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Executive summary

Democratic Backsliding and Security Governance in Central America

Research and Dialogue



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Authors:

Wim Savenije

Edgardo Amaya Cobar

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San Salvador, El Salvador

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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).

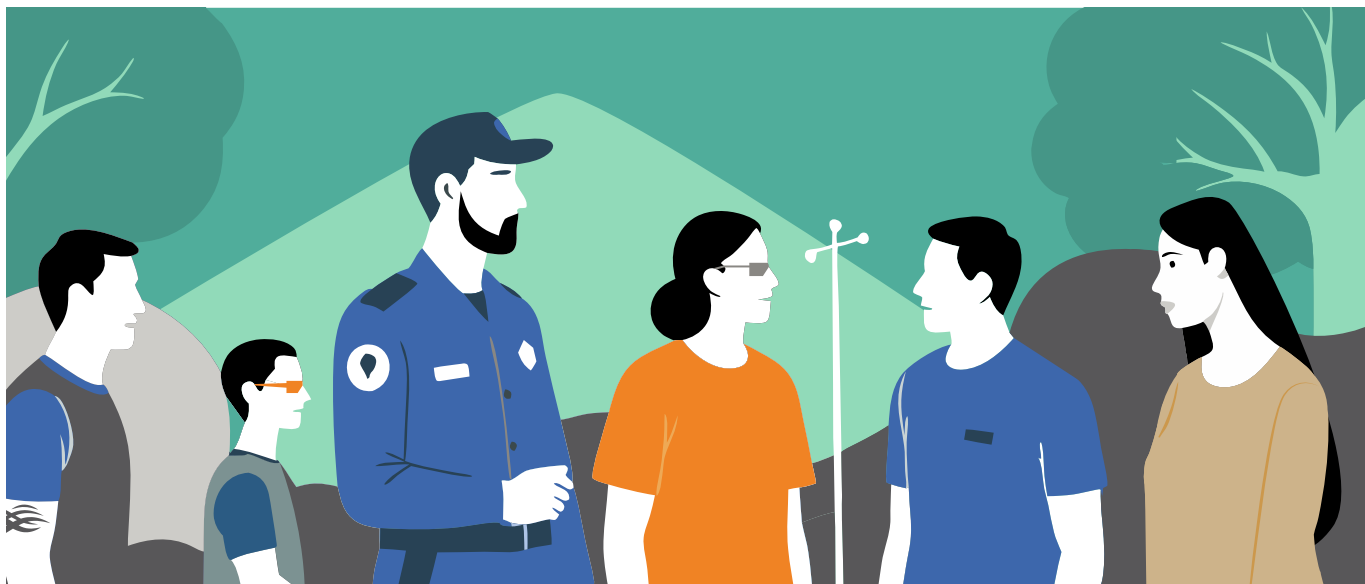
However, these explanations may be too straightforward. If the democratic rights or freedoms supposedly exchanged have only an abstract existence for ordinary citizens, or if their wishes and intuitions about democracy seem irrelevant in everyday life and are not perceived as negatively affected by extraordinary 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.

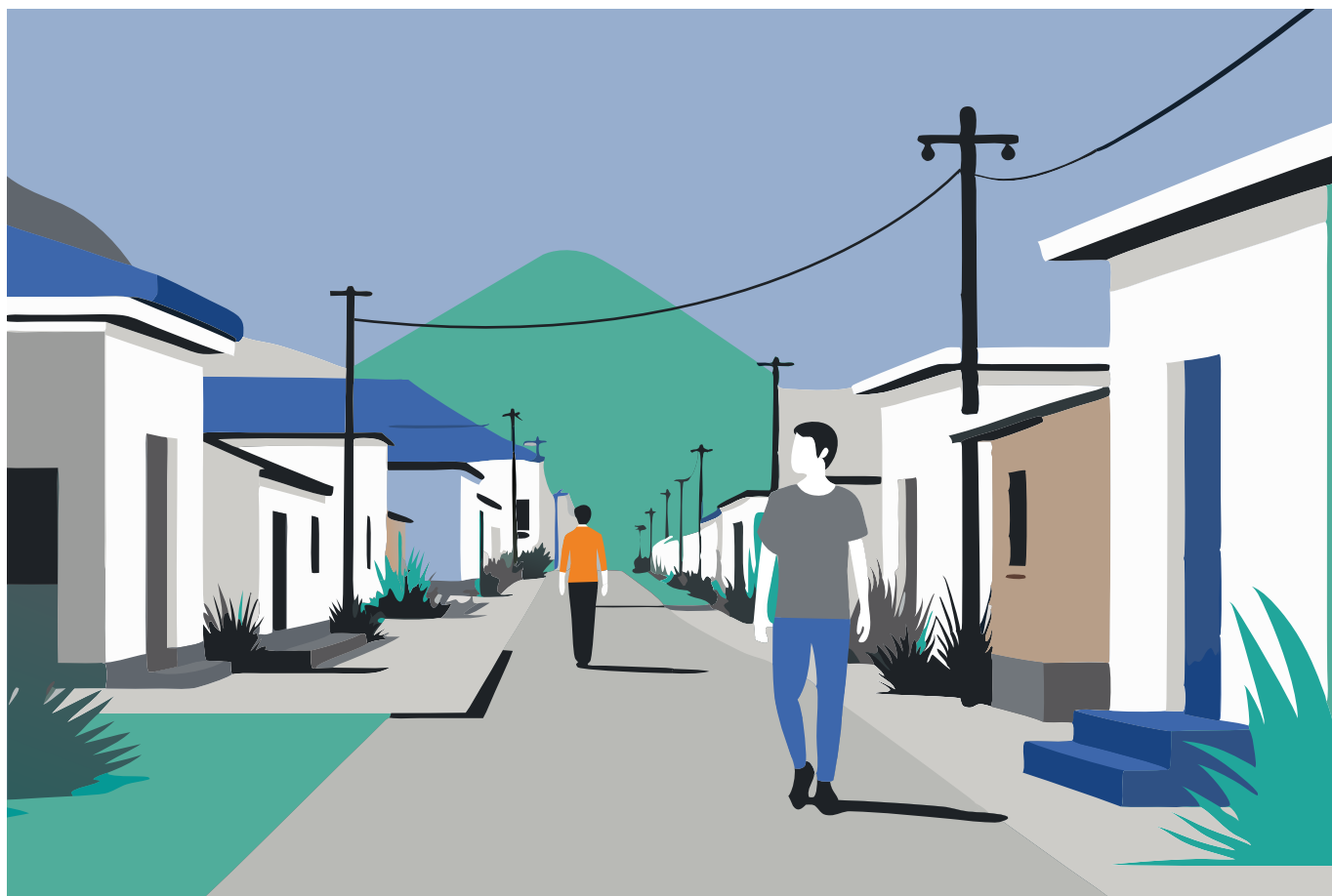
Corruption—more than criminality—is identified in Guatemala and Honduras as the cornerstone of the vicious circle that blocks the possibilities of socioeconomic development and augments the already high levels of delinquency and fear. Corrupt security force members and politicians preserve and use elevated 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Afterword

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 Cobar, 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



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