

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

September 9, 2025

The Honorable Marco Rubio
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Rubio,

We were taken aback by the Trump Administration's vocal support for Nayib Bukele's latest power grab in El Salvador, and urge the Administration to closely consider the severely adverse impact this approach will have on Salvadoran democracy and U.S. interests in the region.

On August 1, El Salvador's Legislative Assembly – at Bukele's behest – approved constitutional changes to allow indefinite presidential re-election, and to extend presidential terms to six years. The crisis was made plain by the comments of El Salvador's Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas, who called on Salvadoran lawmakers to urgently reconsider approval of the changes that had been implemented “without consulting” the Salvadoran people, which he said was essential for the “legitimacy” of the reforms. In an August 6 comment to *The Associated Press*, the State Department said it “rejects the comparison of El Salvador's democratically based and constitutionally sound legislative process with illegitimate dictatorial regimes elsewhere in our region.” This absurd statement was followed by the August 12 release of the State Department's annual human rights reports, with a number of deliberate and glaring omissions in its assessment of El Salvador's poor human rights record under the Bukele regime.

The State Department's assessment that Bukele's power grab is not comparable to that of other authoritarian leaders is simply false, as is its whitewashing of Bukele's human rights record. In recent years, El Salvador's institutions have been systematically captured by Bukele's “Nuevas Ideas” party, which now holds 54 out of 60 seats in the National Assembly. What's worse, there are many signs that the Bukele government has, at different points in time, colluded with organized crime. U.S. federal prosecutors have credibly accused Bukele and his advisors of negotiating with El Salvador's gangs long before Bukele reached the presidency, offering gang leaders impunity in return for political support that helped build *Nuevas Ideas*' supermajority. Moreover, before the March 2022 state of exception, Bukele blocked U.S. extradition requests for top gang leaders, several of whom conveniently “escaped” prison shortly thereafter. There are photos of Bukele government officials secretly visiting gang leaders in jail. The Administration might want to believe that all such collusion ended with the March 2022 state of exception, but Bukele's actions suggest otherwise. Shortly after an independent investigative news outlet, *El Faro*, published videos corroborating U.S. prosecutors' claims, the Bukele government put out arrest warrants for several of its reporters. No less than 40 reporters have

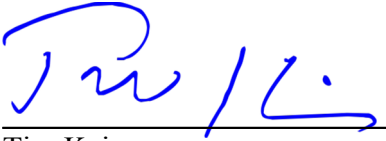
fled El Salvador in recent months, fearing persecution. Both the alleged links between the state and crime and the flight of journalists bear an uncanny, disturbing resemblance to dynamics in Venezuela and Nicaragua—and yet the Administration prefers to ignore it.

Bukele's concentration of legislative power, combined with his handpicked Supreme Court bench, has enabled sweeping anti-democratic constitutional and legal changes without meaningful opposition and has fomented a climate of fear: six out of ten Salvadorans, according to a recent survey by the Central American University (UCA), believe that those who criticize the government are "somewhat or very likely" to suffer negative consequences. Bukele and his cronies have systematically and aggressively restricted civic space – deploying unlawful surveillance against journalists – and have implemented a "state of exception" that suspends Salvadorans' basic civil liberties and concentrates power under the executive. Human rights groups such as Cristosal have faced harassment and threats, even while Bukele and his party have struck sweetheart deals with the same transnational criminal gangs the Trump Administration claims to oppose. So afraid is Bukele of criticism, rule of law, or any sort of civil society opposition that in the dark of night, he and his security services round up and detain leading anti-corruption and human rights lawyers like Ruth Lopez and Enrique Anaya - and without any comment or acknowledgement from the State Department.

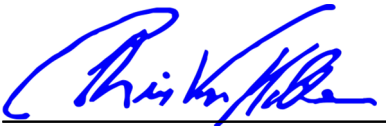
The Trump Administration's willful blindness to the Bukele regime's aggressive degradation of El Salvador's democratic institutions sends a message to despots around the region – including in Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua – that the United States is abandoning its role as a champion of freedom and democracy in the region and is instead willing to do business with any dictator willing to make a "deal." It demonstrates that under the Trump Administration, the United States is ready to pick favorites and that any petty Latin American despot can buy U.S. backing for pennies on the dollar.

It is deeply alarming that the Trump Administration continues to refuse to acknowledge the reality on the ground in El Salvador. A clear-eyed view of the region is essential to advancing our shared, bipartisan regional priorities of mitigating irregular migration, countering narcotics flows, curtailing gang activity and bolstering economic prosperity and democratic institutions. We urge the Administration to immediately reaffirm its commitment to prioritizing U.S. national security objectives, which undoubtedly include fostering democratic governance and human rights in El Salvador, rather than serving as an apologist for the very corruption and authoritarianism that threaten regional stability. The United States cannot afford to be complicit, whether by silence or by omission, in the collapse of El Salvador's democracy.

Sincerely,



Tim Kaine
United States Senator
Ranking Member,
Subcommittee on Western
Hemisphere, Transnational
Crime, Civilian Security,
Democracy, Human Rights,
& Global Women's Issues



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



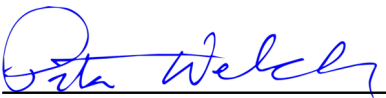
Richard J. Durbin
United States Senator



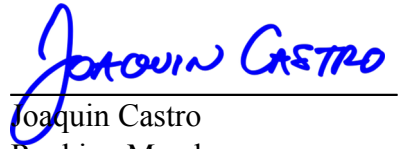
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



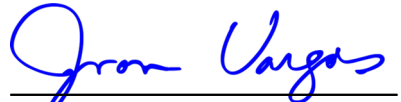
Peter Welch
United States Senator



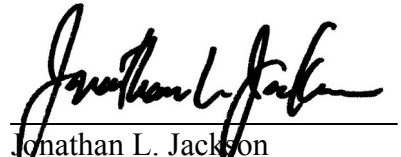
Joaquin Castro
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Western
Hemisphere
House Committee on Foreign
Affairs



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



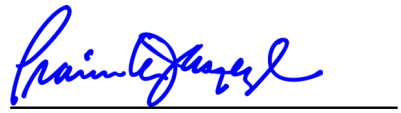
Juan Vargas
Member of Congress



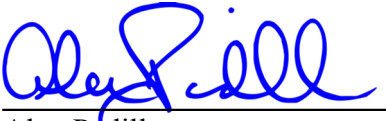
Jonathan L. Jackson
Member of Congress



Darren Soto
Member of Congress



Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Alex Padilla", is positioned above a horizontal line.

Alex Padilla

United States Senator