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From left to right

Nayib Bukele switched parties – and won El Salvador's Presidency. Joachim Schlütter wonders whether this political manoeuvering will prepare him for Trump

Read this interview in German.

On 3 February 2019, El Salvador elected its next President Nayib Bukele. Despite his many years of experience as Mayor of San Salvador, Bukele came into the election campaign as a political outsider and candidate against the establishment. His landslide victory with almost 54 per cent in the very first round of the elections ends the 30-year dominance of the left-wing FMLN and the right-wing ARENA. Bukele used to be a member of the left-leaning former guerrilla movement Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) but he has won the presidential elections on a right-wing ticket.

How did this change from one side of the fence to the other come about?

Bukele was the FMLN Mayor of El Salvador's capital, San Salvador. But at the time he publicly complained that his party colleagues in the town council were not supporting him in important decisions. He also criticised various leading government officials close to the FMLN, such as the chief executive of the state water provider ANDA. To the political bureau of the FMLN this seemed disrespectful. When he was then accused of the harassment of a female member of the town council, the FMLN had enough publicly presentable grounds to drop their lead candidate for the presidential elections due to insubordination. He was also immediately excluded from the party.

After that Bukele founded his own party, 'Nuevas Ideas' [New Ideas]. But there was not enough time to admit his party for the presidential elections. Bukele wanted to use his outstanding approval ratings, at the time over 60 per cent, to stand as a presidential candidate. He was therefore on the lookout for another suitable party. He presented himself to the right-leaning Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANA) as a presidential candidate. GANA gladly agreed, organised an internal party vote in next to no time and ditched its original

candidate because he couldn't match Bukele's appeal to voters. It remains to be seen what 'interest payment' Bukele will have to make for this helping hand and if, for example, he will embrace GANA's demand for the introduction of the death penalty.

Why were the traditional parties, the left-wing FMLN and the right-wing ARENA, punished by the voters?

People feel that the handling of security issues by both big parties has been disastrous. Neither party has managed to significantly reduce the exodus of their fellow countrymen. Nor did either party succeed in fully regaining state power. Instead, during its ten years in power, the FMLN's countless measures against the criminal 'Maras' youth gangs criminalised many innocent youngsters who had the misfortune to live in a district dominated by the Maras. Up until now, human rights violations by combat units have been daily business while, at the same time, the US inadvertently strengthens the Maras by expulsing tens of thousands of youngsters to their countries of origin.

This development even disappointed many core FMLN supporters. From their point of view, the party had not kept to their promise and has sacrificed their political conviction. On top of that, there were various cases of corruption not just in ARENA but also in the FMLN. And in the current two-party system, many of the FMLN's reform projects could never be put in place. The system ensured that political measures were blocked by the opposition parties. This logjam, together with the security problem, hampered sufficient growth, economic progress and the expansion of the social security systems. The result was the ongoing exodus to the promised land: the US. With their vote in the presidential elections, voters now tried to pull their country and their children out of this vicious cycle.

El Salvador has one of the highest murder rates in the world, the country suffers from organised crime, corruption and massive emigration to the US in particular. Do Bukele's reform plans have prospects for success?

In his presentations, Bukele has not been very concrete about possible government projects. He's demanding an International Committee against Impunity (CICIES) in the style of the CICIG in Guatemala. That way, his readiness for the fight against corruption is at least documented. But, due to the ten year time limit for investigations, such a CICIES would have the disadvantage of only being able to roll back to the times of the FMLN government. In addition, establishing it requires the qualified majority of the parliament. Bukele is a long way away from that. And the following generally holds true: without

financial support for reforms from the outside world, there will be no noticeable changes.

El Salvador is being sharply attacked, again and again, by US President Trump. It's one of the countries that he has maligned as 'shithole countries'. What approach will Bukele take vis à vis Washington?

Bukele will – as all his predecessors – have to strive for good relations with the US. El Salvador lives in extreme financial and economic dependence on the US, not least because the US dollar is the general means of payment. In addition, around one third of Salvadorians live in the US – that is over three million people – approximately half of which are legal. Should Trump stay true to his threat and also only expel the Salvadorians who have illegally migrated, these people will have nothing to live on in their home country because of the bad economic situation. The remittances would also massively go down. They make up around 20 per cent of El Salvador's gross domestic product. Losing them would be a disaster, which Bukele must absolutely avoid by remaining on good terms with the US.

It's interesting to note that 86 per cent of the 3,300 voters who cast their ballot from abroad voted for Bukele. As early as the Monday after the election, US ambassador Jean Elizabeth Manes congratulated Bukele. She invited Bukele to cooperate on security policy, on the development of a state based on the rule of law and on the development of inclusive economic growth. However, in mid-2019 Manes will hand over to her successor, Ronald Douglas Johnson, a CIA man. It remains to be seen whether he sees El Salvador more as a location for the command of the Pacific fleet or as a country in which the US would like to promote inclusive economic growth. In any case, the US will be a difficult partner for the El Salvador 'minnow' and its president.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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