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MILLENNIAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN EL SALVADOR

Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez

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On 28 February 2021, New Ideas, the party founded in 2017 and led by President Nayib Bukele, won El Salvador's legislative elections by a landslide. Bukele's party secured 66.5 percent of the vote and 56 of the legislature's 84 seats—an unprecedented supermajority. Meanwhile, the two parties that had dominated Salvadoran politics since the early 1990s—the Nationalist Republican Alliance (Arena) on the right and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) on the left—were decimated, managing to secure a combined total of only 19 seats. For the first time in El Salvador's democratic history, one man could legislate alone.

Bukele did not wait to take advantage of his legislative supermajority. On the evening of May 1—just hours after the new legislators had been sworn in—he and his legislative allies fired the independent attorney-general and the judges of the Constitutional Chamber, El Salvador's highest court. By the following morning, the legislature had packed both institutions with loyalists. Bukele had used his legislative majority to defang the judicial branch in only a day. On Twitter he framed these events as a victory for democracy: "The Salvadoran people," he tweeted May 1, "said, through their representatives: You're fired!" Earlier that day Bukele claimed that "this is called democracy. In 200 years, our country had not savored it, but now we do." Defending the judicial shakeup the next morning, he added that "seventy-five percent of the Salvadoran people voted in free elections for the change we are now seeing."[1] Indeed, polls suggest that over 70 percent of Salvadorans support Bukele's dismissal of the attorney-general and judges.[2]

Yet Bukele's attack on the judicial branch was a serious blow to Salvadoran democracy. Free elections are essential to democratic politics, but so are checks and balances: As Guillermo O'Donnell observed in this

journal, "Accountability runs not only vertically, making elected officials answerable to the ballot box, but also horizontally, across a network of relatively autonomous powers."[3] Bukele and his allies may have been overwhelmingly elected in free elections, but by subverting El Salvador's lead prosecutor and its highest court—two crucial institutions of horizontal accountability—they made the country less, not more, democratic.

How did Salvadoran democracy reach this breaking point? Most Salvadorans see their political establishment as corrupt and ineffective. Arena and the FMLN dominated Salvadoran politics for three decades but failed to solve the country's biggest problems, including corruption, inequality, and widespread organized crime. In part due to these failures, voters grew disillusioned with their political system: By 2018, on the eve of Bukele's rise to the presidency, 78 percent of Salvadorans said that the country's political parties did not represent them. Fewer than 9 percent thought that the country's situation was improving and 62.4 percent agreed that "elections are a waste of time because things in this country will never change." Almost half rejected the claim that democracy is preferable to any other form of government.[4] In 2019, Bukele ran for the presidency on an antiestablishment platform that tapped into these frustrations and promised Salvadorans a fresh start. He won with over 53 percent of the vote—21 percentage points ahead of his closest rival. As president, Bukele has used his overwhelming public support—recent polling reports an approval rating of over 86 percent[5]—to consolidate power and undermine the checks and balances of Salvadoran democracy. His recent attack on the judiciary thus represents an escalation, not a wholesale change in strategy.

The situation in El Salvador therefore resembles previous democratic crises in which a popular antiestablishment leader, elected democratically amid widespread public dissatisfaction with the political system, subverts institutions of horizontal accountability. Indeed, in Bukele's rise there are clear echoes of Latin American authoritarians such as Peru's Alberto Fujimori, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, and Ecuador's Rafael Correa. Yet the unraveling of democratic institutions in El Salvador differs from other episodes of democratic backsliding in important—and instructive—ways. Bukele relies on a distinct blend of political tactics that I label millennial authoritarianism. And two of the broader conditions that fueled his rise—the unintended long-term consequences of democratic pacts and the double-edged nature of depoliticizing state institutions—appear to challenge our scholarly and popular notions of democracy and democratic backsliding.

The 39-year-old Bukele, a former businessman, began his political career as the FMLN mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán (2012–15) and then of San Salvador, the capital city (2015–18). In October 2017, the FMLN Ethics Tribunal accused Bukele of fostering division within the party and expelled him. In response, Bukele formed the New Ideas party and

announced that he would run for president. In February 2019—only seven years after his first election to public office—he became the only candidate not from Arena or the FMLN to win the Salvadoran presidency since 1984. How did Bukele rise so quickly, rupturing El Salvador's two-party system in the process? Bukele relies on millennial authoritarianism, a distinctive political strategy that combines traditional populist appeals, classic authoritarian behavior, and a youthful and modern personal brand built primarily via social media.

> *Bukele frames his movement as a historic mission to return political power to the people and wrest control of government from a corrupt elite that he calls* **los mismos de siempre,** *or "the same ones as always."*

Bukele's political platform is quintessentially populist. He frames his movement as a historic mission to return political power to the people and wrest control of government from a corrupt elite—embodied by the traditional parties—that he calls *los mismos de siempre,* or "the same ones as always." He cast his election as a fulfillment of this mission, announcing in his inaugural address that, for the first time, Salvadorans "will decide how [they] want to be governed. Because now we will have a government of the people and for the people."[6] This Manichean view of politics was a staple of his presidential campaign and has continued to define his presidency. His presidential-campaign platform, for example, vowed to eliminate "institutional chieftainships" and favor "citizen priorities" over those of entrenched elites.[7]

Bukele routinely engages in classic authoritarian behavior. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that an aspiring autocrat in a democracy: "1) rejects, in words or action, the democratic rules of the game, 2) denies the legitimacy of opponents, 3) tolerates or encourages violence, or 4) indicates a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media."[8] Bukele has repeatedly met these criteria. On 9 February 2020, he and forty heavily armed soldiers and police officers forced their way into the opposition-controlled legislature in order to compel the legislators to approve an international loan. Once inside, Bukele sat in the chair reserved for the president of the legislature: "I think now it is very clear who is in control of this situation," he said. He paused to say a silent prayer and, before exiting, left legislators with a thinly veiled threat: "You have one week, gentlemen. One week."[9] Bukele's actions that day may have been particularly striking, but they are part of a broad pattern of undemocratic behavior by the Salvadoran president, as summarized in the Table.

While Bukele talks like a quintessential populist and governs like a classic autocrat, he differs markedly from the traditional strongman

TABLE—NAYIB BUKELE AND THE INDICATORS OF AUTHORITARIAN BEHAVIOR

Rejection of (or Weak Commitment to) Democratic Rules of the Game

- Gathered supporters outside the attorney-general's office and threatened that "the people" would drag the chief prosecutor out of his office (2016).
- Claimed that the electoral authorities were preparing to rig the 2019 election (2018).
- Encouraged a mob of supporters to enter the offices of the electoral authorities en masse (2018).
- Refused to participate in candidate debates for the 2019 election (2018).
- Gave a televised "get out the vote" address on election day, in violation of electoral regulations (2019).
- Used the police and the army to break into the opposition-controlled legislature (2020).
- Used his legislative supermajority to fire the Constitutional Chamber and the attorney general (2021).

Denial of the Legitimacy of Political Opponents

- Repeated claims against the constitutionality of court sentences and legislative activities affecting the executive (2019–21).
- Used his legislative supermajority to fire the Constitutional Chamber and the attorney-general (2021).

Toleration or Encouragement of Violence

- Encouraged a mob of supporters to enter the offices of the electoral authorities en masse (2018).
- Struck pacts with violent criminal organizations in exchange for political and electoral support (2018–19).
- Ordered police units to tail opposition legislators ahead of his occupation of the legislature (2020).
- Used the military and the army to break into the opposition-controlled legislature (2020).

Readiness to Curtail Civil Liberties of Opponents, Including the Media

- Directed a "cyber fraud" network that targeted major newspapers (2015–16).
- Launched money-laundering investigation against the *El Faro* news website (2020).
- Eliminated longstanding tax breaks for printed news media (2021).
- Repeated personal attacks, on social media and during press conferences, against members of the press.

Sources: BBC, the Committee to Protect Journalists, *El Diario de Hoy, El Faro, El País, La Prensa Gráfica,* @NayibBukele (on Twitter), the *New York Times,* and the *Washington Post.*

on one critical dimension: He has developed a youthful, polished, and distinctly modern personal brand—largely through the skillful use of social media. Bukele, who prefers to go by his first name, Nayib, has carefully cultivated a fresh and stylish image. Rarely seen donning a tie, he is known for wearing slim-fitting jeans, a leather jacket, colorful

socks, and a backwards cap. His sleek haircut, styled beard, and aviator shades are instantly recognizable to Salvadorans. Beyond his fashion choices, Bukele shares memes, chimes in on sports and popular culture, and discusses his love of video games. He is, in his own words, "the coolest president in the world."[10] Social media are critical to his brand: Bukele is a master of using Twitter and Facebook to communicate directly with voters, control his personal image, and shape the political narrative around him. Since 2009, he has tweeted to his 2.6 million followers (roughly equivalent to four in every ten Salvadorans) more than 75,000 times, for an average of more than sixteen posts per day. Twitter is also his preferred platform for announcing policies and communicating with ministers, opposition politicians, and members of the international community.

Millennial authoritarianism has allowed Bukele to build a formidable and diverse political coalition. Through populist appeals, Bukele has connected with voters who are tired of the political establishment. He has signaled to voters his commitment to antiestablishment rhetoric by combining these appeals with authoritarian attacks against political elites. Meanwhile, his modern personal brand has complemented these traditional populist and authoritarian tactics in three ways.

First, thanks to his hip and youthful image, Bukele has outmaneuvered political elites by circumventing traditional party-building. While expulsion from the FMLN deprived Bukele of the party's territorial organization and nationally recognized name, his well-oiled online operation helped him to reach voters and rally them around a carefully cultivated personal image.

Second, Bukele's fresh brand and personal connection with his followers helped him to mobilize the 70 percent of Salvadoran voters who reported in a 2018 survey that they were not interested in politics.[11] Young voters, who tend to be less interested in politics and more active on social media, have especially gravitated toward him: In a preelection panel, 54.4 percent of those between eighteen and 29 years of age reported that they would back Bukele in the 2019 race. Only 39.1 percent of those aged thirty through 59 and 27.5 percent of those sixty or older said the same.[12]

Third, Bukele's personal brand has also appealed to moderate voters who favor change but fear extremism. Although Salvadorans are generally unhappy with their political system, most identify as ideological centrists. According to a preelection survey, the average Bukele supporter is a 5.4 on a ten-point ideological scale, where one represents the extreme left and ten the extreme right.[13] Bukele has mitigated the risk of alienating these moderate voters with his authoritarian and populist appeals in part by balancing them with his sleek and polished personal brand—a far cry from the more brazen style that is often associated with political extremism.

Bukele is not the first politician to use populist appeals, engage in authoritarian behavior, or embrace the art of social-media branding. What distinguishes millennial authoritarianism is the integration of all three tactics into a cohesive and effective political strategy. Populist appeals and authoritarian actions have helped Bukele to capitalize on antiestablishment sentiments, while his modern, polished, and social-media–driven personal brand has enabled him to circumvent party-building, appeal to voters who are less interested in politics, and reassure moderates who want change but not extremism.

The Hidden Costs of Democratic Pacts

While millennial authoritarianism helps to explain Bukele's rise, the origins of El Salvador's crisis run much deeper. By the time he ran for president, many Salvadorans had already lost faith in democratic institutions and were ready to embrace an antiestablishment candidate. Why did public support for the political system decline in the first place? Part of the answer lies in the unintended long-term consequences of El Salvador's pacted transition to democracy. Contemporary Salvadoran democracy began in the early 1990s, when the Arena government and the FMLN, then an umbrella group of several armed guerrilla movements, agreed to end the Salvadoran civil war (1979–92) and establish a new electoral regime. These agreements included the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords, which formally ended the civil war, as well as subsequent settlements and landmark pieces of legislation that the Arena-dominated legislature approved between 1991 and 1993. While the FMLN was not represented in the legislature at the time, these laws should be considered part of the transition pact because they emerged from the Chapultepec negotiations. They were far-reaching, altered almost every aspect of the Salvadoran political system, and created a new set of rules for stable and sustainable democratic competition.

At the time, many political scientists argued that such pacts lay at the heart of successful transitions from authoritarian rule. Unlike other types of democratic transitions—such as those that emerged from revolution or from the collapse of an authoritarian regime—pacts could generate consensus regarding the rules of the democratic game and protect the vital interests of powerful elites. This prevented major political actors from defecting or reverting to authoritarianism.[14] Compromise and mutual forbearance, the argument went, were the best ways to achieve enduring democratic rule. Not all scholars shared this enthusiasm for pacts; some worried that, in the long run, pacts could become rigid barriers to change.[15] But as Latin America's new pacted democracies, such as Brazil and Chile, began to show signs of endurance, the argument for pacts prevailed. Today, confronted with a new set of threats to democracy, scholars have doubled down on the argument that compromise,

mutual forbearance, and respect for the rules of the game—the stuff of political pacts—are key ingredients for democracy's survival.[16]

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Salvadoran transition worked much as the proponents of pacts had predicted. The key challenge for democratization in El Salvador was establishing a set of rules that could protect and reconcile the vital interests of both the FMLN guerrillas and the conservative forces represented by the Arena government. The pact accomplished this by laying the foundations for a strong two-party system dominated by Arena on the right and the FMLN on the left. The Chapultepec Peace Accords called for the incorporation of the latter into the political system, creating a legal pathway for the guerrillas to form a party and participate in electoral politics. In exchange, the armed groups committed to a permanent ceasefire. A new 1992 Electoral Code shielded Arena and the FMLN from electoral competition by establishing relatively high barriers to entry for new parties and conditioning public campaign funding on past electoral performance. These regulations also promised wartime leaders significant influence over the electoral process by allowing them to write their parties' rules for leadership and candidate selection. The 1993 General Amnesty Law granted amnesty for war-related crimes. While this law was a major blow to transitional justice and left a decade of rampant violence unpunished, it facilitated democratization by ensuring that wartime leaders on both sides of the conflict could participate in the new democratic regime.

The pact worked. In 1992, El Salvador was poor, unequal, and polarized. It had been ravaged by civil war and five decades of military rule. But by paving the way for the formation of a strong party system anchored by Arena and the FMLN, the pacted transition helped democracy to beat the odds. The FMLN demobilized and became the dominant electoral organization on the left, while Arena consolidated its position as the main party on the right. Former combatants from both sides of the conflict became presidents, ministers, legislators, mayors, and party leaders. The pact thus transformed what had been an armed conflict into an electoral contest. This party system, among Latin America's most stable, sustained Salvadoran democracy for more than two decades: It made democracy safe for both Arena and FMLN—and, crucially, for the powerful constituencies each represented—and gave voters a meaningful choice between two parties that represented preexisting cleavages in society.

Beginning in the late 2000s, however, this system fell victim to political decay: The transition pact—and the institutional framework that it had created—remained static, even as Salvadoran society experienced far-reaching changes. New constituencies, such as younger voters for whom wartime divides meant little, and new issues, namely widespread organized crime, generated novel political demands. The enduring lega-

cies of the pact made it difficult for the party system to adapt to these changing times—and this failure of the mainstream parties to evolve would work to undermine the entire democratic system.

Wartime elites and their close allies still wielded substantial influence over leadership and candidate selection, due in large part to the 1992 Electoral Code. Although a new political-parties law signed in 2013 mandated internal elections, traditional party leaders could still control membership rolls, appoint internal election coordinators, and use their organizations' loosely defined ethics codes as a litmus test for candidates. This meant that both parties continued to nominate candidates with close ties to the civil war even as Salvadoran society moved on.

Consider El Salvador's 2014 presidential election, the first one in which Salvadorans born after the end of the civil war were eligible to vote. The FMLN chose Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla commander, as its presidential candidate and Oscar Ortíz, another former combatant, as his running mate. During the next presidential election, when Bukele appeared destined to win the FMLN nomination, the party leadership expelled him—and nominated Hugo Martínez, yet another former guerrilla, to run against him. These nominations were all decided by traditional FMLN elites, who had been empowered, since the pacted reforms of the early 1990s, to control the inner workings of their party. Even when party leaders experimented with presidential candidates without clear ties to the civil-war period, as Arena did with Antonio Saca in 2004 or the FMLN did with Mauricio Funes in 2009, continuity remained the norm: Familiar faces—and, especially in the case of Arena, well-known family names—dominated each party's lists of legislators, mayors, internal officials, and financiers. While this continuity had been essential to encouraging wartime elites to embrace electoral politics in the early years of democratic rule, in the long run, it forced voters to choose almost exclusively from among "the same ones as always"—to borrow Bukele's now-famous phrase—even as Salvadoran democracy entered its third decade. Arena and the FMLN failed to provide voters with new alternatives, so voters seeking new options would have to look outside the two traditional parties.

The pact, however, also deterred the emergence of new parties that could challenge the Arena-FMLN duopoly. Per the 1992 Electoral Code, political parties' public campaign financing for an electoral cycle was proportional to their vote share in the previous election. For parties that had never competed in an election, access to funding was determined based on projected votes. During the transition period, this system (which is still in effect) provided the FMLN—already a mass organization with significant public support—a financial base upon which it could rebuild itself as a political party. Yet the public campaign-funding mechanism presented new parties with a paradox: In effect, they had to be popular before they could access the resources needed to compete for

votes. Between 1992 and 2018, at least a dozen new parties attempted to break Arena and the FMLN's hold on Salvadoran politics. Until Bukele's victory, no new party had ever succeeded—and most disappeared after one election cycle.

The received wisdom in political science is that a working democracy requires strong institutions. The Salvadoran case demonstrates that overinstitutionalization can also undermine democracy.

As a result, Salvadorans grew increasingly detached from the two major parties—and from the political system with which they were synonymous. In 2009, 50.8 percent of Salvadoran voters said they supported one of the two major parties, a figure which had shrunk to nearly 26 percent by 2018, the year before Bukele was elected president.[17] Only 22.1 percent of voters believed that elections expressed the will of the people. A chasm had opened up between Salvadoran voters and their parties. Bukele and his party exploited this gap to upend the Arena-FMLN duopoly. Millennial authoritarianism allowed them to succeed where previous challengers had failed by substituting Bukele's personal brand and far-reaching social-media operation for traditional party-building.

El Salvador's current political crisis shows that the proponents of transition pacts were right—but so were their critics. The bargains struck in the early 1990s made El Salvador's democratic *transition* possible by protecting powerful elites, just as the supporters of pacts had anticipated. But over time, these same agreements made democratic *consolidation* difficult because they contributed to the creation of a political system that was unable to adapt to meet changing demands. In 1990, political scientist Terry Karl warned that transition pacts "may appear to be temporary agreements" but become "persistent barriers to change, barriers that can even scar a new regime with a permanent 'birth defect.'"[18]

This underlying lesson extends beyond transition pacts. The received wisdom in political science is that a working democracy requires strong institutions. The Salvadoran case, however, demonstrates that overinstitutionalization can also undermine democracy. Strong political institutions—such as rules about campaign financing or intraparty decision making—shape political outcomes by making some results more likely than others.[19] When institutions are so rigid that they are difficult to modify, a large and dangerous gap may emerge between the restricted range of outcomes that those institutions permit on the one hand, and what voters demand on the other. Institutional weakness can destabilize democracy, but, over time, so can overinstitutionalization and political decay.

Paradoxically, public support for El Salvador's post-transition politi-

cal system waned even as key government institutions grew less partisan and political. Traditionally, Salvadoran state institutions that were designed to be nonpartisan—such as the courts, attorney-general, and technical agencies—have in fact been hyperpartisan. Patronage—the distribution of public jobs based on political loyalties instead of merit—is widespread. On the Inter-American Development Bank's Merit Index, which "measures the degree of effective protection against arbitrariness, political capture or clientelism" in the civil service, El Salvador scores well below the regional average.[20] The Salvadoran civil service is characterized by the "discretion of [political] authorities to hire, relocate, or fire employees."[21] This culture of patronage has given elected officials great influence over nominally autonomous state institutions, limiting government oversight and enabling widespread corruption.

Yet as Salvadoran democracy consolidated, key institutions of horizontal accountability grew increasingly independent—and assertive. Beginning in 2014, prosecutors and the courts began to do what they had never done before: investigate and punish corruption at the highest levels of government. In May of that year, the attorney-general's office charged former Arena president Francisco Flores (1999–2004) with embezzlement and misuse of public funds. He died two years later under house arrest. In 2016, former president Antonio Saca (2004–09), his chief of staff, and several other close associates were arrested and accused of illegal enrichment and money laundering. Saca was eventually found guilty of embezzling over US$300 million in public funds and sentenced to prison.

In 2018, the attorney-general ordered the arrest of Mauricio Funes (2009–14), the first FMLN president, for corruption. Funes had fled to Nicaragua in 2016 to avoid prosecution. Thus by the time Bukele became president, three of his four immediate predecessors had faced serious corruption charges. Between 2014 and 2018, corruption charges were also brought against several other high-profile officials, including a president of the legislature, an attorney-general, and a first lady, as well as numerous mayors and legislators. While these investigations were not all entirely apolitical—for example, then-President Funes spurred the investigation against Flores during a highly contested presidential election—these cases showed that, beginning in 2014, the attorney-general and the courts had achieved an unprecedented level of autonomy and were not afraid to hold powerful politicians from both major parties accountable.

How did these developments affect Salvadoran democracy? In principle, depoliticizing state institutions and fighting corruption should strengthen democratic regimes. Such efforts increase horizontal accountability: A democracy in which relatively autonomous courts and prosecutors hold powerful politicians accountable is inherently stronger than one in which they do not. Moreover, high-profile

corruption cases brought forward by nonpartisan institutions can buttress public support for democracy by showing the public that no one is above the law.

Yet in El Salvador, these investigations—and the depoliticization of state institutions more generally—backfired. Voters did not interpret the corruption inquiries against powerful politicians as a sign that state institutions were becoming less partisan or that democracy was deepening. Instead, the public viewed them as proof that the entire political system was corrupt beyond repair. That these high-profile cases did not appear to discriminate between the two major parties meant that the investigations could not be dismissed as partisan witch hunts, further convincing the public that corruption had infiltrated the entire system. As Salvadoran political scientist Oscar Pocasangre notes, before long "voters started questioning their party ties and looking for alternatives."[22] By 2018, a remarkable 82.3 percent of Salvadorans said that there were no meaningful differences between Arena and the FMLN.[23] Only 27.7 percent said they preferred democracy over any other type of government—the lowest percentage of any country that Latinobarómetro surveyed.[24] During his successful presidential run, Bukele capitalized on these perceptions of widespread corruption and democratic dysfunction: *El dinero alcanza cuando nadie roba,* or "there is enough money when no one steals," was one of his signature catchphrases.

The Salvadoran experience thus highlights an important challenge for democratic consolidation: In the long run, depoliticizing state institutions, increasing horizontal accountability, and fighting corruption almost certainly strengthen democracy. But they do so at the cost of revealing potentially damaging information about the extent of politicians' abuses. Therefore in the short run these horizontal-accountability efforts may instead weaken democracy by undermining voters' trust in the political system and driving them toward extremist, authoritarian, or populist candidates and parties. Paradoxically, these negative short-term consequences may be more apparent where corruption and abuse are widespread—precisely where horizontal accountability is most needed.

The Millennial Model

Millennial authoritarianism has helped Nayib Bukele to ride a wave of public discontent to the presidency and undermine democratic institutions. This broad dissatisfaction with the political system has been fueled in part by the hidden costs of democratic pacts. The long-term consequences of pacted transitions are already evident in other Latin American democracies. In Venezuela, the long-run costs of the 1958 Punto Fijo pact undermined public support for political institutions and paved the way for the rise of Hugo Chávez. Chile, where support for political institutions has declined dramatically, is also experiencing the

double-edged effects of its transitional pact. In these countries and El Salvador, transition pacts were designed to protect and strengthen powerful elites. In the short run, these protections ensured that elites remained at least minimally committed to electoral politics; therefore the pacts were essential to democratization. But in the long run, these pacts produced unresponsive party systems that could not adapt to new political demands, undermining the same democracies that they had helped to establish.

In El Salvador, widespread discontent with the political system has also been spurred by the unintended consequences of fighting corruption. Other Latin American states may face a similar short-term tradeoff between increasing horizontal accountability and preserving democratic stability. In Brazil, Guatemala, and Peru, recent high-profile corruption investigations have already undermined public support for democracy and facilitated the rise of antiestablishment candidates. Where attempts to fight corruption and other forms of abuse go hand-in-hand with efforts to strengthen voters' trust in the political system, democracy has a better chance of surviving.[25]

Bukele's rapid rise may also become a model for aspiring autocrats across Latin America. Millennial authoritarianism relies on broad public discontent with democracy and easy access to social media. Both are widespread: According to the 2018 Latinobarómetro survey, only 24.4 percent of Latin Americans are fully or mostly satisfied with their countries' democracy and 70.9 percent are active on social media. Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are already reshaping politics across the region.[26] Bukele capitalized on these trends to win the presidency and undermine democratic institutions. Soon others may follow.

Meanwhile, democratic backsliding in El Salvador will likely continue. In Bukele's speech to the legislature on 1 June 2021—a month after his attack on the judiciary and two years since his inauguration—the Salvadoran president vowed to ensure that "the same ones as always" can never return to power. The next step in his plan, he explained, would be to erase the old regime's "ideological apparatus," including private media organizations, think tanks, and civil society groups. Bukele then asked legislators and those watching on television to stand, raise their right hand, and join him in a solemn oath: "We vow to protect what we have conquered; to fight peacefully against every enemy, against every obstacle, against every barrier. We vow to defend our future conquests; to never allow those who made us suffer to return to power. We vow to stand together in the struggle to come. No one will come between God and his people."[27] With few sources of horizontal accountability having survived Bukele's first two years in office, we should expect El Salvador's authoritarian president to continue concentrating political power.

NOTES

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9. For an unofficial transcript, see Carlos Martínez, "Ahora creo que está muy claro quién tiene el control de la situación," *El Faro*, 10 February 2020.

10. Bukele, Twitter, 6 June 2019, *https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1136838876884979717*.

11. "Encuesta sobre el proceso electoral 2018," 34.

12. Ricardo Córdova Macías, Carlos Eduardo Argueta, and María José Erazo, "La población salvadoreña en las elecciones presidenciales de 2019: Análisis de la intención de voto mediante un Panel Electoral," Working Paper 01-2019 (San Salvador, El Salvador: Fundaungo, San Salvador, 2019), 39.

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15. Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization," 8.

16. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 97-117.

17. "Encuesta poselectoral de las elecciones presidenciales de 2019: ¿Por qué las y los salvadoreños votaron como votaraon en las elecciones del 3 de febrero?" Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas, 19 May 2019, *https://uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/Encuesta-Poselectoral-2019-v9-07-05-19-10-33am-final-1-1.pdf*.

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