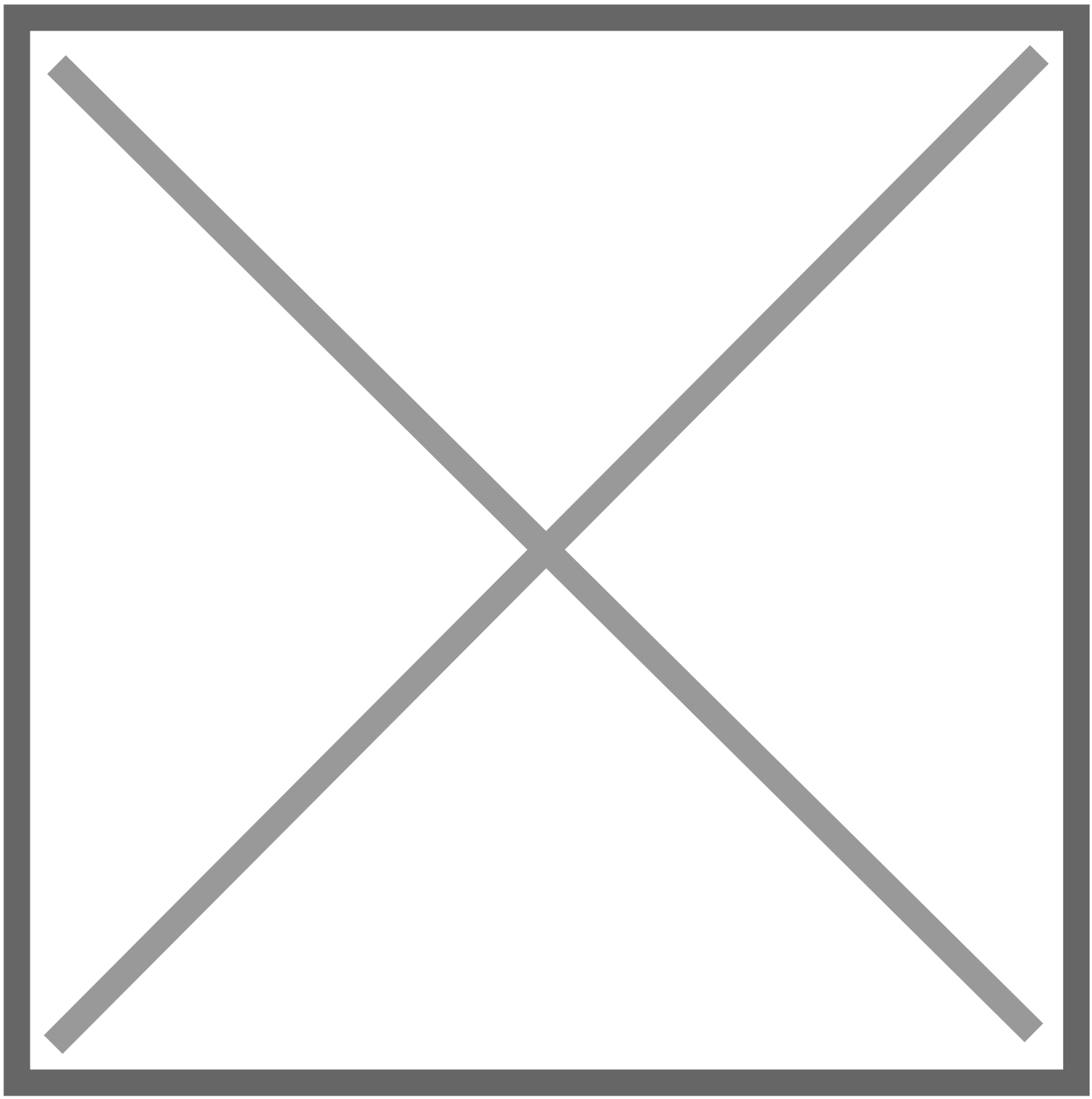
News



People wait in line to cast their ballots at a polling station during the municipal and parliamentary elections in San Salvador, El Salvador, Feb. 28, 2021. (CNS photo/Reuters/Jose Cabezas)



Rhina Guidos

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Chalatenango, El Salvador — March 4, 2021

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Preliminary reports in El Salvador confirm what the majority in the country signaled they wanted and some feared: the consolidation of power in the hands of one person.

Early projections of results of a Feb. 28 election in El Salvador show the conservative New Ideas (Nuevas Ideas) party en route to winning a majority of seats in the national legislative assembly, giving its founder, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, what amounts to absolute power, if lawmakers grant it.

Though Bukele had alleged fraud in the elections before anyone voted, his party resoundingly defeated candidates from the two main groups that have ruled El Salvador for decades. In addition to controlling the legislative branch, New Ideas also is believed to have captured 13 of El Salvador's 14 main municipalities — if not all.

Some say the vote speaks more to the popularity of the 39-year-old president than to any political agenda that New Ideas espouses.

"They voted for Nayib Bukele, not for a candidate," Roberto Aquino, the five-term mayor of Sonsonate, who lost to a New Ideas candidate, told the newspaper La Prensa Gráfica.

Aquino, a member of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), one of the country's ruling parties in past elections, told the newspaper he was a "victim of the state apparatus" run by Bukele. The president's campaign focused on social media and a barrage of state-sponsored newspaper and TV ads that told voters to cast ballots for the party with the "N for Nayib," attacking the ruling parties without really expounding on a political agenda.

Bukele's new majority, set to take their seats May 1, puts El Salvador in a "worrisome circumstance," Carmen Marroquin, a Catholic attorney from San Salvador, told Catholic News Service March 3.

"There will be no counterbalance," she said, giving Bukele the votes he needs in the legislature to approve a new attorney general and Supreme Court justices, among other top positions for the country's institutions.

Though New Ideas was formed less than three years ago, the party's numbers in the legislature also will give the president the power to change the country's constitution, approve a budget to his liking, as well as the power to suspend constitutional guarantees.

Before the 2021 elections, ARENA and the left-wing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front blocked measures and questioned proposed spending by Bukele, who once sent armed soldiers into the legislative assembly, attempting to strongarm lawmakers into approving a $109 million loan he said he needed for national security. The February 2020 event was condemned internationally and raised questions about Bukele's stability.

Jesuit Fr. José Maria Tojeira of the Central American University's human rights institute said recently the only reason a coup had not succeeded that day was because the U.S. embassy put a stop to it.

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Yet, inside El Salvador, the masses have continued to support the president.

"People felt betrayed," by the two ruling parties, said Patricia Lazo, a Catholic from Soyapango who supports Bukele and New Ideas. "We were in a tunnel without a way out, without hope; we had put our trust in both parties, but both failed in many ways."

As FMLN and ARENA members faced charges of corruption and graft, Salvadorans like Lazo felt alone facing gang violence, lack of jobs, education and the disintegration of families because of emigration. And then the "decisive and youthful figure" of Bukele appeared, Lazo said.

But what some see as decisive, others see as authoritarian.

"There's a large part of the population that obviously sympathizes and agrees and believes with what the president and his government are doing, but there are other people, too, who believe we're on track toward a dictatorship because of the way in which he has acted, how he has handled some situations. Some think we might be in some kind of danger," Marroquin said.

They include some U.S. lawmakers, who on Feb. 24 sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken voicing serious concerns about the threats to democracy under Bukele. They said that while the Biden administration's strategy toward El Salvador should offer support for regional initiatives, "it must not inadvertently bolster undemocratic or corrupt individual systems."

Democratic Sen. Ben Cardin of Maryland called out Bukele on Twitter Feb. 27, telling him to "end the promotion of vitriol."

"We know all too well what can happen when presidents incite violence & sow distrust in institutions," Cardin tweeted.

Bukele has verbally attacked members of the press, opponents, even members of the Catholic Church when they have called for transparency. But the attacks went up a notch when a caravan of FMLN sympathizers was fired at in late January, killing two and injuring several civilians. Government personnel were arrested in the attack, and one of the suspected perpetrators later died in a hospital.

"There's been a certain fear to make certain objective observations," particularly if they sound as if they could be critical of the president, said Marroquin.

When Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez called on the Bukele administration to be "open to all," to be collaborative and not confrontational, he raised the ire of New Ideas supporters, including many Catholics. The country's bishops had to issue a statement calling for an end to online attacks.

Marroquin said what the cardinal had done was no different than what Catholic leaders have done in the past. She cited St. Oscar Romero, who looked out for the rights of the downtrodden during a tense time that eventually led to the start of civil war in El Salvador.

But Lazo said she voted to give Bukele — "even with his defects and inexperience" — a chance to change the country legislatively, banking on the vision he sells in his commercials, which capture what many desperately want for El Salvador.

"He sounded like he, too, wanted something better for his country," Lazo told CNS March 3.

To others, the political sounds they hear sound more like the drums of war.

In a Feb. 28 local TV show, Chalatenango Bishop Oswaldo Escobar said that even though he was a child during the country's civil war, as an adult he had never experienced "a polarized atmosphere as we have today," one that feels much like the 1970s in El Salvador, just before the start of a war that officially lasted 12 years.

"If we listen to the message of St. Oscar Romero, it tells us to walk toward dialogue, reconciliation," he said during the show. "Let's not walk toward confrontation because that never works well for us."