

# Spoilers of the Peace: Elites and the News Media in El Salvador (1992-2019)

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## Abstract

Postwar El Salvador's media sector has grown and diversified, particularly with the rise in digital news outlets. However, media ownership remains concentrated in the hands of a few powerful business groups whose commercial pursuits prevail over the public interest. Although media corporations benefit from generous advertising budgets, they have proved complicit with successive governments, irrespective of the party in power. The little investigative journalism that exists has helped expose public corruption and offered a more fair-minded picture of the country's powerful gangs, but it has not spurred an overall production of more critical and responsible information coverage. Rather than supporting the fight against the impunity of those who engage in corrupt practices and perpetrate human rights violations, the media help old and new elites in resisting structural reforms and offer platforms for personal and political rivalries. Fake news sites run the risk of deepening existing levels of political polarization and imperiling El Salvador's still fragile democracy.

**Keywords:** human rights; elections; security; corruption; democracy

## Resumen

El sector mediático en El Salvador de la posguerra ha crecido y se ha diversificado, particularmente con el aumento de los medios digitales. Sin embargo, la propiedad de los medios sigue concentrada en manos de unos pocos grupos empresariales poderosos cuyas actividades comerciales prevalecen sobre el interés público. Aunque las corporaciones mediáticas se benefician de generosos presupuestos publicitarios, éstas han demostrado ser cómplices de los sucesivos gobiernos, independientemente del partido en el poder. El reducido periodismo de investigación que existe ha ayudado

a exponer la corrupción pública y ha ofrecido una imagen más matizada de las poderosas pandillas en el país, pero no ha estimulado una producción general de cobertura informativa más crítica y responsable. En lugar de apoyar la lucha contra la impunidad por prácticas corruptas y las violaciones de los derechos humanos, los medios ayudan a las viejas y nuevas élites a resistir reformas estructurales y se constituyen en plataformas para rivalidades personales y políticas. Los sitios de noticias falsas corren el riesgo de profundizar los niveles existentes de polarización política y poner en peligro la aún frágil democracia de El Salvador.

**Palabras clave:** derechos humanos; elecciones; seguridad; corrupción; democracia

## Introduction

During several decades of socio-economic and political exclusion under El Salvador's ruling oligarchy-military alliance, periodic cycles of protest were brutally crushed.<sup>1</sup> The impossibility of transforming El Salvador peacefully ushered in a twelve-year civil war (1980-1992) between the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a guerrilla movement backed by Cuba and the Soviet Union, and the Armed Forces, propped up by the United States. A military stalemate, an economy shattered by the war, and the end of the Cold War helped shift elite and public opinion towards support for a negotiated end to the armed conflict. The UN-brokered Peace Accords made provisions for a lasting ceasefire and mandated a series of legal, institutional, and structural reforms. The FMLN converted into a political party and started participating in elections.<sup>2</sup> But lukewarm elite enthusiasm for democracy meant that socio-economic restructurings were boycotted, and reforms in the areas of security and justice were stalled.

El Salvador remains a fledgling democracy.<sup>3</sup> The country holds regular, competitive elections in which the FMLN made steady gains at the local and legislative levels, without winning the presidency until 2009. Institutional fragility is the product of limited technical training, pervasive corruption, and a lack of transparency. Socio-economic disparities are evident, the human rights situation is tenuous, and weaknesses in the rule of law shield influential groups from investigation and prosecution.<sup>4</sup> The historic problem of violence became more acute in the postwar period as homicides and street gang activity soared.<sup>5</sup> Democratic openings certainly enabled greater freedom of expression and diversification of the media. Journalists have become more professional, but their working conditions remain precarious and contribute to self-censorship. The media sector has expanded, particularly with the rise in digital media. There is,

however, little investigative journalism, and media alignment with political and economic actors blunts critical content.

This article examines the role of the news media in the consolidation of El Salvador's democracy. It discusses the postwar evolution of the media as well as the ways in which their commercial interests have shaped relations between media and the government and influenced coverage of elections, human rights, security, and corruption. It argues that mainstream media have remained instinctively pliant, even when the conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) lost control of the presidency, in order to preserve vital advertising budgets in a trying economic context. Contemporary restrictions on critical reporting arise from limited resources for watchdog journalism and an underdeveloped culture of transparency. While investigative journalism provides Internet-connected citizens with essential counternarratives, its ability to transform the reality it exposes is limited.

The little media studies research that has been conducted on El Salvador mostly analyzes the contents of electoral and security coverage.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on semi-structured interviews, secondary literature, and investigative pieces, the present article expands on this literature by offering a deeper understanding of the contemporary media landscape, its relations with social and political actors, and their repercussions for news content. It begins by surveying continuities and discontinuities in the media sector after 1992 as well as the media's early resistance towards structural reforms. Subsequently, it shows how, during ARENA's 20-year rule (1989-2009), the media shored up support for the conservative party through biased coverage of electoral campaigns, neoliberal economic plans, and pernicious policies vis-à-vis gangs. The media adapted to the new political realities of FMLN rule (2009-2019), which generally proved much less distinct from ARENA rule than expected, and, with few exceptions, failed to excavate information on gang negotiations, extrajudicial executions, and high-level corruption. The article closes by considering how the 2019 presidential election of social media star Nayib Bukele portends new challenges for government scrutiny and democratic debate.

### **Society and Media: Transitions to Democracy**

Prior to 1992, El Salvador's media system was small and concentrated in the hands of a few powerful families. The dominant television corporation, Telecorporación Salvadoreña (TCS), was owned by Boris Eserski, whose family also has investments in advertising and public relations agencies as well as cinemas.<sup>7</sup> The leading newspapers at the time were the ultraconservative *El*

*Diario de Hoy*, owned by the Altamirano family (landowners with coffee and cotton plantations), and the more moderate *La Prensa Gráfica*, property of the Dutriz family, which also has investments in advertising agencies, telecommunications, and non-media sectors such as real estate, retail, and law firms.<sup>8</sup> All three groups were politically aligned with ARENA. The Altamirano family even helped finance death squads that targeted perceived leftist dissidents and guerrilla fighters.<sup>9</sup>

The traditional media were *oficialistas*, privileging official sources whose discourses they unquestioningly accepted. During the war, alternative voices were limited to two FMLN radio stations as well as foreign correspondents. Local reporters were known as *empíricos*, because they lacked formal journalistic training and instead learned the ropes on the job. Reporting was a perilous affair that entailed reprisals when stories contradicted the official version of events. Freedom of expression and of the press were severely curtailed, and the press office of the Armed Forces was authorized to review and suppress media content.<sup>10</sup>

With the return of peace, and the country's first experiment with democracy, both the media industry and the journalistic profession experienced important transformations. As universities began to offer degrees in journalism, younger generations of better trained and more ethically minded reporters joined the newsrooms.<sup>11</sup> Their precarious working conditions, palpable in low salaries, limited or no social benefits, and a lack of security protocols, had contributed to self-censorship and high turnover rates.<sup>12</sup>

If anything, this job insecurity intensified with leadership changes in the media. The older generation that used to manage *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* considered their journalists as part of the family, and staff tended to remain on the payroll for many years. When the owners' sons took the reins of the newspapers, they saw how the printed dailies lost relevance and financial viability in a digital age, and decided to cut costs by periodically laying off dozens of their journalists.<sup>13</sup> Television channels responded to technological advances with similar measures toward labor flexibilization, requiring reporters to perform multiple, previously separate, roles. Protecting media workers' labor rights has proved challenging, because journalists' professional associations in the country are disunited and dysfunctional.

El Salvador's turn to democracy not only imbued society with a sense of freedom, human rights norms, and the possibility of genuine social and political change, but also opened up unprecedented intellectual space in the media. The magazine *Tendencias*, directed by historian Roberto Turcios until it folded in 2000, brought together writers from across the political spectrum to ponder cultural and political issues that had previously been silenced.

As democratic and human rights reforms came to dominate the public agenda, traditional media began to adjust to these new times. They did convey, however, their skepticism towards ideas and proposals that did not easily resonate in a hitherto authoritarian society. Human rights were dismissed, as they had been throughout Salvadoran history, as a leftist plot to destabilize the country. Street gangs were still an incipient social problem, but they were already beginning to draw media attention. The new penal code and juvenile justice legislation, with their emphasis on due process and human rights, were, for conservative politicians and media, spineless laws and inappropriate in the Salvadoran context.<sup>14</sup> Gustavo Parada (“El Directo”), a Mara Salvatrucha leader who had committed more than a dozen homicides, but as a juvenile offender received a relatively minor prison sentence, was an emblematic case. The mainstream press depicted him as a monster, an example of everything that was wrong with the legislation.<sup>15</sup> El Directo was the first gang member with a media-fabricated image of wickedness and a harbinger of what was to come in the following decade.<sup>16</sup>

Additional changes in the postwar period included moves towards greater media pluralism. Television channels would eventually be bolstered with the arrival of Mexican and Guatemalan capital. In 1996 the Mexican TV Azteca, for example, bought into El Salvador’s Channel 12.<sup>17</sup> But the Eserski family’s TCS remains the dominant corporation, owning the audience-strong Channels 2, 4, and 6 and controlling private television in El Salvador. Megavisión, holding the licenses for Channels 15, 19, and 21, trails in second place.<sup>18</sup> The typical format is the interview, ideal for some light analysis, but not for probing social and political issues. Ernesto López, host of Megavisión’s *Diálogo 21*, and Romeo Lemus, host of Channel 12’s *La Entrevista*, are among the best-known shows. Television continues to be the most popular news medium in El Salvador.

The radio spectrum has not been democratized, in part because the FMLN never pushed for the strengthening of community stations, and in part because governments have not genuinely attempted to regulate the broadcasting companies. The dominant commercial radio stations are those linked to the Samix group of former President Antonio Saca, and Radio YSKL, part of the YSKL Corporation, owned by the Flores family (no relation to the former president).<sup>19</sup> YSUCA, the Jesuit University’s radio station, offers its listeners thoughtful commentary on social and human rights issues. In recent years, the program *Pencho & Aída*, which airs during the morning commute, has gained many followers among time-pressed listeners interested in current affairs. The duo strikes a conversational tone and opens its studio to a diverse array of guests, including investigative journalists who get the chance to share their findings in a digestible form with a larger audience.<sup>20</sup>

The most striking changes, however, unfolded in newspapers. The conservative broadsheets *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* hired foreign editors with more critical perspectives, allowed their journalists to consult and contrast a broader range of sources, and opened their opinion columns to more liberal observers. These openings, however, had their limits. For example, Juan José Dalton, son of the distinguished revolutionary poet Roque Dalton, had his column in *El Diario de Hoy* revoked when his writings on impunity touched a nerve.<sup>21</sup> Advertising revenue, the lifeline of most media, helps dull the edge of news content. The public advertising budget alone is sizeable and, irrespective of the political party in power, has mostly gone towards the leading television and print media. The aim behind this spending is to ensure sympathetic coverage of government policies and achievements that can reach large audiences.

The presence of foreign correspondents, during and after the war, was vital to kickstarting investigative journalism in El Salvador. The weekly *Primera Plana*, founded by German war reporter Paolo Luers, was the pioneer in this field until it became financially insolvent. *Raíces* followed in its virtual footsteps, but also went out of business after a few years. *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* established their own weekly investigative supplements, “Vértice” and “Enfoques” respectively. Both magazines published incisive stories on issues such as corruption, and their candor is also what prompted their closure in 2006 and 2008 respectively.<sup>22</sup> The gaps they left were filled by *El Faro* (est. 1998) and *Revista Factum* (est. 2014), award-winning digital media that have become points of reference for investigative journalism. *El Faro*, for example, has won the Gabriel García Márquez prize and the Maria Moors Cabot prize, among others.<sup>23</sup> Although they receive some advertising revenue, their cost-saving online presence means they are less publicity-dependent than the mainstream press. Rather, grants (from organizations such as Open Society Foundations) and crowdfunding have helped them remain sustainable.<sup>24</sup>

*El Faro* and *Revista Factum* were both founded or managed by reporters who had previously worked for *El Diario de Hoy* or *La Prensa Gráfica*, but decided to leave their stifling newsrooms for outlets that were genuinely dedicated to critical journalism. *ContraPunto*, directed by Juan José Dalton, is also an alternative, though more left-leaning, voice. But *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* are the ones that stand out for their unflinching reporting on violence, corruption, and organized crime. While their impact is difficult to gauge, the existence of these gritty media outlets creates an incentive for the mainstream press to offer more hard-hitting coverage. The weekly supplement “Séptimo Sentido,” launched in 2008, is *La Prensa Gráfica*’s most consistent nod towards in-depth reporting, but to the extent that the two traditional newspapers feature investigative pieces, these stem more from the commitment of individual journalists than from the

family businesses. Possibilities for the mainstream media consist in occasionally picking up the exposés of *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* or, as in the case of *La Prensa Gráfica*, in using more surreptitious forms of criticism, such as data journalism.

If investigative journalism allows citizens to be more comprehensively informed and to demand public accountability, fake news pages have entirely dissimilar goals and implications. They manipulate public opinion, deepen political polarization, and erode trust in government institutions. In an unconsolidated democracy, their proliferation constitutes an alarming trend. In El Salvador, Internet usage has gradually increased and by 2017 reached 34 percent of the population, essentially young, urban, and middle-class individuals.<sup>25</sup> Cellphone usage has grown alongside it, but few customers can afford the plans that would allow them to check the news on social media or other platforms. External media diversity is most apparent among the digital media, but their astronomical growth should not detract from the speciousness of much of their content.

Fake news pages, easily set up and unregulated, have mushroomed in the last few years and often remain online only temporarily. When they are active, they spread information designed to favor certain political parties and figures or entrepreneurs, and to discredit others. Some of these pages have been associated with former President Mauricio Funes (2009–2014) and current President Nayib Bukele (elected in 2019), both discussed below. Local businessmen, such as Adolfo “Fito” Salume, owner of the digital newspaper *Diario1*, use these media to target business rivals (in this case Enrique Rais, a business tycoon with stakes in waste collection).<sup>26</sup> One of the most notorious of these websites is *La Britany*, which prides itself on being the viral news leader in El Salvador and has quickly gained many followers.<sup>27</sup> A related but different phenomenon is the cloning of legitimate websites, in this case *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*, in order to disseminate fake news under their logos and affect these companies’ credibility.<sup>28</sup> Over the years, the effects of fake news and fear-based media coverage on the public perceptions of social actors and public policies, have been most palpable during electoral campaigns and on the gang issue.

### **ARENA: Invoking a “Communist Menace,” Distorting the Gang Threat**

For most of the postwar period, El Salvador’s political system has largely revolved around the two largest parties: ARENA and the FMLN. Smaller parties on the Left have tended not to survive, while those on the Right never swayed the electorate sufficiently to reach the Presidency, but managed to win local governments and have backed ARENA in the Legislative Assembly. The FMLN

itself made steady advances at both the municipal and legislative levels. Prior to 2009, when the FMLN teamed up with former television journalist Mauricio Funes and succeeded at projecting a more temperate image, it was unable to occupy the highest political office. The seeming impossibility of tilting the electoral balance in its favor, after a hard-fought war and hard-earned right to compete at the ballot box, was a source of mounting frustration for the FMLN.<sup>29</sup>

During electoral campaigns, mainstream media regularly provided unequal and biased coverage of the participating parties and their candidates. ARENA habitually received more and more positive exposure in comparison to its main rival.<sup>30</sup> The FMLN was discredited, its contestants smeared, particularly its historic leader Schafik Handal, and its proposals decried as disastrous for El Salvador. Handal, for example, was painted as a gang apologist when in reality he was a principled defender of human rights.<sup>31</sup> The common themes suggested that, given the FMLN's insurgent origins and its ties to Cuba, in the event of a victory, the party would turn El Salvador into a hotbed of communism. As this narrative began to lose force, and with the advent of Hugo Chávez's Socialism of the Twenty-First Century, media coverage adapted accordingly. ARENA, with its US-trained technocrats and thriving entrepreneurs, was, so the stories went, striving to maintain cordial relations with the United States and could be relied on for a stable and prosperous El Salvador. If the FMLN ever came to power, these ties of friendship would be in danger, Salvadoran immigrants in the United States would be deported, and their remittances—which sustained their families and their home country's economy—would be terminated. As street gangs gained more visibility, the media also drew parallels between guerrilla violence and gang violence.<sup>32</sup>

Conventionally, ARENA has portrayed itself as a business-friendly party with a law-and-order approach, whereas the FMLN likes to see itself as the party of social justice. During its twenty years of uninterrupted rule, ARENA implemented neoliberal economic policies centering on market liberalization and deregulation. The expansion of the *maquila* (assembly-plant) industry, with its precarious working conditions and meager wages, a regressive tax rate, and burgeoning public debt have characterized all ARENA governments. As the cost of living rose, the wealth gap widened, yet the media tended not to question the nature or impact of conservative policies.<sup>33</sup>

Gradually, the strains began to show. The population regularly identified the economic situation and violence as El Salvador's chief problems.<sup>34</sup> For a long time, popular dissatisfaction with the direction in which the country was headed did not inspire greater voter trust in the FMLN at the executive level. The party's noticeable advances elsewhere were, however, as much a source of elation for progressive sectors as they were a cause for concern in reactionary

quarters. So much so that, in July 2003, President Francisco Flores (1999-2004) launched Plan Mano Dura with the stated aim of cracking down on gangs and homicides. The initiative had unmistakable electoral objectives, namely placing the gang issue at the top of the public agenda and positioning ARENA as the party best suited to tackling it.<sup>35</sup> Its victory in the 2004 presidential elections would therefore be a foregone conclusion. Extensive and sympathetic coverage by the leading newspapers and television channels played a crucial role in the construction of the threat posed by gangs and of the policy response.<sup>36</sup>

In the aftermath of the war, gangs had evolved from relatively innocuous territorial crews into extensive nationwide networks of increasingly delinquent and brutal cliques.<sup>37</sup> Plan Mano Dura proposed to suppress these groups through patrols that included members of the police and the Armed Forces, neighborhood sweeps, and mass arrests of suspected gang members. Non-governmental organizations and the FMLN heavily criticized the initiative for the human rights violations that its implementation would require and for ignoring crucial facets such as social prevention and insertion. The strategy was widely popular and contributed in no small part to the presidential triumph of Antonio Saca, who implemented a similar Plan Súper Mano Dura.<sup>38</sup> Gang suppression saw the homicide rate spiral, gang structures strengthened from within gang-segregated prisons, and extortion flourish.<sup>39</sup> Plan Súper Mano Dura was withdrawn once the rising violence had made it a political liability. But for three years, the media successfully portrayed gang suppression as the only viable response to a seemingly monstrous threat.

This media-based publicity campaign was unmistakable in the leading newspapers and television channels, and addressed gang activity, gang development, and gang policy.<sup>40</sup> The media fanned a gang panic by typecasting them as “folk devils,” a minority of deviant and violent outsiders. Abundant images “documented” the danger posed by these tattooed and defiant young men, while metaphoric language dehumanized them and rendered their extermination possible. Amplifying the official interpretation of the gang problem, reports linked gang affiliation with lifestyle decisions or the breakdown of families and decoupled gangs from the broader social context. These arguments were expedient for conservative sectors that were not inclined to back the redistribution of wealth and the creation of a fairer and more inclusive society. The media endorsed Mano Dura, highlighted its successes and downplayed its ineffectiveness. Moreover, they encouraged public support for the strategy through episodic or event-oriented framing.

Surveys conducted by the Jesuit University’s Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP) illustrate the media’s effects on public perceptions of gangs and gang suppression. In a 2004 survey of security perceptions, 97 percent of respondents considered gangs to be a significant or somewhat significant national problem,

although only 31 percent thought the gangs constituted an important or somewhat important problem in their communities. The poll showed that the greater the exposure to news, the greater the view that the gangs affected local communities. Public support for *Mano Dura* remained steadfast, despite mounting evidence of its ineffectiveness. For example, the 2005 and 2006 IUDOP end-of-year surveys showed that 83 percent and 67 percent, respectively, favored the plan, although respondents believed that it had shown little or no effectiveness in lowering crime (45 percent and 63 percent). Homicide figures had risen steadily since 2003, but successive surveys showed that at least 45 percent of interviewees thought crime had in fact decreased. More than half of the respondents felt that suppression had managed to reduce the gang problem. One of these polls revealed that 88 percent of respondents had learned of the government's performance through the media. The surveys suggest that media content encouraged Salvadorans to view the gang problem as more serious than it was and to support counterproductive *Mano Dura* policies.

In 2005, following the murder of one of its workers, *La Prensa Gráfica* took measures to make its coverage of violence more ethical. Its *Manual for the News Treatment of Violence* instructed journalists to contextualize events, provide truthful news stories, and avoid stereotyping suspects.<sup>41</sup> When reporting on gangs, they were directed to omit monikers and gang names, as well as images of gang-specific tattoos and gestures, to avoid stigmatizing these groups or inadvertently giving them publicity. Reckless and unethical journalism persisted after the manual was introduced. Some journalists have even questioned its relevance, since some of its guidelines might hinder understanding of the gang phenomenon.<sup>42</sup>

Favorable media coverage of ARENA governments and policies may well have contributed to their popularity. Over time, however, revelations of high-profile corruption cases would taint the image of Flores and Saca. Flores was the first former president of El Salvador to be indicted and tried for corruption and embezzlement. The charges involved the misuse of US\$15 million of relief funds provided by the government of Taiwan and destined for the survivors of two earthquakes in 2001.<sup>43</sup> Part of this money was channeled into ARENA's electoral campaigns.<sup>44</sup> After Flores's death from a stroke in January 2016, then Attorney General Douglas Meléndez pursued a civil case against the family in order to recoup the misappropriated funds, but the family was absolved on a technicality.

Unlike journalistic investigations into gangs and organized crime, which often rely on cultivating sources and on information leaks, Flores's case transpired, because in 2013 President Funes brought the investigations to light after then Attorney General Luis Martínez had hesitated to prosecute Flores.<sup>45</sup> An FMLN-sponsored special investigative commission in the Legislative Assembly finally

forced Martínez (himself later investigated for corruption) to freeze Flores's assets and press charges. Since this was the first corruption case concerning a previously untouchable figure of Salvadoran society, it garnered extensive media and social media attention, though as always, *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* were the ones who dug deepest. The outpouring of revelations about the brazen diversion of funds and the sumptuous lifestyle funded by the ill-gotten gains, made the population wearier about the main political parties. Rising cynicism towards them played a role in Bukele's 2019 presidential victory.<sup>46</sup>

Saca was the first journalist to be elected to the highest office. The Eserski family, a longstanding financier of ARENA, had intervened in the party's internal nomination process to support his candidacy.<sup>47</sup> A former sports radio broadcaster and prominent radio entrepreneur, Saca owned an even larger number of stations upon leaving the presidency than prior to it. During his time in government, he bought flattering media coverage by bribing reporters, including TCS interview host Jorge Hernández, and bestowing them with gifts on the annual Day of the Journalist.<sup>48</sup> The funds came from a discretionary spending account, of which El Salvador's presidents, irrespective of the political party, have traditionally availed themselves. ARENA's defeat in the 2009 presidential election triggered a grave internal crisis that resulted in Saca's expulsion from the party in December 2009. He was accused of having rigged the nomination process that culminated in the candidacy of former police chief Rodrigo Ávila. Saca was also thought to have conspired in the fracturing of the party, since twelve of its Legislative Assembly members (individuals close to Saca) defected after the legislative election earlier that year. Their desertion was followed by the creation of a conservative splinter party in January 2010, the Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU), which soon became the third most important party in the Legislative Assembly and one that often votes with the FMLN.<sup>49</sup> GANU joined forces with two other rightist parties in forming the UNITY coalition, on whose ticket Saca ran—and finished third—in the 2014 presidential election.

The media perhaps showed its highest degree of interest in Saca a considerable time after he left office.<sup>50</sup> In October 2016 he was arrested on charges of illicit enrichment and money laundering, the first former president to be convicted, in September 2018. Saca pled guilty to embezzlement and money laundering involving more than US\$300 million in public funds, in return for a reduced prison sentence of ten years. Six other former government officials were also convicted for their participation in the corruption network. ARENA tried to distance itself from Saca, rejecting the idea that the party was associated with systemic corruption. However, part of the misappropriated funds had been channeled into the party, and Flores himself had taught his successor how he could circumvent the law to enrich himself. (As outgoing president, Saca shared the

same knowhow with Funes.) Even for the mainstream media, it was uncontroversial to cover the trial, since ARENA had disowned Saca, and journalists only needed to transcribe the hearings. *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* prodded further and shed light on the pact of impunity between Saca and Funes.<sup>51</sup>

### **Funes-FMLN: Paths to Power and Privileges**

Mauricio Funes was a renowned television anchor, first with Channel 12 and later with Megavisión, whose penchant for a glamorous lifestyle had driven up his debt.<sup>52</sup> With his professional career faltering, the charismatic journalist became increasingly interested in a stint in politics. The FMLN teamed up with him for the 2009 presidential election, hopeful that a moderate party outsider enjoying ample popularity might strike a chord with the broader electorate. Sánchez Cerén, an ailing ex-guerrilla commander, could appeal to the party's base and ran as the vice-presidential candidate. Funes made sure to build support from the private sector and the military, and the business community had by this point also become more pragmatic. For example, TACA Airlines, owned by long-time ARENA financiers the Kriete family, helped sponsor the campaigns of both Funes and his opponent Rodrigo Ávila, in an attempt to create a business-friendly environment under whichever government.<sup>53</sup> Funes was an attractive candidate, compared to ARENA's lackluster aspirant, but had limited funds to match the conservative party's media presence. News coverage questioned the seriousness of Funes and the FMLN, and highlighted the private sector's fear that, after the Left's win, the country would be handed to Hugo Chávez.<sup>54</sup> With a campaign that alluded to the slain Archbishop Monseñor Óscar Romero and promised a break with corruption and *Mano Dura*, Funes had created enormous hopes for a better El Salvador.

In the media sector, expectations for the Funes government were equally high, given the president's trajectory as a critical journalist. But his administration maintained a traditional approach to media relations. Partly out of concern that the mainstream media might provide unflattering coverage, partly in anticipation of reaching larger audiences, both FMLN governments allotted the bulk of the official advertising budget to the leading television and print media: TCS, *El Diario de Hoy*, and *La Prensa Gráfica*. It also came to light that, in a time-honored tradition, they bought off specific journalists in exchange for glowing stories.<sup>55</sup>

The Funes government is nonetheless acknowledged to have contributed to the creation of mechanisms to ensure transparency and accountability. The two bodies created by Saca, the Government Ethics Tribunal (2006) and the Secretary of Transparency (2009), are perceived as partisan entities. (The latter has been

shut down by Bukele.) By contrast, the Constitutional Court, particularly during the 2009-2018 period, has made some highly regarded rulings concerning, for example, the unconstitutional character of the president's discretionary spending account, and publicity and travel expenses of (the then former) President Funes. Perhaps the most significant legacy of the Funes period as regards transparency and accountability is the Law of Access to Public Information (LAIP) and the corresponding Institute of Access to Public Information (IAIP). In a context of limited active transparency, the LAIP is an invaluable means as it permits any citizen to request public information from state institutions. The at times cumbersome and lengthy process has its limitations, since the institutions quickly worked out ways to evade their transparency obligations. The ability to obtain public information upon making a first request or an appeal also depends on the ability and tenacity of IAIP commissioners. The generation of commissioners who took their oath in February 2019 is seen as exercising its functions in a less scrupulous manner than the previous one.

By the time Funes took office, the situation for journalists had already become more complicated in other ways. In response to *Mano Dura*, which had heightened fears of possible infiltrations, the gangs had become more threatening and tightened their controls over local areas and populations. Gradually, they introduced ID checks in communities and restricted inter-gang territory mobility for residents, students, and workers. Government employees, researchers, and NGO staff began to find it more challenging to provide services or conduct studies and projects without arousing suspicion or facing reprisals. For reporters it became more perilous to enter certain communities and seek out sources.<sup>56</sup>

The most emblematic case was that of Christian Poveda, a Franco-Spanish photographer and filmmaker who had covered the war and in 2006 moved back to El Salvador to make a documentary about the everyday life of Barrio Dieciocho members. *La vida loca*, released in 2008 to widespread international acclaim, aimed to show the human face of gang members and unmask the futility of suppression. The authentic and, in many ways, intimate portrait of gang life was achieved because Poveda had spent extended time with his subjects and become a friend to many of them. In September 2009 members of the same gang killed Poveda, a murder that left deep marks in the journalistic community.<sup>57</sup> If Poveda, who had developed such close ties to gang members, could get assassinated for his work, what fate awaited other reporters?

Funes had entered office with the promise of a comprehensive security policy that would emphasize social prevention and the strengthening of institutions. But virtually empty state coffers, combined with an unexpected uptick in homicides and media charges of incompetence, compelled a *de facto* return to *Mano Dura*. This pressure intensified after the 2010 Mejicanos massacre in which gang

members set fire to a microbus over an extortion dispute. 17 people perished in the event, and a dozen others were hospitalized with serious burn injuries.<sup>58</sup> The callousness of the attack shocked a population accustomed to violence and deepened calls for a concerted crackdown. The Funes administration, which had already given the Armed Forces a greater role in public security, pushed successfully for the adoption of a new gang law. The opportunity to be seen as waging an effective fight against violence, however, came with the gang truce.

In March 2012, *El Faro* broke the story of secret government-gang negotiations aimed at diminishing the homicide rate.<sup>59</sup> In its readiness to point out the lack of transparency, the newspaper may have inadvertently contributed to the breakdown of this initiative. In a series of reports, *El Faro* disclosed that the Funes administration had transferred gang leaders from the maximum-security prison to less restrictive detention facilities and reportedly paid them substantial amounts of money (allegations denied by gang leaders and mediators). When some imprisoned gang leaders were even brought onto the set of a television show to talk about the ceasefire, apprehension amid the population ensued. Although the homicide rate dropped dramatically during the truce, Salvadorans were skeptical of it and felt that the government should not be negotiating with criminals.<sup>60</sup> In response to *El Faro*'s exposés, Funes strenuously denied that his administration had any part in the ceasefire.<sup>61</sup>

In 2011 the Organization of American States (OAS) had assessed the security sector and concluded that the violence in El Salvador would never be sustainably reduced unless a different gang policy was adopted. After initial disinterest as it struggled to contain the rising homicide rate, the Funes government invited the OAS to return.<sup>62</sup> Under its observation of the mediation process, the gangs committed to halting violence and forced recruitment and to carrying out a symbolic disarmament. The government, in return, pledged to improve prison conditions and create educational and job opportunities to wean young people away from gangs. These opportunities never materialized, however, because Funes was primarily interested in cutting the murder rate and failed to persuade FMLN-controlled ministries to do their part supporting the truce. (The party was prepared to instrumentalize the gangs for its own territorial control, but not to concede them autonomy.)

Journalists were divided on whether or not the truce constituted an adequate measure for violence reduction. The media mostly scrutinized the goings-on in the prisons, but *El Faro* tried, through interviews with government officials, gang leaders, and mediators, to unearth the inner workings of the truce. The stories seemed to reveal the untoward maneuvers of a government desperate to see a decline in violence. But they also may have helped fuel citizen misgivings

about a measure that, more than anything else in a long time, actually provided a respite in the bloodshed.

After only one year, the truce collapsed amid changes in the security cabinet and the faltering commitment of the incoming officials. Moreover, in the runup to the 2014 presidential election, ARENA capitalized on popular skepticism regarding the ceasefire and distanced itself from it, leaving the power-hungry FMLN with little choice but to do the same. As *El Faro* revealed, public rejections of the truce did not prevent either party from secretly negotiating financial incentives with the gangs in order to influence voting behavior. The violence spiraled, exceeding even pre-truce levels (2015 had a higher murder toll than any other postwar year), as the gangs sought to reassert control over local territories. Ironically, *El Faro* has since emerged as a lone voice advocating for a return to the truce that, despite all its controversy, managed to lessen the violence when the security apparatus failed to do so.<sup>63</sup>

Local journalists feel that the gangs came to constitute a more momentous threat in the aftermath of the 2012–2013 gang truce. Today it is thought that the gangs, more than any other social or political actors, are the ones who effectively curtail reporters' access to communities and neighborhoods around the country. Often, reporters and photographers avoid certain zones or address the gang issue in only a superficial manner.<sup>64</sup> Whereas during ARENA administrations media content amplified the gang threat, today the challenge consists in finding ways to cover the gangs so as to help audiences understand why youths continue to join these groups, despite their destructive consequences for members and communities alike. Even *El Faro* journalists, whose work relies on information leaks and the cultivation of sources, find that embedded investigations are now impossible to conduct.

### **Sánchez Cerén: The Resurgence of Nepotism and State Violence**

The second round of the 2014 presidential contest saw a pale-looking and uninspiring Sánchez Cerén, aged 70, narrowly defeat ARENA's Norman Quijano, a former mayor of San Salvador. Sánchez Cerén's running mate was Óscar Ortiz, a former guerrilla fighter and a moderate in the FMLN, who had made a name for himself as mayor of Santa Tecla, where he had championed social prevention programs. In subsequent years, however, *El Faro* would uncover Ortiz's business ties to a known drug trafficker.<sup>65</sup>

During his tenure, the increasingly frail Sánchez Cerén was an aloof figure with a very limited public presence and leadership. He gave not a single interview to journalists and left it to his Communications Secretary to make the occasional

television appearance. Like his predecessor, Sánchez Cerén allocated generous chunks of the state advertising budget to the traditional media. To little effect, it seems, since the government regularly grumbled at the scarce media coverage of its flagship programs. By now the media had realized that the FMLN's ascent to power entailed a change in name, but not in practice. The FMLN administrations were business-friendly, carried out paltry social programs within the established neoliberal economic model, and did not build the kind of socialist republic of which the media had warned in the past. Conservative outlets, at least, remained submissive and played virtually no oversight role. But the paucity of critical coverage may also be explained by the glaring absence of an effective opposition.

ARENA posed no counterweight to the ruling FMLN, since both parties implemented very similar policies and none had an interest in publicizing, much less dismantling, the corruption networks in which they were implicated. Civil society had also become a rather silent bystander when the FMLN came into power. Many activists joined the better remunerated public sector or hesitated to express disapproval of supposedly progressive governments, even though it was clear that their hopes for social change were being frustrated. One of the few exceptions to this rule concerned internal displacement (that is, the forced movement of persons) due to gang violence. The Sánchez Cerén government repeatedly denied this phenomenon, as admitting it would have entailed a recognition that the state had lost control over substantial parts of its territory.<sup>66</sup> Thanks to the human rights NGO Cristosal's extensive research and advocacy, the issue occupied an important place in the news media, with even mainstream outlets such as *La Prensa Gráfica* featuring stories and interviews.<sup>67</sup>

The FMLN governments also invested specifically in the creation of party-aligned media, such as Radio Maya Visión and Gentevé television. The channel was established in 2012 by Jorge Hernández, former anchor of TCS's *Frente a Frente* program and owner of the portal *La Página*. Hernández is currently under investigation for money laundering conducted on behalf of former President Antonio Saca.<sup>68</sup> Gentevé is reported to be insolvent and facing closure due to a lack of advertising revenue under the Bukele administration.<sup>69</sup>

One of the central issues during the Sánchez Cerén government concerned police violence in the context of the war on gangs. The post-truce upsurge in violence included an increase in attacks against police officers, and sometimes soldiers, followed by a striking increase in alleged clashes between state agents and gang members. According to the official version of events, police get ambushed by gang members, return the fire, and end up injuring or—more often—killing their attackers. *El Faro* investigations into some of these events showed that, rather than chance encounters, these were extrajudicial executions of suspected gang members (and sometimes non-gang-involved civilians) that police officers

deliberately hunted down to kill.<sup>70</sup> The Human Rights Ombudsperson's Office, upon learning of these cases through *El Faro's* reports, launched its own investigations, albeit with limited forensic abilities and difficulties interviewing the police officers involved.<sup>71</sup> *La Prensa Gráfica* also published stories on the issue, yet some of its journalists have moved to investigative media such as *Revista Factum* where they have more freedom to ask tough questions.<sup>72</sup> *Revista Factum* itself has obtained and analyzed leaked WhatsApp conversations that showed how police officers coordinated and celebrated extrajudicial killings of gang members.<sup>73</sup> The revelations created a backlash for *El Faro* journalists, but have little social and judicial impact in a country where gang members are widely despised and police torture of suspects is condoned.<sup>74</sup>

The second main issue that surfaced under Sánchez Cerén was corruption, particularly the allegations against former presidents Saca and Funes. During his campaign, Funes had stated his intention of fighting organized crime and rooting out corruption. Once in office, however, little more was heard about his stance against impunity. With hindsight, it is clear why: senior FMLN figures and Funes himself became embroiled in allegations of impropriety. The webs of complicity between Funes and his predecessor stretch back to the government of Saca who, after his failed 2014 reelection bid, tended to his radio emporium and shared his musings through broadcasts and social media. First arrested in 2016, Saca was convicted two years later for heading one of the largest embezzlement schemes in El Salvador's postwar history. Through advertising agencies, he siphoned millions of dollars from the president's discretionary spending account, used front companies to purchase properties, and diverted public funds into illegal bonuses, personal travel, bribes to journalists, and ARENA accounts.<sup>75</sup> A central figure in this network was Herbert Saca, an influential businessman and cousin of Antonio. Implicated in a drug trafficking network, Herbert Saca was involved in the creation of the new party GANA and acted as political advisor to both Antonio Saca and Mauricio Funes.<sup>76</sup>

Since 2016, Funes as well as members of his family and his administration are under criminal investigation for embezzling US\$351 million and laundering money.<sup>77</sup> According to independent media reports based on the case files, Funes had developed a friendship with then Attorney General Luis Martínez (2012-15) to buy immunity from prosecution in cases which he thought might affect the image of his government, including the gang truce. In a conspiracy with Saca and Martínez, Funes also shared confidential information in his weekly radio show *Chatting with the President* to harm political adversaries such as former president Francisco Flores.<sup>78</sup> Key figures in the corruption network include former TCS presenter Jorge Hernández, who is accused of having laundered money for Antonio Saca and is presumed to have paid bribes to journalists; and Herbert

Saca, who bought off members of the Legislative Assembly so that they would vote in favor of decrees, budgets, and second-grade officials.

Funes and his clan are accused of having used public funds for personal travel, properties, luxury goods, and services such as plastic surgery. With his family, Funes flew to Disneyland in a plane owned by Enrique Rais, a businessman who, with Luis Martínez, is implicated in an organized crime network. (Sánchez Cerén has also traveled in Rais's private jets.) Rais, currently a fugitive, unsuccessfully sued Héctor Silva, founder and journalist of *Revista Factum*, for defamation for a story published in 2016.<sup>79</sup> The lawsuit was dismissed in 2019 and set an important standard for upholding freedom of the press in El Salvador.<sup>80</sup> Given the wide range of accomplices, including some employees of the traditional media, it is perhaps unsurprising that *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* have done the most to disentangle these intricate ties for their readers. Funes is currently a fugitive and, since September 2016, has been residing in Nicaragua where the Ortega government has granted him political asylum. From there he maintains an active presence on Twitter, where he engages in acrimonious exchanges with the journalists of *El Faro* and *Revista Factum*, and claims that the corruption allegations against him are politically motivated fabrications.

The Sánchez Cerén administration has itself been plagued by corruption and nepotism allegations.<sup>81</sup> Many of these have come to light with the Twitter-based public denunciations that Bukele has made since taking office, and *El Faro* pursued these leads in its own investigations.<sup>82</sup> The practices include naming or hiring relatives of Sánchez Cerén and FMLN leaders to occupy government posts, some of whom lacked the necessary qualifications, and arbitrarily awarding bonuses to government officials, resulting in their receipt of inflated monthly incomes. Bukele made the fight against corruption and impunity a cornerstone of his campaign, offering to repatriate Funes and to create a Commission Against Impunity and Corruption in El Salvador (CICIES). Such an entity would be modelled after the UN-backed CICIG in Guatemala, and was initially the focus of an unfulfilled pledge that Funes made early in his presidency.<sup>83</sup> It is also a proposal that the FMLN has since rejected, under the argument that El Salvador's institutions are resilient enough to fight impunity without the help of an international body. The inability of Attorney General Douglas Menéndez (2015-18) to achieve convictions in major corruption cases suggests that is not the case, and that resistance to the creation of a CICIES may be designed to prevent more effective investigations into corruption networks.

## **Bukele: Continued Connivance or Defiance from the Twitter President?**

The 37-year-old Nayib Bukele, owner of an advertising agency and an erstwhile law student, was rather inexperienced in politics prior to becoming president. He started his political career as the FMLN mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán (2012-15), an obscure municipality just outside the capital, where he also began marketing “Brand Nayib.”<sup>84</sup> He then moved on to being the FMLN mayor of San Salvador (2015-18), before being expelled from the party in October 2017 for alleged verbal and physical attacks against a female municipal council member. In San Salvador, the presidential launching pad, Bukele became chiefly known for the gentrification of the downtown district and high-profile constructions, such as the Cuscatlán market and public library.

Following his expulsion from the FMLN, he created New Ideas, but failed to register the political party on time for the February 2019 election. Bukele eventually established an electoral alliance with GANA and ran on an anti-corruption ticket, despite past nepotism charges against him. In spite of his limited territorial presence during the campaign and mainstream media coverage that clearly favored the conservative party’s candidate, Bukele skillfully used social media to defeat ARENA’s Carlos Callejas and the FMLN’s Hugo Martínez in the first round.<sup>85</sup> His surprising victory reflected, at least in part, the depth of citizen discontent with the two main parties, both mired in corruption and unable to deliver security and sustainable livelihoods.

Bukele has maintained a strained relationship with the media. He is an ardent user of Twitter and has employed social media both to cultivate a slick public image and to assail his critics. In 2013 Bukele created a troll center which, using both real and fake profiles, attacked his critics and used the hashtag #TeamNayib to saturate Twitter with his name and prompt Salvadorans, especially younger generations, to vote for the cool hipster with the colorful socks.<sup>86</sup> In 2016 the Attorney General accused Bukele of having masterminded the cloning of the websites of *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*, ostensibly to undermine the credibility of both newspapers. Prosecutors later withdrew their evidence without formally charging Bukele, but *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* had already spent months divulging how the troll center had been operating through an advertising agency tied to San Salvador’s city hall.<sup>87</sup> Relations with the media did not improve during his presidential campaign, when photos were circulated that showed him praying in a mosque. (Bukele’s father, who passed away in 2015, was of Palestinian descent and the imam of El Salvador’s Muslim community.) His plan for government was widely dismissed as unrealistic and, as he felt that the media were treating him unfairly, Bukele refused to participate

in any candidate forums or to give interviews—except to selected international outlets, such as CNN and Al Jazeera.

Since assuming office, this millennial with no clearly defined policy positions has remained inaccessible and has governed chiefly through Twitter. From this platform, Bukele issues orders to his Ministers and communicates directly with his followers. Given their critical coverage of issues such as nepotism, gang negotiations, and suspected money laundering, *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* have been fiercely attacked by the president as well as by the trolls and fake news media aligned with him.<sup>88</sup> The confrontations have sparked concerns that social media-based threats against independent media and journalists may provoke acts of physical violence. For now, those citizens with a Twitter account (a figure that in 2018 stood at 47 percent) can see almost in real time how Bukele and his officials claim to be tackling (or not) their policy responsibilities.<sup>89</sup> The media, however, are struggling to come to terms with this communications strategy. In many cases, they simply reproduce screenshots of Bukele's tweets without much analysis. But his inaccessibility, and the attendant limitations on access to public information, pose challenges to El Salvador's watchdog journalists.

## Conclusion

El Salvador's media sector is a site where the interests of politics, business, crime, and corruption converge. The traditional media have adjusted to the political changes the country has experienced over the last thirty years, notably democratization and the handover of political power to the FMLN. The openings in the early postwar period were crucial for the development of investigative journalism in El Salvador, but overall the main news corporations have not made watchdog journalism the priority that it deserves to be. Their owners realized that, even with the ex-guerrilla in the presidency, their commercial pursuits could flourish unhindered. Irrespective of the party in power, the relationship between the audience-strong traditional media and the national government has remained one of mutual dependence. The former value their public advertising revenue, while the latter attaches more importance to upbeat coverage of its alleged achievements than to investigations that unmask the social and political reality.

Freedom of the press has notably increased in the postwar period, but it encounters periodic restrictions arising from the commercial interests of media owners and the activities of armed non-state actors, particularly street gangs. With the exception of investigative journalists, members of the press face few direct threats since their reporting tends to be shallow.<sup>90</sup> Many of them practice self-censorship to survive in a context of economic precariousness and violence.

Widening Internet access has paved the way for an upsurge in online media. But while outlets such as *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* are committed to exposing public corruption and violence in all its forms, the proliferation of fake news media, which prize entertainment or the denigration of political adversaries over impartial information, constitutes a threat to El Salvador's still young democracy. Bukele, a skilled marketing strategist and social media user, is the face of a younger generation of political leaders that has had no difficulty adjusting to these changing times.

The challenge for independent news media is to demonstrate their continued relevance when governments and politicians increasingly use Twitter and Facebook to connect directly with citizens. *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* have built a reputation for their unparalleled investigative reporting, including coverage of gang violence that surpasses even much of the academic research in the field. However, their grant-reliant business model is unsustainable, and it is unclear to what extent crowdfunding can provide a lifeline in a country whose citizens, for the most part, only have a very modest purchasing power. While both outlets have gained a loyal readership, more work is required to reach those who remain unconvinced of the stories they tell, or even of the need for them. *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* want to pursue uncomfortable journalism, to shake people up, rather than publish what they may want to hear. The threats and offensive comments they have received suggest that their reporters are doing their job reasonably well. It remains to be seen how they might increase and ascertain their impact, beyond measuring their website traffic, and shape citizen views more actively, for example through more frequent collaborations with academics and civil society.

## Notes

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  8. *Ibid.*, pp. 123-24.
  9. Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador*, pp. 132-33.
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  11. Interview with William Meléndez, anchor of the *8 en Punto* program, Canal 33, San Salvador, 10 June 2019.
  12. Interview with Óscar Pérez, director of *Voces* and president of the Fundación Comunicándonos, San Salvador, 13 June 2019.
  13. Interview with Amparo Marroquín Parducci, Professor of Communication Studies, Central American University, San Salvador, 18 June 2019.
  14. Ellen Moodie, *El Salvador in the Aftermath of Peace: Crime, Uncertainty, and the Transition to Democracy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 183.
  15. Roberto Valencia, *Carta desde Zacatraz* (Madrid: Libros del K.O., 2018).
  16. See Sonja Wolf, *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), pp. 74-118.
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  18. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
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  20. Interview with Pencho Duque, host of *Pencho & Aída*, San Salvador, 11 June 2019.
  21. Interview with Juan José Dalton, founder and director of *ContraPunto*, San Salvador, 12 June 2019.
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