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THE BUKELE MODEL: WILL IT SPREAD?

Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez and Alberto Vergara

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On 26 March 2022, El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele declared war on crime, established a state of emergency suspending a host of constitutional rights, and ordered the army into the streets. In the next two weeks, authorities conducted more than 8,500 arrests, a number that would swell to almost eighty thousand—more than 1 percent of the population—by 2024.

The crackdown worked. By early 2023, the *maras*—powerful gangs that once controlled significant swaths of territory, extorted large portions of the population, and turned El Salvador into one of the world's most violent countries—had virtually disappeared. Official homicide and extortion rates sank to record lows. And, despite widespread arbitrary arrests and other state abuse, Bukele's approval rating soared to 90 percent. "Bukele," remarked Lima's Mayor Rafael López Aliaga, "has accomplished a miracle."¹

Indeed, this is an outcome that defies much of what we know about crackdowns. Bukele is far from the first Latin American president to embrace *mano dura*—or "iron fist"—crime policies. In the early and mid-2000s, for example, governments in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras implemented harsh *mano dura* programs to address rising insecurity. In Mexico, President Felipe Calderón famously declared war on the country's drug cartels in late 2006. National and subnational governments in Brazil and Colombia, too, have experimented with repressive anticrime policies. And Ecuador and Honduras are currently engaged in crackdowns of their own. But until Bukele, none of these crackdowns had eliminated violent crime—most, in fact, had backfired.

In a region marked by persistent insecurity, ineffective governance,

and unpopular incumbents, Bukele's unprecedented success in fighting crime quickly turned him into an international star. In 2023, the Latinobarómetro survey asked respondents to evaluate eleven sitting presidents from across the Americas. Bukele received by far the highest score (see Table). On Twitter, his preferred platform, Bukele has amassed 6.1 million followers, more than ten followers for every Salvadoran user. And an extensive list of politicians—including presidents, ministers, lawmakers, local officials, and candidates encompassing nearly every country in the region—have praised, and even vowed to emulate, Bukele's security policies. Some, like Argentinian presidential hopeful Santiago Cúneo, Chilean legislator Gaspar Rivas, and Ecuadorian presidential candidate Jan Topiic, have gone so far as to explicitly present themselves as “homegrown Bukeles.”

In short, the Salvadoran president and his security policies—the “Bukele model”—have become one of the most visible, popular, and influential political brands in Latin America. The diffusion of *bukelismo* raises at least three important questions. Why did Bukele's crackdown succeed when so many previous experiments with *mano durismo* failed? Can El Salvador serve as a viable model for the rest of the region? And what are the implications of the Bukele model's broad appeal for democracy in Latin America?

Dilemmas of *Mano Dura*

Mano dura policies almost always fail to curb organized crime for at least two reasons. First, as Benjamin Lessing has observed, when the state declares unconditional war on crime, criminal groups have at least two powerful incentives to “fight fire with fire”: physically protecting themselves from state repression and persuading the state to reverse—or at least refrain from enforcing—its repressive policies. As a result, hard-on-crime policies ultimately lead to more, not less, violence. In Mexico, for example, cartel-related homicides multiplied by a factor of eight after President Felipe Calderón declared a “battle with no quarter” against drug-trafficking groups.²

Second, *mano dura* policies tend to trigger counterproductive changes in the organizational structure of criminal groups. In El Salvador, the *maras* were loose constellations of small, scattered, and relatively nonviolent cliques until the mid-2000s, when governments implemented *mano dura* policies. These crackdowns not only motivated cliques to unify (to fight back more effectively against the state) but also gave them the opportunity to do so (by physically bringing clique leaders together in loosely supervised prisons). This is how El Salvador's *maras* evolved into powerful and cohesive national organizations. In Mexico, Calderón's “kingpin strategy”—the targeting of high-level cartel leaders—had the opposite effect on the organization of criminal groups,

TABLE— REGIONAL EVALUATION AND NAME RECOGNITION OF WESTERN-HEMISPHERE INCUMBENTS IN 2023

Name	Country	Evaluation	Name Recognition
Nayib Bukele	El Salvador	6.78	49.9
Joe Biden	USA	4.93	55.9
Lula da Silva	Brazil	4.61	53.5
AMLO	Mexico	4.38	43.0
Guillermo Lasso	Ecuador	3.78	23.9
Luis Lacalle Pou	Uruguay	3.63	20.7
Gabriel Boric	Chile	3.62	25.7
Gustavo Petro	Colombia	3.62	25.3
Alberto Fernández	Argentina	3.57	28.6
Daniel Ortega	Nicaragua	3.04	43.2
Nicolás Maduro	Venezuela	2.16	74.2

Source: Latinobarómetro 2023 survey.

Note: Evaluation scores are the average response on an opinion scale from 0 (Very Bad) to 10 (Very Good) among those who answered the question. Name recognition is calculated by subtracting from 100 the percentage of respondents who said they did not know who each president was. Figures are averages from across the seventeen countries included the sample, with each country receiving equal weight, but excluding each president's home country.

leading to fragmentation, competition, and infighting. But the overall result mirrored El Salvador's: Criminal groups became more violent after the crackdown.³

At the same time, *mano dura* policies tend to carry a high cost for democracy. Hard-on-crime policies usually involve a serious curtailment of individual rights and protections from state abuse. Mexico's war on drugs, for example, led to enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and systematic acts of torture by police.⁴ Unlawful police killings have also been common during local crackdowns in Brazil.⁵ And in El Salvador, Bukele's war on gangs has resulted in widespread arbitrary arrests, the elimination of due-process guarantees, and acts of state torture inside prisons.⁶ Moreover, because repressive measures are more likely to target areas with high levels of crime, and because criminal groups tend to thrive in marginalized communities with limited state presence, it is often the most vulnerable who bear the brunt of state abuse.

In short, *mano dura* policies rarely work, often backfire, and almost always entail high costs for democracy. Yet despite this track record, they are strikingly popular among Latin American voters. In 2014, the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) asked participants in eighteen Latin American countries whether crime should be tackled through prevention policies or through harsher punishment. Those in favor of punitive measures outnumbered those in favor of preventive strategies in every country. In 2016, more than 83 percent of all LAPOP respondents agreed that penalties for crimes needed to be increased. And

studies show that the appeal of hard-on-crime policies in Latin America is broad, diverse, and often cuts across ideological lines.⁷

For politicians, this reality presents a difficult tradeoff between good policy and good politics. Given the popularity of *mano durismo*, politicians often face powerful electoral incentives to embrace hard-on-crime policies, particularly in countries where crime and insecurity are dominant issues. Even though crackdowns and other repressive policies are costly and ineffective, embracing them is therefore often good politics, at least in the short run. Politicians can, in principle, resist the *mano durista* temptation and instead invest in policies that are more likely to provide sustainable solutions to insecurity, such as stamping out the “root causes of crime” through economic development and inclusion, increasing state capacity, or investing in prevention and rehabilitation programs. But these policies are long-term commitments that might yield meaningful results only months or years after they are implemented. They often do little to address citizen demands for immediate and forceful action. Pursuing this alternative path is often good policy, but bad politics.

This tradeoff has contributed to a perverse cycle in many Latin American democracies: Faced with an overwhelming public appetite for *mano dura*, governments adopt popular hard-on-crime policies, which almost inevitably fail or backfire. Governments then sometimes double-down on *mano dura*, but are eventually forced to scale back or abandon repressive policies—until public demands trigger a new wave of *mano durismo*. Individual rights suffer and insecurity persists.

In El Salvador, however, Bukele appeared to find a compelling solution to these dilemmas: a *mano dura* model that promised to eradicate crime, to do so swiftly, and to elicit immediate and widespread public support despite its extensive toll on individual rights. This is the appeal of the Bukele model—and also its puzzle. If history and theory tell us that *mano dura* policies are destined to fail, why did Bukele’s crackdown succeed?

Understanding the Bukele Model

When Bukele became president in June 2019, homicide rates had been in a steep and steady decline for three years, down from 107 per 100,000 in 2015 to 53 per 100,000 in 2018.⁸ Once in office, Bukele opted to negotiate with the *maras*: In exchange for perks for incarcerated gang members, protection from extradition, softer policing, and other concessions, the country’s dominant criminal groups—the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), Barrio 18 Revolucionarios, and Barrio 18 Sureños—agreed to keep homicidal violence to a minimum.⁹ This nonaggression pact helped to further reduce violence, and the homicide rate halved during the first two years of Bukele’s presidency.

Then, on 25 March 2022, the MS-13 went on a killing spree. Ap-

parently triggered by a breakdown in the gang's negotiations with the government, this sudden and coordinated wave of attacks marked a stunning reversal to the country's recent advances in curbing homicides: The MS-13 claimed at least 86 lives in a period of 72 hours, and March 26—when most of the violence took place—marked El Salvador's deadliest day on record.

This acute and unexpected security crisis triggered Bukele's dramatic pivot toward *mano durismo*. By the morning of March 26, Bukele and his allies began to implement the aggressive nationwide crackdown that would come to be known as the "Bukele model," including:

- 1. *The formal suspension of constitutional rights.*** Bukele's congressional supermajority swiftly approved a *régimen de excepción*—a state of emergency or "exception regime"—suspending several individual rights and due-process guarantees. The state of emergency allowed security forces to conduct arrests, intercept private communications, and restrict freedom of movement at will. It also suspended the right to a defense lawyer and allowed authorities to withhold basic information from detainees and their attorneys. Originally valid for thirty days, the *régimen de excepción* has been renewed every month since March 2022.
- 2. *Mass arrests.*** The government sought to punish and dismantle the gangs by physically wiping them away: imprisoning its members, collaborators, and, in the words of one law-enforcement officer, even "their families and their acquaintances."¹⁰ Authorities conducted more than 78,000 arrests in the next two years. In January 2023, the government opened a new maximum-security megaprison, the Terrorism Confinement Center (CECOT), to help house the burgeoning inmate population.
- 3. *Punitive legal reforms.*** Bukele and his allies hardened sentencing guidelines and lowered the age of responsibility for gang-related crimes; greenlit mass trials; and outlawed the dissemination of gang messages that could "could generate a state of anxiety and panic in the population" (including by the press).

These measures came at a high cost for human rights and individual freedoms. Arbitrary and wrongful arrests were widespread, and as El Salvador's incarcerated population ballooned—the country soon amassed the highest incarceration rate in the world—reports of torture and unexplained deaths inside prisons became commonplace.¹¹ More broadly, the crackdown had a chilling effect on civil liberties even among those who were not directly affected by it: In a January 2024 survey, for example, 62.7 percent of Salvadorans said they were "being more careful when sharing political opinions."¹²

But if the crackdown aimed to squash violence and destroy the gangs at any cost, then by that measure it was a resounding success. Even as they conducted 8,500 arrests in the first two weeks of the crackdown

The conventional wisdom holds that the crackdown allowed Bukele to dismantle Salvadoran democracy. In fact, the opposite is true: A crackdown of such magnitude was only possible because Bukele had already captured or undermined all institutions of horizontal accountability.

alone, security forces appeared to face virtually no resistance from the criminal groups—a crucial point we return to below. Violence and extortions plummeted immediately, and within months the Salvadoran government was reporting one of the lowest homicide rates in the world. Less than a year after the crackdown began, the celebrated investigative outlet *El Faro* reported that Bukele had dismantled El Salvador's gangs.¹³

What explains this success? One reason is the crackdown's scope and intensity. Arrest numbers

provide the most striking illustration of the sheer scale of Bukele's policies. Consider Mexico, until recently the most emblematic of Latin America's crackdowns. In the first 43 months of Calderón's war on drugs, Mexican authorities conducted more than 120,000 arrests—equivalent to about 107 for every 100,000 Mexicans, or 0.1 percent of the population.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in the first 24 months of Bukele's crackdown, Salvadoran authorities carried out approximately 1,221 arrests for every 100,000 Salvadorans, or equivalent to about 1.22 percent of the population—a full order of magnitude more than in Mexico, and in a significantly shorter time period. Bukele's crackdown is almost certainly the most extreme ever seen in Latin America.

El Salvador's small geographic scale and the Salvadoran gangs' *relative* weakness (compared to the better-financed Mexican cartels, for example) help to explain why Bukele was able to execute a crackdown of such magnitude. But the critical condition for understanding the intensity of Bukele's crackdown is political: Well before he declared war on gangs, Bukele had eliminated all checks and balances on the presidency.

In March 2021, the president used his legislative supermajority to stage a self-coup, firing the attorney-general, vacating the constitutional court, and packing both institutions.¹⁵ By November, Bukele had purged the rest of the lower courts, gutted the power of local governments, and placed loyalists atop all other key oversight institutions, including the human-rights defender. By the end of 2021, Bukele had effectively captured, dismantled, or coopted all sources of horizontal accountability on the executive. The president, in other words, could rule alone. Without a minimally autonomous legislature that could force him to negotiate

the scope and numerous renewals of the state of exception, without a minimally independent justice system that could check and curb state abuses, and with the army and police firmly by his side, Bukele was free to implement a maximalist, unrestrained crackdown. Bukele implied as much during a speech on the night he was reelected for a second term: “Could we have won the war against gangs with the ARENA attorney-general? Could we have won the war against gangs with the previous Constitutional Court?”¹⁶

The intensity of the crackdown, however, provides only a partial explanation for its success. As we described above, most crackdowns fail not because states apply them with insufficient force, but because criminal groups have powerful incentives to respond to state repression by fighting fire with fire. Yet there is virtually no evidence that the *maras* used their considerable power to resist the existential threat posed by Bukele’s crackdown. While not as well financed or well armed as other groups in the region, the Salvadoran gangs were nonetheless formidable criminal organizations. As they had demonstrated in the decade leading up to Bukele’s crackdown, these groups—which boasted at least seventy-thousand active members—had the resources and organizational capacity to extort 70 percent of all businesses, shut down the country’s public-transportation system, force the government to the negotiating table, influence national elections, and unleash extraordinary violence just as easily as they could tame it. Yet by all accounts, Salvadoran security forces encountered little to no resistance as they went about dismantling the gangs that had ravaged El Salvador for the better part of two decades.

Why did the gangs not fight back? At least part of the answer lies in the pact that immediately preceded the crackdown. Perhaps unintentionally, the Bukele-*maras* pact had two critical consequences for how the gangs responded to the eventual crackdown.

First, the pact crippled the gangs’ ability to formulate a strategic, coordinated response to the state of exception. Three years of negotiations had driven a wedge between gang leaders, who had long operated from behind bars, and their rank-and-file members in the streets: While leaders reaped the immediate benefits of the pact (like better prison conditions, protection from extradition, and, in some cases, early release), it was the rank and file who had to refrain from using violence—a costly sacrifice that made it harder for them to carry out extortions, protect gang turf, and resist arrest. To enforce the pact and avoid losing control over the rank and file, the gangs’ top brass, known as *ranflas*, centralized control, leaving their organizations without capable lieutenants who could lead in their absence. As one gang member told *El Faro*, because of the pact, “the *ranflas* [in prison] didn’t want to appoint substitutes [in the streets]. I don’t know why. . . . these *locos* negotiated for their own benefit.” This meant that the government could cripple the gangs’ ability to coordinate a response to the crackdown by simply cutting off communications between

the *ranflas* and their rank and file. “As opposed to 2015, when the administration of President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, too, launched a [crackdown],” observes *El Faro*, “in the past year the gangs received no guidance from their leaders to organize themselves to face off with the state.” Instead, when the crackdown arrived, what security forces encountered was a weakened and disorganized constellation of “fragmented structures left in the hands of middle managers without top-down directions [or] the capacity to make important decisions.”¹⁷

The pact also reshaped gang members’ strategic calculations about how to respond to state repression. Traditionally, criminal groups respond to unconditional crackdowns with violence because they have little to lose by doing so (since the state has already vowed to repress them unconditionally) and potentially much to gain (self-defense and persuading the state to backtrack). But the Bukele-*maras* pact reversed these expectations. Before March 2022, the gangs had gone on two similar killing sprees: once in April 2020 and then again in November 2021. In both instances, Bukele declared war on the gangs, followed by repressive measures. But the gangs did not fight back, state repression eased within days, and the pact resumed. These episodes established a powerful precedent. Gangs learned that the state would not resort to violence unless they did so first, and that, as long as they did not fight back, any repression would be short-lived. When history appeared to repeat itself in March 2022, many gang members would have concluded that their best response was to lie low and turn the other cheek.

By undermining the *maras*’ ability to coordinate a response and dissuading gang members from fighting back, the pact thus provided an opportunity to cripple the gangs with very little resistance by embracing a sudden, unconditional crackdown. The state capitalized on this opportunity swiftly and decisively thanks to the sheer intensity of the state of emergency. This is why Bukele’s crackdown succeeded.

This interpretation offers two initial warnings about the risks posed by the diffusion of the Bukele model. First, a crackdown of the scope and intensity of Bukele’s is incompatible with democratic checks and balances. The conventional wisdom holds that the crackdown allowed Bukele to dismantle Salvadoran democracy. In fact, the opposite is true: A crackdown of such magnitude was only possible because Bukele had already captured or undermined all institutions of horizontal accountability. This means that any government hoping to replicate the scale of Bukele’s crackdown is likely either to fail or undermine democracy.

Second, the conditions generated by Bukele’s gang pact—critical for the crackdown’s success—are unlikely to be easily replicated elsewhere. The pact itself, as well as the processes it set in motion, were a result of idiosyncratic factors (such as the structure of the Salvadoran gangs), contingent choices (such as the *ranflas*’ decision not to appoint lieutenants), and, ultimately, luck. Unless those who aspire to copy Bukele’s

crackdown can also formulate alternative strategies for avoiding a criminal backlash, their efforts are likely to result in more, not less, violence.

The Model's Limits: The Cases of Honduras and Ecuador

Bold policies that succeed in one environment frequently come to be regarded as models that can be replicated in other settings, but with little regard for how context, sequencing, and contingent choices mediate policy outcomes.¹⁸ Thus leaders often set out to emulate bold policies, but reap very different results. This is precisely what has happened in Honduras and Ecuador, the two Latin American countries that have adopted Bukele-style crackdowns since March 2022. They serve as evidence of the Bukele model's limitations for the rest of the region.

Like El Salvador, gang violence and extortion networks have long plagued Honduras. Drug trafficking has also played a major role in Honduras's criminal landscape, and the state grew increasingly complicit in drug-trafficking operations under the government of Juan Orlando Hernández (2014–22). In 2021, Honduras had one of the world's highest homicide rates in the world, while extortion payments equaled 3 percent of the country's GDP.¹⁹

In November 2021, opposition candidate Xiomara Castro of the Liberty and Refoundation (Libre) party—who campaigned on a leftist platform with a progressive approach to public security—was elected president. Aided by a last-minute electoral alliance with fellow opposition candidate Salvador Nasralla and his Savior Party, Castro's landslide win over regime candidate Nasry Asfura was celebrated as a victory for democracy: During twelve years in power, the National Party had established what appeared to be a durable competitive authoritarian regime.²⁰

During the first three months of her presidency, Castro was able to strike deals with a divided Congress to repeal the so-called official-secrets act, which allowed officials to hide corruption by classifying a wide range of public documents; increase energy subsidies; and end the Zones for Employment and Economic Development, Honduras's controversial model-cities program. This period also coincided with the extradition of Hernández to the United States on drug-trafficking charges. But by late 2022, this brief honeymoon period came to an end. Castro's legislative agenda stalled in a bitterly divided legislature, and her popular support began to slip. In an attempt to shore up her political capital, Castro turned to security. Bukele, who was more popular and well known in Honduras than anywhere else outside of El Salvador, offered a ready-made roadmap. In late November, Castro declared war on extortion, announcing a state of emergency that curtailed several constitutional rights and enabled security forces to crack down on MS-13, Barrio 18, and other criminal gangs. As commentators and observers noted, the Bukele model had a direct influence on Castro's crackdown.

Crucially, however, the Honduran crackdown has been much more limited than its Salvadoran counterpart in both scope and intensity. While Bukele declared a nationwide crackdown, Castro's was initially limited to 162 neighborhoods in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. By the end of 2023, the state of emergency had been expanded considerably, but still included only 158 of the country's 298 municipalities. The use of force also paled in comparison to El Salvador: By one estimate, authorities had conducted only 1,960 additional arrests a year after the crackdown was declared.²¹

The Honduran crackdown has yielded mixed results—and appears to have exacerbated at least some forms of gang violence. An independent December 2023 report noted that homicide rates had decreased during the state of emergency but concluded that these improvements were driven primarily by a decline in “homicides linked to interpersonal violence” instead of those “attributed to gangs and extortion activities.” Multiple-victim homicides against civilians became more common throughout 2023, and violent clashes between criminal groups and state forces increased by 45 percent. Prison riots surged.²² The stated goal of the crackdown was to dismantle extortion—but extortions rose 11 percent, to the highest level in five years.²³

In Ecuador, Bukele-style policies have also failed to eliminate criminal violence. In May 2023, President Guillermo Lasso, who was facing impeachment, dissolved congress and triggered snap elections. Voters would choose a new president to finish Lasso's term in a context of acute violence. Though Ecuador long prided itself on being “an island of peace,” drug trafficking and gang warfare had shattered that image: Between 2019 and 2023, Ecuador's homicide rate soared from 7.03 per 100,000 inhabitants to 47.25, the highest in Latin America. Highly visible acts of violence became increasingly common. Between 2021 and 2023, for instance, prison massacres left more than five hundred dead. And in a particularly dramatic episode, gunmen assassinated anticrime candidate Fernando Villavicencio just eleven days before the first round of voting on 20 August 2023.

At just 35, Daniel Noboa was a relatively unknown candidate for serving out Lasso's term: A week before the election, polls placed his support in the single digits. But with the race in disarray following Villavicencio's murder and having performed well in the campaign's only televised debate, Noboa outperformed the polls to secure a ticket to the October 15 runoff—the kind of unexpected electoral outcome typical of hollowed democracies.²⁴

Before his surprise first-round performance, Noboa had deemphasized security, instead framing his candidacy around right-of-center positions on economic issues. His stance on crime began to harden after qualifying for the runoff, but overall Noboa “presented himself as a moderate politician, distanced from forceful positions [on security] like Nayib Bukele's.”²⁵ Noboa won the runoff narrowly and became presi-

dent on November 23. In the first six weeks of his presidency, he reshuffled the military and police high command, vowed to build two new maximum-security prisons modeled after Bukele's Terrorism Confinement Center, and said he had a plan to crack down on the country's jails. Separately, in mid-December, Attorney-General Diana Salazar Méndez launched "Operation Metástasis," a sprawling probe against public officials linked to organized crime.

Then, in early January 2024, Ecuador's security situation reached a tipping point. On January 7, law-enforcement officials discovered that José Adolfo "Fito" Macías Villamar, leader of the Los Choneros syndicate, had escaped from a penitentiary in Guayaquil to avoid transfer to a maximum-security prison. The following day, Noboa declared an *estado de excepción* similar to El Salvador's, adding that he had ordered security forces to crack down in the country's prisons.²⁶ On January 9, the gangs replied with a wave of violent attacks in Guayaquil, Quito, Esmeraldas, and a handful of other cities. Criminal groups attacked universities, hospitals, prisons, police officers, and civilians in broad daylight. Bomb threats forced the evacuation of government buildings, and almost two-hundred guards were held hostage amid prison riots. A Los Choneros commando entered the studio of a state-owned television network in Guayaquil and took its journalists hostage as they were broadcasting live on air. "The mafias linked to drug trafficking have reacted to show that they are capable of putting democracy under siege," one expert concluded. These criminal groups replied to Noboa's "show of force" with an unambiguous message: "We are the ones in charge and we will prove it to you."²⁷

As Ecuador spiraled into crisis, Noboa doubled down on the crack-down, decreeing a state of "internal armed conflict" and designating 22 criminal groups as terrorist organizations and belligerent nonstate actors. "From this moment on, every terrorist group . . . has become a military target," announced the head of the Armed Forces' Joint Command.²⁸ Over the next two months, authorities reportedly conducted approximately eleven-thousand arrests—about a third as many as there were in El Salvador during the first two months of the Bukele crackdown.

Although Ecuador's delicate security situation continues to develop, Noboa's crackdown, like Castro's, appears to have produced mixed results. According to official statistics, the number of homicides declined sharply between January and March, while Noboa's approval rating climbed to 80 percent. But far from being defeated, Ecuador's criminal groups appear to have adapted, diversified, and relocated their activities—at least temporarily. Extortions and kidnappings have soared, particularly in the gang stronghold of Guayaquil.²⁹ Criminals have also continued targeting public officials: At least four local politicians have been murdered since January. And there are signs that a criminal backlash remains possible, especially if the crackdown hardens. In a new show of force, criminal groups committed 137 homicides during the week of March 27, including eighty dur-

ing Easter weekend alone.³⁰ The president's approval rating, meanwhile, slipped back to the mid-50s. Yet Noboa, who is likely to run for a full term in February 2025, appears set to continue down the *mano dura* path. The nationwide state of emergency, legally restricted to ninety days, was lifted in early April 2024. But, in an April 21 referendum, Ecuadorians voted in favor of extending the law-enforcement role of the armed forces, increasing criminal penalties, and allowing extradition, among other punitive policies. And, in early May, Noboa announced local states of emergency in five of the country's 24 provinces. The consequences of these developments remain to be seen.

For now, Honduras and Ecuador offer lessons about the uses and limits of the Bukele model. They suggest that Bukele-style policies can be appealing to leaders from across the political spectrum: Castro ran on the left, Noboa ran on the right, and both embraced crackdowns with ease. But they did so under different circumstances. Noboa turned to *mano durismo* out of necessity: Ecuador's quickly deteriorating security situation all but forced him to harden his position on crime. In Honduras, Castro's move toward *mano durismo* appears more calculated, designed above all to help boost a president whose agenda—and public support—were increasingly weighed down by political dysfunction. Yet both counted on the overwhelming popularity of hard-on-crime policies and, in both cases, the Bukele model provided a ready-made *mano dura* formula.

Both cases also illustrate the challenges involved in replicating the success of Bukele's crackdown. If one defines success as eradicating organized criminal violence and eliminating criminal organizations, both crackdowns have failed. Ecuador and Honduras are not El Salvador, and we do not pretend to provide a definitive account of why the Noboa and Castro crackdowns have fallen short. Yet it is clear that the scale of those crackdowns was limited by constraints on the presidency. In Honduras, Castro faced an opposition-controlled legislature and a depleted and corrupt police force. In Ecuador, Noboa also faced an opposition-controlled legislature, as well as legal limits on the length and nature of *mano dura* policies. And, unlike Bukele, neither Castro nor Noboa had a strategy in place to avoid criminal backlash and adaptation. Criminal groups appear to have responded to these crackdowns as predicted by the traditional wisdom on crackdowns in Latin America: They adjusted their operations where possible, doubled down on violence when needed, and, ultimately, continued to thrive.

Looking Ahead

Despite these early failures, how likely is the Bukele model to continue shaping approaches to security in Latin America? One possibility is that the model's popularity will be short-lived. Policy diffusion tends to follow a bell-shaped pattern: Initial enthusiasm leads to a wave of emu-

lation, but as the challenges involved in replicating the policy's original success become more evident, diffusion often tapers off.³¹ If Honduras and Ecuador—and perhaps other early emulators of the Bukele model—fail in replicating El Salvador's success, the model's appeal could die off.

There are no signs that the state of emergency will be lifted, even as the gangs have been decimated and evidence of state abuses continues to mount. El Salvador has become a country “without gangs and without democracy.”

Yet it seems unlikely that the appeal of Bukele-style policies—or at least of *mano dura* more generally—will fade away in the foreseeable future. As long as insecurity continues to plague Latin America's democracies, voters will continue to demand forceful state action. Politicians will continue to embrace *mano dura*, and at least some aspects of the Salvadoran experience are likely to continue shaping these efforts.

Persistent insecurity will continue to erode public trust in democratic institutions, and demands for hard-on-crime policies will keep providing an opening for leaders to undermine checks and balances and curtail civil rights.

To escape this cycle, governments must find strategies to deliver results within—not at the expense of—democratic norms, principles, and institutions. As Gustavo Flores-Macías has argued, these strategies might involve investing in more efficient and transparent policing tactics, improving anticorruption systems, and promoting justice-sector reform.³² In any case, as long as voters perceive no viable short-term alternatives to hard-on-crime policies, the *mano dura* temptation will be hard to resist.

As for El Salvador, Bukele's crackdown has contributed to the collapse of democracy. In February 2024, thanks in part to the overwhelming popularity of the *régimen de excepción*, Bukele was reelected for a second term with more than 84 percent of the vote. Meanwhile, his party, New Ideas, won 54 of the sixty seats in the Legislative Assembly. It was an election that consolidated El Salvador's descent into competitive authoritarianism: Bukele ran despite a constitutional ban on reelection, gerrymandered the country's electoral map to favor New Ideas, and abused state resources to tilt the electoral playing field against the opposition. The party's legislators have now begun the process of rewriting the constitution, a move that will almost certainly extend Bukele's tenure and tighten his grip on power. And as we write, there are no signs that the state of emergency will be lifted, even as the gangs have been decimated and evidence of state abuses continues to mount. El Salvador has become a country “without gangs and without democracy.”³³ It looks likely to remain that way.

NOTES

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