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## FEATURED Q&A

# What Will a Ruling Party Supermajority Bring El Salvador?



President Nayib Bukele's New Ideas party last month won a supermajority in the country's unicameral Legislative Assembly. // File Photo: @AsambleaSV via X.

**Q** **New Ideas, the party of El Salvador's president, Nayib Bukele, won a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly, electoral officials announced Feb. 19, two weeks after the country's general election. What policies will the supermajority allow Bukele and his party to push through the Legislative Assembly? How much of a challenge might New Ideas face from opposing parties? What checks and balances exist in El Salvador on Bukele and the ruling party?**

**A** **Phillip Leon Euell, of counsel at Diaz, Reus & Targ:** "In the recent elections, President Nayib Bukele's party, New Ideas, achieved a monumental victory, securing a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly with 54 of the 60 available seats. This result reflects the Salvadoran electorate's endorsement of Bukele's leadership and his party's policies, and it represents a mandate from the people, demonstrating their confidence in Bukele's vision for the nation and his administration's achievements in addressing critical issues like crime and corruption. President Bukele has transformed Salvadoran politics; his efforts to tackle the gang violence that has long troubled the country have garnered broad support. The significant decrease in violence during his tenure contributes to the public's favorable view of his governance. Now, the supermajority secured by New Ideas in the Legislative Assembly grants Bukele's administration an opportunity to further its legislative goals. With this enhanced legislative power, the administration is positioned to implement reforms and policies that align with the populace's aspirations for greater security and prosperity. Although

Continued on page 3

## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## Thousands of Inmates Freed as Gangs Attack Haiti Prisons

Gang attacks over the weekend at Haiti's two largest prisons led nearly all of their 4,000 inmates to escape.

Page 2

### ECONOMIC

## Venezuela Oil Exports Rise, Shipping Delays Remain

Venezuela's oil exports rose in February, but shipping delays have worsened ahead of the expected reimposition of U.S. sanctions on the country's oil industry.

Page 2

### ECONOMIC

## Lithium Demand Will Boost U.S. Imports From Chile: Yellen

U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Saturday during a visit to Chile that demand for lithium will significantly boost U.S. imports from Chile over the coming years.

Page 3



Yellen // File Photo: @SecYellen via X.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Gangs Attack Haiti Prisons, Thousands of Inmates Freed

Gangs in Haiti attacked the country's two largest prisons over the past few days, freeing nearly all of their 4,000 inmates, and leaving at least nine people dead since Thursday, the Associated Press reported today. Among the dead were four police officers, the wire service reported. The attacks led the government on Sunday night to declare a 72-hour state of emergency, and government officials vowed to find the killers, kidnappers and other criminals who escaped from their cells. "The police were ordered to use all legal means at their disposal to enforce the curfew and apprehend all offenders," Finance Minister Patrick Boivert, who is acting as prime minister while Prime Minister Ariel Henry is out of the country, said Sunday in a statement. Henry traveled last week to Kenya, whose government wants to send a force of 1,000 police officers to Haiti in order to lead a U.N.-authorized armed force to fight the gangs that have increasingly seized control of Port-au-Prince and other areas. Henry and Kenyan President William Ruto on Friday oversaw the signing of agreements between the two countries to salvage the plan, which is in doubt after Kenya's High Court in January ruled it unconstitutional. It was unclear how the agreements would circumvent the court's ruling, the AP reported. Haitian gang federation leader Jimmy "Barbecue" Chérizier, a former police officer, claimed responsibility for the attacks and said he wants to capture Haiti's police chief and prevent Henry from returning to the country, the AP reported. "All of us, the armed groups in the provincial towns and the armed groups in the capital, are united," said Chérizier, BBC News reported. On Sunday, one worker at the National Penitentiary, one of the two prisons attacked over the weekend, said 99 prisoners had opted to stay in their cells rather than fleeing, over fears that they would be killed in crossfire surrounding the prison, Reuters reported. Among them were several Colombian soldiers who

were jailed for their alleged involvement in the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, Reuters reported. The bodies of three inmates who had attempted to flee were seen laying dead in the prison courtyard.

## Presidents of Venezuela, Guyana Meet at Summit

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his Guyanese counterpart, Irfaan Ali, met Friday during a summit in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, where they exchanged gifts and expressed a desire for peace, Agence France-Presse reported. "We want peace. We want prosperity for our neighbors and all in this region," Ali said during the summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. "I hope that the good relations that have been established for dialogue deepen... and that we look for, face to face... a healthy, peaceful and diplomatic solution to the differences and controversy that we have had since the 19th century," said Maduro. Ali gave Maduro a bottle of rum and a medal, while Maduro gave Ali a box of Venezuelan products in return. The two countries have been in a border dispute over the oil-rich Essequibo region, which makes up two-thirds of Guyana, but which Venezuela claims as its own.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Venezuela's Oil Exports Rise, Delays in Shipping Remain

Venezuelan oil exports rose in February, but shipping delays have worsened a bottleneck of customers hoping to snatch up Venezuelan crude before the United States reimposes sanctions on the nation's state-run oil firm, according to documents and vessel monitoring data, Reuters reported Friday. The U.S. Treasury Department lifted sanctions on Venezuela's

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Int'l Criminal Court Judges Rule Venezuela Investigation Can Proceed

Judges at the International Criminal Court ruled Friday that a probe into alleged crimes against humanity perpetrated by Venezuelan security forces during anti-government protests in 2017 can proceed, the Associated Press reported. The court's chief prosecutor announced the investigation in 2021, but it was paused when Venezuelan authorities said they wanted to handle the probe. The judges sided with the prosecutor who argued Venezuela was not sufficiently investigating the case.

## Brazil's Petrobras Increasing Price of Jet Fuel

Brazilian state-run oil firm Petrobras said Friday it was increasing the price of jet fuel by an average of 8.4 percent starting this month, Reuters reported. In a statement, Petrobras underlined how the price of jet fuel had been decreased four times in a row, falling 2.7 percent this year, after a 12.6 percent decline throughout 2023. The state-owned oil firm will now increase prices by roughly 0.31 real, or \$0.06, per liter of jet fuel, as of last Friday.

## Mexican State Closes Pemex Refinery Over Environmental Checks

Officials in the Mexican state of Nuevo León on Friday announced that they had closed Pemex's Cadereyta refinery, saying the state-run oil firm refused to comply with environmental inspections, Reuters reported. The state government of Nuevo León, led by opposition-aligned governor Samuel García, threatened to close the refinery in January unless Pemex reduced emissions. There have been multiple complaints from residents over the last year over pollution from the refinery, which can produce up to 275,000 barrels of oil per day.

state-owned oil company, PDVSA, in October, allowing the firm six months of new investments and partnerships. However, the United States promised in January to snap back sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector on April 18 if President Nicolás Maduro does not adhere to agreements on free and fair elections this year. Customers flocked to Caracas to pursue deals with PDVSA after sanctions were lifted, but now many of the state-run firm's clients are facing a bottleneck of tankers waiting to pick up crude. In February, deliveries of crude to PDVSA's customers such as the United States' Chevron and India's Reliance Industries rose significantly when compared to January, and overall oil exports for Venezuela increased to 670,000 barrels per day, but major hurdles have hindered exports from rising further and fulfilling the firm's supply deals, Reuters reported. The principal issues are a shortage of imported diluents at the South American country's main oil port and a lack of crude inventories, according to internal company documents, Reuters reported.

## Lithium Demand Will Boost U.S. Imports From Chile: Yellen

U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen on Saturday said that growing demand for lithium would significantly increase U.S. imports from Chile over the next several years, Reuters reported. Yellen's comments followed meetings with President Gabriel Boric and Economy Minister Mario Marcel, as well as key business executives in Santiago. The treasury secretary's trip ended with a visit to northern Chile to tour U.S. lithium producer Albemarle's site in La Negra, after which she told reporters that increasing demand for clean energy alternatives may generate upwards of \$3 trillion in global investment opportunities over the next 26 years, Reuters reported. Yellen added that deepening U.S.-Chilean economic ties would be a boon to both nations, as well as to climate goals and the United States' aim of reducing overdependence on strategic imports from China and bolstering U.S. energy security.

### FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

the election process faced scrutiny from some opposition parties and international observers, the resounding electoral triumph unequivocally demonstrates the popular confidence placed in Bukele's leadership, and it signals a desire for sustained progress and development under his stewardship. The victory of President Bukele and New Ideas in the legislative elections stands as an endorsement of their agenda and leadership style by the Salvadoran people. The administration now looks forward to enhancing the nation's security, improving governance, and fostering economic development, reflecting the electorate's aspirations for a brighter future."

**A Peter Hakim, member of the Advisor board and president emeritus of the Inter-American Dialogue:**

"Bukele now has free rein to do pretty much whatever he wants. Not only did he win himself a second term with an unprecedented 85 percent of the vote, his political allies gained 54 of 60 seats in the Legislative Assembly. Both the judiciary and the military take their orders from Bukele. And he has overwhelming support from 1.3 million Salvadorans living abroad. There is no serious opposition to Bukele's rule. Moreover, any checks and balances went out the window when he disregarded El Salvador's constitutional restrictions on presidential re-elections. No one expects him to change his policies or style—particularly when the praise keeps coming in from many sources, and other governments appear attracted to his ideas for fighting crime. He has managed to put an end to the crime and violence that long made El Salvador one of the world's most dangerous countries. Homicides per 100,000 citizens have dropped from more than 100 to around three per year. Some 75,000 Salvadorans, mostly young men, are today languishing in jail. Many have been subjected to public humiliation and torture—and few will get anything close to a fair trial, or

any at all. Highly regarded analysts point to experiences elsewhere that suggest Bukele's policies will likely run out of steam, with violence and murder likely to re-emerge full force in El Salvador. But the evidence is not terribly compelling. We do not know what the result of Bukele's experiment will be. We do know that the violent criminality Bukele has brought under control in El Salvador is burgeoning in many Latin American countries. No wonder that El Salvador's policies have gained considerable attention across the region and may soon find imitators—with little concern about human rights."

**A Mneesha Gellman, associate professor of political science at Emerson College:** "Much concern about free and fair elections procedures surrounds El Salvador's most recent presidential and legislative election. From irregular chains of control for ballot boxes to the lack of constitutional basis for President Bukele running for election in the first place, Salvadoran elections are not upholding procedural democratic bench-

**“ The supermajority gives Bukele carte blanche to govern at his whim.”**

— Mneesha Gellman

marks. The New Ideas supermajority in the Legislative Assembly is another step in President Bukele's nondemocratic consolidation of power. From being able to indefinitely extend the State of Exception, which has authorized a police state and undermined the human rights of detained people, to allowing further violations of constitutional rules, including those governing presidential re-election, the supermajority gives Bukele carte blanche to govern at his whim. We are likely to see ongoing arrests and detain-

Continued on page 4



## FEATURED Q&amp;A / Continued from page 3

ments of Salvadorans in the name of public safety under this next iteration of Bukele's government. With opposition voices in civil society scared to speak out for fear of being denounced and detained themselves, the space for freedom of expression, among many other rights, is shrinking in the country. The rule of law is in free fall as the country becomes more and more authoritarian."

**A Adam Blackwell, vice president for international at Development Services Group and former Canadian ambassador to the Dominican Republic:** "Bukele won a landslide re-election on Feb. 4, a clear indication that the Salvadoran people are willing to exchange personal security for personal freedoms. The official tally shows that he received 84.7 percent of the popular vote, and his New Ideas party will control 54 of the 60 seats in El Salvador's reformatted legislature. In 2023, the Legislative Assembly passed electoral reforms reducing the number of seats in the unicameral chamber from 84 to 60. Many, including the Organization of American States, have suggested that there may have been irregularities in the vote, though they would not have overturned

such an overwhelming majority. Bukele will be inaugurated on June 1, having left his private secretary in charge for the six-month interregnum. While it's too early to say what is next, he has the Legislative Assembly and the courts enabling him with almost no checks and balances. Meanwhile, his vice president has already mused about a third term. Eight percent of the male young adult population is already in jail as part of a massive crackdown on gang violence. In the short term, Bukele has created a 'gang divide.' The question, now, is what to do with it? The economy has grown slightly but is still behind Honduras and Guatemala. Will Bukele appeal to the IMF or ask for more help from the Chinese? Is he going to continue arresting suspected gang members or work on the legal backlog and reintegration?"

*[Editor's note: The Advisor requested a commentary for this issue from El Salvador's ambassador to the United States but received no response.]*

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.*

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