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Congress has had significant interest in El Salvador, a small Central American nation that has had a large percentage of its population living in the United States since the country's civil conflict (1980-1992). During the 1980s, the U.S. government spent billions of dollars supporting the Salvadoran government's counterinsurgency efforts against the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The United States later supported a 1992 peace accord that ended the conflict and transformed the FMLN into a political party. Despite periodic tensions, the United States worked with two consecutive FMLN administrations (2009-2019). As bilateral efforts have been unable to prevent irregular emigration from El Salvador, the Trump Administration has focused relations with President Nayib Bukele on migration-related issues.

Domestic Situation

On June 1, 2019, Nayib Bukele, a 37-year-old businessman and former mayor of San Salvador, took office for a five-year presidential term. Bukele won 53% of the vote in the February 2019 election, standing for the Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANA) party. Elected on an anticorruption platform, Bukele is the first president in 30 years to be elected without the backing of the conservative National Republic Alliance (ARENA) or the FMLN parties. Bukele succeeded Salvador Sánchez Cerén (FMLN), who presided over a period of moderate economic growth (averaging 2.3%), ongoing security challenges, and political polarization.

President Bukele promised to reduce crime and attract investment, but his lack of support in the National Assembly (GANA has 11 of 84 seats) has led to several executive-legislative clashes. Homicides continued to trend downward during his first year in office (to a rate of 36 per 100,000), but extortion rates rose. El Salvador's economy grew 2.4% in 2019 but is expected to decline by 5.4% this year due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Bukele has remained popular, but his government's refusal to abide by legislative and Supreme Court decisions and his harsh COVID-19 quarantine have received significant international criticism.

U.S. Policy

Since FY2016, Congress has appropriated nearly \$3.1 billion, at least \$411 million of which has been allocated to El Salvador, through the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America to address the underlying drivers of migration. In March 2019, the Administration suspended most foreign aid to El Salvador (and to Guatemala and Honduras) after criticizing the government's failure to address irregular migration. After signing several migration-related agreements with the Bukele government in 2019, the Administration informed Congress that it intends to release some suspended assistance and provide small amounts of new targeted aid for El Salvador. U.S. funds aim to deter migration, support President Bukele's security strategy, and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The FY2021 budget does not specify a funding amount for El Salvador but asks for \$377 million for the Central American region.

In addition to scaled-back U.S. assistance, shifts in U.S. immigration policies have tested bilateral relations. The Administration's decision to rescind the temporary protected status (TPS) designation that has shielded up to 250,000 Salvadorans from removal since 2001 is a major concern for the Bukele government. A House-passed bill, H.R. 6, would allow certain TPS designees to apply for permanent resident status.

The 116th Congress has considered various measures affecting U.S. policy toward El Salvador. In December 2019, Congress enacted the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-94), which provides \$519.9 million for Central America, including at least \$73 million for El Salvador. Several other measures Congress may consider would expand in-country refugee processing in the Northern Triangle (H.R. 2347 and H.R. 3731) and authorize foreign assistance for certain activities in Central America (H.R. 2615, H.R. 2836, H.R. 3524, S. 1445, and S. 1781).

See also CRS Report R44812, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress*, by Peter J. Meyer.

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Introduction

A small, densely populated Central American country that has deep historical, familial, and economic ties to the United States, El Salvador has been a focus of sustained congressional interest (see **Figure 1** for a map and key country data).¹ After a troubled history of authoritarian rule and a civil war (1980-1992), El Salvador has established a multiparty democracy, albeit with significant challenges, particularly related to insecurity.² A 1992 peace accord ended the war and assimilated the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrilla movement into the political process as a political party. The conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) ruled until 2009, before ceding power to two consecutive FMLN administrations. With both the FMLN and ARENA tarnished by revelations of corruption by former presidents, Salvadorans elected Nayib Bukele, an outsider who took office on June 1, 2019.³

President Bukele, a businessman and former mayor of San Salvador, left the FMLN and captured a first-round victory standing for the Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU) party in February 2019 presidential elections.⁴ Born in 1981, Bukele is the first president of El Salvador from a generation that did not come of age politically during the civil conflict in which more than 70,000 Salvadorans died.⁵ Bukele has battled with the legislature (where GANU holds 11 of 84 seats) and the Supreme Court over funds he sought for his security plan and his aggressive enforcement of a Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) quarantine. Although he remains popular, Bukele's critics are concerned about his authoritarian tendencies and lack of respect for other branches of government.⁶ In contrast to the FMLN, President Bukele has adopted a pro-United States agenda and pledged to stop irregular migration (see "U.S. Relations," below).

This report examines political, economic, security, and human rights conditions in El Salvador. It then analyzes selected issues in U.S.-Salvadoran relations that have been of particular interest to Congress, including foreign assistance, migration, security cooperation in addressing gangs and counternarcotics issues, human rights, and trade.

Politics and Governance

Postconflict Era of ARENA and FMLN Rule

Polarization between the FMLN, a party formed by former guerillas, and ARENA, a party aligned with the military, has been the primary dynamic in Salvadoran politics since the civil conflict. From 1994 to 2008, successive ARENA governments sought to rebuild democracy and

¹ For historical background on El Salvador, see Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, *El Salvador: A Country Study*, ed. Richard Haggerty (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990).

² Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Facing the Challenge of Truth Commissions* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002); Diana Villiers Negroponete, *Seeking Peace in El Salvador: The Struggle to Reconstruct a Nation at the End of the Cold War* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

³ Nelson Renteria and Noe Torres, "Outsider wins El Salvador Presidency, Breaking two-party System," Reuters, February 3, 2019.

⁴ Charles T. Call, *The Significance of Nayib Bukele's Surprising Election as President of El Salvador*, Brookings Institution, February 5, 2019.

⁵ United Nations Commission on the Truth for El Salvador, *From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador*, 1993.

⁶ "Hungry House: Nayib Bukele's Power Grab in El Salvador," *The Economist*, May 6, 2020.

implement market-friendly economic reforms. ARENA proved to be a reliable U.S. ally but did not effectively address inequality, violence, or corruption. Development indicators generally improved, but natural disasters, including earthquakes in 2001 and periodic hurricanes, hindered progress. Moreover, despite ARENA’s probusiness policies, economic growth averaged 2.4% over the postwar years in which it governed.⁷

Figure 1. Map of El Salvador and Key Country Data



Geography	Area: 8,008 sq. mi. (about the size of Massachusetts) Capital: San Salvador
People	Population: 6.5 million (CEPAL, 2020) Life Expectancy: 74 years (CEPAL, 2020) Infant Mortality: 11.8 deaths per 1,000 births (CEPAL, 2018) Poverty: 34.5% (CEPAL, 2018)
Economy	Gross Domestic Product (GDP): \$26.9 billion (IMF, 2019) GDP per capita: \$4,000 (IMF, 2019) Top Trade Partners: United States (34.5%), Guatemala (12.3%), Honduras (10%), China (9.8%) (TDM, 2019) Top Exports to the United States: Apparel and textiles, Electrical Machinery Parts, Sugar, Coffee (TDM, 2019)

Sources: Graphic created by CRS using data from the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and El Salvador’s Central Bank data downloaded from Trade Data Monitor (TDM).

The attorney general’s office has brought cases against the two most recent ARENA presidents. Francisco Flores (1999-2004) passed away in January 2016 while awaiting trial for allegedly embezzling donations from Taiwan destined for earthquake relief. In August 2018, former president Anthony (“Tony”) Saca (2004-2009) pled guilty to charges of money laundering and

⁷ International Monetary Fund (IMF), *World Economic Outlook Database*, April 2019.

embezzlement of some \$300 million. Saca, who started the GANA party in 2010 after being expelled from ARENA, is now serving a 10-year prison sentence.

Mauricio Funes (2009-2014), a former journalist, served as El Salvador's first FMLN president. Funes remained popular and his government reduced poverty and inequality. The government expanded crime prevention programs and community policing but also supported and then later disavowed a failed gang truce.⁸ In 2016, the attorney general's office began investigating Funes for allegedly embezzling more than \$350 million in public funds. He received political asylum in Nicaragua, but Salvadoran officials have sought his extradition.⁹

Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2014-2019), a former guerrilla commander, failed to implement most of his pledges to boost social and infrastructure spending due, in part, to El Salvador's severe fiscal constraints and his party's lack of a congressional majority. During his term, El Salvador continued to contend with difficult security conditions despite reductions in homicides since 2015, low investment, and polarization between the executive and the ARENA-led National Assembly.¹⁰ Aggressive anti-gang efforts led to extrajudicial killings by security forces.¹¹ The FMLN performed poorly in March 2018 legislative elections.

Under Sánchez Cerén, El Salvador continued to strengthen its ties with Cuba and Venezuela and abandoned long-standing ties with Taiwan to establish diplomatic relations with China. Illicit funds reportedly flowed from Venezuela's state oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PdVSA) to its Salvadoran subsidiary (*Alba Petróleos*) and some FMLN politicians, which resulted in U.S. sanctions on the company.¹² The Trump Administration criticized the Salvadoran government's August 2018 decision to abandon relations with Taiwan in favor of China, particularly for the "non-transparent" way in which the decision took place.¹³

Bukele Administration

On February 3, 2019, Nayib Bukele, standing for the GANA party, won 53% of the vote, well ahead of Carlos Calleja (ARENA-led coalition), with 31.8%, and Hugo Martínez (FMLN), with 14.4%. Bukele's first-round victory occurred amid relatively low voter turnout (44.7%) during an electoral process observed by the Organization of American States (OAS) and deemed free and fair.¹⁴ The scale of Bukele's victory demonstrated voters' dissatisfaction with both major parties.

Bukele led the presidential race from start to finish, despite releasing few specific policy proposals until late in the campaign and opting not to attend debates. In 2017, the FMLN expelled

⁸ "Trudging El Salvador's Truce," *The Economist*, August 26, 2017.

⁹ Nelson Renteria, "El Salvador's top Court Approves Extradition Request for ex-President Funes," Reuters, March 21, 2019. In October 2018, the attorney general's office issued another arrest warrant for Funes on charges of involvement in a massive corruption scheme involving contractors, his family, and the former attorney general.

¹⁰ According to the State Department, investors "generally perceived [the Sánchez Cerén government] as unsuccessful at improving the investment climate." U.S. Department of State, *2019 Investment Climate Statements: El Salvador*, July 11, 2019.

¹¹ Anna-Catherine Brigida, "El Salvador's Tough Policing Isn't What it Looks Like," *Foreign Policy*, July 6, 2019.

¹² Douglas Farah and Caitlyn Yates, *Maduro's Last Stand*, National Defense University and IBI Consultants, May 2019; Per U.S. Treasury Department guidance, sanctions on Venezuela's state oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* (PdVSA), announced in January 2019 also apply to any subsidiaries in which the company (PdVSA) has a 50% or greater interest. See https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/licensing_guidance.pdf. Héctor Silva Ávalos, "PDVSA Subsidiaries in Central America Slapped With Sanctions," *InSight Crime*, March 13, 2019.

¹³ The White House, "Statement by the Press Secretary on El Salvador," August 23, 2018.

¹⁴ Organization of American States (OAS), "OAS Electoral Observation Mission Celebrates Peaceful Election in El Salvador," February 4, 2019.

Bukele from the party for criticizing its leadership. Bukele tried to create his own political party, but El Salvador's electoral court did not approve the new party's registration in time to appear on the ballot for the 2019 election. He then became GANA's presidential candidate.

As a candidate, Bukele communicated directly with potential voters using social media rather than relying on a party apparatus. He focused on addressing voters' concerns about corruption, unemployment, and crime. Bukele pledged to use his experience as a businessman and as a mayor to attract investment, address the underlying causes of the gang phenomenon, and give Salvadorans hope so that unauthorized emigration would decline. Despite GANA's reputation for corruption, Bukele ran on an anticorruption campaign and called for the establishment of an international anticorruption commission in El Salvador similar to the U.N.-sponsored

International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG).¹⁵ His opposition to efforts by the National Assembly to shield civil conflict-era human rights abusers from prosecution won domestic and international praise from human rights groups.¹⁶

Upon taking office, Bukele appointed a cabinet composed of individuals from a variety of parties. Vice President Felix Ulloa is a lawyer who has worked with many international institutions on rule-

of-law and election issues. Foreign Minister Alexandra Hill formerly worked at the OAS. Bukele appointed a navy captain as defense minister and promoted six colonels to run the army while pushing several generals into retirement.¹⁷ Bukele's minister of justice and security is a close political ally; his police chief is a career officer who recently oversaw specialized units, including one implicated in extrajudicial killings of gang suspects.¹⁸ Bukele kept the same finance minister and chose an economy minister who used to work with the Inter-American Development Bank. Other ministers (agricultural and head of the ports) are lifelong friends of Bukele who reportedly lack experience.¹⁹ Critics maintain Bukele has largely relied on his brothers for advice.²⁰

President Bukele has governed much as he campaigned, using social media to make policy declarations, purge government officials, attack his opponents, and pressure legislators to back his policies.²¹ Bukele's supporters have praised these moves, viewing them as needed steps to remove corruption and nepotism. Critics have expressed concerns about statements he has made and actions he has taken to discredit and block access to journalists and human rights groups

Nayib Bukele

Born in San Salvador in 1981, Nayib Bukele is the son of the late Armando Bukele Kattán, a prominent businessperson of Palestinian descent who backed the FMLN financially beginning in the early 1990s. Bukele graduated high school in the late 1990s and began working in family businesses started by his father, including a public relations firm that represented the FMLN. Bukele was elected mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán (2012-2015) and San Salvador (2015-2018) for the FMLN. As mayor, he revitalized the historic center of San Salvador and engaged at-risk youth in violence-prevention programs.

¹⁵ Melissa Vida, "Why Tackling Corruption Could Also Reduce Violence in El Salvador," *World Politics Review*, June 19, 2019; Charles T. Call, *International Anti-Impunity Missions in Guatemala and Honduras: What Lessons for El Salvador?* American University, June 2019.

¹⁶ Due Process of Law Foundation, *Three Years After the Annulment of the Amnesty Law*, July 8, 2019.

¹⁷ "El Salvador: Changing of the Guard," *Latin America Weekly Report*, June 20, 2019.

¹⁸ Héctor Silva Ávalos, "El Salvador Flirts with 'Mano Dura' Security Policies Again," *Insight Crime*, June 21, 2019.

¹⁹ "Hungry House: Nayib Bukele's Power Grab in El Salvador," *The Economist*, May 6, 2020.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Patrick J. McDonnell, Alexander Renderos, "Is El Salvador's Millennial President a Reformer or an Autocrat?" *Los Angeles Times*, February 28, 2020.

critical of his actions.²² His use of the military to intimidate the legislature in February 2020 and to detain reported violators of a strict COVID-19 quarantine have prompted rebukes by El Salvador's Supreme Court and international condemnation.²³ Although Bukele may struggle to secure legislative support for his security plan and infrastructure proposals (discussed below) this year, some predict his popularity (92.5% in May 2020) will help GANA pick up seats in the February 2021 legislative elections.²⁴

President Bukele has shifted El Salvador's foreign policy into closer alignment with the United States and asked the United States for "investments and great relations" rather than just foreign assistance.²⁵ He has criticized repression in Venezuela and Nicaragua, a significant departure from the prior government's position, while also condemning the erosion of democracy in Honduras. Bukele took responsibility for the June 2019 deaths of two Salvadoran migrants who drowned while trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border rather than criticizing U.S. immigration policies.²⁶ Bukele's decision to maintain relations with China established by his predecessor was likely driven by a need for foreign investment, but it remains a concern for U.S. policymakers.²⁷

Security Conditions

El Salvador has been dealing with escalating homicides and generalized crime committed by gangs, drug traffickers, and other criminal groups for more than two decades. In 2015, El Salvador posted a homicide rate of 104 per 100,000 people—the highest in the world. Although the homicide rate has decreased by 65% since then to 36 per 100,000, it remains high by global standards (see **Figure 2**).²⁸ In contrast to neighboring countries, El Salvador's municipalities with high levels of violence have varied significantly over time and are located all over the country.²⁹

²² Committee to Protect Journalists, "El Salvador Bans 2 Investigative Outlets from Press Conferences at Presidential Residence," September 11, 2019; U.S. Department of State, Memorandum of Justification Regarding Certification Under Section 7045 (a) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020 (Div. G, P.L. 116-94), May 18, 2020. Hereinafter: U.S. Department of State, May 18, 2020.

²³ U.S. Department of State, May 18, 2020.

²⁴ Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Country Report: El Salvador*, generated June 23, 2020; Edwin Segura, "Bukele Cierre su Primer Año con Alta Aprobación," *La Prensa Gráfica*, May 20, 2020.

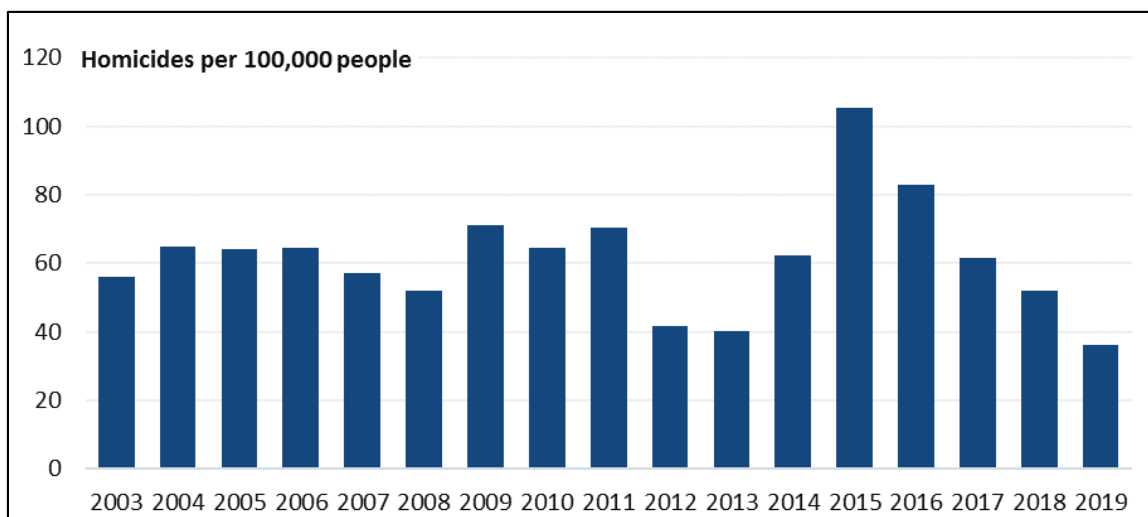
²⁵ Nayib Bukele, "Nayib Bukele: El Salvador Doesn't Want to Lose More People to the U.S.," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2019.

²⁶ Kirk Semple, "'It Is Our Fault': El Salvador's President Takes Blame for Migrant Deaths in Rio Grande," *New York Times*, July 1, 2019.

²⁷ Ernesto Londoño, "To Influence El Salvador, China Dangled Money. The U.S. Made Threats." *New York Times*, September 21, 2019.

²⁸ U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide*, 2019; Chris Dalby and Camilo Carranza, "InSight Crime's 2018 Homicide Round-up," *InSight Crime*, January 22, 2019.

²⁹ Mario Herrera, *Homicides in Central America: Towards a Better Understanding of Territorial Trends, Causes, and Dynamics*, Woodrow Wilson Center's Latin America Program, April 2019.

Figure 2. Homicide Rate in El Salvador: 2004-2019

Sources: Graphic by CRS using United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Victims of Intentional Homicide, 1990-2018,” at <https://dataunodc.un.org/content/data/homicide/homicide-rate>; U.S. State Department, *El Salvador 2020 Crime & Safety Report*, Overseas Security Advisory Council, March 31, 2020, for 2019 data

In recent years, those homicides have included targeted killings of security forces by gangs, extrajudicial killings of gang suspects by police, and among the world’s highest rates of femicide (killing of a woman or girl, often committed by a man, because of her gender).³⁰ The 2018 killing of a prominent journalist, Karla Turcios, by her partner prompted the declaration of a national emergency and captured international attention.³¹ In recent years, deportees have become targets of violence, with at least 70 deportees murdered between 2013 and 2018.³²

El Salvador has the highest concentration of gang members per capita in Central America. As a result, gangs have been responsible for a higher percentage of homicides there than in neighboring countries.³³ Although President Bukele has attributed declining homicides to his military-led security policies, some analysts posit that gangs have deliberately decided to reduce violence in the territories they control to facilitate extortion and drug distribution (their primary sources of revenue).³⁴ Gangs generally have not had a major role in transnational drug trafficking.³⁵ They have carried out periodic violence to demonstrate their power to the government, including attacks in April 2020 that resulted in more than 60 deaths in four days.³⁶ Some fear that Bukele’s response to that violence, which included authorizing the use of lethal

³⁰ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador’s Politics of Perpetual Violence*, Report No. 64, December 2017; Anna-Catherine Brigida, “El Salvador’s Tough Policing Isn’t What it Looks Like,” *Foreign Policy*, July 6, 2019.

³¹ Anastasia Moloney, “High-Profile El Salvador Femicide Case Exposes Deadly Gender Violence,” Reuters, January 21, 2020.

³² Anna-Catherine Brigida, “Kicked Out of the U.S., Salvadoran Deportees Are Struggling Simply to Stay Alive,” *World Politics Review*, October 9, 2018.

³³ International Crisis Group, *Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador*, November 26, 2018.

³⁴ Asmann and O’Reilly, January 2020; The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime/InSight Crime, *A Criminal Culture: Extortion in Central America*, May 2019.

³⁵ Steve Dudley and Héctor Silva, “MS13 in the Americas: How the World’s Most Notorious Gang Defies Logic, Resists Destruction,” *InSight Crime* and the Center for Latin American & Latino Studies at American University, February 2018.

³⁶ Marcos Alemán, “El Salvador’s Jail Crackdown on Gang Members Could Backfire,” AP, April 29, 2020.

force against gangs and pushing gang inmates into crowded prisons with rival gangs, may prompt more gang clashes with security forces and hurt the country's international image.³⁷

Where Did the Gangs in El Salvador Originate?

The major gangs operating in El Salvador (and across Central America) with ties to the United States are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and two divisions of the 18th Street gang, the Revolutionaries and the Southerners. The 18th Street gang was formed in the 1960s by Mexican youth who were not accepted into existing Hispanic gangs in the Rampart section of Los Angeles. It was the first Hispanic gang to accept members from all races and to recruit members from other states. MS-13 was created during the 1980s by Salvadorans in Los Angeles who had fled the country's civil conflict. Both gangs later expanded their operations to Central America but remain active in the United States.

The expansion of MS-13 and 18th Street presence in Central America accelerated after the United States began deporting illegal immigrants, many with criminal convictions, back to the Northern Triangle region of Central America after the passage of the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (P.L. 104-208) of 1996. Many observers contend that gang deportees "exported" a Los Angeles gang culture to Central America (where local gangs were already present). Gangs have recruited new members from among vulnerable youth in poor neighborhoods and in prisons; forcible recruitment is common. Studies have shown that, as happened in the United States, gang leaders in Central America have used prisons to increase discipline and cohesion among their ranks. Estimates of gang membership in Central America vary widely, but all suggest that El Salvador has the highest concentration of gang members and those dependent on gang revenue in the region. According to a November 2018 International Crisis Group report, *Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador*, the three largest gangs in El Salvador comprise some 65,000 members and those members support another 500,000 people, largely through revenue earned from extortion.

For additional information, see CRS Report RL34112, *Gangs in Central America*, by Clare Ribando Seelke; and CRS Report R45292, *MS-13 in the United States and Federal Law Enforcement Efforts*, by Kristin Finklea.

Gang-related violence has fueled most internal displacement in El Salvador, but violence perpetrated by security forces (police and military) also has been a factor.³⁸ In 2019, El Salvador recorded 454,000 new internally displaced persons (IDPs) due to conflict, the most of any country in Latin America that experienced displacement linked to conflict and violence.³⁹ In January 2020, the Bukele government enacted a law to deal with internal displacement that was praised by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations, but then the government reportedly cut the 2020 budget for assistance to victims of violence.⁴⁰

Criminal Justice System

El Salvador has a long history of weak institutions and corruption, with successive presidents and legislatures allocating insufficient funding to criminal justice institutions. With a majority of the National Civilian Police (PNC) budget devoted to salaries, historically there has been limited funding available for investing in training and equipment. Corruption, weak investigatory capacity, and an inability to prosecute officers accused of corruption and human rights abuses have hindered performance. A lack of confidence in the police has led many companies and citizens to use private security firms and the government to deploy soldiers to perform public

³⁷ Mary Beth Sheridan and Anna-Catherine Brigida, "Photos Show El Salvador's Crackdown on Imprisoned Gang Members," *Washington Post*, April 28, 2020.

³⁸ Cristosal, *Signs of a Crisis: Forced Internal Displacement as a Result of Violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, 2018*, June 12, 2019.

³⁹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019*, available at <https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data>.

⁴⁰ UNHCR, "UNHCR Welcomes new law in El Salvador to Help People Internally Displaced by Violence," January 10, 2020; CRS interview with Cristosal, May 19, 2020.

security functions. President Bukele has increased police salaries and sought, but did not receive, legislative approval of a loan to provide new equipment for police and soldiers.⁴¹

The State Department maintained in 2019 that “impunity persisted despite government steps to dismiss and prosecute” some officials who had committed abuses, partially due to corruption in the judiciary.⁴² Whereas some judges and courts in El Salvador have issued significant decisions, particularly in opening civil-war era cases of human rights abuses, others have proven subject to corruption. From January to August 2019, the Supreme Court heard cases against 110 judges accused of various irregularities, including collusion with criminal groups.⁴³ At President Bukele’s direction, auditors have been examining the “reserved spending account” that Bukele’s predecessors used to divert public funds for their own priorities.⁴⁴

Observers praised the probity section of the Supreme Court’s efforts to identify public officials who may have used their positions for illicit enrichment and the anti-corruption work of prosecutors under former Attorney General Douglas Meléndez (2016-2018).⁴⁵ Under Meléndez, Salvadoran prosecutors, with U.S. support, brought corruption cases against three Salvadoran presidents and a former attorney general. Together, those presidents are estimated to have stolen more than \$750 million.⁴⁶ Meléndez faced death threats throughout his term.

Anti-corruption cases have continued, albeit slowly, under Attorney General Raul Melara, a lawyer unanimously selected by the National Assembly in December 2018 to replace Meléndez (who could have served a second term). Melara is a lawyer with ties to ARENA who had no experience in criminal prosecution. Under Melara, prosecutors raided the offices of *Alba Petróleos*, a subsidiary of Venezuela’s state oil company facing U.S. sanctions in May 2019, but have yet to indict anyone from the company or anyone who received funds from it (a group that includes Bukele).⁴⁷ Melara appears to have acquiesced to President Bukele’s limited vision for the International Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES), a campaign promise Bukele fulfilled through an agreement with the OAS in September 2019.⁴⁸ Thus far, CICIES has a very limited staff and budget, and its mandate has been limited to providing technical support to Salvadoran prosecutors. Civic organizations have complained that CICIES is not empowered, as CICIG in Guatemala was, to initiate investigations and prosecutions or push for legislative reforms.⁴⁹ The attorney general’s office also has announced it will investigate COVID-19 spending for irregularities.⁵⁰

⁴¹ “El Salvador Standoff Deepens over Loan for Security Forces,” AP, February 9, 2020.

⁴² U.S. Department of State, *Country Report on Human Rights Practice for 2019: El Salvador*, March 2020. Hereinafter: U.S. Department of State, *Human Rights*, 2020.

⁴³ U.S. Department of State, *Human Rights*, 2020.

⁴⁴ U.S. Department of State, May 18, 2020.

⁴⁵ Several high-profile cases prepared by the probity section had yet to be approved to move forward by the Supreme Court. Those included former FMLN and GANA legislators, as well as former Vice President Oscar Ortiz. U.S. Department of State, *Human Rights*, 2020.

⁴⁶ Felipe Puerta, “El Salvador AG’s Office Escalates Efforts Against Corruption,” *InSight Crime*, October 17, 2018.

⁴⁷ Héctor Silva Ávalos, “El Salvador’s Nayib Bukele Tainted by Money Laundering Allegations,” *InSight Crime*, September 24, 2019. CRS interview with Héctor Silva, June 19, 2020.

⁴⁸ Due Process of Law Foundation, *From Hope to Skepticism: The International Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES)*, April 1, 2020.

⁴⁹ Paola Nagovitch, “Nayib Bukele’s First Year in Office,” *Americas Society/Council of the Americas*, May 28, 2020.

⁵⁰ “Fiscalía Investigará Compras y Contrataciones en Emergencia,” *La Prensa Gráfica*, June 28, 2020.

Delays in the judicial process and massive arrests carried out during anti-gang sweeps made under *mano dura* (heavy-handed) policing efforts have resulted in severe prison overcrowding.⁵¹ According to the U.S. State Department, prison capacity has increased in recent years, but facilities remained at 141% of occupancy as of September 2019.⁵² In addition to building new facilities, the government has channeled more prisoners into rehabilitation and job training programs, some of which have received U.S. support. Nevertheless, many human rights groups maintain that sanitation and access to medical services have worsened since more restrictive prison conditions for gang inmates began in 2016.

Bukele's Security Plan

In June 2019, President Bukele launched the first phase (*Preparation*) of what he said would be a seven-phase Territorial Control plan. A year later, he has publicly announced only three of those seven phases, and the enforcement of a strict national quarantine in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has dominated government efforts and public attention.⁵³ The Bukele government disbanded the council that the prior government used to discuss security issues with civil society and the private sector, but its security plan otherwise appears to resemble the focused, municipal-level efforts of the prior FMLN government's Safe El Salvador Plan.⁵⁴

The first phase of the plan involved deploying police and military forces into 17 high-crime communities and on public transportation and declaring a state of emergency in 28 prisons. The state of emergency tightened the "extraordinary measures" already implemented in the prisons to include preventing visitors, blocking communications networks in and around prisons, and transferring inmates to more secure facilities.⁵⁵ The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights has raised concerns about the measures' impact on inmates' rights and health.⁵⁶

President Bukele received legislative approval of a \$90 million loan to implement the second phase of his security plan, *Opportunity*. This phase has sought to unite the efforts of government agencies, nonprofits, and donors to provide opportunities for youth to work, study, and engage in cultural and sports activities as alternatives to gangs. It also includes programs aimed at reinserting youth who are former inmates into society through their participation in penitentiary farms or public works projects.

For years, Salvadoran presidents have deployed thousands of military troops to support the police, but observers have been particularly concerned about President Bukele's use of the military. Bukele has tasked thousands of members of the armed forces with supporting his

⁵¹ *Mano dura* approaches have involved incarcerating large numbers of youth (often with tattoos) for illicit association and increasing sentences for gang membership and gang-related crimes. A *mano dura* law passed by El Salvador's Congress in 2003 was subsequently declared unconstitutional but was followed by a *super mano dura* package of reforms in July 2004. These reforms enhanced police power to search and arrest suspected gang members and stiffened penalties for convicted gang members, although they provided some protections for minors. For background, see Sonja Wolf, *Mano Dura: the Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017).

⁵² U.S. Department of State, *Human Rights*, 2020.

⁵³ Paola Nagovitch, "Explainer: Nayib Bukele's Territorial Control Plan," *Americas Quarterly*, February 13, 2020.

⁵⁴ Roberto Valencia, "La Fase 2 del Plan Control Territorial es Parecida a lo que Planteaba el Plan El Salvador Seguro," *El Faro*, November 1, 2019.

⁵⁵ "Extraordinary measures," which began as a temporary measure in 2016 but became permanent through legislation passed in 2018 enable the movement of gang leaders to maximum-security prisons, cutting off cell phone service around prisons and restricting visitors to those facilities.

⁵⁶ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), "IACHR Presents its Preliminary Observations Following its in loco Visit to El Salvador," press release No. 335/19, December 27, 2019.

security plan. In August 2019, Bukele announced phase three (*Modernization*) of his plan, which has not yet been implemented. In February 2020, the National Assembly refused to approve a \$109 million loan to equip the police and military, even after Bukele had those forces surround the legislative palace—a move the Supreme Court and international observers rebuked.⁵⁷ Bukele has also defied a Supreme Court order to stop using security forces to detain those accused of violating a national quarantine and force them to stay in “containment centers.”⁵⁸

Economic and Social Conditions

El Salvador has faced significant economic challenges that may be exacerbated by the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (see the text box “COVID-19 in El Salvador”). According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), El Salvador posted an economic growth rate of 2.5% in 2019. The IMF initially predicted similar growth of about 2.5% this year but later revised its forecast to a contraction of 5.4%, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁹

Economists have identified a lack of public and private investment in the economy as a primary reason for El Salvador’s moderate growth rates. According to El Salvador’s Central Bank, net inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) stood at \$849 million in 2018, with a total stock of \$9.7 billion. Experts maintain El Salvador needs to attract more than \$1.2 billion annually in order to bolster growth.⁶⁰ Despite El Salvador’s relatively low inflation and stable, dollarized economy, FDI in El Salvador has been lower than the average among Central American countries for several years. Low levels of FDI have been attributed to the country’s political polarization, complicated regulations and bureaucracy, security challenges, and ineffective justice system.⁶¹

El Salvador’s executive and legislature have often clashed over how to respond to the country’s social and infrastructure needs and significant financing gaps. The government has often swapped short-term debt for longer-term debt rather than implement unpopular fiscal reforms. The legislature has been reluctant to approve multilateral financing requests from the executive branch. In addition, long-standing government practices—including cash payments to officials and a shielded presidential spending account—have exacerbated fiscal woes.

Since 2017, the IMF has credited the Salvadoran government with taking steps to improve the country’s fiscal situation and implementing “pro-growth reforms.”⁶² A 2017 pension reform helped ease the financial burden on that system by raising both employee and employer contributions. The IMF also credits a fiscal responsibility law with helping rationalize public spending. After President Bukele took office, IMF officials urged him to back a broader fiscal pact that could include excise taxes on luxury goods, better targeted social programs, a property tax, and a reduction in the size of some public agencies.⁶³ As part of a COVID-related emergency

⁵⁷ WOLA, *Political Crisis in El Salvador Should be Solved Through Dialogue, Not Through Power Plays and Military Deployments*, February 10, 2020.

⁵⁸ Marcos Aleman and Christopher Sherman, “El Salvador Quarantine Centers Become Points of Contagion,” AP, May 17, 2020.

⁵⁹ IMF, *World Economic Outlook Database*, October 2019; *World Economic Outlook Database*, April 2020.

⁶⁰ United Nations, *2019 World Investment Report*. “El Salvador: Bukele’s Economic Challenge,” *Latin News Caribbean & Central America* report, June 2019.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of State, *Investment Climate Report for 2019*. July 11, 2019.

⁶² IMF, *El Salvador: 2018 Article IV Consultation*, Country Report No. 18/151, June 2018.

⁶³ IMF, *El Salvador: Staff Report for the 2019 Article IV Consultation*, May 7, 2019.

program with the IMF (discussed below), the government has pledged to reduce its fiscal deficit in 2021-2023, necessitating a balance of tax increases and austerity measures.⁶⁴

In recent *Ease of Doing Business* reports, the World Bank has also credited El Salvador with implementing reforms to ease the process for businesses to obtain permits for new construction and pay taxes online, to increase access to electricity, and to speed up border crossings. Nevertheless, El Salvador fell from 73 of 190 countries ranked in 2018 to 85 in the 2019 report and 91 in the 2020 edition, as other countries reported more progress.⁶⁵ The State Department has cited the country's "discretionary application of laws/regulations, lengthy permitting procedures, and customs delays," as hindering the business environment.⁶⁶ Upon taking office, President Bukele vowed to improve the business climate and create 100,000 jobs a year as compared with the fewer than 10,000 jobs created annually during Sánchez Cerén's term. Each year, the country would need to create some 50,000 jobs to keep up with the growing labor force.⁶⁷

Insecurity and corruption are barriers to growth in El Salvador. A 2017 study by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) estimated the costs of crime and violence in El Salvador could reach 5.9% of GDP.⁶⁸ In the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report for 2019, El Salvador ranked last out of 141 countries evaluated for estimates of business costs due to organized crime and high homicide rates. Its overall ranking stood at 103rd.⁶⁹ Crimes against small- and medium-sized enterprises, which employ 55% of El Salvador's labor force, are of particular concern.

According to a study by El Salvador's INCAE business school, corruption has increased transaction costs and reduced the effectiveness of the state.⁷⁰ As an example, in 2019, prosecutors charged former president Funes with paying a company over \$100 million for a hydroelectric plant that it never completed in a region where access to water is vital.⁷¹ In addition to raising the costs of public works projects, corruption has reduced resources available to respond to natural disasters and other challenges. As previously mentioned, former president Francisco Flores (ARENA, 1999-2004) allegedly embezzled donations destined for earthquake relief.

A lack of competitiveness in export sectors has continued to restrict growth. El Salvador's labor force has lacked adequate education and vocational training to align with labor force needs, including English-language skills.⁷² In addition, the country has had logistical and physical infrastructure deficiencies, including no direct access to Caribbean ports. El Salvador's small size and high levels of informality (percentage of businesses that do not pay taxes, provide benefits to employees, or register with the government) have also reduced its competitiveness.

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, Bukele had received loans and foreign cooperation (including through the Millennium Challenge Cooperation) to fund infrastructure projects. Selected

⁶⁴ "El Salvador: Bukele Announces More Coronavirus Stimulus Measures," May 19, 2020.

⁶⁵ World Bank, *Ease of Doing Business: Reforming to Create Jobs*, 2018; *Ease of Doing Business: Training for Reform*, 2019; *Doing Business 2020*, at <https://www.doingbusiness.org/en/rankings>.

⁶⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Investment Climate Report*, July 11, 2019.

⁶⁷ "El Salvador: Bukele's Economic Challenge," *Latin News Caribbean & Central America* report, June 2019.

⁶⁸ Laura Jaitman, *The Costs of Crime and Violence: New Evidence and Insights in Latin America and the Caribbean*, International Development Bank, 2017.

⁶⁹ World Economic Forum, *Global Competitiveness Report*, 2019.

⁷⁰ INCAE, *Corrupcion en América Latina y sus Soluciones Potenciales*, February 20, 2019.

⁷¹ David Marroquín and Xiomara Alfaro, "Fiscalía Presenta Nuevos Cargos Contra Expresidente Funes por Desviar Fondos para presa El Chaparral y Divulgar Información confidencial," *El Salvador.com*, January 4, 2019.

⁷² U.S. Department of State, *Country Strategy: El Salvador*, August 2018.

initiatives included a new Pacific railway line, a doubling in the capacity of the Acajutla port, and an upgrade of the cargo terminal at the international airport.⁷³ Bukele has supported public-private partnerships. He has sought international investment for those infrastructure projects, as well as a tourism hub called “Surf City.”⁷⁴ During a state visit to China in December 2019, Bukele received pledges that China would support several infrastructure projects (including a new stadium and water treatment plant), but details of those pledges were not publicly announced.⁷⁵

Social development indicators in El Salvador have been better than in neighboring Honduras and Guatemala, yet challenges exist, particularly in rural regions. Under successive FMLN Administrations, poverty dropped from 50.1% in 2009 to 44.5% in 2014 to 26.3% in 2018; extreme poverty dropped from 17.1% to 11.7% to 5.7%.⁷⁶ Income inequality has also declined due to growth in the income of the poorest 20% of the population aided by remittances.⁷⁷

According to World Bank data, most social development indicators in El Salvador improved from 2010 to 2017, but some health and education indicators worsened.⁷⁸ The mortality rate for children under the age of five fell from 19 per 1,000 live births in 2010 to 15 per 1,000 in 2017. By 2017, skilled health professionals attended nearly all births in El Salvador and the percentage of children underweight for their age fell to 5%. Despite this progress, immunization rates for children under the age of two fell to 85% (from 92% in 2010) and primary school completion rates declined to 85% (from 92% in 2010). Per-capita spending on social programs has been higher in El Salvador than in Guatemala and Honduras but lower than the regional average for Latin America.⁷⁹ Gang-related intimidation and teen pregnancies have contributed to poor youth attendance in school.⁸⁰ El Salvador has had the highest percentage of youth aged 15-24 who are not employed, in school, or in vocational training (28.4%) in Central America.⁸¹

According to the 2019 World Risk Index, El Salvador has been among the 20 countries in the world most at risk from natural disasters, due to frequent exposure and weak response capacity.⁸² The Central American Dry Corridor, which encompasses 58% of El Salvador, 38% of Guatemala, and 21% of Honduras, is extremely susceptible to irregular rainfall. Food insecurity, often caused by drought or other natural disasters (such as earthquakes and hurricanes), has become a major social issue and driver of emigration from El Salvador.⁸³ As an example, the World Food Program estimated that more than 330,000 Salvadorans are facing food insecurity due to the combined impact of Tropical Storm Amanda and COVID-19.⁸⁴ Although some families may benefit from

⁷³ “How Is El Salvador Advancing Its Infrastructure Projects?” *Bnamericas*, October 7, 2019.

⁷⁴ María Eugenia Brizuela de Ávila and Domingo Sadurní, *Nayib Bukele’s First Six Months*, Atlantic Council, August 2019. The lack of roads and sewage treatment facilities in the coastal region of El Salvador are barriers to tourism that the government aims to address.

⁷⁵ “El Salvador to Get Major Chinese Infra Investments,” *Bnamericas*, December 4, 2019.

⁷⁶ Data are available at U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, https://estadisticas.cepal.org/cepalstat/WEB_CEPALSTAT/estadisticasIndicadores.asp?idioma=i

⁷⁷ The World Bank, “El Salvador: Overview,” updated April 4, 2019.

⁷⁸ The data are available at http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=SLV.

⁷⁹ Bartenstein and McDonald, op. cit.

⁸⁰ USAID El Salvador, “Education Fact Sheet,” at <https://www.usaid.gov/el-salvador/education>.

⁸¹ Data are from the International Labour Organization (ILO), *ILOSTAT*, accessed in June 2019.

⁸² Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and the Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict (IFHV), *World Risk Index*, 2019.

⁸³ Nina Lakhani, “Living Without Water: the Crisis Pushing People out of El Salvador,” *The Guardian*, July 30, 2019.

⁸⁴ World Food Program, “Tropical Storm Amanda Severely Impacts Food Security of 340,000 Salvadorans,” June 9,

remittances sent by relatives living abroad, they are often saddled with debts owed to smugglers, an increased work burden (especially in agriculture), and emotional trauma.⁸⁵ Additionally, households that receive remittances from relatives in the United States are often better able to deal with food insecurity and natural disasters, but observers maintain they have been targets for extortion by gangs and corrupt police.⁸⁶

COVID-19 in El Salvador

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested El Salvador's public health infrastructure. In 2019, the Global Health Security Index ranked El Salvador roughly average (65 of 195 countries ranked) and in the top third of Latin American countries (9 of 33 countries ranked) with respect to its preparedness for infectious disease outbreaks. El Salvador ranked highest in the strength of its laboratory and surveillance systems, average in the strength of its health system and ability to respond to outbreaks, and lowest in its ability to prevent outbreaks.

Before El Salvador confirmed its first case of COVID-19 in March 2020, the legislature declared a state of emergency, which President Bukele has twice extended by decree, allowing the government to impose a series of measures intended to slow the spread of the virus. Those measures include closing the international borders to most foreigners, shuttering schools and canceling large gatherings, and requiring a 30-day quarantine for returning citizens. Initially praised for his government's quick response, Bukele has subsequently received significant criticism from Human Rights Watch and others for his authoritarian approach to the pandemic, which has included ignoring several Supreme Court rulings and laws.

President Bukele has used security forces to enforce a harsh quarantine and curfew measures that restricted freedom of movement, stifled information about the virus, and sought to silence critics of his COVID-19 response. Human rights groups have asserted that there have been thousands of arbitrary detentions among the roughly 14,000 people placed in "containment centers," some for violating quarantine measures. The centers are reportedly crowded and unhygienic; COVID-19 outbreaks have occurred in some of them. As of June 28, 2020, El Salvador had confirmed 6,183 cases of COVID-19 and recorded 164 deaths.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has forecast an economic contraction of 5.4% in 2020, due to the combined impact of the quarantine on output and a recession in the United States—El Salvador's top export market and source of investment, tourism, and remittances. Although President Bukele secured legislative approval of more than \$3 billion in relief funds, largely in the form of multilateral loans, to address the economic impact of COVID-19, legislative-executive relations have remained strained over oversight of those funds and the reopening of the economy. Funds that have been approved aim to provide support for municipalities and to cover government spending; help small- and medium-sized enterprises pay wages and support the self-employed, and provide food for nearly 2 million families. The first COVID-related corruption scandal emerged after the government reportedly purchased masks at inflated prices from a company owned by a public official from Bukele's party; the official has since been dismissed.

The U.S. Agency for International Development has provided \$6.6 million worth of assistance to help El Salvador respond to the health, humanitarian, and economic effects of the pandemic. El Salvador has also received support from international financial institutions, including a \$20 million loan from the World Bank, \$389 million of financing from the IMF, and a \$250 million loan from the International Development Bank, among other financing and support.

Sources: Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, Nuclear Threat Initiative, and Economist Intelligence Unit, *Global Health Security Index*, 2019; Whitney Eulich, "In El Salvador, Quick COVID-19 Response Fuels Fears of an Iron Fist," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 16, 2016; Human Rights Watch, *El Salvador: Broad Powers Limit Accountability*, June 9, 2020; IMF, *World Economic Outlook*, April 2020; EIU, "El Salvador: Bukele Announces More Coronavirus Stimulus Measures," May 19, 2020; "El Salvador: First Irregularities Linked to Pandemic Procurement," *Latin News Weekly Report*, June 25, 2020; U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Government Support to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico During the COVID-19 Pandemic," June 11, 2020; IDB, "IDB Approves Loan to Address the COVID-19 Pandemic in El Salvador," May 28, 2020.

2020.

⁸⁵ World Food Program et al., *Food Security and Migration*, August 2017.

⁸⁶ International Crisis Group, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, December 2017.

Human Rights

Violence and human rights abuses have been prevalent for much of El Salvador's modern history. Since the Supreme Court did not overturn a 1993 amnesty law until July 2016, Salvadoran authorities have relatively recently begun to investigate mass atrocities committed during the civil war (1980-1992).⁸⁷ Prior to Bukele's inauguration, the National Assembly had been considering the enactment of a new amnesty law—a move opposed by Bukele, U.N. officials, and others—which would have provided impunity for past crimes, including emblematic cases such as El Mozote (a massacre in which U.S.-trained military forces killed almost 1,000 civilians).⁸⁸ In February 2020, Bukele vetoed another similar piece of legislation.⁸⁹

In addition to past crimes, many of the most serious human rights abuses in El Salvador today have related to gender and intrafamilial violence, gangs and criminal groups, and the excessive use of force by security forces. Some of the tactics security forces employed in atrocities committed in the 1980s, such as sexual violence, continue to be used against women and children today. The Salvadoran government's ability to address these challenges has been hindered by resource constraints, political polarization, and corruption.

Recent Human Rights Violations

Since the end of the civil war, El Salvador has had a relatively free press and civil society. Nevertheless, journalists and some nongovernmental organizations focused on transparency have been harassed for reporting on corruption, police abuses, gangs, and drug trafficking.⁹⁰ As previously discussed, international organizations have expressed concern about a deterioration in freedom of the press in El Salvador under President Bukele.⁹¹ Employees of a Human Rights Observatory created at the Central American University (UCA) to monitor and analyze data on recent human rights violations have reported harassment in retaliation for their work.⁹²

Indigenous rights and land conflicts have not been as common in El Salvador as in neighboring countries, likely because only 0.2% of the population identified as Amerindian in 2007 (the most recent year available). Although a 2014 constitutional amendment recognized indigenous rights, no laws have ensured that indigenous people benefit from natural resource development that occurs on land historically held by indigenous communities. Still, land rights advocates have praised El Salvador's decision to ban all metal mining to protect communities' water sources.⁹³

Women, children, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) people have often been targets of gang violence.⁹⁴ Gang initiations for men and women have differed.

⁸⁷ Jason Motlagh, "Inside El Salvador's Battle with Violence, Poverty, and U.S. Policy," *National Geographic*, March 2019.

⁸⁸ Nelson Renteria, "El Salvador Wartime Parties Suspend Controversial Amnesty Bill," Reuters, May 23, 2019. For background on El Mozote, see <https://www.cristosal.org/el-mozote>.

⁸⁹ Marcos Alemán, "El Salvador reconciliation law vetoed over impunity fears," AP, February 29, 2020.

⁹⁰ Committee to Protect Journalists, "El Salvador: Online Attacks and Threats Against Salvadoran Investigative News Site," July 25, 2019.

⁹¹ U.S. Department of State, May 18, 2020.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Sarah Sheets, "El Salvador's Mining Ban: Land Rights, Development, and Democracy in Latin America," May 2, 2017.

⁹⁴ KIND, *Neither Security nor Justice: Sexual and Gender-based Violence and Gang Violence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala*, May 4, 2017.

Whereas men may be subject to a beating, women often may be forced to have sex with various gang members. Female gang members have tolerated infidelity from their partners, but women may be murdered if they are unfaithful. Non-gang-affiliated women and girls have been murdered as a result of turf battles, jealousy, and revenge. Those who have refused to help gangs or reported crimes are particularly vulnerable, as are those who are related to, or have collaborated with, the police. Harassment by gangs has led thousands of youth to abandon school. In August 2017, prosecutors from a newly established specialized unit of the attorney general's office filed charges against eight gang members for murdering three transgender people.

Gang-related violence has been part of a broader spectrum of violence in El Salvador that often affects women and children. Child abuse and spousal rape have been major problems. For years, El Salvador has had one of the highest rates of femicide (killing of women) in the world.⁹⁵ Femicides have been linked to domestic disputes, gangs, and other crimes such as human trafficking; they resulted in the deaths of some 551 women in 2017.⁹⁶ A 2019 survey of Salvadoran women deported from the United States found that violence, often gender-related, was the second-most frequent reason cited for having migrated to the United States.⁹⁷ El Salvador has had a total ban on abortion, even in the case of rape or incest, and women in El Salvador have been imprisoned after suffering miscarriages that authorities have deemed illegal abortions.⁹⁸

Human rights groups and journalists have warned the Salvadoran government that its aggressive anti-gang policies have exacerbated human rights abuses committed by underpaid and ill-trained security forces, some of which the State Department and U.N. entities have documented.⁹⁹ In 2018, El Salvador's attorney general secured convictions for four police officers for aggravated homicide of gang suspects and six others for participating in a death squad. Critics maintain that much more progress needs to be made in reducing impunity for crimes committed by police and military forces. As an example, five officers accused of committing an extrajudicial killing well-documented by investigative journalists at a farm in 2015 have been acquitted twice despite forensic evidence and witness testimonies against them.¹⁰⁰ Experts have expressed concern that these types of killings may increase now that President Bukele has authorized killings of gang members for "self-defense" by security forces and the subjection of gang inmates to abuses.¹⁰¹

Confronting Past Human Rights Violations

In 2013, 20 years after a U.N. Commission released its report on the war in El Salvador, Amnesty International issued a statement lamenting that the perpetrators of crimes identified in that report

⁹⁵ Small Arms Survey, *A Gendered Analysis of Violent Deaths*, Research Note 63, November 2016; Sophie Huttner, "El Salvador's Femicide Crisis," *The Yale Review of International Studies*, Winter 2019.

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: El Salvador*, 2018.

⁹⁷ David Bernal, "El Salvador: Inseguridad es la Segunda Razón por la que Emigran las Mujeres," *La Prensa Gráfica*, March 8, 2019.

⁹⁸ Rhodri Davies, "The 'Vicious Cycle' Driving Teen Pregnancy in El Salvador," *Al Jazeera*, July 22, 2019.

⁹⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: El Salvador*, 2018; OHCHR, "El Salvador End of Mission Statement of the U.N. Special Rapporteur for Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions," February 5, 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Daniel Alarcón, "The Executioners of El Salvador," *New Yorker*, August 4, 2015; U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: El Salvador*, 2020.

¹⁰¹ Parker Asmann, "Coronavirus May Be Providing Cover for Police Abuses in El Salvador," *InSight Crime*, May 14, 2020; Eric L. Olson, "Bukele's COVID-19 Response Is Undermining the Rule of Law in El Salvador," *World Politics Review*, May 14, 2020.

had not been brought to justice in El Salvador and that survivors had not received reparations.¹⁰² In October 2013, then-President Funes signed a decree creating a program to provide reparations to the victims of the armed conflict. It is unclear how much funding has been budgeted for that program and how many people it has assisted thus far.

In September 2017, then-President Sánchez Cerén launched a commission to help people find out what happened to their family members who disappeared.¹⁰³ The commission, which received \$1 million in U.S. support in FY2020, is modeled after the government-sponsored national search commission that has located children who went missing during the conflict. Critical to the commission's success may be its ability to access Salvadoran military records and some classified U.S. documents from the period of the conflict.

After the Supreme Court overturned the 1993 Amnesty Law in July 2016, then-Attorney General Meléndez created a small group of prosecutors to investigate past crimes. It has received technical assistance funded by USAID and implemented by experts from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.¹⁰⁴ The group has provided complementary assistance to civil society organizations engaged in investigating historic crimes and carrying out transitional justice programs. In 2017, a Salvadoran judge ordered the case of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero reopened. In October 2018, the judge issued a warrant for the arrest of a former military officer suspected of carrying out the killing whose whereabouts are unknown.¹⁰⁵ The case against the intellectual authors of the 1989 murders of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter also has been reopened but has proceeded slowly.¹⁰⁶

Private human rights attorneys have reopened the emblematic case against 17 surviving military officers charged with involvement in the El Mozote massacre carried out by an elite Salvadoran army battalion in December 1981 in Morazán that resulted in almost 1,000 deaths.¹⁰⁷ Investigators have encountered difficulties, with the military refusing to turn over its historical records on its operations in that region.¹⁰⁸ Still, the case has been before a provincial criminal court whose judge expanded the case to include additional crimes of torture, forced displacement, and forced disappearance in July 2019.¹⁰⁹

Some observers have expressed skepticism that this and other emblematic cases will be solved. Parties on both the left and the right have felt vulnerable to political or legal attack about abuses that took place during the war and might prefer that the crimes of the past remain unexamined. Despite President Bukele's opposition, the National Assembly, which is still dominated by ARENA and the FMLN, have twice sought to replace the 1993 amnesty law (as required by a

¹⁰² Amnesty International, "El Salvador: No Justice 20 Years on from UN Truth Commission," press release, March 15, 2013.

¹⁰³ This paragraph draws from Geoff Thale, "Tracking El Salvador's Progress in Historic Human Rights Cases," WOLA, October 27, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ See "Rights and Dignity Project" on USAID/El Salvador, Country Fact Sheet, July 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Nelson Rentería, "El Salvador Issues Arrest Order for Archbishop Romero's Killer," Reuters, October 23, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Tim Muth, "Jesuit Murders Legal Update," *El Salvador Perspectives*, April 12, 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Elisabeth Malkin, "Survivors of Massacre Ask: 'Why Did They Have to Kill Those Children?'" *New York Times*, May 26, 2018. For historical background, see Mark Danner, "The Truth of El Mozote," *The New Yorker*, December 6, 1993.

¹⁰⁸ Cristosal, "Attorney General's Office Must Investigate What Munguía Payés [Minister of Defense] Did to Declare That Information on El Mozote Is Non-Existent," October 16, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Marcos Alemán, "El Salvador Judge Gives new Charges for El Mozote Massacre," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2019.

Supreme Court order) with a law promising reconciliation but aimed at protecting immunity from prosecution.

U.S. Relations

U.S. relations with El Salvador remained cordial during the Sánchez Cerén government (2014-2019) and have strengthened under the Bukele administration. As president-elect, Nayib Bukele promised to improve El Salvador's image abroad to attract investment; tackle root causes of migration; and align his country's foreign policy with the United States. Bukele reiterated those pledges and his desire to repair relations with the United States that, in his view, had "eroded" under FMLN rule during a July 21, 2019, joint press conference in San Salvador with Secretary of State Pompeo.¹¹⁰ Rather than criticizing U.S. immigration policies or foreign aid cuts, President Bukele said he aimed to bolster bilateral efforts to tackle irregular migration and crime and to attract U.S. investment. Migration could remain an irritant in bilateral relations, however, given Bukele's intention to advocate for Salvadoran migrants in the United States and the potential for his government to receive U.S. pressure to implement the Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA) signed in 2019 (See "Asylum Processing Capacity in El Salvador and the U.S.-El Salvador Asylum Cooperation Agreement" below).¹¹¹

Congress has played a key role in appropriating bilateral and regional aid to El Salvador, overseeing implementation of U.S. assistance programs, and establishing and overseeing U.S. immigration policy, including the future of temporary protected status (TPS) for Salvadorans.¹¹² In May 2020, Members of Congress sent a letter to President Bukele urging him not to take actions to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic that could "jeopardize the human rights of the Salvadoran people."¹¹³ Congress is likely to monitor how the Salvadoran government moves to improve the investment climate in El Salvador, address gangs while respecting human rights, prevent emigration, and combat corruption.

U.S. Foreign Assistance

U.S. assistance to El Salvador has been guided by the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, which was designed to promote economic prosperity, strengthen governance, and improve security throughout the region.¹¹⁴ Congress appropriated more than \$3.1 billion to support implementation of the strategy from FY2016 to FY2020, including at least \$411 million for El Salvador, either as bilateral assistance or through the Central American Regional Security

¹¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele at a Press Availability," July 21, 2019.

¹¹¹ Section 208 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) INA authorizes the executive branch to enter into "bilateral or multilateral agreement[s] for the removal of asylum seekers to third countries. Such agreements are typically known as "safe third country agreements" (STCAs). In 2019, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) started negotiating and/or implementing agreements with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, which allow DHS to transfer some asylum seekers to those countries instead of evaluating their claims for asylum in the United States. DHS has opted to refer to these "Safe Third Country Agreements" (STCAs) with the Northern Triangle Countries as "Asylum Cooperative Agreements" (ACAs).

¹¹² See CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues*, by Jill H. Wilson; CRS Report R46419, *Immigration Legislation and Issues in the 116th Congress*, coordinated by Andorra Bruno.

¹¹³ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, "Engel & Sires Urge Salvadoran President to Respect Democratic Norms," April 29, 2020.

¹¹⁴ This section draws from CRS Report R44812, *U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America: Policy Issues for Congress*, by Peter J. Meyer.

Initiative (CARSI) (see **Table 1**). From FY2016 to FY2018, this assistance was subject to two sets of conditions in an attempt to bolster political will in the region and improve the effectiveness of U.S. programs. For FY2019 and FY2020, the assistance was subject to one set of conditions that included selected criteria drawn from the two prior sets of conditions from FY2016 to FY2018.¹¹⁵ In March 2019, the Trump Administration suspended most foreign assistance to El Salvador (as well as to Guatemala and Honduras) due to continued unauthorized migration.¹¹⁶

Prior to the Trump Administration’s aid suspension, U.S. foreign assistance had supported a range of development efforts in El Salvador. Bilateral assistance funded programs to improve educational and vocational opportunities for at-risk youth, facilitate economic reforms, boost private-sector productivity, and promote government accountability and transparency.¹¹⁷ El Salvador also received assistance through the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) to support justice sector reform, including support for the attorney general’s office, police unit vetting, border and port security, anti-gang efforts, drug interdiction, human rights monitoring and protection efforts, and violence prevention programs.¹¹⁸

Table 1. U.S. Assistance to El Salvador: FY2016-FY2021

(appropriations in millions of current dollars)

Foreign Assistance Account	FY2016	FY2017 (est.) ^a	FY2018 (est.) ^b	FY2019 (est.) ^c	FY2020 (enacted) ^d	FY2021 (request) ^e
Bilateral Aid, Subtotal	67.9	72.8	13.0	16.4	72.7	0.0
Development Assistance	65.0	70.0	3.3	16.4	70.0	0.0
International Military Education and Training	1.0	0.9	0.7	0.0	0.8	0.0
Foreign Military Financing	1.9	1.9	9.0	0.0	1.9	0.0
Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), Subtotal	73.4	70.2	16.8	11.1	NA	NA
Economic Support Fund	35.5	28.5	2.0	11.1	NA	NA
International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement	37.9	41.7	14.8	NA	NA	NA
Total	141.3	143.0^a	29.8^b	27.5^c	72.7^d	NA^e

Sources: U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justifications for Foreign Operations*, FY2018-FY2021; the explanatory statement accompanying P.L. 116-94; U.S. Department of State, CN 18-101, May 18, 2018; USAID,

¹¹⁵ As an example, the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-94) required the Secretary of State to certify that the government of El Salvador was meeting nine criteria prior to the disbursement of 50% of the funds to the central government. The conditions include combating corruption and impunity; implementing reforms, policies, and programs to increase transparency and strengthen public institutions, protecting the rights of civil society, opposition political parties, and the independence of the media; providing effective and accountable law enforcement and security for its citizens, and upholding due process of law, among others. The State Department issued the required report on May 18, 2020 despite expressing some concerns about the Bukele government’s “use of the National Civilian Police and armed soldiers to pressure and intimidate El Salvador’s legislature to approve funding.” U.S. Department of State, “Memorandum of Justification Regarding Certification Under Section 7045 (a) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020 (Div. G, P.L. 116-94),” May 18, 2020.

¹¹⁶ Morgan Ortagus, Department Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing,” June 17, 2019.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, USAID, USAID/El Salvador Country Fact Sheet, July 2018,

¹¹⁸ See, as an example, USAID, CN #134, June 22, 2018; U.S. Department of State, CN 18-101, May 9, 2018.

CN #134, June 22, 2018; USAID, CN #192, August 16, 2019; CN 19-277, August 19, 2019; USAID, CN #197, August 27, 2019; USAID, CN# 189, June 3, 2020; USAID, CN #190, June 3, 2020.

Notes: CARSI = Central America Regional Security Initiative; NA = Not available. El Salvador receives additional assistance from other U.S. agencies, such as the Inter-American Foundation and the Department of Defense. The Department of Defense (DOD) provides security cooperation to train and equip the Salvadoran defense ministry in border and maritime interdiction capabilities with its 10 U.S.C. §333 appropriations.

- a. The Trump Administration withheld some assistance appropriated for El Salvador in FY2017,
- b. Congress appropriated \$57.7 million of bilateral aid for El Salvador in FY2018 and the State Department and USAID initially allocated an additional \$33.6 million of CARSI assistance to El Salvador. In 2019, however, the Trump Administration reprogrammed much of that aid to other countries.
- c. Congress appropriated most foreign assistance for Central America as regional funding in FY2019, giving the State Department flexibility in allocating the resources. These are preliminary allocations.
- d. Like previous years, Congress appropriated CARSI aid for the entire Central American region in FY2020. Allocations for El Salvador are not yet available.
- e. The Trump Administration is requesting \$376.9 million for Central America in FY2021, but did not request any bilateral assistance for El Salvador. El Salvador could receive funds requested through regional accounts.

Suspension of Assistance

In March 2019, the Trump Administration announced its intention to end foreign aid to the Northern Triangle due to the continued northward flow of migrants and asylum-seekers from the region. This announcement prompted a thorough review of U.S. assistance programs to Northern Triangle countries. Following that review, the State Department continued to fund programs implemented by the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security aimed at helping the Salvadoran government counter transnational crime and improve border security as well as vetted units working with U.S. law enforcement agencies.¹¹⁹ By June 2019, however, the Administration had suspended or reprogrammed to other countries and priorities the vast majority of development assistance for El Salvador and the other Northern Triangle countries. Due to that decision, many development projects administered by USAID ended early or were scaled back dramatically.

The Trump Administration asserted that it would not lift the aid suspension until the Salvadoran government took concrete actions to reduce the number of migrants arriving at the U.S. border.¹²⁰ The Sánchez Cerén government expressed concern regarding the potential aid cuts, noting that joint security efforts had resulted in significant progress over the past three years.¹²¹ President Bukele refrained from publicly criticizing the decision, maintaining that his government is more interested in investment than “handouts.”¹²² In 2019, President Bukele signed an ACA agreement with the Department of Homeland Security, along with arrangements formalizing a border security cooperation program and a biometric data-sharing program.¹²³ After those agreements had been signed, the Administration announced it would begin to restore some targeted aid to El Salvador (as well as Guatemala and Honduras).

¹¹⁹ U.S. Department of State, “Estimated FY2017 and 2018 Levels for Northern Triangle Assistance,” document provided to Congress, June 2019.

¹²⁰ Morgan Ortagus, Department Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing,” June 17, 2019.

¹²¹ Kevin Sieff, “U.S. Officials Said Aid to El Salvador Helped Slow Migration. Now Trump is Cancelling It,” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2019.

¹²² U.S. Department of State, “Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele at a Press Availability,” July 21, 2019.

¹²³ U.S. DHS, “Fact Sheet: DHS Agreements with Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras,” October 28, 2019.

As of June 12, 2020, the Administration had informed Congress of its intention to release more than \$705 million of new and previously suspended assistance for programs intended to deter migration, advance U.S. national security interests, implement the ACA, respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and address other health and humanitarian needs. That total includes roughly \$177.8 million for El Salvador.¹²⁴

FY2020 Appropriations and FY2021 Budget Request

The Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020 (P.L. 116-94), states that the Administration should provide “not less than” \$519.8 million in assistance for Central America (including \$72.7 million for El Salvador) but provides flexibility for reprogramming assistance within that region. The act also states that the Administration should provide “not less than” \$527.6 million appropriated in FY2019 (P.L. 116-6) for Central America.

The Administration’s FY2021 budget proposal does not request any foreign aid specifically for El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.¹²⁵ The Administration has requested nearly \$377 million for the Central American region, however, some of which could be allocated to the Northern Triangle countries. The Administration asserts that any assistance is dependent on the Northern Triangle governments continuing to take action to stem migration to the United States.¹²⁶

COVID-19 Assistance and Humanitarian Aid for Tropical Storm Amanda

The U.S. government has provided humanitarian and emergency food assistance to help respond to Tropical Storm Amanda (June 2020) and health and other assistance to support the Salvadoran government’s efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis it has wrought. Humanitarian funding has been drawn primarily from the global humanitarian accounts in annual Department of State/Foreign Operations appropriations legislation. As of June 2020, USAID has provided \$3.1 million in emergency shelter materials, hygiene kits, and food assistance to help the Salvadoran government and relief agencies supported the more than 150,000 people affected by the storm.¹²⁷ Separately, the U.S. government has provided \$6.6 million to help address the COVID-19 pandemic: \$2 million for risk communications, water, hygiene, and sanitation; \$2.6 million in health assistance; and \$2 million to provide access to credit and jobs.¹²⁸ This assistance is being provided in addition to donations, including 250 portable ventilators, mentoring and advice provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and food aid and hygiene kits provided for returned migrants implemented by the International Organization for Migration.

¹²⁴ The El Salvador assistance by fiscal year is \$31.2 million (FY2017), \$1 million (FY2018), \$122.4 million (FY2019), and \$23.2 million (FY2020). U.S. Department of State, “State Department and USAID Migration Related Assistance Programming,” document provided to Congress, November 2019; and “Assistance to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras by Goal, Bureau, and Program,” document provided to Congress, June 2020.

¹²⁵ U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Fiscal Year 2021*, February 10, 2020.

¹²⁶ U.S. Department of State, FY2021 budget briefing document, provided to CRS, February 2020.

¹²⁷ USAID, “USAID Provides Humanitarian Assistance for People Affected by Tropical Storm Amanda in El Salvador,” June 18, 2020.

¹²⁸ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Government Support to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” June 11, 2020.

Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Investment Compact

El Salvador signed a second \$277 million compact with the United States on September 30, 2014, to focus on improving transportation infrastructure, employment opportunities, and the investment climate. The Salvadoran government committed to match that contribution with \$88 million in complementary investments. In response to some lingering concerns expressed by Millennium Challenge Corporation board members, the Salvadoran government designed a Priority Action Plan that was then agreed to by both governments to be completed prior to the compact's signing. The compact entered into force in September 2015 and is scheduled to end in September 2020. The MCC has conducted ongoing monitoring and evaluation, which is reported on a quarterly basis.¹²⁹

Key compact projects include the following:

- **Investment Climate Project (\$40.7 million MCC funds/\$50 million Salvadoran funds)** to help the government develop and implement regulatory improvements and to better partner with private investors to build infrastructure and provide public services.
- **Human Capital Project (\$100.4 million MCC funds/\$15 million Salvadoran funds)** to support full-day schooling; reforms to the policies and operations that govern teacher training and student assessment; and a new technical, vocational, education, and training system that is aligned with labor market demands.
- **Logistical Infrastructure Project (\$105.6 million MCC funds/\$15.7 million Salvadoran funds)** to widen the part of El Salvador's coastal highway that connects the airport and the ports of La Unión and Acajutla and improve border crossing facilities into Honduras at El Amatillo.

Migration Issues

Migration has been a major issue in U.S. relations with El Salvador. As of 2017, some 1.4 million people born in El Salvador resided in the United States, and an estimated 600,000 of them (50%) were in the country without authorization.¹³⁰ In 2019, remittances sent from Salvadorans abroad were equivalent to 21% of El Salvador's GDP, according to the World Bank.¹³¹ Recent unauthorized migration from El Salvador has been fueled by a combination of poverty, natural disasters, poor security conditions, and a desire for family reunification.¹³²

Recent Migration Flows

The number of migrants and asylum-seekers arriving at the U.S. border from El Salvador has fluctuated in recent years, with a record number of Salvadorans apprehended in FY2019 after two years of declining apprehensions (see **Figure 3**). Although on a smaller scale than migrants from Honduras and Guatemala, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has apprehended

¹²⁹ The most recent report is available here: https://assets.mcc.gov/content/uploads/El-Salvador-II-Results-FY20_Q2.pdf.

¹³⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, *2017 American Community Survey*, accessed July 2019; Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Total Dips to Lowest Level in a Decade*, Pew Research Center, November 27, 2018.

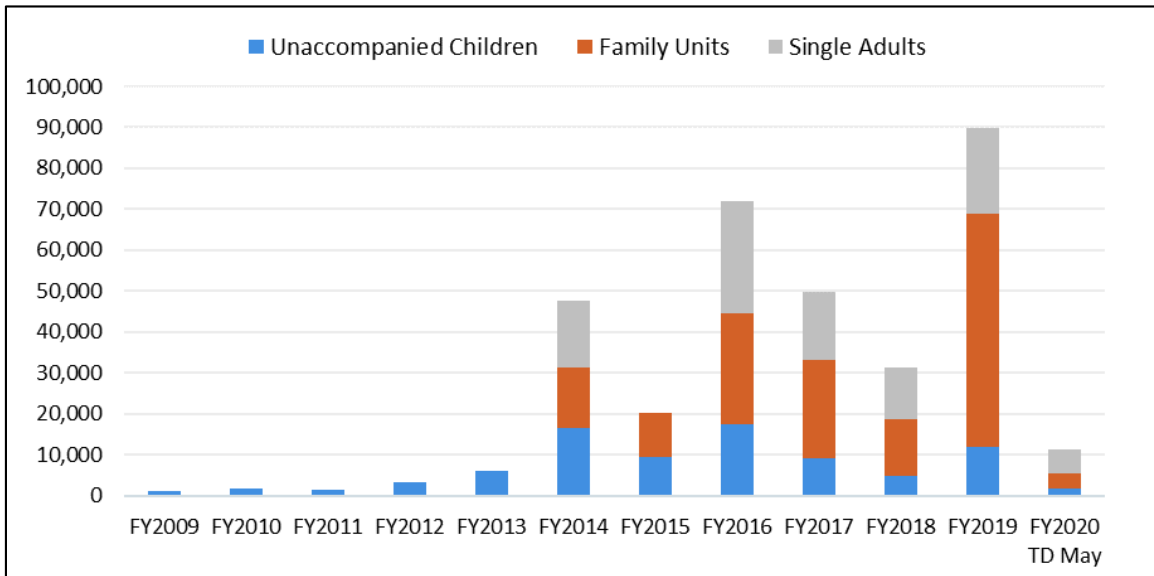
¹³¹ See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>.

¹³² Cecilia Menjivar and Andrea Gómez Cervantes, *El Salvador: Civil War, Natural Disasters, and Gang Violence Drive Migration*, Migration Information Source, August 29, 2018.

increasing numbers of family units from El Salvador, many of whom are seeking humanitarian protection. These increases have occurred despite bilateral efforts to combat human trafficking and alien smuggling, campaigns to warn potential migrants about the dangers of the journey, and Trump Administration policy changes to tighten migrant access to the asylum system.

In 2018, U.S. and Salvadoran officials cited reductions in crime rates as a major reason why illegal emigration from El Salvador to the United States declined from FY2016 to FY2018.¹³³ Although the number of single adults and unaccompanied children apprehended remained lower in FY2019 than in FY2016, the number of family units who were apprehended exceeded 56,897 during FY2019 as compared to 27,144 for all of FY2016.

Figure 3. U.S. Apprehensions of Salvadoran Nationals: FY2009-FY2020 (May)



Sources: Graphic by CRS using data from U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, “U.S. Border Patrol Southwest Border Apprehensions,” press releases, at <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/usbp-sw-border-apprehensions>.

Notes: Unaccompanied children = children under 18 years old without a parent or legal guardian at the time of apprehension. Family units = total number of individuals (children under 18 years old, parents, or legal guardians) apprehended with a family member. Family unit data is not available prior to FY2014.

Human Trafficking and Alien Smuggling

Human trafficking and alien smuggling have persisted in El Salvador despite government efforts. Since taking office on June 1, 2019, through May 2020, the Bukele government arrested more than 150 alien smugglers and dedicated three times the number of prosecutors to combat that crime than the prior government.¹³⁴ Human traffickers have preyed on irregular migrants, some of whom have paid to be smuggled while on their journey or upon arrival in the United States, as well as on migrants from other countries who transit El Salvador.¹³⁵ In 2019, El Salvador received

¹³³ See the comments of El Salvador’s then-Vice-President Oscar Ortiz at U.S. Department of State, “Remarks at the Conference on Prosperity and Security in Central America,” October 11, 2018; U.S. Department of State, *Progress Report for the United States Strategy for Central America’s Plan for Monitoring and Evaluation*, May 2019.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ U.S. Department of State, *2019 Country Reports on Trafficking in Persons*, June 2019.

a Tier 2 (mid-level) ranking by the State Department for its efforts to protect human trafficking victims (especially girls); prosecute cases, including a government official complicit in human trafficking; and prevent future trafficking.¹³⁶ El Salvador received the same ranking in 2020, with progress made in increasing arrests and convictions and passing a law to provide two years residency to foreign TIP victims. According to the State Department, areas for improvement include identifying victims, using victim-centered approaches during criminal proceedings, and providing adequate services to victims.¹³⁷

Removals, Temporary Protected Status, and Deferred Action for Child Arrivals

The United States and Mexico have returned about 37,300 Salvadorans, including 6,600 children, to El Salvador in 2019, a 40% increase from 2018.¹³⁸ Of those, U.S. deportees totaled nearly 19,500 individuals. Salvadoran officials have long expressed concerns about their country's ability to absorb deportees, as it is often difficult for those returning to the country to find employment and a safe place to live. El Salvador has received some USAID assistance to improve its reception center and to reintegrate deportees into their communities, but services remain limited, particularly at the municipal level.¹³⁹ Between January and March 2020, El Salvador received about 5,960 deportees from the United States and Mexico.¹⁴⁰ El Salvador continued to receive roughly three flights with deportees each week through late March. Since the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the country has received fewer deportees, nearly 1,400 individuals through mid-May 2020.¹⁴¹

Deportees have become targets for extortion and violence. In 2018, an investigative report cited at least 70 deportees murdered between 2013 and 2018.¹⁴² A Human Rights Watch report published in February 2020 cited a higher figure, identifying 138 cases of Salvadorans killed since 2013 after deportation from the United States and 70 cases of deportees being victims of torture or other violence, often perpetrated by gangs.¹⁴³ In some cases, the perpetrators of these violent crimes had harassed the deportees prior to their initial departure.

The Bukele administration has advocated for Salvadoran migrants in the United States, including the up to 251,000 nationals who have temporary protected status (TPS).¹⁴⁴ TPS is a form of

¹³⁶ U.S. Department of State, Memorandum of Justification Regarding Determination under Section 7045(a) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2019 (Div. G, P.L. 116-94), May 7, 2020.

¹³⁷ U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Reports on Trafficking in Persons*, June 2020.

¹³⁸ International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Iniciativa de Gestión de Información de Movilidad Humana en el Triángulo Norte (NTMI)," at <https://mic.iom.int/webntmi/el-salvador/>, accessed May 27, 2020.

¹³⁹ Government Accountability Office (GAO), *USAID Assists Migrants Returning to Their Home Countries, but Effectiveness of Reintegration Efforts Remains to be Determined*, November 2018. USAID, "Return and Reintegration in the Northern Triangle: El Salvador," 2018; Olivia P. Tallet and Marie de Jesus, "Strangers in Their own Homelands," *Houston Chronicle*, November 27, 2017.

¹⁴⁰ USAID, IOM, "Retornos al Triángulo Norte de C.A.," January-March 2020.

¹⁴¹ CRS electronic correspondence with DHS, May 21, 2020.

¹⁴² Anna-Catherine Brigida, "Kicked Out of the U.S., Salvadoran Deportees Are Struggling Simply to Stay Alive," *World Politics Review*, October 9, 2018.

¹⁴³ Human Rights Watch, *Deported to Danger: United States Deportation Policies Expose Salvadorans to Death and Abuse*, February 5, 2020.

¹⁴⁴ Data provided to CRS by USCIS. These data reflect individuals with an approved TPS application as of November 29, 2018; the data include some individuals who have since adjusted to another status (excluding those who became U.S. citizens), may include individuals who have left the country or died, and do not necessarily include all nationals from the specified countries who are in the United States and are eligible for the status. The Salvadoran government has

temporary protection from removal for foreign nationals from countries that DHS designates as unsafe for return because of armed conflict, natural disaster, or other extraordinary conditions.¹⁴⁵ Congress originally designated El Salvador for TPS in 1990, but the designation expired 18 months later. In March 2001, following three earthquakes in El Salvador, the George W. Bush Administration designated the country for TPS. That designation was extended by multiple administrations until January 2018 when the Trump Administration—arguing that conditions that originally warranted the designation no longer exist—announced it would terminate TPS for El Salvador, effective September 19, 2019. A court injunction, however, allows Salvadorans and nationals of three other countries whose TPS designation was terminated to continue living and working in the United States beyond the expiration date set by the Administration pending the outcome of the case.¹⁴⁶ On June 4, 2019, the House passed the American Dream and Promise Act of 2019 (H.R. 6), which would provide a path to permanent resident status for some TPS holders.¹⁴⁷

Some reports have predicted that the end of TPS could have negative consequences for the Salvadoran economy (declining remittances, increasing fiscal demands by repatriated individuals), although the IMF has maintained that the overall economic impact may be minimal.¹⁴⁸ The government nevertheless has been working with USAID, other donors, and the private sector to reintegrate former TPS beneficiaries who may return voluntarily or face removal.¹⁴⁹ The State Department also has been preparing to be able to provide consular services to the U.S. citizen children of TPS beneficiaries (estimated to number more than 190,000) who may return to the country.¹⁵⁰

Salvadoran officials have been concerned about the future of some 26,500 young Salvadorans currently protected from deportation through their participation in the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA) initiative.¹⁵¹ On September 5, 2017, DHS announced its decision to rescind the DACA initiative. However, in the case *DHS v. Regents of the University of California*, the Supreme Court held in a five-to-four decision that the reasoning the DHS offered in support of its

estimated that some 195,00 Salvadoran citizens currently have TPS. Government of El Salvador, “Salvadoran Population in the United States Under Temporary Protected Status (TPS),” July 2019.

¹⁴⁵ For more information, see CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues*, by Jill H. Wilson.

¹⁴⁶ To comply with the court order, DHS issued an extension of TPS-related documentation through January 2, 2020, for El Salvador and three other countries. This date could change, depending on the outcome of the case. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Continuation of Documentation for Beneficiaries of Temporary Protected Status Designations for Sudan, Nicaragua, Haiti, and El Salvador,” 84 *Federal Register* 7103-7109, March 1, 2019. For more information on the lawsuit, see CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10215, *Federal District Court Enjoins the Department of Homeland Security from Terminating Temporary Protected Status*, by Hillel R. Smith.

¹⁴⁷ For more information on TPS and potential legislative measures to alter the program, see CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues*.

¹⁴⁸ See, for example, Eric L. Olson and John Wachter, *What if They Return? How El Salvador, Honduras, and the United States Could Prepare for an Effective Reintegration of TPS Beneficiaries*, Woodrow Wilson Center Latin America Program and Seattle International Foundation, 2019. IMF, *El Salvador: 2018 Article IV Consultation*, Country Report No. 18/151, June 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Olson and Wachter, op. cit.

¹⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State, *Country Strategy: El Salvador*, August 2018.

¹⁵¹ Deferred Action for Child Arrivals (DACA) is a program the Obama Administration implemented in 2012 to provide temporary relief from removal and work authorization to certain unlawfully present individuals who arrived in the United States as children. See CRS Report R44764, *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA): Frequently Asked Questions*, by Andorra Bruno.

decision to rescind the DACA initiative was inadequate and therefore violated the Administrative Procedure Act.¹⁵² The Supreme Court's decision means that, at least for the time being, the DACA initiative will remain in place, offering the prospect of continued relief from removal and work authorization to the approximately 650,000 current DACA recipients and apparently also to eligible childhood arrivals who have not previously enrolled in the program.

Asylum Processing Capacity in El Salvador and the U.S.-El Salvador Asylum Cooperation Agreement

El Salvador has not received large numbers of asylum requests, and many humanitarian organizations assert that the country's high levels of violence, poverty, and gang-related crime have made it more of a source than a destination country for asylum seekers.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, in 1983, El Salvador became a state party to the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. It enacted a law on refugee status determination in 2002 that UNHCR maintained was in line with the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.¹⁵⁴

El Salvador's 2002 law created a Commission for the Determination of Refugee Status (CODER) comprising personnel delegated from the Ministries of Interior (which deals with migration) and Foreign Affairs. CODER does not have dedicated staff but meets periodically to make determinations regarding asylum claims.¹⁵⁵ If CODER has a budget, it is very small, according to several domestic and international humanitarian organizations. CRS was unable to determine how many applications CODER has processed annually, but U.N. data revealed 18 applications pending as of 2018 and 48 refugees in the country.¹⁵⁶ According to the State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for 2019, El Salvador received 10 asylum applications between January and August of that year, down from 31 in 2018.

Although it is unclear exactly when negotiations for an ACA with El Salvador began, it was likely after June 2019, when President Nayib Bukele took office. The United States and El Salvador signed an agreement on September 20, 2019.¹⁵⁷ Negotiating teams from both countries have since met to develop an implementation plan, as required by Article 7(5) of the agreement. That plan has yet to be finalized,¹⁵⁸ after which it can enter into force through an exchange of [diplomatic] notes indicating compliance with the necessary domestic legal procedures.¹⁵⁹ The Attorney General and the DHS Secretary must determine that the other party (in this case El Salvador) has "full and fair" procedures to grant "asylum or equivalent temporary protection."

¹⁵² See CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10497, *Supreme Court: DACA Rescission Violated the APA*, by Ben Harrington.

¹⁵³ International Rescue Committee, "US-El Salvador "Cooperative Agreement" Would Send Asylum-Seekers Into Harm's way," September 19, 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Diana Goldberg, "New Refugee law in El Salvador Marks Important Step Forward, says UNHCR," July 26, 2002.

¹⁵⁵ CRS was unable to obtain budget information for CODER from the Embassy of El Salvador in Washington D.C. Information based on CRS interview with former member of CODER who works at Cristosal, a humanitarian organization that has represented asylum-seekers before CODER. CRS interview with Cristosal official, May 19, 2020.

¹⁵⁶ UNHCR, "El Salvador Fact Sheet," May 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Colleen Long and Astrid Galvan, "US, El Salvador Sign Asylum Deal, Details to be Worked out," AP, September 20, 2019. DHS, "Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of El Salvador for Cooperation in the Examination of Asylum Claims," September 20, 2019. Hereinafter: Agreement on Asylum, September 2019.

¹⁵⁸ CRS electronic correspondence with DHS, May 21, 2020.

¹⁵⁹ See CRS Legal Sidebar LSB10402, *Safe Third Country Agreements with Northern Triangle Countries: Background and Legal Issues*, by Ben Harrington; INA §208(a)(2)(A).

Under Article 1 of the agreement, the Salvadoran government could respond to a person transferred into its custody seeking protection with an asylum designation consistent with its obligations as a state party to the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, or with “any other equivalent temporary protection available under Salvadoran migration law.”¹⁶⁰ Such temporary protection might include, as an example, temporary residency.¹⁶¹ It is unclear whether temporary residency would guarantee an individual access to education, employment, and housing, as an asylum designation is supposed to do.

Security Cooperation

Counternarcotics

Although El Salvador is not a producer of illicit drugs, it does serve as a transit country for narcotics, mainly cocaine and heroin, cultivated in the Andes and destined for the United States. In August 2019, President Trump included El Salvador on the annual list of countries designated as “major” drug-producing or “drug-transit” countries for the ninth consecutive year.¹⁶² A country’s inclusion in the list, however, does not mean that its antidrug efforts are inadequate.

From January through October 2019, Salvadoran officials seized around 97 kilograms of cocaine, a decline from 2018 that the State Department attributes to Salvadoran Navy efforts that have pushed maritime trafficking out of Salvadoran waters.¹⁶³ The government seized some \$208,800 in bulk cash and arrested more than 3,000 individuals on drug trafficking-related charges. U.S.-Salvadoran efforts have improved due to the creation of a vetted Sensitive Intelligence Unit within the police that liaises with the Attorney General’s office. In July 2019, President Bukele signed a five-year extension of the Cooperative Security Location agreement allowing U.S. naval aircraft that combat drugs to be based at Comalapa Airport through 2025. According to the State Department, El Salvador needs to maintain funding for its police and the Attorney General’s office if it is to maintain successful antidrug efforts.

Corruption: Sanctions?

In June 2017, some Members of Congress asked the Treasury Department to consider making José Luis Merino, a high-ranking FMLN party official and deputy minister of foreign affairs, subject to U.S. sanctions under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act.¹⁶⁴ Over the past decade, Merino has amassed a fortune and served as the intermediary between Venezuela, ALBA *Petróleos*, and the party. He also reportedly has ties with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas and drug traffickers.¹⁶⁵ In August 2018, some Members of Congress asked the Treasury and State Departments to examine whether Merino and a business executive named José Aquiles Enrique Rais López could be subject to sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act for engaging in corruption.¹⁶⁶ In April 2019, pursuant to the FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 115-232), the State Department sent a report to Congress identifying officials from the three Northern Triangle countries, including

¹⁶⁰ Agreement on Asylum, September 2019.

¹⁶¹ CRS interview with State Department official, May 12, 2020.

¹⁶² White House, “Presidential Determination on Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2020,” August 8, 2019.

¹⁶³ U.S. Department of State, *2020 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, March 2020.

¹⁶⁴ Héctor Silva Avalos, “US Congress Members Request Investigation of El Salvador Official Linked to Organized Crime,” *InSight Crime*, June 23, 2017.

¹⁶⁵ Venezuela Investigative Unit, “Venezuela and El Salvador: Exporting Aid and Corruption,” May 25, 2018.

¹⁶⁶ Office of U.S. Representative Eliot Engel, “Bipartisan Group in Congress Urges Trump Administration to Utilize Global Magnitsky Sanctions in Central America,” August 2, 2018.

nine Salvadorans, known to have committed corruption or to have benefited from illicit campaign funding.¹⁶⁷ None of these individuals have been made subject to U.S. sanctions.

Gangs and Citizen Security

U.S. agencies have engaged with El Salvador and other Central American governments on gang issues for more than a decade, with some regional efforts housed in the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador.¹⁶⁸ On the law enforcement side, U.S. funds have supported vetted police units working on transnational gang cases with U.S. law enforcement. In cooperation with vetted law enforcement units in El Salvador, U.S. law enforcement has brought criminal charges against thousands of MS-13 members in both countries.¹⁶⁹ Since 2012, anti-gang cases have been bolstered by the establishment of an electronic monitoring center in San Salvador and efforts to target the financing of MS-13, designated by the Treasury Department as a Transnational Criminal Organization subject to U.S. sanctions pursuant to E.O. 13581.¹⁷⁰

Ensuring that anti-gang efforts are not carried out using police tactics that violate human rights and supporting efforts to have civilian police rather than military forces in public security efforts are major goals of U.S. programs.¹⁷¹ The State Department has donated body cameras and other equipment to the internal affairs unit within the police that investigates reported abuses.¹⁷² According to a September 2018 Government Accountability Office report, U.S. police training in El Salvador and the other northern triangle countries had not established consistent human rights-related objectives in its police professionalization programs.¹⁷³

USAID has used CARSI funds to implement a variety of crime- and violence-prevention programs. USAID interventions have included primary prevention programs that work with communities to create safe spaces for families and young people, secondary prevention programs that identify the youth most at risk of engaging in violent behavior and provide them and their families with behavior-change counseling, and, most recently, “tertiary” prevention programs that seek to reintegrate juvenile offenders into society. Youth in violent communities are also some of the beneficiaries of the 22,000 jobs USAID’s economic programs have helped generate.¹⁷⁴ Due to the aforementioned sanctions on MS-13, the State Department and USAID had to obtain a waiver

¹⁶⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Narcotics Trafficking, Corruption, and Illicit Campaign Finance in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador*, April 3, 2019. The Salvadorans listed include Carlos Mauricio Funes Cartagena, Elias Antonio Saca, Luis Antonio Martinez Gonzalez, Elmer Charlaiz, Julio Rank, Cesar Funes, Francisco Rodriguez Arteaga, Pablo Homez, and Joege Herrera Castellanos.

¹⁶⁸ Between FY2008 and FY2016 (the last year a line item specified funds for anti-gang efforts in Central America), Congress provided nearly \$50 million to support a variety of anti-gang efforts in the Northern Triangle countries.

¹⁶⁹ See, as an example, U.S. DOJ, “16 Ms-13 Gang Members Indicted for Assault and Drug Trafficking,” September 14, 2018.

¹⁷⁰ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Latin American Criminal Organization: Designation Targets Latin American Gang Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13),” October 11, 2012.

¹⁷¹ U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: El Salvador*, August 2018.

¹⁷² Danielle Mackey and Cora Currier, “El Salvador is Trying to Stop Gang Violence, but the Trump Administration Keeps Pushing Failed ‘Iron Fist’ Policing,” *The Intercept*, October 2, 2018.

¹⁷³ U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Central American Police Training: State and USAID Should Ensure Human Rights Content Is Included as Appropriate, and State Should Improve Data*, GAO-18-618, September 2018.

¹⁷⁴ USAID, “USAID/El Salvador Country Fact Sheet,” July 2018.

from the Treasury Department to carry out programs involving former or inactive MS-13 members; the agencies reportedly did not receive a license for those programs until 2017.¹⁷⁵

Trade Relations

In December 2004, El Salvador became the first country to sign the CAFTA-DR trade agreement and to pass its required legislative reforms, implementing CAFTA-DR on March 1, 2006.¹⁷⁶ CAFTA-DR has eliminated tariffs on all consumer and industrial goods and is scheduled to phase out tariffs on nearly all agricultural products this year. Since CAFTA-DR's implementation, the volume of U.S.-Salvadoran trade has tended to follow trends in growth rates in the United States, with a variety of factors inhibiting the performance of Salvadoran exports vis-à-vis the other CAFTA-DR countries. Those factors have included a continued dependence on the highly competitive apparel trade, low levels of investment, public security problems, and broader governance concerns.

The United States has been El Salvador's main trading partner, purchasing 42% of its exports and supplying 31% of its imports in 2019.¹⁷⁷ Salvadoran exports to the United States, valued at \$2.5 billion in 2019, have included apparel, electrical equipment, sugar, and coffee. El Salvador's top imports from the United States, valued at \$3.5 billion in 2019, include petroleum products, cereals, textiles, and plastics electrical machinery, nuclear reactors and parts, plastics, and cereals. In 2019, the United States ran an \$889 million trade surplus with El Salvador.

In 2017, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer asserted that CAFTA-DR and other trade arrangements throughout Latin America needed to be "modernized," but the Trump Administration has not sought to renegotiate the agreement.¹⁷⁸

Human Rights Cases: Former Salvadoran Officials Tried in the United States

Although the amnesty law made bringing cases against human rights abusers from the war era nearly impossible to do in El Salvador, some former Salvadoran military leaders who have resided in the United States have faced judicial proceedings regarding their immigration statuses. In recent years, the Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Unit within the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has conducted investigations focused on past human rights violations in El Salvador.¹⁷⁹

- In February 2012, an immigration judge ruled that former Salvadoran Defense Minister Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova could be removed (deported) from the United States based on his role ordering the torture of Salvadoran citizens, the 1980 killings of four American churchwomen, and the 1981 killings of land

¹⁷⁵ Danielle Mackey and Cora Currier, "El Salvador is Trying to Stop Gang Violence, but the Trump Administration Keeps Pushing Failed 'Iron Fist' Policing," *The Intercept*, October 2, 2018.

¹⁷⁶ CRS In Focus IF10394, *Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR)*, by M. Angeles Villarreal.

¹⁷⁷ Trade data contained in this section are from Trade Data Monitor.

¹⁷⁸ Isabelle Hoagland, "Lighthizer Says a Slew of Latin American Free Trade Deals Must be 'Modernized' after NAFTA," *Inside U.S. Trade*, October 3, 2017.

¹⁷⁹ For an update on pending cases, see <http://www.cja.org/article.php?list=type&type=199>.

- reformers. That decision was upheld in March 2015, and Vides Casanova was deported to El Salvador on April 8, 2015.
- In September 2012, Colonel Inocente Orlando Montano, one of the officials named by a Spanish judge as responsible for the aforementioned Jesuit murders, pled guilty to immigration fraud. Montano had hidden his military past when applying for TPS in the United States. In August 2017, a federal judge approved a lower court ruling that Montano could be extradited to Spain to face charges for his role in the 1989 killing of six Jesuit priests, most of whom were Spanish. Extradited to Spain in November 2017, Montano's trial began in June 2020.¹⁸⁰
 - In February 2014, a federal judge determined that a former Salvadoran defense minister, General José Guillermo García, could be removed based on his role in brutal human rights violations. The judge ruled that he "assisted or otherwise participated" in 11 violent incidents, including the 1980 killing of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero. He was deported to El Salvador in January 2016.
 - In February 2017, the U.S. Attorney in the Eastern District of Texas filed a civil lawsuit against Arnoldo Antonio Vasquez, a Salvadoran who the U.S. government said misrepresented his past in order to obtain U.S. citizenship. According to ICE, Vasquez failed to acknowledge his involvement as a military officer in extrajudicial killings that took place in San Sebastian, El Salvador in 1988. Citing a lack of sufficient evidence, the judge ruled against denaturalization.¹⁸¹

Outlook

Nayib Bukele's first-round presidential victory in February 2019 elections demonstrated popular disenchantment with the FMLN and ARENA parties that have governed during the postconflict period. The scale of Bukele's victory, combined with his continued popularity, have given him a strong governing mandate, but his

party lacks support in the National Assembly. Aside from initial support for Bukele's security plan, it remains to be seen whether legislators will back his reformist agenda and investors will respond to his pledges to adopt a probusiness agenda and improve the country's security situation.

Analysts predicted that U.S.-Salvadoran relations would improve under a Bukele administration, with leaders from both countries pledging to focus on combating gangs, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration. Tensions could occur, however, should U.S. assistance to El Salvador be permanently suspended or TPS be terminated for Salvadorans. Although President Bukele has expressed a desire to collaborate with the United States rather than seek investment or foreign assistance from China, he may have limited room to maneuver given the country's economic and security challenges.

¹⁸⁰ Héctor Silva Ávalo, "El Salvador: Unwilling to Face Up to the Past," *AULA Blog*, June 16, 2020.

¹⁸¹ ICE, "Denaturalization Lawsuit Filed Against Alleged Human Rights Abuser Originally From El Salvador Residing in North Texas," press release, February 10, 2017; United States District Court Eastern District of Texas Sherman Division, Civil Action No. 4:17-CV-101, March 28, 2019.

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