



# A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** A sudden uptick of violence in March, caused by the breakdown of talks between the government and criminal gangs, has sparked a ruthless six-month law enforcement campaign in El Salvador, anchored in unprecedented mass arrests and restriction of legal rights.

**Why does it matter?** Fed up with gang violence, most Salvadorans have applauded the crackdown. But it has also drawn criticism from human rights organisations and could boomerang. Having more than doubled the prison population, the country is headed for a humanitarian crisis in its jails, while gangs, though now in disarray, could strike back.

**What should be done?** Rather than commit to strong-arm tactics for the long term, the government should provide an off-ramp for the thousands of gang members willing to build new lives in law-abiding society. The country's main foreign partners should support these efforts and revive their cooperation with San Salvador.

## *Executive Summary*

To a chorus of popular support, El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele has embarked on the largest dragnet of suspected gang members ever seen in Central America. Under a "state of exception" declared in March, the government has lengthened the period of detention without charge and lowered the age of prosecution to twelve. Police and troops have mounted checkpoints around and raids on poor districts overrun by gangs. Some 53,000 alleged criminals have been jailed on the basis of often dubious proof, many in overcrowded, unhygienic and dangerous conditions. The prison population now stands proportionally as the world's highest, prompting authorities to break ground for a massive new facility. But although murder rates are touching new lows, with many gang members either jailed or on the run, the draconian policy raises other concerns that require attention. Gangs could regroup to retaliate while a humanitarian and human rights crisis festers in the country's jails. For the country's long-term benefit, authorities should develop a way for gang members to return to society as law-abiding citizens.

The crackdown's severity is all the more startling in light of Bukele's reported overtures to the criminal gangs that have tormented El Salvador for over two decades. Elected in 2019 as an outsider intent on supplanting a discredited two-party system, the extroverted young president boosted public services in places plagued by poverty and violence, where gangs find many of their recruits. According to media reports and first-hand testimony gathered by Crisis Group, his government also entered discreet talks with jailed and free gang leaders, spurring a steep reduction in homicide rates. In return, the authorities reportedly granted these leaders a number of concessions, including expedited release for some of them. During this period, the police and military reported fewer clashes with gangs and arrests of their members.

A shocking killing spree late in March, including the murder of 62 people on one day – the bloodiest 24 hours in recent Salvadoran history – provided the backdrop for Bukele's abrupt change of tack. Yet even before this flare-up, there were reasons to doubt the government's commitment to a negotiated demobilisation of gangs. The president has always denied that talks with gangs were happening, suggesting that negotiation was unlikely to be a pathway to a permanent settlement. As soon as his party won an absolute majority of seats in the legislature in 2021 elections, he worked with deputies to bury any evidence of talks by replacing the attorney general and shelving his predecessor's investigation into the reported negotiations. The MS-13 gang has suggested it carried out the March killings because it felt betrayed by the government's perceived failure to honour its previous commitments, hinting that the president's interest even in secretive talks had waned by then.

Bukele's government has turned to heavy-handed tactics to respond to surges of gang violence in the past, but none compares to the present crackdown in either intensity or duration. With public support for the state of exception sky-high, Bukele seems convinced he is sounding the death knell for the country's three main gangs. He fiercely rejects criticism of his methods.

But there are grounds for wondering whether Bukele will succeed. Although murder rates have reached historical lows, clashes between gangs and security personnel are on the rise. Gangs have leaked statements threatening to hit back harder if the government does not return to dialogue. The campaign to arrest anyone who has, has had or may have had a link with gangs could force former members back into crime if they see no hope of anything else. Mass arrests of former gang members who have converted to Christianity in order to quit gang life are troubling. Dire overcrowding, combined with the government's refusal to take responsibility for what has gone wrong – from custodial deaths to wrongful arrests – could fuel tensions in jails, leading to mutinies and escapes. El Salvador's experience in 2015 after its gang truce broke down, when the murder rate rose to the world's highest, hints at the risks that may lie ahead. Adverse financial conditions, the threat of debt default and strained ties with the West make it all the more vital that Bukele shift to a security policy that is resilient, durable and internationally reputable.

El Salvador needs a more humane and sustainable approach to solving its gang problem. A crucial plank of such a policy would be the creation of a clear pathway out of gang life for jailed and free members. Even as they seek to profit politically from fighting crime, Bukele and his senior officials should be mindful of the innate dangers of a huge prison population, which must be fed and housed, and begin looking for ways to release jailed suspects and convicts subject to their monitored participation in rehabilitation programs. Various bills to create a national rehabilitation scheme have been tabled in the country's Legislative Assembly over recent years, but none has prospered; these should be revived. A rehabilitation and reintegration initiative should include measures that promote employment for former gang members, with support from churches and civil society. To help communities accept the gang members who may come to live among them, San Salvador should also promote restorative justice for victims of violence. Support from large donors, including the U.S. and European Union, will likely be key to making this initiative a reality.

Bukele has so far shown little interest in slowing his pursuit of gangs' unconditional surrender. But the humanitarian and reputational costs as well as the risks of a return to extremes of lethal violence make it imperative that the government prepare an alternative way out for the jailed population. Force may put the gangs on the run for a period of time, but it will take much more to begin dismantling them for good.

**Guatemala City/Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 5 October 2022**

# A Remedy for El Salvador's Prison Fever

## I. Introduction

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Since his 2019 election, President Nayib Bukele has overseen a sharp decline in homicides, with El Salvador experiencing its least violent years since the civil war ended in 1992.<sup>1</sup> Officials attribute the astonishing drop-off to the effects of the government's security policy, but evidence suggests that Bukele's initial success owed more to negotiations between the government and criminal gangs that have plagued the country for decades – the three most prominent being the MS-13 and the 18th Street gang's two factions (ie, the Southerners and the Revolutionaries).<sup>2</sup> Reported jailhouse meetings between officials and gang leaders even prompted the former attorney general to open an investigation, but the new legislature dominated by Bukele's party voted to replace him in May 2021, and the probe was shelved.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of a horrific spike in murders in March, however, El Salvador's leadership changed tack, meeting the threat with an extraordinarily heavy hand.<sup>4</sup> Apparently prompted by the disruption of secretive talks with the government, in late March the MS-13 mounted a sudden but brutal campaign of killings, spurring the government's draconian response. Bukele's government immediately declared a "state of exception", which continues to this day, with mass arrests of suspected gang members.<sup>5</sup> More than 53,000 alleged gang members, including over 7,500 women, have been captured so far, more than doubling the number of people in the country's prisons.<sup>6</sup> El Salvador now has the highest incarceration rate in the world, at around 2 per cent of the adult population.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daily homicides have dropped from almost eight to around two on average. "El año más seguro de la historia", *Diario El Salvador*, 17 December 2021. Averages calculated by journalist Roberto Valencia: on the averages before Bukele took office, see his tweet, @cguanacas, 11:17am, 1 July 2019; and on more recent ones, see his tweet, @cguanacas, 6:59pm, 22 August 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Report N°81, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, 8 July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "Salvadoran ex-prosecutor says government quashed probe into pact with gangs", Reuters, 28 December 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Iron-fist policies have dominated successive governments' approaches to gangs since the early 2000s. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°64, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 19 December 2017.

<sup>5</sup> "Collapsed government talks with MS-13 sparked record homicides in El Salvador, audios reveal", *El Faro*, 17 May 2022. El Salvador deems a "state of exception" to be something different from a "state of emergency". The Salvadoran constitution sees the former as a response to war, major unrest or other forms of instability allowing the government to suspend some constitutional guarantees for renewable periods of 30 days. The latter is regulated by law and is designed primarily for responding more swiftly to natural disasters.

<sup>6</sup> "Gobierno salvadoreño reporta más de 50.270 capturados en estado de excepción", EFE, 19 August 2022. The government posted the 53,000 figure on Twitter. See tweet by the Ministry of Security, @SeguridadSV, 9:53am, 20 September 2022.

<sup>7</sup> El Salvador is set to nearly double the incarceration rate in the U.S., which held the previous world record with 629 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants in 2021. See Figure 3 in Appendix B. "El Salvador

Bukele's actions in the security realm during his tenure in office have given him sustained, stratospheric popularity among Salvadorans, which hovers well over 80 per cent, and enabled him to consolidate power.<sup>8</sup> The president's party, Nuevas Ideas, won a sweeping two-thirds majority in the February 2021 legislative elections, as well as the mayor's office in 152 of the country's 262 municipalities.<sup>9</sup> Once in control of parliament, Bukele wasted no time in taking hold of the judiciary, replacing the attorney general and ten of fifteen Supreme Court judges, including those in the Constitutional Chamber, which has since ruled in favour of allowing re-election to a second consecutive presidential term despite a constitutional ban.<sup>10</sup> Bukele has taken advantage of this judgment to announce that he plans to run again in 2024.<sup>11</sup> The government also forced retirement upon judges, prosecutors and police officers who were over 60 years old or had been in office for more than 30 years, creating an opportunity to replace them with more loyal officials.<sup>12</sup>

Although the government has retained extraordinary popularity throughout the state of exception – and generated some would-be regional imitators who appear to see Bukele as having alighted on a winning political formula – the country's overall outlook is tinged with uncertainty.<sup>13</sup> On the economic front, tough enforcement of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic received widespread praise for helping to manage a public health challenge, but severely affected the country's economy, which contracted by 8.6 per cent in 2020.<sup>14</sup> Despite a 10.8 per cent reboot in 2021, the economy's future looks grim.<sup>15</sup> Rating agencies and financial institutions have voiced concern about Bukele's authoritarian traits and his attachment to Bitcoin, which he made El Salvador adopt as legal tender. This volatile crypto-currency has dropped in value from over \$45,000 per token in September 2021 to around \$20,000 today.<sup>16</sup> Some observers are suggesting that the country may head toward default on its debt

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accused of 'massive' human rights violations with 2% of adults in prison", *The Guardian*, 2 June 2022. See World Prison Brief website.

<sup>8</sup> "El 87 % de salvadoreños aprueba la gestión de Bukele en tres años de gobierno", EFE, 1 June 2022.

<sup>9</sup> "Nuevas Ideas, partido de Bukele, logra 56 diputaciones y mayoría de alcaldías", EFE, 20 March 2021.

<sup>10</sup> "Bukele's Legislative Assembly ousts Supreme Court magistrates and attorney general", *El Faro*, 2 May 2021; "El Salvador top court opens door to president's re-election, U.S. protests", Reuters, 4 September 2021.

<sup>11</sup> "El Salvador president re-election bid draws strong reaction", *The Washington Post*, 16 September 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interview, former judge, Santa Ana, 31 March 2022. "Asamblea de Bukele reforma la ley para purgar a un tercio de los jueces", *El Faro*, 1 September 2021; "3,000 agentes de la PNC y ANSP deberán someterse al retiro obligatorio por cumplir 60 años de edad", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 12 May 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Praise of Bukele's approach has become common in political debate in Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Honduras, among other countries. Ciprian Reyes, a presidential candidate in the Dominican Republic, has openly committed to replicating "Bukele's method" if he is elected. See tweet by Ciprian Reyes, @ciprianreyes, 5:27am, 14 September 2022.

<sup>14</sup> The government was able to balance strict quarantines with economic relief measures such as \$300 subsidies to 100,000 households struggling with the lockdown and food handouts. It also managed a swift vaccine rollout. "La OPS/OMS destaca el trabajo del Gobierno en el manejo de la pandemia y por la preparación del plan de vacunación", Ministry of Health of El Salvador, 12 March 2021.

<sup>15</sup> See World Bank data here.

<sup>16</sup> "El Salvador's Bitcoin losses swell to 28% as Bukele buys more", Bloomberg, 10 May 2022.

in the coming years, as it approaches major payment dates while striving to attract fresh credit.<sup>17</sup>

Bukele has also become notorious for defying the country's main partners, particularly the U.S., as he accuses foreign powers of meddling with domestic affairs and even funding opposition movements.<sup>18</sup> In international forums, El Salvador has taken positions at odds with those of Western democracies, abstaining from UN and Organization of American States (OAS) votes denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Nicaragua's seizure of the OAS building in Managua.<sup>19</sup> As a result of strained ties, the U.S. and European Union (EU) have redirected some of their cooperation funds, particularly those supporting the security and justice systems, away from state institutions and toward civil society organisations.<sup>20</sup>

This report examines President Bukele's shift from negotiation with gangs to a full-scale crackdown and assesses the risks of worsening violence. It then explores how the government could pivot to a policy that places greater emphasis on rehabilitation as a step toward dismantling the gangs. It is based on over 70 interviews in El Salvador and abroad from November 2021 to July 2022, with experts, religious leaders, former gang members, NGO staffers, former government advisers, community leaders and locals, humanitarian workers, diplomats and academics. The dates of some interviews are left unspecified to protect sources. Crisis Group made numerous attempts to hear the views of high- and medium-level government officials, but the enquiries went unanswered.

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<sup>17</sup> El Salvador's risk of default has risen substantially. In 2015, both S&P and Fitch gave it a B+ level credit rating. By the first half of 2022, S&P had lowered that valuation to CCC+ and Fitch to CCC, with Fitch downgrading it further to CC in September. "El Salvador – Credit Rating", Trading Economics, 2 September 2022. A CC-level valuation means default is a real possibility and the country has few coping mechanisms to withstand an economic downturn. Among the most important worsening conditions are an increase in the debt-to-GDP ratio, from 70 per cent in 2015 to an expected 87 per cent in 2022, and a greater reliance on short-term debt. With respect to short-term debt, the government will have to pay \$800 million to external creditors in January 2023, although it repurchased part of it in September. "Los planes de Gobierno para evitar la crisis fiscal: reforma de pensiones, créditos y vender más deuda estatal", *El Faro*, 10 July 2022; "El Salvador anuncia recompra de parte de su deuda soberana", Deutsche Welle, 22 September 2022.

<sup>18</sup> "Nayib Bukele calls himself the 'world's coolest dictator' – but is he joking?", *The Guardian*, 26 September 2021; "Bukele y Biden: 5 momentos de la creciente tensión entre EE.UU. y El Salvador y cómo afecta a dos aliados históricos", BBC Mundo, 15 December 2021; Stephen McFarland, "From Bad to Worse: Nayib Bukele's Split with Washington", *Americas Quarterly*, 15 December 2021.

<sup>19</sup> "Gobierno de Bukele vuelve a abstenerse de votar en ONU por el 'cese inmediato' de ataques de Rusia a Ucrania", *El Salvador*, 24 March 2022; "Condena casi unánime de la OEA a la ocupación de sus oficinas en Nicaragua", EFE, 13 May 2022.

<sup>20</sup> "U.S. to pull El Salvador funds on 'deep concerns' over recent dismissals", Reuters, 21 May 2021.



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## II. From Security Miracle to State of Exception

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Before March 2022, when the MS-13 went on a rampage and Bukele cracked down, El Salvador's public debate was focused more on the president's anti-democratic steps to consolidate power than gang violence. Rates of violence had plummeted to historical lows, with the exception of a few sporadic series of murders. Then, a single weekend of unprecedented violence triggered a radical change, prompting a ruthless government response centred on mass detentions and the suspension of rights.

### A. *El Salvador's Gangs and the Peak of Violence*

El Salvador has been plagued by gang violence for decades. Born in the U.S. among Central American migrants, the MS-13 and 18th Street gang found their members deported en masse in the 1990s, after which they reconstituted and spread across El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala.<sup>21</sup> Thrown back into stagnating post-war economies in Central America, the young gang members were quick to find new recruits. In El Salvador, they swiftly absorbed pre-existing gangs and battled for territory.<sup>22</sup> As noted above, the 18th Street gang later split into two factions, the Southerners and the Revolutionaries, which together with the MS-13 continue to make up the country's three main gangs.

Since the early 2000s, successive governments have sought to use mass incarceration to halt gangs' expansion, but with mixed results.<sup>23</sup> Gang membership continued to rise, with jailed leaders exerting tight control of the lower ranks from behind bars; extortion of local businesses became the preferred means of covering members' and their relatives' needs, as well as the legal expenses of those in jail.<sup>24</sup> Prior to the crack-down, authorities estimated that over 70,000 gang members (circa 1 per cent of the population) were active in more than 90 per cent of the country's municipalities, making it virtually impossible for politicians and state officials to avoid engaging with them if they wish to, among other things, carry out an election campaign or provide services in poor neighbourhoods.<sup>25</sup>

After peaking seven years ago, El Salvador's homicide rate has been on a downward trend.<sup>26</sup> The death toll soared in 2015, following the breakdown of a not wholly

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<sup>21</sup> Mary Helen Johnson, "National Policies and the Rise of Transnational Gangs", Migration Policy Institute, 1 April 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Dudley, *MS-13: The Making of America's Most Notorious Gang* (New York, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> In 2003, President Francisco Flores (1999-2004) from the right-wing ARENA party launched the first policy targeting gangs, called Iron Fist, which his successor Antonio Elías Saca (2004-2009) turned into Super Iron Fist. Crisis Group Report, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Extortion remains central to gang income, although these groups are increasingly diversifying into provision of services and goods, as well as drug peddling. For example, gangs charge for parking, but have also set up shop to provide private transport, wash cars, and sell food and drink, among other businesses. Crisis Group interview, academic, San Salvador, 22 April 2022. "Renta o Extorsión: Victimarios y Víctimas de las Maras en El Salvador", Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, October 2021; "The Omnipresent Business of the MS13 in El Salvador", Insight Crime, 25 January 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interviews, mayor and former municipal counsellor, San Salvador, March and May 2022. Crisis Group Commentary, "Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador", 26 November 2018.

<sup>26</sup> See Figure 1 in Appendix B.

transparent dialogue among the country's main gangs, and between them and the government, known as the "truce" (2012-2014).<sup>27</sup> As the 2014 presidential election approached, President Mauricio Funes, from the left-leaning Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, under whose aegis the dialogue had started, began distancing himself from what had become a highly unpopular process. His successor, Salvador Sánchez Céren, killed off the truce, triggering a resurgence of clashes with the gangs as the military grew more involved in policing, the police gave new "reaction units" greater latitude to use force and the authorities imposed severe restrictions on jailed gang members.<sup>28</sup> Murder rates gradually fell from the highs reached in 2015, but over 20,000 died in the crossfire in the five years after the truce's demise.<sup>29</sup>

### B. *Bukele and the Ire of March*

Under Bukele, who took over the presidency in June 2019, El Salvador's murder rate dropped precipitously.<sup>30</sup> In 2021, authorities reported a rate of eighteen murders per 100,000 inhabitants, the lowest in the country's recent history.<sup>31</sup> It was even lower than in 2020, when neighbouring Guatemala and Honduras also experienced falls in violent crime, perhaps due at least in part to the COVID-19 lockdown that limited mobility for several months.<sup>32</sup> But unlike in the other two countries, the decline in murder rates and other violence indicators in El Salvador persisted.<sup>33</sup>

A growing body of evidence indicates that the drop was connected to negotiations between the government and the three main gangs rather than Bukele's Territorial Control Plan, which coupled increased security force deployment across the country with efforts to prevent gang recruitment by expanding education, training and sport

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<sup>27</sup> During the truce, gangs agreed to bring down homicides, which dropped from fourteen to five per day, in exchange for looser prison measures, and reportedly funds for gang-affiliated organisations. Opposition within the government, the lack of a communications strategy and, above all, public scepticism caused the process to unravel. Crisis Group interviews, truce facilitators, San Salvador and by telephone, January 2020 and March 2022. Crisis Group Report, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> The "extraordinary measures" imposed in 2016 introduced tighter security checks in jails, curtailed communications with the outside world and prohibited family visits. Jeannette Aguilar, "Las Políticas de Seguridad Pública en El Salvador, 2003-2018", Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 21 March 2019; "Sánchez Cerén: 'Nosotros no podemos volver al esquema de negociar con las pandillas'", *El Faro*, 5 January 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Sánchez Cerén's five-year term ended as the most violent in nearly three decades, with more than 23,000 reported homicides, including a sharp increase in killings perpetrated by state forces. Crisis Group Report, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, op. cit. "UN expert urges El Salvador step up measures to halt murders, vicious cycle of impunity", press release, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 6 February 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> "Homicidios en El Salvador 2021", Infosegura, 9 March 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Report N°83, *Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle*, 13 November 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Reported disappearances also fell from over 3,500 in 2018 to 1,828 in 2021, though they outnumbered homicides for the third year in a row. "Insight Crime's 2021 Homicide Round-Up", Insight Crime, 1 February 2022; "35% de denuncias sobre personas desaparecidas en El Salvador en 2021 están sin resolver", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 3 February 2022; "Desaparición de Personas en El Salvador", FESPAD, April 2021.

activities in gang-affected communities.<sup>34</sup> The news outlet *El Faro* uncovered evidence of these conversations in prison authorities' own reports, leading the former attorney general to open an investigation that his successor later quashed.<sup>35</sup>

Whether the drop in homicides was the prelude to or the consequence of these reported contacts is still unclear. Leaders of the 18th Street gang's Southerners faction have said dialogue with the government started in December 2019, following the faction's unilateral decision to scale back the use of lethal violence. They did not know, however, if talks with the MS-13 followed the same sequence.<sup>36</sup> In December 2021, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned the head of the prison system, Osiris Luna, and the director of the government's Unit for the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric, Carlos Marroquín, based on findings that they engaged in secret gang negotiations with gangs, particularly the MS-13, which Washington had designated as a transnational criminal organisation in 2012.<sup>37</sup>

Although the elements of a quid pro quo between the gangs and the government are hard to discern, both sides might have gained in important ways from the reported dialogue. The government seemingly achieved what appeared to be a sustainable reduction in homicide, which it put down to its security policy. It also reportedly received support in carrying out community projects and enforcing COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020.<sup>38</sup> According to media investigations and local testimonies, in some places gangs also provided support for Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party during the 2021 legislative and municipal election campaigns.<sup>39</sup> "Vote for the N (for Nayib and Nuevas Ideas)", gang members stationed outside some voting centres told incoming voters, according to a humanitarian worker.<sup>40</sup>

Gangs also appeared to have benefited from the talks. They allegedly influenced the lists of those would receive a \$300 state subsidy aimed at propping up falling

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<sup>34</sup> Bukele announced that the plan would consist of seven phases but has given details of just the first four: "rescue" of territory through the massive deployment of security forces in 22 municipalities; creation of opportunities for at-risk youth; upgrades to security forces' technological equipment; and doubling the army in size. The government has never made the full plan public. Crisis Group Report, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, op. cit. "Criminal investigation found the Bukele administration hid evidence of negotiations with gangs", *El Faro*, 21 August 2021.

<sup>35</sup> The case was codenamed Cathedral. The current attorney general, Rodolfo Delgado, dismantled the special prosecutors' unit assigned to it. Some prosecutors have left the country as a result. "Salvadoran ex-prosecutor says government quashed probe into pact with gangs", Reuters, 8 December 2021.

<sup>36</sup> "Bukele y las maras | La pandilla Barrio 18-Sureños da nuevos detalles sobre la negociación con el gobierno de El Salvador", BBC Mundo, 29 April 2022.

<sup>37</sup> "Treasury targets corruption networks linked to transnational organized crime", press release, U.S. Treasury Department, 8 December 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Gangs reportedly persuaded community leaders to give the green light to certain government programs, and, in some localities, imposed curfews to enforce pandemic-related lockdowns. Crisis Group interview, former counsellor of Mejicanos city hall, San Salvador, March 2022. Crisis Group Report, *Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle*, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian workers, former municipal counsellor and security expert, San Salvador, March 2022. "US accuses El Salvador of secretly negotiating truce with gang leaders", *The Guardian*, 8 December 2021; "Bukele y las maras", op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, San Salvador, 1 December 2021.

incomes during the pandemic.<sup>41</sup> Arrests of gang members and reported clashes with police became less frequent.<sup>42</sup> Restrictions on jailed gang leaders were also reportedly eased, with many able to meet people in hospitals through non-essential medical transfers and even speak with people outside the prison by telephone.<sup>43</sup>

Another government concession may be reflected in the disposition of fourteen MS-13 leaders held in Salvadoran jails, whose extradition the U.S. requested in early 2021. None have been extradited, and four were inexplicably released. Carlos Marroquín, who was often linked to talks with the gangs since serving in a similar position in San Salvador city hall when Bukele was mayor of the capital, appeared to admit he had personally accompanied one of them to the Guatemalan border.<sup>44</sup> The current attorney general even sent a note to the Supreme Court to request that the extradition treaty with Washington be reviewed.<sup>45</sup> “Gangs are satisfied with the situation: they have to invest less in lawyers and weapons, and can maintain their businesses”, commented a gang expert before conditions changed abruptly in March.<sup>46</sup>

But it was not a stable arrangement. Even before the understanding between the government and gangs broke down, their relations had started to show signs of stress. Despite relatively low levels of violence, Bukele announced in July 2021 that phase four of the Territorial Control Plan, initially intended to address gang members’ rehabilitation, according to a security expert involved in its drafting, would instead map out a plan to double the army’s size over five years.<sup>47</sup> Toward the end of 2021,

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<sup>41</sup> “Barrio 18 Poses As Vendors To Pilfer El Salvador Pandemic Funds”, Insight Crime, 1 March 2022.

<sup>42</sup> As shown in Figure 2 in Appendix B, in 2021, the police reported 120 shootouts with gangs, the lowest number since 2013, 60 per cent fewer than in 2019, and far from the peak of 649 violent clashes registered in 2016. In 2020, authorities arrested eighteen MS-13 members per day on average, down from 28 in 2018. “Las razones que hay detrás del brusco descenso en la detención de pandilleros de la MS-13 en El Salvador”, RT, 19 August 2021; “¿Ha dejado la Policía de enfrentarse a las pandillas?”, *El Salvador*, 24 August 2021.

<sup>43</sup> “Bukele y las maras”, op. cit.; “Gobierno de Bukele negoció con las tres pandillas e intentó esconder la evidencia”, *El Faro*, 23 August 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Pictures posted on social media by the partner of one of those reportedly released, alias Crook, seem to confirm his journey from El Salvador to Guatemala, headed toward Mexico. “Transnational escape of MS-13 leader ‘Crook’ caught on social media”, *El Faro*, 11 July 2022; “Collapsed government talks with MS-13 sparked record homicides in El Salvador, audios reveal”, op. cit.; “Nayib Bukele también pactó con pandillas”, *El Faro*, 29 June 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Only in early July did the Supreme Court approve the extradition of two lower-ranking MS-13 members, aliases “Manicomio” and “Sospechoso”. Crisis Group interview, academic, San Salvador, 20 April 2022. “El Gobierno de El Salvador solicita a la Corte Suprema revisar tratado de extradición con EE. UU.”, *Voz de América*, 3 January 2022; “Extraditan a pandilleros MS “Manicomio” y “Midnight” a EE.UU. por homicidios”, *Diario El Mundo*, 11 August 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, gang expert, San Salvador, 23 March 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Bukele has progressively given greater importance to the army, and not just in the public security realm. In 2017, 7,900 soldiers joined the police in patrolling neighbourhoods, and in May 2022 the total reached 18,000. The army was also in charge of distributing bags of food during the pandemic and, more recently, soldiers have been sent to the premises of the forensic medicine institute to “support” its work, but also reportedly to prevent possible strikes. Crisis Group interview, security expert, San Salvador, March 2022. “El Salvador is trying to control MS-13 by doubling its army”, *Vice*, 30 July 2021; Roberto Valencia, “La ‘nueva’ fuerza armada de Nayib Bukele”, *Dromómanos*, 13 June 2022; “Militares en medicina legal ya tienen tareas asignadas”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 7 July 2022.

former Police Commissioner Ángel Manzano, who had been working closely with Marroquín and whom the 18th Street Southerners identified as their interlocutor, was arrested for allegedly leaking unspecified information to the gang.<sup>48</sup>

### C. *A Brutal Crackdown*

The spike in gang-related killings that shook the country at the end of March was not the first time during the Bukele government's tenure that gangs – particularly the MS-13 – had suddenly ramped up lethal violence. Previously, they had been responsible for at least three killing sprees, to which the government had responded with temporary emergency measures in jails or massive police and military deployments in gang-controlled areas.<sup>49</sup>

The latest episode, however, struck several powerful symbolic blows against the government. By killing 62 people in just 24 hours, gangs turned 26 March into the most lethal day in the country's recent history, depriving Bukele of his argument that even the most violent days under his watch were less bloody than in previous years, particularly in 2015, when the daily death toll often exceeded 40, sometimes even 50.<sup>50</sup> A corpse was left – in all likelihood intentionally – close to a bridge on the road connecting the capital San Salvador to Surf City, Bukele's signature project for attracting foreign tourism and investment.<sup>51</sup> Finally, the murders took place while several influential Bitcoin holders were visiting the country to exchange views on El Salvador's rollout of the crypto-currency, as well as Bukele's plans to introduce a Bitcoin-backed bond and build a tax-free Bitcoin City.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> He was then reportedly released but seems to have been sidelined. Crisis Group interviews, security experts, San Salvador, March 2022. "FGR ordena la captura de estructura terrorista de la pandilla 18 en el departamento de San Salvador", Attorney General's Office of El Salvador, 1 December 2021; "Bukele y las maras", op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> On 20 September 2019, authorities reported seventeen killings. President Bukele threatened to declare a state of emergency in jails, a measure already imposed in July but lifted in August, after homicides had decreased to five per day. Between 23 and 27 April 2020, more than 60 people were killed, up from the 3.5 daily murder average at the start of the year. The prison system director ordered cells to be sealed so that no inmate would see even "a beam of sunlight" (the measure was reportedly soon reversed). On 11 November 2021, Bukele ordered a massive military deployment after more than 40 people were killed in three days. "Bukele ordena frenar los homicidios en El Salvador tras 17 asesinatos en un día", France 24, 21 September 2019; "What's behind the sudden spike in murders in El Salvador?", *El Faro*, 30 April 2020; "Sigue la ola de asesinatos por las pandillas; jueves registra 11 muertes violentas", *El Salvador*, 11 November 2021.

<sup>50</sup> The spree lasted three days, during which at least 87 people were killed. "El Salvador tiene en un mes la cifra de asesinatos que antes se registraban en un día", Presidency of El Salvador, 3 September 2021; "Gang Murder Rampage Sends Shockwaves Through El Salvador Government", *Insight Crime*, 28 March 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Bukele had inaugurated the bypass just one year before. "62 cadáveres en 24 horas: la ilusión de Bukele de un El Salvador más seguro se derrumba", *El País*, 28 March 2022; "Presidente Bukele habilitó el 'bypass' de La Libertad, 'el puente más largo y complejo del país'", *Diario El Salvador*, 19 February 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Bukele's government had envisaged seeking \$1 billion in credit by issuing in mid-March the "Volcano bonds", public debt backed by Bitcoin, part of which it would use to build a Bitcoin City, but it backtracked, arguing that the war in Ukraine disrupted timing for the launch. "Bukele y el bitcoin:

While the reasons behind the previous killing sprees are as yet unclear, evidence suggests that the March flare-up was due to a breakdown of talks between the MS-13 and the government. The 18th Street Southerners were the first to distance themselves from the bloodshed, saying the MS-13 had spearheaded the killings; a former Revolutionaries faction member privately claimed the same.<sup>53</sup> High-ranking MS-13 and 18th Street members' testimonies, as well as audio recordings reportedly sent by Carlos Marroquín to MS-13 members at the start of the state of exception, subsequently gathered by *El Faro*, indicate that MS-13 carried out the killings in reprisal for the arrest of members whom authorities had invited to a "meeting".<sup>54</sup>

In the recordings, Marroquín blamed the security minister, Gustavo Villatoro, for the arrests, hinting at a power struggle between branches of government over how to manage the gang issue.<sup>55</sup> He also voiced suspicion that a prominent MS-13 chapter in the Sonsonate department, the San Cocos Locos Salvatruchos, was turning fellow members over to authorities.<sup>56</sup> The government has ignored this reporting.

Whatever the motivation behind the killings, Bukele's government cracked down with a harshness that caught much of the nation by surprise and sustained the effort past the point when public shock at March's events had worn off.<sup>57</sup> It immediately imposed a 30-day state of exception – already renewed six times – that increases the permissible detention period without charge from 72 hours to fifteen days, and restricts freedom of assembly and the right to a legal defence in court.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, security forces began rounding up alleged gang members, including by placing checkpoints outside gang-controlled neighbourhoods, branding the campaign on social media with the hashtag #WarOnGangs.<sup>59</sup> As of 20 September, the government

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el 'bono volcán' con el que el presidente busca endeudar a El Salvador en criptomonedas", BBC Mundo, 14 April 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, former gang member, San Salvador, March 2022. "Bukele y las maras", op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> "Collapsed government talks with MS-13 sparked record homicides in El Salvador, audios reveal", op. cit.

<sup>55</sup> Similar tensions among various ministries contributed to disrupting the "truce", as the negotiations carried out by the Funes government were known. Crisis Group interviews, truce facilitators, San Salvador and by telephone, 24 January 2020 and 8 March 2022.

<sup>56</sup> The MS-13 is divided into cliques, which operate at the local level, and programs, comprising many different cliques, usually grouped according to the regions in which they operate. Usually considered the most hierarchical and disciplined of the three main gangs, the MS-13 is nonetheless beset with friction over the extent to which its leadership is representative of the gang as a whole. Such disagreements were often mentioned in conversations with experts and former gang members. Crisis Group interviews, gang experts and former gang members, San Salvador and Guatemala City, April 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalists, diplomats and former gang members, San Salvador, March and May 2022. "All Salvadorans at risk': Inside El Salvador's gang crackdown", Al Jazeera, 21 April 2022.

<sup>58</sup> "El Salvador declares 'state of emergency' as homicides soar. Rights groups sound alarms", *The Washington Post*, 30 March 2022; "El Salvador prorroga por sexta vez el régimen de excepción", *Deutsche Welle*, 15 September 2022.

<sup>59</sup> "El Salvador extends state of emergency to curb gang violence", Al Jazeera, 25 April 2022; "El Salvador boosts jail time for gang members after rash of murders", Reuters, 31 March 2022.

claimed to have detained over 53,000 gang members and collaborators, including at least 7,500 women.<sup>60</sup>

In parallel, the Legislative Assembly has passed at least ten bills ratcheting up jail sentences for gang-related crimes, including mere membership, to up to 45 years; deeming that teenagers as young as twelve be tried as adults; creating rewards for those who provide information used to detain gang members; and introducing a sort of “gag” law that threatens ten to fifteen years in jail for those within media outlets who spread messages from gangs that could create public “anxiety”.<sup>61</sup> In late April, the legislature also approved a bill to build new jails and curtailed oversight of public procurement, setting the stage for the president’s mid-June announcement that construction would commence of a huge prison facility able to house around 40,000 inmates, in Tecoluca, some 70km east of San Salvador.<sup>62</sup>

Abuses of power have characterised the crackdown from the beginning. Particularly in the first few weeks, police officers were reportedly forced to comply with daily arrest quotas, and sometimes base detentions on false accusations: “It’s like being back in the times of the civil war, with the ‘ears’ [informants]. There are people who point the finger [at others] to get a reward”, complained a woman from a poor area of San Salvador, adding that during searches male security officers often harass girls using the excuse of looking for gang tattoos.<sup>63</sup> Anonymous calls and their social media equivalent – online accusations by unidentifiable users – are reportedly sufficient grounds to justify an arrest, as are looking “nervous” or “suspicious” in some cases; attorneys who defend victims of unjust detentions are also targets of government sympathisers’ attacks and threats.<sup>64</sup> President Bukele acknowledged on Twitter that

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<sup>60</sup> “Suben a más de 51,200 los pandilleros capturados durante el régimen de excepción en El Salvador”, *Diario El Salvador*, 29 August 2022; “Presidente Nayib Bukele afirma que la baja sostenida de los homicidios se demuestra con hechos y no solo con palabras”, press release, Presidency of El Salvador, 22 September 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Human rights defenders argue that judging suspected young offenders as adults violates the Convention on Children’s Rights that El Salvador signed in 1989. It also undermines alternative measures that judges could use to assist with the youngsters’ rehabilitation. Crisis Group interviews, judges in juvenile courts, San Salvador, 31 March 2022. “Juzgar a menores como adultos viola la Convención sobre los Derechos del Niño”, *Gato Encerrado*, 5 April 2022; “All Salvadorans at risk: Inside El Salvador’s gang crackdown”, op. cit.

<sup>62</sup> Bukele dubbed the facility the Centre for Confinement of Terrorism. Planned to house 20,000 inmates, it was to be completed by late September, but is not yet finished. “Bukele promete terminar en 60 días una cárcel gigantesca para encerrar a 40,000 pandilleros”, Univision, 22 July 2022. “Presidente Bukele anuncia construcción del Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo”, *Diario El Salvador*, 21 June 2022; “Diputados de Bukele aprueban ley para construir más cárceles que expropia bienes privados, omite la LACAP y exonera pago de impuestos a empresas”, *El Salvador*, 19 April 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interviews, human right defender, resident, San Salvador, 3 May 2022. “Bukele contra las maras: los policías que denuncian que los obligan a cumplir cuotas de detenciones en la guerra contra las pandillas”, BBC Mundo, 18 April 2022. Crisis Group interview, resident, San Salvador, 3 May 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Bukele himself has repeatedly argued that those who oppose the state of emergency are siding with gangs. Critics are often targeted on social media by government-affiliated trolls. Crisis Group telephone interview, criminal defence lawyer, 5 July 2022. “Los expedientes ocultos del Régimen: cientos de arrestos por ‘nerviosismo’ y ‘ficha policial’”, *El Faro*, 8 August 2022. Jane Esberg, “All

he expected around 1 per cent of detentions to be wrongful.<sup>65</sup> But national and international human rights organisations have reported over 3,000 abuses, including arbitrary detentions and lack of due process.<sup>66</sup>

The situation in prisons is particularly dire. Active gang members are being rounded up alongside innocent young people and others who have left gangs, including evangelical pastors who have made it their mission to pull people out of gang life through religious conversion.<sup>67</sup> Some arrested pastors and former gang members had been beneficiaries of a rehabilitation pilot project run by UN agencies and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), with government backing, and which Marroquín had cited as proof that reintegration is possible.<sup>68</sup> While the men's prison population has doubled, the number of women in jail has quadrupled.<sup>69</sup> Dozens of inmates have reportedly died in custody since the state of exception began.<sup>70</sup>

Inmates' relatives, particularly women, have seen their burdens dramatically increase because of arbitrary detentions. When the mass detention campaign kicked off, hundreds of people, mostly wives and mothers of male detainees, who are usually the main breadwinners for their households, started camping outside jails in search of news of their loved ones and standing vigil for their release. Often they had travelled for hours on public transport that many could barely afford.<sup>71</sup> In late May,

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the President's Trolls: Real and Fake Twitter Fights in El Salvador", Crisis Group Commentary, 13 July 2020.

<sup>65</sup> The attorney general has only confirmed the release of 803 people. "El Salvador: Nayib Bukele dice margen de 'error' en arrestos puede ser de 1%", Deutsche Welle, 10 April 2022; "803 personas liberadas en Régimen de Excepción. 200 días sin homicidios", *Contrapunto*, 21 September 2022.

<sup>66</sup> The human rights ombudsperson's office has also received more than 3,400 complaints of abuses by authorities. It has confirmed violations in only seven of these cases. "El Salvador: PDDH confirma vulneraciones a derechos humanos", Deutsche Welle, 23 August 2022; "Seguirán presos más de 36.000 salvadoreños detenidos en régimen de excepción", Deutsche Welle, 27 June 2022.

<sup>67</sup> According to an official from the human rights ombudsperson's office, the police are using three criteria for detaining people: criminal records; an intelligence-based database of gang members; and suspicions that someone is a gang collaborator. The last criterion accounts for most arbitrary detentions. Crisis Group interview, San Salvador, 3 May 2022. "Ser expandillero cristiano en El Salvador, un país sin lugar para los arrepentidos", *El País*, 23 May 2022.

<sup>68</sup> A case in point is Huellas de Esperanza (Footprints of Hope) church, which was raided on 4 May, leading to the arrest of 27 former members of the three main gangs who were peacefully living together and working in baking, textiles and construction to make a living. One of them, as well as the church's pastor, had participated in a project called Pioneers, run by the UN Development Programme, USAID, the International Organization for Migration and UNICEF, whose pilot phase had ended in late 2021. Crisis Group telephone interviews, religious leaders, diplomats, security experts, May 2022. "La gente quiere cambiar, pero se la llevan", *Gato Encerrado*, 5 May 2022; "Referentes: pieza fundamental para el desistimiento de la violencia", UN Development Programme, 14 October 2021.

<sup>69</sup> In 2021, authorities reported 2,710 jailed women, roughly 7 per cent of the total prison population. Figures available at World Prison Brief's El Salvador page. For a detailed account of the fate of women suspects under the crackdown, see Floor Keuleers and Natasha Mulenga Hornsby, "Women in El Salvador's Gang War", Crisis Group commentary, 5 August 2022.

<sup>70</sup> "It's a war on the people: El Salvador's mass arrests send thousands into despair", *The Guardian*, 8 June 2022.

<sup>71</sup> "Outside the walls of a Salvadoran prison, 'we're all crying mothers'", *The New York Times*, 12 May 2022.



security forces forcibly dispersed them.<sup>72</sup> “You should thank God that we don’t put you in jail, too”, a prison guard told the wife of a disabled man who, according to her, was wrongly accused of illicit association, and to whom she was trying to get clothes and medicine.<sup>73</sup> Relatives of inmates who die in custody often learn of the deaths through non-official sources such as undertakers.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, government officials have downplayed the suffering of these families, suggesting that opposition politicians are manipulating them.<sup>75</sup>

Although the crackdown remains popular with most Salvadorans, it is still too early to say how the havoc it has wreaked in the lives of thousands of families, and stories of inhumane prison conditions, will affect the government’s standing with a growing number of Salvadorans. Tough anti-gang language and tactics have been the calling cards of virtually every government over the past two decades, playing on the hatred and fear that the gangs’ brutality has instilled in Salvadoran society, as well as the failure of the 2012-2014 truce to keep violence in check for long.<sup>76</sup> In a late May survey by *La Prensa Gráfica*, 73.9 per cent of interviewees backed the measures, but more or less the same proportion were unaware of the restrictions on citizens’ rights that these have entailed, with 28.5 per cent aware of at least one case of wrongful arrest.<sup>77</sup>

Residents of areas where gangs’ grip is especially tight agreed that the government’s tough approach is not a solution for violent crime. Some said they feel less safe now: on one hand, petty crime, usually kept in check by gangs, is on the rise, while on the other security forces are mistreating youth and carting them off for no reason.<sup>78</sup> “Everybody is counting the days until this ends and hoping that they don’t come up with something else”, said one resident. Another said many children are kept cooped up at home, even those not involved in gangs, to prevent their arrest. This person added that many always carry electricity bills or other documents proving residency, the lack of which authorities consider suspicious.<sup>79</sup> “We are reaching the point where being poor or having a relative who made mistakes is going to be a crime”, said a religious leader.<sup>80</sup> A number of residents reported having voted for Bukele and his party and said he has done far more for them than previous governments – such

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<sup>72</sup> “Familiares continúan en mariona pese a desalojos”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 25 May 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, relative of detainee, 5 July 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, human rights defender, 7 June 2022. “It’s a war on the people: El Salvador’s mass arrests send thousands into despair”, *op. cit.*

<sup>75</sup> For example, see President Bukele’s Facebook post on 1 June 2022; and the tweet by Christian Guevara, @ChrisGuevaraG, head of Nuevas Ideas parliamentary group, 1:54pm, 27 June 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group Report, *El Salvador’s Politics of Perpetual Violence*, *op. cit.*

<sup>77</sup> “El 74% de salvadoreños apoya régimen de excepción”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 31 May 2022; “El 28.5% de los ciudadanos conoce de alguna detención que considera injusta”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 31 May 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, San Salvador and Soyapango, May 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Gangs often take over private homes for their own use. Crisis Group interviews, residents, San Salvador, 3 May 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, religious leader, San Salvador, May 2022.

as providing subsidies and laptops for poor children. Still, they said, his return to old-style coercive policies has left them disillusioned.<sup>81</sup>

#### D. *International Strains and Economic Outlook*

The crackdown comes against the backdrop of a steady drumbeat of measures that President Bukele has taken that undercut the rule of law. During the first two years of his term, Bukele had his hands largely tied by state and judicial institutions appointed by previous legislatures. Since early 2021, however, when his party won control of most parliamentary seats and mayoral offices, he has concentrated power at a rapid pace.<sup>82</sup> Besides asserting his command over the judiciary by stacking the Supreme Court with loyalists and replacing forcibly retired judges, the president shut down an anti-impunity commission (CICIES in Spanish) backed by the Organization of American States that he himself had installed in 2019, after it had detected twelve cases of possible government corruption.<sup>83</sup> The government also progressively limited access to public information and, according to diplomats, has been insufficiently transparent in accounting for the use of cooperation funds.<sup>84</sup>

The government's authoritarian slide has damaged relations with its Western partners, particularly the U.S. The U.S. has redirected at least some of its assistance from state agencies to civil society.<sup>85</sup> Since mid-2021, the State Department has added twelve current and former Salvadoran officials and advisers, including the chief of cabinet, as well as five Supreme Court magistrates, to its list of corrupt actors in Central America, known as the Engel list.<sup>86</sup> The EU has also reportedly redirected its

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<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, San Salvador and Soyapango, May 2022. According to a human rights official, "the little trust in the police that there was before was lost in a few days". Crisis Group interview, human rights official, San Salvador, 3 May 2022.

<sup>82</sup> "Nuevas Ideas, partido de Bukele, logra 56 diputaciones y mayoría de alcaldías", EFE, 20 March 2021.

<sup>83</sup> The cases were not made public, but the OAS accused the government of aiming to block progress in investigations into Bukele administration officials. "Bukele's legislative assembly ousts Supreme Court magistrates and attorney general", *El Faro*, 2 May 2022; "El Salvador top court opens door to president's re-election, U.S. protests", Reuters, 4 September 2021; "Bukele sepulta su principal promesa de campaña, la Cicies", *El Faro*, 4 June 2021; "Statement from the OAS General Secretariat on CICIES", 7 June 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, San Salvador, April 2022. "¿Qué información oculta el gobierno Bukele?", *Gato Encerrado*, 1 July 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Those agencies were the judiciary, the National Civilian Police and the Institute for Access to Public Information. "USAID Redirects Assistance for Salvadoran Government Institutions to Civil Society Groups", USAID, 21 May 2021.

<sup>86</sup> The Engel list is a component of the U.S.-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in December 2020 with the aim of bolstering U.S. strategies to foster economic development, tackle corruption, undemocratic practices and crime, and curb migration in the region. Those included in the list are prohibited from entry into the U.S. Bukele claimed that the list has purely political purposes. "Central American officials blacklisted by U.S. as part of corruption crackdown", Reuters, 2 July 2021; "U.S. adds top Guatemalan, Salvadoran officials to corruption list", Reuters, 21 September 2021; "Nayib Bukele a EE. UU.: 'Gracias por la lista, pero en El Salvador tenemos la nuestra'", *Deutsche Welle*, 3 July 2021; "Estados Unidos decide no incluir a Alejandro Zelaya en la Lista Engel", *El Faro*, 20 July 2022.

security cooperation with El Salvador to projects focusing on green energy and gender issues.<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile, Bukele has begun to seek other partners to make up for the West's wavering support, reaching out to countries less concerned with his stance on the rule of law.<sup>88</sup> He has singled out China for attention, although Beijing's interest seems limited to infrastructure projects.<sup>89</sup> Bukele also travelled to Türkiye and was due to visit Russia, a trip that has reportedly been postponed but not shelved after the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>90</sup> As yet, there are few signs that these countries' political support will translate into greater economic engagement.<sup>91</sup>

A prolonged crackdown may fuel further tensions with foreign partners.<sup>92</sup> By taking action against beneficiaries of projects funded by international partners, Bukele risks cooling donors' interest in providing technical and financial support for any activity that touches even indirectly on security issues. Furthermore, "the narrowing of the democratic space has repercussions for the restriction of the humanitarian space", argues an employee of an NGO providing education, protection and humanitarian support. She expressed fear that her organisation's efforts to help Salvadorans who may have ties to gangs could spur the authorities to harass the staff as they cast their nets more and more widely.<sup>93</sup>

Meanwhile, El Salvador's economic outlook remains uncertain. The country's external debt continues to grow, with the International Monetary Fund warning it could reach 96 per cent of GDP by 2026, and pointing to additional concerns over the poorly regulated introduction of Bitcoin as legal tender.<sup>94</sup> Negotiations to obtain a \$1.3 billion loan from the Fund have become bogged down, mostly due to the Fund's concerns about Bitcoin, governance and fiscal sustainability, while the government is scheduled to pay off large sums of debt soon.<sup>95</sup> Similar concerns have played a part

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<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, San Salvador, March and April 2022.

<sup>88</sup> The Biden administration has placed great importance on respect for democratic standards and anti-corruption efforts in its engagement with Central America. "Bukele y Biden: 5 momentos de la creciente tensión entre EE.UU. y El Salvador y cómo afecta a dos aliados históricos", BBC Mundo, 15 December 2021.

<sup>89</sup> China is building a new national library and a dock in the Libertad port, as well as making other infrastructure investments. Crisis Group telephone interview, economist, 27 June 2022. "El cuento chino de Nayib Bukele", Infobae, 6 February 2022.

<sup>90</sup> El Salvador and Türkiye signed economic agreements with the aim of increasing tenfold the volume of bilateral trade, now worth barely \$50 million. "Bukele mantiene viaje a Rusia pese a invasión a Ucrania", *El Salvador*, 4 March 2022; "Bukele busca inversiones turcas para diversificar su política exterior", *El País*, 21 January 2022.

<sup>91</sup> "El club de amigos imaginarios de Bukele", *El Faro*, 25 January 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Then-U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Patrick Ventrell warned in June that the state of exception is "unsustainable", while in September the U.S. Congress' Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a hearing on the abuses committed under state of exception. "Régimen de excepción es 'insostenible' en El Salvador, dice Estados Unidos", EFE, 25 June 2022; "State of exception confirms divide between US Dems and GOP over Bukele", *El Faro*, 14 September 2022.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, humanitarian worker, 17 May 2022.

<sup>94</sup> In 2018, public debt stood at around 70 per cent of GDP. "IMF Executive Board Concludes 2021 Article IV Consultation with El Salvador", International Monetary Fund, 25 January 2022.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, economist, 27 June 2022. "Ilan Goldfajn: 'El mundo se está poniendo más adverso'", *El País*, 27 July 2022; "El Salvador – Credit Rating", op. cit.

in the main rating agencies' decision to downgrade El Salvador.<sup>96</sup> Even if default in 2023 is unlikely, Bukele's clashes with the country's main trade partners – the U.S. and EU – and his gamble on Bitcoin could well presage adverse financial conditions in the coming years.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> The interest rates of the country's benchmark bonds have risen from less than 10 per cent to 24 per cent since May 2021. "Bitcoin-bond sale flop deepens debt market rout in El Salvador", Bloomberg, 29 April 2022.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, economist, 27 June 2022. "A poor country made Bitcoin a national currency. The bet isn't paying off", *The New York Times*, 5 July 2022.

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### III. Gangs' Response and the Risks of Violence

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With his highly popular iron-fist response, Bukele has temporarily managed to contain the damage seemingly sparked by the breakdown of talks with gangs. With gangs beating a retreat, homicides fell to historical lows in recent months, and several days have featured no murders at all.<sup>98</sup> Authorities, however, have started counting homicides separately from deaths of suspected gang members killed in alleged shootouts with security forces, numbers that were merged in the total homicide figure before the state of exception.<sup>99</sup> But continued repression is creating a humanitarian crisis in El Salvador's prisons while feeding dynamics that may wind up driving former gang members back into their prior groups – in part because stigma and the state's relentless and overreaching pursuit of even those with past affiliations to the gangs leave them no other option.

#### A. Will the Gangs Fight Back?

El Salvador's gangs are in disarray, with their most prominent members either jailed, in hiding or outside the country. But their efforts to remain inconspicuous and evade arrest may not last forever.<sup>100</sup>

One factor that has shaped the current environment is that the gangs did not seem to expect such a ruthless crackdown, which has caused them to discontinue some of their operations and hindered their capacity to communicate. "What's happening caught everyone by surprise", said a former gang member.<sup>101</sup> Residents in gang-controlled communities observed that the highest-profile gang members are hiding in the hills, by the rivers or even in sewers. Those who can afford it are fleeing.<sup>102</sup> As a result, some shop and restaurant owners say they have stopped making extortion payments, although in certain places gangs still force merchants to provide food and

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<sup>98</sup> "El Salvador llega a los 200 días con cero homicidios en la gestión de Nayib Bukele", *Diario El Salvador*, 21 September 2022.

<sup>99</sup> In addition to the 102 homicides reported between 1 April and 31 August, 61 gang members were shot dead by the police and army; as a result, around one third of the violent deaths registered in recent months were caused by the police and military. Authorities have not clarified if they are also excluding from the homicide count the dozens of suspicious deaths in jails (see Section III.B below). Before the state of exception, authorities followed the "Bogotá protocol", which considers as homicide any death provoked by another person's aggression, including that of a security forces member. "Policía invisibiliza muertes de supuestos pandilleros en estadísticas de homicidios", *Gato Encerrado*, 15 May 2022; "Las autoridades de Seguridad generan subregistro para ocultar homicidios en El Salvador", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 12 July 2022. See also tweet by Roberto Valencia, journalist, @cguanacas, 7:39am, 21 May 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former gang members, religious leaders and gang experts, San Salvador, April and May 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interview, former gang member, San Salvador, May 2022.

<sup>102</sup> For example, Guatemalan authorities have detained at least 43 Salvadoran gang members who were reportedly trying to flee the country, including Moisés Humberto Rivera Luna, alias "Viejo Santos", who had been released in late 2021, and whom the U.S. Treasury had identified as one of the most prominent MS-13 leaders in 2013. Crisis Group interviews, residents, San Salvador and Santa Ana, April-May 2022. "Guatemala ya detuvo a 43 pandilleros que huían de El Salvador", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 31 May 2022; "El Viejo Santos, líder histórico de la MS-13 salvadoreña, está detenido en Guatemala desde abril", *No Ficción*, 12 July 2022.

mobile phone top-ups free of charge, and even shake them down for money, through low-ranking members or collaborators.<sup>103</sup> In these circumstances, some business-people do what they are told on the understanding that the state's clampdown may be temporary, and gangs will come back to retaliate against those who refused to pay.<sup>104</sup>

For now, gangs have tried to work through the media instead of using violence to pressure the government into scaling back its offensive, but they may change course if they see that Bukele has no intention of doing so himself. Both the MS-13 and the 18th Street Southerners have shared details of previous negotiations with the government with media outlets, probably in the hope that the revelations would tarnish the president's public image, prompting him to backtrack on the clampdown.<sup>105</sup>

At the same time, gangs have aired the threat of renewed violence. In an audio recording obtained by Crisis Group, an 18th Street Southerners leader warned: "We reiterate that we want to be part of the solution ... but we cannot tolerate all these violations against our peers or civilians. If this continues, the country will know real terrorism".<sup>106</sup> "All [gang members] need is a leader who really speaks out, and then the youngsters could make a big mess", argued a former MS-13 member.<sup>107</sup>

Any pushback from the gangs would – at least initially – probably take the shape of scattered acts of violence rather than a coordinated campaign, as many gang members have already left the country and others do not want to fight another "war" similar to that of 2015.<sup>108</sup> Already, clashes between gangs and security forces, which had steadily fallen from 2019 onward, have doubled since the state of exception was put in place.<sup>109</sup> Since late June, the 18th Street Southerners have killed three police officers in Santa Ana, while another attack left a soldier dead in a rural community with a strong MS-13 presence in Chalatenango.<sup>110</sup>

Even without a violent escalation, gangs are unlikely to disappear, and the crack-down could end up boosting their ranks.<sup>111</sup> By indiscriminately jailing former gang members, the government is in effect discouraging the social reintegration of thousands of Salvadorans who, after paying for their crimes in jail, are desperate to build

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<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, San Salvador, May 2022. "Un mes de guerra contra las maras con más de mil arrestos diarios", *Euro News*, 27 April 2022.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, San Salvador, May 2022. "La extorsión no mengua pese al régimen de excepción", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 19 July 2022.

<sup>105</sup> "Bukele y las maras", op. cit.

<sup>106</sup> Audio recording obtained by Crisis Group.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former gang member, April 2022.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalist, gang expert and former gang member, San Salvador and by telephone, April, May and July 2022.

<sup>109</sup> The police reported 141 shootouts, which they register as "legal interventions", between 1 January and 31 August 2022, 109 of them since April. There were 88 in the same period in 2021 and 125 in 2020. Police data obtained by Crisis Group.

<sup>110</sup> It remains unclear whether the attacks were orchestrated by gang leaders or were the result of local conflicts, but they certainly worried the government, which soon after the police officers were killed announced additional operations and quickly captured the alleged culprits. "Asesinato de policías fue planeado", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 30 June 2022; "Bukele: capturan pandilleros acusados de muerte de policías", AP, 1 July 2022; "Muere un soldado en enfrentamiento con supuestos miembros de pandillas", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 13 July 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interviews, security experts, victims of gang violence, NGO workers and community leaders, San Salvador and Soyapango, April-May 2022.

new law-abiding lives.<sup>112</sup> They may also be driving them back into the gangs. According to a former gang member who is in hiding during the state of exception, gangs are offering a “pardon” to those who left should they rejoin their ranks.<sup>113</sup> Other former members agreed that, if left with no alternative, some would renounce their quest to abandon crime since “it’s like we’re slaves of the past”.<sup>114</sup>

At the same time, religious leaders and security experts argue that some of the drivers of gang recruitment, such as broken families and poverty, not only persist but may worsen as a result of both coercive law enforcement and economic turmoil.<sup>115</sup> Through the mass roundups and police harassment, “the cycle of violence and culture of hatred is sinking ever deeper roots”, according to a priest.<sup>116</sup>

### B. *Looming Chaos in Overcrowded Jails*

After years of relative quiet, an already overcrowded prison system has become the site of a gathering humanitarian and potential security crisis. Bukele’s government has made a U-turn in its prison policy. Having endeavoured to reduce the total number of prisoners from almost 40,000 to fewer than 37,000 between 2018 and early 2021, the president had even proudly promised to turn some Salvadoran jails into universities.<sup>117</sup> One humanitarian worker able to visit jails had witnessed notable improvements in hygienic conditions and opportunities to take part in workshops, as well as reduced overcrowding.<sup>118</sup> Yet the government has now reportedly more than doubled the size of the prison population in the span of a few months, and the number of inmates continues to rise.

Specifics about conditions in jails are now hard to gauge. The reported numbers of inmates are difficult to confirm, while access to jails is extremely limited and security forces do not share arrest lists with human rights watchdogs.<sup>119</sup> But a former high-ranking prison official still in touch with prison guards maintained that authorities “cannot find where to put them [prisoners] anymore”.<sup>120</sup> A diplomat who has

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<sup>112</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former gang members, religious leaders, human rights defenders and victims of gang violence, San Salvador, Santa Ana and by telephone, April-May 2022.

<sup>113</sup> While permitted in specific cases, mostly through religious conversion, quitting is not well received by gangs, particularly if the gang suspects its members are using conversion as a pretence for leaving. Without the gang’s permission to quit, converts are liable to be sanctioned or even killed. Crisis Group interview, former gang member, San Salvador, May 2022.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former gang members, San Salvador and by telephone, May 2022.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interviews, religious leaders and security experts, May 2022. “Salud mental de la niñez es afectada por capturas de madres y padres en el Régimen de Excepción”, *Gato Encerrado*, 20 May 2022.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, religious leader, San Salvador, May 2022.

<sup>117</sup> According to a gang expert, the stark decrease had more to do with measures to prevent COVID-19 from spreading in jails. The number of inmates had returned to around 39,700 by the start of 2022. Crisis Group telephone interview, gang expert, 27 June 2022. Figures obtained from the General Directorate of the Prison System. “Gobierno de El Salvador anuncia el cierre de tres centros penales”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 16 April 2021.

<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interview, humanitarian worker, San Salvador, 22 March 2022.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interviews, human rights ombudsperson’s office representative, humanitarian worker and diplomats, San Salvador, May 2022.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former prison official, 23 May 2022.

visited jails confirmed that “the situation is as bad as one can think”, confirming media reports of squalid conditions.<sup>121</sup>

Human rights groups are receiving complaints of ill treatment, torture and inmate deaths – though these are likewise hard to confirm given authorities’ lack of transparency.<sup>122</sup> According to reports from the Forensic Medicine Institute, which the national newspaper *La Prensa Gráfica* has reportedly seen, at least 73 people died in custody between the imposition of the state of exception and late August, with at least 35 presenting signs of violence. For comparative purposes, between January 2019 and June 2021, authorities reported 46 deaths of people held in prisons and police stations, categorising twenty of them as homicides.<sup>123</sup> Testimonies of people released shortly after wrongful arrest, and also of Ernesto Muyschondt, the former mayor of San Salvador, who is in La Esperanza prison on misappropriation charges, suggested that inmates are dying every day.<sup>124</sup> While equally mistreated by the guards, people with no gang affiliation are reportedly sharing cells with active gang members, who control every aspect of jail life, from food rationing to the allocation of sleeping spots.<sup>125</sup>

The sudden increase in mass incarceration is likely to have dire consequences for El Salvador’s jails.<sup>126</sup> With the prison population now standing at around three times capacity, overcrowding is likely to worsen the already precarious health conditions that have made jails a locus of disease, particularly tuberculosis, reversing the limited progress this same government made including during the COVID-19 emergency.<sup>127</sup>

By doubling the number of inmates, prison authorities are also inviting a number of financial and logistical problems.<sup>128</sup> Feeding such a large prison population and building the massive new jail planned in Tecoluca will require additional funding, virtually doubling current budgetary allocations.<sup>129</sup> The increase in jailed gang members

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<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, diplomat, 13 June 2022.

<sup>122</sup> “No lawyer can go. ... You don’t know anything now”. Crisis Group interview, religious leader, San Salvador, 2 May 2022.

<sup>123</sup> “Una Radiografía sobre el Derecho a la Libertad Personal en El Salvador”, Observatorio Universitario de Derechos Humanos, December 2021; “Medicina Legal reconoce 73 reos fallecidos en régimen de excepción”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 26 August 2022.

<sup>124</sup> Muyschondt had a short exchange with the press upon exiting a hearing in June. “Los reos allí mueren a diario, no a la semana”: liberado narra lo que vivió en penal de Izalco”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 28 June 2022; “Muyschondt dice que mueren de dos a tres reos cada día en el penal de Mariona”, *El Salvador*, 6 June 2022; “Denuncian torturas a capturados durante régimen de excepción”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 21 May 2022.

<sup>125</sup> After visiting La Esperanza, the human rights ombudsperson, Apolonio Tobar, dismissed these claims and did not mention prison deaths. Human rights advocates retorted that Tobar had been swayed by government propaganda, allegedly to avoid being dismissed on the basis of Bukele’s previous claims that his appointment was unconstitutional due to three pending cases against him in the Attorney General’s Office. “Pandillas controlan en las celdas de los penales, según testimonios”, *El Salvador*, 27 June 2022; “PDDH confirma que se están respetando los derechos humanos en centros penales durante el régimen de excepción”, *Diario El Salvador*, 29 June 2022; “El procurador de DD.HH. salvadoreño busca la reelección pese a las críticas”, EFE, 16 August 2022.

<sup>126</sup> “Incrementa el peligro en las cárceles de El Salvador”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 15 May 2022.

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian worker and former prison official, San Salvador and by telephone, April and May 2022.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist, 20 April 2022.

<sup>129</sup> According to a former high-ranking prison official, the state spends around \$3 per inmate every day, just on meals. Feeding 53,000 more inmates would cost circa \$55 million annually. The cur-



while the number of prison guards remains unchanged also raises the risk of unrest and escape attempts.<sup>130</sup> Cramming current and former gang members into jails raises the prospects of reprisal against individuals whom gangs regard as informants or traitors or who have declined offers of recruitment.<sup>131</sup>

At the same time, the relentless pursuit of gang members and poor prison conditions are likely to fuel tensions within the gangs' command structure between jailed leaders and members who are still free, with uncertain effects on the country's criminal landscape. "The MS-13 *ranfla* [leadership] is the most weakened", said a gang expert, arguing that the jailed bosses have lost face following the crackdown prompted by the March killings and decisions taken in the negotiations beforehand. The dominance exerted by imprisoned leaders over the past two decades may have been severely compromised.<sup>132</sup>

It is hard to predict how gangs might manage such divisions or rivalries among various outfits, but they may well learn to adapt to current circumstances rather than disappear. In the past, internal tensions have resulted in schisms – most notoriously within the 18th Street gang – and violent purges.<sup>133</sup> Despite the rifts, however, previous rounds of government pressure on the gangs, of the sort that Sánchez Cerén's government undertook, actually stimulated greater coordination among them, at least in their public messaging.<sup>134</sup> Amid the present clampdown, gangs seem to be emphasising the need for survival over dealing with inter- and intra-gang disputes. Even if they do manage to withstand the crackdown intact, in places where they have been hardest hit their control and illicit rackets could be seized by others, including petty criminals.<sup>135</sup>

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rent budget for the prison system is \$53.8 million. Crisis Group telephone interview, 30 June 2022. "Presupuesto de Dirección de Centros Penales no contenía fondos para nueva prisión", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 24 June 2022.

<sup>130</sup> The government recently fired around 500 prison guards as part of a "personnel reduction". Some of the guards said the real reason was that they had witnessed unlawful meetings between government and gangs. Crisis Group telephone interview, former prison official, 23 May 2022. "Centros Penales despidió a custodios que conocieron sobre reuniones de funcionarios con pandillas", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 22 February 2022.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former gang members, May 2022.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, gang expert, 18 June 2022.

<sup>133</sup> According to a former Revolutionaries member, a key issue that prompted the split was the thirst for power of a historical 18th Street leader known as "El Viejo Lin", who reportedly plotted the murder of other powerful figures in the gang. Crisis Group interview, former gang member, San Salvador, January 2020. "Todas las muertes del Cranky", *El Faro*, 13 October 2011.

<sup>134</sup> In an audio recording obtained by Crisis Group, the 18th Street Southerners claimed authorship of a June 2019 video message where the gangs, presenting themselves as "united" (*pandillas unidas*), jointly called on Bukele to seek a solution to violence through dialogue, and offered to halt murders and threats against commuters as well as reduce extortion. The video was posted at the El Salvador, Dios Unión Libertad 503 Facebook page on 13 June 2019.

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group interviews, residents, San Salvador, May 2022.

## IV. Paving a Way Out

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Notwithstanding its popularity, the present iron-fist policy is not a promising long-term solution to El Salvador's struggle with gang violence. Creating what could become a permanent humanitarian and human rights crisis in the nation's jails will be costly, in both financial and reputational terms, and efforts to force a sudden collapse of the gangs may provide only a fleeting respite if the gangs regroup and mount a backlash, as they have in the past.

Much as its instincts seem to be telling it to stay the course, the government should reconsider its tactics. While law enforcement will no doubt continue to feature prominently in addressing gang-related crime and violence, the state needs to ensure higher standards of proof are used against suspects and develop other more sustainable tools. Rather than doubling down on its draconian methods, Bukele's administration should – with donor encouragement – make a major investment in efforts to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of those who wish to rejoin civic life.

### A. *An Alternative to Jail*

The government has undeniably cleared much of the gangs' manpower from El Salvador's streets. But the gangs may recover from this setback if authorities do not take other less heavy-handed steps to reduce their membership. Some observers believe the time is ripe for such an effort. "This is the exact moment to dismantle gangs", asserted a former gang member. Bukele's crackdown is at or near the point of diminishing returns, he said. While perhaps overstating what is possible, he went on to argue that a less coercive approach could now bear fruit.<sup>136</sup>

As for what kind of approach might be effective, negotiations with the gangs are one option to consider although there is some reason for scepticism.<sup>137</sup> On one hand, over the past ten years, gangs have demonstrated they can bring down murder rates quickly if they have agreed with the government that they will do so. Some MS-13 leaders have even said they would consider complete demobilisation and putting a halt to extortion, a topic they have traditionally been wary of addressing, should that be decided in formal negotiations with the state.<sup>138</sup> On the other hand, talks between officials and gangs have tended to be opaque, weakened by spoilers on both sides and poorly structured.<sup>139</sup> They have also tended to be short-term and transactional – eg, with gangs offering to carry out fewer murders in exchange for better prison conditions for their leaders. Meanwhile, violence has ebbed and flowed, even during periods of negotiation, sometimes resurging suddenly and without warning.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Crisis Group interview, former gang member, San Salvador, May 2022.

<sup>137</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Report N°62, *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, 6 April 2017.

<sup>138</sup> "MS-13 pide diálogo al gobierno y pone sobre la mesa su propia desarticulación", *El Faro*, 9 January 2017; "Mara Salvatrucha: confiamos en Dios y en Nayib Bukele", *Revista Factum*, 27 May 2019.

<sup>139</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, op. cit.; Ivan Briscoe and Tiziano Breda, "A Bargain Worth Making? Bukele and the Gangs of El Salvador", *War on the Rocks*, 16 December 2020.

<sup>140</sup> During the Bukele administration, gangs reduced bloodshed to unprecedented lows, but resorted to upticks in violence when they felt the need to pressure the government into making further concessions.

Moreover, the atmosphere is hardly good for negotiations. Following the government's crackdown, talks have broken down and faith in a negotiated route out of violence has waned notably among gangs. The 18th Street gang's Southerners faction continues to insist that the "only solution" to gang violence is dialogue with the government, for which they are willing to observe a ceasefire.<sup>141</sup> But the MS-13 now perceives negotiations with the government to be a dead letter, according to an expert in contact with high-ranking members.<sup>142</sup> Because Bukele's anti-gang rhetoric has been so vitriolic of late, it is equally hard to imagine him wishing to enter a dialogue that would tacitly put gangs on an equal footing with the state.<sup>143</sup>

But even if a fully negotiated settlement seems far-fetched, local experts who study the gangs believe that some sort of simpler arrangement might be constructed to appeal to at least some members. For example, one expert told Crisis Group that Bukele might be able to take advantage of the gang leaders' battered authority among the rank and file by declaring the gangs defeated and offering a form of conditional mercy; he might offer reduced sentences for individuals who are imprisoned on the basis of gang membership but have not been convicted of or charged with the most serious crimes.<sup>144</sup> The individuals who agree to participate would, upon serving their adjusted time behind bars, be allowed to return to civilian life so long as they remain law-abiding and participate in rehabilitation and reintegration programming. For this idea to work, authorities would probably need to amend or provide an exemption to criminal code provisions that treat simple gang membership as an offence warranting at least twenty years in jail.<sup>145</sup>

To make this approach palatable to the public, the president would need to present it "as a surrender of the gangs", an expert stressed.<sup>146</sup> The gangs would of course be loath to accept an offer couched in the language of surrender, but at least some in their number could view the alternative of permanent confrontation and mass arrests as even less appealing.<sup>147</sup> While falling far short of genuine negotiations, and doing little at first to curtail the conditions generating El Salvador's cycles of violence, an approach along these lines could at least staunch the humanitarian harm, jail overcrowding and security risks facing the country over the short-to-medium term. Although it would continue to pursue those who do not abandon gang activity, the government should also commit to apply far higher standards of proof when deciding which cases to take to trial.

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<sup>141</sup> "Bukele y las maras", op. cit.

<sup>142</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, gang expert, 18 June 2022.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert, 25 May 2022.

<sup>144</sup> Bukele might require additional authority in order to cut sentences in this manner. As his party is so strong in parliament, the legislature would doubtless follow his lead in providing it.

<sup>145</sup> Of the 63,000 people the police arrested between 1 January and 31 August 2022, over 42,000 people were charged for "illicit association", and another 8,000 for being part of "terrorist organisations". That is to say, the vast majority of arrests have to do with suspicion of gang membership rather than connection to a specific crime. Crisis Group interviews, religious leader, security experts, San Salvador and Guatemala, April and May 2022.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interview, gang expert, Guatemala, 20 April 2022.

<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former gang member and gang expert, San Salvador and by telephone, March and July 2022.

Of course, if Bukele were to capitalise on his position of strength to pursue discussions with gang leaders in and outside jails who are inclined to enter talks, he could develop the terms of a deal along the foregoing lines while helping ensure greater buy-in from gangs and thus reducing the risks of reprisal against those who commit to rehabilitation.

### *B. Elements of a Rehabilitation and Reintegration Policy*

An initiative of the sort described above should form part of more systematic effort to achieve the rehabilitation of El Salvador's former gang members.

To begin with, this effort would require creating a legal and programmatic framework. A number of proposals along these lines have already been aired in El Salvador over recent years and should be revived for further consideration.<sup>148</sup> For instance, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security presented a bill in 2015 that promoted programs aimed at preventing gang recruitment and rehabilitating gang inmates, including the conditions for participation in these programs, such as undergoing psychological evaluation and having no pending charges, among others.<sup>149</sup> A prominent national NGO has suggested forming a network of institutions in charge of designing, coordinating and overseeing such programs.<sup>150</sup> Oversight should include regular monitoring of participants for recidivism, and the application of sanctions, including (where appropriate) a return to prison, for those who start slipping back into gang activity.<sup>151</sup>

Programming designed for jails, the epicentre of the gang problem, will be crucial to designing an effective rehabilitation and reintegration process. Most of the old-guard gang leaders are behind bars, and members on the outside often continue to comply with their directives, the erosion of their authority notwithstanding.<sup>152</sup> But prisons are also the places where loyalty to gangs is at its weakest. Six of ten jailed

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<sup>148</sup> Civil society groups, academics and parliamentarians have proposed at least five rehabilitation bills over the past twenty years, none of which has prospered. The changes to the penal code passed in early April after the state of exception was introduced are an additional legal obstacle to any new initiative. Crisis Group interviews, security experts, San Salvador and by telephone, 24 March and 23 June 2022. Luis Enrique Amaya and Juan José Martínez, "Pesetas, Calmados y Hermanos: Iniciativas de retiro, rehabilitación y reinserción de pandilleros en El Salvador", *Realidad y Reflexión*, January-June 2019. Police data obtained by Crisis Group.

<sup>149</sup> "El Salvador presenta proyecto de ley para rehabilitación de pandillas", *Insight Crime*, 30 October 2015.

<sup>150</sup> This proposal, however, excluded members of criminal organisations from the list of possible beneficiaries. "Propuesta para una Ley Especial de Prevención de la Violencia: una Tarea Imposter-gable", FESPAD, March 2018.

<sup>151</sup> As of mid-2019, prison authorities reported that around one in five inmates had been jailed before. Crisis Group interviews, NGO workers, former judge and former gang members, San Salvador, March and April 2022. "Aumentan reincidencias en sistema penitenciario", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 7 August 2019.

<sup>152</sup> The state's measures curbing communication between jailed gang members and people on the outside have weakened the old guard's writ. Crisis Group interviews, former gang members, San Salvador and Santa Ana, April 2022. Crisis Group Report, *Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, op. cit.

gang members interviewed for a recent study expressed a wish to leave the groups.<sup>153</sup> That said, programming should also create opportunities for gang members who remain at large, should they meet eligibility requirements (including that they have no charges pending against them) to participate.<sup>154</sup>

As discussed above, the possibility of sentence reduction can help steer inmates out of gangs and toward rehabilitation programs, and authorities should take related steps that could work in support of this broader effort. These could include strengthening job and educational training to prepare prisoners for life outside the prison walls, as well as opportunities for paid employment so they can provide for their families while they remain incarcerated. One possibility would be to expand and improve the “zero idleness” program – which presently employs “civilian” inmates (ie, those without gang affiliation) in unremunerated work – so that it is available to gang members and provides compensation. A program along these lines was crucial to the success of a similar process in Ecuador, according to an academic involved.<sup>155</sup>

The success of these rehabilitation programs is likely to depend in some measure on the extent to which they involve religious leaders. Evangelical churches have spearheaded efforts to promote the peaceful abandonment of gang life, also known as desistance. Indeed, a vibrant religious conversion movement has led to the “deactivation” of thousands of jailed gang members in recent years.<sup>156</sup> Despite some initial resistance, gangs themselves have largely come to accept religious conversion as a reason to let a member leave, though they point out that it is not an automatic pass.<sup>157</sup> Former members remain subject to the gang’s scrutiny, sometimes for quite a while, and must lead a “straight life” to convince the gang that they have indeed become practising evangelical Christians.<sup>158</sup>

It will also be essential that any rehabilitation and reintegration policy hold out the promise of decent jobs, as leaving gang life behind means giving up the economic

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<sup>153</sup> José Miguel Cruz and Jonathan D. Rosen, “Mara Forever? Factors Associated with Gang Disengagement in El Salvador”, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, vol. 69 (July-August 2020); David Brotherton, Adrian Bergmann and Rafael Jose Gude, “Large-scale Rehabilitation and Reentry of Incarcerated Persons in El Salvador”, World Bank, January 2021.

<sup>154</sup> Gang members who remain at large may be less interested in participating given the power and economic benefits (however limited) of gang membership. Crisis Group interviews, NGO workers, former gang members and religious leaders, April-May 2022.

<sup>155</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, NGO worker and academic, 27 January and 3 February 2022. David C. Brotherton and Rafael Gude, “Social Control and the Gang: Lessons from the Legalization of Street Gangs in Ecuador”, *Critical Criminology*, vol. 29 (2021).

<sup>156</sup> Even though prison authorities tend to recognise “becalmed” gang members and separate them from active ones in order to avoid possible retaliation against them, there is currently no such thing as a “former gang member” in Salvadoran law or jail regulations. “For the state, you will always be a gang member”, complained a former gang member. Crisis Group interviews, religious leader and former gang member, San Salvador, April and May 2022.

<sup>157</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former gang members, San Salvador and Santa Ana, April and May 2022. “Pesetas, Calmados y Hermanos: Iniciativas de retiro, rehabilitación y reinserción de pandilleros en El Salvador”, *Realidad y Reflexión*, January-June 2019.

<sup>158</sup> In an academic study, 63 per cent of interviewees said the gang continued to monitor their actions after they joined religious organisations. José Miguel Cruz and Jonathan D. Rosen, “Leaving the Pervasive Barrio: Gang Disengagement under Criminal Governance”, *Social Problems* (February 2022).

support, even if minimal, that membership provides.<sup>159</sup> Former gang members are more likely to find jobs in manufacturing or construction rather than the service sector, where customers could well be turned off by signs of former gang membership.<sup>160</sup> Some can also run businesses: Crisis Group visited a bakery managed by former gang members that had grown to produce \$300 worth of bread per day, but had to halt production when the state of exception began.<sup>161</sup> Yet in a country where, according to the World Bank, more than a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line, with expected GDP growth in 2022 at 2.7 per cent (the lowest in Central America), the public would likely resent programs aimed at creating jobs for former gang members.<sup>162</sup> The precarious economic outlook additionally will pose problems for achieving full employment for tens of thousands of ex-gang members.<sup>163</sup>

For these reasons it will be especially important that the authorities consider how to support ex-gang members seeking work. While businesses tend to distrust people with criminal records and often discriminate against job applicants coming from areas with a strong gang presence, a well-designed program could help address these concerns.<sup>164</sup> Evangelical pastors, social workers and psychologists could monitor and help validate the rehabilitation of former gang members, and assess whether they would be able to take up a new job or receive a small amount of credit to set up a business or fund a cooperative venture.<sup>165</sup> According to a trade union leader and an entrepreneur, if the government were to “certify” that an ex-prisoner had been fully rehabilitated, it would help businesses trust that person.<sup>166</sup>

Beyond employment, former gang members will also require social acceptance to live in peace with the communities that receive them.<sup>167</sup> Hundreds of thousands of people have suffered extortion and displacement at the gangs' hands – and many have seen their family members disappeared or murdered. They will surely demand some form of restorative justice if they are to live alongside former gang members. So, too, will the general public, if they are to support rehabilitation and reintegration, partic-

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<sup>159</sup> “Off-ramps need on-ramps to something else”, said an academic who specialises in criminal justice. Crisis Group telephone interview, 9 March 2022.

<sup>160</sup> Crisis Group interview, entrepreneur and trade union representative, San Salvador, 22 and 30 March 2022.

<sup>161</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former gang members, San Salvador, May 2022.

<sup>162</sup> Crisis Group interviews, NGO workers, residents, business leaders and diplomats, San Salvador, March and April 2022. Figures from the World Bank data website. “Banco Mundial rebaja de nuevo la perspectiva económica para El Salvador”, *El Salvador*, 7 June 2022.

<sup>163</sup> “Enterprises are not country houses”, a trade union representative pointed out. “They respond to the market's demands”. Crisis Group interview, trade union representative San Salvador, 30 March 2022.

<sup>164</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident, San Salvador, 1 December 2021.

<sup>165</sup> Past business efforts usually depended on evangelical pastors. One was League Central America, a textile factory in Ciudad Arce that at one time employed dozens of former gang members, with very few quitting their jobs to return to lives of crime. The initiative came to a halt because the company's profits declined, and the owner had to sell the factory. Crisis Group interviews, religious leader and entrepreneur, San Salvador, 30 November 2021 and 22 March 2022. “Esa utopía llamada reinsertión”, *El Faro*, 10 June 2012.

<sup>166</sup> Crisis Group interviews, San Salvador, March 2022.

<sup>167</sup> Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Bargaining with the Devil to Avoid Hell?”, Institute for Integrated Transitions, July 2020.

ularly since the state has demonised the gangs. Reluctant though they may be to express contrition, former gang members should be expected to provide a truthful account of their path through gang life, potentially through a formal transitional justice mechanism. As part of the path toward reconciliation, they should ask for forgiveness from the families they harmed, and, if they have it, provide information about the thousands of disappeared that often end up in mass graves.<sup>168</sup>

Bringing the gang problem under enduring control will also require efforts to address the economic and educational exclusion, as well as the domestic violence, that help drive young Salvadorans to enlist in the first place.<sup>169</sup> An academic study found that 94 per cent of gang members interviewed had left school early, and 47 per cent had left home before turning fifteen, mostly because they felt neglected or unsafe.<sup>170</sup> The government has made some progress in creating opportunities for poor youngsters. To give one discrete example, it has distributed 770,000 laptops and around 300,000 tablets to pupils with little purchasing power, and it has built more community centres to provide opportunities for after-school education and leisure.<sup>171</sup>

But it has a long way to go. State-run schools in poor areas are still far from offering high-quality education, and also have yet to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, when the number of children enrolled fell.<sup>172</sup> Domestic violence was on the rise even before the pandemic-related lockdowns, affecting one in every five women in metropolitan San Salvador, as well as a similar share of underage boys and girls at the national level.<sup>173</sup>

Finally, keeping kids away from gangs requires far deeper appreciation from the authorities of how abusive police practices, such as excessive force, arbitrary detention and mistreatment of suspects, can also push at-risk youth to join gangs in search of protection.<sup>174</sup> “The police need to understand that not all gang members are dev-

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<sup>168</sup> When asked about the gangs' responsibility for violence, a former gang member was dismissive: “The government should start asking forgiveness for disappearances. We have visible tattoos, but there are tattoos that one carries in one's heart”. Crisis Group interview, former gang member, San Salvador, May 2022.

<sup>169</sup> Alberto Martínez Reyes and José Javier Navarro Pérez, “¿Atracción o Reclutamiento? Causas que Motivan el Ingreso en Las Pandillas de los/as Adolescentes Salvadoreños/as”, *Revista Prisma Social*, vol. 23 (December 2018).

<sup>170</sup> As of 2015, it was estimated that at least 80 per cent of public schools had students who were gang members. Augusto Rigoberto López, “Pandillas en Escuelas Públicas de El Salvador”, *Revista Policía y Seguridad Pública*, vol. 1 (2015); José Miguel Cruz, Jonathan D. Rosen, Luis Enrique Amaya and Yulia Vorobyeva, “La Nueva Cara de las Pandillas Callejeras: el Fenómeno de las Pandillas en El Salvador”, National Foundation for Development, 2017.

<sup>171</sup> “Gobierno avanza en el cierre de la brecha digital con la entrega de 770,000 laptops y más de 298,000 tablets a estudiantes del sector público”, Presidency of El Salvador, 4 June 2022.

<sup>172</sup> Crisis Group interview, teacher, San Salvador, 27 March 2022. “Matrícula escolar de 2021 es la más baja desde 1992”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 11 July 2021.

<sup>173</sup> “Violencia doméstica aumentó en cuarentena, según Fusades”, *El Salvador*, 3 August 2021; “Encuesta de Violencia contra Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes El Salvador”, Ministry of Justice and Public Security of El Salvador, May 2019.

<sup>174</sup> Crisis Group interviews, former gang members, NGO workers, religious leaders, academics and residents, San Salvador, 2019, 2020 and 2022. Crisis Group Report, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, op. cit.; Reyes and Pérez, “¿Atracción o Reclutamiento? Causas que Motivan el Ingreso en Las Pandillas de los/as Adolescentes Salvadoreños/as”, op. cit.

ils”, said an entrepreneur working on gang rehabilitation programs. “But also communities need to understand that not all police are evil”.<sup>175</sup> The government could make use of the forced retirements it has imposed on the police force to hire new officers, focusing their training on community policing, crime prevention and support for rehabilitation – all elements of Bukele’s presidential manifesto, known as the Cuscatlán Plan, that have been cast aside.<sup>176</sup>

### C. *External Backing*

Although relations between El Salvador and its foreign partners are at a low ebb, renewed collaboration around gang rehabilitation could help rebuild a modicum of trust. The U.S. has traditionally provided important, if controversial support to Salvadoran governments in security matters.<sup>177</sup> It has trained police in tactics and criminal investigation, supplied equipment and encouraged prison reform, placing greater importance of late on prevention and rehabilitation, although as noted it has now diverted support for judicial and security institutions to civil society.<sup>178</sup>

The incoming U.S. ambassador, William Duncan, may have the opportunity to revamp bilateral relations by offering support to rehabilitation and reintegration amid the state of exception.<sup>179</sup> U.S. officials should signal to Bukele their willingness to provide robust support for such a program should certain conditions be met – including a rollback of the state of exception, and an agreement to keep the program separate from the Territorial Control Plan that Bukele has managed with little transparency.<sup>180</sup> To increase the odds of success, Washington may wish to keep its pressure with respect to El Salvador’s democratic decline and the humanitarian crisis in its prisons out of the public eye for the time being. Foreign backing will need to be as broad as possible, with the U.S., Canada and the EU all pulling in the same direction. Such coordination has met with success in the past, for example when this trio was able to halt approval of a foreign agents law that posed a major threat to civil society groups.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Crisis Group interview, entrepreneur, San Salvador, 30 November 2021.

<sup>176</sup> The Cuscatlán Plan, which touches on various social, economic and security proposals, has a dedicated website. To move in this direction, however, would entail backtracking on plans to double the number of military officers involved in policing, which is likely to reinforce treatment of gangs as enemies and threats to national security. Crisis Group interview, human rights defender, San Salvador, 3 May 2022.

<sup>177</sup> U.S. assistance has focused on strengthening law enforcement. Unlike the EU, it never showed its support for the 2012 truce. Crisis Group telephone interview, truce facilitator, 8 March 2022.

<sup>178</sup> Biden’s strategy for addressing the root causes of migration in Central America, for example, identified violence prevention, rehabilitation and reinsertion of former gang members into society as strategic objectives. “U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America”, The White House, July 2021.

<sup>179</sup> The U.S. Congress still needs to confirm Duncan’s appointment. Crisis Group interviews, USAID official, NGO representatives and diplomat, San Salvador and by telephone, 25 March and 13 June 2022.

<sup>180</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, diplomat, 5 May 2022.

<sup>181</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats and former government adviser, San Salvador, March and May 2022.



The U.S. should also consider whether the sanctions it has applied to senior Salvadoran officials are having the intended effect, or whether they might usefully be revisited. For example, a U.S. agency representative complained that sanctions against the heads of El Salvador's prison system and the Unit for the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric forced colleagues on the ground to bypass those individuals in order to keep working with the institutions they were leading.<sup>182</sup> But these individuals had played a constructive role as interlocutors with the gangs in the past, and they could do so again in the future. Whether as a matter of law or policy, a sanctions regime that impedes U.S. officials' capacity to deal with them could be counterproductive, to the extent that the U.S. wishes to encourage some form of negotiations to forge a way out of the status quo.<sup>183</sup>

Finally, the World Bank suggests that, in order to build a bridge between rehabilitation work in prisons and a return to productive employment in communities, reintegration strategies should be embedded in broader discussions about El Salvador's economic development. "Job growth in key emerging markets, a change in private and public sector hiring practices, and the inclusion of re-entry targets ... will ensure that", the Bank concludes.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. agency representative, San Salvador, 23 March 2022.

<sup>183</sup> U.S. diplomats have seemingly begun to reconsider their longstanding reluctance to back government dialogue and engagement with gangs, aside from funding pilot projects for gang member rehabilitation. Diplomatic overtures from Washington suggest that it could support gang rehabilitation. It may even agree to back a government program that draws on the consent and cooperation of gang leaders. But for negotiations with gangs to be "acceptable", said a U.S. diplomat, "they need to be transparent, and not everything with this government is transparent". Crisis Group interviews, U.S. diplomats, San Salvador and by telephone, February and May 2022.

<sup>184</sup> Brotherton et al., "Large-scale Rehabilitation and Reentry of Incarcerated Persons in El Salvador", *op. cit.*

## V. Conclusion

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A horrific spike in gang violence amid the collapse of secretive dealings between government and gangs in El Salvador has paved the way for a law enforcement offensive marked by punitive zeal and the suspension of basic rights. Instead of simply pursuing those responsible for the killing spree in March, the government has used a state of exception to clamp down ruthlessly not just on gang members but people with past or even no links to gangs. Along the way, it has created the conditions for a humanitarian crisis in the nation's overcrowded jails.

The government's heavy-handed campaign based on raids, checkpoints and mass arrests appears to have dealt a blow to the gangs, who have beat a retreat, and is certainly popular among Salvadorans and some regional observers, but it is unlikely to yield long-term change in the conditions that generate gang violence. The risks are also significant. Beyond the financial, humanitarian and reputational costs of more than doubling the prison population, the campaign could generate resentment and perhaps backlash from gang members who see no way back into law-abiding society. Against this backdrop, it is almost hard to recall that right after he was elected, Bukele's proposals in the security realm focused on the need to reduce overcrowding in prisons and treat the socio-economic ills that make gangs attractive to Salvadoran teenagers.

While now appearing wedded to iron-fist policing, President Bukele still has an opportunity to move on to a new path by offering a formal way out of gang membership for the thousands of people who, having paid for their crimes, express genuine interest in building new lives. A structured, transparent process offering rehabilitation to qualifying jailed and free gang members, in cooperation with churches, civil society and business, could also present a chance to improve parlous relations between El Salvador and the country's main foreign partners, which could be in a position to play an important role in unlocking funds that the government desperately needs.

The political landscape in the country makes this prospect seem forbiddingly remote. Bukele's government appears fixated on broadcasting the achievements of its crackdown on "terrorists" as it plots the path to what it hopes will be another sweeping victory in the 2024 presidential, legislative and municipal elections. It hardly seems keen on giving gang members a second chance, let alone resuming talks with their leaders. Yet the causes of El Salvador's long struggle with violent crime have not gone away and could deepen should gang members resign themselves to staying on the margins of society while ordinary citizens grow more embittered and the country more isolated. The short-term electoral calculus may point in the direction of tightening the screws on the gangs, but El Salvador's recent history suggests that the benefits of mass arrests are short-lived. The best way to weaken the gangs is to provide members with a way out – not to throw them all in jail.

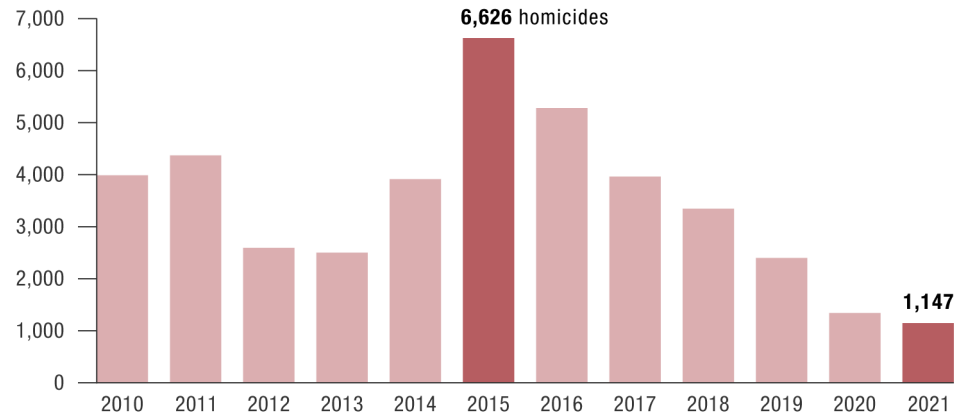
**Guatemala City/Bogotá/Washington/Brussels, 5 October 2022**

Appendix A: Map of El Salvador



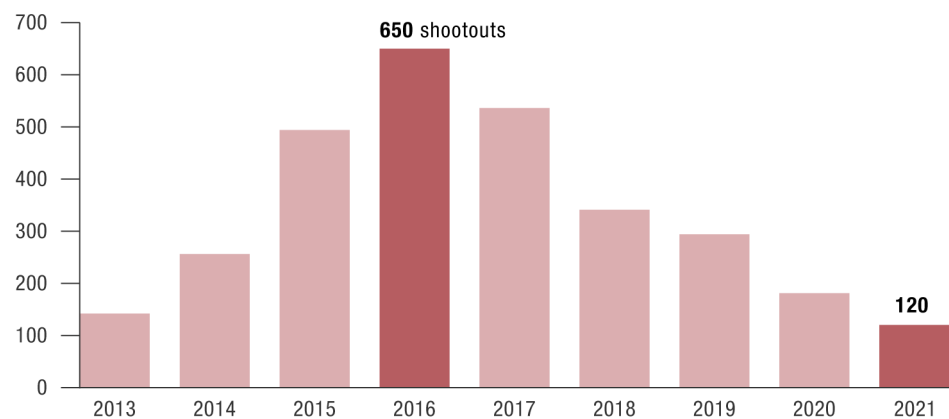
## Appendix B: Violence Indicators in El Salvador

**Figure 1: Homicides in El Salvador, 2010-2021**



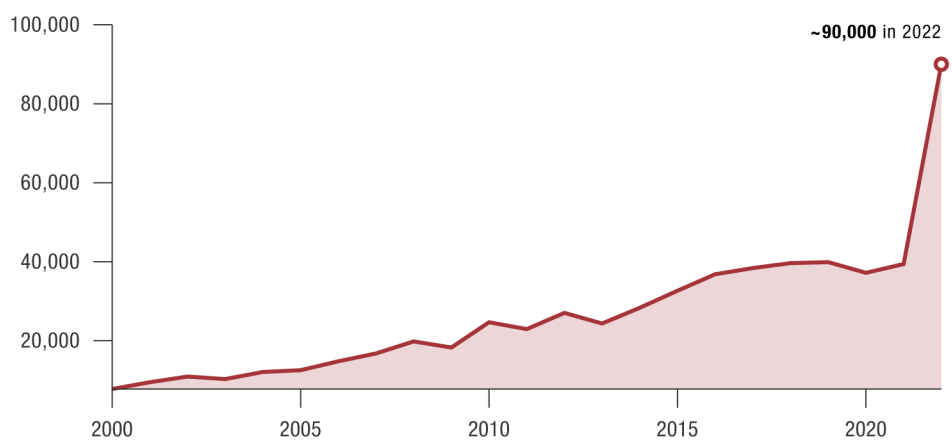
Source: Consolidated figure from the National Police, Forensic Medicine Institute and Attorney General's Office.

**Figure 2: Shootouts between gangs and security forces in El Salvador, 2013-2021**



Source: National Police.

**Figure 3: Prison population in El Salvador, 2000-2022**



Source: World Prison Brief and estimate for 2022, based on police figures. Note: the total prison population as of August 2022 was estimated by adding the 51,438 detentions announced by the police as of 31 August 2022 to the World Prison Brief's reported population as of 1 March 2022 (39,538).

## Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

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**October 2022**

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*Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

*A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022*, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

*7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine*, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023*, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

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*Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South* Latin America Report N°73, 28 February 2019 (also available in Spanish).

*A Way Out of Latin America's Impasse over Venezuela*, Latin America Briefing N°38, 14 May 2019 (also available in Spanish).

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**HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal**  
**Celso Amorim**  
**Óscar Arias**  
**Richard Armitage**  
**Diego Arria**  
**Zainab Bangura**  
**Nahum Barnea**

**Kim Beazley**  
**Shlomo Ben-Ami**  
**Christoph Bertram**  
**Lakhdar Brahimi**  
**Kim Campbell**  
**Jorge Castañeda**  
**Joaquim Alberto Chissano**  
**Victor Chu**  
**Mong Joon Chung**  
**Sheila Coronel**  
**Pat Cox**  
**Gianfranco Dell'Alba**  
**Jacques Delors**  
**Alain Destexhe**  
**Mou-Shih Ding**  
**Uffe Ellemann-Jensen**  
**Stanley Fischer**  
**Carla Hills**

**Swanee Hunt**  
**Wolfgang Ischinger**  
**Aleksander Kwasniewski**  
**Ricardo Lagos**  
**Joanne Leedom-Ackerman**  
**Todung Mulya Lubis**  
**Graça Machel**  
**Jessica T. Mathews**  
**Miklós Németh**  
**Christine Ockrent**  
**Timothy Ong**  
**Roza Otunbayeva**  
**Olara Otunnu**  
**Lord (Christopher) Patten**  
**Fidel V. Ramos**  
**Olympia Snowe**  
**Javier Solana**  
**Pär Stenbäck**