



The Unfreedom Monitor

A Methodology for Tracking Digital
Authoritarianism Around the World

EL SALVADOR
COUNTRY REPORT

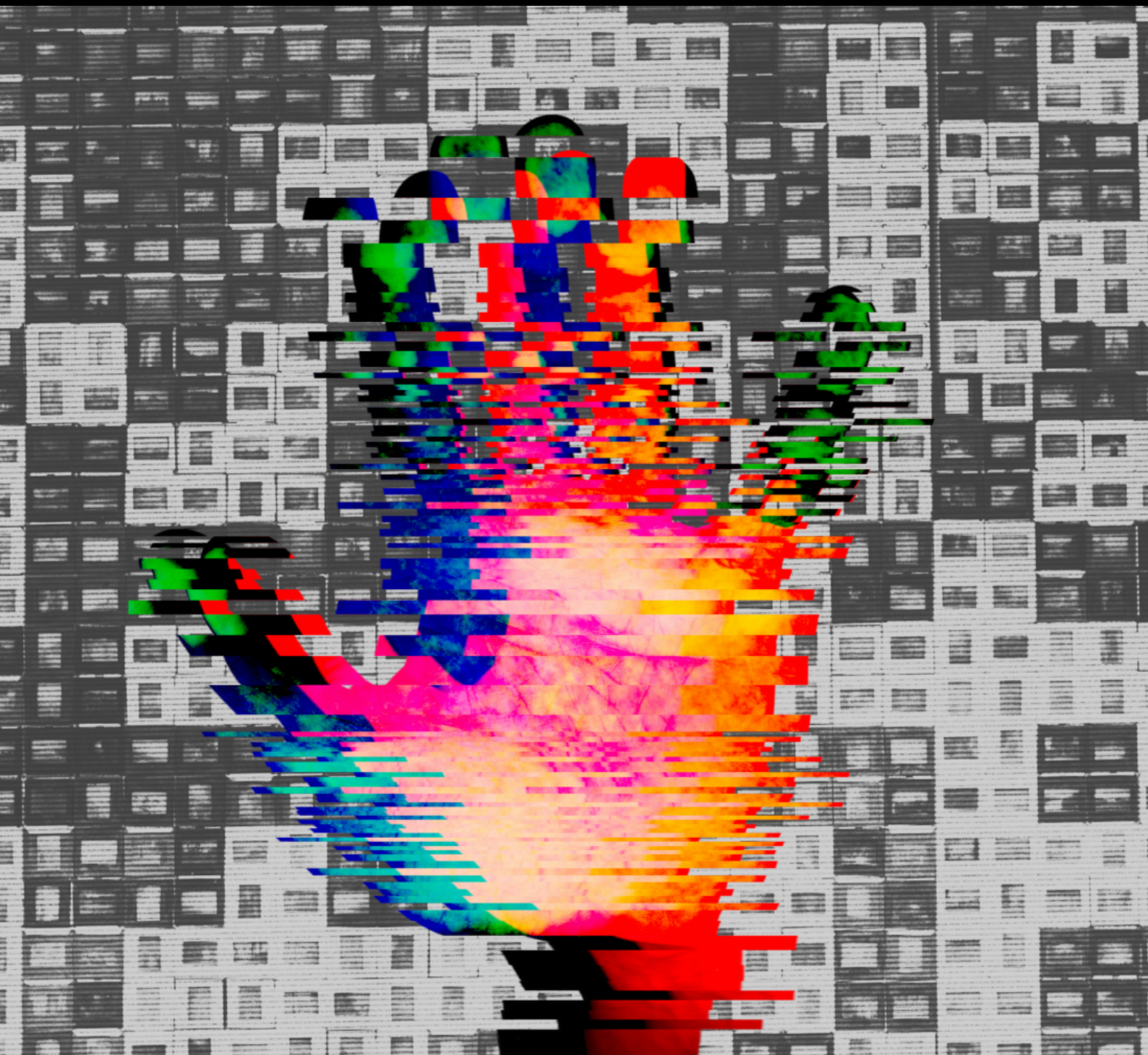


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When El Salvador ended a civil war (1980–1992) through the Peace Accords between the government and the guerrilla movement in 1992, the United Nations presented the country as an example of peace negotiation and conflict resolution around the world. Since the arrival of President Nayib Bukele to power in 2019, El Salvador is becoming a case study for the emergence of a new form of authoritarianism and populism.

In just three years, Bukele has been able to build a complex political phenomenon that some have called “Bukelism,” which entails a mix of a millennial image, promoting the use of Bitcoin as a legal tender in the country, an anti-corruption and anti-traditional political parties narrative, and rhetoric against the United States’s influence on Salvadoran politics. Bukele has quickly moved to create a new political party, Nuevas Ideas, which controls a large majority of the 84 deputies of the Legislative Assembly and the most important local governments in the country. With this support, Bukele promoted a controversial removal of five magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General in May 2021. Thus, Bukele controls the executive, legislative, and the crucial Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice, which just recently re-interpreted the constitution and allowed the possibility of Bukele’s reelection in 2024.

Bukele, who did not finish college and worked in the advertising industry before entering politics, has been recognized for his use of social media, especially Twitter, and other platforms to convey a message to his followers. Since he became president, Bukele has used Twitter to communicate orders to public officials, announce the approval of decrees and respond to any event in the country.

This report analyses two major incidents: the disclosure that Pegasus spyware has been used against journalists from independent media outlets and representatives of civil society, and Bukele’s legal advisor’s threats against two women journalists for not revealing anonymous sources included in a news story. The second event represents a trend of online harassment and threats against women journalists promoted by President Bukele and public officials and replicated by Bukele’s supporters, troll centres, and pro-government influencers on social media.

“ Bukelism [..] entails a mix of a millennial image, promoting the use of Bitcoin as [legal tender], an anti-corruption and anti-traditional political parties narrative, and rhetoric against [US] influence on Salvadoran politics.”

Through the analysis of these two main events, this report attempts to respond to the key research question: What are the main motives for, methods of, and responses to digital authoritarianism in El Salvador? Thus, this research identifies the major characteristics, strategies, and narratives interplaying in the configuration of digital authoritarianism in El Salvador. In conclusion, there is substantive evidence that Bukele and Bukelism are constructing a political project based on populism and authoritarian practices, and within this process, one key objective is to discredit the role of independent journalism, and, using spyware technologies such as Pegasus, to legally establish a monitoring system of critical voices and political opponents.

Consequently, this form of digital authoritarianism not only restricts online and offline freedom of expression in El Salvador but also reflects the dynamics of digital repression and surveillance inspired by other authoritarian regimes around the world.

BACKGROUND

COUNTRY CHALLENGE

In El Salvador, like in other countries around the world, the internet and the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have promoted crucial transformations in the realm of public life, democracy, and freedom of expression. In 2010, the Legislative Assembly approved the Access to Public Information Law, which demanded new practices of open government, transparency, and public accountability. The national and local governments were required to launch new internet transparency portals with information useful to citizens, businesses, and other public institutions. This law also guarantees the citizens' right to access to public information from public and private institutions expending public funds in certain projects or activities. This legal framework established the Instituto de Acceso a la Información Pública (Institute for the Access to Public Information) (IAIP), which can receive complaints when institutions decline a citizen's request for public information. The magistrates of the IAIP were elected from civil society sectors such as journalists' associations, universities, unions, professional associations, and private sector associations. However, Bukele's government has interfered in these elections and co-opted the independence of the IAIP.

“ Bukele seems very savvy in the use of social media, particularly Twitter, and has used the platform to amplify populist and authoritarian rhetoric and practices.

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Moreover, in 2011 El Salvador joined the Open Government Partnership (OGP), which encourages new practices of transparency, citizen participation, and the monitoring of government actions and accountability. Since that date, El Salvador shared four action plans to promote a more transparent and participative government. Despite some achievements in this area, the current government decided to stop participating in this global partnership, and in 2022 El Salvador was declared inactive by the OGP because it does not fulfil the minimum requirements to be part of this alliance (FUNDE, 2022). Thus, Bukele's government has supported critical setbacks on citizens' rights to access public information, transparency, and accountability.

Freedom of expression has also been affected by governmental narratives and online practices, particularly the trend of president Bukele and public officials making derogatory and stigmatising comments on social media against independent journalists, human rights defenders, civil society organisations, university representatives, and opposition politicians. Bukele seems very savvy in the use of social media, particularly Twitter, and has used the platform to amplify populist and authoritarian rhetoric and practices. Furthermore, Bukele's followers on social media have been very aggressive, attacking and threatening anyone who criticises the government -they especially use misogynistic comments and derogatory language against women journalists and human rights defenders in El Salvador.

There are five dimensions in which digital technologies are playing a new role in public life: disinformation and electoral campaigns, counter-attacking investigative journalism, confronting critical and dissident voices in cyberspace, reproducing official propaganda among Salvadorans living in the diaspora, and monitoring and surveilling online activities and telecommunications.

Disinformation strategies have been incorporated into recent elections, particularly in 2021 when Bukele's political party Nuevas Ideas won a large majority of the 84 deputies that make up the Legislative Assembly. The disinformation campaign was focused on the narrative that governments in the 30 previous years from the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) and left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) parties were corrupt, and Bukele and his political party would fight against corruption. Another key narrative around which there was disinformation was that the Supreme Court of Justice and the previous Legislative Assembly were in favour of the death of Salvadorans because they did not support some strict measures and lockdowns promulgated by the president in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, there are several news stories published by independent media and reports from local and international human rights organisations that documented many cases of abuses and human rights violations during the application of a mandatory lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A third strong narrative repeated with disinformation techniques was that President Bukele needed a Legislative Assembly in his favour to support the implementation of something called the "territorial control plan" to tackle violence, homicides, and gang activities in the country.

A second dimension is the use of Bukele and public officials' comments and threats on social media to delegitimise the news stories published by independent media outlets such as El Faro, Gato Encerrado, Revista Factum, Focos, and Radio YSUCA, among others, reporting on cases of government corruption, human rights abuses and secret negotiations between the government and gang leaders. Moreover, Bukele reiterates, without providing evidence, that these critical news media outlets are funded by George Soros and are puppets of the political opposition parties. On the other hand, Bukele established a new official print newspaper called Diario El Salvador, reinforced the funding of the state-owned radio station and television channel, and dominated with the official voice and perspective most of the daily interview programs on private radio and television channels in the country. According to a May 2022 survey, more Salvadorans now have higher trust in the government media than private media ([Kinoshian](#)).

The third dimension is the strategy of confronting, especially on social media, the opinions of dissident and critical voices, which includes independent journalists, human rights defenders, representatives of certain civil society organisations (particularly those working to promote access to public information and transparency), and academic and religious leaders. The objective of this strategy of confrontation is not only to generate a hostile environment that leads to practices of self-censorship in public discussions, but also to stigmatise the opinion and analysis of experts on certain topics such as freedom of expression, civic participation, transparency, and accountability in a democratic society.

A fourth dimension is the implementation of disinformation campaigns and pro-Bukele narratives for the Salvadoran diaspora, particularly those living in the United States using social media, especially Facebook and YouTube. One narrative disseminated by Bukele's supporters is that 99 percent of the Salvadoran diaspora endorses everything the government is doing in El Salvador. This dimension is critical because Bukele's government intends to be reelected, despite an explicit prohibition in the Salvadoran Constitution, and will most likely implement an electronic vote for the diaspora. However, there are several concerns if this electronic vote is implemented without the supervision of an independent Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

Fifth, digital technologies have also been used to monitor and surveil dissident voices and political actors. In recent years, there were some phone communication interventions with judicial approval; however, surveillance of social media and the use of Pegasus spyware against independent journalists, human rights defenders, civil society leaders, and political opponents demonstrated the increasing level of government control of public life. After the disclosure of the use of Pegasus in El Salvador, the Legislative Assembly approved the figure of "cyber patrollers," making it easier for the authorities to intervene in citizens' communication and online activities. Although this reform to the Penal Code is justified in tackling organised crime and gangs, there are concerns that it can be used against political opponents, journalists, and dissident actors in the country.

COUNTRY POLITICAL HISTORY

Civil war and peace agreements (1980–1992)

Most of the twentieth-century political history of El Salvador was dominated by military dictatorship and repression. In 1932 there was an insurrection of peasants and indigenous communities that was wiped out with the killing of thousands of people. Poverty, social injustice, human rights violations, and the lack of freedom of expression and free elections were issues that nurtured the emergence of strong peasants' and workers' movements, and left-wing oriented political and military organisations. During the 1970s, there were demands for land reform, socioeconomic changes to help the living conditions of workers, and free elections. Since these demands were ignored by military governments and the level of repression increased, the conditions were ever more conducive to civil war. In March 1980, Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero was killed while celebrating a mass. Monsignor Romero was the most influential voice against human rights violations in the country, and, in his last homily, he commanded the military to stop the repression against civilians. Some analyses consider that the assassination of Monsignor Romero was the tipping point to fire up the civil war in El Salvador.

The civil war lasted from 1980 to 1992 and saw the Salvadoran army, backed with substantial military aid from the United States government, confronting the guerrilla movement of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) (Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation). About 70,000 people were killed during this conflict, and thousands of Salvadorans emigrated in search of political asylum, especially to the United States. In November 1989, six Jesuit priests were killed by the Salvadoran army at the Central American University (UCA). Among them was Ignacio Ellacuría, president of the university

and a key intellectual, who was promoting a negotiation between the two groups to end the civil war. These murders helped the process of negotiation between the government and the FMLN, and, finally, on January 16, 1992, the “Acuerdos de Paz” (Peace Agreement Accords) to end the conflict were signed in México.

Major political changes in the country (1992–2022)

The Peace Accords focused on political reforms, including the recognition of the FMLN as a political party, the creation of a new police force, an independent institution to protect human rights, and electoral reforms to ensure transparent and free elections. From 1989 to 2009, the government was controlled by the right-wing political party Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) (National Republican Alliance), which implemented several neoliberal economic and social reforms, but with little participation from civil society and labour unions. The last two presidents from ARENA, Francisco Flores and Antonio Saca, were accused of corruption and embezzling millions of dollars. Flores died during the investigation process and Saca is still in prison.

From 2009 to 2019 the left-wing FMLN governed the country with the promise of implementing economic reforms and political participation from excluded communities and social actors. Former presidents Funes and Sánchez Cerén have also been formally accused of corruption and embezzlement of public funds. Both FMLN former presidents now live in Nicaragua and are protected by the Ortega regime.

During this period, El Salvador experienced not only serious cases of public corruption but also an increasing homicide rate, particularly perpetrated by transnational gangs and other forms of organised crime. Citizens felt disenfranchised from the promises of the Peace Accords and government corruption, and insecure with the high levels of violence and crime. In this context, Nayib Bukele, a former militant of the FMLN, was elected as a mayor of the capital, San Salvador, as a candidate of the party. Later, Bukele was expelled from the FMLN party, and he competed in the presidential elections with another political party. The emergence of Bukele in politics and his rhetoric against the two old parties ARENA and FMLN was very appealing to many Salvadorans, and particularly his reiterative message of combating public corruption was crucial for his electoral win in the 2019 presidential elections. In 2021, Nuevas Ideas, Bukele’s new political party, won a large majority in the Legislative Assembly with 84 deputies. The first action of the new pro-Bukele Assembly was to remove from office the Attorney General and the five magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice and immediately appoint new persons with questionable independence from President Bukele, without following the constitutional process. Moreover, Bukele has reinforced a new protagonist role of the army in society, provided more funding for the military and the police, and included the military and police forces in public health activities — such as during the COVID-19 pandemic — response to environmental disasters, and public security tasks, among others.

So far, Bukele, with the narrative of a “war against gangs,” has implemented a state of exception in which constitutional rights are restricted, and from March to December 2022 more than 57,000 people have been arrested on charges of being members of gangs and organised crime. In this context, in September 2022 Bukele announced that he will compete

again in the 2024 presidential elections, even though the Salvadoran Constitution prohibits immediate presidential reelection. Bukele's decision is supported by a new resolution that would allow presidential reelection, passed by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice that Bukele's political party appointed in May 2021.

Freedom of expression and press freedom in El Salvador

In the 2022 Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index, El Salvador was in position 112 out of 180 countries and territories evaluated, which represents a significant decline compared with position of 82 out 180 countries and territories evaluated in 2021. According to RSF, this worrisome decline is related to President Bukele's attacks on and threats against journalists "who criticise his administration, thus creating an image of the press as an enemy of the people" ("[Americas: Murders in the South, Attacks in the North](#)"). Thus, RSF considers that Bukele's authoritarian tendency makes the work of journalists in El Salvador more difficult.

RSF underlines that, amid the anti-press narrative, journalists in El Salvador are facing more online attacks and threats against their integrity, and most of the victims of these cases of aggression are women journalists. Likewise, RSF expressed concerns about police officers' attacks on journalists covering different events, and the use of Pegasus spyware against at least 35 people, including independent journalists, leaders of civil society organisations, and human rights defenders.

Independent news media outlets such as El Faro have been the targets of several attacks and threats, so much so that, on February 4, 2021, the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS) issued a resolution to grant precautionary measures in favour of 34 members of El Faro. According to the IACHR resolution, "the rights to life and personal integrity of the 34 identified members of the digital newspaper "El Faro" were in a serious and urgent situation" ("[IACHR Grants Precautionary Measures in Favor of 34 Members of El Faro Online Newspaper in El Salvador](#)"). Furthermore, the IACHR has also granted precautionary measures to other journalists from the news media outlet Revista Factum.

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Self-censorship, self-exile, and early retirement from work are other consequences that journalists are facing in El Salvador. There are news stories reporting these facts, particularly in cases of women journalists who were victims of cyberattacks, public discrediting, and threats including their family or relatives. Among the cases of women journalists who suffered online attacks and threats are those of Karen Fernández, Mariana Belloso, Wendy Monterrosa, Valeria Guzmán, Julia Gavarrete, and Angélica Cárcamo ([Nochez](#)).

Furthermore, government officials, including president Bukele, are blocking dissident and critical voices on social media, particularly on Twitter. This practice of blocking

social media accounts, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW) is “of particular concern in a context in which the government has hindered access to public information and targeted independent rights groups and journalists” (HRW). Thus, the conditions of press freedom and freedom of expression in El Salvador are in a clear process of deterioration, which reflects the official narrative promoted by President Bukele and government officials against independent journalism and dissident voices participating in online and offline public spheres.

Overview of the country's internet pattern and penetration

The internet was introduced in El Salvador in 1996 with the creation of the SVNet project and the participation of the Central American University (UCA) and Don Bosco University. The Organization of American States (OAS) donated basic equipment to the former National Telecommunications Administration (ANTEL) to make possible the first connection to the internet from El Salvador (Ibarra).

The level of internet penetration in El Salvador has been low, and, by 2020, according to a report from Microsoft and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), 45 percent of the population had access to the internet. This data implies that El Salvador is the country with the second-lowest level of internet connectivity in Latin America and the Caribbean (Alemán). However, in 2020, statistics from the World Bank established that 55 percent of the population had access to the internet in El Salvador (World Bank).

The dimensions of the digital divide in El Salvador include the gap between rural and urban areas, age groups, level of education, socioeconomic sectors, and a transnational digital divide. Some studies have shown that El Salvador has a very low internet penetration in rural areas compared to urban areas, which constitutes a crucial limitation for the socioeconomic development of people living in rural communities (Alemán). Likewise, a report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), found that in Paraguay, El Salvador, Bolivia and Perú more than 90 percent of children from the poorest households live in unconnected households. The gap between high and low economic sectors impacts the right to education and worsens socioeconomic inequalities (Barcena). The transnational dimension of the digital divide compares the gap of Internet and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) access between families living in El Salvador and their relatives living in the diaspora (Benítez). El Salvador has a total population of 6.4 million people and about 3 million Salvadorans live in the diaspora, mainly in the United States.

Datareportal 2021 established that there were 4.3 million social media users in El Salvador by January 2021, which represents 66.1 percent of the total population. On the other hand, there were 9.4 million mobile connections in the country by 2021, which implies that the number of mobile connections is equivalent to 145.6 percent of the total population (Kemp). The iLifebelt report 2021 estimates that only 3.5 million Salvadorans are social media users, which represents 53 percent of the population. The more popular social media platforms among Salvadorans are Facebook (3.5 million users), Instagram (1.1 million users), LinkedIn (510 thousand users), and Twitter (446 thousand users). Thus, by and large, Facebook is the most prevalent social media platform among Salvadorans (Solares).

METHODOLOGY

The Unfreedom Monitor combines the methodology used in Global Voices' previous work on media observatories with an in-depth analysis of the contextual issues around digital authoritarianism. The Civic Media Observatory (CMO) approach is primarily qualitative and looks beyond socio-technical causes to consider power analysis, offer a way to discuss effects, and emphasise what works as well as what is negative. It is a framework that can be consistently applied across a range of settings, in order to identify and contextualise both positive and disruptive developments, to explain the forces and motives underlying them, as well as the narrative framing devices that often require local knowledge to interpret and weigh. This method is particularly helpful in the case of countries, like Hungary, where authoritarian trends are less direct and require contextual information.

This method allows us to compare, draw lessons, and consolidate learning about the trends, systems, and rules that influence what we know, and how we know it. The observatory includes datasets of media items, structured analysis of context and subtext, and a civic impact score that rates media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse.

This study focused on El Salvador has defined two main incidents related to digital authoritarianism that happened in the country in the last two years (2020–2022), and then a group of 20 media items related to each of the incidents was collected and analysed. The qualitative analysis of these 40 items in total was predefined for all the countries participating in this project, in this way a framework can be consistently applied across different national, political, and technological contexts. The items included publications by local and international news media, reports by independent organisations, and social media posts, particularly from Twitter and Facebook. In the selection process, the researcher looked for social media posts by president Bukele, government officials, Bukele's supporters, journalists, and civil society leaders.

These items were analysed by the researcher in terms of sources, narrative frames, subtext, context, reactions, popularity, and a civic impact score that categorised the media items for positive or negative impact on civic discourse and society at large. The coding process was done on a collaborative and relational database on the platform Airtable, and the coding was revised and discussed with editors of the project, which ensured clarity and consistency among all the researchers participating on this project.

The crucial research questions were: what forms of digital authoritarianism exist in El Salvador? To answer this question, four critical dimensions were considered: data governance, speech, access, and information. Another question was: what are the main contours of digital authoritarianism in El Salvador and what are the pro- and anti-state media narratives? To evaluate this aspect, three important elements were included: motives, methods, and responses to digital authoritarianism.

The study was limited by a few factors. To begin with, while qualitative case studies have their value, it is not always straightforward to generalise from them to the populace at large. Time frame and capacity issues means that we did not manage to access all of the narrative frames available. Sometimes, civic discourse happens in closed spaces like Telegram channels and private groups, which are difficult to access.

This study constitutes a significant step for analysing the characteristics of digital authoritarianism in El Salvador, where the Bukele government seems to copy other mechanisms and methods used by authoritarian governments in Latin America, such as Venezuela and Nicaragua. Even though this study has limitations, such as the short period of analysis and absence of in-depth comparison with other Latin American countries, it provides a framework and key aspects for future research that can include some statistical analyses of social media narratives, the use of cyber troops, the deconstruction of disinformation campaigns, and qualitative interviews with key actors in El Salvador. This research can also be used as the basis for designing awareness campaigns and training activities on media and information literacy, and drafting policy recommendations to counter disinformation.

MAPPING EL SALVADOR'S CHALLENGE WITH DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

THE MAIN EVENTS THAT SHOW THAT DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM EXISTS IN EL SALVADOR

One of the main events related to digital authoritarianism in El Salvador has been the uncovering that Pegasus spyware has been used against journalists and members of civil society organisations. In January 2022, Access Now and the Citizen Lab confirmed that the mobile phones of at least 35 journalists were infected by this spyware from July 2020 to November 2021 ([Access Now](#)). These journalists were working during that time in six news media outlets: El Faro, Gato Encerrado, La Prensa Grafica, Revista Digital Disruptiva, and El Diario de Hoy. Pegasus spyware, according to digital security experts, can silently infect a person's mobile phone and get full access to photos, contacts, messages, conversations, and activate the microphone and camera in the infected device.

In 2022, Amnesty International Security Lab reviewed this report and corroborated forensic evidence on the use of Pegasus spyware. Erika Guevara-Rosas, Americas Director at Amnesty International, said, "The use of Pegasus for the surveillance of communications in El Salvador reveals a new threat to human rights in the country. The authorities must stop any efforts to restrict freedom of expression and conduct a thorough and impartial investigation to identify the responsible" ([Amnesty International](#), 2022). Thus, Amnesty International (AI) emphasised that this is a serious case of digital surveillance, it constitutes an unacceptable violation of the digital rights of the victims of this espionage, and the Salvadoran government must conduct an independent investigation. Moreover, AI has made a call to governments in general to "implement a global moratorium on the sale, transfer, and use of spyware until human rights regulatory safeguards are in place" ([Amnesty International](#), 2022).

After these revelations about the use of Pegasus spyware in El Salvador, a large coalition of local and international human rights and digital rights organisations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists ([CPJ](#)), demanded through a public statement that the Salvadoran authorities take action on four key aspects. First, "stop harassing journalists and human rights defenders in any fashion," protect freedom of the press and expression in the country, and respect citizens' privacy rights. Second, call for a comprehensive investigation of this case of espionage to the Attorney General's Office. Third, request the fulfilment of the IACHR recommendations made in the 2021 report on the situation of human rights in El Salvador. One of these recommendations explicitly requested: "Take the necessary measures to ensure a safe working environment for journalists and respect for the independence of the media" ("[Situation of human rights in El Salvador](#)"). Likewise, the IACHR solicited the consent of the State of El Salvador for a working visit by the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the IACHR to monitor and collect information about the right to freedom of expression in El Salvador. Fourth, these organisations urge Salvadoran authorities to fully comply with the precautionary measures granted by the IACHR in 2021 to 34 members of the online news media El Faro ([Access Now](#)).

RSF demanded that the Salvadoran authorities also “open an immediate investigation with the aim of identifying and prosecuting those responsible for this far-reaching case of espionage” ([“El Salvador Must Investigate Use of Pegasus to Spy on Dozens of Journalists”](#)). Furthermore, RSF underlined in its public statement that “ever since he was elected president in 2019, Nayib Bukele’s authoritarian tendencies have been a source of great concern.” One of the examples RSF refers to is that Bukele avoids giving press conferences and prefers to use social media, particularly Twitter, to harass journalists and denounce them as “political activists,” blocking some independent journalists on this social media platform.

On January 12, 2022, President Bukele’s secretary of Communications, Sofia Medina, responded to some questions by the news agency Reuters in a press release. Medina denied that the Salvadoran government is related in any way to Pegasus and said that the government is not a client of the NSO Group. Moreover, Medina underlined that the government was investigating Pegasus and other technologies to intercept mobile phones in the country. She added that they have indications that even government officials might have been among the victims of Pegasus spyware.

In March, at a public hearing before the IACHR on this case of unlawful surveillance against journalists and activists in El Salvador, Margarette May Macaulay, one commissioner of the IACHR said that this case constitutes a serious attack against democracy and against all the standards for a democratic state. Additionally, Macaulay questioned the response from the state, “the State says that public officials have also been victims, but that does not answer what has happened specifically to journalists, who were working on issues related to the government” ([Oliva](#)). In this hearing, the representative from the Attorney General’s Office was the only person who spoke from the side of the Salvadoran State; he denied any knowledge of this illegal use of Pegasus and asserted that “an extensive investigation was underway.” This official representative blamed the victims of this case, accusing them of delaying the investigation and failing to share the information with the authorities. This accusation was strongly refuted by journalists and organisations attending this public hearing at the IACHR ([Oliva](#)).

Other relevant reactions to the Pegasus case have been the comments by the former vice-president Oscar Ortiz, who was in office from 2014 to 2019, and acknowledged that Pegasus was used during the FMLN administration by the police to monitor criminal activities, but not to spy on people. Ortiz pointed out that Bukele and his government officials now have used Pegasus to spy on everybody, mainly journalists ([Página 12](#)). On the other hand, the current vice president, Felix Ulloa, said that journalists do not provide the government with positive coverage, and they are part of a political opposition strategy. Likewise, Ulloa pointed out that there are other risks for journalists, but some are playing the victims of Pegasus spyware (La Prensa Grafica, February 11, 2022).

“ Bukele avoids giving press conferences and prefers to use social media, particularly Twitter, to harass journalists and denounce them as “political activists,” blocking some independent journalists on this social media platform

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Bukele's silence on this case is noteworthy — he has made no specific comment or statement on this issue. It is the same among government officials and the most active Bukele supporters on social media; in fact, some government supporters accused George Soros of being responsible for using Pegasus around the world. The pro-government frames analysed in this study consider that Bukele is the best president in the history of the country and those who criticise him are political opponents, including independent journalists and media outlets. On the contrary, the anti-government frames question the lack of government transparency, for instance in purchasing Bitcoin and adopting it as legal currency in the country, the dismantling of institutions, and concentration of power in the hands of the president.

In November 2022, 15 members of El Faro filed a lawsuit against the company NSO Group in a United States Federal Court for allegedly deploying the spyware Pegasus on the phone of 22 members of the news media outlet El Faro. The plaintiffs are asking that the federal court “require NSO Group to identify, return, and delete all information obtained through these attacks, prohibit the firm from using Pegasus on the plaintiffs, and order them to reveal their client behind the spying in El Salvador” ([Gavarrete](#)).

Ultimately, the Citizen Lab Research Report by the University of Toronto identified a Pegasus customer referred to as “Torogoz” operating almost exclusively in El Salvador since 2019. This report also established that “while there is no conclusive technical evidence that TOROGOZ represents the Salvadoran government, the strong country-specific focus on the infections suggests that this is very likely” ([Scott-Railton et al](#)).

The other event this study focuses on is a threat by Javier Argueta, president Bukele's legal advisor, against two women journalists from the news media Gato Encerrado. In September 2021, Argueta quoted a tweet by Gato Encerrado that revealed that he participated in a private meeting with 4 magistrates of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal to discuss a new judicial resolution that would allow the presidential reelection in El Salvador. Argueta said that if journalists did not reveal the source of that information, they would have to face legal consequences. This news story was published by Karen Moreno and Beatriz Benitez and it was based on anonymous information they obtained from internal sources at the Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

The right to protect the sources of information is recognized by Article 206 of the Salvadoran Penal Code, and by the Declaration of Freedom of Expression Principles defined by the Rapporteur of Freedom of Expression of the IACHR. The president of the Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES), Cesar Fagoaga, argued that given these local laws and international standards were very clear, the threats made by Argueta against the two women journalists were malicious and illegal. Meanwhile, one of the victims, Karen Moreno, considered that Argueta's action was the result of the coopting by the executive branch of all other state institutions that were supposed to be independent, including the Supreme Electoral Tribunal ([Luna](#)).

This particular incident leads to a more general connection with several cases of women journalists who have been victims of online harassment, stigmatisation, and threats on social media. Most of these attacks and cyberbullying began with derogatory comments from President Bukele and other public officials, particularly on Twitter, and then Bukele's supporters and probably troll farms and bots helped to disseminate insulting comments and threats against women journalists.

“ This environment of stigmatisation, hate and misogynistic speech, and rhetoric against independent journalism sometimes triggers other forms of violence and physical threats, and defines some characteristics of digital authoritarianism. ”

One of these emblematic cases of online harassment against women journalists was the story of Mariana Belloso, a journalist and radio presenter. In June 2019, Belloso used her Twitter account to quote President Bukele’s tweet about the plan to curtail criminal gangs and invite the people to listen to his message. But Bukele retweeted Belloso’s comment with the expression “A half-told truth is worse than a thousand lies.” Then Bukele added in another tweet: “I am increasingly convinced that there are journalists who want our security plan to fail.” After this, Belloso received a massive number of online messages with sexualised threats and pejorative comments that spread not only on Twitter but also on Facebook, and the comments section of Belloso’s column in the daily La Prensa Grafica. Belloso said that she became known

as “the journalist who was attacked by the President and his trolls.” After this incident, Belloso recognized that some of her sources refused to talk to her, and she suspected she was being followed. She pointed out that, “[When] the President singles you out and puts you in a place for everyone to attack [...] there is no balance of power” ([Zidan](#)).

In November 2021, another journalist with Focos TV, Karen Fernández, told her story of online attacks and threats to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Fernandez became a target after criticising conditions for prisoners arrested under Bukele’s security plan. Bukele retweeted a post by Fernández, but without an adequate context, after which hundreds of Bukele’s followers made insulting comments and threats of sexual violence against Fernández and her family. Sometime after this episode, Fernández took the decision to leave her role in front of the cameras as host of the FOCOS TV program ([Zidan](#)).

Edison Lanza, a former special rapporteur for freedom of expression of the IACHR, regarded tweets with derogatory comments against journalists as very dangerous, especially when they came from elected officials, as in the case of President Bukele. Lanza told CPJ in an interview that this situation is more critical “particularly in Latin America where violence against journalists and impunity are rampant” ([Zidan](#)). In El Salvador, there are several claims about digital attacks and smear campaigns against journalists, especially women journalists and human rights defenders. In this context, a network of more than 60 civil society organisations denounced the deterioration of human rights conditions in El Salvador and documented, between February and May 2021, at least 370 digital attacks on social media perpetrated by public officials or Bukele’s close inner circle. However, some research on this issue suggests that there must be an under-reporting of cases of aggression and threats against women journalists, because many of these victims do not trust the public institutions of the country ([DPLF](#)). This environment of stigmatisation, hate and misogynistic speech, and rhetoric against independent journalism sometimes triggers other forms of violence and physical threats, and defines some characteristics of digital authoritarianism.

THE MAIN CONTOURS OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN EL SALVADOR

The characteristics of digital authoritarianism in El Salvador can be analysed from the dimensions of data governance, speech, access, and information. In terms of data governance: El Salvador does not have legislation to protect digital rights, and particularly personal data and privacy. When the Access to Public Information Law was approved in 2010, there was a consensus that the issue of personal data protection would be developed later; however, there has been no movement on this specific legislation to protect personal data. On the contrary, after the case of Pegasus espionage against journalists, the Legislative Assembly is reforming the telecommunications law and the Criminal Procedure Code to include the figure of “undercover digital agents,” which allows the Attorney General’s Office to evade court orders and authorise the interception of personal communications. Moreover, the current ministry of security publicly admitted that “we live in freedom of expression, but as I always say, everything has its limits, and yes, we are following up with many journalists” ([Amnesty International](#)). In this way, it seems very clear that Bukele’s government is promoting the surveillance of independent journalists, human rights defenders and leaders of civil society organisations with a twofold intention: to monitor what they are investigating and, at the same time, to create elements of intimidation and fear of prosecution by the authorities.

In the area of speech, Twitter accounts of public officials and institutions have a policy of blocking users on this platform that they consider critics or post opinions questioning the work of public officials or institutions, thus cutting off their access to the public information shared on those accounts, which constitutes a form of limitation to freedom of information and opinion. Moreover, Bukele’s supporters and even public officials have nurtured a hostile environment for social media conversations and debates, specifically discrediting critical voices from academics, journalists and religious leaders. This strategy might intend to promote self-censorship and coercion of critical and dissident voices on social media interactions and conversations. Likewise, the narrative that independent journalists are political activists who are trying to affect Bukele’s good image has been reinforced by public officials, cyber troops, and Bukele’s followers. In this way, the degree to which independent

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news media outlets are discredited might be greater, particularly among the government’s supporters, who get more information and opinions from social media — particularly on Facebook, the most predominant social media in the country — and from pro-Bukele YouTubers in El Salvador and from the diaspora.

In the area of access to platforms and the internet, there is a lack of public policies to ensure access to internet and Information and Communication Technologies for social groups and communities that are digitally disconnected. This government has continued some investment in laptops for students at public schools and better internet connectivity for these institutions, but these actions seem to be more propagandistic than a real attempt to tackle the issue of the digital divide. There have been cases of news media websites that have been blocked for days through inauthentic

behaviour, especially when investigative stories that reveal something that the government dislikes have been published. Bukele's supporters have put in more effort to denounce Twitter accounts of critical and dissident voices of independent journalists, academics, and human rights defenders. This situation has caused debate around Twitter's rules for the suspension of accounts, since somehow public officials' accounts that promote hate speech and threats, particularly against women journalists and human rights defenders, do not seem to get suspended, despite being reported. These actions reveal that Bukele's government is very interested in controlling the debate and narratives on social media, which contribute to maintaining a positive image and the high levels of popularity that is shown on public opinion polls. This strategy might be reinforced in the future, especially since he publicly announced that he will run for president again in 2024, despite the prohibition against presidential reelection in the Salvadoran Constitution.

In the area of information, there is abundant evidence and documented cases of the Salvadoran government deliberately blocking the application of the law for access to public information and the independent work of the Institute for Access to Public Information (IAIP). Nowadays, citizens and journalists cannot find on the websites of public institutions basic data such as the names and salaries of public officials, the number of people who have received the COVID-19 vaccine, the health expenditures during the pandemic, or the amount of money that the government has used to purchase bitcoins.

Thus, the government's propaganda cannot be verified by citizens or journalists, and the social media debate around some critical issues are based only on the official information. One of these key issues is the number of homicides committed per day in the country, which is now reserved information; meanwhile reports by human rights organisations indicate an increase in the number of missing persons in the country (Brigida). Indeed, the reduction in the number of homicides is presented by the official propaganda as one of key achievements of the government; however, this data cannot be independently verified. In this context, it seems evident that Bukele's government propaganda is based on disinformation strategies and methods to counterattack investigative journalism that affects its image and credibility, and, at the same time, to construct narratives that project this government as the best one of all 200 hundred years of Salvadoran history.

These delineations of digital authoritarianism in El Salvador are also influenced by the international context and political relations of this government. El Salvador has strong ties with the United States for historical reasons of political and military support to the Salvadoran government during the civil war, in the context of the Cold War and the rhetoric to stop the spread of communism in Central America. Then, millions of Salvadorans migrated to and now live in the United States, and the remittances these migrants sent to El Salvador represent one of the most significant supports for the economy of the country.

“ There is abundant evidence and documented cases of the Salvadoran government deliberately blocking the application of the law for access to public information and the independent work of the Institute for Access to Public Information (IAIP) ”

Furthermore, there is relevant communication and symbolic cultural exchange between the Salvadoran diaspora and family networks in El Salvador, especially information about what is happening in terms of politics and the participation of the diaspora in the next presidential elections.

In this context, Bukele has been questioned by United States diplomatic representatives in El Salvador because of unconstitutional actions such as the removal of the magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice, the attacks against independent journalists, the refusal of Salvadoran authorities to extradite gang leaders who face charges in the United States and are in prisons in El Salvador, and the decision to adopt Bitcoin as legal tender without transparency and debate. Bukele's response to this criticism by US officials has been to reject dialogue and claim a narrative that El Salvador is independent and not the "backyard of the United States." At present, Bukele's government has, probably, the worst political and diplomatic relations with the US government in the last century, which has been aggravated by the decision of the US Congress to include in the Engel's list -which is a list of people that the United States government identify and consider that are linked to corruption and diminishing democracy in Central America- several public officials of Bukele's inner circle, including Javier Argueta, one of his legal advisors, an Christian Guevara, the leader of Nuevas Ideas political party at the Legislative Assembly.

On the other hand, Bukele has visited China and announced that this country is going to provide disinterested support to El Salvador through the construction of a new public library, new soccer stadium, and other economic investments in the country. Although the former government of the FMLN was the one that opened diplomatic relations with China, these announcements have raised concerns about the implications of these agreements and Chinese influence, not only in terms of cooperation and development, but mainly from the perspective of political advice and the use of digital authoritarianism strategies in the implementation of techniques to control and repress political protests and dissent.

Investigative journalism has also shown that certain Venezuelans are part of Bukele's inner circle of advisors, who were part of the political opposition in Venezuela, but make important decisions in the Salvadoran government ([Alvarado](#)). Some analysts consider that there

“Bukele’s government has been accused of human rights violations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the current state of exception where more than 55,000 people have been detained with alleged accusations of being gang members or collaborators.”

are similarities between El Salvador and Venezuela in terms of destroying the opposition political parties, taking control of all state institutions, and promoting laws to monitor and deter social protests. For instance, Bukele's political party introduced to the Legislative Assembly the discussion of a "Foreign Agents Bill," which is very similar to one proposed in Venezuela and approved in Nicaragua, to regulate the work of civil society organisations that receive foreign funding or donations ([HRW](#)).

This Foreign Agent Bill has not been approved yet, but it is used as a resource to provoke fear and insecurity among civil society organisations working on human rights, freedom of expression, rule of law, transparency and democracy, among other issues. The political alliance with China and the implementation of similar

actions like in Venezuela and Nicaragua, such as laws, strategies and resources to deter and repress social protests, political opposition and international accountability, represent a serious worry, particularly when Bukele's government has been accused of human rights violations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the current state of exception where more than 55,000 people have been detained with alleged accusations of being gang members or collaborators. This concern has now been aggravated by Bukele's decision to seek reelection even against a constitutional prohibition, and the United States government's condemnation of this intention that undermines the principles of democracy in El Salvador.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

President Bukele, with just three years in power, has been able to construct a political phenomenon that some call “Bukelism.” This Bukelism includes a new political party Nuevas Ideas that has a large majority in the Legislative Assembly, a large percentage of popular support from Salvadorans in El Salvador and living abroad, especially in the United States, and the strong investment of public funds in social media — especially on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube — state-owned radio and television, a newspaper, propaganda, public relations, and lobbyists.

Bukelism has also been effective in rapidly controlling almost all state institutions, and reinforced a new narrative to boost the role of the army and to forget all the massacres and human rights violations committed by the military during the civil war. Moreover, Bukelism has managed to destroy the two major political parties in the country: ARENA and FMLN. Today, neither of these two parties have the support or the capabilities to be a real opposition to Bukelism, and the social protests against Bukele have been weakened by the police control over the free movement of people going to these protests — the official narrative that these protests are funded by foreign interests.

In this context, Bukelism has implemented at least six main strategies that are characteristic of digital authoritarianism. First, Bukelism has invested a lot of resources and people in controlling the narrative and public debates on social media, particularly on Facebook and Twitter. The environment for freedom of expression and opinion in the Salvadoran transnational public debate in cyberspace is polluted. Second, Bukelism has created the new daily newspaper *Diario El Salvador*, which is funded by public money and reproduces the official narratives and frameworks of the social and political reality in El Salvador. Likewise, private media outlets, especially radio and television, are co-opted through the use of public advertising and the monopoly of the official version of reality through the daily presence of government officials and pro-Bukele analysts on media interviews. Third, Bukelism has spent significant resources to promote disinformation electoral campaigns. Even though there is no transparency about the resources used for these campaigns, some estimates have established the significant disbursement of money by Bukele and Nuevas Ideas compared to the other political parties.

Fourth, Bukelism has created and reproduced a narrative against independent journalists and news media outlets, particularly against *El Faro*, which has revealed serious cases of government corruption, human rights violations, and the secret negotiations between Bukele’s government and the gangs. This situation has provoked threats and attacks against most journalists from *El Faro*, leading the IACHR to grant precautionary measures to these journalists. The case of *El Faro* might also be an example to intimidate other news media outlets in the country.

Fifth, Bukelism has taken representative women journalists as a target for derogatory, misogynistic and sexualised comments and attacks. Several documented cases indicate that the pattern of these attacks includes comments or disinformation promoted by President Bukele and other government officials, then cyber troops and Bukele’s supporters replicating and expanding the attacks, and, in some cases, there are physical acts of intimidation and aggression. This situation has led some of the women journalists who have suffered these attacks to leave the country; others have left their protagonist roles at media outlets, and still others decided to self-censor their work.

Sixth, the use of Pegasus spyware against journalists reveals the worries about what journalists are investigating and who the sources are that collaborate with independent journalists. Even though the government has denied any responsibility in this case, the evidence so far indicates that Bukele's government is behind this case of espionage, which constitutes a clear message of intimidation to journalists and their informants. Likewise, the legal reforms and proposals by Nuevas Ideas at the Legislative Assembly can be interpreted as an attempt to legalise communications interception and the discretionary use of government espionage against political opponents, journalists, and dissident voices participating in public debates. Take the late case of a Twitter user accused of being disrespectful of president Bukele and sent to prison during the legal process — it is a signal that there might be other cases of criminal prosecution against social media users who are critics of Bukelism and do not have the legal support and incidence like journalists and civil society leaders might have. This can be another strategy to use this prosecution as an example to intimidate and send a message to other critics of Bukelism.

In conclusion, there are sufficient elements to sustain the argument that Bukelism practises digital authoritarianism in El Salvador in order to monitor and prevent significant social and political protest against the government, and to counterattack the investigative journalism that is revealing cases of corruption and human rights violations that can undermine the government's image at the local and international levels. Ultimately, Bukele is implementing an authoritarian government, and this political process is intertwined with the construction and development of a digital authoritarianism to restrict and prevent the rights of protest and freedom of expression and opinion in El Salvador.

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