



CORRUPTION REGIME:

**The Hidden Business of
El Salvador's Prison
System**

SEPTEMBER, 2025

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I. Introduction

The state of exception in El Salvador was implemented on March 27, 2022, ten months after the Legislative Assembly, with a majority of deputies from the Nuevas Ideas party — the party of then-president Nayib Bukele — approved this measure under the argument that it would serve to combat gang-related crime in the country.

Since then, the legislative decree that suspended constitutional guarantees such as the right of assembly and the maximum detention of 72 hours before being presented to a judge has been extended 39 times continuously for more than three years.¹ This has resulted in tens of thousands of arrests and extreme overcrowding in prisons that had already been operating above capacity for years.

Mass arrests, which have mainly affected communities historically stigmatized by the country's two main gangs, have resulted in arbitrary arrests of innocent people. These complaints have been accumulating in various institutions, especially in reports by civil society organizations.

The permanence of a measure that, according to the Constitution of the Republic of El Salvador itself, is only valid under the condition of being temporary, is beginning to show clear signs of decomposition. After the rapid escalation of detentions of innocent people, evidence of probable cases of corruption has emerged, favored and amplified precisely by the regime.

This report aims to provide an overview of some of the possible forms of corruption faced by people deprived of liberty and their families, who must deal with the institutions responsible for their cases. Through the analysis of cases, at least three typologies linked to possible acts of corruption have been identified:

- the demand for in-kind bribes from relatives of detainees in exchange for information or contact.
- charges for visits not regulated by prison law;
- and possible corrupt links between lawyers and prison authorities facilitating the movement of illicit resources from families of detainees (extortion) in exchange for access to information or visits.

According to the information gathered, prison staff involved in these practices are not limited to guards alone. Testimonies indicate that both in-kind bribes and money pass through several hands within each prison.

¹ Legislative Decree No. 344 of July 3, 2025, published in the Official Gazette No. 123, Volume 448 of the same date.

II. Presentation of the topic and justification

The main objective of this research was to identify and corroborate possible acts of corruption by members of the public administration in the context of the state of exception, particularly among those actors linked to the General Directorate of Prisons (DGCP).

The DGCP has for years been the subject of criticism for its lack of transparency² and for acts of corruption inside prisons, both at the operational and administrative levels.

Numerous journalistic investigations and judicial processes³ have exposed irregularities across various administrations, ranging from the imprisonment of innocent people, human rights violations, irregular management of institutional funds, and deficiencies in the custody of detainees.

A clear example of these anomalies occurred in 2012, when the government of then president Mauricio Funes negotiated⁴ with gang leadership a reduction in homicides in exchange for easing prison conditions. This event has been widely documented by various media outlets and even led to judicial proceedings.

Ten years later, a new journalistic investigation revealed that the beginning of the state of exception could in fact be linked to the breakdown of another agreement between the Salvadoran government and gang members.⁵

Journalistic investigations, along with documentation work by civil society organizations, have been crucial in guaranteeing the right to information regarding an institution that for years has faced an insufficient budget to comply with Prison Law and its fundamental principles: rehabilitation and reintegration of persons deprived of liberty, and dignified treatment in prisons.

The state of exception under Bukele's administration has meant a radical change in the management of prisons. The transition has been drastic: from being able to access minimal information, such as knowing the total prison population, to a lack of updated and accurate figures; from guaranteeing basic rights such as food, to forcing relatives of detainees to constantly provide food packages and cleaning supplies; from allowing family visits or at least access to information about detainees, to concealing deaths that occurred under state custody.

The Research and Rule of Law teams at Cristosal confirmed that 265 people deceased in state custody during the state of exception up to April 2024.⁶ By July 2025 this number had risen to 367 confirmed deaths, with 44 more under verification.⁷

The impact of the state of exception on the lives of women and children has not yet been accurately quantified, but it is estimated to reach tens of thousands.⁸

In the absence of official information, civil society organizations have assumed the role of filling this void, documenting cases and human rights violations. For this reason, conducting research into other aspects of the regime, such as the actions of authorities

and the management of funds, became crucial. The identification of cases was carried out through oral and documentary sources, using accounts and testimonies from three unrelated cases pointing to possible types of corruption within the DGCP. These cases include requests for in-kind gifts, money, and the involvement of external actors such as private lawyers, who demanded irregular payments in collusion with prison staff.

The common goal of relatives and associates of detainees in each of these cases was to obtain accurate information about the situation of their loved ones.

² La Prensa Gráfica (2023). “Existen 97 reservas de información relacionadas a seguridad hasta 2023.”

³ El Diario de Hoy (2024). “Exministro Mauricio Landaverde fue condenado a tres años de prisión por caso Asocambio.”

⁴ El Faro (2012). “Gobierno negoció con pandillas reducción de homicidios.”

⁵ El Faro (2022). “Audios de Carlos Marroquín revelan que masacre de marzo ocurrió por ruptura entre Gobierno y MS.”

⁶ Cristosal. El silencio no es opción: Investigación sobre las prácticas de tortura, muerte y justicia fallida en el régimen de excepción. San Salvador: Cristosal, July 2024.

⁷ Cristosal investigation, 2025.

⁸ Connectas (2023). Huérfanos del Régimen de Excepción.

III. Objectives of the Research

General Objective:

- Investigate the possible occurrence of acts of corruption inside prisons in El Salvador during the state of exception.

Specific Objectives:

- Identify one or more cases of corruption inside Salvadoran prisons during the state of exception and substantiate them adequately.
- Identify the actors involved in these corruption cases inside prisons or in government during the state of exception.

IV. Importance of this Study

Possible acts of corruption occurring during the state of exception have not yet been systematically and comprehensively addressed. While some journalistic investigations have reported indications of corruption, these have focused on isolated cases without examining the probable existence of patterns of corrupt conduct.

The gaps created by the state of exception, as well as the absolute control of institutions by the ruling party, have opened opaque spaces inside public administration. These vulnerabilities have facilitated irregular conduct by officials and public servants, as evidenced by numerous testimonies gathered by independent media, which report cases of abuse of power, human rights violations, and harm to the relatives of detainees.

In a context in which obtaining official, reliable, and timely information from public institutions is nearly impossible, this research becomes essential for identifying possible patterns and structures of corruption, contributing to evidence of the erosion of the rule of law.

The right to information and the Law on Access to Information have experienced significant deterioration,⁹ with abuses in the classification of information, concealment of key data on the management of public funds, and lack of transparency in official statistics.

This document aims to serve as a starting point for identifying indications of corruption, the possible actors involved, and a probable research path for addressing these types of cases.

⁹ La Prensa Gráfica (2024). “El Salvador es cada vez menos transparente y brinda menos acceso a la información, según especialistas.”

V. Development of the Research

On March 27, 2022, the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador approved Decree No. 333,¹⁰ which implemented the state of exception, arguing that the country faced high levels of insecurity and that extraordinary measures were needed to identify and arrest gang members. From its approval until July 2025, the regime had been extended 39 times uninterruptedly,¹¹ by two different legislatures. In all extensions, Nuevas Ideas and its legislative allies voted in favor of its continuation.

The original decree suspended several constitutional guarantees, including:

- the rights of assembly and association (Art. 7, Constitution);
- the right of detainees to be informed of their rights and reasons for detention, the prohibition on being forced to testify, and the right to defense (Art. 12, Sec. 2, Constitution);
- the limitation of administrative detention to 72 hours (Art. 13, Sec. 2, Constitution);
- and the inviolability of correspondence and telecommunications (Art. 24, Constitution).

From the extension of August 16, 2022,¹² the suspension of rights of assembly and association was excluded, while restrictions on the rest of the rights remained. Subsequent extensions of the regime have continued under the same conditions. In practice, the implementation of the regime has led to mass raids, increased criminalization of previously stigmatized communities, systematic human rights violations, and opacity in the mechanisms for applying the measure.¹³ Ultimately, it has served as a tool of social control.

However, the validity of the regime has not achieved significant progress in the effective application of justice or in the resolution of cases,¹⁴ both prior to and following its implementation. There has not even been progress in investigations as serious as the death of 87 people in just three days — an event that in fact motivated the creation and approval of Decree 333. Journalistic investigations¹⁵ have revealed that this massacre was a response by gangs to the breakdown of negotiations between the Nuevas Ideas government and these criminal organizations, which had been ongoing for years.

While the regime has succeeded in reducing insecurity¹⁶ in some communities previously controlled by gangs,¹⁷ its consequences regarding poor application of justice, human rights violations, and the possible generation of acts of corruption have been systematically excluded from official public debate.¹⁸

Despite the lack of verifiable official figures, unofficial reports from officials and social media posts by government institutions suggest that the number of detainees under the state of exception exceeds 87,000 people,¹⁹ placing El Salvador in first place in the ranking of countries with the highest incarceration rate in the world.²⁰ In addition, Cristosal has verified 367 deaths of people in state custody during this period.²¹

The implementation of the state of exception and the absolute control of administration and information on prisons have left little room to investigate what is really happening inside them. The few testimonies of people released who have decided to tell their stories, anonymously or publicly,²² have hinted at possible acts of corruption inside prisons, as well as possible scams exploiting the anguish and lack of information of detainees' relatives.

The cases exposed in this investigation suggest the existence of at least three types of corruption involving private lawyers, prison guards, DGCP health personnel, and prison directors.

¹⁰ Legislative Decree No. 333. Legislative Assembly of the Republic of El Salvador.

¹¹ Legislative Assembly of El Salvador. Extension No. 39 of the state of exception. San Salvador: Legislative Assembly, July 3, 2025.

¹² Legislative Decree No. 476 of August 17, 2022, published in the Official Gazette No. 152, Vol. 436.

¹³ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR, 2024). El Salvador: State of Exception and Human Rights.

¹⁴ Revista GatoEncerrado (2022). "Hubo 577 denuncias de personas desaparecidas entre enero y mayo 2022."

¹⁵ El Faro (2022). "Audios de Carlos Marroquín revelan que masacre de marzo ocurrió por ruptura entre Gobierno y MS."

¹⁶ Revista Factum (2024). "Los negocios que ha transformado el régimen de excepción."

¹⁷ El Faro (2023). "Régimen de Bukele desarticula a las pandillas en El Salvador."

¹⁸ WOLA (2022). Corrupción y régimen de excepción en El Salvador: una democracia sin oxígeno.

¹⁹ Legislative Decree No. 344 of July 3, 2025, published in the Official Gazette No. 123, Vol. 448.

²⁰ World Population Review. Incarceration rates by country.

²¹ La Prensa Gráfica (2024). "Ya van 311 muertes de privados de libertad durante el régimen de excepción, según Socorro Jurídico Humanitario."

²² El Faro (2024). "El régimen encarcela como pandillero a víctima de las pandillas y testigo de un asesinato."

VI. Case 1. Donations as a Front for Irregular Payments

Background

Fidel Antonio Zavala Pérez was arrested on February 9, 2022, six weeks before the approval and implementation of the state of exception in El Salvador. Zavala is a businessman and economist who owned a company (Capital Investments Corporation, S.A. de C.V.) that offered returns on monetary investments. At the time of his arrest, the Attorney General's Office (FGR) accused him of fraud and of running a "shell company" to attract investors' money.²³ Zavala remained in prison for 13 months and spent time in two prisons: the one located in Cutumay Camones, Santa Ana, and the La Esperanza Prison (Mariona) in San Salvador.

Six months after being released under alternative measures, Zavala chose to go public with his case. In several media interviews, he denounced abuses of power suffered not only by himself but also by others, as well as irregularities he witnessed in the two prisons. Supported by the organization Unidad de Defensa de Derechos Humanos y Comunitarios (UNIDHEC),²⁴ Zavala filed a criminal complaint against the Director General of Prisons, Osiris Luna Meza, for human rights violations.

Before the interview for this report, his earlier media statements were reviewed and cross-checked with his detailed account. No major discrepancies were found, and the dates and facts matched consistently.

Corruption Practices Observed

Zavala reported that in both Cutumay Camones and Mariona he witnessed:

- Abuse and mistreatment: beatings, food restrictions, prolonged lockdowns, and overcrowded conditions.
- Health neglect: denial of adequate treatment and medical negligence.
- Deaths in custody: from beatings and negligence.
- Corruption schemes: disguised "donations" as a condition for visits.

Regarding Mariona prison, Zavala stated:

"In Mariona, I became aware of the donations. These donations allowed families to enter and see their loved ones. The process was disguised as an official request for a donation, but in reality, the agreement behind it was access to visits."

He explained that inmates had to write a formal letter offering a “donation” (stationery, office supplies, water tanks, construction materials, or medicine).

The request was processed by guards, technical staff, and prison directors. Zavala recalled that his own family donated about \$400 worth of office supplies and antifungal creams, which eventually allowed him a 20-minute family visit. This was the only visit he received during his imprisonment.

Illustrative Testimonies

- Inmates in Izalco and San Miguel reported receiving only 20% of food and hygiene items that families sent; the rest was diverted.
- Families were pressured to provide “donations” such as water trucks, medicine, and office materials in exchange for visits.
- Some “donated” materials, like construction supplies, never went to prison needs — they disappeared.

One particularly grave aspect: even families of deceased detainees were still pressured to deliver packages and money, with guards pretending the person was alive in the prison system.

Corroboration

Zavala’s statements were corroborated by:

- Interviews he gave to El Faro, El Diario de Hoy, and La Prensa Gráfica.²⁵
- Photographic evidence he provided, dated consistently with his account.
- Confirmation of the presence of José Ricardo Reyes Rosales (former mayor of Comasagua, convicted of sexual abuse) as coordinator of “donations” at Cutumay Camones.²⁶

Findings

This case shows a systematized procedure:

1. Agreement between prison staff and detainees about needed goods.
2. Prisoners drafted donation requests, naming a family member to deliver them.
3. Technical staff reviewed and directors approved the “donation.”
4. Families were called and given 72 hours to comply.
5. Goods were delivered, and only then could visits take place.

The “donation” scheme operated as an informal market of favors inside prisons, where desperation of families was exploited by guards and officials.

²³ Attorney General's Office, 2022.

²⁴ Diario Co Latino (2024). “Presentan avisos penales en contra de Osiris Luna y Merino Monroy.”

²⁵ El Faro (2024), El Diario de Hoy (2024), La Prensa Gráfica (2024).

²⁶ Diario El Mundo (2023). “Condenan a 14 años de cárcel a exalcalde de Comasagua por violación.”

VII. Case 2. Direct Payments to Contacts in Prisons

Testimony of “Maura”

“Maura” (pseudonym) is a woman from Ahuachapán, a single mother who has been left in charge of four grandchildren after the detention of her three sons at different times in 2023. They were accused of being gang members.

She agreed to be interviewed by phone in June 2024 under anonymity, later followed up several times through messaging. She explained that she was asked to pay large sums of money in exchange for brief visits to one of her sons.

Her account:

- Her first son was arrested at his workplace by police officers who said they “needed one more” to complete an arrest quota.
- She never received information about the judicial process, hearings, or resolutions.
- Her economic situation prevented her from sending packages since October 2023.
- Police accused one son of extortion despite finding only \$7 in coins on him. She stated:

“They asked me for \$2,000 in Mariona to be able to see my first son. And believe me, if I had had it, I would have paid it to see him.”

Corruption Chain

Maura described how she learned of these irregular practices:

- A woman she met paid \$4,000 twice to see her husband in Mariona.
- The money was allegedly delivered to Osiris Luna, Director General of Prisons, through intermediaries.

- Visits lasted about 20 minutes, during which women could bring food and coffee. She claimed that this chain of payments was arranged by a former detainee who recruited desperate families willing to pay.

In contrast, Maura noted that in Izalco prison, where one of her other sons was held, “it is stricter, this doesn’t happen.”

Other Case: “Estela”

Another testimony, from “Estela,” highlights how extortion was practiced through deception:

- In 2018, one of her sons was detained but released after a police chief intervened. A resentful officer later arrested both him and his brother during the state of exception.
- Estela regularly left packages at Mariona prison.
- A woman approached her at home, claiming to have seen her son inside and delivered her a handwritten letter allegedly from him, asking for shoes and money.
- The woman demanded deposits in exchange for passing items to her son.

Estela suspected extortion. She had recently deposited money legally and delivered packages, so she refused. Days later, her son died in custody.

“When I told her we had no money, she got angry and called someone in front of me. I later realized it was a prison guard. After that, the following Sunday, my son was already a corpse.”

Implications

- Families, especially women, are the main targets of extortion and irregular payments.
- Corruption networks allegedly reach as high as Osiris Luna and his close circle.
- Families risk retaliation if they cannot pay. Corroboration
- On May 1, 2024, the Attorney General’s Office announced the arrest of a band of counterfeiters and swindlers, among them a woman identified by Maura as one of the intermediaries.²⁷
- This suggests that people involved in scams also had sensitive information about prison operations.

²⁷ Attorney General’s Office Bulletin, 2024.

VIII. Case 3. Lawyers as Intermediaries of Payments and Irregular Penitentiary Benefits

Testimony of “Gregorio”

Gregorio is a seasoned criminal lawyer, formerly an assistant prosecutor, now working as a private attorney. Among his clients are people detained during the state of exception, many of them victims of arbitrary arrests.

His background and career gave him insight into the justice system and the changes it has undergone — including the forced removal of hundreds of judges through a decree,²⁸ many of whom were considered “uncomfortable” because of their rulings.

Gregorio confirmed that it is widely known in legal circles that prison employees take payments to allow visits for detainees held under the state of exception, with amounts reaching up to \$5,000.

He also said:

- These visits are often arranged by a small group of private lawyers who dedicate themselves almost exclusively to defending detainees under the state of exception.²⁹
- These lawyers leverage close ties with key prison figures, including Alma Yanira Meza Olivares, mother of DGCP director Osiris Luna.

Who is Alma Yanira Meza Olivares?

- A lawyer by profession.
- Mother of Osiris Luna, head of prisons.
- Reported in various journalistic investigations for allegedly obtaining state resources for personal and third-party benefit.³⁰
- Identified by the U.S. Treasury Department as implicated in corruption.³¹
- Involved in private lending businesses registered in the Property and Commerce Registry.

Examples of Irregular Benefits

According to Gregorio and corroborated testimonies:

- Families of detainees paid \$500 per visit to see relatives at Mariona.
- Lawyers demanded \$3,000 to arrange transfers of detainees to less violent sectors.
- Up to \$7,000 was requested for promises of release — though many of these were never fulfilled.

Corroboration

- Fidel Zavala (Case 1) and Maura (Case 2) also pointed to similar schemes, where lawyers and intermediaries facilitated irregular benefits.
- In some instances, families provided audio evidence confirming these payments.

Findings from Case 3

- Corruption networks are not limited to low-level guards; they involve higher ranking officials and their relatives.
- Private lawyers play a central role as intermediaries, exploiting families' desperation.
- These practices overlap with extortion schemes documented in Cases 1 and 2, showing systematic corruption across prisons.

²⁸ El Faro (2021). "Asamblea de Bukele reforma la ley para purgar a un tercio de los jueces."

²⁹ Off-the-record interview with Gregorio.

³⁰ El Faro (2021). "Osiris Luna vendió 42,000 sacos de alimentos que eran para los afectados de la pandemia."

³¹ U.S. Department of Treasury Press Release, 2021.

IX. Common Elements in the Identified Cases

The three cases illustrate different forms of corruption in prisons, but they share common elements:

1. Participation of a wide chain of command inside each prison, involving guards, technical staff, and directors.
2. Similar amounts demanded for visits, ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars.
3. Occurrence in prisons considered less strict, such as Santa Ana and Mariona.
4. Most visits paid for by women relatives, who were particularly targeted.
5. Use of the state of exception as a pretext to justify irregular charges.
6. Lack of official, timely, and accurate information for families, exposing them to scams and extortion.

Families organized virtual communities to share data on transfers, hospitalizations, or prices of food packages. These informal networks emerged due to the lack of transparency from authorities.

Moreover, scams flourished: intermediaries promised early releases or expedited processes, charging from \$2,000 to \$25,000. Authorities themselves acknowledged structures that defrauded families of about \$100,000.³²

The desperation of families made them vulnerable to false promises. In some cases, refusal to pay led to retaliation and even death of detainees, as in Estela's testimony.

(Case 2).

³² El Diario de Hoy (2024). "Acusan a ocho por estafas relacionadas con la liberación de detenidos en el régimen."

X. Human Rights Impact of the Investigated Cases

Corruption inside prisons has severe consequences for detainees' rights. The identified practices violate several international human rights standards:

1. Prohibition of Arbitrary Detention

International standards require detentions to be legal, necessary, proportionate, and aimed at legitimate purposes such as ensuring judicial process. Any detention that

does not meet these criteria is arbitrary. Even during states of exception, the prohibition of arbitrary detention is non-derogable.³³

³³ Inter-American Court of Human Rights (2007). Case Chaparro Álvarez and Lapo Íñiguez v. Ecuador.

2. Prohibition of Incommunication

Isolation can only be applied exceptionally, for a strictly limited time, and to protect investigations. Excessive incommunication:

- Severely limits detainees' defense rights.
- Prevents contact with family and legal counsel.
- Is considered disproportionate and excessive.

International rules (Mandela Rules, Inter-American Principles) affirm detainees' right to communicate regularly with lawyers and family. Prolonged isolation transforms even legal detentions into arbitrary deprivation of liberty.³⁴

³⁴ Inter-American Court of Human Rights (1997). Case Suárez Rosero v. Ecuador.

3. Right to Defense

The American Convention on Human Rights guarantees:

- Preparation of defense.
- Confidential communication with lawyers.

- Access to public defenders if needed.

Total incommunication prevents detainees from exercising this right, leaving them defenseless.

4. On the Packages Required of Families Authorities' demands that families provide food, clothing, and medicine violate international standards:

- Adequate Food: must be sufficient, nutritious, hygienically prepared, and provided by the State.³⁵
- Clothing: must be dignified, climate-appropriate, and supplied by the State, not families.³⁶
- Medical Care: must be guaranteed by the State through qualified personnel, not left to relatives.³⁷

Forcing families to supply these essentials not only burdens impoverished households but also creates opportunities for corruption and inequality among detainees.

³⁵ Mandela Rules, Rule 22.

³⁶ Inter-American Principles, Principle XI.

³⁷ Inter-American Principles, Principle X.

XI. Conclusions

The information collected confirms the occurrence of corruption inside the prison system and reveals its serious consequences for detainees and their families. The study does not aim to generalize, but the recurrence of similar patterns across cases indicates systemic conditions that enable corruption:

- Families are forced to assume State responsibilities for food, clothing, and medicine.
- Corruption schemes are normalized through “donations” and irregular payments.
- Families who cannot or refuse to participate risk retaliation, even death of their loved ones.

Key risks identified:

1. Deterioration of detention conditions and abandonment of State obligations.
2. Emergence of parallel markets where visits, transfers, and favors are sold.
3. Institutionalized extortion that exploits families' desperation.

4. Culture of impunity, since complaints are silenced and perpetrators inside the prison system go unpunished.

The state of exception, presented as a security measure, has transformed Salvadoran prisons into spaces of institutional abuse and systemic corruption. Lack of transparency and prolonged suspension of rights not only enable massive human rights violations but also create a parallel extortion system that intensifies the suffering of thousands of families.

Allowing these practices to continue normalizes impunity and consolidates a governance model based on fear and opacity.

It is urgent to:

- Investigate and prosecute those responsible.
- Reinstate State responsibility for detainees' basic needs.
- Guarantee transparency and independent oversight.
- Protect victims and families who denounce abuses.

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*This is an English translation of the original Spanish report published by Cristosal.