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El Milagro Bukele

**An Analysis of El Salvador's Newfound Status and its Influence
on Central America**

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Abstract

This paper analyses how El Salvador's and Nayib Bukele's policies since his election in 2019 have slowly but surely changed the political landscape in Central America. It is a qualitative case study of Central American states, using material from Academic articles, newspapers, and international reports. This essay uses two theoretical perspectives: status theory and securitisation theory. They provide adequate analysis in determining El Salvador's status regionally and internationally. Further, the theories enable the analysis to explain how and why other states in Central America have changed.

The result is that El Salvador's status within Central America has reached far and wide, from the northernmost state of Belize to the southernmost state of Panama. El Salvador's elevated status through their method of bukélism has impacted the political landscape in all of Central America. The correlation between El Salvador's status and regional political dialogue is apparent. Further, the analysis offers us an understanding of to what extent a state is willing to adopt El Salvadorian policies, often restricted by their democratic institutions. Overall, nearly all states in Central America have been impacted, indicating a monumental shift in our understanding of Central American politics.

Keywords: El Salvador, Organised-crime, Bukélism, Status, Central America

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1. Introduction

On the 27th of March 2022, following a series of homicides committed by criminal gangs, the Salvadorian government and its president Nayib Bukele declared a state of emergency. What followed was the suspension of several constitutional rights and mass arrests of suspected gang members. Under the name of *La Mano Dura* (The Iron Fist), the state of emergency carries on to this day. El Salvador, a traditional crime-ridden state, made use of the state of emergency to lower crime rates drastically. President Nayib Bukele has received widespread praise for drastically reducing gang-related violence. Some dubbed it *El milagro Bukele*—the Bukele miracle. (Bergengruen, 2024) Some have criticised Bukeles methods for mistreating prisoners and suspending civil liberties following the state of emergency. But the region of Central America is infested with high rates of organised crimes, with high figures of homicides, gang-related violence and extortion. As such, adequate measures in dealing with organised crime will inevitably gain interest from other regional states. The result of *Mano Dura* has garnered international attention and admirers in Central America. El Salvador's status as a state which was able to tackle its historic problem of gang violence impacts the politics of states in the region. This paper will analyse how El Salvador's widespread recognition impacts other states' political landscape. Using status theory and securitisation, we argue that El Salvador's status within Central America impacts the region dramatically. El Salvador has gained status through a political method called bukélism, and other states within Central America have experienced widespread changes to their political landscape due to El Salvador's rise in status.

1.2 Background

Bukeles and El Salvador's success has sent a shockwave through Central American states. More and more states seek to emulate El Salvador's success by adopting more hardline approaches in line with *Mano Dura*. It raises the question of how important status is, not only El Salvador's status but also the President and his regional image. In this section, we will provide background information on both Bukele and El Salvador's transformations.

1.2.1 The World's Coolest Dictator

At 37 years of age, Nayib Bukele became Latin America's youngest head of state. His age promised a fresh start and an end to divisions that had plagued El Salvador since its 1979-92

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civil war. (Meakem, 2024) His freshly founded party, *Nuevas Ideas*, ended 30 years of two-party control of the country, alternating between the right win alliance (ARENA) and the leftist group (FMLN). Two years after the initiation of *Mano Dura*, his popularity has soared, with even Bukele political opponents admitting they feel objectively safer in the country. (Meakem, 2024)

Bukele has branded himself as the: “world’s coolest dictator” and a “philosopher king”. (Bergengruen, 2024) He has become one of the world's most popular heads of state. At 43 years old, he has remade a nation which once had the highest rates of murder in the world. In 2024, Bukele was easily reelected, with approval ratings of around 90 per cent.

(Bergengruen, 2024) Bukele has ruled under a state of emergency since 2022, which has given him key powers. Bukele and his allies fired top judges and employed loyalists in courts, thus allowing him to dodge a constitutional prohibition and run successfully for a second term. These activities align closer to an authoritarian figure than a democratically elected figurehead, but Bukele has taken these actions with broad public support.

(Bergengruen, 2024) Not only do his policies grant him the public support he needs, but the president also has a significant internet presence on platforms X, which helps him whitewash public opinion with well-made videos. A brand which gives Bukele a distinct persona of a sense of coolness with light authoritarianism. (Meakem, 2024)

“There are 660 million Latin Americans who are seeing what is possible with clear common-sense criminal procedures” -Gustavo Villatoro, Security Minister.

(Bergengruen, 2024)

For Bukele's second inauguration in 2024, many high-level political figures travelled to San Salvador, including King Felipe VI from Spain and the U.S. president-elect's son, Donald Trump Jr. Even one of his harshest critics within the Biden administration is shifting his position. Thus, Bukele and the case of *Bukelismo* began spreading to other states in Central America. Regional politicians have raised points in emulating *El Milagro Bukele*. His name can be seen on campaigns in Latin America. (Bergengruen, 2024) Honduras has followed suit in declaring a state of emergency and announced the construction of a mega-prison for 20,000 people. Ecuador has also announced a government crackdown on criminal gangs in South America. (Bergengruen, 2024)

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1.2.2 El Salvador's Transformation

After the drastic changes in society from violence-ridden, unsafe to now a country which, according to Salvadoran government data, is safer than Canada. (Bergengruen, 2024) El Salvador markets itself modernly, hosting international events, and adopting Bitcoin as an official currency attracts cryptocurrency enthusiasts. El Salvador has showcased how authoritarianism, especially populism, can succeed (Bergengruen, 2024). Organisations such as the U.S. Travel Advisory have changed the status of El Salvador from “reconsider travel” to “exercise increased caution” (U.S. Travel Advisory, 2024), Indicating international recognition of increased safety in the country, even with criticism of the methods used. With increased regional and international recognition, El Salvador has become a model state within Central America for dealing with organised crime.

1.3 Purpose & Question

Long has Central America suffered from organised crime, as El Salvador stands out with its government crackdown, the politics of the authoritarian leader Nayib Bukele seem to spread to other political entities. This paper examines El Salvador's and Nayib Bukele's status as leaders in anti-organised gang policy. This study aims to establish a clear connection between El Salvador's newfound status and the adoption of policies in line with *mano dura* in other Central American political entities.

To what extent has El Salvador's elevated status affected states' political landscape in Central America?

The research is essential as it highlights the influence of status in international relations. While status theory is discussed, it rarely becomes a discussion of dominating IR theories. Furthermore, our specific branch of status theory is closely connected to psychological research on social identity theory. The aim is to integrate our discussion of status in relation to social identity theory. Lastly, we aim to contribute to the broader question of security politics in Central America. While Nayib Bukele and El Salvador have received large amounts of attention, specifically for their controversies regarding democratic backsliding, the attention rarely lies within the expected regional consequences of El Salvador's success.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Status Theory, SIT

Status in international relations (IR) is a diverse theory, with differing opinions on status within IR and the means to achieve it. The central premise is that status is an explanatory variable for state behaviour. Status as a variable is understood by its position viewed within a community based on its possession of collectively valued attributes and resources.

(Mcnamara, 2022, p. 1)

Status theory has four main approaches: rationalist, constructivist, status immobility, and social-psychological. (Mcnamara, 2022, p. 1) Set differences determine these four approaches. For this paper, we have selected the social-psychological approach to status theory. This approach analyses status dynamics in world politics through social-psychological lenses. It employs insights from social identity theory (SIT), a well-known strategy in social psychology. Larson and Shevchenko are two principal advocates for this view who have introduced SIT to international relations, especially in their recent book *Quest for Status*. (Götz, 2020, p. 233) Henceforth, our usage of status theory will be based on Larson and Shevchenkos's framework.

A couple of groundwork concepts need to be defined to understand status theory. The first is what status means. According to Larson, status is "collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes" (wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, demographic position, sociopolitical organization, and diplomatic clout). (Mcnamara, 2022, p. 3) Furthermore, status can only exist on a ranking, which could be a regional or world ranking. Within this ranking system exists a hierarchy. Larson's definition of status refers to an actor's position within a social hierarchy: "Status refers to ranking on a hierarchy". (Mcnamara, 2022, p. 3) Lastly, status is based on collective belief, meaning that status is collective beliefs about a state ranking on valued attributes. (Mcnamara, 2022, pp. 3-4) Valued attributes refer not strictly to material resources; instead, valued attributes are socially defined: (Mcnamara, 2022, p. 4)

An example of this would be El Salvador. In the Central and, to an extent, South American regions, security and politics dealing with organised crime have a significant focus. El Salvador has catapulted itself forward within the hierarchy of security politics within the region of Central and, to a lesser extent, South America.

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Why, then, do states pursue status? According to psychological research, humans care deeply about their standings as individuals and the social standing of the group they identify with. (Götz, 2020, p. 233) People want to feel good about themselves and their respective groups, and it provides sources of pride and well-being. In international relations, Larson and Shevchenko argue that policymakers and ordinary citizens care about their countries' standing in world politics. (Götz, 2020, p. 233)

An example of this would be nationalism; people attach themselves to their country and make it part of their social identity. Thus, people are inclined to argue for policies which elevate their countries' status. Status provides certain rights and benefits, but importantly, they are purely side benefits. The central driving force is the state's ambition to attain a high status and increase self-esteem. (Götz, 2020, p. 233) Simply put, status is not a means to an end; instead, status is the end itself.

As status is determined collectively, it can be both positional and club-good. Status as club-good determines their membership status within a specific group. Larson argues that status politics don't stop within a group, as there are different positions within groups, such as implying a form of primacy, leadership or "number one" status. (Mcnamara, 2022, p. 4)

States seek membership in specific clubs, but competition over status continues. Status as positional good refers to a socially scarce resource, and one group's status only increases if another declines. The best way to understand status is "as membership in (club good) and position within (positional good) a status community." (Mcnamara, 2022, p. 4)

Lastly, the higher powers expect lower-status states to defer to them. High status inspires voluntary deference from lower-status states. Deference includes respect for: "...spheres of influence, security, institutions, and prosperity as well as intangible goods such as adherence to norms and ideologies." (Mcnamara, 2022, p. 5)

How do states pursue status? Larson argues for three different approaches rooted in SIT.

When a state's leaders are dissatisfied with its status, they choose one of three alternatives.

Their strategy depends primarily on states' beliefs and understanding of the elite group's

permeability and the status hierarchy's security (stability and legitimacy). (Mcnamara, 2022,

p. 5) We have chosen to illustrate the three approaches in a diagram to make it more transparent:

Strategy	Stability and legitimacy	Permeability Yes/No
Social Mobility Strategy	Stable and legitimate	Yes
Social Competition	Unstable and illegitimate	No
Strategy of Creativity	Stable and legitimate	No

Social mobility entails emulating the higher group's values and practices with the goal of admission into the group. Social competition entails states aiming to equal or surpass the dominant group by the value their status is measured. Finally, the creativity strategy entails states adopting creative ways to change established socially accepted status markers. This could take the form of finding ways to reevaluate the meaning of negative characteristics or identifying new dimensions that lower status states could excel in. (Mcnamara, 2022, pp. 6-7) Multiple strategies could appear simultaneously; however, one usually dominates a state's strategy.

2.2 Securitisation

Ole Wæver, one of the Copenhagen School of International Relations founders, developed the securitisation theory, which provides a perspective on Bukele's security strategy.

Securitisation belongs to the constructivism subcategory of international relations theory.

This subcategory argues that the driving force behind international politics is not merely hard material or political power but that the structure is socially constructed and, therefore, driven by malleable ideas over time (Haughton, 2023, p. 1297).

The securitisation theory examines how specific issues are framed as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures, thus moving them from the realm of everyday politics to security. The defining aspect of securitisation is the speech act. An actor seeks to turn an issue into a security problem by addressing it verbally and justifying the action needed to combat it by steering the debate and discourse. Suppose the audience accepts the actor's framing of the issue. In that case, the securitisation process is complete, and the actor has effectively moved the debate by posing the phenomenon as a security issue. Thus, the actor emphasises the need to address the problem as it affects the state's populace's well-being (Haughton, 2023, p. 1298).

As a last note, Wæver describes how, after a state has completed the securitisation process, it must eventually return to everyday circumstances and initiate a process of desecuritisation

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(Haughton, 2023, pp.1299). In the first part of our analysis, we use the securitisation theory to supplement the status theory, strengthening our analysis.

3. Method & Material

3.1 Case Study

Case studies in political science draw from earlier meanings in fields such as psychology, which aims to capture details and provide insight into human behaviour. In social work, casework entails detailed reporting on a client's history and needs to support analysis for intervening through the helping process. (Yanow, 2008, p.1) Today, in political science, case study research examines anything from a person to a phenomenon. Establishing causal inferences and hypotheses. Case studies usually examine a single subject of analysis, but case studies can also be designed as comparative investigations to establish relationships between multiple subjects. (Nelson, 2023).

From conducting case studies, you can process tracing, which examines diagnostic pieces of evidence. The diagnostic pieces of evidence are called: causal process observation" (CPOs). (Crasnow, 2012, p. 658) CPOs are pieces of data that provide information about context, process, or mechanism and contribute distinctive leverage in causal inference. (Crasnow, 2012, p. 659) Process tracing is the overall research procedure that helps identify CPOs that provide valuable causal assessment information. It is essential to point out that the model does not argue that we can see direct causation but provides inference and a conclusion based on evidence and reasoning.

In this paper, we will use a case study method to analyse the states in Central America. Using case studies as our method, we can provide CPOs per case analysed, thus providing a conclusion based on our evidence and providing arguments inferred from the CPOs. While our analysis consists of multiple instances, it is a qualitative analysis.

As the study is a case study, we must define our variables. For the first section of the analysis, when discussing bukelism, we treat bukelism as our dependent variable and the independent variable being El Salvador and Bukeles actions and policies. The relation between them is simply that bukelism is defined by Bukeles and El Salvador's actions. For the second part of our analysis, the independent variable is El Salvador's status, and the dependent variable is the impact on the neighbouring states in Central America. The relationship is that El Salvador's status impacts the policy and discussion in surrounding states of Central America.

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3.2 Structure of the Analysis

We will start the analysis by analysing El Salvador in-depth and arguing for an adequate definition of “bukelism”. The second part of our analysis concerns the analysis of other Central American states. We will analyse each state individually, analyse them, and provide state-specific arguments on whether El Salvador's status has impacted them. Thus, our analysis consists of multiple cases and is a qualitative analysis. The first part, concerning bukelism, will be a highly in-depth analysis of El Salvador. While the second part concerns the overall trend in Central America, we will devote similar attention to each case, not going as in-depth as we did with El Salvador.

We concluded that incorporating the discussion into the analysis enables us to discuss our findings while providing immediate support for our analysis. This approach makes it easier to follow as we analyse multiple cases.

3.3 Material

Our material will be based on a wide array of materials. As El Salvador is a highly discussed topic in Western media and analysis, many academic and newspaper articles exist on it. Further, when discussing Central America as a region, we will also use reports from observers such as the European Union or the U.S. In the latter part of our analysis, when focusing on the other Central American states, we will use local newspapers, which are provided in English. Important to note is that we have not used any Spanish-only newspaper as we do not possess the required knowledge to translate articles from Spanish to English. When discussing some of the latter cases, there is, at points, a lack of first-hand sources. Thus, our analysis will purely depend on international newspaper analysis of the state. There are drawbacks to using international media, as while providing an overall good overview of the situation, they are primarily Western-centric and possess a certain degree of bias. For that reason, we have diversified most of our analysis with news sources from multiple countries and outlets.

3.4 Limitations of the Study

The study's main limitations are outlined in section 3.3. Additionally, our position as researchers based in Scandinavia—a region known for democratic stability and high human development—affects our perspective. Conducting research on a region experiencing

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democratic backsliding and lower HDI levels poses challenges in offering fully unbiased views on human rights and security politics, as these issues are less prevalent in Scandinavia.

4. Analysis & Discussion

4.1 Bukelism

This section will analyse and seek to define “Bukelism”. Although bukelism is termed an -ism, it is similar to other political ideologies but shares little with traditional ideologies on the left-right political spectrum. Instead, bukelism takes the form of a political method, encompassing the methods used by Nayib Bukele during his presidential reign in El Salvador since 2019. Throughout Bukele's reign, his methods have encompassed what the media calls “bukelism”. However, Western media has never attempted to create a general understanding of bukelism. In this section, we will analyse and define the key characteristics of Bukelism.

4.1.1 A Political Method

Bukelism is currently characterised as a political method. It encompasses El Salvador's political methods for securing power, combating organised crime, maintaining high approval ratings, and displaying a modern image domestically, regionally, and internationally.

4.1.2 Securing Domestic Power and Combatting Organised Crime Domestically

Bukelism has been linked to El Salvador's security principles since the state of emergency was adopted in 2022. To do this, Bukele first had to consolidate power. In February 2020, Bukele intimidated lawmakers by walking into the national parliament flanked by soldiers and police. (Bergengruen, 2024) Bukele cut the electoral seats from 84 to 60 in the legislative assembly. Finally, in May 2021, Bukele removed the attorney general and key opposition judges, replacing them with lawmakers from his party, *Nuevas Ideas*. (BBC, 2021)

The key characteristic of El Salvador's fight against organised crime is its state of emergency. It is a legal measure designed in response to catastrophic events such as pandemics no other Salvadoran government has ever used to deal with gangs. (Papadovassilakis, 2023a) It directly suspended constitutional rights for individuals. Further, the state of emergency enabled security forces to conduct arrests, restrict freedom of movement and intercept private communication. Other rights were suspended: the right to a defence lawyer and allowing

authorities to withhold information from detainees and lawyers. (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024, p. 88) After the state of emergency was initiated, mass arrests followed suit. The strategy of the government was and is to wipe out gangs through sheer force completely. In 2023, there were over 105,000 prisoners, equal to about 1.7 % of the country's population. (Papadovassilakis, 2023b) Due to a dramatic increase in prisoners, the state opened a highly modern mega-prison in early 2023. Bukele and his allies implemented legal reforms that hardened sentencing guidelines. Children as young as twelve could be imprisoned. (Human Rights Watch, 2022) Further, the legal reforms also enabled mass trials and outlawed spreading gang messages that “could generate a state of anxiety and panic in the population”. (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024, p. 88) While, in theory, this law seems natural, it primarily impacts the El Salvadorian media as it allows the government to go after the media. This is one of the three defining aspects of Bukelism: it suspends constitutional rights to combat gang violence, enables mass arrests, and aims to wipe out gangs. Lastly, legal reforms enable the state to fight organised crime.

4.1.3 Keeping Approval Ratings

A second characteristic of Bukelism is Nayib Bukele's ability to maintain high approval ratings, even while restricting constitutional rights and freedom of expression. Bukele achieves this by positioning himself as unaffiliated with traditional ideologies, branding his party "Nuevas Ideas" (New Ideas) (Linthicum, 2021). Despite his background in the leftist FMLN, he criticizes both the left and right for dividing the country since the civil war.

Bukele's popularity is driven by the unprecedented decrease in gang-related violence and his strategy of governing through public opinion. For instance, in 2021, he initially proposed constitutional reforms to legalize same-sex marriage and abortion in cases where the mother's life was at risk but later withdrew these reforms to align with public sentiment (Reuters, 2021). Early in his career, Bukele expressed support for LGBTQ+ rights but later reversed his stance, leading to accusations of opportunism (El Faro Editorial Board, 2023). In 2024, Bukele was reelected with 85% of the vote, campaigning on promises of economic growth and infrastructure development (Reuters, 2024), demonstrating his enduring popularity and the effectiveness of his populist approach.

4.1.4 Securitisation

Through the lens of securitisation, Bukele's actions reveal how he has constructed gang violence and crime as existential threats to Salvadoran society, thereby legitimising his controversial actions. Bukele has shown himself adept at using social media to promulgate his political agenda. Through his portrayal of organised gangs as a critical threat to the well-being of the Salvadoran people, he acts as the securitising actor. He uses speech acts, in Wæver's sense of the term (Haughton, 2023), to highlight the necessity of instituting harsh countermeasures to tackle gang violence. His argumentation centres on the need for public safety and that economic progress is unattainable without peace and order. This strategy has resonated strongly with the population, indicating that the audience has embraced the securitisation process, making the measures legitimate.

The implementation of harsh measures follows securitisation, as discussed earlier in the paper. It highlights how securitisation allows political leaders to use the issue of security to bypass traditional checks and balances and/or create a state of artificial panic in the country. This is not exclusive to non-democratic countries with a strong military dimension. Often cited as an example of securitisation that has led to questionable results is the American justification of the Iraq War on the grounds of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Schotthoefer & Byun, 2020).

Desecuritisation is the opposite process when the issue is framed through normal political means (Haughton, 2023). In Bukele's case, this would require a shift away from emergency measures toward addressing some of the root causes of gang violence (such as poverty, inequality and social issues.) At one point, El Salvador must adopt policies that enable desecuritisation.

4.1.5 Strengthening El Salvador's Image

The third and last defining feature of Bukelism is its goal of strengthening El Salvador's image with the populace in Central America and internationally. El Salvador, which finds itself in a region marked by persistent insecurity, ineffective governance and an unpopular incumbent, has made a name for itself in tackling organised crime. Bukele has managed to create an international brand for himself through social media. He has amassed over 6.1 million followers on X. In a survey from 2023, participants were asked to evaluate eleven

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sitting presidents across the Americas; Bukele received the highest score by far.

(Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024, pp. 84-85)

Adopting Bitcoin as a legal means of payment is part of building its image. Bitcoin gives El Salvador an image among technology and cryptocurrency enthusiasts. It also gives the country an image of modernity, adopting future standards.

Bukele has been adamant about using his presence on social media to attract attention worldwide. He has used social media such as YouTube, X and Facebook to spread political views in the president's favour. (Bergengruen, 2024)

4.2 El Salvador and Status

With our analysis of Bukelism completed, we now turn to the analysis of El Salvador's status from the perspective of status theory. Nayib Bukele has earned high popularity in El Salvador and Central America; the Bukele “milagro” has become one of Central America's most popular, visible, and influential political brands. (Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024, p. 85) As with status theory, the first step is to analyse and clearly define status in Central America.

As stated in 2.1, status is "collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes" (Mcnamara, 2022, p. 3). In Central America, these beliefs centre on establishing a safe state and having a modern, recognised image. El Salvador has achieved a higher status than neighbouring states in Central America, especially in tackling organised crime, producing a recognisable international image, and distancing itself from its problematic past.

Status exists only on a specific ranking out of a specific group. For this section, we argue that El Salvador has accomplished two things by elevating its status into two groups. In the first case, El Salvador competes with other states in Central America. Within this group, El Salvador rests at the top of the hierarchy in achieving a higher status than the other states.

Thus, El Salvador became the state that other states looked up to. Meanwhile, El Salvador joined another group through their newfound security. El Salvador has a mured rate of 2.4 per 100,000 inhabitants, the lowest of any country in the Western Hemisphere and almost a third lower than the world average. (Bergengruen, 2024; Flores-Macías, 2024) Therefore, one could argue that El Salvador has entered an international group of “safe” states. However, this perspective comes under scrutiny because Larson and Shevchenko specifically mentioned that status is a collective belief on multiple attributes. (Mcnamara, 2022, pp. 3-4) El Salvador

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has faced widespread criticism for its status in terms of human rights, which, according to Amnesty International: “Salvadoran authorities have restricted and violated fundamental rights”. (Amnesty International, 2023) Thus, while El Salvador has entered an international group of safe states, it is limited due to widespread condemnation of human rights abuses. Therefore, we conclude that El Salvador has entered a limited, international club of states that prefer heavy-duty-oriented approaches to tackling gang violence. Many of these states are found within the Americas as a whole. Overall, El Salvador has transcended the usual boundaries of what a Central American state can achieve. El Salvador has created the “golden standard”, so to speak, which it has set.

El Salvador and Bukele pursued status to improve their standing. In this way, they distanced themselves from a “bad bunch” within Central America. From being called the “murder capital of the world,” El Salvador has been transformed into the safest country in the Americas in terms of murder (Bergengruen, 2024). Their status can be termed club good, as they achieved a status within a limited international club. El Salvador has also achieved a positional good as they are at the top of the hierarchy within their regional status group.

Lastly, regarding strategy, the most fitting El Salvador policies and dialogue are based on a strategy of creativity.

“‘Everything in life has a cost,’ Bukele says, ‘and the cost of being called authoritarian is too small to bother me much.’” (Bergengruen, 2024)

El Salvador has disregarded UN human rights standards and approached its security politics by accepting the loss of freedom as a necessary evil in tackling organised crime. According to Bukele, authoritarianism is a small price to pay for securing and modernising the country. This strategy has worked for El Salvador, as they have set the tone for internal security.

4.2.1 Earlier Failure of Manu Dura

An essential aspect of El Salvador's elevated status is that the *region's manu dura policy* is nothing new. Multiple attempts have been made in Central America to implement *manu dura* security policies. In the early 2000s, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras implemented variants of *manu dura* programs to address organised crime.

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(Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, 2024, p. 83) Today, Honduras is currently engaged with similar policies inspired by El Salvador. However, these did or have not reduced crime; in most cases, it backfired. This trend was not only visible in Central America but also appeared in Mexico when then-president Felipe Calderó declared war on drug cartels in 2006. Further, in South America, national and subnational governments in Brazil and Columbia experienced similar policies. Today, Ecuador is similar to Honduras and is engaged with policies inspired by El Salvador. All aforementioned attempts have failed, and ongoing ones do not show signs of reversing this trend. El Salvador's model of bukélism sets an attractive trend as it is the first model of *mano dura* to succeed in Central America.

4.2.2 Permeability and Central American Unification

As discussed in 2.1, permeability into a club is essential when deciding on a strategy to elevate one's status. El Salvador and Bukele are within a club by themselves; Bukele encourages the ability to enter this group. Bukele has, on multiple occasions, championed the idea of uniting the Central American countries, thus reunifying from the dissolution in 1839. He argues that the unification would strengthen the region economically. (Williams, 2024) Further, Bukele has positioned himself as a leader for Central America as a region and argues that global powers prefer to keep the region divided. (Williams, 2024)

El Salvador is part of the *Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana* (Central American Integration System, SICA), the institutional framework for regional integration in Central America (European Parliament, 2017). The state is also part of the *Mercado Común Centroamericano* (Central American Common Market, CACM), which facilitates regional economic development through free trade and economic integration. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2014) El Salvador not only shows commitment to Central America as a whole but also actively works with other states to achieve further integration. This point is crucial as it displays a degree of interest in El Salvador to cooperate and improve the region of Central America. Thus, we conclude that accessibility into the regional group El Salvador finds itself in is something El Salvador encourages.

4.3 Reaction within Central America

In this section, we will apply our definition of Bukélism and our understanding of El Salvador's status to analyse how states have reacted to El Salvador's newfound status within

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Central America. This analysis will cover all Central American states, including Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. We will discuss whether the state has implemented policies similar to those in El Salvador or if there is a rejection of Bukelism. We will examine the rejection/acceptance of Bukelism with the help of status theory. The states will be examined individually, examining their political action and discourse around Bukele and El Salvador.

4.3.1 Belize

A former British colony on the northeastern coast of Central America with a population of around 400,000. Belize is still part of the commonwealth today, with Charles III being the official head of state. While Belize shares cultural ties to the Caribbean, it is geographically located in Central America. (Griffith and Alford, 2019) Belize had not conducted any widespread policy changes since El Salvador initiated its state of exception until 2024. In 2024, Belize has initiated two government crackdowns on gang-related violence. The latest one in June 2024 led to the arrest of nearly a hundred people. (Duncan, 2024) The emergency was initially implemented for 30 days but was extended to 90 days to “maximise its effectiveness.” (Duncan, 2024; Love Staff, 2025)

The prime minister of Belize, Johnny Briceño, argued that the emergency would not affect “law-abiding citizens” and give police the power to search homes without warrants and detain suspects for up to 90 days, giving police time and space to do proper investigations. (Duncan, 2024) Chester Williams, the police commissioner of Belize, echoed the prime minister's sentiment and said that the crackdown was necessary to restore law and order. The police officer commented on the crackdown's similarity to the Bukeles model in El Salvador.

“You think that Bukele is the most influential world leader for no reason? The state of emergency is something that many countries in the region are looking at because they have seen how effective it has worked in El Salvador, and every government wants their people to be safe” -Chester Williams, police commissioner. (Duncan, 2024)

The comments demonstrate the influence of bukellism in Belize specifically. Williams stated that Bukele is the most influential leader in the world and that a safe state is essential.

Belize's security policies reflect El Salvador's leadership status in Central America. Further,

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the comments also align with the securitisation theory. Bukele has shifted debate within Central America, and the government and police of Belize frame the debate as if bukeldom is the only solution. While Belize does not copy the state of emergency initiated in El Salvador on a 1:1 basis, we would still classify Belize's strategy as social mobility. Achieving club good within Central America is possible through emulating El Salvadorian practices.

4.3.2 Guatemala

A state in the northwest of Central America, bordering Mexico to the north and El Salvador to the south. It is the most populous country in Central America. (Stansifer and Anderson, 2019) Guatemala has had government crackdowns on organised crime before El Salvador's crackdown in 2022. Since then, Guatemala has not pursued security politics that replicate El Salvador.

Guatemala held presidential elections in 2023. Centre-left president Bernardo Arévalo won, and Sandra Torres of the right came in second. During the campaign, multiple candidates supported emulating the Bukele mode, building mega-prisons, and virtually eliminating gangs (Pérez, 2023). Sandra Torres, in particular, said that she would implement Bukele's strategies "to end the scourge of homicides, murders, and extortions in our country." (Pérez, 2023) Another top candidate, Zury Ríos Sosa, representing the far-right Valor-Unionist coalition, has also expressed admiration of Bukele; "We have to admit that President Bukele has had the character, the strength and the determination to apply the law." (Pérez, 2023) However, the winning candidate, Arévalo, has shown little interest in implementing harsher gang laws in Guatemala. Arévalo campaigned on a platform to combat corruption and preserve democracy within the country. This result came as a shock, and there were multiple reports that Arévalo could be blocked from taking power by far-right organisations. (Phillips, 2023) Guatemalan institutions are more robust in preventing democratic backsliding, as early into the election cycle, Guatemala's electoral authority disqualified candidates who were seen as threatening the established order. One candidate who was suspended was a Bukele admirer, Carlos Pineda. (Romero, Glatky and García, 2023)

Now that Arévalo has become president, his aims align more with democratic values, such as focusing primarily on combatting corruption. Arévalo also displays a more modest view of social issues. While opposing the legalisation of same-sex marriage or abortion, he argues that the state would not permit discrimination against people because of their sexual

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orientation. Such a view is relatively novel in Guatemala, and it stood in contrast to that of Sandra Torres, who used an anti-gay slur to refer to Arévalo supporters. (Romero, Glatsky and García, 2023)

Guatemala is also a case where Bukele policies have shifted the debate within the country. Bukelism has gained widespread recognition, politicians aim to adopt bukélism as it legitimises their policies, aligning with the securitisation theory. In the case of Guatemala, the newly elected president displays a contrast to Bukele and Bukelism. Guatemala aims to increase its status within the international democratic community, aligning more with Western liberal democracies and representing an alternative way to achieve status within Central America instead of following bukélism. Thus, they have engaged in a social mobility strategy aiming to enter an international club of democracies and a strategy of social competition in achieving status in Central America without adopting bukélism.

4.3.3 Honduras

Located in the east of Central America, sharing the most extensive border with El Salvador, with a population of around 10 million. While El Salvador and Honduras are different in size and population, they share similar criminal histories in the sense that they both have had huge problems with organised crime. Also, a state that deals with similar gangs in MS-13 and Barrio 18. (Umer Bin Ajmal, 2022)

Continuing with similarities, in the same year as El Salvador, Honduras implemented their government crackdown. In the same vein as El Salvador, their crackdown was a reaction to a massive gang-related massacre and shootings. (Associated Press in Tegucigalpa, 2023) President Xiomara Castro implemented a state of exception in December 2022, primarily affecting the capital, Tegucigalpa and the second-largest city, San Pedro Sula. (Pellegrini, 2023) After numerous extensions, the state of exception has been implemented in over half of the country's municipalities. Today, the state of exception still rages on, and the government has announced the creation of a new 20,000 mega-prison to support the ongoing crackdown. (Deutsche Welle, 2024) Surprisingly, these policies are a complete U-turn from the president's electoral promises. In Castro's campaign, she promised to stem organised crime with anti-corruption measures and a community police approach. (Pellegrini, 2023) Further, the government has doubled down on their *mano dura* strategy, claiming that the state of

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emergency has achieved: “...significant improvements in the security of our country”, Castro declared. (Woolston, 2024) However, these claims stand in contrast to the statistics provided by ACLED, which show that the crackdown has only caused a shift in where the gangs operate in the country. While the rate of homicides has dropped by a small fraction, the rate of reported extortion has gone up. (Pellegrini, 2023)

There are two significant similarities between Honduras and El Salvador. The first is the government crackdown, primarily inspired by the El Salvadorian crackdown less than nine months earlier. It is particularly telling that the president changed her aims after recognising the success of El Salvador's policies. The second telling is that of using state media, such as X, to spread propaganda to convince Hondurans to support the state of emergency, imitating some elements of bukeli's propaganda machines. In a post by Luis Redendo, a member of Congress, said in a post on X that Hondurans “should not listen” to anyone opposing the state of emergency. (Woolston, 2024) The president's change in views also indicates another definition of Bukelism: adopting policies based on popularity. Castro recognised the popularity of the bukele method and adopted it to keep approval ratings.

Honduras has not had the same success as El Salvador. It is pursuing a strategy of social mobility to achieve club-good within Central America. Honduras is the state within Central America with the most significant influence from El Salvador, emulating the state of exception and eliminating freedom of speech.

4.3.4 Nicaragua

Nicaragua is located south of El Salvador and is Central America's largest country, with around 7 million inhabitants. President Daniel Ortega has ruled since 2007 and is described as an authoritarian leader. In 2018, Ortega and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, violently suppressed peaceful protesters. The government has also forced up to 1,500 church and civil society groups, such as NGOs, to close. They target both protestant and catholic groups and have launched mass imprisonment strategies for such groups. (Pourahmadi and Schmitz, 2024) Ortega has also targeted multiple political opponents.

Nicaragua and its authoritarian President, Ortega, have not in any meaningful way been influenced by bukeli. At the same time, Ortega and Bukele have similarities in

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consolidating power and producing state-controlled media propaganda. Still, Ortega's centralisation of power occurred before Bukele rose to fame in El Salvador. Ortega utilises government crackdowns on political opponents and groups while securing power for himself and his party. Therefore, Nicaragua has neither adopted nor rejected Bukelism, as it has had little interest in emulating El Salvador.

What is the difference with Nicaragua? One can argue that Ortega and the government already believe they have reached a desired status within their group, with the group being left-leaning authoritarian states aiming to install their governance. If anything, Nicaragua exists within a similar group as Cuba, both states toppling US-backed governments during the Cold War era and establishing a revolutionary government. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016) Thus, Nicaragua already believes it has reached a club good within Latin America, which shares similarities with the Cuban and Venezuelan governments. Nicaragua pursued a mobility strategy to secure power during the Cold War through revolution, attempting to join the group of revolutionaries in Central and Latin America.

4.3.5 Costa Rica

It is located in South Central America, inhabiting around 5 million people. Costa Rica has the most democratic government in all Central American countries. Their constitution abolished the country's army and gave women the right to vote, as well as other socioeconomic and educational guarantees for its citizens. (Karnes and Elbow, 2019) Costa Rica has a peaceful reputation and commitment to human rights.

Therefore, it is surprising that Costa Rica bestowed its highest diplomatic honour to El Salvador's president. (Córdoba, 2024) As bukeliism should represent something Costa Rica would naturally be against, as it does not align with the values Costa Rica has presented in their politics. Costa Rica has experienced a rise in homicides, reaching a peak in 2023. The president of Costa Rica, Roldán Abúfars Chaves, said: "The fight against organized crime in any part of Central America is welcome. The reach and influence and bad example of the gangs must be reduced." (Córdoba, 2024)

On the whole, Costa Rica has not experienced in any way with the methods of bukeliism. This stems from generally low rates of gang violence, strong democratic traditions and institutions and a focus on human rights. Costa Rica does not need to elevate its status like El Salvador does. They have achieved widespread recognition in the Western democratic world. Its

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capital, San José, houses several NGOs and pro-democracy foundations. (Karnes and Elbow, 2019) There is no interest in adopting bukélism as it already exists within an established international status group and stands alone in Central America as a highly developed country. Costa Rica employed a social mobility strategy to adapt norms institutionalised by Western democracies, thus achieving club good.

4.3.6 Panama

Located in the southernmost part of Central America and North America as a whole, with a population of around four million people. Panama shares similarities with Costa Rica because they have strong democratic institutions and a strong rule of law. But in May 2024, the election of Jose Raul Mulino, described as a right-wing populist leader, disrupted the country. (Ghai, 2024)

Later, in 2024, Mulino and the Panamanian government announced that it would adopt similar policies as El Salvador in tackling organised crime. Operation Panama 3.0 aims to get rid of gangs. Mulino said on social media, “...Starting today we will go house by house, farm by farm, or wherever the gang members are hiding to put them where they belong: in jail.” (MercoPress, 2024) Further, Mulino has announced curfews from 21:00 to 06:00 in San Migeulito, an area within Panama City and the province of Colón. (Life in Panama, 2024) Thus adopting policies from El Salvador to combat organised crime in the country. Mulino’s framing and speech on social media resemble those of Bukele. The first stages of securitisation were initiated through Mulinio’s rhetoric. Legitimising their attack on gangs by posing them as a threat, emulating bukélism. Panama has shown early signs of adopting similar rhetoric and policies in line with Bukélism. While the country is trending towards adopting bukélism, Mulino has not yet adopted significant policy changes to provide a satisfactory conclusion on whether Panama aims to transform its security policies. We would argue that the country has adopted a weaker variant of the social mobility strategy for now. This might change depending on Mulino and the government's actions.

4.4 Conclusionary Discussion of 4.3

Our analysis of Central American States shows a couple of trends. Our analysis concludes that El Salvador has undoubtedly impacted Central American politics. The cases of Belize and Honduras, and to a lesser extent Panama, Costa Rica and even Guatemala, give us strong CPOs, which in turn provides us with an argument that bukélism has a grip on the region.

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The only outlier is Nicaragua, which has displayed little interest in emulating the Bukele model. Guatemala displays similar signs, but even then, there are clear signs of the significance of Bukele's policies in discussions in Guatemala. Our findings of Costa Rica were surprising. One would expect that a country with such strong democratic institutions established with international democratic organisations would condemn El Salvador and bukélism. Instead, they praised Bukele for his successes within security politics, not to mention the price El Salvador had to pay regarding human rights. Lastly, Panama could represent the early phase of Bukélism in the country, as President Mulino has only been in power for less than a year.

Interestingly enough, all states in Central America's leaders have different ideological backgrounds and beliefs. There were no concrete examples of "liquid ideologies" that Bukele is a proponent of in the other Central American states. But otherwise, there is a mixture of political affiliations in the other states. Surprisingly enough, Honduras and Belize, the states that have implemented similar crackdowns to El Salvador, have centre-left/social democratic party affiliation. In contrast, Costa Rica and Panama have centre-right/right-leaning political leaders. While harsher government policies tackling organised crime are usually characteristic of the centre-right/right of the political spectrum, this does not seem to be the case in Central America. In this case, Guatemala is the only state that follows its traditional characteristics on the centre-left. Overall, the analysis follows what status theory predicts regarding how states act to attain a higher status and club good or positional good. Our definition of Bukélism helped identify similar characteristics in other states.

6. Conclusion

In a century marked by democratic backsliding and attacks on democratic institutions through non-democratic means, El Salvador and Central America illustrate how these processes can spread under the guise of security politics. This paper analyzed El Salvador's influence on the region, identifying key aspects of bukélism and its strength in shaping Central America's political landscape. By focusing on the role of status in international relations—often overlooked in political science—we highlight its impact on dialogue, policymaking, and the pursuit of status itself.

Bukélism's rising popularity has brought dramatic political changes to Central America, with increasing influence on neighboring states. While existing analyses explore its spread across

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Central and Latin America, this paper offers an alternative explanation. Future research should expand this analysis to other regions, such as the Caribbean or Spanish-speaking South America, and examine the reactions of the traditional left/right political spectrum to bukelism, particularly the adoption of its methods by left-leaning politicians.

Finally, this paper concludes that Central American states have undergone significant political shifts due to El Salvador's rise in status.

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