

# **Executive Summary**

**2024 Elections in El Salvador: Coercion,  
Intimidation and Arbitrary Detentions**



# **Cristosal**

## Executive Summary

# 2024 Elections in El Salvador: Coercion, Intimidation and Arbitrary Detentions

Reports of arbitrary detentions, arrest of community leaders, use of daily arrest quotas by law enforcement agencies, re-arrest of individuals previously released, the establishment of military and police cordons in communities, as well as military presence in polling places are among the troubling findings of Cristosal's monitoring of the 2024 Salvadoran presidential, legislative, municipal, and Central American Parliament elections.

These incidents raise the alarm for the defense of human rights, especially given the current context in El Salvador in which the first elections under a state of exception since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992 took place. It was also the first time that a president ran for a consecutive term of office, since 1935, because the practice is prohibited in at least six articles of the Constitution.

Actions of the security forces-- Armed Forces of El Salvador (FAES) and the National Civil Police (PNC)-- combined with violations of the Constitution and use of the State to influence voting, have serious implications for human rights, especially for political and civil rights. Under international standards elections are considered democratic not only when there is universal suffrage. They must also take place in an atmosphere of freedom, transparency and without coercion. According to Cristosal's investigations, these conditions were not fulfilled in the last elections.

Using exhaustive media monitoring, field verification, online surveys and interviews with community leaders from different parts of the country, Cristosal early on detected an increase in the number of arbitrary detentions. During the campaign period, Cristosal tracked arrests reported through the official PNC and FAES accounts: in January they posted 513 arrests, in February the number of people detained dropped to 255 arrests, and 12 arrests were recorded during the first two days of March.

Cristosal's investigation team found part of the explanation for the increase in daily detentions in reports of the reactivation of daily arrest quotas for the PNC and FAES in different areas of the country, a practice that was common at the beginning of the state of exception regime in 2022. The team also confirmed re-arrest of individuals previously detained under the state of exception after judges had released them under pre-trial measures other than detention. Re-arrest in these circumstances violates the presumption of innocence and due process. This practice resulted in the migration of young men and family members of the people arrested in at least five communities.

Of the 412 people who responded to Cristosal's election observation form, 54% reported the presence of military personnel near their homes and in the surrounding areas as well as inside polling centers. In addition to checking documents, soldiers were also reported to have intimidated the

population. Eleven percent of these reports warned of the installation of checkpoints and intimidating actions as a way to interfere with the freedom of movement and the free exercise of the vote. As part of the investigation, Cristosal interviewed 14 community leaders in the areas where mass detentions took place. They stressed that many people had been arrested who had no ties to gangs, including two community leaders.

Cristosal's team also documented violations on election days which included threats to supporters and candidates of opposition parties, surveillance, obstruction, and taking of photographs of election observers and journalists by members of the ruling party. These actions violated rights such as freedom of the press, among others.

Both the media and Cristosal's research indicate that the 2024 elections were marked by intimidation and threats made by members of the ruling party, especially on the day of the elections.

Following the experience of the February 4 elections, marked by several irregularities, the population demonstrated its distrust of the process with high absenteeism at the polls. According to information from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, 2.9 million people voted in the presidential and legislative elections and only 1.6 million people voted in the elections for municipal councils and the Central American Parliament, the lowest turnout in the country's recent history.

Based on these investigations, Cristosal concluded that El Salvador's 2024 elections violated political rights including the right to free elections, freedom of association, freedom of the press and freedom of expression. The investigation also confirmed that the state of exception was used as a political instrument to coerce the population. The organization calls on the Salvadoran State to respect human rights and guarantee the separation of powers. It also urges the international community to be vigilant in monitoring the situation in the country.