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The Salvadoran Struggle: A Transnational Resistance against Imperialism

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My undergraduate career was directed by a self-established plan of learning on my own. This was quite possibly the reason I struggled to find the right major for me. Now that college is coming to a close, I have begun to reflect on this long journey of learning under this self-guided curriculum. I became a double major in Political Science and Latin American Studies and while there were moments in which I believed I chose the wrong path, I realize that I made these choices because this was what I wished to learn. I became confident in my decision and I knew that as long as I was driven by my education, I would become successful. Political Science and Latin American Studies allowed me to have a better understanding of what was going on around the world but these studies became my major for one reason: My background.

I was born in the United States to immigrants from El Salvador and throughout my childhood, I have heard a number of different stories in a country in which I have yet to experience on my own. My parents' immigration status, obligations to school and work, and the current conditions in El Salvador have limited my chances of visiting the country. Although I could not visit El Salvador, I made sure El Salvador was visiting me. I proudly listened to their music, improved my Spanish, ate their food, and essentially became immersed in the culture. I wanted to make up for all of the years I have missed out on in El Salvador and I knew that when the opportunity arrived, I would be more than prepared to be a Salvadoran in El Salvador.

As I continued to learn about this beautiful country, I began to question the reason for not being able to visit. My father was beginning to look for these answers when I was young and with him I began to learn about the country's dark past. I learned about the civil war, my family's migration to the United States, and the country's current condition, which suffers from the effects of economic instability and gang violence. I learned about El Salvador in order to prepare for when my dream of visiting the wonderful country finally came true. Learning about

the country's suffering disheartened me. I was worried of never being able to experience the country I learned about in my family's stories. To make matters worse, the result of the 2016 election introduced an anti-immigrant agenda that is threatening US immigrant communities. Salvadorans currently hold the second largest population of undocumented immigrants in the United States. Salvadorans are also the largest beneficiary of Temporary Protected Status, which has provided a legal status to approximately 250,000 Salvadorans including my parents and several family members. In early January, the Department of Homeland Security announced that it would terminate TPS for Salvadorans, meanwhile ICE raids have continued to threaten undocumented Salvadorans. It became clear that the community that raised me is now living under harsher conditions both in El Salvador and the United States. Although I realized that the country is far from the tropical, mountainous, and peaceful paradise I had imagined as a child, my dream of finally visiting El Salvador has not diminished. My research of El Salvador's history in connection to my family's past has allowed me to make serious revelations which have inspired me to strive for making a positive impact on the nation that shaped me as the person I am today.

The most significant revelation I made throughout my research, regarded the critical role of the United States in El Salvador's long history of crises. The nation's brutal civil war, corrupt governments, emerging gang violence, and emigration from El Salvador can all be traced to the history of US involvement in Salvadoran political and economic affairs throughout the 20th century. US involvement in El Salvador is an example of imperialism, which relates to every aspect of Salvadoran crises. Imperialism could also be seen as the cause of mass migration to the United States, which has been seen as a crisis that the current administration has used to justify their anti-immigrant policies. My research has taught me that the country I call home, was

responsible for destroying the chances for my family and millions of other Salvadorans to live a peaceful and prosperous life in El Salvador. Salvadorans have been forced to struggle through a long history of US imperialism and the current political climate has allowed for the continuation of these effects; however despite the persistence of imperialism, Salvadorans are still demonstrating their resilience against its effects.

The history of Salvadoran struggle against imperialism could date back as far as 1932, when a group of campesino and indigenous workers, organized a rebellion against the Salvadoran government after a significant drop in wages. The rebellion was led by the nation's communist party and revolutionary leader Farabundo Marti. Only lasting about a week, the rebellion ended with a government response of a military campaign that resulted in the massacre of approximately 30,000 indigenous peoples. Remembered as *La Matanza*, this event developed an increasing sense of insecurity among peasant and indigenous communities which would deter another rebellion for approximately 40 years.¹

While the events in 1932 could have been perceived as an example of imperialism, what continues to prevail today, dates back to the beginning of the nation's civil war. In 1979, Carlos Humberto Romero's military dictatorship was overthrown in a coup and became replaced with the Revolutionary Government Junta. As a result of continuous economic unrest and the emerging influence of communism, the new government failed to maintain order during the point in which El Salvador was at the brink of civil war between the military and emerging left wing guerrilla forces. By 1980, five of El Salvador's guerilla forces unified to form the Farabundo

¹ Ching, Erik, and Virginia Tilley. "Indians, the Military and the Rebellion of 1932 in El Salvador." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30, no. 1 (1998): 121-56.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/158450>.

Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) which would spark the official beginning of the civil war.

This war was perceived by the US government as an emerging communist threat and in order to prevent this threat, the United States began supplying El Salvador with military and economic aid throughout the war. The US had been aiding the Salvadoran military since the war broke out but aid would increase significantly by 1981 under the Reagan administration. Under Reagan, the Salvadoran government received approximately \$1 Billion in aid and US military advisors trained Salvadoran armed forces and supplied them with firepower. US military advisors trained Salvadoran military personnel, which would eventually become the military death squads responsible for numerous operations that massacred entire villages made up of innocent civilians including children. Some of the most notable massacres were led by the US trained Atlacatl Battalion in villages such as el Mozote in 1981, where over 800+ were murdered.² An estimated 75,000 people died as a result of this war and it all came to an end in 1992, when a United Nations peace accord was signed between the Salvadoran military and guerilla forces. Under the Chapultepec Accords, democratic elections were established and the left wing FMLN was given representation as a major political party.

After the war, the government was under control of ARENA, the political party representing the right wing elite. Under ARENA, neoliberal policies; which were meant to promote economic development by increasing the private sector, became an important element of the reconstruction period of El Salvador. While the FMLN was not in power, they were still concerned with how El Salvador would sustain peace under policies which associated with a

² Urbina, Ian. "O.A.S. to Reopen Inquiry into Massacre in El Salvador in 1981." The New York Times. March 08, 2005. Accessed May 12, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/08/world/americas/oas-to-reopen-inquiry-into-massacre-in-el-salvador-in-1981.html>.

limited economic role for the state and limited redistribution. To implement much of these policies, foreign entities started to play an important role in El Salvador's economic reconstruction. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the US government through USAID, were important providers in the post war economic reform process. Many of the promised reform programs were funded through USAID. Through these reform programs, economic assistance to El Salvador was provided as long as American and foreign industries were allowed inside of the country under limited regulation. Neoliberal policies were beginning to stabilize the nation's economy, however they were transforming El Salvador into becoming fully dependent on the United States. The economy began to prioritize the private sector, especially the influence of foreign businesses. Average Salvadorans were being displaced by the reformed economy and remittances from families in the United States began to alleviate communities affected by the neoliberal economy. ARENA was aware of this impact and eventually adopted the US dollar as the nation's official currency, which facilitated the transfer of remittances but enforced their dependency on the United States.³

Due to the civil war and the neoliberal policies that began to displace Salvadorans from the nation's economy, many Salvadorans began to migrate north towards the United States. El Salvador's civil war caused a large influx in migration towards the United States. Approximately 94,000 Salvadoran born immigrants were reported to be in the US in 1980. By 1990, the number

³Van Der Borgh, Chris. "The Politics of Neoliberalism in Postwar El Salvador." *International Journal of Political Economy* 30, no. 1 (2000): 36-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40470765>.(43)

grew significantly to around 563,000.⁴ Today, Salvadorans are the third largest Latinx group in the United States with a population of about 2.1 Million⁵.

During the war, many Salvadorans found refuge by immigrating to the United States and settling in the Los Angeles area, bringing their children along with them. After constant mistreatment by local Mexican gangs, Salvadoran youth in Los Angeles decided to organize and form what would eventually become known as the *Mara Salvatrucha*, or MS-13. By the 1990s, the gang became a prevalent criminal threat in the United States and would eventually capture the attention of the US government. Under the Clinton administration, a significant rate of foreign born US residents convicted of crimes were detained and deported. Approximately 20,000 convicted criminals, among them MS-13 gang members, were sent back to El Salvador and several other countries in Central America. Post war conditions in El Salvador allowed MS-13 members to take advantage of the destabilized society, which allowed the gang to spread across the country and into neighboring countries of Honduras and Guatemala. The country is still recognized as one of the most dangerous nations outside of a war zone. In September 2017, 435 homicides were reported in just one month. These homicide rates have been reported after the government increased anti-gang measures.⁶ Today, Gang violence has been responsible for the country's homicide rate of 103 per 100,000 inhabitants. El Salvador makes up only 13.6% of the

⁴ López, Gustavo. "Hispanics of Salvadoran Origin in the United States, 2013." Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project. September 15, 2015. Accessed December 14, 2017. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/15/hispanics-of-salvadoran-origin-in-the-united-states-2013/>.

⁵ Flores, Antonio. "How the U.S. Hispanic population is changing." Pew Research Center. September 18, 2017. Accessed December 15, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/18/how-the-u-s-hispanic-population-is-changing/>.

⁶ "El Salvador Violence Rising Despite 'Extraordinary' Anti-Gang Measures." InSight Crime. November 28, 2017. Accessed May 12, 2018. <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/violence-el-salvador-rise-despite-extraordinary-anti-gang-measures/>

Central American population but it is accountable for 35.3% of the reported homicides in the entire region.⁷ The civil war, mass migration, neoliberal policies, and increased violence as a result of gang violence are all examples of how US imperialism has had a significant impact on El Salvador. Whether it is economic or societal, many of the issues impacting Salvadorans in both the United States and El Salvador are connected to US involvement. Despite these events being both a direct or indirect result of US involvement and the right wing ARENA, the majority of Salvadorans have continued to support conservative policies. Despite the controversy created by the implementation of neoliberal policies, ARENA continued to dominate Salvadoran elections from 1992-2009. In order to maintain their long political reign, ARENA chose more moderate candidates such as President Alfredo Cristiani, who became their image for the promotion of peace. The party also began smearing the image of the opposition such as the FMLN, framing them as a group of militants willing to return to civil war.⁸ ARENA was not responsible for fraudulent elections, they used different methods in subverting the Salvadoran electorate towards their favor. One of their most effective methods of subverting the electorate was when they would politicize issues to garner support.⁹

A great example of this tactic was notable in 2004, when ARENA implemented a set of anti-gang policies. This set of policies were known as *La Mano Dura*, or iron fist and were first implemented in 1996 as emergency measures to facilitate legal procedures against criminals,

⁷ CMS Medios. "El Salvador Es El País Con Más Homicidios De Centroamérica." Noticias De El Salvador - La Prensa Gráfica. January 03, 2018. Accessed May 12, 2018. <https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/El-Salvador-es-el-pais-con-mas-homicidios-de-Centroamerica-20180102-0444.html>.

⁸ Van Der Borgh, Chris. "The Politics of Neoliberalism in Postwar El Salvador." *International Journal of Political Economy* 30, no. 1 (2000): 36-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40470765>.

⁹ Wolf, Sonja. "Subverting Democracy: Elite Rule and the Limits to Political Participation in Post-War El Salvador." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 41, no. 3 (2009): 429-65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27744162>.

increase crime penalties, allow combat troops to join police forces, and even allow juveniles to serve in adult prisons. Mano Dura policies received a significant amount of criticism and were eventually repealed within a month but in 2003, as a means to combat the emerging threat of gang violence, Mano Dura was once again introduced. The revised policies criminalized gang membership and affiliation, increased law enforcement powers for arresting and detaining suspects, and relied on collaborative military and police sweeps. Mano Dura policies granted Salvadoran law enforcement with more authority to even arrest criminals on subjective evidence. These laws established a more authoritarian presence of the Salvadoran government. Because of the rising challenges from the rival conservative party, *Partido de Concertación Nacional* (PCN) and the constant presence of the FMLN, ARENA used Mano Dura to help sustain electoral support.¹⁰ Mano Dura policies were used to subvert the electorate in favor of ARENA by promising tougher policies on gangs, which have been affecting a significant number of Salvadoran communities.

ARENA's trend of politicizing issues in order to maintain votes was a successful method for preserving their political reign. In 2009, ARENA's reign was finally concluded after FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes was elected. The FMLN also went on to win the next election in 2012, with the election of former guerrilla commander Salvador Sánchez Cerén. Despite no longer holding executive control, ARENA's reign restructured El Salvador's government, which today is still under an overwhelmingly conservative national assembly and Supreme Court. Conservative control of most of the government has made it difficult for the FMLN to achieve most of their original policy agendas, which intended to reverse the effects of neoliberalism and

¹⁰Holland, Alisha C. "RIGHT ON CRIME? Conservative Party Politics and "Mano Dura" Policies in El Salvador." *Latin American Research Review* 48, no. 1 (2013): 44-67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41811587>.

eliminate socioeconomic and political inequality. ARENA has used the FMLN inefficiency to once again smear the party's image and today, the FMLN continues to have a significant sense of resentment among Salvadorans both at home and abroad. Salvadorans in US Diasporas, including members of my family would rather support the same party responsible for disrupting their prosperous life in El Salvador than to support anyone affiliated with the FMLN. According to family members, the FMLN is acknowledged as a party of militants who are willing to once again take the country to war despite ARENA being originally responsible for the beginning of that war.

The condition of imperialism in El Salvador today is still strongly prevalent. The conservative legislature and lack of support of left wing policies, appears to show a Salvadoran population that is simply complacent with imperialism. However, as the 2019 elections are approaching in El Salvador and as recent organizing efforts within US Salvadoran communities have risen, a resurgence against imperialism is beginning to reappear.

The upcoming elections in El Salvador will be unlike any other election in the past. After the former mayor of the capital city of San Salvador, Nayib Bukele, was ousted from the FMLN after making derogatory claims against a female member, Bukele decided he would run for president under a third party. Nayib Bukele is a business magnate and part of one of the wealthiest families in El Salvador. Under the new coalition of Nuevas Ideas, Bukele now intends on becoming president by defeating both candidates from the FMLN and ARENA. Unlike candidates in the past, Bukele is also campaigning in the United States and has spoken in several different Salvadoran communities from across the country. Bukele is vocal about his support for the diaspora communities in El Salvador, stating that "the diaspora is the engine of the national economy". He wants the diaspora to reconnect with El Salvador and these policies have attracted

US Salvadoran communities to a significant extent.¹¹ The Nuevas Ideas movement has been gaining support from all over the United State. With support from the US diaspora, Bukele could possibly defeat candidates from both major parties and become president. During the recent municipal and legislative elections, approximately 58% of the electorate stayed home. ARENA maintained control of the assembly and most mayoral positions but the low voter turnout is demonstrating discontent for both major political parties, which is why Bukele believes he could become president.¹² As a wealthy businessman, it is unclear if Bukele will be the ideal candidate for reversing the overall effects of imperialism but his candidacy is getting Salvadorans involved in the political process, which could bring significant ramifications against imperialist policies.

Aside from the upcoming Salvadoran elections in 2019, political involvement among Salvadorans has also sparked as a result of the anti-immigrant agenda of the current presidential administration. The Trump administration has been moving forward with their anti-immigrant agenda, which has been threatening Salvadoran communities in the United States. The most significant attack on the US Salvadoran diaspora was made in January, when the Temporary Protected Status Program was terminated. TPS was first implemented in the 1990s, as a program that granted a legal status to immigrants currently residing in the United States but are from a particular country that has been determined by the Department of Homeland Security as unfit for return. The DHS designates countries for TPS status if they have experienced a political conflict or natural disaster. Current beneficiaries of the program are from El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua, South Sudan, Somalia, Nepal and Syria. The total number of beneficiaries is

¹¹ "Bukele: La diáspora salvadoreña es el motor económico del país." Un periódico con información para los que no se detienen. December 08, 2017. Accessed December 14, 2017. <http://ultimahora.sv/la-diaspora-salvadorena-es-el-motor-economico-del-pais>

¹² "El Salvador's Rising Political Star." The Economist. March 10, 2018. Accessed May 12, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/news/americas/21738417-real-winner-legislative-and-local-elections-was-not-ballot-el-salvadors-rising>.

currently at around 340,000-400,000 and Salvadorans make up a huge portion of this number which is at approximately 212,000. Salvadorans are the largest beneficiaries of TPS and became eligible for the program in 2001 after two earthquakes struck the Central American nation. Salvadorans residing in the United States before 2001, were allowed to receive a temporary legal status regardless of their immigration status¹³

For approximately 20 years, Salvadorans under TPS have been working legally in the US, have paid taxes, raised children, purchased homes, and have even started their own businesses. Legal, tax paying individuals who were allowed to own businesses, purchase homes, create families, and benefit to the US economy are now being told to leave. The January decision on Salvadorans was made stating that the infrastructural conditions in El Salvador have already improved significantly since the 2001 earthquakes. The DHS made this decision without even acknowledging the region's current conditions of poverty and gang violence which have contributed to the recent increase in Central American immigration. The program will provide TPS status to Salvadorans under its final renewal which will last until 2019.

After the announcement that terminated the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals program in September 2017, Dreamers from across the country came together and organized. They led a movement for the purpose of protecting their right to remain in the United States. TPS beneficiaries are not primarily made up of students as compared to DACA so the organizing efforts around TPS have not appeared to be as significant. Although the TPS movement has not made it to mainstream media, the movement has been gaining a lot of traction especially from

¹³Messick, Claire Bergeron Madeline, and Claire Bergeron. "Temporary Protected Status in the United States: A Grant of Humanitarian Relief That Is Less than Permanent." Migrationpolicy.org. March 02, 2017. Accessed May 12, 2018. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/temporary-protected-status-united-states-grant-humanitarian-relief-less-permanent>.

within the US Salvadoran Diasporas. The National TPS Alliance was started in the midst of the Trump administration's threat to the TPS program. Salvadorans in a number of different states across the country such as New York, Maryland, Virginia, Massachusetts, Texas, and California. The alliance is made up of both TPS recipients, their families and children. The ultimate goal of the alliance is to move beyond the protection and renewal of the TPS program, and move towards a Permanent Legal Status.

The organizing around the Temporary protected Status program is a result of an unexpected consequence of the Trump administration's anti-immigrant agenda. Attempting to deport immigrant groups has really only become a catalyst for mobilization. This mobilization can be very consequential for Latino and immigrant politics in the future. Salvadorans are currently the third largest Latino group in the United States with a population of about 2.1 million. They have surpassed the population of Dominicans and Cubans but are still not very recognized within the political or latinx mainstream.¹⁴ Salvadorans who are organizing around the issue of Immigrant justice are finally beginning to give the group more mainstream recognition. The rise in activism is also beginning to educate Salvadoran communities from across the country. National TPS Alliance conferences are vocal about US imperialism throughout the 20th century and previously uninformed Salvadorans, are now learning about US involvement in El Salvador's civil war.

Salvadorans, including my family members are beginning to wake up and understand the harsh realities of their decades of struggle. The Trump administration believes it is tackling immigration but instead, it is sparking resistance that will justify the anti-imperialist sentiment

¹⁴ Flores, Antonio. "How the U.S. Hispanic Population Is Changing." Pew Research Center. September 18, 2017. Accessed May 12, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/18/how-the-u-s-hispanic-population-is-changing/>.

throughout Latin America. A great example of this is in the upcoming presidential elections in Mexico, where Leftist candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, vocal for his stance against Trump is currently the front runner in an election that could potentially transform the US political relationship with Latin America. Anti-Trump sentiment has spread as a result of these Anti-Immigrant policies and it is threatening US relations with Latin America. The US immigration crisis will not be solved through this agenda because this crisis would have never happened if the United States never meddled in Latin America. After WWII, the US had a choice; either preserve their democracy or become a global superpower. They instead used imperialism to combat communism and spread neoliberalism to strengthen their status as a global superpower.

Salvadorans who continue to demonstrate their resilience are an example of the never ending struggle against imperialism. Today, US imperialism is facing the consequences through Salvadoran and the overall resistance from both Latin America and within the United States. I realized that resilience against imperialism is not only exemplified through the means of political activism. Imperialism was intended to prevent their perseverance but today, undocumented Salvadorans and Salvadoran TPS beneficiaries have created well established communities. They own homes, they have started their own businesses, they have raised families, sent their children to college, and have become hard working citizens in a country that was responsible for destroying the future in their native land. Their hard work is also a factor of struggling against imperialism. My research has exposed me to the harsh realities of El Salvador's history but it has also allowed me to be optimistic for its future. Imperialism has created a negative impact on Salvadoran society but Salvadoran resilience has, and will continue to maintain my dream of visiting the beautiful land of my childhood stories.

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