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World's Coolest Dictator: Nayib Bukele's Populist Authoritarian Digital Footprint

by

Kaitlin McQuade

April 2024

Introduction

Nayib Bukele has been re-elected as the President of El Salvador for a second term. In his victory speech delivered before the final vote count was in, he said "Democracy means the power of the people."¹ This seems to be a clear rebuff to his many detractors who accuse him of eroding Salvadorian democratic institutions. He is right in a way; democracy is meant to be the people exercising their power to elect representatives to serve them. But when Bukele uses the phrase "the people," he does not necessarily mean everyone. Instead, with his language he employs common populist rhetoric, wherein "the people" actually only means *some* of the people. "The people" do not include his political opponents who have now been effectively stripped of nearly all their power under the new one-party rule he has instituted. It does not include the 107,000 people in jail, a full 1.7% of the country's population,² some of whom never received a fair trial and were imprisoned under shady circumstances. It will not include whichever groups he decides in the future do not fit the Salvadoran national identity as defined under his rule.

Nayib Bukele exemplifies but also challenges the way we think about populism and authoritarianism. He demonstrates clear markers of both forms of rule in his government, yet at the same time his strong base of followers either does not care about his evidently populist and authoritarian tactics or they would deny the characterization in the first place. Bukele's presence on social media and the messages he sends over the platform will allow us to better understand

¹ Sarah Kinoshian and Nelson Renteria, Bukele landslide shifts El Salvador to one-party state, amplifies democracy fears | reuters, February 5, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/bukele-landslide-shifts-el-salvador-one-party-state-amplifies-democracy-fears-2024-02-05/>.

² Alex Papadovassilakis, "Keeping a Lid on Prisons," InSight Crime, February 9, 2024, <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/el-salvador-keeping-lid-on-prisons/#:~:text=The%20total%20prison%20population%20now,estimated%20at%20just%20over%2027%2C000.>

the phenomena of populism and authoritarianism, and the potentially dangerous combination of the two.

An alarming number of authoritarian governments are currently in power across the world. We are seeing a wave of leaders who exhibit strong authoritarian tendencies gain power in places that had formerly been considered solid democracies. Another increasingly troubling political trend is populism. While the two are not definitionally connected, both authoritarianism and populism are political approaches used by leaders to gain and hold onto power in undemocratic ways (usually, but not exclusively for populism). When a leader seems to embody both approaches at once, we have a choice to make—will we call these leaders “authoritarian populists” or “populist authoritarians”? In this thesis, I will explore which term might be more productive and then evaluate Nayib Bukele’s presence on the social media platform X (which has been his preferred method of official communication and campaign) to determine which of these terms is most applicable to him.

In an attempt to explain Margaret Thatcher’s rise to power in the 1970s, Stuart Hall coined a definition of authoritarian populism that has stuck as a reference for scholars to come. Jeremiah Morelock succinctly refined Hall’s extensive explanation by saying “authoritarian populism” refers to the pitting of ‘the people’ against ‘elites’ in order to have the power to drive out, wipe out, or otherwise dominate others who are not ‘the people.’”³ In the literature, scholars tend to characterize right-wing leaders and movements as “authoritarian populists,” thus implying that they are at heart populists who seek to rule in the name of an exclusive and partial

³ Jeremiah Morelock, “Introduction: The Frankfurt School and Authoritarian Populism – A Historical Outline,” In *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, edited by Jeremiah Morelock, 9:xiii–xxxviii. University of Westminster Press, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv9hvtcf.4>, 14.

body of “the people,” and to do so in a distinctly authoritarian way. When used this way, “authoritarian populism” is often viewed as the worst-case scenario of populism. On the other hand, we can imagine that something called “populist authoritarianism” would, at heart, represent a leader or movement whose goals have less to do with governing in the name of “the people” and more to do with consolidating their own power in an authoritarian way, merely using populist rhetoric and ideas to do so. In the next section, I examine the ideas of authoritarianism and populism and the different ways that we might combine them. Populism and authoritarianism have received increased attention from scholars looking to understand and explain the wave of non-democratic governance that has marked global politics in the past two decades.

Populism has become a topic of special interest in political science, especially since the rise of Trump and the desire to explain his enduring appeal. The term populism is widely employed by political scientists (and pretty much everyone else), often without much thought regarding its actual definition. It could very well be one of the most used but least understood terms out there. One would be hard-pressed to find any leader or movement that would willingly use the word populist to define themselves; it is mostly used as a descriptive term by outside observers. And yet, nobody seems to be able to agree on a single definition of populism. Scholars cannot even agree on whether populism is a positive force or a negative force in politics. In this thesis, I will review the existing literature on populism to develop my own definition; no such definition can be all-encompassing, but it will be useful to try to bring some order to the chaos of the current usage of the word.

Authoritarianism is the less controversial of the two terms and is somewhat less subject to polemic than populism. The world has been closely acquainted with authoritarian leaders

seemingly since scholars began writing about politics. Scholars' definitions of the concept of authoritarianism vary but nowhere near to the extent that they do for populism. We can recognize clear criteria for authoritarian regimes; to some extent, it is something that can be recognized at first glance. I will contend with foundational definitions of authoritarianism and develop my own working definition of the term.

My focus in this thesis is to try to help us theorize about the relationship between populism and authoritarianism, and to develop a clearer and more robust understanding of "populist authoritarianism", as I believe that is the more fitting term for many cases. Both of these terms describe situations where a ruler seems to embody elements of both types of rule, but the ordering of the words of the two concepts—which comes first, which comes second—alters each concept slightly. In this thesis, I will examine the concepts of authoritarian populism and populist authoritarianism and then determine the extent to which Bukele's rule is or is not an example of either of these phenomena. As part of my review, I will address the difference between the concepts differentiated by word placement—populist authoritarianism versus authoritarian populism. The distinction between the two might seem minute and not of any real interest, but I believe that selecting a preferred term is a consequential act. Ultimately, I will argue that while both authoritarian populism and populist authoritarianism are useful concepts for political science, in Bukele's case, populist authoritarianism is a better descriptor.

Talking about populism and authoritarianism is important. Leaders who exhibit these tendencies are not going away anytime soon and many of them are doing real lasting harm in their countries. Appropriate definitions can help us recognize such leaders and then think better about how their influence can be minimized. The dangers of authoritarianism and populism are not to be understated. Populism introduces an "us vs. them" narrative that can lead to violent

opposition to the “them”, who sometimes can be ethnic groups or political minorities.

Authoritarianism is always accompanied by human rights violations and the erosion of democratic institutions. The damage done to democracy by either of these phenomena, let alone some combination of them, takes decades to repair if it is even possible after the fact.

Literature Review

The purpose of my literature review will be to review the existing literature about populism and authoritarianism, paying particular attention to the definitions different authors assign to these ideas. I find that while there is general agreement about the basic meaning of each term, there are also minor differences between scholars, especially when it comes to populism. Below in my discussion, I include charts that contain what I believe to be the most generally agreed-upon indicators of authoritarianism and populism.

One aspect of this taxonomic exercise is to try to understand when, how, and why scholars choose to put these two definitions together, with specific attention to the ordering of the terms in their usage; do more scholars seem to find utility in the idea of authoritarian populism or populist authoritarianism and why? Ultimately, I find that while authoritarian populism seems to be a more popular way to characterize such hybrid actors in some literature, I believe that populist authoritarianism is a more useful term in Bukele's case and the case of many others.

Features of Authoritarianism:

Authoritarianism can be defined as a mode of governance that rejects democracy, plurality, and civil liberties. The authoritarian government will often be led by a centralized power, whether that be a strong party or a single leader. Linz (1975) places authoritarianism somewhere in between democracy and totalitarianism through a set of characteristics that have been incredibly influential to the scholarly understanding of the phenomenon. In this section, I will identify traits that can often be identified as existing within authoritarian modes of governance or precursors to it.

Authoritarianism	
Trait	Author
Disrespect of democratic institutions and norms	Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) Karl and Schmitter (1991)
Anti-pluralist	Linz and Stepan (1996)
Rejection of civil liberties	
A mentality, not an ideology	Linz and Stepan (1996)

Disrespect of democratic institutions and norms:

Democracy can only function with strong institutions and norms. Democratic institutions are responsible for making a democratic government function as intended. These institutions include but are not limited to the judiciary, a constitution, free and fair elections, and many other parts of government and civil society. While they may vary from country to country the principle institutions necessary to call a state a democracy largely remain the same. Politicians and others who choose to participate in democratic systems are expected to respect these institutions and also to adhere to a certain set of democratic norms, some of which may be written down and enshrined in constitutions or other documents and some which may be unwritten, depending on the country. Democratic norms supporting institutions are much more varied on a country-by-country basis and are dependent on a country's history, culture, and political system. However, some norms transcend borders and are applicable in most democracies. Politicians are expected to be civil to a certain extent when speaking with the press or others they may disagree with.

They are supposed to make the transfer of power as smooth as possible, even if they have lost an election—what Karl and Schmitter (as well as Dahl) refer to as the “democratic bargain.”⁴ This includes acknowledging that they have lost and not using their power to attempt to prevent their opponent from gaining office. If leaders start to ignore or blatantly disrespect these norms and institutions, it is a strong indicator of authoritarian behavior.

In *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, the authors argue that the disrespect of democratic institutions and norms is a strong indicator of an authoritarian leader. The book was written in 2018 and is a clear response to Trump’s 2016 victory and time in office. The authors are disturbed by a pattern of authoritarian leaders who came to power from the inside through democratic means before eventually degrading or even destroying the institutions that empowered them in the first place. Some examples they cite are Adolf Hitler in Germany, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. As they note, many of these leaders started as political outsiders who were given power and concession by fearful political elites in an attempt to contain them. This backfired and ended in authoritarian take-over in every single case.

Levitsky and Ziblatt identify indicators that help us identify if a leader could be an authoritarian. Their historical examples display a pattern of not recognizing authoritarianism until it is too late, and they aim to remedy this. They list four indicators of authoritarian behavior which include: rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game; denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; toleration or encouragement of violence; and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media.⁵ These indicators reveal a pattern of

⁴ Philippe Schmitter, and Terry Karl, “What Democracy Is...and Is Not”, *Journal of Democracy* 2, no. 3 (Summer, 1991): 3-16, 10.

⁵ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2019), 24.

disrespect for democratic institutions and norms. What can start as calling their opponents criminals or spies, or suggesting the need to suspend certain elements of the constitution or other institutions can be the first steps down a path of no return. This can be a very clear indicator of authoritarian tendencies; one only needs to listen to what a leader has to say. Statements of blatant disrespect can turn into real actions and eventually authoritarianism.

Anti-pluralist:

A healthy democracy includes the participation of a range of groups that advocate for different voices. Pluralism allows for the existence of those groups. They can be anything from political parties to labor unions, and they can operate either inside or outside of government. In a healthy democracy, these different groups can use their resources to lobby for their interests. These groups are also typically legally and socially protected. Such pluralism is a hallmark of a healthy democratic government but is intentionally lacking in an authoritarian one.

Juan José Linz wrote many books about authoritarianism over many years; one key element of authoritarianism that he finds across multiple books is the anti-pluralist attitude. In *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Linz wrote that “The limitation of pluralism may be legal or de facto, implemented more or less effectively, confined to strictly political groups or extended to interest groups, as long as there remain groups not created by or dependent on the state which influence the political process one way or another.”⁶ In authoritarian governments, the government aims to hold as much power as possible. People and interests that gain power in authoritarian governments do not get that power from interest groups like they might in a democracy. Instead, they get it straight from the person or group that is running the government.⁷

⁶ Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Rienner, 2009), 161.

⁷ Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder, CO: Rienner, 2009), 161.

This diminishes the power of those groups without the government directly interfering. Pluralism allows for the existence of power being held by opposing groups within the government and also non-governmental groups. Just as democratic societies entrench the existence of pluralism, authoritarianism essentially does the same with anti-pluralism. But Linz does not claim that pluralism is completely eradicated in authoritarian governments, just limited.

In another book of Linz's, in which he collaborated with Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, Linz states that in authoritarian regimes there is often extensive social and economic pluralism (if not political pluralism) and that there is often some space for political opposition, albeit quite constrained.⁸ In an authoritarian government, an anti-pluralist attitude certainly runs high, but there is often some room for resistance. These groups that persist in the anti-pluralist governments can be the best chance for getting out of them and restoring democracy to the country.

Rejection of Civil Liberties:

The final and arguably simplest indicator of authoritarianism that most authors agree on is the rejection of civil liberties. Nearly every democracy has a constitution that allows certain civil and political rights to its citizens. Those rights usually include things like free speech, freedom of religion, right to assemble, freedom from persecution, and other important rights. Authoritarian regimes do not allow the same civil liberties that democracies do. While the extent to which these civil liberties are either erased or ignored varies from country to country, that base disrespect of civil liberties is always present. Ultimately in authoritarian regimes, those at the helm of the government hold power, not the people. However, some civil liberties, or at least the

⁸ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998), 44.

façade of them, will remain in an authoritarian regime. This is part of what sets it apart from a totalitarian regime. The threat to civil liberties is one of the surest indicators of democratic decline; once civil liberties start to erode or come under threat in democratic governments, it is often too late to easily go back, which is why it is so important to recognize the initial indicators of authoritarianism.

A mentality, not an ideology

In a return to Linz and Stepan's work, another key feature of authoritarianism is its distinct lack of common ideology. Their work seeks to distinguish authoritarianism from both democracy and totalitarianism and this aspect is part of what separates authoritarianism from totalitarianism. In *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*, Linz and Stepan state that authoritarianism is a "Political system without elaborate and guiding ideology but with distinctive mentalities."⁹ Linz clarified this idea years earlier in his work, *An Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Spain*. He writes that ideologies are "systems of thought more or less intellectually elaborated and organized, often in written form" whereas mentalities are "ways of thinking and feeling, more emotional than rational, that provide non-codified ways of reacting to situations."¹⁰

Authoritarianism can either co-exist or compete with ideologies or sometimes both compete and co-exist at the same time. An authoritarian leader might be resistant to adopting an ideology that has a leader to it, like religion for example, because it might diminish their power. But regardless of the presence of an ideology, an authoritarian regime will rarely base its power solely on that ideology. There would be too much room for outside influence and claims to

⁹ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998), 44.

¹⁰ Juan J. Linz, "An Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Spain;" in Erik Allardt and Yrjö Littunen, eds., *Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems* (Helsinki: Transactions of the Westermarck Society, 1964), 291-342, 12.

power. Understanding authoritarianism as a mentality allows us to examine how it can combine with a “thin ideology” or logic like populism to create an especially potent and widely applicable system.

Features of Populism:

Populism is a contested concept but a generalized accepted definition of it is a “political stance[s] that emphasize[s] the idea of “the people” and often juxtapose[s] this group against “the elite.””¹¹ The important thing to emphasize about populism is that it gains its legitimacy from the people. This is in contrast to the broad concept of authoritarianism, where power can be derived from any kind of rationalization. As I will demonstrate, the construction of “the people” and “the other” remains a constant theme in populism.

Populism	
Trait	Author
Ideational Approach	Weyland (2001), Ostiguy (2017)
Anti-pluralist	Müller (2017)

Different Approaches to Populism:

When it comes to understanding populism, there are three widely used approaches: the political-strategic approach, the socio-cultural approach, and the ideational approach. The political-strategic approach defines populism as a political strategy. Kurt Weyland describes this idea of populism as a political strategy as being “when personalistic leaders base their rule on

¹¹ “Populism,” ECPS, December 28, 2020, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/populism/>.

massive yet mostly un-institutionalized support from large numbers of people.”¹² Because this support is un-institutionalized and unorganized, it is not dependable. If a leader fails to meet popular expectations, their popularity with their base can waver. As that base is their source of power, they will likely lose power or office. This makes populist support very unstable, so populist leaders must try to create stronger bonds with their followers, going past their ideas and relying on their charisma.¹³ Weyland writes that populist leaders will then seek to “routinize their charisma” which leads to party organization or clientelism.¹⁴ This process makes populism transitory because if it is successful, it will transition into institutionalization. This instrumentalist understanding of populism is appealing and minimalist in a way that allows for further study and recognition of the different ways populists operate. It has a very narrow focus on leadership in populist movements, which is both its strength and its weakness.

The socio-cultural understanding of populism recognizes the importance of strategic leadership on the part of the populist leader while also noting that the relationship between a populist movement and the people it serves goes both ways and is not exclusively top-down.¹⁵ Pierre Ostiguy defines populism through the socio-cultural approach as “the flaunting of the low.”¹⁶ The “low” is in reference to how someone acts concerning what is expected of them including the way they dress, speak, and relate to people. Embracing or flaunting the “low” could

¹² Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>, 18.

¹³ Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>, 13.

¹⁴ Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>, 13.

¹⁵ Pierre Ostiguy, ‘Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach’, in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, and others (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford Handbooks (2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 6 Nov. 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.3>, 73.

¹⁶ Pierre Ostiguy, ‘Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach’, in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, and others (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford Handbooks (2017; online edn, Oxford Academic, 6 Nov. 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.3>, 74.

include speaking in a brash manner, dressing down, and behaving in a more uninhibited way in public. This does not however mean that the leader themselves comes from the “low.” In fact, many populist leaders come from very privileged backgrounds. They adopt certain mannerisms to appeal to a base that came from a lower socio-economic background and in an attempt to represent them. There are certainly some populists that do come from less privileged backgrounds and these actors tend to lean into this identity by enhancing certain mannerisms or just talking about it a lot.

Ostiguy sees populists as “*enfants terribles*,” so it should come as no surprise that his view of the socio-cultural approach is very cynical. To him flaunting the low is a performance, a ruse employed strategically to seek power from those who might be attracted to it. This approach to populism is very much based on emotion. Populists can tap into frustrations to gain access to a very powerful form of support.

While I find aspects of the political-strategic and socio-cultural approaches to be compelling, I find the ideational approach to populism to be the most productive approach. For my analysis of Nayib Bukele’s X presence as an indicator of his populist authoritarian leaning, the ideational approach is especially useful in recognizing the “us vs. them” ideas behind many of his tweets. I will however be borrowing from all of these authors’ work in some ways to describe populist authoritarianism, as they all have their strengths in definition even if not as broadly applicable as the ideational approach.

Anti-pluralism:

A key feature of any populist leader is the claim that they exclusively speak for the people. This feature has another name: anti-pluralism. Pluralism itself is the idea that a variety of

different groups should hold power; it should not be monopolized by one leader or party. It is a vital element of any liberal democracy. Populists reject this notion. They posit that *only they* are capable of leading “the people” and in the name of “the people.” Their political opponents are unequipped to do so, and anyone who might not agree with them is by definition not a part of “the people.” Jan-Werner Müller explores this idea in his book *What is Populism?*

Müller argues that although not every anti-pluralist is a populist, every populist is an anti-pluralist.¹⁷ In order to create the logic of populism, they must first construct the idea of who the “people” are and then argue that they are the only option to lead the “people” forward. There is no room for opposing forces or dissenting voices in this equation. They become “enemies of the people,” and this gives populists a reason to seek to exclude them from political life altogether, if possible,¹⁸ a distinctly authoritarian tactic.

The interesting element of Müller’s work is the idea that this anti-pluralist exclusion works on two levels: the “elites” and the “people.”¹⁹ The elites can be people with political, economic, or cultural power. The extent of this power is not important for populism; rather it is their stance towards the populist movement—namely, that they are against it—that is important. The other exclusion can happen on the level of the “people.” This exclusion can be posited on the basis of many things, but usually on whether or not someone is in support of the populist movement. If they are not, then they are not part of the “people.” This construction of logic is entirely based on presumed morality, it eschews all empirical knowledge. The “people” are the pure and deserving party while the “other” are traitors and threats to the wellbeing of the

¹⁷ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (UK: Penguin Books, 2017), 3.

¹⁸ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (UK: Penguin Books, 2017), 3.

¹⁹ Niels Boel, Carsten Jensen, and André Sonnichsen, “Populism and the Claim to a Moral Monopoly: An Interview with Jan-Werner Müller,” *Politik* 20, no. 4 (December 4, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.7146/politik.v20i4.101536>, 72.

“people.” This assignment of morality to the people and exclusion of all others from the realm of “the good” is a dangerous basis for thinking about any issue. Müller’s definition of populism in general, especially his characterization of anti-pluralism, seems very authoritarian. In this sense, Müller’s definition of populism helps us understand why the idea of populism is so often linked with authoritarianism, whether in the guise of authoritarian populism or populist authoritarianism.

Ultimately, I find the most useful definition of populism to be the simplest. It is the idea that there exists a true “people” and that they are under threat by an “other,” whether that be an elite class, minorities, or something else. In populism, the “people” should hold the power in government, not the “other.” It boils down to an “us vs. them” mentality that is strongly rooted in morality, who deserves what. Populism can be useful for those who wish to capitalize on it because anyone can be the “other.” The construction of the “people” and the “other” varies country by country but that idea remains. Allowing for such a simple ideational definition includes the salient regional and tactical differences. Populism is a thin ideology that allows it to be combined with any other ideology that could make it fit in democratic systems or allow it to be a dangerous combination.

Authoritarian Populism or Populist Authoritarianism?

Not every authoritarian is a populist, and not every populist is an authoritarian, however, the two approaches to governance cover a lot of the same ground. When a leader exhibits both traits of populism and authoritarianism, they can be classified as either “authoritarian populists” or “populist authoritarians.” The definitions we use in political science rise and fall in terms of popularity over the years. In our current moment, terms like authoritarian populism and populist authoritarianism seem increasingly relevant, as we see the rise of leaders who exhibit elements of

both types of rule. Theorizing and employing hybrid terms like authoritarian populism and populist authoritarianism allows us to have a more nuanced view of both phenomena. It forces us to see that there are many kinds of authoritarians, and that there are many kinds of populists, but that sometimes, they come together. In this next section, I will try to unpack the difference between what I understand as populist authoritarianism and authoritarian populism.

Populism itself is not inherently bad and not even always anti-democratic. In fact, some would claim that populism as an approach to governing can be democratic when combined with certain other ideologies such as liberalism or strong democratic sentiments. But when combined with authoritarianism, populism becomes anti-democratic. Unfortunately, this combination has become increasingly more common.²⁰ In the existing literature, we seem to find the term “authoritarian populism” employed more often than populist authoritarianism, suggesting that for most scholars, populism itself is the problem, especially when it comes couched in authoritarian forms. However, in the case of Nayib Bukele, I will argue that the term populist authoritarian is more useful, as it emphasizes that the main threat from Bukele is the authoritarianism he is bringing to El Salvador, not populism. In the next sections, I will further define the difference between these terms and then, in my analysis section, I will argue that Bukele is a populist authoritarian by looking at the ideas and messages he sends over X.

Authoritarian Populism:

Many scholars define authoritarian populism as the worst-case scenario of populism.²¹ This suggests that there is such a thing as democratic populism. However, in practice, scholars

²⁰ Bojan Bugarcic, “The Two Faces of Populism: Between Authoritarian and Democratic Populism,” *German Law Journal* 20, no. 3 (2019): 390–400, <https://doi.org/10.1017/glj.2019.20>, 391.

²¹ Tom Palmer, “The Terrifying Rise Authoritarian Populism,” *Cato*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/terrifying-rise-authoritarian-populism>.

seem to have identified situations of authoritarian populism far more frequently than those of “democratic” populism. This does not mean that democratic populism is not possible, just that it is rarer and the less destructive nature of it makes it less pressing for study. When scholars label someone or something as being “authoritarian populist,” they place more weight on the *populism* of the leader or movement than their *authoritarianism*, suggesting that the authoritarian aspects are merely a means to an end. In such situations, the primary orientation is populist—furthering the needs and wants of the people over the “other,” however defined. Authoritarian tactics are merely the means to achieve that.

For a regime or leader to be characterized as an “authoritarian populist,” we would need to find substantial evidence that said entity was working mainly towards the fulfillment of promises and goals made to the people. They would be seeing to the constant development of that program through institutionalization and policymaking. Authoritarian means might sometimes have to be used to clear obstacles to achieving the people’s goals, but their achievement remains first and foremost. The leader or regime in an authoritarian populist mode would have to display evidence of attempting to remain connected to, in touch with, and working diligently for “the people” of their country ultimately for the good of those people.

In the case of Bukele, I find that his goals are far more self-serving and aimed at consolidating his personal power in an authoritarian way than they are “serving the people of El Salvador.” This is mostly because the policies he has been most celebrated for are his approaches to fighting the gangs. The sheer results are impressive and have undoubtedly improved safety in El Salvador for most people, but ultimately are likely not sustainable and have been a vehicle for him to excuse authoritarian behavior. While he has been successful in using populist rhetoric and strategies, they have been marshaled solely toward authoritarian ends.

Populist Authoritarianism

My definition of populist authoritarianism is the use of populist ideas and the construction of the “people” and the “other” in the pursuit of consolidation of power and erosion of democracy. This order of words highlights that the primary emphasis should be on the authoritarian measures taken by leaders and that the populist ideas that get them there should be secondary and modifying that authoritarianism. In contrast to authoritarian populism, populist authoritarians are more clearly moving towards the consolidation of an authoritarian regime, with populist rhetoric, ideas, and strategies being the mere vehicle towards that end. In the case of a populist authoritarian leader or regime, we would see direct evidence that the main goal was to erode or degrade democratic institutions and civil liberties and instead consolidate power in the hands of the leader or regime. The leader or regime would use populist rhetoric to cloak and legitimize their actions, but evidence of clear authoritarian ends would be most visible.

Here is one example. Authoritarianism, according to Linz and Stepan, allows for limited pluralism depending on the government in power.²² Such pluralism is only really allowed in social or economic spaces though; politically it is more limited. The way that Müller represents anti-pluralism in populist movements seems to have a lot in common with an authoritarian approach to pluralism. While not all agree that anti-pluralism is a feature of all populism, I argue that it is undeniably a feature of populist authoritarianism. Therefore, in the case of a populist authoritarian, we will see stronger motivation to crack down on pluralism, one based on their exclusionary vision of who “the people” in whose name they govern and lead are.

²² Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998), 44.

As Weyland notes, populist rule is often transitory.²³ If successful, the populist leader will transition to a different kind of rule. This is what I believe to be true in situations of populist authoritarianism. As populism and authoritarianism are both “thin” in regards to their need for another ideological tendency, there is an opportunity to introduce one that would benefit populist authoritarianism such as personalistic rule, militarism, or many other tendencies. For Bukele, this currently looks like a special attention to law and order. These can eventually supersede populism in its relation to authoritarianism and lead to a harsh authoritarian rule with a strong base of power that was carefully cultivated through an initial populist approach.

Populist leaders campaign on the basis of exclusionary ideas of who “the people” are. This constructed group of “the people” is often what delivers them to power through the polls. This strategy of denying the legitimacy of other groups, of the “other,” does not end if they achieve power. Some turn to mass clientelism or abandon their former populist ideas once in power, but populist authoritarians will attempt to enshrine anti-pluralism as best as they can. Depending on the level of democratic erosion that is already present they can do this to different degrees of efficiency. Some can remove all opposing parties entirely like the Chinese Communist Party did.²⁴ Others just gain more leverage to delegitimize opposing parties within the allowances of the democratic constitution like, appropriately enough, Nayib Bukele. Upon coming to power, he tore down a statue dedicated to the end of the civil war erected by the FMLN, both a party in the civil war and the former political party in power.²⁵ This act was an

²³ Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>, 14.

²⁴ Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule,” Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule>.

²⁵ El Gobierno de El Salvador Demuele El Monumento a La Reconciliación,” *Voz de América*, January 4, 2024, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/el-gobierno-de-el-salvador-destruye-el-monumento-a-la-reconciliacion/7426473.html>.

attempt to deny their political legitimacy by connecting them to the violence of the past and present.

I argue that populist authoritarianism is most salient and successful in situations of profound failures of government. Government failure creates a disgruntled mass population that is open to populist strategies and that a populist leader can use to gain power and establish an authoritarian rule. The goal of fixing what was broken is a strong reason to declare states of emergency and maneuver around constitutional checks to get the job done. The people will support such moves because they want to see wrongs righted. In their paper “Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?,” Bram Spruyt, Gil Keppens, and Filip Van Droogenbroeck explore who populist bases often include. They found no strong correlation with age and gender, some with education and class, but the most salient being perceived vulnerability.²⁶ These people felt vulnerable mostly because they found their government to be ineffective in delivering the results they felt that they needed. This vulnerability also included social forces and feelings of deprivation, but this still falls in line with there being a problem that people feel needs solving. This feeling of vulnerability being a strong motivator for people supporting populism transcended gender, age, education, and class even if the specific feelings of vulnerability may have been specific.

Populist authoritarianism thrives where the government has previously failed. The bar is already low, so for a populist authoritarian to reach power and keep it, they only need to deliver minimal results and have the previous administration and other constructions of the “other” as an

²⁶ Bram Spruyt, Gil Keppens, and Filip Van Droogenbroeck, “Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?” *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (2016): 335–46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44018014>, 342.

ever-convenient scapegoat. Their government will be swifter and more efficient than any previous iteration, it will only come at the cost of liberty.

What I find to be unique about populist authoritarianism is the emphasis on authoritarianism. Figures or movements who employ populist authoritarianism ideas seek power for themselves, not for the people they claim to represent. To transition to an authoritarian model, leaders must get elected first and stay in power for long enough to see this change through. Populist ideas garner far more support than openly authoritarian ones do and provide a path to that democratic election.

In the next section, I will make the case that Nayib Bukele is a clear example of a populist authoritarian. He utilizes the populist idea that he alone is leading the true people of El Salvador to salvation but emphasizes that he must do this through the suspension of civil rights and liberties and the lifting of constitutional checks on his power. And he has been remarkably successful in delivering what people felt the previous governments could not: safety from the gangs. I believe populist authoritarianism is a more productive approach, especially when considering cases like Bukele's. I think that Bukele is straying closer to authoritarian rule and might eventually not need the populist support he currently enjoys. Authoritarianism is the fear when it comes to populism, which is what many authors write about in regard to authoritarian populism. Ordering it with authoritarianism as the second word emphasizes its dominance over a populist veneer, which I believe is the right approach to take to characterizing Bukele. In taking a close look at the messages and ideas he is conveying on X, I will demonstrate that Bukele is a populist authoritarian and that his success in El Salvador is a worrisome precedent for the region of Latin America that is already delivering more leaders like him.

Historical Context

To better understand El Salvador's current political situation, it is important to briefly establish a history of the country's experience with democracy and the conditions that led to Nayib Bukele's resounding success in the elections of 2019 and 2024. The country has a long and rich history that warrants pages and pages of examination but for the purpose of my thesis, I will just be providing a brief history of democracy and authoritarianism in the country.

Like other countries in the region, El Salvador was first colonized by Spain, and then a part of Mexico, before it finally gained independence in 1841. For the next hundred-plus years, the country saw several coups, dictatorships, wars, and unsuccessful presidents. In short, democracy had a hard time taking off in the country. This cycle of dictatorships continued up until 1980 when the country experienced a brutal civil war. The two sides in the war were the government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The leftist FMLN received support from Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union while the authoritarian and militaristic government received support from the United States (the US support of this right-wing regime was characteristic of its overall approach to Latin America at the time).²⁷ The FMLN was a guerilla group that desired an end to state-sponsored violence, agrarian reform, and just general better care for the people of El Salvador. After the death of 75,000 people, the displacement of nearly one million, and a war that devastated the country for 12 years, the two sides signed a peace treaty that would pave the way for a democratic transition.²⁸

²⁷ Mike Allison, "El Salvador's Brutal Civil War: What We Still Don't Know," Al Jazeera, March 1, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/3/1/el-salvadors-brutal-civil-war-what-we-still-dont-know/>.

²⁸ Joaquín M Chávez, "How Did the Civil War in El Salvador End?," OUP Academic, December 9, 2015, <https://academic.oup.com/ahr/article/120/5/1784/2581570>.

In terms of corruption in the traditional sense, El Salvador has been home to slightly below-average levels compared to its neighboring countries. While the country has had its share of corruption scandals, overall, it has not been to the extent of some other countries in the region or at levels that are dangerously alarming.²⁹ This does not minimize the impact of the corruption. Any level of corruption is troublesome for a country and the potential of disruptiveness is often ammunition for populist authoritarians to use against their opponents regardless of whether they have actually been accused or found guilty of corruption. Bukele pointed to corruption in the government, much of which was fair, during his initial campaign. He continues to speak about it even though he has now been in power for nearly five years and has put many of his friends and family in positions of power and includes them in important decision-making.³⁰

The most important context concerning democracy right now in El Salvador is the gang presence in the country. During the civil war, a million people were displaced from their homes. Many of those people would find their way to the United States, specifically Los Angeles. During this time in the United States, gangs were on the rise and many Salvadorian youth found themselves caught up in it and created their own gangs. El Salvador's biggest gangs, MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang, started in the United States on the streets of Los Angeles. Due to the tough-on-crime laws of the 70s and the new strict immigration bills in the United States,³¹ many of the people in these gangs were deported back to El Salvador, bringing the gangs with them. El Salvador was not equipped to deal with the influx of gang members coming into the country as the country had just come out of a civil war. The United States did not care to give them much

²⁹ "CID Gallup: Salvadoreños Perciben Menor Corrupción Que Otros Países," *Diario El Mundo*, February 23, 2023, <https://diario.elmundo.sv/politica/cid-gallup-salvadorenos-perciben-menor-corrupcion-que-otros-paises>.

³⁰ Jimmy Alvarado, Gabriel Labrador, and Sergio Arauz, "El Clan Bukele Que Gobierna Con Nayib," *El Faro*, June 7, 2020, https://elfaro.net/es/202006/el_salvador/24512/El-clan-Bukele-que-gobierna-con-Nayib.htm.

³¹ "Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act," *Legal Information Institute*, 1996, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/illegal_immigration_reform_and_immigration_responsibility_act.

warning or support in taking back many people who proved to be dangerous. As a result, the gangs created a very strong foothold once they arrived and made the country very dangerous for years to come.

Nayib Bukele used to be a member of the political party he reviles today, the FMLN. As the mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán and later San Salvador, he ran as an FMLN party member. In 2017, he was expelled from the party for violating the party's principles and being disruptive and disrespectful within the party.³² This included, in a strange series of events, calling a female colleague a witch and allegedly throwing an apple at her. After his expulsion, he created his own party, Nuevas Ideas (New Ideas), and decided to run for president. Although he ultimately ran under another party (GANA), Nuevas Ideas has since gained popularity. He won the presidency in 2019 with about 53% of the vote.³³ He was the first candidate not from one of the two major parties in El Salvador to win the presidency since the end of the civil war.

It is highly unlikely for a candidate in any country with a two-party system to win the presidency by running on a third-party platform. It would be as if a Green Party politician won the US presidency. His success points to how well Bukele was able to capture the moment and find a massive popular base. Although he ran with GANA, another third party, he has since built his party Nuevas Ideas into the party it is today. Unlike Bukele who is a conservative, Nuevas Ideas is meant to be a big tent party and encompass right- and left-wing views. There is not much of a base ideology to the party (which is in line with authoritarianism's tendency not to have strong ideological roots, merely "mentalities"). Its main platform concerns fighting corruption

³² Jonathan Laguan, "Nayib Bukele, Expulsado Del Fmln Por Estas Razones | La Prensa ...," La Prensa, October 10, 2017, <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Nayib-Bukele-expulsado-del-FMLN-20171010-0075.html>.

³³ "El Salvador: Anti-Corruption Candidate Nayib Bukele Wins Presidential Election," The Guardian, February 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/04/el-salvador-anti-corruption-candidate-nayib-bukele-wins-presidential-election>.

and anti-establishment rhetoric. However, the party was made in Bukele's image by Bukele, and supports him without question. Nuevas Ideas initially won a majority in 2021, but in the recent 2024 election, the party won 54 of the 60 seats in the legislature.³⁴ This came after Bukele reshaped the legislature by limiting the number of seats, effectively guaranteeing victory for his party (here we see evidence of the authoritarian tendency to erode democratic institutions).

Bukele's win in the most recent election is also troubling because it seems to be unconstitutional. The Salvadoran constitution prohibits running for a second term as president. The last and only person to break this rule was Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, a dictator and fascist. In his first term, Bukele removed and replaced judges he felt were not sympathetic to him (his super-majority allowed him to do so). These same judges found that Bukele could run for president if he resigned five months before the polls opened in the 2024 election.³⁵ And sure enough, five months before the polls opened, Bukele took a leave of absence from the presidency but still ran the show from behind the scenes. Bukele's newfound expanded power makes an analysis of his intentions, ideas, and messages more important than ever as his power grows.

³⁴ Julia Gavarrete, "Bukele's Party Imposes Its Dominance in El Salvador," NACLA, March 7, 2024, <https://nacla.org/bukeles-party-imposes-dominance-el-salvador>.

³⁵ "Sala de Lo Constitucional Avala Reección de Bukele y Estados Unidos Lo Compara Con Hugo Chávez," *elfaro.net*, September 5, 2021, https://elfaro.net/es/202109/el_salvador/25693/Sala-de-lo-Constitucional-avala-reelecci%C3%B3n-de-Bukele-y-Estados-Unidos-lo-compara-con-Hugo-Ch%C3%A1vez.htm.

Methodology

For my methodology, I will be putting my definitions to work by using them to evaluate a single case study; I will examine Nayib Bukele's large social media presence with the intent of furthering our understanding of how we should classify his movement. Bukele's use of social media, specifically X, as his communication method of choice is prominent and worthy of examination. Other populists like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Javier Milei, and many others also use social media platforms (X in most cases) as their preferred method of communication. However, there has not been much systemic examination of the implications of this choice. Because of Bukele's fondness for the platform as well as its functionality, I will be looking primarily at X for my analysis.

I am particularly interested in examining the ideas that Bukele shares in his tweets. He often shares clips of speeches he gives, most recently his speech at CPAC and his victory speech. However, he also uses his posts to go after the media, speak about his accomplishments, share memes, and sometimes just tweet emojis. I believe that every single one of these tweets, no matter how seemingly innocuous, is a conscious part of his ruling strategy. I will examine them to understand more precisely how we should characterize his rule.

Similar to other populist leaders like Erdoğan, Bolsonaro, and Modi, Bukele has been accused of utilizing troll farms to target media, political opponents, and just normal people who spoke out against him on social media.³⁶ Troll farms are the institutionalized use of people, usually paid for their work, to spread messages about a political party or politician. Often the

³⁶ Jane Esberg, "All the President's Trolls: Real and Fake Twitter Fights in El Salvador," Crisis Group, January 22, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/central-america/el-salvador/all-presidents-trolls-real-and-fake-twitter-fights-el-salvador>.

practice will go past just sharing propaganda and start viciously targeting people. This practice lends itself well to social media platforms like X where the number of people using a hashtag makes it more visible and interaction is encouraged. While impossible for me to document, I will be keeping a close eye on hashtags associated with Bukele, positive and negative, and seeing how he interacts with them. The use of these troll farms alone points to the attempt to exert power over something very difficult to control, a seemingly authoritarian impulse.

Using X as a method of evaluating if Bukele is more of an authoritarian populist or a populist authoritarian is a useful method because it is the platform he has chosen for governance. Before Bukele started in politics, he ran a marketing firm. This is his professional background, and it shows. He ran both of his campaigns largely over X and currently uses it as his preferred form of presidential communication. Over X, we can observe how he attempts to portray himself to the people of El Salvador and the world. Is he defending his policies and ideas? If so, how is he doing that? There are years and years of content to go through, so much that I cannot include all possible data points in a thesis of this length and scope. However, I believe that the tweets I have selected are indicative of Bukele's broader presence on X and can serve as a representative sample.

Analysis

Nayib Bukele is an avid X user. Whether it is him directly, or more likely, a social media team that operates his account, it is active daily. Bukele boasts 6.1 million followers, which is close to El Salvador's total population of 6.3 million. While he also has many foreign followers, these numbers suggest that a huge percentage of the Salvadoran population follows him. He often tweets messages about El Salvador's success, posts highly produced videos, shares an occasional meme, and interacts with others on X, both supporters and critics. My goal in this analysis is to look at the ideas he is sharing, and how he is sharing them to determine how best to characterize his regime in terms of its mix of populist and authoritarian tendencies. I ultimately conclude that Nayib Bukele is a populist authoritarian as I have defined it: someone who uses populist ideas and constructions of the "people" and the "other" in the pursuit of consolidation of personalized authoritarian power and the explicit destruction of democratic norms and institutions.

My analysis of Bukele suggests that social media use can be an indicator of populist authoritarian behavior as well as a vehicle for entrenching that power. Almost every would-be politician in the world is on X now, and they tend to make their intentions and ideas pretty clear via the platform. It is an opportunity for them to communicate with voters and with the world directly and personally. The level of direct contact (or at least perceived direct contact) we have with our leaders through X is higher than it has ever been, and politicians' posting on X presents an opportunity to understand their ideas better than we might have before. Historically, we have said that people did not recognize a leader was authoritarian until it was too late, but now with X and other methods of direct communication on social media people have a better chance to recognize those indicators and potentially to be able to do something about it.

There is no shortage of material to draw from for this analysis. Bukele has been on X since 2009 and has been an extremely active member during most of that time. He favors the platform over conventional press conferences and press releases. X allows him and other politicians to circumvent these traditional institutions that are important for fact-checking and providing context for what politicians have to say. Because Bukele tends to release important policy information through X, people are often reading what he has to say without any kind of further analysis or fact-checking, unless they seek it out.

Campaign and re-election win



Nayib Bukele’s 2019 presidential campaign was an unconventional one. He chose not to attend any debates and did not tour the country much to campaign. He did most of what passed for “campaigning” over X. His initial 2019 campaign was however quite different from his most recent 2024 one. It mostly focused on combating corruption in the government and relied on populist sentiments. Bukele clearly used populist ideas to propel him to the national stage and subsequently, the presidency.

Source: @nayibbukele via X, January 15, 2019.

As demonstrated in this political cartoon that he tweeted during the campaign, Bukele positioned himself as a new kind of leader. While his opponents await to entrap him in an empty room and think only about how they can serve themselves, he speaks to the entire country

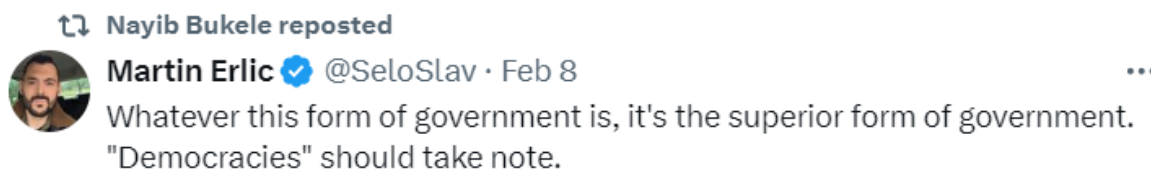
directly through social media as exemplified by his iPad. These populist ideas and messaging would continue throughout his presidency and the 2024 campaign, however, more authoritarian ideas pop up in ways in the latter that were not present in the first campaign. This development, taken together with moves he has made since 2019 to curb democratic norms and institutions in El Salvador, is exemplary of his ultimate goal of authoritarianism.

Following his constitutionally unsound re-election in February 2024, Bukele became even more active on X than he normally is. He began tweeting and re-tweeting posts celebrating his victory and boasting about his impressive poll numbers. Prominent amidst all of this, an interesting yet concerning pattern arose; many of the tweets and re-tweets he shared contained strong authoritarian tendencies, bolstering my argument that Bukele is essentially a populist authoritarian.

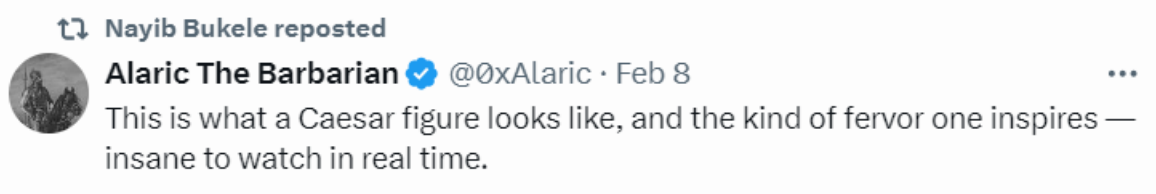
Once it became clear that Bukele had won the 2024 election, but before the official vote count was done, Bukele delivered a victory speech. In it, he talked about using his second term to establish a “real” democracy for the people of El Salvador, but *not* for the criminals of the country. He later took to X to echo many of the same ideas delivered in the speech. His tweets and the tweets he reposted signal a populist authoritarian message and demonstrate how he is beginning to lean into democratic erosion and depictions of him as a strongman authoritarian more than he has in the past. In the tweet below, we see him using X to convey his disdain for the ideas of “human rights” and “real Democracy,” and we see his supporters praising him for his “Caesar-like” behavior.



Source: @nayibbukele via X, February 12, 2024.



Source: @SeloSlav via X, February 8, 2024.



Source: @0xAlaric via X, February 8, 2024.

One of Bukele’s tweets includes human rights in quotations, signaling his disdain for the concept and revealing the little regard he holds for those rights. He elaborated on this further in his inaugural speech when he spoke of how the gangs and those associated with them do not deserve the rights that are technically afforded to them by the Salvadoran Constitution. He frames it as a conflict between the “civil rights” of the criminals and the safety of the “honest people” as he put it in his speech. This framing makes it seem like you cannot have one at the same time as the other; the country must choose and empower Bukele personally (empower him to remove the civil rights of the gangs) as much as possible in order for him to be able to protect the people. Seemingly, this has not been a hard choice at all for the people of El Salvador. A long

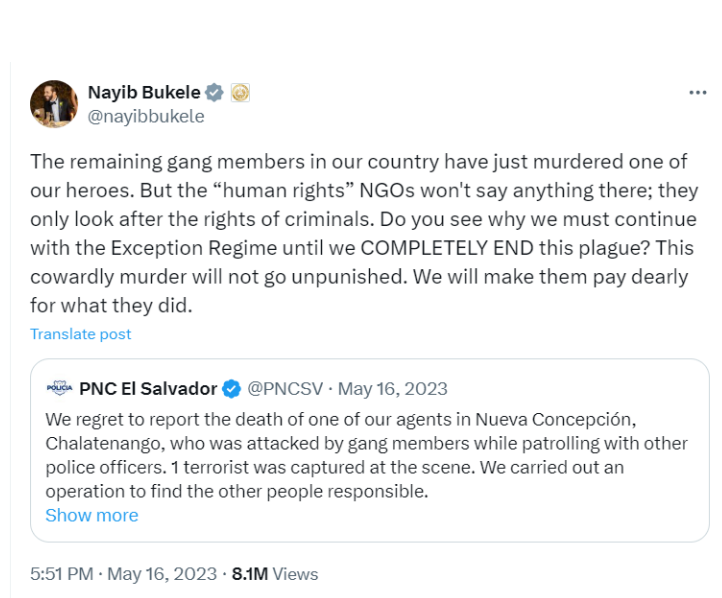
and violent history with the gangs has left many people with no sympathy for them. Bukele has been able to capitalize on this and use it as justification to behave in authoritarian ways and degrade the country's democratic institutions.

Bukele's tweet denigrating democracy and human rights, as well as the retweets referring to him and his style of governance as less than democratic, reveal his attitude toward democracy and help support my claim that he should be characterized as a populist authoritarian rather than an authoritarian populist. The fact that Bukele retweeted "Alaric the Barbarian's" characterization of Bukele as Caesar, signaling his approval of the message, is frightening. While it likely refers to Caesar's charisma, political acumen, and leadership, one cannot help but draw connections to Caesar's willingness to centralize power, declare himself Dictator for Life, and stack important institutions with his supporters. One might even argue that Caesar was an example of a very early populist authoritarian. The person who initially tweeted this was right; Bukele resembles Caesar in all of these ways, good and bad. The fact that he leans into this typification as Caesar reveals that he is a populist authoritarian with a disdain for democracy, much like Caesar, and maybe is less inclined to deny it any longer.

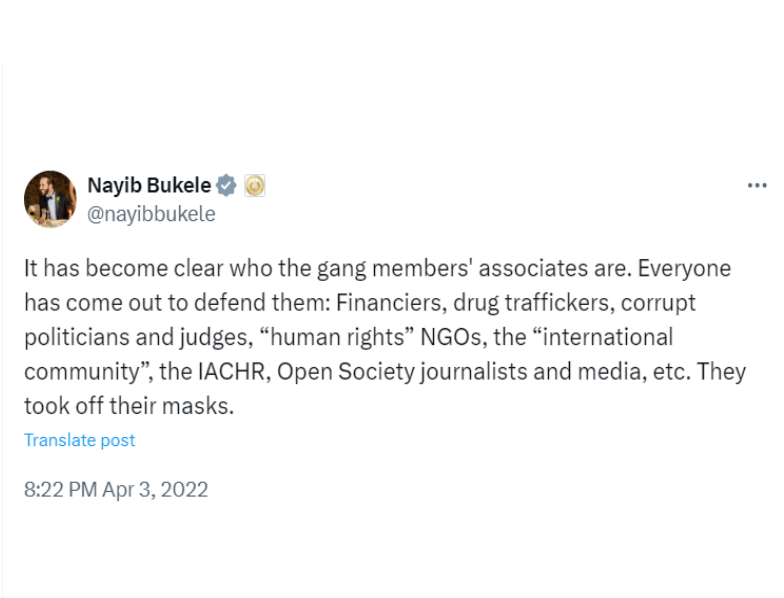
The people and the other

The way in which Bukele designates those who are not with him as against him and the entire country of El Salvador is indicative of his leaning towards populist authoritarianism over authoritarian populism. Based on this kind of ideas and behavior, his ultimate goal is authoritarianism. El Salvador's violent history with gangs allowed Bukele to expertly craft a populist construction of "the people" and "the other." The people are the good law-abiding citizens of El Salvador, and the others are those who are in or collaborate with the gangs. But it has been Bukele who determines who is and is not part of the people time and time again. This

strategy has allowed him to crack down on pluralism by going after other political parties, the media, opponents, and anyone else who does not support his rise to power. The people of El Salvador do not benefit from Bukele attempting to otherize the press or a former ally turned rival. It is purely for Bukele's gain, as the three tweets below demonstrate.



Source: @nayibbukele via X, May 15, 2023.



Source: @nayibbukele via X, April 3, 2023.



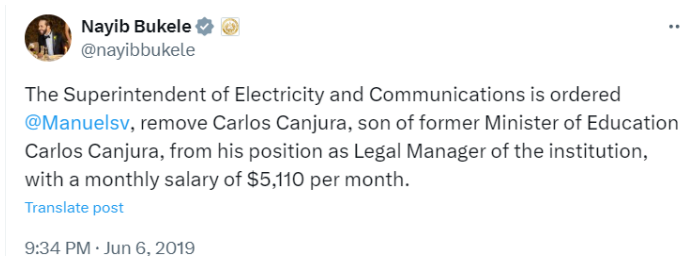
Source: @nayibbukele via X, April 3, 2022.

With these tweets, Bukele is categorizing NGOs, the media, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (an autonomous organization meant to promote and defend civil rights in the Americas), Open Society Foundations (founded by George Soros, a frequent target of criticism and conspiracy theories by the international right and authoritarian leaning), and other politicians. Fully aware that these are all organizations and people that have and will continue to criticize his authoritarian actions, Bukele attempts to portray them as in collaboration with the gangs.

Governance over X

The use of X as a communication channel bypasses all official channels in a way that seeks to get around the press, Bukele's often-criticized enemy, is another example of his populist authoritarian tendencies. Bukele's word, and his word alone is law. The way he sends mandates and orders over X is reminiscent of dictators ordering their ministers to exact their orders. He did not deliver these messages in a press conference or a session of governance, he did it over X.

Bukele effectively governs over X. Although he does not do it anymore, for a period in 2019, Bukele began to issue "orders" over X to his ministers. These orders usually included the firing of people he thought to be corrupt or ineffective. His word over X was quite literally law. What we are seeing here (below) is a budding authoritarian issuing his commands over social media.

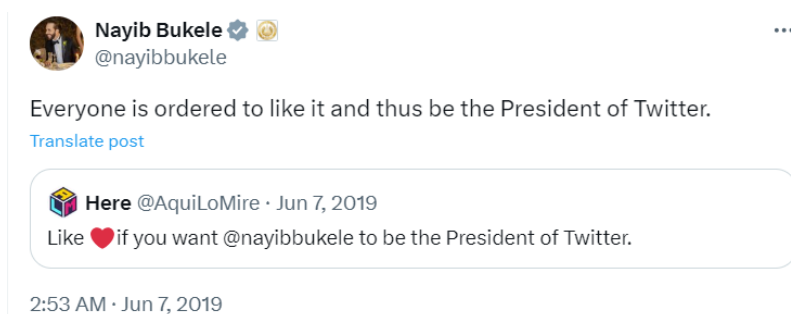


Source: @nayibbukele via X, June 6, 2019.



Source: @nayibbukele via X, June 6, 2019.

These were not requests of his ministers. He notably used the imperative tense in Spanish (“se le ordena”). This is a tense meant for issuing commands in Spanish. This was not a request but a mandate. Bukele was exercising his power and doing over X in a way that allowed it to go viral. #SeLeOrdena started to trend after these posts. People started using it as a joke ordering people to do things. It went viral in the country and in the region, and people found it to be funny. Bukele leaned into this newfound characterization of his tweets. What had before been a possible attempt to show he was making good on campaign promises and demonstrate his power had now become a trending hashtag. This newfound irony softens the edge of the implications. Much like he often does, Bukele leaned into the irony and started playing towards the hashtag (see below).



Source: @nayibbukele via X, June 7, 2019.



Source: @nayibbukele via X, June 11, 2019.

These tweets are self-referential in a way that Bukele seems to deeply enjoy. They are two of many he posted during this time. Making it into a joke makes the entire operation seem far more innocent. It plays into his “for the people” persona. After all, if leaders are able to poke a little bit of fun at themselves like Bukele sometimes does, how bad can they really be? While these tweets seem harmless, and by themselves are harmless, combined with the more serious orders he was issuing, they reveal someone who is reveling in their ability to issue commands. Undoubtedly using his professional background in marketing, he has figured out how to market himself in a simultaneously imposing yet playful way. These tweets and the ones below follow a trend of him reposting those criticizing him or making jokes about his authoritarian leanings or his problems with the press.



Source: @joakedzierska via X, March 8, 2024.

Source: @nartiles via X, February 16, 2024.

Bukele has clearly had a lot of fun poking fun at both himself and what others label him. He once famously changed his X bio to “World’s Coolest Dictator.” He has since changed it to “Philosopher King, his new bio. “World’s Coolest Dictator” is dangerously close to an acceptance of the title. He of course plays it off as a joke, but the fact that instead of denying the label, he will either play with it or go on the offense is troubling. Bukele is heading towards being a bonafide dictator, and he seems to actively crave this role, provided he can still look cool doing it.

Depiction of Jails

The jails and rules surrounding them that Bukele has made a centerpiece of his governance is a clear sign of authoritarianism. Even if he couches it as being for the good of the country, his “reforms” of El Salvador’s jails are a massive violation of civil rights and a clear example of him exerting as much power as he can in opposition to the Constitution. The way he communicates about the prisons and jails on X is an example of his populist authoritarian leaning. He is using X to demonstrate that he is doing this to keep the “people” safe. Those in prisons are not part of his construction of the “people”, as he has made very clear. And yet, the actions themselves are decidedly authoritarian in nature.

A major element of Bukele’s Territorial Control Plan meant to disempower the gangs in the country and bolster safety is incarceration under very severe conditions within prisons. Initially once Bukele took office, it seemed as if he had made another pact with the gangs to prevent violence. In exchange for a reduction in violence and support for his political party, Bukele granted favors like making jail conditions more favorable for gang leaders, restricting

extraditions, and other concessions.³⁷ He was not the first president to do this. The gangs in El Salvador were immensely powerful and sometimes the best the government could do was bargain with them. This strategy initially worked. Bukele boasted of a dramatic decrease in crime over his X account.³⁸ However, this decrease was likely due to the gangs deciding to be less violent, not government intervention.

This plan of dealing with the gangs changed after a bloody spree in 2022. Over three days, MS-13 killed 87 people in the country, a massive uptick in violence compared to the previous months. MS-13 told the Salvadoran newspaper El Faro that they enacted this violence after the government broke its pact by arresting people they had promised not to and by not keeping their word.³⁹ They provided audio files of conversations between gang leaders and high-ranking people close to Bukele speaking about the deal to prove there had been one. This incident provoked Bukele to request and be granted a state of exception that would allow the government to suspend certain civil liberties. He also built a new jail, the largest in Latin America, dubbed the Terrorism Confinement Center to house all of the people who would be arrested under this new state of exception. Bukele took to X to communicate the start of this move and promote it as time passed.

The depiction of these jails reveals a brutal setting. In one tweet, Bukele retweets a YouTube video in which someone who tours jails around the world was allowed into the

³⁷ Carlos Martínez et al., “Bukele Has Been Negotiating with MS-13 for a Reduction in Homicides and Electoral Support,” El Faro, September 6, 2020, https://elfaro.net/en/202009/el_salvador/24785/Bukele-Spent-A-Year-Negotiating-with-MS-13-for-a-Reduction-in-Homicides-and-Electoral-Support.htm.

³⁸ Nayib Bukele (@nayibbukele), “Podemos confirmar que hemos cerrado el martes 21 de julio, con 0 homicidios a nivel nacional. Delincuencia: CONTROLADA Los que le apuestan a que nuestro país falle, están equivocados...”, Twitter, July 22, 2020.

³⁹ Carlos Martínez, “Collapsed Government Talks with MS-13 Sparked Record Homicides in El Salvador, Audios Reveal,” El Faro, May 17, 2022, https://elfaro.net/en/202205/el_salvador/0000026177-collapsed-government-talks-with-ms-13-sparked-record-homicides-in-el-salvador-audios-reveal.

Terrorism Confinement Center to see what it was like. The new structure is depicted as state-of-the-art and impenetrable, a place where gang members serve time as terrorists. Some of the conditions depicted in the video include 100 people in a small jail cell with no windows and permanent lights. There are no mattresses on the steel bunks, the prisoners only receive a towel that many are pictured using to shield their eyes from the harsh fluorescent lights in order to sleep. They stay in their cells all day except for the short period when they are permitted to stand directly outside for exercise. Prisoners are not allowed visits or calls from those who are not their lawyers. They even attend court remotely, meaning they have no contact with the outside world.

These are just the conditions that the government corroborates (and even brags about), some credible reports describe far more dire conditions that include torture. Officials in the video explain this is to punish these men, many of whom are murderers, and ensure they are not able to exercise any power while inside. They insist that this prison is for the worst of the worst. However, most jails in El Salvador are home to horrific conditions, not just this one meant for high-security prisoners. Bukele has used his X account to depict these jails and promote them as an integral part of his Territorial Control Plan. What is shocking is that videos like this one (of which there are many) depict a stark image of the jails as places of misery. And yet we are still likely not seeing the entire picture. The strategy to promote these jails falls in line with Bukele's authoritarian leanings because of the sheer level of control the government is exerting to create and fill them. He is presenting a strongman image and demonstrating that he is the person who can defeat the gangs, justifying his state of exception and the violations of human rights that come with it.



Source: @nayibbukele via X, February 10, 2024.

Bukele’s X account features endorsements of Salvadoran jails, especially the maximum-security Terrorism Confinement Center. His promotion of these jails, and system of justice by proxy, indicates the presence of populist authoritarian ideas. In his populist logic, “the other” is the gangs and everyone affiliated with them. With these jails, he demonstrates exactly what he does with “the other,” all in the name of the people. This tough-on-crime attitude and state of exception that allowed him to restrict the civil liberties of those in these jails has allowed him to target whoever he likes, including adversaries.

The state of exception led to policies like arresting people with tattoos, some of whom swear to have no connection to the gangs.⁴⁰ A hotline was set up to allow people to anonymously

⁴⁰ Amna Nawaz, Teresa Cebrián Aranda, and Julia Galiano-Rios, “Thousands of Innocent People Jailed in El Salvador’s Gang Crackdown,” PBS, February 13, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/thousands-of-innocent-people-jailed-in-el-salvadors-gang-crackdown#:~:text=The%20government%20has%20so%20far,to%20fill%20a%20police%20quota.>

report their friends and neighbors for being involved with gangs (often incorrectly),⁴¹ effectively creating an informer class of citizens, something common in authoritarian systems. Some were arrested and jailed simply for “looking nervous.”⁴² The state of exception allows for trials to be conducted collectively, which has resulted in hundreds of people being put on trial together. It has also allowed the removal of the 24-month limit for criminal proceedings, opening the door to people being indefinitely jailed without standing trial.

These jails violate the civil rights of Salvadorans who end up incarcerated in them. Bukele says it does not matter because they are not part of “the people” he is sworn to protect. But anyone currently included in the people can find themselves suddenly excluded from that group. This grants Bukele complete control and adds another tool towards his goal of complete authoritarian control.

Interactions with the press

Bukele is no stranger to criticism from the international community and press. On X, his account often interacts with the foreign press with dismissal and disdain. Most interactions take place solely on X and do not reflect an interest in addressing the real concerns being brought up by the news report in question. This disdain for and attempt to delegitimize the press is an indicator of populist authoritarianism. The press is a fundamentally important democratic institution. They hold politicians accountable and provide invaluable fact-checking and context. Without them, we would not know the truth and would not be able to properly participate in

⁴¹ Zedryk Raziel, “El Salvador: The Hell of the Innocent Sent to Prison on an Anonymous Phone Call,” EL PAÍS English, August 27, 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-08-27/el-salvador-the-hell-of-the-innocent-sent-to-prison-on-an-anonymous-phone-call.html>.

⁴² Jimmy Alvarado and Sergio Arauz, “Bukele Buscará Reelegirse En 2024 Pese a Que La Constitución Lo Prohíbe En Cuatros Artículos,” elfaro.net, September 16, 2022, https://elfaro.net/es/202209/el_salvador/26382/Bukele-buscar%C3%A1-reelegirse-en-2024-pese-a-que-la-Constituci%C3%B3n-lo-proh%C3%ADbe-en-cuatros-art%C3%ADculos.htm.

democracy in an informed way. The press in El Salvador is no different. *El Faro*, *El Diario de Hoy*, *La Prensa Gráfica*, and many more all provide crucial political coverage for the country. International media also extensively covers El Salvador, the sum total of which is a rich source of information coming out of the country.

Bukele is no friend of the press. In his eyes, the press is a threat and an enemy to his agenda of control. *El Faro* specifically has conducted groundbreaking investigative work into Bukele's administration. In response, they have been systematically targeted in the courts, faced physical and verbal harassment, and have been falsely accused of colluding with the gangs. In response to this, *El Faro* uprooted and moved its legal and administrative operations to Costa Rica.⁴³ Their news headquarters thankfully remain in El Salvador but that they felt the need to move their legal and administrative operations out of El Salvador is a troubling indicator of the targeting of journalism by Bukele. The attack on civil liberties via the press is strong evidence of Bukele's authoritarian tendencies winning out over his populist ones.

Bukele uses his X account to target and attack the press. Always on the offense, whenever something unfavorable comes out about him, rather than provide his side of the story or defend himself, he will attack that publication directly instead. A brief scroll through any point in his X feed will uncover many responses to publications, some domestic, nowadays mostly international. Two tweets of his, one in response to a *CNN* article and the other in response to a question asked by a *BBC* reporter at a rare press conference, demonstrate his general disregard for the press and the targeted tweets he often sends their way.

⁴³ "El Faro Moves to Costa Rica," *El Faro*, April 13, 2023, <https://elfaro.net/en/202304/opinion/26805/El-Faro-Moves-to-Costa-Rica.htm>.

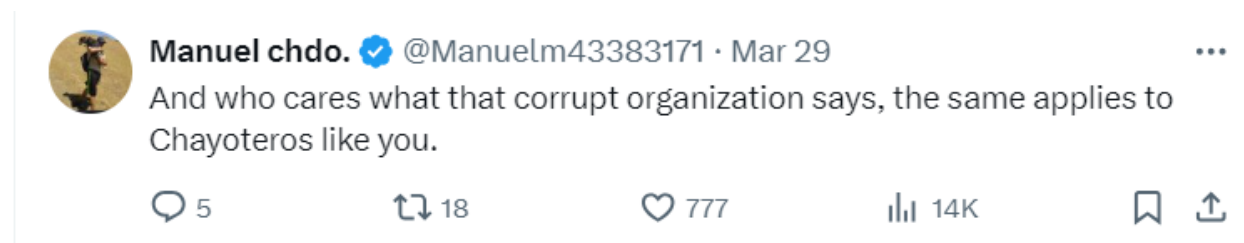


Source: @nayibbukele via X, February 6, 2024.

Source: @nayibbukele via X, February 15, 2024.

Bukele has systematically stripped the checks on his power. He has done this by stacking the court with supporters and gerrymandering the legislature in a way that has allowed his party a super majority. This leaves the press as one of the few checks on his power remaining. The press remains strong in El Salvador. Mostly unable to use his presidential powers to de-platform the press, (except for certain situations regarding reporting on gangs as included in his state of exception) Bukele has taken to using his power on X to attempt to delegitimize them. His cult of personality has resulted in a massive following on X, even outside of El Salvador. Replying

directly to *CNN*, *El Faro*, or other publications makes it very easy for his supporters to go after them. The following tweets are comments on the *CNN* article that Bukele replied to in one of the tweets above. There are 1.8 thousand responses, both in English and Spanish which demonstrates the international breadth of his supporters. Every single response I read was profoundly negative like those below.



Source: @manuelm43383171 via X, March 29, 2024.



Source: @danielson_pina via X, March 29, 2024.

These kinds of tweets are, frankly, not unusual for X, which highlights its unique ability to be a source of rounding up a base and directing them a certain way. That would be much more difficult on Instagram or Facebook simply because of the functionality of the platforms. X also presents the opportunity for more success with creating fake accounts.⁴⁴ Bukele has reportedly employed the use of troll farms, which is people hired to post in support or attack detractors of a leader online. No one knows the exact number of fake accounts that have been created but one former contractor reports creating hundreds of accounts for Bukele in the lead up to his 2019

⁴⁴ Queenie Wong, "Twitter's Fake-Account Problem Got Messier with Musk. It May Get Worse," CNET, November 17, 2022, <https://www.cnet.com/news/social-media/twitters-fake-account-problem-got-messier-with-musk-it-may-get-worse/>.

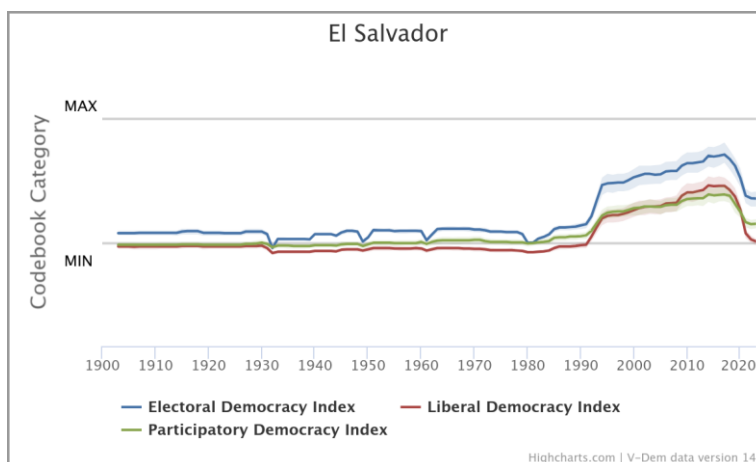
election.⁴⁵ These fake accounts join and bolster the number of real-life supporters who take to X to support Bukele when he signals them to. The use of troll farms is a threat to democracy because they skew what public opinion is. By adding fake numbers online to certain opinions, they make those opinions seem more popular than they actually are. They also send vicious threats (sometimes death threats) to critics and reporters for coming out against the people they are paid to support. They are a threat to democracy everywhere and Bukele's alleged use of them points towards his authoritarian leanings.

Bukele's and his digital army's attacks against the press are an indicator of his populist authoritarianism. Attacking the press is a common populist tactic but it has authoritarian implications, especially in this case, because of the importance of the press in upholding democracy. As more press covers El Salvador and Bukele, he will likely continue to go on the offensive against them.

⁴⁵ Sarah Kinosian, "Trolls, Propaganda & Fear Stoke Bukele's Media Machine in El Salvador," Reuters, November 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/el-salvador-politics-media/>.

Conclusion

This reversion to authoritarianism is well underway in El Salvador. All of the signs are there. According to the V-Dem database, levels of democracy, especially liberal democracy, are dropping back to where they were around 1990 during the civil war. Looking at many different types of measuring democracy as illustrated here, there is a drop in 2019, the year Bukele took office. These numbers continue to drop.



Source: V-Dem Institute Index El Salvador, 2023.

Democracy is eroding in El Salvador and Bukele has done little to deny it. On election day this year, Bukele said to a member of the press “We are not substituting democracy because El Salvador never had democracy. This is the first time in history that El Salvador has democracy. And I’m not saying it, the people say it.”⁴⁶ Félix Ulloa, Bukele’s vice president, told the New York Times: “To these people who say democracy is being dismantled, my answer is yes — we are not dismantling it, we are eliminating it, we are replacing it with something new,”⁴⁷ The two of them are not defending themselves against a serious allegation. They instead

⁴⁶ Megan Janetsky and Marcos Alemán, “Salvadorans Celebrating Expected Reelection of ‘World’s Coolest Dictator’ as Their President,” AP News, March 5, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/el-salvador-election-bukele-gang-violence-democracy-dc9f65f450875c5841f937753cd3101a>.

⁴⁷ Natalie Kitroeff and Fred Ramos, “He Cracked down on Gangs and Rights. Now He’s Set to Win a Landslide.,” The New York Times, February 2, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/02/world/americas/el-salvador-bukele-election.html>.

go on the offensive, an emerging pattern in Bukele's approach to communicating with criticism and make some serious claims about democracy. By reframing the conversation, they attempt to escape the criticism.

Bukele and Ulloa are not wrong; democracy in El Salvador has been far from perfect over the years. Options on the ballot have been less than ideal and not everyone has felt properly represented by the system. But El Salvador's democratic institutions were working as they were meant to function, and things were improving, as demonstrated in the V-Dem graph. Salvadorians have chosen Bukele, but many of them feel as if he was their only option when they elected him and have been continuously impressed by his success in fighting back against the gangs. This choice has to be respected, it was made in a free and fair election. It comes after years of what the people felt to be ineffective governance and to finally have someone they feel represents them must feel like a gift. Many people understand that they are trading their democracy for their safety. One fisherman who lives in a former gang stronghold told reporters that "Some people call it a dictatorship. But I would prefer to live under the dictatorship of a man with a sound mind than under the dictatorship of a bunch of psychopathic maniacs."⁴⁸ Bukele's populist ideas and deliverance on campaign promises have convinced most Salvadorians that he is the right leader for this time in history.

In writing this thesis, I have tried to make the case that our understanding of non-democratic regimes like Bukele's can be enhanced by thinking more deeply about the consequences of placing one word in front of another: authoritarian populism versus populist authoritarianism. I have argued here that especially in the case of populist authoritarianism, the

⁴⁸ Natalie Kitroeff and Fred Ramos, "He Cracked down on Gangs and Rights. Now He's Set to Win a Landslide.," The New York Times, February 2, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/02/world/americas/el-salvador-bukele-election.html>.

word placement is significant because it emphasizes that the end goal in these cases is authoritarianism, which, unlike populism, is always bad. Authoritarian governments lead to years of entrenched centralized rule that is hard to dissipate. People who live under this type of rule are often subject to violations of their human rights. By calling Bukele a populist authoritarian, we put the focus where it should be; not on his supposed “connection with the people,” but on his growing authoritarianism.

As populist authoritarianism continues to spread across Latin America, and the world, we must keep in mind that there is still hope. It is people who put these leaders into office, and it will be people who can take them out of office. In my opinion, it is important that this resistance comes from inside of the country in question, especially in the case of El Salvador. International interference has a bad reputation in Latin America, and most of the Global South. Populist authoritarianism is frightening but fallible; it does not need to mark the end of democracy forever within a country. Areas of future study would do well to look into what movements and strategies against it have worked in the past and what ones in the future might need to include to be successful.

My hope is that this thesis has provided insight into the utility of the term populist authoritarianism and has demonstrated through Bukele’s actions and tweets that he fits this definition. Hopefully, the people of El Salvador can find a way to keep Bukele under check or no longer have need of him while still being able to keep their country free of gangs and safe. It is ultimately difficult to tell people that they should care about democracy when they are concerned for their very lives due to living in danger every day. It will ultimately be up to the people of El Salvador to decide what should be done with Bukele and I look forward to hearing what they have to say.

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