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FEATURED Q&A

Has Bukele Gone Too Far in Cracking Down on Gangs?



Salvadoran authorities have arrested tens of thousands of people since the government declared a state of emergency in March. // File Photo: @nayibbukele via Twitter.

Q El Salvador's Legislative Assembly, which is controlled by President Nayib Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party, on July 19 extended for the fourth time the state of emergency that Bukele first declared in March to address gangs and gang violence in the country. Since the emergency measures have been in effect, Salvadoran authorities have arrested at least 46,000 people. Also in July, the U.S. State Department named Bukele's press secretary, the leader of his party in the Legislative Assembly and other officials on its list of "corrupt and undemocratic actors" in Central America. How much longer will the state of emergency last, and will it become permanent? How has the Salvadoran population been responding to the heightened visibility of security forces in the country, and how has it affected Bukele's strong popularity ratings? How will the U.S. decision to designate some of Bukele's allies as "corrupt and undemocratic" affect the way Bukele's administration addresses security issues in the future?

A Michael Paarlberg, assistant professor of political science at Virginia Commonwealth University and associate fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies: "The mass arrests are political theater, covering up the failures of mano dura policing by successive administrations in El Salvador, the latest being that of President Bukele. At the same time that the government has been locking up ordinary citizens for such things as having tattoos, living in neighborhoods with gang presence or 'looking like criminals,' it has freed top leaders of MS-13, going so far as to escort one out of the country to avoid extradition to the United States. The Bukele government has

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TODAY'S NEWS

ECONOMIC

Havana to Begin Power Blackouts This Month

Havana this month is to begin electricity blackouts in addition to other measures in an effort to stem the country's energy crisis.

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BUSINESS

Mexico Unit Drives Profits to Double at Spain's BBVA

A strong performance at the Mexico unit of BBVA led the Spanish bank's profits to more than double in the second quarter as compared to the same period last year, BBVA said Friday in announcing earnings.

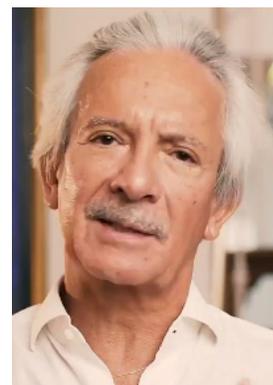
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POLITICAL

Guatemalan Police Arrest Prominent Newspaper Editor

Guatemalan police late Friday arrested José Rubén Zamora, the founder and president of newspaper El Periódico and critic of President Alejandro Giammattei, on money laundering, blackmail and influence peddling charges.

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Zamora // File Photo: @ChepeZamora via Twitter.

POLITICAL NEWS

Guatemalan Police Arrest Prominent Newspaper Editor

Guatemalan police late on Friday arrested José Rubén Zamora, the founder and president of prominent newspaper *El Periódico*, on charges of money laundering, blackmail and influence peddling, *The Wall Street Journal* reported, citing authorities in the Central American country. Officers detained Zamora at his home in Guatemala City after a judge issued a warrant for his arrest. The head of the Guatemalan attorney general's anticorruption unit, the Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity,

“This is a political persecution.”

— José Rubén Zamora

or FECCI, Rafael Curruchiche, said the charges relate to Zamora's business activities. “I want to make it clear that the arrest has no relation to his quality as a journalist, but to a possible act of money laundering in his capacity as a businessman,” said Curruchiche, Reuters reported. However, Zamora's staunch opposition to President Alejandro Giammattei led to accusations, including by Zamora himself, that was targeted in retaliation for coverage by his newspaper. “This is a political persecution,” Zamora told reporters outside his home, alongside several police officers, *The Wall Street Journal* reported. A group of people gathered outside Zamora's home, chanting, “You are not alone!” Speaking from a jail cell in a video that was posted to Twitter, Zamora said he would start a hunger strike, Reuters reported. An assistant prosecutor at FECCI, Samari Carolina Gómez Díaz, was also arrested in connection with the possible disclosure of confidential information in the Zamora case, Curruchiche said. Curruchiche himself was included last month on the U.S. government's so-called Engel List, a

listing of “corrupt and undemocratic” actors in Central America. FECCI has targeted prosecutors, judges, human rights figures, opposition officials and journalists, Reuters reported. At least five Guatemalan journalists from various media outlets are currently in exile, as are more than a dozen former prosecutors, judges and rights activists.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Havana to Begin Power Blackouts This Month: State Media

Havana is set to begin electricity blackouts this month, in addition to other measures to mitigate Cuba's energy crisis, including the cancellation of the city's carnival, Reuters reported, citing a state media announcement on Saturday. Most of the rest of the island has experienced daily power outages of four or more hours for months, though Havana had been spared, the wire service reported. “This is the moment to show solidarity and contribute so that the rest of Cuba suffers less from the undesirable blackouts,” said Luis Antonio Torres, a Communist Party leader in Havana, the Communist Party daily, *Tribuna de la Habana*, reported. The Cuban government on July 18 said that electricity blackouts in the Caribbean country are likely to continue indefinitely, Reuters reported in July. “The operating reserves that we have in the electrical system are insufficient to cover the demand, making effects on service inevitable,” Liván Arronte Cruz, the country's energy and mining minister, said last month. “When you keep running the equipment past its capital maintenance schedule it falls into a downward spiral with no short term solution,” said Jorge Piñón, the director of the University of Texas at Austin's Latin America and Caribbean Energy and Environment Program, the wire service reported. The current schedule of power outages will cut electricity of each of Havana's six municipalities every three days during peak mid-day hours, Reuters reported, citing *Tribuna*.

NEWS BRIEFS

Most in El Salvador Back State of Emergency: Catholic Archbishop

The Roman Catholic archbishop of San Salvador, José Luis Escobar Alas, said Sunday that most people in El Salvador support the government's months-long state of emergency that has led to the arrests of tens of thousands of suspected gang members, the Associated Press reported. The Legislative Assembly on July 19 extended the country's state of emergency for the fourth consecutive time. “People don't want the violence to return,” said Escobar Alas. “They not only want these things maintained, they want them to advance, to end the violence,” he added.

Chile's Codelco Reports 35 Percent Drop in Profit for Year's First Half

Chilean state-owned copper producer Codelco on Friday reported a 35 percent decline in its pretax profit for the first half of this year to \$2.4 billion, Reuters reported. Lower production levels and higher costs have taken a toll on the company's profits. Codelco said it produced 736,000 metric tons of copper in the period, a 7.5 percent decline, year-on-year.

Colombia's Ecopetrol Discovers Natural Gas in Offshore Block

Colombian state oil company Ecopetrol discovered a natural gas accumulation in the Tayrona Block, drilled in deep waters off the country's coast, the company said Friday. Brazil's Petrobras has a 44.4 percent stake in the block and acts as the exploratory well's operator, while Ecopetrol has a 55.6 percent stake. Ecopetrol said the discovery is in line with its 2040 energy transition plan, and it increases new exploration and production prospects in the northern Colombian Caribbean region, the statement said.

BUSINESS NEWS

Mexico Unit Drives Profit at Spain's BBVA to Double in Q2

A strong performance at the Mexico unit of Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria, or BBVA, fueled the Spanish bank's profit to more than double in the second quarter as compared to the same period last year, the lender said Friday in announcing earnings, Reuters reported. BBVA, led by chief executive officer Onur Genç, reported a net profit of 1.675 billion euros (\$1.71 billion) in the quarter, as compared to 701 million euros in the second quarter of last year. The bank's profit for this year's second



Genç // File Photo: LinkedIn profile of Onur Genç.

quarter beat the analysts' estimate of 994 million euros in a Reuters poll. BBVA's net profit in Mexico accounted for 60 percent of the bank's earnings in the quarter and soared 66 percent year-on-year, while the unit's net interest income jumped 38 percent. The lender's Mexico unit reported the bank's largest increase in profit as compared to last year's second quarter, Dow Jones reported. Overall, BBVA's net interest income, or earnings on loans minus the costs of deposits, grew 31.1 percent to 4.6 billion euros, higher than analysts' estimate of 4.11 billion euros, Reuters reported. BBVA added that the strength of its Mexico unit's performance more than offset a downturn in Turkey. For years, European banks have faced pressure amid low interest rates. However, that is now changing as central banks are raising interest rates, a move that is expected to help banks increase their income, the wire service reported.

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recognized, but won't publicly admit, that the only measure proven to lower crime rates is direct negotiations with the gangs, the terms of which the government allegedly broke by suspending payments to the gangs, sparking the March murder spree, which became the pretext for the state of exception. The arrests send a message not to the gangs but rather to the broader public: everyone is subject to indiscriminate arrest, a troubling omen for journalists and civil society activists already targeted by government persecution. For its part, the United States, which for years not only supported *mano dura* policing, but exported the gangs to El Salvador through criminal deportations, has belatedly started to recognize the deleterious effects of both policies on citizen security in the region and on migration flows. A willingness to name and sanction corrupt officials—and in the case of Salgado, an outright warlord—is a necessary first step to reining in an authoritarian gang state which the United States helped to create.”

A Christine J. Wade, director of the International Studies Program at Washington College in Chestertown, Md.: “Bukele’s state of emergency, which has been in place since late March, will likely continue until it becomes politically unpopular—which could be a long time from now. Despite the fact that punitive policies, such as *mano dura*, have been largely unsuccessful and often counterproductive, they remain very popular with Salvadorans. Nearly two decades of polling on crime and punitive measures repeatedly show that a majority of Salvadorans support these ‘tough on crime’ policies. In fact, some feel these policies aren’t tough enough. Concerns that human rights organizations and the international community have about arbitrary and indefinite detentions or the death of several dozen recent detainees are generally not shared by the average Salvadoran voter, many of whom feel that criminals have ‘too many rights.’ It’s

a sentiment that the Bukele administration has repeatedly stoked in its ‘war against gangs.’ Given this, Bukele is unlikely to yield to pressure from the United States or other members of the international community on security issues, though that has been true

“Some feel these policies aren’t tough enough.”

— Christine J. Wade

to Bukele’s form for most issues throughout his presidency. In fact, part of Bukele’s popularity is derived from his unwillingness to cater to pressure from the United States. Whether an impending debt default will change that calculus remains to be seen. For now, Bukele successfully laughs off criticism of his government as corrupt, undemocratic or authoritarian, much to the delight of his base.”

A James Bosworth, author of the Latin America Risk Report: “*Mano dura* policies cracking down on gangs are rarely effective at improving security, but often popular with the public that believes the state has an obligation to punish gangs. Polling shows that Bukele remains quite popular, with anywhere between 70 percent and 90 percent approval depending on the poll. Even the polls showing him with approval levels closer to 70 percent still suggest he is the most popular president in the hemisphere. There are cracks in that positive approval rating. Having detained more than 2 percent of Salvadoran adults, many people know someone who has been unjustly detained. Credible corruption allegations have been made against many people in his inner circle, undermining his anticorruption credentials. The Biden administration is correct to highlight those corrupt actors across Central America. It should do more to demonstrate that the

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decisions for those designations are being made on evidence, not politics, and that there are additional efforts to crack down on all corrupt actors and their assets regardless of political ideology. The most positive thing Bukele has going for him is that his traditional political opponents within the FMLN and ARENA remain weak and unpopular. Bukele is doing everything he can to keep the focus on those worse politicians and undermine civil society and the potential rise of new political actors who could represent credible alternatives to the current government.”

A Douglas Farah, president of IBI Consultants LLC: “President Bukele’s strategy is to maintain the state of emergency indefinitely because it allows him to consolidate his increasingly authoritarian leadership without checks. The arrest of 46,000 people for supposedly being gang members while protecting the MS-13 gang leadership from extradition to the United States—and actively helping some of them escape to Mexico—shows Bukele’s lack of interest in truly attacking the gang structures. There is growing consensus among the United Nations, Organization of American States and respected human rights groups that the mass arrests are largely targeting young men with no gang affiliation, leading to harsh condemnation of the arrests and grow-

ing number of deaths inside the prisons. Past iterations of the mano dura government policies have shown that the gangs gain strength in prison when provided with an almost limitless number of new recruits. Initially hailed as a needed measure against the gangs, the rapidly escalating arrests and deaths are affecting greater portions of the population with incarcerated family members. As the discontent mounts and the situation increasingly resembles the worst days of the civil war of the 1980s, the erosion of Bukele’s popularity is accelerating. The U.S. decision to designate a third list of corrupt actors at the most senior levels of Bukele’s administration and party illustrates the growing awareness of his government’s corruption and criminal elements. This has caused strains in Bukele’s inner circle as officials and their families lose their U.S. visas. But the measures will be unlikely to dissuade Bukele from his march toward authoritarianism.”

[Editor’s note: The Advisor requested a commentary for this issue from El Salvador’s ambassador to the United States but received no response.]

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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Advisor Video

Colombia’s Energy Policy Under Incoming President Gustavo Petro

A Latin America Advisor interview with Inés Vesga, partner at Holland & Knight in Bogotá

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