



In Leaving Anti-Corruption Accord, Bukele Moves Close to Unchecked Power in El Salvador

On June 4, El Salvador's Attorney General Rodolfo Delgado made an announcement, later confirmed by President Nayib Bukele, that the country had terminated its 2019 cooperation agreement with the Organization of American States (OAS) to back an International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador (CICIES). Bukele [criticized the OAS and its appointment of Ernesto Muyschondt](#), a Salvadoran politician under investigation for conspiracy and electoral fraud, stating that the OAS could not be trusted and that partnering with a different international organization might be a better avenue; however he then went on to attack those organizations as well. This worrisome move comes just over a month after the majority bloc in El Salvador's National Assembly, led by Bukele's New Ideas party, [moved quickly and without adherence to local or international norms](#) to replace the attorney general and all five magistrates of the country's Constitutional Chamber with political allies.

With a new majority, Bukele acted quickly to consolidate his political control, and legislators [threatened](#) further actions against independent oversight bodies. Now, with an undermined judiciary and the loss of checks and balances, the removal of the CICIES is the latest in an alarming set of attacks on the country's rule of law and judicial independence.

The CICIES and the need to combat corruption was a central focus of Bukele's presidential campaign. In a [speech given on February 3](#), the day Bukele officially won the presidential election, he said that "The people's money has to return to the people, they owe us \$37 billion and they are going to start paying [...] that's why we are going to bring CICIES." However, during the first two years of his presidency, few efforts were made to strengthen the commission's investigative capacity. Despite his campaign pledges, and his public comments at the signing of the agreement with the OAS, President Bukele and his administration have done little to make the CICIES an effective and genuinely independent body. As described [in a recent statement](#) by the OAS General Secretariat, the Bukele administration took "actions aimed at preventing progress in the investigations into allegations of corruption by the current administration " and sought to "induce the CICIES to investigate actions of opposition politicians exclusively." Despite its limitations, the CICIES had been working with Attorney General Raul Melara in investigating alleged irregularities of emergency fund purchases to respond to the pandemic.

Shortly after the May 1 removal of Attorney General Melara, El Salvador's National Assembly [granted immunity](#) to officials accused of mismanaging COVID-19 funds. In a separate move, the decision this week by the National Assembly—at the request of President Bukele—to authorize

the use of bitcoin as legal tender, raises concerns that the approval of the unregulated cryptocurrency could make the country's financial system open to [manipulation and fraud](#).

These developments should deepen concerns about unchecked corruption, the separation of powers and judicial independence in El Salvador.

The need for a strong international response is urgent. The international community and financial bodies should condition any cooperation, assistance, or loans on El Salvador's government demonstrating commitment to anti-corruption efforts and a renewed commitment to judicial independence and the rule of law. Additionally, the National Assembly must not protect public officials from corruption probes. The OAS should make the Commission's investigations public so that citizens can make use of the information and existing mechanisms to defend their rights violated by the corrupt.

Without a strong response from the international community that makes clear the necessity of genuine anti-corruption efforts and adherence to democratic norms and rule of law for any amicable relations to continue, power will continue to be further concentrated in El Salvador, with fewer and fewer avenues available for checks and balances.