News

Pope Francis greets Salvadoran Archbishop José Escobar Alas of San Salvador in Panama City

Pope Francis greets Salvadoran Archbishop José Escobar Alas of San Salvador in Panama City Jan. 24, 2019. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



Rhina Guidos

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — September 27, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The archbishop of San Salvador found himself under verbal fire for seeming to back reelection efforts by the Salvadoran president, even though the country's constitution limits the post to one term.

"The people have been disappointed, and now they see a light in the path ahead," which is why many overwhelmingly want the president to run again, Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas said during a Sept. 25 news conference, where his comments were taken as tacit support for President Nayib Bukele.

Bukele's administration quickly disseminated the archbishop's comments via social media, posting them the following day on the front page of a government-run newspaper with the archbishop's photo and words above the fold.

Reaction was swift.

People "want" many things, but if they go against what the constitution says, it doesn't make it legal, argued Paulita Pike, a Catholic active in the Archdiocese of San Salvador. She asked the archdiocese on Twitter if that applies to everything, including abortion, which the Salvadoran Constitution forbids.

Escobar Alas also commented on the legality of Bukele seeking a second term, saying the country's Supreme Court issued a ruling "interpreting the constitution in such a way that it (reelection) is possible."

However, in 2021, Bukele's administration fired the country's attorney general and a group of top judges that made up the Supreme Court, putting in place a group of magistrates that came up with the interpretation that favored the president seeking reelection.

The U.S. Department of State and lawmakers such as Massachusetts Rep. Jim McGovern have expressed concerns over El Salvador's fraying democracy, saying Bukele's sky-high popularity among Salvadorans does not justify the erosion of human rights. The U.S. wants to be a partner and provide economic aid to help the country, but basic human rights and democratic principles have to be adhered to, McGovern said in a Sept. 12 Congressional hearing.

"To those who counter criticism of the Salvadoran government by saying that President Bukele's actions are popular and that his approval ratings are high, we just say that popular doesn't (make it) right," McGovern said.

In a Sept. 26 Salvadoran morning show, host Julio Villagran interviewed Fr. Juan Vicente Chopin about the archbishop's remarks. The host* said the archbishop seemed to be discarding authority by highlighting "what people want" instead of what the constitution says.

Chopin said there's a popular saying in El Salvador: "One becomes a master of what one keeps to himself and a slave of what one says."

"When he (the archbishop) manifested himself in those terms, in favor of reelection, he stepped into history," he said.

Chopin said that "as pastors ... we are called to prudence."

The day following the news conference, the archbishop released a video of himself reading a "clarification," saying "I did not pronounce myself" approving or disapproving Bukele's reelection, "because it is not my responsibility to do so." He said he was stating facts: that the majority of Salvadorans want Bukele to run again and that the high court has cleared the path toward reelection.

The criticism kept coming and was compounded by comments made public from a group protesting outside San Salvador's cathedral. Protesters had asked the archbishop to denounce mass incarcerations carried out by Bukele's government.

The detentions began in late March after a spree of 62 gang-related homicides over the course of a weekend. The government announced a clampdown, declaring a 30-day period of mass arrests and suspension of personal freedoms, denying access to legal counsel, saying it was necessary to get the violence under control. Only gang members would be arrested, the government said.

The measures have been in place for six months and resulted, by the government's count, in 53,465 detentions to date.

The government refers to those detained as "captured terrorists," but admitted that perhaps "1 percent" of those arrested could be innocent. Critics say authorities are randomly arresting people to meet a quota.

Escobar Alas has called the detentions "bitter medicine," deemed necessary to stop the level of violence.

After the protests, the archbishop did not comment on the detentions. Instead, the archdiocese published a news release about an upcoming Salvadoran delegation's visit to Pope Francis Oct. 14 at the Vatican, to give thanks for the January beatifications of Jesuit Fr. Rutilio Grande and his two companions, as well as the beatification of Franciscan Fr. Cosme Spessotto.

*This story has been updated to correct the person who made this comment.

Advertisement