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El Salvador's self-proclaimed saviour

The recently re-elected president of El Salvador is the prototype of a modern autocrat. But how successful is the 'Bukele model' really?

In El Salvador, an overwhelming majority voted in favour of the unconstitutional re-election of President Nayib Bukele on Sunday. At least if the winner is to be believed, as official results were still not available 24 hours after the end of polling day. An impatient Bukele announced on X on Sunday evening that 85 per cent had voted for him. However, his pompous victory celebration was overshadowed by the fact that the electoral court did not provide any results. Eventually, the officials excused themselves with cyberattacks and power cuts. Now, votes are to be recounted by hand in the country that wants to become a tech hub and has legalised Bitcoin. A symptom of the desolate state behind the official glittering façade.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Vice President Félix Ulloa announced that El Salvador would 'eliminate democracy and replace it with something better'. Bukele, on the other hand, spoke of a 'true democracy' that would now begin, and it was possible to get an idea of what this will look like on election day: when the writer Carlos Bucio stood in a square in the capital and quoted the articles of the constitution that prohibit re-election, he was booed by passers-by and arrested by the police.

El Salvador is thus setting the stage for the 2024 super election year, in which hundreds of thousands of voters around the world will face a similar dilemma: to either give democracy a chance despite its tediously slow decision-making processes and complicated checks and balances, or to believe self-proclaimed saviours who claim that – in a world full of violence, crises and conflicts – human rights, the separation of powers, the rule of law, environmental protection and a free press are merely disruptive factors that stand in the way of the well-being of their subjects.

Democratic fatigue

Against the background of historical experience, it seems obvious to the average European which is the better political alternative. But Bukule's victory shows that people in other parts of the world do not think the same way, not even in Latin America, the continent closest to Europe in cultural terms and which has already had enough desolate experiences with authoritarian rulers. Indeed, according to a survey by the *Latinobarómetro* Institute, 54 per cent of people there do not care whether their government is authoritarian or democratic — as long as it solves their problems.

Bukele is therefore regarded by many in Latin America not as a dictator but as a hero, and his counterparts in neighbouring countries look up to him with admiration. These include the left-wing government of Xiomara Castro in Honduras, the World Bank official Rodrigo Chaves in Costa Rica and the entrepreneurial scion Daniel Noboa, who rules in Ecuador. They see the 42-year-old as a model for political success to solve one of the continent's biggest structural problems and thus secure their hold on power. Consequently, they have copied some of his measures, such as the state of emergency or the construction of high-security prisons.

Bukele has indeed achieved something extraordinary: during his five years in office, the murder rate fell from 36 to 2.4 per 100 000 inhabitants. El Salvador, which was still considered the most murderous country on the continent in 2015, has thus become one of the safest countries in the region. However, the methods used are questionable: these include the state of emergency, which has been repeatedly extended for two years and is now completely unfounded, suspending all basic rights, as well as the establishment of a police state in which the most people in the world are behind bars in proportion to the population and the legal persecution (lawfare) of political rivals, critical journalists and environmentalists. The co-optation of all institutions has also fuelled nepotism, corruption and a lack of transparency.

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The publicity expert Bukele thwarts all these criticisms with the help of his powerful PR team, compliant influencers on social media and troll factories. They focus the spotlight on his successes – his security policy – or on superficial diversionary manoeuvres such as the Miss Universe event, the launch of Bitcoin, the opening of a modern animal hospital or the inauguration of a state library built with

Chinese loans. The discourse of fear was also effective: if he did not remain in power, Bukele said, his successors would release the criminals he had imprisoned during his first term of office.

Over half of the Salvadoran population is under 30 years old. Most of them do not consume traditional media but inform themselves via social media instead. However, these are dominated by Bukule's PR machine, fuelled by bots, trolls and algorithms. Opposing views find little echo there: the fact that extreme poverty rose from 5.6 to 8.7 per cent since 2019, that Bukele dissolved the structural fund for the provinces, and since then, health and education as well as infrastructure have been in ruins, that he gambled away taxpayers' money with Bitcoin speculations, that suddenly heaps of officials and confidants of Bukele won the state lottery and others built themselves luxury villas, that the state owes millions to private contractors, that his re-election is a clear breach of the constitution, that his supporters illegally handed out food parcels on election day and that his party manipulated the outcome of the election by redistributing the constituencies.

The list of violations is long — some of which are likely to appear in the election report of the observers from the EU and the Organization of American States (OAS). Such criticism is important, but it does not get through. Bukele is a master at manipulating the hopes and pride of a population that he has propelled from the shadows of world affairs into the limelight. That is what makes him so attractive in the eyes of some heads of state. He has succeeded in pushing through a narrative that has little to do with reality.

What makes the millennial caudillo so dangerous?

El Salvador is not the first country in the region to succumb to the totalitarian temptation of a caudillo, a strongman. Latin America has had a long tradition of authoritarian rulers since independence from Spain. But since the democratisation of the region in the 1990s, no one has enjoyed as much support. Even in his heyday, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela received just 62 per cent of the vote; Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua even had to make a pact with his arch-enemy, the corrupt liberal Arnoldo Alemán, for an electoral reform so that 38 per cent of the vote was enough for his victory in 2006. And the conservative Juan Orlando Hernández in Honduras was re-elected in 2017 with just 42 per cent of the vote, despite numerous manipulations and a suspicious computer

crash.

In contrast to Bukele, Chávez, Hernández and, for a long time, Ortega at least endeavoured to create the appearance of democratic legitimacy — even if they discreetly undermined its foundations. To this end, they used the classic populist recipes: plebiscites, populist social programmes that only brought dependence instead of structural improvements, agitation against critics, rivals and intellectuals, harassment of non-governmental organisations and the media, bringing the state apparatus into line, especially the judiciary, and weakening transparency and control mechanisms.

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Bukele, on the other hand, makes no secret of his contempt for democracy, for which the country once paid a high price in blood: more than 75 000 people died in the civil war between 1980 and 1992. Driven by historical revisionism, Bukele described the peace treaty as a 'farce', destroyed the monument to reconciliation and labelled the traditional parties as corrupt war profiteers who divided up the spoils in the shadow of foreign powers. Bukele pushed the boundaries of what can be said and done with well-considered stagings — and thus reinterpreted history.

Back in 2020, when parliament failed to approve a loan he had requested for security projects quickly enough, he marched into parliament with the military. At the time, the traditional parties still had a majority there and were speechless in the face of this taboo-breaking. However, Bukele justified the transgression to his cheering supporters with the true interests of the people, which were supposedly being disregarded by Congress. This time, he said, the military had sided with the people, not the oppressors. The symbolic capture of Congress paved the way for the militarisation of the country, which culminated in the imposition of a state of emergency and the arrest of thousands of innocent people in 2022. Only a few human rights activists protested. Bukele thus provided the script for authoritarian imitators.

Limits of the Bukele model

The heavy-handed policy has long been regarded as the elites' traditional response to the problem of violence in Latin America. It produces short-term results and enables social control. But it has always fallen short — even in El Salvador. This is because it does not address the root of the

problem: on the one hand, the lack of the rule of law, which is sabotaged by elites out of self-interest. On the other hand, the structural poverty and inequality of opportunity in countries that are still trapped in neo-colonial schemes — due to both rigid hierarchical social structures and unjust economic globalisation.

Bukele's model is a so-far successful new edition of the heavy-handed policy. However, his model is not so easily transferable – at least not if you shy away from taking the step towards an authoritarian police state – as initial examples show. Honduras may have declared a state of emergency, but violent crime has hardly decreased. The country has far fewer security forces than El Salvador, which are also more corrupted by organised crime. President Noboa has also declared a state of emergency in Ecuador and sent the military onto the streets. However, it is still a 'Bukele light' model: civil society is much more critical and better organised, and the USA and the EU have also pledged emergency aid in order to secure their influence on the course of events.

What may deter some from total 'Bukelisation' is the fact that most authoritarian presidents of the modern era – Chávez in Venezuela, Hernández in Honduras or Alberto Fujimori in Peru – did not end well. Moreover, cracks in Bukule's model are already visible. According to initial projections, only two of the six million eligible voters went to the polls on Sunday — which puts his success into perspective. In his victory speech, Bukele revealed a complete lack of ideas on how to proceed in El Salvador. He now faces challenges that cannot be so easily dismissed: despite the improved security situation, there is a lack of foreign investment. The economy grew by just 2.3 per cent in 2023 — less than in its Central American neighbours. The Salvadoran state is in arrears with private service providers, with public debt amounting to 85 per cent of gross domestic product. The International Monetary Fund links new loans to the abolition of Bitcoin. A third of the population continues to live in poverty. El Salvador, a country the size of the German state of Hesse with a population of 10 million, that exports T-shirts, sugar and plastic packaging, is now embarking on a path into the unknown.



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