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# NAYIB BUKELE: POPULISM AND AUTOCRATIZATION, OR A VERY POPULAR DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED PRESIDENT?

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## Abstract

This article is about Nayib Bukele's presidency in El Salvador, and to what extent it is a case of populism, and if it has contributed to a negative democratic development between 2019–2021. By using the concepts of democratic backsliding, autocratization, and populism, three main conclusions are made. First, actions taken by Bukele during his presidency has directly contributed to a negative democratic development. Second, both during the electoral campaign and in office, there are also signs of populism, such as anti-pluralism, hijacking the state, mass clientelism, and a feeling of a less democratic civil society and free media. Consequently, Bukele has pushed the country into a process of autocratization, where the future destiny toward less democracy is still uncertain.

## Key words

Democratic recession, autocratization, populism, President Bukele, El Salvador.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2019, when Nayib Bukele was elected in a landslide, with over 50% of the popular vote in the first round, he became the third president elect from the former guerilla group, FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional). However, the former mayor of San Salvador was elected on a ticket from GANA (La Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional), the center-right party in Parliament. This was due to the fact that Bukele's newly formed party, Nueva Ideas (New Ideas), was not yet registered for the presidential race. With what many interpreted as an agenda

appealing to the masses, based on fighting crime, gang violence, and corruption, Bukele ran against the two dominant parties, FMNL and ARENA (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista) (Monitoreo, 2019).

On one hand, under Bukele's presidency, more resources have been allocated to schools, social welfare, and health care; the country has managed COVID-19 well, and his approval ratings have been between 85% and 95%. He closed his first year with an approval rate of around 90% (La Prensa Grafica, 2021). On the other hand, Bukele has not only been accused of running an election with a populist agenda, his presidency has also been blamed for taking

anti-democratic actions, e.g., when members of the Supreme Court and the general attorney were dismissed. Bukele's presidency has been discussed heavily regarding various aspects, such as his regular Twitter use and communication style (Ruiz-Alba, Mancinas-Chávez, 2020), the executive and legislative relationship (Tobar, 2020), authoritarianism (Gavarette, 2021), polarization and populism (Masek, Aguasvivas, 2021) and populism in relation to other Latin American leaders (Díaz Gonzáles et al., 2022). Few studies have really connected Bukele's presidency or his actions directly to the concepts of populism and democratic recession as a possible part of a wider process of autocratization (Baldovinos, 2021).

This article is about president Bukele's presidency and to what extent it is a case of populism, and if it has contributed to a negative democratic development in EL Salvador between 2019–2021. One could ask whether Bukele's presidency is symbolized as variant of pure populism, including democratic backsliding, or if it is a case of democratic recession and wider ongoing autocratization, as has been seen in other third-wave countries such as Nicaragua, Hungary or Turkey. It could also represent a combination of these two; one could understand El Salvador's government as a case of a very popular leader who has won the presidency and the majority in Parliament by a landslide, but where democracy will remain and is only backsliding temporarily.

The article is divided into four remaining sections. The second section covers the two analytical concepts used (democratic recession and populism) in relation to the case. The third section deals with El Salvador's democratic development and challenges and the extent to which they can be connected to Bukele's presidency; the fourth mainly is about the extent to which Bukele's presidency could be seen as populism. Finally, some conclusions are made.

## 2. Analytical approach: democratic recession and populism

Democracy's worldwide backsliding or regression over the last decade or so is not a new phenomenon (Freedom House, 2022b; V-Dem., 2022). In "State of the World 2020: Autocratization Turns Viral," the relatively new V-Democracy Institute reached the conclusion that,

While the world is still more democratic than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, we demonstrate that the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down to the levels around 1990. The "third wave of autocratization" is continuing, currently affecting 25 countries

and 34% of the world's population (2.6 billion) (Hellmeier et al., 2021, p. 1053)

A vast number of approaches have been used to tackle this theme from an analytical point of view. All sorts of obstacles to democracy or facilitators of nondemocratic or autocratic behavior have been related to issues such as populism and right-wing parties in advanced democracies, new self-confidence in authoritarian countries within non-Western cultural spheres, and shifting geopolitical balance between democracies and their authoritarian rivals, also acting as a de-consolidation process (Diamond et al. (Eds.), 2016; Puddington, Roynance, 2018; Kendall-Taylor, Lindstaedt, Frantz, 2019).

In 2021, Christian Welzel argued that democracy still belongs to the future despite worrying authoritarian behavior, concluding that,

Consequently, the backsliding of democracies into authoritarianism is limited to societies in which emancipative values remain underdeveloped. Contrary to the widely cited deconsolidation thesis, the ascendant generational profile of emancipative values means that the momentary challenges to democracy are unlikely to stifle democracy's long-term rise (Welzel, 2021, p. 132).

From a slightly different point of view, the concept of democratic backsliding has been used in recent years to analyze when a country is going through a process of implementing less free and fair elections, decrease of civil and political rights and weakening of rule of law, or when national security becomes a main issue to respond to perceived antagonists (Diamond, 2014; Ginzburg, Huq, 2019; Kendall-Taylor, Lindstaedt, Frantz, 2019; Puddington, Roynance, 2018; Waldner, Lust, 2018; Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2019; Haggard, Kaufmann, 2021).

In recent years, since Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg's article, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What is New About It?" (2019) was published, the trend has moved toward another somewhat different understanding of the pattern, in which we are witnessing a wider, longer-lasting process of autocratization. Autocratization includes phases such as democratic recession, democratic breakdown and, when autocracy is in place, and further autocratic consolidation (See also Lührmann et al., 2021).

As a consequence, the analysis of the case of El Salvador and President Nayib Bukele will be accomplished in two steps. First, one needs to establish to what extent democracy in El Salvador has lessened, using the democratic backsliding indicators of degree of free and fair elections, decrease of civil and political rights and weakening of rule of law. The second issue is to what extent this pattern could be linked to policies or actions accomplished by

president Nayib Bukele during 2019–2021, including to what extent prioritization of national security becomes the way to cope with internal political opponents. If democratic backsliding could be linked to Bukele's actions, one could understand the case as a wider process of autocratization, in which democratic recession is the first part of this process (Lührmann, Lindberg, 2019; Hellmeier et al., 2021; Vanessa et al., 2021).

Second, the issue of populism will be explored. The academic field contains a variety of versions of populism among historians, sociologists and political scientists, such as the popular agency approach, the Laclauan approach, the socioeconomic approach or a political strategy or style of politics (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2017). In recent years, some have called it an overstretched and misused concept (Brett, 2013) in relation to the far right or the left, demagoguery and something of a new force, but often in a negative sense.

However, the most common way to frame populism is with an ideational approach in which a group appeals to the people, critiquing the ruling elite or having an antiestablishment attitude (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2017). It also includes a binary view of politics with one good side, the people, against an evil side, represented by a corrupt elite. Consequently, populism could include all sorts of ideological stands and cannot automatically be positioned on a right–left scale (see an overview in Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). In Latin America, for example, Fujimori was in favor of a more liberal and conservative ideology with his neoliberal project, while left-wing leaders such as Chávez represented the opposite, with socialist and communist perspectives.

In this article, however, the approach Jan-Werner Müller (2017) takes in *What is Populism?* is used to discuss to what extent President Bukele is a true populist and how populism is connected to democracy, as well. One main point of Müller's (2017) contribution is the issue of populism through discussing most populists' key characteristics and what happens when a populist enters an official office, which is highly relevant in the Salvadorian case. Three main characteristics are used: critique of elites, antipluralism and the idea of forming identity politics.

The first condition is that populists are *critical of elites*, who are seen as corrupt or morally inferior. Often, populists understand themselves as innocent and hardworking, in contrast to the corrupt elite. The second condition is *antipluralism*, which means that populists claim that they are the only ones who could represent real people in terms of morality. The competing parties or leaders are immoral, corrupt or not a part of the real people. As Müller (2017)

understands it, "They, and only they, represent the people" (2017, p. 20). A third condition is that populism is form of *identity politics*, in which the populist claims to stand for the proper (the only) way to understand the people and real problems in society, therefore tending to pose a threat to democracy.

However, when a populist is in office, Müller (2017) adds three other important dimensions. In office, populist tend to continue fighting against the elite and appear as victims, maintaining the polarization of the debate and society overall. Ultimately, populists look for a crisis, e.g., an existential threat to allow them to act.

The first characteristic of a populist in office relates to "hijacking the state," which means that populists will pack the bureaucracy with their own people loyal to the leader or to the party, including lifting the independence of the judicial system and the courts. A second characteristic is mass clientelism or corruption, which means giving favors to loyal people, who also can represent real people. It is a step away from the principle of rule of law, representing "discriminatory legalism". Finally, in office, populist leaders tend to diminish the role of a free civil society and free media; by certain actions, the state takes control of these sectors directly or indirectly.

To summarize, the key questions are, first, to what extent Bukele's policies can be connected to democratic development in El Salvador during 2019–2022. The second issue is whether Bukele himself can be seen as populist.

### 3. Democratic development during Bukele's presidency

The background of the current situation can be traced back to civil war (1980–1992) and its aftermath. El Salvador is known to most people because in the 1980s, the left-wing guerrilla group FMLN and the government, supported by the Christian Party and the ARENA, fought a civil war of revolution, which was also part of the Cold War between communism and capitalism. The FMLN was directly or indirectly supported by the Soviet Union, Cuba and Nicaragua, while the government received political, economic and military support from the United States (McClintock, 1985). The civil war claimed more than 75,000 lives and forced more than a million people to leave the country. After the Catholic Church, the President of Costa Rica and the UN acted as mediators, a comprehensive peace agreement was signed in January 1992 under the auspices of the UN, which opened completely free and fair elections in 1994 (Karl, 1995; Paige, 1997; Wood, 1995).

Meanwhile, the former enemies ARENA and FMLN alternated in power of the presidency, and as the largest parties in the Parliament, after the 1994 election, two problems gradually developed: gang-related crime and corruption (Colburn, 2009; Colburn, Cruz, 2014; Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021; Wolf, 2009). Both the parties were to blame for this development, and neither of them tried to tackle the issues. Rather, political corruption grew in both parties, and by 2022, several former top politicians were facing allegations of political corruption, including all former presidents from ARENA and FMLN. Moreover, during this period, checks and balances in the political system were relatively successful, and democracy was developing (Freedom House, 2017–2022a). The Supreme Court managed to ensure that the executive and legislative branches followed the constitutional order, and ARENA (together with smaller right-wing parties) generally prevented further, deepening social and economic reforms, simply because the FMLN lacked a significant majority in the Parliament.

When Nayib Bukele, as mayor of San Salvador for FMLN, faced possible expulsion for having criticized the leadership of FMLN, it prompted momentum for a new party between FMLN and ARENA, particularly at a time when gang-related crimes had risen to an unprecedented rate and in light of the charges against top officials of the two dominant parties since the end of the civil war. Thus, Nueva Ideas was founded with Bukele as the top figure (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021). However, Nueva Ideas was prevented from achieving legal status to place a candidate

in the 2019 presidential election. Instead, Bukele became candidate for GANA. Meanwhile, Nueva Ideas grew as a party across the country and finally won by a landslide in the 2021 legislative elections, with a clear majority of seats. For the first time, El Salvador faced a reality in which one party controlled the presidency and a majority of Parliament with at least 56 out of 84 seats (Freedom House, 2022a).

To analyze to what extent President Bukele has contributed to a democratic regression or democratic backlash in El Salvador since he took office, one first must elaborate on the degree of democracy before and after he took office, between 2016 and 2021. One must also consider this period as a longer perspective of democratic development (between 1994 and 2021) to understand if the pattern of democratic regression might be even longer.

Bukele won the election in 2019 and has been the president since June 1, 2019, which means that the period of 2016 to 2018/2019 came before his presidency; 2019 and beyond represent his time in office. Before Bukele became president, El Salvador's democratic rate peaked between 2014 and 2017. Based on V-Democracy's Electoral and Liberal Democracy Index, Figure 1 illustrates a decline of democracy after 2017 (interval from low to high, 0–1), with the index of 0.67 for Electoral democracy (year 2014–2017) and 0.47 for liberal democracy year (2014–2017, see V-Dem., 2022). Besides the electoral democracy index, the liberal democracy index also includes civil and political rights and the rule of law. After 2017, the democratic rate decreased to 0.64 and 0.44 for 2018–2019, respectively for electoral

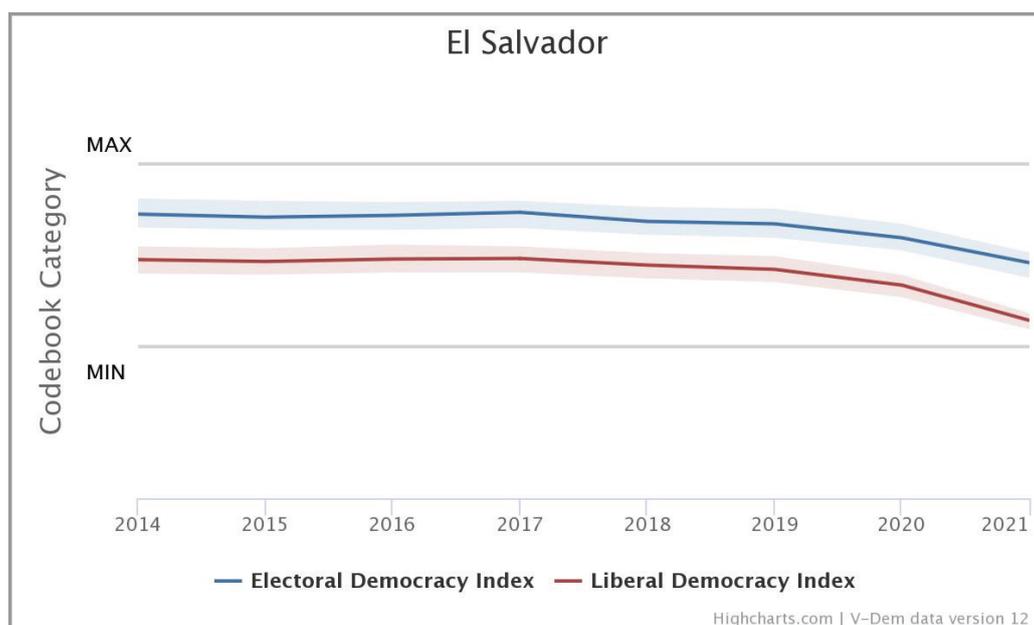


Fig. 1. Democratic Decline in El Salvador (2014–2021).

Source: V-Dem Institute Index El Salvador, 2022.

democracy and the liberal democracy index (see V-Dem., 2022). This means that the negative democratic path had already begun, and the question is therefore what the problems were during this period. Looking at various democratic reports, most democratic problems could be traced to widespread corruption or gang-related issues. These two problems led to democratic issues with the rule of law as well as self-censorship among the media and politicians (Freedom House, 2017-2022a).

Therefore, it must not be a coincidence that the entire background and ideas of Bukele's presidential campaign as well as the emergence of Nueva Ideas represented a fight against corruption and against the political pact of the left's FMLN and the right's ARENA. The idea behind the campaign was also to gain control of the country over gang-related activities, another key problem with democracy in El Salvador. However, the decline of democracy has continued during Bukele's presidency, and by 2020, V-Dem's Electoral and Liberal Democracy Index was 0.58 respectively 0.37. During 2021, the democratic rate decreased even more; the rate for electoral democracy fell down to 0.47, while the liberal democracy index fell to 0.21 (see V-Dem., 2022).

From a longer perspective, as Figure 2 (scale: 0–1) shows, El Salvador's 2020 democratic rate returned to the level of 1994, around the time when the civil war ended, and the country held its first completely free and fair elections. Figure 2 also shows that El Salvador made the transition to an electoral democracy during the 1994 election, the "election of the century", when the civil war had ended with a peace

agreement and when the left, represented by FMLN, participated in the election for the first time.

The second issue in this section is elaborating on how this negative democratic development could be connected directly to Bukele's policies or actions during his time in office. One part of the answer seems clear, and there are some signs connected to Bukele's misuse of the principles of democracy.

The first few signs include the norms of the electoral democracy and the rule of law component and surfaced after Bukele's Nueva Ideas won a supermajority in the Parliament election in 2021, enabling the administration to sack disloyal judges, assign new judges to the Supreme Court and install a new attorney general, all loyal to the president and Nueva Ideas (Freedom House, 2021, 2022a). However, it gets a bit trickier here. In reality, the checks and balances between the executive, legislative and the judicial branches diminished, which could be seen as a part of the autocratization and the democratic recession. Nevertheless, these actions still aligned with the constitutional order of El Salvador. The Constitution (and the ideas extending from it about the construction of the political system) never involved the assumption that one dominant party or coalition would gain both the presidency and two-thirds of Parliament, which indirectly lifted most of the checks and balances in the system. However, staging national parliamentary elections and presidential elections every third and fifth year also allows the political game to change, and the Constitution states implicitly that a president can only serve one term, not seeking reelection in a consecutive period.

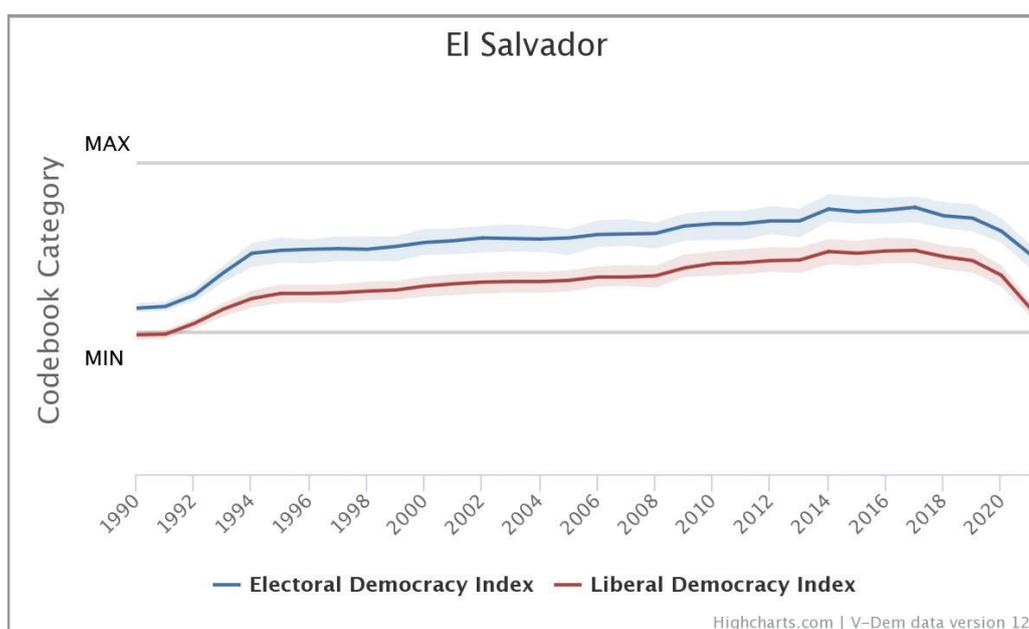


Fig. 2. Democratic development in El Salvador (1990–2020).

Source: V-Dem Institute Index El Salvador, 2022.

The idea is to prevent any president from gaining too much political power over time, thereby upholding the principle of checks and balances, and preventing, for example, a process of autocratization. The problem is that Article 154 of the Constitution only states that the “presidential period shall be of five years, and shall begin and end on the first of June, without the person who exercised the Presidency being able to continue in his functions one day more” (Constitution de la República de El Salvador, 1983, Art. 154). It does not tell us anything about seeking reelection *per se*. Article 152 of the Constitution of the republic (1983) states,

[The following] shall not be candidates for the President of the Republic:—He who has filled the Presidency of the Republic for more than six months, consecutive or not, during the period immediately prior to or within the last six months prior to the beginning of the presidential period.

This means that a president could resign a few months ahead of the next election and run again for the next presidential term. No one has done that, but President Bukele has announced that he will run again in 2024, based on this premises. The Supreme Court, loyal to Bukele, has also certified that it is within the constitutional order to seek election in another period if the candidate has been away from the office for six months, in accordance with Article 152 of the Constitution. In this case, Bukele is using a constitutional loophole, and the Supreme Court, loyal to Bukele, makes it possible. However, a more critical Supreme Court could have denied the move for other reasons, e.g., though the Constitution does not explicitly forbid any president to run again, but a former Supreme Court decision made it clear that 10 years must pass before seeking reelection. This decision is not a part of the written Constitution *per se* and could therefore be reinterpreted by a new Supreme Court.

All together Bukele’s ambition to run again in 2024 extends far beyond acceptability, since the idea behind the entire Constitution was to establish a system with a one-term presidency. Bukele knows, this of course, and is therefore demonstrating another sign of autocratization as a part of the country’s democratic recession.

Another worrying sign of El Salvador’s status of free and fair elections is that during 2021, both formerly dominant parties’ (FMLN and ARENAS) party offices were raided, and several party figures were arrested on corruption charges. According to Freedom House (2022a), there were also reports that the police failed to inform the arrested of the charges against them, and they were denied access to lawyers. The opposition understood this operation as

a sign of a political climate increasingly hostile to the opposition, who had been denied access to preview legislation in the Parliament. The next step of autocratization will be harder restrictions on political parties, perhaps prohibition of some parties and more extensive harassment of political parties and candidates.

Another key incident prompting authoritarian alerts, including both rule of law and the security aspect of democracy, involved Bukele in early February 2020, before he had a majority in the Parliament. Bukele occupied the parliamentary buildings and surrounding areas with military and security forces to force Parliament to approve funds for his master plan of security funding related to Plan Cuscatlan, Bukele’s master plan of future political and socio-economic reforms. The action was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, which was not fully loyal to the new president at the time. The entire scene must be seen as an authoritarian move in which the president purposefully violated fundamental political and civil rights, rule of law and used security forces to enhance his political agenda against his opponent in Parliament. This incident includes most aspects of the concept of autocratization, as a part of a larger process of democratic recession.

Some other signs of autocratization and violations of civil rights and the rule of law include anti-COVID-19 measures accomplished by the Bukele administration during 2020 (Freedom House, 2021; Hellmeier et al., 2021). Several governments around the world have taken up anti-democratic COVID-19 measures during the pandemic in 2020–2022, but it does not excuse Bukele’s actions. According to Freedom House (2021), Bukele’s administration resisted judicial complaints about the strict lockdown in March to June 2020, when people were forced to stay at home and threatened with arrest if caught outside. Several hundred people were detained for violating COVID-19 regulations in poor sanitary conditions that violated basic human rights, according to the Supreme Court. In addition, the administration avoided making information public, despite common demand.

Finally, a lot of the policies proposed by Bukele and confirmed by Parliament involve the greater Cuzcatlan Plan, including all sorts of infrastructure projects, social issues and security-related issues (Plan Cuscatlán, 2019). Yet, these policies have not included a wider campaign to silence the opposition by force, though there are some signs that this might happen or that some principles of democracy are about to vanish. For example, during Bukele’s war against *las maras*, launched in late March, there

were also new additions to the penal code. Graffiti related to gang issues was forbidden, sanctions were set for media and other actors that published overly positive images of gang activities and gang members were labeled officially as terrorists on Bukele's Facebook and Twitter accounts (Nayib Bukele, 2022a, 2022b). All of these actions can be seen as a violation of freedom of expression, or at least as Bukele stretching the concept of democracy to define a terrorist and establish how to treat criminals (Amnesty International, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022). Furthermore, during the campaign against the gangs, photos of gang members have been published through social media and on the president's official Facebook account, actions one does not normally see in liberal democratic societies but more in authoritarian states such as China, Russia and Belarus.

To summarize, though El Salvador's democracy might only be backsliding temporarily, it seems rather like Bukele is following the path of autocratization, since his policies have contributed to weakening the possibility of free and fair elections, individual rights and the rule of law. Additionally, his emphasis on security might escalate into further decreasing the opposition's possibility to act politically, both during his first term and in forthcoming elections.

#### 4. Populism during the campaign and in office

During the presidential campaign and his time in office, Nayib Bukele has been recognized as everything from a millennial boy, a social media star, a populist and a maverick to a millennial dictator or someone at least related to millennial authoritarianism (Baldovinos, 2021; Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021; Perelló, Navia, 2022). Bukele was elected as mayor for FMLN in the small town of Nuevo Cuscatlán 2012 and the capital of San Salvador in 2015, but was forced to leave the party in 2017 after frequent criticism of FMLN leadership. Many saw him as a doer who achieved impressive and visible projects, mostly related to infrastructure and social benefits. Since he decided to run for office in 2018, his popularity increased, mostly staying between 40% and 60% two months before the election (Fundaungo, 2018). In office, his approval rate has been around 90% most of the time, which makes him into one of the most popular democratically elected presidents ever in El Salvador and around the world.

However, there have been clear signs of populism both during the campaign and under his presidency. First, most of the presidential campaign consisted of various types of *criticism of the ruling elites*. One type was his campaign against corruption within the

entire political system, but more precisely, of the two dominant political parties since the peace agreement in 1994, ARENA and FMLN. The top level of corruption involved at least two former presidents, Tony Saca (ARENA), imprisoned for ten years due to money laundering of over \$300 million in public funds, and Mauricio Funes (FMLN), accused of embezzling around \$351 million. Funes fled to Nicaragua, where he applied for asylum (Monitoreo, 2019).

In the campaign, Bukele used slogans such as "There is enough money when nobody steals it" (The Guardian, 2019). Concerning concrete plans for dealing with corruption, he also stated that El Salvador should use a system similar to the international corruption commission, which was implemented in Guatemala with great success. However, Bukele's criticism of political elites goes beyond corruption; he heavily criticized the entire political system of the post-1992 peace-agreement political development with ARENA and FMLN. The two former enemies from the Civil War later developed a political elite pact during the 2000s, which no one expected. At the same time, both parties have been connected to corruption scandals at all levels and have not been able to prevent gangs controlling city neighborhoods.

However, when Bukele was about to launch his campaign, El Salvador had fallen somewhat on Transparency International's index of corruption among countries, from 39 points (100 is the top, 0 the bottom) around 2014–2015 to 33 points by 2017 (Transparency International, 2014–2022). This means that corruption increased in the country, or at least, people saw it as an increasing problem. Furthermore, in the 2019 election, the two other major presidential candidates from ARENA and FMLN campaigned somewhat against corruption. Together with gang-related issues, it was one of the main foundations of the entire campaign (Monitoreo, 2019).

Monitoreo (2019), the center for transparency and democracy, published a comprehensive report on the main candidates' messages on television and in newspapers and other channels during the campaign. Carlos Callejo, the ARENA candidate, often used phrases such as "vote," "all people," "the family" and "good," and he brought up topics related to social problems, education, health and internal security. Callejo's campaign has been measured as combination of what is best for the party and his personal messages, and to a lesser extent, about the party platform. FMLN's candidate, Hugo Martínez, used different phrases, such as "Salvador," "vote," "the governments," "the country," "the people" and "the president," and he talked about justice, social and health issues. His campaign message was more

about the party and its platform, and less about his own personal image. From this perspective, Bukele's campaign message stands out; he more frequently emphasized phrases such as "the country", "the flag", "new ideas", "change", "the same", "as always", "robbery", "not traditional" and related topics such as modernizing the country, including social and health issues, control of territory, education and fighting corruption and the robbery of common goods. Bukele's campaign message was almost exclusively related to him as a person. In this sense, despite the extent to which the three top candidates talked about social issues, education and internal security, Bukele's campaign had a much more populist stance against the political elite, the corrupted political system and the established politicians behind it.

Consequently, the Bukele campaign also had features of *antipluralism* and posed *identity politics* as the solution, i.e., implying that Bukele and his movement were the only solution to tackle the situation in El Salvador after decades of misbehavior from the old right and left governments. The foregoing allows us to infer that Bukele's campaign was largely emotional and intended to arouse emotions such as confidence and the hope of a better quality of life based on the election of a candidate from a "non-traditional" political party. Bukele often claimed that he could best represent and understand the people's needs, and that the combating FMLN and ARENA candidates represented the old traditional and corrupt system (Monitoreo, 2019).

Still, an electoral campaign is a unique situation; the populist approach does not automatically apply in office. However, with Bukele, it has followed the same path. To a large extent, his entire time in office (between 2019 and 2022) has followed a populist path.

First, there are very clear signs of "hijacking the state," at least in the judicial arena, including lifting the independence of the judicial system and the courts. After Nueva Ideas won a super-majority in Parliament in 2021, Bukele sacked former members of the Supreme Court and packed it with his own loyal supporters. The same thing occurred with the attorney general, who is supposed to be loyal to the country rather than a government-aligned attorney, and this tendency has been repeated across the country in lower courts. As recognized by Freedom House (2022), for example, this trend means that at least part of the judicial system can be criticized for being aligned with Nueva Ideas and President Bukele rather than being independent from the political system. In addition, it is a clear sign of mass clientelism and could favor corruption.

Second, during the campaign, Bukele promised to fight corruption among politicians and civil servants. He has done that to some extent, but there are also worrying signs of corruption related to the government. Some of the former members of the FMLN and ARENA governments have been prosecuted for corruption, and some are under corruption charges. Bukele has also been criticized heavily for several reasons. One is that the authorities have raided the opposition's campaign offices to find evidence of corruption, but the opposition has rather interpreted these actions as illegal attempts to silence and weaken them. In addition, while the Bukele administration officially emphasizes the fight against corruption, its efforts have been criticized by the international community. For example, when prosecutors found evidence of illegal public contracts related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the newly controlled national assembly issued immunity for all contractors during the pandemic. The US Department issued a list of Salvadorians engaged in corruption at the highest level within the Bukele administration in July 2021, but Bukele dismissed the allegations and decided to leave the OAS-sponsored International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES) to assist Salvadoran prosecutors in their effort to fight corruption. As a consequence, Freedom House concluded that Bukele has contributed to the politicization of anticorruption efforts across the entire political system (Freedom House, 2021, 2022a).

A third characteristic of populism while in office is that civil society and the media feel less freedom than before. When it comes to these issues, however, there has not been any significant decline during Bukele's presidency (Freedom House 2019, 2022a). Civil society operates more or less under the same conditions as before Bukele took office. However, there is a feeling among civil organizers that civil society has been more excluded from policymaking under Bukele. In addition, during 2021, Nueva Ideas dominated the legislative assembly and set up a commission to investigate the previous year's NGO state funding. Critics are afraid that this might be a step toward more state control over civil society, not only for funding, but also about their ideas and other anti-government activities. Still, however, civil society operates as freely as before. The same goes for the media, though one of the most dominant challenges for journalists is self-censorship after risking harassment or violence for covering issues related to gangs or corruption charges. As in other countries, other challenges relate to social media, a high concentration of media ownership and fake news (Freedom House, 2021, 2022a).

## 5. Conclusions

When Bukele won the presidential election in a landslide in 2019, all Salvadorians hoped for a change. Gone from the presidential seat were the two dominant parties, FMLN and ARENA, and after Nueva Ideas won the parliamentary election in 2021, the trend became even clearer. President Bukele now had massive popular support for his policies and has maintained a very high popular rate (over 80%) during his time in office. That said, Bukele could basically do whatever he would like and can quite easily accomplish what he wants in terms of political and socioeconomic reforms, since he has a two-thirds majority in the legislative assembly.

If Bukele is a true democrat, he does not have to lean toward autocratic behavior or use populism, as a way, to accomplish his political agenda per se. Unfortunately for democratic development, his style and decisions have contributed to the decline of democracy between 2019 and 2022, with the result that El Salvador's democratic status is back to what it was before 1994's breakthrough democratic election. Bukele's decisions and behavior (firing the supreme judges and others, as well as the attorney general), his accusations against the media and his populist rhetoric have showed clear signs of autocratization, rather than just somewhat democratic backsliding.

In addition, during Bukele's time in office, there have been very clear signs of hijacking the state in the judicial arena and worrying signs of corruption within the government. There is also a sense within various organizations as well as the press and TV establishments of less freedom than before. Altogether, it means that Bukele fits into the category of populism. Together with the negative democratic trend and a form of autocratization, in which his policies are clearly connected to negative anti-democratic actions since 2019, these forecast the overall picture for the democratic development in El Salvador in a very bad light. The 2022 war against the gangs also seems to strengthen this trend of pure populism and autocratic behavior (see, Amnesty International, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

In a wider sense, Bukele seems to follow the same path as other populist and autocratic leaders—one-time democratically elected leaders—in Latin America as well as in Europe, such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Recep Erdogan in Turkey and Victor Orbán in Hungary. While Nayib Bukele is a very popular and democratically elected president who has accomplished several important reforms in El Salvador, his legacy will remain as someone who pushed the country's democracy

in the wrong direction, toward more autocracy and less democracy, as a result of some of his decisions. Hopefully, it will not end with a full-scale autocratic rule, as in the case of Chávez, Ortega, Erdogan or Orbán, but if Bukele runs and wins another term unconstitutionally, the assumption is that democracy will vanish in El Salvador, at least for the time being.

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