President Bukele that have political overtones.”

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El Faro, November 2020

On August 21, 2020, the Legislative Assembly called Defense Minister Merino Monroy to testify regarding the events of February 9. Merino Monroy [framed the events of February 9](#) not as a military operation but rather as a “major security procedure” with the intention of protecting President Bukele and claimed that the operation had been coordinated by the military unit charged with protecting the president (Estado Mayor Presidencial, EMP). Merino Monroy refused to state who had given the orders that day, though, as legislator Rodolfo Parker [clarified during his questioning](#), the EMP responds directly to the president.

When asked what unique threat presented itself on February 9 that warranted military protection, Merino Monroy cited the crowd outside the Legislative Assembly building, which had been convened by the president.

As was noted during the questioning, Bukele himself had previously revealed in an interview with Puerto Rican rapper René Pérez Joglar, known as Residente, that the military takeover was [intended to intimidate the legislators](#) as a “form of pressure.”

Based on the final report presented by a special legislative commission to investigate the events on February 9, the Legislative Assembly voted 58-10 on

December 2020, to recommend the removal of PNC Director Mauricio Arriaza Chicas for his role in the February 9 takeover. The report also suggested that Defense Minister, René Merino Monroy, the head of the presidential protection unit (EMP), Manuel Aceveno, and the head of the Joint protection unit (EMC), Carlos Tejera, step down from their respective positions.

According to the report, “Evidence confirmed that the director of the PNC, commissioner Arriaza Chicas, violated the independence of the PNC, subjugating [the police] to the command of the Armed Forces, thereby undermining the civil nature of PNC actions and violating Article 159, paragraph two of the Constitution of the Republic.”

The report also found that the “actions of the Minister of Defense, as with the director of the PNC, were decisive to carrying out the actions of February 9, putting democracy and the separation of powers in jeopardy. [Therefore] neither should be occupying the positions for which they were named.”

The President did not comply with the Assembly’s recommendation, nor did Attorney General Raúl Melara choose to act on a notification received December 9 from the Legislative Commission regarding possible violations of the law.

The Role of the Police and Military in Enforcing Constitutional Violations under COVID-19

Just weeks after the events of February 9, 2020, El Salvador was forced to confront the COVID-19 pandemic. As wealthier nations such as the United States and China shut down travel and commerce, El Salvador followed suit, shutting down its airport, borders and implementing a strict national quarantine.

While the administration’s drastic actions may initially have suggested accordance with public health measures, it quickly

“We have seen, above all last year in light of the pandemic, a major, active and protagonist role from the military class, which, according to democratic standards, should be highly curtailed.”

Rodolfo González, former Supreme Court magistrate

became clear that the Bukele administration intended to respond to the virus as it has to any other oppositional threat, that is, by increasing role of the military and police over other, likely more effective, solutions.

As former Supreme Court magistrate Rodolfo González told online news outlet Gato Encerrado, “We have seen, above all last year in light of the pandemic, a major, active and protagonist role from the military class, which, according to democratic standards, should be highly curtailed.”

Actions taken during the pandemic that served to normalize the militarization of Salvadoran society include:

- Military and police conducting arbitrary detentions of citizens accused of violating curfews and stay-at-home orders, even after rulings by the Supreme Court of Justice that such detentions were unconstitutional. As online news outlet *El Faro* reported, “The director of the PNC accompanied the president in his decision not to comply with a ruling from the Supreme Court that it was unconstitutional to detain people for violating the quarantine if a law or legislative decree to that respect had not been previously approved.”
- Military officers forcibly quarantining and detaining citizens in holding centers lacking basic needs and health standards.

Strict shutdown measures were also extended to prisons, violating various rights of incarcerated people, including to see their family and lawyers.

Human rights abuses in the prisons drew [international condemnation](#) when police officials, following orders [delivered by the president on Twitter](#), packed incarcerated people together for exploitative photo ops to promote the administration's "zero tolerance policy," ignoring recommended social distancing guidelines.

Police officials also disregarded long-standing policies to preserve life in prisons such as maintaining gang members from opposing factions separated.



A government billboard celebrates the police abuse of prisoners that was internationally decried. The billboard reads, "Don't lose your life in the gangs. It's easy to get in but the only way out is jail or death." (Photo: CISPES)

Military and police officials were also deployed to enforce "health closures" or "cordons" in communities often with underlying political purposes. Notable cases include:

- September 20, 2021: The military [prevented](#) a judge and court-appointed private investigators from entering the

town of San Francisco Gotera to review archives related to the 1981 El Mozote massacre, citing a COVID-19 outbreak (*read more on page 8*)

- October 20, 2021: President Bukele ordered a [doubling of military and police forces](#) to the municipalities of San Fernando, Nueva Trinidad, Arcatao, and San Ignacio in the department of Chalatenango, which border Honduras, at first citing a COVID-19 outbreak and later alleging, without evidence, that the military presence was due to drug and arms trafficking and human smuggling. [Leaders from the Catholic diocese](#), speaking on behalf of their communities, flatly rejected the claims as unfounded and denounced the [disruption of life at the border](#) including [sexual harassment](#) by military. It is notable that several of the municipalities targeted have historic ties to the leftist FMLN party. Local FMLN members accused the administration of [targeting these communities for disruption and intimidation](#) ahead of municipal and legislative elections that were scheduled to take place on February 28, 2021.

Extreme measures implemented by the Bukele administration during the first months of the pandemic functioned to empower and normalize police and military presence, rather than limit the harms of the pandemic. During almost five months, more than 15,000 people were forcibly detained in quarantine centers where public health protocols were not ensured. Meanwhile, doctors and hospitals were denouncing that they had extremely limited access to personal and protective equipment (PPE); as a result, El Salvador's mortality rate for doctors and medical staff was among the [highest in the region](#).

El Salvador's Legislative Assembly and the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice made repeated attempts during the months of the enforced quarantine to put controls on Bukele's

COVID-19 response, particularly with regards to human rights abuses.

In response, the Bukele administration not only refused to adhere to the rulings but also [stated](#), “If I were a dictator I would have executed all of them. Save thousands of lives in exchange for five [Supreme Court justices].” These actions were again [denounced internationally](#).

Violations of Legal and Constitutional Responsibilities of the Police Resulting in Obstruction of Justice

The leadership of the PNC has repeatedly demonstrated loyalty to President Bukele and protection of various members of his cabinet above and in violation of their legal responsibilities and limitations therein.

1. Obstruction of Investigations into Corruption

Violations of Constitutional Responsibilities of the Police

1. Obstruction of investigations into corruption
2. Obstruction of criminal investigations
3. Obstruction of judicial processes

On several occasions, members of the Bukele administration and of the PNC have blocked and undermined [investigations into corruption charges](#).

- On October 2, 2020, PNC Director Arriaza Chicas defied orders from the Legislative Assembly to bring Treasury Minister Alejandro Zelaya to appear before a legislative hearing to present accounting reports for how COVID-19 relief funding was spent after his fourth refusal to do so. The Attorney General’s office brought charges against Arriaza Chicas for

dereliction of duty, making him the first member of the Bukele administration to face criminal charges.

Arriaza Chicas was ultimately absolved by the court when Judge Salamón Landaverde ruled that the Assembly had been in error when ordering him to present Zelaya. But in dismissing the charges, [the judge reportedly chastised Chicas](#), saying, “We are not in a monarchy here.”

- On November 10, 2020, officials from the Attorney General’s Office denounced an attempt by police officers to [interfere with an investigation](#) into possible corruption at the Ministry of Health, one of multiple agencies facing investigations into suspicious contracts related to the COVID-19 response.

Acting on a judicial order, the Attorney General’s office went to search government archives as part of an investigation into suspicious multi-million dollar contracts with companies, both foreign and domestic, linked to members of the Bukele administration or their families.

Under the direction of PNC Director Arriaza Chicas, officers attempted to [block and obstruct the investigative duties](#) of the prosecutors by demanding they produce licenses for their weapons during an investigation at Ministry of Health buildings. The PNC is constitutionally mandated to support the efforts of the Attorney General.

2. Obstruction of Criminal Investigations

According to Salvadoran law, though the PNC has jurisdiction over criminal investigation, the Attorney General has responsibility for supervising all criminal investigations.

Following the killing of two members of the opposition FMLN party on January 31, 2021

by two employees of the Ministry of Health and one employee of the PNC working as security detail for the Minister of Health, the PNC publicly countered information released by the Attorney General's Office in an attempt to undermine the investigation.

Immediately following the shooting, President Bukele began tweeting unsubstantiated theories about the attack that directly contradicted the testimonies of victims, first claiming it had been orchestrated by the FMLN to gain publicity and later that it was an armed confrontation.

In response, the Attorney General's Office published video footage of the event showing that it had, in fact, been an attack, not a confrontation.

Subsequently, however, the PNC published other, highly editorialized videos to reinforce the claim that there had been a confrontation, in direct contradiction of the Attorney General, and of what could be concluded from the footage itself.

3. Obstruction of Judicial Processes

In 2016, following the overturning of El Salvador's Amnesty Law by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court, a Salvadoran judge re-opened an investigation into the 1981 El Mozote massacre. On September 21, 2020, a team of investigators was dispatched to the Military Headquarters Number 4 in San Francisco Gotera to review archives possibly related to the massacre, which killed an estimated 1,000 people.

Citing a COVID-19 "health cordon" that had been ordered by Health Minister Francisco Alabi the night prior, members of the armed forces prohibited Judge Guzmán and his team from entering, prompting condemnation from human rights organizations and the Human Rights Ombudsman, José Apolonio Tobar Serrano. "It is regrettable, sad, and shameful, a dark day," [Tobar lamented](#).

Role of Military and Police in Upholding Violations of Electoral Law

On February 28, Salvadoran citizens participated in elections for representatives in the legislature, at the municipal level and at the Central American Parliament.

Upholding Violations of Electoral Law

- Police complicity with attacks against employees of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal
- Politically motivated arrests of members of local elections boards
- Military participation in campaign
- Attempting to influence public opinion and undermine the electoral authority

In the months leading up to the election, civil society organizations like Professionals for El Salvador (PROES) and others [warned of an "alarming panorama"](#) in which "the rule of law is rapidly deteriorating because of Bukele's disregard for legal norms, the separation of powers, abuse of public funds, and clearly fraudulent actions," such as illegally withholding public campaign funds to opposition parties. PROES, an organization of economists and social scientists, evaluated that the February 28 election would be El Salvador's "most unequal and oppressive of the 21st century."

Both the PNC and the Armed Forces played visible and vocal roles in the 2021 electoral process, breaking with norms established throughout the past three decades and with the Peace Accords' proscriptions on political or partisan activity.

1. Police complicity with Bukele and New Ideas attacks against employees of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal

In November 2020, New Ideas party members [held a group of Supreme Electoral Tribunal \(TSE\) magistrates, employees and reporters hostage](#) in a ploy to pressure the institution into approving candidates who did not meet the requirements to run for office.

Such illegal actions and abuses committed by Nuevas Ideas were fueled by baseless claims of electoral fraud promoted by party members and public functionaries, including President Bukele. During the takeover of the TSE, the president backed his followers, implying that their violent actions were taken in order to “prevent fraud.”

The Minister of Public Security Rogelio Rivas and PNC director Mauricio Arriaza Chicas dismissed the events as “peaceful protest,” thereby justifying police inaction.

2. Politically motivated arrests of members of local electoral boards

On November 20, 2020 in the province of Usulután, the [PNC detained a member of the local electoral board](#) for allegedly damaging the registration paperwork of a New Ideas candidate. Members of the Legislative Assembly from both ARENA and the FMLN raised concerns that the police actions were of a partisan nature.

Cristina Cornejo, then an FMLN legislator, [told the press](#), “I hate to think that the President of the Republic is using an institution so critical to democracy [as the PNC] ... to generate these types of actions and try to favor the interests of certain political parties.” [According to](#) ARENA legislator Ricardo Velazquez Parker, “What we fear here ... is when the Police have acted in a political manner. When we look to the past, this was one of the issues [in the signing of the Peace Accord] that allowed us

to reach peace and it would be a rollback for the PNC to begin taking discretionary, arbitrary actions with overtly political overtones.”

3. Military participation in campaign

In the days leading up to the election, photographs showed members of the military delivering emergency food boxes to households in El Salvador in violation of prohibitions on the use of state funds for election campaigns.



Earlier in the campaign period, one photograph that circulated widely on social media (above) showed members of the Armed Forces delivering emergency food boxes accompanied by someone wearing Bukele’s former logo.

[According to](#) former Supreme Court magistrate Rodolfo González, the Armed Forces, “became involved [in the electoral campaign] from the earliest days in that they are the backbone of the distribution of emergency food aid,” in violation of Legislative Decree 757, Article 12, which assigned this role to local municipalities.

4. Attempt by Minister of Defense to influence public opinion regarding election and to undermine the electoral authority

In the days following the election, the Minister of Defense echoed Bukele's baseless declarations that the Supreme Electoral Tribunal was conspiring to commit fraud, [tweeting](#), "[The] TSE is not acting with transparency in processing the numbers. The people recognize that the magistrates in the electoral body respond to some of the traditional political parties."

This statement represents the first time in decades that the Minister of Defense has attempted to influence an electoral process.



Armed Forces Seek to Renew “Political” Participation

In January 2021, Defense Minister Merino Monroy was invited to speak with an ad-hoc commission assembled by the Bukele administration to study possible constitutional reforms. As of May 1, 2021, Bukele's party, New Ideas, together with allies from the GANA party, holds the two-thirds supermajority needed to approve constitutional reforms, though any reforms must be ratified by the subsequent legislative session.

[According to investigative journalists at Gato Encerrado](#), "During the meeting with the ad hoc team, the Minister of Defense made reference to 'the political-ness of the

Armed Forces and of officials.' The military chief explained that 'the Constitution permits the Minister of Defense to be a civilian and he [sic] as a civilian can belong to a particular party ... and as a civilian, he can express certain things,' he said, though adding that 'as members of the military, sometimes we restrain ourselves from acting like a normal citizen, given the very nature of the institution.'

IDHUCA Assistant Director Manuel Escalate, told *Gato Encerrado* that he was [concerned](#) that the Bukele administration, either through the ad hoc commission or through a National Security Law that was being discussed in the Legislative Assembly, seeks to legalize or formalize the participation of the military in national public issues.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Since taking office, President Nayib Bukele has made it clear that he thinks he is above the law. He has also shown utter contempt for any critics from the international community, as well, from heads of international human rights organizations to Members of Congress. Now that his party holds an overwhelming majority in the legislature, Bukele wields near unprecedented levels of power in modern Salvadoran history.

Among the very first actions taken by the New Ideas members in the Legislative Assembly was the illegal ousting of five magistrates of the Supreme Court's Constitutional Chamber and the Attorney General. The move demonstrates the depths of Bukele's disregard for constitutional law and foreshadows more assaults on democratic governance that will be ostensibly legitimized by legislative votes.

Moving forward, the new Attorney General and Supreme Court Magistrates - and possibly the Human Rights Ombudsman

and members of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal - will all likely come under President Bukele's direct influence, no longer serving as a potential counterweight to potential abuses of power. Simultaneously, high-ranking police and military officials have made evident that their loyalty lies not with the Constitution, but with Bukele himself.

It is therefore urgent that the United States Government act swiftly to withdraw its support for police and military forces that, over the past two years since Bukele's election, have repeatedly violated and attempted to subvert the limitations on their role that are inscribed in the Peace Accords. Failure to do so will hasten the downfall of civil liberties, political freedoms, and democracy in El Salvador.



The Bukele administration touted major increases in military spending during its first year in office (Photo: CISPES)

On December 21, 2020, Members of Congress voted to restrict access to Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador during the 2021 Fiscal Year. This was an important action and the first time that Congress had

imposed these restrictions on El Salvador since the 1989 murder of the Jesuits at the University of Central America and subsequent cover-up.

On May 21, 2021, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) announced it would no longer provide direct funding for the police in El Salvador or several other government institutions. This decision is well-justified.

But these restrictions, while critical, represent only a small percentage of overall U.S. assistance to the Salvadoran Armed Forces and police. For this reason, CISPES joins a number of human rights, religious and solidarity organizations, including School of the Americas Watch, Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective, Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) - Los Angeles, Network in Solidarity with Guatemala (NISGUA), Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), Sisters of Mercy - Justice Team, Pax Christi - USA, and others, in recommending that Congress restrict all police and military assistance to El Salvador through both State and Foreign Operations and Defense appropriations.

Though Congressional leaders and members of the Biden Administration have repeatedly expressed concerns regarding Bukele's actions and demonstrated authoritarian tendencies, continuation of funding to military and police, which are among his most powerful tools in fostering a culture of intimidation, fear, and compliance, especially considering the nation's traumatic history, undermines any statements that are made, however forceful. Given numerous demonstrations that both the police and military are acting in violation of their constitutional mandates – and limitations therein – further U.S. cooperation will only fuel their power and make the U.S. complicit in their actions.

-May 31, 2021