



The Salvadoran government has tightly controlled its data on gangs, claiming that they have been totally eliminated. Credit: El Salvador government

News Barrio 18

El Salvador Police Reports Contradict Bukele's Triumphalism

by Roberto Valencia
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More than a dozen confidential reports from El Salvador's National Civil Police obtained by InSight Crime reveal that, although "weakened" after a year and a half under a state of exception, the three main gangs operating in El Salvador remain a subtle threat.

The Mara Salvatrucha (**MS13**), Barrio 18 Sureños, and Barrio 18 Revolucionarios still maintain 54 armed groups, mostly in rural areas. Nearly 43,000 people who have been profiled as gang members remain at large. These people have been classified into three categories: active members (*homeboys*), aspiring members (*chequeos*), and

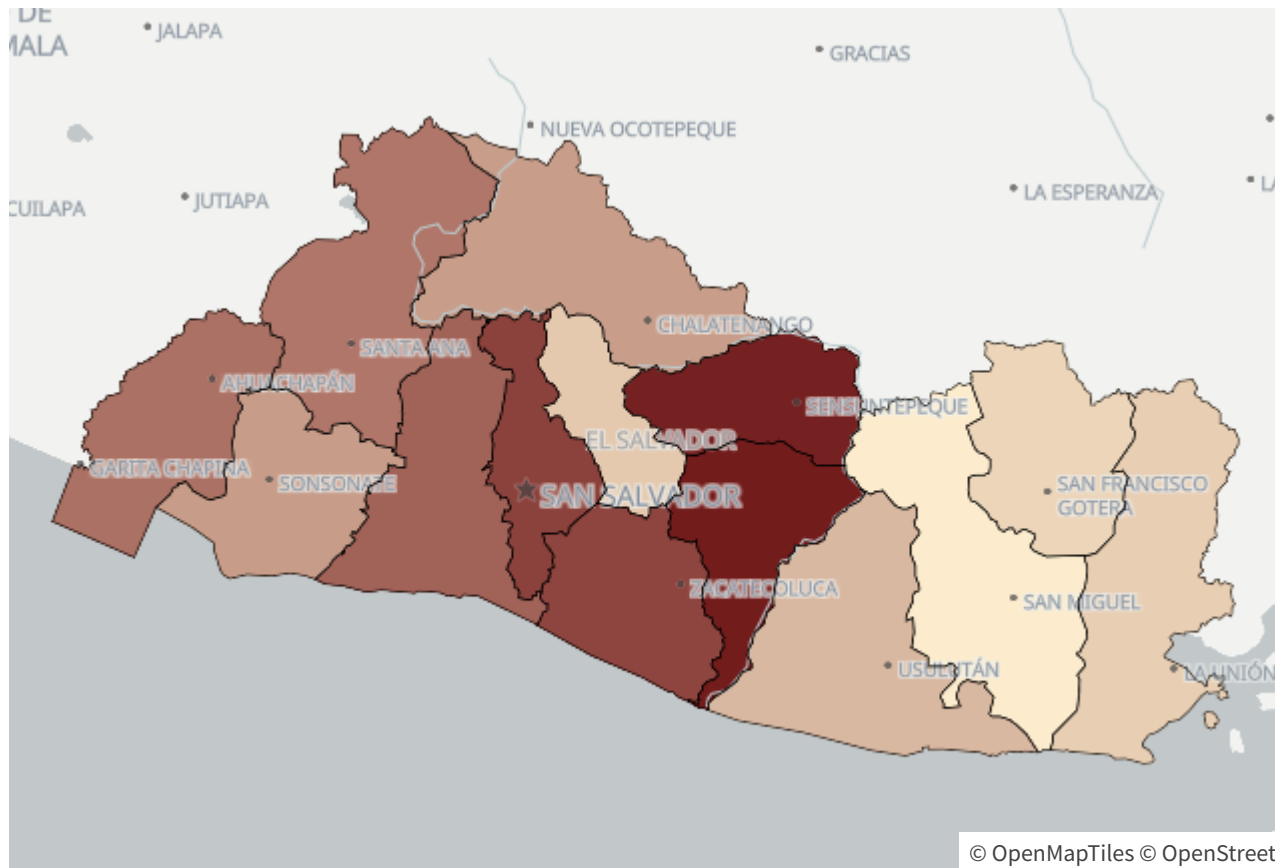
“collaborators,” a broad designation for those who allegedly work with or for these gangs, assisting in a number of tasks.

These numbers call into question the triumphalism of President Nayib Bukele’s administration, which has mounted an unprecedented offensive against these criminal groups.

Percentage of Gang Members* at Large in El Salvador



Percentage 20%  52%



*The National Police estimates the number of members, aspiring members, and collaborators, which we are collectively describing here, for simplicity's sake, as “members.” •

Source: El Salvador's National Police (Policía Nacional Civil). Data as of August 31, 2023

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 A Flourish map

The police reports detail the situation of the gangs and their uneven presence across El Salvador. They show that the anti-gang crackdown has achieved notable success in dismantling these groups, but they also hint at the possibility that the gangs may have **decided** against carrying out a violent response, as opposed to being unable to do so.

El Salvador has been **under a state of emergency** since March 27, 2022, approved and extended month after month by the Legislative Assembly at Bukele’s request. The measure has led to the imprisonment of more than 72,000 people. More than 7,000 were **released** after it was proven they had been arbitrarily detained, but their freedom came after weeks or months behind bars.

SEE ALSO: El Salvador Escalates Gang Crackdown With New Measures

The reports obtained by InSight Crime — titled “State of Gangs in the Context of the State of Exception” (Apreciación de pandillas ante coyuntura del Régimen de Excepción) — are periodically prepared by the Intelligence Analysis and Production Division, a unit of the Intelligence Subdirectorate of the National Civil Police (Policía Nacional Civil – PNC).

They are sent to PNC Director Mauricio Arriaza Chicas, who distributes them only to highly trusted officials. The source who provided them is part of that circle. In addition, InSight Crime corroborated the authenticity of the documents with a former senior PNC official and non-governmental experts who had obtained similar reports.

The analysis of the gangs’ current status is centralized by the Intelligence Subdirectorate and, according to the former police official, the database is constantly updated.



These confidential reports represent the Bukele administration’s true perspective on gangs in El Salvador, which is far removed from the propaganda and secrecy that surrounds official communications. Genuine internal assessments of gang dynamics have been exceedingly difficult to obtain due the Bukele administration’s clampdown on government transparency.

“The Salvadoran opposition, its unions, its media, its NGOs, its experts; all came out yesterday, in UNISON, accepting the total success of our war against gangs,” Bukele [tweeted](#) on February 4, 2023.

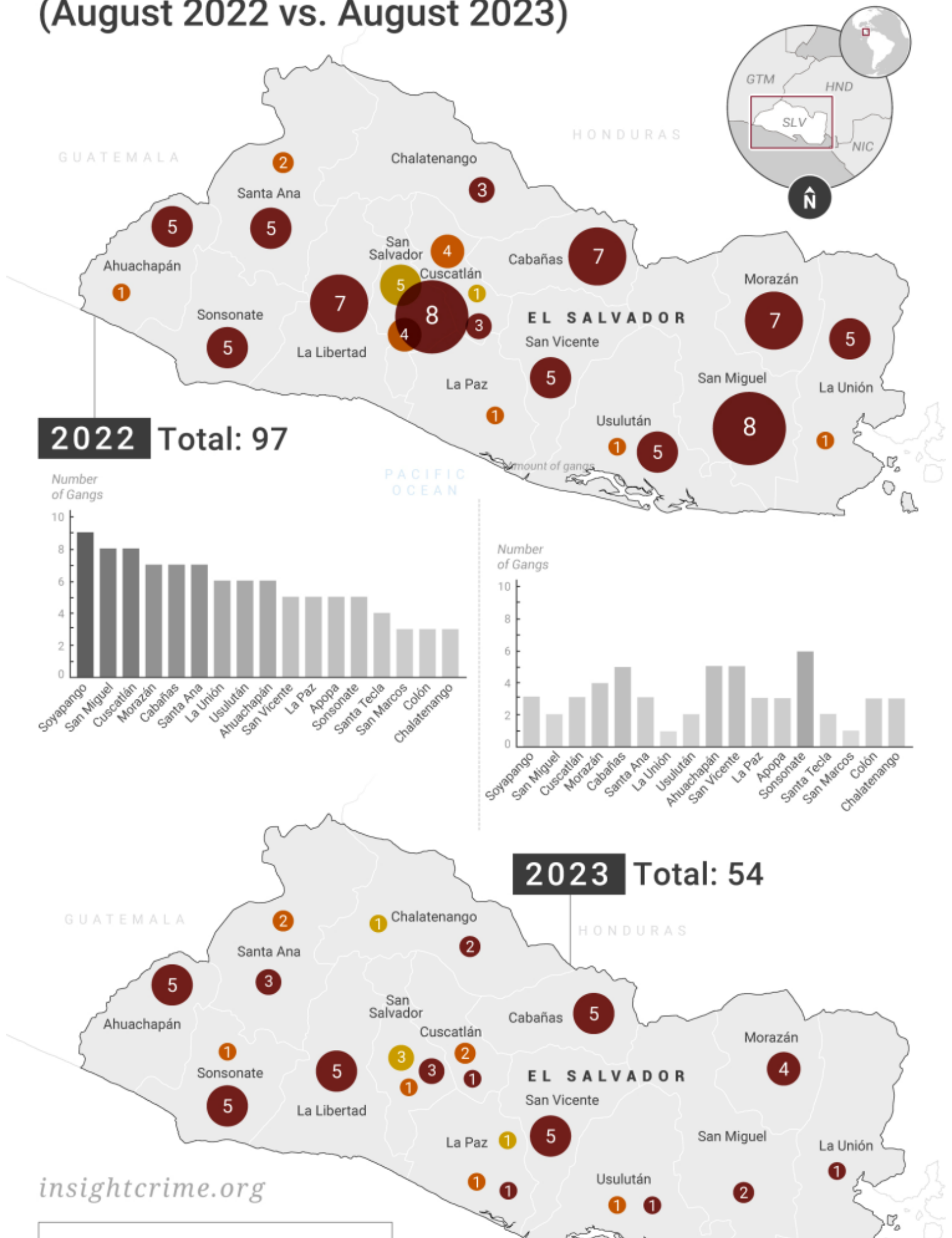
54 Armed Cliques Still Standing

The most recent police report received by InSight Crime was 19 pages long and released on September 1, 2023. It states that 54 armed groups, or cliques (*clicas*, in gang slang), remain active in El Salvador. Back in June 2022, two months into the crackdown, the PNC had monitored 97 cliques with enough weapons to be considered “armed groups.”

This number dropped to 75 by February 2023 and to 67 by May. In September, 54 remained.

The MS13 is behind 43 of these 54 cliques; six are from the Barrio 18 Sureños, and the remaining five are from the Barrio 18 Revolucionarios.

Total Number of Armed Gangs in El Salvador (August 2022 vs. August 2023)





PACIFIC OCEAN



Data as of August 31, 2023

Source: El Salvador's National Police (Policía Nacional Civil)

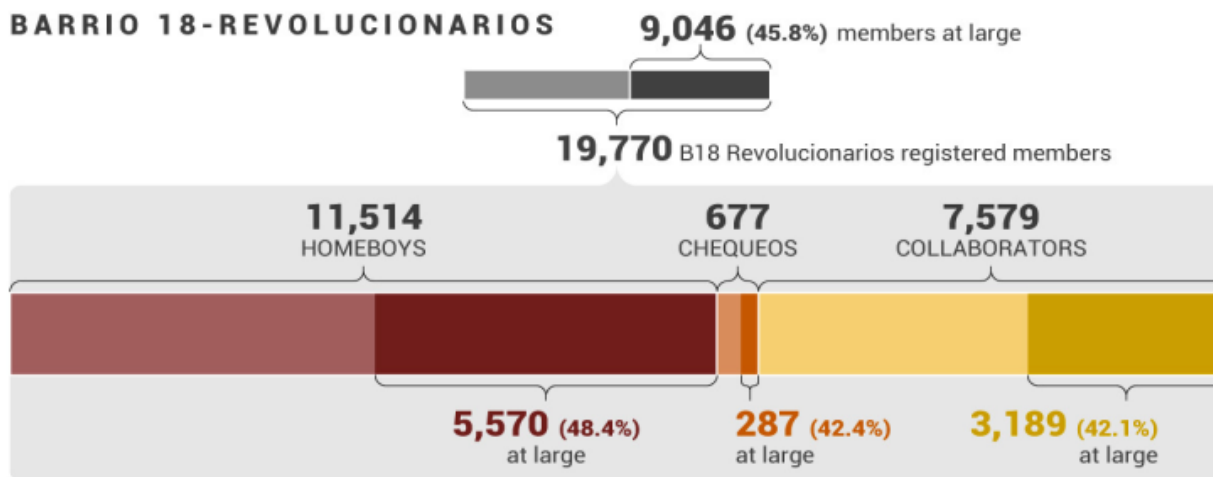
In addition, progress in dismantling these gang structures has not been consistent throughout the country. The PNC and armed forces have hit the gangs hardest in the departments of Cuscatlán, Santa Ana, San Miguel, La Unión, and Usulután. But there has been markedly less impact in San Salvador, Ahuachapán, Morazán, Cabañas, La Libertad, and La Paz.

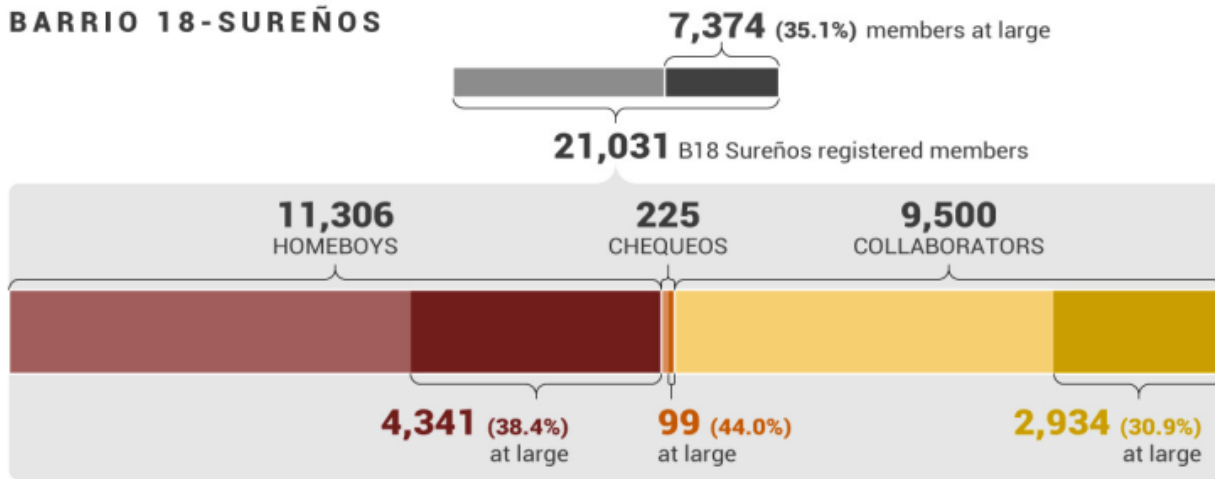
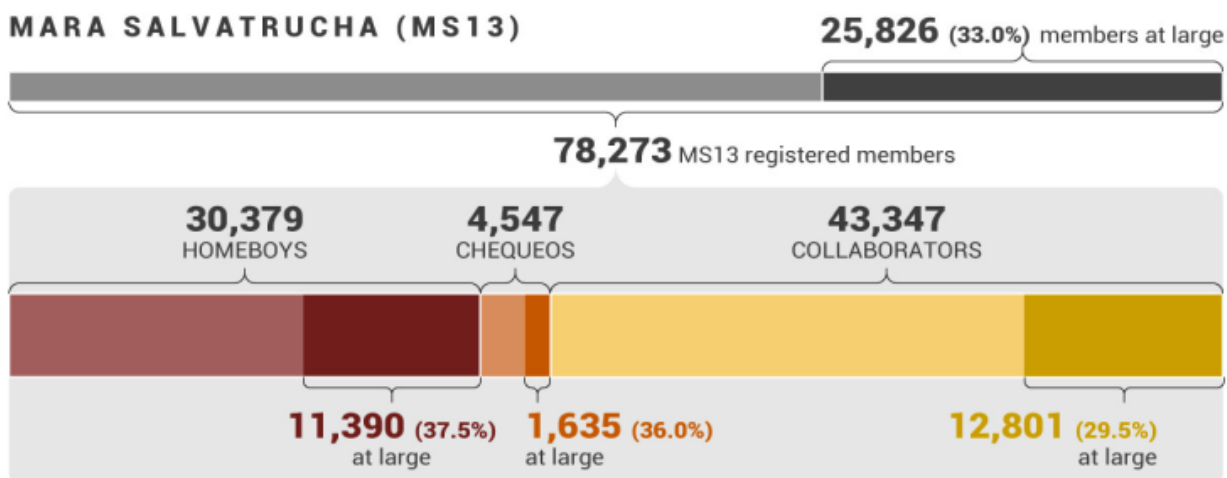
In two departments — Chalatenango and San Vicente — the number of groups has remained the same. But the most surprising case is Sonsonate, where the number of groups has increased from five to six.

While the MS13 and the Barrio 18 Sureños have been hit the hardest, 33% and 35% of their members remain at large, respectively.

The Barrio 18 Revolucionarios — a gang with a strong presence in the eastern half of the San Salvador metropolitan area and in the departments of La Libertad and La Paz — seems to have resisted the offensive better, or its dismantling has not been as high a priority. Either way, 46% of its members are free.

Across all gangs, the report indicates that 42,826 active gang members, aspirants, and collaborators remain free, 36% of all those registered. The highest percentage of free members are the homeboys, with 40% at large.



BARRIO 18-SUREÑOS**MARA SALVATRUCHA (MS13)**

To put it more precisely, of the 72,871 people detained between March 2022 and August 2023, only 1,230 (1.7%) have been identified as “ringleaders,” a category in which the PNC includes various levels of leadership such as *ranfleros*, clique runners, and *palabrerros*.

The crackdown has also seen varying efficiency in different parts of the country. San Vicente, Cabañas, La Paz, La Libertad, and San Salvador are the departments with the most gang members who avoided capture. Although in the case of the latter two — the most urban parts of El Salvador — this could be because gang members have gone into hiding in the interior of the country or abroad.

On the other hand, the government’s attack has been more forceful in Cuscatlán and in the four eastern departments of El Salvador.

Weakened but Not Defeated

Homicides have fallen to historic lows in El Salvador and the projection is that the country will end 2023 with a rate of between 3 and 4 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. In 2015, the homicide rate stood at 106 homicides per

100,000 inhabitants.

Veronica Reyna, human rights director at the Passionist Social Service (Servicio Social Pasionista – SSPAS), confirmed that the gangs have lost power and territory since the state of exception began but strongly questioned the government's ruthless approach, referring to national and international **reports** of systematic violations of human rights in El Salvador.

“The government gives superficial solutions that are often rooted in illegality and human rights violations, such as extrajudicial executions and torture. But if that is [how we define success], any cynical government with no limits can do it,” she said.

SEE ALSO: How El Salvador's Police Creates, Uses Its Gang Database

Research and public security consultant, Luis Enrique Amaya, agreed that the government's so-called war on gangs had dealt them an unprecedented blow.

“People have a perception of better security, and that perception is not false, it is not the result of a publicity campaign by the president,” Amaya told InSight Crime.

However, he explained that it is a step too far to assert that gangs are a thing of the past, as the government and even some opposition parties have done.

The gangs “are no longer as we knew them, with the strength they had, with a public presence in large parts of the country,” said Amaya.

Instead, he pointed to “sleeper cells” of gang members, who have decided to be “temporarily and intentionally inactive.” This lends further credence to the hypothesis that the gangs' lack of a violent response is a deliberate strategy.

“Knowing the history of the gangs, one wonders if they are not simply in a process of adaptation, of redefining their way of being, their way of operating,” Amaya said.

In fact, while reports of extortion registered by the PNC have decreased by 54% in 2023 compared to the same period in 2022, 16 complaints related to extortion are still made every week. A total of 572 complaints had been processed as of September 11, and in 375 of these, the extortionists were identified as being from the MS13 or one of the Barrio 18 factions.

Another indicator is that only 83 rifles have been seized by police so far in 2023, as compared to 242 last year. Prior to the state of exception, the numbers were much higher, with police seizing 321 rifles in 2020 and 508 in 2019.

This indicates that the gangs may have hidden a large part of their arsenals, as indicated by an InSight Crime [investigation](#) in July 2022.

But the government has tightly controlled its data, declaring far and wide that it has eliminated the country's gangs. This supposed success has made Bukele immensely popular, and despite a constitutionally-imposed one-term limit, he has declared his intention to run for a second term.



Under President Bukele's state of exception, security forces have detained more than 72,000 people. Credit: El Salvador government

Regardless, the gang issue may linger. "In the last few days, there has been information, which is being confirmed, about possible actions by the MS-13 gang to try to influence or boycott the upcoming elections," read the September 1 report.

In conclusion, the PNC Intelligence Sub-Directorate believes it is still too early to say that the regime has dismantled the gangs in El Salvador. "They are weakened, but there are [still] cliques that can carry out murders as ordered," said the report.

**With additional reporting from Steven Dudley.*

