

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

January 30, 2024

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We are writing to express our significant concerns regarding democratic backsliding and an increase in reports of human rights violations in El Salvador. These concerns are especially pressing with elections planned for early next month, in which the incumbent President Nayib Bukele is running for an unconstitutional second term.

The State of Exception declared by President Bukele in March 2022 has provided the framework for tens of thousands of arrests without due process, including that of U.S. citizens, and has also served as a smokescreen for the targeted harassment of political opponents of the government, human rights defenders, environmental activists, and others.

President Bukele has also, during his first term, overseen the militarized harassment of the legislature, a significant erosion of judicial independence, and the *de facto* criminalization of civil society. With the election approaching, this crushing of dissent and restriction on multiparty democracy has extended to the arrests and arrest warrants of political opponents, including the former Salvadoran Ambassador to the United States, Rubén Zamora. Much of this persecution has been done with the active complicity of El Salvador's judicial system.

According to the State Department's 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights, since the State of Exception was put in place, El Salvador has seen "[s]ignificant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, forced disappearances; torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by security forces; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including censorship and threats to enforce criminal laws to limit expression; serious government corruption; lack of investigation and accountability for gender-based violence; significant barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services; and crimes involving violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex individuals."

The upcoming elections also represent a significant break in El Salvador's constitutional norms, with President Bukele running for re-election. The Salvadoran constitution is unambiguous in its prohibition on serving consecutive terms as President, and Bukele is only able to run due to a ruling made by judges appointed by lawmakers from the President's ruling party after the removal the previous supreme court officials – a move strongly criticized by the United States.

It is not the place of the United States government to determine who is eligible to run for President in a foreign country, nor to pick winners. We are nevertheless alarmed that some of the State Department's public messaging on the elections has been overly credulous toward President Bukele's re-election bid, and his governance.

We respectfully ask that the Department:

- 1) Send an unequivocal message on the importance of respecting constitutional and democratic norms to the Salvadoran government, both publicly and privately;
- 2) Forcefully denounce the excesses of the State of Exception, including the human rights violations listed above;
- 3) Consider establishing mechanisms that would allow for greater direct funding to vetted Salvadoran civil society and Salvadoran non-governmental partners rather than providing funds through intermediary or third party partners when it comes to bilateral assistance programs;
- 4) Restrict security assistance and other support for the Salvadoran police and military in line with existing human rights laws.

We thank you for your attention on this important matter and look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress



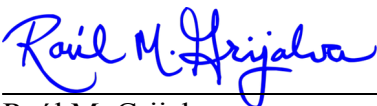
Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress



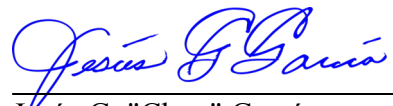
Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



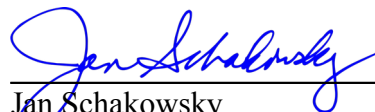
Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress



Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress



Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



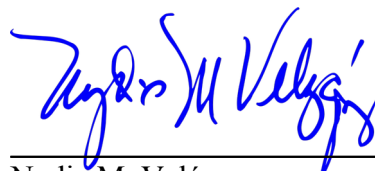
Greg Casar
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