



Democratically Legitimised Repression:

*A Discursive Study of Security, Legitimacy, and Exceptional Governance
in El Salvador.*

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Abstract

This thesis examines how exceptional security measures are discursively constructed and legitimised in El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele during the ongoing state of exception introduced in March 2022. While the suspension of constitutional guarantees and implementation of mass detention policies have generated extensive criticism from human rights organisations and international actors, the regime has maintained exceptionally high levels of public support. This raises the question of how coercive and extraordinary measures become accepted and legitimised within a democratic context.

The study aims to analyse how exceptional security measures, particularly the state of exception, are constructed and legitimised in political discourse in El Salvador. Drawing on securitisation theory, theories of populism and penal populism, and scholarship on emergency power and the state of exception, the thesis develops an integrated analytical framework to examine the relationship between insecurity, legitimacy, and political authority.

Methodologically, the study combines qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis of presidential speeches and tweets, legal texts, Legislative Assembly communications, and a limited selection of public responses.

The findings demonstrate that exceptional measures are legitimised through three interconnected discursive processes: the construction of crisis and threat, the redefinition of concepts such as freedom and legality, and the production of legitimacy through popular sovereignty and the delegitimation of critique. The study argues that popular support for the regime is not produced *despite* the suspension of rights, but through discursive processes that present exceptional governance as necessary, lawful, democratic, and morally justified.

Keywords: El Salvador; Nayib Bukele; state of exception; securitisation; populism; emergency power; legitimacy; security; human rights

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1. Introduction

Since 2022, El Salvador has been governed under a repeatedly renewed state of exception introduced in response to gang violence. The government has suspended constitutional guarantees and implemented mass detention policies on an unprecedented scale, while simultaneously presenting these measures as necessary for public security, peace, and national liberation. However, despite extensive criticism from human rights organisations and the international community, the regime has maintained exceptionally high levels of public support.

This thesis examines how exceptional security measures in El Salvador are discursively constructed, justified, normalised, and legitimised under President Nayib Bukele. The combination of extraordinary coercive measures and broad public approval raises important questions about how exceptional power is justified and normalised in contemporary political discourse. Rather than sparking a legitimacy crisis, exceptional measures in El Salvador are publicly framed as democratic, lawful, and morally and physically necessary. The Salvadoran case, therefore, challenges conventional assumptions that states of exception inherently undermine democratic legitimacy or popular consent. Instead, it suggests that coercive governance may be normalised not *despite* democratic discourse, but *through* it.

More specifically, this thesis seeks to answer the following research question: *How are exceptional security measures, particularly the state of exception, constructed and legitimised in political discourse in El Salvador under President Nayib Bukele?* To answer this question, the analysis is guided by three sub-questions: *How is the situation framed as an emergency that demands exceptional measures? How is the suspension of rights discursively transformed into lawful and democratic protection? And how is legitimacy produced, amplified, and defended across official communication and public discourse?*

Importantly, this thesis does not seek to evaluate the effectiveness or morality of the policies themselves. Instead, it examines how exceptional measures are made meaningful, justified, and acceptable within political and public discourse. The thesis explores how support for the regime of exception becomes linked to the discursive

reframing of concepts such as freedom, security, legality, and popular sovereignty, through which exceptional measures are presented as necessary and legitimate.

The case is also analytically significant because it raises broader questions about the relationship between security, democracy, and political authority. Existing scholarship on El Salvador has extensively documented rights violations under the state of exception, while many studies have also highlighted the exceptionally high public approval rates for the regime. Nevertheless, relatively few scholars have examined why such levels of support exist and how they are discursively produced and justified. More broadly, theoretical scholarship has widely examined securitisation and threat construction, populism and the division between “the people” and “the enemy”, as well as emergency power and states of exception. However, these perspectives are often studied separately, even though they address interconnected dynamics of insecurity, legitimacy, and political authority. This thesis addresses the research gap by analysing how exceptional governance is discursively legitimised in El Salvador. To do so, it combines insights from securitisation theory, populism and penal populism, framing and labelling theory, and scholarship on emergency power and the state of exception. Rather than treating these perspectives separately, the thesis develops an integrated analytical framework for examining how insecurity, legitimacy, coercion, and political authority are constructed and justified in discourse.

Methodologically, the thesis employs qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis to examine presidential speeches and tweets, Assembly debates, legal texts, and a more limited selection of public responses. Particular attention is paid to framing strategies, metaphors, securitising language, populist constructions, and the discursive production of legitimacy. This combination allows the thesis to identify recurring patterns in the material and to analyse how language shapes political meaning, power relations, and perceptions of legitimacy.

Structurally, the thesis is organised into six chapters. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 provides contextual background on El Salvador, gang violence, and the state of exception, while also reviewing existing research on the Salvadoran case, and identifying the research gap addressed by this study. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework, focusing on securitisation, populism, penal populism, and theories of

emergency power and exception. Chapter 4 presents the methodological approach, including the research design, data selection, analytical procedure, and limitations of the study. Chapter 5 contains the analysis, organised around three interconnected dimensions: the construction of the emergency, the justification and normalisation of exceptional measures, and the production and defence of legitimacy. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes by summarising the findings, discussing the theoretical contributions of the thesis, and reflecting on the broader implications of the Salvadoran case for understanding the relationship between security, democracy, and exceptional power.

2. Context, Case, and Existing Research

This chapter provides the necessary background information for a correct understanding of the Salvadoran state of exception. It first outlines the historical and political context surrounding gang violence, punitive security policies, and the introduction of the emergency regime in 2022. It then shortly examines the legal framework, the consequences and critiques of the state of exception, and the reasons why El Salvador constitutes an analytically relevant case. Finally, the chapter reviews existing scholarship on the Salvadoran case and identifies the research gap addressed by this thesis.

2.1 El Salvador before the state of exception

El Salvador's contemporary security politics cannot be understood without considering the country's post-civil war context and the consolidation of gang structures in the decades following the civil war. Although the 1992 Peace Accords¹ formally ended twelve years of armed conflict and initiated a transition to electoral democracy, the post-war state remained institutionally fragile and socially unequal. Despite reforms such as demilitarisation and the creation of the Policía Nacional Civil (National Civil Police or PNC), weak institutions, limited accountability, socio-economic marginalisation, and widespread insecurity persisted.²

During the post-war period, gangs ("maras" or "pandillas") appeared as key security actors. The contemporary organisation of gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 was strongly shaped by migration and deportation processes between El Salvador and the United States. Large numbers of Salvadorans who fled to the United States during the civil war became involved in gang structures in Los Angeles and were later deported back to El Salvador during the 1990s. In a context of institutional fragility

1 United Nations Peacemaker, 'Chapultepec Agreement', *United Nations*, 1992, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/sv920116chapultepecagreement.pdf> (accessed 4 March 2026).

2 S. Wolf, *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador*, 1st edn., Austin, University of Texas Press, 2017, pp.1-2.

and limited economic opportunities, these groups consolidated into organised criminal networks.³

Over time, gangs expanded their territorial control through extortion, surveillance, and violence, exercising significant influence over everyday life in many communities. Homicides, extortion, and organised criminal activity became defining features of public insecurity.⁴ In 2015, El Salvador recorded one of the highest homicide rates in the world, reaching 103 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.⁵ The persistence and visibility of violence positioned crime and public security at the centre of political debate.

Successive governments responded primarily through punitive security strategies. Beginning with the Mano Dura (“iron fist”) policies introduced in 2003, governments expanded police powers and adopted increasingly repressive anti-gang measures. Although these policies proved politically popular, critics argued that they prioritised short-term repression over structural reformation and prevention while enabling arbitrary detentions and human rights abuses.⁶ Despite some attempts at negotiation, most notably the 2012 gang truce, repression remained the predominant strategy of gang control.⁷

By the late 2010s, El Salvador had experienced decades of extreme violence, repeated punitive security initiatives, and widespread public frustration with perceived state incapacity.^{8 9} Security policy had become deeply politicised, and demands for decisive action against gangs occupied a central place in electoral competition. It was within this context of prolonged insecurity, punitive governance, and weak institutional trust that the state of exception was introduced in March 2022.

3 S. Wolf, *Mano Dura*, pp.8-10.

4 S. Wolf, *Mano Dura*, p.2.

5 D. Gagne, ‘InSight Crime’s 2015 Homicide Round-up’, *InSight Crime*, 2016, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/insight-crime-homicide-round-up-2015-latin-america-caribbean/> (accessed 3 March 2026).

6 S. Wolf, *Mano Dura*, p.3

7 C. Van der Borgh, ‘Government Responses to Gang Power: From Truce to War on Gangs in El Salvador’, *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies - Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, vol.107, no. January-June, p.2.

8 Los Angeles Times, ‘Historias para entender los 1.380 asesinatos en dos meses en El Salvador’, *Los Angeles Times*, 2 March 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/internacional/articulo/2016-03-02/hoyla-int-historias-para-entender-los-1-380-asesinatos-en-dos-meses-en-el-salvador-20160302>, (accessed 3 March 2026).

9 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, ‘Victims of Intentional Homicide’, *United Nations*, 2023, <https://data.unodc.org/datareport/hom-victim>, (accessed 3 March 2026).

2.2 The introduction of the state of exception and the legal framework

Between 25 and 27 March 2022, El Salvador experienced one of the deadliest outbreaks of violence in recent years, with 87 people killed within 72 hours. On 26 March alone, 62 homicides were recorded, making it the deadliest day since the end of the civil war.¹⁰ The killings were widely attributed to the country's main gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18. Nevertheless, some analysts and investigative journalists later suggested that the violence may have been linked to the collapse of negotiations between the government and gang leadership.¹¹

The government's response was immediate. On 27 March 2022, the Legislative Assembly, where President Nayib Bukele's allies hold a large majority, approved a state of exception with 67 votes out of 84 deputies.¹² Initially authorised for thirty days, the measure suspended several constitutional guarantees, including aspects of freedom of association, due process protections, limits on administrative detention, and the inviolability of communications. Security forces were granted increased powers to detain individuals suspected of gang affiliation without an arrest warrant.¹³

In the following days, the Legislative Assembly also approved a series of legal reforms facilitating large-scale detentions. Amendments to the penal code expanded the use of pre-trial detention and broadened legal provisions relating to gang membership and "illicit association", including for minors.¹⁴

The policy was implemented on a massive scale. According to official figures, more than 20,000 people were arrested within the first weeks of the operation, while by the

10 A. Papadovassilakis, 'Gang Murder Rampage Sends Shockwaves Through El Salvador Government', *InSight Crime*, 2022, <https://insightcrime.org/news/gang-murder-rampage-sends-shockwaves-through-el-salvador-government/> (accessed 8 March 2026).

11 Human Rights Watch, 'El Salvador: Events of 2022', *Human Rights Watch*, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/el-salvador>, (accessed 8 March 2026).

12 mn, 'El Salvador: Congreso decreta régimen de excepción', *DW*, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/es/el-salvador-congreso-decreta-r%C3%A9gimen-de-excepci%C3%B3n/a-61272558>, (accessed 8 March 2026).

13 Human Rights Watch, 'El Salvador: Evidence of Serious Abuse in State of Emergency', *Human Rights Watch*, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/02/el-salvador-evidence-serious-abuse-state-emergency>, (accessed 8 March 2026).

14 L. J. Abrego and S. Osuna, 'The State of Exception: Gangs as a Neoliberal Scapegoat in El Salvador', *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol.29, no.1, 2022, p.61.

end of 2022 more than 60,000 individuals had been detained under the state of exception. Human rights organisations reported that many arrests were carried out in low-income neighbourhoods and were sometimes based on limited evidence, such as anonymous accusations or suspicions of gang affiliation.¹⁵ These detentions contributed to a dramatic increase in the prison population, which reached nearly 100,000 inmates by late 2022, far exceeding the official prison capacity.¹⁶

Although initially presented as a temporary emergency measure, the state of exception has been repeatedly renewed by the Legislative Assembly. At the time of writing (May 2026), it has been extended 50 times¹⁷ and remains in force. What was introduced as an exceptional response to a short-term crisis has therefore evolved into a prolonged and routinised form of security governance.

The implementation of these measures was grounded in an existing constitutional framework which regulates emergency powers. Article 29 of the Salvadoran Constitution permits the temporary suspension of certain constitutional guarantees during exceptional circumstances, including war, rebellion, catastrophe, epidemic, or “serious disturbances of public order”.¹⁸ The rights that may be suspended include freedom of association, aspects of due process, limits on administrative detention, and protections concerning private communications.¹⁹

On 27 March 2022, the Legislative Assembly adopted Decree No. 333, formally declaring a nationwide state of exception in response to what were described as serious disturbances caused by criminal groups threatening public security and peace.²⁰ The

15 Human Rights Watch, ‘El Salvador: Evidence of Serious Abuse in State of Emergency’.

16 Human Rights Watch, ‘El Salvador: Events of 2022’.

17 Asamblea Legislativa, ‘Nueva prórroga del régimen de excepción reforzará reducción de la criminalidad’, *Asamblea Legislativa*, 2026, <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/13933>, (accessed 4 May 2026).

18 Asamblea Legislativa, ‘Constitución de la República de El Salvador’, *Asamblea Legislativa*, 1983, Art. 29, <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/sites/default/files/2025-12/1.%20CONSTITUCI%C3%93N%20DE%20LA%20REP%C3%9ABLICA.pdf>, (accessed 10 February 2026).

19 Alianza Americas, ‘El Salvador’s State of Exception, Explained’, *Alianza Americas*, 2022, <https://www.alianzaamericas.org/tool/el-salvadors-state-of-exception-explained#:~:text=Updated:%20April%2027%2C%202022,defense%20and%20freedom%20of%20movement>, (accessed 10 March 2026).

20 Asamblea Legislativa, ‘Decreto 333’, *Asamblea Legislativa*, 2022, Art.2, <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/sites/default/files/documents/decretos/5B3C0D42-3E35-4AB4-9EAF-8564F62B3E53.pdf>, (accessed 10 February 2026).

decree suspended several constitutional guarantees²¹ and authorised the emergency regime for an initial period of 30 days²², with the possibility of renewal if the underlying circumstances persisted.²³ Since then, the Legislative Assembly has repeatedly renewed the measure on a monthly basis, gradually transforming what was constitutionally framed as a temporary emergency response into a prolonged exceptional legal regime. Some legal scholars and human rights organisations have argued that the constitutional framework provides limited mechanisms for restricting repeated renewals as long as authorities continue to use ongoing insecurity as justification.^{24 25}

2.3 Consequences and critiques

The implementation of the state of exception has generated continuous criticism from human rights organisations and international institutions.²⁶ Since the introduction of the measure, security forces, including the National Civil Police and the armed forces, have carried out large-scale raids and mass detentions across the country. Human rights

21 Asamblea Legislativa, 'Decreto 333', Art. 4.

22 Asamblea Legislativa, 'Decreto 333', Art. 5.

23 Asamblea Legislativa, 'Constitución de la República de El Salvador', Art. 30.

24 J. Recinos, 'The Salvadoran State of Emergency: A Comparative Analysis of Methods for Constitutional', *Columbia Undergraduate Law Review*, 2024, <https://www.culawreview.org/journal/the-salvadoran-state-of-emergency-a-comparative-analysis-of-methods-for-constitutional#:~:text=While%20the%20state%20of%20emergency,and%20rights%20to%20criminal%20defendants>, (accessed 10 March 2026).

25 Inter-American Commission On Human Rights, 'Report State of Emergency and Human Rights in El Salvador', *OAS*, 2024, p.47, [https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2024/report_stateemergencyhumanrights_elsalvador%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/2024/report_stateemergencyhumanrights_elsalvador%20(1).pdf), (accessed 10 March 2026).

26 For example: Amnesty International, 'El Salvador: State of emergency has created a perfect storm of human rights violations', *Amnesty International*, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/04/el-salvador-state-of-emergency-human-rights-violations/>, (accessed 11 March 2026).

Human Rights Watch, 'El Salvador: Evidence of Serious Abuse in State of Emergency', *Human Rights Watch*, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/02/el-salvador-evidence-serious-abuse-state-emergency>, (accessed 8 March 2026).

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 'IACHR reiterates concern over prolonged and improper use of state of emergency in El Salvador', *OAS*, 2025, https://www.oas.org/fr/CIDH/jsForm/?File=/en/iachr/media_center/PReleases/2025/162.asp&utm_content=country-slv&utm_term=class-mon, (accessed 11 March 2026).

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'El Salvador state of emergency', *United Nations*, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/03/el-salvador-state-emergency#:~:text=The%20state%20of%20emergency%20has,other%20forms%20of%20ill%2Dtreatment>, (accessed 11 March 2026).

organisations have reported thousands of alleged violations linked to arbitrary detention, lack of due process, and abuse in custody.²⁷

Concerns have been raised regarding the legality and procedures surrounding many of the arrests. Reports indicate that detentions have frequently been carried out without arrest warrants and that detainees and their families were often not informed of the reasons for arrest or the location of detention.²⁸ Some arrests were reportedly based on weak or questionable indicators, including anonymous accusations, tattoos, or perceived suspicious behaviour.²⁹ Critics have also argued that expedited judicial proceedings, extensive use of pretrial detention, and large-scale hearings have weakened due process guarantees and limited access to legal defence.^{30 31}

The emergency regime has also had significant consequences for the prison system. Mass arrests drastically increased the prison population, giving El Salvador one of the highest incarceration rates in the world.³² In response, the government expanded detention infrastructure, including the construction of the Center for the Confinement of Terrorism (CECOT).³³ Nevertheless, human rights organisations have reported severe overcrowding, deteriorating prison conditions, and deaths in state custody.^{34 35}

Despite continuous international criticism, the state of exception continues to enjoy strong domestic support. Following the introduction of the state of exception, homicide rates declined sharply and public perceptions of security improved. Opinion polls consistently show high approval ratings for President Nayib Bukele and for the government's anti-gang policies.³⁶

27 V. J. Medrano Meraz, 'The State of Emergency in El Salvador: Curtailing Individual Rights in the Name of Tackling Gang Violence', *Berkeley Latine Journal of Law & Policy*, vol.34, no.1, 2024, p.93.

28 Human Rights Watch, 'El Salvador: Evidence of Serious Abuse in State of Emergency'.

29 S. Wolf, 'El Salvador's State of Exception: A Piece in Nayib Bukele's Political Project', *LASA Forum*, vol.54, no.4, 2023, p.36.

30 V. J. Medrano Meraz, 'The State of Emergency in El Salvador: Curtailing Individual Rights in the Name of Tackling Gang Violence', p.95.

31 Observatorio Universitario de Derechos Humanos, 'Informe anual 2022 – El estado de los Derechos Humanos en El Salvador', p.193.

32 S. Wolf, 'El Salvador's State of Exception: A Piece in Nayib Bukele's Political Project', p.37.

33 V. J. Medrano Meraz, 'The State of Emergency in El Salvador: Curtailing Individual Rights in the Name of Tackling Gang Violence', pp.95-96.

34 V. J. Medrano Meraz, 'The State of Emergency in El Salvador: Curtailing Individual Rights in the Name of Tackling Gang Violence', p.96.

35 S. Wolf, 'El Salvador's State of Exception: A Piece in Nayib Bukele's Political Project', p.37.

36 S. Wolf, 'El Salvador's State of Exception: A Piece in Nayib Bukele's Political Project', p.37.

This tension between widespread domestic support and continuous international criticism has made the Salvadoran state of exception one of the most debated contemporary examples of security policy and emergency governance.

2.4 Why El Salvador is an analytically relevant case

The Salvadoran state of exception constitutes a particularly relevant case for examining the relationship between insecurity, exceptional measures, and political legitimacy. The coexistence of highly coercive security policies with widespread public support raises important questions about how exceptional power is justified and accepted within a democratic context.

El Salvador represents an extreme case in terms of both the scale of repression and the visibility of its political discourse. Since 2022, the emergency regime has involved mass arrests, the suspension of constitutional rights, and the enlargement of executive power. At the same time, political communication surrounding these measures has been highly explicit, making it possible to analyse how threats, enemies, legitimacy, and security are discursively framed. The case therefore provides a particularly useful context for examining processes of securitisation, populism, and emergency governance.

What makes the Salvadoran case especially significant is the contradiction between persistent international criticism and exceptionally high domestic approval. Despite extensive criticism from human rights organisations and international institutions, Bukele's security policies continue to enjoy broad public support. This creates a central analytical puzzle: how are highly coercive and exceptional measures not only implemented, but also legitimised and defended as democratic, necessary, and justified?

The relevance of the case also extends beyond El Salvador itself. Similar discursive logics can be observed in contexts such as the United States' "war on terror"³⁷ and Duterte's anti-drug campaign in the Philippines³⁸, where governments frame certain

37 See, for example:

B. Buzan, 'Will the "Global War on Terrorism" Be the New Cold War?' *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, vol. 82, no. 6, 2006, pp.1101-1118.

R. Van Munster, 'The War on Terrorism: When the Exception Becomes the Rule', *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, vol.17, 2004, pp.141-153.

38 See, for example:

groups as existential threats, justify extraordinary measures, and appeal to public fears and demands for order. While these cases differ in important respects, they share a tendency to present coercive policies as necessary, justified, and supported by “the people”.

From this perspective, El Salvador can be understood not only as a national case study, but also as part of a broader global trend in which security, populism, and emergency governance increasingly intersect. Having established the empirical and analytical relevance of the Salvadoran case, the following section turns to existing research on the state of exception and identifies the gap addressed by this thesis.

2.5 Existing research on El Salvador’s state of exception

A growing body of literature has examined the Salvadoran state of exception, particularly its implications for violence, democracy, and the rule of law. Most of this scholarship adopts a critical perspective, portraying the government’s security strategy as both repressive and potentially unsustainable.

One important strand of scholarship questions the long-term effectiveness of Bukele’s security strategy. Daniel Pantaleón Pacheco argues that the current policies reproduce earlier “mano dura” approaches that failed to address the structural causes of violence, including economic exclusion and family fragmentation.³⁹ He also describes this approach as a form of punitive populism, in which crime is framed as “bad behaviour” requiring uncompromising punishment rather than as the product of broader social conditions.⁴⁰ Similarly, María Fernanda Obando-Sánchez argues that Bukele’s repressive policies have intensified social conflict and contributed to radicalisation and

D. A. Reyes, ‘The Spectacle of Violence in Duterte’s “War on Drugs”’, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol.35, no.3, 2016, pp.111–137.

M. Thompson, K. Agojo, and J. Li Liang, ““Framing” the Opposition: The Limits of Mobilization against Duterte’s “War on Drugs” in the Philippines’, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol.56, no.2, 2024, pp.253–276.

39 D. Pantaleón Pacheco, ‘La nueva política criminal contra las maras en El Salvador’, *Revista Científica Internacional*, vol.7, no.1, 2024, p.2.

40 D. Pantaleón Pacheco, ‘La nueva política criminal contra las maras en El Salvador’, p.14.

resistance against a state seeking to eliminate criminalised groups.⁴¹ Alberto Martínez Reyes likewise contends that repression-based security strategies generate new forms of exclusion and marginalisation, particularly among Salvadoran youth, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty, stigmatisation, and structural violence.⁴² Collectively, these authors portray the state of exception as a strategy that may reduce violence in the short term while deepening long-term social and political risks.

A second, substantial branch of literature examines the implications of the state of exception for democratic governance in El Salvador. Much of this scholarship argues that the emergency regime has accelerated processes of democratic erosion through the concentration of power in the executive, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, and the gradual transformation of the political system into a form of electoral or competitive authoritarianism. Several authors focus specifically on the deterioration of democratic institutions and accountability mechanisms. Salvador Martí i Puig and Daniel Rodríguez Suárez describe the current trajectory as a process of “de-democratisation”⁴³ marked by the weakening of both horizontal and vertical accountability through the co-optation of institutions, electoral reforms, pressures on opposition actors, and restrictions on independent media.⁴⁴ Similarly, Sonja Wolf argues that Bukele’s government maintains a façade of democratic legitimacy while simultaneously eroding judicial independence, institutional separation of powers, and press freedom.⁴⁵ Arturo Flores López likewise analyses El Salvador as a case of contemporary democratic backsliding, arguing that the growing concentration of executive power and the weakening of local institutions have disrupted the balance between national and subnational governance.⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Rafael A. Molina argues that the concentration of political power has dismantled institutional safeguards

41 M. F. Obando-Sánchez, ‘Violencia e inseguridad social en El Salvador y Costa Rica: un análisis comparativo de las políticas públicas de N. Bukele y R. Chaves’, *Revista Comunicación*, vol.33, no.1, 2024, pp.135,138.

42 A. Martínez Reyes, ‘De la violencia de las pandillas a la violencia del estado: la nueva realidad en El Salvador’, *América Latina Hoy*, vol.95, 2025, pp.8-9.

43 S. Martí i Puig and D. Rodríguez Suárez, ‘Nayib Bukele, seguridad a cambio de democracia’, *Más Poder Local*, vol.56, 2024, pp.142, 143.

44 S. Martí i Puig and D. Rodríguez Suárez, ‘Nayib Bukele, seguridad a cambio de democracia’, p.152.

45 S. Wolf, ‘El Salvador under Nayib Bukele: the turn to electoral authoritarianism’, *Rev. cienc. polít. (Santiago)*, vol.44 no.2, 2024, pp.295, 297.

46 A. Flores López, ‘Chapter 10: Looking at Populism and Democratic Backsliding in the Latin American Context: The Case of El Salvador’, in M. Lackowska et al. (eds.), *Cities Against Democratic Backsliding - Evidence from Europe and Beyond*, Bristol, Bristol University Press, 2026, p.163.

and consolidated a form of punitive populism that generates fear and uncertainty among political opponents and critics of the government.⁴⁷

A related strand of literature focuses more explicitly on authoritarian consolidation and the erosion of the rule of law. Julia Gavarrete argues that Bukele has progressively dismantled democratic institutions established after the 1992 Peace Accords, particularly through the weakening of judicial independence.⁴⁸ Likewise, Tommie S. Montgomery and Thomas Boerman contend that the state of exception functions not only as a security strategy but also as a mechanism that facilitates authoritarian governance and corruption under the guise of anti-gang policy.⁴⁹ They maintain that the emergency regime legitimises practices that weaken democratic structures while obscuring broader patterns of executive abuse and impunity.⁵⁰ Benjamin Kurylo similarly highlights the concentration of power under Bukele, linking democratic erosion to opaque management of public resources and the weakening of oversight institutions.⁵¹ Similar critiques also emphasise the implications of the state of exception for international law and due process guarantees. Ángel Muñoz Carpintero, for example, argues that the normalisation of emergency measures violates states' obligations under international human rights law. In the Salvadoran case specifically, he contends that Bukele's Territorial Control Plan cannot be implemented without breaching international legal obligations and undermining fundamental rights protections.⁵² As a whole, these authors suggest that the state of exception has become not only a security strategy, but also a mechanism through which exceptional governance, weakened accountability, and expanded executive power are normalised.

Lastly, a limited body of research seeks to explain the strong domestic support for Bukele's security policies. Jonathan D. Rosen, Sebastián Cutrona and Katy Lindquist argue that high levels of violence and weak trust in state institutions have contributed to

47 R. A. Molina, 'El flautista de Hamelin y Bukele: las notas de la autocracia electoral', *Análisis Plural*, vol.8, no.3, 2024, p.12.

48 J. Gavarrete, 'A Permanent State of Exception in El Salvador', *Dissent*, vol.72, no.3, 2025, pp.51-52.

49 T. S. Montgomery and T. Boerman, 'Intentional Injustice: Destroying the Rule of Law in El Salvador', *CeMeCA's REGIONAL EXPERT PAPER SERIES*, vol.12, 2024, p.4.

50 T. S. Montgomery and T. Boerman, 'Intentional Injustice: Destroying the Rule of Law in El Salvador', p.15.

51 B. Kurylo, 'Corrupción en El Salvador: el doble juego de Bukele', *Revista Nueva Sociedad*, no.310, 2024, p.4.

52 Á. Muñoz Carpintero, 'Normalizando La Excepción: Perspectivas Del Derecho Internacional Sobre Suspensión De Garantías En El Salvador, Honduras Y Ecuador Para El Combate Al Crimen Organizado', *Revista de Derecho*, vol.45, no.1, 2024, p.237.

public support for militarised anti-crime policies and expanded executive power.⁵³ They suggest that, in contexts characterised by insecurity and low institutional legitimacy, citizens become more willing to accept exceptional measures and reduced accountability when these are perceived as effective in restoring order.⁵⁴ Similarly, Mario José Sánchez González argues that prolonged exposure to violence and insecurity has generated strong public demands for immediate and effective responses, even when these involve exceptional or extralegal measures.⁵⁵ He therefore links support for the state of exception to fear, insecurity, and demands for protection.⁵⁶ In sum, these authors explain public support for the regime primarily through the interaction between fear, insecurity, and demands for order and protection.

While existing literature provides important insights into the consequences, drivers, and political implications of the state of exception, less attention has been paid to the discursive mechanisms through which these policies are legitimised and normalised. In particular, there remains a gap in examining how coercive security policies are rendered politically and morally acceptable within democratic settings. This thesis seeks to address this gap by analysing how discourse contributes to the democratic legitimisation of exceptional governance.

53 J.D. Rosen, S. Cutrona, and K. Lindquist, 'Gangs, violence, and fear: punitive Darwinism in El Salvador', *Crime Law Soc Change*, vol.79, 2023, p.176.

54 J.D. Rosen, S. Cutrona, and K. Lindquist, 'Gangs, violence, and fear: punitive Darwinism in El Salvador', pp.189-190.

55 M. J. Sánchez González, 'De las políticas de mano dura a la política del estado de excepción en El Salvador', *Estudios Centroamericanos*, vol.79, no.776, 2024, p.27.

56 M. J. Sánchez González, 'De las políticas de mano dura a la política del estado de excepción en El Salvador', p.41.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework used to analyse the Salvadoran state of exception. Existing theoretical scholarship has examined processes such as securitisation, populism, and emergency governance, through a range of theoretical perspectives. While these approaches offer valuable insights individually, they address interconnected dynamics of insecurity, legitimacy, coercion, and political authority. This chapter therefore develops an integrated theoretical framework that brings these perspectives together in order to examine how these processes interact discursively in the legitimisation and normalisation of exceptional governance.

The chapter first examines securitisation, framing, and labelling theories, before turning to populism and penal populism. It then discusses theories of emergency power and the state of exception, particularly the work of Hobbes, Agamben, and Neocleous. The final section explains how these perspectives are integrated into the analytical framework that guides the thesis.

3.1 Securitisation and the construction of security threats

Securitisation theory, associated particularly with Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, examines how issues become constructed as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures.⁵⁷ According to their framework, security is a “self-referential practice”⁵⁸, meaning that an issue becomes a matter of security not necessarily because a threat objectively exists, but because it is successfully *framed* as such.⁵⁹ By labelling a problem as a security issue, political actors claim the legitimacy to address it through exceptional means. As Rita Taureck notes, securitisation moves issues from the sphere

57 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, p.21.

58 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. Wilde, *Security*, p.26.

59 B. Buzan, O. Wæver, and J. Wilde, *Security*, pp.23-24.

of normal politics into the domain of emergency politics, where they can be addressed without the usual democratic procedures and constraints.⁶⁰

Later scholars have expanded securitisation theory by emphasising the broader social and political conditions under which securitising moves are successful. Thierry Balzacq argues that securitisation should not be understood solely as a linguistic “speech act”⁶¹, but as a broader social process involving persuasion, context, and audience reception.⁶² From his perspective, securitisation depends on the ability of political actors to convince an “empowering” audience⁶³ that a particular issue constitutes a critical threat and resonate with existing fears, experiences, and cultural understandings.⁶⁴ Securitisation therefore emerges from the interaction between political actors, audiences, and social context.

Importantly, this thesis does not approach securitisation as simply a process of exaggeration or manipulation. Threats may indeed be experienced as real and immediate by the population. The analysis therefore focuses not on whether threats are objectively valid, but on how they are articulated, interpreted, and mobilised to justify particular forms of governance.

The insights from securitisation theory resonate with labelling and framing theory. Howard S. Becker’s labelling theory argues that deviance is not an inherent quality, but the result of social processes through which certain actors are defined as outsiders.⁶⁵ Similarly, framing theory scholars such as David A. Snow and Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu examine how political actors construct interpretive frameworks that shape how audiences understand social problems.^{66 67 68} Together, these perspectives help explain

60 R. Taureck, ‘Securitisation Theory and Securitisation Studies’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, vol.9, 2006, p.55.

61 The concept of securitisation as a “speech act” originates in the work of Ole Wæver: O. Wæver, ‘Chapter 3 - Securitization and Desecuritization’, in R. Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security*, Columbia University Press, 1995, pp.46-87.

62 T. Balzacq, *Securitization Theory*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2010, pp.1, 3.

63 The empowering audience refers to an audience that is directly linked to the issue, and possesses the capacity to authorise or enable the securitising actor to implement measures to address the threat. From: T. Balzacq, *Securitization Theory*, p.8.

64 T. Balzacq, *Securitization Theory*, p.13.

65 H. S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the sociology of deviance*, New York, Free Press, 1973, pp.15-17.

66 D. Snow, ‘Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization.’, *International Social Movement Research*, vol.1, 1988, p.198.

67 A. Ardèvol-Abreu, ‘Framing theory in communication research. Origins, development and current situation in Spain’, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, vol.70, 2015, pp.430, 435.

how actors, behaviours, and events become discursively constructed as dangerous threats requiring exceptional responses.

While securitisation theory explains how threats are constructed and legitimise exceptional measures, it does not fully address the political logics through which these constructions are mobilised. Consequently, it is useful to complement this perspective with theories of populism and punitive security politics.

3.2 Populism and punitive security politics

Populism is commonly understood as a political ideology that frames society as divided between virtuous “people” and corrupt or threatening “others”. As Cas Mudde argues, populist discourse presents politics in strongly moralised terms, constructing “the people” as morally pure while depicting opponents as illegitimate actors who betray the popular will.⁶⁹ Within this framework, politics become a struggle between good and evil rather than a competition between legitimate alternatives.⁷⁰

While populism emphasises the centrality of “the people”, it frequently relies on strong personal leadership to embody and articulate the popular will. Kurt Weyland therefore conceptualises populism not only as an ideology but also as a political strategy based on direct and largely unmediated support between a leader and mass followers.⁷¹ This relationship can create tensions with institutional checks and balances, which populist leaders often portray as obstacles to the realisation of popular will.⁷²

Populist politics frequently intersects with debates on crime and punishment, giving rise to what John Pratt describes as penal populism. Penal populism refers to punitive criminal justice policies that mobilise public fears and frustrations by portraying institutions as overly lenient toward criminals and disconnected from ordinary citizens.⁷³

68 Mass Communication Theory, ‘Framing Theory’, *Mass Communication Theory*, n.d., <https://masscommtheory.com/theory-overviews/framing-theory/>, (accessed 8 April 2025).

69 C. Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, p.543.

70 C. Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, p.544.

71 K. Weyland, ‘Chapter 3 - Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach’, in C. Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p.50.

72 C. Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, p.562.

73 J. Pratt, *Penal Populism*, London, Routledge, 2007, p.3.

Within this logic, harsh punishment becomes framed as necessary to defend victims, communities, and the law-abiding majority.⁷⁴ Policies associated with penal populism often emphasise stronger policing powers, harsher sentencing, and visible displays of punishment intended to reassure the public and restore order.⁷⁵

In this thesis, populism is not understood as a rigid category, but as a set of discursive logics through which political authority, legitimacy, and popular sovereignty are portrayed. These perspectives help explain how punitive and exceptional security measures are framed as morally justified expressions of the people's will.

Populism helps illustrate how political actors mobilise support for punitive policies, however, it does not fully capture the broader logic through which the suspension of rights becomes accepted in the name of security. Therefore, the following section turns to theories of emergency power and the state of exception.

3.3 Emergency power and the state of exception

Thomas Hobbes argues that fear and insecurity play a central role in the formation of political authority. In the state of nature, where no common authority exists, individuals live in conditions of insecurity and vulnerability.⁷⁶ To escape this condition, they rationally surrender certain freedoms to a sovereign capable of guaranteeing protection and enforcing order.⁷⁷ In this framework, submission to coercive authority is not necessarily irrational or purely forced, but accepted because security is prioritised over unrestricted freedom.⁷⁸ The legitimacy of authority therefore depends largely on its capacity to provide protection.⁷⁹ This logic also allows those portrayed as threats to collective security to be positioned outside the normal protections of the political community.

74 J. Pratt, *Penal Populism*, p.12.

75 J. Pratt, *Penal Populism*, p.30.

76 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London, Andrew Crooke, 1651, pp.76-79, <https://historyofeconomicthought.mcmaster.ca/hobbes/Leviathan.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2026).

77 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp.80-81.

78 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp.79-88.

79 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pp.103-106.

Building on similar concerns with security and authority, Giorgio Agamben analyses how states institutionalise exceptional measures in the name of necessity. He defines the state of exception as a situation in which normal legal guarantees are suspended and executive power becomes expanded in response to perceived emergencies.⁸⁰ Importantly, this suspension is itself authorised through legal mechanisms, creating what Agamben describes as a paradox in which law provides the means for its own temporary deactivation.⁸¹ The distinction between norm and exception therefore becomes increasingly blurred.

Although states of exception are formally presented as temporary responses to crisis, Agamben argues that emergency powers increasingly become normalised within modern governance. Measures introduced in the name of necessity tend to persist and expand over time, gradually eroding democratic safeguards and concentrating power.⁸² Importantly, what counts as a “necessity” is not objectively fixed, but politically constructed.⁸³ The state of exception therefore allows governments to justify extraordinary measures by framing particular threats as existential dangers requiring urgent and prolonged intervention.⁸⁴ Agamben also argues that exceptional governance can produce categories of individuals who are effectively excluded from the normal legal order and governed primarily through coercive power.⁸⁵ Therefore, the state of exception enables the treatment of certain groups not as full citizens, but as enemies whose rights and protections can be suspended in the name of collective security.

While Agamben focuses on the expansion and normalisation of exceptional power, Mark Neocleous examines how these measures are legitimised through the language of security itself. He critiques the common idea that liberty and security can be balanced, arguing instead that appeals to security frequently justify the expansion of coercive state power. Restrictions on rights become framed as necessary sacrifices for collective protection, allowing authoritarian measures to appear reasonable and legitimate.⁸⁶ Drawing on Locke’s concept of prerogative power, Neocleous argues that liberal

80 G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, p.7.

81 G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, p.1.

82 G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, p.7.

83 G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, pp.29-30.

84 G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, p.2.

85 G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, pp.3-4.

86 M. Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008, p.13

political thought itself contains mechanisms through which governments can act outside, or even against, ordinary legal limits when this is presented as necessary for the public good.⁸⁷ In this manner, exceptional power is not entirely external to liberal governance, but can be normalised through discourses of protection and public safety.

Together, these perspectives of exception and emergency help explain how fear, insecurity, and the promise of protection can legitimise the expansion of coercive authority and the normalisation of exceptional governance.

3.4 Analytical framework

This thesis combines insights from securitisation theory, populism and penal populism, labelling and framing theories, and critical approaches to security in order to analyse how exceptional security measures are discursively constructed, justified, and normalised. Drawing on these complementary perspectives, the thesis develops an integrated analytical framework focused on the relationship between discourse, fear, legitimacy, and political authority.

At the core of the framework is the assumption that security threats are not simply objective realities, but are politically and discursively constructed. Drawing on securitisation and framing theories, the analysis examines how crime, violence, and insecurity are represented, and how certain actors are positioned as existential threats requiring extraordinary responses. This process of threat construction is closely linked to Hobbes' writings on fear, understood not as irrational panic but as a rational response to perceived insecurity that can make coercive authority and the surrender of rights appear necessary and legitimate.

The framework also draws on theories of populism and penal populism to analyse how legitimacy is constructed through appeals to "the people" and punitive understandings of justice. In this context, exceptional measures are not presented as controversial political decisions, but as morally necessary acts carried out on behalf of ordinary citizens against dangerous enemies.

⁸⁷ M. Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, pp.15-16.

Agamben's concept of the state of exception provides a framework for analysing how emergency measures become institutionalised and normalised over time, blurring the limit between temporary emergency and ordinary governance. At the same time, Neocleous' critique of the security-liberty relationship helps explain how restrictions on rights are legitimised through discourses of necessity and public protection.

Used together, these perspectives allow the thesis to analyse how insecurity, legitimacy, coercion, and political authority are articulated across political discourse. Particular attention is paid to the construction of enemies, the mobilisation of fear, the justification of extraordinary measures, and the discursive framing (and reframing) of concepts such as freedom, legality, democracy, and security.

The framework also allows the analysis to consider whether the Salvadoran case goes beyond what is traditionally understood as "classical" securitisation. Rather than presenting exceptional measures as temporary responses to crisis, the discourse increasingly frames them as necessary conditions for restoring and maintaining normality. Therefore, the analysis explores whether the distinction between emergency and ordinary governance becomes progressively blurred through the normalisation of exceptional rule.

Finally, while the framework draws on established theoretical approaches, it is used as a flexible analytical tool rather than as a rigid explanatory model. It is not assumed that empirical reality will perfectly fit theoretical categories, but instead theory is used to interpret recurring patterns, discursive logics, and processes of legitimation within the material.

4. Method and Data

This chapter outlines the methodological approach and research design of the thesis. It explains the selection of empirical material, the analytical procedures used, and the reasoning for combining qualitative content analysis with critical discourse analysis. The chapter also reflects on limitations, ethical considerations, and the interpretative nature of the study.

4.1 Research design

This thesis adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a social constructionist epistemology. From this perspective, social reality is understood as constructed through language, interpretation, and social interaction rather than as objectively fixed.⁸⁸ The analysis therefore focuses not on whether insecurity or threats are objectively “real”, but on how they are represented and made meaningful through political discourse.

This epistemological stance also informs the choice of method. The thesis combines elements of qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Qualitative content analysis is used to identify recurring themes and patterns within the material, while CDA allows for a closer examination of how language constructs political meaning, legitimacy, and power relations.

This approach aligns closely with the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 3, particularly securitisation, framing, and labelling theories, which emphasise the role of discourse in constructing threats and legitimising political authority. The thesis is therefore concerned not only with what policies are implemented, but with how they are justified and made meaningful through language.

88 V. Burr, *Social Constructionism*, 4th edn., London and New York, Routledge, 2025, pp.1-30.

4.2 Data selection

In this thesis, the primary data consists of public communications and texts produced by key political actors involved in the implementation and justification of the state of exception. This includes tweets⁸⁹ and public speeches by President Nayib Bukele, legal texts, official communications from the Legislative Assembly, and public comments⁹⁰ posted in response to Bukele's tweets. For practical purposes, these materials are referenced using abbreviations throughout the thesis: A (Assembly text), PC (public comment), S (speech), and T (tweet). Full references are provided in the corpus of analysed materials. These sources were selected because they provide direct insight into how security, threat, and legitimacy are framed within political discourse. The selection is not intended to be exhaustive, but to capture key moments and dominant discursive patterns. Secondary data includes reports by non-governmental organisations and international organisations, as well as news articles and academic literature. These sources are used to provide contextual information and to support the interpretation of the primary material, but are not themselves the main object of analysis.

The selection of primary data was achieved through a combination of temporal, thematic, and relevance-based criteria. First, key moments were identified in order to ground the data collection. These include, among others, the declaration of the state of exception on 27 March 2022, the first extensions in April–May 2022, the one-year anniversary in March 2023, and subsequent legal developments such as reforms extending pretrial detention. These moments were selected because they represent key phases in the development and consolidation of the emergency regime. Second, relevant texts were identified through thematic and keyword-based searches related to security, gangs, emergency measures, human rights, and legitimacy. These keywords were used to locate texts that explicitly engage with issues of security, threat construction, and political justification.

Approximately 20 tweets published on Bukele's official account (@nayibbukele) from April 2022 onwards were selected based on their relevance to the framing of significant

⁸⁹ Although Twitter was rebranded as X in 2023, this thesis uses the term "tweets" for clarity and consistency, as it remains widely used in both academic literature and public discourse.

⁹⁰ Public comments are analysed not as representative of public opinion, but as part of the broader discursive environment in which official narratives are echoed and reinforced.

themes. Purely administrative, repetitive, or informational posts without discursive framing were excluded. Public speeches were similarly identified through official government channels and selected based on their relevance to the themes of security, gangs, and the state of exception. Two speeches were included: one delivered on 5 April 2022 and another on 29 June 2022, both of which contain explicit references to security policy and the justification of exceptional measures. To capture the institutional dimension of the discourse, the legal material includes the Constitution of El Salvador, Decree No. 333, and relevant international legal provisions referenced within these texts. These documents were selected as they provide the formal legal framework sustaining the state of exception. In addition, a small number of official texts published by the Legislative Assembly were included to capture how the emergency measures are presented and justified institutionally. Finally, a limited selection of public comments posted in response to Bukele's tweets was included in order to explore how official discourse is received, echoed, and reinforced in digital spaces. Together, this selection of data allows for the analysis of how security discourse is constructed, circulated, and legitimised across different institutional and communicative arenas.

4.3 Method of analysis

This thesis employs a qualitative approach, combining elements of qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). This combination allows for the identification of recurring themes within the data, as well as a deeper analysis of how language constructs meaning, power relations, and political legitimacy.

Qualitative content analysis is used as an initial analytical strategy to identify patterns, themes, and recurring elements within the data. Rather than focusing on quantitative measures such as word frequency, the analysis examines how key concepts, such as “violence”, “security”, “criminality”, and “order”, are used and connected within the texts. This approach makes it possible to identify dominant themes and organise the material in a systematic way.

The analysis is complemented by critical discourse analysis, which emphasises the role of language in constructing social reality and reproducing power relations.⁹¹ Following this perspective, texts are not treated as neutral descriptions of reality, but as interventions that actively shape how issues are understood and acted upon. CDA is therefore particularly suitable for this case study, as it allows the analysis to examine how political actors frame insecurity, justify exceptional measures, and construct legitimacy. Rather than applying a rigid CDA model,⁹² the thesis selectively incorporates insights from discourse analysis while remaining closely grounded in the empirical material.

While qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis can be analytically distinguished, in practice they are closely intertwined⁹³. Content analysis provides an overview of key themes and patterns, while discourse analysis enables a more in-depth examination of how these themes are constructed, articulated, and linked to broader structures of power.

The analysis focuses on several key aspects of the texts. First, it examines how actors and groups are represented, particularly how distinctions are made between “the people”, “criminals”, and other relevant categories. Second, it analyses how threats are constructed, including the framing of violence, insecurity, and urgency. Third, it considers how exceptional measures are justified, including references to necessity, morality, legality, and protection. Finally, it explores how legitimacy is produced, for example, through appeals to popular support, national identity, or collective experience. Through this analytical focus, the method allows for a systematic examination of how discourse contributes to the normalisation and justification of exceptional governance.

91 R. Preiser et al., ‘Chapter 19: Qualitative content analysis’, in R. Biggs et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods for Social-Ecological Systems*, London, Routledge, 2021, p.274.

92 For an example of a structured approach to critical discourse analysis, see N. Fairclough, *Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language*, London and New York, Longman Publishing, 1995.

93 L. Prior, ‘Chapter 19: Content Analysis’, in P. Leavy (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn., New York, Oxford University Press, 2020, p.545.

4.4 Analytical procedure

The analysis was conducted through a repetitive, multi-step process combining elements of qualitative content analysis and CDA.

First, the collected material was reviewed and organised according to type (tweets, speeches, legal texts, legislative communications, and public comments). The initial stage of analysis focused on identifying recurring discursive elements within the data, including moral justification, constructions of “the people” and “the enemy”, delegitimation of critics, normalisation of exceptional measures, and the use of war-related language. This coding procedure was applied for tweets and public comments.

The analysis of speeches followed a slightly more detailed procedure. The selected speeches were first transcribed and organised into numbered lines to facilitate precise referencing. Relevant sections were then coded using the same analytical framework, focusing on rhetorical structures, oppositions, and recurring narrative patterns. Particular attention was given to processes of moral polarisation, dehumanisation, and the construction of threats and legitimacy.

Legal texts were analysed by focusing on sections directly related to the state of exception and the suspension of rights. The analysis examined how these measures are framed linguistically, particularly in terms of necessity, legality, and security.

In the final stage, the insights identified from the different data sources were brought together in order to identify broader discursive mechanisms across the material. This resulted in the identification of six overarching mechanisms through which repression and the state of exception are constructed as necessary, lawful, and legitimate. Given the overlap between some of these mechanisms, they were then grouped into three broader analytical groups, which structure the analysis chapter.

This step-by-step analytical process allows for a systematic examination of how discourse constructs and legitimises exceptional governance across different types of texts.

As the majority of the analysed material was originally produced in Spanish, all texts were first examined in their original language during the coding and analytical stages.

This ensured that the interpretation remained grounded in the linguistic and cultural context in which the discourse was produced. For the purposes of presentation, all quotations included in the thesis were translated into English by the author. Original Spanish versions are provided in footnotes where relevant. For reasons of space and readability, full translated versions of the corpus are not reproduced in the appendices, however, the corpus of analysed materials provides references to all sources used in the analysis.

4.5 Reflections and limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study is interpretative in nature. However, several steps have been taken to ensure transparency, validity, and reliability. Transparency is ensured by clearly outlining the data selection criteria, the theoretical framework, and the analytical steps taken. The sources analysed are publicly available and clearly identified, allowing the reader to follow and assess the research process. Validity is supported by the selection of data that directly reflects institutional discourse, including official government communications and related texts. These sources are well suited for analysing how security policies are framed and legitimised. Finally, reliability in qualitative research does not imply exact reproducibility⁹⁴, but rather consistency and clarity in the analytical process. Although interpretation is inherently subjective, reliability is strengthened through the use of established theoretical frameworks and a systematic approach to analysis.

At the same time, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis focuses on selected texts and cannot capture the full range of perspectives or discursive practices surrounding the state of exception. The selection of data prioritises texts that are particularly relevant to the research question, which may favour more visible or explicit forms of discourse over shorter or informal expressions. In addition, discourse analysis emphasises meaning and interpretation rather than measurable outcomes. However, this approach is appropriate given the aim of the study, which is to understand how political narratives construct and legitimise exceptional governance.

94 R. Preiser et al., 'Chapter 19: Qualitative content analysis', p.278.

A further limitation involves the representation of public support within the analysed material. The discourse examined (especially the public comments) in this thesis frequently projects an image of widespread or unanimous support for the government's policies. However, this should not be interpreted as direct evidence of actual public opinion. Rather, the appearance of consensus can itself be understood as part of the discursive construction of legitimacy. This perceived unanimity may be reinforced by factors such as the marginalisation of dissenting voices, self-censorship, exile, or the selective visibility of supportive content in digital spaces. In this sense, the analysis does not claim that all Salvadorans support these policies, but instead examines how the appearance of support is produced and mobilised as part of the broader governance strategy.

A final limitation regards language and translation. As most of the material was originally produced in Spanish, translation into English may involve subtle shifts in meaning, tone, or emphasis. While care has been taken to preserve the original meaning, some nuances of the discourse may not be fully transferable across languages.

5. Analysis

This chapter examines how the state of exception in El Salvador is discursively constructed, legitimised, and normalised across political and public communication. Drawing on presidential speeches and tweets, legal texts, Assembly texts, and public comments, the analysis focuses on how meaning is produced across different communicative arenas to justify and stabilise exceptional governance.

The chapter is organised into three sections, moving from the construction of crisis, to the justification of exceptional measures, and finally to the production and defence of legitimacy. This structure also loosely reflects classical rhetorical modes of persuasion: the creation of threat relies on emotional appeal (pathos), the justification of exceptional measures draws on rationalisation and legality (logos), and the production of legitimacy appeals to authority and credibility, particularly through references to “the people” (ethos).

Section 5.1, *Constructing the emergency*, addresses the question: *How is the situation framed as an emergency that demands exceptional measures?* It analyses how insecurity is discursively represented as an existential threat requiring urgent and extraordinary responses. It shows how moral polarisation, temporal narratives (past versus present), and the framing of violence as inevitable, work together to produce a sense of necessity, in which alternative responses are marginalised or presented as unthinkable.

Section 5.2, *Freedom, legality, and the normalisation of exception*, examines how the suspension of rights is discursively transformed into lawful and democratic protection. It explores how exceptional measures are justified and normalised through the redefinition of key concepts such as freedom and legality. In particular, it shows how freedom is reframed as security, legality functions as reassurance rather than a constraint, and temporary emergency measures are gradually normalised through repetition and institutional practices.

Section 5.3, *Popular support, legitimacy, and silencing critique*, focuses on how legitimacy is produced, amplified, and defended across official communication and public discourse. It analyses how legitimacy is constructed through appeals to “the people”, reinforced through claims of success and international recognition, and

defended by delegitimising critics. The section highlights how popular sovereignty functions as moral authorisation, how support is amplified through public discourse, and how human rights critique is reframed as illegitimate, foreign, or complicit in violence.

5.1 Constructing the emergency

The construction of the emergency does not rely on a single narrative, but emerges through a combination of interconnected discursive strategies. These include the moral polarisation of society, the reimagining of the past, present, and, to some extent, future, and the portrayal of violence as inevitable. Together, these elements produce a coherent understanding of insecurity as an existential threat that leaves little room for alternative responses.

5.1.1 Moral polarisation

A central feature of Bukele's discourse is the construction of a strong moral binary between "good" citizens and an evil enemy. Across presidential speeches, tweets, Assembly debates, and public responses, Salvadoran society is repeatedly divided into morally opposed categories in which "honest" citizens and "the people" are positioned as deserving of protection, while gang members and those accused of defending them are constructed as dangerous, immoral, and outside the legitimate political community. This binary removes ambiguity and reduces political conflict to a moral struggle between good and evil, making repression appear not only acceptable but necessary.

This moral dichotomy appears consistently across different types of material. Across multiple tweets, Bukele creates a division of Salvadoran society in which security and rights are distributed selectively rather than universally. In T07, "honest", law-abiding citizens are positioned as the legitimate subjects of protection ("Honest citizens have nothing to fear"⁹⁵), while "terrorists", "criminals", and those who defend them are excluded from security concerns. This produces a conditional understanding of rights: the state, rather than functioning as a universal guarantor, allocates protection only to

95 Original Spanish: "*Los ciudadanos honrados no tienen nada que temer*"

those who belong to the moral community (the in-group), while fear, deprivation, and repression become acceptable for those outside of it. Similarly, in T08 Bukele contrasts public welfare with the treatment of prisoners, stating that he “will not cut funding from schools to feed these terrorists”⁹⁶.

This logic is particularly noticeable in Speech 1, where Bukele constructs an extremely polarised moral reality in which actors are divided into mutually exclusive categories of absolute good and absolute evil. Police officers killed in confrontations are repeatedly described as “heroes”, elevating them above ordinary state agents and framing them as morally exceptional figures who have sacrificed their lives for the nation. This heroic framing is reinforced through emotional and personal details, such as references to their families and children (lines 9-11 & 17-18), which encourage the audience to perceive their deaths not as abstract casualties but as intimate personal tragedies. By anchoring state violence in private suffering, the speech generates empathy for state actors while discouraging critical distance. At the same time, gang members are positioned as an absolute enemy, reinforcing a moral division that leaves little room for nuance or ambiguity.

A similar structure can be observed in Assembly texts. In A02, references to “terrorist structures”, the “war against gangs”, and the objective of leaving “not a single gang member on the streets”⁹⁷ are contrasted with “Salvadoran families”, reinforcing a binary between those who deserve protection and those who must be eliminated. At the same time, “the people” are portrayed as a homogeneous collective (“protecting the life of the population”⁹⁸), implying a single shared group life that must be protected. Assembly text A05 further moralises this binary distinction by referring to “law-abiding citizens”⁹⁹, implicitly defining the opposite category of the dishonourable and criminal “other”.

This binary also extends to the treatment of criticism. In T11, human rights organisations and the international community are not engaged with on legal or political grounds, but are instead framed as morally corrupt actors who “only defend the rights of criminals”. This way, dissent itself becomes associated with insecurity and threat. The overall framing resembles wartime mobilisation (“win this war” and “continue the

96 Original Spanish: “no le quitaré presupuesto a las escuelas para darle de comer a estos terroristas”

97 Original Spanish: “ni un solo pandillero en las calles”

98 Original Spanish: “protegiendo la vida de la población”

99 Original Spanish: “ciudadanos honrados” and “población honrada”

fight” in A02 or the hashtag #WarAgainstGangs¹⁰⁰ promoted by Bukele in T05) rather than administrative governance, where the objective is not regulation or negotiation, but total eradication of the enemy.

A key strategy that reinforces this binary is the systematic dehumanisation of gang members. In Speech 1, Bukele explicitly states that the state is not fighting “little angels”¹⁰¹ (line 12) but “the devil himself”¹⁰² (line 13), while gangs are repeatedly described as a “cancer” (e.g. line 97, 122...) spreading through the social body that requires “chemotherapy” (e.g. line 106, 112...) to be eradicated. These metaphors remove gang members from the category of social or political actors and instead frame them as existential threats to society. The same language is reproduced in Assembly discourse, where criminality is described as a “cancer”¹⁰³ (A04), framing repression as a sort of medical necessity. Importantly, these discursive patterns are not confined to official communication but are echoed and intensified in public responses, where supporters adopt a similar language, referring to repression as “chemotherapy” that prevents the “cancer” from returning (e.g. PC3: “What a great chemotherapy, so that this cancer, that caused us so much harm, no longer appears.”¹⁰⁴).

Dehumanisation further emerges in Speech 2, where prisoners are not treated as legal subjects but as instruments of control through which pressure can be applied on those still free. The casual and mocking tone used to describe deprivation (“let's see how long they last”¹⁰⁵, line 5 and 6-7; “without chicken”, line 16) further strips prisoners of dignity and normalises cruelty as an acceptable and effective strategy of governance.

These findings reflect broader populist and securitising logics identified in existing literature. The moral polarisation reflects framing and labelling theories, which show how discourse establishes social categories and assigns actors fixed identities that shape how they are perceived and treated. In this case, labels such as “honest citizens”, “terrorists”, and “criminals” do not merely describe actors, but position them within a

100 Original Spanish: “#GuerraContraPandillas”

101 Original Spanish: “*angelitos*”

102 Original Spanish: “*el mismo demonio*”

103 Original Spanish: “*cáncer de la delincuencia*”

104 Original Spanish: “*Que buena quimioterapia para que ya ese cancer no aparezca y que tanto daño nos hizo*”

105 Original Spanish: “*a ver cuanto tiempo duran*”

moral hierarchy. This moral polarisation also reflects a populist logic. As Mudde¹⁰⁶ and Weyland¹⁰⁷ argue, populism tends to divide society into two antagonistic camps: the “pure people” and a corrupt or dangerous “other”. In the Salvadoran case, this moral distinction is extended to gang members, criminals, and those accused of defending them. The result is a political field organised less around plural disagreement than around a struggle between good and evil.¹⁰⁸

At the same time, the discourse operates through securitising dynamics in which gangs are constructed not merely as criminals, but as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures. In securitisation terms, the enemy is not only identified as dangerous, but presented as an existential threat that is relocated outside the boundaries of the legitimate political community and “*into the realm of emergency politics, where it can be dealt with swiftly and without the normal (democratic) rules and regulations of policy-making*”¹⁰⁹. This dynamic also resonates with Agamben’s argument that states of exception can produce categories of individuals who are no longer fully recognised as part of the political community, but are instead governed through exceptional and coercive measures.¹¹⁰

The findings also resonate with Pantaleón Pacheco’s characterisation of Bukele’s security strategy as a form of punitive populism in which criminality is understood less as the product of broader structural conditions than as morally deviant behaviour requiring uncompromising punishment. Within this framework, gang members are not constructed as social actors shaped by historical or socio-economic conditions, but as irredeemable enemies whose exclusion and elimination appear both justified and necessary.

Overall, these discursive strategies produce a closed moral universe in which empathy is distributed selectively. State agents and “honest” citizens are humanised and protected, while gang members and critics are excluded from legitimate political and moral concern. By defining the enemy in absolute moral terms, repression is framed not as a controversial political choice but as a necessary and justified response. The removal of

106 C. Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, p.543.

107 K. Weyland, ‘Chapter 3 - Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach’, p.52.

108 C. Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, pp.543-544.

109 R. Taureck, ‘Securitisation Theory and Securitisation Studies’, p.54.

110 G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, p.2.

empathy from the targeted group makes mass incarceration and the suspension of rights appear not only acceptable but desirable. Moral polarisation also helps prepare the ground for the broader justification and normalisation of exceptional measures (examined in chapter 5.2).

5.1.2 The past as a threat, the present as rupture

Another central feature of Bukele's discourse is the construction of a temporal narrative that contrasts a traumatic past with a transformed present and a fragile future. Across the material, the past is repeatedly represented as a period of fear, violence, and national suffering, while the present is framed as a decisive historical rupture made possible through the regime of exception. At the same time, the discourse insists that this transformation remains fragile and reversible, creating a constant sense that any step back from the current policies risks a return to violence and disorder.

This temporal framing is particularly evident in Bukele's tweets, where past violence is described in highly graphic and emotionally charged terms. In T01, gang violence is narrated through references to "terrorist gang members, who set fire to a minibus, burning 17 people alive"¹¹¹, followed by mentions to "the 150,000 people they murdered, as well as those who were extorted, assaulted, injured, and those they raped"¹¹². Similarly, T04 describes the killing of police officers as the "murder of our heroes". By highlighting extreme acts of violence and focusing on victims, the discourse produces a strong moral shock that portrays the past as intolerable and morally unacceptable. Victims are elevated to symbolic figures whose suffering represents not only individual tragedy but national trauma. In this way, the past is not presented as neutral memory, but as a morally charged narrative that demands a strong response. The past is mobilised to justify present policies by transforming repression into a moral obligation owed to victims, while alternative approaches are portrayed as irresponsible or dangerous.

111 Original Spanish: "*los pandilleros terroristas, quienes prendieron fuego a un microbús, quemando vivos a 17 personas*"

112 Original Spanish: "*las 150,000 personas que asesinaron, además de los extorsionados, asaltados, heridos y las que violaron*"

Similar patterns emerge in Assembly texts, where references to “decades of suffering” (A01), “terrorist structures that have caused mourning in the country for decades”¹¹³ (A02), and “that cancer of criminality which for so many decades caused us to shed blood”¹¹⁴ (A04) reinforce a shared narrative of prolonged national trauma. Across these texts, the past is consistently associated with fear, disorder, insecurity, and suffering.

Alongside this emphasis on the past, the discourse frames the present as a decisive rupture and historical turning point. This is especially noticeable in Assembly texts, where the regime of exception is repeatedly presented not as a temporary security policy, but as a transformative break with the past. In A01, the regime is described as a “miracle” following decades of suffering, and as part of a historical moment that “will remain in the history of our country”¹¹⁵. Phrases such as “we cannot relive the history we have experienced”¹¹⁶ and “we will not take a single step back”¹¹⁷ reinforce the idea that the present represents a definitive break that must be preserved. A02 similarly describes the regime as part of a broader “historical moment”¹¹⁸, emphasising national transformation and collective destiny. The discourse in A02 positions the Assembly as acting on the “right side of history” and frames the present as fundamentally different from both the recent past and “the 200 years that precede us”. Across these early texts, the language is highly dramatic and oriented toward rupture, portraying the regime as a national turning point fundamentally different from the preceding political order.

In later texts such as A03, the discourse becomes less dramatic but continues to rely on the same structure. The past, which is described as “pain, death, fear and bloodshed”¹¹⁹, remains a constant reference point, now functioning as a warning rather than a rupture. A04 expands this logic further by introducing themes of national rebirth and transformation. The contrast between a past where “our blue and white colours were stained with blood”¹²⁰ and a present characterised by investment, tourism, and economic possibility reframes the regime as part of a broader project of national recovery and

113 Original Spanish: “*estructuras terroristas que por décadas causaron luto en el país*”

114 Original Spanish: “*ese cáncer de la delincuencia que por tantas décadas nos hizo derramar sangre*”

115 Original Spanish: “*va a quedar en la historia de nuestro país*”

116 Original Spanish: “*esa historia que hemos vivido no podemos volverla a vivir*”

117 Original Spanish: “*no daremos ni un paso atrás*”

118 Original Spanish: “*etapa histórica*”

119 Original Spanish: “*dolor, muerte, miedo y sangre*”

120 Original Spanish: “*el azul y blanco estaba manchado de sangre*”

modernisation. Similarly, A05 contrasts a past of fear (“law-abiding citizens lived in fear”¹²¹) with a present defined by peace, security, and “unprecedented successes”¹²².

The juxtaposition between a violent past and a transformed present is accompanied by a strong emphasis on the fragility of the future. The discourse repeatedly insists on the necessity of avoiding any reversal to previous conditions, producing a “no return” logic that frames regression as a constant threat. This is evident in recurring phrases such as “we are not going to take a step backwards”¹²³ (A05), “We will never return to the past”¹²⁴ (PC4), and “without taking a single step back [...] so that we NEVER return to that dark past”¹²⁵ (T01). Assembly texts reinforce this logic by explicitly linking the continuation of the regime to the prevention of regression. In A03, it is stated that “if the state of emergency were not to continue, there could be a setback”¹²⁶, while the past is again invoked as a state of “anxiety”¹²⁷ that must be avoided. Through this framing, the future is not presented as open or indeterminate, but as fragile and conditional on the continuation of the regime of exception. The past is discursively visualised as something that can re-emerge if vigilance is relaxed, which creates a continuous sense of risk. The insistence on “not going back” narrows the range of acceptable political options, as any deviation from the current path is associated with the possibility of renewed violence.

These temporal narratives perform important political work. By constructing the past as traumatic, the present as liberation, and the future as permanently fragile, the discourse produces a continuous sense of urgency that supports the normalisation of exceptional governance. Through a securitisation lens, past violence is mobilised not as closed history, but as evidence of an ongoing and potentially recurring existential threat. Exceptional measures therefore appear necessary not only to resolve present insecurity, but to prevent national regression. The temporal stress of the discourse also narrows the range of acceptable political alternatives. Since the future is framed as fragile and conditional upon the continuation of the current policies, criticism and dissent become

121 Original Spanish: “*los ciudadanos honrados vivían con temor*”

122 Original Spanish: “*logros sin precedentes*”

123 Original Spanish: “*no vamos a dar un paso atrás*”

124 Original Spanish: “*Jamás regresaremos al pasado*”

125 Original Spanish: “*sin retroceder un tan solo paso [...] para JAMÁS regresar a ese pasado tan oscuro*”

126 Original Spanish: “*de no seguir con el régimen de excepción, podría existir un retroceso*”

127 Original Spanish: “*zozobra*”

indirectly associated with the possibility of renewed violence and disorder. Therefore, the discourse transforms political choices into moral and historical necessities.

5.1.3 The inevitability of violence

An additional fundamental feature of Bukele's discourse is the construction of violence as necessary, unavoidable, and lacking alternatives. Repression is not presented as a political choice among several possible responses, but as the only rational and morally acceptable reaction to an existential threat. Within this logic, the state appears not as an active agent choosing coercion, but as simply responding to circumstances imposed by criminal violence. This framing narrows the space for political alternatives and transforms exceptional measures into an apparent necessity.

This logic is particularly visible in Speech 2, where coercion is presented without mediation or procedural justification. Bukele addresses "the criminals" (line 1) directly, disregarding institutional or legal language, and instead expressing punishment in immediate and bodily terms. Threats such as the withdrawal of food from prisons (e.g. "they won't eat one grain of rice", line 6; "they won't have any food", line 14¹²⁸) emphasise the state's control over the most basic conditions of life, making power appear direct, physical, and absolute. Violence is therefore not explained or justified through legal or institutional necessity, but enacted as an obvious and unquestionable response. The absence of consideration or procedural framing reinforces the idea that repression is not a matter of choice, but the natural and default mode of governing an existential threat.

The necessity of violence is made even more explicit by the metaphors of disease and survival. In Speech 1, gangs are repeatedly described as a "cancer" within the social body, while repression is equated to "chemotherapy". This framing constructs violence as a form of necessary treatment rather than punishment. If repression is interrupted, the "cancer" will return, become stronger (line 114), and ultimately "kill us all" (line 122)¹²⁹. Violence is therefore presented not as punitive or political, but as a defensive and unavoidable response required for collective survival. Within this logic, the

128 Original Spanish: "*no comen un arroz*", line 6; "*no van a tener comida*", line 14

129 Original Spanish: "*lo único que vamos a lograr es que el cáncer nos mate a todos*"

suffering produced by exceptional measures is reframed as a necessary cost of healing rather than as a violation. The medical metaphor is echoed in T12, where criminality is described as a “plague”¹³⁰ and repression is linked to purification and recovery (“We will heal our country”¹³¹). The continuation of the state of exception is explicitly linked to the total elimination of the threat, reinforcing the idea that exceptional violence must continue until the enemy is completely eradicated. Across these examples, violence is consistently described as necessary, justified, and without alternative. Importantly, this logic of necessity is not limited to a temporary emergency response. Instead, violence is framed as requiring continued application as long as the threat persists. In A04, the regime of exception is extended “as many times as necessary”, suggesting that its duration is not tied to clearly defined legal or temporal limits, but to the continued existence of danger itself. Similarly, in A05, the declaration that there will be “no step backwards”¹³² presents continuation as self-evident and non-negotiable. In this way, what is formally a temporary measure becomes discursively transformed into a permanent necessity.

Analysed together, these discursive strategies transform violence from a contested political choice into an unavoidable necessity. Responsibility for violence is shifted away from the state and onto the enemy, which is portrayed as the source of coercion and instability. Repression is presented as morally required, physically necessary, and lacking any other viable alternatives. Through this discourse, temporariness gradually disappears. What is formally presented as an exceptional measure becomes transformed into a permanent necessity grounded in the constant possibility of regression and renewed violence.

These discursive constructions resonate strongly with Hobbes’ understanding of political authority and fear. In Hobbesian terms, individuals accept coercive authority not because repression is inherently desirable, but because security is prioritised over liberty in contexts perceived as existentially threatening. Once insecurity is constructed as a condition of collective survival, coercion appears rational, necessary, and even morally justified. The findings also align with Rosen, Cutrona, and Lindquist’s argument that fear of crime and distrust in institutions increase public willingness to

130 Original Spanish: “*peste*”

131 Original Spanish: “*sanaremos nuestro país*”

132 Original Spanish: “*no vamos a dar un paso atrás*”

accept militarised security policies, expanded executive power, and reduced accountability when these are perceived as capable of restoring order.¹³³ Similarly, Sánchez González argues that fear becomes politically exploitable in contexts characterised by violence and weak democratic institutions, creating fertile ground for authoritarian and exceptional responses presented as immediate solutions to insecurity.¹³⁴ At the same time, the analysis extends these arguments by demonstrating how this acceptance is discursively produced. Fear is not treated merely as a pre-existing social condition, but actively organised and reinforced through narratives of survival, disease, and permanent threat. In other words, the discourse does not simply justify repression after the fact, but constructs a political reality in which coercion appears unavoidable and alternatives become increasingly unintelligible. This dynamic also reflects a broader securitising logic. Once gangs are constructed as existential threats to collective survival, the range of imaginable responses narrows significantly. Exceptional violence therefore becomes framed not as extraordinary, but as the only realistic and responsible course of action.

Overall, the discourse presents violence not as a political choice but as an unavoidable condition of security and collective survival. Through narratives of fear, disease, and existential threat, coercion is framed as rational, necessary, and increasingly permanent, while alternative political responses are progressively rendered unimaginable.

5.2 Freedom, legality, and the normalisation of exception

The justification of exceptional measures is achieved through the reshaping of key political and legal concepts. Rather than appearing as a suspension of normal order, the state of exception is framed as lawful, necessary, and desirable. This section examines

133 J.D. Rosen, S. Cutrona, and K. Lindquist, 'Gangs, violence, and fear: punitive Darwinism in El Salvador', pp.176, 190.

134 M. J. Sánchez González, 'De las políticas de mano dura a la política del estado de excepción en El Salvador', p.27.

how freedom, legality, and temporariness are discursively redefined to justify and normalise exceptional governance.

5.2.1 Freedom redefined as security through exception

Another discursive pattern that emerges from institutional communications, especially Assembly texts, is the redefinition of freedom. Rather than being understood as the enjoyment of rights and liberties, freedom is discursively reconstructed to mean security and the absence of fear. Within this framework, the state of exception is presented not as a restriction on freedom, but as the very condition that makes freedom possible.

This redefinition is most explicit in Assembly text A01, where the state of exception is explicitly equated with freedom. This appears both in the headline (“The state of exception, for the people, means freedom”¹³⁵) and in the opening statement: “The state of exception, for the people, means freedom; it means peace”¹³⁶. Here, a legal mechanism that suspends fundamental rights and guarantees is reframed as the very condition of liberty and peace. Rather than being presented as a temporary restriction, the regime of exception is presented as a form of collective liberation from fear and violence. Importantly, this reinterpretation is already visible at an early stage. In A02, published only a few months after the introduction of the regime, the discourse already suggests that “true freedom”¹³⁷ is only being realised in the present, with the state of exception. Freedom is therefore not associated with civil liberties, but with liberation from insecurity. This shift is further reinforced by the framing of the regime itself as a tool to “guarantee security” (“new extension of the state of exception to guarantee security”), basing the meaning of freedom on a security-oriented framework from the beginning.

This logic continues throughout later Assembly texts. In A05, the extension of the regime is associated with the continuation of “social peace and a complete environment of security”¹³⁸, while the state of exception itself is described as a “tool that brings peace

135 Original Spanish: “*El régimen de excepción, para el pueblo, significa libertad*”

136 Original Spanish: “*El régimen de excepción, para el pueblo, significa libertad, significa paz*”

137 Original Spanish: “*verdadera libertad*”

138 Original Spanish: “*la paz social y un completo ambiente de seguridad*”

to all”¹³⁹. References to maintaining “the peace and security in which we currently live”¹⁴⁰ further reinforce the idea that freedom is no longer defined through legal protections or rights, but through the experience of safety. Across these texts, freedom becomes increasingly associated with stability, normality, and the absence of fear. The discourse therefore shifts attention away from suspended rights and instead highlights emotional and physical security as the defining feature of liberty. At the same time, this reconstructed freedom is implicitly conditional and selectively distributed. It applies primarily to the in-group of “honest citizens”¹⁴¹, whose security is prioritised, while those positioned outside the moral community are excluded from these guarantees. Moreover, this freedom is explicitly linked to the repression of others. In Speech 2, for example, punitive measures and deprivation are framed as necessary to protect “our people” (lines 8–9). The implicit logic is that the security of the population justifies the physical suffering of those positioned in the out-group. In this framework, freedom is not only redefined as security, but as security produced through repression. The liberty of the in-group is made dependent on the control and punishment of the out-group.

Analysed together, these discursive patterns shift the meaning of freedom away from rights and legal protections and toward security, order, and protection from fear. Freedom increasingly appears not as a universal condition but as something produced through the exclusion and control of the threatening “other”.

These discursive patterns strongly resonate with Neocleous’ critique of the relationship between security and liberty. Rather than security temporarily limiting freedom, the discourse fundamentally redefines freedom itself through the language of security and protection. Liberty no longer refers primarily to rights or political guarantees, but to the absence of fear and the restoration of order. The findings also reflect a broader Hobbesian logic in which security becomes the foundational condition of political life. Within such a framework, restrictions on liberty appear rational and acceptable when presented as necessary for collective survival and protection. Importantly, however, the analysis demonstrates that this transformation is not merely philosophical or institutional, but discursively produced. The discourse actively reorganises the meaning of concepts such as freedom, peace, and security in ways that make exceptional

139 Original Spanish: “*herramienta que aporta paz a todos*”

140 Original Spanish: “*continuar con la paz y la seguridad en la que actualmente vivimos*”

141 Original Spanish: “*seguirán garantizando la seguridad a la población honrada*”, in A05

governance appear not contradictory to liberty, but essential to it. At the same time, the analysis extends Agamben's insights regarding the normalisation of exceptional governance. Rather than presenting the suspension of rights as a temporary sacrifice, the discourse reconstructs emergency rule as the permanent condition through which freedom itself can supposedly be secured. Simply put, exceptional measures are not framed as external to democracy or liberty, but increasingly articulated as their guarantor.

Overall, the discourse transforms freedom from a concept grounded in rights and legal protections into one centred on security, order, and protection from fear. Through this redefinition, the state of exception is legitimised not as a temporary restriction on liberty, but as the necessary condition through which freedom itself is supposedly achieved and maintained.

5.2.2 Legality as reassurance, not limitation

Law occupies a central place in the discourse surrounding the Salvadoran state of exception. However, it is not primarily mobilised to restrain or limit state power. Instead, legal language functions as a source of reassurance, authorisation, and legitimacy, presenting exceptional measures as constitutional, lawful, and therefore acceptable. Through this discourse, the state of exception is framed not as a deviation from legal order, but as an expression of it.

This logic is already visible in Decree 333¹⁴², which formally proclaimed the state of exception. The decree does not reject legal or human rights language; instead, it carefully stages legality. Its opening "considerandos" ("considering") perform three key functions. First, they affirm human dignity and frame the exception as protecting life and security rather than limiting rights. Second, they emphasise constitutional procedures, legal competence, and time limits, presenting the suspension of guarantees as orderly and by-the-book. Third, the decree explicitly names the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR), signalling that international law is not ignored but used as a source of legitimacy. The implicit message is therefore not that the state is acting outside the law, but that it is applying the law correctly in extraordinary circumstances.

¹⁴² Asamblea Legislativa, 'Decreto 333'.

At the same time, the part of the decree containing the core provisions is extremely minimal. It formally declares the regime (Art. 2), assigns authority (Art. 3), specifies suspended guarantees (Art. 4), and sets a 30-day duration (Art. 5), without elaborating on safeguards, proportionality, or the criteria for its termination. This combination of formal legal precision in the first part, and vagueness in the principal section of the decree allows the political discourse to fill in the gaps as it wishes. Legality provides the framework, while its interpretation remains flexible.

A similar pattern appears in political communication. In Speech 1, Bukele does not completely reject human rights language, but actively reappropriates it. By referencing a police officer trained in human rights doctrine, the state positions itself as the true defender of rights and public protection, while critics are portrayed as hypocritical or aligned with criminal interests. Legality and rights language are not abandoned, but selectively reconfigured in support of the state's position. Legal and moral language becomes a mechanism for preventing criticism and reinforcing legitimacy rather than constraining state power. This performative use of legality is also evident in Assembly discourse. In A01, the regime is repeatedly described as a “legal and constitutional instrument”¹⁴³. References to parliamentary vote counts and formal procedures further position the exception within a framework of democratic legality. This logic is already present in earlier texts such as A02, where the regime is framed as a set of “legal tools”¹⁴⁴ granted to the executive in order to protect the population. Even the explicit list of suspended rights is presented within a broader narrative of security and national protection. Across these texts, legality functions as a form of reassurance. The exception is not presented as a rupture with constitutional order, but as evidence that institutions are functioning correctly under extraordinary circumstances.

While legality is consistently cited, it is also mobilised selectively. The Salvadoran Constitution¹⁴⁵ itself provides for states of exception, but frames them as temporary, delimited, and reversible measures. The relevant articles (Arts. 29–31) allow for the suspension of certain rights under specific conditions, but impose limits: the suspension must be time-bound, linked to clearly defined circumstances, and subject to renewal through new decrees. Crucially, guarantees must be restored once the conditions

143 Original Spanish: “*herramienta jurídica y constitucional*”

144 Original Spanish. “*herramientas legales*”

145 Asamblea Legislativa, ‘Constitución de la República de El Salvador’.

justifying the exception no longer apply. More broadly, the Constitution defines a legal order in which state power over individuals is tightly restricted. Provisions on due process, presumption of innocence, judicial oversight, and strict limits on detention establish a framework in which coercive power is limited, supervised, and justified through law¹⁴⁶. Within this constitutional structure, the exception appears as a fragile and temporary deviation from a rights-based order. A similar logic is reflected in international law. Article 27 of the American Convention on Human Rights¹⁴⁷ permits the suspension of certain obligations in situations of emergency, but only under strict conditions. It emphasises temporality, proportionality, and the continued protection of fundamental rights, including those that cannot be removed, such as the right to life, the integrity of the person, the principle of legality, and the judicial guarantees indispensable to protect those rights. It also requires that states justify and communicate such measures, and restore normal legal order once the emergency ends. In Decree 333, this framework is explicitly referenced. The mention to Article 27 allows the government to claim that its actions are not only constitutionally grounded, but also consistent with international human rights law. However, this citation is selective. While the decree draws on the parts of the legal framework that enable emergency powers, the strong emphasis on limits, safeguards, and restoration of normality moves into the background. This creates an important conflict. Legality is not absent or fabricated; instead, it is used in a biased manner. It highlights the authorising dimensions of law while downplaying its constraining aspects. At the same time, a discursive contradiction can be observed: international legal frameworks are used as sources of legitimacy in formal texts, while international actors and organisations are delegitimised in political discourse (examined in 5.3.2). Law, therefore, plays a dual role, functioning both as a shield against criticism and as a resource for legitimising exceptional power.

These findings strongly resonate Agamben's argument that the state of exception is characterised by the paradox that law provides the mechanism for its own suspension. Rather than functioning simply as a limit on power, legality here becomes a language through which extraordinary power is framed as correct and acceptable. In the

146 Asamblea Legislativa, 'Constitución de la República de El Salvador', Arts. 11-13, 27.

147 Organization of American States, 'Convención Americana sobre Derechos Humanos (American Convention on Human Rights)', OAS, 1969, https://www.oas.org/dil/treaties_b-32_american_convention_on_human_rights.pdf, (accessed 10 February 2026).

Salvadoran case, legality does not disappear during emergency governance; instead, exceptional power is continuously articulated through constitutional procedures, legal discourse, and formal institutional practices. The exception is therefore legitimised not through open rejection of law, but through its selective reinterpretation. This dynamic also resonates with classical notions of prerogative power. Drawing on Locke, Neocleous shows how prerogative allows rulers to act “for the public good, without the prescription of the law, and sometimes even against it”¹⁴⁸. Therefore, legality does not fully constrain political authority, but coexists with forms of unrestricted power justified in the name of collective security. As Neocleous argues, such appeals to the “public good”¹⁴⁹ can place sovereign action in a space where it is formally legal but effectively beyond meaningful limitation.

At the same time, the findings help explain broader processes of democratic erosion identified in existing scholarship on El Salvador. Martí i Puig and Rodríguez Suárez describe this trajectory as one of “de-democratisation”¹⁵⁰, while Sonja Wolf, Arturo Flores López, and Rafael A. Molina similarly point to the weakening of institutional safeguards, judicial independence, and political pluralism under Bukele’s government. Importantly, however, the present analysis demonstrates how these processes are discursively legitimised. Rather than appearing as openly authoritarian ruptures, the expansion of executive power and the weakening of constraints are framed as lawful, constitutional, democratic, and necessary for public protection. Democratic erosion therefore becomes stabilised not despite legality, but through legal discourse itself.

In sum, the findings show how legality operates not simply as an institutional framework, but as a central discursive mechanism through which exceptional governance is normalised and rendered politically acceptable.

148 M. Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, p.15.

149 M. Neocleous, *Critique of Security*, p.16.

150 S. Martí i Puig and D. Rodríguez Suárez, ‘Nayib Bukele, seguridad a cambio de democracia’, pp.142, 143.

5.2.3 From temporariness to permanence: the routinisation of exception

Although the state of exception is formally presented as temporary and extraordinary, the discourse surrounding it increasingly normalises its continuation and repeated renewal. Through procedural repetition, administrative regularity, and the absence of a meaningful endpoint, exceptional governance gradually becomes integrated into ordinary political life. The exception gradually shifts from a temporary interruption of normality to a stable and routinised mode of governance.

The legal framework itself assumes temporariness. In the Salvadoran Constitution, Articles 29–31 regulate states of exception as finite and exceptional measures. Most importantly, Article 30 establishes that the suspension of constitutional guarantees shall not exceed 30 days¹⁵¹, while Article 31 requires the restoration of guarantees once the circumstances motivating the suspension have disappeared¹⁵². The constitutional framework therefore assumes limitation, and eventual return to normality. A similar model appears in Article 27 of the ACHR, which permits emergency suspension only for a strictly limited time and requires notification both of the suspension and of its termination.¹⁵³ Therefore, in both the national and international legal frameworks, exception is imagined as temporary, transparent, and reversible. By contrast, political discourse and institutional practice gradually transform the state of exception into a renewable and open-ended administrative mechanism.

This transformation becomes especially visible in the Assembly texts, which show a clear progression from emergency response to routine governance. In A02, discussing the sixth extension in September 2022, the state of exception is still framed as a historic rupture and an extraordinary response to a crisis. The language is dramatic and exceptional, referring to a new “historic moment” and the “right path” in the war against gangs. At the same time, however, the text already begins to normalise renewal by

151 Original Spanish: “*EL PLAZO DE SUSPENSIÓN DE LAS GARANTÍAS CONSTITUCIONALES NO EXCEDERÁ DE 30 DÍAS. [...]*” [original format]

152 Original Spanish: “*Cuando desaparezcan las circunstancias que motivaron la suspensión de las garantías constitucionales, la Asamblea Legislativa o el Consejo de Ministros, según el caso, deberá restablecer tales garantías.*”

153 Organization of American States, ‘Convención Americana sobre Derechos Humanos (American Convention on Human Rights)’, Paragraph 3.

presenting continued extensions as acceptable and necessary “as many times as needed”¹⁵⁴. The measure is linked to security improvements, visible results, and majority support, which gives renewal an early sense of legitimacy. By A05, on the twenty-third extension in February 2024, the tone has shifted. The emphasis is no longer on rupture, but on continuity and maintenance. The extension is presented as a way of preserving “social peace” and a “complete environment of security” for another thirty days. In other words, the regime is no longer justified primarily as an extraordinary response to a crisis, but as an ordinary instrument for maintaining stability. Repetition itself starts to appear normal.

Later texts show this process even more clearly. In A04, concerning the twenty-eighth extension in July 2024, the regime of exception is increasingly linked to ordinary governance goals such as tourism, investment, economic recovery, and the country’s international image. The state of exception is no longer discussed only as a security measure, but as a precondition for normal national life and development. The declaration that the regime will be extended “as many times as necessary” further removes any sense of a near endpoint. What was initially introduced as a temporary emergency measure is gradually integrated into a broader narrative of national progress and normal governance. Similarly, in A01, on the thirty-second extension in November 2024, routinisation deepens further. The state of exception is no longer merely tolerated but positively redefined as a condition of “freedom” and “peace.” Its continuation is justified through the presence of criminal “remnants”, constitutional procedure, and the need to keep providing the necessary tools for peace. Finally, A03, discussing the thirty-ninth extension in May 2025, offers the clearest example of routinisation. The tone is calmer, less dramatic, and more administrative. The emphasis is no longer on war or rupture, but on avoiding “setbacks”¹⁵⁵ in security outcomes. Continuation is presented as obvious and sensible, while the possibility of ending the regime does not appear as a serious option. The repeated extensions are no longer treated as extraordinary measures, but as the only rational path forward. Compared to earlier texts, the discourse has clearly shifted from emergency mobilisation to stable governance. The state of

154 Original Spanish: “*las veces que sean necesarias*”

155 Original Spanish: “*un retroceso*”

exception is no longer narrated as a temporary interruption of normality; it has become part of a new normal order.

This routinisation is also physically visible in Decree 333 itself. Although the Constitution frames the state of exception as temporary, the decree becomes a record of permanence. More than seven of its ten pages are dedicated to listing the repeated extensions of the regime. In this sense, the transformation is not only discursive but procedural: repetition itself normalises exception. What begins as a temporary suspension of guarantees is converted into an ordinary administrative practice.

This gradual transformation of temporary emergency into routine governance strongly reflects Agamben's argument that states of exception tend to exceed their initial justification and become embedded in ordinary governance. What is formally understood as a temporary suspension is discursively and practically converted into a lasting mode of rule. In the Salvadoran case, this normalisation takes place through repetition, regularity of legal procedures (e.g. monthly Assembly voting to extend the exception), and the absence of any meaningful endpoint. Agamben further emphasises that the temporality of the state of exception is inherently unstable, since it is meant to last only as long as a situation of necessity persists. However, determining what constitutes such necessity ultimately relies on political judgement rather than fixed criteria.¹⁵⁶ As a result, the boundary between temporary emergency and permanent governance becomes increasingly blurred, allowing exceptional measures to be continuously renewed while still being framed as provisional. Importantly, the analysis demonstrates that this transformation is not achieved through dramatic authoritarian rupture, but through procedural repetition, administrative regularity, and discursive normalisation. Each extension appears technical, lawful, and reasonable when considered individually, while the cumulative permanence of the regime becomes progressively obscured. The findings also resonate with Muñoz Carpintero's argument that the normalisation of emergency measures risks undermining constitutional and international legal protections.¹⁵⁷ While legal frameworks such as the Salvadoran Constitution and the American Convention on Human Rights formally construct

¹⁵⁶ G. Agamben, *State of Exception*, p.30.

¹⁵⁷ Á. Muñoz Carpintero, 'Normalizando La Excepción: Perspectivas Del Derecho Internacional Sobre Suspensión De Garantías En El Salvador, Honduras Y Ecuador Para El Combate Al Crimen Organizado', p.237.

emergency powers as temporary and exceptional, the discourse surrounding the regime increasingly detaches renewal from meaningful temporal limitation or clearly defined conditions for termination.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates how permanence is discursively produced. The state of exception is gradually transformed from an extraordinary interruption into a routinised condition of governance through repetition, procedural regularity, and narratives of continuity, prevention, and stability. The exception, in other words, is no longer exceptional.

5.3 Popular support, legitimacy, and silencing critique

The stability and continuation of exceptional measures depends not only on their justification, but also on the production and maintenance of legitimacy. This section explores how legitimacy is produced through appeals to popular sovereignty, reinforced through claims of success and recognition, and defended through the delegitimation of critical voices.

5.3.1 Popular sovereignty as moral authorisation

Another central source of legitimacy in the analysed material is “the people”. The people are not regarded merely as an audience that supports government policy, but as the ultimate basis of political and moral authority. Across speeches, Assembly debates, and public comments, exceptional measures are repeatedly justified not simply as effective security policies, but as expressions of the popular will. The government therefore presents itself not as imposing coercive measures from above, but as responding to the demands and interests of “the people”, while presenting itself as their protector. This way, support for the regime is transformed into democratic and moral authorisation for exceptional governance.

Bukele's tweets express this logic particularly clearly. In T19, he presents "the people" as the highest democratic authority: they have the right to criticise, pressure, demand accountability from, and even remove those in power. At the same time, Bukele positions himself as someone who listens and responds rather than imposes authority. This framing is important because repression is not mentioned directly. Instead, democracy is abstracted from concrete rights and procedures and reduced to responsiveness. The implication is that if the government acts, it does so because the people want it ("This government has proven to be the one that listens to the people the most"¹⁵⁸). Legitimacy is therefore grounded in the claim that the government listens to and embodies popular will. This logic becomes even more explicit in T20, where Bukele refers to "the will of an entire people"¹⁵⁹ that has already decided to leave the past behind. Here, the people are not represented as a plural democratic public engaged in debate, but as a unified symbolic force with a single coherent will. Political authority is therefore collapsed into an already-existing consensus. In this tweet, popular sovereignty does not open space for democratic contestation but closes it. T21 pushes this logic further by translating legitimacy into numbers. Bukele responds to criticism of the regime by arguing that 95% support means "practically the entire Salvadoran people"¹⁶⁰. Majority becomes totality. Once legitimacy is reduced to overwhelming numerical support, rights, procedures, and objections become secondary. If nearly everyone agrees, disagreement can be treated as anti-democratic. Together, these examples transform "the people" from a plural democratic public into a unified political subject whose will already appears decided.

A similar merging of state and people is evident in the Assembly texts. In A01, representatives claim that the continuation of the state of exception is "requested by Salvadorans" and that "many Salvadorans ask for its continuation"¹⁶¹. This blends institutional authority and popular will into a single voice: the Assembly presents itself not as an institution making political decisions, but as the executor of the people's demand for security. State authority is equated with popular will. A02 establishes this logic early on by linking the Assembly to "the right side of history and [on the side] of

158 Original Spanish: "*Este Gobierno ha demostrado ser el que más escucha al pueblo*"

159 Original Spanish: "*la voluntad de un pueblo entero*"

160 Original Spanish: "*prácticamente TODO EL PUEBLO SALVADOREÑO*"

161 Original Spanish: "*es solicitud de los salvadoreños*" and "*muchos salvadoreños le solicitan la continuidad de la medida*"

the majorities”¹⁶², while A05 collapses elections, public opinion, and emergency power into a single chain of legitimacy: the future has been “expressed at the ballot box,” and “the people want this tool to continue”¹⁶³. Across these texts, the distinction between government and governed is blurred, making state action appear simply as the direct expression of collective will. Referencing “the people” does not simply provide democratic legitimacy; it also creates a moral obligation. Once support is framed as overwhelming and self-evident, and combined with claims of success, continuation of the regime appears not as a controversial decision, but as the only responsible and ethical response. The argument is no longer just that “the people want this”, but that it is morally right because it both reflects the will of the people and produces their protection and wellbeing. This dynamic becomes particularly visible in later Assembly texts such as A03 and A04. In A03, the regime is described as having “the support of the population”, something reinforced through references to surveys. At the same time, this support is linked to concrete outcomes, such as improved security and stability. Similarly, A04 presents the measure as successful precisely because of the “support that the Salvadoran population has given” to the government, directly connecting that support to security, economic recovery, and national progress. Support and success are therefore merged into a single legitimising logic: the regime is justified because people support it, and that support is validated by visible results. Through this combination, policy is transformed into ethical necessity rather than political choice. If a measure is both widely supported and demonstrably effective, opposing it can be framed not simply as disagreement with the government, but as opposition to the wellbeing of the population itself. This narrows debate, and criticism becomes easier to be regarded as irresponsible or anti-people.

Public comments under Bukele’s tweets echo and reinforce these narratives of legitimacy. In PC1, change is explicitly portrayed as the decision of “the majorities”¹⁶⁴, directly reproducing the government’s translation of majority support into political legitimacy. Support is not presented as passive approval, but as active popular endorsement of the new order. Other comments go further by portraying support as participation in the security project itself. In PC3, gratitude is directed not only towards

162 Original Spanish: “*seguiremos estando del lado correcto de la historia y de las mayorías*”

163 Original Spanish: “*La gente quiere que continúe esta herramienta*”

164 Original Spanish: “*lo han decidido las mayorías*”

Bukele, the armed forces, and the police, but also towards the population that now denounces terrorists. Support is therefore represented as collective engagement in the production of security. In PC4, the fusion of state and people becomes even more explicit: “the people” and “the state” are said to respect one another, while the government is described as protecting the people rather than criminals. Here, the state appears not as a separate coercive authority, but as the protective expression of the people themselves. Some comments, such as PC8 and PC9, also show how public support can move beyond reinforcement into escalation. Calls for executions or deliberate deprivation of prisoners radicalise the punitive logic already present in official discourse. This suggests that public responses not only echo government narratives, but can intensify them.

Legitimacy is also reinforced through claims of international recognition. The discourse moves beyond “our people want this” to suggest that the world itself confirms the correctness of the government’s approach. External recognition becomes an additional layer of validation. This is especially visible in A03, where El Salvador is described as “recognised as the safest country in the Western Hemisphere” and as a model that other countries seek to replicate. The implication is that the government’s strategy is not only domestically supported, but an example internationally. This logic is condensed in T02, where Bukele states that “the safest country on the continent commands respect”¹⁶⁵, linking security success directly to international status and recognition. A04 develops this further by framing security success in terms of image restoration, tourism, investment, and diaspora return. External admiration and improved international standing are presented as proof that the government’s path is correct. This suggests that legitimacy in the analysed discourse is not derived from a single source, but is instead multi-layered and strategically distributed. Internally, legitimacy is grounded in “the people”, whose support is presented as both democratic mandate and moral authorisation. Externally, however, actors are divided into two distinct categories that perform different functions within the discourse. On the one hand, international recognition, admiration, and imitation by other countries serve to reinforce legitimacy, presenting El Salvador as a successful and exemplary case. On the other hand, critical actors, particularly human rights organisations, international NGOs, and disapproving

¹⁶⁵ Original Spanish: “*El país más seguro del continente se respeta.*”

foreign governments, are systematically delegitimised and reframed as hypocritical or complicit in violence. In other words, external actors are not treated uniformly, but are selectively incorporated or rejected depending on whether they validate or challenge the government's narrative. Therefore, legitimacy becomes not only democratic and moral, but also performative and validated externally. Success is reflected back through the regard of others and used to reinforce the sense that the government is right.

These findings strongly reflect populist constructions of legitimacy centred on "the people" as a unified moral authority. As Mudde¹⁶⁶ and Weyland¹⁶⁷ argue, populist discourse tends to construct politics as a moral opposition between a unified "people" and those portrayed as threatening or illegitimate outsiders, while elevating the general will as the ultimate source of authority. In this framework, political decisions are not presented as contestable, but as the direct expression of a unified popular will. In the analysed material, this logic becomes especially visible through the repeated collapse of state authority into popular will, where political decisions are represented not as disputable choices but as direct expressions of collective demand.

The analysis also reflects Balzacq's emphasis on audience acceptance within securitisation processes. The legitimacy of exceptional measures depends not only on the articulation of the threat, but on securing its endorsement by a relevant public. The government presents itself as acting for the people, listening to the people, and responding to the people's will. Additionally, the repeated union of punitive policy with the will of "the people" also echoes penal populist logics, in which harsh security measures are framed as finally restoring justice on behalf of ordinary citizens, who have been wronged in favour of criminals for too long.¹⁶⁸ The analysed discourse similarly presents coercive measures as morally necessary acts of protection carried out on behalf of ordinary citizens who have supposedly suffered for too long under insecurity and impunity. Within this framework, exceptional measures are presented as morally justified and democratically authorised actions, not as controversial political decisions. Legitimacy therefore emerges not only from claims of effectiveness, but from the construction of "the people" as a unified moral authority whose support transforms exceptional measures into democratic and ethical necessity.

166 C. Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', p.543.

167 K. Weyland, 'Chapter 3 - Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach', p.52.

168 J. Pratt, *Penal Populism*, p.12.

5.3.2 Delegation of human rights discourse

Human rights discourse is not ignored in the analysed material, but actively reframed and attacked. Critics are represented as politically illegitimate and aligned with violence and foreign interests. As a result, both critique and human rights discourse lose legitimacy before they can meaningfully operate. Rather than appearing as protections for citizens, rights are reframed as obstacles to security, justice, and national wellbeing.

In Bukele's discourse, rights are not presented as neutral protections, but as mechanisms that cause harm and enable violence. Human rights organisations and international actors are represented as defending criminals while ignoring victims. As examined in 5.1.1, a central discursive mechanism is the construction of a stark moral binary between victims and criminals, framed as extreme innocence versus absolute evil. This is particularly visible in Bukele's tweets. In T09, the victim is a seven-year-old girl, whose innocence is emphasised to morally anchor the argument and prevent critique. In T12, this binary is reinforced through the contrast between "heroes" and irredeemable enemies described as "damn murderers"¹⁶⁹ and "plague". Similarly, T10 juxtaposes small business owners struggling to survive with predatory extortionists. Across these examples, extreme innocence is consistently positioned against absolute evil, leaving little room for ambiguity. Within this moral framework, human rights actors are portrayed as complicit in violence. They are depicted as silent when victims suffer, but vocal when criminals are detained. In T09, Bukele questions the absence of NGO responses to the murder of a child, while emphasising their attention to detained "terrorists, rapists, and murderers", concluding that they "only care about the rights of criminals"¹⁷⁰. A similar argument appears in T12, where human rights organisations are not framed as neutral critics, but as actors who effectively enable violence by prioritising criminals over victims. Through this framing, human rights discourse is stripped of its moral neutrality and seen as selective and fundamentally unjust. As a result, repression is reframed as protection and justice. It is not presented as coercion, but as an ethical obligation. Violence by the state becomes morally necessary in order to defend innocent victims and restore social order. Therefore, the suspension of rights is justified not *despite* its coercive nature, but because it is presented as the only morally

¹⁶⁹ Original Spanish: "*malditos asesinos*"

¹⁷⁰ Original Spanish: "*únicamente velan por los derechos de los delincuentes*"

acceptable response to violence. Through this framing, human rights discourse is stripped of moral neutrality and presented as selective and fundamentally unjust. Repression consequently appears as an ethical obligation.

This logic extends beyond abstract principles to the actors who articulate human rights critiques. NGOs, international organisations, and foreign governments are not only disagreed with, but actively delegitimised. In Speech 1, Bukele repeatedly portrays human rights actors as morally inconsistent and detached from Salvadoran reality. He claims that these actors remain silent when “the people” suffer and react with indifference or even celebration when police officers are killed (lines 19-20), while expressing concern for detained gang members. This framing allows criticism to be dismissed in advance: if critics are selective and morally inconsistent, their arguments can be disregarded without engagement. Hypocrisy becomes grounds for delegitimation. Critics are also framed as foreign and detached from Salvadoran reality. In Speech 1, Bukele introduces the idea of “two classes of citizens” (line 87) in the world, arguing that violence in countries like El Salvador is treated differently from violence in more powerful states. This represents international criticism as hypocritical and shaped by global double standards. References to the United States reinforce this narrative by contrasting El Salvador’s past solidarity with a perceived lack of reciprocity (lines 79-81). This logic is further developed in T15, where human rights norms are described as abstract, ideological, and disconnected from local realities¹⁷¹, while the government’s policies are framed as grounded in “our own reality” and validated by results. Human rights, therefore, appear as foreign impositions, whereas local governance is presented as authentic and legitimate.

In addition to moral and political delegitimation, critique is also dismissed through ridicule and confrontation. In Speech 2, Bukele adopts an openly sarcastic tone, challenging critics to “come and protect our people” (lines 8-9) or to “come and take their gang members” (line 9), even offering them mock incentives, such as a “2 for 1 discount” (line 10) on prisoners. Rather than engaging with criticism, he disqualifies it through irony and confrontation. Since human rights actors are portrayed as outsiders who care more about criminals than about the population, this reinforces a nationalist and exclusionary framing. Critique is not answered; it is dismissed as irrelevant from

171 Original Spanish: “*sus ideologías y conceptos reestablecidos*”; “*un país que desconocen*”

the start. Human rights actors are also represented as economically and strategically invested in violence. In several tweets, NGOs are portrayed as economically dependent on violence and instability. Peace is described as not profitable for human rights organisations, and their criticism is reframed as part of a business model that relies on suffering. Statements such as “is not profitable for human rights NGOs”¹⁷² (T03), “it caused them to lose their business here”¹⁷³ (T03), “These organisations have a vested interest in the bloodshed continuing”¹⁷⁴ (T06), or “They want to see our people bleed to death; that’s their business.”¹⁷⁵ (T14) invert the conventional moral position of human rights actors. Rather than defending life and peace, they are depicted as benefiting from death and instability. This narrative is reinforced by collapsing a wide range of actors, such as NGOs, global media, political elites, international organisations, and foreign governments, into a single, homogeneous block. Tweets such as T03 and T17 merge these actors into a unified enemy opposed to El Salvador’s success. This produces a simplified and coherent enemy, where critique is no longer plural or diverse, but part of a coordinated hostile force. Within this inverted framework, the state is repositioned as the genuine defender of life and wellbeing. While human rights actors are depicted as promoting or benefiting from violence, the government is presented as the actor that delivers peace and security. This logic becomes visible in T13, where Bukele states that the government will “continue working for the security of Salvadorans, even if ‘human rights’ NGOs complain”¹⁷⁶, explicitly positioning critique as secondary to the imperative of protection. As expressed in T15, the government’s refusal to follow international prescriptions is justified by its success in transforming the country into one of the safest in the region. This produces a complete moral reversal: the state becomes the true humanitarian actor, while human rights defenders are transformed into obstacles to protection.

Public comments under Bukele’s tweets reproduce and reinforce these delegitimising narratives. In PC7, human rights discourse is explicitly rejected, with statements such as “Human rights are for humans, not for ruthless parasites”¹⁷⁷, which exclude certain

172 Original Spanish: “no es rentable para las ONG”

173 Original Spanish: “les hizo perder su negocio”

174 Original Spanish: “Estos organismos tienen intereses invertidos en que siga el baño de sangre”

175 Original Spanish: “Quieren ver a nuestro pueblo desangrarse, ese es su negocio.”

176 Original Spanish: “Seguiremos trabajando por la seguridad de los salvadoreños, aunque reclamen las ONGs de ‘derechos humanos’.”

177 Original Spanish: “derechos humanos son para humanos y no para parásitos despiadados”

groups from moral and legal protection altogether. Comments such as PC5 and PC6 also emphasise national sovereignty, framing international actors as external forces imposing irrelevant or harmful agendas. At the same time, the moral inversion identified in official discourse is also reproduced at the level of public commentary. In PC2, expressions of compassion towards detained gang members are framed as betrayal of victims, reinforcing the idea that empathy towards offenders is morally wrong. These comments demonstrate that delegitimisation is not only articulated by political leaders, but also internalised and reproduced within public discourse.

A final contradiction emerges between legal and political uses of human rights. In legal texts such as Decree 333, international human rights law, including the ACHR, is cited as a source of legitimacy and authorisation. However, in speeches and tweets, human rights actors and institutions are portrayed as hypocritical or irrelevant. Human rights therefore hold a dual role: as a legal resource that legitimises emergency measures, and as a discursive target that is actively undermined.

This delegitimation strongly reflects a populist logic in which alternative moral and institutional authorities are portrayed as hostile to “the people”. As Muddle argues, populism tends to frame politics in strongly moralised terms, where opponents are not simply disagreed with but rejected as fundamentally illegitimate.¹⁷⁸ In the analysed discourse, human rights organisations and critical actors are not treated as legitimate opponents within democratic debate, but as morally compromised actors aligned with criminals, foreign interests, or national decline. The analysis also demonstrates how securitising logics extend beyond the construction of criminal threats to include the delegitimation of critique itself. Human rights discourse is repositioned as an obstacle to collective survival, while critics are incorporated into broader narratives of insecurity, disorder, or external interference. This way, securitisation operates not only through the identification of enemies, but also through the narrowing of legitimate political disagreement. More broadly, the findings reveal a significant moral inversion within the discourse. Rights language is not rejected outright, but selectively reappropriated and redefined. Human rights become associated with criminal protection, while coercive state violence is reframed as the true defence of life, dignity, and collective wellbeing. This process is particularly important because it allows exceptional governance to

178 C. Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, p.544.

appear ethically justified rather than merely strategically necessary. By delegitimising alternative moral frameworks, the discourse reduces the possibility of critique while simultaneously strengthening the legitimacy of repression.

Human rights are therefore not rejected outright, but discursively reconstructed in ways that transform critique into threat and repression into protection.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to analyse how the state of exception in El Salvador is discursively constructed, justified, and normalised under President Nayib Bukele's government. Specifically, it addressed the question: *How are exceptional security measures, particularly the state of exception, constructed and legitimised in political discourse in El Salvador?* The findings show that exceptional security measures, including mass detention and the suspension of rights, are framed as necessary, legitimate, and even democratic. Importantly, support for the regime is not produced *despite* the suspension of rights, but because this suspension is discursively reframed as the very condition for freedom, dignity, legality, and popular sovereignty. The analysis identifies three distinct but interconnected discursive logics that together produce what can be understood as democratically legitimised repression:

First, the moral polarisation of society into “good” citizens and an irredeemable enemy, combined with the construction of the past as a traumatic threat and the present as a decisive rupture, enables the acceptance of violence. Within this framework, repression is not presented as a political choice, but as a necessary and unavoidable response to an existential threat.

Second, the discourse redefines key concepts. Freedom is reformulated as security and the absence of fear, while legality functions primarily as reassurance rather than constraint. The state of exception is therefore framed as lawful, constitutional, and justified, and therefore acceptable. At the same time, its repeated extension, procedural normalisation, and lack of a clear endpoint transform what is intended as temporary into a routinised and permanent mode of governance.

Third, legitimacy is grounded in appeals to popular sovereignty. The government presents itself as acting in the name of “the people”, transforming policy into a moral and democratic necessity. At the same time, critics are delegitimised as morally corrupt, politically illegitimate, or aligned with violence. Human rights discourse is actively reframed and contested, further narrowing the space for critique.

Together, these three logics reinforce one another: the construction of threat enables coercion, legal and normative reframing normalises it, and appeals to popular

sovereignty protect it from contestation. In combination, they produce a form of repression that appears not only necessary, but legitimate, democratic, and widely supported.

This thesis contributes to existing theoretical debates on securitisation, populism, and the state of exception by demonstrating the analytical value of examining these perspectives together. Taken in combination, these approaches help explain how different discursive logics can mutually reinforce one another in ways that normalise extraordinary power through a broader reorganisation of key political meanings such as security, freedom, legality, and democracy.

First, the findings extend securitisation theory by showing that threat construction operates not only through the identification of danger, but through a broader moral and temporal framing that presents gangs as existential enemies, the past as traumatic, and the future as permanently fragile. The analysis also demonstrates that securitisation depends not simply on declaring a threat, but on producing resonance with a public positioned simultaneously as victim, audience, and moral authority. In this analysis, securitisation emerges not as a singular speech act, but as an ongoing discursive process through which exceptional measures become normalised and unquestionable.

Second, the analysis contributes to debates on populism by showing how popular sovereignty is mobilised not only to legitimise power, but to narrow the space for political contestation. “The people” are constructed as a unified moral subject whose will is already embodied by the leader, while critics are framed as illegitimate or aligned with threat. The findings therefore demonstrate how populist, penal, and securitising logics can converge to produce a form of democratically authorised coercion, grounded simultaneously in popular legitimacy, security discourse, and the delegitimation of opposition.

Third, the Salvadoran case reinforces Agamben’s argument that states of exception tend to become normalised, while also identifying the discursive mechanisms through which this occurs. Repetition, procedural regularity, and the constant invocation of threat transform temporary emergency measures into an enduring mode of governance. At the same time, legality is reframed not as a limit on power, but as a source of reassurance

and authorisation. Hobbesian and Neocleousian insights further help explain why this transformation can appear rational and legitimate in contexts where security is prioritised over liberty. Rather than presenting the suspension of rights as a loss, the discourse reframes it as protection.

In sum, these contributions suggest that the durability of exceptional regimes cannot be explained by coercion or fear alone. Rather, they depend on a broader reorganisation of political meaning, in which security, democracy, and legality are re-articulated in ways that make the suspension of rights appear necessary, legitimate, and even desirable. Therefore, the findings challenge the assumption that states of exception are inherently temporary or unstable, showing instead how they can be discursively stabilised and sustained through the alignment of security, popular legitimacy, and legal justification.

The key analytical insight of this thesis is that support for the regime of exception is not irrational, but discursively structured and made coherent. Rather than being explained as manipulation, ignorance, or emotional reaction, support emerges within a framework in which core political meanings are systematically redefined. Freedom becomes security, law is transformed from a limit into a source of authorisation, democracy is reduced to majoritarian will, and violence is moralised as protection. Within this discursive configuration, the suspension of rights does not appear as a loss, but as the necessary condition for order, dignity, and collective survival.

The apparent paradox of popular support for repressive and exceptional measures therefore becomes more coherent when examined discursively. Within the political reality constructed by the discourse, the suspension of rights is reframed not as a contradiction to freedom or democracy, but as their necessary condition.

The Salvadoran case has broader implications for how we understand the relationship between security, democracy, and political legitimacy. It demonstrates how authoritarian practices can be articulated through democratic language, and how popular consent can coexist with the normalisation of permanent emergency. Rather than appearing as a contradiction, this combination is made coherent through discourse, challenging the assumption that democratic legitimacy and coercive governance are inherently opposed. At the same time, the case helps explain why similar discursive strategies are attractive

and potentially transferable to other contexts. Bukele has increasingly been referenced as a model by political actors in Latin America and beyond, with calls to replicate his approach to security. El Salvador functions as a kind of “test laboratory”, in which a model of popularly legitimised repression is not only implemented, but observed, validated, and potentially imitated. The discourse surrounding the Salvadoran case thus extends beyond its national context, contributing to the circulation of a political template that links security, popular support, and exceptional power.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of analysing how legitimacy itself is constructed and made visible. The apparent consensus reflected in public discourse should not be taken as a direct measure of public opinion, but understood as part of a broader discursive environment in which meanings are produced, circulated, and reinforced. The discourse constructs a hegemonic image of popular support, in which agreement appears unified and self-evident. This appearance is not neutral, but politically significant: it reinforces legitimacy, narrows the space for contestation, and frames dissent as marginal or illegitimate. At the same time, this hegemony is not only discursively produced, but can also be reinforced through broader conditions, including repression, the marginalisation or silencing of dissenting voices, exile, and the algorithmic visibility of supportive narratives in digital spaces. What is visible as “public opinion”, therefore, is not simply a reflection of social reality, but a structured outcome of the same processes that sustain the regime of exception.

On the basis of this study, it can be argued that the legitimacy of the Salvadoran state of exception cannot be understood solely through coercion, propaganda, or fear alone. Rather, support for exceptional governance emerges through discursive processes that redefine core political meanings such as security, legality, freedom, and democracy. At the same time, this thesis does not claim that discourse alone determines political behaviour or public opinion, nor that all Salvadorans experience or interpret the regime in the same way. Instead, the study demonstrates how official discourse constructs a coherent framework through which exceptional measures are made indispensable, legitimate, and widely acceptable.

An important issue that emerges from this analysis concerns the temporality of the state of exception. While formally conceived as a temporary and extraordinary response, the

Salvadoran case illustrates how emergency measures can become normalised and routinised into an ongoing mode of governance. This raises a broader question: if the state of exception is continuously justified through the persistent possibility of threat and regression, when and under what conditions does it end? Or does it instead become self-perpetuating, sustained by the very discursive logic that initially justified it?

This puzzle points to several avenues for further research. For example, scholarship could examine whether similar discursive patterns emerge in other contexts where security is prioritised over rights, and how these narratives move and adapt across different political settings. Alternatively, research could also explore the durability of these regimes over time, particularly whether and how the normalised state of exception is eventually challenged or transformed. Finally, further work could examine the relationship between discursive constructions of legitimacy and their material effects, including how these narratives shape lived experiences of security, justice, and exclusion. The Salvadoran case does not offer a final explanation, but opens a broader set of questions about how exceptional power is justified, maintained, and potentially normalised in contemporary political life.

Corpus of Analysed Material

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- A04 - Asamblea Legislativa, 'Régimen de excepción continuará protegiendo la vida de los salvadoreños', *Asamblea Legislativa*, 10 July 2024, <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/13229>, (accessed 10 February 2026).
- A05 - Asamblea Legislativa, 'La seguridad ciudadana y la paz social continuarán con nueva prórroga del régimen de excepción', *Asamblea Legislativa*, 10 February 2024, <https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/13092>, (accessed 10 February 2026).

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- PC2 - Laura PocaSV, 'Los que ahora salen teniéndole lástima a los pandilleros...', *X (Twitter)*, 21 June 2024, <https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1803990665988104634>, (accessed 13 February 2026).
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- PC5 - Carlos Hermann Bruch, 'Es hora de que todos esos farsantes de afuera...', *X (Twitter)*, 28 March 2022, <https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1508278475026845696>, (accessed 13 February 2026).
- PC6 - Sara Ayala, 'Excelente la comunidad internacional...', *X (Twitter)*, 28 March 2022, <https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1508278475026845696>, (accessed 13 February 2026).

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PC9 - EddoStark, 'Yo creo que sería bueno que hiciera ayunar...', *X (Twitter)*, 28 March 2022, <https://x.com/nayibbukele/status/1508278475026845696>, (accessed 13 February 2026).

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Speech 01 - Original transcript

Title of speech: “President Nayib Bukele announces that he will intensify the war against gangs”

Date: 29 June 2022

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJwqDJIL7zw>

Language: Spanish

Duration: 27 min 20 sec

Note: For long speeches, such as this one, only analytically relevant excerpts are transcribed and included in the annexes. Omitted sections are indicated with ellipses.

Line	Text
1	[...]
2	Buenas noches a todos. Quiero informar, creo que, algunos de ustedes tendrán alguna
3	información preliminar, que en un enfrentamiento con pandilleros en Santa Ana, tres de
4	nuestros agentes de la PNC han fallecido, víctimas del fuego de las pandillas.
5	[...]
6	Sin embargo, un mensaje importante que queremos enviarle a las pandillas, es de que esto
7	no va a quedar así y que van a pagar caro por la por el asesinato de estos de estos tres héroes
8	que dieron su vida para proteger a la población.
9	Todos ellos dejan familia, dejan hijos. Hay uno de ellos, su esposa había fallecido hace unos
10	meses de Covid, y ahora él es asesinado cruelmente por las pandillas, por lo tanto deja a su
11	hijo en la orfandad. Una, hay una agente mujer fue asesinada también, uno de estos tres y, y
12	creo que esto resalta varias cosas: la primera es que no estamos combatiendo angelitos,
13	estamos combatiendo al mismo demonio y la maldad existe y esta, esta, y esta vez se
14	llevaron a tres de nuestros héroes. Gente que estaba ahí, dando su vida, literalmente para
15	defender la seguridad del pueblo salvadoreño a pesar de los ataques, a pesar de que los
16	acusen, y ellos lo que están haciendo es dando su vida por la gente, literalmente. Porque
17	estos tres héroes que han perdido la vida, los tres jóvenes, dejan sus familias, truncan sus

18	carreras, sus vidas. Y, estoy seguro, los organismos de los derechos humanos y las ONGs no
19	van a decir absolutamente nada, y nos van a decir absolutamente nada siempre sencillamente
20	porque no les importa. Ellos, estoy casi seguro, que es casi motivo de celebración para
21	algunos en las ONGs y en algunos medios de comunicación amigos de las pandillas que
22	están siempre pendientes de algo malo que le pueda pasar a nuestro país para, para
23	celebrarlo y estoy seguro que ahora ellos están... en el menor de los casos no van a mostrar
24	consternación como sí la muestran con los pandilleros. Cuando hay un pandillero que es
25	llevado a la cárcel, ni siquiera abatido a tiros, llevado a la cárcel, empiezan a decir que
26	“pobrecito el pandillero, que no va a comer bien en la cárcel, que tiene familia, que tiene,
27	que tiene...que su madre está triste porque el pandillero se lo llevaron a la cárcel, que su
28	esposa está triste porque el pandillero se lo llevaron a la cárcel”. Pero el pandillero ahí está,
29	vivo, en la cárcel, y va a tener un proceso judicial que enfrentar, pero nuestros héroes no, a
30	nuestros héroes los asesinaron y ellos también tienen familia, también tienen madre, también
31	tienen hijos, también tienen esposa o esposo. Pero en ese caso, no sólo no se van a
32	consternar por ellos, sino que ellos no habían cometido ningún delito, ellos no son asesinos a
33	sangre fría como sí lo son los otros. Ellos no cortan, no le cortaban cabezas a la gente como
34	sí hacían los pandilleros, ellos no extorsionaban a nuestro pueblo como sí hacían nuestros
35	pandilleros, ellos estaban trabajando honradamente para cuidar al pueblo salvadoreño. Y
36	¿qué pasó?, los asesinaron.
37	[...]
38	Si ellos piensan que esto va a ..., los pandilleros pues y sus aliados internacionales y
39	nacionales, si ellos piensan que vamos a, esto va a hacer que retrocedamos en la guerra
40	contra las pandillas se equivocan. Y son tontos, realmente aparte de asesinos y despiadados
41	son tontos porque ellos piensan que eso va a hacer que nosotros retrocedamos y va a ser
42	totalmente lo contrario.
43	[...]

44	Así se quejen las organizaciones de derechos humanos, así se quejen las ONGs, o los países
45	enemigos de nuestro pueblo. Que se quejen lo que quieran, nosotros vamos a defender a
46	nuestro pueblo y vamos a hacer que la vida de estos agentes no se haya perdido en vano.
47	[...]
48	Me acaba de venir una información: el día de ayer el., uno de los fallecidos, el inspector,
49	había finalizado su curso en doctrina de derechos humanos. Ayer..., ayer le entregaron su
50	diploma por haber finalizado su curso en doctrina de derechos humanos. Los policías que
51	están luchando por trabajar, por tener un enfoque de derechos humanos a combatir a estos
52	delincuentes, hoy lo asesinaron. Y..., y bueno no va a quedar en la impunidad.
53	[...]
54	Esto solo nos recuerda que el mal sigue ahí y que sí están bien golpeados, y han sido
55	reducidos a niveles que nunca antes se habían visto, pero también es una realidad que siguen
56	ahí con poder de fuego, con capacidad de causar mucho daño, dolor y muerte.
57	[...]
58	Y esto nos demuestra que debemos arreciar la guerra contra las pandillas y se queje quien se
59	queje, llore quien llore, grite quien grite, reclame quien reclame, condene quien condene,
60	pero no podemos parar ahora. Porque si paramos ahora ellos se van a reagrupar, como nos
61	demuestran que pueden hacerlo, van a adaptarse a la nueva realidad y, una vez adaptados a
62	la nueva realidad, va a ser imposible extirpar ese cáncer de nuestro país. Así que vamos a
63	luchar hasta acabar con las pandillas. Sabemos que no va a ser fácil, sabemos que no va a ser
64	de la noche a la mañana, pero sí sabemos que hemos logrado mucho en estos casi tres meses
65	de guerra contra las pandillas y que no vamos a parar y más bien vamos a arreciar hasta que
66	terminemos con todos los pandilleros en nuestro país y estén entre las rejas.
67	[...]
68	[*Preguntas de la prensa*]: Buenas noches presidente, quisiera que usted me dijera que
69	otras medidas van a tomar ahora que se ha dado un ataque a policías. Si van a reforzar las

70	medidas de seguridad en las calles y al interior de los centros penales y también qué opinión
71	le merece las críticas que han dado organismos internacionales con relación al régimen de
72	excepción. Entre las últimas teníamos lo que decía el ex-encargado de la embajada de los
73	EEUU, que dijo que el régimen de excepción era insostenible.
74	[*Bukele*]: Bien, muchas gracias. Sí, vamos a tomar medidas, vamos a reforzar la presencia
75	en las calles [...]
76	Y el otro, en cuanto a las condenas que han habido para el régimen de excepción, yo quiero
77	decir que yo he visto cuando otros países han tenido que enfrentar momentos duros. Y
78	cuando ellos han enfrentado momentos duros, EEUU u otros países, nosotros hemos
79	mostrado nuestra solidaridad siempre con ellos. Cuando han habido atentados terribles en
80	los EEUU, nosotros hemos mostrado rápidamente nuestra solidaridad con las víctimas y con
81	el país y con el gobierno de ese país, porque nosotros nos consideramos amigos de los
82	demás países, nos consideramos amigos de la comunidad internacional y nos consideramos
83	amigos de EEUU. Esperaríamos lo mismo, esperaríamos que cuando nosotros tenemos..,
84	como el fin de semana donde tuvimos 87 fallecidos, nosotros esperaríamos que nuestros
85	países amigos, y esperaríamos que la comunidad internacional se muestre solidaria también
86	con las con la pérdida de vida de salvadoreños. A veces pareciese como que si habemos en el
87	mundo ciudadanos de dos clases: están los ciudadanos a los que no se pueden tocar, y estoy
88	totalmente de acuerdo que no se pueden tocar, pero están el tipo de ciudadanos de otros
89	países, del tercer mundo donde ahí no importa que los masacren, ahí no tienen, ahí no
90	pueden hacer nada, no se pueden defender, no pueden meter a la cárcel a los asesinos,
91	porque ellos se indignan.
92	Y el régimen de excepción, cuando dice que no es sostenible no sé a qué se refiere, porque
93	evidentemente el régimen de excepción es de excepción, no va a durar para siempre. Sin
94	embargo, en la guerra duró una década. No esperamos que dure una década pero tampoco lo
95	vamos a quitar en 2-3 meses antes de acabar la guerra contra las pandillas. Es algo muy

96	importante, y lo dije hace un rato pero también lo puedo reforzar ahora, y es que las
97	pandillas son como un cáncer y tienen muchas similitudes: en primer lugar está un cáncer
98	con metástasis, pues en primer lugar está regado en todo el cuerpo, en este caso en todo el
99	país. En segundo lugar, las células cancerígenas están pegadas a células sanas y por eso es
100	tan difícil sacarlo porque no es un ejército enemigo que está ahí en el horizonte, sino que
101	están adentro de las comunidades, están adentro de las casas, están adentro de los mercados,
102	están adentro de la de la misma población. Es decir, son familiares, son hermanos, son
103	conocidos, son vecinos, tienen negocios, incluso, entonces es más difícil extirpar un cáncer
104	que está con metástasis y que está a la par de células sanas. Es mucho más difícil que una
105	enfermedad diferente o un cáncer que estuviese encapsulado. Lo otro que se parece, tiene
106	una similitud, es que si lo atacamos ahora con la quimioterapia, llamémosle a la guerra
107	contra las pandillas, pues lo estamos debilitando y ustedes han visto cómo ha caído la
108	violencia y la actividad pandillera, la misma población lo ha visto. Pero evidentemente aún
109	quedan muchas células cancerígenas todavía en el cuerpo.
110	[...]
111	Pero hay otra [similitud] que es la que mencionaba del cáncer: si nosotros atacamos con
112	quimioterapia, lo reducimos, digamos ahorita probablemente los tenemos reducidos a
113	aproximadamente en un 50%, pero el otro 50% que todavía está ahí. Si quitamos la
114	quimioterapia ese 50% va a volver a crecer, va a ser mayor que el 100% que era, y lo peor
115	de todo es que va a ser resistente a la quimioterapia, porque generalmente cuando un cáncer
116	regresa es resistente a la quimioterapia con la que se afectó a un inicio.
117	Entonces decir que el régimen excepción es insostenible, probablemente fue una opinión
118	desafortunada, probablemente fue una opinión desinformada, o probablemente fue una
119	opinión mal traducida. Porque si él se refiere a que no puede quedar para siempre, estamos
120	de acuerdo, no puede ser quimioterapia para siempre. Pero si él se refiere a que
121	suspendamos la quimioterapia antes de eliminar el cáncer, entonces es totalmente absurdo

122	porque lo único que vamos a lograr es que el cáncer nos mate a todos. Entonces ¿vamos a
123	suspender la quimioterapia? por supuesto que sí, cuando hayamos eliminado todas las
124	células cancerígenas del cuerpo.
125	[...]

Appendix 2: Speech 02 - Original transcript

Title of speech: “President Nayib Bukele sent a strong message to the gangs.”

Date: 5 April 2022

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vef112hLjZw>

Language: Spanish

Duration: 1 min 20 sec

Line	Text
1	Voy a aprovechar la oportunidad para enviarle un mensaje a los criminales. No a los que
2	están adentro, porque eso les quitamos la televisión, desde el 2019, claro. Sino a los que
3	están afuera.
4	Por ahí andan rumores que quieren empezarse a vengar de la gente honrada al azar; hagan
5	eso y no va haber un tiempo de comida en las cárceles, uno. A ver cuánto tiempo duran sus
6	homeboys ahí adentro. Les juro por dios que no comen un arroz y vamos a ver cuánto
7	tiempo duran.
8	Y no me importa lo que digan los organismos internacionales; que vengan a proteger a
9	nuestra gente, que vengan a llevarse a sus pandilleros. Si tanto los quieren se los entregamos
10	todos al dos por uno. Ustedes desatan una ola de criminalidad y nosotros quitamos la comida
11	en las cárceles.
12	Y recuerden que en las cárceles no sólo están los 17.000 pandilleros que ya estaban, sino que
13	están también los 6000 que hemos arrestado en estos nueve días. Y también van a estar
14	ustedes cuando los arrestamos y los llevemos ahí, y ahí no van a tener comida tampoco. Así
15	que mejor estense tranquilos y déjense arrestar. Por lo menos allí adentro van a vivir y van a
16	tener comida, dos tiempos, claro, y sin pollo.