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An Illusion of Control: How El Salvador's President Rhetorically Inflates His Ability to Quell Violence

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Abstract: To create an illusion of improving country conditions with respect to gang violence, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele relies on rhetorical strategies that include asserting his power and aptitude to accomplish what no other leader before him has done, undercutting the credibility of his critics, and selectively revealing and concealing national data. In this paper, I offer a fantasy-theme rhetorical analysis to demonstrate the strategic digital mediation of one key instance of Bukele's wielding of the power of public diplomacy to detract attention from El Salvador's continuing legacy of violence and democratic decline. Delivered in the midst of a government-sanctioned state of emergency following a rash of gang violence in early 2022, Bukele's third annual Address to the Nation speech accomplishes the twin goals of proclaiming imminent victory over El Salvador's infamous and pervasive gangs and defending himself against the critical global gaze directed at the country.

Keywords: El Salvador; rhetorical analysis; political communication; gang violence



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1. Introduction

Nayib Bukele became the youngest-ever president of El Salvador in June 2019. The former marketing executive ran on an anticorruption platform, and within six months of taking office, he began asserting that crime in the country had fallen sixty percent (Al Jazeera 2019). Since then, official government data coming out of El Salvador paints an optimistic picture: The country's historically high homicide numbers are down, international tourism is up, and the president has claimed he has gained control over the country's notoriously violent gangs (World Bank 2022).

However, a closer look shows a different picture—the government is manipulating crime data to make it look artificially low (Asmann 2019), attacks on independent journalism occlude the reality of the country's dangerous conditions from international view (Reporters without Borders 2020), and behind closed doors, unable to quell the gangs' rising power, Bukele engages in clandestine negotiations with gang leaders, exchanging favors for the gangs' electoral support (Martínez et al. 2021). These realities indicate a decline in democracy in El Salvador and add to evidence of a wider regression of democratic principles throughout Central America (Gellman 2022). A 2022 report from the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) asserts that the current authoritarian leaning of several Central American governments has led to one of the region's "most fragile moments in recent decades" (Central America 2022). Some features of the erosion of democratic principles in countries including Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador are shared, such as the absence of judicial independence, the concentration of governmental power, and attacks on the freedom of the press. Still, the ways these phenomena play out in each national context are unique, necessitating individual analysis that offers more specified insights than can be gleaned from a generalized review of the region as a whole.

The Salvadoran context offers rich fodder for such specified inquiry. As both the most media savvy and the most popular of Central America's current leaders, Bukele manipulates public opinion for his personal advancement; this has implications that extend

beyond the country's borders and add momentum to the region's authoritarian slide. Indeed, the rhetorical picture of El Salvador past, present, and future that Bukele paints in his official communication impacts the safety and security of Salvadorans at home and abroad, as well as the status of international relations and migration patterns. I see these impacts firsthand in my capacity as an expert witness in asylum cases involving El Salvador's gang violence. I review migrants' asylum cases and write country condition declarations showing how these applicants' experiences relate to the broader sociopolitical realities in the country. My declarations demonstrate how the government of El Salvador is failing to effectively prevent gang violence. However, during cross-examination, the Department of Homeland Security attorneys who are present in every asylum hearing sometimes challenge my conclusions by proffering anecdotal evidence from Salvadoran government-run and funded media outlets of high profile gang takedowns (e.g., "27 Gang Members Captured in Cuscatlán Will Continue to be Imprisoned for Various Crimes" (Carpio 2021)) and waning homicide numbers ("Homicide Rate Decreases 41.4% in the First Half of January 2022 in El Salvador" (Marroquín 2022)) that misleadingly suggest El Salvador has gang violence under control and is increasing in safety and stability.

These mediated claims sometimes sway judges to deny asylum cases on the premise that the government of El Salvador would be willing and able to protect the asylum seekers if they were denied protection from the United States and deported. They have also earned President Bukele a good deal of popularity with violence-weary Salvadorans still carrying the trauma of the bloodshed of the country's recent civil war. But government-produced media obscures evidence that undermines Bukele's preferred narrative and contradicts reports from independent Salvadoran journalism and international human rights organizations that paint a more realistic picture of El Salvador's continuing struggle to quell violence and the ways Bukele's actions are undermining the country's democracy (see Gellman 2022).

By making clear the rhetorical strategies Bukele uses to create an illusion of improving country conditions with respect to gang violence, this essay contributes to a wider, ongoing conversation about the means by which populist national leaders may retain widescale popularity even while imperiling the nation's democratic future. In Bukele's case, these rhetorical strategies include asserting his power and aptitude to do what no other leader before him was capable of, undercutting the credibility of his critics, and diverting attention away from realities that contradict his preferred vision through the selective revealing and concealing of national data. These strategies are carefully and repeatedly mediated to bolster their believability; they appear in Bukele's speeches and tweets and are reported in government-funded television, radio, and newspapers. Bukele reinforces the validity of his claims of control over gang violence through attacks on independent journalists and the international NGOs that denounce him and through manipulation of how some government data such as homicide numbers are reported. The communication strategies he employs allow him to effectively wield the power of public diplomacy to distract from his ingratiation with the country's most powerful gangs and El Salvador's continuing legacy of violence.

Bukele's uncanny ability to paint a positive veneer over life in El Salvador advances his own interests for national and international audiences while occluding the more unsavory realities of gang control and violence in El Salvador. The ways this positive veneer is mediated and disseminated deserves close attention. Macro-analyses may help explain Bukele's actions but cannot demonstrate the nuanced means through which he is able to rhetorically influence public opinion in El Salvador and beyond in the way a more granular analysis can.

In this paper, I offer a rhetorical analysis of one key instance of Bukele's international communication that demonstrates the media and communication strategies he employs to construct and advance a self-serving picture of the current country conditions in El Salvador. Delivered on 5 June 2022 in the midst of a government-sanctioned state of emergency following a rash of gang violence, Bukele's third annual Address to the Nation

speech accomplishes the twin goals of proclaiming imminent victory over El Salvador's infamous and pervasive gang control and defending himself against the critical global gaze currently directed at the country. This particular speech holds significance both because it occurred during El Salvador's unconstitutional state of emergency and because of the ways it illustrates some of Bukele's most reliable communication strategies. A rhetorical analysis of this speech demonstrates how the president skillfully paints a picture of El Salvador's progress toward safety even in direct opposition to documentary evidence to the contrary and how he works to undermine the public's faith in non-governmental media and human rights organizations by eroding the credibility of his critics.

Bukele's recent moves toward authoritarianism have drawn the attention of legal scholars, human rights organizations, and global governments, and much has already been said to denounce, historicize, and predict El Salvador's declining democracy. My goal is not to repeat these important existing criticisms, but rather to illuminate the role that mediated communication plays both to skew public understanding of and justify Bukele's actions.

2. Method

My evaluation of this speech follows the qualitative guidelines of the fantasy-theme method of rhetorical analysis. This method, which follows from symbolic convergence theory, seeks to understand and describe the ways a group comes to develop, believe, and act on a shared set of realities. Symbolic convergence theory rests on the assumptions that communication creates reality and that some meanings given to the realities created by communication can come to be shared among a group through stories, fables, figures of speech, and other dramatized messages. The "fantasy" in a fantasy-theme analysis, then, refers to the constructed shared realities that a group comes to believe and act on as they relate to a particular rhetorical vision (Zanin et al. 2016). The goal for the critic employing a fantasy-theme analysis, according to Ernest Bormann, who designed the method, is to "illuminate how people who participated in the rhetorical vision related to one another . . . how they acted to achieve the goals embedded in their dreams, and how they were aroused by the dramatic action and the dramatis personae within the manifest content of their rhetoric" (Bormann 1982, p. 401). Applying this to my analysis of Bukele's speech meant searching out the key characters in Bukele's narrative to see how they relate to each other and investigating how Bukele himself works through dramatic action and key messaging to paint a self-serving picture of El Salvador's progress toward safety.

Fantasy-theme analysis illuminates "how collectivities of people build a shared consciousness that provides emotion, meaning, motive, and value for human action through talk" (Bormann et al. 2001, p. 274). The "talk" I set out to analyze included the mediated visual and textual components of Bukele's third annual Address to the Nation. I began by viewing and listening to the speech multiple times and drawing out and grouping the themes that surfaced. I considered these themes in the context of my knowledge of the country conditions in El Salvador more generally, paying particular attention to instances where Bukele's words challenge or contradict those of independent Salvadoran investigative journalism and recent inter/national human rights reports.

For the quotes from the speech that I use in this analysis, I draw from the official English subtitles that were provided live when the speech aired on 5 June 2022. As my analysis reveals, an English-only speaking audience was presumed and addressed throughout this speech. In order to most accurately analyze how the government prepared this speech for this audience, I hold to this government-provided translation even in instances where I would have translated the Spanish into English using slightly different words if I were creating my own translation.

Rather than critiquing only the verbal content of the speech, my broader critical focus interrogates the way this speech was digitally mediated. This facet of the analysis centers Bukele's announcement of the speech on Twitter, the livestream made available on YouTube with simultaneous, pre-written English subtitles, and the visual facets and editing of the filmed speech.

A fantasy-theme method of analysis requires coding this mediated speech event (known as “the artifact”) according to its actions, setting, and characters, in order to see what these codes illuminate about the “shared rhetorical outlook” Bukele and his supporters are working to promote (Wu 2010, p. 386). “Characters” refers to the humans who serve as the speakers, audience members, and groups discussed in speech itself; “setting” to the mediated temporal, physical, cultural, and political context; and “action” to the behaviors displayed and initiatives undertaken by the characters.

3. Findings

3.1. Characters

Fantasy-theme analysis illuminates the values and beliefs constructed and shared among a group rather than in the mind of a single actor. This consideration is appropriate in the context of Bukele’s speech because although he is at the center of the speech event, the actions and realities about which he speaks are only possible and salient because of the other characters present.

Bukele delivered this speech in front of El Salvador’s Legislative Assembly, and while not the speakers in this artifact, these lawmakers play a critical role. The 84-seat Assembly became dominated by 56 Bukele supporters on 1 May 2021, leaving only 28 opposition members. While the visual prominence given to this supermajority in the filming of the speech appears to testify to Bukele’s popularity in a democratic electoral system, some recent historical context complicates this image. The 2020 parliamentary elections, in which Bukele took majority control of the Assembly, took place against a menacing backdrop. Shortly before the election, Bukele had threatened to remove opposition lawmakers by force (Neuman 2020), ordered the occupation of the oppositional assembly by soldiers carrying assault rifles (“Now I think it’s quite clear who has control of the situation,” Bukele announced during this stunt (Goodfriend 2020)), and called for a popular insurrection to pressure opposing lawmakers to approve a massive spending plan (Patricio 2020).

With the new majority in place, Bukele’s Legislative Assembly took immediate action to dismiss dozens of judges and oust both the Attorney General and all five magistrates in the Constitutional Chamber of the country’s Supreme Court—actions widely criticized by the international human rights community as unconstitutional and a threat to democracy. Shortly after Bukele replaced the ousted judges with his new picks, the new judges ruled that Salvadoran presidents can serve two consecutive terms instead of one. This constitutional change paves the way for Bukele to pursue reelection when his term expires in 2024 (BBC 2021).

The filming and editing of the 3rd Address to the Nation prioritizes the 56 Bukele-supporting lawmakers through frequent shots of their enthusiastic applause, visually erasing the antidemocratic ousting and replacement of the former occupants of the same chairs and leaving an oversimplified picture of widespread enthusiastic support. The visibility of these characters in the filming of the speech reinforces Bukele’s verbal crediting of his Assembly for making possible the kinds of victories he claims over the gangs.

The rhetorical impact of the visual prominence of Bukele’s supermajority in the Legislative Assembly is reinforced by another group of characters physically present. Throughout the speech, Bukele directly addresses dozens of supporters on a mezzanine above the assembly floor. Bukele’s claims of victory are audibly celebrated by these mezzanine supporters who shout their support while hoisting colorful banners over their heads as the cameras linger on them. The banners read, for example, “THANK YOU PRESIDENT NAYIB BUKELE! SOYAPANGO IS SAFER NOW. LET’S CONTINUE MAKING HISTORY”; “128 DAYS WITHOUT HOMICIDES”; and “2024 2029 #NAYIB”—a foreshadowing of Bukele’s September 2022 announcement of his plans for reelection (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Bukele supporters on the mezzanine of the National Assembly.

The visible and audible presence of Bukele's supporters contrasts with the reality that Bukele has banned members of independent media outlets that are critical of him from attending his speeches or entering the presidential palace when other press are invited ([Committee to Protect Journalists 2019](#)).

Finally, though not physically present, the third group of characters playing a major role in this speech artifact are the gangs Bukele condemns throughout. The two most powerful gangs operating in El Salvador are MS-13 and Barrio 18 (also called the 18th Street Gang or M-18). Both groups began as loose gatherings of young people, and over the last several decades have grown in sophistication and structure. In his 2020 book *State of War*, William Wheeler explains, "Today the gangs comprise members of all the classes . . . now they are to be found in the universities as well. The gangs are training their future lawyers and doctors, economists and military intelligence officers" ([Wheeler 2020](#), p. 117). Though gang affiliates vary in the degree of public safety threat they pose—from shot callers who order homicides to pre-teens whose only job is to report unfamiliar arrivals to a neighborhood—Bukele does not name nor offer specificity about these characters. This homogenization allows a kind of rhetorical justification of his administration's one-size-fits-all condemnation.

Notably absent from this speech, especially considering the amount of attention Bukele gave these characters during his presidential campaign and first two years in office, are mentions of El Salvador's former governmental leaders. Historically, Bukele has contrasted himself to former leaders to whom he refers en masse as "*los mismos de siempre*"—in English, "the usual suspects." But in the lead up to his third annual speech, several independent sources began to use this popular phrase against him, pointing out ways that Bukele was continuing rather than disrupting the legacy of governmental corruption, acting as one of *los mismos de siempre* himself (see, for example [Gonzalez 2020](#); [Valencia 2021](#)). Rather than invoking the now-troubled phrase in reference to former leaders, Bukele instead makes a break with the past in this speech, leaving former leaders out of the narrative in order to spotlight more favored and supportive characters.

3.2. Setting

The 36-min speech took place in the expected physical setting of the Legislative Palace in San Salvador, but the most salient facet of the setting of this artifact for the purposes of my analysis is not spatial but temporal. The speech aired 70 days after Bukele had ordered an emergency 30-day state of exception on 27 March 2022 in response to the rash of 87 homicides that the gangs ordered in a single weekend after the unraveling of their clandestine negotiations with Bukele.

Under the emergency state, Bukele commissioned the police to incarcerate all Salvadoran gang members and affiliates, purportedly to put a stop to the alarming number of homicides. The Legislative Assembly swiftly passed changes to the penal code that require longer sentences for gang members and allow the courts to charge gang affiliates as young as twelve years old as adults in direct defiance of international human rights laws (Flores Amaya 2022). Despite the fact that the National Civil Police (PNC) reported only 17 homicides during the entire first 30-day state of exception, the Legislative Assembly had voted to reinstate the 30-day emergency state twice so that at the time of this speech it was in its third consecutive month. It has since been extended for additional months, and at the time of this writing, continues.

At the time of this speech, the international human rights community had begun to widely denounce the unconstitutional continuation of the emergency state and the affiliated ways Bukele's actions were compromising El Salvador's democratic system and leading to the increasingly well-documented incarceration of many innocent Salvadorans and the denial of even basic human rights to the tens of thousands of prisoners detained since March. It is within this temporal context that the reasons for Bukele's frequent and defensive acknowledgement throughout his speech of the critical international attention he was receiving become clearest.

3.3. Action

Like in many other countries, in El Salvador, an annual Address to the Nation speech is prescribed by the constitution. Bukele's first two annual addresses in 2020 and 2021 focused primarily on the coronavirus pandemic, the economy as it related to the nation's adoption of Bitcoin as legal tender, and the differences Bukele wanted the Salvadoran public to identify between his own administration and its predecessors. This third speech is unique in its almost singular focus on gang violence and the government's response to it—a focus necessitated by the temporal context of the emergency state. Thus, the gang violence and the government's violent response are the "actions" coded in this fantasy-theme analysis.

The gang violence action in this context refers both specifically to the March 2022 spike in gang-perpetrated homicides and, more broadly, to the country's history of violence under gang control—what Bukele calls in this speech "the violence that we have experienced all our lives." There are three important government actions during this state of exception to consider. First, in ordering the incarceration of all gang members and affiliates, Bukele's administration simultaneously removed citizens' due process rights and civil liberties, including the right to legal counsel and the right to be informed about the reason for one's arrest.

Second, Bukele publicly announced via Twitter crackdowns in prison conditions including communication and access to visitors. Seven days after the State of Exception went into effect, Bukele tweeted that he was removing access to food, bedding, natural light, and clothing for the incarcerated as punishment. Human Rights Watch responded, "Punishing detainees for the actions of people outside prison is a form of collective punishment that violates multiple human rights, and the harsh treatment of detainees described by Bukele may amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Third, Bukele's assembly passed with very little discussion \$80 million in increased funding for the military (Flores Amaya 2022). The drastic and abrupt jump in military spending and the prison population during a national economic downturn requires ideological justification that this speech works to provide. Following these actions, to date, over 52,000 Salvadorans have been incarcerated. At least 73 prisoners have died, some after having been beaten and/or denied medical treatment (Avalos 2022). Currently, hundreds of mothers and other family members are camping in makeshift dwellings outside the prisons hoping to hear word of their loved ones inside.

The realities and values that Bukele advances in his speech become clearer in the light of the characters, setting, and actions at play in his Address to the Nation. Specifically,

Bukele proclaims imminent victory over a rhetorically constructed “war on gangs” and strategically opposes the critical international attention on El Salvador, reifying himself as the only one who can lead El Salvador to safety.

4. A Façade of Imminent Victory

Three minutes into his speech, inciting a standing ovation from his present supporters, Bukele solemnly announced, “We are on the verge of winning the war against the gangs.” This militaristic language continues to feature prominently throughout the 36-min speech—the words “war” and “battle” appear 17 times. As El Salvador’s youngest-ever president, Bukele was only 10 years old when the country’s bloody 12-year civil war ended in 1992. The memory of the war still looms large in the minds of older, violence-weary citizens, many of whom had family members among the 75,000 killed. There is an element of surprise, then, when Bukele, on several occasions, compares the civil war to his own war against the gangs and determines that the latter is more important, more difficult, and ultimately more successful.

Bukele draws this comparison creatively by first ideologically distancing his listeners from and then undercutting the significance of the official end of the country’s civil war. He asserts,

Let us remember that the armed conflict—or “the war” as some call it—was funded with billions of dollars from international interests that had nothing to do with our own. Isn’t that true? It was started, fed, planned, and even finished from outside our borders. This was not a war of the Salvadorans, it was a war by outside powers that wanted to influence our country and they did so. We were only the pawns of international powers. They provided the dollars and the weapons, and we provided the dead.

With these two sentences, Bukele simultaneously disassociates Salvadorans from the impetus for civil war (“It was not a war of Salvadorans”) and rhetorically diminishes the importance of the war (“the armed conflict—or ‘the war’ as some call it”). This diminishing continues in other characterizations of the civil war in this speech in which Bukele calls it the “supposed war” and the “so-called war.”

The work Bukele does throughout this speech to undermine the importance and proximity of the civil war contrasts sharply with how he describes his own war against the gangs, which he exalts and centers squarely at home in El Salvador. The centering comes by way of Bukele’s determination that “100% [of Salvadorans] have been affected” by gang violence and his pronouncement that, unlike the civil war, “this is a war between all of the honest Salvadorans and the criminals who kept us in panic, mourning, misery, for years.” Bukele establishes the superior importance of his own “war” against the gangs by claiming, “Without a doubt, this is the most important moment in our country’s history” and affirming that the war against the gangs is “the most difficult battle that we have waged.” These claims lay the foundation on which he constructs a façade of victory.

Throughout this speech, Bukele offers what appears to be evidence of his administration’s advancements toward safety that, on closer inspection, are only made possible by occluding centrally relevant data. For instance, Bukele claims that before he took office, “the gangs had judges and prosecutors as accomplices to set them free the day after they were arrested”—an ironic charge considering that recordings of conversations between senior Bukele official Carlos Marroquín and MS-13 made public in May 2022 by *El Faro* reveal that Bukele’s administration quietly released an MS-13 shot caller from prison and allowed him to escape to Guatemala, defying a U.S. extradition request ([Marroquín 2022](#); [Martínez 2022](#)).

Bukele announces that he “took control of the prisons [and] cut off all communication from the inside,” failing to mention that he was the one who had negotiated to provide cell phones and other communication privileges to high-ranking incarcerated gang members. Bukele was discovered through meticulously documented reporting by investigative journalists working for *El Faro* in 2020 to have been negotiating with imprisoned gang leaders

who reportedly agreed to a reduction in homicides and electoral support in exchange for prison privileges and other benefits for incarcerated gang members (Martínez et al. 2020). The U.S. State Department has since deemed corrupt Bukele's director of prisons, along with several other high-ranking officials in his administration. Bukele's highly popular decision to crack down on prison conditions and prohibit communication between the inside and outside appears to reinforce his tough on crime approach while in fact giving Bukele more leverage when he needs to negotiate with the gang.

Perhaps the most widely reported positive development during Bukele's tenure in office and the line item that received the most immediate attention in national news about this speech is the decline in El Salvador's official homicide numbers. In 2019, the year Bukele was elected, the PNC reported there were 36 homicides per 100,000 residents. Homicide rates higher than 10 homicides per 100,000 residents are typically considered in literature by entities such as the World Bank and the United Nations to be epidemic (see World Bank 2010; United Nations 2013). In 2020, the PNC reported there were just 20 homicides per 100,000 residents and in 2021, 17.5 homicides per 100,000.

These numbers undoubtably stand in sharp contrast to other recent years. In 2015, the official homicide rate was 103 homicides for every 100,000 residents, making El Salvador the most violent country in the world that year (United Nations 2019). The decline in officially reported homicides has provided a major popularity boost to Bukele, but on closer review, these numbers are only possible through the omission of some deaths from the official count.

Bukele has changed the way homicide number are reported so that individuals killed as the result of a confrontation with security forces are no longer recorded as homicides despite the country's epidemic of extrajudicial killings and other violence by police and military forces (U.S. Department of State 2021). Bukele makes reference to this omission twice in his speech, as a kind of parenthetical in the claim that El Salvador is now "the country with the lowest per capita murder rate in Latin America if we don't count the gang members who died trying to attack our forces of public order." He qualifies, "The data are calculated yearly, but if we look only at May, which gives us the best idea right now, and if we don't count the gang members killed when they tried to attack our security forces, El Salvador was the safest country in Latin America in the month of May." Claiming El Salvador as the safest country in Latin America by analyzing data from only a single month during a militarized state of emergency that purposefully excludes all murders by extrajudicial forces allows Bukele to advance a rhetorical vision that selectively omits unwanted realities.

The 2021 U.S. State Department Human Rights Report on El Salvador emphasizes the degree to which the Salvadoran police have been responsible for the arbitrary deprivation of life based on suspected gang membership, and notes "credible reports of: unlawful killings of suspected gang members and others by security forces; forced disappearances by military personnel; [and] torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by security forces" (U.S. Department of State 2021). Calling these murders merely the result of those "who died trying to confront our security forces" occludes the reality of state violence. As reported in *Foreign Policy*, "These killings are typically blandly reported as *enfrentamientos* [confrontations or clashes], when in reality they often represent police overreach and subsequent cover ups" (Brigida 2019). Bukele's victorious but inexact claims about the waning homicide numbers are further bolstered by the reality that disappearances—which in 2019 exceeded the number of murders for the first time—are no longer recorded as homicides, even when forensic evidence from found bodies clearly suggest murder (Brigida 2021).

There is no question that the country's official homicide numbers, reported globally, are being made to look artificially low. In unexplained contrast to the official homicide numbers from the PNC, Bukele asserts in this speech: "we reduced homicides by more than 80%." Even if one overlooks the way the PNC data artificially mitigate the homicide rate, their data still only show a 51% decline (from 36 homicides per 100,000 residents in 2019 to

17.5/100,000 residents in 2021). In this instance Bukele shows a willingness to hyperbolize his successes even beyond his own government entities' already inflated official reports.

Most glaringly, Bukele claims that the first two phases of his Territorial Control Plan to prevent gang violence "have allowed us to drastically reduce the number of killings," even though the documentary evidence of his negotiations with the gangs clearly shows it was Bukele's willingness to provide prison privileges that convinced the gangs to order fewer homicides until the negotiation unraveled in March. Moreover, empirical research from the International Crisis Group about the Territorial Control Plan rollout demonstrates that local areas where there appear to have been reductions in homicides do not correspond to the areas where the plan has been implemented, suggesting that it is not the government controlling the number of homicides but, "Instead, in large part, gangs appear to have themselves decided to scale back their use of lethal violence" ([International Crisis Group 2020](#)). The vision Bukele advances in this speech depends on his ability to occlude this empirical data in order to falsely position himself as on the brink of victory.

Bukele is careful in this speech to underscore that he does not yet have all he needs to be fully victorious. Language about being on the threshold of triumph appears throughout. He remarks, "Today we are *on the verge* of winning the most difficult battle of all. We are *so close* to winning the war against the gangs (emphasis added)." This holding back of some of the triumph lays the groundwork for Bukele's exhortation near the end of the speech: "Now that we are so close to winning. I call upon all Salvadorans to support this battle without hesitation." Here, Bukele walks a fine line; the idea that victory is imminent but not yet complete serves simultaneously to galvanize his listeners into full support of the glowing vision he advances and to rationalize the expense of the resources he has asked the Assembly to approve.

Indeed, the urgency of Bukele's characterization of his war against the gangs works to justify massive military spending in the midst of an economic crisis. He implicitly rationalizes the spending in this speech by telling the story of brave police and military forced to do their work "without even the basic tools for the job. They had old boots and uniforms, no weapons, or sometimes no ammunition, and broken down police cars, let alone things like bullet-proof vests, drones or armored vehicles." This justification rebuffs the wide-ranging criticism that Bukele is gathering authoritarian control by militarizing the police force and fortifying an arsenal under the less reproachable cover of purchasing the equipment necessary for combatting the gangs. These rhetorical strategies allow Bukele to villainize anyone who would question his intent when he is so close to being able to provide Salvadorans with the security they deserve.

5. Acknowledging and Opposing the Global Gaze

Bukele's first two annual Addresses to the Nation were announced and delivered in Spanish without subtitles in any other languages. In contrast, Bukele announced in English on Twitter that the third would be aired live with pre-written English subtitles (see Figure 2). The next evening, Bukele tweeted again in English again to emphasize the availability of the speech in English; he posted a link to the video of the speech with the text: "This is what we are fighting for sv (English subtitles)".

The interest in having a wider international audience—and inviting English listeners in particular—corresponds to an uptick in critical international attention aimed at Bukele initiated by the 2020 reporting by *El Faro* of hundreds of pages of evidence about Bukele's clandestine agreements with MS-13 and Barrio 18 despite claims he would not negotiate with the gangs ([Martínez et al. 2020](#)). Bukele's response to the exposé was swift and vehement—he denied the allegations and during a press conference days later charged that the country's independent media were conspiring against him and could not be trusted ([Martínez et al. 2020](#)). Despite these efforts, he could not prevent the international human rights community from fixing its critical gaze on El Salvador.



Figure 2. Tweet from Nayib Bukele 5 June 2022.

Much of the criticism came from the United States and U.S.-funded human rights organizations who increasingly began to inquire about and denounce Bukele's authoritarian leanings. Among the published headlines were warnings about "El Salvador's Slide to Authoritarianism" (Vivanco and Pappier 2021), "El Salvador's Democracy in Rapid Decline" (McDonald 2021), "Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador" (Meléndez-Sánchez 2021), and "President Bukele Engulf[ing] the Country in a Human Rights Crisis after Three Years in Government" (Amnesty International 2022). The negative mediated attention exponentially intensified in March 2022 when Bukele's agreement with the gangs unraveled, demonstrating both the enduring nature of gang control of Salvadoran life and the precarity of the nation's democracy. The international denouncements incensed Bukele because they undercut the validity of his sweeping assurances about his ability to subdue the gangs and threatened Bukele's undeniably high popularity both with residents of El Salvador and the diaspora.

More than two million Salvadorans, equivalent to almost a third of the country's residential population, currently live in the United States and make up the second largest U.S. population of Latin Americans after Mexicans (Noe-Bustamente et al. 2019). The remittances Salvadorans abroad send back to the country make up a fifth of El Salvador's GDP, and without them, many more families would be living in abject poverty (Menjívar and Cervantes 2018). Following a law passed in 2013, Salvadorans living abroad can vote in presidential elections, making controlling the internationally mediated image of the nation's leadership for this audience highly important (O'Reilly 2013).

Bukele satisfies any question about the degree to which he is interested in this audience for his speech by identifying them directly: "How many Salvadorans living abroad, watching us now had to leave everything behind because a gang member said so? Thousands of them had to emigrate, but soon they can come back to live here if they choose, or at least to visit, or even invest in an El Salvador without gangs." Here, Bukele acknowledges a central truth in the history of Salvadoran migration: much of the migration out of El Salvador has

been forced by the pervasiveness of gang violence, and the investment of this Salvadoran diaspora is integral to the country's economic present and future.

Inside Salvadoran borders, Bukele's media savviness, investment in his government-run and -funded newspaper and television network, and attacks on Salvadoran independent media have helped to secure his popularity. Indeed, Bukele can only control the political climate and maintain the illusion of peace in El Salvador to the degree that he can successfully undermine independent Salvadoran journalism—a task he has managed by refusing access to speeches given in the Presidential Palace to journalists likely to contradict him ([Committee to Protect Journalists 2019](#)), baseless claims that the country's independent media are laundering money ([Committee to Protect Journalists 2020](#)), and, as was revealed in January 2022, hacking with spyware the cell phones of Salvadoran journalists who have crossed him ([Gavarrete 2022](#)). However, the critical attention he has received beyond El Salvador's borders from international outlets is more difficult to control, requiring a more creative approach.

Rather than skirting the reality and prevalence of this international criticism, Bukele faces into it, seeming at first to be preparing to call out his detractors by name: "We must know clearly who are the ones who condemn us, who are the ones who criticize us. Who *are* these people?" But instead of answering the questions he poses, Bukele remains remarkably vague, characterizing his detractors in only the most general terms, as "representatives of international agencies that don't know El Salvador but suddenly we are their priority. They spend all day talking, sanctioning, condemning and operating in El Salvador, even if they didn't know where we were before." Bukele dismisses these unnamed "representatives of international organizations" firmly: "But no matter what they say, no matter what they do, no matter what they write, even if they attack again and again, here me: they will not stop us." He invokes these international actors several more times throughout the speech, referring to them in turn as "international interests," "international powers," "the international lobby," "international media" and "our friends and some who are not so friendly in the international community." No additional identifying information is offered.

Even though he does not identify them, Bukele makes the bold statement in this speech that the rise of the gangs' power "was funded with billions of dollars of international interests" and that Salvadorans have become the "pawns of international powers." Placing the blame for the bloodshed of the civil war on international parties, he charges ambiguously that it was started and finished outside the borders of the country without any more direct charges. The decision not to invoke the United States in this instance stands out since it is well-known that the United States sent \$8 billion in military aid to the Salvadoran government during the civil war ([Bonner 2018](#)); referencing the negative effects of this glut of funding for a corrupt predecessor would have been uncomplicated. The rhetorical commitment to ambiguity in Bukele's charges suggests that rather than taking a stand against a particular unwanted influence, it is more important to him to undercut the credibility of *any* "outside" government or media outlet and affirm El Salvador's sovereignty over its own doings.

Boldly, Bukele suggests twice in this speech that these undefined international actors he rhetorically fashions are rooting for the gangs' victory and actively supporting them. First, in reference to reports that contradict Bukele's version of the truth, he contends, "And even if the opposition with its pamphlets and NGOs say otherwise, even if they hope for more innocent blood to be spilled—because that is what they want, they cannot deny the truth no matter how hard they try." Minutes later, Bukele proclaims, "And that is why the opposition, those parties with their pamphlets and satellite NGOs, which are ultimately just the puppets of much more powerful puppeteers, began to block us and create a campaign against the Territorial Control Plan because they knew that we were putting an end to their business." These charges are nonspecific enough to be irrefutable despite their audacity. This "shared group consciousnesses" is not dependent on specificity or empirical evidence so long as Bukele's supporters accept and act according to it ([Bormann et al. 1994](#), p. 271). The result is that Bukele is able to rhetorically foster and share among his supporters a

reality in which Salvadorans must band together under his supreme leadership to protect their own from the active outside negative influences that want to harm them.

6. Conclusions

As authoritarian-leaning governments grow more technologically savvy and adept at using mediated public diplomacy to strategically reveal and conceal national data, both citizens and international audiences will find it difficult to maintain an accurate picture of a country's sociopolitical conditions. In contexts where governments restrict both the availability of national data and the freedom of independent journalists to analyze and interpret it, citizens may continue to support governmental actors under false pretenses and lack the information they need to make informed decisions.

Bukele's skillful deployment of mediated rhetorical strategies that advance a shared reality aids him in gathering authoritarian control of El Salvador to himself while simultaneously retaining the support of the majority of Salvadorans. A series of false and hyperbolized claims paired with a carefully designed media strategy allows Bukele to fashion in the minds of his listeners a rhetorical vision in which he is a kind of long-awaited savior figure for El Salvador and the only one capable of bringing the country the successes they deserve.

Bukele capitalizes on the violence weariness of Salvadorans as he assumes the posture of being tough on gangs. The support his State of Exception has received echoes the popularity of the earlier "Mano Dura" and "Super Mano Dura" gang violence crackdowns that ultimately resulted in retaliatory spikes in gang violence rather than lasting change. Wide ranging public support for these former and current gang crackdowns heightens hopeful citizens' tolerance for state-sponsored violence and persecution as they act against supposed perpetrators with or without evidence.

Despite global criticism about his dismantling of democracy and disregard for human rights, Bukele's cunning media strategy about his willingness and ability to combat gang violence is still being frequently used in immigration courts across the United States as evidence for sending migrants in need of protection back to the dangers from which they fled. Harnessing the power of strategic storytelling by parading arrested gang members in front of cameras for anecdotal reporting in his own newspaper (Renteria 2020), in speeches laden with unverifiable claims of the country's improving security, and via the strategic manipulation of government data for contexts of public diplomacy, Bukele expertly shapes and advances the reality that reflects most favorably on him, impacting audiences at home and abroad.

These moves have a range of effects ranging from increasing international tourism to decreasing Salvadoran citizens' awareness and fear of the country's most powerful gangs while obfuscating the fact that Bukele has repeatedly conducted clandestine negotiations with MS-13 and Barrio 18, yielding to their demands in exchange for political favors. Only through careful analysis of the ways Bukele wields the power of mediated public communication can one begin to see through the illusion of his control and gain a clearer understanding of El Salvador's current authoritarian turn.

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