

The Bukele Model: The Effects and Dangers of Mano Dura Policies in
Latin America

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Political Science
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

May 2025

An Abstract of the Thesis

Matthew Gattey for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Political Science to be taken May 2025

Title: The Bukele Model: The Effects and Dangers of Mano Dura Policies in Latin America

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This paper will examine the rise of the “Bukele Model” in Latin America, a “tough-on-crime” mindset characterized by Mano Dura (iron fist) policies, many of which violate Salvadoran citizen’s rights (Rosen, 2021), alongside a populist governing style that weakens democratic institutions. In doing so, this paper will analyze the impact of this model on other Latin American countries through an examination of political leaders’ rhetoric and policies. As other Latin American nations begin to feel pressure to curb violence and organized crime, many have begun to advocate for the “Bukele Model” to address their citizens’ security concerns (Rosen, 2021). However, this model is unique in its design and execution and may not be replicable in places that have different conditions than those found in El Salvador. It may therefore fail to reduce crime, while putting ordinary citizens at risk of government mistreatment and violence and eroding democratic institutions under populist authoritarianism (Broner 2022, et. al). As such, we need to better understand the “Bukele Model,” its expression and impacts in El Salvador, and the degree to which it is influencing rhetoric and policies in other Latin American countries. This paper therefore explores the effects of the Bukele Model outside of El Salvador and explores how partisanship and political ideology mediates the uptake and implementation of the Bukele Model. Furthermore, it asks how leftist vs right-leaning administrations respond to the popularity of the Bukele Model through a comparison of policy direction in El Salvador, Honduras, and Ecuador.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Dr. Beck for all she has done for the project. Without her help, this paper would have never been possible. I'd also like to thank my Clark Honors College advisor Trond Jacobsen. Thank you for supporting me from Freshman to Senior year.

Thank you to my roommates (and couch dwellers) for listening to my ramblings and rants for the last six months. I'm honored to call you all my friends.

Last, I'd like to thank my family. Thank you Mom, Dad, Megan, Pa, and Papa, I love you all.

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Chapter 1: Literature Review and El Salvador

Literature Review: Context for El Salvador and Latin America

El Salvador is a nation that has long been characterized by violent crimes, street gangs, and government corruption (Rojas, 2024). However, the current right-wing president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, has enacted a series of Mano Dura policies intended to keep the streets safe and the people satisfied. In doing so, he has turned himself into a near-dictator of the nation, overthrowing the Supreme Court of El Salvador and unconstitutionally running for and winning re-election (Harsha, 2024). Through tough-on-crime policies such as lowering the age of criminal responsibility, increasing penalties and sentencing requirements, and often incarcerating suspected criminals inhumanely and without trial, Bukele has created an overflowing prison system, partially filled with innocent people (Janetsky & Pesce, 2023). Suppression of journalism, often violent, the unfair and unethical treatment of prisoners, and revolving-door prisons have left Salvadorans in often equally brutal conditions as prior to his arrival (Oette, 2024).

However, ordinary Salvadoran citizens now feel safe enough to walk around their neighborhoods at night. According to a survey from May of 2024, 91% of Salvadorans support Bukele's actions in El Salvador (Latinobarometro, 2024). Bukele has made El Salvador one of the "safest" countries in Latin America. Violent crime statistics from 2015 show 6,656 homicides, while in 2024, that number had dropped to 114. These statistics are difficult to fully grasp without context of the data used to calculate it, however. "...the decreasing homicide rate per 100,000 does not take into consideration forced disappearances. The homicide statistics would change significantly if this was considered." (Rosen, 2022). While Bukele is undeniably a violator of Human Rights and due process laws, he has (on some levels) improved the nation for

the average citizen. The American Affairs Journal published a scathing report on his human rights practices, yet still found it necessary to include, “By all accounts, the country is better off today than when Bukele first assumed office in 2019.” Combined with his smooth personality and elegant wardrobe, Bukele has convinced Salvadorans that he is acting their best interests.

Bukele’s reign has won him immense popularity in El Salvador despite his innumerable human rights violations, and other nations are taking notice (Rosen, 2021). Latinobarometer, an NGO which polls 18 Latin American countries, showed Bukele had the highest approval rating of all Latin American incumbent presidents in 2023, and was the only President to receive a positive evaluation score (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024). Bukele held a score of 6.78, while the average score for all other presidents was 3.734 on a scale from 1-10, which emphasizes his successes as a leader. Many Latin American nations, such as Ecuador and Honduras, are now turning to El Salvador as a model to control crime and gang violence. As such, political leaders on both the left and the right are advocating for “Mano Dura” policies akin to those being implemented in El Salvador (Rojas, 2024). This analysis will provide a framework for understanding how political ideology affects the implementation of the “Bukele Model” in Latin American countries.

By understanding support for tough-on-crime policies in Latin America, it becomes easier to understand both national and international support for Bukele. As written by Jonathan Rosen, “...leaders from both the ideological left and the right are tapping into the fear and desire for tough-on-crime policies to combat organized crime, gangs, and violence” (Rosen, 2021). Prior to the Bukele Model’s introduction (which came in March 26, 2022), 2021 statistics

showed that over half of all Salvadoran citizens were fearful of violent crime (Rosen, 2021). As such, 52% of all Salvadoran citizens agreed that punishments for crimes should increase. An addition to note is that 35% of Salvadorans also believed that a military “coup is justified when crime is high.” (Rosen, 2021). Local trends in South America and Central America have proven over time that coups are far more common than in other places in the world. For context, between 1900 and 2006, over 20 coups were enacted throughout Latin America. (Lehoucq & Pérez-Liñán, 2014). The constant violence and political instability, often fueled by Western and American influences, have consistently led to governmental overthrows and challenges to democracy for well over 100 years. As such, when military forces step in to control crime, it is much more accepted in Latin America and aids in explaining the public’s political mindset. “In 2014, the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) asked participants in eighteen Latin American countries whether crime should be tackled through prevention policies or through harsher punishment. Those in favor of punitive measures outnumbered those in favor of preventive strategies in every country.” (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024). Furthermore, Latinobarometer stated in 2023 that only 48% of Latin American citizens voiced support for Democracy as a political system, which is nearly 15% lower than in 2013 (AFP, 2024). Furthermore, Salvadoran citizens polled in 2024 have expressed their support for populist ideologies much more than their neighbors, with 75% believing that small powerful groups are acting in their best interest in government (LatinoBarometer, 2023).

Category	Total	Country Identification		
		Ecuador	El Salvador	Honduras
Powerful groups in their own interest	58.7%	85.3%	20.1%	65.5%
For the good of all	36.4%	12.6%	75.6%	25.7%
Does not know / Does not answer	4.9%	2.1%	4.3%	8.9%
(N)	3,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	1,000 (100%)

Table 1: Do small, powerful groups act in the public’s best interest? (Latinobarometro, 2023)

It is also important to note the geographical and international context of populist institutional takeovers. While many authoritarians take power with soaring high approval rates (Hugo Chavez, Vladimir Putin, and Alberto Fujimori all boasted 80%+ approval ratings at the beginning of their terms in office), this initial steam eventually wears off, and leaders often violate democratic and moral principles to cement their place in power. (Levitsky and Way, 2025). As such, “a crackdown of the scope and intensity of Bukele's is incompatible with democratic checks and balances.” Long-term issues eventually begin to arise due to the erosion and in some cases demolition, of democratic systems, standards, and norms (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024). Ecuador’s President Daniel Noboa, for example, lost over half of his approval rating in only 10 months, falling from 80% to 39% (Statista, 2024).

While Bukele has successfully lowered El Salvadoran crime rates, some problems arise when analyzing policy and investigating the long-term effects of Mano Dura policies. First and foremost, El Salvador’s population and size, when compared to other Latin American nations attempting to cut organized crime rates such as Mexico, is much smaller in both territory and population. This allows for more government influence and control, especially when considering

the Salvadoran gang's relative weakness in comparison to the better-funded Mexican cartels (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024). Secondly, Bukele's control over information makes the spreading of propaganda and the suppression of information much easier, leading to support from his constituency (Vílchez, 2024).

A survey of the Colombian population revealed intrigue and interest in Bukele's brand of government. When polled on the feasibility of a President resembling Bukele, 55% of citizens responded that they would support such a candidate. (Epstein, 2024). This demand for control, safety, and order has driven populations to vocally demand a change. As Epstein bluntly writes, "In countries where violence and security are a priority for citizens, political candidates could be more likely to associate themselves with Bukele and his policies in their campaign messaging due to his success in lowering violent crime and improving security while maintaining a high approval rating." As such, support for Mano Dura policies has become popular in the region.

Bukele's reign in El Salvador has decimated the legislative process. On top of his well-documented overhaul of the Salvadoran constitution to allow for his re-election, Bukele has reduced the number of seats in parliament from 84 to 60, of which 54 members are currently in his own populist party, Nuevas Ideas. While a few other politicians remain, notably two members of A.R.E.N.A., the longstanding traditional Salvadoran conservative party, Bukele's supermajority makes partisanship difficult, as individual assembly members lack the power to impact politics on a national level. Bukele's populist-authoritarian consolidation of legislative and judicial powers grew partially out of Salvadoran's discontent with the previous party system. Bukele's original party, a left-leaning organization known as FMLN, has been nearly destroyed

in the process. To Bukele, parties are useful only insofar as they support his personal political gains, a clear indicator of authoritarian tendencies. “When he achieved strong political capital [with FMLN], and upon learning that he could not run as a presidential candidate for the FMLN, Bukele provoked a rupture with the party to expel him and thus create his political movement.” (Maldonado, 2024). As such, I want to answer the questions: What are the defining elements of the Bukele Model, and how does it interact with partisanship and political rights?

Chapter 2: Terminology and Methodology

Mano Dura, Tough on Crime

While El Salvador is the direct focus of this paper, a deeper understanding of the ideology of Mano Dura is necessary to understand Bukele's swing towards populism and authoritarian governmental control. In this paper, I rely on Cutrona et. al.'s paper which categorizes different elements of Mano Dura policies. Using this categorization, I plan to analyze both left and right-wing implementations of Mano Dura policies in Latin America as well as the potential dangers of implementing this model in other nations. By analyzing data on police violence, mass incarceration, harsh sentencing guidelines, and human rights violations, I will explore the dangers of adapting Mano Dura and the "Bukele Model" in the fight against crime.

Mano Dura is a term that has no exact translation from Spanish to English. While a direct translation would define Mano Dura as a "firm hand" ruling, it is probably much closer to an "iron fist." While an exact definition is impossible, Mano Dura relies upon "repressive state policies and political strategies which are aimed at tackling crime OR its associated fear (Rosen, 2021). Common tactics include police violence, extra-legal detention, increased penalties and sentencing, and often human rights violations and mass incarcerations. El Salvador currently engages in all these practices, firmly cementing Bukele as the hand behind the fist of the justice system.

Cutrona et. al's definition of Mano Dura is broad but successfully manages to classify elements of policy implementation. They rely upon multiple dimensions of Mano Dura: Formal, Informal, and Rhetorical. Following this, the then-classified actions are described as either Full,

Institutional, Performative, or Covert. By examining the words and actions of other Latin American nations under these parameters, this paper will build on existing literature by classifying the policy directions of other Bukele-inspired Latin American nations.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that many studies have investigated Mano Dura in El Salvador, both prior to and during the time of Nayib Bukele. Former Salvadoran President Francisco Flores, for instance, had proposed a plan to imprison people for “having gang-related tattoos or flashing gang signs in public,” in 2013. (Cutrona et. al. 2021). As such, many of the tactics defined have been given careful consideration in the case of El Salvador and has influenced the existing literature on Mano Dura to skew towards El Salvador specifically.

Mano Dura Terminology

Here I will discuss how Mano Dura actions and policies are considered in determining which dimension(s) of Mano Dura are being enacted. First, it is important to know who the actor is *behind* the actions. For example, a nation-state’s government passing legislation increasing sentencing minimums and lowering the amount of evidence necessary for criminal prosecution would consider the state as the “actor.” Secondly, the recipient of these initiatives is considered the “target.” In this case, that would be the citizen accused of a crime or simply arrested and detained under suspicion of having committed a crime with or without evidence. The final consideration necessary for determination is the tactical significance of the action. This asks the question of: What do these actions mean to accomplish, and how? In other words, is this action tackling the fear of crime versus the criminals themselves? Or is it simply propaganda, raising support for Mano Dura policies? This allows us to determine the political purpose behind the actions.

The Three Dimensions of Mano Dura

Formal Mano Dura

Formal Mano Dura is defined by Cutrona et. al. as a form of Mano Dura enacted through state policies and legal precedents. It follows that the state can be the only one responsible for the introduction and enforcement of these tactics. These include “harsh [legal] penalties and the involvement of the armed forces” in and among the civilian population, especially in poorer regions and those suspected to be containing higher concentrations of criminals and gang members. These are actions promoted by the state and viewed as legal, whether or not they violate human rights. Formal Mano Dura actions and policies are committed by the visible arms of the government.

Informal Mano Dura

Acts of Informal Mano Dura are actions which are not legally or governmentally supported, yet often go unpunished or internally approved. These include, “limits on due [legal] process and extra-legal policing,” as well as racial profiling and police violence. Importantly, these actions are much more difficult to track and quantify than either Formal or Rhetorical Mano Dura, as many accounts either go unnoticed, unreported, or suppressed. Furthermore, Cutrona et. al. acknowledges that “...administrations in Latin America have strategically navigated the sometimes-blurred line between legality and illegality.” As such, some actions which are labeled as Formal Mano Dura can cover up Informal strategies, such as torture by police officers and undue detention based purely on physical appearance. This makes data on informal Mano Dura especially difficult to accurately ascertain.

Rhetorical Mano Dura

Rhetorical Mano Dura is the expression of Mano Dura policies which are not necessarily enforced, but rather pushed to promote the ideological and political views of the leader or state. These actions, often performative in nature, exist to promote the belief that the state is acting in the average citizen's best interest and removing criminals from society. "There is also a rhetorical or theatrical dimension, often accomplished through punitive discourses intended to convince the audience that citizen security is taken seriously, which does not necessarily imply the adoption of formal or informal initiatives." (Cutrona et. al., 2021). Examples would include Nayib Bukele's promotion of building new mega-prisons online, or flaunting videos of tortured prisoners on X under the guise of justice. These actions, meant to convince citizens that they are being protected and cared for, are examples of Rhetorical Mano Dura.

The Four "Forms" of Mano Dura

Now that I have defined the three dimensions of Mano Dura, I will now attempt to discuss the forms of Mano Dura and how their definitions can be used to understand and categorize governmental and political actions. Importantly, as Cutrona et. al. eloquently writes, "There are likely to be very few events which are purely *institutional*, *covert*, or *performative*. These types of *mano dura* represent instead ideal or "best" illustrations within a continuum of laws, policies, and practices visible in the real world." As such, these ideas are meant to define and categorize Mano Dura political and social policies through theory.

Institutional Mano Dura

The first of the forms of Mano Dura, Institutional Mano Dura is the enforcement of government policies which align with the stated laws of the nation (Cutrona et. al., 2021). These

are commonly examples of Formal Mano Dura, and in the case of Bukele and El Salvador, are seen in the loss of legal precedent, extreme prison sentencing, constant declarations of “States of Emergency,” and scheduled police and military intervention in Salvadoran communities. Institutional Mano Dura policies are meant to curb crime and violence through direct state intervention.

Performative Mano Dura

Performative Mano Dura actions can be classified as actions which mean to show the public that the actions necessary for their protection are being performed, or actions meant to increase support for Mano Dura policies (Cutrona et. al., 2021). For Bukele and El Salvador, examples of these actions manifest as, “...the deployment of the military to the National Assembly to intimidate politicians who did not support his security law and the publication on Twitter of multiple photos and videos of shirtless gang members in the penitentiary system one on top of another.” (Cutrona et. al., 2021) Performative Mano Dura can also include the support of Mano Dura policies which are not actually ever enacted, or simply propaganda supporting Mano Dura ideologies as successful. While there is sometimes overlap between Rhetorical and Performative Mano Dura, they are not as connected as Formal and Institutional Mano Dura.

Covert Mano Dura

The usage of tactics such as unreported police violence and other non-legal yet state-sanctified activities define Covert Mano Dura. “...evidence suggests that the practices of law enforcement forces are largely discretionary, as the president encouraged the police to use lethal force during the pandemic and indicated that the government will no longer record extrajudicial

killings. Indeed, there are more than 13,000 forced disappearances that are not included into the country's official statistics" (Cutrona et. al., 2021). The state's complicity in these actions, examinable through statistics like disappearances, clearly indicate these practices. In the case of El Salvador, I would argue that the relationship between the public discourse and Bukele's noted negotiations with gangs is a form of Covert Mano Dura. The best example in El Salvador is the alleged deal between Bukele and the criminal organizations.

Full Mano Dura

The adoption of all three forms of Mano Dura (Institutional, Performative, and Covert) show that a state has fully committed its government's policies to Mano Dura. Full Mano Dura states are very rare, and El Salvador is the only current nation to be labeled as such (Cutrona et. al., 2021). It is easy to compare Full Mano Dura states to pure authoritarianism, especially when the policies implemented are those of a single person.

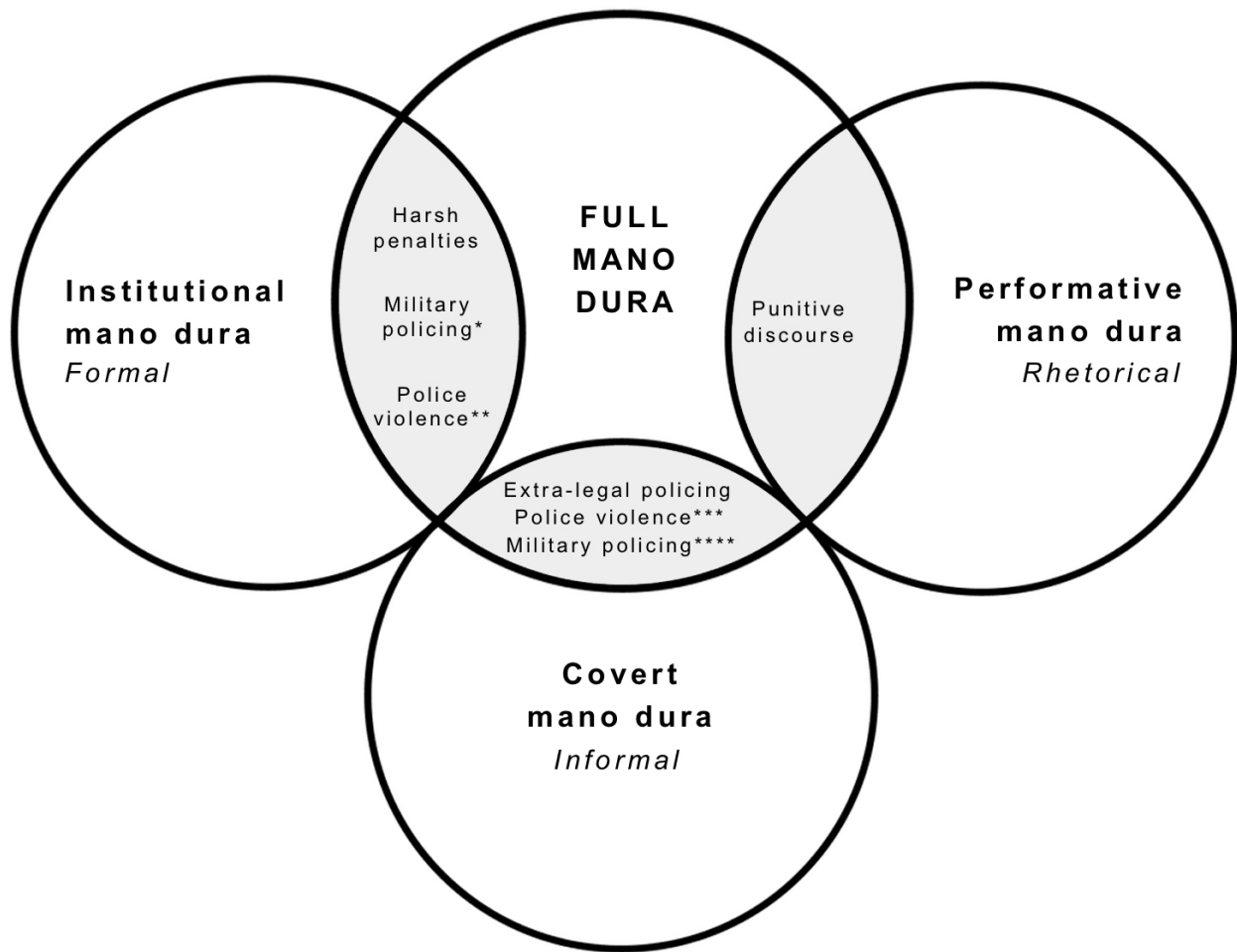


Figure 1: Mano Dura Venn Diagram, Cutrona et. al. 2021.

Impacts of Mano Dura

Mano Dura policies, while occasionally successful in the short term, are nearly always detrimental to the nation-state in the long term. “In short, *mano dura* policies rarely work, often backfire, and almost always entail high costs for democracy.” (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024). Furthermore, recent studies have shown that the undercover “truces” gangs make with political leaders have had a much more influential role in the success of reducing homicides compared to Mano Dura policies. “Violence was 54% higher in El Salvador during Mano Dura periods relative to gang truce periods, and from 2003 to 2022 nearly 18,000 homicides were

attributable to the policy.” (Escaño et. al., 2024). This creates a difficult situation for politicians who seek to create times of peace. They must either break societal and ethical norms to negotiate peace with gangs, typically causing a loss of public trust in both politicians and institutions, or they need to institute Mano Dura policies to be viewed as tough on crime (Esaño et. al., 2024). Alisha Holland (2013) also emphasizes the dangers posed by Mano Dura as a political ideology. “Mano Dura policies represent a more radical trend, in which institutional weakness is used to undermine core tenets of “third wave” justice reforms.” Mano Dura policies, she argues, are detrimental to democracy because it creates a “race to the bottom” (Holland, 2013) for politicians to be tougher on crime to secure electoral support. Since many forms of Mano Dura policies, such as Covert Mano Dura, are in violation of many local and international laws, politicians are incentivized to remove constitutional rights in order to fight crime, opening the door to democratic backsliding. (Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 2023).

Populist Authoritarianism and Mano Dura

Populism can be defined as, “... an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” (Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal 2017). In short, populism relies on support from the public to validate the power and rules of a government. Nayib Bukele acts in the manner of a populist ruler; for example, using X to spread messaging of the success of his plans against the a ‘dirty and corrupt state.’ Authoritarianism is a form of power and rule which is categorized by “...indicators of authoritarian behavior which include: rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game; denial of the legitimacy of political opponents; toleration or encouragement of violence; and readiness to curtail civil liberties

of opponents, including media.” (McQuade 2024). Undeniably, these definition’s nets catch Bukele.

Mano Dura policies may be used to further individual political goals as opposed to the fight against crime. In a populist-authoritarian sense, Mano Dura policies encourage political division by allowing for generalized statements claiming other politicians are working with (or going easy on) gangs. By claiming narco-gangs and other groups fund or back rival politicians, populist authoritarians can use the force of the government in order to smear and slander political rivals. Politicians can also use Mano Dura policies as a stepping stone to populist authoritarianism by using the guise of national security to enforce democratic backsliding (Holland, 2013).

Partisanship and Mano Dura: A Connection?

Mano Dura policies are not new to Central and South America, and they often come from right-wing politicians (Holland, 2013). This makes intuitive sense, as many conservative politicians in South and Central America run campaigns based on the control of societal issues like gang violence, stability, and crime (Holland et. al. 2022). First, there is typically overlap in the issues that conservatives prioritize when discussing and implementing policy decisions. For example, this includes reducing crime and the reinstatement of law and order. “Given escalating crime across Latin America, public security may prove an important campaign issue for conservative parties that lose their economic and moral appeal. Crime is a rare issue of national importance that cuts across class and ideological lines.” (Holland et. al. 2022). In the case of El Salvador, this opportunity to unite a conservative party under ideals of control and floundering

economic success was particularly appealing. The A.R.E.N.A. party of El Salvador (Nationalist Republican Alliance) was the previous leading power in EL Salvador, but they began to lose favor as corruption and gang truces came to light (Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 2023). Thus, when Bukele began his run for office under Nuevas Ideas as opposed to his previous party, the left-leaning FMLN which he now wants to eradicate, Bukele rode support for Mano Dura policies to nearly destroy the party system, limiting democracy in El Salvador in the process. “Bukele ran despite a constitutional ban on reelection, gerrymandered the country’s electoral map to favor Nuevas Ideas, and abused state resources to tilt the electoral playing field against the opposition. The party’s legislators have now begun the process of rewriting the constitution, a move that will almost certainly extend Bukele’s tenure and tighten his grip on power.” (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024).

However, this is not to say elements of Mano Dura cannot be found in the actions of left-wing Latin American politicians. Most famously, César Gaviria of Colombia implemented both covert Mano Dura practices such as allying with armed paramilitary groups, and institutional practices of Mano Dura such as declaring a state of international emergency, to track down and eventually kill notorious drug kingpin Pablo Escobar (Cutrona et. al, 2024). Recently, former leftist President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico implemented acts of Mano Dura as well. However, these politicians acted in a much less authoritarian manner than Bukele, relying on Mano Dura for institutional policy and electoral success as opposed to a path to dictatorship.

The Bukele Model

I define the Bukele Model as having two distinct characteristics. First, an embrace of Full Mano Dura as a governmental strategy. Secondly, it is characterized by an embrace of populist authoritarianism as a form of legitimization and semi-democratic support. Through these strategies, Bukele has ridden public support to slowly remove the democratic proceedings of El Salvador, gut the judiciary, and to threaten social and political opponents.

Bukele combines elements of populism and authoritarianism to exert his power and control over all aspects of civilian and political life in El Salvador. Through control of the judiciary through his sweeping overhaul, his parliamentary supermajority, and his control of the military, Bukele is free to manipulate data and facilitate propaganda, which he routinely does through websites such as X. He also has actively removed protections of free speech, focusing on investigative journalists such as those at El Faro, a national newspaper and whistleblower dedicated to accountability (Vílchez, 2024). “Journalists can be sentenced to up to 15 years for disseminating gang-related messages or reporting on gangs’ territorial control; this outlaws reporting such as the one which exposed Bukele’s deal with the local gangs.” (Velasco-Escobar, 2023). This suppression of information is justified under the constant “State of Emergency” declared in El Salvador and has led to a “culture of silence” in the press. “The Salvadoran Journalists Association (APES) documented 311 attacks, including harassment, doxxing, threats, and criminalization, against journalists in 2023; in the first nine months of 2024, it recorded 165 more attacks.” (Vílchez, 2024). Furthermore, the deliberate withholding of political strategies, such as Bukele’s “Plan Control Territorial,” which he devised to remove criminals from the streets, limits the ability citizens to play a role in democracy. Currently, Bukele has refused to

deliver any details on the current phase seven of his war against crime, which he calls the “Territorial Control Plan”. This makes civil resistance and/or protest nearly impossible, as citizens lack the governmental transparency necessary to participate in decision-making processes.

Through the eventual overturning of El Salvador’s hard-fought gains in terms of democracy, Bukele has managed to position himself as a populist authoritarian. Here, I argue, a distinction needs to be made. Mano Dura policies themselves did not make Bukele a dictator. Bukele’s distinct enabling of populism has allowed the people to turn him into a dictator: he has used the power granted to him by the people to overturn the constitution meant to protect the nation. His methodology, especially in overthrowing the judicial system to overthrow term limits, relies specifically on the nation’s overwhelming support in his fight for “justice” and against crime. As such, Nayib Bukele is a dangerous combination of populist and authoritarian, which may have already subdued the rule of law enough to gain permanent control. As Kaitlin McQuade eloquently writes, “Bukele is straying closer to authoritarian rule, and might eventually not need the populist support he currently enjoys.” (Mcquade, 2024). El Salvador has found itself slipping further and further towards a complete loss of direct democracy and a new reign of punitive, populist authoritarianism. However, the more the institutional checks and balance fade, the more Bukele can use Mano Dura policies to fight criminals and violence. “Thus, the broader erasure of democratic and institutional checks and balances in El Salvador directly contributes to Bukele’s success in combating crime.” (Rojas, 2024). This creates a dangerous cycle in which democratic erasure leads to higher citizen support.

To illustrate these claims, Freedom House index data from 2019, the year Bukele took office, scored the nation as “Free,” with a 32/40 score for political rights, including electoral processes, political pluralism and participation, and government functions. However, the 2025 report shows that number has fallen to 17/40. El Salvador’s overall “Freedom” score has declined from 70/100 to 48/100 in the same timeframe. Scores regarding government corruption and government transparency have dropped from 2/4 and 3/4 to 0/4, highlighting Bukele’s corrosion of democracy. However, even despite five years of democratic backsliding, Bukele left May of 2024 with a 91% approval rating (Statista, 2024), a simply astronomical number.

As such, the spread of Nayib Bukele’s brand of populism in combination with Mano Dura ideologies is potentially threatening to democracy in Latin America. Current Latin American politics are centered around the issues of crime, violence, and criminal gangs, and as such, any politician which fails to quickly act to fight these issues is ridiculed publicly for a lack of care of their constituents. Bukele’s populist-authoritarian movement threatens democracy in many Latin American nations.

As previously mentioned, the majority of existing literature on Mano Dura policies examines either El Salvador or other right-wing parties. The historical association between mano dura and right-leaning politicians has obscured the relationship between Mano Dura, populism, and partisanship. How does partisanship interact with the Bukele model, and to what degree does partisanship mediate the uptake of the Bukele model?

Methodology

I will analyze the policies and rhetoric of two other Latin American nations struggling with organized crime who have expressed interest in Mano Dura policies, Honduras and Ecuador. By analyzing Mano Dura policy direction and motive, I will attempt to understand how Nayib Bukele and his overthrow of El Salvador's democracy have influence political direction in Latin America. I have already introduced the nation of El Salvador and its struggles. Next, I will examine the relationship of Mano Dura policies and partisanship in Latin America. I will conclude by using these models and definitions to examine the role the Bukele Model has affected the nations of Ecuador and Honduras. By examining other Latin American nations which are dealing with similar societal situations, I will be able to determine the impacts of Nayib Bukele's populist-authoritarian Mano Dura model. I will be examining Google Scholar for searches on partisanship, Mano Dura Policies, and authoritarianism. I will also examine grey information sites such as UN reports, news articles, and Human Rights Watches.

In 2020, prior to the full introduction of the Bukele model, Honduras, El Salvador, and Ecuador's citizens faced similar levels of fear of crime (Statista, 2020). Furthermore, in 2023, citizens in all three nations viewed political parties with disdain. (Statista, 2023). They also share similar variation in types of violence. (Statista, 2023).

Please tell me if you strongly agree (1), agree (2), disagree (3), or strongly disagree (4) with the following statements. Political parties in (COUNTRY) work well

Category	Total	Country Identification		
		Ecuador	El Salvador	Honduras
Strongly agree	3.4%	1.3%	5.7%	3.6%
Agree	18.7%	12.4%	26.2%	18.9%
Disagree	56.6%	63.2%	51.8%	53.4%
Strongly disagree	17.8%	22.0%	11.2%	19.4%
Does not know / Does not answer	3.5%	1.1%	5.1%	4.8%
(N)	3,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	1,000 (100%)

Table 2: Support for political parties in Latin America (Latinobarometro, 2023)

[2020] How often, if at all, do you worry about becoming a victim of violent crime?

Category	Total	Country Identification		
		Ecuador	El Salvador	Honduras
All the time	25.9%	28.0%	27.4%	22.0%
Some of the time	25.9%	26.8%	27.9%	22.9%
Just occasionally	17.0%	22.9%	15.8%	11.2%
Never	29.4%	21.3%	26.8%	41.6%
No answer	1.8%	1.0%	2.1%	2.3%
(N)	3,198 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	998 (100%)

Table 3: Fear of becoming a victim of violent crime (Latinobarometro, 2020)

[2023] Tipos de violencia más frecuente donde Ud. vive.

Category	Total	Country Identification		
		Ecuador	El Salvador	Honduras
Bullying/Harassment	10.5%	8.4%	15.0%	9.4%
Domestic violence with children	10.0%	8.3%	12.8%	9.8%
Domestic violence with women	11.6%	10.2%	13.4%	11.8%
Violence in the streets	18.0%	20.8%	12.2%	19.5%
Organized crime	11.8%	15.2%	6.2%	12.0%
Maras – Gangs	14.3%	16.6%	9.8%	15.1%
State violence, abuse of police violence	7.7%	5.6%	10.6%	8.3%
Verbal violence	16.1%	14.8%	20.1%	14.1%
(N)	5,960 (100%)	2,696 (100%)	1,668 (100%)	1,596 (100%)

Table 4: Types of violence (Latinobarometro, 2023).

In Honduras, instances of political violence and intimidation are common, with at least 68 candidates being murdered in the run-up to the 2024 elections. Honduras also deals with many of the same issues as El Salvador; corruption (both in the police and the judiciary) and organized crime. Furthermore, the 2021 election of Xiomara Castro, a left-wing candidate, means that I will have an example of a left-leaning administration to examine the effects of partisanship on Mano Dura and policy decisions.

I chose Ecuador because it faces similar political and social troubles, mainly high rates of organized crime and violence. Ecuador's struggle with violent crime helped to push Ecuadorian citizens to snap-elect right-wing business mogul Daniel Noboa in 2023, who has already implemented many similar policies as Bukele. El Salvador and Ecuador are dealing with similar issues, at similar times, in the same region. Lastly, all three nations have declared governmental "States of Emergency" which allows for military intervention in public policing, a characteristic which aligns with Mano Dura tendencies.

For each of these nations, I will look at a multitude of factors to determine the effects of the Bukele Model. I will look at Google Scholar searches for the nations and Mano Dura, populism, and authoritarianism. I will also examine the political speech and actions of the nations and their leaders to determine any effects of Rhetorical Mano Dura. I will also look at crime and freedom statistics from sites such as Latinobarometer, Freedom House, and Statista to see the impacts of the leaders on democracy, journalism, and crime. By analyzing expert opinions, local journalism, and statistics, I will be able to analyze citizen and political response to Mano Dura actions. I will be heavily relying upon Rosen et. al.'s definition and clarification of

different types of Mano Dura policies. Using his system of classification, I will classify the actions and political rhetoric of governments of neighboring nations and determine the effects of Bukele's style of governance on Latin American nations.

Chapter 3: Case Studies: Honduras and Ecuador

Honduras

Honduras is a Latin American nation which has been characterized by crime and violence over the last 20 years. When surveyed by the Latin American Public Opinion project in 2025, nearly 38% of Honduran respondents responded that they felt “Somewhat unsafe” or “Very unsafe” when asked about the possibility of being assaulted or robbed in their neighborhood, indicating that the threat of violence is real (LAPOP, 2025). Honduras’ Defense and Security Council have also promoted and supported a decree from June of 2024 which follows many patterns of traditional Institutional Mano Dura policies, including increasing prison size and quantity, classifying gang members as terrorists, as well as the stated goal of “establishing control.” The plan also included increased punishments for criminals and lowered the requirements for detainment.

President Xiomara Castro has acted in support of Mano Dura policies to control organized crime and gang violence since her arrival in office in January 2022. “Castro ultimately rescinded her campaign promises and implemented a strategy centered on Mano Dura in response to external pressures to address the crime crisis.” (Rubio and Casique, 2024). Castro implemented a national state of emergency in December of 2022 which “suspend[s] the rights to freedom of association and assembly and to be informed of the reason for arrest, among others,” and these policies have been extended until today (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Compared to El Salvador, Honduras’ crackdown is much less severe in size and scope, they have only covered 175 of Honduras’ 298 municipalities, and only 1,960 additional arrests took place the year following its introduction.” (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024). This all acts in direct

opposition to her Defense Minister's statements from 2022, in which he claimed, "President Xiomara Castro has stood up to the police forces, to the military forces. One of her main goals is to promise that there will never be another coup, that the police and military will never again be used to torture, criminalize and murder the Honduran people..." (Schoenstein, 2022).

Castro is a member of the LIBRE party, a democratic-socialist party whose primary party goals are the redistribution of wealth, development of electricity in Honduras, and the eradication of corruption (Schoenstein, 2022). However, corruption scandals and organized crime have become Honduras' primary focus out of necessity. After the previous National Party's (a pro-business, neoliberal conservative organization) President Juan Hernández was arrested and charged in the United States to 45 years in prison for drug trafficking, Castro rose up to challenge the incumbent party. LIBRE, which was created by those who opposed the 2009 coup which put the National Party in charge, was able to capitalize on the charges of corruption. "The elections in 2017 were the last straw. Along with vast corruption scandals, the sentencing of Juan Orlando's brother for drug trafficking in the US and the government's mismanagement of the pandemic increased distrust in the government to an extent that the ruling party was unable to contain." (Moncada, 2022). As such, Castro's election can be partially viewed as a response to the corruption and violence in the region.

Corruption and a lack of trust in the Honduran state are critical issues. However, Castro has made some attempts to fix this issue, as evidenced by completing her campaign promise to repeal the "Secrets Law" in 2022, which was noted by the US State Department as "Civil society had criticized the law for limiting transparency and allowing officials to use the classification of

documents to hide corruption.” This, along with her efforts to introduce an “International Commission against Corruption and Impunity,” shine light on her efforts to remove crime and extortion from the institutional arm of the government. However, Human Rights Watch notes that “a law prohibiting sanctions against legislators for actions taken “in the exercise of their duties” remained in place at time of writing.” (H.R.W., 2025). That law remains in place to this day. Castro’s decision to align herself with the authoritarian states of Latin America (Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela) have also put her and her associates under scrutiny for corruption herself. “A recent video showing a member of the ruling Castro-Zelaya family discussing campaign contributions from criminal organizations to Xiomara’s husband Mel Zelaya’s previous presidential campaign has placed President Castro under intense scrutiny.” (Berg, 2024). While the video was taken in 2013, it appears Castro may indeed have ties to the same criminal organizations she ran so fervently against. Her competitor, incumbent president Juan Hernandez, was marred by scandals and corruption. “Her administration followed the contentious reign of Hernandez, whose presidency was tarnished by allegations of drug trafficking, culminating in the revocation of his US visa and subsequent trial in New York for related crimes.” (Bereza, 2024).

In the upcoming election, furthermore, candidates are leaning heavily towards security as a primary focus. “Nasralla has expressed admiration for Argentina’s libertarian president, Javier Milei, while Cáliz says he wants to emulate popular El Salvador President Nayib Bukele’s heavy-handed security policies.” (Meriguet, 2025). Furthermore, Nasralla is a known populist who also utilizes his role as a media presence to garner support from the people. “Nasralla enjoys widespread popularity due to his media presence and populist leadership style. His anti-

establishment rhetoric, promoted since founding the Anti-Corruption Party (PAC) in 2013, places him within the global populist wave.” (Balmaceda, 2025). Candidates like this prove the immense wave of support for Mano Dura policies and politicians in Honduras.

However, many reporters state that the current similarities to El Salvador are shocking. With Castro’s state of emergency still in effect, many constitutional rights are being withheld, including the right to assemble freely, which is an example the erosion of democracy caused by Institutional Mano Dura policies. Institutional Mano Dura is still in full effect, with the construction of a 20,000-capacity prison in progress. Law enforcement can detain anyone without a warrant for arrest, and militarized national security is in full effect. “Human rights organizations have documented a rise in arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances across the country since the state of exception was declared. Activists told us the national police, working hand in hand with the military police, are particularly targeting young people from marginalized areas and accusing them of being members of criminal gangs – regardless of whether they have sufficient evidence, or any at all.” (Neau, 2023). These forms of Institutional Mano Dura highlight the influence Bukele has had over the security policies of Honduras.

The effects of these formal Mano Dura policies are striking. “However, constitutional rights – including the inviolability of the home – are suspended, and the government is trying to hide a series of arbitrary actions and crimes under these alleged results.” (Pousset, 2024). Furthermore, more than 2,147 complaints were filed to the National Human Rights Coalition about police in Honduras for “...abuse of authority, incrimination with false evidence, death

threats, inhumane and cruel treatment, forced disappearances, theft and murder” between December 2022, when the declaration appeared, and March of 2024. “Authorities’ silence and the usual explanation that “criminal groups are posing as State security forces” are not defensible when new cases are analyzed.” (Pouset, 2024). While this can be interpreted as evidence of Covert Mano Dura, the severity of police corruption in Honduras makes it appear likely that at least some of these cases are corruption in the police system as opposed to Covert Mano Dura, and Honduran officials must stand by their police in such as time of crisis. However, prosecutions have been few and far between, emphasizing the lack of success of the model. “From the start of the state of exception through January 27, 2023, police authorities had reported the detention of 8,155 persons for different crimes, but only 105 have been referred for further prosecution over extortion charges, pointing to the root problem of weak judicial institutions and processes.” (Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 2023). That would amount to roughly 27 extra prosecutions per month, hardly enough to make a noticeable impact. While arrests remain high, prosecutions remain low, partially due to corruption within the police, highlighting the institutional failure of Mano Dura policies in part due to weak Honduras’ institutional power. “Elements within the police play an important role in criminal groups and not just gangs,” the official said. “The main impact of the state of emergency has been the violation of society’s fundamental rights.” (Woolston, 2024).

While dealing with a divided parliamentary legislative, it seems that the Bukele Model has served mostly as a form of gathering electoral support. “...the measures taken by the Castro administration in an effort to emulate the Bukele model show that public approval, and not the desire for sustainable security, appears to be driving the pressure to increase the number

detainees.” (Hernandez-Roy and Bledsoe, 2023). Castro has generally appeared to be acting under the laws of the state, and while her security policies model that of El Salvador in terms of attempting Institutional, Covert, and Rhetorical Mano Dura practices, as well as leaning into populist ideologies, she does not present the trademark signs of authoritarianism of Bukele.

Ecuador

Ecuador has dealt with particularly violent criminal gangs over the last half decade, and Ecuador’s political background over the last 20 years makes this case study particularly interesting. Previous president Rafael Correa was a left-leaning, self-described Democratic Socialist whose party had run on ideas of an economic revolution, with ideas such as “Markets should be subject to societies, not the other way around.” Correa initially took office in 2007, but after implementing many unpopular policies such as cuts to benefits of public service officers in 2010, Correa was injured by tear gas from protesting police and had to be rushed to the hospital by the military. Correa was also a populist ruler, with his left-wing model of “Correísmo” still remaining popular. In this regard, Ecuador can be seen as a hyper-politicized state which makes populism a recurring factor.

Noboa was snap-elected partially as a direct response against the previous left-leaning regime, with many analysts viewing challenger Luisa González as an extension of the previous president Noboa was elected to replace, Rafael Correa. Correa is currently in Belgium avoiding warrants of arrest over the kidnapping of a political opponent in 2018, to which he was sentenced to eight years in prison in absentia. “To sum up, it was a negative vote more than a full endorsement of President Noboa’s performance during his first half-term in office,” writes Grace

Jamarillo, a professor of International Affairs at the University of British Columbia. As predicted by Holland (2013), "...security policy emerged as one of the key issues in Ecuador's 2023 election cycle, with presidential candidate Jan Topic calling for the implementation of tough policies similar to those of Salvadoran president Bukele...his rhetoric helped to shift the conversation on security policy toward hardline options, potentially making it more likely that the election winner, Daniel Noboa, would go with a maximalist, tough-on-crime approach when the security situation in the country further deteriorated following his inauguration." (Hernandez-Roy et. al, 2025). As such, partisanship played a role in his election, although not directly through Noboa's actions: rather, he was the reactionary response to a left-leaning government's overreach amid the context of crime and violence.

Similar institutional weaknesses have also plagued Ecuador and El Salvador. Police corruption, prisons run by prisoners, and judicial corruption run rampant, and this issue remains widespread (Freeman, 2024). Furthermore, the rise of organized criminal organizations in the nation, who seek to use Ecuador's Pacific coast ports as a "cocaine superhighway" according to InSight Crime, is directly linked to the soaring levels of violence and corruption. Ecuador's neighbor Colombia is home to large amounts of Coca crops, which indirectly places Ecuador at the center of international gang activities. "Organized crime has run roughshod over Ecuador's institutions, embedding itself in prisons and corrupting the courts." (Calanche, 2025). The gangs, which have both local and international origins, are also fighting themselves over access to these routes, leaving a bloody trail along Ecuador's Pacific coast. However, the approach to adopt a tough-on-crime candidate as a reversion from Correa's leftist policies has potentially backfired in fighting crime. "Following Correa's departure, state institutions have become less present and

less embedded in local territories, creating space for international criminal organizations to establish and consolidate power,” stated Dr. Samuele Mazzolini in an April 2025 interview. By removing funds from leftist-supported programs such as the Justice and Security Coordination ministries, pro-business conservatives in Ecuador have successfully consolidated power and resources away from the poor through the politicization of the fight on crime (Calanche, 2025). This trend perfectly encapsulates Holland’s explanation of conservative Mano Dura policies as electoral tools, despite their proven ineffectiveness. “The need to expand the right’s natural constituency creates incentives to orient programmatic competition away from distributive politics.” (Holland, 2013).

The precarious living situations in Ecuador have also forced the hands of smaller, localized criminal organizations. Through extortion of individuals and organizations under the guise of protection, such as churches, hospitals, businesses and schools, the gangs make home life even more difficult for the average citizen. “The basic form of control is through extortion. It is the groups’ lifeblood”, a [local] human rights activist said. “In terms of revenue, it competes with drug trafficking. But it dismantles the whole community organization, the social base.” (Calanche, 2025). Considering the instability and violence which run rampant, it is hardly a surprise that the civilian population originally welcomed the hardline Mano Dura changes implemented by Noboa. Citizen support for these policies can be witnessed in their votes to extend the state of emergency in the nation which were enacted by Noboa (Calanche 2025). However, Noboa’s failure to consolidate his populist movement or see meaningful results in violence have left some Ecuadorians with regret. Noboa enjoyed an 81% approval rating in February of 2024 after seeing the initial results of Mano Dura practices, yet by December it had

fallen to a measly 39% after Ecuadorian gangs adapted (Statista, 2024, and Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024).

On January 9th, 2024, gangs responded to Noboa's state of emergency declaration on gang violence by "attack[ing] universities, hospitals, prisons, police officers, and civilians in broad daylight. Bomb threats forced the evacuation of government buildings, and almost two-hundred guards were held hostage amid prison riots." (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024). Interestingly, Noboa had opposed the use of military forces to fight organized crime until January 2024, when a television station was famously stormed by gunmen (Muggah, 2024). Since then, despite Noboa's previously centrist-leaning social policies, he has continued to "double down" on his initial crackdown, leading to skyrocketing arrest numbers and initially soaring approval rates. However, when the state of emergency was repealed in April of 2024, citizens voted it back into place due to the continuation of organized criminal violence, granting the military and judicial branches of government with more power and control of punitive policies (Berg and Bledsoe, 2024). As of today, Ecuador continues to wrestle with gang violence despite its heavy usage of Mano Dura policies. Through a 2024 plebiscite, Ecuadorians voted in favor of "...constitutional and legal reforms will formalize the armed forces' role in public security functions; enable the extradition of Ecuadorian citizens; increase sentencing for crimes including terrorism and drug-trafficking; and designate special judges to oversee due process measures, such as habeas corpus petitions, which the Ecuadorian government asserts some judges have used improperly to benefit criminals." (Klein, 2025). This broad popular support could mean trouble if Noboa weaponizes it to overrule the judiciary, as he already overridden the National Assembly to pass an Anti-Trust Law (Merriguet, 2025).

Unfortunately, the results of this may push Ecuador farther from democracy and closer to authoritarian populism. Furthermore, media coverage of crime and violence during the 2025 electoral cycle may have played directly into Noboa's hand. "...the visibility and shocking nature of some of the country's violence may engender greater support for a tough-on-crime approach since it is more likely to be publicized by the media and consumed by citizens." (Polga-Hecimovich, 2023). Noboa's Defense Minister even visited El Salvador's CECOT prison just two weeks after his re-election in an act of Performative Mano Dura, stating that "[We are looking at] implementing the legislative changes that El Salvador pushed for, which are so necessary in Ecuador in order to achieve similar results." (AP News, 2025).

Noboa has also relied on TikTok to promote his campaign and presidency in a similar manner to Nayib Bukele. A 2023 study done on Mano Dura practices in Ecuador found that while there was a noticeable difference in support (5%) between left and right leaning citizens, the larger difference was found in those who consume more media (Polga-Hecimovich, 2023). This mirrors ideas of Holland (2013), in which she mentions how press coverage typically benefits the right more than the left. "The data indicate that between 30-40 percent of Ecuadorians support hardline security policies, with right-leaning, older, and less educated citizens all more likely to favor them... Yet at least one important contextual factor, media exposure, can increase that foundation of support. Specifically, the tests suggest that higher levels of news consumption are associated with increased support for mano dura." (Polga-Hecimovich, 2023). In this context. President Noboa's TikToks can be viewed as a method of gathering populist support modeled after Nayib Bukele.

President Noboa has also engaged in authoritarian practices. Firstly, he has overridden Ecuador's national assembly to pass his Anti-Trust ruling. Secondly, he has essentially excommunicated Ecuador's Vice President, Veronica Abad, by sending her to Israel, and investigating her son for corruption while she was away. Abad claimed this was a form of intimidation against her, which was designed to force her to resign. Noboa proceeded to send her away, this time to Turkey, under the guise of a diplomatic mission. Furthermore, he has temporarily appointed a non-elected citizen to be his acting Vice President, despite said citizen receiving 0 electoral support. Furthermore, Noboa issued state-issued bonds to thousands of Ecuadorian citizens immediately before his April 2025 re-election. "We also saw the strategic use of state-issued vouchers right before the election to secure electoral support—classic clientelist, patronage politics. These elements point to a serious erosion of democracy in Ecuador." (Mazzolini, 2025).

Noboa has had good reason to lean into anti-crime rhetoric and policies. "Ecuador's homicide rate has increased by more than 500% since 2019, leaping rapidly from 13.7 per 100,000 people in 2021 to 47.25 in 2023, surpassing Venezuela and Honduras to become Latin America's most violent country" (OECD 2024). Violence in Ecuador has certainly influenced his policy decisions, and the mindset of the average citizen. Even his left-wing opponent who lost the April 2025 election (although she contests voter fraud) had expressed plans to turn towards Rhetorical and Institutional Mano Dura policies, such as the construction of two "super prisons" to deal with Ecuador's broken, overcrowded prison system. (Calanche, 2025). However, an important difference to notice is that she promised to reintroduce the Justice and Security Coordination offices, distributive social works projects which "[left Ecuador] without crucial

capacity to fight organized crime.” (Calanche, 2025). It appears that in the case of Ecuador, Rhetorical and Institutional Mano Dura policies appeal to left-leaning and right-leaning politicians as a form of both electoral support.

Noboa’s government has been characterized by the markings of an authoritarian ruler. With his hard-handed rule justified under the cover of Mano Dura policies, Noboa is poised to potentially take the mantle of Ecuador, using an eerily similar playbook to Nayib Bukele. “Following the elections, Ecuador has entered yet another phase of democratic recession, particularly regarding the three fundamental pillars of democracy: competitive elections, liberal rights of expression and association, and the rule of law.” (Córdova-Alarcón, 2025). Furthermore, Bukele was twice as popular in Ecuador as any Ecuadorian candidate in polling prior to the 2024 election cycle (Epstein, 2024). The list of parallels between the two is uncanny.

As such, I argue Nayib Bukele’s influences and reliance on Mano Dura tactics can be thought of as partially responsible for the democratic backsliding of Ecuador. Forms of Institutional Mano Dura, such as recurrent declarations of states of emergency, illegally instating military police, ignoring democratic practices, and suspension of due process show Noboa blatantly disregarding the law to enact Mano Dura policies. Noboa has also adapted many of Bukele’s populist-authoritarian practices, such as refusing to disclose the plans of his “Plan Phoenix” similar to Bukele’s Territorial Control Plan, and undemocratically removing his Vice President despite court orders to the contrary for failing to align with his personal politics. Furthermore, his refusal to step down from his presidency to campaign was a blatant disregarding of the Ecuadorian constitution, and his bond-voucher patronage system prior to his

April 2025 re-election clearly violates electoral rules. Daniel Noboa has shown consistent disrespect for the Ecuadorian rule of law in service of promoting his populist-authoritarian, Mano Dura policies in a manner similar to Bukele. While citizens are eager to promote state and military intervention to reduce the violence, they may be walking into a trap.

Implications and Conclusions

Modern Mano Dura policies arise from a variety of factors and can be conducive to the erosion of democratic and human rights. Because Mano Dura policies are typically aligned with right-wing ideologies, it is natural that many previous case studies have been from conservative governments. Today, however, the pressure to act harshly against violence and crime within a nation is proven to benefit politicians on both the left and the right at the ballot box. As such, Mano Dura policies must be viewed as both politically and electorally motivated. Second, the perceived success in El Salvador under these policies creates a situation in which politicians are perceived as being weak if they do not follow such ideologies despite their documented failure (Estaño, 2024) and do not have the public's goodwill to rule. Right wing politics appear more conducive to Mano Dura policies as a method of populist-authoritarianism than left wing government, as they benefit more from media coverage and policy alignment than the left. As such, the Bukele model is dangerous as a stepping stone towards authoritarian rule, supported under the guise of national security.

Furthermore, it appears that the rise of modern Mano Dura ideologies plays a new role in Latin America. I argue that the forms of Mano Dura seen in Latin America today are necessary to appeal to voters, yet ineffective in practice. An example of this is Honduras' upcoming elections, in which Mano Dura policies have been proven ineffective yet still see significant voter support. Given the rise of internet-led communication, this leads to a spiral in which politicians are trapped in expensive, unproductive "races to the bottom" to fight crime. Since Mano Dura policies are often illegal, involve military operations, and violent, the logical path to complete these objectives is the consolidation of power in the executive, by way of constitutional

changes and populist-authoritarian practices. Since right-wing politicians typically benefit more from media coverage and political alignment to ideas like law and order, right-wing politicians are especially capable of using Mano Dura practices for populist-authoritarian purposes, such as Noboa's usage of TikTok in Ecuador. By pressuring Mano Dura ideologies to be adopted regardless of either intent or ideology, Mano Dura policies appear to be nearly necessities in crime-ridden areas to garner votes. It is important to remember that issues such as weak institutions, constant violence, propaganda, and lack of faith in democracy also play a role in voter decisions. Combined with the rise of social media, elements of Rhetorical Mano Dura will likely play a larger role in determining electoral results in the future, especially on the right.

The existence of strong partisanship alone seems to limit the length that Mano Dura can go in preventing crime. "Yet it is clear that the scale of those crackdowns was limited by constraints on the presidency. In Honduras, Castro faced an opposition-controlled legislature and a depleted and corrupt police force. In Ecuador, Noboa also faced an opposition-controlled legislature, as well as legal limits on the length and nature of mano dura policies." (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024). Since Bukele faced weak institutions in El Salvador, including a fractured party system, his rise became much easier as Nuevas Ideas took control. In Ecuador and Honduras, as both nations struggled to fight crime, their politicians raced to use security to gain electoral and populist support to further their own political gain. As such, Mano Dura policies appear to inevitably clash against organized opposition, namely courts and legislative assemblies, which encouraged leaders to lean into populist authoritarianism to institute Full Mano Dura practices.

I argue that the dangers of the Bukele Model arise from the fact that it provides a model path to penal-populist authoritarianism in Latin America. By creating fears against crime and seeing subsequent improvement (whether through initial Mano Dura policies themselves or secret gang truces), public support for the acting party or politician will skyrocket due to the perceived *lack* of safety without them, creating optimal conditions for the overthrow of democracy by overwhelming public support. As seen in the case of El Salvador, potentially Ecuador, and Honduras, this model only exacerbates long-term issues without solving the root causes, such poor socio-economic conditions, lack of opportunities for young men drawn to or trapped in gangs, governmental corruption which allowed organized crime to fester in the first place.

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