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PREVENTING AND CONTROLLING ORGANISED CRIME, AT WHAT COST?
EXAMINING HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACTS OF STRATEGIES FROM BELIZE,
EL SALVADOR, AND GUATEMALA

MA Thesis
 (27,628 words, excluding footnotes)
 Supervisor: Oksana Belova-Dalton, PhD

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ABSTRACT:

Following decades of failed strategies in combating organised crime, 2022 constituted a turning point for Latin America – El Salvador, under the government of President Nayib Bukele, took a hard-on-crime approach that, for the first time, appeared to successfully prevent and control organised crime. This thesis asks at what cost for human rights did these measures take place? The investigation analyses the targeted nature of organised crime prevention and control strategies in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala between 2015-2025, looking at state of emergency usage, *mano dura* attributes, and the prevalence of securitising language used during the period. Using securitisation theory as a point of departure, this *small-n* study uses the above methods to contribute to an under-researched element of securitisation, namely perpetual cycles of fear and perceived vulnerability, and their role as a catalyst for the continued popularisation of hard-on-crime measures. This thesis posits that less targeted strategies have a negative impact on the level of human rights, which is mostly proven to be the case. These conclusions are derived from an analysis combining established quantitative trends with qualitative insights that seek to explain them.

RESUMEN:

Tras décadas de estrategias fallidas para combatir el crimen organizado, 2022 marcó un punto clave para Latinoamérica. El Salvador, bajo el gobierno del Presidente Nayib Bukele, implementó políticas de mano dura que, por primera vez, parecían prevenir y controlar el crimen organizado de manera exitosa. Esta tesis busca contestar la pregunta, «¿a qué costo se llevaron a cabo estas medidas en materia de derechos humanos?» Esta investigación analiza el carácter dirigido de las estrategias de prevención y control del crimen organizado en Belice, El Salvador y Guatemala entre los años 2015 y 2025, a través de los usos de estados de emergencia, atributos de mano dura establecidos y la predominancia de discursos con lenguaje de securitización. Al usar la teoría de la securitización como punto de partida, este estudio de *n* pequeña (*small-n*) utiliza los métodos arriba mencionados para contribuir a un elemento de la teoría poco investigado, concretamente los ciclos perpetuos de miedo y vulnerabilidad percibida, que han desencadenado popularizaciones continuas de las medidas de mano dura. Esta tesis sugiere que las estrategias con menor carácter dirigido tengan un impacto negativo en materia de derechos humanos, algo que esta tesis mayoritariamente ha podido validar. Estas conclusiones derivan de un análisis que combina indicios cuantitativos establecidos junto con casos cualitativos que buscan explicar los mismos.

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Finally, to the communities affected by the themes discussed in this thesis, know that your struggles are acknowledged. I hope that this thesis can play its small part in highlighting the need for fairer and consistently applied justice policies to match the contributions being made by communities across the region.

Please note: this thesis contains source material in Spanish, which has been preserved for its linguistic authenticity. Translations to English have been carried out *bona fide* by the author.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS:

ACHR: American Convention on Human Rights

BDF: Belize Defence Force

BPD: Belize Police Department

CECOT: Terrorism Confinement Centre (El Salvador)

CEH: Commission of Historical Clarification (Guatemala)

CJNG: Jalisco New Generation Cartel

EU: European Union

FMLN: Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Salvador)

IACHR: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

IACtHR: Inter-American Court of Human Rights

ICJ: International Court of Justice

LIU: Leadership Intervention Unit (Belize)

MS-13: *Mara Salvatrucha* (gang)

NGO: Non-governmental organisation

OAS: Organization of American States

PNC: National Civil Police (El Salvador)

TOC: Transnational organised crime

UK: United Kingdom (of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

UN: United Nations

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

USA: United States of America

1: INTRODUCTION

Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala are three countries on the northern half of the Central American isthmus. These countries have faced challenges relating to organised crime for various reasons: their geographical locations between South America and the United States of America (USA) make them prone to exploitation from organised crime related to drug-trafficking; as well as social and historical factors, namely the demographic changes following mass migration towards the USA as a result of civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, and the destruction caused by strong hurricanes in Belize. Upon deportation to their respective countries of origin, the return migration of some young men saw the transfer of behaviours acquired from Californian gang contexts onto the streets of their home countries, which still had weak state institutions to effectively deal with these threats. Since the 1990s, organised crime has only grown in the region, continually transforming itself. Most state responses have been ineffective at best, and some have even been counterproductive. In recent decades, however, the government of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador has implemented extreme measures to prevent and control organised crime since 2022, with the country now regarded as one of the safest in the Americas by homicide rate. The Salvadoran approach presents a bifurcation from the established fate of state responses to organised crime in the region. Countries across Latin America – including those with much lower organised crime rates, such as Chile and Costa Rica, as well as those facing challenges on a similar scale, namely Honduras and Ecuador – have seen increased debate around the implementation of measures following the ‘Bukele Model’. Crucially, two countries of the region, Belize and Guatemala, have not sought to take similar approaches, despite facing similar organised crime dynamics. It is proposed that there is a reluctance to carry out such extreme measures in other countries due to the possible criticism that could arise as a result of the negative human rights impacts such measures tend to create. This thesis seeks to analyse the approaches of these three countries over a ten-year period, between 2015-2025. During this time, the organised crime dynamics did not significantly alter in the three countries, except for after the state of exception imposed in El Salvador since March 2022. As such, state responses to organised crime during this period can be effectively analysed to understand the extent to which these measures are targeted, and the resulting change in the level of human rights throughout the period.

The second section will form the first part of the theoretical framework which establishes the key lenses of securitisation that are useful for this study. These are beneficial insofar as they

aid in understanding the repeated or extended use of emergency measures in the three countries. Crucially, securitisation is used here not to judge *if* state responses to organised crime are securitised in the countries studied – this thesis takes as a premise that they are inherently securitised, akin to an exceptional politicisation, constructed on and propelled by perpetual cycles of fear and perceived vulnerability. These cycles do appear in securitisation literature, but infrequently. Nevertheless, they are extremely useful for determining the dynamic of state responses to organised crime in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala, as the securitising moves implemented by state officials are such that publics are implored to see existential threats in their everyday lives. When state responses to handle such threats are unsuccessful, the feelings conveyed by the securitisations do not disappear with the cessation of extraordinary measures.

Following this, the study will attempt to define the relevant terms, from organised crime, to prevention, control, and human rights. Available literature on the connection between organised crime prevention and control strategies and human rights will be examined. To close the theoretical framework, a sub-section exploring the evolution and popularisation of *mano dura* – a regional strategy used in Latin America to prevent and control organised crime – will be presented. Its utility arises from its origins in El Salvador in the early 2000s, and its frequent appearance in political discourse across the region ever since, popularised within debates on security as the best response to organised crime by the public, despite widely having a track record for being ineffective, as well as often having a negative human rights impact.

The third section will explore the historical, social, and cultural specificities of each country chosen for analysis. Understanding each country's specific context is vital for examining how organised crime dynamics unfold and how state responses can differ based on those specificities. The combination of countries studied is unique insofar as diverse populations are considered: from mixed-race Hispanics, indigenous Mayan communities, Afro-descendants, and others; and distinct governance structures, two Central American republics, El Salvador and Guatemala, will be considered alongside the constitutional monarchy of Belize, which combines Central American and Caribbean influences. Trends in homicide rate will be briefly introduced to provide an understanding of changes in organised crime dynamics in each country over the period, but these figures do not appear directly in the analysis. The limitations of these datasets will be explored in that section. Following this, an

exploration of the gaps found in the literature will be reviewed, and the significance of this research puzzle will be explained in more detail.

Hence, the research question and hypothesis for this thesis are as follows:

Research question: *How does the targeted nature of prevention and control strategies against organised crime affect the level of human rights?*

Hypothesis: *Less targeted organised crime prevention and control measures will have a negative impact on the level of human rights.*

The first empirical section will explore the targeted nature of organised crime prevention and control strategies in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala. For a measure to be considered as targeted, it is expected to follow the legal basis upon which the country's constitution and long-standing national practice dictate. Consideration of the implementation of states of emergency over the study period is central and will proceed as follows. Firstly, the legal bases for these measures in all three countries will be explored through an examination of the limits established in national constitutions and relevant laws pertaining to the use of extraordinary measures. The identification of the relevant legal limits in each country is essential for engaging with the proceeding states of emergency section, which provide details of the states of emergency used across the ten-year period, such as the locations and time periods, to determine the extent to which the measures were targeted in nature.

The subsequent sub-section provides an analysis of *mano dura* attributes, as established within the relevant literature on this phenomenon, and will be examined to understand the degree to which these measures are commonplace in responding to organised crime in each country – the more they feature, the more it is understood that the resulting measures are non-targeted. One of the features that complement this is that of the prevalence of securitising language, which will examine the extent to which such language is prevalent amongst governmental and media reports on developments relating to organised crime in the countries studied throughout the ten-year period.

The final empirical section seeks to identify the change in the level of human rights. It uses data from Freedom House to establish the trends quantitatively, complemented by scholarly reports and journalistic articles to explore human rights challenges qualitatively in all three countries from across the study period, namely examining both political and democratic safeguards, and restrictions of civil liberties and due processes.

2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1: LENSES OF SECURITISATION

Strategies used to prevent organised crime in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala can be viewed through lenses of securitisation, given the unilateral decisions that can be taken at a national level on the issue, and the range of measures, both targeted and non-targeted, at a state's disposal. Put simply, securitisation theory posits that “when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object”¹, extraordinary measures can be invoked. This work takes as a premise that organised crime in the countries studied has become a securitised issue. The degree to which securitisation occurs, and relevant impacts will be explored throughout. As such, this work does not seek to re-open the debate as to whether this is the case, as much research has already been carried out in this regard. Nevertheless, it is of benefit to the understanding of this thesis as a whole to examine the role that lenses of securitisation play in creating conditions for divergences in tackling organised crime.

Whilst the use of the state security apparatus can form part of prevention and control strategies in targeting organised crime, the phenomenon should be viewed through a wider lens of securitisation: from the political sphere, through to ramifications for the private sphere. This is a crucial duality within securitisation theory, and is equally pertinent in the studied cases. Following Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde's Copenhagen School approach to security, securitising moves make securitisation more feasible, as “presenting something as an existential threat to a referent object does not by itself create securitization—this is a *securitizing move*, but the issue is securitized only if and when the audience accepts it as such.”^{2,3} In the cases studied, the effect upon the referent object, society, is rarely questioned – the pervasive nature of organised crime deeply rooted in the private sphere creates a sentiment of it as an issue, which becomes securitised when political leaders declare it as such. Indeed, as the theory specifies, a securitisation occurs when a referent object is deemed as threatened, typically a “threat of a dramatic nature, portrayable as threatening the breakdown or ruin of some principle or some other irreparable effect whereby one can then

¹ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), p21

² Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p25

³ Italicised in the original.

legitimate extreme steps.”⁴ The extremity of such steps varies across Central America, being dependent on the degree to which organised crime, despite its pervasiveness across the region as a whole, impacts countries in particular. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras jointly form what is known as the ‘Northern Triangle’, a trio of countries sharing similar socio-economic factors, including having some of the highest rates of organised crime and insecurity in the Americas. Belize, in addition, has been positioned by scholars such as Baird as the ‘fourth corner’ of the triangle, due to the similar challenges faced in this regard, despite its regionally atypical historical and cultural background, blending a mixture of Caribbean and Central American influences.⁵ Subsequent sections will illustrate the specificities of each case and their relevance in more detail.

This thesis also does not seek to cast judgement on the effectiveness of organised crime prevention and control measures taken as a result of these issues having undergone differing degrees of securitisation. Indeed, securitisation theory is being introduced here as a springboard from which it becomes easier to determine how strategies to deal with organised crime have become normalised at all levels, by means of a socially accepted securitising move. Upon acknowledging the theory’s applicability within various sectors, for the societal and political sectors, Buzan *et al.* warn of the potential for securitisation to transform a case into becoming “politics beyond the established rules of the game”⁶, creating a socio-political environment which “frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics. Securitization can thus be seen as a more extreme version of politicization.”⁷ Additionally, as securitisation is state-led in all cases examined, the state’s political agency, combined with its ability to react to challenges, will also play an important role in the degree to which securitisation of an issue becomes “ad hoc or institutionalized.”⁸ Of particular interest for the cases of Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala is how the authors envisaged the undoing of securitisation, when the referent object ceases to be threatened, or when the threat is significantly reduced. A constant state of securitisation ultimately changes the floor from which a future issue would potentially need to be securitised, thus possibly altering the

⁴ Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p148

⁵ See Adam Baird, “The Fourth Corner of the Triangle: Gang transnationalism, fragmentation and evolution in Belize City”, in *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang Studies*, eds. David Brotherton and Rafael Gude (Routledge, 2021)

⁶ Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p23

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p27

effectiveness of subsequent actions that could be taken. Indeed, as they clarify on the use of securitisation and desecuritisation:

“although in the abstract desecuritization is the ideal, in specific situations one can choose securitization—only one should not believe this is an innocent reflection of the issue *being* a security threat; it is always a political choice to securitize”.^{9,10}

The ad hoc/institutionalised nature of extraordinary measures and the decision whether to desecuritize form the basis for the emergence of divergences seen in approaches between the three countries. Securitisation on the issue of violent crime is pervasive in all three countries, but target populations differ. In Belize and Guatemala, specific urban neighbourhoods with a strong gang presence are always informally securitised to a low level, which increases when official formal decrees are made to prevent organised crime-related issues from becoming acute. In Guatemala, some rural regions also undergo similar low-level securitisation and acute increases, but as a result of drug trafficking or regional conflict between communities in specific settlements, often fuelled by the presence of organised crime networks propelled by the former. In El Salvador, however, the whole country has undergone a nationwide securitisation since 2022, with measures taken throughout the country, despite similar regional pressures to Belize and Guatemala. Pervasive securitisation, in all its forms, creates a socio-political environment of “[n]eed and fear”¹¹, whereby “[t]he nomenclature of an enemy opens the door to demonisation and political insecurity.”¹² By combining the acceptance of securitisation as a political strategy by the securitising actors, with the immediate society as the referent object in the targeted cases, and the wider society as the referent object in the Salvadoran case, cycles of perceived insecurity and risk are only perpetuated. This perception, over time, reduces the chances of desecuritisation going forward, regardless of any progress that may have occurred during the imposition of emergency measures. These perceptions remain heightened due to the continued or repetitive states of acute threat messaging coupled with the imposition of extraordinary measures.

The resources used to tackle the threat also often contribute to reinforcing the perceived severity of the issue, thus perpetuating the aforementioned cycle, “[t]he incorporation of military forces and other military bodies in the fight against public insecurity while

⁹ Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p29

¹⁰ Italicised in the original.

¹¹ Diego Lopez, “Securitisation and its impact on human rights in Latin America”, *Global Campus Human Rights Journal* 1, no.2 (2017): p466 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.25330/1468/>>

¹² Ibid.

denaturalising their original functions contributes to building and reinforcing in the collective imagination the feeling of being in a state of war.”¹³ Despite not commonly featuring in literature on securitisation, Markiewicz argues that “the role of vulnerability in securitisation practices”¹⁴ should be recognised as an essential element in securitisation and desecuritisation theorisations and should be considered more widely amongst researchers. This underexplored element of vulnerability and perceptions of fear, leading to perpetual cycles of feeling insecure, should be considered in the cases studied, as they all demonstrate environments with a high level of vulnerabilities, which are described as: “not a fleeting emotion but a ‘core belief’ which is an integral element of one’s identification as being perpetually ‘in harm’s way’.”¹⁵ Markiewicz’s spotlight on the interconnection between the state and societal level views of vulnerability are striking. Whilst there tends to be an “intersubjectively constructed state narrative”¹⁶, the impact of that on the societal level fosters “a form of group identity, which is a ‘template’ used by the collective to interpret its standing.”¹⁷ Thus, whilst it is specifically the feeling of being threatened that is required for securitisation to take place, that same feeling also prevents full desecuritisation from taking place later on.

Much of the limited literature on desecuritisation focusses on the perception of crime as a threat associated with securitised migration, rather than solely organised crime. Nevertheless, where securitisation is taken into the realm of organised crime, in this case transnational organised crime (TOC), Badillo and Mijares take the theory further, highlighting the difficulty in desecuritisng in such instances:

“The securitisation of TOC groups implies i) the militarisation of the conflict by the state, ii) the establishment of some political barriers to eventual negotiations, and iii) the construction of a violent ‘other’ without any ideological motivation. Facing this, armed organisations react by politicising. That is, they transform their identity by assuming a discourse that attempts to avoid their being considered simply profit-seeking actors without political justification.”^{18,19}

¹³ Lopez, “Securitisation and its impact on human rights in Latin America”, p468

¹⁴ Tadek Markiewicz, “The vulnerability of securitisation: the missing link of critical security studies”, *Contemporary Politics* 30, no.2 (2024): p215 <DOI:10.1080/13569775.2023.2267371>

¹⁵ Markiewicz, “The vulnerability of securitisation”, p205

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Reynell Badillo and Víctor M Mijares, “Politicised crime: causes for the discursive politicisation of organised crime in Latin America”, *Global Crime* 22, no.4 (2021): pp314-5 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2021.2024804>>

¹⁹ The element of reactivity in the pursuit of an organised crime identity is explored further in the sub-section on *mano dura*, as well as case selection chapters.

It is precisely these steps taken in the process of securitising which present another challenge to successful desecuritisation of the securitised groups, where “the objective becomes the reduction of the public force in their areas of influence and operations, or, at least, the delegitimisation of the state’s justification for combatting them with exceptional measures.”²⁰ As such, by having provided a platform of official recognition of the security threat posed by organised criminal groups, and in the case where that threat still exists, even if it is at a much lower level than before, feelings of vulnerability and fear at the societal level persist. It is precisely that *de facto* recognition at the state level of the extraordinary influence that organised criminal groups have had on a society’s normal way of life that consolidates their presence as a recurring legitimated threat in a state’s societal vision of security.

Indeed, whilst speech acts feature as a fundamental basis for much of securitisation theory in how an issue becomes politicised, thus leading to its eventual securitisation, as Balzacq suggests, the usefulness of speech acts in some cases is limited: “language does not construct reality; at best, it shapes our perception of it. Moreover, it is not theoretically useful nor is it empirically credible to hold that what we say about a problem would *determine* its essence.”^{21,22} In addition, I suggest that, given the potential perpetual cycles of vulnerability previously discussed, desecuritising speech acts cannot assure a full desecuritisation. When a President/Prime Minister announces on the television that the threat is no longer sufficient to warrant extraordinary measures, this does not equal desecuritisation if the referent object, society, does not recognise it as such – if indigenous communities’ lands continue to be used for drug cultivation, or if a gang member continues to knock on doors every week to extort money from hard-earned wages promising to maintain ‘order’ in a neighbourhood. These are just some of the motivations behind why these perpetual cycles of fear and vulnerability persist.

The existence of pervasive organised crime in the countries studied requires an adequate state response to protect society, the referent object. As discussed, this regularly appears following securitising moves, with the potential associated risks that come with that, namely the perpetual cycle of fear and vulnerability. Of focus for this study, such measures usually take the form of prevention and control strategies.

²⁰ Badillo and Mijares, “Politicised crime”, p315

²¹ Thierry Balzacq, “The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context”, *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no.2 (2005): p181 <DOI:10.1177/1354066105052960>

²² Italicised in the original.

2.2: EXAMINING CRIME PREVENTION AND CONTROL STRATEGIES, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THEIR CONNECTIONS

To analyse the targeted nature of prevention strategies in tackling organised crime, it is firstly useful to dissect scholarly definitions of relevant terms. Notably, direct scholarly definitions are rare across criminology and political science, due to the array of crime types and strategies to prevent crime in various socio-political contexts globally. However, a refined definition from Ceccato and Abraham provides for a holistically appropriate understanding of prevention in line with the focus of this study: “[p]revention may also include measures to improve the safety perceptions of those who may feel unsafe due to particular situational conditions in both rural and urban areas.”²³

Crime prevention alone, however, does not fully capture the methods used by states in the region in the fight against organised crime. As such, both crime prevention and crime control should be examined in parallel. Similarly to crime prevention, strictly defining crime control faces challenges relating to its varied use across different contexts. Despite these difficulties, the following conceptualisation from Churchill offers a useful insight into the complexities of seeking simple definitions in such a multi-layered field:

“Conceptualizing crime control as a field of governance means regarding it as a semiautonomous social space, composed of relations between multiple agents consciously engaged in the governance of crime. These agents assume *positions* within the field based on their differential capacity to govern.”^{24,25}

In the context of crime prevention and control in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala, these agents are varied, but almost exclusively apply to the response of states. They can consist of the head of state, ministers, the military, the police, the judicial system, and other state-controlled figures necessary to maintain order. Following Churchill’s link of crime control with consciously engaged governance, it is possible to understand how these relations are typically top-down in nature.

²³ Vania Ceccato and Jonatan Abraham, *Crime and Safety in the Rural: Lessons from research* (Springer, 2022), p93

²⁴ David Churchill, “History, periodization and the character of contemporary crime control”, *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 19, no.4 (2018): p484 <DOI:10.1177/1748895818811905>

²⁵ Italicised in the original.

According to Pastore, defining “‘organised crime’ has been at the centre stage of sociological, criminological and legal debate for several decades.”²⁶ He acknowledges that precise definitions for such broad terms are difficult to arrive at in practice, but that their elaboration would be particularly helpful for each specialty, and that any field-specific descriptions should highlight the relevant focus that aligns with their needs. Nevertheless, in attempting to create a definition suitable for this study, Pastore suggests that two factors are required: an understanding of crime, followed by ‘organised’, used as a modifier. At its most basic level, a crime “is an intentional act or omission in violation of criminal law, committed without defence or justification, and sanctioned by the State.”²⁷ To further enhance that understanding, as a structure, organised criminal groups are defined as being “a continuing criminal enterprise with a persistent criminal programme and a strong and stable organisational structure.”²⁸ Notably, Pastore states that “[t]he ability to use violence, whether directly or in the form of a credible threat, is a generalised ingredient of organised crime groups.”²⁹ This is significant as it features the tactics commonly used by organised criminal groups in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Indeed, specific forms of organised crime are more prevalent in some regions than in others. Sergi defines these as “location-specific manifestations”³⁰, for example, “when we speak about organised crime in Latin America, we often see the word ‘cartel’ used to identify a criminal group that is engaged in drug trade and violence, two characteristic elements of organised crime in South and Central America.”³¹ Another nomenclature that can be applied in this context is ‘gangs’, which are prevalent in Central America as important drivers of organised crime in the region. Whilst gang activity is not solely associated with this region, gangs are known locally as ‘*maras*’, which further contributes to the localisation of the term.

Human rights should apply to all, regardless of socio-political context or geography. Exact definitions are rare in literature, as such fundamental rights are essentially contested concepts, highlighting their unique nature from an analytical standpoint. Nevertheless, their importance as a “substantive topic in modern political science”³² cannot be overstated, given that they

²⁶ Baldassare Pastore, “Definitions: Some Methodological Remarks”, in *Redefining Organised Crime: A Challenge for the European Union?*, eds. Stefania Carnevale et al. (Hart Publishing, 2017), p17

²⁷ Pastore, “Definitions”, p18

²⁸ Pastore, “Definitions”, p21

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Anna Sergi, “Organised crime and power in the modern world”, in *A Research Agenda for Organised Crime*, ed. Barry Rider (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), p60

³¹ Ibid.

³² Todd Landman, “The Political Science of Human Rights”, *British Journal of Political Science* 35, no.3 (2005): p549 <DOI:10.1017/S0007123405000293>

represent “an important nexus between traditional concerns within comparative politics and those in international relations.”³³ The UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights forms a fundamental springboard from which states can work on enhancing human rights further, considering all articles listed as a primordial basis upon which states should enable the protection of these rights for all. Nevertheless, Articles 5, 9, 10, and 11 are particularly relevant to this study, as they cover torture and degrading treatment, arbitrary detention, the right to an independent judiciary, and the presumed innocence unless otherwise proven guilty under compatible laws.³⁴ Furthermore, finding exact indicators for measuring the level of human rights is also a challenge, as Green states, “[t]he field of human rights indicators is not a coherent one, and there remain a number of areas in which there is no theoretical consensus.”³⁵ This is significant, as this study will contribute to the identification of attributive factors that indicate changes in the level of human rights in the cases set out forthwith, which will be further explored in subsequent chapters.

Scholarly literature exploring the impact of organised crime prevention and control measures on human rights is scarce, but thematic variations exist. Much has been written on the link between anti-terrorism measures and human rights, and variations thereof.³⁶ Nevertheless, remaining faithful to the aspect of crime is not impossible, despite it having been researched less frequently. In exploring the link between public security measures taken against drug cartels in Mexico and their human rights implications, Landman articulates the connection cohesively in a way which readers of this study should consider throughout, “[f]ighting crime and upholding human rights is not only possible but compatible.”³⁷ Landman goes on to explore Mexico’s path to democratisation, and its related impact on the proliferation and consolidation of drug-related organised crime, explaining that, “[w]ith the democratization of state institutions and society, informal relations between the cartels and the state have broken down, leading to a period of transition, which has seen a dramatic increase in uncertainty and

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted 10th December 1948, arts. 5, 9, 10 and 11 <<https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>>

³⁵ Maria Green, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Indicators: Current Approaches to Human Rights Measurement”, *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no.4 (2001): p1096 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2001.0054>>

³⁶ For examples, see Rebecca Cordell, “Security-Civil Liberties Trade-offs: International Cooperation in Extraordinary Rendition”, *International Interactions* 45, no.2 (2019): pp369-400 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2019.1522307>>; Jessica Wolfendale, “Terrorism, Security, and the Threat of Counterterrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no.7 (2006): pp753-70 <DOI:10.1080/10576100600791231>

³⁷ Todd Landman, “Framing the Fight: Public Security and Human Rights in Mexico”, in *Mexico’s Struggle for Public Security: Organized Crime and State Responses*, eds. George Philip and Susana Berruecos (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p112

violence”³⁸. This new approach in a state’s response to organised crime highlights how a weak enforcement of the rule of law, even if not intentionally, can allow organised crime to permeate in a country alongside the official state structures. The challenges that arise when enforcement actions are attempted can unsettle the pre-existing balance of power, leading to an increased risk of further violence. These elements should also be reflected upon in the cases of El Salvador and Guatemala, during their post-civil war transitions to democratic structures. Landman also explores the importance of effective horizontal and vertical accountability structures in ensuring that firm human rights commitments prevail at all levels, even when tested by a state’s response to organised crime.

As such, a country’s non-democratic status can support organised crime structures, as seen in the case of Mexico. However, if the non-democratic state so wishes and conditions allow, it can also crack down more easily on organised crime, on the supposition that governmental and criminal structures do not share linkages:

“From an abstract perspective, it is easier for nondemocratic states to fight organized crime since they are less accountable to their citizens and can introduce a range of measures that curb any rights protections that may have existed or that citizens may have been able to exercise in the absence of formal legal protection.”³⁹

In examining links between combatting organised crime and respecting human rights, particular elements from the previous section on securitisation also gain relevance here within the broader literature on this relationship. The use of extraordinary measures or a particularly strong state response can be such that “an increased *climate of criminality* in which failure to respect the rule of law on either side of the fight creates its own downward spiral and increase in expected (or real) criminal danger.”^{40,41} The consequences of such a climate have a paradoxical effect on those who seek to uphold human rights, as Krause analyses regarding post-conflict Guatemala, “efforts to protect the rights of criminal suspects have had the unintended consequence of galvanizing a certain part of the population in opposition to the defense of human rights.”⁴² This sentiment is now shared across Latin America, far beyond Guatemala, having wider ramifications for security and human rights in national and regional

³⁸ Landman, “Framing the Fight”, p102

³⁹ Landman, “Framing the Fight”, p108

⁴⁰ Landman, “Framing the Fight”, p107

⁴¹ Italicised in the original.

⁴² Krystin Krause, “Authoritarianism, Social Dominance, and Contesting Human Rights in Latin America”, *Latin American Research Review* 55, no.2 (2020): p263 <<https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.113>>

polities. Comprehensively examining public perceptions relating to security and human rights is beyond the scope of this paper, but nonetheless will be an important consideration throughout, as the nexus provides for an understanding of why civic resistance to human rights violations tends to be low in the region. With a population particularly ‘apathetic’ to any development – resulting from these perpetual cycles of perceived vulnerability – effective human rights protections are crucial, with well-functioning horizontal and vertical accountability mechanisms needed to guarantee those protections.

In a *large-n* study examining the connections between crime control measures, individual liberties, and civil rights, covering 40 countries, Albanese makes use of the following indices: civil liberties ranking, democracy index, human development index, information and communication technologies index, political rights index, corruption perceptions index, education index, index of economic freedom, press freedom index, and prosperity index. In justifying why these indices were chosen, Albanese admits that “[t]here is some overlap among these indexes, but they each measure multiple variables in unique combinations, so they are measuring somewhat different aspects of social, political, and economic life.”⁴³ The overlap of data that occurs despite using a range of indicators demonstrates a dilemma for researchers in choosing the best methods to measure a study of such magnitude. Curiously, despite Central America consistently ranking as the highest scoring region in the world for criminality according to the Global Organized Crime Index,⁴⁴ Albanese only examines one country from the region, Costa Rica, whilst exploring many countries in Western Europe. Whilst not immune to criminality, Costa Rica’s crime level ranked significantly lower when compared to its Central American neighbours to the north, particularly at the time of Albanese’s publication. The exclusion of other countries in the region, and a wider preference for more developed countries is a limitation that Albanese directly addresses: “the best data exist in developed countries, as many developing countries do not have the infrastructure or resources for reliable data collection.”⁴⁵ For a study such as a *large-n* on such an intricate link, relying on 10 comprehensive dataset measurements ultimately limits the scope of the findings to developed countries. Ignoring developing countries risks missing out on valuable

⁴³ Jay Albanese, “Crime Control Measures, Individual Liberties, and Crime Rates: An Assessment of 40 Countries”, *International Criminal Justice Review* 27, no.1 (2017): p10 <DOI:10.1177/1057567716680401>

⁴⁴ “Central America”, Global Organized Crime Index, published 2025, <<https://ocindex.net/region/central-america>> [accessed 6th February 2026]

⁴⁵ Albanese, “Crime Control Measure, Individual Liberties, and Crime Rates”, p15

conclusions from some of the world's most noteworthy criminality hotspots, which could ultimately alter the findings of such a study.

Therefore, whilst this study is useful in examining the link between crime and individual liberties in these mostly developed countries, further studies are still required to ascertain whether the same applicability can be transposed to other contexts. Ultimately, I identify that a refined approach would require a lower reliance on the use of complete datasets, acknowledging the aforementioned limitations, instead relying on a mixture of data from a smaller number of targeted indices and empirical evidence from which to arrive at results that have a broader utility, independent of a country's level of development. Indeed, local and regional factors can also play a significant role in crime patterns and state responses, suggesting that future research should first consider "variations within nations in the effort to locate important influences and variables to be measured before moving to multinational-level studies of available data, which often mask these local variations and the reasons for them."⁴⁶ This study aims to contribute to deepening understandings of these links for Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala, in a way that a *large-n* study would not be able to accurately capture, particularly with regard to regional dynamics.

2.3: EVOLUTION AND POPULARISATION OF *MANO DURA*

A dynamic that is highly characteristic of the studied region is that of *mano dura*. Maintaining the Spanish language terminology here is important given the geographical prominence of the term, but for ease of comprehension, it can be widely understood as state-led hard-on-crime measures, akin to 'iron fist' or 'firm hand' in English. Cutrona *et al.* denote *mano dura* as an "essentially contested concept"⁴⁷ as their study on the conceptualisation of the phenomenon concluded that despite "increasing empirical interest, [...] there seems to be limited conceptual clarity about the wide spectrum of strategies developed to combat crime and associated fear."⁴⁸ Their comprehensive study attempting to conceptualise *mano dura* arrives at many salient points, which will be explored and utilised in subsequent chapters. Nevertheless, despite the status of *mano dura* as an essentially contested concept making direct conceptualisations impossible, there are attributes that are typical. Such attributes can include, but are by no means limited to, "mass arrests without due process, unrestrained uses

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sebastian Cutrona *et al.*, "Conceptualizing *Mano Dura* in Latin America", *Latin American Politics and Security* 67, no.2 (2025): p21 <DOI:10.1017/lap.2024.32>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

of force in high-crime areas, militarization of law enforcement and criminal justice, and presidents' assertion of special executive powers to make war on crime."⁴⁹ Due to its emergence as a crime prevention and control strategy deployed against gangs in El Salvador since the 2000s, *mano dura* has traditionally been associated with strategies to tackle gang-related crime. Its use, however, can go far beyond that, since some governments in Latin America have employed such tactics in the so-called 'war on drugs', as Cutrona *et al.* note in their analysis.⁵⁰ For the cases of Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala, where various forms of organised crime operate in parallel, this is important. It demonstrates that there is a need to move beyond narrow interpretations. Indeed, this highlights how *mano dura* measures can be versatile in nature, flexible in targeting more than one type of criminal actor.

As alluded to previously, *mano dura* was first devised as a term by Francisco Flores, former President of El Salvador in 2003, as a crime prevention and control strategy. The move appears to have been more of a political tactic, however – Flores' ARENA party had suffered a defeat at legislative and municipal elections some months prior, understood to be a “castigo, por parte de la ciudadanía, ante la mala gestión de las crisis humanitarias en el contexto de los dos terremotos de 2001”⁵¹ [punishment, by the electorate, based on the poor management of the humanitarian crises that occurred following two earthquakes in 2001], alongside corruption scandals and financial shocks resulting from the economic toll of those earthquakes and the adaptation to dollarisation that year. In the years prior to the implementation of Flores' *mano dura* policy, registered homicides were in fact decreasing, following high numbers in the post-civil war period. The approach consisted of detaining thousands of males typically at risk from social exclusion, propelled by visual elements, such as particular clothing or tattoos. This attempt to reduce the presence of gangs on the streets can be viewed as the key mechanism used by ARENA to garner support from a wider electoral base before the upcoming presidential elections. The strategy worked for the party, with them consolidating their power, and more than doubling their vote count. Flores was unable to return to power at that time due to the country's one term presidential limit. His successor, Antonio Saca, later adopted self-titled *súper mano dura* as a further strengthening of his predecessor's policy, incorporating support from the military in combatting the gangs.

⁴⁹ Javier Corrales and Will Freeman, “How Organized Crime Threatens Latin America”, *Journal of Democracy* 35, no.4 (2024): p155 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2024.a937740>>

⁵⁰ See Cutrona *et al.*, “Conceptualizing *Mano Dura* in Latin America”, p7

⁵¹ Mario José Sánchez González, “De las políticas de mano dura a la política del estado de excepción en El Salvador” [From *Mano Dura* Policies to State of Exception Politics in El Salvador], *Estudios Centroamericanos* 79, no.776 (2024): pp16-7 <<https://doi.org/10.51378/eca.v79i776.8198>>

Intriguingly, in the Salvadoran context, “el fenómeno de las maras no constituía un problema social de envergadura nacional en la percepción de la ciudadanía”⁵² [the *maras* phenomenon was not perceived by citizens as a nationally important social problem] until after the creation and implementation of *mano dura* strategies by the Flores government in 2003. It is worth mentioning, however, that most *mano dura* attempts, regardless of their stylisation, have had the opposite effect. The incarceration of thousands of young males, many of whom, but not all, were gang members, created the perfect environment for their operational structure to thrive – with the consolidation of “la identidad del grupo, ha incrementado el sentido de lealtad y fortalecido los liderazgos al interior de las pandillas”⁵³ [the clique’s identity, which has only worked to increase the feelings of loyalty and strengthen the gangs’ internal leadership structures]. By 2006, with homicides having more than doubled since 2002, Saca had discreetly ceased the *súper mano dura* measures, so as to avoid public criticism, all while gangs consolidated their power.⁵⁴

Mano dura’s legacy, nevertheless, lived on. Its limitations, meanwhile, remained the same, even when transposed onto other national contexts in neighbouring Guatemala and Honduras, and later towards Mexico and South America in response to various organised crime types. Criminal groups, in response, have two essential avenues to survival in the midst of state crackdowns, “to “fight fire with fire”: physically protecting themselves from state repression and persuading the state to reverse [...] its repressive policies.”⁵⁵ As the initial Salvadoran case demonstrated, such measures rarely have the desired outcome as the gangs seek to defend themselves, either on the streets, or by conniving in prisons. Such scenarios highlight the weakness of the state apparatus, particularly where corruption is widespread, thus increasing the risk of criminal insurgency.

The need to feel secure, as previously examined regarding perpetual cycles of fear and vulnerability, however, does not disappear, but instead becomes vindicated following securitisation of the issues that led to the crackdowns in the first place. As such, *mano dura*

⁵² Sánchez González, “De las políticas de mano dura a la política del estado de excepción en El Salvador”, p16

⁵³ Jeannette Aguilar Villamariona, “Los efectos contraproducentes de los Planes Mano Dura” [The Counterproductive Effects of *Mano Dura* Plans], *Quórum* 16, no.1 (2006): p86 <<http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=52001608>> [accessed 14th February 2026]

⁵⁴ See Saúl Hernández Alfaro, “El fracaso de la mano dura: más muertes y violencia” [The failure of *mano dura*: more deaths and violence], *Focos* (San Salvador), 25th March 2019 <<https://focostv.com/el-fracaso-de-la-mano-dura-mas-muertes-y-violencia-2/>> [accessed 12th March 2026]

⁵⁵ Benjamin Lessing, *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), quoted in Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez and Alberto Vergara, “The Bukele Model: Will It Spread?”, *Journal of Democracy* 35, no.3 (2024): p85 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2024.a930429>>

measures maintain a high level of popularity throughout Latin America with diverse sectors of the population. Wanting electoral success, given the popularity of *mano dura* in many countries, “[e]ven though crackdowns and other repressive policies are costly and ineffective, embracing them is [...] often good politics, at least in the short run.”⁵⁶ As such, the persisting need for security in the face of justified threats, regardless of the measures’ effectiveness in practice, explains why the implementation of *mano dura* strategies has become normalised in public political debate across the region as a viable solution. This occurs, at least in part, because citizens are unable to imagine alternative solutions, given the lack of trust in state institutions to form effective long-term strategies. Sánchez González captures these connections well, explaining how:

“la confluencia de la crisis de seguridad, el contexto de debilidad institucional y el desencanto ciudadano en el sistema político incentiva en la ciudadanía el apoyo de medidas autoritarias y extralegales como medios expeditos y eficaces para garantizar la seguridad en contextos con altos índices de violencia.”⁵⁷ [the convergence of the security crisis, institutional weakness, and public disenchantment with the political system incentivises citizens to support extra-legal and authoritarian measures, seen as quick and sure ways to guarantee security in high violence national contexts.]

Mano dura is a key concept to explore for this study, as it has been shown to appeal towards authoritarian governance, paradoxically supported by many voters. By justifying the need for extreme measures in order to effectively securitise an issue leads to a perpetual cycle of fear and vulnerability. In turn, that increases the citizens’ desires for improved safety perception, which in countries where trust in state institutions is low, oftentimes means that the most extreme measures can become popular, regardless of their human rights impact. Where states resist such calls from the electorate, we should ask why this occurs – are these governments conscious of the impact that these measures would have on human rights, and by extension, their image on the international stage?

The success of extreme crackdown measures in El Salvador since March 2022, under the presidency of Nayib Bukele, can be seen as the notable exception to the pattern of repeated failed attempts at implementing *mano dura* strategies in Latin America to target organised crime. The country’s reduction in homicide rate has seen a new wave of popularisation for

⁵⁶ Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, “The Bukele Model”, p87

⁵⁷ Sánchez González, “De las políticas de mano dura a la política del estado de excepción en El Salvador”, p24

such measures elsewhere. Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara explore how a unique set of factors contributed to the achievements made in El Salvador, termed ‘The Bukele Model’. These factors are not easily replicable elsewhere, having only been so effective in the Salvadoran case given a specific timeline of events that occurred prior to March 2022. These trends will be further explored in the corresponding section on El Salvador.

3: METHODOLOGY

3.1: CASE SELECTION AND BACKGROUND

This section seeks to offer an insight into the countries chosen for analysis, exploring their recent history, notably the elements that are significant in understanding the formation of organised crime. As far as necessary, a brief explanation of organised crime patterns and evolving societal trends will be explored to further justify why these countries are particularly valuable cases for analysing the human rights impact of prevention and control measures against organised crime. Furthermore, to provide a contemporary understanding of the tangible impact of a country’s response to organised crime from an international standpoint, the foreign travel advisories from four countries will briefly be provided, as of early 2026, finalising the current state of affairs in regards to security at the close of the study period.⁵⁸ I consider these advisories to be useful tools when examining these countries specifically as they all have the potential to be successful touristic hotspots and financially benefit from the tourism sector. Nevertheless, warnings against travelling to specific countries or areas within a country will ultimately reduce tourism flows, having a negative impact on the economy.

3.1.1: BELIZE

Belize, formerly known as British Honduras, gained independence from the United Kingdom (UK) in 1981. It is the least populated country in Central America, with a population estimated to be just over 400,000 people. It is the only Central American country to not have Spanish as an official language, and blends Central American and Caribbean influences through the use of English, Belizean Creole, Spanish, and indigenous Mayan languages, attributable to its multi-ethnic population. Belize is a constitutional monarchy with a

⁵⁸ These are USA, Canada (chosen as the countries of the Americas with the most influential tourist presence in the region that release comprehensive travel advisories), as well as the UK and Spain (as the former colonial powers, the countries are still strongly connected by language and culture, also release comprehensive travel advisories).

parliamentary democracy comprising of a House of Representatives and a Senate, with the House of Representatives being elected under a first-past-the-post system. Belize is a Commonwealth realm, with the UK's King Charles III as the head of state.

Guatemala has maintained a territorial claim over more than half of the current Belizean territory administered from Belmopan based on historical claims made by Spain during its colonial occupation of modern-day Guatemala. Both Belize and Guatemala have conducted referenda with their respective populations to refer the territorial dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for its peaceful determination, where it has remained under consideration since 2019, still awaiting a final judgement. In a region characterised by high levels of organised crime, this border dispute is significant as the existence of a porous border creates fertile ground for illicit trades in arms and drugs, as well as facilitating human trafficking.

Belize is often overlooked by researchers investigating organised crime in Central America as its manifestations are slightly atypical for the region. However, for the purposes of this study, the inclusion of Belize emphasises that the link between prevention and control strategies to tackle organised crime and their resulting human rights impacts can be applied to a country with a fundamentally different political system, common organised crime patterns, and also unique local gang cultures. Differing sociopolitical contexts highlight the transversality of this study's methodology. Bar the *mano dura* element, which is regionally specific to Latin America, the inclusion of Belize demonstrates how other geographical contexts could be examined using a similar methodology.

A combination of factors has led to high levels of organised crime in Belize. Its inland geography is predominantly rural. Located between Guatemala and Mexico on the northeastern edge of the Central American isthmus, with many small cayes and a long coastline on the Caribbean Sea, Belize "serves as a major transit point for South American cocaine bound for Mexico and the US, with traffickers utilizing clandestine airstrips and maritime routes."⁵⁹ Compounded by the border dispute with Guatemala, "[f]oreign criminal groups, particularly Mexican cartels, play a dominant role in transnational organized crime activities."⁶⁰ The Global Organized Crime Index highlights that the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel, which is also present in Guatemala, has operations in Belize. Furthermore, the Belizean

⁵⁹ "Belize", Global Organized Crime Index, published 2025 <<https://ocindex.net/country/belize>> [accessed 17th February 2026]

⁶⁰ Ibid.

authorities, in the form of the Ministry of National Security and the Police Gang Suppression Unit have expressed “rising concerns about the presence of Central American gangs (MS-13 and Barrio 18) in Belize”⁶¹. Transnational organised crime has grown alongside local organised crime, often operating in parallel, mostly without challenge given the differing types of operations they carry out. Whilst local gangs mostly “engage in drug trafficking, extortion and territorial disputes”⁶², it is estimated that 900-1400 gang members on the ground also operate as “subordinates to Mexican cartels.”⁶³

Much of the local organised crime in Belize can be attributed to the prevalence of street gangs in Belize City, which was previously the capital of British Honduras until 1970 when the governing administration transferred power to Belmopan, a newly-created city established as the capital to avoid the vulnerabilities from hurricanes that had afflicted low-lying Belize City in the years prior. Despite this, Belize City continues to be the most populous city in the country, with an approximate population of 65,000, compared to Belmopan’s 20,000 inhabitants. Divided in half north-to-south by the Haulover Creek inlet which leads to the Caribbean Sea, the city’s southern half, known as Southside, can be regarded as the epicentre of gang activity in the country. Following Hurricane Hattie in 1961, which prompted the transfer of the capital administration to Belmopan, Belize City was a city in ruins, where “[a]lready fragile livelihoods and poorly built housing south of the creek were easily destroyed. Sudden homelessness and destitution led to an exodus northward to the USA”⁶⁴. It was precisely this forced migration pattern towards the USA that then contributed to the growth in gang activity in Belize decades later. This pattern is similar for the emergence of gang violence in El Salvador and Guatemala, with different origins due to gang affiliation in Los Angeles divided along linguistic lines. Belizean gang members in the USA predominantly became involved with gang activity in African-American English-speaking communities in Los Angeles, unlike their Hispanic neighbours to the south.

Upon returning to Belize decades later, mostly as a result of deportation, they exported the gang violence, feuds, and methods learned in the Californian context onto the streets of Belize City, mostly concentrated in their native Southside. The resemblance does not end

⁶¹ Jennifer Peirce, *Gap Analysis Report: Citizen Security in Belize*, IDB-DP-513 (Inter-American Development Bank, 2017), p21 <<https://doi.org/10.18235/0000695>>

⁶² “Belize” (Global Organized Crime Index)

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Adam Baird, “From vulnerability to violence: Gangs and “homicide booms” in Trinidad and Belize”, *Urban Crime* 1, no.2 (2020): p83 <<https://doi.org/10.26250/heal.panteion.uc.v1i2.246>>

there, for the gangs are homonymous with their US counterparts: *Bloods* and *Crips* are the two largest rival gangs vying for power. For many in Southside, being born into a specific family can determine which gang one will grow up to belong to or, at least, be associated with, as “multiple generations of families are involved in gangs and the drug trade”⁶⁵. Family ties are the lifeblood for the gangs’ survival, for example: “when one leader is killed, the teen sons or brothers are expected to take on the vacant role in the gang”⁶⁶, with reports of “gangs recruiting increasingly younger children, as young as 8 years old.”⁶⁷

This endemic security issue creates a dilemma for Belize’s international image. The country thrives off tourism, possessing a pristine coastline and extensive coral reefs. However, many countries alert their citizens to the prevalence of violent crime in the country, reducing its touristic appeal. *Mano dura*-type crackdowns have been implemented in Belize, but military policing has widely been replaced with specialist gang prevention forces. Belize’s prison system has undergone transformation, pivoting from an emphasis on punishment to rehabilitation, as Insight Crime revealed, “[i]nmates now have access to addiction treatment services and can voluntarily partake in educational classes to work towards earning a primary school certificate – something many lack.”⁶⁸ This approach highlights a governmental understanding of the specificities of their local context, such as the continuous generational cycle of gang recruitment contributing to a reduction in educational attainment.

As of March 2026, Belize is negatively impacted by foreign travel advisories due to criminality.⁶⁹ The UK does not provide additional advice for Belize. The USA, Canada, and Spain urge increased caution countrywide, with the USA suggesting that travellers reconsider travelling to Belize City. Canada recommends avoiding non-essential travel to Belize City’s Southside, whilst Spain suggests avoiding all travel to Southside, as well as the Belize-

⁶⁵ Peirce, *Gap Analysis Report*, p16

⁶⁶ Peirce, *Gap Analysis Report*, p21

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Parker Asmann, “Belize Prison Offers Softer Touch than Latin American Counterparts”, Insight Crime, published 15th April 2019 <<https://insightcrime.org/news/belize-alternative-latam-mano-dura-prison/>> [accessed 17th February 2026]

⁶⁹ “Travel Advisories”, US Department of State <<https://travel.state.gov/en/international-travel/travel-advisories.html>>; “Travel advice and advisories by destination”, Government of Canada <<https://travel.gc.ca/travelling/advisories>>; “Foreign travel advice”, UK Government <<https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>>; “Recomendaciones de viaje” [Travel recommendations], Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación <<https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/ServiciosAlCiudadano/Paginas/Recomendaciones-de-viaje.aspx>> [all accessed 5th March 2026]

Guatemala adjacency zone, and the Melchor de Mencos-Benque Viejo del Carmen border crossing with Guatemala.

3.1.2: EL SALVADOR

El Salvador is Central America's smallest country, but is considered densely populated for the region, with a population of approximately 6.3 million people, despite being smaller than Belize. It borders Guatemala to the west, Honduras to the north, with the Pacific coastline to the south. The country emerged from a 12 year-long civil war between the Salvadoran government, heavily supported by the USA, and the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (known by its Spanish acronym FMLN), in 1992 with the signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords. The FMLN, fighting against social and economic inequalities at the hands of the entrenched oligarchal Salvadoran government structure of the era, were widely supported by Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union, exacerbating the proxy-like nature of the Cold War-era conflict. Large numbers of Salvadorans migrated towards the USA during the civil war period. As in Belize, some Salvadoran young men found themselves involved in Los Angeles gang culture, with some even going as far as to form their own cliques, to rival established and ever-growing structures in the city's Hispanic gang cultures, with predominantly Mexican origins. As Wajsman explains regarding the formation of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), "llegaron a alinearse a la Mafia Mexicana de prisioneros y se convirtieron en "Sureños", adoptando el número 13 en su iconografía (por la letra "M", la 13ava. letra del alfabeto)."⁷⁰ [they aligned themselves with the Mexican mafia of prisoners, becoming known as 'Southerners', incorporating the number 13 (as 'M' is the 13th letter of the alphabet).] These growing rivalries came at a crucial time: drug flows towards the USA had begun to shift in their routes, from maritime flows using the Caribbean islands – which were increasingly risky given heightened law enforcement action – to overland routes through Central America and Mexico. Combined with the ongoing civil wars in multiple countries in the region during this period, the shift in increase in revenue from these re-routings was significant for the continuation of hostilities, whilst also increasing the income and viability of gangs in the USA, as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) notes how "civil wars exposed the region to deep penetration by drug trafficking

⁷⁰ Gustavo Wajsman, "Las Maras Salvatrucha en Centroamérica: un fenómeno dinámico transnacional" [The Salvatrucha Gangs in Central America: a transnational dynamic phenomenon], *Boletín del Departamento de Seguridad Internacional y Defensa* 52, no.1 (2023): p15 <<https://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/handle/10915/149751>> [accessed 25th February 2026]

organisations, as drugs were a source of revenue for the conflict.”⁷¹ Upon cessation of active conflict after 1992, many young Salvadoran men returned to El Salvador, primarily following deportation. This trend, as in Belize, saw the exportation of gang violence with it, in this case through the consolidation of MS-13 and Barrio 18 operational structures exported to El Salvador.

Post-conflict peace agreements were formulated in such a way that the state security institutions were almost abolished given their role in perpetrating violence during the civil war. The Salvadoran state’s ability to respond to the growing threat posed by the consolidation of gang structures in the country that started following the return of those deported from the US, was diminished and lacked any strong capacity, as a result of the agreements’ provisions. López Fuentes *et al.* describe how the National Civil Police (PNC), the post-conflict policing force envisaged in the peace accords, was conceived from the abolishment of all previous policing, security, and intelligence structures, effectively having to rebuild from the ground up: “se destruyó toda la experiencia en manejo territorial que tenía el Estado salvadoreño, ya que se valoró más los aspectos políticos que los aspectos técnicos.”⁷² [all territorial operational capabilities that the Salvadoran state had at its disposal were destroyed, with preference given to putting political aspects over technical ones.] As such, in a country where gang violence had recently surged and embedded itself throughout the country after the end of the conflict and the return migration patterns in the years that followed, the state found itself in a position whereby it could not effectively manage the threat. El Salvador was also hampered by the trauma it had suffered: so, the population tended to view violence with a recent post-conflict mentality. This is a unique stance that communities unaffected by conflict are unlikely to have. Indeed, it is in this way that one can perceive how extreme levels of violence during conflict can foster the normalisation of such behaviour in a post-conflict setting, the threshold from which violence is permitted by the citizenry is somewhat higher due to the trauma suffered during the conflict, and the desire to not return to open hostilities once again. Certainly, the effect of the normalisation of violence in a post-conflict setting can be viewed as the traumatised population tacitly accepting brutality “as a legitimate way of settling disputes, particularly where the conflict resolution

⁷¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Crime and Development in Central America*, B.07.IV.5 (UNODC, 2007), p12

⁷² Daniel López Fuentes *et al.*, “Las Pandillas: Su Expansión Territorial en El Salvador 1992-2015” [The Gangs: Their Territorial Expansion in El Salvador 1992-2015], *Colegio de Altos Estudios Estratégicos*, no.1 (2017): p22 <<https://caee.edu.sv/?wpdmp=las-pandillas-si-expansion-territorial-en-el-salvador-1992-2015&wpdmdl=1663&refresh=699f18c8938831772034248>> [accessed 25th February 2026]

mechanisms of the state are viewed as incompetent, corrupt, or biased.”⁷³ Over time, the two main gangs have become firmly established in the country, resisting various *mano dura* attempts at thwarting them. One of the ways that they have achieved this has been their ability to effectively control their respective territories with limited external challenge. By existing alongside, and even supporting, transnational drug cartels to operate in their specific territorial domains without open dispute, it thus solidifies their presence and control, contributing to the multi-layered nature of organised crime in the country, which has traditionally been difficult to prevent and contain.

The decades-long persistence of high levels of violence and successive failed state-led attempts to contain them, combined with living memory of conflict perpetrated by the state, have created fertile ground for the popularisation of hard-on-crime measures. Nowhere else in Latin America have these measures had such ‘success’ in contemporaneity as in El Salvador, under the presidency of Nayib Bukele. Specific conditions had led to the success of this approach, however. Bukele had inherited a falling homicide rate year-on-year upon assuming the presidency in 2019, far lower than the heights of 2015, which saw El Salvador as the world’s deadliest country that year, based on homicide rates in relation to population. Despite talking tough-on-crime in public, behind closed doors, Bukele’s team were carrying out negotiations with various factions of MS-13 and Barrio 18 on improving prison conditions in exchange for a reduction in the number of gang-feud homicide incidents.⁷⁴ Investigations have highlighted how further reforms to ease state pressure on gangs and improve penitentiary conditions were promised dependent upon the outcome of the 2021 elections to the Legislative Assembly, highlighting that the President’s team were also seeking to garner support from the gangs’ large voter base, given their extensive influence across much of the country. Bukele’s *Nuevas Ideas* (New Ideas) party went on to win an outright majority. With an ever-favourable relationship between the gangs and the state, and a reduction in violent incidents between rival gangs – coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic – the organisational structures of the gangs were not as well-established as in the highly deadly years prior. Indeed, temporary state crackdowns after rises in homicide rates in April 2020 and November 2021 had established expected patterns of state behaviour, whereby the gangs

⁷³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Crime and Development in Central America*, p14

⁷⁴ See Carlos Martínez *et al.*, “Bukele Has Been Negotiating with MS-13 for a Reduction in Homicides and Electoral Support”, *El Faro* (San Salvador), 6th September 2020
 <https://elfaro.net/en/202009/el_salvador/24785/Bukele-Has-Been-Negotiating-with-MS-13-for-a-Reduction-in-Homicides-and-Electoral-Support.htm/> [accessed 28th February 2026]

understood that “the state would not resort to violence unless they did so first, and that, as long as they did not fight back, any repression would be short-lived.”⁷⁵ In March 2022, after a similar spike in homicide incidents, deep fragmentation in the organisational structures of the gangs was exposed following a swift crackdown with mass incarceration of suspected gang members and a declaration of a nationwide state of exception in response. Such a combination of factors, including negotiations, the COVID-19 pandemic, and misplaced trust perception, contributed to the continued falling homicide rate in El Salvador, with the country at present claiming to have one of the lowest homicide rates in the Americas.

As of March 2026, El Salvador is slightly negatively impacted by foreign travel advisories due to criminality.⁷⁶ The UK, USA, and Spain do not provide additional advice for El Salvador. Canada urges increased caution countrywide. It is noteworthy that, at the time of writing, El Salvador is the only Latin American country for which the USA advises travellers to exercise normal precautions countrywide, a significant step for what was previously one of the world’s deadliest countries.

3.1.3: GUATEMALA

The case of Guatemala is valuable for this study as it combines many elements seen individually in the cases of Belize and El Salvador, notably the exportation of violence from Californian gang dynamics onto a post-conflict society, and the similar shifts towards drug trafficking routes through Central America, with Guatemala’s geographical position playing a crucial role. With Pacific coastline to the south, bordering Mexico to the north and west, Honduras and El Salvador to the east, and Belize to the northeast along the disputed border, known as the ‘adjacency line’, Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America, with a population of approximately 18.5 million people. The country is ethnically diverse, comprised approximately of 55% Ladinos, a term formally used to identify those of Hispanic or mixed Hispanic descent; 40% from the more than 20 indigenous Mayan communities; with the remaining population being indigenous Xinca and Afro-descendants, including the Garifuna Afro-indigenous population. After 36 years of civil war, ending in 1996 with the signing of the *Acuerdo para una paz firme y duradera* [Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace], the country emerged with entrenched injustices and an institutional legacy of persecution against the Mayan populations, later confirmed by the post-conflict UN-mandated

⁷⁵ Meléndez-Sánchez and Vergara, “The Bukele Model”, p91

⁷⁶ “Travel Advisories”; “Travel advice and advisories by destination”; “Foreign travel advice”; “Recomendaciones de viaje”.

Commission of Historical Clarification (known by its Spanish acronym CEH) as amounting to genocide against the Mayans, at the hands of the Guatemalan state.

The end of the civil war brought the deportation of many of those who had emigrated to the USA, following similar patterns as in El Salvador. By then, the established presence of MS-13 and Barrio 18 in neighbouring El Salvador since 1992, alongside readily available access to arms from both the Guatemalan and Salvadoran Civil Wars, meant that these gang dynamics, increasingly transnational in nature, soon took a stronghold in Guatemala. Unlike in El Salvador, where MS-13 and Barrio 18 widely operate throughout the country, these gangs' presence in Guatemala is largely urban in nature, predominantly in and around Guatemala City, Escuintla and Quetzaltenango. Urban spaces are contested between gangs, whilst organised crime is multi-layered in rural areas. The existence of transnational criminal networks and the country's geography position Guatemala as a producer of heroin and cocaine, but primarily as a transit hub for cocaine originating from South America, trafficked by Mexican cartels who vie for dominance of shipment routes. Environmental exploitation for natural resources and illicit profits from such resources fuel criminal enterprises, and despite the complex nature of transnational operations in rural areas, indigenous communities living there attempt to reclaim their territories as the state presence is typically weaker outside urban areas. Even within urban areas, the presence of state authorities is typically limited or non-existent in areas controlled by MS-13 and Barrio 18. Local issues are often compounded by transnational organised crime. In Ixchiguán and Tajumulco, rural areas near the border with Mexico, instead of growing coffee, "sus pobladores prefieren cultivar y producir amapola, de la cual su principal derivado ilícito es la heroína y que llega al mercado estadounidense por medio de los grupos narcotraficantes de México"⁷⁷ [locals prefer to cultivate and produce poppy, the main illicit derivative of which is heroin, which arrives in the US market from Mexican drug trafficking groups]. Conflicts often arise in this region for control of the land. The state's official line, when recognising the escalation of conflict, has typically been that it is based on historical disagreements regarding the demarcation of territorial boundaries, often without recognising the increasing tensions regarding drug cultivation in the region. The reluctance to intervene and the inability to accept the changing realities on the ground in official discourse leads Girón Mendizábal to determine that the

⁷⁷ Jorge Francisco Girón Mendizábal, "La insurgencia criminal, un reto a la inseguridad de la nación para Guatemala" [The Criminal Insurgency, a challenge to national security for Guatemala] (Master's thesis, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 2023), p92 <<https://doi.org/10.36958/sep.v6i2.180>>

Guatemalan state has effectively allowed the conditions for criminal insurgencies to take hold in the country, propelled by corruption in policing and a weak judicial system. Since winning the presidency in 2023 and taking office a year later, President Bernardo Arévalo has sought to put an end to long-standing politics of corruption at the hands of the pro-establishment elites, despite direct opposition from the existing judiciary, headed by Attorney-General Consuelo Porras, a figure who has been sanctioned by the European Union (EU), UK, and USA over continued corruption, and having orchestrated to block Arévalo's candidacy and subsequent presidency by promoting various allegations of incorrect paperwork, ballot count irregularities, and multiple attempted suspensions of the *Semilla* party on various fabricated pretences. As previously occurred in El Salvador prior to the Bukele presidency, Guatemala continues to maintain a one term presidential mandate, with outgoing establishment President Alejandro Giammattei also being sanctioned by the UK, Canada, and USA.

A particularly noteworthy development occurred within the first year of the Arévalo presidency in December 2024, when the government sought an advisory opinion from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) on whether democracy, rather than just being a form of political governance, actually constitutes a human right under the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR).⁷⁸ In addition, it seeks to interpret whether democracy applies as a right to individuals or to populations or groups, or both, amongst other technical clarifications. In the light of a contentious domestic political situation between the judiciary and the presidency, as well as continued ethnic divisions, this advisory opinion appears to be a crucial path towards establishing a democratic precedent with the potential to have far-reaching consequences for all Organization of American States (OAS) members. The case was accepted for consideration, with civil society organisations and NGOs providing their input before a final judgement is made.

A conflict driven by wealth inequalities and ethnic divisions has perpetuated the perception of mistrust and societal suspicion. In such an environment, the previously explored perpetual cycles of fear and vulnerability persist due to the threat from organised crime in the form of gangs, transnational drug cartels, and environmental criminal networks. Such perceptions of vulnerability have not only assisted securitisations by the state, but have also allowed smaller private security initiatives to thrive. In Guatemala City, many *colonias*, small to medium-

⁷⁸ See Julio Roberto Saavedra Pinetta, *Request for an Advisory Opinion "Democracy and Political Rights"* (Procuraduría General de la Nación, 2024) <https://corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/soc_1_2025_eng.pdf> [accessed 12th March 2026]

scale neighbourhoods, tend to have private security enterprises protecting the residents' properties at all times, by means of gate infrastructure and security guards allowing access to residents and invited parties only. Peeters, examining the impact of these security measures on the perception of wealth, communities, and space in Guatemala City discovered that "[w]hile residents may be united by a shared fear of the external world, the persistence of 'otherness' within the gates themselves ensures that fear continues to fragment rather than unify."⁷⁹ Peeters' study also demonstrates how it is not unheard of for gang members to infiltrate these private security structures to later create the perfect conditions to exploit known security weaknesses and to target the assets of residents under their 'protection', or even for gang members to impersonate police in order to gain access, thus worsening the element of constant suspicion and fear of the 'other'. At the same time, in areas where no one gang or criminal network dominates, the presence of which can often create a sense of security in itself, vigilantism often becomes "the last resort of people without the resources to protect themselves"⁸⁰. The significance of this cannot be over-stated: where the state apparatus is essentially unable to maintain control over areas which are hardly disputed, or not at all disputed, the fragmentation of the security landscape presents increasingly complex challenges to effectively address. Once again, in the Guatemalan context, this trend is symptomatic of the centuries-long mistrust between ethnic communities, and increasingly between those of differing social strata, even when co-existing in the same urban spaces.

As of March 2026, Guatemala is significantly negatively impacted by foreign travel advisories due to criminality.⁸¹ The UK does not provide additional advice for most of Guatemala, however it does advise against all but essential travel to within five kilometres of and along the section of the border with Mexico between Gracias a Dios in Huehuetenango Department southwards to the Pacific coastline; as well as to the towns of Santa Ana Huista, San Antonio Huista, and La Democracia, also in Huehuetenango Department. Canada and Spain urge increased caution countrywide. In addition, Canada suggests avoiding non-essential travel to Guatemala City zones 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 18, and 21; as well as San Pedro Ayampuc and Villa Canales in Guatemala Department; San José, Siquinalá, and Tiquisate in Escuintla Department; alongside multiple land border crossings: four with Mexico, three with

⁷⁹ Timo Peeters, "Divided we stand: gated communities, fear and violence in Guatemala City", *Third World Quarterly* 47, no.4 (2026): p685 <DOI:10.1080/01436597.2025.2572791>

⁸⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Crime and Development in Central America*, p20

⁸¹ "Travel Advisories"; "Travel advice and advisories by destination"; "Foreign travel advice"; "Recomendaciones de viaje"

El Salvador, three with Honduras, and one with Belize. Spain, for its part, advises against all travel to zones 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, and 18 of Guatemala City, as well as nearby Mixco and Villa Nueva, both in Guatemala Department. The USA advises travellers to reconsider travelling to Guatemala countrywide, with the highest ‘do not travel’ warnings applicable to Zone 18 of Guatemala City, Villa Nueva, and all of San Marcos and Huehuetenango Departments (excluding their eponymous capitals).

3.1.4: TRENDS IN HOMICIDE RATE

When considering the human rights impact of prevention and control strategies targeting organised crime, particularly in the Central American context, it is useful to explore the trends relating to homicide rate. Their utility emerges as much of the crime in the region is violent in nature, and as such, the targeted nature of prevention and control strategies often adapts to changing realities on the ground. Additionally, they aid in understanding the evolving security landscapes over much of the ten-year period examined. Nevertheless, trends in homicide rate are unable to act as definitive indicators for comparing the link between the variables. For instance, in the case of El Salvador in 2022, the notorious state of exception was started at a time when, in general, the homicide rate was decreasing year-on-year, but rose significantly on one particular day. As such, trends in homicide rate should be considered an antecedent variable insofar as they frequently have an impact, but that they are not exclusively present or directly responsible for all observed trends, especially as not all organised crime is violent in nature.

Data is available for all three countries.⁸²

For Belize, figures are provided between 2015-2022, all years inclusive. The trend shows an overall slight decrease, with the highest homicide rate occurring in 2017 at 38.1 per 100,000. 2020 was the year with the lowest figure, at 26.1. Such a reduction in 2020 could be attributed to increased police patrols and curfews put in place. Such a police presence in Southside was increased on the premise of enforcing COVID-19 lockdowns. The rate since increased in 2021 to 31.6 and then decreased in 2022 to 28.1.

For El Salvador, figures are provided between 2015-2022, all years inclusive. The trend shows a sharp decrease in homicide rate, falling from the highs of 107.6 per 100,000 in 2015 to its lowest recorded point during the period at 7.9. It is also important to mention that in

⁸² “Country profile”, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, published 2025
 <<https://data.unodc.org/datareport/countryprofile>> [accessed 7th March 2026]

2018, a year prior to the beginning of the first Bukele presidency, the homicide rate had halved to 53.8 per 100,000, a continuing decline from 2015, which continued under his presidency.

For Guatemala, figures are provided between 2017-2023, all years inclusive. The trend shows a substantial decline until 2020, followed by a slight rise. The highest rate was reported in 2017 at 32.8, and the lowest rate in 2020 at 18.2. Rates since then have increased to 20.3 in 2021, 22.1 in 2022, and 23.4 in 2023. These figures highlight that societal restrictions during the acute phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 reduced the homicide levels in both Belize and Guatemala considerably. Both countries, however, witnessed slight increases in homicide rate in 2021, suggesting that the gangs and criminal networks behind them were only partially immobilised temporarily, as their structures remained intact even as the public health crisis dissipated.

The UNODC provides the most comprehensive, standardised, and unbiased reporting of homicide rates, as is possible on a global scale. Separately, given the difficulty of documenting data on the drug trade, the UNODC is only able to provide statistics on drug seizures. Even so, such information could also be useful were it more comprehensive. As such, such data will not be considered. In attempting to analyse data from these indicators, I found their utility to be limited for this study as they only present the drugs seized by authorities, and often miss key drug markets entirely, such as heroin in the case of Guatemala.

Returning to homicide rates, accessing precise data on them can be challenging for multiple reasons. For homicide rate, some countries are unable or unwilling to report their statistics to the UNODC every year, either due to limited state resources for data collection and systematisation, or a lack of political will to do so. Furthermore, even when data is accumulated and made available, it is not always easy to create direct comparisons. In the case of countries with a relatively small population, such as in the case of Belize, far fewer homicides can cause a greater impact on the country's trend than in a country with a higher population. Similarly, one area of a country may face particular challenges with high homicide rates, whilst other areas of the country may have a much lower rate – once again, this is an issue which is highly applicable to the Belizean case. Still, understanding the year-on-year trend can be helpful in any case, even if only a few locations are mostly contributing to the change in numbers, as it can aid in examining the resulting securitisations that take place in the country – whether they take place locally or nationally, over what period of time, and any particular change following crackdown measures over or after that period.

The UNODC methodologies are publicly available, and work to reduce bias by sending identical data requests to UN member states, called crime trend surveys. They provide “standardised definitions of each crime type and [ask] respondents to fit their crime figures into the appropriate categories.”⁸³ They highlight how this is an essential element, as countries’ own methodologies are often different, and that this can occur even within the same country. For instance, when attempting to understand how homicide rates in El Salvador were measured at a national level, they found up to four distinct methodologies used: “one published by the police, one by the national forensic science institute, and one published by the national prosecution authority”⁸⁴, with Salvadoran national reporting to the Pan-American Health Organisation also differing to any of the aforementioned rates provided, therefore “suggesting a fourth rate.”⁸⁵

In addition, since the implementation of the state of exception in El Salvador in 2022, the country has not reported further homicide rates to subsequent UNODC crime trend surveys, although President Bukele regularly uses social media to share news of rapidly decreasing homicide rates. Since much data relating to the results of the state of exception has since been officially classified, this leaves researchers questioning the reliability of the state’s narrative, given how “recorded homicides have dropped, [but] the number of reported disappearances has increased.”⁸⁶ Such divergences resulting from a lack of transparency further confounds the puzzle regarding the successes of Bukele’s state of exception, making the human rights focus of this study even more valuable.

3.2: RESEARCH DESIGN: A COMPARATIVE *SMALL-N* STUDY

This study intends to identify if non-targeted prevention and control measures against organised crime have a negative impact on the level of human rights – and crucially, whether the avoidance of taking such measures arises due to states’ concerns that limiting such freedoms is too high of a price to pay for countries that seek to find a balance between security threats and the human rights impact of measures targeting them. This is the foundation of the research puzzle. As has been discussed in previous sections, other scholarly works have explored the link between anti-terrorism measures and civil freedoms, and the link between public security measures and human rights. Crime prevention and control

⁸³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Crime and Development in Central America*, p52

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Sonja Wolf, “El Salvador’s State of Exception: A Piece in Nayib Bukele’s Political Project”, *LASA Forum* 54, no.4 (2024): p36 <<https://forum.lasaweb.org/files/vol54-issue4/dossier-5.pdf>> [accessed 6th March 2026]

strategies have been examined regarding their impact on individual liberties, as was the case in Albanese's 2017 study, in which mostly developed countries were chosen across a *large-n*, and thus lacked a wider transposability onto other contexts, as well as lacking specific cultural specificities. Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala are key countries for the exploration of such themes as they have undergone differing levels of securitisation to similar societal problems relating to waves of organised crime arising from similar migration patterns, namely the entrenchment of gang violence in countries at the crossroads of drug trafficking. As such, these three countries are studied by means of a comparative *small-n* study. Belize is atypical for the region, which is valuable in itself for the transposability of this study onto other regions affected by organised crime. In addition, El Salvador and Guatemala both have unique post-conflict views on security concerns, as gang violence became prominent after the end of long periods of civil wars. Guatemala, notably, also has regions whereby drug production is present. Organised crime in all three countries chosen for analysis possesses both local and transnational elements but lacks transnational co-operation on shared organised crime issues – which remains low, or even non-existent.

This study will examine developments across a ten-year period from 2015-2025. This timeframe is notable as contemporary organised crime patterns were mostly established prior to 2015 and have not undergone significant evolutions in their nature over that time, but responses to tackle them have. Belize has seen the continuation of entrenched gang violence in Belize City's Southside, with illicit trades in arms, drugs, and human trafficking over the porous border with Guatemala. El Salvador has seen the reduction in homicides throughout the period, from the world's most deadliest country by homicide rate in 2015 to being one of the lowest in the region by 2025, resulting from a mixture of a natural decline from the 2015 peak, reclassification of disappearances alongside untransparent reporting of the figures, as well as organised crime prevention and control measures, especially after March 2022. Guatemala has widely continued to use predominantly isolated states of emergency to tackle its various organised crime types, which have gradually declined over the period, but levels still remain relatively high.

Following Nayib Bukele's post-2022 *mano dura* strategies against organised crime in the country, the term has surged in popularity across the region, being actively discussed in political debates once again. This thesis has revealed the chain of events that led up to the crackdown, including their unique nature in weakening the gang's internal structures beforehand. Notably, what remains unclear is whether this strategy was intentionally devised

as such, or whether it was a result of fortunate happenstance. Nevertheless, the impact that the so-called ‘Bukele model’ has had on countries in Latin America where organised crime issues have widely been securitised over many decades is profound. Countries as diverse as Costa Rica, Chile, and Ecuador have seen the popularisation of discourse to that regard. What is noteworthy, however, is that such strong discourse is not commonly reproduced by politicians in Belize and Guatemala, despite facing much higher levels of organised crime than in Costa Rica and Chile. This study proposes that it is because these countries seek to prioritise human rights through carrying out targeted measures.

With these observations in mind, the central research question remains as follows:

Research question: *How does the targeted nature of prevention and control strategies against organised crime affect the level of human rights?*

Hypothesis: *Less targeted organised crime prevention and control measures will have a negative impact on the level of human rights.*

This thesis is inductive in nature as it seeks to propose a new way of studying the link between organised crime and human rights. It employs a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis. For issues of such a complex and multi-layered nature, this approach is essential in ensuring that all elements are adequately explored, without relying solely on neither qualitative nor quantitative methods. The quantitative nature of the study is primarily focussed on data analysis relating to occurrences and durations of states of emergency, and creating scales across which examined indicators in the three countries can be measured and presented in a way which is comprehensible, and easily replicable for future studies. In addition, a mixed methods approach is appropriate for a study of this nature and length. Nevertheless, it is worth qualifying that a purely qualitative study based on ethnographic research from interviews with those living in impacted communities, and governmental officials and/or security experts would be valuable, and should be conducted in the framework of further research.

3.3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section seeks to identify and present the choices that have been made in aligning the relevant indicators to answer the research question whilst acknowledging the theoretical expectation that has been given, as well as any limitations in data collection and analysis that may arise.

The indicators that will be used are as follows:

Table 1: Indicators

<u>Targeted nature of organised crime prevention and control strategies</u>		<u>Level of human rights</u>
States of emergency	<i>(Antecedent: Homicide rate)</i>	Political and democratic safeguards
<i>Mano dura</i> attributes		Restrictions of civil liberties and due processes
Prevalence of securitising language		

Firstly, it is necessary to qualify what is meant by ‘targeted’ in the context of this study. For a measure to be considered as targeted, it is expected to follow the legal basis upon which the country’s constitution and long-standing national practice dictate. For states of emergency, these widely relate to the time period and geographical area covered by such measures, with the specific legalities being explored further in the respective analytical sections.

Furthermore, for the measures in place either within the context of states of emergency or outside of such periods, they are expected to be proportionate, and possess as few *mano dura* attributes as possible, and a low prevalence of securitising language.

By considering ‘states of emergency’ in analysing the targeted nature of prevention and control strategies against organised crime, it is recognised that these measures are a useful indicator for examining to what extent these measures are being used as intended, ie: extraordinary measures designed to handle a specific issue or set of issues, rather than them becoming perpetually entrenched into the country’s political system. In order to achieve this, ‘states of emergency’ will be operationalised as two distinct aspects with three possible outcome levels within that, namely:

- Adherence within legal limits, measured as: full, moderate, low
- Scope and duration of measure(s) taken, measured as: limited, significant, excessive

In order to achieve this, a thorough review of all states of emergency between 2015-2025 will be considered after presenting the legal basis upon which these measures should adhere to. This data will be presented to include information on the justification for the measures, the type of state of emergency invoked, its duration (including whether it was renewed, and if so, how many times), and the locations affected. They will be accessed by means of a comprehensive search over the period for states of emergency in governmental reporting, foreign travel advisories, and journalistic coverage from key news outlets in each country.

The operationalisation of '*mano dura* attributes' will also be categorised and measured through the demonstration of prominent characteristics associated with this Latin American phenomenon, based on scholarly conceptualisations compiled by Cutrona *et al.* in their 2025 study – namely: harsh penalties, military policing, limits on due process, punitive discourse, extra-legal policing, mass incarceration, and police violence. At that point, a categorisation will be formulated by means of a calculation of elements present in each country, then divided by three, categorised as: limited, considerable, and extensive. This divided categorisation can aid understanding regarding the extent to which these attributes have become systemic – and by extension targeted – vis-à-vis the management of organised crime prevention and control strategies in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala. This will be viewed based on literature reviewed from the use of states of emergency, as well as the corresponding country case selection sections. This approach seeks to go beyond examining the states of emergency compilation to better understand the national dynamics of organised crime prevention and control strategies, and the degree to which extraordinary measures under the *mano dura* umbrella may have become normalised in the countries studied, with excessive demonstrations of such actions expected to negatively impact human rights.

'Prevalence of securitising language' will be examined through the analysis of media and governmental reports released at the start of or renewal of states of emergency or in the announcement of measures targeting organised crime, using a mixed-methods approach to coding and categorised as: low, medium, and high – depending on the strength of the nouns, verbs, or modifiers used and their frequency across multiple reports. Mildly securitising language will receive one point, moderately securitising language will receive a multiplier of 2 points, and highly securitising language will receive a multiplier of 3 points. These will then be calculated based on their prevalence per 1000 words in each report, then added together, divided by 3 for the mean average. Averages below 333 will signify low prevalence, 334-666 moderate prevalence, with those above 667 signifying a high prevalence of

securitising language. Media and governmental reports are understood to be inherently securitised when discussing issues relating to organised crime, so this approach only seeks to examine to what degree the securitisations occur in a targeted way. The inclusion of language as an indicator here is useful insofar as it highlights the strength for securitising measures from the state being targeted onto a specific actor or set of actors, or the extent to which the referent object is explicitly referred to as being threatened, thus requiring and strengthening the securitisation. Nevertheless, this approach still seeks to adhere to the inductive nature of this study by not suggesting precise terms to be identified by incidence and strength, rather than positing any deeper discourse analysis.

Analysing the level of human rights has as its challenging foundation the lack of a clear definition for the term, given its all-encompassing utility globally post-1945. Therefore, it is necessary to view general trends over the course of the period studied firstly, followed by specific instances that demonstrate the trends examined.

‘Political and democratic safeguards’ and ‘restrictions of civil liberties and due processes’ will be examined in a similar way. Their utility arises from the way in which the data is collected. In order to provide as broad of an understanding as possible, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data will form the basis of these operationalisations. Firstly, each country’s reports from Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World* index will be reviewed for the entire ten year period.⁸⁷ This is valuable in and of itself as the methodologies developed by this globally recognised human rights index are available alongside the publication of each report, and their indexes follow a rigorous process before each publication.

Acknowledgement should be given to the fact that such a comprehensive analysis can only be carried out on such a large scale, with a team of independent researchers across policy and geographical areas and specialisms. The trends from these will be presented for all countries over the period, alongside an exploration of accompanying scholarly works released on certain events and journalistic articles published around the time of noteworthy trends taking place. As such, it is possible to gain a holistic understanding of the level of human rights in the countries studied, based on how the *Freedom in the World* index findings match up with evolving situations on the ground at the time based on trends relating to organised crime

⁸⁷ See Freedom House, “Belize”, 2026, Freedom House <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/belize>>; Freedom House, “El Salvador”, 2026, Freedom House <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador>>; Freedom House, “Guatemala”, 2026, Freedom House <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/guatemala>>; Freedom House, “Publication Archives”, 2023, Freedom House <<https://freedomhouse.org/reports/publication-archives>> [accessed 21st April 2026]

prevention and control strategies within the period.

Both indicators will be measured using the same criteria: positive or negligible change, slight negative change, or significant negative change. These three levels will indicate whether any progress has been made in respect to human rights over the period, and in case of no progress, the degree to which the situation has worsened.

4: TARGETED NATURE OF ORGANISED CRIME PREVENTION AND CONTROL STRATEGIES

4.1: STATES OF EMERGENCY

States of emergency are used in all three countries as crime prevention and control measures, and their usefulness has already been explored in previous sections. This section will analyse their specific usage during the ten year period between 2015-2025 in order to determine the extent to which these measures are targeted or not, with this having also previously been identified and qualified. As such, before analysing the specific instances across the three countries in the period, it is necessary to understand the specificities regarding the usage of states of emergency in each country. On the whole, they share the same commonality: extraordinary measures which are used to prevent and/or control an extraordinary situation. This situation can be varied, including natural disasters, public health emergencies, war, civil unrest, and organised crime.

All three countries researched for this study have constitutions which explicitly state the provisions according to which extraordinary measures in the form of states of emergency are permissible. Furthermore, some countries have one sole state of emergency which can be adjusted as necessary in order to adapt to the threat, whereas others have diverse categories of states of emergency which allow for specific degrees of state reach depending on the severity of the threat. This distinction is crucial as where these categories exist, it is often easier for a proportionate response to be taken, but can also complicate the public understanding of the degree to which limits are curtailed according to each classification.

4.1.1: LEGAL BASIS IN BELIZE

Article 18 of the Belizean constitution allows for the invocation of a “period of public emergency”⁸⁸. For the purposes of organised crime prevention and control, the Governor-General would have to declare the state of public emergency based on an action that:

“has been taken or is immediately threatened by any person or body of persons of such a nature and on so extensive a scale as to be likely to endanger the public safety or to deprive the community, or any substantial proportion of the community, of supplies or services essential to life.”⁸⁹

Article 18 sub-section 4 qualifies that a particular geographical area can be covered by state of emergency measures. An element that is particularly noteworthy is that this is the only reference to geographical limitations within the scope of the provision, ie: no provision explicitly states that such measures can apply nationwide, but it is implicitly accepted that this can occur, particularly as the period of public emergency provision is also the relevant legislation that can be enacted in case of war. State of emergency measures in Belize that are applicable for the purposes of this study can be in force for a period of up to one month. After that period, these measures will cease to apply automatically. The chosen wording for a renewal of these measures is temporally ambiguous, however, stating the measures “may be extended from time to time”⁹⁰, without any explicit reference as to how often or under which circumstances such reinvocations are to be determined. This ambiguity ultimately results in Belize displaying significantly untargeted legal limits for the implementation and maintenance of measures intended to be extraordinary. The National Assembly needs to vote in favour of the measures - if approved, these measures will remain in force for an additional 12-month period. This is a substantial amount of time for such measures to remain in force, considering their ‘extraordinary’ or ‘emergency’ status. This untargeted nature of legal limits for extraordinary measures in the constitution does not necessarily connote that Belize displays untargeted organised crime prevention and control strategies. By examining the Belizean constitution, one can ascertain the legal limits of established procedure in national governance. The next section, which examines the use of states of emergency within the study period will exemplify *if* politicians in Belize use their extensive extraordinary powers as a form of normalised long-standing state practice, or whether these measures are revoked upon the cessation of the threat, as would be expected for the measures to remain targeted.

⁸⁸ Belize Constitution, 1981 (revised 2011), C.II (Belize)

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Sub-section 9b of the Belizean constitution allows for “orders and rules”⁹¹ to be created within the provisions enabled under article 18 “as are necessary or expedient for the purposes of the regulations”⁹². Such unclear definitions demonstrate that the provisions within the article are wide-ranging, as guidelines are not clearly stipulated for the boundaries of such measures. Additionally, sub-section 9c states that “any order or rule made in pursuance of such regulations may amend or suspend the operation of any law”⁹³, with sub-section 9d clarifying this as excluding the constitution. As such, these sub-sections indicate that any non-constitutional laws can be altered during the period of public emergency. Over an extended period of time, such as the 12-month time period in case of a measure’s renewal, these wide-ranging alterations or suspensions of regular laws could potentially allow for the limiting of human rights and judicial procedures not included within the constitution, without defined oversight stipulating how such rights should be protected in the absence of such guarantees.

4.1.2: LEGAL BASIS IN EL SALVADOR

As in the case of Belize, the constitution of El Salvador has one sole state of emergency, the ‘state of exception’. The measures allowed for in articles 29, 30, and 31 of the Salvadoran constitution are more targeted than in Belize insofar as the exact wording is less ambiguous, presenting specific details in relation to the limits of measures to be taken during the state of exception. For the purposes of considering organised crime prevention and control measures, these would be classed as “grandes perturbaciones del orden público”⁹⁴ [large disturbances affecting public order], for which the state cannot guarantee the maintenance of provisions relating to articles and some specific sub-sections of the constitution during a state of exception.^{95,96}

- Article 5 regarding freedom to enter/exit the country and access to corresponding identity documents
- Article 6 (first sub-section) relating to freedom of expression
- Article 7 (first sub-section) regarding freedom of association and one’s choice to associate

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Constitución [Constitution], 1983 (revised 2014), C.II (El Salvador)

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Does not apply to religious, cultural, economic, or sporting events.

- Article 12 (second sub-section) pertains to one's rights upon being detained and access to a defence lawyer
- Article 13 (second sub-section) which guarantees that administrative detention cannot exceed 72 hours before which time a court order has to be presented to the detainee. Under article 29, this period is extended to 15 days during a state of exception.
- Article 24 which guarantees the inviolability of correspondence

In addition, the suspension of constitutional provisions derived from an invocation of a state of exception can be either applicable to specific areas of the country or applicable countrywide “por medio de decreto del Órgano Legislativo o del Órgano Ejecutivo”⁹⁷ [by means of a decree issued by the legislative branch or the Executive].

A declaration of a state of exception in El Salvador puts in place a time-bound and renewable provision that attempts to act as a safeguard against misuse, “el plazo de suspensión de las garantías constitucionales no excederá de 30 días. Transcurrido este plazo podrá prolongarse la suspensión, por igual periodo y mediante nuevo decreto, si continúan las circunstancias que la motivaron.”⁹⁸ [the period during which constitutional guarantees are suspended will not exceed 30 days. After such time, the suspension can be extended for another 30 days by means of a new decree, should the originating circumstances which caused it remain.]

The most noteworthy element of this section of the Salvadoran constitution is article 31, which states that “[c]uando desaparezcan las circunstancias que motivaron la suspensión de las garantías constitucionales, la Asamblea Legislativa o el Consejo de Ministros, según el caso, deberá restablecer tales garantías.” [when the motivating circumstances that caused the suspension of constitutional guarantees disappear, the Legislative Assembly or the Council of Ministers, respectively, should re-establish those guarantees.] This highlights a clear legal expectation that upon the cessation of a threat, constitutional guarantees should be re-instated. Such a provision demonstrates the proportionality of the intended measures, and the balance sought by linking the cessation of the state of exception directly to the continuation of a threat. In turn, these explicit measures highlight that these specific constitutional civil rights should only be suspended in extraordinary circumstances. In other words, a state of exception should be ‘exceptional’, not a normalised everyday practise.

4.1.3: LEGAL BASIS IN GUATEMALA

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Guatemalan legislation relating to extraordinary provisions is significantly more extensive than that of Belize and El Salvador as it is comprised of provisions established in the constitution, which subsequently rely directly on existing legislation that was in force prior to the current constitution. The Guatemalan constitution, based on articles 138 and 139, with the latter deriving from and relying on the 1965 Law of Public Order and, together, they establish the limits to certain elements of the constitution on a five-tiered scale, depending on the aim of the measures and the type of threat. For the purposes of considering organised crime prevention and control measures, these would be classed as acts or events which present a “perturbación grave de la paz, [o] de actividades contra la seguridad del Estado”⁹⁹ [serious disturbance of the peace, [or] those activities which go against the security of the State]. The elements of the constitution which can be suspended or altered during an invocation of a state of emergency in Guatemala are:¹⁰⁰

- Article 5 relating to freedom of action (within established legal limits)
- Article 6 regarding freedom from detention when acting in accordance with the law – this article establishes a six-hour period before which a detainee is to be brought before a judge, one of the shortest periods in the world for this procedure.
- Article 9 relating to comments made during interrogation – explicitly stating that findings from extra-judicial interrogations are not considered. A 24-hour period is stipulated, inclusive of the aforementioned six-hour period to be brought before a judge.
- Article 26 regarding freedom to enter and exit the country, to be issued with a passport, and to not require a Guatemalan visa for crossing the national border
- Article 33 relating to freedom of assembly and demonstration, after having provided prior notice to the authorities of the intention to do so
- Article 35 (first paragraph) on the freedom of expression of thought
- Article 38 (second paragraph) relating to the right to bear arms, within legal limits
- Article 116 (second paragraph) giving state workers the right to strike, as long as essential services are not disrupted

For one of the states of emergency to occur, it is necessary for the President to make the “la declaratoria correspondiente, por medio de decreto dictado en Consejo de Ministros y se

⁹⁹ Constitución Política de la República de Guatemala [Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala], 1985 (revised 2002), C.IV (Guatemala)

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

aplicarán las disposiciones de la Ley de Orden Público. En el Estado de Prevención, no será necesaria esta formalidad.”¹⁰¹ [corresponding declaration, by means of a decree issued by the Council of Ministers and application of the provisions of the Law of Public Order. Such a procedure is not necessary for a state of prevention.] Following this, Congress must review, ratify, modify or annul the proposed legislation immediately, or within three days during periods within which Congress is not gathered. The decree must specify “a) [l]os motivos que lo justifiquen; b) [l]os derechos que no puedan asegurarse en su plenitud; c) [e]l territorio que afecte; y d) [e]l tiempo que durará su vigencia.”¹⁰² [a) the motives that justify it; b) the rights that cannot be guaranteed in their totality; c) the territory affected; and d) the duration of the measures.] Indeed, the constitution does not explicitly state the geographical scope of the measures. The Law of Public Order, however, does establish a flexible geographical scope for the state of alarm only: in parts of the country or countrywide.

A declaration of one of the five states of emergency in Guatemala puts in place a time-bound and renewable provision that attempts to act as a safeguard against misuse, “[l]os efectos del decreto no podrán exceder de treinta días por cada vez. Si antes de que venza el plazo señalado, hubieren desaparecido las causas que motivaron el decreto, se le hará cesar en sus efectos”¹⁰³ [the effects of each decree cannot be exceeded beyond 30 days. If before that period expires, the causes that motivated the decree disappear, the decree’s effects shall cease]. In effect, a new decree has to be declared in order for measures to continue – there is no automatic renewal of measures. By having five tiered states of emergency, with the four most serious requiring a procedural examination by the Congress upon every decree under the Law of Public Order, it can be understood that these measures are thoroughly reviewed each time, thus where measures are to continue, the need to inspect their effectiveness in detail can be viewed as encouraging a reduction in the response’s severity, as deemed appropriate by the President, Council of Ministers and Congress.

In order from least to most severe, the five states of emergency as invokable under the Law of Public Order are:¹⁰⁴

Table 2 (compiled by the author): Guatemalan Law of Public Order’s tiered state of emergency measures

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ley de Orden Público [Law of Public Order], 1965, C.I-VI (Guatemala)

<u>State of emergency type</u>	<u>Measures taken</u>
<i>Estado de prevención</i> [State of Prevention]	Militarises public services, places limitations on the right to strike, on outdoor gatherings, and on public protest. Restricts freedom of circulation of vehicles. During the state of prevention, publishing content deemed to be against public order is prohibited.
<i>Estado de alarma</i> [State of Alarm]	Allows the state to request co-operation with, or take control of, the operations of private businesses. Visas can be denied to foreign nationals and they can also be expelled from the country. General restrictions on freedom of movement can be imposed, alongside curfews. Arms' licences can be suspended or cancelled, strikes, public gatherings, and demonstrations can be suspended or prohibited.
<i>Estado de calamidad pública</i> [State of Public Calamity]	<i>Used during natural disasters and public health emergencies – not applicable to this study</i>
<i>Estado de sitio</i> [State of Siege]	President becomes Commander-in-Chief of the military. Measures from 'state of prevention' and 'state of alarm' are in force, alongside the ability to intervene in the functioning of or dissolve any organisation, entity, or group. Anyone deemed to be disturbing, or committed to disturb, public order can be detained without a judicial warrant.
<i>Estado de guerra</i> [State of War]	<i>Used during wartime – not applicable to this study</i>

4.2: APPLICATIONS OF STATES OF EMERGENCY

This section will explore the recorded states of emergency used in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala for the purposes of preventing and controlling organised crime. As such, states of emergency used in relation to other extraordinary factors, such as natural disasters, pressure

on public services from transiting migrant caravans, shortages of essential supplies, and public health emergencies will not feature. Nevertheless, as has previously been explored, the COVID-19 pandemic is notable as related measures to deal with the public health threat also worked to reduce the homicide rate during this period in all three countries.

Examining governmental strategies used within the period is also beneficial for understanding a state's direction in choosing how a securitisation should take place – whether it is to be an acute measure and time-bound, over a longer period of time invoking a state of emergency, or solely as part of a governmental strategy without relying on the invocation of states of emergency to manage the threat.

Upon entering office in 2020, former Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei devised *Plan Recuperación y Control* [Recuperation and Control Plan], aimed at tackling the different types of organised crime that occur in both urban and rural areas.¹⁰⁵ This was particularly ambitious given that the state presence in rural areas has typically been weaker, as previously highlighted in relation to the continued ethnic injustices against indigenous communities, which form a majority in the country's rural areas. Giammattei's plan sought to target particular hotspots in a proactive manner, thus forming a series of prevention strategies, in comparison to reactive approaches – used for crime control – visible in other cases. The plan's objectives were limited after the COVID-19 pandemic, as crime patterns had changed during this time as organised crime groups now understood how *Plan Recuperación y Control* functioned in practice from its implementation in the months prior to the COVID-19 lockdowns, and used this time to alter their operational structures in response. In 2024, newly-elected President Bernardo Arévalo introduced his *Plan Control Territorial* [Territorial Control Plan].¹⁰⁶ Unlike the previous president's plan, this sought to focus on particular rural areas where drug-trafficking and gang-related crime are interlinked, particularly in border areas, in a regular manner, rather than using states of emergency.

¹⁰⁵ See Julio Morales, “Operativos de recuperación y control en el territorio nacional se retomarán” [Resumption of *recuperación y control* operations nationwide], *AGN* (Guatemala City), 7th January 2021 <<https://agn.gt/operativos-de-recuperacion-y-control-en-el-territorio-nacional-se-retomaran/>> [accessed 2nd April 2026]

¹⁰⁶ See “Gobernación y Defensa aseguran recuperación de áreas fronterizas con México” [Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defence ensure reclamation in the border areas with Mexico], Ministerio de Gobernación, published 2nd May 2024 <<https://mingob.gob.gt/gobernacion-y-defensa-aseguran-recuperacion-de-areas-fronterizas-con-mexico/>> [accessed 2nd April 2026]

In 2019, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele introduced a homonymous plan.¹⁰⁷ It took the form of concrete actions at various stages of the national context, which have previously been viewed through the lens of how negotiations with gangs took place in a way that was not transparent, and how these negotiations later proved fortuitous for the shock imposition of a prolonged state of exception, in force since March 2022. This plan came after a four-year attempt at reducing the impact of organised crime under his predecessor. Former Salvadoran President Salvador Sánchez Cerén implemented *Plan El Salvador Seguro* [Plan Secure El Salvador] in 2015, just as the homicide rate was spiking.¹⁰⁸ States of emergency were not used as part of this strategy, instead Sánchez Cerén opted for a violence prevention strategy focussing on crime control and prosecuting offenders, rehabilitation, victim protection, and strengthening institutional resilience in the 50 areas of the country most affected by organised crime. Whilst the homicide rate began to decrease during that time, critics claim that the strategy was methodologically flawed, that the gangs resisted the measures, and non-homicidal organised crime increased.¹⁰⁹

The Belizean approach has been far more focussed on rehabilitation than strict penalisation, which demonstrates how the country's government views the challenges as issues which will not be solved without providing opportunities for offenders, given the youth element of the gang-related organised crime. Regarding drug-related organised crime affecting Belize, it is almost exclusively transnational in nature, despite often relying on the local gang structures for limited tacit in-country support. *#PlanBelize* was created in 2022, providing a four-year framework for a post-COVID-19 recovery for the country. One of its six key pillars is 'citizen security', which emphasises the interlinked nature between social deprivation, a lack of educational opportunities, and crime. Here, the Belizean government recognises the challenges facing the country from organised crime, and the difficulty in tackling it alone given its "small size and limited public resources to fight crime"¹¹⁰. The governmental report

¹⁰⁷ See "Presidente Nayib Bukele anuncia Fase VI del Plan Control Territorial" [President Nayib Bukele announces the sixth phase of *Plan Control Territorial*], Ministerio de Seguridad Pública y Justicia, published 15th September 2023 <<https://www.seguridad.gob.sv/presidente-nayib-bukele-anuncia-fase-vi-del-plan-control-territorial/>> [accessed 2nd April 2026]

¹⁰⁸ See Consejo de Seguridad Ciudadana y Convivencia, *Plan El Salvador Seguro* [Plan Secure El Salvador] (Ministerio de Seguridad, 2017)

¹⁰⁹ See Parker Asmann, "El Salvador Citizen Security Plan Struggling to Reduce Insecurity", Insight Crime, published 16th July 2018 <<https://insightcrime.org/news/el-salvador-citizen-security-plan-struggling-reduce-insecurity/>> [accessed 1st April 2026]

¹¹⁰ Ministry of Economic Development, *#PlanBelize: Medium-Term Development Strategy 2022-2026* (Ministry of Economic Development, 2023), p18 <<https://met.gov.bz/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Belize-Med-Term-Dev-Strategy-Action-Plan-2022-to-2025.pdf>>

recognises that Belize is used as “a source, transit, and destination country for [...] sex trafficking and forced labour. In recent years, narco-trafficking is at an all-time high, with frequent night landings of drug planes”¹¹¹. It goes on to explain how the Belizean Defence Force and the Coast Guard are working with external partners to increase “their capacity for surveillance and counteractions to discourage and apprehend criminal incursions at border points and into [its] airspace.”¹¹² Additionally, it seeks to increase the number of soldiers operating within the adjacency zone with Guatemala until the ICJ provides a resolution to the border dispute.^{113,114} Furthermore, the plan indicates that the primary reasons for focussing on the adjacency zone relate to reducing the threat from incursions with illegal loggers operating as a result of organised crime groups crossing over from Guatemala in the largely rural forested border area to exploit Belizean natural resources illegally. Under *#PlanBelize*, the country sought to reduce its homicide rate from 40 to less than 25 per 100,000 inhabitants by 2026.¹¹⁵ UNODC statistics on homicide rates tend to be published retrospectively by one to two years, so it is not yet known whether this was achieved. The creation of a rehabilitative Leadership Intervention Unit (LIU) provides opportunities for young people in socially deprived areas, notably Belize City’s Southside, which is a hotspot for gang-related crime and feuding rivalries between gangs. The LIU seeks to provide educational and work opportunities to these young people, such as microgrants to encourage entrepreneurship for community groups; a positive role models programme to counteract negative influences from gang structures; community support training programmes in schools; and teaching conflict resolution mechanisms in communities to reduce overspill from gang feuds, with the hope to slow down any potential escalations, allowing more time for the state to respond.¹¹⁶

Table 3 (compiled by the author): State of emergency use in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala between 2015-2025

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ See Ministry of Economic Development, *#PlanBelize*, p50

¹¹⁴ As a reminder, this work has examined how this porous border has facilitated arms and human trafficking, activities that allow for the strengthening of transnational organised criminal networks.

¹¹⁵ See Ministry of Economic Development, *#PlanBelize*, p33

¹¹⁶ See Kareem Musa, *Annual Technical Report: 2023-2024* (Ministry of Home Affairs and New Growth Industries, 2023), pp29-33

<u>Country</u>	<u>State of emergency type, and reasons for use</u>	<u>Duration</u>	<u>Locations affected</u>
Guatemala	State of siege, due to violence perpetrated by armed groups, rooted in an historical conflict regarding municipal boundaries in this border area with Mexico renowned for opioid cultivation and trafficking (crime control)	10 th May 2017, 90 days total (renewed twice)	Ixchiguán and Tajumulco in San Marcos Department
Belize	State of public emergency, following a series of inter-gang retaliatory attacks (crime control)	5 th September 2018, 30 days	Southside of Belize City
Guatemala	State of siege, following the murder of three soldiers by drug-trafficking groups in Semuy II (crime control)	4th September 2019, 60 days total (renewed once (excluding Livingston and Puerto Barrios))	- Municipalities of Livingston, Puerto Barrios, El Estor, Los Amates, and Morales in Izabal Department - Municipalities of Tactic, Senahú, Tamahú, Tukurú, Panzós, Santa María Cahabón, Santa Catalina la Tinta, Chahal, and Fray

			Bartolomé de las Casas in Alta Verapaz Department - Municipalities of Gualán, Río Hondo, Teculután, and Usumatlán in Zacapa Department - San Agustín Acasaguastlán, and San Cristóbal Acasaguastlán in El Progreso Department - The municipality of Purulhá in Baja Verapaz Department - The municipality of San Luis in Petén Department
Guatemala	State of prevention, part of <i>Plan Recuperación y Control</i> (crime prevention)	17 th January 2020, 6 days	Mixco and San Juan Sacatepéquez in Guatemala Department
Guatemala	State of prevention, part of <i>Plan Recuperación y Control</i> (crime prevention)	24 th January 2020, 6 days	Villa Nueva in Guatemala Department
Guatemala	State of prevention, part of <i>Plan</i>	5 th February 2020, 6 days	Municipalities of Chimaltenango, El Tejar,

	<i>Recuperación y Control</i> (crime prevention)		and San Andrés Itzapa in Chimaltenango Department
Guatemala	State of prevention, part of <i>Plan Recuperación y Control</i> (crime prevention)	14 th February 2020, 6 days	Municipalities of Escuintla, Puerto San José, Nueva Concepción, Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, Tiquisate, and Palín in Escuintla Department
Belize	State of public emergency, following gang-related murders (crime control)	18 th March 2020, 30 days	Southside of Belize City
Belize	State of public emergency, as a preventative measure following a reduction in organised crime as a result of nationwide COVID-19 public health emergency measures, which were coming to an end (crime prevention)	7 th July 2020, 90 days total (renewed once)	Southside of Belize City
Guatemala	State of prevention, due to armed groups attacking state security forces and limiting circulation of vehicles (crime control)	26 th July 2020, 30 days total (renewed once)	- Municipalities of El Estor, Morales, and Livingston in Izabal Department - Municipalities of Panzós and Santa Catalina la Tinta in

			Alta Verapaz Department
Belize	State of public emergency, due to a rise in gang-related shootings (crime control)	19 th August 2021, 30 days	Southside of Belize City
El Salvador	State of exception, in immediate response to the 26 th March 2022 massacre (crime control) Renewed as a long-term strategy, part of <i>Plan Control Territorial</i> (crime prevention)	27 th March 2022, ongoing (renewed 48 times, as of April 2026)	Nationwide
Guatemala	State of siege, similar conditions as in the 2017 case (crime control)	7 th June 2022, 60 days total (renewed once)	Ixchiguán and Tajumulco in San Marcos Department
Belize	State of public emergency, due to a rise in gang-related murders (crime control)	28 th July 2023, 30 days	Southside of Belize City
Belize	State of public emergency, due to a rise in gang-related murders (crime control)	26 th March 2024, 30 days	- Hattieville and Southside of Belize City in Belize District - Roaring Creek, Another World, Young Bank, and

			Camalote in Cayo District
Belize	State of public emergency, due to continued gang-related violence (crime control)	25 th June 2024, 90 days total (renewed once)	- Hattieville and Southside of Belize City in Belize District - Roaring Creek, Another World, Young Bank, and Cotton Tree in Cayo District
Belize	State of public emergency, due to gang-related shootings (crime control)	6 th May 2025, 30 days	- Hattieville and Southside of Belize City in Belize District - Roaring Creek, Another World, Young Bank, and Camalote in Cayo District
Guatemala	State of prevention, due to an escalation of a long-standing territorial conflict, exacerbated by organised criminal groups (crime control)	14 th December 2025, 30 days total (renewed once)	Nahualá and Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán in Sololá Department

Over the ten-year period, particular developments arose in each country relating to how extraordinary measures were used or perceived. In Belize, it became customary that detainees arrested during a state of public emergency would be released after the expiration of the measures, often signing contracts with the government agreeing not to re-offend, with many

going to be rehabilitated with support initiatives, such as the LIU. In El Salvador, the state of exception has become a normalised feature of everyday life since March 2022. In Guatemala, the use of some types of state of emergency has been controversial. The state of siege put in place in 2019 under former President Jimmy Morales was extensive in its geographical scope, covering various municipalities in Izabal, Alta Verapaz, Zacapa, El Progreso, Baja Verapaz and Petén Departments, after an isolated incident in the extremely remote hamlet of Semuy II, in Izabal's El Estor region. The incident as reported by the presidential administration and the security forces was also contested by local residents – the government claimed that drug traffickers had influenced all the municipalities placed under the state of siege and was looking to weaken their influence in these regions, whilst the locals of Semuy II claimed that an altercation took place when soldiers arrived in the area, given that the indigenous population of the hamlet opposed the expansion of mining operations in the area, and that the state of siege reduced their ability to protest these operations.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, in 2020, the El Estor region of Izabal was once more actively considered by the Guatemalan government, under the Giammattei presidency this time, to undergo another state of siege due to the presence of armed groups attacking the security forces in the area. This time, the President's decree was voted down by the Congress. Former President Alejandro Giammattei then declared a state of prevention instead, as this is the only state of emergency that does not require a congressional vote. Indigenous concerns over mining operations continued.¹¹⁸ Moreover, in both the 2019 and 2020 cases, the tourist towns of Livingston and Puerto Barrios were given differential treatment. In 2019, the towns were initially excluded from the state of siege so as not to negatively impact tourism in these areas. However, Congress included them in the final declaration, but excluded their town centres. When the measures were extended, Puerto Barrios and Livingston were subsequently removed for the remaining period. In 2020, Livingston was included in the state of prevention, once again, excluding its town centre. This is despite both town centres including vital port infrastructure with access to the Caribbean Sea and Belize's coastline, which are key trafficking routes for organised

¹¹⁷ See "Militarization In Eastern Guatemala Threatens Freedom of Expression and Indigenous Human Rights Defenders", Cultural Survival, published 12th September 2019 <<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/militarization-eastern-guatemala-threatens-freedom-expression-and-indigenous-human-rights>> [accessed 6th April 2026]

¹¹⁸ See Aj Ral Ch'och' (Q'eqchi' heritage pseudonym), "Gobierno fracasa en implementar un estado de sitio pero decreta estado de prevención en cinco municipios" [Government fails to implement a state of siege, but declares a state of prevention in five municipalities], *Prensa Comunitaria* (Guatemala City), 28th July 2020 <<https://prensacomunitaria.org/2020/07/gobierno-fracasa-en-implementar-un-estado-de-sitio-pero-decreta-estado-de-prevencion-en-cinco-municipios/>> [accessed 6th April 2026]

crime anyway, even more so when one considers the complications of travelling by land during a state of emergency only being implemented inland.

Additionally, a state of public calamity was declared in 2016 to combat forest fires started by drug-trafficking groups in the ancient Maya Biosphere Reserve, a protected area.¹¹⁹ This strategy of these groups, known as ‘narcoranchers’, of clearing protected land by setting forest fires is a trend which has continued since, with some even going as far as ransacking unexplored Mayan ruins before leaving the land to burn.¹²⁰ The 2016 state of public calamity was not included in the list given its secondary environmental impact, rather than being an organised crime prevention or control strategy. Nevertheless, such cases remain important for understanding the necessity for some state response to organised crime, given potential serious harm to communities, cultures, and the environment.

4.2.1: APPLICATION OF STATES OF EMERGENCY IN BELIZE

Regarding adherence within legal limits, from the table and descriptions, Belize demonstrates full adherence, as its recorded uses of states of emergency have taken place within the laws as stipulated, with the country even having normalised a more lenient practice of releasing detainees after the expiration of every state of emergency.

Furthermore, the country demonstrates limited scope and duration of measures. Individual neighbourhoods were highly targeted for the imposition of measures, even within areas of specific cities, towns, and villages. Whenever states of public emergency were declared during the ten-year period, they always included Belize City’s Southside, given the high concentration of gangs in this area as a national base for organised crime originating from gangs. Where inland communities were affected by measures, these were highly directed at specific neighbourhoods in towns and villages in Cayo District, Belize’s largest district by area, rather than placing the whole district or country under a state of public emergency.

4.2.2: APPLICATION OF STATES OF EMERGENCY IN EL SALVADOR

¹¹⁹ See “Forest fires set by drug traffickers threaten Guatemala’s virgin forest and archaeological wonders”, *EntreMundos*, published 20th June 2016 <<https://www.entremundos.org/revista/environment/forest-fires-set-by-drug-traffickers-threaten-guatemalas-virgin-forest-and-archaeological-wonders/?lang=en>> [accessed 6th April 2026]

¹²⁰ See David Mercer, “Drug dealers blamed for Guatemala national park’s fires”, *Al Jazeera* (Laguna del Tigre), 30th April 2017 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/video/2017/4/30/drug-dealers-blamed-for-guatemala-national-parks-fires>> [accessed 6th April 2026]

El Salvador, conversely, demonstrates low adherence within legal limits – the normalisation of the nationwide state of exception since March 2022, and the abuse of the extraordinary measures in particular through legislative interference, highlight this. Despite an extremely successful homicide reduction effort, acknowledgements from multiple countries on the El Salvador’s improved safety record, and a legal obligation to remove the measures following the threat’s cessation as per Article 31 of the Salvadoran constitution, President Nayib Bukele continues to use the state of exception as a way to maintain power with reduced scrutiny following regular protests in 2021, as recourse for citizens is reduced whilst the extraordinary measures remain in force. These measures started two years after Bukele interrupted the sitting Legislative Assembly with armed soldiers forcibly requesting its approval for the government’s request for a loan from the US government to assist in funding part of the Salvadoran *Plan Control Territorial*. At that time the Legislative Assembly did not have supporters of Bukele’s *Nuevas Ideas* party as the party did not exist when those elections were held. Since winning a majority in the 2021 Legislative Assembly elections, Bukele’s subsequent participation in presidential elections was permitted, despite being prohibited under the Salvadoran constitution. Such prohibitions are a common feature of post-civil conflict constitutions in Central America, and also apply to the Guatemalan case. This followed an assembly vote which saw five Supreme Court judges removed from office.

In El Salvador, the sole measure taken within the ten-year period – the state of exception – demonstrates excessive scope and duration. Having been in place for more than four years, and affecting the whole country during that time, the measures continue to impact all communities of the country. Tacit acceptance of the measures by the public –given the success in homicide reduction – should not translate into the continuation of emergency measures. Indeed, were an immediate emergency to occur during this time, no higher measure can be put in place to deal with it, as the country has been constantly under emergency status since the 26th March 2022 massacre.

4.2.3: APPLICATION OF STATES OF EMERGENCY IN GUATEMALA

Guatemala demonstrates full adherence within legal limits. Accountability mechanisms and checks and balances continued to operate in a reasonably consistent manner during this period. Whenever renewals were being considered, they did so following considerable parliamentary scrutiny. The Guatemalan tiered system of states of emergency supports the presidency in carrying out measures on a proportionate basis, with the least restrictive

measures not requiring congressional approval. However, any measures above the state of prevention do require congressional approval.

Guatemala's use of states of emergency can be deemed significant in scope and duration. Presidential overreach in 2020 was prevented by Congress, but some emergency measures were inconsistently applied to favour certain areas, and the repeated targeting of areas with a high concentration of indigenous communities opposed to new mining projects during the Morales and Giammattei presidencies shows how Guatemala during this period attempted to carry out securitisations on issues where the threat as seen by government and the threat as seen by the affected communities differed. As such, it can be argued that the measures were not administered transparently and that the measures were not always fully securitised, given the lack of popular support at local levels, but restrictive measures still went ahead regardless. Measures were always geographically targeted, but curiously no states of emergency were enacted for the *zonas* of the capital, Guatemala City, despite the city being a hotspot for gang-related organised crime, as well as a major Central American transport hub. This could either signify how the Guatemalan state does not confidently believe that it can exercise sufficient control in many *zonas* of the capital, or that it was often deemed easier to carry out measures in smaller towns and villages where any potential resistance to states of emergency would be lower and not as well orchestrated, and then proceed politically to convince urban voters that the government was serious about dealing with the threat from organised crime.

4.3: *MANO DURA* ATTRIBUTES

This section of the analysis explores the prevalence of *mano dura* attributes present in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala. It uses the categorisation compiled by Cutrona *et al.* (2025) to determine how many features are present. Having a higher number of such attributes can be viewed as the country utilising *mano dura* as a normalised strategy of carrying out organised crime control and/or prevention, thus reducing the targeted nature of such strategies. It is pertinent to clarify that where an attribute is deemed not to occur in a country, it may still be present in a certain area or have occurred during a short time throughout the period, but has not become normalised for a substantial amount of time during the ten-year period. Exemplifications will be subsequently provided, on a country-by-country basis, but the overall allocation of attributes has been done based on wider literature relating to organised crime and prevention strategies reviewed for this thesis, in relation to each country.

Table 4: *Mano dura* attributes in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala, as found across scholarly literature, reports, and documented cases, 2015-2025

	Harsh penalties	Military policing	Limits on due process	Punitive discourse	Extra-legal policing	Mass incarceration	Police violence
Belize		X					
El Salvador	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Guatemala		X	X	X			

4.3.1: *MANO DURA* ATTRIBUTES IN BELIZE

Belize demonstrates just one *mano dura* attribute, namely that of military policing. As a result, the country's '*mano dura* attributes' score is limited. The Belize Defence Force (BDF) has been utilised during states of public emergency as an organised crime prevention or control strategy, accompanying the Belize Police Department (BPD) in their operations. In general, across the study period, the Belizean state has demonstrated that it prioritises a rehabilitative approach which ultimately reduces the need for *mano dura*. Where military policing is used, it is done so in a targeted way. Nevertheless, its inclusion still exemplifies two-tier policing insofar as the registered states of public emergency have always included Belize City's Southside within the proclamations. As such, when military policing has been used, it has repeatedly occurred in this infamous neighbourhood known for its high gang prevalence, that is also predominantly inhabited by Afro-descendants. Although not directly explored in this thesis, living in or growing up in a certain neighbourhood where military policing takes place, especially when it does not occur in the remainder of the country, could potentially fuel social stigmas relating to reduced trustworthiness of the population as a whole, and foster social divides that the government's official rehabilitative approaches actively seek to dispel. Indeed, as Godoy-Guillen discusses, these populations "become the primary subjects of [...] securitized governance, illustrating how emergency powers reconfigure citizenship through selective exposure to state coercion."¹²¹ Nevertheless, for a

¹²¹ Abbie Godoy-Guillen, "States of Exception: Policing, COVID-19, the 13th Amendment, and the Suspension of Human Rights in Belize", *Journal of Belizean Research* 4, no.1 (2026): p81
<<https://jobr.ub.edu.bz/index.php/ubrij/issue/view/9/1>> [accessed 18th May 2026]

country in the region seeking to actively counter organised crime, just possessing one *mano dura* attribute is comparatively much better than most countries of the region facing similar challenges, as the cases below demonstrate.

4.3.2: *MANO DURA* ATTRIBUTES IN EL SALVADOR

The most significant case here is that of El Salvador, which continues to demonstrate all seven attributes since March 2022 as normalised state practice relating to organised crime prevention and control strategies, meaning that it possesses an extensive score. The normalisation of such attributes over an extended period has wider ramifications beyond solely tackling organised crime, as the normalisation of such measures can permeate into other elements of relations between the state and the citizenry, particularly regarding trust and accountability in all spheres of life.

4.3.3: *MANO DURA* ATTRIBUTES IN GUATEMALA

Guatemala, for its part, exhibits considerable *mano dura* attributes, namely military policing, which is used during states of emergency, as well as for routine operations, particularly in rural areas in tackling organised crime relating to drug production and trafficking. Limits on due process are commonplace, primarily resulting from the country's high rate of corruption, low rate of conviction within established timeframes, and the risk of criminal insurgencies arising from the influence of gangs and drug cartels on officials in state positions, at various levels. Punitive discourse is also present. However, many of the other established *mano dura* attributes are not commonplace, especially those which have significant social ramifications, such as extra-legal policing or police violence. Furthermore, the combination of ineffective state operations and social injustices following decades of ethnic conflict mean that one cannot rule out the possibility of *mano dura* attributes being applied unequally across different regions of Guatemala, with some urban Ladino-majority areas possessing fewer *mano dura* attributes than those shown here due to the challenges of effectively policing urban areas. Rural areas with higher percentages of ethnic Mayans could see *mano dura* attributes being utilised more frequently. This forms part of a wider theme which is discussed throughout this work.

4.4: PREVALENCE OF SECURITISING LANGUAGE

This section will explore various instances of securitising language appearing in media and governmental reports in relation to state measures to tackle organised crime. Variations in

reporting occur in all three countries – namely, El Salvador has a comprehensive archive of governmental reports and speeches on the *Plan Control Territorial* and state of exception. In Belize and Guatemala, media reports supplement the sporadic nature of governmental reporting on such issues. A point worth emphasising once again is that this thesis takes it as a premise that media reports can be inherently securitised in nature.

Table 5 (compiled by the author): Securitising language in media and governmental reports relating to organised crime measures taken in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala, 2015-2025

<u>Report title</u>	<u>Instances of securitising language</u>	<u>Score calculation</u>
“Government of Belize declares ‘State of Emergency’ for communities in south side Belize City” ¹²² (The San Pedro Sun, 08/09/2018, Belize)	“escalating criminal activity” (1) “most murderous weekend in Belizean history” (3) “alarming death toll forced the government” (3)	$3 \times 1 = 3$ $6 \times 3 = 18$ $6 \times 3 = 18$ Securitising: 39 Total: 994 Securitising score calculated as: $39 \div 994 \times 1000 =$ 39 per 1000 words
“State of Emergency declared for Southside Belize City” ¹²³ (Amandala, 07/07/2020, Belize)	“combat an abrupt increase” (2) “targeted areas where known gang members and/or criminals live and base their activities” (1) “gangs would not be allowed to hold the country hostage” (3) “gang members and criminal offenders were reeled in” (2) “if they do not behave responsibly, a stiffer message will be sent” (2)	$4 \times 2 = 8$ $14 \times 1 = 14$ $10 \times 3 = 30$ $8 \times 2 = 16$ $12 \times 2 = 24$ Securitising: 92 Total: 331 Securitising score calculated as: $92 \div$

¹²² The San Pedro Sun, “Government of Belize declares ‘States of Emergency’ for communities in south side Belize City”, 2018, The San Pedro Sun <<https://www.sanpedrosun.com/crime-and-violence/2018/09/08/government-of-belize-declares-state-of-emergency-for-communities-in-south-side-belize-city/>> [accessed 8th April 2026]

¹²³ Amandala, “State of Emergency declared for Southside Belize City”, 2020, Amandala <<https://amandala.com.bz/news/state-of-emergency-declared-for-southside-belize-city/>> [accessed 8th April 2026]

		$331 \times 1000 = 278$ per 1000 words
“Police Says State of Emergency Is A Necessary Course Of Action” ¹²⁴ (News 5 Live, 27/03/2024, Belize)	“I don’t think that any reasonable Belizean would say that the government and the police is [<i>sic</i>] not doing enough” (1) “we just want to be able to pluck out the bad seeds” (2) “Which right is more important? The rights of 50 people who hold the city or country hostage, or the rights of over 140,000 in the city?” (2)	$19 \times 1 = 19$ $12 \times 2 = 24$ $26 \times 2 = 52$ Securitising: 95 Total: 366 Securitising score calculated as: $95 \div 366 \times 1000 = 260$ per 1000 words
“Presidente Nayib Bukele ordena a PNC y ejército usar fuerza letal contra terroristas pandilleros” ¹²⁵ [President Nayib Bukele orders the PNC and Army to use lethal force against terrorist gang-members] (Government of El	“a hacer uso de la fuerza letal contra los terroristas que lleven a cabo amenazas inminentes contra la vida e integridad física de la población” [can use lethal force against the terrorists who realise imminent threats against the lives and physical integrity of the population] (3)	$25 \times 3 = 75$ Securitising: 75 Total: 450 Securitising score calculated as: $75 \div 450 \times 1000 = 167$ per 1000 words

¹²⁴ News 5 Live, “Police Says State of Emergency Is A Necessary Course Of Action”, 2024, Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/News5Live/videos/736231728320782/>> [accessed 8th April 2026]

¹²⁵ Presidencia de la República, “Presidente Nayib Bukele ordena a PNC y ejército usar fuerza letal contra terroristas pandilleros” [President Nayib Bukele orders the PNC and Army to use lethal force against terrorist gang-members], 26th April 2020, Archivos: Plan Control Territorial <<https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CO-ABRIL-26-20.pdf>>

Salvador, 26/04/2020, El Salvador)		
“Gobierno del Presidente Nayib Bukele solicitará prórroga del régimen de excepción, que ha dado excelentes resultados en el combate a las pandillas”¹²⁶ [President Nayib Bukele’s government will request an extension to the state of exception, which has brought great results in combatting the gangs] (Government of El Salvador, 24/04/2022, El Salvador)	“regimen de excepción, una herramienta legal que ha dado excelentes resultados [...] llevando tranquilidad a la población” [the state of exception, a legal tool which has provided excellent results in bringing calm to the population] (1) “El Presidente Bukele está comprometido con la seguridad y el bienestar de los salvadoreños, tomando decisiones firmes para combatir a los criminales” [President Bukele is committed to the security and wellbeing of the Salvadoran people, taking strong measures to combat the criminals] (2)	$16 \times 1 = 16$ $22 \times 2 = 44$ Securitising: 60 Total: 330 Securitising score calculated as: $60 \div 330 \times 1000 = 181$ per 1000 words
“Diputados consolidan cuatro años de régimen de excepción con nueva prórroga de la	“El Salvador seguirá manteniendo vigente el régimen de excepción como una de sus principales herramientas para el combate a las pandillas” [The state of exception in El Salvador will remain in force as it is one of the main tools in the fight against the gangs] (2)	$21 \times 2 = 42$ $20 \times 2 = 40$ $18 \times 3 = 54$ $11 \times 3 = 33$ Securitising: 169 Total: 413

¹²⁶ Gobierno de El Salvador, “Gobierno del Presidente Nayib Bukele solicitará prórroga del régimen de excepción, que ha dado excelentes resultados en el caso a las pandillas” [President Nayib Bukele’s government will request an extension to the state of exception, which has brought great results in combatting the gangs”, 2022, Gobierno de El Salvador <<https://www.presidencia.gob.sv/gobierno-del-presidente-nayib-bukele-solicitar-prorroga-del-regimen-de-excepcion-que-ha-dado-excelentes-resultados-en-el-combate-a-las-pandillas/>> [accessed 8th April 2026]

medida” ¹²⁷ [Lawmakers back another renewal of the state of exception, four years after its inception] (Legislative Assembly, 26/03/2026, El Salvador)	“fue avalada para dar continuidad a las aprobaciones mensuales que realizan los parlamentarios desde el 27 de marzo de 2022.” [this was approved to provide continuity to the monthly approvals parliamentarians have given the measures since the 27th March 2022.] (2) “se ha convertido en un pilar fundamental dentro de las transformaciones en materia de seguridad en El Salvador” [this has become a fundamental cornerstone in the Salvadoran security transformation] (3) “estos cuatro año [<i>sic</i>] han cambiado la historia y rumbo el [<i>sic</i>] país” [these four years have transformed the course of history of the country] (3)	Securitising score calculated as: $169 \div 413 \times 1000 = 409$ per 1000 words
“Jimmy Morales decreta estado de Sitio en 22 municipios de seis departamentos”¹²⁸ [Jimmy Morales declares a State of Siege in 22 municipalities across six departments]	“El Ejecutivo justifica el estado de Sitio por la muerte de los soldados en El Estor, que ponen en riesgo la libertad, justicia, la seguridad [<i>sic</i>], la vida, la paz y el desarrollo de las personas.” [The Government justifies that a State of Siege is necessary following the soldiers’ deaths in El Estor, which threaten the freedom,	$35 \times 3 = 105$ $38 \times 1 = 38$ $42 \times 2 = 84$ $32 \times 2 = 64$ $30 \times 3 = 90$ Securitising: 381 Total: 515 Securitising score calculated as: 381

¹²⁷ Asambela Legislativa, “Diputados consolidan cuatro años de régimen de excepción con nueva prórroga de la medida” [Lawmakers back another renewal of the state of exception, four years after its inception], 2026, Gobierno de El Salvador <<https://www.asamblea.gob.sv/node/13897>> [accessed 8th April 2026]

¹²⁸ Irving Escobar, “Jimmy Morales decreta estado de Sitio en 22 municipios de seis departamentos” [Jimmy Morales declares a State of Siege in 22 municipalities across six departments], 2019, Prensa Libre <<https://www.prensalibre.com/guatemala/politica/jimmy-morales-decreta-estado-de-sitio-en-municipios-de-cinco-departamentos/>> [accessed 11th April 2026]

(Prensa Libre, 04/09/2019, Guatemala)	justice, security, life, peace, and development of communities.] (3) “El Estado de Guatemala repudia los hechos de las personas que se escudan en banderas de la seudo defensa de los derechos humanos. Hemos constatado que muchas personas en esa región han estado vinculadas a acciones del narcotráfico” [The State of Guatemala condemns the actions of those who seek to protect themselves under the banners of ‘pseudo human rights defenders’. We have established that many people in that region are linked to drug-trafficking operations] (1) “hay una “pelea asimétrica” entre la logística que emplea el narcotráfico contra los recursos del Estado del Guatemala, en la cual también hay poblaciones que ponen a mujeres y niños como barricadas humanas para que no puedan llegar a las pistas clandestinas.” [there is an ‘asymmetrical fight’ between the capabilities of those involved in drug-trafficking against the resources of the Guatemalan state. In this fight, there are those who place women and children as human shields to prevent the state from reaching their clandestine airstrips.] (2) “Durante el estado de Sitio, Morales instruyó para que se arreste a los responsables y se decomisen armas ilegales que usan estos “seudo defensores de derechos humanos” y “seudocampesinos” en	$\div 515 \times 1000 =$ 740 per 1000 words
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	esa región.” [During the State of Siege, Morales ordered for all individuals responsible to be arrested and for the seizure of illegal weapons used by these ‘pseudo human rights defenders’ and ‘pseudocampesinos’ in the region.] (2) “El gobernante repudió que uno de los soldados asesinados quedó sin rostro a causa de un escopetazo y a otro le arrancaron la cabellera, el cual apareció en una estaca.” [The President condemned the fact that one of the murdered soldiers was left faceless following gunshots, and another was stripped of his scalp, with his scalp then placed on a stake.] (3)	
Post from Alejandro Giammattei on X¹²⁹ (@DrGiammattei, 05/02/2020, Guatemala)	“no solo estaremos realizando allanamientos y persiguiendo a esos delincuentes que tenemos identificados y que andan sueltos en la calle, sino que también ingresaremos al centro de privación de libertades para encontrar esa conexión malévola que existe entre los grupos criminales que están utilizando las cárceles para poder tenernos a nosotros los guatemaltecos de rodillas con	$115 \times 3 = 345$ Securitising: 345 Total: 256 Securitising score calculated as: $345 \div 256 \times 1000 = 1348$ per 1000 words

¹²⁹ Alejandro Giammattei (@DrGiammattei), “Hemos decretado el Estado de Prevención en El Tejar, San Andrés Itzapa y Chimaltenango” [We have declared a State of Prevention in El Tejar, San Andrés Itzapa, and Chimaltenango], 2020, X <<https://x.com/drgiammattei/status/1225068108966252549>> [accessed 11th April 2026]

	las extorsiones, los sicariatos y acciones delincuenciales. Esto va a generar que podemos retomar el control de nuestras calles, pero también retomar el control de nuestras cárceles. Nuevamente, les pido a ustedes su colaboración, como siempre lo han hecho, para que juntos podemos trabajar en la captura de aquellas personas que le han robado la paz a los guatemaltecos.” [not only will we be carrying out raids and going after these criminals that we have identified as being on the loose on the streets, but we will also be entering the detention centres. We will do this to uncover the malevolent connection that exists between criminal groups that bring us Guatemalans to our knees, using our prisons to extort our money, fund hitmen, and carry out other criminal activities. This will lead to us reclaiming control of our streets, but also our prisons. Once more, I ask you all to keep working with us, as you have always done, so that we can work together in capturing those who have been taking the peace away from the Guatemalan people.] (3)	
“Un ataque contra un destacamento militar en Guatemala deja al menos cinco muertos	“Siete soldados resultaron heridos en la refriega, tres en estado delicado, por lo que el Ejército envió helicópteros de rescate que también fueron atacados. Arévalo ha culpado a grupos del crimen organizado de aprovecharse “maliciosamente de un conflicto comunitario” en la zona para	$46 \times 3 = 138$ $18 \times 3 = 54$ $60 \times 2 = 120$ Securitising: 312 Total: 479 Securitising score calculated as: 312

y 12 heridos”¹³⁰ [An attack against a military detachment in Guatemala leaves at least five dead and 12 injured] (El País, 16/12/2025, Guatemala)	realizar el ataque.” [Following the skirmish in which seven soldiers were injured, three of whom remain in a delicate condition, the Army sent rescue helicopters to the area, which were also attacked. Arévalo has blamed organised crime groups of “maliciously taking advantage of a community conflict” in the area to carry out the attack.] (3) “Estamos en un momento crítico para el departamento de Sololá y para la seguridad en el territorio nacional” [We are at a critical juncture for Sololá Department and for the security of the whole country] (3) “Arévalo dejó claro que en esta ocasión la violencia se originó por grupos criminales. “El ataque intenso y sostenido al destacamento militar evidencia que estos grupos criminales buscan que el Ejército de Guatemala se retire del área, su objetivo es claro: quedarse con el control del territorio para operar libremente y seguir extorsionando y realizando actividades ilegales”, aseveró el mandatario.” [Arévalo made it clear that on this occasion the violence stemmed from organised crime groups. “The intense and sustained attack on the military detachment highlights that these criminal groups seek the withdrawal of the Guatemalan Army from the area. Their goal	$\div 479 \times 1000 =$ 651 per 1000 words
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¹³⁰ Sofía Menchú, “Un ataque contra un destacamento militar en Guatemala deja al menos cinco muertos y 12 heridos” [An attack against a military detachment in Guatemala leaves at least five dead and 12 injured], 2025, El País <<https://elpais.com/america/2025-12-16/un-ataque-contra-un-destacamento-militar-en-guatemala-deja-al-menos-cinco-muertos-y-12-heridos.html>> [accessed 11th April 2026]

	is clear: they want to maintain control over the area to operate freely, keep extorting money, and carry out criminal activities”, said the Head of State.] (2)	
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4.4.1: PREVALENCE OF SECURITISING LANGUAGE IN BELIZE

The chosen reports from Belize show that the country demonstrates multiple instances of low prevalence of securitising language, as follows:

$$39 (L) + 278 (L) + 260 (L) = 577$$

$$577 \div 3 = 192 (\text{Low})$$

Resultingly, the prevalence of securitising language in Belize overall is low. The chosen excerpts generally highlight the measures taken, the government’s wish to find a balanced solution focussing on rehabilitation, whilst openly acknowledging that a balance has to be struck regarding measures taken and their impact on human rights.

4.4.2: PREVALENCE OF SECURITISING LANGUAGE IN EL SALVADOR

The chosen reports from El Salvador all came from official government sources. They reveal a low to moderate prevalence of securitising language, as demonstrated below:

$$167 (L) + 181 (L) + 409 (M) = 757$$

$$757 \div 3 = 252 (\text{Low})$$

Resultingly, the prevalence of securitising language in El Salvador is low. The chosen excerpts overall highlight that many of the governmental reports relate to political successes in comparison to previous governments, boasting the legality of measures, whilst ‘terrorist’ and ‘criminal’ seem to be used interchangeably in fuelling short bursts of securitised discourse, its prevalence as a continuous feature in these reports is low.

4.4.3: PREVALENCE OF SECURITISING LANGUAGE IN GUATEMALA

The chosen reports from Guatemala show that the country demonstrates instances of moderate to high prevalence of securitising language, calculated as follows:

$$740 \text{ (H)} + 1348 \text{ (H)} + 651 \text{ (M)} = 2739$$

$$2739 \div 3 = 913 \text{ (High)}$$

Resultingly, the prevalence of securitising language in Guatemala overall is high. The chosen excerpts demonstrate that highly securitised, dramatic, and even macabre language relating to the need for states of emergency to be invoked have been used over all three presidencies. Of all three countries studied, this clearly shows that Guatemala possesses the strongest prevalence of securitising language, which has become normalised in Guatemalan politics and journalism. Such an approach undoubtedly contributes to the worsening of the perpetual cycles of fear and perceived vulnerability, with the potential ramification of believing that future measures should be quickly considered for one to 'be protected' if a threat is not reduced – thus maintaining the 'need' for 'security' to feature highly in domestic socio-political constructs.

Table 6: Results from 'targeted nature of organised crime prevention and control strategies' section:

<u>States of emergency</u> - <i>Adherence within legal limits</i> Full: Belize, Guatemala (2) Moderate: (0) Low: El Salvador (1) - <i>Scope and duration of measure(s) taken</i> Limited: Belize (1) Significant: Guatemala (1) Excessive: El Salvador (1)
<u>Mano dura attributes</u> Limited: Belize (1) Considerable: Guatemala (1) Extensive: El Salvador (1)
<u>Prevalence of securitising language</u>

Low: Belize, El Salvador (2) Medium: (0) High: Guatemala (1)
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5: LEVEL OF HUMAN RIGHTS

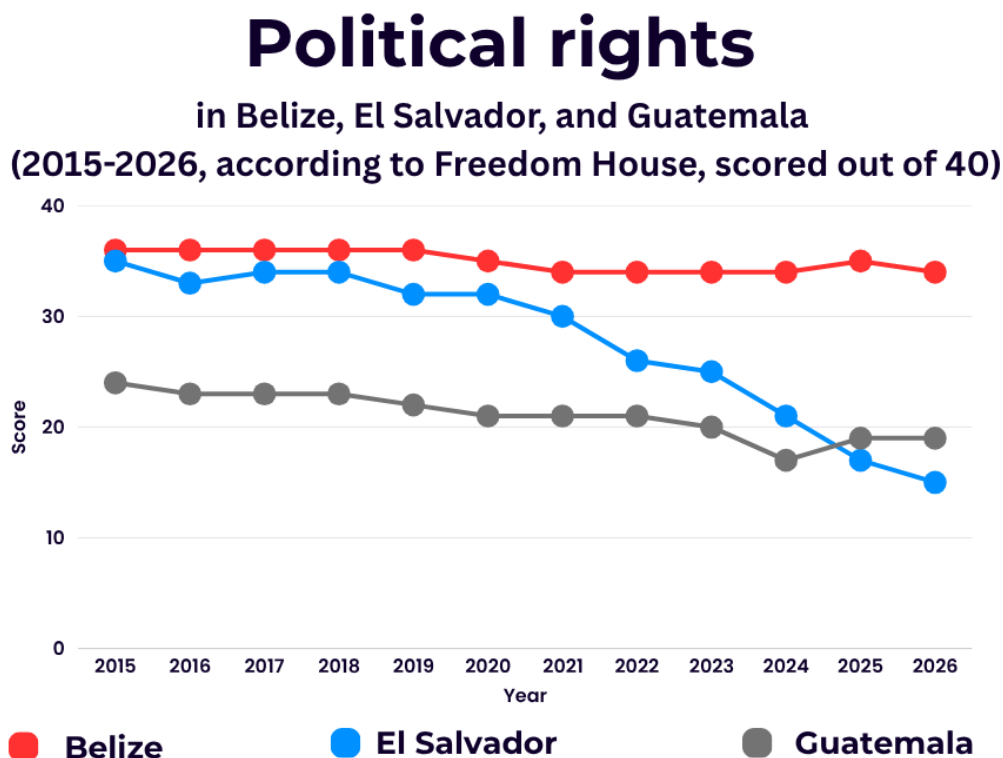
5.1: POLITICAL AND DEMOCRATIC SAFEGUARDS

This section will analyse the trend of political and democratic safeguards in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala by providing data from Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World Index*, namely the section entitled ‘political rights. The reported years provided span 2015-2026, but the inclusion of 2015 and 2026 are important as the reports are released retrospectively by one year, meaning that 2015 covers events occurring in 2014, just outside of the study period but crucial in gaining an understanding of the human rights situation immediately prior to the beginning of the study period. Conversely, the inclusion of 2026 effectively presents Freedom House’s analysis of developments from 2025, the final year of the study period. When examining ‘political rights, Freedom House looks at aspects of the electoral process, political pluralism and participation, and the functioning of the government.¹³¹ This data will be further complemented by the consideration of key developments, either positive or negative – as applicable – addressed in the corresponding reports published alongside the rankings. Relevant cases available in scholarly articles, reports from civil society organisations, and/or journalistic reports regarding specific instances where erosion or improvement of political and democratic safeguards have taken place will provide a qualitative understanding of the trends documented over the period – thus presenting a holistic view of how the trends manifest themselves, outside of solely examining data trends.

Graph 1: Political rights in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala (2015-2026 reports, according to Freedom House, scored out of 40)¹³²

¹³¹ These are broken down into sections in the respective country reports

¹³² Freedom House, “Belize”, 2026; Freedom House, “El Salvador”, 2026; Freedom House, “Guatemala”, 2026; Freedom House, “Publication Archives”, 2023



5.1.1: BELIZE

As per the ‘political rights section of the *Freedom in the World Index* published by Freedom House, Belize demonstrates little change throughout the study period, maintaining a high level of political rights, fluctuating between 34 to 36 out of 40. Freedom House’s most recent written report on Belize highlights how the interlink between organised crime and corruption persists, with cases against police officers facilitating drug-trafficking occasionally making it to trial, before being thrown out. Upon further investigation into political and democratic safeguards in Belize, no significant impediments appear in this regard.¹³³ As such, for this section, Belize demonstrates a trend of positive or negligible change in political and democratic safeguards upon the end of the study period.

5.1.2: EL SALVADOR

According to the compilation of ‘political rights scores between 2015-2026 published by Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World Index*, El Salvador has experienced a considerable decline in this regard, dropping 20 points over the study period, from 35 in the 2015 report to

¹³³ See Freedom House, “Belize”, 2026

15 in the 2026 report. This decline can be attributed to multiple deteriorating factors in political rights, from the unconstitutional re-election of President Nayib Bukele, as well as the holding of elections during a state of exception in which freedom of expression is restricted. According to the OAS preliminary report from the corresponding 2024 election observation mission, “[v]arious stakeholders with whom the Mission met expressed their concern about the repeated extension of the emergency regime, which in their opinion undermines its temporary nature.”¹³⁴ In its report, Freedom House further notes that many political opponents are in prison or in exile, and criminal investigations into political links with organised crime groups were suspended alongside the dismantling of anti-corruption bodies since 2020.¹³⁵ When cases did come to light, consequences for whistleblowers were severe, as was the case for Alejandro Muyschondt, Bukele’s former security advisor, who accused government officials of having links with drug-trafficking groups. Following these public allegations, 46-year-old Muyschondt was “swiftly arrested, and—after suffering physical abuse—died in state custody in February 2024.”¹³⁶

Since Bukele entered office in 2019, a notable trend has been the crackdown on civil society organisations and human rights defenders, with many of these organisations previously operating out of El Salvador now headquartered elsewhere, most prominently in Costa Rica or the USA. One of the most well-known cases has been the detention of Ruth López, a prominent lawyer and human rights defender from Cristosal, one of the most well-established human rights NGOs operating in the Northern Triangle region. López is well-known in El Salvador for her investigations into corruption in the country, as well as the use of Pegasus spyware against journalists and human rights defenders. She was detained on charges of embezzlement at the same time as she was working on representing the cases of Venezuelans being held at the notoriously harsh *Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo* (CECOT) [Terrorism Confinement Centre] flagship mega-prison located outside Tecoluca. This followed a lack of co-operation between the Trump administration in the USA and the Venezuelan government under President Nicolás Maduro, leading US President Donald Trump to sign an agreement with Bukele that CECOT could hold these deportees at the

¹³⁴ Organization of American States, *Preliminary Report of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission in El Salvador* (OAS, 2024), p2

¹³⁵ See Freedom House, “El Salvador”, Freedom House, published 2025 <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/el-salvador/freedom-world/2025>> [accessed 23rd April 2026]

¹³⁶ Ibid.

beginning of the former's non-consecutive second term.¹³⁷ Cristosal claims that in El Salvador “at least 86 people are currently detained for political reasons”¹³⁸.

Due to the aforementioned cases which contextualise the decline visible in the Freedom House data, El Salvador demonstrates a trend of significant negative change in political and democratic safeguards during the study period.

5.1.3: GUATEMALA

As per the ‘political rights section of the *Freedom in the World Index* published by Freedom House, Guatemala demonstrates little change throughout the study period, maintaining a level of political rights which has fluctuated between 17 to 24 out of 40. Despite the figures not declining as significantly as in El Salvador, the issue of political and democratic safeguards has been particularly acute for Guatemala, which began the study period with a much lower political rights score than Belize and El Salvador, at just 24 out of 40 in 2015, followed by a gradual decline, reaching its lowest level of 17 in the 2024 report. Ultimately, this score refers to the events of 2023 in which presidential elections were marred by political interference by the pro-establishment figures in the Constitutional Court, Supreme Electoral Tribunal, and the Public Prosecutor's Office, who jointly orchestrated the obstruction of the election of President Bernardo Arévalo in various ways, already examined in earlier sections. In the 2025 and 2026 reports since Arévalo took office, an upward trend has emerged, reaching scores of 17 and 19 respectively, but the score remains slightly below the average for the past ten years and, on a Latin American level, Guatemala's 2026 ‘political rights score from Freedom House only surpasses El Salvador, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Cuba, and Haiti. As explored, this is largely due to the deep ethnic injustices that persist in the country, with the organisation highlighting the continued under-representation of women and indigenous communities in Guatemalan politics.¹³⁹ Despite promises by subsequent Guatemalan presidential administrations to reduce corruption, the issue remains endemic, and further complicates the effectiveness of external state responses in areas highly affected by organised crime.

¹³⁷ See Thomas Graham, “Lawyer for Venezuelans deported to El Salvador prison arrested”, *The Guardian* (San Salvador), 19th May 2025 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/may/19/el-salvador-lawyer-arrested-deported-venezuelans>> [accessed 23rd April 2026]

¹³⁸ *The Tico Times*, “An NGO says Bukele has 86 political prisoners in El Salvador”, 5th March 2026 <<https://ticotimes.net/2026/03/05/an-ngo-says-bukele-has-86-political-prisoners-in-el-salvador>> [accessed 23rd April 2026]

¹³⁹ See Freedom House, “Guatemala”, 2026

Following these trends visible in the Freedom House data, Guatemala demonstrates a trend of slight negative change in political and democratic safeguards during the study period.

5.2: RESTRICTIONS OF CIVIL LIBERTIES AND DUE PROCESSES

This section will analyse trends relating to restrictions of civil liberties and due processes in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala by providing data from Freedom House’s *Freedom in the World Index*, namely the section entitled ‘civil liberties’, following the same time period as in the previous sub-section. When examining ‘civil liberties’, Freedom House looks at freedom of expression and belief, associational and organisational rights, the rule of law, as well as personal autonomy and individual rights.¹⁴⁰ This data will be further complemented by the consideration of key developments, either positive or negative – as applicable – addressed in the corresponding reports published alongside the rankings. Relevant cases available in scholarly articles, reports from civil society organisations, and/or journalistic reports regarding specific instances where erosion or improvement relating to civil liberties and due processes will provide a qualitative understanding of the trends documented over the period – thus presenting a holistic view of how the trends manifest themselves, outside of solely examining data trends.

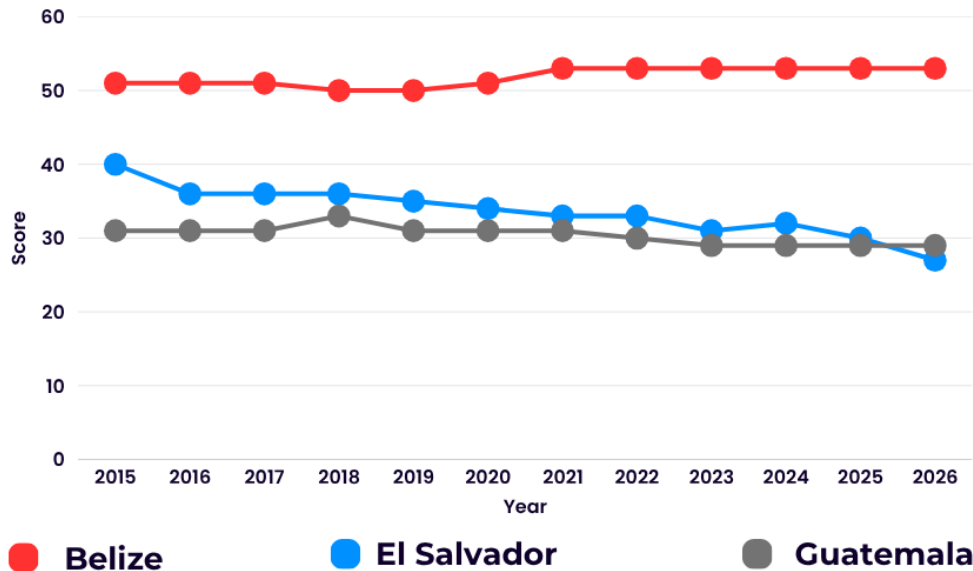
Graph 2: Civil liberties in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala (2015-2026 reports, according to Freedom House, scored out of 60)¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ These are broken down into sections in the respective country reports

¹⁴¹ Freedom House, “Belize”, 2026; Freedom House, “El Salvador”, 2026; Freedom House, “Guatemala”, 2026; Freedom House, “Publication Archives”, 2023

Civil liberties

in Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala
(2015-2026, according to Freedom House, scored out of 60)



5.2.1: BELIZE

According to the compilation from 2015-2026 published by Freedom House's *Freedom in the World Index*, Belize has experienced a slight increase in civil liberties throughout the study period, from continued scores of 51 out of a total of 60 at the outset, rising to a score of 53, which has been maintained every year since the 2021 report. Freedom House has noted in its most recent report that the right to freedom of expression and assembly are well-respected and that NGOs operate without interference from the government. Furthermore, where cases of police brutality have been documented, prosecutions and convictions have largely followed. Exploitation, forced labour, and human trafficking are issues, rooted in organised crime, which the state is still unable to effectively counter.¹⁴²

The Belize Constitution 13th Amendment Bill (2025) is currently being debated in the Belizean Parliament. Amongst other things, some notable elements of the bill include the creation of a dedicated Gun and Gang Court to deal with gang-related crime, the imposition of extraordinary measures usually reserved for a state of public emergency to occur without

¹⁴² See Freedom House, "Belize", 2026

such a declaration taking place in specific areas, and detention in those areas possible based solely on “reasonable suspicion”¹⁴³. Whilst these measures will be in place and subject to the similar legal requirements as the constitution sets out for states of public emergency, these legal limits are still extensive, allowing for the measures to take place for up to 12 months upon renewal. The proposed amendment was tabled in 2025, the same year in which the High Court of Belize ruled that, according to Justice Sonya Young, “[t]he use of the words ‘sporadic’ increase in violent crimes and ‘subtle’ resurgence by ‘some’ gang members does not suggest [...] that the criminal activity was of the gravity that could not be dealt with by the ordinary law”¹⁴⁴. This was in relation to the Belizean government’s justifications for the state of public emergency issued in July 2023. In her 2026 article, Godoy-Guillen goes on to suggest that the very idea of normality is constructed, and that what is ‘normal’ for one community may be deemed ‘exceptional’ by another, thus suggesting that the invocation of extraordinary measures under the state of public emergency was inappropriate. Indeed, this interpretation is not surprising – when establishing the prevalence of securitising language in Belize in the relevant section of this thesis, the country scored low in all reports selected for analysis. This could highlight how there is a disconnect between the state’s priorities and those of the residents in affected communities, especially Southside. This disconnect could result in any attempted state-imposed securitisations being unsuccessful, reducing their effectiveness as the public does not feel that extraordinary measures are necessitated. Godoy-Guillen suggests that alongside the proposed changes to the constitution with the provisions of the 13th Amendment Bill, the normalisation of extraordinary measures is increasingly common in Belize. Moreover, the proposed bill makes challenging the legality of such measures difficult. The *Staine v. Attorney General* (2025) case would be procedurally impossible under the new proposed legislation, as it supposes the legality of all actions carried out by the Security Forces, and declares any proclamations made under the legislation to be “reasonably justifiable in the circumstances of any situation arising or existing during the period for the purpose of dealing with that situation.”¹⁴⁵ Following the determination that a previous state of public emergency was unnecessarily declared, this effectively reduces trust in the use of this law in the future, should it come to pass.

¹⁴³ Godoy-Guillen, “States of Exception”, p77

¹⁴⁴ Jahreem Staine *et al.* v. Attorney General (2025), High Court of Belize Claim 613 of 2023, quoted in Godoy-Guillen, “States of Exception”, p79

¹⁴⁵ Belize Constitution (Thirteenth Amendment) Bill, 2025, C.III (Belize)

Given that this legislation is still being debated in Belize, and consultations with the public and foreign legal experts are ongoing, it cannot substantially form part of the longer-term analysis of restrictions of civil liberties and due processes for this thesis as it has not yet been enacted or enforced. Nevertheless, were the proposed bill to become law, this could potentially negatively impact the level of human rights in Belize in the future. As of now, given the positive Freedom House trend and lack of significant changes to civil liberties and due processes for the majority of the study period, Belize demonstrates a trend of positive or negligible change, suggesting that civil liberties and due processes have not been restricted by the country's organised crime prevention and control strategies.

5.2.2: EL SALVADOR

The change in 'civil liberties' as per the *Freedom in the World Index* signals a decrease, but the declining trend is less acute than the country's change in 'political rights during the same period. As of the 2015 report, El Salvador scored a total of 40 out of 60 points, which has declined gradually between 2016 to 2022, from where the decrease then intensified – from 31 out of 60 in 2023, to 27 in the 2026 report. At first glance, this appears puzzling when one considers the rights suspended by the state of exception in place since March 2022, but various factors are at play here which explain the continued decline, which is nonetheless notable when viewed across the period. The most recent Freedom House report for El Salvador notes the state's regular use of social media to propagate disinformation campaigns. Other notable developments include the regular self-censorship of journalists and academics to avoid persecution, and the purge of judges opposing Bukele's plans already mentioned previously. Furthermore, it explains how the issue of freedom of movement has improved for some, and worsened for others. Whilst previous informal restrictions prevented freedom of movement for those living in or travelling to areas largely controlled by gangs, restrictions of this type of movement have decreased as a result of mass detentions of gang members, whilst other "Salvadorans—especially youth—tend to restrict their movements in public space for fear of arbitrary harassment or arrest by the police or military."¹⁴⁶ Here, I argue that this hypervigilance takes place due to the stereotypes that persist in relation to young men, from deprived areas, often having typically been associated with being target recruits for gangs, prior to the 2022 state of exception. The pervasiveness of these stereotypes only fuels the

¹⁴⁶ Freedom House, "El Salvador", 2026

perpetual cycle of fear and vulnerability as already discussed in this thesis, as the state assures residents that extraordinary measures continue to be needed in an uninterrupted fashion for more than four years to counter the threat associated with members of the population with certain stereotypical social and physical attributes. This duality, where much of the population exercises freer movement rights, and a certain section of the population does not for the perceived risk of threatening the former, demonstrates how a non-targeted measure can latently have a targeted impact.

Significant concerns remain in relation to the treatment of detainees held in Salvadoran prisons, with the most notable of them being the infamous CECOT, known for its multiple appearances in President Bukele's slick social media posts, and for its mass incarceration rates of young Salvadoran men. It gained global notoriety in 2025 following the transfer of immigrants from the USA to the facility when they were not able to be deported to their countries of origin. Many of them had not committed any crimes. In a joint investigation carried out by Human Rights Watch and Cristosal, it was discovered that prisoners faced systemic abuse of their rights, including "incommunicado detention, inadequate food, denial of basic hygiene and sanitation, [and] limited access to health care and medicine [...] in violation of several provisions of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners"¹⁴⁷. Moreover, the organisations reported that inmates suffered "constant beatings and other forms of ill-treatment, including some cases of sexual violence."¹⁴⁸ Since the start of the state of exception, the Legislative Assembly has backed the suspension of guaranteed time limits for cases to reach trial. When pre-trial hearings have occurred, these have seen up to 900 detainees being processed at once, and mass trials for alleged members of the MS-13 gang took place in April 2026, with 486 accused.¹⁴⁹ The judicial system is using such extreme measures to cope with the demand being placed upon it,

¹⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, "'You Have Arrived in Hell'", 2025, Human Rights Watch <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/11/12/you-have-arrived-in-hell/torture-and-other-abuses-against-venezuelans-in-el>> [accessed 26th April 2026]

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ See Leire Ventas, "El megajulio contra centenares de supuestos pandilleros de la Mara Salvatrucha que arrancó en El Salvador" [The megatrial of hundreds of accused *Mara Salvatrucha* gang-members has begun in El Salvador], 2026, BBC <<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c4gxjz3lpdjo>> [accessed 26th April 2026]; see also Patrícia de Matos, "El Salvador autoriza julgamentos em massa de até 900 presos" [El Salvador authorises mass hearings of up to 900 detainees], 2023, Brasil de Fato <<https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2023/07/28/el-salvador-autoriza-julgamentos-em-massa-de-ate-900-presos/>> [accessed 26th April 2026]

especially as approximately 2% of the Salvadoran population is in prison.¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, due process norms in this respect are unable to be followed. This leaves individual cases indistinguishable, effectively meaning that when one enters a Salvadoran detention facility, they are assumed guilty, with avenues to recourse to prove one's innocence being severely limited. The declining civil liberties' trend and extreme penitentiary conditions – combined with multiple reported cases of gross due process violations relating to mass trials and arbitrary detentions – highlight that El Salvador has undergone a significant negative change during the study period, meaning that restrictions of civil liberties and due processes have become systemic.

5.2.3: GUATEMALA

As in the 'political rights chart, Guatemala's 'civil liberties' scores in the *Freedom in the World Index* display figures from the outset lower than in Belize and El Salvador, but that remain relatively stable throughout the study period. As of the 2015 report, the country starts with a score of 31, which is maintained until 2022, barring a one-off increase in 2018 to 33. Since the 2022 report, however, the civil liberties score decreases slightly to 29 in 2023, where it has remained ever since.

The latest Freedom House report for Guatemala has highlighted that continued particular areas of concern in relation to civil liberties include the self-censorship of journalists. Indeed, in compiling relevant literature on contested uses of states of emergency in the country, uncovering points of view that are contrary to the official government message can be difficult, either due to a lack of open criticism, or when publication does occur, articles come without stated authorship or employ cultural heritage pseudonyms to protect the author's identity. This trend was particularly the case when researching contested states of emergency under the Morales and Giammattei presidencies. Additionally, the report goes on to explore how attacks on human rights defenders are common, that due process is marred by corruption in the judiciary, exacerbated by ineffective policing.¹⁵¹ The displacement of populations affected by organised crime continues to rise, particularly as many MS-13 and Barrio 18 strongholds in El Salvador are now more firmly established in Guatemala since the 2022 state of exception. Whilst attacks on human rights defenders in the country have long

¹⁵⁰ See Roxana Lemus, "El Salvador inaugura curso internacional antipandillas con delegaciones de seis países" [El Salvador launches an international course for combatting gangs with delegations from six countries], *Infobae* (San Salvador), 28th April 2026 <<https://www.infobae.com/el-salvador/2026/04/28/el-salvador-inaugura-curso-internacional-antipandillas-con-delegaciones-de-seis-paises/>> [accessed 29th April 2026]

¹⁵¹ See Freedom House, "Guatemala", 2026

been an increasing cause of concern throughout most of the study period, the 2025 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) report on Guatemala highlights how “the Commission observed a positive change in the narrative of some high-level State authorities toward greater recognition of the work of human rights defenders. However, the defense of human rights continues to be a high-risk activity”¹⁵². This appears to be a moment of transition for the country. Under the Arévalo presidency, attacks on human rights defenders have decreased, but some human rights defenders remain in prison, and active cases continue to be heard – thus underlining the difficulty of reducing corruption in the judicial system, often as human rights defenders are from indigenous communities protecting their land from exploitation on behalf of large corporations.

Prisons in Guatemala are often overcrowded, with an overcrowding rate of 110%. Most prisons are severely understaffed, with cliques having *de facto* control over certain areas of some prisons, or also entire prisons altogether, continuing extortion and abuse from within.¹⁵³ Just outside of the study period, but still notable, is the attempted criminal insurgency that occurred on 17-18th January 2026, which saw a co-ordinated network of gangs across the country’s prisons activate in kidnapping prison officers, and threatening to attack political figures and major government buildings that same evening, after it was announced that gang leaders would stop receiving some of the privileged treatment that they had become accustomed to.

What is visible regarding restrictions of civil liberties and due processes in Guatemala is that political will is increasingly present, but structural political and social injustices hinder significant developments in this regard. With the first judicial elections to the Constitutional Court, Supreme Electoral Tribunal, and Attorney General’s Office since Arévalo took office expected in 2026, it is possible that the figures perpetrating restrictions of civil liberties and due processes in the country may be substituted by pro-government magistrates. If all these changes occur in a way that favours Arévalo’s government with its human rights-first promises, Guatemala could see a decline in restrictions of civil liberties and due processes into the future. Nevertheless, based on the trends observed in the Freedom House and IACHR reports, Guatemala displays a slight negative change in restrictions on civil liberties and due processes during the study period.

¹⁵² IACHR, “Human rights situation in Guatemala”, 2nd November 2025, Report: OEA/Ser.L/V/II, Doc. 227/25, p217

¹⁵³ For detailed reporting of such incidents, see IACHR, “Human rights situation in Guatemala”, pp313-7

Table 7: Results from ‘level of human rights’ section:

<u>Political and democratic safeguards</u> Positive or negligible change: Belize (1) Slight negative change: Guatemala (1) Significant negative change: El Salvador (1)
<u>Restrictions of civil liberties and due processes</u> Positive or negligible change: Belize (1) Slight negative change: Guatemala (1) Significant negative change: El Salvador (1)

6: CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This thesis set out to explore the link between organised crime prevention and control strategies on the level of human rights – namely if non-targeted prevention and control strategies negatively impacted the level of human rights. To that end, the cases of Belize, El Salvador, and Guatemala, three countries in Central America with similar organised crime challenges, were considered between 2015-2025. This study has determined that, despite the similarities present, state responses denote a trifurcation during the ten-year study period, remaining faithful to the hypothesis.

Following the imposition of a state of exception in 2022 under President Nayib Bukele, El Salvador saw mass incarceration of suspected gang members, and the country’s reported homicide rate plummeted. The popularisation of these *mano dura* attributes, following their success in the Salvadoran case, saw other countries in Latin America consider the implementation of similar approaches. Such measures had never experienced such high popularity in the region before 2022, as the results from Bukele’s state of exception were unprecedented, especially considering that the country had the world’s highest homicide rate at the start of the study period. Despite being regional neighbours with similar organised crime challenges, Belize and Guatemala did not take similar measures. This thesis proposed that the level of human rights was deemed too high of a price to pay for these countries. For Belize, I propose that its human rights record is among the highest in the region and the country sought to maintain that. For Guatemala, following centuries of entrenched ethnic injustices and regional disparities, culminating in a civil war which lasted more than three decades, the country’s human rights score when compared to regional counterparts was

already relatively low upon entering the study period. The logic here implies that Guatemala would not wish to worsen that record by following the extraordinary measures seen in El Salvador, especially as much of the country receives essential international development funding given its vulnerability to climate change, high levels of malnutrition, and the pervasiveness of regional inequalities.

Indeed, by showing positive or negligible changes in political and democratic safeguards and restrictions of civil liberties and due processes, the level of human rights in Belize during the period was not negatively affected by the measures taken to prevent and control organised crime in the country, as Belize demonstrates full adherence within legal limits with a limited duration and scope of states of emergency; limited *mano dura* attributes; and a low prevalence of securitising language.

El Salvador, for its part, demonstrated significant negative changes in both indicators used to measure the level of human rights over the ten-year period. This is to be expected as the country can be viewed as implementing a non-targeted strategy to prevent and control organised crime, especially since March 2022. Such manifestations are visible from this study, as the country is classed as low adherence within legal limits for the use of states of emergency, with the scope and duration of the extended sole measure taken – the state of exception - being deemed excessive. Furthermore, the country demonstrates extensive *mano dura* attributes, with all seven common identified features forming part of everyday life in the country's organised crime prevention and control response. The hypothetical expectation posited a high prevalence of securitising language in El Salvador given its significant negative change in the level of human rights. Ultimately, this was not the case, and will be considered shortly.

Nevertheless, Guatemala did present a high prevalence of securitising language. At first, the Guatemalan case appears to be the most complex of the three countries studied in terms of analysing the results that derive from it. The country presents a full adherence within legal limits relating to its uses of states of emergency, but they were also deemed significant in scope and duration. Furthermore, considerable *mano dura* attributes commonly appear in Guatemala, alongside the aforementioned high prevalence of securitising language. What one expects from such a mixed set of results therefore would be that the level of human rights changes would be neither positive or negligible, nor significant – resultingly, a slight negative

change in the level of human rights would be expected. This is exactly what the data shows, with both indicators for this section arriving at results of slight negative change.

Despite the results for the prevalence of securitising language not aligning with the hypothetical expectation, I wish to briefly explore why this may be the case. Belize has demonstrated consistent results throughout, using highly targeted states of emergency, with an emphasis on rehabilitation and addressing social injustices from the root. As such, a low score here is to be expected as it is not in the government's interests to create a highly securitised environment, as this may go against the success of their approach to date. In El Salvador, despite using available governmental reports for analysis, the prevalence of securitising language was still low. I propose that in El Salvador, discourse is highly securitised, but that such language is not necessarily highly prevalent. This could be the case as the country has enforced the most punitive measures, which have had systemic results visible on the streets, in the news, on social media, as well as at the ballot box in relation to the popularity of Bukele's *Nuevas Ideas* party. As such, regularly re-inforcing a perceived threat that you are trying to eradicate is thereby not seen as effective – with authorities instead preferring to use highly targeted securitising language infrequently in order to maximise its impact. In Guatemala, however, where the prevalence of securitising language has been seen to be high, highly securitising language is used frequently to remind the public of the justifications for measures taken. In part, this is because Guatemala has not devised a rehabilitative strategy, as in Belize, nor has it followed a hard-on-crime approach as in El Salvador. As such, securitising language is highly prevalent in Guatemala as the country actively perpetuates cycles of fear and perceived vulnerability to justify its measures, thus reducing the potential for pushbacks against the state's responses, as they are increasingly legitimised by officials and in the media. I consider that examining the prevalence of securitising language in this novel way has the potential to produce more detailed results, were more reports to be taken for analysis, and could be applied to other cases. For these three countries, this approach would face limitations if taken at a larger scale given the low availability of governmental reports across all years studied.

In the five months between the end of the study period and the publication of this thesis, some key developments have occurred which have the potential to signify a change in the level of human rights in Belize and Guatemala going forward. As alluded to in earlier sections, debate in Belize is ongoing regarding possible reforms to its constitution, which could see the dilution of legal recourse against the use of states of emergency. Guatemala saw

co-ordinated gang attacks from both within prisons and against public buildings, widely seen as an attempt at criminal insurgency. In Belize, debates are ongoing regarding these measures, but of significance is how the Belizean government has attended ‘anti-gang’ courses offered by the government of El Salvador.¹⁵⁴ Were Belize to reduce legal recourse over its use of states of emergency, and normalise their use over extended areas or periods of time with even any resemblance of the ‘Bukele Model’, the results gathered here from the 2015-2025 period suggest that the level of human rights could be negatively impacted by such potential changes. In Guatemala, state of emergency measures of varying tiers have been implemented across the country since the events of January 2026 – firstly nationwide, followed by measures on a departmental basis. As of May 2026, a state of prevention is ongoing across the entirety of Guatemala, Escuintla, Izabal, San Marcos, and Huehuetenango Departments. This change of approach is significant as it highlights a major deviation from the targeted approach against the use of states of emergency that Arévalo had proposed upon entering the presidency. In addition, it marks the first time that nationwide emergency measures have been used to respond to organised crime, as well as the first time that the *zonas* of Guatemala City have been under direct states of emergency relating to organised crime. In March 2026, Arévalo announced that construction of a mega-prison would take place in Morales, Izabal Department.¹⁵⁵ Named *El Triunfo* (The Triumph), the Guatemalan government seeks to create a CECOT-style maximum security prison. Following a direct threat against governmental control, which temporarily overwhelmed the existing penitentiary security apparatus, it appears that Guatemala seems willing to learn from elements of the hard-on-crime approach taken in El Salvador. This could ultimately have a severe impact on the country’s already relatively low human rights score going forward.

As such, the publication of this thesis could not come at a more pivotal moment for the human rights situations in the countries studied. El Salvador continues to extend the state of exception more than four years after its initial implementation, as the second Trump administration increasingly emphasises its desires for what it deems to be robust, hard-on-crime measures to be taken in the region to prevent and control organised crime, with the belief that this will reduce migration flows towards the USA. Indeed, following the

¹⁵⁴ See Lemus, “El Salvador inaugura curso internacional antipandillas con delegaciones de seis países”

¹⁵⁵ See Sayda Galicia, “El gobierno de Guatemala inicia construcción de la cárcel de máxima seguridad El Triunfo en Morales, Izabal” [The Guatemalan government has begun building El Triunfo maximum security prison in Morales, Izabal], *Infobae* (Guatemala City), 27th March 2026
 <<https://www.infobae.com/guatemala/2026/03/27/el-gobierno-de-guatemala-inicia-construccion-de-la-carcel-de-maxima-seguridad-el-triunfo-en-morales-izabal/>> [accessed 10th May 2026]

assassination in Mexico of Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) leader, alias El Mencho, a resulting wave of violence swept across the country in response to Mexican state security operations, carried out with US support. Furthermore, the Bukele government has received strong backing from the USA during Trump's second term – thus re-inforcing US expectations for how other countries in the region should respond to such challenges.

There are various future angles for research that emerge from this study – including the impact of TOC on the environment and preservation of cultural patrimony in protected areas. Furthermore, analysis of the role of international organisations in response to organised crime could be considered, as well as the policing challenges that arise in post-conflict areas where ethnic injustices reduce trust in the police. Ultimately, any analysis of this ilk would benefit from ethnographic field research and interviews with populations affected by organised crime and its ramifications, as well as those working on the ground to prevent and control it.

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