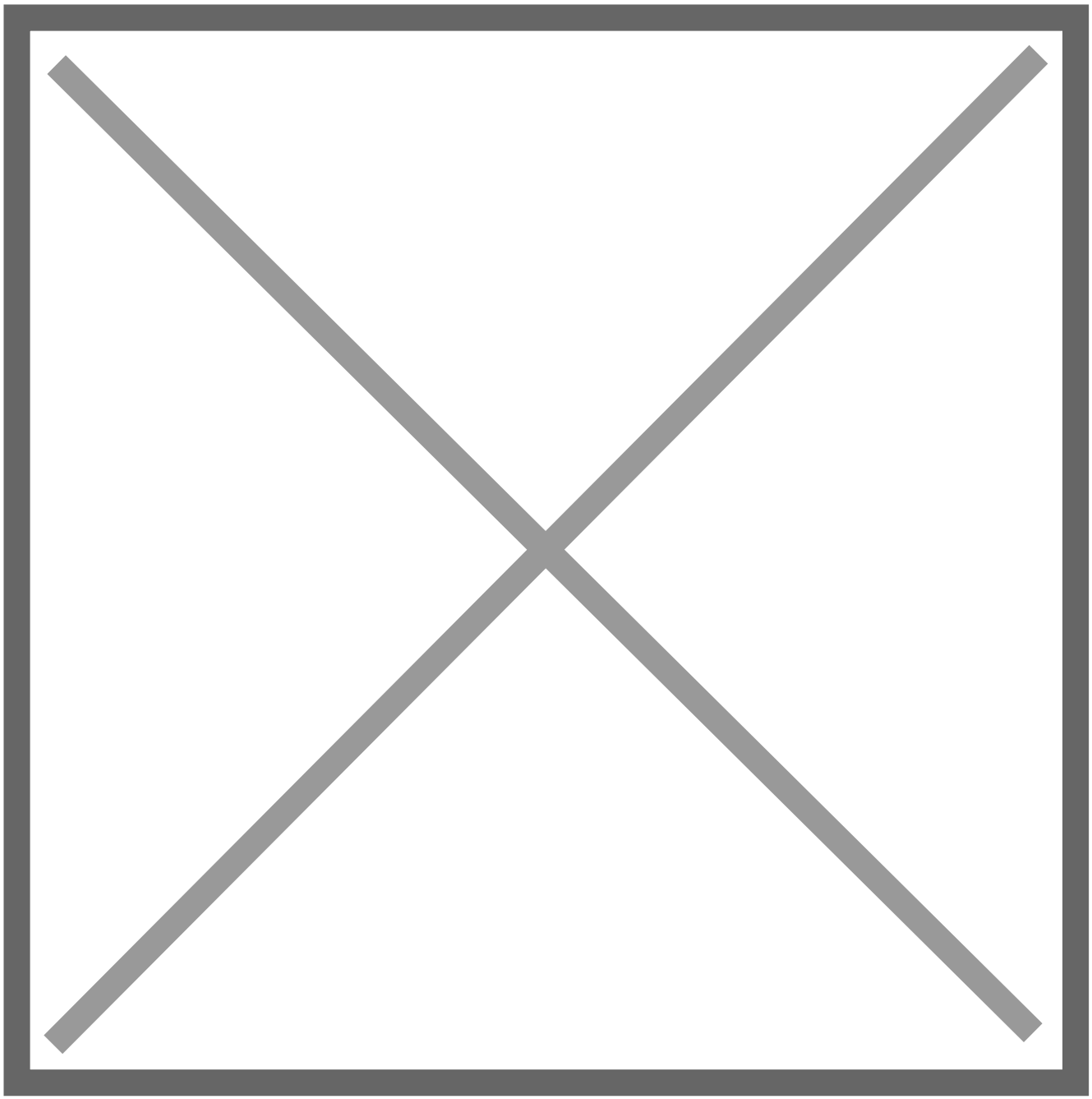
News



Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez of San Salvador, El Salvador, is pictured in Rome in an Oct. 12, 2018, photo. (CNS photo/Alessandro Bianchi, Reuters)



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Washington — September 7, 2021
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After a top court in El Salvador ruled that a president can seek a second term, even though it's against the constitution, the country's only cardinal called on the world to help preserve democracy.

"If the world accompanied us while seeking peace, it will similarly accompany us to save democracy," said Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez, speaking to reporters Sept. 5 about the developments.

The country's constitution limits a president to serve one term of five years. But on Sept. 3, the Supreme Court's Constitutional Chamber -- made up of judges recently installed by the political party founded by Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele -- threw out the provision. Bukele won the presidency in 2019.

The move had long been expected as politicians from the Nuevas Ideas party that Bukele founded tweeted hints about a reelection, but it still was widely criticized when it finally happened in early September.

Rosa Chávez said reelection was clearly banned in the constitution.

"So, what happened?" he asked. "The church shares in this worry."

September, the month when El Salvador celebrates its independence, should move the country's citizens to reflect, the cardinal said.

"If this isn't corrected, this sort of thing, or worse, can take place in the future," he said.

The cardinal, who lived through 12 years of civil war, including the 1980 killing of his archbishop, St. Oscar Romero, wasn't the only one sounding the alarm.

Jean Manes, interim chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy to El Salvador, said during a news conference that the U.S. government condemned the decision and denounced it as "clearly contrary to the Salvadoran Constitution."

"This decline in democracy damages the bilateral relationship between the United States and El Salvador, and the relationship that we've had for decades and want to maintain," Manes said.

She also voiced concern that Nuevas Ideas had been moving toward consolidation of power.

"A fundamental principle of democracy is the three branches of government, so a weakening of the independence of the judiciary is a sign of a democracy in decline in El Salvador," she said.

The actions taken showed a "clear strategy" to undermine judicial independence, she said.

U.S. Rep. Albio Sires of New Jersey, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Latin America, tweeted Sept. 4 that he was "deeply concerned" by the court's actions, which he, too, saw as premeditated. After winning the majority of seats in the legislative assembly in late February, Nuevas Ideas legislators dismissed the country's top judges May 1 and immediately appointed others more to their liking.

"The president's allies replaced the constitutional court's judges with political loyalists. This confirms why," Sires tweeted. "Salvadorans deserve to live in a democracy where the principles of separation of powers, judicial independence and the rule of law are respected."

Rosa Chávez compared the state of democracy in the struggling nation to a patient in intensive care, in its final phase before death.

He urged citizens to not respond to the situation with indifference but, instead, with a sense of "responsibility and serenity," seeking to stay away from political polarization.

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