

Trump to Meet President of El Salvador, Where Deportees Face Prison

Mr. Trump has found in President Nayib Bukele a willing partner in a plan to step up the removal of migrants from the United States with little or no due process.

By Zolan Kanno-Youngs
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President Trump will meet with President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador at the White House on Monday as the administration ramps up its use of a notorious Salvadoran prison for holding migrants deported by the United States.

In Mr. Bukele, who has referred to himself as the world's "coolest dictator," Mr. Trump has found a willing partner in a plan for deportations with little or no due process. The removal of the migrants to the prison, known as CECOT, has become a flashpoint in the administration's attempt to skirt normal immigration practice and the role of the courts in reviewing Mr. Trump's executive power.

Just a day before the meeting between the two leaders, the Trump administration once again tried to resist a federal judge's order to bring back a Maryland man who was unlawfully deported to the prison. In a legal filing on Sunday, [the Justice Department argued](#) that the courts lacked the ability to dictate steps the White House should take to return the man, Kilmar Armando Abrego Garcia, because only the president had the power to handle U.S. foreign policy.

The Trump administration has fought against returning Mr. Abrego Garcia, a 29-year-old father of three, despite admitting in court that his removal was an "administrative error." In 2019, an immigration judge had barred the United States from deporting the man by finding that he might face violence or torture if sent to El Salvador. That did not stop the United States from deporting him and scores of other migrants to El Salvador last month.

The Trump administration has justified its use of a wartime authority to deport the migrants to El Salvador by alleging that they are members of violent gangs like MS-13, which originated in the United States and operates in South America, and the Venezuelan criminal group [Tren de Aragua](#).

While some of the deportees had criminal convictions, court papers have shown that the evidence the government has relied on to label some of them as gang members was

often little more than whether they had tattoos or had worn clothing associated with a criminal organization.

The Trump administration doubled down on its incarceration agreement with Mr. Bukele on Sunday when it announced that it had [sent 10 more people](#) alleged to be members of the two gangs to El Salvador over the weekend.

In announcing those deportations, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the alliance between Mr. Trump and Mr. Bukele had “become an example for security and prosperity in our hemisphere.”

Mr. Bukele has also found an opening on the global stage in opening the doors of his prison system to Mr. Trump.

While the Biden administration accused Mr. Bukele and the Salvadoran government of secretly negotiating a pact with certain gang leaders, the Trump administration has fully embraced his tough-on-crime persona.

Mr. Trump and Mr. Bukele have paired their aggressive enforcement tactics with a [highly sensationalized public relations campaign](#) on social media. Both leaders have faced accusations of undermining democratic institutions.

After a surge of gang violence in El Salvador, Mr. Bukele imposed a state of emergency that has yet to be lifted, in addition to directing police and the military forces to carry out mass arrests. Many of the [85,000 Salvadorans](#) who were arrested disappeared into the prison system without trial and without their families knowing whether they were alive.

“Human rights, democratic norms and the rule of law have all but disappeared in El Salvador,” said Amanda Strayer, senior counsel for accountability at the advocacy group Human Rights First. “The United States should be holding Bukele’s government accountable for these serious violations, but instead the Trump administration is cozying up to and copying Bukele’s authoritarian playbook — rounding up people with no evidence, denying them any due process and disappearing them in abusive Salvadoran prisons indefinitely.”

Still, Mr. Bukele’s popularity has soared, and he was re-elected in a landslide last year. The Trump administration just last week changed a travel advisory for El Salvador, grouping it with some of the least dangerous countries for Americans to visit.

Mr. Bukele described the decision on social media as akin to receiving a “gold star.”