Editors’ Introduction

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How has Central America fared amid the current global wave of autocratization and democratic erosion (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Diamond 2020)? There were promising transitions to democracy around the region in the early 1990s after an era of civil wars and dictatorships, but after a period of democratic institutionalization, the picture has gotten darker over the past decade (e.g., Dada 2020; Pignataro, Treminio, and Chavarría-Mora 2021).

There have been some bright spots of democracy and accountability. The 1990s were marked by efforts to professionalize national armies and police forces, with reforms aimed at subordinating security forces to civilian control. The region also celebrated competitive elections and witnessed the expansion of civil liberties, including an explosion of civic and social organizations representing the interests of previously excluded sectors of society. However, these democratic reforms faced crucial challenges. In most of the region, democratization was predicated on passing blanket amnesties for the political crimes and human rights violations committed in prior decades, resulting in a generalized lack of accountability and a climate of impunity. As a result, de facto power remained at the hands of military and traditional oligarchic elites. Though the regimes built in the 1990s in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua were nominally democratic, they struggled and often failed to translate this into meaningful improvements in citizens’ lives, protection of basic rights, and public accountability. As Alberto Cortés Ramos and Diana Fernández Alvarado (2021) have argued, Central American states have been institutionally robust in exercising their coercive functions, and institutionally precarious and weak in providing basic public services. This has meant high levels of violence, restrictions of civil liberties, continued persecution and exclusion of women, Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups and LGBTQI communities, and high levels of corruption and impunity.

Despite state repression and government intransigence, people around the region have continued to take to the streets to demand accountability, expansions of basic state welfare provision, and an end to corruption and abuses of power (e.g., Sosa and Almeida 2019; Cabrales and López-Espinoza 2020; Masek 2020; Valencia 2021), with Guatemalan protesters in 2015 even succeeding in forcing the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina.
and his cabinet over a major corruption scandal (see Flores 2019). But overall, popular efforts to forge or protect democracy have been met with an iron fist. The 2009 coup against President Manuel “Mel” Zelaya in Honduras, the rise of a ruthless dynastic dictatorship in Nicaragua spearheaded by President Daniel Ortega, the swift dismantling of the separation of powers in President Nayib Bukele’s El Salvador, gross violations of human rights in Guatemala, and the rise of an extremist, anti–rights movement in Costa Rica that seriously contended in the 2018 elections (Vargas Cullель y Alpízar Rodríguez 2020), all point to serious regional descent towards autocratic rule.

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Corruption, Impunity, and Authoritarian Actions

Though justice for crimes committed during civil wars and under dictatorships has moved in fits and starts, one major step for accountability in the region was the 2013 conviction of former Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide and crimes against humanity in his military regime’s campaign of mass violence against Indigenous communities during Guatemala’s Civil War. After the initial conviction was controversially overturned, Ríos Montt was being re–tried in 2018 at the time of his death, and other military officials have also been convicted of war crimes (see Burt 2021). Elsewhere, accountability for war crimes has been elusive, with Nicaragua never having any transitional justice process after its civil war (see Núñez de Escorcia 2014) and the long fight for justice for victims of El Salvador’s El Mozote massacre facing new barriers as Bukele has eroded judicial independence and cultivated military support (Bonner and Rauda 2021). Impunity and efforts to undermine institutions and civil society groups dedicated to governmental accountability have, unfortunately, been common when it has come to other abuses of power, too.

In Honduras, President Manuel Zelaya’s post–election shift to left–wing politics and push to form a constituent assembly sparked a fierce right–wing reaction and a 2009 military coup that led to a new government under the right–wing Partido Nacional (PNH) and President Porfirio Lobo (Meza et al. 2010; Pastor Fasquelle 2011; Ruhl 2010), who violently suppressed post–coup demonstrations (Sosa 2015). Under Lobo’s successor, Juan Orlando Hernández, the PNH’s rule grew more authoritarian and corrupt, with stacked courts, election fraud in 2017 to ensure Hernández’s victory, repression of protests, and Hernández and his family’s increasing involvement in narcotrafficking (Freeman and Perelló 2022; Salomón 2018; Sosa and Almeida 2019). Though the government in 2016 agreed jointly with the Organization of American States (OAS) to establish a special prosecutors’ unit (UFECIC) and an anti–corruption and impunity commission (MACCIH), despite (or because of) investigators’ success in uncovering corruption, there was little cooperation and sometimes outright attacks from Hernández and the PNH, and the agreement supporting the commission was not renewed in 2020 (Calderón Boy 2022; Call 2022). Persistent corruption, state repression, gang violence, and the lack of accountability for Hernández and government officials contributed to high levels of dissatisfaction and despair, especially among young people who came of age around the 2009 coup and its aftermath (Frank–Vitale and d’Aubuisson 2020).

There is potential for change, though, under the new administration of President Xiomara Castro (see below).

In Guatemala, the scandal that led to President Pérez Molina’s downfall in 2015 was emblematic of the institutionalized corruption that developed in the state during the civil war and then persisted (Bowen 2022; Schwartz 2021). Pérez Molina’s forced resignation offered an opportunity for a reset of a culture of ubiquitous corruption, in which it has been difficult for Guatemalans to get by without some degree of clientelism or bribery (Burrell, El Kotni, and Calmo 2020). Comedian Jimmy Morales ran for president and won in 2015 as a populist outsider focused above all on cleaning up corruption, yet he turned out to be more of the same, brushing off family members’ and his own implication in corruption, and then launching a campaign against the United Nations–backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). Morales sought to expel CICIG, and then succeeded in ensuring the Commission’s mandate was not renewed, though it had successfully worked with Guatemalan investigators to implicate over 1,500 people in corruption cases over the course of twelve years (Gutiérrez 2016; Hallock 2021; Schwartz 2022). Morales’ successor, current President Alejandro Giammattei, has only deepened the persecution of anti–corruption actors and efforts. His government has threatened, fired, arrested, and chased into exile anti–corruption investigators and prosecutors (Bowen 2022; Schwartz 2022), and in late July 2022, the police arrested Guatemala’s most prominent journalist, Jose Rubén Zamora, president of El Periódico, signaling a likely wider crackdown on the press (Valdés 2022).
The extent of Giammattei’s anti-democratic ambitions may or may not be limited to preserving impunity, but in El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele is clearly intent on dismantling democracy. After years of high crime rates and little accountability for the powerful (e.g., Allison 2017), Bukele won office in 2019 as a youthful populist pledging to clean up the political establishment’s corruption and combat El Salvador’s endemic gang violence—and then ran roughshod over democratic institutions. In 2020, Bukele marched into the Legislative Assembly with armed soldiers to give a speech to his captive audience pressuring them to force the passage of new security funding (Agren 2020). After his Nuevas Ideas party won a supermajority in the 2021 legislative elections, Bukele upped his aggression, covering up corruption related to COVID-19 aid funding while selectively prosecuting rivals, firing judges en masse, and ceasing cooperation with the Organization of American States—backed International Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES) (Indacochea and Estrada 2021; Labrador and Gavarrete 2021; Meléndez-Sánchez 2021). In 2021 and 2022, Bukele has threatened El Salvador’s financial stability (and opened up avenues for corruption and sanctions-busting) by adopting Bitcoin as an official currency (Vásquez 2022); journalists have been under attack (e.g., Arévalo and Arredondo 2022); and tens of thousands of people have been arrested under a state of emergency that the legislature continuously extends (Buschschläuter 2022)—a convenient way to give Bukele more power while using the ostensible purpose of combating gang violence. Bukele continues to enjoy high approval ratings, but rather than a new political dawn, he has brought authoritarianism and corruption in slick new packaging (Meléndez-Sánchez 2021; Miranda 2021; Roque Baldovinos 2021; Wolf 2021).

Bukele is following in the footsteps of Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega, who has shown the region how to win the presidency and then develop an authoritarian regime. Ortega returned to power in 2007 at the head of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), whose revolutionary government he helped lead in the 1980s, but his politics and the FSLN had sharply diverged from the past. Ortega formed alliances with conservative politicians, business elites, and Catholic Church leaders to gain and solidify power, and then worked to remove democratic checks and balances on his power and perpetual reelection (Martí i Puig 2010; Jarquín 2016; Thaler 2017). As Ortega’s family and FSLN elites corruptly accumulated business empires and wealth, he sought to establish a political dynasty, using the 2016 elections—which took place after leading opposition parties were sidelined through legal manipulations—to make First Lady Rosario Murillo the new Vice President (Jarquín 2016; Thaler 2017). Mass protests in 2018 challenged the regime and its elite pacts (e.g., Chamorro Barrios 2020; Monte Casablanca and Gómez 2020). But after weathering the uprising and violently retaking the streets (Cabrales Domínguez 2020; Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes 2018; Mosinger et al. 2020), Ortega and Murillo have further entrenched their power. The Ortega-Murillo family and the FSLN control all state institutions and use all arms of state power to persecute anyone who opposes them—politically or commercially—creating a culture of nepotism and turning even the healthcare system and telecommunications regulators into agencies of repression. The regime has expelled and shuttered civil society organizations, seized control of universities, shut down media outlets and arrested journalists, and gone on the offensive against the Catholic Church. In 2021, the government arrested and jailed all of the leading opposition presidential contenders months before the November elections (Martí i Puig, Rodríguez Suárez, and Serra 2022; Thaler and Mosinger 2022), and in July 2022, the police took over the town halls of the remaining opposition-governed municipalities, rather than waiting to rig the vote in November’s municipal elections (Redacción Confidencial 2022). With no political competition, freedom of assembly, or freedom of expression, Nicaragua today is a dictatorship by any definition, and, unfortunately, it may be offering a roadmap for Bukele and Giammattei in their own power grabs and crackdowns (e.g., Selser 2022).

**Violence and Human Rights**

Though the end of civil wars and open conflict significantly reduced levels of political violence, the region has nevertheless reached comparable and even higher levels of violence in the post-war period. Attention is often focused on the extraordinarily high homicide statistics in the Northern Triangle produced by conflicts among gangs to secure territory and economic markets. However, a more holistic perspective on violence in the region should also consider equally concerning rates of sexual violence, the increase in femicides, the persistence of targeted attacks on Indigenous and Afro-descendant people, as well as forms of structural violence and human rights violations perpetrated by the state.

In Nicaragua, political violence has escalated swiftly, particularly after the aforementioned civic protests that paralyzed the nation between April and August of 2018. The government responded by ordering police and pro-government paramilitary groups to use live ammunition on protesters, leaving a death toll of over three hundred
and twenty-five in the span of three months of protest (Cortés Ramos et al. 2020; Martí i Puig y Jarquín 2021). For over a decade, the Nicaraguan police force was praised for implementing a community-oriented policing model that has been deemed successful at preventing citizen insecurity in comparison with the rest of the region, but the force’s loss of any institutional independence and utter loyalty to a ruling family went mostly ignored (Cajina 2017; Sierakowski 2020). Long before 2018, the use of excessive force became routine against those deemed to oppose the Ortega government and its policies, including against industrial and agricultural workers expressing labor grievances (Walters 2019), senior citizens seeking to access pensions (Chamorro and Yang 2018), and peasant, Indigenous, and Afro–descendent people opposing extractivist and infrastructural megaprojects (Collombon 2015; Sánchez González 2016). When the police force has not been the agent of state repression, it has stood by as armed government supporters and paid gang members attack social and political protesters (Rodgers 2017). The complete deterioration of Nicaragua’s security forces and generalized fear among the population since the response to the 2018 protests has been compounded by the ongoing cancellation of thousands of non–governmental organizations and civic associations, many of whom provided basic services to impoverished urban and rural communities neglected by the state (Human Rights Watch 2022a). Canceled organizations include human rights organizations, private universities, medical associations, Christian charitable organizations, feminist collectives, community water management associations, among others.

While the situation in Nicaragua is extreme, political violence and human rights violations are on the rise elsewhere. As Giovanni Batz (this issue) argues, the Guatemalan state has also increasingly “exploited times of unrest to suspend civil liberties, as well as arbitrarily arrest, criminalize, and persecute activists, Indigenous leaders, journalists, and environmentalists” (32). Likewise, in El Salvador, President Nayib Bukele used his supermajority to order the national assembly to declare a state of exception on March 27, 2022 with the aim of lowering homicide rates, after a record 62 people were assassinated the day prior. According to investigative journalists, the spike in homicides was the product of a rupture in tacit agreements between Bukele and the leaders of El Salvador’s most notorious gangs (Martínez 2022a). The ongoing state of exception has suspended four constitutional guarantees, including the liberty of reunion and association, the right to defense, the right to the inviolability of correspondence and intervention in communications, and the 72-hour limit on administrative detention. Police forces have targeted young men from poor urban and rural communities en masse, detaining over forty-five thousand people without investigations or warrants by simply alleging they have involvement in gangs or ties to gang members. Human rights groups have documented sixty–three deaths while in custody, as well as thousands of allegations of torture, cruel treatments, and even forced disappearances (Observatorio Universitario de Derechos Humanos 2022; Human Rights Watch 2022b). For the families of those unfairly detained, the fear and despair resemble those experienced during the civil war. Thousands have spent months on a pilgrimage across El Salvador’s prisons and hospitals seeking information about their loved ones to no avail.

In addition to the resurgence of forms of political violence unseen in three decades, the reorganization of land tenure, the expansion of extractivist industries, the creation of tax–exempt zones, among other shifts, have produced new sites of conflict among state and non-state actors (Robinson 2019). Throughout the region, government support for extractivism, including mining, forestry, large–scale fishing, and infrastructural mega–projects has undermined the rights of Indigenous and Afro–descendent people. Despite state commitments to grant communal land rights to Indigenous and Afro–descendent groups and promises of the right to self–determination, racist counternarcotics policing and outright militarization of Indigenous communities have prevailed in Nicaragua and Honduras in the name of the so–called war on drugs (Goett 2015, 2019; Montero 2020). Moreover, governments continue granting concessions without community approval for megaprojects and resource extraction (Copeland 2019a; See Altamirano Rayo, this issue; Batz, this issue). In Honduras and Guatemala, rural farmland has been appropriated by transnational corporations that have transformed them into oil palm plantations, displacing Indigenous and Afro–descendent people from ancestral lands (Castillo 2019; Copeland 2019b). Tourism, too, has often been developed at the expense of Indigenous and Afro–descendant peoples' rights and their use of lands and waters prized by developers and tour operators in Honduras, Panama, and elsewhere (e.g., Mollett 2016, 324–25; Loperena 2017; Martínez 2022b). Transnational agribusiness projects in Costa Rica are displacing mestizo peasants further into the agricultural frontier (Edelman 2000). Displaced peasants and corporations in Nicaragua are invading Indigenous lands for mining, cattle ranching, and the exploitation of forests, using murders, kidnappings, violence, and intimidation with impunity (The Oakland Institute 2020; Mayer and Mittal 2021). Meanwhile, in Guatemala’s Indigenous highlands,
human rights organizations have documented the return of death squads to protect private gold, silver and fossil fuel extraction.

At the same time, rights and protections for women and LGBTQI populations have also stalled and in some instances deteriorated with the region’s authoritarian setbacks (Sagot 2012). The region tops per capita statistics in femicides and violence against LGBTQI people, and the situation is worsened by institutionalized corruption, lack of state capacity to prosecute crimes, and a generalized culture of impunity towards perpetrators (Gonnella-Platts et al. 2020; Human Rights Watch 2020; Torres 2019; Sagot 2022). Gender based aggressions, violations, and threats are used as tools to intimidate, extort, torture, and ultimately force populations to comply with demands by state and non-state actors, including police officers in Nicaragua and gangs in the Northern Triangle countries. Violence against transgender activists in El Salvador has led most to seek refuge elsewhere (Chavez Courtright 2019). Across the region, states have ignored or outright rejected international human rights agreements, and in particular, agreements related to the rights of women and LGBTQI populations. A notable exception is Costa Rica, where same-sex marriage became legal in 2020 following a 2017 paradigmatic decision by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, which declared that all rights applicable to the family relationships of heterosexual couples should also be extended to same-sex couples (Gonzalez Cabrera 2020). Costa Rica also adopted a Court decision that established the right of people to change their name according to their gender identity.

In most of Central America, political pandering to conservative values has set barriers for progressive reform on women’s and LGBTQI rights, leading to momentous setbacks, particularly with regards to access to reproductive care. In El Salvador, abortion has been banned with no exceptions since 1998 and the constitution recognizes “every human being from the moment of conception” as a person. Hundreds of women have been prosecuted criminally for abortion or aggravated homicide, which can be punished with up to fifty years in prison, when experiencing an obstetric emergency (Viterna and Santos Guardado Buatista 2017; Center for Reproductive Rights 2021). In Honduras, where abortion is also banned with no exceptions, Congress prohibited the use of emergency contraception (commonly known as Plan B) in April of 2009. While then-President Zelaya vetoed the prohibition, the Supreme Court of Honduras upheld the law after he was ousted from power. Under Honduran Law, simply being in possession of emergency contraception can be considered an “abortion attempt,” punishable with three to six years in prison (Center for Reproductive Rights 2012). In Guatemala, where abortion is banned except when a judge deems that carrying a pregnancy to term poses a risk to the woman’s life, a new law was recently passed by Congress that establishes jail sentences for pregnant people suffering an involuntary abortion or miscarriage (Amnesty International 2022). It also “expressly prohibits same-sex marriage, as well as the teaching of sexual diversity and gender equality in schools, and outlaws prosecuting people or groups for discriminating against others for their sexual orientation” (Ibid). President Giammattei withdrew his support for the law and ultimately vetoed it after large scale protests, but human rights groups fear the reversal is only temporary.

The situation is no different in Nicaragua. Overturning a precedent that had been in place for over a century, abortion was prohibited in 2006 with no exceptions to save the woman’s life (Kampwirth 2008). This prohibition foretold a general policy of hostility and outright criminalization of Nicaragua’s organized women’s and feminist movement by the Ortega government. The critical situation for Nicaragua’s women’s movement has been masked in part by government propaganda, a case of “autocratic genderwashing” (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022). The government decriminalized homosexuality and passed a so-called “gender parity” law that mandates gender equity in the country’s elected representatives, going as far as justifying Ortega’s selection of his wife, Rosario Murillo, as vice-president in the interest of gender parity. In practice, the complete control of Ortega and Murillo over all branches of government has meant that no elected officials have any independence to legislate in the interests of women and LGBTQI populations. The recent banning and confiscation of the assets of Nicaragua’s non-governmental organizations addressing gender-based violence and discrimination threatens to worsen the situation of women and LGBTQI populations who rely on their services for access to healthcare and legal assistance (Vilchez 2022).

The convergence of anti-capitalist, anti-extractivist, gender-based, and environmental struggles has fueled coalitions that have brought previously excluded political actors to the center of national politics. Indigenous and Afro-descendant people, women, and LGBTQI people have been at the heart of these national struggles, visibly leading efforts for transformation in the entire region (Sevilla Jiménez 2022). In 2021, an Indigenous led campesino organization in Guatemala (CODECA) guided peasant, student, and workers organizations in strikes and road blockades
demanding the resignation of President Giammattei and the establishment of a Plurinational and Popular Constituent Assembly to rewrite the constitution, refound Guatemala as a Plurinational State, and develop an alternative to the current economic model (Batz 2021). In Nicaragua, a coalition formed against extractivist projects and environmental degradation in late 2017 that brought together the struggles of the Movimiento Campesino that emerged in opposition to Nicaragua’s Interocceanic Canal megaproject and other communities denouncing the disasters posed by American and Canadian mining corporations in their territories. Large-scale waves of social mobilization have emerged opposing water privatization in Costa Rica (Ballestero 2012) and El Salvador, as well as against mining concessions throughout the region (Dougherty 2011, Spalding 2014). These mobilizations are routinely met with excessive violence by police, military, and paramilitary forces. Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala all top Global Witness reports’ rankings for deadliest countries for “land and environmental defenders” (Global Witness 2021). Most murders of Central American environmental activists and land defenders have gone unpunished, but a Honduran court convicted the construction executive who allegedly coordinated the 2016 assassination of Indigenous Lenca activist Berta Cáceres, with the lower-level assassins already imprisoned. Such outcomes offer hope that organized national and international mobilization for justice can still outweigh the corruption and impunity that has become the norm in the region.

**Looking Ahead**

In 2021, Honduras offered a democratic ray of hope in the region by ending the PNH’s rule over a decade after the coup—despite the party’s efforts to tilt the playing field and call the election early in their favor (Freeman and Perelló 2022; Salomón 2022)—with new President Xiomara Castro vowing to make the government serve all Hondurans and requesting that the United Nations help set up an anti-corruption commission. That said, the Castro government has already disappointed some by granting an outsized role to her husband, former president Manuel Zelaya and using a Manichean rhetoric that divides the population into heroes or traitors and coup-mongers, deepening polarization. Others have noted Castro has failed to prioritize the country’s gender and sexual violence epidemic and has continued the prior government’s policy of fighting citizen insecurity with increased militarization.

Elsewhere in the region, democracy and citizens’ satisfaction with it have been faring poorly, with even Costa Rica seeing rising xenophobia (Jillson 2020; Malone 2019) and voting for an anti-establishment populist in 2022, Rodrigo Chaves, who has already begun to attack the country’s independent press in ways that resemble the strategies used by Bukele and Ortega (Mora 2022). Even Panama, which has been stably democratic for three decades after the U.S. invasion toppling Noriega (Loxton 2022), erupted in nationwide protests in summer 2022 over cost-of-living increases and corruption (e.g., Guevara 2022).

Against this regional background of turmoil and repression, however, there are potential sources of optimism. First, people have remained willing to take to the streets in order to challenge governments to uphold their side of the political bargain and to actually serve the people they are supposed to represent. Only in Nicaragua has the ability to protest publicly been smothered, though people there still find small ways to engage in everyday resistance. Second, the civil society and non-governmental organizations that blossomed over the last three decades make it more difficult than ever for governments to hide corruption and abuses and to curtail or deny rights without a fight. The efforts by Nicaragua’s government to crush civil society and attacks on journalists and media outlets around the region show politicians’ discomfort with being publicly called to account, and online outlets (see Avila Reyes 2021) and social media have helped keep governments from controlling the flow of information. Politics in Latin America have often been pendular, with advances in democratic and economic inclusion and representation followed by reactionary swings in the opposite direction (e.g., Cameron 2021). Pro-democracy actors in Central America will be hoping that the momentum shifts soon, and they will continue working to try to ensure that it does.

**Contents of the Issue**

The articles in this issue provide diverse perspectives on the quality of democracy around Central America, going beyond simply issues of regime type or elections to discussing what governments in the region mean for citizens’ lives, and how democratic deficiencies and increasing authoritarianism are impacting the region. We sought to bring together scholars from across disciplines to put political science into dialogue with research from and on Central America from across the social sciences on the causes and consequences of democracy’s lack of consolidation in the northern countries of Central America. The first two articles discuss how democracy has been dismantled in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and the historical roots of authoritarian leaders’ ability to do so. The second pair of articles discuss how the governments of
Honduras and Guatemala have undermined democratic institutions, and how democracy in the countries has often fallen short, especially for Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, though the new Castro government in Honduras might be able to break with the pattern. In the book exchange, the authors of two recent books on the politics of crime, violence, and policing in Latin America discuss each other’s work and its implications for future studies and policy.

In the opening article, Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez examines the growing autocratization of El Salvador by President Nayib Bukele and how public dissatisfaction with democracy contributed to Bukele’s rise and his continued popularity. Meléndez-Sánchez argues that democratic disillusionment in El Salvador can, paradoxically, be traced to two main sources: the elite pact that helped the country democratize and investigations exposing high-level corruption. The pact between the FMLN and Arena at the end of the Salvadoran Civil War helped leaders in both parties feel secure about democratization, but it did so at the cost of restricting intra-party democracy and tilting the electoral playing field in the two parties’ favor. Public support for the parties waned, and Bukele and his anti-system Nuevas Ideas party offered a chance to reject the effective Arena-FMLN duopoly. Corruption investigations against former presidents and other top officials, meanwhile, led the public to conclude that politicians in general were corrupt, rather than creating perceptions of accountability. Bukele’s populist anti-corruption rhetoric therefore found a receptive audience, who have continued to support him even as he dismantles democracy.

Antonio Monte Casablanca and his co-author, who has requested to keep their name anonymous due to security concerns, approach Nicaraguan authoritarianism as a structural problem rooted in the longstanding practice of establishing authoritarian pacts among the nation’s elites. Tracing the practice of pacts throughout the twentieth century, they show how negotiations between elites have been used to resolve political turmoil and create power-sharing arrangements at the exclusion of non–elite social and political actors. Moreover, they argue this practice has been adopted by Daniel Ortega in his return to power, establishing arrangements with right wing politicians, capital holding elites, and high–ranking members of the military to ensure his political continuity in exchange for opportunities for enrichment. The authors link pact-making with a supplementary authoritarian practice that also has historical roots: the use of Manichean discourses that dehumanize political opponents and strip them of their nationality, thus justifying their incarceration, torture, or death.

Giorleny Altamirano Rayo looks at Honduras, where, surprisingly, the right-wing governments of Porfirio Lobo and Juan Orlando Hernández implemented expansions in titled communal territories for Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups. Rather than emerging from a concern with these communities’ rights and historic claims, Altamirano Rayo shows how titling communal lands was a strategy to reestablish government influence in the eastern region of Mosquitia, in the face of criminal organizations’ increasing power. Crucially, the government titled lands and set up administrative structures in ways designed to ensure central state control, rather than providing communities with meaningful autonomy or full rights to all their traditional lands. New President Xiomara Castro has demonstrated commitments to protecting Indigenous and Afro-descendant rights in a cooperative manner, so her administration offers an opportunity to potentially democratize state–sanctioned governance of communal lands.

Writing from the perspective of Guatemala’s organized indigenous Mayan communities, Giovanni Batz expands on the continuities between the decades of civil war and current structural inequalities and the marginalization and exploitation of Indigenous peoples. He argues that persistent structural inequalities, the dismantling of anti–corruption institutions combating impunity, the use of the justice system to persecute agents of the rule of law, and the unfettered expansion of extractivist industries in ancestral lands has plunged Guatemala into further violence and civil strife. In this context, Indigenous communities have experienced increased militarization and suspension of their civil liberties with tacit support from U.S. officials who continue to support Guatemala with military equipment that has been used to suppress dissent. Despite facing persecution, assassinations, and forced displacement, and increasing migration, Batz argues that Indigenous communities and ancestral authorities have organized Guatemala’s most prominent national protests calling for change, and promoting the establishment of a dignified, plurinational state that respects the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination.

In the Author Exchange, Yanilda González and Eduardo Moncada discuss each other’s recent books (González 2021; Moncada 2021). Both books focus on responses to crime and violence around Latin America and what remedies politicians and citizens may seek, with important implications for democratic accountability. González’s work looks at why it is so difficult to reform police institutions, even under democracy, showing how politicians are often reluctant or ineffective at reforming and restraining violent or unaccountable
institutions. While the book primarily examines Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia, its findings are very relevant for Central America, where weak democratic institutions and corruption have allowed criminal organizations and high levels of criminal violence to persist (e.g., Yashar 2018). Moncada examines cases across Colombia, El Salvador, and Mexico to understand why citizens adopt differing responses to organized criminal violence when the state is unable or unwilling to control it. Moncada shows how the interaction of criminal group interests, local economies, and the level of police corruption or complicity explains when we see individuals and communities rely on everyday nonviolent resistance and negotiation, and when they turn to vigilantism to protect themselves (see also Bateson 2021). With criminal violence and violent, corrupt policing continuing to plague Central America, the books can help diagnose structural problems and chart potential paths forward towards making states safer and more accountable for everyone, not only political and economic elites.

References


Lessons from El Salvador’s Authoritarian Turn

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If El Salvador is still a democracy, it is unlikely to remain one for long. President Nayib Bukele has exhibited autocratic tendencies since he took office in June 2019. But the country’s turn toward authoritarianism began in earnest in May 2021, when Bukele gained a supermajority in the country’s Legislative Assembly. Within hours of taking their oaths, the president’s new legislative allies voted to vacate—and then pack—the Constitutional Chamber, El Salvador’s highest court. Speaking to the legislature soon after the judicial coup, a triumphant Bukele vowed never to let his enemies return to power: “As long as God gives me strength,” he promised, “I will not let it happen.” Indeed, Bukele and his allies have systematically undermined remaining sources of horizontal accountability, including opposition parties, lower courts, local governments, independent government agencies, civil society organizations, and the press. In late 2021, the Constitutional Chamber paved the way for Bukele to seek reelection in 2024. If he runs, Bukele is all but guaranteed a second term—in part because he is extremely popular and in part because there remain few guarantees that the election would be minimally fair.

What explains El Salvador’s ongoing authoritarian turn? Bukele himself has, of course, played a key role. Relying on a distinctive political strategy that combines populist appeals, authoritarian tactics, and a modern personal brand fueled by social media—what I have labeled millennial authoritarianism (Meléndez-Sánchez 2021)—Bukele has built a formidable electoral coalition. Like many would-be autocrats before him, Bukele has used his overwhelming public support—most polls place his approval rating above 80 percent (e.g., Rentería 2021)—to consolidate power under the presidency and weaken checks and balances.

This, however, is only one part of the story. In 2018, the year before Bukele’s election, 63.4 percent of Salvadorans said they were dissatisfied with democracy...