



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on January 5, 2024

El Salvador: Murders Down by 70 Percent After Crackdown

El Salvador's rigorous anti-crime program appears to be producing results, according to statistics — yet the measures continue to raise outcry from human rights organizations.

Per El Salvador's security authorities, homicides in the Central American nation — long a hub of violence and stomping ground of brutal gangs such as MS-13 — decreased by nearly 70 percent in 2023. As [NBC News](#) reports, the government credits the state of emergency declared by President Nayib Bukele for the purpose of fighting gangs.



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Gustavo Villatoro, El Salvador's Justice and Security Minister, said the number of murders declined to 154 from 495 the previous year. That makes for a homicide rate of 2.4 per every 100,000 people — a figure Villatoro called the lowest in the Americas, with the exception of Canada.

The murder numbers have gone down over the last few years. Over 1,000 homicides occurred in both 2021 and 2020, while 2019 saw more than 2,000 murders committed in the country whose population is 6.31 million.

After years of widespread fear induced by extortion, gang violence, and drug activity, Bukele's tough-on-crime policies have proven popular with the Salvadoran people. Human rights advocates, however, claim the government's actions have included torture, arbitrary detentions, and death in custody.

As NBC News notes:

The state of emergency declared in early 2022 allows police to swiftly arrest and jail suspected gang members, while suspending their right to a lawyer and court approval of preliminary detention.

Since it went into effect, security forces have arrested nearly 75,000 suspected gang members and released 7,000, according to official data.

Human rights groups have reported 190 deaths and over 5,000 abuses related to the crackdown.

Other countries, impressed by the results of the crackdown, have looked to El Salvador as a model for dealing with the crime and lawlessness that have for decades been so prevalent in Central America. For example, [Ecuador is set to build](#) two maximum security prisons based on the Salvadoran mega jail constructed under Bukele's direction — a prison capable of housing 12,000 inmates.

Currently, Bukele finds himself campaigning for reelection, a bold move given that the Salvadoran constitution prohibits the president from seeking a second consecutive term. But new judges on the country's supreme court, appointed by Bukele, determined that a president can serve again if he steps back from the presidency six months before inauguration day (which will be June 1). Accordingly,



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Bukele and Vice President Felix Ulloa, at midnight on November 30, stepped back from their offices in order to qualify to run in the February election.

Bukele still resides in the presidential residence and has a presidential security detail, but presidential duties have been assumed by acting president Claudia Rodríguez de Guevara, a finance manager for Bukele, while Bukele campaigns. He is the first president to run for reelection since military dictator Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in 1939.

This has only served as more fuel for Bukele's opponents, who accuse him of being an authoritarian dictator.

But during a two-hour X forum on Wednesday, Bukele [assured that he will not seek](#) to change the constitution to allow for indefinite reelection. He has repeatedly and aggressively pushed back against his critics, arguing that the results of his policies speak for themselves and that he has made his country the safest in Latin America.

El Salvador punctuated its rebranding by hosting international events such as the Central American and Caribbean Games back in July 2023 and the Miss Universe competition in November.

In his 2023 speech at the United Nations General Assembly, Bukele defended his record against the criticism of the human rights crowd:

"Today, I come to tell you that that debate is over," the Salvadoran president said. "The decisions we took were correct. We are no longer the world death capital and we achieved it in record time. Today we are a model of security and no one can doubt it. There are the results. They are irrefutable."

During his Wednesday X forum, he touched on the subject of Argentina, advising recently elected President Javier Milei that he will have to work against a political system that will try to undermine him.

"I told him that I wished him luck, we wish him the best and hope that he can overcome those obstacles, the obstacle of the reality, as well as the obstacle of the system that is going to try to block him and that isn't going to let him make the changes that he wants to make," Bukele said of a conversation he had with Milei.

While Bukele remains a controversial figure on the international stage, at home in El Salvador he is overwhelmingly popular and is expected to sail to reelection.

The story of El Salvador's radical transformation should serve as a lesson: Voters are more interested in elected officials putting the good of the people first than they are in lofty globalist talking points about "equality" and "democracy."



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