

Election Watch for the Digital Age



El Salvador

Preelection assessment

Legislative elections set for February 2021

The February legislative elections have major implications for President Nayib Bukele's authority for the remainder of his term, which so far has been marked by hostility towards democratic institutions. The vote, which takes place alongside local elections, will test the viability of newer and smaller parties and coalitions. Bukele, of the Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU) party, was elected in 2019, defeating the long-dominant Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) parties. His election marked the first time a third-party candidate won the presidency since the end of the civil war in 1992.

El Salvador has a history of generally free and credible elections, and the media environment remains vibrant in the face of interference by the government and violence against journalists who report on sensitive issues, such as corruption and gang activity. In February 2020, Bukele deployed troops to the El Salvadorian parliament in a bid to coerce lawmakers to pass a funding bill that was part of his anti-crime agenda, and throughout the year his administration defied numerous court orders. Administration officials and members of law enforcement have intimidated independent journalists, prevented them from attending press conferences, and limited their access to protests and other political events. Bukele has repeatedly harassed independent media for their investigative reporting on government activities and has made unsubstantiated claims that specific reporters and outlets are under investigation for money laundering.

El Salvador has a score of 73 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a strong track record of election credibility and political participation despite corruption, challenges to media freedom, and widespread activity of criminal groups. The country is rated **Partly Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 66 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the El Salvador country report in [Freedom in the World](#).

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Influence operations:** Domestic political actors have regularly manipulated online discourse and may do so ahead of the February election. A July 2020 [report](#) from the International Crisis Group identified coordinated domestic influence operations on Twitter, in favor of and in opposition to Bukele. Earlier in the year, the government alleged that the FMLN was running an influence campaign. During his candidacy in 2018, Bukele was linked to an effort to imitate the websites of media outlets while publishing misleading information.

- **Harassment and violence for online activity:** Journalists consistently face harassment on social media for criticizing Bukele, including frequent threats of sexual violence against women journalists. Through his Twitter account, Bukele has disparaged journalists and accused them of propagating “fake news.” Escalating political discourse ahead of election day could encourage a parallel rise in harassment. Given the history of offline intimidation and violence against reporters in El Salvador, it is possible that digital harassment for online activity could escalate into physical attacks.
- **Cyberattacks:** Media outlets and civil society organizations are potential targets for cyberattacks during the electoral period. Independent outlet *Revista Factum*, whose journalists faced escalating harassment online and were banned from attending one of Bukele’s press conferences in September 2019, was targeted by a cyberattack in October 2019 that left their website inaccessible for a week. The Salvadoran Network of Women Human Rights Defenders reported attempts to hack their Twitter account in September 2020.