

REBUTTAL REPORT

A Critical Legal and Factual Response to:

**"ARE CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY BEING COMMITTED
IN EL SALVADOR'S 'WAR ON GANGS'?"**

By the Due Process of Law Foundation (DPLF)

Leonor Arteaga & Hannah Ahern, March 2024

THE VOICE OF EL SALVADOR

"We are the ones who lived through the terror.

We are the ones who buried our dead.

We are the ones who fled our homes.

And we are the ones who now, finally,

can walk our streets without fear."

— Citizens of El Salvador

Prepared by: Rodolfo Benitez – Discreet Private Investigators UK

Date: March 2026

"The truth cannot be silenced. Viva El Salvador."



200,000
MURDERED
1992-2022

**INTERNATIONAL
HYPOCRISY**

DPLF
REPORT

FORD
FOUNDATION

OPEN
SOCIETY

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This rebuttal directly dismantles the DPLF report’s core thesis that El Salvador’s State of Exception “might” constitute crimes against humanity.

The DPLF itself admits it offers only “questions,” not conclusions, yet speculates about arbitrary detentions, torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings under Article 7 of the Rome Statute. Every one of these claims is refuted below:

1. The 87 murders of March 2022 were a gang terrorist massacre — not the “collapse of secret negotiations” alleged by El Faro (DPLF’s main source).
2. Over 91,300 arrests (Feb 2026) targeted documented gang affiliates; ~8,000 innocents have already been released — proving the system is not arbitrary.
3. Homicide rate fell from 106 (2015) to 1.3 per 100,000 (2025) — the greatest public-safety success in Latin American history.
4. No “widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population” exists; operations target criminal organizations.
5. No “State policy” to commit CAH — only a lawful emergency response renewed 40+ times by the elected Congress.
6. Alleged “200+ deaths in custody” are under investigation; they do not meet the Rome Statute threshold.

The DPLF report is political advocacy funded by networks hostile to the Bukele government, not objective legal analysis.

II. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

A. Purpose of This Rebuttal

The purpose of this rebuttal is not to deny the existence of isolated human rights incidents—which occur in every nation under stress—but to challenge the unfounded escalation of such allegations to the level of crimes against humanity, a charge of the gravest nature under international law.

B. The Security Situation Pre-2022:

A Brief Overview

The DPLF report correctly acknowledges that El Salvador suffered from extreme gang violence, citing a homicide rate of 104 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015—one of the highest in the world. For decades, gangs (maras) operated as de facto parallel powers, controlling territories, extorting citizens, and murdering thousands. The State had an obligation, under both domestic and international law, to protect the lives of its citizens. The State of Exception, declared in March 2022, was not an arbitrary power grab. It was a direct response to the mass murder of 87 civilians over a single weekend—a terrorist act that shocked the nation and demanded immediate action.

III. CATALOG OF CRIMES COMMITTED BY GANGS AGAINST THE SALVADORAN POPULATION

To understand the necessity of the State of Exception, one must first understand the magnitude of the criminal terror to which the Salvadoran people were subjected for over three decades. The following is a comprehensive, non-exhaustive catalog of crimes committed by the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs against the civilian population of El Salvador.

III. CATALOG OF CRIMES COMMITTED BY GANGS

A. Homicides and Mass Murder

Crime Category	Statistics	Source
Total gang-attributed deaths	~200,000 over three decades	Salvadoran government
Peak rate (2015)	106 per 100,000	Official records
March 2022 massacre	87 civilians murdered in three days	PNC / international media
MS-13 sentenced (Dec 2025)	248 members; 43 homicides + 42 disappearances	Attorney General / France 24 / UPI
Longest sentence	1,335 years	UPI / CBS News

B. Extortion as a System of Economic Terror

The gangs financed themselves by extorting thousands of Salvadorans, mainly merchants, transport workers, and small business owners. This was not merely petty crime; it was a sophisticated, nationwide economic terror campaign.

The Scale of the Criminal Economy: According to Salvadoran Security Minister Gustavo Villatoro, prior to the State of Exception, gangs were generating approximately **\$2,000 million annually** from extortion alone. To put this figure in perspective, this revenue stream dwarfed their income from drug trafficking, which yielded only about **\$200 million per year**. Villatoro explained that unlike gangs in the United States that primarily finance themselves through narcotics, Salvadoran gangs "made extortion the most profitable business".

The "Renta" System: This illegal taxation, known as the "renta," was imposed on virtually every economic sector. The Attorney General's Office documented that gangs demanded regular payments from victims under threat of death. The Society of Salvadoran Businesses and Industries (SCIS) documented extensive extortion networks that functioned as a parallel tax system, crippling local economies.

Impact on the Transport Sector: Bus companies and transport workers were particularly targeted. The Association of Salvadoran Bus Companies (AEAS) reported years of systematic extortion. According to William Cáceres, a representative of the Federation of Transport Cooperatives (Fecoatrans), the sector suffered a **95% reduction in extortion** thanks to the State of Exception. Cáceres emphasized that previous governments were repeatedly asked to stop the extortions but "were never heard".

Decline in Extortion Cases: The government's security strategy produced measurable results:

- 2019: 2,365 reported extortion cases
- 2022: 1,690 cases
- 2023: 732 cases (a **57% reduction** from the previous year)

Fiscal General Rodolfo Delgado attributed this decline to "the loss of fear by the population to denounce," noting that citizens are "trusting more in the authority" because they see that reporting crimes leads to "the capture of delinquents".

C. Territorial Control and "Invisible Frontiers"

At their peak, MS-13 and Barrio 18 controlled an estimated **80 percent of the country's territory**. They established "invisible frontiers" that restricted the free movement of citizens. Crossing from one neighbourhood to another controlled by a rival gang could result in death.

Physical Control of Property: The gangs' territorial dominance extended to literal ownership of homes and land. The Ministry of Housing reported that authorities have recovered **more than 11,000 houses** that were occupied by alleged gang members . These properties were not merely squatting; gangs would rent out usurped homes to generate additional revenue. According to official reports, **90% of recovered homes needed improvement**, and **60% were totally or partially dismantled** .

Forced Abandonment: Thousands of families fled their homes out of fear. Many left houses they were actively paying for through the State Social Fund for Housing (FSV) on credit. The recovered homes were primarily located in the departments of San Salvador, La Libertad, Santa Ana, and Sonsonate .

Internal Displacement: This territorial dominance caused massive internal displacement, with families fleeing their homes to escape gang recruitment, extortion, or death threats. The government attributes **more than 120,000 homicides** to gangs over the last three decades .

D. Recruitment and Exploitation of Children

Gangs actively recruited children, often through coercion or the promise of protection. This was not opportunistic; it was a systematic strategy to sustain their criminal enterprises.

Scale of Youth Involvement: According to Human Rights Watch, approximately **3,000 children, some as young as 12**, were detained during the state of emergency. This figure, far from being an indictment of the government's policies, actually demonstrates the extent to which gangs had embedded themselves in the youth population. Children were used as lookouts, messengers, and even hitmen.

Academic Research on Recruitment: A 2025 study presented at the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse documented that criminal organizations in El Salvador "commonly target children" for recruitment in schools . The research found that a preventive program involving police patrols at schools led to a **50% decline in gang recruitment** immediately after implementation. Children at key recruitment ages were "significantly less likely to drop out of school and join gangs" . The study also found that affected children were less likely to be incarcerated for gang-related crimes in adulthood, and that gangs' main business—extortion—was affected in the long run because "they have less labor to perform their activities" .

International Concern: As early as 2004, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and UNICEF expressed concern over the situation of boys, girls, and adolescents involved with gangs. They noted that these youth were subjected to:

- Extreme poverty
- Murders
- Violations of personal well-being
- Arbitrary arrests (by gangs, not the State)
- Mistreatment
- Stigmatization and discrimination

Schools as Recruitment Grounds: Academic research has confirmed that schools often became "gang turf." A Cambridge University Press publication documented that "violence related to gangs directly affects students and teachers" and that local schools lacked the resources to confront these challenges. The National Council for Education (CONED) had assigned schools the role of being "the central pillar of violence prevention," but recognized that they were ill-equipped to handle the gang presence.

E. Violence Against Women and Girls

Gangs used rape and sexual violence as tools of control and intimidation. Women and girls in gang-controlled territories were at constant risk of sexual assault.

A Tool of Terror: Sexual violence was not incidental; it was a deliberate strategy to dominate communities. Gang members would target women and girls to demonstrate their power, punish perceived transgressions, or simply because they could act with complete impunity. Many women and girls fled their homes specifically to escape gang-related sexual violence and recruitment.

Contrast with Pre-Gang Era: While some critics argue that gender-based violence continues under the State of Exception, this does not negate the reality that women lived under a constant, specific threat from gangs. As one commenter on a European Consortium for Political Research article noted, "Women in general are substantially safer than during gang rule. This doesn't mean they are 'safe'... to say that the situation in general is worse for all women under the state of exception now than it was before is just not objectively true".

F. Forced Disappearances

The gangs engaged in forced disappearances as a tactic of terror. Victims were taken, never to be seen again, their fates unknown to their families.

Judicial Recognition: Recent convictions demonstrate the scale of this crime. In December 2025, **42 disappearances** were formally linked to MS-13 members in judicial proceedings. These are not mere allegations; they are proven crimes with convicted perpetrators.

Historical Impunity: For decades, families of the disappeared had little recourse. The justice system was too weak or too infiltrated by gang collaborators to investigate. Witnesses refused to come forward out of well-founded fear that they or their families would be killed. The climate of terror was intentionally designed to ensure that disappearances would go unsolved and unpunished.

The Current Situation: Today, families of the disappeared have hope that justice may finally be possible. With gang structures dismantled, witnesses can speak, evidence can be gathered, and perpetrators can be brought to trial.

G. Attacks on Public Officials and Justice System Personnel

Gangs systematically targeted law enforcement and judicial officials to ensure their criminal enterprises could operate without interference.

Targeted Assassinations: Police officers, judges, and prosecutors were assassinated or threatened to deter enforcement of the law. Those who dared to investigate gang crimes knew they were marked for death. The gangs' capacity to intimidate and kill witnesses created a climate of impunity that extended from the poorest neighborhoods to the highest levels of the justice system.

Impact on Rule of Law: The result was a paralyzed state. When judges fear for their lives, they hesitate to issue convictions. When prosecutors fear reprisals, they decline to pursue cases. When police officers fear for their families, they look the other way. The gangs understood this dynamic perfectly and exploited it ruthlessly.

H. Violence in Schools and Against Teachers

Gangs extended their control into schools, using educational facilities as recruitment grounds and terrorizing students and teachers.

Documented Threats: The Union of Public Education Teachers of El Salvador (SIMEDUCO) documented years of threats, extortion, and violence against educators. Teachers were forced to navigate a daily reality where gang members controlled the streets surrounding their schools and, in some cases, the hallways within them.

Academic Confirmation: A research program at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) studied 25 public schools in seven regional departments with gang presence. Through 177 semi-structured interviews with teachers, principals, parents, and local organizations, researchers found that gangs' influence in schools was pervasive and deeply destructive .

Failed Prevention Efforts: The research concluded that government-sponsored prevention programs, while well-intentioned, "typically disregard the social dynamics of the school, the families, and the nearby community." Although such programs could "create the sensation that things are more or less under control," they could "do little to prevent students from getting closer to gangs or to diminish gang influence in schools" . This finding underscores that before the State of Exception, the government lacked effective tools to protect its own educational system from criminal infiltration.

I. Organized Crime Linkages

In addition to extortion and murder, gangs became deeply involved in drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime, transforming into sophisticated criminal enterprises with regional reach.

Transformation of Criminal Structures: Security Minister Villatoro explained that gangs underwent a significant evolution. Before the State of Exception, they "went from being an organization that directed serial killers to an organization that really controlled a country" . They "had to change their form of government" and even modify the names of programs inherited from the United States to adapt to their new role as quasi-state actors .

International Designation: The United States has designated MS-13 and several other gangs in Central and South America as **foreign terrorist organizations**. This designation reflects the scale of the threat they pose, not just to El Salvador but to regional security. Unlike gangs in the United States that primarily operate through drug sales and local vice, Salvadoran gangs built a parallel structure that challenged the state's monopoly on force and taxation.

A Hybrid Threat: These organizations blurred the lines between street gang, organized crime syndicate, and insurgent group. They controlled territory, taxed economic activity, recruited child soldiers, and challenged state authority—all while maintaining transnational drug trafficking networks. This hybrid nature made them uniquely dangerous and uniquely resistant to conventional law enforcement approaches.

IV. LEGAL DEFICIENCIES IN THE DPLF REPORT

Direct Rebuttal of DPLF Pages 2–13

A. The Report Itself Admits It Does Not Prove Crimes Against Humanity

The DPLF report is framed as an inquiry, not a conclusion. Its very title poses a question: "*Are crimes against humanity being committed?*" This is not the language of a legal finding—it is the language of hypothesis and speculation.

Throughout the document, the authors repeatedly undermine their own credibility with qualifying language:

DPLF Phrase	Page	What It Really Means
"might they also amount to crimes against humanity"	2	Speculation, not evidence
"alleged violations"	2	Unproven accusations
"it may be too early to say definitively"	8	They admit they don't know
"possible crimes against humanity"	3	Conjecture dressed as analysis
"preliminary inquiry should be carried out"	8	Even they say more investigation is needed

Let us be absolutely clear: Under international criminal law, allegations of crimes against humanity require **clear and convincing evidence**, not theoretical speculation. The Rome Statute demands proof beyond reasonable doubt. The DPLF report provides none.

The report itself concedes that "precise figures for each category of violation... remain to be determined" and that "it may be too early to say definitively" whether these crimes are occurring. After 45 pages of text, the authors admit they have not proven their case. They cannot. The evidence does not exist.

Yet this report—this collection of questions, maybes, and allegations—has been used to call for United Nations intervention, to pressure international financial institutions,

and to smear the democratically elected government of El Salvador. This is not human rights advocacy. This is **lawfare**.

B. Exposing the Financial Architecture: Who Funds the Accusers?

Before examining the legal deficiencies in detail, we must ask a fundamental question: **Who is behind this report, and what are their true interests?**

The Due Process of Law Foundation is not a grassroots organization of Salvadoran citizens. It is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit with **\$2.5 million in annual revenue**, funded by some of the largest progressive foundations in the United States.

The Money Trail

According to publicly available tax records, DPLF receives substantial funding from:

Funder	Amount	Year	Purpose
Ford Foundation	\$300,000	2025	"Core support to conduct a toxic polarization analysis related to multilateral justice rulings in Central America"
Ford Foundation	\$125,000	2023	"Core Support To Strengthen Salvadoran Civil Society's Efforts To Fight Corruption and Impunity"
Wellspring Philanthropic Fund	\$140,000	2023	"Lessons on Justice and Reparations in Latin America"
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	\$128,080	2024	"Promise of An Equitable Future"
MacArthur Foundation	\$1,185,150	2007-2019	Multiple grants for rule of law programs in Latin America

These are not neutral actors. The **Ford Foundation**, **Wellspring Philanthropic Fund**, and **MacArthur Foundation** are prominent funders of progressive causes globally. They have specific ideological agendas. They fund organizations that advance those agendas.

The question must be asked: **Why are American foundations spending millions of dollars to influence public perception of a democratically elected government in El Salvador?**

The answer is not concern for Salvadorans. The answer is **political ideology**.

The "Toxic Polarization" Grant

Perhaps most revealing is the **\$300,000 grant from the Ford Foundation** approved in July 2025 for DPLF to conduct "toxic polarization analysis related to multilateral justice rulings in Central America" .

Read that carefully. The Ford Foundation is paying DPLF to study "toxic polarization" in Central America. But what is "toxic polarization" in this context? It is the legitimate democratic mandate of the Salvadoran people expressing overwhelming support for President Bukele's policies.

According to the Ford Foundation's own description, this grant will focus on "concrete geographical areas, specific territorial groups, land tenure, and other key issues" . This is not abstract research. This is targeted intervention in specific communities to study—and presumably counter—support for the Bukele government.

The Authors' Backgrounds

Leonor Arteaga has a long history of criticizing the Bukele administration. In June 2025, she delivered a statement to the UN Human Rights Council demanding that El Salvador "establish an independent commission of experts to review cases of detention and to end the state of exception" . She has publicly referred to El Salvador as a "one-party state" and alleged "systematic torture."

These are not the statements of an impartial legal analyst. They are the language of political opposition.

Hannah Ahern joined DPLF in January 2020 . Her background is instructive: she worked with the **Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team** on enforced disappearances from Peru's internal conflict (1980-2000), interned at the **Inter-American Court of Human Rights**, and worked with **Amnesty International Japan** .

Ms. Ahern has dedicated her career to documenting state violence. That is her expertise. That is her lens. And that lens is now being applied to El Salvador—not because the evidence demands it, but because her funders demand it.

In 2025, Ms. Ahern co-authored a DPLF blog post titled "**In the name of 'justice': The torture of detained women in El Salvador**". The title itself assumes the conclusion: that torture is occurring. No evidence. No due process. Just accusation.

The DPLF Network

DPLF does not operate alone. Its tax records show grants to organizations like **Citizens for Integrity** (\$311,206 in 2023) to "address corruption and human rights violations linked to Venezuela". The same playbook used against Venezuela is now being deployed against El Salvador.

The foundation's "program areas" include:

- "Judicial independence" (code for opposing judicial reform)
- "Impunity and grave human rights violations" (code for opposing security measures)
- "Strengthening the inter-american human rights system" (code for empowering international bodies over national sovereignty)

Every program area aligns with opposition to the Bukele government's agenda.

The Question That Must Be Asked

So we ask: **Where were these organizations when Salvadorans were being murdered by gangs?**

Where was the Ford Foundation when our homicide rate was 106 per 100,000? Where was the MacArthur Foundation when our women were being raped in cemeteries? Where was DPLF when our children were being recruited at gunpoint?

They were silent. They were absent. They were nowhere to be found.

But now that a democratically elected government has finally brought peace, they appear—with millions of dollars in funding—to accuse that government of "crimes against humanity."

This is not coincidence. This is not objective human rights monitoring. This is a **well-funded political campaign** to destabilize a government that refuses to bow to international pressure.

C. Failure to Meet the Rome Statute Threshold

Under **Article 7 of the Rome Statute**, a crime against humanity requires that the acts be committed:

1. As part of a **widespread or systematic attack**;
2. **Directed against any civilian population**;
3. **Pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy**.

The DPLF report fails to establish any of these elements with the requisite legal certainty. Let us examine each element in detail.

i. No Evidence of a "Widespread or Systematic Attack" Directed Against a Civilian Population

The DPLF Claim: The report cites over 76,000 detentions (now more than 91,300) as evidence of a "widespread" pattern of arbitrary detention targeting civilians.

The Legal Reality: The term "civilian population" in international criminal law refers to persons who are **not taking part in hostilities**. Gang members who have terrorized communities, engaged in armed violence, and operated as de facto paramilitary organizations do not enjoy the same protected status as innocent civilians.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) established in **Prosecutor v. Tadić** that the "civilian population" requirement does not protect individuals actively participating in violence. The gangs of El Salvador—MS-13 and Barrio 18—have been designated **foreign terrorist organizations** by the United States. They are not civilians. They are combatants in a war against the Salvadoran state and people.

The Numbers Tell the Story:

Statistic	Figure	Source
Total gang-related homicides (three decades)	~200,000	Salvadoran government
Homicide rate at peak (2015)	106 per 100,000	Official records
Territory controlled by gangs	80%	Multiple sources
Houses recovered from gangs	11,000+	Ministry of Housing
Gang members sentenced (Dec 2025)	248	France 24/AFP
Disappearances linked to MS-13 in convictions	42	Judicial records

When the Salvadoran government detains suspected gang members, it is not attacking civilians. It is **defending civilians** from a criminal organization that has murdered 200,000 people.

The "Arbitrary Detention" Fallacy: DPLF claims these detentions are "arbitrary." Yet approximately **8,000 detainees have been released**—proving that case-by-case review is occurring. If the government were engaged in a systematic attack on civilians, why release anyone? Why conduct reviews at all?

The answer is obvious: because this is legitimate law enforcement, not crimes against humanity.

The ICC's Own Standard: The ICC's Elements of Crimes document requires that for imprisonment to constitute a crime against humanity, it must be "in violation of fundamental rules of international law." The Salvadoran State of Exception is constitutionally authorized, legislatively renewed, and judicially reviewed. It violates no fundamental rule of international law.

i. No Evidence of a "State Policy" to Attack Civilians

The DPLF Claim: The report suggests the Bukele administration has promoted or encouraged human rights violations as a matter of state policy.

The Legal Reality: The DPLF report provides **no direct evidence**—no orders, no written policies, no official directives, no recorded statements—demonstrating such intent. Instead, it relies on inference and conjecture.

The government's policy is **public, constitutional, and democratically endorsed:**

- The State of Exception was requested by the President
- Approved by the Legislative Assembly (democratically elected)
- Reviewed and renewed 20+ times
- Subject to judicial oversight

As the ICC Elements of Crimes document notes, the policy element requires **active promotion or encouragement** by the State—not the failure to prevent every violation.

The "Isolated Abuses" Argument: The existence of isolated abuses by individual actors does not prove a state policy. Every nation—including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and every democracy in history—has experienced misconduct by individual police officers or soldiers. That does not transform legitimate security operations into crimes against humanity.

In contrast, the government has repeatedly stated its commitment to public security within the law. President Bukele has publicly acknowledged that mistakes may occur and has ordered investigations. That is accountability, not criminality.

The FUNDING Question: If DPLF truly believed the Salvadoran government was committing crimes against humanity, why are they not calling for intervention by the International Criminal Court? Why are they instead producing "toxic polarization analyses" funded by the Ford Foundation?

Because this is not about international law. It is about **political warfare**.

iii. The "Knowledge" Requirement Is Not Met

The DPLF Claim: The report alleges that State agents acted with knowledge that their conduct was part of a broader attack on civilians.

The Legal Reality: The DPLF report fails to demonstrate that State agents possessed the requisite **mens rea** (criminal intent) required for crimes against humanity.

The arrests were conducted under a legal framework—the State of Exception—which was:

- Constitutionally enacted under Article 29 of the Salvadoran Constitution
- Approved by the democratically elected Legislative Assembly
- Publicly announced and transparently implemented
- Subject to ongoing judicial review

Even if certain detentions were later found to be arbitrary (a claim DPLF has not proven), this does not retroactively transform them into crimes against humanity. The agents acted in good faith, under color of law, to protect the Salvadoran people from a documented terrorist threat.

The Subjective Standard: International criminal law requires proof that the accused **knew** their conduct was part of a widespread attack on civilians. How could Salvadoran police officers, trained to combat gang violence, have known that arresting suspected gang members constituted an "attack on civilians"? They could not. Because it does not.

D. DPLF's Own Cited Definition of Arbitrary Detention Is Satisfied

The DPLF report cites the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention's definition, which requires that:

"The legal basis justifying (...) detention must be accessible, understandable, non-retroactive and applied in a consistent and predictable way."

The Salvadoran State of Exception satisfies every element:

Requirement	How It Is Met
Accessible	Published in official records, debated publicly, reported in media
Understandable	Clear language, specific grounds (suspected gang affiliation)
Non-retroactive	Applied only to conduct after enactment
Applied consistently	Focused on documented gang territories and known gang structures

The DPLF report also cites the Working Group's statement that:

"An overly broad statute authorizing automatic and indefinite detention without any standards or review is by implication arbitrary."

But the Salvadoran system provides review:

- Approximately 8,000 detainees have been released
- Cases are reviewed individually
- Detainees have rights to challenge their detention
- The judiciary retains oversight authority

The system is not perfect—no system is. But it is not arbitrary. It is a legitimate, proportionate response to an unprecedented terrorist threat.

E. The Irony: DPLF's Funders Have Blood on Their Hands

Let us speak plainly about the moral bankruptcy of the organizations attacking El Salvador.

The Ford Foundation, which funds DPLF's "toxic polarization analysis," has a long history of funding organizations that undermine democratically elected governments in Latin America. From Venezuela to Nicaragua to Bolivia, Ford Foundation grantees have been at the forefront of campaigns to destabilize left-leaning governments—and now they target El Salvador's center-right government.

The MacArthur Foundation, which has given DPLF over \$1.1 million, funds organizations that advocate for gun control in the United States while remaining silent on the gun violence that devastated El Salvador for decades.

The Wellspring Philanthropic Fund and **W.K. Kellogg Foundation** fund progressive causes globally, yet had nothing to say when our women were being raped, our children recruited, and our families murdered.

Where were they?

Where were the human rights defenders when bus drivers were being forced to pay "renta" to gang members? Where were the international observers when teachers were being threatened in their classrooms? Where were the United Nations investigators when families were being displaced from their homes by armed criminals?

They were silent.

And now, when a Salvadoran government finally has the courage to do what needed to be done—to confront the gangs directly, to arrest them, to imprison them, to dismantle their

structures—these same organizations emerge with millions of dollars in funding to accuse that government of "crimes against humanity."

This is not human rights advocacy. This is not justice. This is not morality.

This is a **well-funded political campaign** by organizations that were comfortable with gang violence because it generated victims they could use to raise money and justify their existence. When the gangs were killing Salvadorans, these organizations had endless material for fundraising appeals. When the gangs were raping our women, they had endless stories for their newsletters.

But now that the killing has stopped? Now that the rapes have plummeted? Now that Salvadorans can walk their streets in peace? These organizations have lost their *raison d'être*. And they are furious about it.

They would rather have dead Salvadorans to exploit than living Salvadorans to ignore.

F. The Ultimate Question: Who Speaks for El Salvador?

The DPLF report purports to speak for Salvadorans. But who does it actually represent?

- A Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit with \$2.5 million in annual revenue?
- American foundations with progressive political agendas?
- International lawyers who have never lived in our neighbourhoods?
- Journalists who fled the country years ago?

No.

The only legitimate voice of El Salvador is the Salvadoran people. And the Salvadoran people have spoken:

- **83% re-elected President Bukele** in 2024
- **Overwhelming majorities support the State of Exception** in every poll
- **Thousands of former gang-controlled communities** now live in peace

The DPLF report does not represent these voices. It represents a tiny, well-funded elite that cannot accept that the Salvadoran people have chosen a different path.

Let the international community decide who to believe: the foreign-funded NGOs with political agendas and millions of dollars, or the Salvadoran people who finally, after decades of terror, can sleep peacefully at night.

Legal Requirement	DPLF's Claim	Reality
Widespread attack	76,000+ detentions	Suspected gang members, not civilians; 8,000 released
Directed at civilians	Yes	Gang members are not civilians under international law
State policy	Implied	No evidence; policy is public, constitutional, democratic
Knowledge	Alleged	Agents acted under color of law in good faith
Proof	"Might," "alleged," "possible"	Speculation, not evidence

Summary: DPLF's Legal Failures

The DPLF report does not prove crimes against humanity. It proves that well-funded political opponents of the Bukele government will stop at nothing to undermine the democratically expressed will of the Salvadoran people.

VI. THE STATE OF EXCEPTION: A LAWFUL AND PROPORTIONATE RESPONSE

Constitution Art. 29 explicitly allows suspension for “grave alteration of public order.” The 87-murder weekend met this threshold.

- Renewals are voted by the Legislative Assembly — not “arbitrary.” Now over 40 renewals (as of 2026), each constitutionally valid.
- International law (American Convention Art. 27) permits exactly this during public emergencies.

Constitutional and International Law Framework

The Salvadoran Constitution permits the suspension of certain rights during a State of Exception, subject to temporal and procedural limits. Article 29 allows for such measures in cases of "grave alteration of public order." The massacres of March 2022 clearly met this threshold. Moreover, international human rights law recognizes that States may derogate from certain obligations during public emergencies. Article 27 of the American Convention on Human Rights permits suspension of guarantees "to the extent and for the period of time strictly required by the exigencies of the situation." The Salvadoran government has acted within this framework. The State of Exception has been reviewed and renewed by the Legislative Assembly, and the judiciary retains oversight. B. Comparison with Other Nations.

The DPLF report avoids comparing El Salvador's policies with those of other nations facing similar threats. Many democratic countries have enacted emergency measures to combat terrorism or organized crime:

Country	Measure	Context
United States	Guantanamo Bay detentions without trial (ongoing)	War on Terror
United States	MS-13 designated foreign terrorist organization	Gang violence
France	States of emergency (2015-2017)	Terrorist attacks
Colombia	Enhanced security powers (decades)	FARC insurgency
United Kingdom	Internment without trial (Northern Ireland)	The Troubles

If the DPLF wishes to apply the "crimes against humanity" standard consistently, it must explain why El Salvador is singled out while similar or harsher measures elsewhere go unmentioned. The answer lies not in law, but in political advocacy.

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VII. THE POLITICAL AGENDA BEHIND THE REPORT

Exposing the Network of Actors Behind the Campaign Against El Salvador

A. Institutional Bias: The Due Process of Law Foundation Exposed

The Due Process of Law Foundation is not a neutral fact-finding body. It is a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy organization with a stated mission to challenge governments it perceives as authoritarian. But who are the people behind this report? What are their connections? And most importantly—**where were they when Salvadorans were being slaughtered by gangs?**

The Founders' Dark Legacy

DPLF was founded in **1996 by Professor Thomas Buergenthal and his colleagues from the United Nations Truth Commission for El Salvador**. Let that sink in. This organization was created by individuals who spent their careers investigating the Salvadoran state—not the gangs, not the criminals, but the state. From its very inception, DPLF's institutional lens has been fixed on accusing the Salvadoran government of human rights violations, regardless of who holds power or what crimes are committed by non-state actors.

Thomas Buergenthal, the founding father of DPLF, served as a judge on the International Court of Justice and dedicated his life to international human rights law. While we respect his legal scholarship, we must ask: **why did he and his colleagues feel compelled to create an organization dedicated to monitoring the Salvadoran government, but not the criminal organizations that would go on to murder 200,000 Salvadorans?**

The answer is uncomfortable but undeniable: **DPLF was built on a foundation of suspicion toward the Salvadoran state**. That institutional DNA remains today. The organization's entire reason for existence is to find fault with the government, not to protect the Salvadoran people.

The Leadership: Leonor Arteaga

Leonor Arteaga, co-author of the report, is the **Program Director at DPLF**. According to her profile, she has a long history of criticizing the Bukele administration in the strongest possible terms.

Her public statements reveal her agenda:

Statement	Context	What It Reveals
"El Salvador has been presented as an example of success in reducing crime. However, victims, civil society organizations, and journalists have suffered firsthand the high costs of this publicized success."	March 2026 CIDH hearing in Guatemala	She dismisses the homicide reduction as "publicity" while ignoring 200,000 dead
"Arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances, massive violations of due process, and acts of torture have become systematic practices in the country."	March 2026 CIDH hearing	She asserts conclusions as fact without judicial proof
"Today many Salvadorans have stopped fearing the gangs and have begun to fear the state itself."	March 2026 CIDH hearing	She claims to speak for Salvadorans while 83% re-election man

Let us examine this last statement closely. Ms. Arteaga claims that "many Salvadorans" now fear the state instead of the gangs. Yet **83% of Salvadorans re-elected President Bukele** in 2024. Poll after poll shows overwhelming support for the State of Exception. Who is Ms. Arteaga to tell Salvadorans what they should fear? Who is she to dismiss our lived experience?

Ms. Arteaga has never been elected by anyone in El Salvador. She holds no mandate from our people. She answers to no Salvadoran constituency. Her salary is paid by American foundations, not Salvadoran taxpayers. And yet she presumes to tell the world that we are wrong about our own country.

The Co-Author: Hannah Ahern

Hannah Ahern's background is equally instructive:

- Worked with the **Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team** documenting enforced disappearances from Peru's internal conflict (1980-2000)
- Interned at the **Inter-American Court of Human Rights**
- Worked with **Amnesty International Japan**
- Joined DPLF in January 2020

Ms. Ahern has built her entire career around documenting state violence. That is her expertise. That is her lens. And that lens is now being applied to El Salvador—not because the evidence demands it, but because her institutional mandate demands it.

In 2025, Ms. Ahern co-authored a DPLF blog post titled "**In the name of 'justice': The torture of detained women in El Salvador.**" The title itself assumes the conclusion: that torture is occurring. No evidence. No due process. No judicial findings. Just accusation dressed as analysis.

The Staff: Who Else Is Behind This?

According to DPLF's organizational records , the foundation employs approximately 14-20 staff members with an annual revenue of **\$3,066,000** . Key personnel include:

Name	Position
Brett Voyles	Program Assistant
Mark Blanchet	Director
Karen Ramos	Communications Coordinator
Daniel Cerqueira	Senior Program Officer
Sonia Padilla	Project Coordinator
Ramiro Orias	Senior Program Officer
Ursula Prevost	Director, Judicial Program

Each of these individuals plays a role in producing, promoting, and disseminating reports that damage El Salvador's international reputation. Each of them draws a salary from American foundation money to attack a democratically elected government.

The Office in El Salvador

DPLF maintains an **office in El Salvador** with a multinational team of professionals based throughout the region . This means they have a physical presence in our country—offices, staff, resources—all dedicated to documenting alleged abuses by the Salvadoran state.

Where was this office when the gangs were murdering 100 people per day? Where were DPLF's "multinational professionals" when our women were being raped in cemeteries? Where was their "technical legal assistance" when our children were being recruited at gunpoint?

They had no office then. They had no mission then. They had no funding then.

It is only now, when a Salvadoran government has finally done what needed to be done, that DPLF has "professionals based throughout the region" documenting "abuses." The timing is not coincidental. It is strategic.

B. The Network of Organizations Behind the Report

The March 2024 DPLF report did not emerge from a vacuum. It is part of a coordinated campaign involving multiple organizations with overlapping personnel, funding sources, and political agendas.

The March 2026 "Expert Group" (GIPES)

On **March 10, 2026**, a follow-up report was presented at a public hearing of the **Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) in Guatemala**. This report was authored by the **"Grupo Internacional de Expertas y Expertos para la Investigación de Violaciones de Derechos Humanos en el marco del Estado de Excepción en El Salvador" (GIPES)**.

Who is GIPES? According to the news report, GIPES includes the following organizations :

Organization	Acronym	Focus Area
Due Process of Law Foundation	DPLF	Rule of law in Latin America
International Federation for Human Rights	FIDH	Global human rights advocacy
International Commission of Jurists	ICJ	Legal advocacy, international law
InterJust	InterJust	International justice research
IMPACTUM Research Project	IMPACTUM	Human rights research
Ghent University (Belgium)	—	Academic research program

This is not a grassroots movement of Salvadoran citizens. This is a **well-funded international consortium** of advocacy organizations, academic institutions, and legal groups, all united by a common agenda: to delegitimize the Bukele government.

The Key Players Named

Susana SáCouto – Expert quoted in the March 2026 report, stating that "the documented facts point to the commission of international crimes against the civilian population, including imprisonment in violation of fundamental rules of international law—including the detention of children and adolescents—torture, murder, forced disappearances, sexual violence, persecution, and other inhumane acts" .

Ms. SáCouto is affiliated with the **IMPACTUM Research Project** and **American University Washington College of Law**. She is yet another international "expert" who has never faced a Salvadoran voter, never walked the streets of Soyapango at night, never lost a family member to gang violence.

Santiago Cantón – Former Executive Secretary of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, now Secretary-General of the **International Commission of Jurists**. He has explicitly called the Bukele model "the destruction of democracy" and co-authored the 2026 follow-up report calling for UN intervention.

C. The Salvadoran NGOs and Reporters Cited in the DPLF Report

The DPLF report relies on information from Salvadoran civil society organizations and journalists. Let us examine who these groups are and who funds them.

The NGOs

Organization	Leadership	Funding Sources	Political Ties
Cristosal	David Holiday (President), former manager of Latin America Program at Open Society Foundations until November 2021	Open Society Foundations (Soros): \$2.8 million+ (2017-2022)	Opposition-aligned; has received funding from U.S. government agencies
Acción Ciudadana	Eduardo Escobar (Executive Director)	Open Society Foundations; National Endowment for Democracy	Anti-corruption mandate; director publicly admitted receiving OSF funding

Organization	Leadership	Funding Sources	Political Ties
FUNDASPAD	Created by 22 FMLN members including Jorge Schafik Hándal, Eugenio Chicas	\$700,000 from Salvadoran legislature (2012-2017) while FMLN controlled Congress	Direct FMLN creation; operated without legal personality

The Cristosal Connection: Cristosal is perhaps the most significant Salvadoran NGO cited in these reports. Its president, **David Holiday**, served as manager of the Latin America Program at **Open Society Foundations until November 2021**. He then joined Cristosal, which has received over \$2.8 million from OSF. The revolving door between Soros's foundation and Salvadoran NGOs could not be clearer.

The FUNDASPAD Scandal: This NGO was created by **22 members of the FMLN**, including Jorge Schafik Hándal, Mirna Perla, Eugenio Chicas, Nidia Díaz, and Arístides Valencia. Between 2012 and 2017, it received **\$700,000 from the Salvadoran legislature**—while FMLN deputies, including some of its own board members, voted to approve the funds. This is not human rights advocacy. This is **self-dealing and corruption disguised as civil society**.

The Reporters and Media

Media Outlet	Key Reporters	Funding	Political Orientation
El Faro	Carlos Dada (founder), Sergio Arauz, Óscar Martínez	Open Society Foundations; Ford Foundation; international donors	Consistently critical of Bukele; 25 journalists have fled country
Factum	Multiple contributors	Open Society Foundations	Works in coordination with El Faro
Gato Encerrado	Multiple contributors	Open Society Foundations	Described as working "en conjunto" with El Faro

Carlos Dada, founder of El Faro, now lives in exile in the Netherlands. Before entering politics, **Nayib Bukele attempted to purchase El Faro from Dada in 2010-2011**—an offer Dada declined. The personal animosity between Dada and Bukele is well-documented and colors El Faro's coverage.

Sergio Arauz, an El Faro journalist, now serves as President of the **Association of Journalists of El Salvador (APES)**. APES has transferred its operations outside the country for the first time in 80 years. Arauz operates from abroad.

The Exile Narrative: According to APES, **at least 53 journalists have fled El Salvador** in recent months. What DPLF and its allies do not tell you is that many of these journalists worked for outlets funded by foreign foundations with explicit political agendas. Their departure is not evidence of persecution—it is evidence that foreign-funded advocacy journalism is incompatible with a sovereign nation's right to determine its own future.

D. The Funding Architecture: Who Pays for These Attacks?

Let us follow the money. The DPLF report and its allied organizations are not funded by Salvadorans. They are funded by some of the largest progressive foundations in the United States.

DPLF's Funders

According to publicly available records , DPLF receives funding from:

Funder	Known Grants	Years	Focus
Ford Foundation	Multiple grants including \$300,000 (2025) for "toxic polarization analysis"	Ongoing	Progressive social justice
MacArthur Foundation	\$1,185,150+	2007-2019	Rule of law programs
Wellspring Philanthropic Fund	\$140,000 (2023)	Ongoing	Human rights advocacy

Funder	Known Grants	Years	Focus
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	\$128,080 (2024)	Ongoing	Equitable future programs

The "Toxic Polarization" Grant

The **\$300,000 grant from the Ford Foundation** approved in July 2025 is particularly revealing. According to the grant description, DPLF received funding to conduct "toxic polarization analysis related to multilateral justice rulings in Central America".

What is "toxic polarization" in this context? It is the overwhelming popular support for President Bukele's policies. The Ford Foundation is paying DPLF to study why Salvadorans support their government—and presumably, how to counter that support.

The Open Society Network

Beyond DPLF, the network of Salvadoran NGOs and media cited in these reports is heavily funded by **Open Society Foundations (George Soros)** :

- **Cristosal**: \$2.8+ million (2017-2022)
- **El Faro**: Principal funder (amounts undisclosed)
- **Factum**: Confirmed recipient
- **Gato Encerrado**: Confirmed recipient
- **Acción Ciudadana**: Confirmed recipient

The Question That Must Be Asked

Why are American foundations spending millions of dollars to influence public perception of a democratically elected government in El Salvador?

The answer is not concern for Salvadorans. The answer is **political ideology**.

The Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and others have long histories of funding organizations that challenge governments they perceive as authoritarian—but their definition of "authoritarian" aligns suspiciously with governments that resist their policy preferences.

Where was the Ford Foundation's concern for "toxic polarization" when gangs were polarizing our communities through murder and extortion? Where was Open Society's funding for Salvadoran civil society when our civil society was being terrorized by MS-13?

They were silent. They were absent. They were nowhere to be found.

E. The Timing: Designed to Interfere with Elections

The DPLF report was published in **March 2024**—just weeks before Salvadoran general elections. The timing was not accidental. It was strategic.

What the report does not tell you:

- President Bukele was re-elected with **83% of the vote**
- The State of Exception has been renewed dozens of times by the democratically elected Legislative Assembly
- Poll after poll shows overwhelming public support for security policies

The 2026 follow-up report was presented at a **CIDH hearing in Guatemala** on March 10, 2026. Why Guatemala? Why not El Salvador? Because the authors know they have no audience among Salvadorans. They must travel to other countries to find sympathetic ears.

The report explicitly calls for **United Nations intervention**—a clear attempt to internationalize domestic policy disagreements. This is not human rights advocacy. This is **lawfare**: the use of legal instruments to achieve political ends.

F. The Ultimate Hypocrisy: Where Were They?

Let us now ask the question that cuts to the heart of this matter. It is a question that every Salvadoran wants answered, and that no DPLF representative can answer honestly.

Where were these organizations when our people were being murdered?

Where was Leonor Arteaga when the homicide rate was 106 per 100,000? Where was her concern for "systematic practices" when gangs were systematically murdering bus drivers, shopkeepers, and schoolchildren?

Where was Hannah Ahern when our women were being kidnapped, raped, and murdered? Where was her expertise in "enforced disappearances" when gangs were making people vanish by the hundreds?

Where was DPLF when MS-13 and Barrio 18 controlled 80% of our national territory? Where was their Washington, D.C. office when families were fleeing their homes, abandoning everything they owned, to escape gang violence?

Where were the Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations when our children were being recruited at gunpoint? Where was their funding for "civil society" when our civil society was being terrorized?

Where were Cristosal and Acción Ciudadana when our people were being extorted into poverty? Where were their human rights reports when the "renta" system was destroying our economy?

Where were El Faro and Factum when gangs were painting their numbers on our walls and claiming our streets as their own? Where were their investigative journalists when the truth was that gangs, not the state, were the primary violators of human rights?

THEY WERE SILENT.

They were silent because dead Salvadorans did not serve their fundraising purposes. Dead Salvadorans could not be used to justify grants from American foundations. Dead Salvadorans could not be trotted out at CIDH hearings to demand UN intervention.

But now that Salvadorans are alive? Now that our homicide rate has dropped 98%? Now that our children can play outside? Now that our women can walk home safely? Now they have found their voices. Now they have found their funding. Now they have found their outrage.

They would rather have dead Salvadorans to exploit than living Salvadorans to ignore.

G. The Moral Inversion: Defending the Indefensible

The DPLF report represents a complete moral inversion. It takes the side of criminal organizations that murdered 200,000 people against the democratically elected government that finally stopped them.

Let us be clear about what DPLF is defending:

DPLF Defends	Against
Individuals detained on suspicion of gang membership	The right of Salvadorans to live without fear
"Due process" for confessed killers	The safety of communities terrorized for decades
The "rights" of MS-13 members	The right of children to not be recruited
International scrutiny of security forces	National sovereignty and democratic self-determination

This is not human rights. This is a **political project to protect criminal organizations and the corrupt political class that enabled them.**

The FMLN, which created FUNDASPAD and channeled public funds to itself through NGOs, now sees its former officials investigated for corruption. ARENA officials, including former Presidents Cristiani and Saca, now face justice for embezzlement and illicit enrichment. And the international NGO network—funded by American foundations and staffed by career activists—has stepped in to defend them.

They claim to defend human rights. In reality, they defend a corrupt status quo that made gang violence possible.

H. The Names: Who Exactly Is Behind This?

Let us name them. Let us identify every individual and organization that has signed onto this campaign against El Salvador.

The Authors and Co-Authors

Name	Affiliation	Role
Leonor Arteaga	DPLF Program Director	Lead author, March 2024 report; speaker at March 2026 CIDH hearing
Hannah Ahern	DPLF Program Officer	Co-author, March 2024 report
Santiago Cantón	International Commission of Jurists	Co-author, March 2026 follow-up report
Susana SáCouto	IMPACTUM / American University	Expert quoted in March 2026 report

The Organizations

Organization	Acronym	Headquarters	Key Personnel
Due Process of Law Foundation	DPLF	Washington, DC	Leonor Arteaga, Hannah Ahern, Karen Arita

Organization	Acronym	Headquarters	Key Personnel
International Commission of Jurists	ICJ	Geneva	Santiago Cantón
International Federation for Human Rights	FIDH	Paris	Multiple
InterJust	—	International	Multiple
IMPACTUM Research Project	IMPACTUM	—	Susana SáCouto
Ghent University	—	Belgium	Academic researchers

The Salvadoran NGOs

Organization	Leadership	Funding Sources
Cristosal	David Holiday	Open Society Foundations (\$2.8M+)
Acción Ciudadana	Eduardo Escobar	Open Society Foundations, NED
FUNDASPAD (defunct)	FMLN members (Jorge Schafik Hándal, Eugenio Chicas, et al.)	Salvadoran public funds (\$700,000)

The Reporters and Media

Media Outlet	Key Figures	Funding
El Faro	Carlos Dada, Sergio Arauz, Óscar Martínez	Open Society Foundations
Factum	Multiple	Open Society Foundations
Gato Encerrado	Multiple	Open Society Foundations
APES	Sergio Arauz (President)	Membership organization

The Funders

Funder	Headquarters	Total Known Funding to DPLF
Ford Foundation	New York	\$300,000+ (2025) plus prior grants
MacArthur Foundation	Chicago	\$1,185,150+ (2007-2019)
Wellspring Philanthropic Fund	New York	\$140,000 (2023)
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	Battle Creek, MI	\$128,080 (2024)
Open Society Foundations	New York	Millions to Salvadoran partners

I. The Call to Action: What We Demand

To every organization and individual named above, we say:

You have no moral authority to judge El Salvador.

You stood silent while gangs murdered our families. You raised no funds while our children were recruited. You published no reports while our women were raped. You held no hearings while our people were displaced.

And now, when we have finally found peace, you dare to accuse us of crimes?

We demand that you:

1. **Publicly explain** where you were during the decades of gang terror
2. **Disclose all funding** sources and amounts received to attack El Salvador
3. **Cease your campaign** to destabilize our democratically elected government
4. **Apologize** to the Salvadoran people for defending those who murdered us

We will not be silenced. We will not be intimidated. And we will not allow you to take our peace away.

IX. LEGAL CONCLUSION

Based on the foregoing analysis, the DPLF report fails to establish, by any reasonable legal standard, that crimes against humanity are being committed in El Salvador. Its speculative language, reliance on unverified sources, omission of context, and political bias render it unsuitable as a basis for legal action or international condemnation. The Salvadoran government has acted to protect its citizens from violent criminal organizations. In doing so, it has achieved historic reductions in homicide and restored public order. While no government is perfect, and isolated abuses must be investigated and remedied, the wholesale characterization of El Salvador's security policy as criminal under international law is unfounded and unjust.

X. COMPREHENSIVE LEGAL CITATIONS AND REFERENCES

- InSight Crime 2025 Homicide Round-Up (March 2026) — 82 murders, 1.3 rate.
- PNC official data (Jan 2026) — 1.3 rate confirmed.
- Reuters (March 2026) — 91,300+ detentions, ~8,000 released.
- Attorney General statements on Dec 2025 mass sentencings.

XI. POLITICAL PERSECUTION OR CRIMINAL ACCOUNTABILITY? FORMER OFFICIALS AND THEIR LEGAL CASES

A recurring narrative advanced by critics of the Bukele administration is that former officials from the ARENA and FMLN parties are victims of "political persecution." This section examines the actual charges and legal proceedings against these individuals,

demonstrating that they are not being targeted for their political beliefs but for specific crimes committed while in office.

A. The Principle of Accountability Under international law, States have an obligation to investigate and prosecute serious crimes, including corruption, embezzlement, and illicit association. The Salvadoran Attorney General's Office (FGR) has pursued numerous cases against former officials based on evidence, witness testimony, and financial records. These prosecutions represent the exercise of legitimate State authority, not political vengeance.

B. ARENA Officials Investigated or Convicted

- Alfredo Cristiani President (1989-1994) Illicit enrichment, corruption Asset seizure; \$85M seized
- Antonio Saca President (2004-2009) Embezzlement, money laundering Arrested (March 2026)
- Norman Quijano Presidential candidate Bribing gangs (\$100,000), electoral fraud 13 years; deported from U.S.
- Gustavo López Davidson ARENA Party President Corruption Arrested (August 2020)
- José Atilio Benítez Defense Minister Corruption Arrested (August 2020)
- Ernesto Muyschondt San Salvador Mayor Negotiating with gangs On trial ARENA Deputies (multiple) Legislative Assembly Money laundering, corruption Asset seizures

C. FMLN Officials in Prison or Convicted in El Salvador

Benito Lara Minister of Justice (Sánchez Cerén) Fraud, illicit associations, illicit enrichment 28 years In prison

- Arístides Valencia Minister of Governance Fraud, illicit associations 28 years In prison David Munguía Payés Minister of Defense/Security Negotiating with gangs 18 years In prison Eugenio Chicas TSE Magistrate President Illicit enrichment (\$200,000+) Awaiting trial In prison (Santa Ana)
- Nercy Patricia Montano Mayor of Soyapango Incumplimiento de deberes, negociaciones ilícitas 10 years In prison
- Luis Antonio Martínez González Attorney General Fraudulent process, omission of investigation 10 years In prison
- Julio Adalberto Arriaza González Director, Defense of Society's Interests Fraudulent process 5 years In prison

D. FMLN Officials in Exile, Fugitives, or Deceased

Mauricio Funes President (2009-2014) Corruption, illicit enrichment, gang negotiations (14-year sentence) Nicaragua (deceased Jan 2025) Died in exile

Salvador Sánchez Cerén President (2014-2019) Corruption, illicit enrichment Nicaragua Fled; under investigation

Manuel Melgar Security Minister Corruption, organized crime links Nicaragua Fled after accusations Sigfrido Reyes Legislative Assembly President Corruption, illicit enrichment Mexico City Asylum in Mexico

José Luis Merino Vice Minister of Technical Cooperation Illicit enrichment, corruption Unknown Fled El Salvador

Wilson Alvarado FMLN-linked operative Fraud, illicit associations (gang link) Fugitive Believed abroad

Raúl Mijango FMLN collaborator, gang truce negotiator Illicit associations, fraud Deceased Died during proceedings

E. Analysis: Political Persecution or Rule of Law?

The pattern revealed by these cases is clear: individuals from both major political parties—ARENA and FMLN—have been investigated, arrested, and convicted for crimes including embezzlement, money laundering, illicit enrichment, and even bribing terrorist organizations. The charges span administrations of both parties, demonstrating that the investigations are politically neutral. Key observations:

1. **Bipartisan Targeting:** Cases involve both ARENA and FMLN officials, negating any claim of one-party persecution.
2. **Specific Criminal Conduct:** Charges are based on specific acts—diverted funds, bribes paid, illicit negotiations—not political affiliation.
3. **Judicial Process:** Cases proceed through the ordinary courts with defendants entitled to legal representation and appeal.
4. **International Cooperation:** The deportation of Norman Quijano from the United States demonstrates international recognition of the legitimacy of these prosecutions. When former officials claim "political persecution," they are engaging in a rhetorical strategy to deflect attention from the specific criminal conduct with which they are charged. The Salvadoran people, who suffered under corrupt administrations for decades, have the right to see justice done regardless of the political party of the accused.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **For International Bodies:** Reject the DPLF report as legally insufficient and politically motivated. If further inquiry is warranted, it should be conducted by neutral fact-finding missions with access to all parties, not by advocacy organizations. When you want to talk to the Salvadorean Society, please don't talk to organizations, talk to the people on the streets, visit the towns and villages, visit our colonias and talk to the real Public Society.
- **For the Salvadoran Government:** Continue to investigate and address any individual cases of abuse through domestic institutions. Transparency and accountability strengthen the legitimacy of security policies. Publish a website containing the crimes with names and pictures of each gang member for the world to know what they have done to the population; this will show the world that these criminals are not angels as they are being portrayed to be. Generate a PDF report per gang member with pictures and the list of crimes they have committed, charges and sentences.
- **For the International Community:** Recognize the right of El Salvador—and all nations—to defend their citizens from organized crime. Support policies that have proven effective in saving lives, rather than condemning them based on incomplete and biased reports.

WORDS FROM A CITIZEN OF EL SALVADOR

Threatened, Forced to Migrate, and Exiled by the Gangs

A Voice That Has Been Silenced for Too Long

Before international human rights organizations rush to judge President Nayib Bukele, his ministers, and the Legislative Assembly, there is a voice that has been systematically ignored for decades—the voice of the ordinary Salvadoran citizen. Not the politician. Not the NGO director with foreign funding. Not the journalist writing from exile in Europe. The mother. The bus driver. The small business owner. The young woman who could not walk home from school alone.

We are the ones who lived through the terror. We are the ones the gangs tried to kill, extort, displace, and silence. And we are the ones who finally have peace.

J. The Forgotten Victims: A Testimony from the Salvadoran People

1. Living Under the Shadow of Death

For thirty years, we did not live—we survived. Every morning when we woke up, we wondered if we would make it home that night. Every knock on the door could be the last. Every child who left for school might never return.

The gangs controlled **85 percent of our national territory**. They did not hide in the shadows; they ruled in broad daylight. They painted their numbers on our walls, claimed our streets as their own, and demanded that we bow to their authority or face death.

Esperanza Martinez, a 65-year-old resident of the 10 de Octubre neighbourhood in San Marcos, lived through the worst of it. She lost **three relatives** to gang murder. Her **12-year-old niece** was killed because she refused to join the gang. Her **sister** was murdered for trying to defend her daughter. Her **brother-in-law** was executed for failing to pay an extortion demand. One of her three daughters fled to the United States at just 17 years old to escape death threats.

"Many people entered here and never left. I saw dead people lying there, shot or stabbed. There's a clandestine cemetery on the hill," Martinez recalls.

This was not exceptional. This was everyday life in El Salvador before 2022.

2. The System of Terror: Extortion as a Way of Life

The gangs built a parallel government through fear. They imposed a "renta"—a tax on survival. No one was exempt.

A small business owner in Soyapango, a barber named Fernando, once ran a mobile phone minutes business while his wife operated a small restaurant. Gang members would come daily, demanding free lunches and free phone minutes. Eventually, both businesses became unprofitable and closed. Fernando now survives by cutting hair, barely scraping by. When the gangs came for him, he told them to just kill him—he had nothing left to give. Remarkably, they left him alone. But he was the exception, not the rule.

In a rural village in Chalatenango, a woman named Rita sold pupusas from her two-room home to feed her family. The gangs came first demanding two dollars. She paid, fearing for her life. Within a week, they returned and demanded **ten dollars a day**. Rita was not earning ten dollars a day. She had to shut down her business, her only source of income.

A farmer in the same region was too terrified to speak to a reporter about gang violence. When approached, his body shook uncontrollably. He turned away without saying a word. That is what decades of terror does to a people.

3. The Invisible Frontiers: Prisoners in Our Own Homes

The gangs divided our country into "invisible frontiers." Crossing from one neighbourhood to another controlled by a rival gang meant risking death. We became prisoners in our own communities.

In rural areas, the control was absolute. A woman named Elena, who later fled into exile, described life under gang rule: "The gangs tell us when we can leave our houses to work the fields. Nobody can be outside after dark, not even to use the outhouses. The women wear no makeup when they go out to wash clothes for fear of appealing to one or more of them and being raped" .

The gangs did not merely occupy territory; they owned it. At their peak, they controlled an estimated **80 - 85 percent of the country** . They took over homes, evicting families at gunpoint, and then rented those same homes to other Salvadorans, profiting from our displacement. Authorities have since recovered **more than 11,000 houses** that were occupied by gang members. Of these, 90 percent needed repairs, and 60 percent were totally or partially dismantled by the criminals who had stolen them .

4. The Recruitment of Our Children

The gangs did not only kill us; they stole our children. They recruited boys as young as 12, turning them into lookouts, messengers, and eventually hitmen. They preyed on the poorest communities, offering protection, money, and belonging to children who had nothing.

A study presented at the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse documented those criminal organizations in El Salvador "commonly target children" for recruitment in schools . The gangs understood what the international community did not: that controlling children meant controlling the future.

When mothers tried to protect their children, they were murdered. Esperanza Martinez's sister was killed for defending her daughter from gang recruitment. A 12-year-old girl was murdered for refusing to join. These were children. These were our children.

5. Violence Against Women and Girls: The Hidden Epidemic

The gangs treated women as property. Sexual violence was not incidental; it was a weapon of war.

In late 2014, four gang members abducted a woman named Norma and took her to a cemetery. Three of them raped her. Her crime? She was married to a police officer. After the rape, they threw her in the trash and left her for dead.

Despite her husband being a police officer and despite filing an official report, Norma could not be protected. The gang continued to threaten her and her children. She fled her home, changed her phone number, and never went outside. Still, the threats continued.

Eventually, she had no choice but to flee the country entirely, paying a coyote to smuggle her through Mexico to the United States, where she sought asylum.

Before leaving, she wanted to withdraw the police report to protect her family left behind. But even that could not save them. Her children continued to be threatened.

Lidia's story is equally horrifying. After Barrio 18 murdered her brother, they claimed her as property—punishment for her family's loss. For three years, she was forced into conjugal visits with a gang leader in prison under threat of death. When she finally escaped, the gang kidnapped and tortured a family member to force her return. She was repeatedly raped, physically abused, and forced into drug trafficking.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, SGBV contributes to the annual displacement of some **500,000 people** from the Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. That is 9 percent of the entire population. A study of 319 Salvadoran refugees found that **61 percent fled for fear of rape, sexual abuse, or enforced disappearance.**

The numbers are staggering: a woman is murdered every 18 hours in El Salvador. Gender-based violence is the second leading cause of death for women in Honduras. Our region has been called the world's "epicentre for gender-based violence"—a humanitarian crisis .

And where were the human rights defenders then?

6. Forced Disappearances: The Vanished

The gangs made people disappear. Not quietly, but as a tactic of terror. They wanted us to know that anyone could be taken at any time, and no one would ever find them.

A mother named Sandra Hernandez lost her husband, Jose Medrano, a day laborer taken by police in May 2022. He was falsely accused of gang membership. Nearly a year later, she received a covert call—he had been taken to hospital for dialysis. Then she was informed he had died, of kidney failure. But at the funeral home, she was told the body had bruises.

"Good people are paying for the sins of others," she said.

Irma Garcia has not seen her son Isaias Galicia since he was arrested at 17 years old in June 2022, charged with gang association. "I haven't seen him. I don't know if he's okay, if he's alive," she said, clutching a photo of her son. "My son is not a gang member, he doesn't have any tattoos, he didn't hurt anyone." After his arrest, the family was cast out by their community, forced to find a new home .

"I live in fear that they will inform me he was killed inside," Garcia said. "They have taken away their dreams, their future" .

7. The Silence of the International Community

For decades, we cried out for help. We begged the international community to see what was happening to us. We asked for intervention, for support, for someone—anyone—to help us reclaim our country from the criminals who had taken it hostage.

Where were the NGOs?

Where were the human rights organizations when our children were being recruited at gunpoint? Where were the international observers when our women were being raped in cemeteries? Where were the United Nations investigators when our family members were being disappeared, their bodies never found?

The answer is painfully simple: they were silent. They were absent. They were nowhere to be found.

The **Inter-American Commission on Human Rights** and **UNICEF** issued a joint press release in December 2004 expressing concern over children involved with gangs. A press release. Words on paper. No action. No intervention. No protection .

The gangs continued their reign of terror for another 18 years.

8. The Transformation: Peace Finally Arrives

Then came March 2022. After gangs murdered 87 people in three days—a massacre that shocked even us, who had grown numb to violence—President Nayib Bukele asked the Legislative Assembly to approve a State of Exception.

For the first time in our history, a president actually cared enough to stop the gangs.

The results have been nothing short of miraculous. Today, our homicide rate has plummeted from **106 per 100,000 in 2015 to just 1.3 per 100,000 in 2025**—a reduction of over 98 percent. We are now the safest country in the Western Hemisphere.

In the 10 de Octubre neighborhood, where Esperanza Martinez lost three family members, the walls once covered with gang graffiti now display murals of balloons, butterflies, and multi-coloured flowers. A giant "N" for Nayib and his New Ideas party adorns a sky-blue wall. At lunchtime, buyers bustle in front of market stalls. A motorcyclist makes food deliveries. A woman sells slushies from the back of a truck .

This was unthinkable just a few years ago.

Carlos Sanchez, a 48-year-old car washer, speaks for many of us: "Today we have a little peace, but remnants (of gangs) are hidden in the hills". We know the threat is not completely gone. But for the first time in our lives, we are not afraid to leave our homes.

9. A Message to the International Human Rights Community

To every human rights organization, every international court, every foreign diplomat, and every journalist who seeks to judge President Bukele and his government:

You owe the Salvadoran people the respect of at least coming to our country and speaking to us—the citizens who actually live here.

Do not base your judgments on reports written by foreign-funded NGOs operating from Washington or Europe. Do not rely on testimony from former politicians who fled to Nicaragua to escape corruption charges. Do not cite journalists who left the country years ago and now write from comfortable exile.

Come to our neighbourhoods. Walk through the streets of San Marcos, Soyapango,, San Miguel ,Chalatenango and the rest of the Country. Talk to the mothers whose children can now play outside without fear. Talk to the business owners who no longer pay "renta" to gang members. Talk to the young women who can walk home from school in daylight.

Ask us what we think.

You will hear what we have been trying to tell the world for decades: that President Bukele is the first leader in our history to give us peace. That we gave his government the full power to control the gangs and put every last one of them in prison for the rest of their lives—and then some. That we support this policy not because we are uninformed or brainwashed, but because we lived through the alternative and we never want to go back.

A commenter on a European Consortium for Political Research article put it simply: "Women in general are substantially safer than during gang rule. This doesn't mean they are 'safe'!... to say that the situation in general is worse for all women under the state of exception now than it was before is just not objectively true" .

That commenter was not a government official or a party loyalist. They were an ordinary reader, responding to an academic article critical of the government. Even they could see what the experts refuse to acknowledge.

10. The Disrespect of Passing Judgment Without Evidence

It is disrespectful. It is unfair. And it is fundamentally undemocratic.

You cannot claim to care about human rights while ignoring the most fundamental human right of all: the right to live without fear of violent death. You cannot claim to defend the Salvadoran people while dismissing our voices and our choices. You cannot claim to seek justice while giving platforms to corrupt former officials who negotiated with terrorists and stole from the public treasury.

President Bukele, his ministers, and the Legislative Assembly did what no other government in our history had the courage to do. They took on the gangs and won. They dismantled the criminal structures that had held our country hostage for three decades.

They restored our right to walk our own streets, to run our own businesses, to raise our own children without gangs stealing them away.

We, the Salvadoran people, gave them that mandate. We re-elected President Bukele with over **83 percent of the vote** . We have renewed the State of Exception dozens of times through our elected representatives. We know what we want, and we have made it clear.

11. The Challenge to Human Rights Entities

So here is our challenge to every human rights entity and court that seeks to pass judgment on our government:

Come to El Salvador. Not to San Salvador's diplomatic quarter, but to the neighborhoods that were once controlled by gangs. Talk to us. Listen to us. And then tell us—honestly and directly—that you have the right to condemn the government that finally gave us peace.

Tell Esperanza Martinez, who lost her niece, her sister, and her brother-in-law to gang violence, that President Bukele should be investigated for crimes against humanity. Tell her that the mothers who can now let their children play outside are victims of state repression. Tell her that the peace she has finally found after 65 years of terror is actually a human rights violation.

You will not have the courage to say it to her face. Because you know, deep down, that it is not true.

You know that your reports and investigations are based on a fundamentally flawed premise: that the gangs were the legitimate representatives of our communities, and the state that defeated them is the criminal. You have it backwards. You have always had it backwards.

12. The Final Word: From Us to the World

We are the Salvadoran people. We are the ones who survived. We are the ones who buried our dead. We are the ones who fled our homes. We are the ones who watched our children being stolen.

And we are the ones who finally, after decades of suffering, have peace.

President Nayib Bukele, His Ministers, The National Assembly, The NEW Judicial System , Our police Officers and our Army gave us that peace. Not the NGOs. Not the international community. Not the human rights organizations that ignored our suffering for thirty years. Him. And we will not let you take it away.

You can write your reports. You can file your complaints. You can call for United Nations investigations. But you cannot erase what we have lived through. You cannot deny what we have achieved. And you cannot silence our voices.

We are the citizens of El Salvador. We have been threatened. We have been forced to migrate. We have been exiled by the gangs.

And now, finally, we are free.

President Bukele incarcerated almost 90,000 MONSTERS, But freed millions of law-abiding Citizens

We gave President Bukele the power to save us. And he did.

Where were you?

To DPLF, its employees and to all the people involved in the report SHAME ON YOU. YOU HAVE NOW SHOWN YOUR TRUE COLORS AND WE NOW KNOW YOU VALUE THE LIFE OF A MONSTER MORE THAN THAT OF A LAW ABIDING CITIZEN.

XIV. CERTIFICATION AND SUBMISSION I, Rodolfo Benitez, certify that this rebuttal directly refutes every factual and legal claim in the DPLF March 2024 report using official 2026 data and international law.

Prepared by: Rodolfo Benitez Date: March 18, 2026 Contact:

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