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Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance in Central America

Research and Dialogue

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Authors:
Wim Savenije
Edgardo Amaya Cóbar

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Foreword

In the early 2000s, the first exercises in political alternation tested the resilience of young democracies in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The peace agreements in El Salvador and Guatemala marked the end of military regimes and civil wars, ushering in a period of institutional change. Electoral bodies and human rights authorities were established, transparency and accountability mechanisms were introduced, and political participation for women and youth expanded. Supported by international cooperation, the three countries also adopted social policies aimed at reducing poverty and unemployment.

Despite these efforts, the reforms fell short of guaranteeing lasting well-being for the population. Gang-related violence emerged as a dominant issue, prompting governments to implement "tough-on-crime" policies. Although their effectiveness is debated, these measures were widely supported. In March 2022, the state of exception in El Salvador provided the legal framework to intensify such policies. While these policies raise serious human rights concerns, they remain popular and are increasingly seen as a model in neighbouring Honduras and Guatemala.

At NIMD, we believe it is essential to understand why citizens are willing to trade hard-won rights for security. What leads communities to place less importance on democracy, despite the sacrifices made to achieve it? While quantitative data on these trends exists at the national and regional levels, this qualitative research aims to go further. Our goal is to listen with an open mind, free of judgment, to better understand people's perspectives. We seek not only to answer the "why" but also to find new ways to promote the importance of democratic values and human rights in these changing times.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the participants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras who participated in the study anonymously and without expecting anything in return. In the study we may have called them "ordinary people", but they never were. Also, I want to thank our intermediaries in the three countries who made fieldwork possible, especially Luis Quintanilla, Luis García and Oscar Valladares (El Salvador), Carlos Chinchilla and Leonardo Pineda (Honduras), and Edson Gutiérrez and Pedro Alberto Calel (Guatemala). I also want to commend the research team for initiating this research, motivating the participants, and finishing the report on time; I especially want to mention Carmen Avelar, Edgardo Amaya Cóbar, and Wim Savenije. Finally, all this hard work would not have been possible without the coordination of Gracia Grande, Mario Valiente, and Cynthia Flores, and the administrative support of Esmeralda Gómez de Quintanilla and Carolina Castro.

Juan Meléndez
Executive Director NIMD El Salvador

Executive summary

Some threats to democratic governance in Central America—for instance, in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—seem to be intimately connected to insecurity and fear of crime and violence. The region has a long history of autocratic regimes renowned for the use of violence against their opponents and alleged criminals, but only a short period of democratic rule. However, with formal democracies in place, violent crime, drug trade, gangs, corruption, and abuses by the security forces have become critical concerns for large parts of the population. After decades of being considered one of Latin America's most insecure countries, El Salvador has taken drastic measures in recent years. The tough-on-crime policies and state of exception declared by the Bukele government in March 2023 and the resulting reduction in violence and crime placed El Salvador among the safest countries in the world. Although President Bukele restricted the freedoms of ordinary citizens by suspending parts of the Constitution, he has maintained high approval ratings of 97.4% in 2023 and 95.0% in 2024 (IUDOP, 2023a, 2024a). He is regarded as the most popular president in Latin America (Harrison & Vilcarino, 2024). Honduras followed El Salvador's lead in December 2023 by declaring a partial state of exception to combat crime, specifically extortion (Appleby & Dudley, 2023). Guatemala has not declared one, but its population suffers from high levels of crime and fear (Infosegura, 2024).

The UNDP Human Development Report 2023-24 notes a paradox: people believe that democracy is a fundamental pillar of political systems but increasingly support leaders who bypass the

fundamental rules of the democratic process (UNDP, 2024a). This phenomenon of bypassing established democratic processes and rules is sometimes called "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016). One explanation may be that people are exceedingly discontented with actual democracies (Levistki en: Elman, 2024) and are looking for "miracle cures" (Przeworski, 2024). Another reason may be self-interest, in that some citizens engage in a trade-off between personal good (for example, prosperity and living in a secure environment) and democracy (Müller, 2021).

However, these explanations may be too straightforward. If the democratic rights or freedoms supposedly exchanged have only an abstract existence for ordinary citizens, or if their wishes and intuitions about democracy seem irrelevant in everyday life and are not perceived as negatively affected by extraordinary measures, it is difficult to talk about a "trade-off". Also, surveys by Latinobarómetro and LAPOP's Americas Barometer show that support for democracy is higher in El Salvador than in neighboring countries (Latinobarómetro, 2023; Lupu et al., 2023). The explanations of a trade-off or strong dissatisfaction with democracy seem flawed because, at first sight, the state of exception in El Salvador seems to have reinforced the satisfaction of living in a democracy. There appears to be a gap in our understanding of how ordinary people in northern Central America think about democratic governance and how it relates to security, tough-on-crime policies, and the legitimacy of extraordinary measures.

The research project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance in Central America" focuses on how El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala citizens understand the relationship between democratic governance and security. To comprehend their experiences, ways of thinking, and opinions, the study focused on ordinary citizens and issues they worry about, such as insecurity, justice, and the local economy, as well as their participation in elections and what they expect from their government. It aims to deepen the understanding of the seemingly contradictory visions and meanings concerning topics such as security, mano-dura policies, democratic freedoms, and extraordinary measures to confront violence, criminality, and gangs. It asks how citizens view and value the relationships between security, democratic freedoms, tough-on-crime policies, and the legitimacy of extraordinary measures. The main research questions are:

- *How are citizens' perspectives on security, tough-on-crime approaches, and the legitimacy of extraordinary security measures related?*
- *How are ideas about the legitimacy of security policies affected when governments suspend fundamental democratic freedoms to fight delinquency and related insecurity?*
- *How can democratic values be strengthened in areas with high levels of insecurity?*

These questions are essential to understanding the popularity of the ongoing state of exception in El Salvador, why these policies appeal to the Honduran government, and why they challenge the new Guatemalan government. They are also elemental to identifying alternatives that strengthen security and democratic resilience in the region.

Methodology

To gain deeper insights into recent survey results, clarify apparent contradictions, and understand citizens' perspectives on democratic governance and extraordinary security measures, a qualitative methodology is essential. To prevent getting trapped in visions, opinions, and discussions influenced by predefined political perspectives or discourses, the study centers on the experiences and opinions of *ordinary citizens*—i.e., people who aren't engaged in politically influenced social movements or NGOs and who do not identify with any political party as supporters or militants. However, for a small-scale qualitative methodology to unearth reliable and valid results while studying the sensitive topics of insecurity, mano dura policies, and democratic values, a diverse sample of informants is crucial.

This study identified four populations relevant to how these policies may be perceived: (1) residents from urban neighborhoods with high levels of insecurity; (2) people living in more secure, often middle-class, urban neighborhoods; (3) people from rural areas; and (4) indigenous communities. Twenty-eight focus group discussions (FGD) and fifty-three semi-structured key informant interviews (KII) were conducted in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. An equal number of FGDs and KIIs were planned for each population, but in Guatemala, extra FGDs were held with members of indigenous communities due to logistical challenges. The FGDs were men- and women-only—except when participants from the LGBTQ+ community joined—and the average number of participants was seven and eight, respectively. The total number of participants was 263.

Ordinary people on democracy and security: some findings

In El Salvador, participants describe the actual situation in their neighborhood, city, or town as peace and tranquility. This indicates the enormous change they experience now that a state of exception is in place, with no gang members harassing, threatening, or extorting them or their family members. Some even use religious terms to describe the enormous change and the feeling of safety after decades of victimization and fear of being victimized by street gangs, not only attributing it to President Bukele but to divine intervention.

Youths, however, especially young males from areas previously claimed by gangs as their territory, still feel insecure. The security forces regularly stop them, demanding that they remove their shirts to show that they do not have (gang-related) tattoos. The police or soldiers also insist on checking their bags or belongings and inspecting their mobile phones. If officers find indications of gang sympathies, interpret something as being gang-related, or frown upon the youngsters' reactions, they may detain and imprison them under the state of exception. Young people from these communities often live with uncertainty; they don't know what could happen during a chance encounter with security forces.

Women experience insecurity and threats of violence differently than men. In Guatemala and Honduras, gangs threaten and try to recruit particularly young men, while girls are seen as potential girlfriends or sexual objects. However, under the state of exception in El Salvador, it is the security forces who stop and frisk young men. At the same time, girls are often subject to derogatory remarks and insinuations, and some instances of

improper behavior were also mentioned. Mothers mention being worried about what may happen to their children if they are outside on the streets and encounter gangs or security forces.

Participants generally prefer to live in a democratic political system and appreciate having the opportunity to vote and choose leaders who decide the future course of their country or municipality. This assertion may seem somewhat contradictory, especially when participants affirm they have little trust in the electoral process. In the eyes of citizens, having the opportunity to vote is essential but not enough. The vote-counting process, promises made during electoral campaigns, security, and the local economy are all relevant to how citizens perceive democratic governance.

Many people consider extraordinary security measures and mano-dura policies attractive for resolving gang-related violence and delinquency while also diminishing their daily fears and anxieties about becoming victims. The state of exception in El Salvador is an example of how it is possible to rapidly change a dire security situation characterized by street gangs deeply involved in criminality, extortion, and violence, causing terror and distress in the neighborhoods they claim as their territory. The images shown on social media and television convey how, during the state of exception, security forces have detained thousands of gang members through mano-dura-style operations. As selective and biased as this information may be, it profoundly influences citizens' opinions, as well as the views of neighboring countries.

Insecurity and the risks of being harassed or becoming a victim of violence in the three countries appear to remain concentrated in the same neighborhoods as always, i.e., the already poor and marginalized communities. The ongoing presence of gangs and other delinquent groups is primarily responsible in Guatemala and Honduras, while the security forces are the main culprits in El Salvador. Nevertheless, the police in Guatemala and Honduras are also accused of abusive behavior, and participants often fear that some officers are allied with criminals.

Many participants consider extraordinary security measures legitimate to fight persistent violence and delinquency; however, suspending fundamental democratic freedoms holds less legitimacy. While in Guatemala and Honduras, participants clearly expressed their aversion to extreme police discretionary powers that facilitate arbitrary detentions and disrespect the privacy of ordinary citizens, in El Salvador, ordinary people view this as an everyday hazard, considering opposition to the police and the government's security policies to be dangerous and irrelevant.

Democratic values are widely shared; nevertheless, they often seem irrelevant to everyday life. Everyday threats provoked by insecurity, corruption, neglect by policymakers, and fear of the security authorities cry out for answers, but few solutions are forthcoming. Many sense that democratic institutions are failing them; however, they display resignation. They go to vote but have little hope that the results will change or improve their conditions. They feel encouraged when candidates promise to intervene and help resolve their problems if elected. However, they feel let down or abandoned if, after the elections, the promises are broken or forgotten.

Reflections

The results indicate that most participants visualize mano-dura policies as extraordinary measures against gang members and other delinquents, falling within the regular legal framework and, therefore, legitimate. However, the perceived legitimacy of these exceptional measures changes when they extend beyond this framework. Suspending fundamental democratic freedoms in the name of fighting insecurity, for instance—declaring a state of exception and suspending constitutional rights—is viewed with alarm. Granting security forces special discretionary powers, allowing arbitrary detentions, eroding personal privacy, and imposing restrictions on freedom of speech are regarded as less acceptable and legitimate.

Corruption—more than criminality—is identified in Guatemala and Honduras as the cornerstone of the vicious circle that blocks the possibilities of socioeconomic development and augments the already high levels of delinquency and fear. Corrupt security force members and politicians preserve and use elevated levels of insecurity for their own benefit and contribute to deepening already difficult economic situations. However, these actors are also essential to make mano-dura policies work.

Social media significantly influences how people are informed and shape their political and social perspectives. In the three countries of study, the political use of social media has primarily been for propaganda and promoting specific narratives rather than fostering open debates about strengthening democratic governance and citizen expectations. The findings emphasize the importance of enhancing digital education to mitigate the adverse effects of algorithm-driven opinion formation and the spread of misinformation on these platforms. However, reviving traditional forms of political conversation is also crucial. Face-to-face contact between citizens and representatives of political parties, along with sustained interactions with candidates and elected officials, can help prevent the segregation of political preferences caused by social media algorithms and serve as a way to combat political intolerance and polarization.

Strengthening democratic values in areas with high levels of insecurity starts with returning to ordinary citizens and engaging them in ongoing dialogues about what democratic governance means to them. Ordinary people need to be at the center of democracy, and when they distrust their elected representatives, something has gone wrong. Citizens must become involved again. National political actors—politicians, political parties, elected officials, etc.—must reconstruct their relationships with the public and rebuild trust.

Engaging with ordinary citizens and knowing their experiences, views, and expectations is essential for designing adequate policies and policy proposals. However, it is also vital to understand how social media channels and mass media influence their views and opinions.

Recommendations

1. Bring dialogues and discussions about democracy and democratic governance back to ordinary people.

The everyday responsibilities and activities of citizens often don't leave time to discuss and reflect upon subjects such as democracy, security, government, and economic conditions. This makes democratic governance and local politics seem like distant and unattainable issues. However, discussing these topics helps people realize they share common interests and discover different approaches and viewpoints. International cooperation, in partnership with national civil society organizations, can invite political parties to a frequent series of dialogues with ordinary people about their experiences and views on issues important to them. The results can be used as input for a more comprehensive national dialogue about democratic governance.

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2. Bring government actors closer to local communities, their challenges, and their struggles.

The central government and national legislators are often perceived as far away; local governments are geographically closer and often more relevant to communities and socioeconomic development. However, the relationship with local politicians is frequently also seen as distant or inadequate. This situation highlights a crisis concerning traditional political parties and their relationship with the people. Although this manifests slightly differently in the three countries, all traditional and emerging political parties must address negative perceptions and past experiences to build positive relationships with ordinary citizens. Political parties and CSOs should develop and implement systematic, continuous communication strategies that connect local and national political actors with communities and their struggles.

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3. Make the middle-ranking cadres of national political parties structurally connect to ordinary people's perspectives.

Discontent with elected local and national officials is not only provoked by corruption or support for the political opposition; it can also stem from resource scarcity and conflicting interests, both locally and nationally. Politicians cannot please everyone, and a lack of communication and information exchange with local constituencies can further exacerbate discontent. Therefore, national political parties should cultivate structurally and organizationally embedded relationships with local populations. The middle-ranking cadres of political parties in northern Central America are the persons who can naturally serve as a bridge between local populations and local and national officials and political leaders. They can connect with the daily lives of ordinary people and connect their struggles, preoccupations, and worries to local and national elected officials.

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4. Conduct recurrent, small-scale, and punctual studies that provide relevant information to local, national, and international political actors.

Participants in the three northern Central American countries often feel that national and international political actors are unaware of their struggles, needs, and demands. This is not only related to a lack of interest but also to an absence of channels and methods that document local contexts, describe everyday struggles at different levels of society, and communicate them to a broader public. Recurrent small-scale qualitative and quantitative studies that provide feedback to local, national, and international political actors can serve as a means for local voices to be heard and to collect relevant and timely information for appropriate and democratic policymaking.

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5. Taking social media and its consequences seriously.

Social media influences how people in northern Central America are informed, influencing their political and social perspectives. El Salvador is a prominent example of how social media is used for political propaganda and promoting specific narratives rather than fostering open debates about democratic governance and citizen expectations. However, this trend is also occurring in Guatemala and Honduras. Despite this, little is known about how people handle the information obtained and how it shapes their political and social perspectives. Because of the involvement of governments themselves or powerful allies of the political opposition, international organizations may need to stimulate research into the use of social media in the region. Important questions include how news and information are created and spread, how political propaganda permeates social media channels, and in what ways possible manipulation occurs.

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1. Introduction

Some threats to democratic governance in Central America—for instance, in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala— seem to be intimately connected to insecurity and fear of crime and violence. The region has a long history of autocratic regimes renowned for using violence against their opponents and alleged criminals, but only a short period of democratic rule. However, with formal democracies in place, violent crime, drug trade, gangs, corruption, and abuses by security forces have become critical concerns for large parts of the population. After decades of being considered one of Latin America's most insecure countries, El Salvador has taken drastic measures in recent years. The tough-on-crime policies and state of exception declared by the Bukele government in March 2023, along with the resulting reduction in violence and crime, placed El Salvador among the safest countries in the world (Gallup, 2024). Although President Bukele restricted the freedoms of ordinary citizens by suspending parts of the Constitution, he has maintained high approval rates of 97.4% in 2023 and 95.0% in 2024 (IUDOP, 2023a, 2024a) (IUDOP, 2023a) and is regarded as the most popular president in Latin America (Harrison & Vilcarino, 2024). Even though this suspension has been extended monthly for more than two years in a row, and there is no declared end date, President Bukele was re-elected in February 2024 with a broad majority for a second term in office, even though the Constitution prohibits two consecutive terms.

The popularity of President Bukele's policies on reducing violence and crime has attracted the attention of other Latin American countries, and politicians see the electoral benefits of implementing similar policies, even though they undermine democratic standards as well as civil rights and liberties (Rochabrun, 2024; The Economist, 2023). The government of Xiomara Castro in Honduras implemented a partial state of exception to combat extortion by street gangs (maras) and other criminal groups, suspending constitutional guarantees (Pérez et al., 2024; Redación Web, 2022). Although the president of Guatemala, Bernardo Arevalo, may prefer another kind of security policy and has not declared a state of exception, he may face pressure from the population to implement extraordinary measures to address insecurity, considering that, in 2023, the incidence of criminality showed the most significant increase in 10 years (Infosegura, 2024).

The UNDP Human Development Report 2023-24 notes a paradox: people believe that democracy is a fundamental pillar of political systems but increasingly support leaders who bypass the fundamental rules of the democratic process (UNDP, 2024a). These leaders tend to weaken political institutions and executive accountability that sustain an existing democracy, accumulating power and often remaining in office beyond the constitutionally permitted terms (Khaitan, 2019). This phenomenon of bypassing established democratic processes and rules is sometimes called "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016). One explanation is that people are exceedingly discontented with actual democracies (Levistki en: Elman, 2024) and are looking for "miracle cures" (Przeworski, 2024). Another reason may be self-interest, in that some citizens engage in a trade-off between personal good (for example, prosperity and living in a secure environment) and democracy (Müller, 2021).

However, these explanations may be too straightforward. The idea of an electoral trade-off implies that people know what is at stake—i.e., what kinds of rights or freedoms are to be exchanged—and consider the balance between the rights or freedoms exchanged and the personal benefits obtained—the "price" being paid—as attractive. Yet, if people do not recognize the ramifications of their choices or value them differently, the balance can differ from what outsiders expect to be reasonable. A fundamental question is whether people consider their electoral choices to harm democracy and benefit them personally. If not, the trade-off metaphor is too superficial or misleading. If the democratic freedoms that are supposedly exchanged exist only in abstraction for ordinary citizens, if their wishes and intuitions about democracy appear irrelevant in everyday life, or if their rights are not seen as negatively impacted by the extraordinary measures, it is difficult to talk about a trade-off.

Although many observers and academics consider that the state of exception and extraordinary security measures in El Salvador erode democratic rights and freedoms (Carothers & Hartnett, 2024; Wolf, 2024), ordinary people do not necessarily agree (Meléndez, 2024). The explanations of a trade-off or strong dissatisfaction with democracy seem flawed. The popularity of these measures suggests that many people consider them legitimate (IUDOP, 2023b). Recent studies do not support the idea that Salvadorans consider weakened or diminished democratic governance a price worth paying. On the contrary, despite broadly publicized human rights violations committed by police, military, and prison authorities under the state of exception (Cristosal, 2023, 2024), recent public opinion surveys not only reveal that the state of exception has widespread support (CEOP, 2024; IUDOP, 2023a, 2023b) but also that most people in El Salvador consider that security, respect for

human rights, and the administration of justice have improved (IUDOP, 2024b, 2024c). The national police and army are regarded as the most valued public institutions (IUDOP, 2024c), and President Bukele enjoys high approval ratings of 97.4% in 2023 and 95.0% in 2024 (IUDOP, 2023a, 2024a). Although national surveys report a lack of interest in politics (CEOP, 2024) and little comprehension of democracy, justice, and the rule of law (IUDOP, 2023b), comparative regional surveys by Latinobarómetro and LAPOP's Americas Barometer paradoxically indicate significantly higher support for democracy in El Salvador than in neighboring countries (Latinobarómetro, 2023; Lupu et al., 2023).

These findings raise important questions. For instance, how does the suspension of constitutional rights relate to a higher support for democracy? Why do widely publicized human rights violations not affect the perception of the national police and army as highly valued public institutions? And how must we interpret the Guatemalan citizens who, although supposedly scoring low on democratic support (Latinobarómetro, 2023; Lupu et al., 2023), have shown resilience and determination in defending electoral results and lawful democratic rule (Colussi, 2024)? There appears to be a gap in our understanding of how ordinary people in northern Central America think about democratic governance and how it relates to security, tough-on-crime policies, and the legitimacy of extraordinary measures.

The research project "Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance in Central America" focuses on how ordinary citizens in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala understand the relationship between democratic governance and security. To comprehend their experiences, ways of thinking, and opinions, the study focused on ordinary citizens and issues they worry about, such as insecurity, justice, and the local economy, as well as their participation in elections and what they expect from their government. Even though they are influenced by—frequently biased—social media messages and content, as well as mass media coverage, their perspectives are essential to understanding the popularity of extraordinary measures—proposed by politicians or implemented by the government—to bring security to their societies, even if these infringe on the rights of ordinary citizens. This study seeks to hear their voices and understand their perspectives, despite the fact that it involves a population that is challenging to engage with because they are not organized in political parties or politically oriented social movements.

It aims to deepen the understanding of the seemingly contradictory visions and meanings concerning topics such as security, mano-dura policies, democratic freedoms, and the use of extraordinary measures to confront violence, criminality, and gangs. It asks how citizens view and value the relationships between security, democratic freedoms, tough-on-crime policies, and the legitimacy of extraordinary measures. The main research questions are:

- How are citizens' perspectives on security, tough-on-crime approaches, and the legitimacy of extraordinary security measures related?
- How are ideas about the legitimacy of security policies affected when governments suspend fundamental democratic freedoms to fight delinquency and related insecurity?
- How can democratic values be strengthened in areas with high levels of insecurity?

These questions are essential to understanding the popularity of the ongoing state of exception in El Salvador, why these policies appeal to the Honduran government, and why they challenge the new Guatemalan government. They are also fundamental to identifying alternatives that strengthen security and democratic resilience in the region.

Structure of the report

The report has the following structure: The following section introduces the conceptual framework of this study, and Section 3 explains the methodology, including the selection process, fieldwork, and analysis. Subsequently, Section 4 discusses the political context of democratic governance and security in northern Central America and provides a brief overview of quantitative indicators regarding the population's perceptions of democracy.

Section 5 presents the study results from three different countries, contrasting the findings of El Salvador with those of Guatemala and Honduras and organizing the information into conceptual clusters. It begins with participants' general conceptions of democratic governance and security in northern Central America. Afterward, it presents the findings that emerged in El Salvador in relation to the clusters state of exception (peace, security, and justice), security forces (discretionary powers, erosion of privacy, sexual harassment, and freedom of expression), local economy (income, increasing taxes, uncertainty), and democracy (resignation and abandonment). Subsequently, the findings from Guatemala and Honduras are presented. The participants indicated that corruption is central to experiences and views in various areas. Each cluster features corruption as a pivotal concept: insecurity (security forces, corruption, harassment, and justice), local economy (corruption and local development), and democracy (corruption, resignation, and the allure of a state of exception).

Section 6 then explores the results, questioning whether democracy is at risk in northern Central America. First, it focuses on how insecurity and extraordinary measures affect men, women, and people with few economic resources. Afterward, it looks at the relevance of democratic governance and the legitimacy of extraordinary measures and security governance, considering similarities and contrasts between the three countries. Section 7 examines the state of democracy in northern Central America and explores ways to strengthen democratic values. The final Section, 8, makes recommendations about how this can be done in practice.

2. Conceptual framework

This study examines how ordinary citizens in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala perceive the relationship between democracy, security, and the extraordinary measures that some believe their governments should implement, even if those measures may exceed legal boundaries and could be seen as anti-democratic. This section clarifies how these concepts are understood and serves as the foundation for this study.

Citizens have different expectations when living in a democratic society, including the belief that government policies will ensure their security (see Figure 1). When these expectations for safety are not met, the government, opposition politicians, or social actors may identify specific individuals or groups to blame for disquieting levels of crime and insecurity. When an essential part of the population is persuaded that these persons or groups are indeed responsible, they become securitized, i.e., seen as deserving extraordinary measures to counter the threat they pose. If, in time, the securitization of certain groups becomes stronger, extraordinary measures may get more extreme, and security governance can become increasingly autocratic and even destabilize the democratic foundations of government.

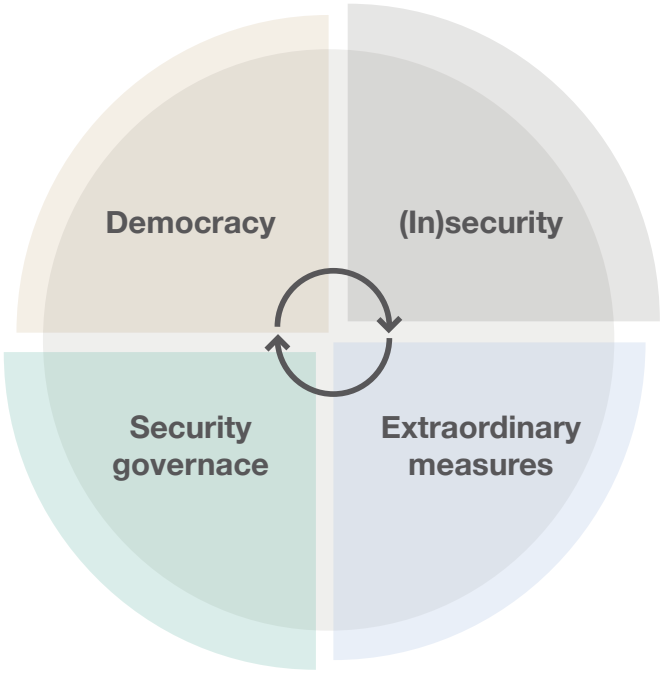


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Democracy

Unlike typical assessments that evaluate democracies through theoretical perspectives on electoral conditions and processes (for instance, through constructing and analyzing democracy indices[1]), this study focuses on lived democracy, i.e., how ordinary people appreciate living in a democratic society. A common belief or "folk theory" understands a democratic government as "of the people, by the people, and for the people." It comprises "a set of accessible, appealing ideas assuring people that they live under an ethically defensible form of government that has their interests at heart" (Achen & Bartels, 2017, p. 1). However, whether living in a democracy is assured depends on the conception one employs. Przeworski distinguishes between minimalist and maximalist conceptions (Przeworski, 2024). For minimalist conceptions, the essential aspect that defines a democracy is that people are free to choose their political leaders, including removing governments. Although for some academics and democracy theorists, the minimalist conception may be conceptually concise and convenient, for ordinary people, this conception may be too abstract and offer too little. For them, the attraction of living in a democracy may imply that some crucial values are realized. People may feel that democracy must, more than just free elections, "guarantee those ideals and interests such as freedom of conscience and speech, justice, decent government and so on" (Schumpeter, 1942, p. 242) and also offer room for expressing and supporting claims to political attention to their social and economic needs (Sen, 1999). However, the multifaceted wishes and intuitions about democracy may explain its appeal but also generate a range of broad civic demands that are challenging to meet. This can lead to a general impression of failing democratic institutions or a sense of what Norberto Bobbio calls "the broken promises of democracy" (Müller, 2016, p. 75).

In northern Central America, the ideals and interests contained in the folk theory of democracy may include aspects such as economic well-being and safety, as these are often in short supply for ordinary people. Even though discourses by political, economic, and social leaders emphasize the importance of democratic governance, they are often disconnected from everyday practice in the region (Ching, 2014). Promises of security and economic development, transparent governance, or combating corruption are typical, but the reality is different. Therefore, for ordinary citizens, the broken promises of democracy may refer to fundamental aspects of social life.

[1]See the V-Dem Institute's data collection and construction of democracy indices, as well as the analysis of these datasets by academic researchers.

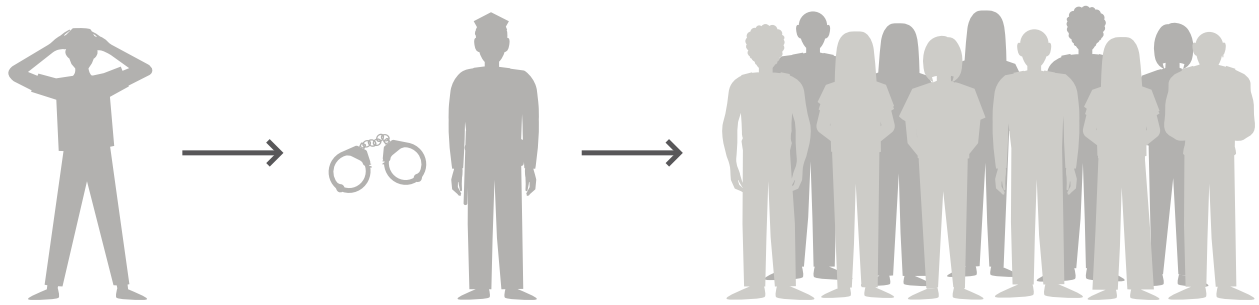


Figure 2.: Mano-dura security policies are common

Security, security governance, and extraordinary measures

Security has been a substantial preoccupation of the relatively young democracies in northern Central America (Latinobarómetro, 2023; Lupu et al., 2023; Van der Borgh & Savenije, 2019). During the last few decades, street gangs and drug trafficking have been blamed for the growing levels of violence and delinquency. Governments in the region have been confronted with demands for improved security from their citizens. Identifying street gangs as the prime cause, subsequent governments have implemented harsh security policies to show they are concerned while also maintaining control of the situation.

Tough-on-crime or "mano-dura" policies can be understood as governmental responses to perceived insecurity or increasing delinquency. Harsher security measures may involve, for example, laws allowing longer sentences, increased police presence on the streets, assigning public security tasks to the military, and building more secure prisons (Cutrona et al., forthcoming). These measures can be analyzed as processes of securitization, where groups or categories of people are portrayed as threats, thus becoming the focus of security concerns and subjects of stricter laws and extraordinary measures.

However, this process involves more than just a government framing an issue as a threat and declaring the necessity for extraordinary measures. For securitization to be successful, Balzacq emphasizes the importance of the general public or a given audience. A significant portion of the population must accept that an issue presented as a threat is indeed one before it is socially defined or constructed as such, opening the way for a shift from 'regular' security policies to the "politics of the extraordinary" (2019, p. 343). The role of ordinary citizens in securitization is essential. They form the principal audience of the discursive aspect of securitization efforts. Not only is their acceptance of an issue as a security threat needing extraordinary measures crucial, but they can even demand extraordinary policies against groups provoking fear and insecurity in their daily lives. Their clamor for more police on the streets or harsher treatment of delinquents can profoundly influence political actors and candidates for political positions, especially during election time. More than merely policies advocated for electoral gains by political or social actors, the call to be tough on crime can represent a shared belief among a large segment of the population.

Successfully securitizing an issue as needing extraordinary measures, however, is different from these measures being effective in resolving the security threat. Calls for extraordinary measures can continue if the issue remains unresolved or if the initial threat develops into something even more menacing and alarming. The discursive need for and implementation of extraordinary measures can become a regular feature of security policies as failed policies are replaced or supplemented by more decisive measures. This can lead to progressively more extreme measures and policies being implemented. Measures that suspend fundamental legal rights and freedoms might be seen as necessary and acceptable to address the evolving threat. In this process, security governance can grow increasingly autocratic, undermining the democratic foundations of government in the name of security.

In northern Central America, street gangs have been successfully securitized. There is a broad consensus that street gangs, or maras, are an existential threat to security and that extraordinary measures are needed (Van der Borgh & Savenije, 2015, 2019). Institutionalized mano-dura policies (Cutrona et al., forthcoming)—especially approving more stringent laws, applying harsher punishments, giving more discretionary powers to the police, and deploying the military in public security tasks—have become common.

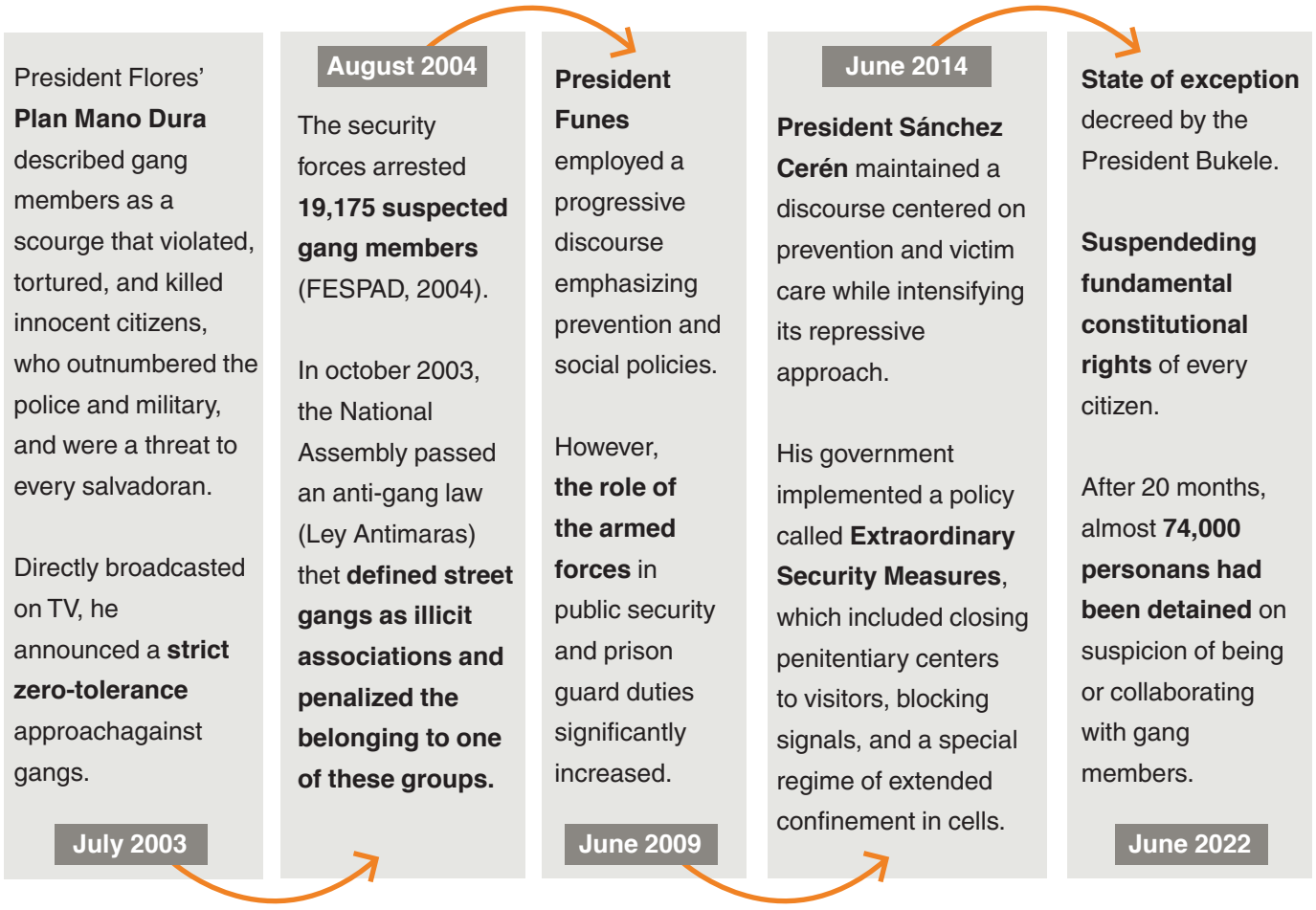


Figure 3. The securitization of street gangs in El Salvador

An example is the ongoing securitization of street gangs in El Salvador (see Figure 3.). The process of defining the gangs as an existential security threat was initiated by President Flores in July 2003. He described gang members as a scourge that violated, tortured, and killed innocent citizens, who outnumbered the police and military and posed a threat to every Salvadoran. Directly broadcast on TV, he announced a strict zero-tolerance approach, Plan Mano Dura (hard hand or tough-on-crime plan), against mainly the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street (Barrio 18) street gangs (El Diario de Hoy, 2003; Redacción de Nación, 2003). His announcement was followed by extensive police and military operations in disadvantaged neighborhoods with a known gang presence. One hundred forty-two alleged gang members were detained in the first 24 hours, and between July 23, 2003, and August 30, 2004, the security forces arrested 19,175 suspected gang members (FESPAD, 2004). A few months later, in October 2003, the National Assembly passed an anti-gang law *(Ley Antimaras)* that classified street gangs as illicit associations and penalized belonging to them. However, the gangs did not disappear as a security threat.

Following the mano-dura policies of the Flores and subsequent Saca administrations, managing gang-related insecurity stayed firmly within the control of the security and criminal justice establishment, resorting to extraordinary measures to the detriment of social prevention. (Bergmann & Gude, 2021). Even though the government of Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) employed a progressive discourse, the role of the armed forces in public security and prison guard duties significantly increased (Amaya Cóbar, 2012). Likewise, the Sánchez Cerén government (2014–2018) upheld a discourse focused on prevention and victim care while intensifying its repressive approach.

His government implemented a policy called Extraordinary Security Measures, which included closing penitentiary centers to visitors, blocking telecommunications signals inside and around penitentiary facilities, a special regime of extended confinement in cells (Andrade Cruz, 2018; Bergmann & Gude, 2021), and deploying new specialized elite task forces that were better equipped to confront the gangs (Reyna, 2017). This repressive stance allowed for more robust law enforcement, including the use of lethal force. The consequence, however, was not only a significant increase in the prison population but also a rise in civilian deaths during armed confrontations, often presumed gang members.

Arguably, the strongest of the extraordinary measures to date is the state of exception decreed by the Bukele government in June 2022. The state of exception suspended the fundamental constitutional rights of every citizen to receive information about the motives of detention, not to declare, and to have access to a defense lawyer, as well as the inviolability of correspondence and telecommunications. Also, the period of administrative detention was expanded to 15 days. More than two years later, these restrictions are still in place (Cristosal, 2023, 2024). The security forces resorted to mass incarceration of those suspected of gang involvement. During the first two days, 1,400 persons were detained, and after 20 months, almost 74,000 persons had been detained on suspicion of being or collaborating with gang members (Campos Madrid, 2023). The Salvadoran population considers these extraordinary measures successful and generally endorses them. The measures brought security and cemented the approval rate of President Bukele. In 2023, President Bukele obtained an approval rate of 97.4% and his policies a mark of 8.48 (over 10) (IUDOP, 2023a), maintaining an approval of 95.0% in 2024 (IUDOP, 2024a)

It seems that more than imposing a state of exception on a reluctant population, President Bukele responded to a clamor for a more secure society free from fear of gangs; at the same time, he installed an electorally approved authoritarian regime (Wolf, 2024). From an analytical perspective, it appears that after facing decades of gang-related insecurity, democracy has taken a backseat. Rights and freedoms are being traded for security, reinforcing a trend of democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016). However, from the ordinary people's view of democracy—i.e., from a folk theory of wishes and intuitions about democracy (Achen & Bartels, 2017)—it may be that the promises of democracy have been broken for a long time. Decades of gang-related insecurity, corruption, failed mano-dura security policies, and persistent economic challenges may have eroded their expectations. Although the independent press and NGO monitoring show the consequences of mass arrests on family members and loved ones, along with the challenges of the lack of legal protections (Cristosal, 2023, 2024), in the eyes of ordinary people, President Bukele might have fulfilled a fundamental promise of democracy. After decades of unfulfilled promises by traditional political parties, he restored security to El Salvador. Something that also caught the attention of the citizens of neighboring Honduras and Guatemala.

3. Methodology

To gain deeper insights into the survey results, clarify apparent contradictions, and understand citizens' perspectives on democratic governance and extraordinary security measures, a qualitative methodology is essential. However, to avoid getting trapped in visions, opinions, and discussions shaped by predetermined political perspectives or discourses, the study focuses on the experiences and viewpoints of ordinary citizens—specifically, persons who are not involved in politically influenced social movements or NGOs and do not identify with any political party as supporters or militants. The methodical starting point is to listen to local voices from diverse contexts and cultural backgrounds, gather a wide array of experiences, views, and opinions, and aim to capture perspectives that are often overlooked.

This study is deeply influenced by El Salvador's ongoing state of exception. To understand the perspectives of citizens in northern Central America regarding security, tough-on-crime policies, and the legitimacy of extraordinary security measures, it is crucial to contrast the experiences and opinions of people in El Salvador with those in Guatemala and Honduras. Salvadoran citizens' experiences and views are profoundly influenced by living under a state of exception for over two years. In contrast, the understanding of democratic governance and security in the neighboring countries are shaped by persistent insecurity and a desire for a safer environment. Although there are many differences between the countries of northern Central America, Guatemala and Honduras confront security challenges similar to those that El Salvador has faced in the past. A comparison can, therefore, reveal both differences and similarities in the experiences and perceptions between Guatemala and Honduras on one side and El Salvador on the other; it can also highlight the nuances of each country. Additionally, it may provide insights into the extent to which support for leaders who circumvent the fundamental rules of the democratic process can be perceived as a trade-off between personal good and democracy, as sometimes suggested by scholars (Müller, 2021).

However, due to the apprehension of living under a state of exception in El Salvador and the uncommonness of publicly discussing politically related topics in all three countries, ordinary citizens may feel awkward and uncomfortable talking with strangers about issues related to democracy and security policies. Therefore, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted in a dialogue-centered manner. The emphasis during the focus groups and interviews was on fostering trust and a comfortable atmosphere. Rather than strictly following a rigid interview protocol, the researchers focused on cultivating trusting relationships and encouraging open exchanges among participants. They also stressed that no opinion was more valid than the others. Rather than following a standardized data collection procedure, the interviews aimed to foster open dialogue without any pressure to reach a consensus.

Insecurity, violence, and extraordinary security measures are often experienced in different ways by men and women. The focus groups and interviews were conducted to allow room for these gendered experiences along with the accompanying views and opinions. The focus groups were exclusively for men- and women-only—except when participants from the LGBTQ+ community participated—and the selection criteria for the interviews differentiated between gender and young and adult viewpoints. A female team member directed the women's focus groups. The focus group and interview guides contained questions about topics such as insecurity, policies to reduce crime and violence, democratic values, and the dilemmas of security policies through open questions and short descriptions (vignettes) of concrete situations. (See Attachment 1 for the focus group and interview guides.) There was room for every participant to respond, but there was no insistence that everyone had to answer every question. From the start, it was made clear that there was no requirement to respond, and participants could stop and finish their contributions whenever they wanted.

Selection

For a small-scale qualitative methodology to unearth reliable and valid results studying the sensitive topics of insecurity, mano dura policies, and democratic values, a diverse sample of informants is crucial. This study initially identified four populations relevant to how these policies may be perceived: (1) residents from urban neighborhoods with high levels of insecurity; (2) people living in more secure, often middle-class, urban neighborhoods; (3) people from rural areas; and (4) indigenous communities. Another relevant group was identified when fieldwork was underway in El Salvador: the LGBTQ+ community. They were affected by increasingly restrictive government policies directed at their members. However, due to time and logistical constraints, they could only be partially included in the study in El Salvador. The causes of insecurity in rural communities often differ from those in urban neighborhoods, sometimes relating to remoteness, intense poverty, and distant relations with the authorities. Distinct cultural traditions and understandings of justice and security characterize indigenous communities.

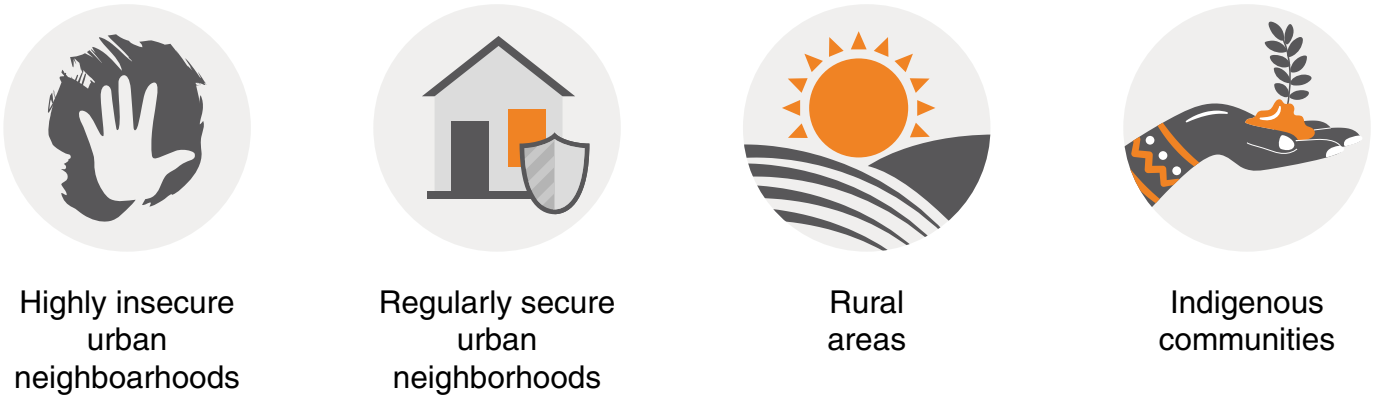


Figure 4. Different participant populations

Local counterparts of NIMD in Central America were the intermediaries in the selection process and recommended urban, rural, and rural indigenous communities using the following criteria: 1. They know the community, have developed relationships with leaders who can facilitate fieldwork, and understand the local security situation. 2. Within the communities, various opinions exist, and members feel free to express them. 3. Local leaders are willing to participate in selecting and contacting potential participants interested in sharing their opinions and explaining their visions. In coordination with the researchers and following the selection criteria, relevant neighborhoods and communities were selected. However, convening citizens who are not organized in politically inspired social movements or NGOs and who do not identify as supporters or militants of a political party proved challenging. It required many community contacts and trusted relationships and, therefore, necessitated the involvement of local gatekeepers. Even so, persuading women to participate was more straightforward than convincing men.

The inclusion criteria for selecting participants include: 1. people from urban, rural, and indigenous populations; 2. residents from (previously) high-security and normal-security urban neighborhoods; 3. an equal number of men and women; and 4. youth and adults. Therefore, in each country, focus group discussions and interviews were held with participants from two kinds of urban populations—characterized by living in insecure areas and more secure neighborhoods—from rural populations, as well as indigenous communities. A mix of youth and adults was sought for the focus groups, while for the interviews, an equal number of each. Twenty-eight focus group discussions (FGD) and fifty-three semi-structured key informant interviews (KII) were conducted. An identical number of FGDs and KIIs were planned for each population in each country. However, due to logistical challenges, four extra FGDs were held with members of indigenous communities in Guatemala. The average number of participants was seven and eight, respectively. The total number of participants was 263. See Table 1 for information about the number of participants.

Fieldwork

Number of participants						
Populations	FGD			KII	LGBT (FGD/KII)	Total
	FGD	FGD -M	FGD -F			
Urban insecure	6	19	31	10	-	50
Urban secure	6	21	18	13	-	39
Rural	8	20	28	10	6	48
Indigenous community	8	34	39	16	-	73
Total	**28**	**94**	**116**	**53**	**6**	**263**

Table 1. Participation in fieldwork

Fieldwork

An additional layer of contacts was needed to address the challenge of bringing together everyday people who are not involved in political parties, politically oriented advocacy organizations, or NGOs. The primary means of reaching out to ordinary people from different areas and communities was to use intermediaries—who may be involved in partner or related organizations—who identified the urban, rural, or indigenous communities in their zone. However, having them reach out to people who were not politically organized was not enough. They needed local gatekeepers who knew the neighborhood and its inhabitants, were trusted, and could speak to them personally to persuade them to participate. Local gatekeepers were essential in engaging with various communities and organizing fieldwork across different geographical areas.

Of prime concern were the participants' safety, confidentiality, and anonymity. This was considered especially important in El Salvador, where discussing topics related to democratic governance and security is delicate. Interviews and focus groups were organized outside the neighborhood in a nice—often commercial—establishment and participants were offered refreshments. This method of organizing has two advantages. First, it ensures the privacy and confidentiality of interviews and focus groups by organizing them in settings where neighbors have no access and security forces do not enter. Second, it transforms the interview or focus group activity into a small outing where participants can relax from their daily hassles. These two aspects gave the invitation to participate a distinctive and attractive quality, as people from disadvantaged or middle-class communities often have few resources available for outings.

At the start of each activity, anonymity and confidentiality on the part of the research team were emphasized, as well as the confidentiality of what participants said during the focus groups. "What is said inside this room remains here" was a fundamental agreement. It was also emphasized that there are no "good" or "bad" answers to the questions, and everyone's thoughts, feelings, opinions, and experiences were valued. Participants were not pressured to agree with others or to reach a consensus opinion. On the contrary, during interviews and focus groups, the team listened to the participants, sought to understand their positions without judging, and tried to ensure that others did the same. It was essential that participants felt free to narrate their experiences and feelings without worrying about what others might think.

As a result, focus groups were often lively and animated, and their duration frequently extended well beyond the scheduled time. At the end of the interviews and focus groups, there was a space where participants could discuss and exchange opinions with the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the topic of study. Remarkably, participants—men and women—frequently thanked the interviewers for the opportunity to participate, reflect on surprising questions, and exchange opinions.

At the beginning of each FGD and KII, the study and its objectives were explained, and the participants were asked if they agreed to participate and if the session could be recorded. Recording only started after explicit permission was granted and when the participants had introduced themselves. Permission was solicited again once the recorder had started. No personal information was recorded. Immediately after each FGD and KII, the recorded information was securely saved and removed from the recorders. Only the date, type of population, and location of the FGD or KII event were registered.

Analysis and analytic generalization

Researchers took notes during the interviews and focus groups, which were later transformed into reports. Audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed to understand the participants' experiences, opinions, and views. Qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software (NVivo) was used to organize, code, and arrange the information in the reports. The transcriptions were used to deepen understanding and examine the experiences and relationships emphasized in the reports. The analysis employed a grounded theory approach (Chamaz, 2014). The initial conceptual categories were questioned, refined, and reorganized with the information obtained in the subsequent analysis (Saldaña, 2013).

Qualitative design cannot statistically or numerically generalize results or characteristics to a population. Not only are the samples too small, but it also often remains unclear to researchers how, in practice, the local gatekeepers accessed and selected the participants. However, the diversity of participants and the multiplicity of places where fieldwork took place provided an ideal basis for analytic generalization (Firestone, 1993). When diverse local contexts—such as urban areas with high levels of insecurity, relatively secure middle-class neighborhoods, rural populations, and indigenous communities—expose similar opinions, perspectives, or experiences, something significant is being revealed. "Similar results under different conditions illustrate the robustness of the finding" (Firestone, 1993, p. 17). Through in-depth scrutiny, analysis, and interpretation of what is said, more

abstract conceptualizations of processes and human experiences can be developed (Polit & Tatano Beck, 2010). The analysis not only focuses on identifying specific topics regularly mentioned or alluded to by participants, indicating their relevance, but also on the coherence with the experiences and views expressed by others. It sought to distinguish between experiences and views relevant to all participants and those aspects exclusive to specific informants (Ayres et al., 2003).

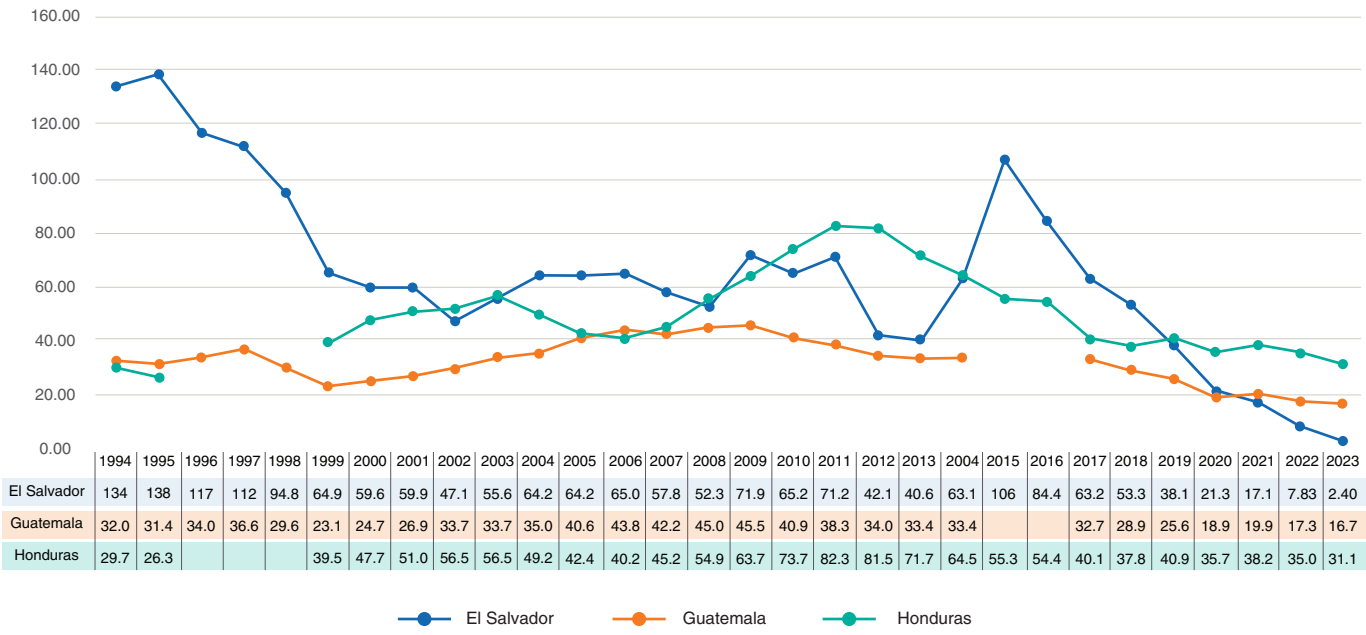
The FGD and KII numbers are also too small to make a comprehensive comparative analysis between the three countries. The main interest of the study is to relate and contrast the experiences and opinions of people in El Salvador with those in Guatemala and Honduras. Significant changes in security governance in El Salvador, in response to security challenges similar to those faced by neighboring countries, raise essential questions for democracies throughout the region. To understand these questions and the effects of El Salvador's approach, it is essential to reveal, discuss, and contrast the experiences and perspectives of ordinary citizens, particularly those who continue to face significant everyday insecurity and fear, as well as those who—through a seemingly sudden and remarkable change—began to live with much greater security and less fear. Therefore, the analysis emphasizes the similarities and contrasting findings between El Salvador and its neighbors, Guatemala and Honduras, but also looks for peculiarities of each country.

Even though the study cannot say anything about statistical significance and whether some findings are representative of specific populations, it strives to generalize the results analytically to broader conceptualizations (Yin, 2003). It aims to deepen the understanding of how ordinary citizens in northern Central America experience and view the relationship between democratic governance, (in) security, and extraordinary security measures.

4. Northern Central America: security and political context

For many years, the nations of northern Central America have struggled with problems such as widespread criminal violence and the limited ability of the government to address these issues. Even after internal armed conflicts ended and transitions to democracy took place, it remains challenging to establish peaceful societies governed by the rule of law. As Graph 1. shows, the levels of violence (exposed by the homicide rates) have been high for decades, although lately, they have been coming down.

Graph 1. Homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (1994-2023)



	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2004	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
El Salvador	134	138	117	112	94.8	64.9	59.6	59.9	47.1	55.6	64.2	64.2	65.0	57.8	52.3	71.9	65.2	71.2	42.1	40.6	63.1	106	84.4	63.2	53.3	38.1	21.3	17.1	7.83	2.40
Guatemala	32.0	31.4	34.0	36.6	29.6	23.1	24.7	26.9	33.7	33.7	35.0	40.6	43.8	42.2	45.0	45.5	40.9	38.3	34.0	33.4	33.4			32.7	28.9	25.6	18.9	19.9	17.3	16.7
Honduras	29.7	26.3				39.5	47.7	51.0	56.5	56.5	49.2	42.4	40.2	45.2	54.9	63.7	73.7	82.3	81.5	71.7	64.5	55.3	54.4	40.1	37.8	40.9	35.7	38.2	35.0	31.1

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) International Data Base on Homicide (1994-2022); PNUD-InSegura for Honduras y Guatemala 2023. National Civilian Police, El Salvador (2023).

The legacy of authoritarian pasts and the limited capacity of democratically elected governments have fostered a tendency to respond repressively to problems rooted in structural issues such as inequality, poverty, social exclusion, and the absence of comprehensive and sustained development policies. Corruption exacerbates the vicious cycle of state incapacity, insecurity, and repressive responses, reducing resources allocated to the population and distorting the purpose of institutional functioning.

The 2020s have witnessed a wave of political change in the region, marked by the rise of new leaders who have challenged the status quo and fueled the population's expectations. Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, Xiomara Castro in Honduras, and Bernardo Arévalo in Guatemala have all come to power, promising progressive reforms and a break from the past. However, the new administrations have also inherited significant security challenges that are testing democracies in the region.

El Salvador

On July 1, 2019, Nayib Bukele assumed leadership of the Salvadoran government after winning an election against the traditionally dominant political parties that had ruled for three decades. They experienced a significant loss of electoral support due to frustration with their performance, particularly regarding security. Bukele positioned himself as the alternative and a promise of change.

The Territorial Control Plan (TCP) was announced during the first month of his administration. This plan was credited with reducing homicides in the

early months of the government. It was supposed to be carried out in stages, but no document outlining the plan's rationale and goals was released to the public (Alharaca & La Prensa Gráfica, 2022)[2].

In February 2020, the president requested approval for a loan related to the TCP. This led to a controversial call from the executive branch for the Assembly to convene on Sunday, February 9th. However, the majority of Congress rejected this request. On the day of the call, security forces, led by the Minister of National Defense and the Director of the National Civil Police, surrounded the legislative building and entered the session hall armed, creating the impression that a coup d'état was underway. Meanwhile, the president vehemently criticized the absence of political parties from the Assembly.

In the following months, the Legislative Assembly did not approve the loan required by the President and established a special commission to investigate the events of February 9th. In its report, issued in December 2020, the commission recommended the dismissal of both the Minister of National Defense and the Director of Police due to serious human rights violations, which included actions against a democratically elected institution. Although the Constitution of the Republic mandates the dismissal of the Director of Police in this case, the president failed to remove either official from their positions.

Another indication of President Bukele's reluctance to adhere to democratic principles was his attitude and conflictual relationship with the other branches of government during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government unilaterally implemented strict and extraordinary health control measures that affected individual rights. Many of these measures required legislative approval, which the administration circumvented by rejecting the bills proposed by the legislative branch. This resulted in ongoing conflicts with the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice, which reviews and oversees the legality of issued norms (FESPAD, 2020). President Bukele vetoed more bills in just four months than any previous president had during their entire term.

On May 1, 2021, the New Ideas party, founded by Bukele, won a decisive victory in the legislative and municipal elections. As a result, the party gained a qualified majority in the Legislative Assembly, which is crucial for appointing and dismissing high-level officials. The newly installed Assembly's initial actions included the immediate removal of the magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber and the Republic's Attorney General, along with their replacement without due process, challenges, and background checks.

Afterward, other legal and institutional actions were taken to dismiss judges and prosecutors with long careers, sanction, transfer, or demote judges who insisted on judicial independence, and appoint new judges (Ávalos, 2021; DPLF, 2022). Many prosecutors and judges involved in investigations of significant corruption, organized crime, or dealings with criminal groups by people close to the government or the New Ideas party opted for exile (García, 2022). The ruling New Ideas Party has successfully neutralized many of the political, judicial, legal, and administrative oversight mechanisms that regulate government.

[2] Investigative journalists obtained a copy of the Territorial Control Plan and consulted experts about its content. The experts saw a significant difference between the text and the government's actions. They also considered that it could not be the real reason for the decrease in homicides.

The Bukele administration highlighted the significant drop in homicides in 2020 and 2021 as a major achievement, attributing it to its TCP. However, investigative journalists revealed a secret negotiation process between the government and street gang leaders, indicating that this, rather than the TCP, may have been the true cause of the decrease in homicides (Pérez, 2021).

In late March 2022, there was a spike in recorded violent homicides. Between March 25th and 27th, 87 people were murdered, with 62 of those killings occurring on March 26th alone. The media revealed that the cause of the spike was a stalemate in the negotiations between the government and gangs (Martínez, 2022). The severity of the situation led the authorities to declare a state of emergency to restore order. The state of emergency was continuously extended and ultimately became an ongoing extraordinary measure that has persisted for over two years as part of the government's *war on gangs.* According to President Bukele, the state of emergency will only end when nearly all gang members are captured (Bergengruen, 2024).

The state of emergency led to the mass arrests of people suspected of belonging to gangs, surpassing 60,000 detentions in the first nine months of its implementation (SSPAS et al., 2023). This measure effectively neutralized gang activity and greatly enhanced security in the country, particularly in areas previously controlled by these groups. It garnered widespread public approval; however, it also drew numerous criticisms and accusations of serious human rights violations.

In September 2021, the newly appointed Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice—irregularly chosen by the ruling party and its allies—reinterpreted the Constitution and ruled to allow consecutive presidential re-election, permitting the incumbent president to serve two consecutive terms, even though the Constitution clearly prohibits it. This ruling allowed President Bukele to run for a second term in February 2024. Thanks to President Bukele's high popularity, a widespread social media campaign, significant improvements in the country's security, and the restoration of the capital's historic center, he won the elections. However, the election process was marred by numerous allegations of irregularities (BBC News Mundo, 2024) and electoral manipulation in favor of the ruling party (OAS, 2024).

Guatemala

In the August 2023 elections, the political party Movimiento Semilla, which initially wasn't among the top preferences in the polls, managed to advance to a second round to determine the winner of the presidential elections with its candidate, Bernardo Arévalo. They secured around 60% of the votes, surpassing their opponent, Sandra Torres from the National Unity of Hope (UNE) party, who obtained about 40%.

The previous governments of Jimmy Morales (2016–2020) and Alejandro Giammattei (2020–2024) were known for their efforts to dismantle or weaken institutions. For example, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) was closed in 2017, and an impunity agreement was adopted through penal code reform to shield politicians and officials from allegations of illegal electoral financing and to reduce potential sentences for related offenses (known as the *Pact of the Corrupt*). In 2018, the Public Prosecutor's Office was co-opted, and high-ranking police officers with established track records were removed (Interamerican Dialogue & Cristosal,

2024). Former justice system officials, members of the Public Prosecutor's Office, journalists, and social leaders involved in investigations related to corruption or economic crimes in recent years faced prosecution. Some opted for exile, while others were incarcerated.

After the August 2023 elections, the transition to the new government faced several challenges. Conservative factions of the Pact of the Corrupt and the Public Prosecutor's Office (MP), led by Attorney General Consuelo Porras, made multiple attempts to undermine the election results. Their actions included temporarily suspending the Movimiento Semilla party and initiating legal efforts to prevent President Arévalo's inauguration. The threats to the democratic transfer of power sparked widespread popular protests that paralyzed the country. The protests reached their peak in October and November 2023, with major roads blocked and gatherings held at institutions such as the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) and Congress.

Despite the political tensions and allegations of irregularities, the TSE confirmed the results, and Bernardo Arévalo was officially declared president-elect. His victory symbolized the aspiration for change and sent a strong message of rejection toward the traditional political class, whose refusal to accept the results was mainly due to his proposals focused on combating corruption and renewing the country's institutions. Arévalo took office as the president of Guatemala on January 14, 2024. According to the country's main polls, the challenges facing the new government include the economy, insecurity, and corruption. However, it is encountering significant political limitations (Fundación Libertad y Desarrollo & Gallup, 2023).

Movimiento Semilla, the party that brought President Arévalo to power, was suspended as a political party and does not hold a majority in Congress. It has only 23 deputies in a Congress of 160 seats. The majority in Congress continues to summon government officials for unending explanations to wear down the administration. Despite these limitations, the government has implemented measures to improve security, such as creating special teams to combat extortion and increasing prison searches. Still, their impacts are little felt by the population, even though during the first six months of the new government, violent crime decreased (UNDP, 2024b). He also maintains a difficult relationship with the MP and its head, Consuelo Porras, due to the institution's actions to disrupt the government transition and obstruct the executive's agenda (Deutsche Welle, 2024).

It is generally anticipated that President Arévalo will not adopt harsh security policies like those in El Salvador or Honduras. Even during the most violent years of the 2010s, Guatemalan governments did not implement mano-dura policies to combat insecurity. Instead, they chose to pursue alternative institutional approaches focusing on strategic criminal prosecution by the MP. These measures had a positive impact on crime reduction, particularly homicides (Paz y Paz Bayley, 2017), and received international recognition (Interamerican Dialogue & Cristosal, 2024).

However, the actual government has limited influence over the prosecutor's office, faces a hostile congress, and is under immense political pressure to address insecurity. This challenging political climate has reduced its room for maneuver and resulted in swift public disillusionment (Bin, 2024).

Honduras

On January 27, 2022, President Xiomara Castro, candidate of the Liberty and Refoundation Party (LIBRE), assumed office after winning the 2021 general elections with 51.12% of the votes. This election was considered the most attended since 2001. Like El Salvador, this victory marked the success of a political actor different from the traditional political parties (the Liberal and National parties).

The President's victory reflected the population's desire for change after more than a decade of instability and democratic challenges. In 2009, democratic continuity was interrupted by a military coup that overthrew President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya's government, the current president's husband. After the situation normalized, the Supreme Court, controlled by then-President Juan Orlando Hernández of the National Party (2014–2018), approved continuous presidential re-election, allowing him to run for and win a second term.

During Hernández's presidency, there was a notable decline in civic freedoms and an increase in the persecution of political opposition and critical groups. There were also severe acts of violence, such as the forced exile or murder of human rights activists and legal officials (ACNUDH, 2023). Furthermore, serious allegations arose regarding government officials, including the president's brother, Juan Antonio Hernández, being involved in drug trafficking. His brother was arrested and tried by U.S. authorities, and shortly after leaving office, Juan Orlando Hernández himself was extradited to the United States. He was then tried and sentenced to 45 years in prison for drug trafficking-related crimes.

Xiomara Castro's government faces the challenge of addressing high levels of insecurity affecting the population caused by drug trafficking, street gangs, other criminal groups, and common crime. Initially, she proposed a different approach from the traditional focus on crime control, incorporating community development initiatives and opportunities for youth. However, this approach did not prevail. After nearly two years in office, following events like the massacre at the Women's Prison in June 2023, Xiomara Castro reversed some of her key campaign promises, including demilitarizing public security and upholding human rights (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2024). After initially transferring prison control from the military to the police, after the massacre, she reinstated military control. The military police also perform public security duties, such as patrolling rural areas and urban neighborhoods.

In December 2023, she followed El Salvador's example and decreed a state of emergency to combat crime, specifically extortion. However, unlike El Salvador, the state of emergency was only applied to specific municipalities rather than to the entire country. Evaluations of the state of emergency have revealed disappointing outcomes, showing minimal impact on the country's levels of violence and a decline in the population's human rights (Appleby & Dudley, 2023; Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2024).

The release of a video on September 2024 showing a meeting between alleged drug traffickers and Carlos Zelaya, the brother of Mel Zelaya—husband and principal advisor to President Castro—sparked a major crisis for the government's public image and fueled citizen discontent. After a remark from the U.S. ambassador to Honduras about the situation, President Castro canceled the extradition treaty between the two countries due to allegations of political interference (E. Sandoval, 2024).

Citizens' assessments on democracy in northern Central America

In this section, we present quantitative indicators regarding the evaluations and perceptions of the population in northern Central America, based primarily on data from the Americas Barometer conducted by Vanderbilt University's Public Opinion Research Lab.

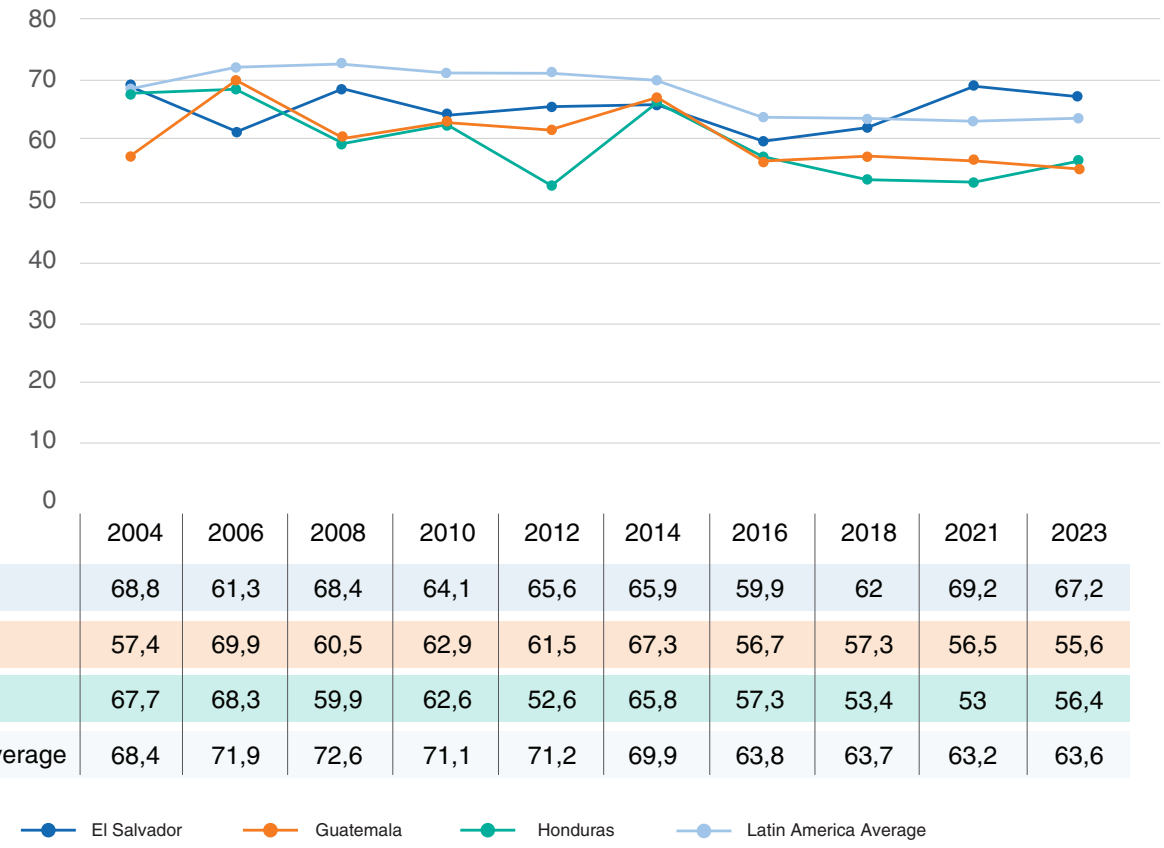
The categories examined pertain to democracy, corruption, and security, highlighting the latest political shifts linked to government changes at the start of the 2020s. This includes the change of government in El Salvador in 2019, when President Bukele assumed office, in Honduras in 2022, when President Castro came to power, and the period before the transition in Guatemala in 2024, when President Arévalo was elected.

Democracy

Two indicators selected for this category are the population's support for the idea that democracy is the best form of government and the level of satisfaction of the population with the democracy in which they live. In the last decades, the northern Central American countries supported democracy under the Latin American average, while the satisfaction with democracy was roughly in line with the average. However, in 2018 the satisfaction in El Salvador changed drastically.

Graph 2 shows that the 2016 survey reports a decline in support for democracy in the three northern Central American countries, a trend that continued in subsequent surveys for Guatemala and Honduras. Honduras slightly recovered in 2023, probably due to the 2022 change of government, although it was still below the 2016 levels. In El Salvador, after 2016, there was a significant increase in support for democracy, with a slight decline in 2023, although still higher than the values of the last decade. President Bukele's administration exploited the pandemic to enhance its reputation and to undermine its political rivals and also the check and balances system (FESPAD, 2020). It showcased itself as the government that handled the emergency most effectively—although it hid real data of deaths—that implemented a successful vaccination program, and that presented significant crime reductions.

Graph 2. Democracy support in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (2004-2023)

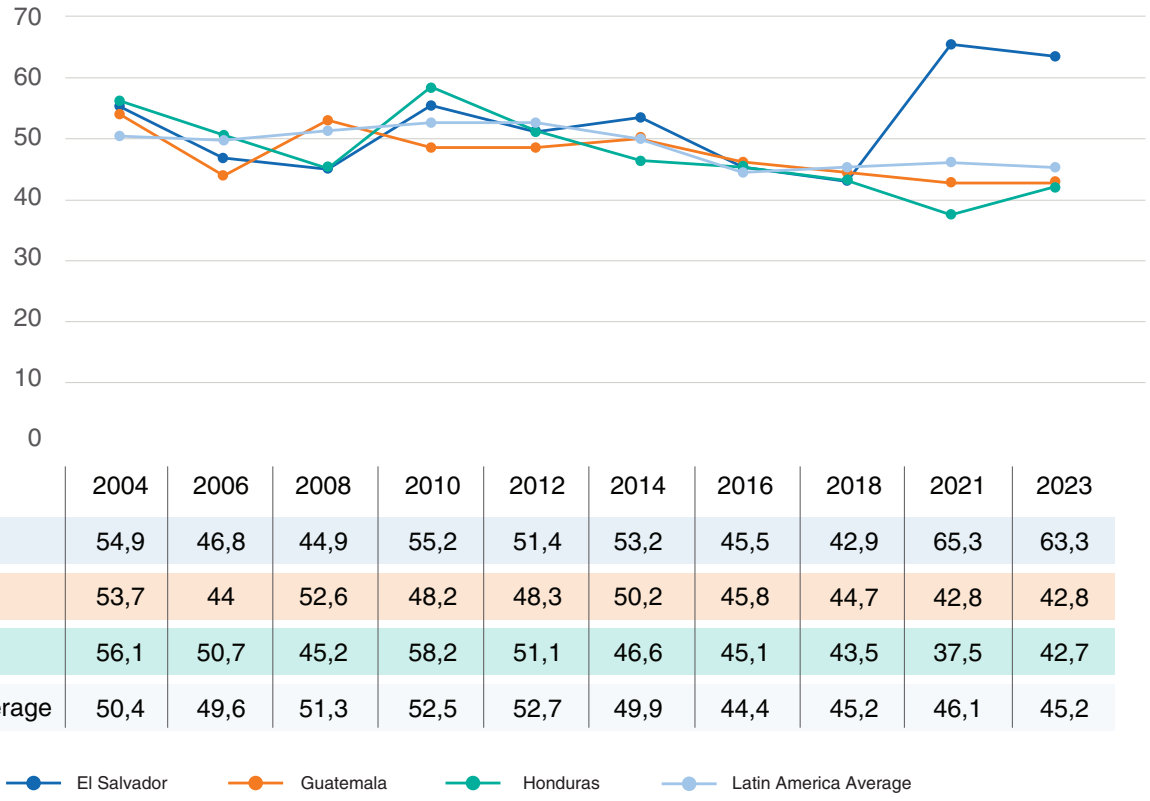


	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2021	2023
El Salvador	68,8	61,3	68,4	64,1	65,6	65,9	59,9	62	69,2	67,2
Guatemala	57,4	69,9	60,5	62,9	61,5	67,3	56,7	57,3	56,5	55,6
Honduras	67,7	68,3	59,9	62,6	52,6	65,8	57,3	53,4	53	56,4
Latin America Average	68,4	71,9	72,6	71,1	71,2	69,9	63,8	63,7	63,2	63,6

Source: Center for Global Democracy, Data playground. Affirmative responses to the question: "Democracy may have problems, but it is better than any other form of government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Regarding satisfaction with democracy, Graph 3. reveals the three countries also experienced a decline in 2016, which continued in the cases of Guatemala and Honduras in 2018 and 2021, with a slight improvement in the Honduran case in 2023. In 2010, Honduras showed the highest support for democracy following the restoration of democratic rule after the coup d'état in 2009. However, support began to decline swiftly, reaching levels even lower than those seen in 2008 during the political crisis preceding the coup. By the 2023 poll, support for democracy increased again, likely due to the formation of a government led by a political party distinct from the traditional ones.

Graph 3. Satisfaction with democracy in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (2004-2023)



	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2021	2023
El Salvador	54,9	46,8	44,9	55,2	51,4	53,2	45,5	42,9	65,3	63,3
Guatemala	53,7	44	52,6	48,2	48,3	50,2	45,8	44,7	42,8	42,8
Honduras	56,1	50,7	45,2	58,2	51,1	46,6	45,1	43,5	37,5	42,7
Latin America Average	50,4	49,6	51,3	52,5	52,7	49,9	44,4	45,2	46,1	45,2

Source: Center for Global Democracy, Data playground. Responses "Very satisfied" and "Satisfied" to the question: "In general, would you say that you are very satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with democracy?"

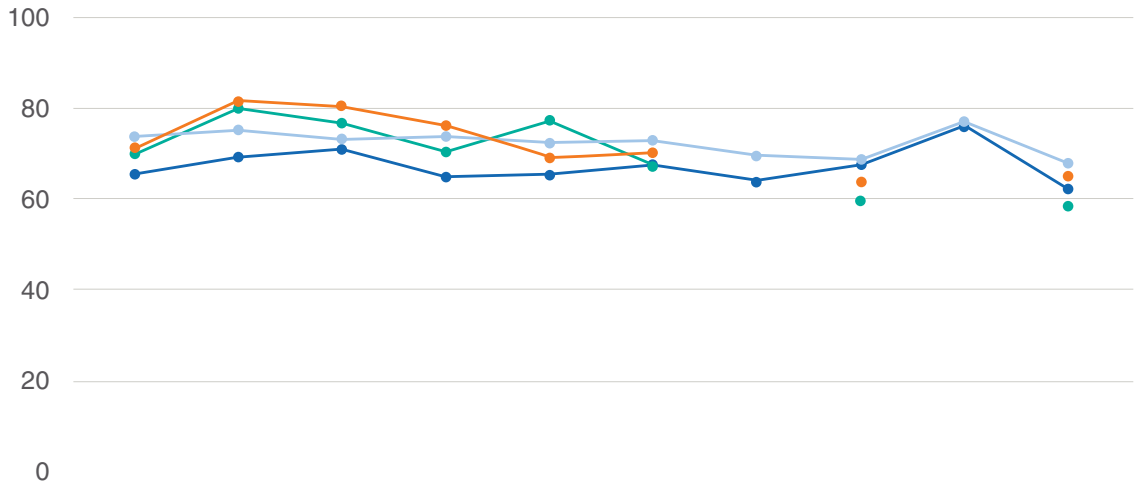
In El Salvador, the decline reported in 2016 continued in the 2018 survey, but satisfaction skyrocketed in 2021 and 2023 after President Bukele took office. Bukele effectively built an image as a president dedicated to enhancing citizens' health and safety, which may explain the high level of satisfaction. Although support for democracy tends to accompany satisfaction with democracy (if one goes up, the other does too), the level of satisfaction is not inevitably linked to support for democracy, as seen in El Salvador, where satisfaction is higher than support levels.

Examining these results raises several questions, such as: Why did citizens protest and paralyze the country for weeks in Guatemala in defense of the 2023 electoral results if there is supposedly a decline in support and satisfaction regarding democracy? Why does the population in El Salvador express greater support for democracy when the government has eliminated checks and balances and implemented a state of exception that suspends constitutional rights for an extended period? These survey results show a clear need to investigate further how citizens in the region understand and appreciate concepts like democratic governance.

Corruption

Corruption—understood as the private, illegal, and illegitimate transaction of public goods and services or the conditioning of decisions by public officials—is an incompatible element in a democratic society oriented toward the common good. Fundamental principles of democratic governance are the submission of public officials to the rule of law and the equality of all persons. Corruption undermines the ideas of the common good or general interest by benefiting individuals or minorities through illegal transactions or by avoiding the application of established rules.

Graph 4. Corruption's perceptions of public officials



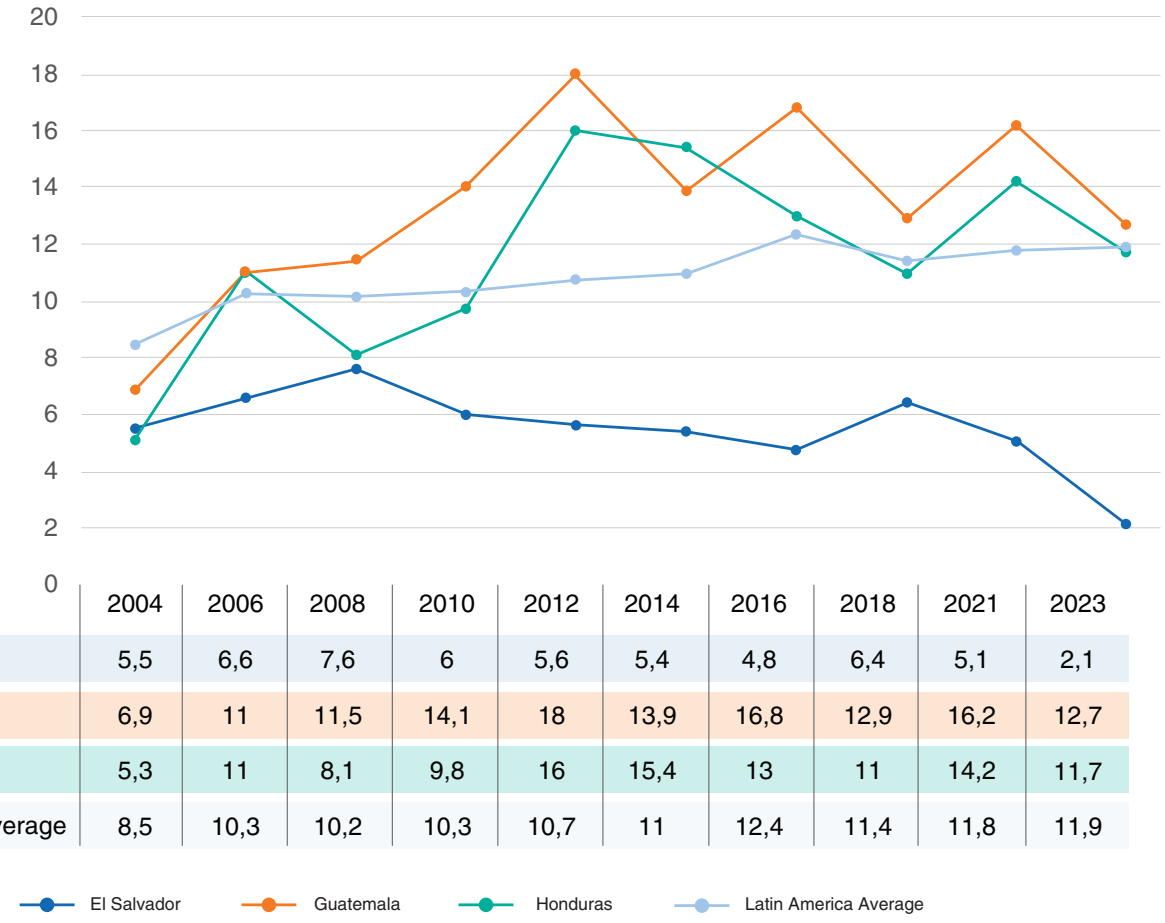
	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2021	2023
El Salvador	65,8	69,3	71	64,9	65,9	68	64	67,3	75,8	62,4
Guatemala	70,8	81,4	80,5	75,9	69,3	70,6		63,6		65,1
Honduras	69,5	79,8	76,8	70,7	77	67,6		58,9		58,4
Latin America Average	73	75,1	73,2	73,5	72,4	72,3	69,5	68,3	76,2	67,5

Source: Center for Global Democracy, Data playground. Responses "Somewhat widespread" and "Very widespread" to the question: "Taking into account your own experience or what you have heard, corruption among public officials is…?"

The preceding graph shows that, on average, in the northern Central American countries, more than 60% of the population perceives corruption among public officials or employees. These values are high but similar to the Latin American average. However, this perception has reduced in the recent decade, with the notable exception of El Salvador, where this perception reached the highest value in the 2021 survey.

Victimization by corrupt actions of police officers, considering that the police is one of the entities with the most daily contact with citizens, highlights a serious problem for democratic governance. Graph 5 shows that the number of reported police bribes is high in Honduras and Guatemala, while it is generally lower in El Salvador. They slightly increased in 2018 but markedly reduced during the Bukele government, reaching their lowest point in 2023.

Graph 5. Victimization by police bribe



	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2021	2023
El Salvador	5,5	6,6	7,6	6	5,6	5,4	4,8	6,4	5,1	2,1
Guatemala	6,9	11	11,5	14,1	18	13,9	16,8	12,9	16,2	12,7
Honduras	5,3	11	8,1	9,8	16	15,4	13	11	14,2	11,7
Latin America Average	8,5	10,3	10,2	10,3	10,7	11	12,4	11,4	11,8	11,9

Source: Center for Global Democracy, Data playground Affirmative responses to the question: "Has a police officer asked you for a bribe in the last twelve months?"

Honduras has reported police bribes similar to the Latin American average, while Guatemala has surpassed that average in almost all surveys, highlighting the severity of the issue. Although El Salvador shows lower levels of victimization by police bribes, it coexists with serious complaints about extortion and sextortion committed by police officers against citizens, especially during the state of emergency implemented in 2022 (Ramírez Irías, 2024; W. Sandoval, 2024).

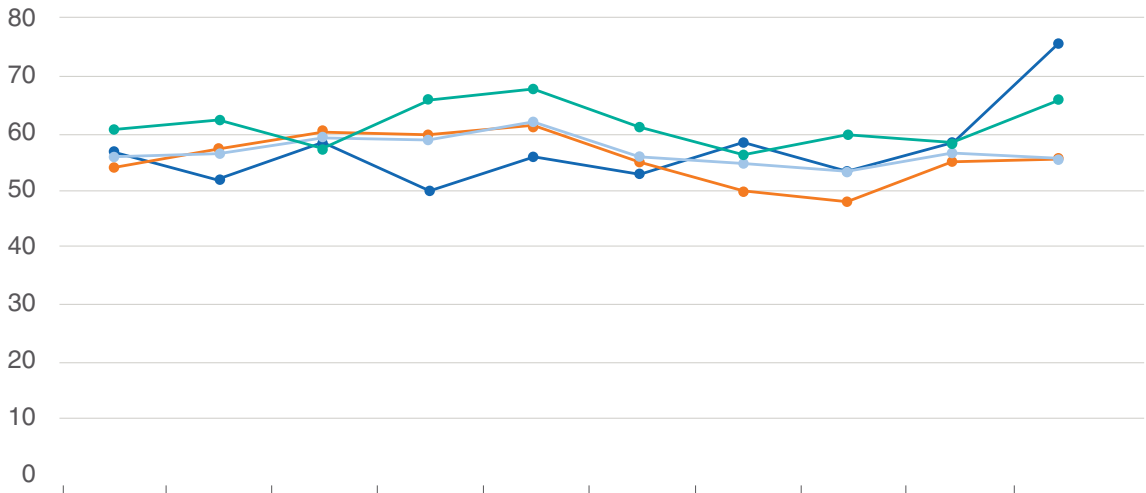
In this sense, although there is a widespread perception of public officials' corruption, this does not necessarily materialize in the same way for all actors. El Salvador shows that, although it shares similar perceptions of corruption among public officials with its neighbors, the perceived corruption of the Salvadoran police is significantly lower than that of the police in Honduras and Guatemala. This represents a significant difference among the three countries.

Security

In this section, we refer to security as the perception of the risk of becoming a victim of violence or crime, or the personal experience of being a victim.

Graph 6 shows that the population's perception of security in their neighborhoods has improved in the three northern Central American countries, with Guatemala matching the Latin American average and El Salvador and Honduras performing better. In the 2023 Americas Barometer survey, El Salvador recorded the highest level of security, with the highest percentage in its trajectory and the highest of all series. Honduras also reached one of the highest values in its trajectory. Guatemala shows an improvement compared to the surveys from 2016 and 2018; however, the perception of security is poorer and more distant than that of its Central American neighbors. Due to the recent change in government in Guatemala, the results presented are attributable to the previous administrations.

Graph 6. Security's perception of neighborhood



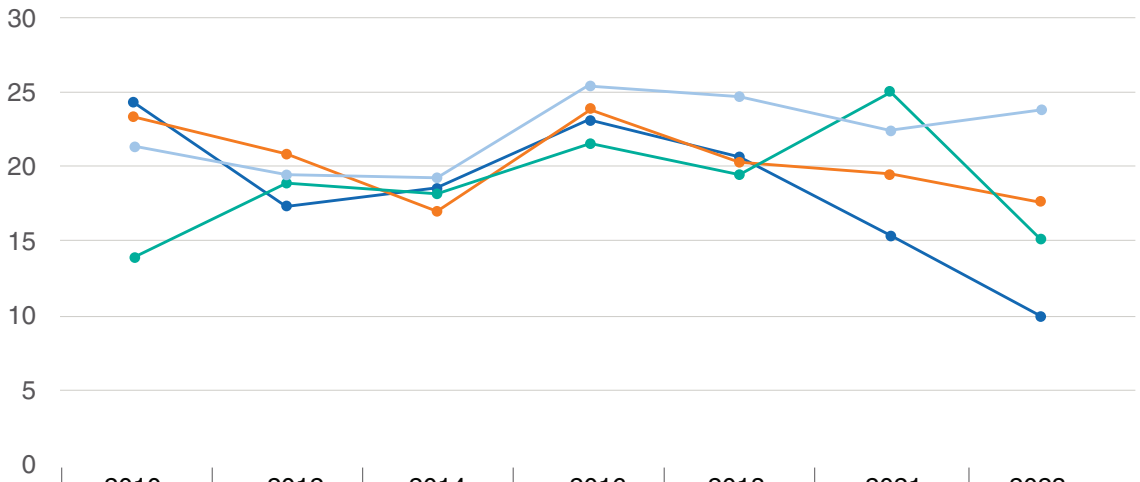
	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2021	2023
El Salvador	56,4	51,7	58,2	50	55,9	52,9	58,2	53,1	58,4	75,3
Guatemala	54,2	57	60,1	59,7	61,5	55	49,7	47,8	55,3	55,4
Honduras	60,7	62,3	57,9	65,7	67,7	61,1	56,3	59,4	58	65,8
Latin America Average	56,2	56,9	59,1	58,7	61,7	55,5	54,5	53,1	56,3	55,2

Source: Center for Global Democracy, Data playground. "Somewhat safe" and "Very safe" responses to the question: "Speaking of the neighborhood where you live and thinking of the possibility of being assaulted or robbed, do you feel very safe, somewhat safe, unsafe, or very unsafe?

Several authors have criticized the lack of success of the Honduran government's security strategy and the implementation of the state of emergency in various cities (Appleby & Dudley, 2023). While this strategy may not be effective against extortion—the main reason for its introduction—it might have improved other indicators, like people's perception of security in their neighborhoods.

In terms of victimization by crime, Graph 7 indicates that the three countries coincide in experiencing a reduction of the impact of crime on ordinary citizens in the 2023 survey—even lower than the Latin American average—mainly manifest in El Salvador and Honduras, despite the critics about the lack of results of the emergency states decreed by the Honduran government. To some extent, there is a coincidence between the two indicators; with less victimization, the inhabitants experience a greater sense of security.

Graph 7. Crime victimization in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (2010-2023)



	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2021	2023
El Salvador	24,2	17,4	18,6	50	55,9	52,9	58,2
Guatemala	23,3	20,8	17	59,7	61,5	55	49,7
Honduras	14	18,9	18,3	65,7	67,7	61,1	56,3
Latin America Average	21,3	19,5	19,3	58,7	61,7	55,5	54,5

Source: Center for Global Democracy, Data playground. Affirmative responses to the question: "Have you been a victim of any type of crime in the past 12 months? That is, have you been a victim of robbery, assault, fraud, blackmail, extortion, violent threats, or any type of crime in the past 12 months?"

The three countries in northern Central America have demonstrated improved security indicators despite their differing political processes and strategies for tackling crime and violence. This prompts the question of whether these countries have enhanced their security governance capacity, resulting in greater capability to combat crime and concomitant insecurity.

Information and public opinion

Considering the qualitative nature of this study, which seeks to explore how individuals perceive democracy, security, and government, it is important to include a section on the regional context concerning information consumption patterns. This aspect is vital for understanding people's opinions and how they interpret their environment.

The information available significantly influences individuals' beliefs, and the quality and accuracy of the information significantly affect citizens' decision-making abilities. This section will briefly analyze the news consumption and information habits related to public and political affairs among the populations of the three Central American countries.

Primary sources of information for the population

With the rise of the internet as a tool for information transmission, traditional media formats have undergone substantial changes. This evolution has been accelerated by the portability of technology, including cell phones, smartphones, and tablets, as well as the development of social networks in the 21st century. The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified this shift by virtualizing social interactions.

As a result, citizens no longer rely solely on traditional media outlets—such as newspapers, radio, and television—for content. Instead, they have access to a wide array of platforms, including popular social networks like Facebook, Twitter or X, Instagram, and YouTube, along with numerous content creators on each platform.

However, this abundance of media has led to significant criticism regarding the lack of quality standards and information verification on social networks, where misinformation can spread rapidly and extensively (Baptista & Gradim, 2022). In the last decade, social networks have garnered significant attention due to their substantial impact on public discussions about politics and electoral behavior. Their political importance is undeniable. Although social media allows for greater exposure of opinions, their functioning tends to segregate groups by preferences, increasing radicalization, polarization of opinions, and intolerance (Motos, 2021). In a democratic context, this could lead to division rather than integration, which is why some warn about social media's threat to democracy (Manley, 2020).

Information consumption trends

In the countries examined in this study, there has been a notable shift in information consumption patterns, largely driven by social media. This change is further influenced by the demographic and generational dynamics present in each country, especially in those with a predominantly young population.

According to measurements by the University Institute of Public Opinion, in 2022, 40% of the Salvadoran population do not have access to cable television and rely on open signal channels for entertainment. Furthermore, 50% lack residential internet access, yet 75% report having a Facebook account. Notably, 91% state they are frequently informed about politics, with 90% mentioning television and social networks, primarily Facebook, as their primary sources. Additionally, 85% indicate they regularly consume government-related content or content related to President Bukele through television and social media (Instituto

Universitario de Opinión Pública, 2022). Recently, TikTok has also emerged as an influential platform for information consumption in the population (Picardo et al., 2024).

In Honduras, 40.8% of the population relies on television for information, followed by social networks at 32.7%, pushing radio to third place at 15.1%. Among social networks, Facebook is the most popular source, with a preference rate of 73.6%, while WhatsApp follows far behind at 7.8% (ERIC, 2024).

In Guatemala, a 2022 study that surveyed 752 people revealed that 53% prefer to get their information from digital newspapers, reflecting the broad range available in the country. Television ranks second at 50.1%, and Facebook ranks third at 45.5%. The social network X follows closely with 40.4%. These findings indicate that the internet and social media are Guatemala's predominant sources of news and information (A-01, 2022).

In all three countries, a clear trend towards using social media as the primary means of obtaining information is emerging. This shift may shape public opinion and influence political decisions.

Narrative control and branding: The 'Bukele Model'

A significant trend in the region is the increasing efforts of political leaders to enhance their presence and influence on social media. The Salvadoran president stands out as a notable example due to his global recognition and positioning as a political reference.

A vital aspect of the Salvadoran president's political communication strategy is his extensive use of information technology and social networks. He employs disruptive tactics to disseminate his message widely, aiming to remain omnipresent and steer social discourse. Moreover, numerous supporters consistently share his message, regardless of whether they are paid, volunteers, or automated users (bots).

The narrative presented elevates the leader's status, creating a cult of personality that portrays him with heroic or pastoral traits. This narrative framework enables him to wield power and provide justice while simplifying complex situations and explanations. It establishes a clear division between good and evil, allies and adversaries, honest individuals, and criminals. It often employs disinformation, stigmatization, and defamation against individuals or groups. The leader "purifies" his motivations and actions by invoking divine authority or faith, promoting emotional appeals—especially fear—over logical reasoning, and encouraging obedience among followers (Picardo et al., 2024). The narratives are frequently bolstered by audiovisual content crafted for mass dissemination, particularly on social media platforms.

To further broaden the narrative's scope, the communication strategy includes astroturfing, which involves utilizing third parties—either recognized or anonymous, such as trolls and bots—as promoters of a figure or cause, often based on false or misleading information (García-Orosa, 2021). Numerous social media channels and content creators openly support the official narrative and may even possess a broader reach than official channels (Paises & Olivares, 2023).

Mass production and repetitive content are crucial to the strategy. Studies have shown that approximately 90 to 300 videos about President Bukele are produced daily on YouTube (Picardo et

al., 2024), while a relentless army of trolls on social network X posts 20 hours a day (Palacios, 2023).

In addition to misinformation, the strategy involves using digital violence to harass, attack, and discredit critical voices and to intimidate and discourage citizens from freely expressing themselves, thereby affecting the conversation in civic space. This violence has been particularly marked against women in politics, including social leaders, analysts, and journalists (OAS, 2024).

This strategy has also extended into traditional media. On one hand, public media budgets have been increased, while some private media outlets have come under government control through judicial actions. Other media outlets have been incentivized or coerced into alignment through government advertising practices.

Public trust has shifted toward public media, while confidence in private media—notably those critical of government policies—has declined (Kinosian, 2022). This trend consumes significant public resources and raises ethical concerns about using advertising funds to saturate the information landscape with manipulative content, often employing neuromarketing techniques (Real Lindo, 2019). This approach contradicts government stated goals of transparency and accountability and hampers individuals' capacity to make informed decisions.

Digital strategies used in Guatemala and Honduras

In 2019, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) conducted a special investigation into the use of "net centers" as tools for spreading false information about political corruption and economic crime cases. The objective was to manipulate public opinion and discredit justice institutions, a tactic that has continued since then and is now used against the government (CICIG, 2019; Redacción Ocote, 2202).

In Honduras, the three main political parties—National, Liberal, and Libre—have employed trolls and bots to disrupt public discourse and shape narratives, resulting in heightened polarization. Investigative journalism has revealed the extensive use of TikTok for spreading disinformation in the country, with the X network closely trailing behind. Many of these accounts operate in coordination with other replicator accounts or in teams. (Pineda, 2024; Sánchez, 2024).

Some thoughts

Social networks play a crucial role in informing people in northern Central America and shaping their political and social views. However, these networks are used politically for propaganda and promoting specific narratives rather than for fostering open debates about democratic governance and citizen expectations. The studies mentioned above highlight the need to improve digital education to mitigate the negative impacts of misinformation spread on these platforms and algorithm-driven opinion segregation. However, revitalizing traditional forms of political conversation is equally important. Face-to-face and diverse interactions can help prevent the polarization of preferences and act as tools to combat political intolerance and division.

5. Ordinary people on democracy and security

The participants in this study seem—often implicitly—to expect a democratic government to guarantee some ideals and interests. Although voting is seen as essential in the sense that they appreciate the opportunity to participate, it is not enough. Some of the most important themes mentioned are security, decent government, justice, economic well-being, the observation of privacy rights, and freedom of speech. It is not only that the participants frequently assert these expectations are not fulfilled; often, they neither have confidence in the election process nor in the outcomes. Not all understand these promises of democracy in the same way, and some feel frustrated about living in a democracy that does not meet their expectations. Still, the expectations are a good starting point for presenting the results of our study.

The participants' expectations are often intimately connected to their everyday life experiences. For analytical purposes, they can be ordered into conceptual spheres or clusters to emphasize their significance and relationships. In El Salvador, for instance, a cluster consists of concepts related to the state of exception, a regained sense of everyday security, justice, and freedom of expression. However, clusters can share certain concepts; for instance, in Honduras and Guatemala, corruption permeates the economic and political domains and profoundly affects the experiences of (in)security. The results will therefore be presented in conceptual clusters to emphasize their significance and relationship to others.

The participants expressed different views, experiences, and expectations; interestingly, occasionally, the expressions of the same person exposed tensions or contradictions. Far from being problematic for the validity of the results, this reflects the multifaceted reality they live in, try to make sense of, and formulate a stance about. The causes of these tensions or contradictions may lie in the fact that ordinary citizens do not often discuss the questions and topics that came up—something participants expressed frequently—but also in the complexity, fragmentation, and emotional weight of reality. This makes developing coherent and consistent views and judgments difficult or even unattainable, especially concerning contested issues such as democratic governance and security. Organizing the expectations, experiences, and views into conceptual clusters also helps to make sense of the seemingly contradictory opinions and assertions.

A. Participants' conceptions of democratic governance and security

The participants generally value democratic governance, as almost everyone considers it vital to vote in elections. They see it as a responsibility or duty, even though they may worry about other aspects or did not vote last time. Participating gives them the expectation that, in some way, they have influence or can provoke change. In the following quotes, participants explain why voting is important.[3]

> *To carry out my responsibility as a citizen. Voting is also a responsibility because it gives me the opportunity to express what I want.* [Guatemala – mas-urb inseg]
>
> *Voting is very important and every citizen's obligation. It is like buying a lottery ticket; you do not know if you will win, but equally, you must vote.* [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]
>
> *Exactly, because we want change. When voting, you put forward the person you think or believe has the best capability. Not going to vote is letting the same remain in power.* [Honduras – fem-urb seg]
>
> *It is a right one has, and one votes for the person he considers the best at that moment. We have gotten it wrong many times, as they say, we gotten it wrong many times.* [...] *I believe that, at some point, it can be considered a duty.* [El Salvador – urb inseg]

However, as will become apparent, ordinary people sometimes express contradictory views and expectations when discussing democratic governance. Ideal conceptions and hopes about government, elections, and casting votes are often squashed when confronted with political reality. Suspected electoral fraud or belonging to a traditionally excluded population also means that participating in elections does not guarantee representation.

[3]The quotes in this section illustrate the findings and argument. They come from a diverse public of participants and are selected to clarify the different points made and give the participants a 'voice.' The end of each quote indicates the background of the participant who made the assertion: the country, gender (feminine [fem], masculine [mas], or LGBTQ+), and community (urban secure [urb seg], urban insecure [urb inseg], rural [rural], or indigenous community [ind com]). If relevant and possible, it also indicates if a young person was speaking (youth).

Expectations of a democratic government

In all three countries, the participants have many expectations of their governments that go far beyond providing security. Topics such as health, work and income, education, food prices, and other basic needs are frequently mentioned. However, the lack of access to essential services may provoke people, especially indigenous and rural communities, to express feelings of being abandoned by their government. Some participants express it in the following ways:

> *They have to take care of communities that have needs. They must visit the communities to see how they are, how they exist, and take notice of how people live in the countryside.* [El Salvador – fem-rural]
>
> *Governments should promote education, preserve the cultures of the different regions, improve security, and attract foreign investment to create more employment and income sources.* [Honduras – mas-urb seg]
>
> *We, the indigenous communities, are at this moment in an abyss from which we cannot escape. The Constitution states that it is the obligation of the state, of the government, to protect the indigenous communities; but regrettably, if we do not apply pressure, they will give us nothing.* [Honduras – mas-ind com]
>
> *Yes, they want us to vote, but there is no government help while we have a lot of necessities. There is no help, but we need help.* [Guatemala – fem-ind com]
>
> *What I expect from a government is that it provides us with a minimal quality of life and dignity.* [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

Essentially, the participants expressed that they want their votes to count. They want to be heard and cared for by the government regarding accessibility to food, employment, health, and education. They feel the government should recognize their needs and translate this awareness into policies that help them with everyday uncertainties and worries.

Security

For the participants, like democratic governance, security has many aspects, including, but not limited to, physical security or not fearing being harmed by gang members or members of other delinquent groups. But some, having lived for so many years with fear and rampant insecurity, did not know well how to respond to the question of what it means to live securely or safely. In a neighborhood with long trajectories of gang presence and gang-related insecurity, participants merely made references to a past when the situation was safer. Some participants said:

What does it mean to live in security?

- *A luxury..., a luxury.*
- *Happiness, if we had it.*
- *Honestly, security... security, that is really difficult. Feel safe, safe..., I do not know.*
- *It should be most beautiful, being safe. The only reassurance I have now... is that we will go to heaven one day.*
- *I do not know what to say...* [El Salvador – urb inseg] (All quotes come from the same FGD).

To have a safe country and live with security, we have to go back to the 1980s. I remember that in those times, there were no gangs or gangsters. But nowadays, we do not have security. What kind of security can we get from the government? [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

For participants in all three countries, security has a broad definition and a variety of dimensions. Although fear of becoming a victim of threats, extortion, assaults, violence, etc., is repeatedly mentioned, so is having access to basic food and services, housing, work, and economic stability. For the participants, living safely means different things.

To live safely is not to fear that they [police] *will confound you, nor to be afraid that they will mistake you for someone who belongs to a group* [gang]. [El Salvador – youth, mas-urb inseg]

To live safely first is to have a house to live in. When I have my home and where to live, I will breed chickens and plant there. [El Salvador – mas-ind com]

To go out freely, without fear that something will happen. [Honduras – mas-rural]

The highest insecurity in Honduras is the cost of the basic food basket, which has become very expensive. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

If there were no violence and sexual harassment stopped, along with a certain level of economic stability. [Guatemala – fem-ind com]

Living safely means residing no longer in Guatemala. This is what many people believe. [Guatemala – youth, mas-urb seg]

In a sense, the participants' expectations of a democratic government and the conception of security partially overlap. Both relate to enjoying some kind of well-being, such as not having to worry about access to basic food and services, housing, and employment. Expectations of living in a democracy are intimately connected to economic and social well-being, including feeling safe.

B. El Salvador: democratic governance with a state of exception

The present study focuses on the beliefs, opinions, and understandings of democracy in northern Central America, especially how ordinary people regard security, tough-on-crime approaches, and the legitimacy of extraordinary security measures that suspend fundamental democratic freedoms and rights. The findings show a division running through the region. The participants in El Salvador agree that the state of exception has profoundly changed the longstanding situation of insecurity that has plagued the country and its inhabitants. It removed the street gangs from the streets, ended their control over the neighborhoods they considered their territory, and diminished delinquency, making everyday life more secure. More than 30 years after the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1993—officially ending the decade-old civil war—and after decades of gang-related violence, participants mention that they finally live in peace. Still, many worry about the weakening of democratic freedoms and civil rights. The participants in Guatemala and Honduras consider insecurity a paramount concern. Some participants long for the same kind of extraordinary security measures implemented in the neighboring country, while others are concerned about a possible infringement of constitutional rights. Also, corruption is mentioned as having a negative influence on security and a central factor in the waning of democratic governance. First, the findings for El Salvador will be presented, and then they will be juxtaposed with those of Guatemala and Honduras.

The conceptual clusters that surged in El Salvador are the state of exception (security, justice and peace), security forces (discretionary powers, erosion of privacy, harassment, and restricted freedom of expression), local economy (income, incrementing taxes, uncertainty), and democracy (resignation and abandonment).

State of exception: security, justice, and peace

In El Salvador, the first cluster of conceptual categories centers around concepts mentioned when talking about the actual state of exception: peace, security, and justice. Various participants describe the situation in their neighborhood, city, or town as peace and tranquility. This indicates the enormous change they experience now that a state of exception is in place, with no gang members around harassing, threatening, or extorting them or their family members.

Where I live was previously very conflictive; everybody was frightened. Thanks to God, we can say that now we live in peace; we are tranquil. [El Salvador – urb inseg]

We are happy. Our neighborhood is somewhat more tranquil, and we live in peace. [El Salvador – fem-ind com]

[The neighborhood where I live] *is a very tranquil and peaceful community compared to how it was previously.* [El Salvador – mas-urb inseg]

Some even use religious terms to describe the change and the feeling of safety after decades of victimization and fear of being victimized by street gangs, not only attributing it to President Bukele but to divine intervention.

It is the man [President Bukele] *who gave us the liberty and peace we have now, but God has done this because God does everything. Many people say, "No. It is the President who has done all this." Yes, he has done it, but because God wanted it this way.* [El Salvador – urb inseg]

Look, the governors and everybody are put there by God. God permits all this [the state of exception]. *Because if God does not permit it, things will not happen. And yes,* [because of that] *one trusts in the person who will govern. The man who goes for the presidency* [President Bukele] *has done quite a lot.* [El Salvador – mas-urb seg]

All participants, even the most critical, affirmed that the Bukele government restored security to their neighborhoods and daily lives. They observed a clear change between before and after President Bukele took office and are grateful for how it transformed their daily lives. No one expressed fear of violence, delinquency, being extorted, or family members being threatened by gang members. After decades of gang presence and control, accompanied by constant fear—even of talking to relative strangers—some never thought this change would happen.

We are fine regarding security. Although the situation was difficult in the past, now that the youths [related to gangs] *have been imprisoned, we feel more confident in our neighborhood.* [El Salvador – mas-ind com]

The truth is that life has changed a lot. Just as I never expected to see Rubén Darío Street clean of street vendors, I never expected that there would be an atmosphere free of gangs and that I could walk with tranquility. [El Salvador – urb inseg]

Previously, I felt insecure talking to strangers. I did not have the confidence to talk to anyone without knowing whether this person was a relative of someone in the gang. Now, I no longer feel that way. [...] *Previously, I also feared visiting another neighborhood. Now I can go out and get on a bus. I have my cell phone with me, knowing nothing will happen.* [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

Justice

Often, participants express that the justice system is functioning, at least partially. Although gang members are in prison for years or decades, there are others for whom the system is not delivering. Among those locked up, many are innocent people who are not related to gangs and did nothing to deserve this fate. But still, they were taken away and sent to prison, and often little is known about them.

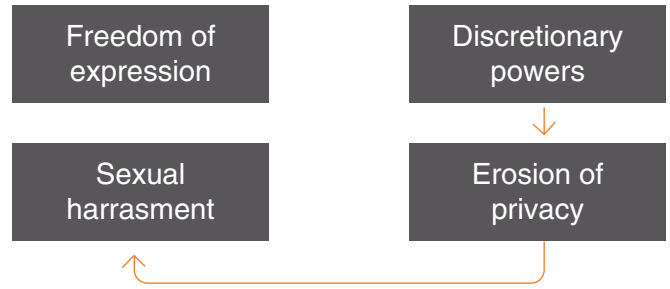
In my opinion, 60% of the time, justice is served. However, there are also innocent people who get imprisoned. They go there because of the state of exception, only because someone makes false accusations against them. So, perhaps, in this sense, 60%. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

Thanks to God, we feel that the system is more reliable and that everything is right. Thanks to the president. However, the situation affects many people who were innocently sent to prison, leaving behind their children. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

The fact that a member of these groups [gangs] *is in prison, means that for him justice is being served. However, there is also injustice. For example, some of my friends were arrested without being* [gang members] *or belonging to any group* [gang]*, but simply because they wore a shirt or maybe a tattoo that did not reference any group.* [El Salvador – mas-urb inseg]

Look, the regime has brought positive changes, although we all know there have been cases that we hope will be resolved. I have friends, and I know people… There are a lot of complaints about innocent people [being imprisoned]*. I hope that this will never happen to me.* […] *Considering everything, we are living a lot better now, which is something we cannot deny. Therefore, I feel satisfied with the current conditions. I really do.* [El Salvador – mas-urb seg]

Security forces: discretionary powers, the erosion of privacy, sexual harassment, and freedom of expression



Now that the gangs are gone from the communities and their members do not harass, threaten, or extort neighbors anymore, many feel a new sense of security. However, as shown above, new kinds of uncertainties have surged during the state of exception. The discretionary powers delegated to the security forces to detain someone and send them to prison have collateral consequences, such as maltreatment, sexual harassment of girls, harassment of family members of imprisoned persons, the erosion of privacy, and the encroachment on freedom of expression.

Discretionary powers

Participants describe how—especially for youths and, consequently, their parents—the police have become a significant source of insecurity. Although they enjoy the new security situation without gang presence, they dread encounters with police or soldiers because of the uncertainty of what may happen to them. Especially residents of neighborhoods that had gang presence previously feel vulnerable because of the broad discretionary powers transferred to the security forces under the state of exception.

Young participants relate that the security forces regularly stop them, demanding that they remove their shirts to show that they do not have (gang-related) tattoos. Police and soldiers also insist on checking their bags and belongings and inspecting their mobile phones. If officers find indications of gang sympathies, interpret something as being gang-related, or frown upon their reactions, they may detain them. The discretionary powers permit the security forces to detain any suspected person and send him to prison.

> *Being a young person, police officers make me feel insecure. I feel very insecure because I live in a red district—that's how they called it previously, but not anymore—they can detain me and take me with them. Nobody can do anything about it. This is what makes me feel insecure.* [El Salvador – youth, mas-urb inseg.]

I lost fear—a lot of fear—that is, now I am relatively quiet. There are no gang members anymore, but there are police officers, there are soldiers on the street. Sometimes, because I am young—as they have this odd habit against us—it has occurred to me: "Hey, stop there!" Where do you come from? Raise your shirt!... in the street, in front of everybody. They examine your cell phone, scrutinize WhatsApp, and read the conversations. This became so recurring that I started to see it as normal. When I came home from work, they stopped me; when I went to buy something, they stopped me; when walking in the neighborhood, they stopped me. [El Salvador – youth, mas-urb inseg]

The authorities can stop you many times and question you. If they are in a bad mood, they can mix you up; they might say you are close to something [a gang]. *That is, they can take you with them. I have seen it happen. I have seen it quite a few times.* [El Salvador – youth, mas-urb inseg]

This kind of ill-treatment is more commonly directed at young males than females; however, as will be described below, girls often are subject to another type of harassment. Mothers often worry about what may happen to their children when they encounter a police or military patrol. In the case of their sons being on the streets, mothers fear that for no apparent reason at all, they may be detained, mistreated, and sent to prison.

I am afraid that the soldiers abuse their power as authority figures. Sometimes, it happens to young adults, more often males, only because soldiers see them alone, detain them, and take them along, although they are innocent. […] *I have witnessed the case of my son, who was taken away by the authorities and tortured both physically and psychologically.* [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

My son called me and said, "Mommy, the police detained me." We went running immediately because this was something serious. I told them, "You have caught my son." "Without effect. They even told me, "You keep out of it, or we will beat you. We are going to take him with us." They had him with his legs spread, totally searched, viewing his Facebook, viewing his chats, and everything. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

Just as you enjoy peace, you also feel sadness. Not everyone is happy with what the president is doing. In my case, I feel confident that my husband will go to work and come back fine. Now, some mothers cannot say the same because there may have been a raid, and their sons were taken away. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

Restricted use of public spaces

Some participants signal that youth withdraw from public spaces, especially as their activities may provoke interest or suspicion. Walking the streets at night, talking or listening to music, break dancing, or doing hip hop may all draw the attention of the security forces.

Many youths who played outside or went out at night do not do so anymore because of the police, as they reprimand them. [El Salvador – LGBTQ+-rural]

These communities [hip-hop and break dance] *are diminishing more and more. The youth adapt. Not only do they dress more conservatively, but they also stop practicing these activities. Each time, fewer young people practice. When there are events, fewer attend.* [El Salvador – youth, mas-urb inseg]

Erosion of privacy

These discretionary powers are not only reflected in the possibility to detain suspected gang members or collaborators and send them to prison without previous investigation or concrete evidence but also in the practice of reviewing the bags, inspecting cellular phones, or even entering houses without a warrant or other legal authorization. The right to privacy is surpassed when police officers or soldiers stop persons to search their belongings and ask to unlock their cellular phones. Especially in areas that previously were considered gang territory, people fear these powers and comply out of fear of being arrested and accused of being related to a gang.

What they do, I think, is an abuse of power. The moment they arrive, it's like, "Give me your cell phone." "Unblock the phone." They start to read the messages and look at the photo gallery. [El Salvador – youth, mas-urb inseg]

They search [a house] without a warrant. They do it. They say bringing a judicial order is unnecessary as they are the authorities. [El Salvador – fem-rural]

However, not everyone is worried about the discretionary powers of the police and the intrusions into the privacy of one's cellular phone or home. When asked if it is valid for the police to check someone's cell phone, some responded:

It is a way to find out where he comes from. They check his cell phone to see what it has. If there are bad influences, it will obviously come out. [El Salvador – mas-urb seg]

Sometimes, the police come to a house and go inside to see if a person has dangerous instruments or other items [arms] *or if he is involved in illegal activities.*
- Do you let them in if they knock on the door here?
Yes, to show them everything I have—my things and everything—and that there is nothing bad. [El Salvador – mas-rural]

Sexual harassment

Where young men fear being detained and sent to prison by the security forces, women and girls fear sexual harassment. The source of fear is often the soldiers who are stationed in the neighborhood, shouting at girls passing by or making offensive remarks. People fear denouncing the soldiers or police officers involved in these conducts may provoke even more harassment.

> *We arranged for the soldiers to stay in my community's Communal House. A group of eight or ten rotated, stayed there for four days, left, and another group came. We did not want them to stay there anymore because they had imprisoned many young people. They also shouted things at the girls, even using a megaphone, when they walked down the street. This is incorrect; being an authority and saying things to a girl is unacceptable.* [El Salvador – fem-rural]
>
> *A case occurred in the neighborhood up there. The soldiers stayed in the communal house that the community had provided for them. Several of them harassed a girl from the neighborhood who walked past to college. Her mother indicted them.* [El Salvador – youth, fem-rural]

Also, family members of the imprisoned under the state of exception may experience harassment through constantly being stopped and frisked when they encounter police or military patrols in their neighborhood. However, they have had nothing to do with the activities of their relatives.

> *Near my terrain, there is a lot of harassment by soldiers. This is disturbing. In my specific case, my brother is detained. Because I have a brother in prison, they harass me. Only because I am his brother, they harass me.* [El Salvador – mas-rural]

Freedom of expression: the return of self-censure

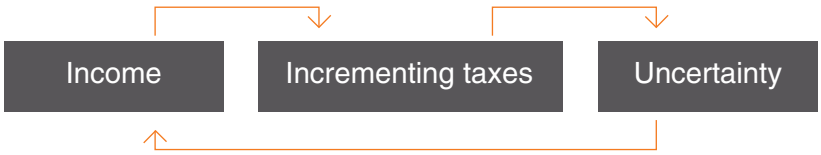
The fear of discretionary powers can also expand into worries about freedom of expression. In part, participants affirm that feeling safe in their neighborhood also includes feeling free to talk about different topics, which was difficult or dangerous when gangs were still around. Nowadays, they exercise restraint in interactions with the security forces, for instance, when they disagree with police officers or soldiers using excessive force or detaining an innocent person. They fear being accused of being a gang member or collaborator, which implies the risk of a long time in prison. However, some participants do not feel free to talk to a journalist about topics related to security, politics, or the government.

My neighborhood is labeled as dangerous, but actually, there is confidence that you can speak and express yourself freely and make your point normally. Nothing will happen. I believe that actually we have freedom of expression. [El Salvador – mas-urb inseg]

I believe that maybe because I am a woman, the state of exception does not affect me so much, but it does affect my freedom of expression. If we want to complain and say to the police, "Look, you are catching the wrong person. Please go and get the correct one," they will detain you. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

Talking about the government, maybe I would not do that anymore. Because there are situations in which I think as I see things. Yes, we have the right to freely express ourselves, we still have that. But I think that sometime soon, it might not be the case anymore. That is to say, if we say something against the government, there could be negative consequences. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

Local (or household) economy: income, incrementing taxes, and uncertainty



Local (or household) econonomy

Improved security has opened new economic opportunities, such as new shops or other commercial initiatives in communities with previous gang presence. The absence of gangs generates tranquility, has stopped the extortion of shops and businesses in the neighborhoods, and motivates residents to open new ones. Sometimes, these have the character of formal enterprises such as shops or small factories, while others are informal activities such as street selling. The counter face of these new economic activities is that people don't only see it as an opportunity but often also a sheer necessity in their efforts to make ends meet.

There is more street selling. Many people have started selling, opened shops, and are coming more vendors. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

Most of all, you see many things on the main street. The street is illuminated and lively, and people are still around at midnight. Also, in the market, they sell anything. In the neighborhood, there are shops. That is to say, previously, there were no shops; nowadays, there are some. Now, it is very different. [El Salvador – urb inseg]

From an economic point of view, yes, it is true that the gangs no longer affect the people's purses. This has helped a lot. I know that the people feel relieved that they are no longer being extorted. [El Salvador – mas-urb inseg]

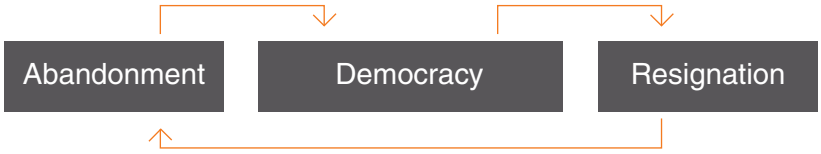
The economy generally disquiets the participants, especially the local or household economy. Some are worried about making ends meet or losing their job, others about the future of their business and the increasing taxes, while others are concerned about the possibility of buying a house. Now the worries about gangs and insecurity are mostly gone, they want the government to give more attention to the economy.

I believe that the president has acted on the topic of delinquency, and this gives tranquility. This is positive. However, when considering the economy, everything has become expensive. You cannot go to a nice place because the prices are so high. The economy is in a bad state. [El Salvador – urb inseg]

I believe the topic of small entrepreneurs and sellers is related to the challenge of finding jobs due to a lack of employment opportunities. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

With the gangs gone, house prices have increased. Therefore, the economy must improve. With only one minimum wage or even two within a household, it is impossible to buy a house. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

Democracy: resignation and abandonment



Lived experiences of democracy

As mentioned before, the participants predominantly express that they believe elections are essential to choosing the candidates they believe should govern the nation. Participation is considered an important right, and some even consider it an obligation. However, they often feel let down by democratic institutions and have little confidence in the electoral process and results. Some believe the election results are fraught with irregularities, and others complain that promises made during election time are readily forgotten afterward. Curiously, one participant even mentioned that she trusts the results because the process is not controlled by her compatriots but people outside the country.

I believe the results are manipulated; one way or another, I suspect they are manipulated. This is not because I have a political preference for one party, but because certain numbers I observed do not add up. [El Salvador – mas-urb inseg]

Yes, I trust the results because those who manage the voting system are from outside, from another country. [El Salvador – fem-urb inseg]

We, as an LGBTQ+ collective, were told that our concerns would be heard, but we find ourselves even more marginalized than before. They promised us equality, but I now see it was just a fraud, a tactic to secure votes—nothing more. It turned out to be nothing but an electoral promise, as is often the case. While some things have changed, they only marginalized us more than we were before. [El Salvador – LGBTQ+-rural]

The El Salvador municipal restructuring diminished 262 municipalities to 44, while the original municipalities were transformed into districts. The new municipalities have a much greater geographical area to govern; therefore, the relationship with the people in the districts has changed. The participants, especially from rural areas and indigenous and LGBTQ+ communities, feel more distant from the new local authorities than before and sense not being listened to by the national government. It is also more difficult for them to establish a dialogue with the new mayor (alcalde) to explain their problems and necessities, such as infrastructure, environment, or basic services. Consequently, they feel ignored or abandoned by the local authorities.

The new model of many districts and a single municipality means that the current mayor does not know my community. He is only familiar with a specific sector, but for him, grasping the necessities of so many communities—how can he do that? In the past, each municipality had its own mayor, who at least had a good understanding of the area. For the current mayor of San Vicente, reaching the municipality's last community is very difficult. So, for me, the new model is flawed. [El Salvador – LGBTQ+-rural]

I wish they listened to the people because the current government does not listen. They do what they want. When you live in our cantons, you know its necessities. They do not because they are seated [comfortably]. *They need to listen to the people.* [El Salvador – fem-rural]

C. Guatemala and Honduras

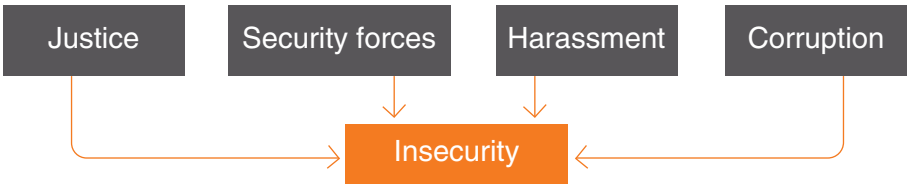
While there are many differences between the countries of northern Central America, Guatemala and Honduras face security problems similar to those previously in El Salvador. Participants in these countries often refer to their neighbors when discussing everyday insecurity and what to do about it. To understand how the citizens see and value the relationship between (in)security, democratic freedoms, tough-on-crime policies, and the legitimacy of extraordinary measures, it is insightful to contrast Guatemala and Honduras with El Salvador, where extreme extraordinary measures are in place. A comparison can indicate differences and similarities in experiences and visions between Guatemala and Honduras on one side and El Salvador on the other, but it also can uncover the nuances of each country.

In Guatemala and Honduras, the relationship between democratic freedoms or rights and security is perceived differently. Although Honduras declared its state of exception on December 6, 2022, in various municipalities, the participants indicate that it does not have the same effects as in El Salvador, nor do they consider that it changed the security situation in their neighborhoods. Guatemala is the only country in northern Central America that has not declared a state of exception as an extraordinary security measure. Participants in both countries express concerns about the insecurity that affects many people, the fear of street gangs, and signal corruption as a factor affecting democratic governance.

As mentioned, the number of participants is too small for a comprehensive comparative analysis of the three countries. The study's main aim is to relate and contrast the experiences and opinions of people in El Salvador with those in Guatemala and Honduras. It is essential to reveal and discuss the experiences and visions of ordinary people in these countries—who know insecurity and different governmental policies firsthand—to understand better the effects of El Salvador's approach, not only in the country but also in the region. This section presents the findings concerning democratic governance and security in Guatemala and Honduras. The conceptual clusters that surged are insecurity (security forces, corruption, harassment, and justice), local economy (corruption and local development), and democracy (corruption, resignation, and the attraction of a state of exception).

Corruption is a central concept in the three clusters. It negatively affects security, local and household economies, and democratic governance. The contexts where the participants signaled corruption reveal how corruption affects different areas of their lives. Situating it in different clusters relates it to the other concepts in each social and economic sphere. Interestingly, corruption hardly arose as an issue in El Salvador.

Insecurity: security forces, corruption, harassment, justice, and freedom of expression



Aspects of insecurity

Almost all participants in Guatemala and Honduras recognize insecurity as a problem affecting them and the population at large. If they can, people often take measures to improve security when they do not feel safe in the streets or to protect themselves when they feel at risk. Even those, especially from rural indigenous communities or urban gated communities, who say their neighborhood is safe occasionally feel insecure when venturing outside. They fear being assaulted or robbed, for instance, in the city center or public transport. Street gangs or maras are viewed as a critical source of insecurity and fear, as before in El Salvador. The individual experiences are very different and concern different situations, but the participants communicated a pervasive sense of insecurity throughout the study.

The growth of gangs and maras, I believe, has influenced our government. Recently, they declared a state of exception, but I don't think it has improved anything because there have been many disappearances, and they even use police uniforms to impersonate law enforcement officers. [Honduras – mas-rural]

The gang situation is practically the same as it was in El Salvador before. Currently, yes, I see a big difference with El Salvador. I would like the government to declare a state of exception that is genuinely enforced. I do not think it's being enforced at present due to possible connections between high-ranking police and military officers and the gangs. [Honduras – mas-rural]

Here, one sleeps with one eye closed and one open. In this neighborhood, one feels safe because of the Lord but not because of others. We only trust in God. I have never had any problems; I don't mess with anyone. You shouldn't stick your nose where it doesn't belong. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

In other places, I've noticed that insecurity has increased a lot. I've seen more news about murders, especially. I 'am worried about robberies and assaults. That's why I prefer not to venture far from where we are. If it's not necessary, why put myself at risk? I've seen that the violence rate has risen considerably outside of Antigua. [Guatemala – fem-urb seg]

We used to live downtown, but we had to leave due to extortion. We owned our own home, but eventually, we ended up renting a place with security. We thought it would be safer, but you come to realize that you're never truly safe. While you feel secure inside your gated community, you can't stay shut in forever; everyone has to go out sometimes. [Guatemala – fem-urb inseg]

Box 1
Guatemala and Honduras still share some of the problems of insecurity El Salvador suffered previously. Although Honduras implemented its own state of exception, participants assert it is not having the desired effect. Robbery, assaults, and extortion are often attributed to street gangs, but in contrast with El Salvador, different gangs and other criminal groups are mentioned.

Security forces

The security forces[4] in charge of public security are viewed with profound ambiguity. Essentially, the participants expressed that they want them to do their job and, above all, to be trustworthy[5]; sometimes, they even yearned for times passed by when these forces did their work well and could be trusted. They usually expect them to effectively reduce daily insecurity, i.e., patrolling the city, town, or neighborhood, preventing delinquency and gang crime, impeding drugs from being sold in their communities, or stopping drunkards from buying and drinking alcoholic beverages and harassing neighbors. The following quotes show that they often long for more and more effective police presence.

The truth is, I would feel a bit more secure if there were more police officers. A police officer explained to me that they only have two patrol cars for Copán Ruinas and its surrounding villages. [Honduras – fem-urb seg]

Increased police presence would help a lot. For example, if there are robbers or thieves in a specific area, more frequent police patrols would make them feel less confident about robbing people or breaking into houses. [Honduras – mas-urb seg]

If there were more police, people would feel safer walking the streets. Because, you know, gang members don't do anything if there are police officers on the streets. [Guatemala – fem-ind com]

They only show up when there's a really big need; otherwise, they don't come. Sometimes, their presence is absent from the place when there is a great need. So, the problem must resolve itself. [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

[4]Police officers and soldiers. In Honduras, not ordinary soldiers are involved in public security tasks but military police.
[5]Sometimes, it is explicitly mentioned that soldiers are trusted more than the police. The participants talk about their experiences with the police, although they also mention the soldiers patrolling and stopping people.

The police only show up when there is a significant need; otherwise, they do not arrive. Ironically, during times of greatest need, their presence is often absent. Issues tend to resolve themselves.

However, in the eyes of most participants, one of the problems is that the security forces ceased to be trustworthy. Often, they feel that the police officers and soldiers do not do their work properly, collide with the delinquents, and hence cause their own kind of insecurity. Some feel uneasy if halted because of fear of being extorted or arbitrary detentions. Induced by rumors, own experiences, or those of family members or friends, people often evade contact with the security forces or treat them cautiously, suspecting them of being corrupt, fearing being mistreated or extorted. In Honduras, participants even mention the fear that gang members go disguised as police officers. The following quotes show some aspects of the disillusionment with the police.

Here, the problem is that sometimes the police collaborate with the gang. People don't report a crime because gang members often show up shortly after. The police tell them, "Someone came to report you." They leak the details to the gang, and people end up dead. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

If you see two police officers, you don't know if you can trust them. Even you may feel insecure about saying, "This and this happened to me," or "Can you help me?" I mean, you feel unsafe because they could be imposters dressed as police. [Honduras – fem-rural]

Here, even though you don't trust the police, there is a police presence. Now, I would feel unsafe if I went out at night and the police stopped me. For example, if I'm driving and the police stop me late at night, I would feel unsafe. [Guatemala – mas-rural]

We don't trust the police anymore. It's not fear; it's just that we do not believe in them anymore. They have done so many things. [Guatemala – fem-urb inseg]

Box 2
In Guatemala and Honduras, people often want the police to function, even if distrust has often taken hold. In Honduras, there is extensive fear of police being part of criminal groups or gang members using police uniforms, while in Guatemala, there is a worry about encountering police when alone or at night.

Corruption

One of the main topics that causes unease in the participants is corruption. Although they mentioned that not all police officers are corrupt, the impression is that some are thoroughly involved in it. Police officers stop cars or motorbikes to extract money from the drivers. They accuse the driver of an infraction or plant drugs on them and then ask for money to let them go free. Although the participants stress that not all police officers are corrupt, their experiences with those who are corrupt make it difficult to trust the officers.

I can't blame all police officers, can I? But there is always—like I said before—there's always corruption. I have relatives in the police force who may have been good to me. Once, I almost got robbed, and I called my cousin, who is a cop. He arrived quickly. But that doesn't mean that others will do the same or that they'll act in the moment. [Honduras – fem-rural]

The police exploit those who use the streets, especially riders of motorbikes. If they do not pay, the police do not allow them to pass until they hand over everything they have. One feels afraid because if you report it…, don't you think they will come to shut you up? [Honduras – fem-ind com]

It happens frequently with the police; they extort people, too. I experienced extortion once. A situation arose, and they demanded one thousand quetzals from me, but I only had about one hundred quetzals on me. I said, "Look, this is all I have." They responded, "Well, give it to me." [Guatemala – fem-urb inseg]

It is no longer an assailant who will assault you, but the police themselves. [Guatemala – mas-urb seg]

Sometimes, the police are suspected of colluding with delinquent groups or gangs. Some even maintain that police officers are conspiring actively with gang members.

I don't even trust the police. The police detain the gang members, and shortly after, they come back quietly. The police turn on their sirens so they can get away. The same thugs tell you, "Don't call the police. We'll handle the problem." [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

Corruption has enabled many of these criminal gangs to operate freely because they control the prison system, the police, and parts of the military, along with drug trafficking. [Guatemala – mas-urb inseg]

Some participants explicitly insist that not every police officer or soldier is corrupt. However, experiences with the bad apples cause people to worry or fear when confronted by security forces. Especially in Honduras, some participants long for more soldiers in public security tasks. They see soldiers as less corrupt and more efficient. It was even suggested that the police institution should return to the control of the military.

The police station is right here in Rivera. Look, three patrol cars are driving around here all day and all night, but it still doesn't feel safe. The military that used to be here, I don't see them nowadays. I felt safer then. I mean, you could go out at 1 a.m., and you would see three military police, and they'd immediately ask you where you were going. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

We must turn back time and let the police fall again under the Army's Joint Chiefs of Staff. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

Box 3
In Guatemala and Honduras, participants often fear corruption thriving in the security forces, although they also mention that not all police officers or soldiers are corrupt. In both countries, people fear the police wanting to extort them by planting drugs or accusing them of wrongdoing. In Honduras, they sometimes long for a military presence in public security, which seems less the case in Guatemala.

Harassment and exclusion of women

In Guatemala and Honduras, sexual harassment was often mentioned by the female participants, but in a more general context than in El Salvador. They situate their experiences of harassment in daily life, mentioning their neighborhoods, towns, or even their families. Sometimes, they also mention the lack of support they receive from other family members or official institutions.

I witnessed a girl's violation […] *Three days later, the boy's father came to my house and told me that if I didn't drop the charges, he would kill me.* [Honduras – fem-urb inseg]

Harassment is quite common. Sometimes, if you don't pay attention to someone, it can also become a problem for you. [Guatemala – fem-ind com]

The whole area is commercial, so everything closes around 6 or 7 pm. From being a bustling city, it becomes a silent city. It's really scary, especially for a woman; you feel more in danger. You have to be cautious, always looking around to see if someone is following you. Another type of insecurity is harassment, right? You see it everywhere. I mean, yes, I've been harassed here. [Guatemala – fem-urb seg]

Some mention that the family has ceased to be a safe space for them. They even fear leaving their children with other family members when they work or have activities outside their house. Their sources of support are often found in other women outside their families, while official institutions are not prepared to assist them.

If a woman wants to file a complaint, the process is so tedious and, excuse my language, so stupid that she ends up defending herself before the authorities even do. [Honduras – fem-urb inseg]

It's not always strangers who violate others. Sometimes, it's a family member; sometimes, they are family members. But it's their business; other people outside the family do not intervene. [Guatemala – fem-ind com]

Box 4
In all three countries, women suffer violence and criminality differently than men. In Honduras, sexual violence was explicitly mentioned in a very insecure neighborhood. In Guatemala, it was more broadly discussed, but members of the indigenous community even ventured to talk about sexual violence in family settings.

Justice

Not only do the participants show little confidence in the police, but neither in the justice system in general. They perceive that innocent persons are sometimes sent to prison while culprits walk free, for instance, because people with enough money pay to be released or absolved. Some participants alluded that people in different parts of the country do not wait for the police to act or for the justice system to contemplate what has happened; people take the law into their own hands. Not only do individuals look for revenge themselves, but even communities have organized their ways to deliver justice to their members. The following quotes illustrate how justice is a complex and contested issue.

This happens here; sometimes, they arrest innocent people. That's why people are afraid of the police: because they detain whoever they want. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

No. There are no gangs in La Entrada, but many people are seeking revenge. People don't expect justice from the police, so they take matters into their own hands. […] *People always want to take the law into their own hands instead of letting the justice system handle it."* [Honduras – fem-rural]

"There's security here, there's the National Civil Police, there's a military detachment, there's a presence of the Public Prosecutor's Office, there are judges, there's the Judiciary, but there's no justice." [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

There's a lot of injustice in Guatemala. Let me give you an example: they catch someone who has robbed or murdered someone. He supposedly goes to trial, and then they acquit him. So, he is released. What's the point? Why go through the whole process of arresting someone if they don't investigate him properly or do things correctly? [Guatemala – fem-urb inseg]

In Guatemala and Honduras, the indigenous communities often administer justice in their own way. Not expecting much from the police and penal justice system, they implement their ways to obtain justice and security. They entrust and empower their local and communal structures.

Our safety has depended chiefly on ourselves. Well, yes, sometimes we need support from data from state agents, but you could say they are very slow... they don't solve problems; they just put on a show. [Honduras – mas-ind com]

When a criminal gets caught, the community usually decides to take the law into their own hands. This is because security forces are not present in all the villages. [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

There are no more robberies because people—we—took matters into our own hands. We didn't allow it, and now there are no robberies anymore. Each village has set up its own security. It's a "secret security," but they help a lot. Before, they would rob us anytime: early morning, midday, or night. But everything stopped when the secret security was put in place. […] *Right now, I can say that we live safer, thanks to God. But also, the authorities haven't gotten to the extreme of caring for the people.* [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

Box 5
In Guatemala and Honduras, people expect little from the justice system and consider it not to deliver justice. In Honduras, participants mention that people in different parts of the country take justice into their own hands. While in both countries, it was emphasized that indigenous communities have their own ways of ensuring security and delivering justice.

Freedom of expression

The participants in Guatemala and Honduras do not relate limitations on their freedom of expression to the security forces, as is repeatedly done in El Salvador. While some feel free to express their opinions, others signal their lack of trust in the press and journalists.

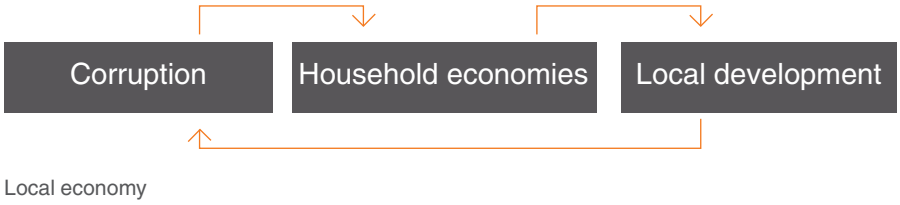
Here in Honduras, we don't trust the press. We don't trust the press at all. I wouldn't give them my name because the insecurity in the country is really bad. You could end up being dumped in the woods somewhere. They don't like it when you tell the truth. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

Personally, I wouldn't lend myself to that [giving an interview to a journalist] *because, from what we have seen in Guatemala, I think the sensationalist press and populism twist everything. So, I believe they sometimes use it to popularize a person, to motivate people to vote for them, or as a campaign.* [Guatemala – mas-urb inseg].

They're not very reliable. I can give my point of view, and they [the journalists] *will twist it; they'll tell something else.* [...] *They'll change what I say, and it won't be 100% reliable.* [Guatemala – fem-rural]

Box 6
In Guatemala and Honduras, the participants related the felt restrictions on the freedom of expression primarily to distrust in the press and media. Especially in Honduras, some mention fear if the press alters their words, they can find themselves in harm's way.

Local economy: corruption and local development



Corruption affects people's perceptions of security and their economic well-being. Bribes or extortion are often paid from their salaries or business incomes. However, economic and social development suffer when (local) government officials siphon money from public coffers for personal or pet projects.

Household economies

The participants affirm that corruption and extortion profoundly affect local and household economies. Corruption and extortion by police and criminal groups raise the cost of doing business, making the work of local entrepreneurs or the self-employed more difficult. The local entrepreneurs are the most vulnerable; they often work for themselves because they cannot find formal or stable employment. Both kinds of corruption make businesses and households suffer. In the following quotes, participants explain how corruption and extortion obstruct the local economy.

All these businesses you see here must pay protection money to four different gangs. They have to figure out how to pay these four gangs, pay for electricity, and pay their employees. In other words, what are these people actually earning? That's something that's dragging us down, consuming us. It's like a cancer, eating away at us little by little. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

Maybe the [central] *government wants them to build a road connecting San Francisco to Santa María. They allocate the funds, but sometimes municipal officials don't do it and pocket the money. They justify it by saying, "We already did it," even though there's nothing there. That's where extreme corruption comes in.* [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

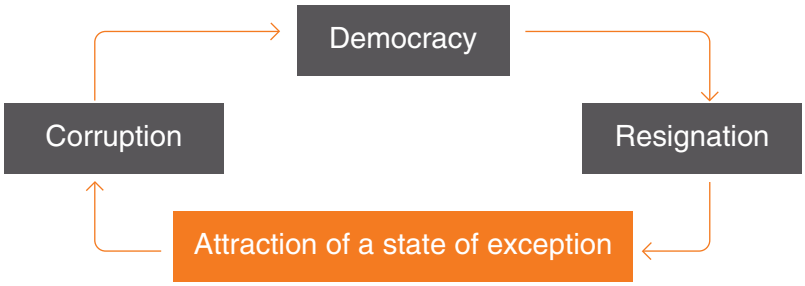
Local development

Corruption by governments and officials also limits local development. It siphons off resources destined for communities, restricting opportunities for their people. Particularly in indigenous communities, participants believe that a substantial part of the money goes to politicians, their friends, and their projects.

> *"Because they* [the government officials] *also receive millions from other countries, take out loans, and so on. They say it's to help the poor, but it's a lie. They help only among themselves.* [...] *They don't invest in the poor but in their own things; nothing reaches the poor."* [Honduras – fem-ind com]
>
> *"So, the whole issue of corruption is ruining us here in Santiago Sacatepéquez.* [...] *There's a mayor who's been in office for 20 years; he's still there. When the election campaign starts, he gives away 300 or 500 Quetzales, and people fall for it. The municipality is always broke. Why? Because of corruption. The same goes for opportunities. If I try to find work here in Santiago, I won't find any. There are no opportunities.* [...] *It's poverty caused by corruption."* [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

Box 7
In Honduras, participants note that the household economy and small businesses suffer from corruption in the form of paying bribes or extortion. Participants in both Guatemala and Honduras emphasize that local development suffers when politicians invest in personal or pet projects.

Democracy: corruption, resignation, and the attraction of a state of exception



Weakend democratic governance

Local governments may be more important in Honduras and Guatemala because both countries are much bigger than El Salvador. The central government is perceived as further away, dedicating its attention to numerous regions. This makes the people feel more connected to and dependent on the local government and prompts them to vote more readily in local than national elections. The distance of the central government from the different regions and its dependence on the local governments to govern the whole country can also generate space for corruption in elections. This may provoke a more direct disenchantment with elections and democracy.

In Santa María [Chiquimula]*, when it is time to elect a mayor, I think that's when there is the most movement of people going to vote. But when it comes to the presidency, when there is a second round, many people don't go out to vote anymore because it is only for the government. When there are municipal elections, that is when most people go out to vote.* [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

Elections and corruption

Politicians, especially in election time, often make promises to attract followers, offering benefits when they are in office or directly buying the public's votes. The people may feel disillusioned when the promises are not fulfilled, or the benefits are not realized afterward. Indigenous women in Guatemala even mentioned that sometimes they are accused by relatives of selling their votes too cheaply, i.e., without receiving real benefits. Several aspects of the harmful relationship between false promises or buying votes and elections are mentioned in the following quotes.

The majority will always vote, but I think that some do so because of influence from others or from politics itself. They don't think about "who are we going to choose?" but rather about their own benefit. Politics is based on I give you something; you give me your vote. Yes, I've seen this a lot. [Honduras – mas-rural]

There is tremendous corruption. So, can we expect anything from governments, from democracy? Democracy is just a name. […] *Only we have interest groups who want to benefit themselves once they are in power. Practically, that's democracy in our environment; in other words, it only serves them while they are in power.* […] *The people are only useful for getting into power, and afterward, we are forgotten until the next election season comes around.* [Honduras – mas-urb seg]

You know that sometimes politicians promise us things, right? They promise: "Oh, I'll do this and that." Then, I cast my vote and thought it was going to be different. [Honduras – fem-rural]

- They only give us one passage, one refreshment, just that, nothing more... and it's not enough.
- That's all they earn from electing a mayor for four years: one refreshment and one passage. (Quotes from the same FGD) [Guatemala – fem-ind com]

We women need to come to an agreement. This has to be at the municipal level so that we no longer allow ourselves to be manipulated. Men tell us: "We don't allow ourselves to be manipulated, but women—for something small—say, "That's fine." Maybe that's why mayors seek out groups of women. Why? Because women let themselves be manipulated. And that's true. [Guatemala – fem-ind com]

Disillusionment may lead to feeling abandoned by the local and central governments. Some participants feel that winning elections and staying in power are the only things that matter for the candidates. They feel that, in the end, they are unimportant to politicians and the government. Their votes matter only at election time.

Honestly, I haven't trusted the previous elections. Last time, they never finished counting the votes. One week passed, and they needed more time; another week passed, and they still needed more. I mean, they take the people for a ride, but really [a lot]. [Honduras – fem-rural]

I've never trusted elections. For me, there's always trickery, especially when counting the votes. We've seen them play tricks before. The system crashes, and suddenly, someone seems to have the most votes. [Honduras – mas-rural]

In Guatemala, the participants express greater trust in the results of the last elections; however, some say they trust the local elections more than the national ones. However, in the indigenous communities, participants state that they don't feel represented because few of their candidates get elected.

The electoral process we have now is a bit more trustworthy, but we could improve it by using automation and new technologies to achieve even better results. [Guatemala – mas-rural]

Contrary to the general elections, in these local elections that I mentioned, the votes were counted manually. This counting process did not leave any doubts; it did not give way to accusations of fraud or any suspicion of suspicious activities being carried out. [Guatemala – mas-urb seg]

Sometimes, when we, indigenous people, go to vote here, some people from Guatemala City come as well, and their candidates win. Those we voted for do not come to the fore. He, whom we do not want to win, wins. [We do not feel represented] *because those we elect do not win.* [Guatemala – fem-ind com]

Box 8

Local elections and politics are more important for the participants in Guatemala and Honduras than in El Salvador because of the size of these countries. However, elections are often marred by questionable behavior and corruption. Buying votes is frequently mentioned in the indigenous communities in Guatemala, as doubts about the vote-counting process in Honduras. The experience of blatantly broken electoral promises is shared in both countries. Participants often considered that the only interests of candidates are to get or remain in power.

Resignation

Participants repeatedly insist that all this is normal; it is how things go in their municipalities and countries. A kind of resignation is often conveyed. Not all politicians are equally corrupt, and not all participants get exasperated by corruption. Some even accept corruption as being part of the game. Someone compared the electoral process and political system with a circus, with the voters being the audience. Some even prefer not to vote to prevent the sensation of being lied to or let down.

Resignation can also extend to accepting and getting accustomed to living in an insecure neighborhood, even if the price is high. The first quote is from a neighborhood leader whose son was killed by a local gang but still lives in the same neighborhood. When organizing activities or events in the neighborhood, he must consider the gang's interests and keep them informed.

> *One learns to live here.* (Field notes after finishing FGD) [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

While this sense of resignation comes from living in a context of extreme control by gangs and criminal groups, the following quotes refer to a broader feeling of resignation with the electoral processes that sustain democracy.

> *- We Hondurans are so disappointed* [with the elections]; *we have seen so much corruption that we are not interested.*
>
> *- Unfortunately, the candidates they've presented are not people one would want to vote for. So, who to choose? The "lesser evil."* (Quotes from the same FGD) [Honduras – fem-urb seg]
>
> *He was a more or less decent mayor.* [...] *He took a bit* [of money]*, but I think it's fair. He took a little himself and gave a bit to the community. That is normal. Since he was working, he took a little for himself. Well, it's his reward.* [Guatemala – mas-ind com]
>
> *There's disillusionment with everything, beginning with the electoral process. Every time, there are problems with counting the votes. The authorities come and mess up the results. We no longer trust them. It's like a circus. They do what they want.* [Guatemala – fem-rural]
>
> *In the second round, you vote for the "lesser evil". It is sad to say, but how can one vote for the lesser evil? We need that the country is going to be represented with dignity. In the end, all one is saying: "Well, I'm going to go, there's nothing else I can do." That is where the charm disappears because the lesser evil ends up being worse than we imagined.* [Guatemala – fem-rural]

Ultimately, participants often feel abandoned, disillusioned, and let down by their elected officials. With promises broken or forgotten and their economic conditions and security situation unchanged, exercising the democratic right to cast votes seems like an empty gesture. Participants state that participating and going to vote does little to alleviate their daily insecurity and economic difficulties.

The costs of the basic food basket are quite high, and the president doesn't pay attention to that. [...] *The president doesn't see it; she raises the basic food basket instead of lowering it.* [Honduras – fem-ind com]

I think it's better not to vote. In all these years, I've seen that they don't help us. [Guatemala – fem-ind com]

Democracy? There's no democracy; there's no democracy. [Guatemala – fem-rural]

Box 9
Resignation is a concept that captures the feeling of discontent and deception, together with the sense of seeing no solution. Participants often express that they see no light at the end of the tunnel or that their tunnel has no end. In Honduras, this is most strongly communicated in a neighborhood that had been insecure for a long time: obtaining security means returning to the past. In Guatemala, a similar feeling can be felt in a city renowned for its insecurity. Also, young people express the same sense of resignation of not being heard and accepted. In both countries, resignation was felt with the democratic system. Some participants consider democracy a circus that hides corruption and people voting for the "lesser evil" ("menos peor"). But no one sees an alternative.

State of exception

Some participants long for someone who decisively puts things in order, often due to their disillusionment, abandonment, and resignation about their political leaders, the security forces' incapability or lack of interest in resolving the economic difficulties and insecurity, and a related sense of dread, fear, or anxiety. They admire El Salvador's President Bukele and consider the extraordinary measures and state of exception his government implemented as an attractive alternative. They ask how these measures can be so effective by the neighbors while their own countries remain suffering from violence and criminality, often attributed to street gangs.

The sources of information about El Salvador's state of exception and security situation are generally second-hand, often through social media channels, the mass media and the press. However, what they learned impressed several participants. Even though they admit to knowing little about how the state of exception operates in everyday life—sometimes even asking field researchers about it—it seems an attractive alternative for resolving their country's insecurity.

For me to live safely, maybe not at 100%, it is essential that they combat the maras, the gangs more […] *Personally, I do wish there were a Bukele here who would take them all to prison. Maybe he will not eliminate them completely because that is not possible. That would be a lie.* [Honduras – fem-urb inseg]

I think what El Salvador has done is good. The president has tried to improve the situation. But yes, it would be good to implement it here in Honduras. I would really like that. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

The president of El Salvador should be commended for overcoming the security crisis we currently face. For instance, I believe this is primarily due to the authorities here not taking adequate action. [Guatemala – fem-urb inseg]

We would like a government that deploys police forces, just like in El Salvador. Before, El Salvador was the most insecure country in Central America, but now it is the safest, according to the news. This is because the government has significantly increased the presence of police and military forces on the streets. They say that it is now a very safe country. We would like to see the Guatemalan government take similar actions, not only in the capital but also in the departments and here in the municipality. [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

Yes, the president can do something, just like in El Salvador. Right now, El Salvador is calm. So, if the president enacts that law, I think it will become calm here too, let's say, in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, or Chimaltenango because it's very dangerous to go out there. [Guatemala – mas-ind com]

However, not all participants are comfortable with the idea of a state of exception declared in their country. Some fear that their rights will be infringed and innocent persons will be incarcerated. This is not only what they perceive as happening in El Salvador but also because, to some extent, they see it already happening in their own country. Most insist on the importance of criminal research and establishing evidence before detaining persons instead of arresting them because of mere suspicions.

I think that at that point, they should make sure the people they're going to arrest are actually gang members, that they find a weapon on them, and that they find evidence of drugs or any other situation like that. [Honduras – mas-urb inseg]

We've heard that in El Salvador, they keep gang members in prison. On the one hand, it's good, but on the other hand, it's not because they're also imprisoning innocent people. [Guatemala – fem-ind com]

The state of exception remains, for many, an attractive option, but it also leaves them with various questions, doubts, and fears. What happened in El Salvador seems like a magical solution for the insecurity and fear that are so present in their countries. However, it looks so fantastic that even the participants often implicitly give reasons why it may not function in their own countries, corruption being one of them. The next section discusses what this all means for the relevance of democracy, the legitimacy of extraordinary measures, and whether democratic governance is under threat.

Box 10

In both Guatemala and Honduras, participants admire what President Bukele has done for the security in El Salvador and long for effective extraordinary measures in their own country. This is mentioned in both countries, especially by participants from insecure urban areas and, in Guatemala, indigenous communities. Participants from both countries, however, insisted on the importance of criminal investigation, instead of discretionary police powers, to prevent innocent people from being send to prison.

6. Discussion: Is democracy under threat?

The research findings show tensions and contradictions in the experiences and opinions of the participants. The number of participants in the focus groups and interviews was relatively small, so nothing can be said about how wide these tensions and contradictions are spread in their respective countries; numerically, there is nothing to generalize. However, various issues arose in different dialogues among persons who did not know each other and were from different geographical regions and walks of life. The diversity of the participants allows for some general insights to be obtained through analytical generalization (Yin, 2003). The discussion of the findings focuses on four aspects: 1. the different experiences with insecurity and extraordinary measures; 2. the relevancy of democracy; 3. extraordinary measures and legitimate security governance; and 4. the question of whether democratic governance is under threat. Through the length of this section, the findings from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras will be related and contrasted.

Experiences with insecurity and extraordinary measures: gender and poverty

Women experience insecurity and threats of violence differently than men. In Guatemala and Honduras, street gangs threaten and try to recruit particularly young men, while girls are seen as potential girlfriends or sexual objects. In addition, female participants mention the risk of sexual harassment in public spaces and at home. Under the state of exception in El Salvador, it is the security forces who stop and frisk mainly young men, implicitly threatening to send them to prison if they do not obey or if they give the impression of being involved in gangs. Girls are often subject to derogatory remarks and insinuations, although some instances of improper behavior were also mentioned. In all three countries, mothers express concern about what might happen to their children if they are outside on the streets and come across gangs or security forces.

Being poor or living in marginalized communities aggravates the risks of harassment or becoming victims of violence or improper treatment. It is not only that gangs are mostly present in poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods, but security forces also tend to treat their residents more harshly. This is evident in the experiences of residents in insecure urban areas compared to those in more secure ones. Even in El Salvador, where urban neighborhoods are now generally safe, in areas that were once feared for gang presence and violence, security forces create a sense of insecurity, especially among young males and their families. It seems that insecurity and the risks of harassment or becoming a victim of violence in northern Central America remain primary concerns for the already poor and excluded communities.

Among the participants of indigenous communities, who often live in extreme poverty, the presence of security forces is often regarded as irrelevant to maintaining security. In Guatemala and Honduras, these communities have often established their own procedures and methods to obtain security, and the participants frequently mention that they live in relative safety. They fear becoming victims of violence or crime when they go to towns and cities outside their areas. However, inside these communities, especially in Guatemala, it is the women who express the fear of being sexually assaulted or facing violence within their families.

The relevance of democracy

Participants generally prefer to live in a democratic political system and appreciate having the opportunity to vote and choose leaders who decide the course of their country or municipality. This assertion may seem somewhat puzzling, especially when participants affirm they have little trust in the electoral process. Expectations may be influenced by the folk theory that democratic government is of the people, by the people, and for the people (Achen & Bartels, 2017); however, daily experiences are often very different, leading to contradictory views, understandings, and hopes. In the eyes of citizens, having the opportunity to vote is essential but not enough. The vote-counting process, promises made during electoral campaigns, security, and the local economy are all relevant to how they perceive democratic governance.

Long-lasting insecurity, economic hardship, and corruption (by security forces or politicians) can make democratic governance seem irrelevant to ordinary people. A situation in which powerful delinquent groups or gangs—apparently colluding

with police officers—impose their rule and extort local residents and businesses can lead to desperation and resignation when citizens see the impotence of state security institutions in addressing these problems. They also fear that reporting criminal activities to the police could cost them dearly because security officials often filter the names of those who denounce them. The apparent success of the state of exception in El Salvador, which has suspended constitutional rights for over two consecutive years while bringing peace and tranquility to the streets through the detention of numerous suspected gang members and their collaborators, suddenly seems interesting or appealing to both politicians and ordinary citizens. Democratic institutions seem disadvantaged in confronting ordinary people's longstanding and severe insecurity problems.

The security forces are expected to do their work efficiently and be trustworthy. But people often fear security officials being involved in corrupt practices, for instance, extorting ordinary civilians by making false accusations and under the threat of detention. As a result, civilians prefer to keep security forces at arm's length; that is, they feel safe when the forces patrol their neighborhood, town, or city, yet they dread encounters when they are stopped due to the fear of being falsely accused or extorted. Fear increases when security forces appear to have gained more power by aligning with criminal groups or street gangs (Honduras & Guatemala), or by being granted extensive discretionary powers by the government in the context of extraordinary measures such as a state of exception (El Salvador). More or less democratic governance appears to make little fundamental difference in how ordinary citizens of the region view the security forces, particularly those living in poor and marginalized areas.

Local economies are negatively affected by criminality, corruption, or security policies that mediatize security while ignoring the problems and worries of ordinary people. In Honduras and Guatemala, people often feel caught between insecurity and economic difficulties or hardship. Gangs, delinquents, and corrupt security officials make citizens feel unsafe on the streets (or sometimes even in their homes), where they fear being assaulted, extorted, or arbitrarily detained. Economic hardship caused by dwindling or stagnant sales, challenging business conditions, low salaries, or lack of employment makes life even more difficult. In El Salvador, the state of exception has alleviated the suffering caused by gangs; however, the peace and tranquility experienced do not come with economic well-being. On the contrary, many participants are concerned about the economic situation. Having more or less democratic governance does not seem to make much of a difference for local economies.

Politicians buying votes and elected officials breaking electoral promises diminish the relevance of democratic governance for ordinary citizens. Especially in local elections where people know their local politicians, they feel defrauded if politicians make appealing promises to obtain their votes and forget them afterward. Seeing that casting their vote does not make a difference for their conditions, even if promised it would so, may cause a sense of being abandoned or ignored. Citizens may choose to vote for a different candidate in the next election, feel a sense of resignation because the same outcome is likely to occur again, or opt not to participate in the upcoming election. In all three countries, the appreciation for democratic governance has weakened due to—either overtly or covertly—breaking promises made.

For ordinary citizens, democratic governance is at risk of becoming irrelevant. Even if people appreciate the opportunity to elect the leaders who represent them, in practice, for many participants, this opportunity is more ephemeral than a realistic way of influencing policies to change the economic and security situation in which they live. The people often feel that candidates will not solve the electorate's everyday conditions, difficulties, or hardships. People feel forgotten or ignored by their elected leaders. To strengthen democratic governance in northern Central America, it is essential to take ordinary people's problems seriously and uphold promises.

Extraordinary measures and legitimate security governance

Many people find extraordinary security measures appealing for addressing gang-related violence and delinquency while also alleviating their daily fears and anxieties about becoming victims. The state of exception in El Salvador seems to be an example of how it is possible to change rapidly a dire security situation characterized by street gangs deeply involved in criminal activity, extortion, and violence, which instill terror and distress in the neighborhoods they claim as their territory. The images shown in social media and television convey how, during the state of exception, security forces have detained thousands of gang members with mano-dura-style operations. The participants are impressed by how El Salvador has changed, viewing it as a country on the path to progress, characterized not only by security but also by stunning new buildings and beautiful beaches. As selective and biased as this information may be, it profoundly influences citizens' opinions, as well as the views of neighboring countries.

Some participants from Guatemala and Honduras express strong support and admiration for the extraordinary measures implemented in El Salvador. They distrust their leaders, who have shown themselves incapable or lack interest in resolving the daily insecurity they face, and feel let down both economically and politically. As a result, they are disillusioned with their democratically elected leaders and long for someone who resolves their difficulties. A leader who imposes himself determinedly on criminal structures and their activities—someone like President Bukele—and a state of exception that promises to be as successful as the one functioning in their neighboring country may seem attractive. However, many acknowledge that they have limited knowledge of how the state of exception and the extraordinary measures that come with it are implemented and their daily implications for everyday people.

Extraordinary security measures, such as mano-dura policies, seem valid when there is a widespread sense of insecurity; however, suspending fundamental democratic freedoms carries less legitimacy in the eyes of the participants. For instance, giving police extreme discretionary powers, like the faculty to seize and inspect mobile phones or conduct arbitrary detentions—something the Salvadoran security forces are often alleged to be doing—is not readily accepted in Guatemala or Honduras. Although the experiences of distrust toward the police in Honduras correspond with recent criticisms of abuse and excess during the state of exception (Pérez et al., 2024), the participants rarely mention it. They primarily base their opinions on long-term experiences with the police. Not many participants are willing to give substantial discretionary powers to the security forces they don't trust, nor pay the price of innocents being detained, freedom of expression being curtailed, and privacy being eroded. This may also be the case in El Salvador,

but many participants recognize it as their everyday reality, whether they agree or not.

In Guatemala and Honduras, the longing for a state of exception is multifaceted. It is a strange mix of hope, temptation, magic thinking, and fear. The desperation with governments that promise change but do not alter their citizens' everyday worries and preoccupations makes citizens vulnerable to persons "offering magical solutions, never tried before, but, at least, solutions" (Przeworki cited in: Vázquez, 2024). A critical source of desperation in northern Central America is the constant concern about daily security and its ongoing effects on the socioeconomic situation. It is the longing for peace and tranquility—words participants in El Salvador often use. Successive democratic governments have shown they cannot resolve the need for security by ordinary means. However, the fear of what may happen if things remain the same or if insecurity deepens, accompanied by the yearning for change and solutions, fuels the demand for more and more extreme extraordinary measures.

Although the idea of a state of exception is not novel to the citizens of Guatemala and Honduras, the way it was implemented in El Salvador seems different. Extensive social media exposure and mass media reporting display its drastic character and astonishing results. Even though some coverage may consist of disinformation or political manipulation, it has an essential influence on the participants' beliefs and expectations by arguing that a situation of major security and well-being exists in a neighboring country that was previously one of the most insecure in the region. *The desperation and longing for solutions and the provoking images and messages on social and mass media may foment magical thinking.* When desires, needs, and anxieties sway thoughts, and critical thinking is forsaken, flawed reasoning renders the prospect of change through extreme measures seem promising (Carhart-Harris, 2020; Sternberg & Halpern, 2020).

This type of thinking enhances the appeal of the extraordinary measures taken in El Salvador, even if the belief that these could be effective in the other countries of northern Central America is hard to sustain. Politicians in office—often accused of buying votes and reneging on their promises—and the security forces—distrusted and accused of being corrupt—are mysteriously expected to do the trick of honestly and efficiently implementing the extraordinary measures and justly dealing with enhanced discretionary powers.

Three northern Central American countries: still similar

Comparing the three countries is challenging due to methodological limitations, such as the relatively small number of participants and the varying trajectories concerning security and the development of democratic institutions. However, similarities stand out when contrasting what participants say in El Salvador with what was expressed in Guatemala and Honduras.

Insecurity and the risks of harassment or becoming a victim of violence in the three countries seem concentrated in the same neighborhoods as always—namely, the already poor and marginalized communities. Street gangs and other delinquent groups are primarily responsible in Guatemala and Honduras, while the security forces are the main culprits in El Salvador. Nevertheless, the police in Guatemala and Honduras are also accused of abusive behavior, and participants often fear that

some officers are allied with criminals.

Many participants consider extraordinary security measures legitimate when confronted with a pervasive sense of insecurity or fear; however, suspending fundamental democratic freedoms has less legitimacy. While in Guatemala and Honduras, participants clearly expressed their aversion to extreme police discretionary powers that facilitate arbitrary detentions and disrespect the privacy of ordinary citizens, in El Salvador, ordinary people view this as an everyday hazard, considering opposition to the police and the government's security policies to be dangerous and irrelevant.

Democratic governance appears to have little impact on ordinary citizens' perceptions of the security forces, particularly those living in impoverished and marginalized areas. In Guatemala and Honduras, these forces are perceived to be involved in corruption and maintain connections with organized crime. In El Salvador, they are feared due to the extensive discretionary powers they wield.

Having democratic institutions does not seem to significantly improve local economies in northern Central America. The Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador participants expressed misgivings about their economic situation and prospects. In El Salvador, where improved security makes an important difference in the participants' everyday lives, the economy remains a serious cause for concern.

Broken electoral promises diminish the perceived authenticity of democratic governance. Democracies become weaker when electoral candidates do not comply with their promises. People feel neglected, tricked, or offended by officials during electoral campaigns who make nice promises and afterward do not respond to the people who voted for them. It is fundamental that candidates take ordinary people's problems seriously and keep promises when elected if democratic governance in northern Central America is to be reinforced.

Is democracy under threat?

Basic democratic values are widely shared; for example, participants highly value engaging in elections and are concerned about opaque electoral processes. Nevertheless, these values often appear irrelevant to everyday life. Concerns raised by insecurity, corruption, neglect from policymakers, and fear of the security authorities demand answers, yet few responses are forthcoming. Many participants feel that democratic institutions are failing them, which leads to a sense of resignation. They go to vote but have little hope that the results will change or improve their conditions. They feel encouraged when candidates promise to intervene and help resolve their problems if elected. However, after the elections, they often feel disappointed, abandoned, or forgotten.

Some participants keep looking for candidates who will keep their promises and will vote for someone else in the next election if those promises are broken; others have already completely lost interest in voting. Even if some consider democratic governance to be falling and others feel that there is little democracy in their country, *few are willing to discard democratic governance.* The alternatives may be worse. Even if the democratic governance in Guatemala or Honduras is not scorned by their populations, *democratic stability in northern Central America may become troublesome.* Things may change fast if the longstanding insecurity and dire economic situation do not improve. In El Salvador, the failure of prolonged extraordinary measures to resolve the security crisis has given way to

even more extreme measures of suspending constitutional rights, violating privacy, and limiting the freedom of expression for ordinary citizens. While many people are pleased that security has improved and appreciate some peace and tranquility, democracy is declining.

The study's findings shed new light on the alleged trade-off between personal good and democracy as an explanation for the widespread support for leaders who bypass democratic processes and institutions. The following section examines whether this purported trade-off impacts democratic governance in northern Central America and explores ways to strengthen democratic values.

7. Reflections: The state of democracy in northern Central America

The study focuses on people's beliefs, opinions, and understandings of democratic governance, security, and their relationship to each other. The results show that people find security extremely important. Not only do they want to feel safe and protected from assaults, extortion, violence, etc., but they also believe that insecurity caused by corruption and delinquency creates difficult economic situations and poverty. In El Salvador, even the participants who are critical of President Bukele's government and the state of exception acknowledge the newly obtained security and are grateful for it. In Guatemala and Honduras, they long for more security, and some yearn for their country to follow the example of their neighbor. For many participants, resorting to extraordinary security measures is a legitimate way to reduce the threats and fears they experience daily. Tough-on-crime or mano-dura approaches seem broadly accepted.

Extraordinary measures

The results indicate that most participants visualize mano-dura policies as extraordinary measures against gang members and other delinquents, falling within the regular legal framework and, therefore, legitimate. However, the perceived legitimacy of these exceptional measures changes when they extend beyond this framework. Still, they admit that other actors, like corrupt security force members or politicians, may cause insecurity and difficult economic situations. However, these actors are also essential to make mano-dura policies work.

The perceived legitimacy of the extraordinary measures changes when they go beyond the regular legal framework. Suspending fundamental democratic freedoms in the name of fighting insecurity, for instance, or declaring a state of exception and suspending constitutional rights, is seen with some caution. Extraordinary measures, which include giving security forces special discretionary powers, the possibility of arbitrary detentions, the erosion of personal privacy, and imposing restrictions on freedom of speech, are considered less legitimate than ordinary mano dura policies, such as stricter laws allowing for harsher sentences, more police and military patrolling the streets, and more prisons (Cutrona et al., forthcoming). Most participants insist that investigating crime and collecting evidence is essential before arresting and incarcerating someone. Respecting judicial procedures and criminal law is seen as fundamental, as are constitutional rights and freedoms. Extraordinary security measures are often considered legitimate against those causing longstanding insecurity, such as gangs, but respecting the Constitution.

This study reveals insights into the state of democracy in northern Central America. It looks into whether the region's longstanding security and economic situations have reduced the relevance of democratic governance in the eyes of ordinary people. *The answer is a clear yes, but without suggesting that democratic governance is rejected. The enthusiasm for living in a democracy is muted because people consider that democratic institutions are failing to address insecurity and economic uncertainty or hardship.* The support of many people in El Salvador for the state of exception must be understood in the context of an enormously changed sense of security. Successive governments could not solve the extreme sense of insecurity people were experiencing, not even with decades of mano-dura policies. President Bukele changed the rules by declaring a state of exception and suspending constitutional rights for every Salvadoran, not only for suspected gang members. He implemented extraordinary measures that resolved everyday insecurity for many people, bringing them peace and tranquility while giving extreme discretionary powers to the police. However, these measures also communicate the irrelevance or dysfunctionality of democratic institutions in making ordinary people feel safe. Still, participants are concerned that they do not bring economic certainty or well-being to many people.

Although prolonged insecurity may cause people to call for extraordinary measures, the protracted implementation of these measures, together with democratic resignation felt by the population, may open the doors to democratic backsliding. The reason is that *extraordinary security measures fundamentally damage the democracies in northern Central America, not because they put democratic rules aside but because they argue the irrelevance of a democratically devised rulebook.*

Social media

Social media significantly influences how people are informed and shape their political and social perspectives. In the countries of this study, their political use has primarily been for propaganda and promoting specific narratives rather than fostering open debates about strengthening democracy and citizen expectations. The Salvadoran government's communication strategy displaced the preferences for news and information to official channels and those aligned with the government to the detriment of critical and independent media (Kinosian, 2022). In Honduras, three political parties have botnets to promote their campaign information and attack their opponents (Sánchez, 2024). In Guatemala, the members of the Pact of the Corrupt used a strategy of disinformation to undermine the government (Redacción Ocote, 2202). The attacks in social media against opponents and critics coincide with participants' unwillingness to give interviews or declarations to journalists or to share personal information. This indicates a diminishing trust in the press and reporting at large that affects the liberty of expression and news media's credibility, both essential pillars of a democratic system of checks and balances.

The findings emphasize the importance of enhancing digital education to mitigate the adverse effects of algorithm-driven opinion formation and the spread of misinformation on these platforms. However, reviving traditional forms of political conversation is also crucial. Face-to-face contact between citizens and representatives of political parties, along with sustained interactions with candidates and elected officials, can help prevent the segregation of political preferences caused by social media algorithms and serve as a way to combat political intolerance and polarization.

Strengthening democratic values

Strengthening democratic values in areas with high levels of insecurity starts with going back to the ordinary citizens and including them in recurring dialogues about what democratic governance means to them. Ordinary people need to be the center of democracy, and when they distrust their elected representatives, something has gone wrong. Citizens must get involved again. National political actors—politicians, political parties, elected officials, etc.— must reconstruct their relationship and trust with them. They must convince ordinary citizens that democracy is not a political system that systematically breaks promises and lets them down. This starts with engaging them in meaningful and influential dialogues about topics relevant and vital to them. In this process, local politicians and governments have a special responsibility. They are close to the people in their constituencies, and the promises—kept or broken—directly impact daily life and the perception of democratic governance.

Political parties also have essential responsibilities in maintaining democracy booming. The perceptions of national politicians as being distanced from the life and preoccupations of ordinary people, being corrupt, and only focused on their personal interests also cause a profound disenchantment. Middle-ranking cadres of national political parties are in the best positions to reach out to the people, listen to them, communicate their worries, problems, and hardships to their leaders, and communicate their reactions and answers back to the people. The task of the middle-ranking cadres is not to defend the actions or omissions of the national politicians and political parties; their loyalties must lie with the ordinary people. They must defend the needs and interests of the people at the national level and

ensure that these are heard and acted upon. Their role is vital for a vibrant democracy. They connect national political actors to their local base and make democratic governance more resilient to the whims and impulses of national politics.

Engaging with ordinary citizens and knowing their experiences, views, and expectations is essential for designing adequate policies and policy proposals. However, it is also essential to understand how social media channels and mass media influence their views and opinions. Recurrent, small-scale, and punctual qualitative and quantitative studies should be conducted to obtain actual information about ordinary people's visions, problems, and difficulties. The results should be shared among the political spectrum (national and international) as input to formulating national policy proposals, strategies, and plans for international cooperation.

8. Recommendations

1. Bring dialogues and discussions about democracy and democratic governance back to ordinary people

Some participants greatly appreciated the dialogue aspect of the KIIs and FGDs and were grateful for the opportunity to participate in a space where vital topics were shared, discussed, and questioned. Women from rural and indigenous communities frequently mentioned having limited access to these kinds of spaces and interactions. The everyday responsibilities and activities of citizens often don't leave time to discuss and reflect on subjects such as democracy, security, government, and economic conditions. This makes democratic governance and local politics seem like distant and unattainable issues. However, discussing these topics helps people realize they share common interests and discover different approaches and viewpoints.

Recently, in El Salvador, this sense of distance has intensified with the abolishment of municipalities and the formation of new districts. International cooperation in partnership with national civil society organizations (CSOs) can invite political parties to a frequent series of dialogues with ordinary people about their experiences and views on issues important to them. The results can be used as input for a more comprehensive national dialogue about democratic governance. To obtain a broad range of visions and opinions, these dialogues need to include vulnerable populations such as (rural and indigenous) women and the LGBTQ+ community. They should concentrate on topics that directly impact participants and their experiences of how democratic governance relates to everyday life. Participants can initially be reached through defined groups, such as local community leaders, university students, and local churches. To enhance diffusion, influencers (operating on TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) can also be invited to participate.

To prevent the politicization of the dialogue and the CSOs, it is essential to avoid allowing political parties to become co-organizers. Instead, they should participate strictly as guests. To create safe spaces for discussing and expressing opinions, the organizers should consult potential participants in advance about how to structure the dialogues in a way that makes them feel comfortable. Establishing clearly defined conversation rules that ensure respectful treatment for everyone from the outset helps foster a relaxed atmosphere where participants feel free to express their thoughts. Even in El Salvador, where the regime of exception has been a mechanism for demobilizing social organization, with appropriate planning, conversations can be held in safe places free of external interference, keeping them neutral and private.

2. Bring political actors closer to local communities, their challenges, and their struggles.

The central government and national legislators are often perceived as far away; local governments are geographically closer and often more relevant to communities and socioeconomic development. However, the relationship with local politicians (including the mayor) is frequently seen as distant or inadequate. Communities feel neglected, especially when elected politicians view neighborhoods, villages, or towns as supporting the political opposition. Voters may see politicians as liars when they make big promises at election time and then forget about them afterward.

This situation highlights a crisis concerning the traditional political parties and their relationship with the people, which manifests itself somewhat differently among the three countries. In El Salvador, the traditional parties have nearly vanished, leaving Nuevas Ideas virtually the only party. Unlike traditional parties, Nuevas Ideas fosters more distant relations, primarily using social media to communicate with its constituents. In Guatemala, Movimiento Semilla, the party that brought President Arévalo to power, is currently suspended as a political party, and the President faces significant political constraints. In Honduras, the traditional parties—the Liberal Party and the National Party—have been severely impacted by corruption and lost elections to the newcomer LIBRE, although they still remain significant political forces.

In all three countries traditional and emerging political parties must address negative perceptions and past experiences to build positive relationships with ordinary citizens. Political parties should develop and maintain systematic, ongoing communication strategies that connect local and national political actors with communities and their struggles in order to remain relevant.

CSOs can promote constructive relationships between political parties and ordinary citizens in various ways. In El Salvador, collaborating with the party currently in power (Nuevas Ideas) presents significant challenges, but CSOs engage effectively with local governments. They should collaborate with local and national institutions in two other countries. In Honduras, CSOs can focus on strengthening existing political parties through democratic means.

3. National political parties should structurally connect to ordinary people's perspectives

Discontent with elected local and national officials is not only provoked by corruption or support for the political opposition; it can also stem from resource scarcity and conflicting interests, both locally and nationally. Politicians cannot please everyone, and a lack of communication and information exchange with local constituencies can further exacerbate discontent. Therefore, national political parties should cultivate structurally and organizationally embedded relationships with local populations to strengthen the ties between local and national challenges and struggles, build democratic resilience, and counter the risk of corruption by elected officials that damages the relationship with ordinary people.

Mid-ranking members of political parties in northern Central America can connect local populations with local and national officials and political leaders. They relate to the daily lives of ordinary citizens, fostering empathy for their struggles, concerns, and worries. These cadres can also bridge the distance between citizens and local and national elected officials, enhancing ordinary people's understanding of these officials' tasks and responsibilities.

4. Conduct recurrent, small-scale, and punctual studies that provide relevant information to local, national, and international political actors.

Participants in the three northern Central American countries often feel that national and international political actors are unaware of their struggles, needs, and demands. This is not only related to a lack of interest but also to an absence of channels and methods that document local contexts, describe everyday struggles at different levels of society, and communicate them to local and national officials, political parties, and even international actors interested in development cooperation. The fact that participants frequently thanked the researchers for the opportunity to participate in the FGD and KII—making the researchers feel a little uncomfortable because they were the ones expected to be grateful for their participation—stemmed from a sense of being acknowledged in such an important issue as a study about democratic governance. Participants often feel ignored and believe that their interests and struggles are overlooked.

Recurrent, small-scale qualitative and quantitative studies can serve as a means for local voices to be heard and to collect relevant and timely information for appropriate and democratic policymaking. To generate broad insights into the experiences, visions, and opinions of various social actors—for instance, private organizations, businesses, and social, political, and economic leaders—specialized or focused studies can be conducted.

These localized studies can also contribute to a more permanent monitoring program. International organizations may encourage research initiatives in which national governments collaborate with local organizations such as universities, think tanks, and NGOs. The goal is to understand the experiences and

perspectives of the general population and various social, political, and economic actors in northern Central America and beyond.

Broadening the current study and research methodology could be a significant step in efforts to understand the struggles, needs, and demands of ordinary people in Latin America. It can also help explain the tendency of citizens to support leaders who disregard fundamental democratic principles and processes. Argentina and Ecuador are notable examples where voters have chosen leaders who undermine democratic values to address issues they perceive as more pressing. The fight against street gangs has been seen as a greater good in northern Central America. Similarly, in broader Latin America, issues such as drug trafficking, inflation, and immigration are being used by leaders as justifications for diminishing the importance of democratic values and processes. Comparing the tendencies and experiences in Central and South America from the perspective of ordinary people helps to understand the changing political panorama in the region and the challenges for democratic governance.

5. Taking social media and its consequences seriously

Social media influences how people in northern Central America are informed, influencing their political and social perspectives. El Salvador is a prominent example of how social media is used for political propaganda and promoting specific narratives rather than fostering open debates about democratic governance and citizen expectations. However, this trend is also occurring in Guatemala and Honduras. Despite this, little is known about how people handle the information obtained and how it shapes their political and social perspectives.

Because of the involvement of governments and powerful political opposition allies, international organizations may need to step in and stimulate research into the use of social media in the region. Important questions include how news and information are created and spread, how political propaganda permeates social media channels, and in what ways possible manipulation occurs. It is also essential to explore ways to prevent this and to experiment with creating alternative positive influences, such as studying how constructive and protective views about living in a democracy and democratic politics can be enhanced through social media. Both strands are necessary for starting a broad discussion about how social media can harm and benefit democratic institutions and governance.

The results of this discussion should be directed toward initiatives to educate citizens about social media and political manipulation, to promote the generation and diffusion of quality information through social media, and to encourage civil society and ordinary citizens to use this information. An innovative initiative can educate interested youth about these issues, inspire them to become influencers who strengthen and protect democratic values and institutions and work with them to discover ways to create messages that support democratic processes.

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10. Attachments

Attachment 1.: Focus group discussions guide

Diálogo y democracia en Centroamérica

Guía de grupos focales (df)

Fecha:

Lugar:

Información demográfica (anónima)

Sexo: M / F

Zona rural / urbana

Edad: _____

Educación: _____

Profesión: _____

Contexto (situación en la comunidad)

1. ¿Cómo describiría la comunidad dónde usted vive? (urbano/rural; socioeconómico; seguridad)

¿Cómo se percibe la democracia?

2. ¿Es importante ir a votar cuando hay elecciones? ¿Por qué?
3. Para tomar decisiones en su comunidad, ¿usted prefiere participar o confía en lo que deciden lo demás? ¿Por qué?

¿Cómo se perciben las autoridades?

4. ¿Los gobernantes son capaces de mejorar las condiciones de vida de la gente? ¿Cómo?

¿Qué es seguridad?

5. ¿Qué situaciones le hacen sentir inseguro a usted o su familia?
6. ¿Qué sería para usted vivir seguro?

¿Cómo se relacionan democracia y seguridad?

7. ¿Vivir sin temor a la delincuencia es un derecho más importante que otros derechos? ¿Por qué?

Diálogo y Democracia en Centroamérica

Guía de viñetas Grupos Focales (df)

1. La policía detiene a un grupo de jóvenes que estaba conversando en la esquina, acusándolos de ser pandilleros. ¿Es válido que la policía se los lleve?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

2. Un estudiante manchó una pared de su comunidad. La policía lo ha detenido y puede ir a la cárcel. ¿Estaría usted de acuerdo?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

3. Casi llegando a su casa, usted ve un/a conocido/a que está discutiendo con una patrulla de policía y soldados. ¿Usted intervendría en la discusión?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

4. Algunos vecinos proponen toman la calle para reclamar el acceso al servicio de agua potable, ¿usted participaría?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

5. Llega un periodista que quiere hacerle preguntas sobre la política y los políticos, ¿usted le contestaría?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

En caso de que **sí**, ¿daría su nombre si lo pide?

No	Sí

¿Usted piensa que esta plática podríamos haberla hecho con tranquilidad en su comunidad? ¿Por qué?

No	Sí

Attachment 2.: Key informant interview guide

Diálogo y democracia en Centroamérica

Guía de conversación (KII) (df)

Contexto (situación en la comunidad)

1. ¿Cómo describiría la comunidad dónde usted vive? (urbano/rural; socioeconómico; seguridad)
2. ¿Usted se preocupa por sus familiares cuando andan fuera de la casa? (esposo/a, hijos, …) ¿Por qué?
3. ¿Se sienten seguros en su comunidad actualmente?
4. ¿Quiénes ponen en riesgo la seguridad en su comunidad?

¿Cómo se percibe la democracia?

5. ¿Es importante ir a votar cuando hay elecciones? ¿Por qué?
6. ¿Usted tiene confianza en los resultados de las elecciones? ¿Por qué?
7. La alcaldía convoca una vez al mes a los ciudadanos para exponer los problemas de su comunidad. ¿Usted iría?
8. Para tomar decisiones en su comunidad, ¿usted prefiere participar o confía en lo que deciden lo demás? ¿Por qué?
9. ¿Usted prefiere un gobierno que consulte a la gente para tomar decisiones o un gobierno que resuelva directamente? ¿Por qué?

¿Cómo se perciben las autoridades?

10. ¿Los gobernantes son capaces de mejorar las condiciones de vida de la gente? ¿Cómo?
11. ¿Qué espera usted de un gobierno?

¿Qué es seguridad?

12. ¿Qué situaciones le hacen sentir inseguro a usted o su familia?
13. ¿El gobierno es capaz de influir sobre su seguridad? ¿Cómo?
14. ¿Qué sería para usted vivir seguro?

Confianza en la justicia (derechos) y las fuerzas de seguridad

15. ¿Usted cree que se hace justicia en ES/Hon/Gua? ¿Por qué?
16. En su comunidad la policía y los soldados comienzan a patrullar todos los días e, incluso, se quedan allí. ¿Qué le hace sentir su presencia?
17. ¿La gente tiene miedo a las fuerzas de seguridad? ¿Por qué?

    En el caso que sí, ¿Desde cuándo?

¿Cómo se relacionan democracia y seguridad?

18. ¿Usted aceptaría que la policía se meta en su vida privada (por ejemplo, pararlo/a en la entrada de la comunidad para hacerle preguntas o registrar sus pertenencias) para que su comunidad pueda vivir seguro? ¿Por qué?
19. ¿Usted considera que meter a los sospechosos a la cárcel es la única medida para lograr seguridad?
20. ¿Vivir sin temor a la delincuencia es un derecho más importante que otros derechos? ¿Por qué?

Información demográfica (anónima)

Edad: _____

Sexo: M / F

Zona rural / urbana

Educación: _____

Profesión: _____

Diálogo y democracia en Centroamérica

Guía de viñetas (df)

1. La policía detiene a un grupo de jóvenes que estaba conversando en la esquina, acusándolos de ser pandilleros. ¿Es válido que la policía se los lleve?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

2. Un estudiante manchó una pared de su comunidad. La policía lo ha detenido y puede ir a la cárcel. ¿Estaría usted de acuerdo?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

3. Caminando por la calle usted ve que la policía está registrando la gente que pasa allí. ¿Usted evitaría pasar cerca para que no le paren a usted?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

4. Algunos vecinos proponen toman la calle para reclamar el acceso al servicio de agua potable, ¿usted participaría?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

5. Caminando por la calle la policía para a su cuñado/a. Le pregunta sobre dónde anduvo y pide revisar su celular. ¿Es válido que la policía revise su celular?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

6. La policía llevó preso a jóvenes que molestaban durante años a una comunidad cercana. La policía dice que nunca más van a salir de la cárcel. ¿Usted estaría de acuerdo?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

7. Casi llegando a su casa, usted ve a un/a conocido/a suyo que está discutiendo con una patrulla de policía y soldados. ¿Usted intervendría en la discusión?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

8. Un día, la policía toca la puerta de su casa y pide entrar para revisarla, pero no tiene una orden de un juez. ¿Es válido que la policía pueda entrar así a su casa?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

9. Llega un periodista que quiere hacerle preguntas sobre la política y los políticos, ¿usted le contestaría?

No	Sí

¿Por qué?

En caso de que **sí**, ¿daría su nombre si lo pide?

No	Sí

¿Usted piensa que esta plática podríamos haberla hecho con tranquilidad en su comunidad? ¿Por qué?

No	Sí

Netherlands Institute for
Multiparty Democracy