

Post-conflict Remilitarization and Militarism in El Salvador

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1. Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, until the coup d'état of 1979, El Salvador lived under military regimes in which the military elite directly exercised political power. Since the eighties, the military elite formally allowed the rise of civilian governments through elections. Despite these reforms, the military continued to have enormous power in the Republic, derived from the omnipresent armed control they exercised in all areas of national life until the end of the civil war in 1992. Moreover, their alliance with the oligarchic bloc and their armed capabilities made them the “gatekeeper of the status quo.” This status allowed the Military to hold significant political power, even when they no longer exercised it directly.

In this way, the Military has been more than a judge between economic power groups and political sectors. For most of the last century, until the Peace Accords, it was the most powerful institution in the country. Samour (1994) makes this point when talking about the excessive militarism that has characterized Salvadoran political history. The military's supremacy in the political sphere was such that it turned the military into a de facto power above any other factual power. This role has negatively influenced the Salvadoran political process and its possibilities for democratic development.

The military has influence in the political and social sphere, and an important role in creating governability for the ruling elites at different times in history, because of its ability to use armed power as a tool for political action. For decades, that political power preserved privileges, guaranteed impunity, and delivered enormous economic benefits to the military leadership and the officers on duty, enriching many military members.² In this way, the military establishment's control of internal security has been key to preserving both its power and “military prerogatives.” The constitutional reforms derived from the peace agreements sought to eradicate the military prerogatives by changing the mission and doctrine of the military as an institution. “The hegemonic control that the military maintained over security allowed them to manipulate perceptions of threats to public order and become essential for political power. When the loss of control over internal security reduced the military's capacity for manipulation, they lost the fundamental instrument they had to make themselves necessary” (Costa, G., 1999, p.217).

Until the political reforms of the peace accords, keeping public order and law enforcement was part of the ordinary mission of the Salvadoran Military (FAES). Internal security and political repression was the primary function of the Salvadoran army throughout the last century (Stanley, W, in Costa, G., 1999) within the framework of the National Security Doctrine. Since the mid-sixties, with the United States government's support, the FAES, together with the security forces and paramilitary structures, constituted an internal security system used for the political persecution of any opponent.

From the war's beginning, the military took a leading role in counterinsurgent security policy. The main focus was the defense of the State or ‘internal security,’ which resulted in brutal and indiscriminate persecution of anyone who fit into the vague category of “domestic enemy.” The transition from a more selective paramilitary repression to more severe and indiscriminate repression involved massive bombings of the civilian population in the countryside and hundreds of massacres within the framework of the so-called Scorched Earth strategy, which displaced millions of Salvadorans and forced them emigrate internally or internationally. During the armed conflict in El Salvador against the civilian population,

the military's grave human rights violations were part of the repressive machinery to exercise social and population control. The report of the *Comisión de la Verdad* put together by the United Nations after the war revealed that 95% of the complaints of serious human rights violations were attributed to the military, former security forces, and paramilitary groups (composed of military and police) which acted with the acquiescence of the military (UN, 1992).³

The demilitarization of the State, and the rethinking of its constitutional mission, were core to advancing the process of democratic construction that began with the signing of the Peace Accords. As Costa argues (p.97), “the most important thing about the military reform was not its quantitative reduction, but the adoption of a new mission and doctrine” that constitutionally removed the military from its political role and the field of civilian law enforcement. The Accords’ drastic reduction of the military’s power sought to give the military its rightful place in a democratic society, that of guarantor of national defense. In addition, “this allowed Salvadorans the broadest development of their potential, by freeing them from the restrictions imposed by the population control system of the old regime and from a discriminatory institutional framework” (Costa, p.103-104). In other words, peace was possible, provided the military abandoned its political role and control of security and dismantled the legal and illegal repressive structures that led to serious human rights violations.

However, this process was not without its shortcomings and threats. Although there were essential advances on crucial issues, the military’s efforts to delay, distort and hinder compliance with the Agreements as far as possible are widely documented. From the beginning, the military sought to ensure significant interference in the newly established police force (Aguilar, J., 2016). Opposition and threats from military leadership group (the “Tandona”) to the Peace Process’s advancement weakened with the approval of high pensions for their retirement. In the case of lieutenants and captains, their bargaining chip ensured their entry into the new police force.⁴

Three decades after the most ambitious military reform in Salvadoran history, empirical evidence reveals severe failures by the military to adhere to its new mission and doctrine. These failures created a severe reversal of the proposed demilitarization process, which has gradually and progressively favored a new rise of the military in different spheres of civilian life and its return to a political role. Under the justification of a massive increase in crime, the various postwar governments perpetuated and normalized, in clear violation of the Constitution, the participation of the military in civil security tasks. This favored them moving into this arena to such an extent that today, the military has civil security as part of its ordinary and strategic role. Today, there is no doubt that guaranteeing public safety has once again become the military’s leading role. Postwar governments’ weak legitimacy and their inability to solve the severe civil security challenges favored progressive military involvement in civilian law enforcement. This involvement has allowed the military to seep more and more into civilian roles, favoring a new rise in militarism.

In 2019, an authoritarian autocratic government arrived in El Salvador and quickly dismantled the democratic advances made after the war’s end. Since then, the military left behind its apolitical nature and violated the Constitution by attacking democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. One example of these attacks is the military’s takeover of the Legislative Assembly and the illegal replacement of the magistrates of Congress. This favored

the subsequent authoritarian capture of the judicial branch, the serious abuses, and the arbitrary detention of thousands of people during the Covid-19 quarantine. More recently, in March 2022 the military participated in a policy of mass detentions producing severe human rights violations during the State of Exception that the Legislative Assembly mandated at the President's request. These extreme events show that three decades after the signing of the Peace Accords, the military continues to obstruct democracy in El Salvador.

This work uses a definition of militarism proposed by Samour (1994). We should understand militarism as the “excessive influence of the military on social and political institutions.” In contrast, the remilitarization of security is understood as the progressive return and increasing direct participation of the military in civilian law enforcement, at both the operational level and in managing the agencies responsible for security.

In this context, we assume that the remilitarization of security began before the signing of the Peace Accords had ended. Still, to protect their corporate interests, the military needed to become indispensable to the ruling politicians and to recover their power and capacity for political influence. This report seeks to show, with available empirical evidence and verifiable indicators, the reversal of the demilitarization process established by the signing of the Peace Accords. The latter is demonstrated by an increase in the military class, which goes beyond the increase in numbers to showcase the military’s intervention in civilian law enforcement affairs and other areas of civilian life, including the political arena. Although the analysis focuses on the leading indicators over the last decade, it includes a historical look at the post-conflict period, allowing us to understand where the ambitious military reform failed. Additionally, it examines the relationship between the official narrative around the domestic enemy as a justification for a more significant military presence in public and civilian life, and the impact that remilitarization actually has had on vulnerable groups and sectors.

1. Peace Agreements, Constitutional Reforms, and the Remilitarization of Security.

Unlike other countries in the region, in El Salvador, the military does not have constitutional powers to carry out civilian law enforcement roles. Therefore, keeping the peace, order, and civilian law enforcement is beyond the ordinary scope of the FAES. Nor does the Salvadoran legal system give FAES the power to restore constitutional order, guarantee free elections, or change a sitting president, as is the case in countries such as Guatemala and Honduras.

The constitutional reforms resulting from the Peace Accords redefined the military’s constitutional mission to defend the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity against an external military threat (Article 212 Cn.). This redefinition established that fulfilling this mission is inseparable from democratic values and strict respect for the Constitution in all its parts (United Nations, 1991, p.49)⁵. The other critical dimension of the military reform was its suppression of the military’s former political role and their new subordination to civilian authorities. The military was redefined as an obedient, professional, apolitical, and non-deliberative institution with a ‘non-instrumental’ nature, meaning that the institution was not to make decisions in the political field (UN, 1993).

The 1991 Peace Accords, mainly developed in the agreements of Mexico and New York, under the mediation of the United Nations, foresaw a reconversion, restructuring, and reduction of the military, and the suppression of El Salvador's former internal security system and its armed forces (National Police, Treasury Police and National Guard). The Peace Accords also created a new civilian institution responsible for keeping public order and security, the National Civilian Police⁶. "Internal Security shall be the responsibility of the National Civilian Police, which shall be a professional agency, independent from the Military and any partisan activity" (Art. 159, Cn.). The PNC is the only institution with national competence to guarantee civilian law enforcement. The Peace Accords pointed out that the military doctrine "is based on the distinction of the concepts of security and defense." This means that civilian law enforcement will be the competence of civilian, not military, institutions. "For the first time in the republican history of El Salvador, the keeping of public order and security were no longer part of the military's mission" (Costa, p.97).

In the Constitution, the Military's participation in civilian law enforcement was allowed only under extraordinary circumstances, as an exceptional and temporary measure, with prior authorization of the president, and only "when the ordinary means for the keeping of order have been exhausted" (Art. 168, Inc. 12, Cn.). This exception emphasizes the extraordinary nature of the military's participation in a civilian law enforcement role, justified under circumstances where the capabilities of the police are surpassed. Examples are a state of emergency or a breakdown of public order. This constitutional provision also emphasizes the temporary and transitory nature of this support. A novel element is a constitutional control that the Legislative Assembly must exercise in authorizing, prior justification, its participation through legislation, and incorporating mechanisms of accountability to the Executive Branch on the work performed by the military during the period in which it was authorized to provide security support.

Yes, regarding the Peace Accords, removing the military from political and internal security roles was the main purpose. Dictatorships started developing within national security doctrines. However, these doctrines ended up becoming military dictatorships that seized control of the State. Internal security and public administration also depended on them. So, to consolidate democracy, we needed the military to go back to their barracks (Atilio Montalvo, member of the negotiating team of the Peace Accords).

It was a structural reform that sought to allocate a new place for the military in the country's institutional life. The reform promoted a transformation and modernization that would make the military into the apolitical and professional institution that the country needed to move forward in its process of democratization. As Acosta points out, "the backbone of pacification was not the demobilization of its opponents, but the demilitarization of the State and the democratization of its institutions" (Costa, p.17). In this sense, the military reform sought to break with the military hegemony that had prevailed for over half a century. The reforms would lay the foundations for the professionalization of the military as an institution, stripping it of the political role it had played throughout the history of the republic (Aguilar, 2016).

Remilitarization by decree: the perpetuation of exceptionality

The new Constitution prohibited military personnel from undertaking civilian law enforcement tasks. Despite these reforms and all the efforts made within the framework of the negotiation process, the government of Alfredo Cristiani authorized the deployment of a group of soldiers in the first post-war peace patrol the same year that the Peace Accords were signed. Since then, all post-war presidents have used their “state of exception” power almost without interruption, though to different degrees. None of them complied with the provisions set forth by the Constitution and all authorized the use of the military in support of civilian law enforcement. Through executive and legislative mandates and in direct violation of the Constitution and the Peace Accords, post-war governments turned the exceptional and temporary participation of the army in law enforcement roles into a permanent activity.

Criminal violence that spread since the beginning of the post-conflict period and the State’s failure to control it turned this scourge into one of the leading public concerns and an obstacle to the pacification of the country. The increase in crime has been essential to justify the army’s role in successive post-war governments. In each security crisis (real or induced) or critical juncture (changes in administration, elections), under various security plans and policies, military groups were appointed in support of civilian law enforcement, which resulted in a progressive increase of military personnel in civilian law enforcement roles and a gradual expansion of their powers. The vast majority of the decrees which enabled the military’s participation in civilian law enforcement did not comply with the provisions or conditions of exceptionality outlined in Article 168, paragraph 12 of the Constitution. “The decrees were implemented, without an order being broken, and without ordinary means being exhausted” (Aguilar, 2016, p.71-72).

This continuous and permanent process of remilitarization by decree both institutionalized and normalized the military’s presence in civilian law enforcement and other civilian institutions, such as schools, public transport, prisons, and communities. This progressive process distorted and confused responsibilities between the police and the military. Ultimately, the overlap prevents the military from professionalization and erodes their public image because the military must perform tasks for which they lack training and skills.

The first military group of around 2000 soldiers was deployed in December 1992 as part of the *Grano de Oro* plan, executed under the excuse of protecting coffee crops during the government of Alfredo Cristiani. Most recently, the government of Nayib Bukele appointed military groups to various security tasks under the protection of the Presidential Decree No. 41. In total, more than twenty presidential decrees have been issued, authorizing the deployment of military personnel in support of internal security, many of as a continuation or extension of previous decrees.

Until 2009, the decrees granting powers to the military generally contained provisions referring to support in joint patrols (PNC-FAES) through the so-called Joint Task Groups (GTC). The groups worked under the operational command of the police in tasks of deterrence and apprehension *in flagrante delicto* of alleged criminals. During the rise of the Iron Fist policies (2003-2007), there was an expansion of the territorial coverage and attributions of the GTC. Despite this, the administration of Mauricio Funes pushed for even more accelerated remilitarization of civilian law enforcement starting in 2009. During this period there was an unprecedented expansion of military participation in different areas and

functions (Iudop, 2014, Amaya, 2012 and Aguilar, 2016). Executive Decree No. 70 allowed for the creation of Task Forces without police supervision and the control of the external perimeter security of prisons. This gave way to the authorization by decree of functions in areas in which the military had not traditionally intervened, such as customs and land borders, migration, foreign affairs, prisons, and educational centers. These decrees specified, in some cases, the number of military personnel authorized to participate in these tasks and the roles they would perform, in addition to maintaining the traditional GTC in patrolling and deterrence tasks. During the administration of Mauricio Funes alone, at least eight executive decrees and one legislative decree were issued that supported the excessive militarization of law enforcement and other areas of civilian life.

The problem is that these emergencies must be temporary and limited. At this point, it would have been time to strengthen internal security through another mechanism other than the military. So the departure or return of the military to the streets, I think, was due to an electoral manipulation of the security issues and wanting to cause an impact on the population. (Mario Vega, pastor of Elim Church).

Protected by the annual and continuous extensions of the decrees, the expansion of tasks and powers to areas where traditionally the military had not interfered led to these tasks becoming permanently integrated in the operational plans of the security and defense institutions. This process of remilitarization of civilian law enforcement happened while the government of Mauricio Funes was negotiating with gang leaders to keep low homicide rates.

When the leftist government of Salvador Sánchez Cerén arrived, these military groups both continued to operate and simultaneously increased their number and territorial control. The FT continued to work autonomously, as it had done during the previous government administration. In this way, the GTC and the FT were permanently installed even though they were originally created as part of temporary plans. These developments justified a progressive growth of military forces, and a significant increase in the military's budget expenditures.

This discretionary expansion of tasks was now institutionalized in practice, starting in the middle of the last decade. The expansion was then consolidated and codified under a single generic annual decree under the name "*Special transitory provisions for the participation of the military in the keeping of domestic peace.*" Both of the last two governments used this decree to defend and continue the sustained remilitarization of internal security. Their use of this decree provides another irrefutable indicator of the remilitarization process in El Salvador. It also facilitates the de-facto institutionalization of extended military security functions, in clear violation of the provisions outlined in the Constitution.

Nayib Bukele's administration adopted similar mechanisms to those of its predecessors, ensuring the continuity of the army in internal security. Still, a new turn in the remilitarization process is expected in the future. One such new development follows the enormous role given to the FAES in security, and a new stage of militarism that began with the government of Mauricio Funes. Following the approval of Executive Decree No. 36 in November 2019, the Bukele administration issued two more decrees formally allocating an unprecedented number of troops to the security arena. Presidential Decree No. 41, approved in November 2021, enables the participation of the military in internal security until December 2022.

A characteristic of the decrees issued under the Bukele administration is that the military's involvement in civilian law enforcement is highly generalized. The general language leaves open the possibility of including a wide range of functions that the military can perform under the justification of keeping domestic peace and internal security⁷. The so-called Territorial Control Plan confirms this by delegating very broad powers and high prominence to the military within its framework. More recently, soldiers assumed police powers during the State of Exception approved by the Legislative Assembly. A more detailed reference to the army's role in the State of Exception will be provided later in this analysis.

Finally, it is worth noting that the use of executive decrees to enable the army's participation in civilian law enforcement functions has become a way to evade the legislative controls and requirements set forth in the Constitution. With the repeated use of these decrees, the executive branch has long incurred a possible unconstitutionality. First, an extraordinary power has been used without exhausting the ordinary means of dealing with crime and without fulfilling the provisions set forth in the Constitution to comply with this exceptionality. Second, the executive branch made permanent a provision that the Constitution proposes as only temporary and extraordinary. A third violation of the provisions of the Constitution occurred by the government's failure to follow the procedures of control or accountability to the Legislative Branch outlined in the Constitution: *"(...) within fifteen days following its completion, and the President shall submit to the Legislative Assembly a detailed report on the actions of the military."*

It is unknown if the different governments have presented the reports mentioned above to the Legislative Assembly, aside from the fact that regulations were never created to govern these (Amaya, 2012). However, it should be noted that, in the distortion of this constitutional provision used to remilitarize civilian law enforcement, there is a direct responsibility of the Legislative Assembly and the legislative commissions on Security and Defense, which have not exercised their role as controlling entities concerning the actions of the Executive Branch. On the contrary, given the traditional composition of these commissions, often comprised of former military or former officials of the security cabinets, they promoted and actively favored the army's participation in civilian law enforcement roles. This extensive process of remilitarization of security in El Salvador is also part of a regional trend to justify the use of the military in the face of what has been called "emerging threats," under which the military has been favored to undertake more and more missions related to civilian law enforcement.

2. Staff and Budget Increase and Greater Functional Autonomy and Capacity for Political Influence.

The remilitarization by decree promoted by the post-war governments, and justified by the increase in crimes, has been protected and justified under various security plans and policies carried out by different governments. Official information indicates that the military's involvement in support of civilian law enforcement significantly expanded both qualitatively and quantitatively over three decades. The first military group's participation in civilian law enforcement functions took place at the end of 1992 under the so-called *Grano de Oro* Plan. These military patrols were implemented during the coffee harvest season, justified by the new police force's lack of presence, and were repeated later (Costa, 2003).

Since 1993, under the *Guardianes* plan, the so-called Joint Task Groups (JWGs) started doing patrols. These groups were composed of both police and military assigned to a sector. The groups never had more than five members. This practice of deterrent patrolling and joint operations has endured for decades, under different names and operational plans, in addition to progressively expanding their number, geographical coverage, and areas of operation. The following table summarizes the main methods used to justify the military's increasing involvement in security operations over the past three decades.

Table 1. Participation of the FAES in different Security Plans, 1992-2022

Year	Groups	Mission and modality	Coverage
1992	Golden Grain Plan	Military patrols to protect coffee crops	Coffee production areas in the country
1993	Vigilante plan	Military patrols to prevent crimes	Highways and rural areas
1993	Guardianes Plan	Joint Operations and Deterrent Patrols (GTCs)	Rural and suburban areas
2003	Mano Dura plan	Combined Anti-Gang Task Groups (GTA)	AMSS
2004	Super Mano Dura	Combined Anti-Gang Task Groups (GTA)	The entire country
2009-2022	Prevención y Apoyo a la Comunidad plan	Joint Community Support Groups (GCACs).	Rural areas and municipalities with the highest crime rates
2011	BarriosPlan	Security at buses and vehicle control points	San Salvador Metropolitan Area
2012	Escuela Segura Plan	Safety programs in schools	788 schools in 5 departments
2014	Comando Águila	GCAC were assigned to special positive monitoring and patrol groups in various educational centers in the country and the transport routes used by students.	565 schools
2015-2018	Fuerzas Especializadas de Reacción El Salvador Seguro (FERES)	Combined special rapid intervention forces coordinated by the PNC.	
2009-2022	Comando Zeus	Task Forces for preventive patrols and vehicle revision points	The entire country
2010-2022	Comando San Carlos	Support for the security of prisons and rehabilitation of minors.	Prisons, halfway houses, and juvenile rehabilitation centers
2011-2022	Fuerza de Tarea Sumpul	Combating smuggling, transfer of weapons, drugs, stolen vehicles, and human trafficking at border points in support of the DGME	187 unauthorized border crossings at land and sea borders
2019-2022	Fuerza de Tarea Vulcano	It carries out civilian law enforcement tasks in the capital city in support of the PNC.	25 strategic points of the greater San Salvador area and its downtown
2019-2022	Comando Águila	Presence in schools at higher risk through 310 GCACs	Presence in 565 schools identified as having the highest risk

2016-2022	Fuerza de Tarea Tridente	Control and surveillance of the territorial sea and airspace to combat drug trafficking alongside the FGR, the Anti-Narcotics Directorate of the PNC, and the Air Force.	National airspace and maritime
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Source: Reports of the work of the Ministry of National Defense, several years.

Additionally, Task Forces (FT) have been developed for more than a decade. The FTs performed similar functions to those of the GTC but operated autonomously under police command. This contradicts the constitutional authority that recognizes only the PNC as the police force with the national authority to guarantee civilian law enforcement. Since June 2010, the Task Force was approved to provide internal and perimeter security in prisons and juvenile centers, in a return to the militarized framework under which prisons operated during the war⁸. Likewise, FTs controlled non-authorized border crossings (land and sea), perimeter surveillance of schools, security to the capital's downtown area, and public transport.

Figure 1. Territorial deployment of Task Forces and Groups, 2011.



Source: Ministry of National Defense, 2011

These groups were created during the Funes administration, and they continued to grow numerically, in territorial coverage, and in power during the administrations of Salvador Sánchez Cerén and Nayib Bukele. Their enduring presence as military units at the service of civilian law enforcement provided justification for a significant increase in human and financial resources for the military. Thus the military, in clear violation of the Constitution, incorporated civilian law enforcement as part of its strategic plans for over a decade.

In addition to operating without subordination to any police command, these Task Forces carry out activities for which they are not legally authorized or technically prepared, such as arrests, seizures, vehicle searches, requisitions, and seizures. As Rojas Aravena (2008, p.48) points out, “the military lacks the training, logic, doctrine, and equipment to face police

problems. This generates serious human rights violations and ultimately militarizes public policy alternatives.” Presently, state institutions have failed to debate the risks of the use of lethal force derived from the military’s greater participation in these institutions. This failure persists despite the military’s recent involvement in cases of torture, kidnappings, and extrajudicial executions.

A decision that further aggravates the risks of the military’s participation in civilian law enforcement roles is the assignment of newly recruited soldiers, with a training course of just 15 weeks, to roles that require extensive training in areas related to respect for the law, due process, the proportional use of force and respect for human rights. In the last two years, these soldiers with almost no weapons training are the ones who captured thousands of people during the mandatory quarantine at the beginning of the pandemic. They are the ones who implemented the policy of mass detentions within the framework of the State of Exception, from which thousands of complaints of abuses of power have risen.

The War Narrative Used to Justify Military Intervention

The narrative of the gangs as the main enemy of the population, an enemy that requires that the army eradicate it from the streets, was intensely employed during the administration of Mauricio Funes within the context of the remilitarization that began in 2010 (Marroquín and Vásquez, 2014, in Aguilar, 2019). The State justified deployment of all its punitive power in this scenario where the “single enemy” theory resurfaces (Aguilar, 2019). The Sánchez Cerén administration imposed an even more radicalized military response against the gangs. The response included elite military intervention operations and a dehumanizing narrative of revenge against domestic enemies. The new narrative favored the creation of structures of extralegal violence that aggravated an already violent situation.

By the end of March 2022, the Bukele administration declared a new war against gangs. The new war was declared after the alleged breakup of the government’s pact with these groups, an event which led the gangs to partake in the most violent day of the century⁹. In this context, where the government claims to wage war against gangs and other domestic enemies, a warmongering language is used. The narrative serves a strategy of strong remilitarization of civilian law enforcement and other spaces of civilian life into the public discourse as the solution to security problems. As in previous governments, this administration uses the narrative that the only way to achieve a safer country is through military intervention. Concepts such as “collateral damages,” “casualties” instead of homicides, and the “law of war,” among others, have been used by officials to justify deploying state-sponsored violence and the serious abuses committed against the population within the framework of the state of exception. However, unlike his predecessors, Bukele wages war not only against gangs but also against poor communities living on the outskirts. This disproportionate enforcement happens in a context in which the police and the military arbitrarily apply the State of Exception to meet arrest quotas imposed on the police and the military.

The State of Exception: The Prime Example of State-Sponsored Abuses and Military Autonomy in the Security Arena

Since the approval of the State of Exception at the end of March 2022, under the framework of the so-called War on Gangs, the military has arbitrarily detained thousands of people. By the military's accounts, these people are gang members or collaborators for criminal groups. In less than five months under the State of Exception, these arrests by police and soldiers manage to capture nearly 50,000 people, many of whom have no links to gangs, or involvement in criminal acts, as documented by human rights organizations. The reports of human rights organizations agree that in the context of these detentions, police and soldiers committed serious abuses against residents of stigmatized communities and detainees, including ill-treatment, torture, kidnappings, and deaths during custody. Likewise, given that the State of Exception was also being used as a publicity strategy to improve the government's image, videos uploaded to the official accounts of the Military, the Presidency, and the Attorney General's Office openly showed an excessive display of the use of force by police and military. These included video evidence of beatings and torture of detainees at the time of their capture.

Although no control mechanisms were able to verify that only authorized military groups took on security roles until the administration of Salvador Sánchez Cerén, only certain elite groups were appointed with such law enforcement tasks, including the FTs and GTCs. With the implementation of the State of Exception in the administration of Nayib Bukele, there is evidence that participation in security tasks, previously limited to specific groups, has been extended to several units of the army and even to the various branches of the military, which in the past were excluded from civilian law enforcement roles¹⁰. This is a sign of the growing autonomy the military has been gathering in the last decade.

I believe that the military does not even pretend anymore because, at least during the Funes and Sánchez Cerén administrations, the principle that the military accompanied the PNC in law enforcement tasks was kept. Still, nowadays, the military has become careless. We often see the military acting on its own, not even accompanied, much less under the guidance of the PNC. It acts as an autonomous internal security agency. (Mario Vega, pastor of the Elim Church).

During the State of Exception, information on the detentions was published in the official social network accounts of the Ministry of Defense or the personal accounts of Minister Merino Monroy. In the posts, there was evidence that military personnel from different detachments, brigades, regiments, and army units, including intelligence, participated autonomously in the mass detentions (Tweet 14 May). There was also evidence of participation from units from other branches of the Military, such as the Navy or Air Force (Tweet June 29 and 12, MM, April 30). If this practice continues, the military will soon completely infiltrate and control civilian law enforcement. Several people, including representatives of the PNC Workers' Movement, have warned about the progressive marginalization of the PNC in its civilian law enforcement role under the current government and about the risk of its possible dissolution to give back to the FAES the role that was taken from them with the peace agreements. Although this would require constitutional reform, a

modification in this regard will be included, either to subordinate the PNC to the strategic command of the Military or to reform it and formally integrate it as military police.

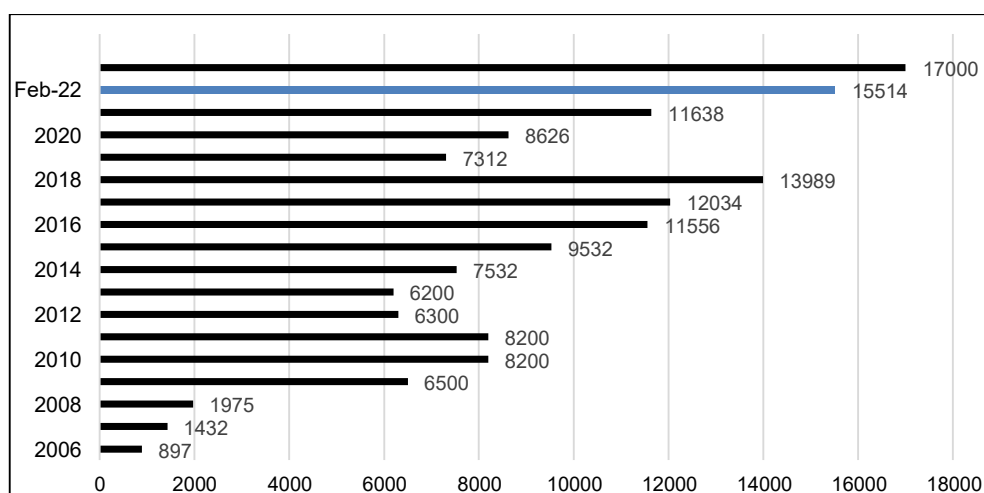
In the current context, President Bukele gives great importance to the military in matters of civilian law enforcement. There is thus a great risk of progressive replacement of the PNC's leadership in civilian law enforcement, something that may not be formalized in the short term to avoid the political costs of dismantling the most critical institution formed in the Peace Accords¹¹. Although this risk has been latent in the post-conflict period because the military elites never gave up the possibility of regaining control of the police, it is now exacerbated in a context in which the president manages the Military as a political instrument of defense and as his personal guard.

I believe today that the imbalance is worse; there has been an abandonment [of the police], and there is an evident preference and support for the military, and I think that reinforces what I said earlier, that the Military is seen as a political instrument of defense, security, support [for the President]. (...) So I believe that if things continue moving in this direction, the police will be weakened even more and will be weakened not only organically but institutionally, losing the orientation and philosophy with which they were formed. And there may come a time when it is under the command of the military; that is, the military can empower themselves so that they look down on the police and use them as their errand boy. (Mario Vega, pastor of Elim Church).

These permanent military units and commands were created as part of the organic structure of the FAES as it expanded its fields of intervention across different areas of civilian life, unheard of before 2009. As a result of these new units and expanded intervention pattern, there was a notable and accelerated increase in the number of military personnel, a budget expansion, and a visible growth of the military's capacity for influence. This new leverage impacts various aspects of national life.

An unavoidable indicator of the remilitarization of internal security is the progressive increase in military personnel involved civilian law enforcement functions. Data from the Ministry of Defense indicates that between 2006 and 2009, the number of military personnel assigned to security tasks increased sevenfold, while between 2009 and 2018, it doubled from 6500 to almost 14000. This significant increase in the number of military personnel began with the first leftist government and continued to deepen during the administrations of Salvador Sánchez Cerén and Nayib Bukele. The following figure shows the number of military personnel assigned to security tasks every year from 2006 to 2022, according to data from the Ministry of Defense.¹²

Figure 1.
Military personnel assigned annually to security tasks (in thousands)



Source: Ministry of National Defense, 2006-2021 and Infodefensa, 2021-2022

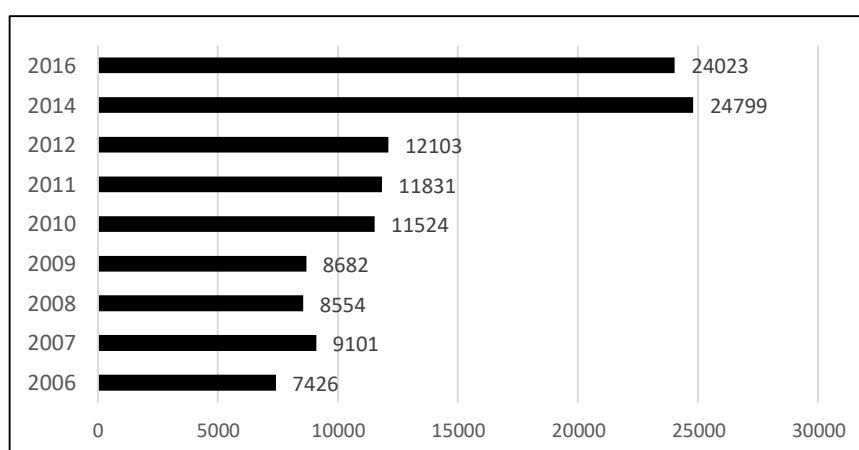
A decrease in active-duty soldiers was reported at the beginning of 2019, according to official data. However, this was reversed as of 2020 with the continuous recruitment of soldiers under the justification of the so-called Territorial Control Plan. As a result, in 2021, more than 11,000 soldiers were reported to be assigned to security tasks (Infodefensa, 2021), while in 2022, this number surpassed 17,000, according to statements by the Minister of National Defense.¹³

These official data indicate that in the last decade, the military involved in citizen security roles has grown more than 1,700 percent, from 897 soldiers in 2006 to 17,000 in 2022. In recent years, about 60 percent of military troops have been assigned to security tasks, which showcases the change in the institutional mission of the FAES. If this trend

continues, fueled by the accelerated pace of calls to enlist in the army under the urgency of enlarging the military, the number of soldiers assigned to security will soon exceed that of police personnel.

The continuous demand for military personnel in security tasks, now justified under the so-called Territorial Control Plan, has created a significant growth of personnel in the military. According to official data, between 2009 and 2014, the military force was close to tripling from 8682 to 24,799, thus exceeding the police force, around 23,000 officers (Aguilar, 2016).

Figure 2.
Military personnel on active duty in the Salvadoran Military (in thousands), 2006-2021



Source: Ministry of Defense for the years 2006-2014; Redsal for 2016 and Infodefensa for 2021.

There is no official data on all military personnel on active duty because the information has been classified in recent years.¹⁴ However, there is evidence of the constant recruitment of personnel justified by the need to reinforce the Territorial Control plan. The continuous campaigns aimed at young people enlisting in the army allow the quarterly intake of around 1000 new soldiers to the army ranks, out of which 60 percent are assigned to internal security tasks under the so-called Territorial Control Plan (López, 2021).

Additionally, similar to what happened during the presidential administrations of Mauricio Funes and Sánchez Cerén, the current administration calls on reservists to meet the demand for military personnel (Aguilar, 2016; SPASS, 2022, Espinoza, C., 2022). This may be because the administration requires immediate availability of experienced military personnel, and they are having difficulties meeting quotas of recruited personnel vs. the military personnel they have.¹⁵

At the end of 2021, the Minister of Defense, Francis Merino Monroy, mentioned during the swearing-in of new soldiers that they had surpassed the 25,000 mark with that group of recruits. Three thousand soldiers will be added to these recruits in 2022. These data indicate that in the last 15 years, the military has increased its size threefold. This growth rate warns of a dangerous numerical superiority of military forces compared to the police force, which in 2021 was of 28,128 officers (PNC, 2021). It is pertinent to point out that with the current number of police officers, El Salvador has a rate of 413 police officers per every hundred thousand inhabitants, which far exceeds the internationally established

parameter in police surveillance (300 x 100,000 inhabitants). This undermines any argument regarding a deficit in the police workforce. At the same time, the official narrative that exalts the successes in security contradicts the justifications used to continue militarizing the country.

By the end of 2021, during the graduation of a new group of troops to reinforce the Territorial Control Plan, President Bukele ordered the military force to be increased to 40,000 in the next five years without further technical justification¹⁶. It is plausible that behind this decision, there are practical motivations aimed at reducing the costs and time of training a 3rd class soldier, whose training lasts four months, while a police officer at entry level must complete a training course in policing (ESP) of at least eight months between theoretical and practical training¹⁷. According to some jurists, this could be illegal, as it would seek to replace police officers with soldiers as a way to have “more police on the street” without actually meeting the requirements set forth by the Law of the Police Career (Marroquín, D., 2019). As previously mentioned, behind the extensive strategy of “policing” the military, the road might start being paved for the military to gain a greater numerical advantage and ultimately control the civilian law enforcement arena.

If the projection of 40,000 troops requested by President Bukele materializes, El Salvador would have the largest army in the Central American region, with a size similar to that of the last years of the civil war, again under a context of an accelerated authoritarian drift.

For me, the only justification is political; it is the idea of instilling fear through force and saying, “the military is on my side; they have sworn loyalty to me. And it’s a powerful military from the force point of view and also powerful in numbers,” I think that’s the whole intention, and it is not technical, much less for the protection of our national sovereignty. (Mario Vega, pastor Elim Church)

This remarkable growth of military personnel entails a serious transgression of the reduction established in the peace agreements and the constitutional role assigned to the FAES after the war's end. At the same time, the progressive increase of the military unnecessarily encourages regional tensions and puts at risk the reasonable balance of forces adopted by the Central American countries within the Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in the nineties (SICA, 1995). Since the previous decade, El Salvador has surpassed the size of the armies of Honduras and Guatemala by several thousand¹⁸. Both the absence of geopolitical threats and intraregional conflicts in Central America, as well as the size and coverage of the current police force that exceeds the international parameters established by the United Nations, are strong technical arguments that oppose the excessive growth of the Salvadoran military.

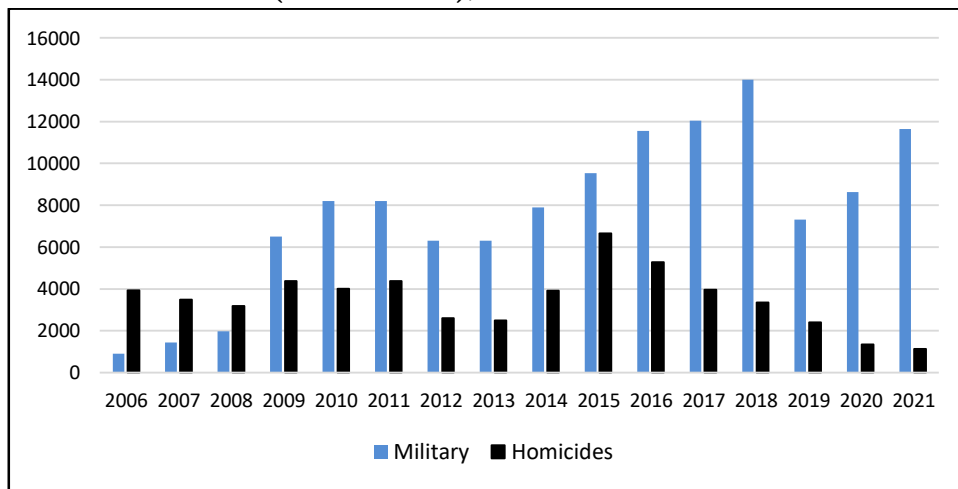
Militarization and Homicides

Homicidal violence in El Salvador has undergone qualitative and quantitative changes since the last decade, related to the transformation of violence and the changes among criminals and their practices.

The main justification for the militarization of security has been urgency to strengthen security forces to face the crime increases. However, evidence shows that the

constant presence of the military on the streets over the past few decades does not appear to have had a significant and sustained impact on homicide rates, which remained on the high end. Moreover, given the organized nature of major criminals, many murders are often planned collectively. This underscores the need for strong criminal investigation efforts. Given this context, deterrent patrols by the military appear to still be somewhat effective in the face of the complex organized violence in El Salvador. The following figure shows the behavior of the number of soldiers assigned annually to security tasks and the number of homicides reported by official sources.

Figure 3.
Number of military personnel in security tasks and number of homicides
(in thousands), 2006-2021



Source: Ministry of Defense, Institute of Legal Medicine and Inter-institutional Technical Council for the Conciliation of Figures of Victims of Homicide (2006-2021).

By contrasting both types of data, there does not appear to be a possible correlation (whether positive or negative) between the number of military personnel in security and the behavior, whether increasing or decreasing, of homicide rates. Between 2009-2011, a period of profound remilitarization of civilian law enforcement, homicide rates averaged 69 homicides per every hundred thousand inhabitants, while in 2015 and 2016, violent death rates reached 103 and 81 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively.

There are periods in which there is evidence indicating that the reduction in homicides was due to government negotiations with criminal groups.¹⁹ Excluding these periods from analysis, only in 2017 and 2018 can we find a negative relationship between the number of military personnel and the number of homicides. Official figures reported between those years, homicides decreased from 3962 to 3346, which means that 2018 had a rate of 50.4 homicides per one hundred thousand inhabitants, a period in which the military in security tasks went from 12,000 to about 14,000 according to the Ministry of Defense. However, at the same time, the gangs were facilitating a strategic withdrawal as a negotiating tools for the 2019 elections. The impact of this possible change of strategy in their route of consolidation as criminal enterprises, where violence is dosed and even avoided altogether (Aguilar, 2019), cannot be underestimated. Apart from the multicausality nature of the behavior of homicide rates in El Salvador and its political dimension, the data indicate that

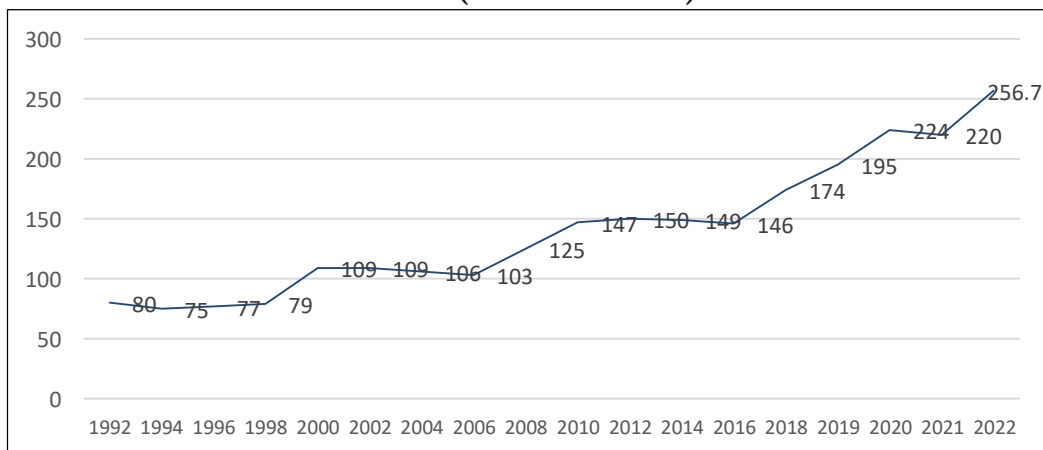
the presence alone of the military on the streets does not seem to be a major factor influencing the behavior of violent deaths for more than two decades. Rather, evidence has shown that periods of increased militarization of security tasks have brought about serious abuses, including torture, killings, and disappearances of people perpetrated by military personnel (PDDH, 2019, SPASS, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). Therefore, the use of militarizing civilian law enforcement is a false solution to rising violence. Although it may enjoy popular support and temporarily affect the subjective perception of insecurity, it does not seem to be an important factor in reducing violent deaths, despite assurances from government officials in different administrations.

Increasing Military Spending and Budget Growth as an Indicator of Remilitarization

“The reduction of the FAES, embodied in the agreements, transcended the numerical dimension and essentially referred to the reorganization and readjustment of the military institution per its new mission during peacetime. This included an organic and functional restructuring, the reduction of military spending and the reconversion, return and closing down of facilities that would no longer be used by the FAES, under its new organization” (Aguilar, 2016, p.63).

Parallel to the military force’s growth and the importance attributed to the military by recent administrations, there has been a progressive increase in military spending and budget. The preponderance given to the military usually goes hand in hand with budget increases and a greater endowment of human resources and military equipment. An analysis of the three post-conflict decades shows that after the end of the war and until the late nineties, the annual budget allocated to the Ministry of Defense was around USD 79 million. This represented a significant reduction from the enormous resources available to the military in the most intense years of the conflict, whose annual official budget exceeded USD\$200 million.

Figure 4.
The annual budget approved for National Defense, 1992-2022
(in USD millions)



Source: Ministry of Finance, various years

However, in line with the unprecedented increase in military personnel since 2010, the defense branch registered a notable budget increase that coincided with the significant recovery of the importance of the military during the first leftist government. Between 2008 and 2014, the annual budget approved by the Ministry of Defense increased by \$47 million. However, between 2016 and 2020, it grew by USD\$78 million, representing an increase of 53.4%. By 2022, the budget approved for the Ministry of Defense reached USD 256 million, the highest since the end of the war, which indicates that, in the last three post-conflict decades, the annual budget allocated to the Ministry of Defense has tripled in absolute terms, going from USD\$80 to USD\$265.7 million. This amount was increased in the first quarter of 2022 with a budgetary reinforcement of \$ 20 million justified under the state of exception (reference).

These figures correspond to the budget approved by Congress for each fiscal year. To this budget, reinforcements are usually added coming from fiscal adjustments, loans, and international grants. Additionally, the Ministry of Defense receives millions of dollars annually from the Ministry of Justice and Security as payment for the support provided by their personnel to security. These allocations increase as the number of soldiers assigned to civilian law enforcement grows and are often subtracted from the annual budget allocated to the PNC, so at the end of the day, these are financial resources that are subtracted from the police. The following table contains the budget allocations transferred to the Defense branch for civilian law enforcement tasks in the last decade. These allocations have been increasing yearly in line with the growth in the number of troops.

Table 2. Budget allocated to FAES for internal security tasks (in millions of USD)

Year	Allocated budget	No. of troops
2009	\$10,575,000	6500
2010	\$17,244,349	8200
2011	\$23,713,772	8200
2012	\$14,067,584	6300
2014	\$30,219,987	7900
2015	\$30,455,233	9532
2016	\$30,455,233	11 556
2017	\$32,829,586	12 034
2018	\$31,334,865	13 989
2020	\$67,000,000	8626

Source: Ministry of National Defense.

The apparent increase in the amount allocated in the last decade for security support is striking. It contrasts with the amounts received by the Ministry of Defense in 2010 and 2020 with a similar number of troops. This shows that the cost to the country of a soldier assigned to security tasks has increased fourfold in the last decade, going from USD 17 to USD\$ 67 million. These data suggest that these allocations have grown by 533% in the last decade.

Until 2020, the Ministry of Defense also received money from the "Special Contribution to Security," a tax applied by the government to mobile telephony companies

to reinforce security plans. For the year 2020 alone, allocations to the Ministry of Defense were USDS48.6 million, representing 37 percent of the total collected by the special contribution for that year (Ministry of Finance, 2020). Likewise, in 2020 the FAES received additional allocations from two loans from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) for the second and third phases of the Territorial Control Plan. An estimate based only on budget allocations from state resources for 2020 indicates that the national defense branch is given around USD\$340 million, or about 5.3 percent of the national budget approved for that year. This is well above the percentage allocated to other State branches such as Economy, Agriculture, Livestock, Environment, Housing, and Local Development (Ministry of Finance, 2020). We also must add to this number the donations and loans from international cooperation and income from the seizure of assets resulting from forfeitures.²⁰

These budgetary reinforcements have been justified as salaries and bonuses of military personnel, as well as for procuring equipment and weapons, helicopters, military drones, surveillance technology, and high-tech military vehicles such as the Yagu²¹. Should things continue to move in that direction, El Salvador will keep competing in a miniature arms race that benefits some entrepreneurs together with some side businesses of military and political leaders.

A 2011 analysis of El Salvador by the World Bank points out that public spending on security, of which 45 percent was allocated to police surveillance, has been impacted by increased spending on military tasks (World Bank, 2011). Another fact that showcases the impact on public spending of maintaining a sustained militarization scheme is military spending. According to estimates by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in 2019, military spending in El Salvador reached USD\$317.2 million, while in 2020, it was USD\$372.3 million, well above the military expenditure of 1985 at the peak of the war, which was around USD\$250 million.²²

The increasing military spending also coincides with a serious crisis in public finances, high levels of debt, and a greater demand for social investment derived from the increase in poverty and inequality brought about by the pandemic. Military spending also contrasts with very low budget allocations to programs for victims of violence, social prevention, and rehabilitation and reintegration. Likewise, in the security sector, there is still an enormous need. Wages for entry level police officers are around USD\$500.00 and many police headquarters are in deplorable conditions, lacking basic equipment and supplies such as gasoline for squad cars²³. All this has weakened the PNC as an institution as the guarantor of security, undermining civilian security management's capabilities.

I think this is very negative, the PNC never had all the budgetary support it deserved, and it had always been a police force with very few resources, with very deficient infrastructure. But I believe that today, the imbalance is worse; there has been practically an abandonment, and there is an evident preference and support for the military, and I believe that this reinforces what I said earlier, that the military is seen as a political instrument of protection and support, while the police are perhaps considered not sufficiently armed to be able to play that role (...). Mario Vega (pastor of Elim Church).

Although El Salvador has lacked a strategic vision of civilian law enforcement, an element that has remained constant throughout the different post-war administrations has

been the remilitarization of security, in clear contradiction with the commitment to the demilitarization of Salvadoran society that was seen as a condition for the pacification and democratization of the country.

3. The impact of Militarism on Democracy and the Return of the Domestic Enemy and War narratives.

The Military's return to its political role

One of the main purposes of the military reform contained in the peace agreements and included in the constitutional mission of the military was to limit their participation in the political sphere drastically; this was to ensure that gun violence ceased to be an instrument of political control (Costa, G, 1999). Three decades after the signing of the peace agreements, a favorable scenario is brewing for the military to play a political role again and for militarism to become a fundamental feature of the Salvadoran political process. At present, the threat of the military's return to its political role adds to its high military importance in security issues and its omnipresence in national life. All this while, the system of institutional counterweights is being dismantled when there is an absence of independence of powers and an excessive concentration of power in the hands of the Executive branch.

This accelerated process of democratic erosion that El Salvador is currently experiencing is only possible due to the political and armed support of the military. Therefore, the FAES have again intervened negatively in the Salvadoran political process, which means that the military is a threat to democracy in El Salvador.

The current political repositioning of the military cannot be understood without considering the overall process of remilitarization favored since the arrival of the first leftist government. This process includes the capture of critical areas of civilian control during the administration of Mauricio Funes, with the support of networks of power linked to the right wing. General Munguía Payés, former Minister of Defense, used these developments to assume the role of Minister of Justice and Security in 2011. Upon his arrival, General Francisco Salinas, former deputy Minister of Defense, was appointed director of the PNC.

The military elite had extensive control over all areas of security, including State intelligence. Its interference in other critical areas of the country, including the political sphere, put national security and stability at risk and compromised the already weak democratic institutions.²⁴

In contrast to what is happening in other countries, this process of remilitarization of security did not seek to formally subordinate security institutions to the military. Rather, it used a more strategic approach based on the tactic of permeating the institutions through the appointment of men, trusted by General Munguía Payés, in areas and roles that allowed him to have direct control of key areas of the country (Iudop, 2014). The seizure of the security apparatus favored by the appointment of generals in charge of security profoundly weakened the institutions of the security sector, mainly the police, by allowing greater participation of criminal networks and revitalizing militarism and militarization in civilian institutions.

The generals were removed in 2013 by a Congressional resolution that deemed their appointments illegal. Despite this, they continued to practice control of the institutions,

according to former security officials, which ensured the power and influence of these groups during the next administrations. With the arrival of a new administration, General Munguía Payés was again appointed Minister of Defense and protected against any possible criminal investigations. The administration of Sánchez Cerén gave continuity and momentum to the process of remilitarization of civilian law enforcement.

Regardless of differences with different generations of the Military, General Munguía Payés's reconquest of public security represented an important symbolic triumph for the military. Through this achievement, the military managed to recover its main source of political power. In symbolic terms, this reconquest can be interpreted as revenge for those who took away the main means of preserving the military prerogatives. The military sector could now reunite with economic shareholders while enjoying complete impunity. Thus, illegal networks reappeared and strengthened their foothold in security and other key areas of the State.

"Payés continued to represent a strong military power figure within the government cabinet. He was Minister for almost ten years and was one of the trailblazers behind the truce with the gangs; protected the historical archives of the military from the civilian justice, "even with his own life"; protected his military commanders accused of crimes, past and present; as Minister of Security, he contributed to impunity by burying files against police chiefs; and believed himself to be a supervisor of democracy by issuing warnings about the results of the 2019 presidential elections" (SPASS, 2022, p.19).

General Munguía Payés is in prison, accused of several crimes related to arms trafficking, corruption, and illicit enrichment, as well as serving as the mastermind behind the truce with gangs during the Funes administration.²⁵

The Return to Authoritarianism and its Byproduct: Militarism

At present, the public faces a scenario of accelerated authoritarian regression with a political context of threats to freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and persecution of opponents and dissident groups. In this context, the Bukele administration allied with the military. This choice provides for greater militarization of the public life and the return of the military to a political role. In this situation, the military has been politically instrumentalized at unprecedented levels since the Peace Accords were signed.

This new role of the Military contradicts the essence of its nature as an apolitical and non-deliberative institution and its constitutional mission. To showcase its new position, the Minister of Defense, Rear Admiral Francis Merino Monroy, pursued serious attacks against the constitutional order, the separation of powers, and human rights. Undoubtedly, the armed assault against the Legislative Assembly on February 9, 2020, led by President Bukele, has been the most serious act committed by military leaders. This action made evident the degree of political instrumentalization of the military. Although this armed incursion did not end with the dissolution of the congress, it did constitute a momentary self-coup d'état. Various elite units of the army participated formally, alongside the participation of the FAES and senior police chiefs. Based on the opinion issued by the Congressional committee that investigated this issue: *"Minister Monroy did participate in the possible commission of crimes against the constitutional and public peace systems, crimes against the State and its existence, security, and organization,*

by violating the independence of the government branches and by illegally and forcibly breaking into the legislative precinct thus interfering with the constitutional order” (Velásquez, E., 2020). After this investigation, the political commission of Congress recommended the dismissal of the Minister of Defense for his attacks against democracy and the separation of government branches. The Commission also recommended that the Prosecutor's office open a criminal investigation for possible crimes of disobedience and violation of the Constitution (Legislative Assembly, 2020, 2021²⁶). Although the majority of Congress supported the recommendation for the dismissal of Merino Monroy, it was ignored by the president.

Months later, during the quarantine mandated by the government, the FAES carried out thousands of arbitrary detentions together with the PNC for violating home confinement rules. Thousands of people were detained in so-called containment centers, where many were infected, and some even died. The FAES were also held in contempt of a court order when they disobeyed a Supreme Court ruling mandating them to refrain from detaining people for walking about on the streets during the quarantine. The social crisis, uncertainty, and fear brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic were worsened by the threat of being arbitrarily detained by State agents during a time when the entire country was militarized and fundamental rights were suspended under a national state of exception.²⁷

The military was again held in contempt towards a judicial order when, on six different occasions, soldiers refused to allow the entry of Judge Jorge Alberto Guzmán to several military barracks to carry out proceedings in the military archives. Said proceedings involved the Mozote Massacre case, in which a dozen senior military commanders were criminally prosecuted for crimes against humanity and war crimes during the armed conflict. In response to the soldiers' arrogant refusal to receive the judge as they guarded the garrisons where the proceedings were to be carried out, military leadership passively noted that the files in question contained secret military plans, justifying the soldiers' refusal to obey the judicial order. This situation is a sign of the political power that the military seems to believe they have, above a judicial authority.²⁸

But, I believe that the military retained its power of influence over political decisions, and proof of this is that those military archives remain classified even if they could potentially point to liable parties in serious cases of human rights violations; that is a closed vault, and it will remain closed, precisely because there is still a military group with enough strength and power to keep it shut despite the citizen's demands. So to me, that's evidence that the military continues to wield power over civilian governments (Mario Vega, pastor of Elim Church).

After the harsh blow to judicial independence on June 1, 2021, the same day that a congress, comprised mostly of members of the official party, took office, Judge Guzmán was removed from the El Mozote case and dismissed together with a third of all judges, through a decree that ordered judges over 60 years of age to resign their positions. After his dismissal, Judge Guzmán reported threats and harassment.²⁹

In another unprecedented event that contradicts its supposedly apolitical character, the military participated in the delivery of food packages to the population weeks before the 2021 legislative and municipal elections. The packages were distributed under a clientelist and proselytizing strategy in favor of the president's party. The previous Legislative Assembly should have prohibited this to prevent the military and the PNC from continuing to abuse

the population under the excuse of quarantine due to the pandemic (Velásquez, E, 2020; Government of El Salvador, 2020).³⁰

At the same time, the political power that the military now seems to hold comes from the importance that the president has given it on the issue of security and its omnipresence in different areas and public policies. Its new power has repositioned the military as a supra institution in the country. The president assigned an excessive role to the military in the management of the pandemic, consistent with the punitive approach that prevailed over the public health approach used during the pandemic (HRW, 2020; OUDUH, 2020a, and 2020b). The military has also played a central role in the COVID-19 Vaccination Plan. In recent years, the military have also led relief efforts during socio-natural disasters and emergencies due to rains. They have been appointed to lead the works in the fight against pests in support of the Ministry of Agriculture and to provide security in international events to promote tourism. More recently, military personnel were assigned to drive public transportation units and as autopsy assistants at the *Instituto de Medicina Legal*. Indeed, the military needs to justify its existence and huge budgets by undertaking more and more tasks. Its main concern in the post-conflict period has been to justify its existence.³¹

And in my opinion, the most important objective they have is "how do we justify resources?" because everything the military does that is not defense-related is being paid by the State, and all that costs money; it doesn't always show the budgets, because a lot is done through other institutions that pay the money, and these reap the benefits (Otto Argueta, researcher).

This repositioning of the military through government rhetoric and propaganda as a player essential in national life has led Minister Merino Monroy to take political stances. Frequently, the rear admiral publicly expresses his political preferences, takes sides in the face of important events, and disqualifies parliamentarians from the opposition or critics of the government, always forgetting the apolitical stance he must have as mandated by the Constitution.

In the new context of the Bukele administration, I believe that the military has returned to the political roles they had before the peace agreements because we have heard purely political comments and expressions from the Minister of Defense; he takes sides with one social segment, and undermines another; that is, he as a member of the military is expressing partisan political preferences (Mario Vega, pastor Elim Church).

Minister Monroy has also mentioned to the team that drafting amendments to the Constitution require the military to have greater spaces for political participation, something currently limited by the Constitution.³²

Minister Monroy's high degree of servility and obedience to any action ordered by the president is very obvious. It is evident in both his public interventions and through his Twitter account, even if these have to do with presidential image strategies. His absolute obedience continues to persist even when the rights of the population are being violated, like with the state of exception, within the framework of what has been called *#GuerraContraLasPandillas* (War on Gangs), or what happened with the 9F.

And there is a fundamental political element, and that is that, in our countries, there is no better ally for an illegitimate government than the military; if you have military support, the military is going to obey the orders,

even political orders. And this is not an ideological issue; that is very important. Now we realize this administration's military is not the military of old that had a perfectly defined ideological estate; these soldiers for this administration and their ideological loyalties are quite flexible. Therefore, they are going to adapt to a president and a government that protects their advantages and prerogatives and one that does not endanger the sustainability of the institution. (Otto Argueta, researcher).

Indeed, as Otto Argueta points out, the military over the last decade seems to bow down to the president's administration in order not to lose its benefits, regardless of its ideological affinities. This pragmatism finds fertile ground in the lack of legitimacy of governments, which need to resort to the military's support to maintain control of the State.

The military incursion into the Legislative Assembly on 9F

One of the political events that marked the beginning of the Salvadoran democratic process's decline was the military takeover of the Legislative Assembly on February 9, 2020. This democratic breakdown, a first in the Salvadoran post-war period, was led and planned by the President. The military and PNC both participated, and the Council of Ministers supported it. For the first time since the coup d'état of 1979, the military was once again the leading actor in the process of rupturing Constitutional order.

Case Study: The Military Incursion into the Legislative Assembly on 9F

On Sunday, February 9, 2020, the blue room of the Legislative Assembly, where legislators meet, was taken by a group of police and military forces bearing assault weapons. The purpose of the military incursion led by the President of El Salvador was to pressure the representatives to hold an extraordinary session in favor of the approval of a \$109 million loan to strengthen the strategic mobility and surveillance technology of the PNC and FAES in what they called the "Third Phase of the Territorial Control Plan." It was a loan aimed at reinforcing the country's militarization, which allocated about half of the funds for acquiring technology for military intelligence work (drones, video surveillance cameras), vehicles, a helicopter, and a ship for the armed forces³³. Among the technology assigned to FAES was a strategic UAV drone valued at one million dollars³⁴. This equipment would enable the FAES to play a strategic role in the security and intelligence field.

The legislative plenary sent the loan proposal to the Finance Committee, which had doubts about possible overpricing and the uses of said surveillance technology.

The Executive branch put together a propaganda campaign accusing the representatives of opposing the improvement of security for the population, citing the urgency of modernizing the security forces to face the criminal threat as a justification. Then, through the Council of Ministers, the President called Congress to an extraordinary session where they would force the representatives to approve the loan for the security sector. The president's threat in case of absenteeism by the representatives invoked the right to insurrection provided in Article 87 of the Constitution.

Upon his arrival in Congress on February 9, 2021, Bukele entered a blue room packed with heavily armed military and police forces and sat in the chair of the President of the

Legislative Assembly. Although he did not call the deputies to a session, this was a clear attempt to usurp the functions of another state organization's functions through military force. After speaking, Bukele left the legislative precinct and, before thousands of supporters and escorted by the military, gave a speech full of insults and threats to the representatives, to whom he gave a deadline of one week for the approval of the loan.³⁵

In addition to the soldiers of the Special Military Security Brigade and the police officers who took the blue room and the administrative building of Congress, the streets surrounding the legislative precinct were militarized. Snipers on the roofs of buildings near the Legislative Assembly were also identified. The representatives also reported that, as part of the president's pressure measures, their security details appointed to them by the PNC were removed without justification one day before the military incursion. Also, some representatives reported police and military harassment in their homes the day before the armed takeover. Part of the plan of military takeover also included forcing out Assembly security personnel and lobbying those in charge to provide keys to various offices in the legislative precinct. The director of the PNC and the Minister of Defense were present to overwatch the military operation.

An investigation by a special congressional commission led to the questioning of the Director of the PNC and the Minister of Defense regarding their participation in the armed incursion. The investigation found that different military and police units had participated in its planning. Despite that, in both cases, the Commission recommended the President dismiss both officials. Yet, almost three years later, no official has been prosecuted for having planned or participated in this serious attack against Salvadoran democracy.³⁶

The military incursion into the Legislative Assembly anticipated the authoritarian pool the country would later be plunged into. Political scientist Manuel Alcántara called it the prelude to a new scenario of institutional breakdown. Indeed, empowered by the support and loyalty of his armed wing, President Bukele began an accelerated cycle of institutional dismantling that included a new blow to the judicial branch on June 1, 2021, the subsequent seizure of key institutions, and a strategy of attacks and persecution of the independent press, civil society organizations, academia and critics of the government.

The Construction of the "Domestic Enemy" Theory, From the Precepts of the Doctrine of National Security and a Policy of Hatred.

“The National Security Doctrine is a military theory of the State that seeks the survival of the nation in the face of all adverse forces, and the triumph of national objectives based on the militarization and ideologization of security, including in its instrumentalization, the takeover of state institutions” (Jiménez, 2009, p.79). This doctrine was promoted by the United States during the Cold War and was copied by many Latin American countries as an internal security policy during military dictatorships. Although the threat of international communism provided an ideological unification to ensure the defense of the State, a central axis of that fight was against the so-called *domestic enemy*, cataloged as “any adversary that operates within the country borders and who might pose a threat against national objectives” (Jiménez, p.79).

The military rationale behind the National Security Doctrine “turned this internal enemy character into a concept, a key piece in the asymmetric war against a social reality characterized by citizen discontent, mobilization and consolidation of protest social movements” (Rincón Oñate, 2019, p.253). Here we can see the creation of a dichotomous interpretation of reality, under which the society is divided into two: friends or enemies, good or bad. From this Manichean vision, the spectrum of the internal enemy becomes vague and indeterminate.

Under this radicalization of the internal enemy, the notion of national defense was distorted to give greater importance to domestic security over external security. (Mardones, SF). Here the main purpose was to guarantee the security of the State over the security of citizens. From this ideological instrumentalization, the fight against the internal enemy and its ultimate destruction were understood as a military objective. This gave the military an opportunity to open a wide field of action, militarize the State, and justify the development of a new type of war (Jiménez, 2009), under which all kinds of abuses and serious human rights violations were legitimized.

A central dimension of the political construction of the figure of the internal enemy and its political instrumentalization is what Martín Baró (1978) called the *ideological background*, a key element for the justification and social legitimization of the violence used in its name by the State. Its construction tailors to the people’s fears or rejections (subversive, terrorist, gang member, corrupt politician), and together with the above, a *devaluing ideologization* is instilled that favors its dehumanization and objectification. This strips the internal enemy from its rights and guarantees, and makes it deserving of all kinds of punishments, including its extermination.

These precepts, arguably overcome decades ago in Salvadoran history, seem to be valid again. A new authoritarian administration promotes the resurgence of concepts such as the internal enemy.

This is perhaps the most important characteristic on which such a policy of hatred lies (...) the creation of the internal enemy, where generating anxiety, increasing the feeling of insecurity, and sharing fake news, among other strategies, has become the most expeditious route to consolidating ties that massify, that demand security, protection, and that achieve the purpose of building an enemy (Oñate, 2019, p. 261).

On May 7, 2021, during a swearing-in ceremony for 130 cadets of the military on Soldier Day in El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele, in a speech that praised the work of the military as the savior of the country, mentioned:

"As the Commander in Chief of the military and on behalf of the Salvadoran people, whom I represent as president, I want to reiterate our gratitude for helping save our homeland from our foreign and domestic enemies" (Infobae, 2021).³⁷

In his speech, the president also mentioned, *"attacks are now no longer external, but also internal. Those little voices that attack the military,"* referring to the downpour of national and international questionings about the illegal dismissal of the magistrates of the Constitutional Chamber and the attorney general who took advantage of having the legislative majority and using it in favor of the presidential agenda.

These narrative elements that blame the “internal enemies” for every single problem the country may face have become repetitive in the president's speeches and tweets, in which he openly accuses people and institutions of obstructing the country's progress. A novel narrative element is equating these “enemies” with a national threat from which the army is saving the country. This narrative that has the military as the people’s savior has not only been maintained throughout his mandate, but has become omnipresent in the president's communication strategy. This is especially true after the president’s armed takeover of the Legislative Assembly with the support of the military and the PNC.

This seems to be a serious problem, and I think it is how the president manages to feel safe, relying on the military, financing them with millions to have them by his side and be able to be protected against these imaginary enemies and fears, a figment of his imagination and a result of his being so insecure. (Specialist interviewed).

In this way, the enemy, here the “gangs” and “the same old people” represented by political opponents, are joined today by a diversity of civil society players and international actors, whom the president and his officials attack and openly insult in their conferences and social networks for questioning their anti-democratic actions and acts of corruption. Independent journalists, human rights organizations, academics, businessmen, U.S. government officials, diplomats, and any critical party have become part of the broad and vague category of “enemies.” This narrative is the articulating axis of an official advertising strategy in which accusations against people or institutions are accompanied by smear campaigns, disqualification, and threats directly or on social networks. At the same time, there has been an escalation of intimidation, espionage, and monitoring by intelligence agencies, police, and the military against key people in the government. In several cases, they have resorted to opening criminal cases or threatening to do so as a way of silencing any questioning against government officials. A powerful element of intimidation used by the official party is the instrumentalization of the criminal system as a mechanism of political revenge, favored since June 2021 by the capture and submission of the judicial branch. It is not ruled out that the approval of the state of exception used to carry out mass arrests without a warrant and the pinning of criminal charges without the right to defense during the so-called *War on the Gangs* is also another tool of intimidation against key players accused of being enemies of the government. In the current scenario of an accelerated authoritarian regression, the notion of the internal enemy comes into play once again in the official rhetoric as a justification to increase the practices of social control and State violence.

The Forging of the Internal Enemy and Its Dehumanization as a Source of Unity.

The public enemy is forged using people’s fear. This method ensures citizens’ cohesion in the face of the danger or rejection said enemy represents, as is the case with gangs or with the “*same old people*” who have a high capacity to gather repudiation among different sectors of Salvadoran society. These terms are repeatedly used within the framework of a policy of hatred. The dynamic seems to respond to a political marketing strategy that seeks to maintain a climate of conflict and social polarization. This climate

doubles as a distractor from the national problems and as a public image strategy of the president.

Under this logic, much of the country's activity is oriented towards the attack and disarticulation of "the enemy," so any action carried out against this enemy is considered self-defense. Therefore, in defending the country's interests against the enemies of the nation, any abuses and unlawful actions are justified as legitimate. Behind this ideological justification is the notion of the internal enemy as an animal, not a person, who deserves all kinds of punishments. This dehumanization, personified mostly in the figure of the gang member and the terrorist, has allowed governments to legitimize the extermination openly and atrocious practices carried out by security agencies.

"The enemy's figure is complemented by that of the terrorist, making him the star of a new narrative that frames an ontological reality that designates what is radically opposed to peace and order. The label "terrorism," as a synonym for an irrational homicidal drive, characterizes the enemy as non-human, non-person, who does not deserve to be treated with the guarantees of the law or politics. This serves as a new anthropology of inequality, marked by a criminal, insane and inhuman character associated with the enemy and also a new and radical difference between "us" and "them." (Angarita, Pablo, in Rincón Oñate, 2009, pg.260).

Beyond a government marketing strategy, the political use of the internal enemy favors the justification of a greater intervention of the military in the field of civilian law enforcement. As in the past, the juxtaposition between internal security and national defense seeks to enable the military to play a leading role in the fight against "the internal enemy."

The military's most direct intervention in the war against the internal enemy is its participation in the *War on the Gangs*, which the current Salvadoran government seems to be waging without any legal limits. Beyond this intervention, an exacerbated official rhetoric prevails that equates the gangs with human rights organizations and with any group or citizen that reports or questions the serious abuses committed by the state. Under this logic, an official discourse led by President Bukele has been constructed in which any critic of government security measures is accused of being a defender or collaborator of terrorists. This discursive construction criminalizes the work of human rights defenders, academics, journalists, and any critic who opposes government decisions.

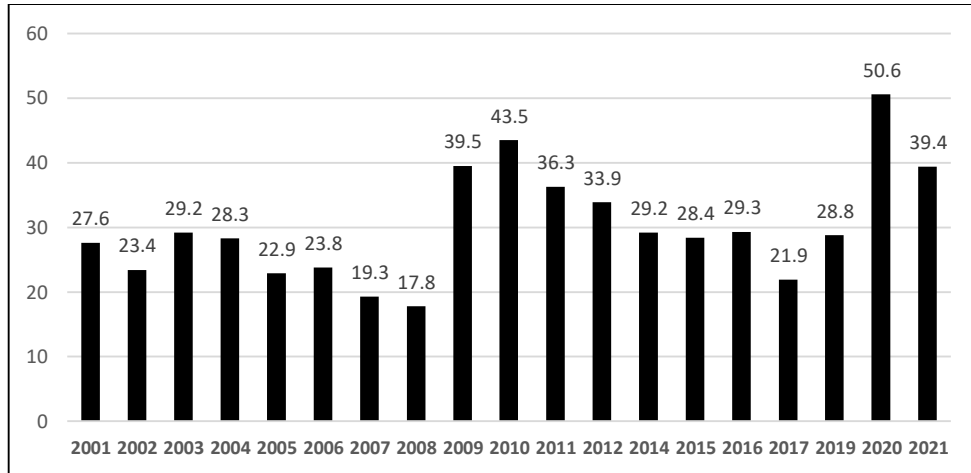
Militarization and its impact on public perceptions

The military left a stain on Salvadoran history as the perpetrator of serious crimes against the civilian population, and through its harmful influence on efforts to democratize the country. Despite this, throughout its recent history, the figure of the military continues to be acknowledged as a positive among important segments of the Salvadoran population. Moreover, although the military institution has positioned itself over time as one of the stakeholders with the highest levels of public trust, above other ministries in the country and social actors, data indicates that the public trust attributed to the FAES grows significantly during periods of greater remilitarization of security accompanied by public exaltation and the greater importance of the military.

“One of the risks of the militarization processes is to enlarge and enhance, in the collective imagination, the figure of the military as the most capable institution of solving problems, and, therefore, the most essential for the development of society; a narrative that, for a long time, legitimized its hegemony in the state and favored its rise to politics” (Iudop, 2014, p.94).

Surveys by the Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública de la UCA (Institute for Public Opinion at UCA) (Iudop) mention that between 2001 and 2008, the ratio of those who greatly trusted the FAES fluctuated between 30 percent and 18 percent, with a decreasing trend in the last years of ARENA’s administration. Between 2009 and 2010, a period in which militarization was revitalized with the arrival of Mauricio Funes, there was a significant recovery of public confidence in the military, which reached 40 percent. From 2011 onwards, this public confidence began to decline until it was halved. In 2020, a period of strong military presence and involvement, increased by the pandemic, the FAES reached historical figures in its levels of public trust, where half of those surveyed mentioned greatly trusting it³⁸. A common denominator is that during these periods of greater praise, the Military established itself among the three agencies or social actors of greatest credibility among Salvadorans.³⁹

Figure 5.
Percentage of people who greatly trust the FAES (2001-2021)



Source: Iudop, yearly surveys, various years.

We will have to wait for information on the possible impact of the emergency regime and the abuses committed by the military on the levels of public trust towards the military at the end of 2022. Public trust usually decreases under increased institutional violence. Indeed, a brief analysis of the periods in which public trust in the Military has grown the most seems to indicate that the improvement of its public image did not occur automatically by putting more soldiers out on the streets but as a result of propaganda focused on transforming the military image to that of heroes. The main reason behind the army's popularity has been propaganda in the media which seeks to position the higher rates of military involvement as the solution to all security problems. Although these periods of greater militarization usually coincide with security crises, they also have to do with a public image crisis of the sitting administrations, which seek to capitalize on the public support of the military to improve the support of the people. After periods of strong involvement by the army, there seems to be an erosion of their image reflected in reduced levels of public trust. The reduction not only ceases to be profitable for the sitting administrations but is a sign of possible political attrition by embodying the image of military abuses against the population.⁴⁰

In countries like El Salvador, where values of an authoritarian culture still prevail, these campaigns that praise the virtues of the military, making them look like heroes and saviors capable of solving the problems that civilians cannot solve, further foster an authoritarian culture. The Ministers of Defense have embodied these quasi-heroic figures. They maintain a strong media presence as strongmen, capable and attentive to solving the country's problems, especially those that most concern the population, such as insecurity and gangs. This has happened with General Munguía during the Funes administration and with Rear Admiral Merino Monroy in the current administration. However, trends based on historical series of national surveys show that the notable increases in confidence levels towards the FAES, recorded in periods during which they have been given high importance, are not sustained over time. Instead, these are often accompanied by declines, possibly related to the increase in military abuses and the public realization that despite the more significant military presence, security conditions have not been sustainably changed.

4. The Impact of Militarization on Vulnerable Social Sectors.

The evidence available in El Salvador shows that a common denominator from the periods of greater militarization of public spaces is the increase in serious human rights violations. For example, data on claims submitted to the PDDH against military members in the last decade show a notable increase in reported incidents since 2010, a significant deployment of military personnel in the streets due to the remilitarization of security championed by the Mauricio Funes administration.

Table 3. Claims of Human Rights Violations Against Members of the Military, 2009-2016

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
41	160	181	117	159	153	161	149

Source: PDDH Work Reports, 2009-2016-SPASS, 2016.

Although this indicator is not representative of all transgressions committed by the military against the population, given the fear of reporting or the loss of credibility of oversight agencies such as the PDDH, evidence provided by academic groups and human rights organizations shows that a greater military deployment in the territories is usually accompanied by an increase in military abuses, mainly towards young men from poor and stigmatized communities.

Apart from the figures, an indicator that shows the increase in military abuses in militarization situations is the place the FAES hold amongst the most reported public institutions in the PDDH. In 2015, the Military reached second place regarding reports for alleged human rights violations (PDDH, 2015), only surpassed by the PNC, which has been the public institution with the highest number of claims. The most violated rights by military members are personal integrity, security, and the right to life. This coincides with the beginning of a five-year period in which the PDDH, non-governmental organizations, and international human rights organizations documented severe abuses committed by police and military forces that included cases of torture, forced disappearances, and extrajudicial executions (PDDH, 2015, 2019; United Nations, 2018; IACHR, 2017; SPASS, 2014-2018, OUDH, 2019, 2020).

I believe that a significant change was that in the Cerén administration, there was a return to human rights violations since the Sánchez Cerén security policy was one of confrontation, repression, and filled with executions perpetrated mainly by the PNC. Naturally, this was a significant setback to the mission and philosophy of the PNC, but there was also the participation of the military, and that is also very serious because now we had the military not only in the streets but also violating fundamental human rights, such as that to life (Mario Vega, pastor of Elim Church).

Beginning in 2014, a new surge in gang-induced homicidal violence unleashed a radicalization of the government's repressive responses. Government responses included interventions by special forces made up of military and police, which frequently led to unlawful executions of suspected gang members. Various police and army units deployed the

widespread use of lethal force in so-called “armed” gunfights with gang members that resulted in thousands of victims.

In April 2015, the President announced the creation of an elite anti-gang battalion within the PNC and three quick-response battalions in the army in support of the police in this new scheme of militarized response against gangs. The announcement was made in May 2015 with the deployment of the Salvadoran Special Reaction Forces (FERES), formed by 600 soldiers and 400 police officers. These units were assigned to combat gangs in rural areas. In addition, three elite battalions were formed, each formed by 200 members of the Anti-Terrorist Command and the Paratrooper Command of the FAES, equipped with tanks, assault weapons, and helicopters. After the end of the war, these battalions were dissolved as per the provisions outlined in the Peace Accords, so it seemed paradoxical that they were revived during a leftist government (Aguilar, J., 2019, p.57-58).

Between 2014 and 2019, the PNC reported 2514 armed confrontations, during which a death toll of 2025 victims was recorded. Of the total deaths, 97 percent were alleged gang members or citizens (OUDH, 2019), and 13 percent were police and military. These statistics showcase an excessive use of lethal force according to the international parameters stipulated for this type of event, like the lethality quotient.⁴¹

This phenomenon, whose magnitude was not recorded in the recent past, revealed practices of unlawful violence and abuses against the population, mainly towards residents of poor and stigmatized communities. Said practices were normalized in operational units of the PNC and the army as part of the Extraordinary Security Measures adopted by the administration of Sánchez Cerén. The United Nations Rapporteur on Unlawful Executions, who visited El Salvador at the beginning of 2018 to verify these facts, stated in her report:

Interviews with survivors and witnesses of the so-called "armed confrontation" pointed to similar, highly troubling patterns during these "confrontations." In particular, suspected gang members are killed execution-style, and the crime scene is manipulated by those responsible for the murders or by third parties, even planting weapons and drugs next to the bodies. (Report of the Special Rapporteur on unlawful, summary, or arbitrary executions on her mission to El Salvador, pg.9).⁴²

A report published by the PDDH in 2019 confirmed from an analysis and investigation of 116 deaths in police interventions, a predominance of patterns of unlawful actions. Violations were preceded in many cases by prior planning, intimidation, and threats to victims and their families. It was documented that at least one-third of the victims showed signs of torture inflicted before their death, which contradicted the thesis of armed confrontation and pointed out that the victims had been executed while subdued. Although this report placed primary responsibility on members of the PNC for being in charge of the strategic command of the intervention operations, a fifth of these cases had combined participation of police and army forces. The analysis also found that, although the official police version vaguely mentioned that most of these people were gang members, there were no indications to confirm these allegations in most of the documented cases. Instead, the evidence indicated that "these were people who were executed under various circumstances, in conditions of defenselessness, in a context of excessive actions and abuse of authority by members of the PNC" (PDDH, 2019, p.39).

It should be noted this context of abuses was aggravated by an unprecedented period of attacks on PNC members, military, and other security-related officials, mainly during their

periods of leave, which resulted in a high number of police and military deaths⁴³. This scenario of confrontation legitimized unlawful actions by police and the military under the narrative of legitimate defense. It thus led to widespread abuses of authority against members of impoverished communities that escalated the conflict between the police and the communities. The following is part of a joint report letter written by a community and addressed to the PDDH.

[...] We hereby inform you of the unlawful events faced by our community perpetrated by the officers working in post [...] accompanied by members of the military, events that we detail below: The harassment that young people of the community are being subjected to since any young person who goes to or returns from their farming work is stopped and subjected to pat downs in terrible and unprofessional ways, even using physical and verbal abuse, while holding them at gunpoint in a repressive and intimidating manner and stripping them of their phones and searching them without their consent, violating their private property (...). (PDDH, 2019, p.36).

Representatives of human rights organizations and churches point out that, during this period, the rejection of the military increased due to the arbitrary detentions, interrogations, torture, and beatings carried out against young people from the communities. These abuses of authority and harassment increased the fear of citizens, which caused insecurity among the population.

[...] the issue of abuses of authority, many cases of detentions, interrogations, and often the mistreatment of the military against young people were often unfounded. Even when there had been suspicions of a young man being part of a criminal organization, the military did not use the proper procedures against them; they could have just detained these people and taken them to the police, but instead of doing that, they took it upon themselves to teach the young people a lesson. I heard many testimonies of young people about being mistreated and even tortured. Of course, people did not like the military's lack of training in human rights (Mario Vega, pastor Church of Elim).

This scenario of violations by the security forces and the fear in the communities was further aggravated by the proliferation of extermination groups comprised of police, military, and civilians. Between May 2016 and December 2020, 15 extermination groups with 251 perpetrators, including 59 police officers and 24 soldiers, were prosecuted, according to a record from the University Observatory of Human Rights at UCA. These investigations revealed that the main motifs behind these crimes are social cleansing actions, hired assassins financed by merchants or entrepreneurs, and personal settling of accounts (OUDH, 2020, p.20). However, these investigations only reveal the arrival of a more widespread phenomenon that emerged within the same security agencies and took a life of its own, favored by impunity, institutional tolerance, low salaries of the security forces, and the context of social conflict.

During the first three years of Nayib Bukele's government, the levels of violence by the military deployed in the communities varied according to local context. Although this period has been characterized by unprecedented militarization, how the military has been present in the territories has three very well-defined moments. During the first year, despite being deployed in stigmatized communities, the military maintained a physical presence. Still, it did not go after gangs, or other young people in the communities, as in previous years. This new way of showing military presence in impoverished communities might be explained by the negotiations between the sitting administration and the gangs.

I would not dare to say that there is an endorsement or acceptance [of the community towards the soldiers] ...; I would say that there is a resigned conformism, an "it is what it is" attitude. I imagine that, if you were to ask people, they would say 'they better leave,' but since they are no longer abusing (...), then I guess it's more tolerable for them to have soldiers there all the time, as long as they're not beating people, arbitrarily detaining or torturing them. So it is like the people accept that they are there, but with resignation; however, they did not have a warm welcome. (Mario Vega, pastor of the Church of Elim).

A second moment came with the repressive action adopted by the police and the military at the beginning of the pandemic as part of the containment measures ordered by the President. The containment measures included the arbitrary detention of thousands of people as punishment for violating mandatory confinement measures.⁴⁴ "The management of the health emergency, especially during the first months, was characterized by disorganization, authoritarian centralism, the delegation of excessive power to the military and the police, and the abuse of power" (OUDH, 2020b, p.7).

President Bukele openly disobeyed to judicial rulings ordering the executive branch to refrain from carrying out illegal detentions. Specifically, President Bukele not only reiterated the order to the FAES and the PNC to continue with the detentions, but he also openly encouraged the security forces to carry out abuses of power against those who violated the quarantine. Between March 21 and May 9, the period of forced quarantine, 2424 people were detained, according to official data⁴⁵. In most cases, these people were detained for more than 30 days in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in the so-called containment centers, which increased the cases of infections. In addition to being contrary to the Constitution, as pointed out by the Judicial Branch and the Legislative Assembly, these actions also violated international human rights and emergency management standards, as mentioned by the IACHR, the OHCHR, the Secretary General of the United Nations and Human Rights Watch.

In this context, police and military abuses increased significantly. The PDDH, human rights organizations and the media documented several cases of abuse of authority that, beyond arbitrary detentions, included injuries, threats, physical aggressions, extortion, illegal home searches, cruel treatment, and arbitrary executions⁴⁶. Most of the victims were working-class or people in conditions of economic vulnerability, according to claims gathered by the PDDH and human rights organizations (PDDH, 2020).

"Some police actions that were reported included threats of beatings and arrests against the victims' families for leaving their homes, taking their photographs, displaying them on media, and forced sit-ins under the sun without water and food, among other punishments. There were also situations in which people who did not have access to drinking water were threatened for washing their clothes in rivers near their residence, or people who were on their way to buy groceries were threatened and insulted by police personnel" (PDDH, Preliminary Report on Covid 19 and Human Rights in El Salvador, June 2020).

Of a total of 1962 authorities reported to the PDDH for alleged violation of rights between March 21 and May 12, the PNC and the military made the top two spots, only surpassed by the Ministry of Health (PDDH, 2020). There were also reports of ill-treatment

and threats against people in detention centers by police and military personnel, as well as the death of people whom the soldiers denied access to medicines or medical care while in the detention centers.

In an unprecedented event without any legal support or epidemiological basis, entire municipalities were cordoned-off by the military, which imposed restrictions on mobility and violated several rights of the population; this, of course, went beyond any epidemiological containment measures. “The so-called ‘epidemiological barriers’ were often a kind of a state of siege by the military with a greater degree of punishment in some municipalities, such as La Libertad” (OUDH, 2020, p.129). In a Twitter order issued by President Bukele, this municipality of more than 35,000 inhabitants was militarily surrounded overnight, for several days, and its inhabitants were unable to leave.

At the same time, during the militarization and home confinement, the military occupied public and private spaces for community use, such as the 10 de Marzo Community.

In a community called 10 de Marzo, where we have worked with and cared for children, about 120 or 130 the military arrived and occupied the church, which doubles as a kitchen where food is prepared for the children in the program (...). And those were the days of quarantine, so the church needed to attend to the needs of children because this is an extremely poor community where many people make a living, for example, selling products on the streets or buses; so we had to cook and bring food for the children, but that was impossible since the military had settled in the church/kitchen. And by that, I mean that they lived there, that is, they arrived, they settled, and there was a rotation of soldiers, and they all stayed there; it was the place where they slept, they drank the water, which is a service that the church pays for, they used electricity; That is, the soldiers lived there, they remained there for several weeks, until a time when we explained the situation to them, and they were asked to leave because we needed to take care of the children (...)

The case above is a sample of the power wielded by the military during the pandemic, who claimed the right to use a private space without considering how doing so would affect the people.

At the same time, the military played an important role in the COVID-19 vaccination plan. The Military Medical Command was in charge of the chain of custody, distribution, and logistics of the vaccines, so the vaccination clinics were also militarized.

In short, the health emergency brought about by the pandemic was used by the Salvadoran government to further empower the military. The adoption of a military and punitive approach to the management of the pandemic, and the lack of oversight of the principles of necessity and proportionality of the corrective measures, together worsened the suffering of the people. This situation exposed many to threats and risked their lives and physical integrity⁴⁷. The military’s intervention was possibly a pilot test for the more repressive role they would adopt two years later under the state of exception.

The third moment of unprecedented abuses, including detentions without investigation or legal grounds, torture, ill-treatment, warrantless home searches, and deaths while under custody, took place under the state of exception approved by the Legislative Assembly in late March 2022. This regime, which may last for a long time due to the constant extensions of the legislative decrees⁴⁸, reports having captured in less than five months more than 49,000 people, thousands of whom are not gang members, according to human rights organizations that documented the cases. Although the PNC has carried out most of the

arrests, there has been unprecedented military participation in mass detentions since the state of exception came into force.

There have been serious violations against the freedom, security, integrity, and privacy of thousands of people by soldiers from different units, garrisons, and branches of the Ministry of Defense. Reports from non-governmental organizations that have documented thousands of complaints revealed the discretionality and subjectivity of the police and soldiers in detaining thousands on suspicion of gang membership. People were arrested based on their neighborhood, appearance (artistic tattoos, haircuts, clothing), socioeconomic status, or other characteristics that the soldier or police officer found suspicious. A common denominator in most of the detentions, as human rights organizations have pointed out, is the condition of poverty and socioeconomic vulnerability of the detainees.

In addition to the reports by civil society organizations and the media, the PNC Workers' Union has reported, through its spokesman, Marvin Reyes, the imposition of quotas of detainees by police and military headquarters. Quotas become an incentive to detain people arbitrarily.

“The agent assures that the complaints of the citizens usually point to “soldiers who, without having legal authorization, entered the homes of people in different areas, searched and accused young people of belonging to gangs, without grounds for such accusations” (Marvin Reyes, from the PNC Workers' Union, in an interview with the DW broadcasting corporation on May 27, 2022).⁴⁹

Videos posted on social networks show arbitrary military actions where the Minister of Defense decides who to arrest based solely on "looking at the face of the alleged suspect." In addition to arbitrary arrests, military members were accused of torture, abuse, injury, extortion, and threats during the state of emergency.

Lieutenant Trejos knelt and beat me... then he told me: take out \$300”: fishermen report being beaten by members of the Navy

It was Lieutenant Trejos who bit me in the legs, knelt, and bit me in the head and on my back, and hadn't it been for my cousin who arrived while he was doing this, I don't know what would have happened, because after that he threatened me and told me I was going to regret it. Then he told me: take out \$300, and we're good. That is, he wanted me to give him money in exchange for letting me go,” said the fisherman (LPG, April 17, 2022).⁵⁰

News reports also mentioned the case of three police officers arrested after refusing to put under arrest a disabled person who soldiers detained from the Special Forces Command without presenting evidence. “The refusal of the police angered the military, who informed their bosses” (Beltrán Luna, Jorge, May 2, 2022). This showcases the power of the military over the PNC, represented by the authority that soldiers now seem to have to impose their will over the police, who, by law, have operational and strategic command of security tasks. In this same journalistic note, police officers interviewed mentioned that this is not an isolated case. The PNC Workers' Union has registered nearly 50 instances where there have been conflicts between police and military because soldiers capture and choose to leave detainees at police headquarters, often refusing to sign forms and to substantiate the reasons for their detention.⁵¹

Despite the more than 70 deaths of people under custody and the thousands of reports of serious abuses against detainees, some of which could be considered crimes against humanity, the President, his Vice President, Ministers of Security, and pro-government legislators, highlight the vast success of mass captures. Although they admit to a margin of error that can lead to the capture of innocents, they usually minimize it citing the massive success of mass detentions. At the same time, the government uses the state of exception to praise the heroic work of the military members, providing them with all kinds of financial and political support. Here, the military has become both a political instrument and the main component of the communication and publicity strategy of the state of exception, which despite being atrocious and dehumanizing, continues to have the support of important portions of the population.

Quotes

¹ Researcher on issues of security and violence, former director of the Institute of Public Opinion, José Simeón Cañas Central American University (UCA).

² See: Vilas, C. (1996). "Un balance en la ejecución de los acuerdos de paz en El Salvador", in *Revista de sociología*, Vol. 49 (1996), Barcelona: UAB; Samour, H. (1994). *Las fuerzas armadas salvadoreñas* in *Revista de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades Realidad*, No.41 (September-October 1994), San Salvador.

³ From the eighties and since the start of the war, the FAES had a leading role in the counterinsurgency security policy, which resulted in a more brutal and indiscriminate persecution of any possible political opponent, compared to that from in previous decades. Multiple reports from international organizations indicate that the military and their counterinsurgency security apparatus played a leading role in state-sponsored terrorism and institutional violence, which extended to anyone considered an opponent or suspected of being part of, collaborating or sympathizing with the insurgent forces. Thousands of people were killed, tortured and kidnapped by members of the security forces or paramilitary groups, while hundreds of thousands were forcibly displaced in and out of the country due to the war. Large-scale military operations that led to massacres and bombings of civilians in the countryside forced the exodus of thousands of peasants. In this context, there is copious evidence of the leading role the military in the forced disappearance of thousands of children (see Probusqueda, CNB).

⁴ As Atilio Montalvo, a member of the FMLN negotiating team, points out: in the first progress report of the peace agreements presented by the United Nations in September 1992, ONUSAL together with the negotiating teams reported that "the mission was operating within a tense and distrustful environment, and that more threats had been made" against ONUSAL members to get them to leave the country. Another hit to the schedule of the Agreements happened on September 30, when the UN Secretary General forwarded to the President the recommendations of the *Ad hoc Committee* responsible for evaluating officers of the military. The grievances of the military were increased due to the civilian components of the Commission, which revealed the resistance of the military leaders to subordinate themselves to a civil authority. The threat of a coup d'état and civil unrest was also present during the first year of implementation of the peace agreements. These threats decreased when former President Cristiani negotiated with the military leadership his retirement in exchange for what Montalvo calls "The Golden Bridge", that is, juicy pensions through the Social Security Institute of the Military (IPSFA). In the case of mid-ranking officers, pressure on the government was aimed at ensuring their entry into the PNC's military quota. Many of these officers brought their military points of view to the new police, especially since they have had control of the PNC from day one. Interview with Atilio Montalvo.

⁵ This contrasts with El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala granting the powers to the military to restore constitutional order and guarantee free elections (Art. 272 Constitution. Of the Republic of Honduras and art. of the Republic of Guatemala).

⁶ The agreements contained in the reforms to the military and included in chapter 1 of the Chapultepec agreements, revolved around 12 aspects: doctrine, educational system, purging, reduction, overcoming impunity, public safety forces, intelligence services, immediate reaction battalions, subordination to civilian power, paramilitary entities, suspension of forced recruitment, preventive and promotional measures and relocation and discharge measures (United Nations, 1992).

⁷ Executive Decrees No. 36. 46 and 41.

⁸ Legislative Decree No. 371, D.O. No.113, Volume No.387 of June 17, 2010.

⁹ Martínez, C. (May 17, 2022). *Audios de Carlos Marroquín revelan que masacre de marzo ocurrió por ruptura entre Gobierno y MS*. Available: https://elfaro.net/es/202205/el_salvador/26175/Audios-de-Carlos-Marroquin-revelan-que-masacre-de-marzo-ocurri%C3%B3-por-ruptura-entre-Gobierno-y-MS.htm; DW (27 March 2022). *El Salvador vive una nueva jornada de violencia*. Available in: <https://www.dw.com/es/el-salvador-vive-una-nueva-jornada-de-violencia-homicida/a-61270739>; Marroquin, D., (March 28, 2022). *Violencia acabó con vida de 87 personas en El Salvador*. Available in: <https://www.elsalvador.com/noticias/nacional/homicidios-violencia-87-personas-asesinadas-marzo-2022/940899/2022/>

¹⁰ The military of El Salvador is organized into three major operational branches: the army, the air force, and the naval force.

¹¹ Editorial YSUCA. (July 7, 2022). *La PNC podría ser desarticulada próximamente según Movimiento Policial*. Available in: <https://ysuca.org.sv/2022/07/la-pnc-podria-ser-desarticulada-proximamente-segun-movimiento-policial/>

¹² The figures for the years 2006-2020 have been officially reported by the Ministry of Defense through requests for access to information and published in different reports: 2006-2013 (Aguilar, J., 2016); 2014-

2018 Information Sharing Resolution No.40/41 of July 6, 2020 available official from the MDN; 2019-2020 (SPASS, 2022) and 2021-2022 (Infodefensa, 2021 and 2022).

¹³ This information was provided by the Minister of Defense on June 1, 2022 during a live interview by Channel 33.

¹⁴ The request for information regarding the number of military personnel on duty in the FAES has been declared confidential for the last three years by the Unit for Access to Public Information of the Ministry of Defense, saying that this information is linked to purposes related to the achievement of military operations. Until 2019, this information was delivered without hesitation by the Information and Response Offices of the Military (OIR-MDN), since it was not classified information according to the Law of Access to Information.

¹⁵ During the armed conflict, the practice of increasing the military workforce through inexistent job positions for soldiers was common, something that did not go away in the early post-war years according to Stanley, W. (1995). This researcher points out that the number of soldiers made available to the security operations of the nineties was usually less than those who were officially assigned. It would not be crazy to think that military force on duty, including those that enroll as a result of the summons or drafts, is "artificially" exaggerated to justify greater budgetary expenditures. See Costa, G. (1999) and Stanley, W. (1995) "International Tutelaje and Domestic Political Will: Building a New Civilian Police Force", in *Studies in Comparative International Development*, May 1995.

¹⁶ Infodefensa, 2021 <https://www.infodefensa.com/texto-diario/mostrar/3110862/salvador-duplicara-effectivos-militares-20000-40000-cinco-anos>.

¹⁷ See: ANSP (2015). Instructivo general para el entrenamiento en el servicio policial. Available: <https://www.ansp.gob.sv/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/INSTRUCTIVO-GENERAL-PARA-EL-ENTRENAMIENTO-EN-EL-SERVICIO-POLICIAL.pdf>

¹⁸ According to the *Comparative Atlas of Defense in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 2016, the size of the Honduran army was 15,216 personnel, that of Guatemala 18,181, while El Salvador reported 24,023 personnel, including officers and soldiers.

¹⁹ The political agreement between the Funes administration that started in February 2012, with leaders of the three main gangs, and concluded in mid-2013 is comprehensively documented by judicial, journalistic and academic investigations. Publications of the *El Faro* online newspaper have shown evidence of new negotiations between the gangs and the government of Nayib Bukele where one of the main bargaining chips has been the reduction of homicides. These publications confirm the well-founded suspicions of possible negotiations. See: Martínez, C. (May 17, 2022). *Audios de Carlos Marroquín revelan que masacre de marzo ocurrió por ruptura entre Gobierno y MS*.

²⁰ See: Infodefensa. El Salvador aumentará presupuestos en seguridad y defensa. Available in: <https://www.infodefensa.com/texto-diario/mostrar/3129877/salvador-aumentara-presupuestos-seguridad-defensa-2020>;

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<https://gatoencerrado.news/2022/01/15/la-fuerza-armada-de-bukele-goza-del-mayor-presupuesto-desde-los-acuerdos-de-paz/>

²¹ Part of this equipment and technology for military use has been acquired with the controversial CABEL loan that led President Bukele to militarize the blue room of the Legislative Assembly on February 9, 2020.

²² See historical series compiled by the World Bank, based on SIPRI data.

<https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/MS.MIL.TOTL.PI?locations=SV>

²³ Although since 2015 police and soldiers receive a quarterly bonus of \$USD 400.00, to which a monthly bonus of USD \$ 200.00 has been added to cover food expenses, these are monetary incentives that are part of the base salary of police officers and not raise their wage bracket. This has with for their retirement and credit scores. The wages of PNC members have not changed in 14 years. See Parrillas, M. (2021) *La engañosa promesa de Bukele sobre el aumento salarial de los policías*. Gato Encerrado, February 9, 2021.

²⁴ For a broader understanding on how the military elite took over the areas of security and other key areas in the country during the Funes administration, see: Iudop (2014), *El Estado de la seguridad y la justicia en El Salvador 2009-2014*; Aguilar, J. (2019) & Aguilar, J. (2016)

²⁵ See: Infobae Munguía Payés, el poderoso general salvadoreño enfrenta a la Justicia (July 28, 2020) <https://www.infobae.com/americas/agencias/2020/07/28/munguia-payes-el-poderoso-general-salvadoreno-enfrenta-a-la-justicia/>; Infobae (August 3, 2022). El Salvador: embargan más bienes a exministro de Defensa. <https://www.infobae.com/americas/agencias/2021/08/03/el-salvador-embargan-mas-bienes-a-exministro-de-defensa/>; López, J., Castro, M., and Jurado, V., (July 23, 2020). Former Minister David Munguía Payés is captured for crimes linked to the truce

<https://historico.elsalvador.com/historico/735804/david-munguia-payes-captura-fiscalia-general-tregua-pandillas.html>

²⁶ Legislative Assembly (2021). Available:

<https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/sites/default/files/documents/correspondencia/B5C6AF9C-B1A3-4F9E-AB31-A38481E0A982.pdf>; See also: La Prensa Gráfica (September 17, 2020). *Legislative Assembly approves recommendation for the dismissal of the Minister of Defense*. Available:

<https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Asamblea-Legislativa-procede-en-la-recomendacion-de-la-destitucion-del-ministro-de-Defensa-20200917-0074.html>; Oliva, X. (September 19, 2020). Assembly concludes that Merino Monroy endangered "democracy and autonomy of the government branches." Available: <https://gatoencerrado.news/2020/09/19/asamblea-concluye-que-merino-monroy-puso-en-peligro-la-democracia-y-division-de-poderes/>

²⁷ See: PDDH, "Preliminary Report on COVID-19 and Human Rights in El Salvador," June 2020.

<https://www.pddh.gob.sv/portal/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/informe-preliminar-junio-2020.pdf>;

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- ³⁸ See: <https://uca.edu.sv/iudop/wp-content/uploads/BOLETIN-EV-ANO-2020-Nacional.pdf> Survey
- ³⁹ See Iudop, Year Evaluation Surveys. <https://uca.edu.sv/iudop/encuestas-de-opinion/2022/>
- ⁴⁰ Historical analyses of the data indicate that after the initial periods in which the involvement of the military in security has increased, which usually correspond to the launch of media plans to promote security and an increase in public trust in the military, this support declines significantly. One hypothesis in this regard is that both the against the population, and the realization that insecurity remains despite the militarization contribute to the decline of public trust in the military. A recent example is what happened during the state of exception called by Salvador Sánchez Cerén.
- ⁴¹ The lethality quotient (number of police and military killed and number of opponents killed during armed confrontations) is one of the most widely used indicators internationally to establish patterns of abuse of lethal force. International standards on the use of lethal force indicate that when the ratio exceeds that of 10 opponents for every police officer or military killed, it could indicate an abuse of lethal force (See, SSPAS, 2017,2018, OUDH, 2019). Based on official data, the estimated lethality quotient for 2016 was 61; 69 for 2017 and 106 for 2018, people killed for every policeman or soldier killed (SPSS, 2018, p.24). In this regard, as indicated by United Nations agencies, these data showed a pattern of extremely excessive use of lethal force by the State (Aguilar, 2019, p.74 and 75).
- ⁴² Callamard, Agnes (2018). "Final Report on the El Salvador Mission ", OHCHR, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations on unlawful and arbitrary executions. February 5, 2018. Available: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22634&LangID=S>.
- ⁴³ According to official data, between 2014, 228 police and 101 military personnel were killed under different circumstances, but mainly while being off-duty. Most of these attacks were pinned on gangs. See SPASS, 2018; OUDH, 2019 and Aguilar, J., 2019.
- ⁴⁴ These detentions took place in the midst of a series of inter-agency conflicts that occurred mainly because President Bukele abrogated powers that corresponded to the Legislative Branch, failed to comply with the precautionary measures issued by the Constitutional Chamber before Habeas Corpus 148-2020 and follow-up resolutions that ordered the police and the army to refrain from carrying out illegal detentions, as well as resolutions declaring the unconstitutionality of different decrees made by the Executive Branch and the Legislative Branch. See: OUDH, 2020a and 2020b).
- ⁴⁵ Government of El Salvador, "National COVID-19 Situation," updated May 09, 2020, <https://covid19.gob.sv/>
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- ⁴⁷ Various analyses by civil society organizations indicate that the continuous decrees issued by the President to extend the state of exception and the quarantine due to the pandemic, which led to serious conflicts between state organizations, were used to put on hold the controls established in state procurement procedures, which led to accusations of irregular purchases and corruption. There are many pieces of evidence that implicate various officials of the Bukele administration in cases of irregular purchases and

serious acts of corruption during the pandemic, justified under the state of exception during which the application of the LACAP was suspended.

⁴⁷ Telesur (April 13, 2022). Salvadoran Police Reports Anomalies in Anti-Gang Raids

<https://telesurtv.net/news/denuncias-regimen-excepcion-el-salvador-policias-20220413-0015.html>

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⁴⁸ Upon closing this investigation, the decree that authorizes a state of exception for 30 days has been extended for the fourth time until the end of August. The security chiefs and the legislative fraction of the official party have expressed their intentions to keep extending it "as long as necessary to end the gangs," this may be an indication that the state of exception could become a permanent measure. See: Flores, L. (June 22, 2022). *State of exception on its way to be as long as the quarantine*. Available: <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Regimen-de-excepcion-camino-a-ser-tan-largo-como-la-cuarentena-20220624-0086.html>; La Nación (July 20, 2022). *El Salvador approves extending the state of exception for the fourth time to combat gangs*. Available: <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Regimen-de-excepcion-camino-a-ser-tan-largo-como-la-cuarentena-20220624-0086.html>

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