



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on March 17, 2023

A Lesson Learned From El Salvador's Crackdown on MS-13

Is El Salvador providing the model for dealing with crime? If not, are there takeaways that can inform the ongoing conversation about organized crime in Latin America?

Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele has certainly been controversial. His crackdown on violent gangs in his country — most notably on Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13 — has been widely popular within El Salvador, as citizens have experienced a notable difference in quality of life as crime has very visibly gone down.

But Bukele's policies have also earned him deep criticism from the international human-rights community, who say the administration is denying due-process rights and inhumanely treating inmates.

On Wednesday, El Salvador [sent 2,000](#) more individuals suspected of being gang members to a specially built prison. Justice Minister Gustavo Villatoro says these suspected gang members "will never return" to the streets.

"They are never going to return to the communities, the neighborhoods, the barrios, the cities of our beloved El Salvador," said Villatoro.

Bukele is asking El Salvador's congress to extend anti-gang emergency measures, which would take this policy into its 13th month.

These measures suspend the right of association and absolve police from having to read people being arrested their rights or tell them the reason for the arrest. Additionally, those arrested do not have the right to an attorney and can be detained for 15 days without seeing a judge.

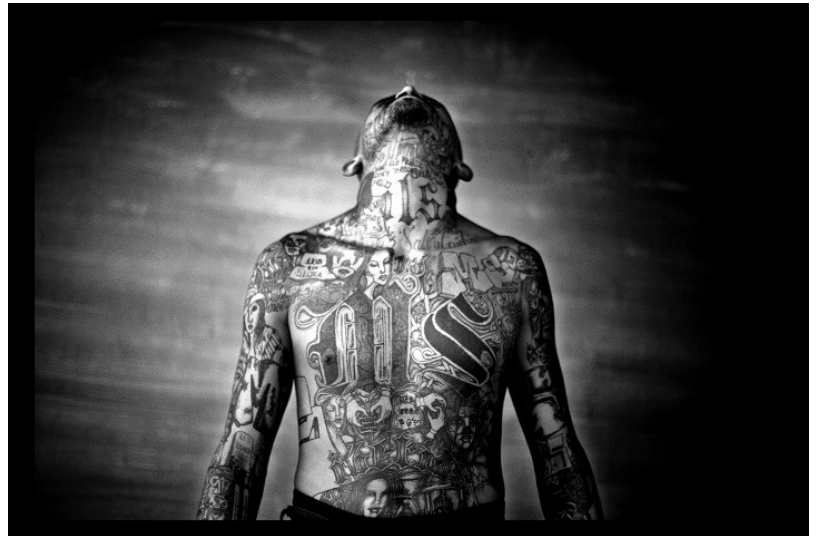
Approximately 65,000 people have been arrested as part of this campaign so far. Gang members are being held at the Terrorism Confinement Center. Opened in February, the prison is anticipated to eventually be able to house up to 40,000 inmates.

The country's congress is expected to approve Bukele's request for the extension, as they have done for all his requests so far. The president made his first request on March 27, 2022 to tackle rising gang violence. In one day, 62 people were killed throughout El Salvador.

Thanks to the measures, government officials claim, there have been no homicides for 200 days.

The Associated Press reported on the recent transfer of 2,000 inmates to the Terrorism Confinement Center:

Over the last 354 days, about 65,000 people have been arrested in the antigang campaign. Human rights groups say that there have been many instances of prisoner abuses and that



markarinafotos/flickr
MS-13 gang member



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innocent people have been swept up in police raids.

The government announced the mass inmate transfer with a slickly produced video posted on social media. It showed prisoners forced to run barefoot and handcuffed down stairways and over bare ground, clad only in regulation white shorts. They were then forced to sit with their legs locked in closely clumped groups in cells.

Gustavo Villatoro, the government's minister for justice and peace, said the suspected gang members would never return to the streets, even though about 57,000 of those arrested are still awaiting formal charges or a trial.

Citizens of El Salvador have expressed astonishment at the degree and speed of change, with some Salvadorans [saying](#) that gang members have "completely vanished."

Even Bukele's critics acknowledge that the measures have largely worked, although they argue the cost has been high for "democracy" and "human rights" and, thus, "the cure could be as harmful as the disease."

But the question is a complex one. After all, one might ask: What about the human rights of those who have been killed or would have been killed by the gangs?

It can be easy for foreign human rights advocates to wave their fingers scornfully while living in safety. But for the average person who actually has to live in El Salvador, abstract talk of alleged human-rights abuses is likely an unconvincing argument when they know what it's like to live in constant fear from bloodthirsty criminals.

Is Bukele's lead one that should be taken elsewhere, including drug-trafficking hot zones like Mexico?

There are certainly principles that can be applied across situations. Toughness on criminals is always a deterrent to crime. While there may very well be room in El Salvador's case to better protect due-process rights amid the crackdown, there's no denying that keeping gangsters off the streets and making an example of them works.

Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines took similar actions while he was president, likewise producing drastic effects in the fight against drug trafficking and communist terrorists.

However, these tactics work best when the government has a high level of autonomy from the criminal groups, so it can freely apply the full weight of government power to stamp out the criminals.

This is the case in El Salvador, where the government is dealing with MS-13, which, while widespread and brutal, is mostly concerned with perpetrating violence. Although MS-13 is known to dabble in the drug trade and other money-making schemes, these are not its primary focus and, as a result, it does not have the vast wealth at its disposal that has given the Mexican cartels so much control over the government there.

As a result, real change in Mexico would require vast social and political reform. They are now learning the sad lesson that once you let criminals take over your country, it is nigh impossible to be rid of them.



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