

The Bukele Trap: The Authoritarian Temptation Facing Latin America's Right

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Leadership is ultimately about people. Yet, too often, our conversations about Nayib Bukele delivered what successive Salvadoran governments could not: a dramatic restoration of public security. Communities once terrorized by gangs have recovered their streets. Businesses were freed from systematic extortion. Millions of Salvadorans finally enjoy basic freedoms in their daily lives. That achievement is real, and denying it makes it impossible to understand Bukele's extraordinary popularity not only in El Salvador but throughout much of Latin America.

That is precisely why Bukele matters beyond El Salvador. His success has produced more than a security policy. It has produced a political thesis: authoritarianism can deliver what democracy cannot. Bukele dismisses every criticism as the whining of a discredited establishment and progressive global elites, pointing to the results that decades of incompetent democratic governments failed to deliver. What is being exported across Latin America, therefore, is not simply a prison model. It is a theory of power.

Those security gains, however, came at a devastating institutional cost. A state of exception has been in force since March 2022, enabling mass arrests without ordinary due process. The judiciary has been brought under political control, while independent journalists, human rights lawyers, and civil society leaders have faced surveillance, persecution, and arrest. Between May and September 2025 alone, at least 140 journalists and human rights defenders fled the country. In July 2025, constitutional limits on presidential re-election were removed altogether. What began as an emergency response to gang violence has hardened into a permanent system of government.

In 2021, Bukele described himself as "the coolest dictator in the world," an act of trolling intended to ridicule his critics. The joke has not aged well. There is increasingly nothing ironic about the word dictator.

That is the Bukele trap. Many conservatives in Latin America have concluded not merely that his security policies worked, but that democratic constraints had to be dismantled for them to work. In this reading, courts obstruct justice, journalists protect criminals, human rights favor gangs, and constitutional limits are luxuries that frightened societies can no longer afford. The concentration of power is no longer treated as an unfortunate byproduct of the crackdown. It is celebrated as the source of its success.



The appeal should not be underestimated. For years, democratic governments across Latin America failed at their most basic responsibility: protecting citizens. They allowed criminal organizations to capture neighborhoods, penetrate ports, corrupt institutions, and make ordinary life miserable for law-abiding citizens. After so much incompetence, voters have little patience for lectures on due process from political leaders who failed to keep them safe. Bukele offers a simple answer, visible results and a leader who appears willing to do what others did not dare.

Still, our political family must confront the danger without ideological double standards. The centre-right has consistently and rightly denounced the dictatorships of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. But our commitment to democracy cannot depend on the ideological orientation of the autocrat. El Salvador increasingly belongs in that same conversation, and we must be willing to say so without hesitation. Neither popularity nor a talent for trolling the Left overrides the rule of law, electoral majorities do not make independent courts expendable, and success against criminals does not give governments a blank check to discard constitutional limits. Democratic principles mean little if we invoke them only against our political opponents.

Bukele is no longer merely the president of a small Central American country. He has become a regional political brand. In Ecuador, President Daniel Noboa has relied on emergency powers, military deployments, and a new maximum-security prison inspired by the Salvadoran experience. In Colombia, newly inaugurated President Abelardo de la Espriella campaigned as a law-and-order outsider, proposing military crackdowns, and Bukele-style mega-prisons in the jungle.

Yet the criminal threats in these countries differ profoundly. El Salvador confronted territorial gangs with identifiable membership and concentrated control. Ecuador faces competing criminal groups tied to global cocaine markets. Colombia must contend with guerrillas, cartels and armed organizations operating across a vast and forbidding geography. Importing the Salvadoran model as a universal formula is not only dangerous for democracy; it may also be ineffective. But the political narrative travels more easily than the policy: only a strongman, freed from institutional restraints, can restore order.

Perhaps the most troubling sign is that this siren song has reached my own country: Costa Rica, Latin America's oldest and one of its most stable democracies. President Laura Fernández has been in office for only four months, but her presidency represents continuity, not a break with the political project that governed before her. Although the country's unprecedented wave of drug-related violence and the

campaign against its democratic checks and balances began before she took office, both are intensifying under her watch. Judges, journalists, oversight bodies, and political opponents are routinely portrayed as enemies of the popular will, while State institutions are increasingly weaponized to intimidate those who challenge the government. As fear spreads and institutions struggle to respond, the promise of



concentrated power becomes more attractive. If the Bukele trap can seduce Costa Rica, no democracy in the region should consider itself immune.

Costa Rica abolished its army in 1948, one of the proudest achievements in our history. But over time, our legitimate pride in that decision encouraged a complacent interpretation of pacifism. We came to believe that because Costa Rica had no army, it did not need robust security institutions. The result was a fragmented, under-equipped, and improvised police apparatus built for another era. Transnational criminal organizations now operate with advanced technology, enormous financial resources, and sophisticated international networks. They face police forces designed to preserve order in a peaceful country, not to confront global criminal enterprises.

Costa Rica's pacifist tradition is something I cherish and will always defend. But pacifism does not mean passiveness. Peace is not merely the absence of an army; it requires strong, professional and well-equipped institutions capable of defending citizens and the rule of law. A country without armed forces cannot afford weak police forces.

Escaping the Bukele trap, therefore, does not mean responding to organized crime with timidity. Quite the opposite. Latin America's democracies need better intelligence, professional police forces, secure ports, effective financial investigations, and much deeper international cooperation. Criminal organizations cross borders, move money across jurisdictions and exploit the commercial ties between Latin America, Europe, and the United States. No country can confront that threat alone.

During my presidential campaign in Costa Rica, I proposed a pilot project involving the deployment of Europol at the port of Moín, now a major departure point for cocaine bound for Europe. The initiative would combine police cooperation, intelligence sharing, and technical assistance to prevent criminal organizations from contaminating legitimate cargo with cocaine. The proposal received the formal support of the European People's Party as part of a broader resolution on security cooperation between Europe and Latin America.

This is the response the democratic centre-right should champion: international cooperation instead of isolation, stronger institutions instead of personal rule, and determined action against criminals without treating constitutional limits as a disposable inconvenience. Latin Americans should not have to choose between being abandoned by a weak democracy or being protected by an authoritarian state. Our centre-right family must prove that order and liberty can reinforce one another. If we fail, the Bukele model will not remain the Salvadoran exception. It may become the Latin American rule.