6 February 2024 / “The world’s coolest dictator”

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): If you’re a regular *Today, Explained* listener,you already know that 2024 is a historic year for elections around the world. Over half of humanity lives in a country where there’ll be an election this year!

But that doesn’t guarantee all those elected leaders will be super democratic.

*<CLIP> NAYIB BUKELE ARRIVING TO VOTE while R.E.M.’s “It’s The End of The World As We Know It” plays over P.A. system*

SEAN: In El Salvador’s big election this past weekend, sitting President Nayib Bukele showed up to vote blasting “It’s The End of The World As We Know It.”

*<CLIP> Music posts a bit*

SEAN: It was a bit of a troll for all the critics of his many anti-democratic reforms as president, including changing the constitution to allow himself a second consecutive run at the top job.And, of course, he’s claiming a landslide victory.

*<CLIP> REUTERS Bukele Reelection Speech 1: [Spanish]This will be the first time where one single party rules a country in a completely democratic system. We pulverized all of the opposition.*

SEAN: Why the whole wide world would be wise to pay attention to what Bukele is up to in El Salvador, coming up on the show today.

[THEME]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): *Today, Explained!* Sean Rameswaram. But Nayib Bukele is the star of this show today, he’s from a ritzy neighborhood called Los Sueños, which, if you didn’t take Spanish in high school, means “the dreams”. This dude is literally dreamy.

Silvia Viñas is the co-host of the podcast “Bukele: El señor de Los Sueños.” We asked her to tell us his story.   
  
SILVIA VIÑAS (co-host *Bukele: El señor de Los Sueños*): He comes from a family of Palestinian immigrants.

SCORING: STR\_STR\_0026\_01901\_Lost\_And\_Found\_APM

SILVIA: So after he finishes school, Bukele went to a small, bilingual private school. That's why his English is so good. He started working for the family's advertising agency. He actually became the president of the company when he was 18 years old.

SEAN: Wow. So he's a nepo baby?

SILVIA: Yes, he definitely is. The agency actually began to manage clients for the FMLN, the traditional left wing party. So thanks to these ties with the FMLN, he finds a way to enter politics. So at this point, he's in his early 30s, so he's very young. He wins the, mayoral election for San Salvador which is the most important mayorship. It's the one that has the biggest budget and that gets the most media coverage. As mayor of San Salvador, very quickly and very visibly, one of the main things he does is that he recovers a small part of the historic downtown in El Salvador. And I went there with our colleague Gabriel Labrador from the digital newspaper *El Faro*, and he showed me how Bukele had modernized a very small area that used to be controlled by gangs and informal commerce. But we later found out, the press reveals, that in order to get street vendors off the streets, he had to negotiate with gangs. So of course, this is something that he has denied, but it shows how he was willing to pretty much do anything to get things done. And that kind of started when he was already mayor. And this is what catapults him to the presidency. Being known for being this young, hip, politician who gets things done.

*<CLIP> BUKELE announces his candidacy 2019: He decidido lanzar este día un movimiento para buscar la presidencia de la república en el año 2019.*

SCORING FADE OUT

SILVIA: When he announces he's running for president, it's not clear what his ideology is, or what the ideology is behind this new political movement that he says he's creating. His message is mostly against the two traditional parties that had governed the country for decades and had not been able to solve basic problems. And the major issue of El Salvador, which is security.  
SEAN: He’s the youngest president in the history of El Salvador when he’s elected in 2019. A millennial president. What’s he like when he gets into office? Is it all avocado toast and Instagram or what?

SILVIA: Well, he continues to sell this image of the young, hip millennial president who is different from the other presidents in Latin America. He was 37, as you say he looked very different from other presidents. He didn't wear suits. He wore leather jackets. you know, he used social media to even conduct state business, you know, like to fire government employees or to ask them to take care of an issue. He goes to the UN, he takes a selfie.

*<CLIP> BUKELE UN Selfie Speech> BUKELE: Believe me, many more people will see that selfie once I share it than will listen to this speech. And I hope that I took a good one.*

SILVIA: When he takes office, the Congress is doing their job of being a counterweight and checks and balances, as they should in a democracy, because he doesn't have a majority there. So during the campaign, his first campaign, his narrative was against the traditional parties. Now he starts a new fight, and that fight is with lawmakers because he wants them to approve a loan to finance his plan to reduce violent killings and to fight the gangs. So the Congress asks for more details about how he's going to spend this money. And Bukele gets tired of this back and forth of legislators delaying everything. And he dials up the pressure a lot.

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SILVIA: He calls for an extraordinary session for Sunday, February February 9th, 2020.

SEAN: He calls everyone to work on a Sunday?  
  
SILVIA: Yeah!  
  
SEAN: That sounds tyrannical.

SILVIA: Yes, yes. Beginning. Beginning there, right? So we spoke to a legislator from that Congress. His name is Leonardo Bonilla, and he's the only independent legislator the country has ever had.

*<CLIP Ep3 Bukele TE> BONILLA: El mismo presidente de la república había convocado a sus simpatizantes a que llegaran a la asamblea legislativa a hacer presión.*

*TRANSLATION: The president had called to supporters to descend upon the national legislature to pressure us.*

SILVIA: So that February 9th, some legislators go, but they don't have enough people to actually carry out a session to vote on the loan. And Bonilla says that it was very clear that that's not really why Bukele wanted them there. So Bukele advertised on social media that he was calling on this extraordinary session, and he told people to go with him. He told people to go march, to the Congress. So people gather outside the building, and it's not like a spontaneous gathering. The government sets up a stage with a sound system, you know, everything from Bukele to give a speech outside the building. They use government buses driven by military personnel to bring people to this gathering. And inside, the legislators are just waiting for the session to start. And while they're waiting, armed military personnel start marching inside the building.

*<CLIP Ep3 Bukele TE> BONILLA: pues, los militares alrededor de todo el salón azul de ahí los diputados, no hicimos nada. No se podía debatir porque no existía el cuo insuficiente.*

*Translation: The military surrounded the legislators in the legislative hall. We didn't do anything. We COULDN'T do anything because we didn't have quorum.*

SILVIA: And they stand around the room where, where they vote. Bonilla, this legislator, tells us that they feared that this was a coup. Military entering the Congress.

SEAN: It sounds like, it's got like, January 6th vibes if it worked.

SILVIA: *Yes*. Meanwhile, outside, Bukele speaks to the people.

*<CLIP Ep3 Bukele TE> BUKELE: Estamos haciendo historia y los que digan que no, que miren este más de gente enfrente de la asamblea legislativa con su presidente, hablándoles con el apoyo de la fuerza madre de la policía nacional civil que está acá, no para reprimir el pueblo, sino para apoyar al pueblo.*

*Translation: We're making history. Those who say we aren't, look at these people in front of the legislature with their president, speaking to them with the support of the armed forces, the national polices, not to punish the people but rather to support the people.*

SILVIA: You know, he says, Will you let me enter Congress? And people are like, “Yes!” <chortles>

*<CLIP> BUKELE Entering legislature w/ military music*

SILVIA: So he enters the room where the legislators are waiting, with the military already inside. He sits in the chair where the president of the Congress would sit during a session. And he says, let's say a prayer.

SCORING OUT

SILVIA: He puts his hands on his head and he prays in silence. You can’t hear it. And then he just gets up and he leaves. It's like a show of force, kind of like, this is what I'm capable of doing. I didn't go all the way. I didn't, you know, instigate a coup. But it was a fear tactic.

SEAN: Does he find a way to consolidate power after that?

SILVIA: Yeah, he does. And he does that the following year when his party and the allied parties win a majority in Congress.

*<CLIP NEWS Bukele purges the courts and the attorney general> NEWSCASTER: El partido de Bukele estrenó este sábado su mayoría parlamentaria deshaciéndose de dos de los principales estorbos que ha encontrado el presidente, el fiscal general y los magistrados de la sala constitucional.*

*Translation: Bukele's party premiered its parliamentary majority by getting rid of two of Bukele's biggest obstacles, the attorney general and the judges on the constitutional court.*

SILVIA: So in, in just a few months after winning that election, after his party won majority, he was able to get a hold of legislative power and then the judicial power. And so after that it's like, okay, he can do anything he wants. He controls everything.

SEAN: It's my understanding that one of the reasons people back Bukele, it's because he's taking a stand against the gangs and the gang violence in El Salvador.   
  
SILVIA: Mm-hm.  
  
SEAN: How does he, as president, oppose the gangs?

SILVIA: So you might remember these images of prisoners in Salvadoran jails with, you know, their shaved heads without a shirt, with their hands behind their back, like sitting very close to one another in lines?

*<CLIP NBC El Salvador mega prison> REPORTER:  Hundreds of inmates, barefoot and stripped down to white shorts, scurry into El Salvador's new mega prison, ordered to crouch down on the ground, one after another.*

SILVIA: Those images kind of went around the world. But that was a reaction from President Bukele, his government, because in April 2020 there was a surge in violence. There were 76 homicides in four days. So his response was to crack down on gang members in jails. So he authorized the use of lethal force, meaning that, you know, he gave security officers permission to shoot inmates or suspects in defense, in self-defense or to protect citizens. He mixed members of rival gangs in the same cells. He installed metal sheets to seal off cells. So he was showing, you know, I am treating these guys terribly because they've done so much damage to our society. But the, the trick is that just months after he does this, the digital newspaper El Faro revealed that Bukele had been negotiating with gang members since June 2019, since the beginning of his presidency. And how these negotiations would work is that he would give them privileges in prison. In exchange, they would reduce murders and tell people in their territories to vote for Bukele’s party in the legislative election. Of course, Bukele denies it. But then there's another big wave, and this is even bigger. Eighty-seven murders in three days.   
  
SEAN: Wow.   
  
SILVIA: And this is when that weekend, Bukele requests Congress to declare a state of emergency. And that's kind of the beginning of this state of emergency that has been renewed every 30 days, 22 times. We're almost at a two year mark in El Salvador has almost been two years under a state of emergency in the name of fighting the gangs.

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SEAN: And what does the state of emergency get him in terms of power?

SILVIA: This one suspends basic rights like right to defense or the presumption of innocence.So during this time, there are more military on the streets. He has increased the military, he has given them more resources. And the government so far has imprisoned over 75,000 people. That's more than 1% of the population

SEAN: Wow.

SILVIA: El Salvador is the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world. The issue with this is that there are thousands of reports of arbitrary arrests, of abuse, of torture, but again, this is possibly his most celebrated measure and the one that has ultimately made him one of the most popular politicians in the Americas, and so after that, it's like, okay, he can do anything he wants. He controls everything.

SEAN: Except for the constitutional term limit on his presidency.

SILVIA: Yes, but remember that now he also has control of the people who make decisions about the Constitution and who interpret the Constitution.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Bukele uses democracy to make El Salvador less democratic when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: So Sylvia, Bukele seems to have consolidated so much power while in office. But he is still restricted by a constitutional term limit. How does he get past that?

SILVIA: Yeah. So the Salvadoran constitution is very clear. Reelection is prohibited. So basically you can be president as many times as you win in El Salvador, but just not consecutively. So in September 2021, the Constitutional chamber, you know, is already controlled by pro-Bukele magistrates. They issue a resolution that says that it's only up to the people to decide whether the president should continue, and they basically ignore the articles of the Constitution that say very clearly that reelection is not allowed. And they focus on a specific article that refers to requirements to be a presidential candidate.

SCORING Ice Skating in a Hurricane\_APM

SILVIA: And so the chamber basically interprets this article to say, you know, the requirements for Bukele to run for reelection. The only requirement is that he step down from his position as president six months before the beginning of the new presidential term. So the new period, which he will begin now, is June of this year, 2024. So he had to step down from office before December 1st of 2023. And that's what he did.

*<CLIP BUKELE Steps down> BUKELE: Eh, primer lugar, como todos ustedes saben, en aproximadamente tres días, voy a pedir una licencia a la asamblea legislativa para, eh, dedicarme a la campaña y no, y no voy a estar en funciones como presidente, digamos*

*Translation: As you know, in three days I'll be asking for a license from the legislature to dedicate myself to the campaign and I won't be functioning as president.*

SEAN: Was it controversial as you went through this process of getting rid of the constitutional term limit?

SILVIA: So political parties and lawyers, they tried to challenge with the Electoral Tribunal because even though the Constitutional Chamber did this resolution, the institution that, you know, had to have the final say, let's say, is the Electoral tribunal. The Electoral Tribunal is not under complete control of Bukele, but they are under immense amounts of pressure. Bukele’s Congress passed a law that said that if you interfered with a candidate wanting to run for office, you can go to jail. So if you are an official who works for the electoral tribunal and you go against Bukele, the most popular, you know, politician wanting to run, this law could be applied to you. So their hands are tied.

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP FRANCE24 Bukele Reelection> He styles himself as the most popular dictator in the world, and El Salvador's general election may have proven it.*

SEAN: So he changes the rules democratically, to get a second term consecutively, which is inherently undemocratic. Is El Salvador still a democracy?

SILVIA: That's a big question. I guess it depends on how you define a democracy. If you see a democracy as being able to go to vote and make a choice, then maybe you can say, yeah, El Salvador is a democracy on the surface. The problem is that democracy is a lot more than that. And when one person and his government has made all these changes to debilitate other political parties, then it's not a fair fight. Is it a democracy if he still controls everything, if there are no checks and balances, is it a democracy? And I think the concern is, okay, this election confirms that this is the path that he's taking. And what comes next? That's, that's the big question and the big concern. What, what is he going to do now?

SEAN: What does he say he's going to do? What do people think he's going to do now that he has this …   
  
SILVIA: Yeah.  
  
SEAN: … historic second term?

SILVIA: When he announced that he was running, he said, you know, we have shown that this is the only correct path for El Salvador. So his excuse kind of to say I need to be reelected is that we need to continue this path. We can expect the state of emergency to continue. There's no indication that Bukele plans to dial back his policies. There's a concern that several experts mentioned while we were reporting that if Bukele’s, popularity decreases because the question is really, how sustainable is this popularity when there are so many people being arrested? The concern is that as his popularity decreases, he will use the military even more, he will become more iron fisted, and he will implement more, you know, of these policies to maintain his power.

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SEAN: You know, I saw an article in The Economist from a few years ago that said, Nayib Bukele may want to become Latin America's first millennial dictator. Do you think he's done that now, four years later?

SILVIA: Well he has, he's self-proclaimed the coolest dictator, and he likes to play with that.

SEAN: So that's a yes.

SILVIA: No! <laughs> He likes to play with that. I think again, this goes back to your question of what is a democracy. So in Latin America, when you say dictatorship, it kind of evokes the military dictatorships of the 80s. If you think of like military overthrowing a democratic government and not supporting a very popular president, like, like they do now. So, this, this historian, Hector Lindo, told us that popularity doesn't define whether it's a dictatorship or not. So you can have a popular dictator, basically. Dictatorship also refers to governments that function without the limits that come with this system of checks and balances by three independent powers of the state. So if you look at it that way, then yes.

SEAN: I just want to take it back to this unknown nepo baby, rich kid. Do you think he sees the path to the presidency, to maybe the dictatorship in El Salvador? Or do you think he's just making it up as he goes along?

SILVIA: So there's a very interesting moment, back in 2013, and he goes and he speaks to a group of university students, kind of like in a TED Talky situation. And during this, you know, sort of TED Talky event, he says that the country needs a paradigm shift

*<CLIP Ep1 Bukele TE> BUKELE: Que venimos a hablar de cómo vamos a cambiar las cosas para todos.*

SILVIA: And one of those things has to do with populism, with the idea that populism is bad. So he asks the students, ‘Does anyone want a populist president?’

*<CLIP Ep1 Bukele TE> BUKELE: Alguien que era un presidente populista,*

SILVIA: The students don't say anything. But he raises his hand and he smiles, and he asks

*<CLIP Ep1 Bukele TE> ¿Nadie? Bueno, yo sí.*

SILVIA: nobody, well, I do.And then he reads out a definition of populism.

*<CLIP Ep1 Bukele TE> Populismo, doctrina política que pretende defender los intereses y aspiraciones del pueblo.*

SILVIA: And the definition that he gives is something like a political doctrine that seeks to defend the interests and aspirations of the people, and he uses that to question why we would think that that's bad. So he's right there in 2013, more than ten years ago, telling these students what he aspires to. And I think that that's what he has shown, that he believed in this sort of populism, that this was the way for El Salvador in order to change things for everyone, as he says.

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SILVIA: But I think the concern for everyone, you know, whether in the U.S. or in other countries, is, you know, seeing a politician use authoritarian tactics with the support of the people. I think that's the most concerning thing, whether those authoritarian practices are to crack down on immigration or to, you know, end gangs. Whatever, whatever that might be. The holding on to power no matter what, and doing everything you can to hold on to power is the scary part, I think.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Silvia Viñas. She co-hosted a series called *Bukele: El señor de Los Sueños*. If your Spanish is up to it, you can find it by searching *Central* wherever you listen. *Central* comes from Radio Ambulante Studios. Thanks to Daniel Alarcon from Radio Ambulante for his help with today’s show.

And FYI, El Salvador’s highest electoral court says the votes from Sunday’s election need to be recounted due to some irregularities. But at this time it doesn’t look like anyone’s holding their breath for a different result.

Jesse Alejandro Cottrell produced our program today. Amina Al-Sadi edited, Laura Bullard fact checked and Patrick Boyd engineered. Hasta mañana on *Today, Explained*.