

The Same Script, Different Actors: Left-Wing and Right-Wing Populism as a Gateway to Authoritarianism in Nicaragua and El Salvador

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Nicaragua and El Salvador: Two Not-So-Isolated Cases

At first glance, one could argue that the Nicaragua of Ortega and the El Salvador of Bukele are isolated scenarios, since they are authoritarianisms of distinct ideologies, Ortega from the left and Bukele from the right; however, they have more in common than it appears. Their main similarity lies in the way both dictators implemented populism in the pursuit of power and in how, to this day, they continue to use it to maintain that power and justify their actions. In this sense, it is worth revisiting the research and theories of the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde (2004), who in his work *The Populist Zeitgeist. Government and Opposition* offers a definition of the concept of populism and its main characteristics, which are notably fulfilled in the cases of Ortega and Bukele.

From this perspective, populism no longer represents an exception but rather the norm within contemporary politics, and these two examples clearly demonstrate this. This article will analyze, first, the theoretical framework of populism proposed by Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser; second, the populist trajectory of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua; third, Nayib Bukele's so-called "millennial authoritarianism" in El Salvador; and finally, a comparative analysis focused on the discursive construction of "the people" and "the elite", the role of populism as a legitimizer of power, and repression as a mechanism of exclusion once both regimes had consolidated. In this way, the aim is to demonstrate that, beyond their ideological differences, both cases are far more similar than they appear at first glance.

Populism and Cas Mudde's Vision

Populism has been defined in various ways, but its analysis and interpretation from Cas Mudde's perspective becomes more direct and forceful in the case of Ortega and Bukele. In conceptual terms, "Populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be

an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people". (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Populism is not simply an ideology, but an empty structure awaiting its host ideology; likewise, populism does not function on its own, it requires a robust ideology attached to it in order to be carried out more effectively, which is why Mudde classified it as an ideological chameleon, since it does not respond to a specific stance but adapts itself however the populist leader wishes (Mudde & Rovira, 2017). In Ortega's case, he linked his populist style to revolutionary socialism, creating a left-wing authoritarianism with strong populist participation to achieve it; Bukele, for his part, associated it with a technocratic and security-oriented right-wing ideology, establishing a right-wing authoritarianism.

Mudde broadens the vision of populism with two very interesting variants, inclusive and exclusive populism, which can be evidenced in the cases of Nicaragua and El Salvador (Mudde & Rovira, 2013). Inclusive populism, typical of the Latin American left, is characterized by broadening the concept of "the People" to include historically excluded groups, such as Indigenous peoples, the poor, and the working class. The discourse has always been aimed at giving voice and representation to these groups. Exclusive populism, meanwhile, typical of the European right, has been responsible for defining "the People" in a much more closed manner, excluding certain sectors such as migrants and minorities, among others, and securitizing them so that they are perceived as a threat.

There is no doubt that the Populist Zeitgeist proposed by Mudde is a reality; this refers to a scenario in which populist discourse becomes normalized and permeates the political system in such a way that its rhetorical elements, such as the opposition between "the people" and "the elites", the appeal to popular will, and the questioning of traditional institutions, are adopted even by parties and leaders who do not identify as populist. Populism is no longer merely the expression of a few but has become a rule for today's world, shaping every political practice and attempt at global governance (Mudde, 2004). Populism is used by both the right and the left. And something important is the anti-elitism that exists and is directly related to the Zeitgeist; the elite must always be seen as the enemy, otherwise populism does not exist.

Nicaraguan Populism

Recalling the history of Nicaragua, it was a nation battered by dictatorships throughout time, which has exacted a heavy toll on its people, as will be evident in the country's trajectory. In response to the Somocista dictatorship of the era, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was created with the purpose of overthrowing the government in power and liberating Nicaragua. It was a movement that always criticized the system that governed them and sought through its actions to find a new model, one that was just and had all the freedoms that had been taken from them. But the worst representative of their struggle came to power, Daniel Ortega, alongside his wife Rosario Murillo, the marital dictatorship.

To understand populism in Nicaragua, it is important to look back to the late 1970s. Ortega differs from other populist leaders because he came to power twice. By the time he regained the presidency in 2006, he was already a well-known political figure in Nicaragua. He secured his return to power thanks to a murky political arrangement known as "El Pacto" (The Pact), in which Ortega helped protect the then-president, liberal Arnoldo Alemán, from corruption convictions; in exchange, Alemán allowed him to reform the electoral system to benefit the FSLN (Capetillo, 2019). Thanks to the secret agreement, Ortega managed to reach the presidency, given that the percentage required to be elected was 45% and was lowered to 35% so that he could reach the threshold, since he only had 38% and under the previous law it would have been impossible to win, the agreement was ideally suited to him, given that he was coming off three lost elections. "El Pacto" restructured the electoral system to benefit his Sandinista party and change the course of Nicaragua (Capetillo, 2019).

A peculiarity of Ortega is that he uses revolutionary populism, as well as conservative populism, to delegitimize his opponents, normally social liberals, all with a single aim, to impose and justify authoritarian practices such as the absorption of independent institutions, the expulsion of NGOs, the use of armed force, and arbitrary detention (Capetillo, 2019). Within this strategy and the calculated use of populism, it was observed that the FSLN shifted toward conservative policies; Ortega incorporated the church and right-wing groups into his politics. This changed the FSLN's populism because it redefined who "the people" are and who "the corrupt elite" are, while consolidating power (Capetillo, 2019). This was the most effective strategy he used to reach power and the perfect reflection of his populism in full display.

Ortega lost three consecutive elections (1990, 1996, 2001) as the classic revolutionary leftist leader. He then understood that he needed to broaden his electoral base beyond the Sandinista core and given that Nicaragua is a deeply Catholic and socially

conservative country, he made a strategic pivot, he banned abortion even in cases of rape, allied himself with evangelical leaders and the Catholic Church, and adopted a discourse of traditional family values, thereby managing to win in 2006 (Awadalla, 2023). Ortega quickly understood that he had to change his host ideology, but without reshaping his populist structure; previously, the people were the revolutionary workers, and the elite were the oligarchy and Yankee imperialism; afterward, the people came to also include believers and traditional families, and the new corrupt elite incorporated social liberals, feminists, and NGOs. The Nicaraguan case constitutes an illustrative example of the thin-centered ideology proposed by Mudde, demonstrating the chameleon-like nature of this type of ideology when it is articulated with more robust doctrines, such as the revolutionary socialism promoted by Ortega. Added to this is the strategic incorporation of conservative tenets in order to broaden his electoral base, a recurring practice in authoritarian regimes; the end justifies the means.

Salvadoran Populism

In 2019, Nayib Bukele shook up El Salvador's political scene, becoming the first democratically elected president in decades who was not a member of either of the country's two main parties, the leftist FMLN and the rightist ARENA. Although he began his political career in the FMLN, Bukele publicly severed his relationship with the party while serving as mayor of San Salvador (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021). From this point on, there was a rupture of the bipartisanship that El Salvador had experienced; although Bukele had already held some public offices, he presented himself as an outsider challenging traditional politics and established political parties. Bukele established what has been called "Millennial Authoritarianism", an innovative political strategy that combines traditional populist appeals and classic authoritarian behavior with a youthful and modern personal brand built through social media (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021). In this way, he developed an image different from that of any authoritarian leader seen before; social media played an important role, as through this medium he can control the narrative around his decisions as a dictator, while also projecting a "good" image of the regime, polishing his dictatorship into a more modern and current one.

The guiding principle of "Bukelismo" is to retain and strengthen the power of the president and his inner circle, ensuring that his popularity remains high at all times, since this makes it easier to legitimize authoritarian practices, given that if the government has popularity and acceptance, there is a high probability that citizens will accept unconstitutional costs. Bukelismo incorporates strategies from Latin American authoritarian populists and has developed more sophisticated

communication strategies, taking politics into the world of virtual media further than anyone else (Magaloni & Díaz-Cayeros, 2025).

Within this same dynamic, Bukele decided to adopt Bitcoin as an economic strategy, but it was used as an instrument to create a populist identity. This crypto-populism on Bukele's part expanded as he added the promise of technology-driven development through Bitcoin (Boos, 2024). This mixture may well be part of the broader rise of right-wing populism in recent times, with a disregard for liberal democratic principles that takes different forms in various contexts and regions (Boos, 2024). A configuration similar to Bukele's appears to be emerging in Argentina with the rise to power of Javier Milei, an economist who calls himself a libertarian (Boos, 2024). There is no doubt that the Bukele model is being exported, that is, it is not an isolated case but the beginning of a trend of technological right-wing populism in Latin America.

Along the same lines, El Salvador is no longer a "possible dictatorship"; it is a consolidated and advanced dictatorship. In August 2025, the Salvadoran legislature voted to eliminate presidential term limits, effectively giving Bukele the right to govern indefinitely. At that time, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) noted that El Salvador experienced the fastest rate of democratic backsliding of any country in Latin America, and that recent actions solidify Bukele as a dictator (Alemán, 2025). In addition to the strong expansion of this Salvadoran model to other countries and authoritarian leaders, this has further complicated the analysis of this dictatorship, since a segment of the population maintains a favorable perception of the regime, which contributes to its legitimization.

Two Peoples, One Enemy: How Did Left- and Right-Wing Populism Converge on the Same Authoritarian Destination?

The Construction of "The People"

For Mudde, "the pure people" has no fixed content; it varies according to the host ideology (Mudde & Rovira, 2017). In Ortega's case, the people are the working class and the revolutionary peasantry, heirs of Sandinismo; in Bukele's case, the people are the ordinary citizen, a victim of insecurity and bipartisanship. Both construct a distinct collective subject, but with the same discursive function. Ortega used an inclusive populism, since, during his electoral campaign, he sold the idea of making "the people president", typical of the left (Capetillo, 2019). Bukele used a different strategy, securitizing gangs so that they would be seen as a latent threat and to gain more sympathizers among victims of violence, thereby accumulating

more power. In a situation where the security of most people was under a significant threat of gang violence, people become vulnerable to a politician who exploits that threat (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021). Each authoritarian leader knew and understood the context of their country; under this approach, they stayed one step ahead of other political actors, thereby creating a concept of "the people" and gaining a closeness to citizens that the "corrupt elite" had never had.

The "Corrupt Elite": The Enemy of the Populist Narrative

For populism to exist, anti-elitism is required, reflected in the idea that those who govern have money and power, which makes them "disconnected" from the people and acting only for their own benefit; if the elite is not treated as the enemy, there is no populism (Mudde, 2004). Anti-elitism can be directed toward the cultural elite (intellectuals, journalists, and judges) or toward the economic elite, but it is most frequently directed toward the political elite, portrayed as corrupt and disconnected from reality (Mudde & Rovira, 2017). Both regimes construct different enemies. Ortega identifies as the elite the liberals, NGOs, the imperialist right, the Church (paradoxically, later an ally), and the student opposition. Bukele identifies as the elite the traditional parties (FMLN and ARENA), gangs, and eventually international organizations. From a populist's point of view, the elite will always be arrogant, incompetent, and self-serving.

Populism as a Gateway to Authoritarianism

Something very important to highlight is that populism, in its origin, is not necessarily anti-democratic, but it has an ambiguous relationship with liberal democracy that can lead to its destruction. Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012) argue that left-wing populists in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia have strengthened the protection of Indigenous rights through new constitutions, which shows that populism can be both a threat and a corrective for democracy. It is necessary to evaluate different cases of populism to see that it is not entirely a pathway toward authoritarianism, but the cases of Nicaragua and El Salvador are no exception, given that these types of regimes impose a substantial deterioration in the institutional quality of liberal democracy. The institutional cost is significant and lasting, and its main victims are "the people" whom they swore to defend and represent.

Populist Discourse as Legitimation of the Exercise of Power

In line with the above, Bukele and Ortega used populism not only to reach power, but to justify it. Cas Mudde (2004) insists that populism defines what is done in power. Both

cases are examples of populism that legitimizes institutional erosion as the “will of the people”. They swear that they can represent the interests of citizens, but they only seize upon each country’s structural problems in order to advance policies for their own benefit. What is most paradoxical is that they rise to power wielding a discourse aimed at ending traditional politics and being emancipators, yet they become what they swore to destroy. El Salvador has already experienced this, undergoing the fastest rate of democratic backsliding in Latin America. Bukele gained power through populist ideology and then used that power to completely dismantle democratic institutions, concealing authoritarian actions behind anti-corruption and anti-crime campaigns (CIVICUS, 2025). Nicaragua has been no exception, Ortega, who came to power invoking the Sandinista revolutionary legacy and the defense of popular sectors against oligarchic elites, used that same symbolic capital to consolidate a dynastic regime alongside his wife and vice president, Rosario Murillo, dismantling the separation of powers through absolute control of the Supreme Electoral Council, the judiciary, and the National Assembly. Following the 2018 protests, the government intensified repression under the narrative of defending “stability” and “national sovereignty” against alleged foreign conspiracies, which led to the closure of hundreds of civil society organizations, independent media outlets, and universities, as well as the revocation of legal status for opposition parties (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In this way, both Bukele and Ortega exemplify how populist discourse, initially presented as an emancipatory break from traditional elites, ends up functioning as a mechanism for legitimizing an increasingly personalist and authoritarian form of power.

The Role of Social Media and Political Communication

Today, social media and the mass media hold great power, as they are responsible for filtering information and indirectly controlling what users see. It has become normalized to consume news and reports through apps or media outlets without questioning whether what is being seen is real, and whether people may fall victim to fake news. This is a debate that should be explored further, since it can be seen not only in the news but in the statements of influential actors, including presidents, members of congress, and high-ranking officials, which allows them to control the narrative of how a situation is perceived and shape it to the government’s benefit. Bukele inaugurated this new style of practicing populism, which could be called “digital populism” (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021). Ortega, meanwhile, uses a more traditional populism, centered on revolutionary discourse and party structure; Bukele innovated a new, modern form of populism, marked by the strategic use of social media as the primary channel of communication with citizens, dispensing with traditional media and classic institutional intermediaries. Through Twitter/X,

memes, livestreams, and image management characteristic of digital culture, he built a direct and seemingly “unfiltered” bond with the people, reinforcing the anti-elitist narrative while projecting an image of closeness, efficiency, and modernity. This style could well be exported, being used as a reference point for other populist movements in the region.

“The People” After Consolidation: Repression as Inverted Populism

Once in power, both regimes begin to restrict who belongs to “the pure people”, since whoever dissents ceases to be “the people” and becomes part of the “elite” or the “enemy”. This is the moment at which Mudde’s populism becomes a tool of exclusion (Mudde & Rovira, 2013). From the moment a group ceases to be part of “the people”, it experiences government repression, since if you are not aligned with the government’s ideas, you cannot be part of it. Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Venezuela are open autocracies in the region. These regimes used elections and democratic institutions to alter the rules of the game, marginalize opposition forces, capture the judiciary, and concentrate authority in the executive branch (Diálogo Político, 2026). Ortega, for his part, is open and direct in showing that he presides over an autocracy; Ortega did not need to be covert, reaching a point where repression became completely overt. Since April 18, 2018, very few people in Nicaragua and around the world doubt that Nicaragua has become a consolidated dictatorship (Capetillo, 2019). Bukele, on the other hand, employs a covert authoritarianism, in which practices that would appear repressive under an authoritarian regime become ambiguous when the ruler uses covert authoritarian tactics; for example, Bukele has obstructed the accountability that transparency requires and has generated an ambiguous rule, that is, the use of normative gaps that are not explicitly prohibited by law, yet also not clearly authorized, which allows him to quietly dismantle checks from the executive branch (Meléndez-Sánchez, 2021).

A Path of No Return? Final Reflections on Populism in Nicaragua and El Salvador

The cases of Nicaragua and El Salvador demonstrate that populism, far from being a political anomaly, can function as a single ideological script that adapts to different actors. Ortega and Bukele, despite emerging from opposing political traditions, converged on a common pattern, they used an anti-elitist discourse and a flexible construction of “the people” to legitimize their rise to power, and subsequently drew on that same symbolic capital to justify institutional erosion, presenting it as an act of “popular will”. The central paradox of both processes is that leaders who proclaimed themselves

emancipators against a corrupt traditional politics ended up reproducing, and even deepening, the very authoritarian and exclusionary practices they swore to fight against.

As evidenced throughout the analysis, the most significant difference between the two cases lies not in the end goal, the concentration of power and the weakening of democratic checks, but in the method, Ortega has opted for open and direct repression, while Bukele has perfected a covert authoritarianism, supported by regulatory ambiguity and a skillful management of his public image through social media, which has made it more difficult to identify his regime as authoritarian in the eyes of both national and international public opinion.

This finding invites a broader reflection, populism, in itself, is not inherently anti-democratic, and there are cases in which it has strengthened rights historically denied to excluded sectors. Nevertheless, its ambiguous relationship with liberal democracy makes it fertile ground for the emergence of authoritarian leadership when combined with a sufficiently robust host ideology and with structural conditions, such as poverty, violence, and institutional distrust, that facilitate its instrumentalization. The cases of Ortega and Bukele serve as a warning that neither the left nor the right is exempt from this risk, and that the vulnerability of Latin American democracies to authoritarian populism depends less on the ideology that wields it than on the fragility of the institutional checks and balances that should contain it. A path whose ending, as long as these conditions persist, remains unknown.

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