

# **Fabricating Perceptions of Crime: El Salvador's mass media and gang repression**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

The mass media in El Salvador has acted as an ally to the conservative ARENA party, promoting its political and economic agenda and helping to preserve an exclusionary elite political project. When ARENA's political dominance was threatened in 2003, the media increased and sensationalized reports on gang crime to garner electoral support for ARENA's repressive Mano Dura security policies. Since then, the media's elaboration of gang news stories has promoted repression and legitimized state violence. After the electoral triumph of the FMLN in 2009, the media obstructed attempts to reform the public security system with integrative measures, portraying the government as ineffective against gangs and inciting moral panics over crime. The resulting heightened perceptions of insecurity at times when homicides have decreased significantly demonstrate the extent of the media's manipulation of public opinion through a near monopoly of information that favors conservative interest at the cost of citizen security.

**Keywords:** Mass media; repression; maras; insecurity; FMLN; ARENA

I dedicate this work to my country and to my people. To my homeland, El Salvador, despite all the scars that history has clawed upon you, you remain beautiful and defiant. With all the strength in my soul I wish that one day peace will settle within you and remain. To my people, who have endured the cruelest punishments at the hands of their own governments, who suffer the consequences of centuries of exploitation, who have sacrificed and lost so much, and yet persevere. I live in constant awe of the strength and resilience that lives within the hearts of my people, and I hope to one day possess even a fraction of that fortitude. Finally, I dedicate this work to those who made the ultimate sacrifice and paid the highest price in the hopes of making their country and the world a better and more just place. To those who lost their lives in 1932, during the Civil War and even today, innocents and victims of tyranny. Your stories and your voices live in my heart and they inspire me. May you rest in peace.

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## Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Dedication .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures.....	vii
List of Acronyms.....	viii
Glossary.....	ix
<b>Chapter 1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Discussion of research methods .....	4
The origins of El Salvador's gangs: socioeconomic foundations of violence .....	8
Early responses to gangs .....	11
<b>Chapter 2. Popularizing repression in times of peace .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Postwar democratic development: the survival of the authoritarian state .....	17
Obstructing democracy: El Salvador's media system .....	20
Constructing realities: recurring elements in crime news .....	24
Institutionalizing Repression: From Mano Dura to Mano Super Dura .....	28
Unintended Transformations .....	31
<b>Chapter 3. (In)Security in the time of the FMLN.....</b>	<b>35</b>
Governing with "a difficult inheritance".....	37
Punitive populism in times of the FMLN:.....	39
"La llamada tregua entre pandillas" .....	41
Undoing the truce: the role of the media.....	46
Manipulating public opinion: effects of media coverage of crime .....	52
The politics of insecurity .....	54
<b>Chapter 4. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>63</b>

## List of Tables

Table 1.	Sample of gang related headlines, El Diario de Hoy (2003-2004) .....	26
Table 2.	Sample of gang related headlines, El Diario de Hoy (2004-2006) .....	30
Table 3.	Changing homicide trends.....	32
Table 4.	Sample truce-related articles according to publication.....	51

## List of Figures

Figure 1.	Police raids and arrests have become the norm and the mistreatment of young males in poor neighborhoods as suspected criminals by police has become institutionalized since Mano Dura. ....	58
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## List of Acronyms

AEAS	Asociación de Empresarios de Autobuses
ARENA	Alianza Republicana Nacionalista
ASDER	Asociación Salvadoreña de Radiodifusores
CNJ	Consejo Nacional de la Judicatura
CSNP	Consejo Nacional de Seguridad Pública
FESPAD	Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho
FGR	Fiscalía General de la República
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional
GAN	Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IUDOP	Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública
IML	Instituto de Medicina Legal
OAS	Organization of American States
OIE	Organismo de Inteligencia del Estado
ONUSAL	United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador
PCN	Partido de Concertación Nacional
PDC	Partido Demócrata Cristiano
PDDH	Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos
PNC	Policía Nacional Civil
TCS	Telecorporación Salvadoreña
TSE	Tribunal Supremo Electoral (Supreme Electoral Tribunal)
UCA	Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas"
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime



## **Glossary**

Cabecilla	Leader of a gang clique
Mara	Salvadorian slang word used to refer to a group of people. The “Mara Salvatrucha” literally means “Salvadorian people” in slang. Because of this, it became increasingly associated with youth gangs over the 90s and is currently colloquially used to refer to gangs. However, it the term is still used in other contexts to refer to a group of people.
Marero	A member of a gang

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

In March of 2012 *El Faro* news site shocked El Salvador; the leftist government, it revealed, had secretly negotiated with the country's two largest rival street gangs and brokered a truce between them in a desperate bid to reduce the exorbitant homicide statistics. The immediate backlash against the new gang policy was understandable, not only because of the government's secrecy, but because past governments and the media had spent a decade indoctrinating Salvadoreans to believe that gangs were responsible for committing most of the violence in the country. The truce was the first attempt by a Salvadorian government to deal with the complicated gang phenomenon by means other than repression. The controversial truce process was far from perfect, but the results were undeniable; the prolonged decrease in murders managed to remove El Salvador from one of the top three most violent countries in the world, reducing homicides by 60% for over a year. However, despite the promising decrease in violence and the growing international support for the process, news coverage and public opinion remained strongly against an inclusive approach to gangs. Amidst a relentless misinformation campaign surrounding the truce, the cost of appearing "soft on criminals" became too high, and the government withdrew its support for the truce process ahead of the 2014 presidential elections. As the evening news returned to showing the familiar mass captures of youths in the streets, and despite the gradual climb in the daily homicide count, the FMLN secured its second presidential victory (though by the narrowest margin in history). By 2015, El Salvador had become the most violent country in the world; the small Central American nation's return to repressive security policies saw the homicide rate skyrocket to 104 per 100,000 inhabitants, an average of 18 homicides per day.

This research project began with a desire to understand the overwhelming public preference for repressive anti-gang policies despite their repeated failure to decrease

violence levels, specially in light of the tangible success of alternative measures such as the 2012 gang truce in reducing crime. Furthermore, it seeks to answer why authoritarian measures of crime control survived the alternation of power from the ultra-conservative ARENA party to the leftist FMLN, despite promising initial attempts by the new government to move towards a more integrative approach to public security. It is understandable that in a highly violent society, public perceptions of crime are high and insecurity becomes a primary concern for most citizens, and that in turn, many would call for increasing punitive measures against criminals. However, in El Salvador, poll data shows that public perceptions of insecurity appear to be highest at periods of time when homicides, and specifically gang-committed homicides, have decreased significantly for prolonged periods of time. As a result, repressive policies against gangs specifically remain the preferred security approach over integrative measures for many citizens. How can this contradiction be explained?

The failure of the truce process, with all its potential for long term improvements in public security, and the return to police repression of gangs (which seemed to take on a vindictive dimension in its increased deadliness) appeared to be a welcomed return to normalcy. Or at least, that was the sentiment conveyed by the mass media, and it certainly echoed the feelings of the country's conservative opposition. Indeed, for the duration of the truce, El Salvador's largest news outlets served as mouthpieces for political conservatives opposed to the process, carrying out an outright delegitimization campaign which negatively affected public opinion, greatly contributing to its eventual collapse. Though the behaviour of the majority of news outlets during this episode was reprehensible, it was by no means a new practice; for decades, the country's mass media has contributed to increasing citizen's perception of crime, creating a generalized state of "misinformed" public opinion and limiting the flow of information that frames the social and political debate on crime, its causes, and the different policy options to address it. This has been done in order to protect the interests of a small conservative economic elite, represented by the ARENA party.

Together, ARENA and the country's largest media conglomerates have hindered democratic development in the postwar period; as the media has the power to set the public and political agenda in the country, it has historically done so in support of ARENA's

political and economic interests. However, the most damaging effects of the mass media-ARENA alliance in the postwar period has been the construction and legitimization of a system of extreme government repression over the last decade which has dismantled several of the democratic, public security and human rights achievements gained after twelve years of civil conflict. Beginning in 2003, ARENA and the media have politicized gangs; portraying them as the main perpetrators of violence and exploiting citizen's fears of crime to increase electoral support for repressive measures while displacing other issues on the social agenda at times when ARENA's political dominance has been threatened. This thesis will examine the role of El Salvador's mass media, first in creating, and then in maintaining, public support for repressive security policies, both before and after the end of ARENA's 20 years of rule in 2009. It will show how the media's manipulation of information and portrayal of gangs in news reports have had a clear effect on public perceptions of crime which in turn translates into political and public support for repression over other forms of security policy.

The importance of the media in any democracy is indisputable. Beyond its role as a communication tool between politicians and the public (whether during elections or at other junctures), the media is also the main source of information used by citizens in order to form their opinions about different issues (Sánchez-Ruiz, 2005). Empirical studies of the media's power to set the public agenda and influence public opinion in both the West and Latin America have demonstrated a positive correlation between increased media coverage of an issue and the importance given to that issue by the public (Freidenberg, D'Adamo & García Beaudoux, 2000). This project seeks to prove the relationship between the media's behavior in the elaboration of gang related news and the creation of a widespread culture of intolerance towards integrative security policies in the country. It will demonstrate the relationship between sensationalistic media coverage of gang related news stories and heightened public perceptions of insecurity that greatly differ from the reality of the criminal activity of these groups. These heightened feelings of insecurity have in turn led citizens to reject integrative security measures which are portrayed by the media as benefiting criminals. The media's behaviour has thus resulted in the perpetuation of repressive policies as the preferred approach to crime by the public, and in turn, by elected officials.

By consistently using a number of elements in the elaboration of gang news, which elicit emotional responses and deprive the audience of information, El Salvador's media has manipulated public opinion in favor of repressive, authoritarian measures of crime control. After an examination of El Salvador's media system, its unprofessional journalistic practices and the effect these have had on public opinion, it becomes apparent that the country's conservative media is largely responsible for misleading the public into heightened perceptions of insecurity, which in turn leads citizens to demand punitive action from elected officials. It is the media, and the political interests it represents, that account for the failure of integrative security policies and the perpetuation of a system of extreme government repression in public security. This thesis project endeavours to prove this connection with qualitative analysis of the country's media system and the news it produces.

## **Discussion of research methods**

Studying the topic of gangs presents unique challenges for carrying out fieldwork; there is an inherent danger to working with gangs and those directly affected by their activities, so there are many safety considerations to be made. However, this research project does not study gangs directly, but rather the ways in which the media has presented information about gangs, the changing political and social responses to the issue of gangs over the postwar period, and how in turn this has framed political choices. Originally, I had intended to carry out unstructured interviews with subjects from an extended network of personal and professional acquaintances in El Salvador, which ranges from peasant agricultural workers to government employees. These interviews were proposed as a way to explore how individuals form their opinion about the issue of gangs and insecurity, where and how they gather the information to form their opinions, and how they perceived the current government's action towards gangs compared with previous administrations. The safety of both subject and researcher were a priority, and so interview participants would have excluded anyone who lived, worked or regularly transited through areas with a gang presence. In reality, this was a very low-risk research exercise. However, despite a prolonged application process, approval to carry out interviews was not granted by the Office of Research Ethics at SFU because of the nature of the subject matter.

As a result, the research for this project centers instead around an extensive analysis of media portrayals of crime and public security in El Salvador's postwar period. I believe that by providing a thorough picture of the country's media system, its ties to political and economic interests, and its practices in the elaboration of news reports, I can establish a clear argument about how the media has acted to favor elite interests at the cost of integrative security policies and the safety of citizens. This will in turn establish a framework for analysis of media sources to uncover the intended effects of news stories for political aims. The media stories analyzed in later chapters are drawn from articles of the country's biggest newspapers published online. These articles are also available in the printed editions of both papers, so the format of sources chosen is due to ease of access. Though polls reveal that Latin Americans are more likely to watch news on television than read about them in newspapers (Maldonado, 2011), I seek to prove that media ownership in the hands of a few elite families who share ideologic and business ties to the ARENA party has led to the homogenization of reporting practices and presentation of information in favor of conservative political interests across different news media formats. Thus, I justify the use of newspaper articles as the sole format for source analysis by arguing that television and the printed press share the same interests and employ the same tactics in the construction of gang news reports, so that the effect on the audience is the same.

First, a literature review of the early gang and political developments in the years leading up to the introduction of anti-gang policies known as Mano Dura will place the later media analysis in the context of the changing needs of the ARENA party. Several authors have to some extent discussed the role of the media in swaying public opinion in support of Mano Dura policies since 2003 (Hume, 2007; Wolf, 2011; Cruz, 2011a). However, none have closely examined the country's media system or the changes it has undergone in relation to the coverage of gang issues. Indeed, archival research undertaken for this project reveals that, prior to 2003, gangs barely figured on the media agenda (as well as the political agenda). By reviewing the available online archives of the country's largest newspaper, *El Diario de Hoy*, between 1999 to 2006, this study seeks to trace the shift in the media's behavior towards gangs as news subjects, first quantitatively in terms of the amount of coverage of gang related news, and qualitatively by the way in which news on gang crimes are constructed and presented to the public. In order to better understand

the relationship between media coverage and heightened perceptions of insecurity, I have extensively reviewed Salvadorian sources that discuss the journalistic practices of the mass media. As a result, I have identified a number of elements used by conservative media outlets in reports of gang crime. These elements and their intended effects are elaborated on in Chapter 2, and provide a framework for the later analysis of news stories in Chapter 3.

The reviewed academic sources that discuss the media's impact on public support for repression focus almost entirely on the period of ARENA rule, specially during the transition between the Francisco Flores presidency to Antonio Saca administration (2003-2006). There is, therefore, a lack of academic research on the relationship between the media and security policy during FMLN governments (2009-present). Thus, this thesis seeks to fill in some of the gaps in the literature by examining the role of the media in driving public opinion on crime and security policy during the presidential administrations of Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) and the first year of the administration of Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2014- present), ending the period of analysis in 2015. Many expected that the end of conservative rule would bring about a definite shift in the government's approach to public security. However, the first FMLN government abandoned alternative strategies based on prevention and rehabilitation and instead deepened levels of repression and militarization of public security, further eroding the democratic and civilian character of public security institutions. Chapter 3 seeks to show and explore the relationship between media coverage of gang crime and the shift in public security policies of the Funes administration in depth.

Originally, I hoped to provide proof of emergence of a media consensus during the Funes administration around the truce process (2012-2013) by providing a large sample of news headlines related to the truce along with a qualitative analysis of some of those articles. Unfortunately, many of the online news stories selected for analysis have been removed from the original websites and can no longer be accessed. Some previously obtained online links are no longer available in the servers and have had to be removed from this study. Instead, from those still available articles, I have selected a few illustrative news stories that will be analyzed in depth to provide evidence of a larger discourse elaborated by the media during this period. Some of these stories will be contrasted with

reports of the same event by moderate outlets that provide a larger context which demonstrates the extent of manipulation of information by conservative newspapers. In addition, more recent articles about the effects of the truce have been added to the study to provide proof of the continuation of negative discourse which maintains a partial and biased interpretation of events, serving as propaganda against the FMLN government's security policies into the present day. These are important also due to the amount of extra-judicial violence that exploded after the truce, as a way to understand how society perceived gangs after the end of the process, which seemed to incense violence from social cleansing groups and state security forces.

Finally, in order to further emphasize the relationship between media coverage of crime news and the resulting public perception of crime, I have analyzed public opinion poll data during the Funes presidency and specially during the period from 2012 leading up to the 2014 elections. These include figures cited in secondary sources, as well as data from polls conducted by the Latinobarómetro Corporation, reports from the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), and surveys conducted by the *Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública* (IUDOP) of El Salvador's *Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas"* (UCA). The IUDOP carries out nation-wide surveys on a number of issues and publishes reports during electoral periods. Several nation-wide surveys conducted during the period of study by these institutions reveal surprising information about citizen perceptions of insecurity. This poll data is used to corroborate the argument that media coverage of crime news and stories related to the truce process served to deceive the public and create heightened public perceptions of insecurity at a time when homicides remained at historic lows for over year, emphasizing the relationship between media coverage of gang related news and changes in public opinion.

It should be clarified that the intention of this study is not to diminish the very real role of gangs as a major source of insecurity for those living in areas under their control; gang members are often victimizers who commit opprobrious acts of violence against citizens and against members of the country's security forces. Nonetheless, the data will show that the moral panics and social hatred engendered by the media against gangs compared to other criminal actors who are not as visible over the years has had deep social and political ramifications, and has ultimately contributed as much to the heightened



public perceptions of insecurity as to the increase in violence between gangs, the state's security forces, social cleansing groups and ordinary citizens. The remainder of this chapter will give an overview of the development of gangs as social and criminal groups. Chapter 2 will provide the political context before discussing the relationship between the ARENA party and the country's mass media conglomerates to reveal a deeply politically biased media system. Chapter 3 will discuss the changing political and media behavior after the loss of the executive by ARENA, to illustrate its role as a propaganda machine for the new opposition. Furthermore, Chapter 3 will engage in a thorough analysis of media coverage of the gang truce and its effects. Finally, Chapter 4 will give provide some concluding thoughts. The chapters are organized in a time sequential manner to illustrate the changing relationship between gangs and state in response to different approaches to security under consecutive presidential administrations.

### **The origins of El Salvador's gangs: socioeconomic foundations of violence**

El Salvador's two largest street gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Barrio 18, known locally as *maras*, originated in the streets of Los Angeles in the 1980s by youths from the estimated one million Salvadorean refugees who had fled the country's bloody civil war. Seeking protection in the "dynamic and predatory Los Angeles street environment" (Valdes, 2011, p. 25), they joined the established Chicano 18<sup>th</sup> Street gang or banded together to create the MS-13. Many of these youths had become traumatized and hardened by the violence they had witnessed during the civil war, mostly at the hands of their own government. Reproducing the terror tactics they had experienced in their homeland gave Salvadorean *mareros* an edge over local LA gangs, after years of war had "socialized [them] to the brutalizing power of violence" (Ward, 2013, p. 1).

Over the decade of the 1990s, *maras* that had originated and developed into violent criminal entities in the streets of Los Angeles were introduced by the thousands to El Salvador as the end of conflict in 1992 allowed US authorities to focus more aggressively on deportation efforts against Salvadoreans. According to Valdez (2011), during the height of deportations in the mid-1990s, some 40,000 immigrants with criminal records were being repatriated to Central America each year. It is impossible to discern what number of those deported to El Salvador on criminal grounds were active MS-13 or

Barrio 18 since US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) only began sharing deportees' criminal background information in 2007 (Matei, 2011), and to this day does not indicate a deportee's gang affiliation unless it is the primary reason for deportation (Seelke, 2014). However, it is indisputable that LA gang culture was "imported" from the U.S. at an accelerated rate into El Salvador during this period.

Once deported gang members arrived in El Salvador, they found ample recruiting grounds in burgeoning marginal neighborhoods and shantytowns of the capital San Salvador, since unfortunately, after the end of the civil war, the precarious living conditions of the urban and rural poor had worsened. The 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords that set the stage for the country to become an electoral democracy focused mostly on demilitarization and democratization measures but had neglected to address the reforms necessary to alleviate the poverty and inequality that had been the root cause of the civil conflict (van der Borgh, 2000; Richani, 2010; Montoya, 2012). In the immediate postwar years, neoliberal economic reforms implemented by the conservative Republican Nationalist Alliance (ARENA) government deepened inequality in the postwar period, crippling the rural economy while giving rise to a small financial elite that profited from the influx of remittances (van der Borgh, 2000; Montoya, 2012). The stark class contrast was more pronounced in the capital, where a mass exodus of peasants from the embattled countryside to the relative safety of San Salvador during and after the war led to an explosion in urban populations. According to Richani (2011), the percentage of the population residing in urban areas increased from 40% in 1980, to 47% by 1990, to 61.3% by 2001. The flight of rural residents to urban centers after the end of the war was in large part due to the collapse of the peasant economy after the implementation of aggressive neoliberal policies; whereas the rural economy contributed a total of 38% to the GNP in 1980, by 1998 that share had declined to just 13% (Richani, 2011). Unsurprisingly, the rapid liberalization of the economy and the resulting growth in inequality and poverty contributed to rise in crime and insecurity experienced by citizens in the postwar period (Moodie, 2011; Garni & Weyher, 2013)

Despite the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions, social improvement was far from a priority for ARENA governments in the postwar period. As Richani points out, public education expenditure comprised just 2.5% of GDP between 1995 until 1997,

increasing slightly to 2.9% of the GDP between 2000 to 2002, while public health expenditure remained at 3.6% of the GDP between 1990-2002 and decreased to 3.5% of GDP in 2005. According to Bruneau, by 2004, 47.5% of the population in El Salvador lived in poverty, while 19% survived in conditions of extreme poverty (2011). Therefore, the absence of the state in the lives of poor citizens, and specially of impoverished youths, was a major contributor to the formation of youth gangs in the cities; government neglect of basic social services perpetuated a cycle of poverty, marginalization and criminality, as youths lacked any mechanisms for social and economic improvement, forcing some among them to resort to crime.

In this context of social exclusion, lack of opportunities and economic hardship, native youth gangs in El Salvador had emerged as early as the 1960s, and over the following decades developed into turf-based, localized and informally organized groups who engaged in petty crime (Wolf, 2011), what Sullivan (2006) has termed “first generation gangs”. A multitude of such territorially based youth gangs were thus already present and established in marginal neighborhoods and shantytowns long before mass deportations in the 1990s brought the LA brand of gangster to El Salvador. When deported MS-13 and Barrio 18 gang members began arriving in these communities, they brought with them the exotic allure of the LA gang life and the romanticized image of *maras* as a source of pride and belonging. This prospect of social acceptance and recognition through a shared identity attracted disaffected youths to them. In return, gang members who had grown up alienated from their own culture in the United States and now lacked a social and familial support structure in their native country were able to replicate the surrogate family that the gang represented. (Cruz 2010; Ward, 2013). Thus, deportees quickly adapted to local social conditions and amalgamated with local gang structures, merging two social phenomena that were related but had developed independent of each other.

Early studies on El Salvador’s gangs show that the process of adaptation and consolidation of independent local gangs into cliques identifying as either MS-13 or Barrio 18 happened within a fairly short period of time. In 1993, the country’s prosecutor’s office, the Fiscalía General de la República (FGR) reported a total of 236 independent gangs across the country, 185 of which were located in San Salvador. By 1996, however, the *Policía Nacional Civil* (PNC) identified only 54 cliques in all of greater San Salvador, all of

them claiming affiliation to either MS-13, Barrio 18 or the Mao Mao (a surviving local gang). By 2004, the PNC reported the existence of 251 MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs across the national territory (Wolf, 2011). As the multitude of local, turf-based gang structures began self-identifying as either MS-13 or Barrio 18, they created a constellation of multiple, independent “cliques” that now dot the urban landscape, unintentionally delineating the first territorial boundaries that both gangs shed blood to protect to this day.

## **Early responses to gangs**

Despite their rapid propagation, the growth of the LA-brand *maras* was not immediately a concern for most Salvadoreans, and media portrayals of them did not bring to mind the generalized fear it does today. Before the MS-13 and Barrio 18 became synonymous with crime and violence in the nation’s collective psyche, the fashion aesthetic of *mareros*; their loose clothing, baseball caps and American sneakers were seen as a style to be emulated. As Valencia (2014a) remembers, articles and photo spreads in the country’s two largest newspapers, *La Prensa Gráfica* and the ultra-conservative *El Diario de Hoy*, openly showcased the new youth trend: “In El Salvador of the first half of the 1990s, *gangsterism* in general terms was not censured; it was tolerated, even promoted. One could speak without shame about ‘mara fashion’”.

However, by the second half of the 1990s, as the gothic letters spelling out Barrio 18 or Mara Salvatrucha continued to pop up on the walls in poor neighborhoods and marginal communities, *maras* began to attract the negative attention of the public and the media. Patterns of extreme violence the *maras* used to survive the L.A. gang battleground were replicated in the overcrowded streets of San Salvador. The spontaneous violent confrontations as rival gang members happened upon each other in public spaces helped to develop the image of the young tattooed male as a pest to “honest” citizens going about their daily business. And yet, as Wolf (2011) points out, their violence was greatly aimed towards each other; territorial battles between the Barrio 18 and MS-13 were the largest source of gang violence during the 1990s. In addition, violence was used against those living within their communities and their criminal activities largely confined within the territorial boundaries of their turf. Gangs were opportunistic predators, involved in theft,

extortion, street fights, rape, sale and consumption of drugs, all limited in scale and perpetrated at the local level.

Undoubtedly, their visibility compared to other criminal groups (who usually seek to avoid detection) contributed to the aura of fear surrounding gang members, and at the same time helped in the process of normalisation and institutionalization of *maras* as permanent entities in the communities where they became entrenched. Established cliques grew in numbers as more disaffected youths were attracted to the lifestyle of partying and drug consumption, by the sense of respect and fear they commanded from others, as well as the sense of support and community that belonging to the *mara* brought to its members (Cruz, 2010). According to Wolf, the motivation for joining a gang is primarily social rather than criminal; “Crime is a product of gang affiliation rather than its purpose. Gangs exist because they fulfill their members’ psychosocial aspirations (notably status, identity, respect, friendship, and fun) and legitimate antisocial behavior” (2012, p. 77). Compared to what they are today, *maras* in the 1990s were *relatively* unimportant criminal groups, engaged in petty crime at the local level and made up of networks of loosely organized and autonomous cliques; a federation of a single *mara* (Cruz, 2010). However, though their actions did not affect the country’s overall levels of violent crime significantly at this point, gangs represented a major source of insecurity for those living in the same neighborhoods. The gang phenomenon has most deeply affected the poor, who have lived in fear of these groups since they became entrenched in their communities, suffering victimization at their hands for over two decades. Nonetheless, as phenomenon that exclusively affected the poor, this type of crime did not merit any social or law enforcement response for governments before 2003.

When asked in a 2012 interview about the importance of gangs at the time, Hugo Barrera, one of ARENA’s founders and Minister of Security from 1994-1999, declared that the issue was “completely secondary...back then *maras* had nothing to do with what we have today” (Valencia, 2012a). In an interview conducted in 2000 by *El Diario de Hoy* with Mauricio Sandoval, who served as director of the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC) from 1999-2003, he failed to mention gangs as one of the public security concerns facing the country. Instead, he identified the country’s security concern as being primarily;

social violence, which becomes intolerable, because we still have six homicides per day and four of those homicides are due to social violence. Society is incredibly violent. That is to say that [homicides] do not originate from a robbery, an extortion or a kidnapping, it is just a discussion between two motorists, between two family members or between two friends who go drinking and then kill one another. (“Intolerancia cuasa ola criminal”, 2000).

Clearly, gangs were not in the radar of the country’s highest ranking security officials as a significant threat to public security. Instead, in the face of government apathy towards the gang phenomenon, efforts to address the complex issue were limited to a number of underfunded civil society-led prevention and rehabilitation programs that acted at the community level (Aguilar & Miranda, 2006).

During this time, gang crime was largely portrayed in the media as part of the chaos of life in poor urban areas rather than as a larger threat to society. Instead, over the late 1990s and early 2000s the focus of government and media attention alike had been on the large number of kidnappings for ransom carried out by organized criminal groups with links to the military and the old state security forces; a type of “leftover” violence from the civil war days. An online search of *El Diario de Hoy*’s archives of former printed editions reveals that between 1999 to 2002, a total of 23 headlines about kidnappings, drug trafficking or other forms of organized crime appeared as the main title on the front page. Examples of these front-page headlines include “The FBI might investigate kidnappings” (Gómez), “Another telecommunications businessman kidnapped” (Martínez) in 2000 and “Police puts an end to capo and kidnapping band” (Rivas), “Two persons kidnapped per week in the country” (Pérez) in 2001. The same searched revealed zero front page headlines about gangs between 1999 and 2001, with a single title, “*Tragedia familiar por riña entre ‘maras’*” (Family tragedy due to fight between ‘maras’), appearing in the front page in all of 2002.

It was not until 2003 that government and media attention turned abruptly to gangs. That year, a total of 20 of the newspaper’s front pages were headlined by gang related news stories. At that point, the country’s mass media began carrying out a demonizing campaign against gangs which has continued unabated to this day, and which has shaped social relations and political responses to gangs in favor of extreme repression. The resulting legislation and institutional changes have seen the retrocession of the country’s

hard earned democratic security reforms and human rights achievements, legitimizing authoritarian measures of crime control with the help of a media system that follows the policy preferences of the country's conservative elites.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Popularizing repression in times of peace**

On July 23, 2003, president Francisco Flores introduced Plan Mano Dura, a zero-tolerance “iron fist” crime fighting strategy as the country’s first gang policy. The country’s passive laws, Flores claimed, had long protected criminals, even those who were minors, rather than protecting honest citizens. In this spectacular media event, Flores proposed to the legislative assembly a package of amendments to the penal code and judicial procedural code that he claimed would take gangs off the streets and out of poor neighborhoods. Broadcast from a marginal neighbourhood famous for gang crime, Flores stood in front of a graffitied wall, flanked on each side by the PNC director and the head of the Armed Forces in full uniform. As the president delivered his speech, the television audience saw images of tattooed gang members flash on their screen. Flores’ Mano Dura speech laid out ARENA’s new stance on crime in no uncertain terms;

Criminal gangs have descended into dangerous levels of moral degradation and barbarism. We have all known cases of decapitations, mutilations, satanic acts and dismembering committed against minors, old people and defenceless women. It is time we freed ourselves from this plague...I want to clearly state to citizens that I am not concerned with the well-being of criminals, I am concerned with the well-being of honest Salvadorians, and I am clearly on their side (AudiovisualesUCA, 2013).

Plan Mano Dura criminalized gang membership, awarded security officials the power to arrest suspected gang members based on physical appearance alone, and removed individual judicial guarantees to expedite convictions of those arrested. Despite being announced as an initiative that would require legislative approval, that same night soldiers and police were sent out in force to carry out raids of poor neighborhoods, carting off truckloads of dark skinned, tattooed, shirtless young men for the TV cameras. The images were repeated daily on the news, showing the effectiveness of the government’s new crime fighting strategy. This cleverly staged announcement was the opening act of a joint government-media spectacle which would change public perceptions and policy preferences against gangs.



From the statements made by Flores about the danger posed by gangs at the time of his Mano Dura declaration, one would think that the country was experiencing inordinate levels of violence. In fact, the complete opposite was true. Sadly, Salvadorean society has long been plagued by extremely high levels of crime. In the years after the end of the war, homicides increased dramatically, and citizen's preoccupation with political violence was replaced with fears over widespread criminal violence, quickly becoming the number one concern for most citizens (Moodie, 2012; Cruz & González, 1997). In addition, politically motivated killings, paramilitary "extermination" and "social cleansing" groups, organized crime and other violent actors linked to the old state forces flourished during the transition period from military to civilian police (Cruz, 2011b). Notwithstanding, Flores' declaration of war against gangs was made at a time when El Salvador's homicide rate was at its lowest since the end of the war; a rate of 32 in 2002 and 33 in 2003 (Aguilar, 2006) compared to 124 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1995 (Cruz, 2003). Furthermore, despite Flores' claims that the vast majority of homicides were perpetrated by gangs, according to the country's forensic institution, *Instituto de Medicina Legal* (IML), only 8% of homicides committed in 2003 were perpetrated by gang member (Aguilar, 2006).

In reality, Mano Dura was a finely crafted populist electoral strategy that exploited citizen's fears of violence in a highly insecure society (Barahona & Lejarraga, 2011; Hume, 2007). Its publicity and implementation were executed in a way that would maximize the measure's popular appeal over a period of months ahead of the 2004 presidential elections through what Hume condemns as "the political manipulation of fear" (2007, p. 743). In order to justify such widespread and indiscriminate acts of repression against "suspected" gang members (which included any young, dark skinned male residing in poor neighborhoods with a gang presence), security officials, from the general prosecutor's office, *Fiscalía General de la República* (FGR) to police officers, repeated the government's discourse on insecurity; gangs were responsible for the majority of violence and homicides, they presented a danger to the population at large, and the solution to the problem was to do away with the legal and human rights of any suspected *marero* to protect honest citizens who, unlike criminals, were entitled to safeguarding of their rights by the state (Cruz, 2011a).

At this point in the analysis, it is necessary to explain the political context into which the anti-gang policies were enacted, as a way to understand how and why they were

promoted by the government and media. The following section will give a short summary of the political and institutional development in the postwar period to contextualize the use of repressive policies by ARENA before resuming the analysis of the political connections between ARENA and the country's mass media.

### **Postwar democratic development: the survival of the authoritarian state**

The signing of the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992 put an end to El Salvador's 12 year long civil war, a conflict that cost an estimated 75,000 lives. The two political forces that formed during the war, the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) and the *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* ARENA party, representing the extreme political left and right respectively, emerged in the postwar period as the two main contending parties. For the first 20 years after the signing of the Peace Accords, ARENA dominated the race for the executive, enjoying a comfortable lead over the FMLN and the former ruling elite parties. Despite not holding a majority of seats in the 84-member Legislative Assembly, ARENA was able to carry out its political and economic agenda largely unimpeded by forging pacts with the older conservative parties, the Christian Democrats (PDC), and the National Coalition Party (PCN) (van der Borgh, 2000). Together they formed a voting block that neutralized the increasing legislative presence of the FMLN and passed legislation that reversed many of the democratizing reforms established by the Peace Accords. In the 20 years after the supposed end to authoritarian rule, ARENA consolidated power and wealth in the hands of party supporters and business associates from 1989 to 2009 with four presidencies; Alfredo Cristiani (1989-1994), Armando Calderón Sol (1994-1999), Francisco Flores (1999-2004), and Antonio Saca (2004-2009).

Though the Peace Accords and the 1993 Truth Commission had outlined a number of legal and institutional reforms for the creation a democratic public security system, ARENA either delayed their implementation or failed to abide by the established rules, maintaining elements of authoritarian security in times of peace. The high ranks of the newly formed PNC were staffed with a number of former military officers, thus polluting the institution's intended civilian character with the culture of the old militarized security forces (Perez, 2003). The reforms to the Criminal Code and Judicial Procedural Code

prescribed by the Peace Accords and 1993 Truth Commission were delayed for years. A new Criminal Procedure Code, which limited pre-trial detentions, banned extra-judicial confessions, and differentiated procedures for adult and underage offenders, was not implemented until 1998 after pressure from international donors (Popkin, 2000), though just 5 years later, Mano Dura abolished many of the improved judicial standards. In addition, according to Martinez Barahona & Linares Lejarraga, the appointment of exclusively conservative judges to El Salvador's Supreme Court; "reduce[d] its democratic role as veto player in the political process, becoming an institution that simply reflects the executive or legislative preferences" (2011 p. 55). Furthermore, the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), the institution established by the Peace Accords to monitor elections, was politicized by the appointment of conservative party sympathizers, leading to electoral irregularities that undermined the FMLN not being investigated, and allowing for continued conservative domination of many state institutions (Wolf, 2009).

Fear of criminal violence quickly replaced the fear of political violence as the main concern for Salvadoreans in the years after the end of the war (Moodie, 2012), though as mentioned earlier, gangs were not prominent criminal actors, nor did their brand of crime garner much attention from the press over the 1990s (Valencia, 2012d). Though Wolf (2009), Perez (2003), and Cruz (2011b) argue that ARENA lacked the political will to concern itself with crime during this period, Holland (2013) points out that ARENA did politicize some types of crime, specifically those which threatened elite interests. For instance, the creation of an emergency law in 1996 that featured the old authoritarian style of joint military-police round-ups and criminalized "antisocial behavior" was passed after increased violence in parts of the countryside threatened the traditional landed/agrarian elite (Popkin, 2000). Also, as formerly mentioned, a review of *El Diario de Hoy's* archives reveals an intense media focus on abductions. This type of crime also figured strongly in the legislative agenda; as a form of crime that targeted affluent families and business elites, ARENA and the other conservative parties passed several laws toughening prison sentences for accused abductors. ("Redoblarán lucha antisecuestro", 1999).

In summary, ARENA governments responded to the heightened levels of crime in the immediate postwar years by resorting to old, authoritarian punitive measures of crime control, politicizing crime only when elite interests were endangered. Nonetheless, crime

as a broader social issue did not become a prominent component of ARENA's electoral platform until the presidential elections of 2004. By then, the FMLN had become a threat to ARENA at the ballot box, increasingly attracting voters disillusioned with the ruling party's poor performance and corruption scandals. Since the end of the war, the FMLN had continually increased its share of seats in the legislature and gained a number of key municipalities, including the mayoral seat of the capital San Salvador in 1997. Over the course of the 1990s, economic concerns increasingly replaced crime as the main concern for many; the results of rampant neoliberal reforms over the 1990s and the dollarization of the economy by the government of Francisco Flores in 2001 had worsened economic conditions for the lower and middle classes. According to survey data from Latinobarómetro<sup>1</sup>, in 2002, 57.6% of Salvadoreans considered economic concerns like poverty and unemployment to be the main problems facing the country, compared to 23.7% who identified crime-related issues as the main problem. In the 2003 legislative elections, the FMLN won the popular vote and 4 more seats than ARENA with its "common front against neoliberalism" platform, a historic victory (Holland, 2013, p 59).

With the poor performance of the Flores administration and FMLN's rising popularity endangering ARENA's prospects for the Executive for the first time, the party desperately needed to align itself to a winning strategy. Plan Mano Dura, introduced just 9 months before the 2004 presidential elections, became the Flores administration's redeeming strategy after five years of unpopular economic policies. Mano Dura was proposed as a 6-month emergency measure against the supposed rise in gang crime claimed by the government. Though the security forces had begun carrying out militarized raids of poor neighborhoods immediately after the Plan's announcement, the conviction of those captured hinged on the legislative approval of an "Anti-gang Law". In the months following the introduction of the Plan, media coverage of Mano Dura's mass arrests of gang members and the reiteration of ARENA's anti-gang discourse helped popularize the strategy. ARENA became, in the media's portrayal, the party most capable of fighting crime, the only political force committed to protecting "honest citizens" from the growing

<sup>1</sup> This thesis project references both published reports and survey data available for analysis online from the Latinobarómetro Corporation. If cited Latinobarómetro figures do not have a corresponding entry in the References section, the data was taken from the specific year's survey figures, and is available at <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>

spectre of gangs. Meanwhile, the opposition was portrayed as siding with criminals over its criticism of Mano Dura, as this article from *El Diario de Hoy* shows:

ARENA's legislative faction "demanded, solicited, asked" and finally "implored" for the approval of the [Anti-gang] Law. Their pleas touched the hearts of their partners in the PCN. The FMLN, CDU and PDC were not moved by their supplications and they maintained their positions. (Bonilla & García, 2003)

Thus, the intense media focus on gang crime and the effects of Mano Dura helped displace concerns over the economy, inserting gang crime at the top of the public agenda. The media campaign to promote Mano Dura and demonize gangs proved extremely effective; whereas polls showed the economy as the main concern for citizens at the beginning of the 2003, a survey conducted in October by the *Instituto Univesitario de Opinion Pública* (IUDOP) showed that 88% of respondents supported Flores' Plan, while 21% identified gangs as the main issue facing the country for the first time (in Wolf, 2011). The following section will discuss El Salvador's media system and the ways in which it has helped uphold a conservative hegemonic political project through the perpetuation of unethical journalistic practices that have hindered the country's democratic development.

### **Obstructing democracy: El Salvador's media system**

The media plays an extremely important role in any democracy, and as a political actor in its own right, can act to aid or obstruct the democratic development of a country. In an ideal situation, a country's media system is independent of ideologies and economic interests and serves as a source of information for citizens to form their opinions by providing investigative coverage of important social issues from a plurality of voices (Sánchez-Ruiz, 2005). However, in El Salvador, an oligopolistic mass media system has led to the homogenization of news reporting that favors conservative ideologies and presents partial or inaccurate facts to the public, impeding the construction of a free social and political debate and leading to "a mere flow of quasi-unidirectional persuasive information" (p. 28). Both ARENA and the media have conceived of the public as a passive receptor of the official discourse rather than fostering a system of political communication between citizens and the government, limiting democratic participation to periodic casting of votes in support of a candidate or issue that has been construed in a reality colored by ideological preferences. (Guzmán, 2008).

Historically, El Salvador's media has acted as the defender of a hegemonic conservative political project. During the civil war, the media repeated the extreme right's dialogue of social justice movements and later the FMLN as instigators of war, promoting fear of the "communist threat", legitimizing authoritarian repression and inciting retributive violence from civilians against perceived "subversives". Conservative media outlets were complicit in the underreporting of grave human rights violations by state security forces while upholding the official portrayal of the civil war as a battle between the forces of "democracy" and the evils of communism (González, 2016). After the end of civil war, the media continuously promoted the idea of the FMLN as a threat to social order and economic development through fear campaigns and biased news coverage into the present day, particularly (though not exclusively) during electoral periods (Guzmán, 2009). The oligopolistic nature of El Salvador's media market and the inextricable ideologic and economic links between the ARENA party and the country's mass media owners have hindered democratic development in the postwar period in a variety of ways; from depriving citizens of information that present alternatives to ARENA's political project, to carrying out outright smear campaigns of the opposition (Lungo Rodríguez, 2009). The media market is so tightly dominated by a few pro-ARENA families that it can be classified as "an authoritarian news model" (Wolf, 2009) and as "accumulation media rather than communication media" (Freedman, 2012).

The country's two largest and oldest nationally circulating newspapers, *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*, are owned by traditional agrarian elites and manufacturing magnates, the Altamarino and the Drutiz family respectively. The two families' business connections to members of ARENA ensure that their news stories and editorial pages promote the party's political and economic agenda, often censoring and punishing journalists who diverge from the newspapers' ideological stance (Freedman, 2012; Wolf, 2016). Similarly, the country's radio market is dominated by one group; the *Asociación Salvadoreña de Radiodifusores* (ASDER). The country's fourth ARENA president, Elías Antonio Saca, had served as president of ASDER from 1997-2001. He entered the office of the Executive owning 7 radio stations and finished his term with 11 (Freedman, 2012). The country's largest television network, which captures 90% of the nation's viewing audience, is owned by media mogul Boris Eserski, who helped fund the infamous death squads led by ARENA's founder, Roberto D'Aubuisson, during the civil war (Wolf, 2009).

All three channels that make up Eserski's *Telecorporación Salvadoreña* (TCS) air noon and evening news programs, which similarly tend to present information in a way that favors the image of ARENA. Besides depriving audiences of critical, in-depth coverage that allows the viewer to form a well-informed opinion, their tendencies towards creating a spectacle out of death and grief in crime stories is nothing short of morally objectionable. For instance, Canal 4's popular news program is known for elaborating crime news reports that feature visual and audio effects ranging from flashes of red in the screen to the use of horror movie soundtracks, as though crime news and homicide stories were created for entertaining rather than informing the audience.

A few, smaller media outlets have emerged in the postwar period that present more balanced/objective news coverage; channels 12, 19 and 33, *Diario Co-Latino* newspaper, Radio Maya Visión and Radio YSUCA, though their audience base is significantly smaller than that of the TCS, ASDER and *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* (Wolf, 2016). In addition, a few online newspapers like *ContraPunto* and *El Faro* offer a brand of professional investigative journalism that stands in stark contrast to the rest of the country's newspapers, including other online newspapers like *Diario La Página* and *El Mundo*, which maintain the same deficient journalistic practices of the large printed newspapers. However, in a country where the internet is still only available to a small proportion of the population, the impact of online newspapers is incredibly limited. Indeed, El Salvador is one of the countries with the least internet access in Latin America; data from Latinobarómetro showed that in 2013, 70.4% of the population had never logged on to the internet, by 2015 that number had only decreased to 64.9%. In addition, a 2016 poll by the same institution revealed that only 10% of the population uses the internet as a source of information on political issues. Thus, the internet is still too small of a medium to have a significant impact on audiences compared to the traditional conservative outlets.

It could be argued that, just like El Salvador is a new and developing democracy, so is the country's journalism a relatively new field; the first courses in journalism and communications were not offered by universities until the early 1990s (García Dueñas, 2009). However, dedicated and objective journalists have labored in the country since the days of the civil war, working to open spaces of discussion and democratize the country's media (Darling, 2007), though their work ethic has failed to catch on with the larger media

networks. These journalists tend to work for the few radio, newspaper and television channels that seek to compete with the country's media conglomerates. Unfortunately, the high operational costs of running any kind of media outlet is obviously a contributing factor that limits broadcasting range and audience reach of smaller, independent or community-run media. Thus, the few voices that seek to provide an alternative to the near monopoly on information of the country's mass media conglomerates tend to be drowned out by the much louder elite owned outlets. Sadly, institutionalized censorship of dissenting or critical journalists working for the different media outlets over the years stunted the professionalization of journalistic practices in the country, (Urquiza, 2000; "Libertad de mentir", 2013; González, 2016), and has thus impeded the democratization of the country by limiting a free flow of information that creates a state of "misinformed" public opinion.

Sanchez-Ruiz (2005) points out "The empiric investigation on the social influences of the media has found that they not only exercise power over the short term of political or propagandistic campaigns, but also in the middle and long terms of cultural change or permanence." After examining the way in which El Salvador's conservative mass media has consistently portrayed gangs since 2003, it becomes apparent that a main reason behind the overwhelming support for authoritarian security policies despite their failure to decrease crime is that the media has fostered a culture of intolerance and hatred that drives citizens to reject integrative measures and even incites retributive violence. After becoming familiar with crime news reports from the different conservative media outlets, I have identified five elements used in news stories relating to gangs. I posit that the standard use of these elements since 2003 has cemented social hatred against these groups that makes integrative security approaches politically inviable. These elements are; 1) the sensationalization of a story, 2) the selective characterization of victims and perpetrators, 3) the partialized presentation of information, 4) the portrayal of opinions as facts, and 5) the elaboration of conjectural scenarios presented as reality. The identification of one or more of these elements in gang related news stories are the basis of the framework of analysis that will be applied to the primary media sources henceforth. A discussion of these elements and their intended effects follows as identified by the author follows.



## **Constructing realities: recurring elements in crime news**

Academics have noted a general trend towards the sensationalization of crime news over the last decades, not just in El Salvador but throughout Latin America, and note their effect on increasing perceptions of insecurity that diverge from the reality of crime incidence and victimization (García Dueñas, 2009; Kessler & Focás, 2014). Sensationalism in crime news is used to elicit an emotional response from the audience, aggrandizes the effects of a single criminal event and often makes a spectacle out of violent death and exploits the grief of family members. Selective characterization of the victim is also done with the purpose of eliciting an emotional response. Descriptive qualifiers that portray the victim in a sympathetic light are used; victims are not identified by age and sex, but are described as children, students, seniors, hardworking parents and honest citizens, fallen prey to the collective threat of gangs. These qualifiers are dropped when the victim is a gang member – a *marero* cannot be a child, a son or a student; instead they are described as criminals, morally corrupt individuals, and members of terrorist groups. In cases where the victim is both a child and a gang member, a news report will emphasize one and obviate the other, depending on the desired effect of the report. Thus, selective characterization of victims works to both heighten sympathy for the victim and to diminish the deaths of gang members. Meanwhile, the perpetrators of homicides are often imagined to be gang members, often due to unjustified opinions from police at the scene. “Presumed” or “supposed” gang members are often identified as culprits in the title or mentioned at random during homicide stories to raise the spectre of gangs at any opportunity. Meanwhile, the police and military are generally portrayed as heroes, risking their lives to protect ordinary citizens, even in stories of suspicious killings of gang members by police.

While sensationalization and selective characterization are used to elicit an emotional response, the partialized presentation of information and the portrayal of opinions as facts are used in the elaboration of crime news with the intention of deceiving the audience and act as propaganda. In the case of the former, the story might completely omit important facts, creating an incomplete “truth”, or it might highlight some facts while diminishing others, relegating information that would create a balanced news story to the end of the report so it that it does not seem to be a significant part of the story. The portrayal of opinions as facts is meant to deceive the audience while also framing the story

in an ideologically “correct” truth. This often means describing civil society groups, protesters, opposing parties and the FMLN as literally being morally wrong while ARENA or other conservative parties are the logical, correct option in the face of the disruption to social order. Though opinions of ordinary citizens featured to corroborate the ideologic aims of the stories are common, the most impactful opinions are those of known political, religious and official figures. Invariably, these are members of ARENA, security officials, members of business associations and other conservative figures, and their opinions, presented as helpful expert information, serve as unofficial propaganda for the conservative agenda.

Finally, and most outrageous of all, is the elaboration of conjectural realities presented as facts. These stories demonstrate a serious lack of journalistic integrity by both the reporter and the news outlet that broadcasts or publishes these stories. For the most part, conjectural realities are created around the idea of the FMLN as a source of chaos, and are most evident and prolific during electoral campaigns. Conjectural realities as facts over time have presented the FMLN as proud of their violent “terrorist” past, as opposed to modernization and economic development, as part of the “axis of evil” and as puppets of Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro. ARENA’s 2009 campaign slogan, *No entregues a El Salvador* (Don’t hand El Salvador over) was constructed around the conjectural reality that an FMLN victory would mean handing El Salvador over to Venezuela and would result in the total stop of remittances because of a breakdown of relations with the U.S. Though they are less common outside of electoral periods, conjectural realities figure strongly in gang news and have been common since the FMLN took power in 2009, as the media has switched its role from upholder of ARENA’s government strategies to now a supporter of the conservative opposition. In this context, outrageous scenarios became part of the wider narrative of the 2012 gang truce, as will be later described.

Beginning in 2003 with the introduction of *Mano Dura*, these elements have largely been ubiquitous in gang-crime news and have remained the standard journalistic practice of most (if not all) of the country’s mass media news programs and newspapers into the present time. As already discussed, in 2003 and 2004, the number of gang related news stories in the mass media increased exponentially compared to previous years, and stories on gang crime repeated the discourse of Flores’ *Mano Dura* address; *maras* were

responsible for the majority of homicides in the country, the observance of their human rights and judicial guarantees was a done at the expense of the safety of honest citizens, and the only way to combat gang crime was through the adoption of Mano Dura's Anti-Gang Law.

In addition, other political parties who objected to Mano Dura were portrayed as choosing to side with criminals rather than with honest citizens. Gangs as groups (rather than individual offenders) were condemned as legally responsible for most homicides and other acts of violence. At a time when homicide rates were at an all time low, elite owned news outlets helped increase the public perception of insecurity by creating widespread panic over a type of crime that was, in reality, greatly confined to poor neighborhoods under gang control. Table 1 presents samples of front page headlines from *El Diario de Hoy*. Before Mano Dura, a total of 1 front page headline referencing gangs appeared in three years (1999-2002). However, between 2003 and 2004, a total of 33 stories on gangs were featured as the main headline in the newspaper's front page. Only 5 headlines about organized crime appeared during this same period, compared to 23 stories between 1999 and 2002.

**Table 1. Sample of gang related headlines, El Diario de Hoy (2003-2004)**

July 26 2003	"PNC detiene a 247 mareros" – PNC detains 247 <i>mareros</i>
October 4 2003	"Maras vuelven a sembrar el terror" – Maras sow terror once more
October 25 2003	"Jueces liberan 99% de maras" – "Judges free 99% of gangs"
November 4 2003	"Mano Dura: 151 muertes menos" – "Mano Dura: 151 less homicides"
December 31 2003	"Centroamérica cerca a maras" – Central American fences maras in
April 25 2004	"Maras asedian Soyapango" – Maras prey on Soyapango
July 1 2004	"Sigue la guerra contra mareros" – War against <i>mareros</i> continues
July 19 2004	"Se cumple un año de lucha antimaras" – One year from start of Anti-gang battle
August 31 2004	"Lucha total anti maras" – Complete battle against gangs
September 1 2004	"PNC a la caza de líderes de maras" – PNC on the hunt for leaders of gangs
Source: Table elaborated by author from <a href="http://archivo.elsalvador.com/noticias/archivo/index.asp">http://archivo.elsalvador.com/noticias/archivo/index.asp</a>	

Thus, gang crime displaced the kidnappings and organized crime news which had dominated the headlines in previous years. Gang crime seemed like a more likely threat

to the average urban, middle and lower class citizen who, unlike the country's elite, might share public spaces with gang members in their everyday lives. Moodie (2011) points out how the racialized image of the poor, tattooed, young male stranger as an object of fear promoted by the media in the months prior to the announcement of Mano Dura created a climate of fear and higher perception of crime among citizens of all classes, producing a state of panic beyond the reality of crime incidence. This made Flores' Mano Dura address of July 2003 and the subsequent media coverage of militarized raids on poor neighborhoods that much more effective of a campaign tool in the nine months before the 2004 presidential elections. The distinction between "criminal" and "citizen" modernized ARENA's security discourse from the usual communist threat to gangs as the new enemy in 2003. However, in a 2012 interview with *El Faro*, Hugo Barrera, one of the founding fathers of ARENA and minister of security from 1994-1999, stated "those plans were pure rubbish...their handling was more propagandistic than anything else" (Vanlencia, 2012a). He is not the only member of the party's high echelons to admit that Mano Dura was more of a populist electoral strategy rather than a real security plan. According to Martinez Barahona and Linares Lejarraga (2011): "'punitive populism' involves the exploitation of misinformed opinion in the pursuit of electoral advantage in the sense that many manifestations of penal populism are premised on assessments of public opinion which are oversimplifications or incomplete in some way." (p. 53). In the case of El Salvador, it was ARENA through the mass media who had created the misinformed, generalized climate of fear against an oversimplified idea of the gang phenomenon that made Mano Dura appealing to a wide range of voters.

In March of 2004, Antonio Saca, a former sports commentator, ex-president of ASDER and radio executive with no political experience, won the 2004 presidential elections with 57.71% of the vote. Saca's administration deepened the repression established by the first Anti-Gang Law, changing the judicial and institutional security system to legitimize and perpetuate the discriminatory authoritarianism of Mano Dura. Perez (2003) points out that high levels of insecurity create support for authoritarianism and militarization of public security in a society. Of course, despite the generalized heightened perception of insecurity promoted by the media, in reality, it is the poor who are most affected by it, and thus were likelier to support Mano Dura in 2003. Holland reveals the extent of ARENA's popularity in light of Mano Dura among the country's poor;

“ARENA won [in 2004] with a lower-class coalition, the poorest quintile backed ARENA by twenty-four percentage points more than the richest quintile” (2013, p. 62). The irony that *Mano Dura* as a populist strategy generated mass support amongst the poorest citizens is that, sadly, it is them who have since become the targets of repression and the most affected by the escalation of violence brought about by the war on gangs, specially in the case of the urban poor

To many authors, the level to which ARENA utilized repression and its reluctance to carry out democratizing measures amounts to the survival of an authoritarian conservative hegemonic project in the postwar period. Hume (2007) sees the ready use of force and fear politics by the State as a crisis for the country’s “fledgling democracy,” considering the government’s willingness to demonize youths and gangs as a continuation of a political hegemonic project of exclusion. Cruz (2011) asserts that *Mano Dura* and the survival of “violent entrepreneurs” with connection to the old regime in post-transition institutions represent the legitimization of extra-judicial violence by ARENA; a way to regulate security not just through formal institutions, but through illegal armed actors who act with the approval of the state against gangs. Perez (2003) points out the “uncivil” character of policing methods, referring to the country as a “democradura”. Wolf (2009) does not classify El Salvador as a democracy “with adjectives” (such as O’Donnell’s “delegative democracy” or Zakaria’s “illiberal democracy”), but instead argues that ARENA’s behaviour makes El Salvador a system of “electoral authoritarianism”;

ARENA, benefiting more from the preservation of the status quo than from democratic changes, had accepted a politically inclusive system only to end the war and restore the oligarchy’s dominant position through electoral politics. Uncommitted to democratic strengthening, rightist governments erected an institutional façade of democracy to reproduce authoritarian governance and continue defending elite interests. (p 430).

### **Institutionalizing Repression: From *Mano Dura* to *Mano Super Dura***

The first Anti Gang Law was approved in October 2003 with 43 votes, the total number of ARENA and the PCN legislators in an 84-seat legislature (Bonilla & García, 2003). The PCN had at first opposed the Law, as had the FMLN and the PDC. The reason behind the sudden conversion of all the PCN’s legislators from one day to another remains

undisclosed. Though the Anti-Gang Law was later determined to be unconstitutional, the pro-ARENA Supreme Court waited until a week before the law was set to expire to pronounce its ruling (as an emergency law it had been given a 6-month lifespan), thus allowing ARENA to carry out its populist strategy unimpeded (Martinez Barahona and Linares Lejarraga, 2011). A day after the law was declared unconstitutional, a second Anti-Gang Law which contained the same provisions as the first one was approved by the Legislative Assembly. Two months after entering office, just as the second law was set to expire, Saca launched Plan Super Mano Dura. “The party is over for them,” he declared in a presidential address, “Plan Super Mano Dura guarantees that criminals and lowlifes will remain in prison” (quoted in “Se inicia la Súper Mano Dura”, 2004). Saca’s 5-year Government Plan, labelled *País Seguro* (Safe Country), marked the first inclusion of public security as a cornerstone of ARENA’s governance strategy. Super Mano Dura escalated the sentences for convictions of the first Plan and increased the number of combined military-police patrols, labelled “Groups for Anti-maras Tasks”, from 39 to 333, and their mandate was extended from patrols in San Salvador to the entire national territory. (Aguilar & Miranda, 2006).

Though the Plans enjoyed massive popular support and two consecutive Anti-Gang laws had been approved, lower court criminal judges largely refused to prosecute captured gang members on the basis of a lack of evidence. This resulted in gang members being arrested and released, often only to be recaptured by police 48 hours later. Of the 19,275 arrests of suspected gang members carried out by the PNC during the lifespan of the first and second anti-gang laws (October 2003 to August 2004), 95% of suspects were later released with no charges. These figures are inflated by the fact that the same individuals were arrested multiple times (Aguilar & Miranda, 2006). ARENA responded by accusing judges of siding with gangs in the media and escalating the discourse against gangs, increasingly referring to them as terrorists. An August 2004 article in *El Diario de Hoy* titled “Al Qaeda with gangs?”, which cited an “expert in security and former FBI agent” employed by a private US security company and claimed that Central American gangs had been contacted by the most feared terrorist group at the time. The article stated; “President Elías Antonio Saca said his government did not have information on the subject, but the mandatory declared ‘Nonetheless, I cannot dismiss it because terrorists infiltrate organized crime groups, like the *maras*’”.

Gangs were officially denominating as terrorist with the adoption of a broadly defined “Anti-Terrorism Law” called “Special law against organized crime or complex realization offences” (Martinez Barahona & Linares Lejarraga, 2011). Though the law had been crafted after a protester shot and killed two policemen during a student protest outside of the Universidad de El Salvador, the Anti-Terrorism law was largely used to prosecute gang members. Increasingly, the media linked international terrorism, gangs and the FMLN together in news reports. Conjectural realities, selective characterization and opinions presented as facts in gang crime news was common practice in *El Diario de Hoy*, as evident in the front-page headlines shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Sample of gang related headlines, El Diario de Hoy (2004-2006)**

August 30, 2004	<i>“Al Qaeda con maras?”</i> – Al Qaeda with <i>maras</i> ?
June 21, 2005	<i>“Tratarán a maras como terroristas”</i> – <i>Maras</i> will be tried as terrorists
February 22 2005	<i>“Cercarán a mareros devueltos”</i> – Deported <i>mareros</i> will be corralled in
July 10 2006	<i>“Saca exige que FMLN condene al terrorismo”</i> – Saca demands that FMLN condemns terrorism
August 12 2006	<i>“Saca exige ley antiterrorista”</i> – Saca demands an anti-terrorist law
Source: Compiled by author from <a href="http://archivo.elsalvador.com/noticias/archivo/index.asp">http://archivo.elsalvador.com/noticias/archivo/index.asp</a>	

The Anti-Terrorism Law could be used to prosecute anyone accused of crimes “committed by two or more persons, that are committed against two or more victims, and the perpetration of which provokes alarm or social commotion” (“Ley Contra el Crimen Organizado”, 2006). With the explicit use of conjectural realities, the presentation of opinions as facts, and the sensationalization of gang related news, the media helped create public and legislative support for these measures, though civil society groups, academics and the FMLN opposed it. The Anti-Terrorism Law served the triple purpose of escalating the moral panic over gangs, establishing special courts to prosecute “terrorists” that neutralized the opposition of lower court criminal judges, and threatened to prosecute protestors in a climate of civil unrest due to the unpopular laws passed during the Saca government (Martinez Barahona & Linares Lejarraga).

## Unintended Transformations

Along with the retrocession of judicial guarantees, Mano Dura and Super Mano Dura had extensive social consequences. The Plans empowered the police and military to once again act as the repressive weapon of the state against a widespread sector of society; impoverished youths. Gang members were not the only ones affected by police repression; all young males living in areas with a gang presence became “suspected gang members” to the security forces. Media portrayals of raid operations carried out on poor neighborhoods did not differentiate between arrested gang members and by-standers, as coverage did not extend beyond their capture. To the police and the audience, all those arrested were guilty. Thus, the laws stigmatized the poor, young, urban-dwelling males, further marginalizing and victimizing a disadvantaged population. Granting complete discretionary powers to the police against suspected gang members while promoting a discourse that dehumanized gangs eroded the observance of human rights towards residents of poor marginal neighborhoods by the security forces.

Excessive use of force during raids and home invasions were the more innocuous of practices the PNC and the military engaged in after the approval of anti-gang laws. The growth of social cleansing groups with connection to the security forces targeting gangs was the darker side of state repression (Cruz, 2011), as once again dismembered bodies bearing the unmistakable signs of torture and execution started appearing regularly in the poor barrios and rural areas of El Salvador (Aguilar & Miranda, 2006). In an interview about Mano Dura, former president Alfredo Cristiani stated “This was what the population wanted: the *maras* were to be stamped out, even if this meant killing the *mareros*.” (in Cruz, 2011). Thus, impoverished youths were now besieged by the full force of the state and by extralegal groups acting with the implicit approval of the state. Civil society organizations working in violence prevention and rehabilitation of former gang members reported a decrease in attendance and participation in programs as youths feared being intercepted and arrested by police, thus depriving young people of the few options to escape the gang lifestyle (Aguilar & Miranda, 2006). Criticism led the Saca administration to introduce *Plan Mano Amiga*, an intended prevention measure, and *Mano Extendida*, a supposed rehabilitation and reintegration plan. However, both were underfunded, badly implemented and had no real impact on either prevention or rehabilitation (Wolf, 2011).



The introduction of Mano Dura also marked the reversal of the downward trend homicide figures had exhibited in the early 2000s; the gradual increase in homicides since the implementation of gang repression evidenced the failure of the measures as public security policies. From a starting homicide rate of 33 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2003, the rate increased to 40.9 in 2004 and 55.5 in 2005. An alarming percentage of these deaths were youths between the ages of 15 to 25 years of age; from 55.70% in 2003 to 62.10% by 2005. This reveals that El Salvador's youths already comprised a majority of homicide victims, and their victimization only grew with Mano Dura. The fact that of the total 3,761 homicides committed in 2005, 1,700 deaths were of gang members (a total of 45% of all homicides in the country) should be looked upon with suspicion, as the police and media present victims of homicides as either active members or "related to gangs" in order to minimize their perceived importance for the overall insecurity in the country. This number also obscures homicides committed by the security forces, which are rarely investigated and dismissed as casualties of the war against gangs. Meanwhile, the percentage of homicides perpetrated by gangs also increased; according to the IML, 8% of homicides in 2003 were committed by gangs, compared to 13.4% by 2005. Violence resulting from confrontation between gangs and police are obvious explanations for the increase in homicides, though an increase in homicides of "unknown motive" also took place during this period, from 28.9% in 2003 to 59% in 2005 (Aguilar, 2006). Whether these changes reflect murders committed by extra legal gang extermination groups, hide homicides committed by security forces or illustrate a shift in the dynamics of violence between criminal groups, it is clear that Mano Dura altered the system of violence in the country.

**Table 3. Changing homicide trends**

Year	2003	2004	2005
Total number of homicides	2170	2762	3761
Homicide rate	33	40.9	55.5
Homicide victims aged 15-25 (%)	55.70%	61.20%	61.10%
Homicides with gang member as victim	n/a	n/a	1700
Homicides committed by gangs (%)	8%	9.90%	13.40%
Homicides of unknown motive (%)	28.9%	48.4%	59%
Source: compiled from figures in Aguilar, 2006			

Contrary to the intended goals, by maintaining a permanent state of warfare against gangs, repressive public security policies have been proved to increase group

cohesion (Hazen, 2010). Beyond increasing the level of violence in the streets, Mano Dura had a transformative effect on the development of gangs as criminal groups; changing the way in which they related to society, how they operated as groups and the way they sought to profit economically. The mass incarceration of gang members brought together individuals and cliques from across the country who would otherwise not communicated with each other due to their geographical isolation within different turfs. From this meeting of gang members from across the country, a hierarchy of gang members developed inside the prisons, with “national leaders” at the top issuing orders that are carried out down the ranks. According to one Barrio 18 gang member interviewed by *La Prensa Gráfica* in 2004, quoted in Cruz (2010); “Before (Mano Dura) began it was different. We hadn’t gotten to seeing things collectively. The system has united us more because there is something there, we could call it solidarity. (...) And, like it or not, we cannot look at things individually, because they haven’t treated us individually, nor have they pursued or locked us up individually.” (p. 393).

Under the coordination and instruction of national leaders in prisons, gang members changed their dress style, stopped gathering in the streets in favor of safe houses, and the practice of visibly tattooing gang identifiers as symbols of pride was abandoned. Gang members were assigned specific roles within a clique, consumption of hard drugs was forbidden, and initiation rights for recruits hardened. Acts of violence against community residents increased to discourage collaboration with the police, and the killing of suspected informants and citizens who “broke the rules” became the new norm, making life more insecure for those already trapped in gang-controlled areas (Wolf, 2011). Recruitment of new members was stepped up, sometimes leading to forced recruitment to replace members lost to police violence or imprisonment, and rule enforcement within the gang was regulated with extreme violence (Wolf, 2012). Furthermore, in addition to sustaining themselves, gang members in the streets were tasked with generating enough income to support imprisoned gang members and their families, as well as to acquire weapons and resources against rivals and police. This led to the emergence of widespread extortion networks that operate from prisons, and which have become synonymous with gang crime (Cruz, 2012).

Thus, Mano Dura catalyzed the evolution of gangs from a number relatively autonomous, disorganized cliques into more professional, coordinated criminal structures who sought to increase their capabilities in order to survive under the new conditions of repression. In some cases, new alliances with other criminal groups were forged out of necessity and led to some gang cliques deepening their involvement in more professional criminal activities (Cruz, 2010). Whereas in the 1990s gangs supported themselves through small “contributions” from residents, robberies and burglaries, the age of Mano Dura allowed for the development of a new, far more profitable form of crime; the establishment of networks of extortion against residents and businesses (Wolf, 2012). In this context of heightened gang violence, increased capabilities and citizen victimization, insecurity became one of the FMLN's greatest challenges in 2009.

## Chapter 3.

### (In)Security in the time of the FMLN

In a historic event, the FMLN won the presidency of El Salvador in March 2009 with Mauricio Funes as its candidate. At the time, with the abject failure of *Mano Dura* as a security strategy, and with the 2008 financial crisis making the economy the main concern for most Salvadoreans, ARENA did not politicize crime to the extent that it had during the 2004 election. Though the term *Mano Dura* had disappeared from ARENA and the media's discourse after the Plan's failures became obvious (Wolf, 2011), the party tried to reinvigorate its image as a keeper of law and order by postulating two-time police chief Rodrigo Ávila as its candidate, while linking the FMLN to gangs and terrorism. ARENA's other formulaic campaign tactics, like the use of graphic fear campaigns that painted the FMLN as violent insurgents that would break relations with the US, were greatly neutralized by the fact that Funes, a respected journalist for Channel 12 and party outsider, had no connection to the FMLN's guerrilla past and run on a business-friendly platform. Funes attracted a coalition of centrist voters who had been suspicious of the FMLN's guerrilla past, moderate business elites and some members of the military (Mills, 2012). It appears that cumulative disenchantment and resentment after two decades of ineffective social and economic, specially in the face of ARENA corruption scandals, pushed many to the political alternative, and citizens were hopeful over the possibility of change; Funes was inaugurated as president with 81% citizen approval (Moodie, 2012).

With the new government came expectations that the rupture from the old regime would reinvigorate the democratization process that had been stalled by ARENA's authoritarian attitudes. Early on, the Funes administration showed the political will to change ARENA's government style. However, the Funes administration faced a number of structural and institutional challenges (Cannon & Hume, 2012). Among them, the new government was confronted with a resourceful political opposition, a strong conservative voting block in the legislature, and an overwhelmingly pro-ARENA media environment. After the loss of the executive, ARENA experienced an internal split that culminated with the expulsion from the party of former president Antonio Saca and the defection of some ARENA legislators, who formed their own party, the *Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional*,

ANA (Arauz, 2012). Many believed the split would weaken ARENA's ability to block the policies of the new government. However, rather than having a destabilizing effect on the former ruling party, internal cohesion was strengthened, and ARENA's influence and voting power in the legislature were not significantly altered at the beginning of the Funes administration. Cannon and Hume (2012) point out that, despite vowing to become a constructive opposition to the new government, veiled threats from ARENA leaders, including former president Alfredo Cristiani, revealed that they planned to ensure the preservation of elite interests in times of FMLN rule at any cost. This included making use of the media to undermine the image of the new government to the public.

Just as it had supported the conservative party during its time in power, the media now aided to promote ARENA's accusations of the FMLN's incapacity to govern. "Ungovernability" became the new buzzword in the media (Mayen, 2010). The country's long-standing problems were now framed as being the responsibility of the FMLN, creating a conjectural reality of poor management that omitted the context of the growth in social problems over 20 years of ARENA rule;

Curiously, once Mauricio Funes assumed the presidency, in the media began appearing apocalyptic readings of the country: 'insecurity on the rise', 'social instability growing', 'economic instability growing', 'persecution on the rise'...El Salvador seemed to have entered an anarchic state in terms of social security after deciding for a [leftist] government (Gonzalez & Guzman, 2010).

ARENA did not stop with the media's unofficial publicity against the new government, it also used its private funds to publicize its accusations of the country's supposed state of ungovernability. Within one year of the Funes government, ARENA had bought private ad space across the country; large billboards in the red and white colors of the leftist party displayed a simple message: "Gobierno del FMLN, incapaz"; "FMLN government, incapable" (Mayen, 2010).

Thus, from the outset, Funes's actions were harshly scrutinized by ARENA and the media, to the extent that some of the new government's policies became responsive to the homogenous criticism from the media. Indeed, the Funes administration provides an example of the media's agenda setting ability; over the course of the administration, the media was able to set the public agenda and in turn influence the FMLN's political

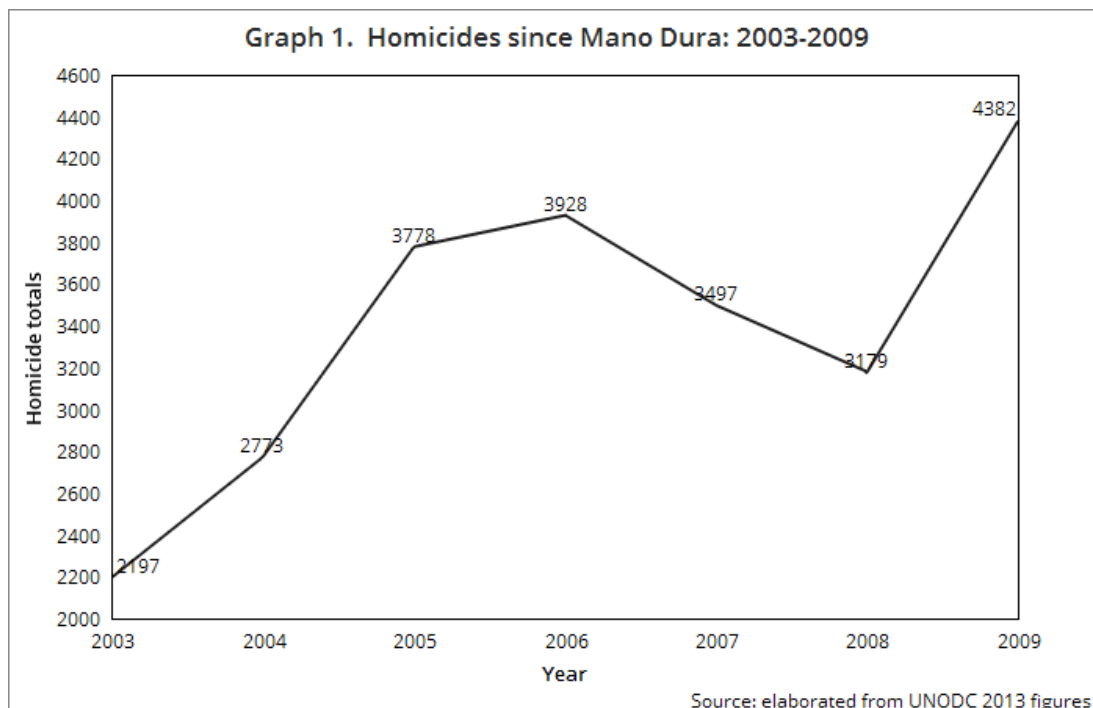
agenda in a number of social issues. This chapter will show how, despite initial efforts from the FMLN government to address a multi-dimensional insecurity crisis with comprehensive security policies aimed at long-term results, the hostile political and media climate has led FMLN administrations to ineffectively alternate between inclusion and repression. This contradictory approach to security has been due to the perpetuation of a culture of intolerance fueled by media portrayals of gang crime, which in the era of ARENA as the opposition, has also entailed the construction by the media of the FMLN as incompetent in the face of crime. In light of the relentless media focus on gangs and ARENA's criticism, the FMLN government was compelled to change its security policy several times to appease public opinion, failing to deepen integrative policies in the face of popular support for repression.

### **Governing with “a difficult inheritance”**

During its first year, the Funes administration appeared committed to changing the exclusively punitive character of public security policies, acknowledging the structural conditions of marginalisation that had aided the growth of insecurity. Immediately after elections the new government convened committees and discussion tables that brought together different sectors of society at the local and national level to create social and economic policies based on participative democratic mechanisms (Cannon & Hume, 2012; FESPAD, 2013). Social justice and grassroots organizations that had been blacklisted by previous governments were now included in a wide range of policy discussions, including the creation of Funes' security strategy, which was presented in February 2010 after months of participative draft sessions. (van der Borgh & Savenije, 2014). A week after Funes' inauguration, the new director of the penitentiary system announced the establishment of *Mesas de la Esperanza* or “Roundtables of Hope”; discussion meetings between government officials, church groups, legal aid NGOs and the families of imprisoned gang members, stating that “human dignity as a fundamental right that all imprisoned persons have; the right to life, their physical, psychologic and moral integrity, must be respected”. (quoted in Méndez, 2009). These are examples of early attempts by the new government to address the human rights abuses that had become institutionalized under the Mano Dura plans, and demonstrates a will to reform criminal justice institutions and move away from an entirely punitive character. Rather than

isolating gangs as the focus of security policy, the government sought to emphasize their plan to engage in prevention and rehabilitation measures, as well as highlighting the long-term effect of its proposed redistributive social policies.

However, this new “soft” approach to criminals was widely criticized in the conservative media as the FMLN fighting to benefit gangs (“Maras se beneficiaron”, 2014). This negative publicity, coupled with a steep increase in homicides in 2009 served to delegitimize the integrative security efforts of the new administration; according to figures from UNODC (2013) the first year of the Funes government closed with 4,382, an increase of 1,200 from the previous year (see graph 1.) However, there is no indication that the sudden rise in homicides was due to increased gang violence. In fact, figures from the IML show that the share of homicides perpetrated by gangs had decreased; were as an estimated 13.40% of homicides were committed by a member of a gang (Aguilar, 2006), by 2009 that number had decreased to 11.8% (“Pandillas vinculadas”, 2010). A report from the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) theorizes that the increase in violence in 2009 “might be related to the transition over control of the executive, and the attempts of certain political structures linked to organized crime to maintain political control



through the use of illegal groups to generate violence” (IUDOP 2014, p 6). Regardless of the reasons, the increase in crime was publicized by the media as being caused by both gang crime and the government’s “incapacity”, and causing as state of “ungovernability”.

Indeed, the juncture at which the Funes administration attempted to change the focus of public security could not have been more poorly timed. Figures in Monzón and Parducci (2014) reveal the extent of the media’s obsession with gangs; whereas in 2005, at the height of *Mano Dura*, an average of 2.5 reports on gangs appeared per day in *La Presa Gráfica* and *El Diario de Hoy*, by 2009 an average of 11.6 news reports on gangs appeared per day. By this point in time, the consistent portrayal of gangs as the main source of insecurity by ARENA and the media had “defined [gang crime] as an existential threat to the Salvadorean state and society, requiring extraordinary measures”. (Van der Borgh & Savenije, 2014, p 152), cementing in citizens a culture of extreme fear, intolerance and condemnation of all members of these groups (rather than individual perpetrators) that made the government’s integrative approach politically costly. The new administration faced immense pressure, from the media, from citizens increasingly concerned with the levels of insecurity, and from a belligerent ARENA party, to make a stance against crime. In the end, it appears that the Funes government resorted to enacting punitive populist measures to appease the public, escalating the authoritarian character of public security established during ARENA governments.

### **Punitive populism in times of the FMLN:**

In October 2009, Funes approved the deployment of 2,500 army personnel to join the 1,600 already involved in public security since the Saca administration. In addition, the government positioned 1,500 soldiers to guard the country’s prisons, citing the high levels of corruption that had long plagued the institution. By June 2010, 44% of the country’s 15,000 soldiers were engaged full-time in public security functions (Dalton, 2010), a level of militarization not seen since the days of authoritarian rule. The move was undoubtedly a populist strategy; despite its history of human rights abuses, the armed forces in El Salvador are considered more effective than the police, with a 2012 LAPOP survey showing that an overwhelming 86.9% of Salvadorians supported the involvement of the armed forces in combating crime (Perez, 2015). In the face of increased violence, in



November 2011 Funes appointed David Munguía Payés, a retired army general and then Minister of Defense as the Minister of Security. Three months later, Funes appointed the vice-Minister of Defense, also a retired general, as Director of the PNC. These measures were deeply criticized by civil rights groups, academics, and even many within the FMLN. However, the military deployment and appointments were incredibly popular among the public, media and opposition alike.

With these appointments, the Funes government demonstrated its preference for strong-armed, short-term solutions to pacify the opposition and citizens' anxieties over long-term, crime-reducing policies, evidencing just how sensitive the administration had become to media criticism in matters of public security. Most alarmingly, Funes showed his willingness to sacrifice the country's democratic institutions by militarizing two of the most relevant public security institutions, which the Peace Accords explicitly instruct *must* remain in the hands of civilian authorities. In the face of accusations of the unconstitutionality of his appointments, Funes declared that "[the PNC director] is no longer a military authority from the moment he requested retirement from the Armed Forces. He is therefore a civil authority, who is beholden to civilian authorities, which is what is established by the Constitution of the Republic for the National Civilian Police, as in the same manner of the writings and spirit of the Peace Accords" (quoted in "Mauricio Funes nombra", 2012).

Though the militarization of public security is among the most democratically detrimental populist acts of the Funes government, it was not the only populist measure. Two events that were greatly exploited by the opposition and the media prompted these actions by the government. First, a massacre of 17 bus passengers by members of the Barrio 18, who were allegedly targeting rival members, shocked the nation. The uniform condemnation of this opprobrious act by all sectors of society prompted Funes to name (for the first time in his government) gangs as terrorists (Murcia, 2010). Immediately after the event Funes introduced a new anti-gang law, the first since Super Mano Dura. The "Law of Proscription of Gangs" was legally redundant and thus unnecessary, as it reiterated the same provisions of the anti-gang laws adopted during the Saca administration. Nonetheless, the law passed with massive support in the legislature, with only some resistance from FMLN legislators (Portillo, 2010). Second, after gangs

threatened to burn public transit units in protest for the approval of the Law of Proscription, bus owners from the powerful *Asociación de Empresarios de Autobuses* (AEAS) shut down operations, leading to a three day nation-wide public transit strike that paralyzed the country (Mayen, 2010). These two events created a level of widespread fear in society that was fueled by alarmist news coverage. Though the individuals responsible for the first act were arrested and prosecuted, the amount of media and citizen outcry nonetheless served to change the Funes administrations' punitive focus from individual perpetrators to the entirety of gangs as groups, as it had been under the Mano Dura plans.

Thus, the reversal of integrative public security measures towards increasing authoritarian policies during the Funes government must be understood in the context of moral panics fueled by the media and the political opposition. ARENA capitalized on these events by increasing accusations of the FMLN's incapacity against gangs and calling for the resignation of the entire security cabinet. Predictably, as had been the case during Mano Dura, the increase in state repression led to an escalation of violence in the streets, as gangs retaliated against police and soldiers who lived in the same poor neighborhoods as gang members, making them (and their family members) easy targets. Thus, the return to state repression, militarization of public security and the passing of new anti-gang legislation lead to an escalating cycle violence and abuse between the state's security forces and gang members. It was in this context of conflict between gangs and the state that the Funes government's most infamous security policy emerged; the 2012 gang truce.

### **“La llamada tregua entre pandillas”**

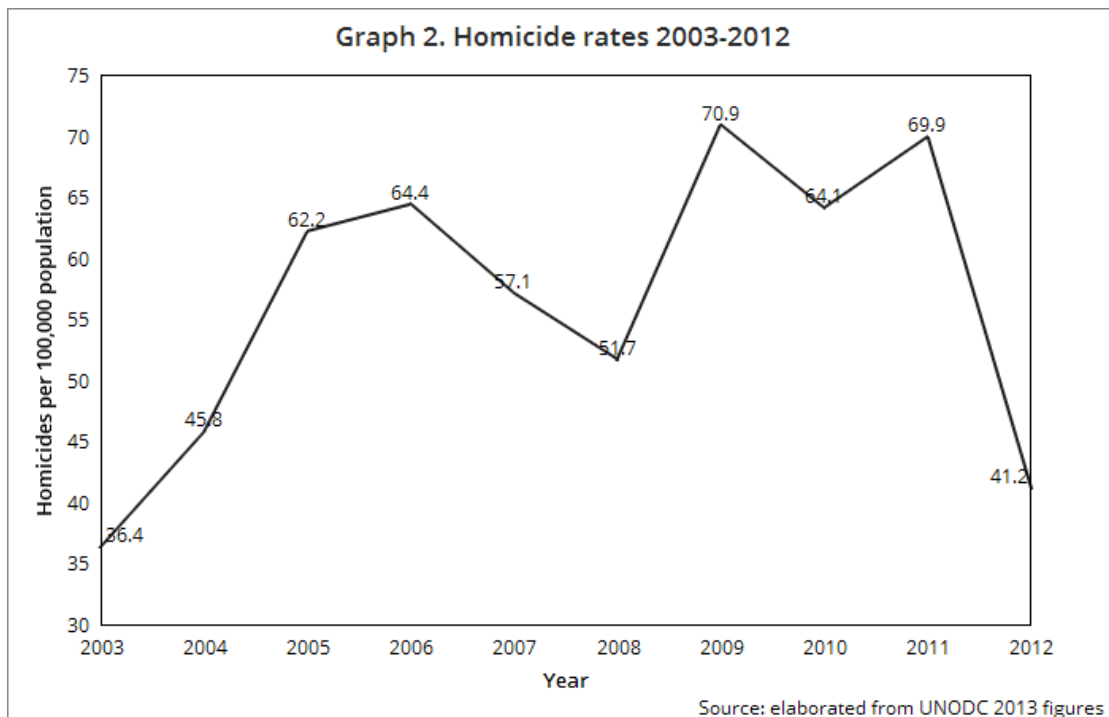
Despite the bold promises of the new Minister of Security to carry out military incursions in gang controlled territories and reduce homicides by 30%, homicides in his first three months in office increased by 19.54% compared to the same period in the previous year (Valencia, 2012b). A sudden drop in homicides from 14 to 6 over the weekend of the legislative and municipal elections in March 2012 was ascribed to increased police operations by the Minister of Security. Days later, the unprecedented drop was revealed by *El Faro* online newspaper to have been due to a government negotiated truce between the MS-13 and Barrio 18, in which gangs agreed to stop homicides in exchange for the transfer of top leaders from maximum security

penitentiaries to lesser security prisons (Martínez, Martínez, Arauz & Lemus, 2012). Once there, the leaders had communicated to mid-level bosses that all killing must be stopped; as the orders filtered down the ranks, the country saw an unprecedented and prolonged decrease in homicides. This was the beginning of what the mass media continually referred to as “*la llamada tregua entre pandillas*”, the “so-called gang truce”; a process of negotiations between the government, the MS-13 and Barrio 18 in which the government pledged to fulfill demands of gang members for improved penitentiary conditions, education, job training, rehabilitation and reintegration programs in exchange for a ceasefire between gangs to decrease the levels of violence (Martínez & Sanz, 2012a).

The process was marred by controversy; outrage from citizens, condemnation by the opposition and misinformation campaigns by the media, all fueled by a lack of transparency that eroded public trust in the government. By engaging gangs in any kind of dialogue, the government went against previous statements that it would never include gangs in negotiations of public security. What some called a “historic opportunity” (Peña & Gibb, 2013) and others a “hypocritical truce” proved to be an incredibly effective violence-reducing strategy. Between 2012 and 2013, homicides decreased by approximately 60%, lowering the per capita homicide rate from 70 in 2011 to 41 in 2012 (UNODC, 2013), and turned 2013 into the year with the lowest number of homicides since *Mano Dura* was implemented (see Graph 2). However, despite a positive impact on visible levels of violence and its potential for long-term security gains as a “social pacification process”, the truce was immensely flawed. Ultimately, the political cost of appearing soft on gangs proved too high, and the Funes administration abandoned the process, once again letting its public security strategy be dictated by short-term improvements in public support.

From the beginning, the government endangered the success of the truce as a long-term strategy by an utter lack of transparency and discordant discourse from the Presidency and the Ministry of Security. After the truce was first unveiled by *El Faro*, the security minister, truce mediators and even the gangs themselves, declared the ceasefire as an initiative of the maras after having “entered into a period of reflection” about their part in the country’s problems. The discourse “if we are part of the problem we can be part of the solution” (Lemus & Martinez, 2012) had been adopted by gangs and NGOs since

the beginning of the Roundtables of Hope, and was now promoted by the security minister as a strategy to decrease violence to a disapproving and understandably distrustful public. The government vehemently denied its role as “negotiator”, calling itself a “facilitator” of a process it claimed to have been initiated by the Catholic church, all while taking credit for the results (Dudley, 2013). The government acted as “facilitator” by easing police repression on gang-controlled neighborhoods, removing the military from prisons, facilitating meetings between leaders from different penitentiaries and convening talks between clique members and municipal governments. For his part, the president maintained a flippant attitude to calls for transparency and inclusion from the public and civil society groups; “Let the public security officials work. You’re seeing homicides are lower with this new administration, right? Let them work.” (Valencia, 2015a)



Though domestically the truce remained extremely unpopular, international organizations were more supportive. Contrary to his ambiguous stance on the truce at home, Funes proudly touted the decrease in homicides in speeches at the UN, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the US Department of State and even the Vatican, presenting the truce as a church initiative that presented a “social pacification” opportunity for El Salvador. The Organization of American States (OAS) became the

official guarantor of the truce process after a meeting between then-Secretary General José Miguel Insulza and imprisoned gang leaders in July 2012, in which gang leaders read out a document outlining their expectations for the government in order to carry on with the process. In its coverage of the meeting, *El Faro* reported how Insulza commended the leaders during the meeting, saying: “I congratulate you for the things you include [in the document], which complement each other, and also for the things you don’t include...you are not asking for anything that implies the omission of judicial processes or not carrying out sentences. What you are asking for are things for the future, looking forward” (Martinez & Sanz, 2012a). After that, then-Secretary for Multidimensional Security for the OAS, Adam Blackwell became an enthusiastic supporter of the truce, overseeing the process as it expanded from a ceasefire to technical committees planning for prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

In a series of shows of “good will”, gangs vowed to stop forceful recruitment, violence against women, declared schools as “peace zones” and publicly surrendered weapons, all while the executive promoted the idea of a “national dialogue” to support the truce. Meanwhile, the Catholic church sometimes appeared at odds in regards to the truce, though for the most part the ecclesiastical community showed support for the process. Moreover, outside of the larger institutional context, some evangelic and catholic parishes in gang affected areas joined the truce process on an individual basis (Ruiz & López, 2013). Crucially, after a process of discussions meetings between gangs, municipal governments and groups from local communities, a number of “violence free municipalities” were created. These were designated neighborhoods in which gangs vowed to stop committing any violent acts (Rodríguez, 2012). Several mayors from both political parties who governed over gang affected areas and who understood the social dynamics between marginalized youths and gang incidence took the opportunity to include gang members in communal labor projects, supplying them with employment opportunities they were barred from before the truce (Arias, 2013).

Thus, at the community level, inhabitants and local governments seemed enthusiastic. The respite in violence presented an opportunity for those living and working in poor neighborhoods with a gang presence. When funds from the central government to finance proposed projects in the “violence free municipalities” failed to materialize, mayors

who were motivated by the promising results of the process resorted to using municipal funds and creating their own programs. Paradoxically, one of the most committed officials was Salvador Ruano, ARENA's mayor to Ilopango, a municipality with a long history of gang violence. Taking advantage of the truce process, he planned job training programs that included metalwork, chicken farms and bakeries, hiring gang members for manual labor projects and even going so far as to write a manual for rehabilitation and reintegration for his municipality (López & Iraheta, 2013). This demonstrates that, despite the larger climate of political and social opposition to the truce, many of those who worked and lived in gang-affected areas recognized the potential of a process that included gangs as part of their communities and which proposed to alleviate the factors of marginalization and poverty that drive at-risk youths to crime and gangs.

However, despite the prolonged reduction in overall violence levels, the institutional support of the OAS, and tangible benefits to gang affected communities, public opinion remained strongly against the truce. The perplexing images of gang members attending church services and foreign diplomats shaking hands with the familiar tattooed faces failed to persuade Salvadoreans of the credibility of a truce between gangs, specially in light of the way the information about the process was presented to the public by government officials. El Salvador's overwhelmingly conservative mass media promoted a negative image of the truce through biased, editorialized and misleading coverage and unprofessional reporting practices, thus limiting the information available for the public to form an educated opinion. The following section provides a qualitative analysis of news articles from *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*. This analysis seeks to illustrate the climate of misinformation and fear that dominated press coverage of the truce process, and demonstrates the unethical use of elements in news stories that seek to construct a reality that benefits the conservative agenda by wilfully deceiving the public. The elements outlined earlier; sensationalization of news, selective characterization of victims and perpetrators, partialized presentation of information, use of opinions as facts, and the construction of conjectural realities; will be highlighted in these stories to demonstrate that these newspapers elaborate news stories with the purpose of convincing the public audience of the existence of a "truth" that arises from ideology and political interests rather than facts. The contents of these articles are put into context by contrasting them with reports from moderate journalists and news outlets.

## Undoing the truce: the role of the media

In a 2016 interview with *El Faro* discussing how the truce process was perceived, Adam Blackwell lamented how;

“We held meetings with mayors, with representatives of civil society, with communities...and everything went great, everyone was happy, we had excellent input. But then it seemed like in El Salvador there is only black and white. Rather than celebrating that we were getting a hundred gang-held arms out of circulation, [the news] would say that they were too few, or that they didn’t work...I think there were interests against the advancement of the process.” (Valencia, 2016).

From the time the truce was unveiled by *El Faro*, the media played a critical role in the shaping of public opinion on the process. Rightfully, the media echoed the questions from the population about the government’s true participation in truce negotiations and demanded transparency from security officials. However, beyond seeking accountability, conservative news outlets engaged in a misinformation campaign that negatively affected public opinion. With the positive impact on homicides and the gaining international support, most conservative news outlets served as soapboxes for truce detractors; politicians, public servants, journalists and economic elites who endeavoured to make the truce fail (Lüers, 2012, 2013a). The entire process from the beginning was framed within a single conjectural reality by conservative media outlets; the truce benefitted only gangs, who were taking advantage of the break in repression to arm themselves, train and increase their capabilities, all while continuing to kill as they had before, simply “disappearing” their victims. In order to maintain this discourse in the absence of any real evidence, the conservative media sensationalized crime stories, selectively characterized victims and perpetrators, presented opinions of prominent rightist officials as facts, provided partialized information to corroborate their claims, sometimes by outright omission of relevant facts, all to uphold a conjectural reality that undermined the truce process.

In the absence of homicides to report on, the sensationalism the media had previously applied to gang crime reports was applied to sometimes real, sometimes speculative, sometimes outrageous, claims about the truce. A two-page printed and online article in *El Diario de Hoy* about the first 100 days of the truce titled “Truce not benefiting society” (written in a deep red font in the printed edition for visual impact) reads;

100 days after the beginning of a supposed truce between the two criminal gangs, far from bringing benefits for all Salvadoreans, it has only benefited these delinquent groups who are now becoming stronger, and the problem of disappeared persons has worsened and extortions have increased, according to former Public Security officials consulted by *El Diario de Hoy*...In order to have a better idea of what this has signified for the Salvadorean population, the former Minister of Public Security, Francisco Bertrand Galindo, the former director of the police, Rodrigo Ávila, and the criminologist Carlos Ponce voiced their considerations and coincided that the gang truce has not lessened violence from those groups towards the population because they continue to victimize it with their criminal acts. (Marronquín & López, 2012)

This article is an excellent example of the reporting methods of the country's mass media. Rather than providing a balanced and critical assessment of the first 100 days of the truce, as any informative newspaper should, the article limits itself to presenting the personal opinions of known rightist political figures that are well known to citizens and whose statements might carry strong credibility to the reader, including Rodrigo Ávila, who served twice as PNC director under ARENA governments and was Mauricio Funes' contender for the presidency in 2009. The article fails to provide concrete data to support what it asserts, does not explain how the cited figures formed their opinions, or considers the opinions of figures who do not identify with ARENA (Lüers, 2012). Of the persons whose opinions serve as support for the claims of the article, only Carlos Ponce, a criminologist, was currently working in the public security system. Somehow those who formerly served public security institutions are endowed with knowledge about a process they were not a part of by virtue of their former experience by the article's author.

In addition to the use of opinions to support a conjectural reality, the article in *El Diario de Hoy* claims that the reduction in homicides can be explained by the fact that gangs are simply disappearing their victims and presented partialized information by omitting the true homicide figures which showed a decrease. For its part, *El Faro*'s report on the first 100 days of the truce pointed out that, despite what truce detractors claimed, there was no concrete indication that disappearances had increased since the truce began, and furthermore highlighted the fact that, with a reduction from an average 14 daily homicides to just 6, some 800 lives had potentially been spared in 100 days (Valencia, 2012c), a fact that is not mentioned in *El Diario de Hoy*'s report. Unfortunately, outlets like *El Faro* do not capture enough of an audience to counter the effects of a homogenized conservative media dialogue, which extends to the news programs of the TCS network



and ASDER radio programs. The difficulty in accessing different sources thus helps the almost complete monopoly of conservative news outlets on the distribution of information.

Elaborating on the conjectural reality of a decrease in homicides equating to more disappearances, articles like “Number of persons disappeared doubles since last year” from *La Prensa Gráfica* in December of 2013 (this one after the truce had fallen apart and repression began anew) and which appeared frequently during the truce, popularized this theory. Though many of them cited official figures from the IML, they did not mention that a person’s disappearance is not removed from the institution’s databases once they have been found, as the PNC does not relay this information, so that their numbers do not reflect the number of persons who have been found. For its part, the PNC reported in August that between 47-50% of persons reported as missing had been found alive that year (Santos, 2013). Though this does not take away from the seriousness of the fact that hundreds of people remained missing, news reports like this one are examples of how the mass media popularized the idea that first, the truce had not actually decreased homicides but simply decreased their visibility, and second, that gangs were responsible for all of these disappearances. Thus, the country’s conservative news outlets’ reports on disappearances, mass burials and the remaining daily homicides were largely ascribed to gangs in conservative media discourse, obviating the existence of other criminal actors and the regularity of these occurrences before the truce. (Valencia, 2015a)

The director of the IML and the Attorney General of the FGR, as representatives of criminal justice institutions widely cited by news reports, took on a leading role against the truce, repeating that gangs were not murdering but disappearing their victims, or that they had ceased violence amongst themselves but not against “honest citizens” (López, 2015). An August 2012 article in *La Prensa Gráfica* titled “IML Director: truce between gangs is fracturing”, where the director claims to have elaborated a “psychiatric profile” of gang leaders, but does not explain how, makes the assertion that a slight homicide increase compared to the previous month meant that gangs could not be trusted. Again, these kinds of articles present partialized information in that they only takes into account the total number of homicides of one month, regardless of context or specific causes, and obviates the existence of other criminal actors in a country where gangs are just one of many perpetrators of crime. In fact, according to data compiled by *El Faro* from the PNC

and IML at the end of the year, August had only 157 homicides, compared with 175 the previous month, so the report's claims might be outright exaggerations.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the reiterated opinions of those cited upheld the conservative consensus; the truce benefited only gangs, who were taking advantage of the decrease in repression to increase their capabilities and extend their territory. (Chávez, 2013). In addition, headlines like "Truce' between gangs does not solve violence in El Salvador, according to church" from *La Prensa Gráfica* in 2012 exemplify the common practice of passing individual opinions from one individual to represent a larger institution and frame the truce narrative in a negative light. In this case, that of a single archbishop.

One outrageous example of a conjectural reality *within* a conjectural reality is represented by an article in *El Diario de Hoy* titled "Gangs learn Nahuatl". The article reported without a doubt that Mexico's Zetas cartel was training MS-13 members in war-era FMLN military camps in remote mountains, claimed some members were learning Nahuatl to code their communications, and that gangs were selling surface-to-air missiles and other weapons to Colombia's FARC. The multi-page spread in the paper's printed edition was based on a report from Douglas Farah, an American journalist and consultant for the Center for Strategic & International Studies, a US conservative think tank (Beltrán Luna, 2013). Despite the utter laughability of the claims, they were presented as verified facts, with no confirmation other than the authority from a "US expert on transnational criminal organizations" who had authored the report. According to Lüers (2013b), a respected journalist and friend of Farah, the report's assertions were obtained after two visits from the author to the country, each lasting less than a week. Despite the criticism from respected journalists about the report and Farah's lack of credibility, *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica* continued to quote the author as an expert on organized crime in articles about the truce (Ávalos, 2013).

In addition to the use of opinions and partialized information to construct an unsubstantiated conjectural reality about the truce, the mass media also sensationalized reports on the remaining homicides and selectively characterized victims and perpetrators to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Homicides were generally portrayed as

<sup>2</sup> El Faro has compiled homicide data in recent years and is made available at <https://public.tableau.com/profile/el.faro#!/vizhome/HomicidiosEnero2002-Julio2016/Platilla>

having occurred because or in spite of the truce, as an article titled “Youth is murdered in zone “free of violence”” illustrates. The article states the police “are considering” a motive related to gangs, framing the report as another example of the “hypocrisy” of the truce, as the murder happened in one of the zones gangs had declared as “violence free”. One interesting example of clear selective characterization of victims in the elaboration of news is the murder of two 15-year-old MS-13 members who were killed for unknown motives in the province of San Miguel. A PNC official explained the details to *El Faro*;

“the news reports in La Prensa [Gráfica] and El Diario [de Hoy] said “Two students are assassinated”, and those news filled half the country with mourning. I know that if they had said “Two criminals killed,” everything would have been different, but they assumed, for some reason, that they were students, and they also began writing parallel articles about harassment in schools, and all because of two people who, even though they were students, were also gang members.” (Valencia, 2013).

The article in *La Prensa Gráfica*, titled “Two students are murdered in San Miguel” fails to explicitly mention the fact that the victims were also known gang members, reporting instead that “the students might be linked to criminal groups,” and describing how “at the site [of the crime] were left behind backpacks and school supplies” to further elicit emotion (Melara & Alfaro, 2012). The manipulation of facts and information to enhance the emotional reaction of homicide news is evident in this story. Undoubtedly, before and after the truce, news of these children’s deaths would have been titled along the lines of “Two gang members killed”, and it would not generate much sympathy from readers.

The articles analyzed above are illustrative of how the mass media framed the truce within a conjectural reality where only gang members benefitted (1), and employed sensationalization (2), selective characterization of victims and perpetrators (3), partialized presentation of information (4) and opinions presented as facts (5) to homogenize news coverage of the truce in a negative light. The following table presents a sample of articles, including some discussed above, from *El Diario de Hoy*, *La Prensa Gráfica* and *El Faro*. The right-hand column lists the elements used in these articles as enumerated above. This is meant to further demonstrate the widespread use of unprofessional and unethical practices in news elaboration during the gang truce of the conservative outlets, as again, these articles are also representative of the way television news programs constructed news reports on the gang truce. This negative and largely

uncritical elaboration of news on the gang truce continues today, as the more recent articles show.

**Table 4. Sample truce-related articles according to publication**

<b>La Prensa Gráfica</b>		<b>Elements used</b>
June 12 2012	Two students murdered in San Miguel	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Dec, 2012	Truce is a hypocritical negotiation: Attorney General	1, 4, 5
Feb. 10 2013	“Truce” between gangs does not solve violence, according to church	1, 5
May 18 2013	Munguía Payés, the godfather of the gang truce	1, 2
July 9 2013	“Truce strengthened gang’s territorial control” -Farah	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
July 18 2013	Security Minister: Gangs have benefited from the truce	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Dec. 19 2013	Number of disappeared doubles in 2013	1, 2, 4
April 30 2014	Truce strengthened and benefited gangs, says Attorney General	1, 2, 4, 5
<b>El Diario de Hoy</b>		
March 3 2013	Maras learn Nahuatl	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
April 17 2013	Attorney General: gang truce is a hypocritical pact	1, 2, 4, 5
May 29 2013	ARENA: Funes has failed with security	1, 2, 4, 5
Jan 29 2014	Gangs benefited with the policies of Funes’ government	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Sept. 7 2014	Truce in El Salvador made gangs stronger	1, 2, 4, 5
April 3 2015	Gangs covered homicides with disappearances	1, 2, 5
Oct. 18 2016	Gangs took the truce as an opportunity to kill police in El Salvador	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
May 19 2017	Truce allowed gangs to arm themselves for attacks against police	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
<b>El Faro</b>		
Mar. 14 2012	Government negotiated with gangs reduction of homicides	
June 17 2012	100 days of truce, 100 days with 8 less homicides	
July 17 2012	The list of petitions gangs made to the government	
April 8 2013	Perception versus reality	

It becomes undeniable, then, that the mass media coverage of the 2012 gang truce was largely propagandistic, echoing the criticism of the ARENA party and other conservative parties. But how was public opinion affected by this? As already discussed, studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between increased media coverage of crime and the heightened perceptions of insecurity (Kessler & Focás, 2014), as well as the amount of coverage the media gives to any given issue and how important that issue

becomes in the public agenda (Freidenberg, D'Adamo & García Beaudoux, 2000). How did media coverage of crime during the Funes administration, and specially during the gang truce, affect public opinion?

### **Manipulating public opinion: effects of media coverage of crime**

As discussed above, crime and insecurity had figured strongly in the media's agenda since the beginning of the Funes administration. Data from Latinobarómetro shows that in 2009, the year Funes was elected, 58.5% of the population identified economic issues like poverty and unemployment as the main problem facing the country, compared to 34.2% who identified issues of public security as the main problem, with 2.5% naming gangs specifically as the main problem. By 2010, the numbers were completely reversed, with only 34.3% of Salvadoreans identifying economic issues as the country's primary problem, while 58% identified insecurity as the main problem facing the country, and 14.4% explicitly naming gangs. Though the escalation of homicides over the course of 2009 might account for this shift to some extent, as mentioned before, the percentage of homicides committed by gangs had actually decreased compared to 2005, at the height of Mano Dura repression. In addition, the total number of homicides decreased from 4,382 in 2009 to 3,987 in 2010 (see Graph 2), so the complete reversal of opinions of the main problem facing the country cannot be explained by the absolute numbers in homicides, specially in light of economic conditions not improving significantly over the course of one year to the next. Instead, the most likely reason for this sudden shift in perception is due to the moral panic incited after the killing of 17 bus passengers by gang members in 2010. Alarmist and sensationalistic media coverage of this event and the subsequent three-day public transit strike is the most likely explanation for this extreme shift.

By 2011, the percentage of the population who considered issues of insecurity to be the main problem facing the country decreased to 51.5%, with 11.4% naming gangs specifically as the main issue. This decrease occurred despite the fact that homicides actually increased in 2011, partly due to the Law of Proscription which heightened levels of gang repression once more; a total of 4,371 homicides were committed that year. Perhaps the absence of headline-grabbing crimes leading to moral panics accounts for the decrease in importance of insecurity issues for many Salvadoreans. In 2012, with the

beginning of the gang truce, daily homicide numbers were halved almost over night, with a total of 2,594 murders committed that year, the numbers decreased by an amazing 1,777 homicides compared to the previous year. One would expect that the drastic reduction in homicides since March would lead to a notable decrease in the percentage of the population that consider insecurity to be the main problem facing in the country. However, a survey conducted in November 2012 by UCA's IUDOP revealed that 49.3% of respondents considered insecurity to be the main problem in the country. Furthermore, only 22.5% of respondents believed that crime had decreased in the country compared to the previous year, while an amazing 74.5% believed crime had remained the same or increased compared to the previous year.

Besides the media, the other main determinant of perception of insecurity is victimization of crime. However, of those polled, only 19.9% declared being a victim of a crime during the past year (mostly robberies and muggings) and of those, only 8.2 had been victim of a crime committed by gangs. With only a relatively small percentage of respondents having experienced crime directly in the past year, it can be concluded that media coverage of crime news was responsible for the high perception of crime at a time when homicides had remained at historic lows over the eight months prior to the survey. Therefore, there is little doubt that the discrepancy between the reality of crime incidence and the public's perception of insecurity was due to the negative media coverage of crime during the truce, which had created a conjectural reality in which gangs simply concealed homicides by disappearing their victims, crime news were sensationalized, homicides were ascribed to gangs by selective characterization, where former officials and experts asserted that gangs continued to commit crimes and with information presented in a partialized manner to corroborate the conservative consensus.

As for feelings on the gang truce specifically, the 2012 IUDOP poll revealed that 89.4% of the population had little or no trust in the truce. Cruz (2012) cites a May IUDOP survey which revealed that 60.5% of Salvadoreans were against government negotiations with gangs. Despite the respite in violence the truce had brought to many communities, the IUDOP's May 2013 survey revealed that 42.5% of respondents believed the truce had not reduced crime at all, and public opinion about the truce remained overwhelmingly negative; 83% of respondents had little or no trust in the truce (IUDOP, 2013). As reported

in August by InSight Crime, a survey from El Salvador's Universidad Tecnológica (UTEC) revealed that 47% of Salvadoreans believed only gangs had benefited from the truce (Cawley, 2013). In this context of extreme political, media and public opposition, the truce's immediate impact on violence and its long-term potential for security improvement paled with the political cost of appearing soft on gangs.

## **The politics of insecurity**

In May of 2013, the Constitutional Court ruled against the appointment of retired army professionals to the posts of Minister of Public Security and director of the PNC, in a victory against the militarization of public security (Arauz, Martínez & Sanz, 2013). Munguía Payés, who by then had admitted to being the “architect” of the truce, was replaced by Ricardo Perdomo, an economist and friend of president Funes. A re-shuffling within the Ministry and the PNC led to the departure of many truce supporters from institutions that played a key role in the truce process. Though independent mediators remained emphatic on their support for the truce, the new security minister immediately distanced himself from them, denying the truce had ever been part of the government strategy. Over the rest of 2013, the government gradually removed institutional support for the truce, leaving imprisoned gang leaders and mediators to try and maintain the fragile process on their own. As the proposed education, job training and reintegration programs vanished and police repression in poor neighborhoods intensified, the number of daily homicides rose once more.

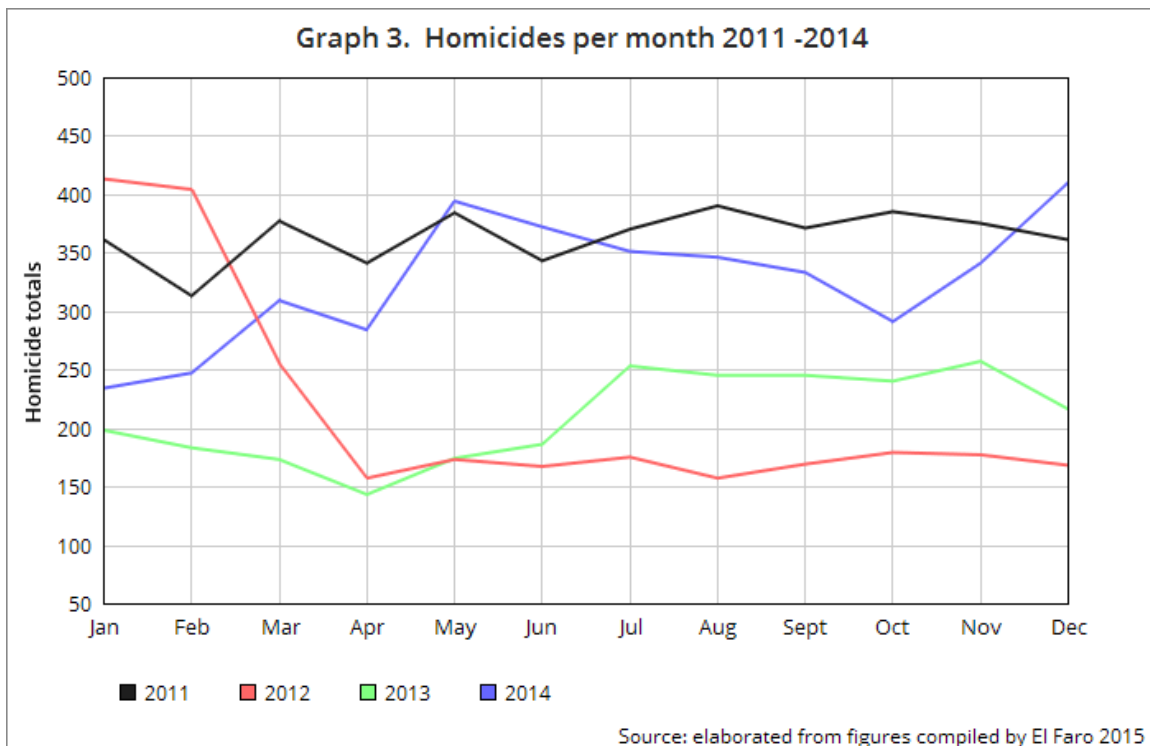
Many consider the removal of Munguía Payés as security minister to have been the undoing of the truce process, as Perdomo proved to be decidedly against the truce. However, the change of ministers might have been an opportune chance for the president; for the duration of the truce process, Funes had denied knowledge of Munguía Payés's plans to negotiate a ceasefire with the gangs, even after the minister had admitted to have acted with the president's approval. Nonetheless, Funes had always claimed to trust in his minister's actions, thus giving support to the truce without accepting responsibility for it as part of the Executive's strategy. Once negative public opinion on the truce proved insurmountable ahead of the 2014 presidential elections, the government decided to abandon the process. The new minister, who had not previously declared a position about

the truce, immediately denied it had ever been a government strategy, thus singling out Munguía Payés as an independent actor within the government and exonerating Funes for his role in the process.

Despite the continued efforts of truce supporters, the ceasefire fell apart as gang members in the streets lost incentives and returned to their previous lifestyle, even as imprisoned leaders called for order amongst the ranks. Renewed police repression reignited the cycle of revenge killings between gang members and security forces, inter-gang violence broke out once more, ordinary citizens once again became targets, and other criminal groups could once again operate safely behind the smokescreen of gang violence. The month of July 2013 closed with a total of 253 homicides, when April had closed with 143 (“Con 481 asesinatos”, 2015). If that year’s homicides had stayed at the same level as before Perdomo’s appointment, El Salvador could have ended 2013 with less than 2,000 homicides, and it would have been the first time in the country’s modern history (see Graph 3). However, with the return to familiar government repression and amidst rising homicide rates, El Salvador resumed its violent normalcy.

During the 2014 presidential campaign, both parties failed to produce a concrete plan for public security, but ARENA harshly criticized the FMLN for having negotiated with criminals. As soon as the campaign period opened in mid 2013, ARENA began running television ads denouncing the government’s pact with the gangs, narrated by an ominous voice and showing an outstretched hand covered in tattoos (Robbins, 2013). Meanwhile Perdomo continued to staunchly deny government involvement in the process. The revelation in early 2014 that former president Francisco Flores had appropriated at least \$15 million USD in humanitarian aid from Taiwan and used a portion of the donations to finance the presidential campaign of Antonio Saca (Vaquerano, 2015) bolstered electoral support for the FMLN. Thus, the campaign focus between the two parties became a matter of criticism over past security policies and of moral superiority over the other (or rather, moral relativity).





In March 2014, the FMLN's candidate, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, a former guerrilla commander, was elected president with 50.11% of the vote, the narrowest margin in the country's democratic history. In January 2015, the new president declared that the government would not return to negotiating with gangs, ending all hopes from truce supporters that the process might be renewed by the new administration and closing the door on what some, including the OAS, had considered an innovative security strategy (Valencia, 2015). As the cycle of attacks between gang members and police renewed itself with a vengeance after the end of the truce, the director of the PNC instructed police to "shoot without fear at criminals" ("Director de la PNC", 2015). In February, the gang leaders were returned to high security prisons, cutting off communications between the most senior leadership and the rest of their ranks. The next month, the country saw a total of 481 homicides. In August, an incredible total of 918 homicides were committed (El Faro, 2016)<sup>3</sup>. In 2015, with a total of 6,640 homicides and per capita homicide rate of 104.2 per 100,000 inhabitants, El Salvador became the most violent country in the world (Daugherty, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> <https://public.tableau.com/profile/el.faro#!/vizhome/HomicidiosEnero2002-Julio2016/Platilla>

Alarmingly, a large portion of these homicides occurred in the form of mass executions of gang members; several cases of four, five and one notable instance of eight suspected gang members occurred during 2015. The latter was perpetrated by state forces in a commando style operation on a country estate in San Blas, where at least one of those killed was an innocent bystander. The case was widely reported as a shootout between police and gang members, though an investigation by *El Faro* reveals that all killed were unarmed at the time, and were later poorly posed with weapons to make it appear as a confrontation. A witness to the attempts of surrender by the caretaker of the estate, who had no relation to the gang members present, was later found assassinated. Though other cases of mass killings of gang members that year were only “reportedly” committed by persons wearing dark clothes similar to those of the police, the San Blas massacre is incredibly disturbing because the police admitted having perpetrated it without justifying the reasons behind the operation. By all accounts, no criminal acts were being committed during the attack (Valencia, Martínez & Caravantes, 2015). Thus, it becomes disappointingly clear that the state’s security forces were a major contributor to the exorbitant number of homicides that occurred in 2015, the year that earned El Salvador the title of most violent country in the world.

Despite the explosion of violence after the truce (or because of it), the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court ruled in August of 2015 that gangs must be considered terrorist groups, specifically naming the MS-13 and Barrio 18, stating that the government must use all its resources against them, including “elite police forces and special tribunals” (“Sala declara a pandillas”, 2015). The Attorney General, who had been one of the truce’s loudest critics, rejoiced at the decision. One week later, a 17-year-old gang member was the first to be convicted as a “terrorist” for attacking a group of police with a home-made weapon. (“Adolecente”, 2015). In June 2015, the Constitutional Chamber admitted a suit that froze over \$900 million approved by the Legislative Assembly after ARENA argued the funds had been approved during a voting session that violated constitutional procedures. A vast portion of the funds had been allocated to carry out the public security programs detailed by Sánchez Cerén’s public security plan (Alvarado, 2015). *Plan El Salvador Seguro* (2015) had been the result of inclusive policy discussions between a vast number of social groups over matters of public security. It centered around measures of prevention, education, job training and rehabilitation to be

executed at the local level by community groups and municipal governments, and with the help of a new force of “communitarian police” from the PNC. The Chamber took over a year to pronounce its sentence, and ultimately ruled in favor of ARENA in July 2016, depriving the government of much needed funds in what many consider an overtly political decision. (Feusier, 2016). Needless to say, *El Salvador Seguro* has not been properly implemented, owing largely to lack of funds, and thus results have not been impactful. In light of the escalation of violence against gang members by the army and police, however, it is uncertain that the Plan’s programs would have attracted prospective participants even if funding had been available. Youth gangs in El Salvador continue to be portrayed as terrorists who do not deserve basic legal and human rights, and their treatment as such continues to contribute to a long-standing state of social warfare.



**Figure 1.** Police raids and arrests have become the norm and the mistreatment of young males in poor neighborhoods as suspected criminals by police has become institutionalized since Mano Dura.

## Chapter 4.

### Conclusion

This thesis project began with a desire to understand the public rejection of integrative security measures and the preference for repressive anti-gang policies, even though repression has proven since 2003 to be ineffective as a tool to lower gang crime. Instead, the continued support for repression has gradually deteriorated public security policy into a state of warfare between the state's security forces, gang members and extralegal violent actors, which has contributed substantially to the country's exorbitant homicide figures. The research undertaken for this project has revealed a clear relationship between the amount and quality of media coverage of gang crime and heightened perceptions of insecurity which have driven citizen's preferences for repressive policies since 2003. The role of El Salvador's mass media in helping to create the current levels of violence in support of ARENA's political project *cannot* be understated; in 2003, when homicides in the country were at historic lows, the media aided the ARENA party's electoral prospects by promoting Mano Dura as the best strategy to deal with a gang crisis that did not exist at the time. During the Funes administration, it aided ARENA as the new opposition by creating moral panics over gang committed crimes that promoted the idea of a state of "ungovernability" as being directly caused by the FMLN's incapacity. The effects of media coverage of gang news are directly visible in opinion polls in 2010 and later in 2012 and 2013 that show levels of citizen perception's of insecurity that do not reflect the reality of crime incidence and personal victimization.

By portraying gangs as a collective evil and that threatens honest citizens rather than as individual perpetrators in gang news, over the years this has created a widespread culture of intolerance against these groups that is understandable within the context of the emotionally charged coverage of gang related homicides. The media exploits grief over homicides and makes a spectacle out of death, which helps to maintain citizen's reactions to these groups in the realm of the emotional rather than the logical when it comes to support for security policies, and understandably so. The public has been socialized to repudiate gangs so much that in news where the victims are gang members or suspected gang member, regardless of whether they are students or children as young as 12, many

rejoice over their death, as made evident in comment sections of online news. The proliferation and popularity of pages on social media that celebrate and encourage extrajudicial violence against gangs in the age of the internet reveals the extent to which El Salvador has been socialized in favor of repression. In light of these facts, it is not surprising that integrative approaches to security and experiments in alternative measures like the 2012 gang truce have failed. Any policy that seems “soft” towards gangs or which seems to benefit these groups will remain politically inviable as long as these media practices continue.

By highlighting the media’s effects on driving security policy, this research contributes to the body of literature on the media’s agenda setting capabilities. The extensive qualitative analysis on the elaboration of crime news coupled with the examination of poll data provides ample evidence of the relationship between media coverage and the changes in public opinion over the most important problems facing the country. Typically, citizens are most concerned over the economy or public security. The drastic changes in what is most important to citizens between these two issues in the years between 2009-2013 shown in this study is proof of the power of the media to incite moral panics that lead to shifts in public opinion, specially in light of the criminal and social events that took place in the period of analysis. Thus, this study provides a great example of the media’s ability to set the public agenda, and in this case, also the political agenda of the FMLN. From what this study has revealed about the relationship between the country’s mass media and the ARENA party, no real distinction exists between the media’s agenda and the political agenda in times of ARENA rule. Therefore, this instance of the media setting the public as well as the political agenda could only happen during a time in which the FMLN is in power and ARENA is the opposition. These conclusions can provide the basis for further research in the field of media studies.

The research undertaken for this thesis project has revealed a number of serious impediments for democratization in the country that stem directly from its media system. The oligopolistic nature of the media market has led to a near monopoly of information at the hands of a few elite families with ties to the ARENA party. This has limited social and political debate on important issues as the media either withholds information from the public or frames issues in a way that ensures the preservation of elite interests. The

literature review of Salvadorean sources on the behavior of the media reveals a long battle for improved journalistic standards, professionalization of reporting practice and an inclusion of a plurality of perspectives in the media. Wolf (2016) is able to point out, over the long histories of *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Grafica*, moments in time at which attempts to reform from within these institutions themselves created openings for criticism and discussion. However, these experiments have eventually failed due to resistance from the owners to move away from a model in which the papers essentially act as propaganda for the ARENA party; their interests are too tightly bound. In light of this, a grim picture emerges about the probability of El Salvador's mass media outlets improving their reporting standards. Nonetheless, the rise of the internet has opened some spaces for honest citizen discussion (Monterrosa, 2010) and has seen the rise of alternative media outlets that seek to provide higher quality news coverage. However, the internet as a medium is still in its nascent state in the country; by 2015, 64.9% of the population had never connected to the internet (Latinobarómetro, 2015). Thus, though technological advances are providing alternatives to the hegemony of conservative media outlets, it will be a long time before internet based news can have a significant impact as a source of information to help citizen's form their opinions.

On a final note, this thesis has dealt with the topic of gangs and insecurity and has sought to provide an explanation for the rise of violence in the country in light of changing policies and social attitudes towards these groups. The intention of this study is not to diminish the pain and suffering caused by gang members who commit acts of violence; gangs are a major source of insecurity in poor neighborhoods and rural areas and their individual crimes must be prosecuted. However, these groups must be understood as a social phenomenon based on continued poverty, exclusion and marginalization. Individuals within the group, who join them for a vast variety of reasons, cannot be legally or morally condemned for the actions of other individual gang members. It is this universal persecution, which forms the basis for Mano Dura and the Law of Proscription, that has led to a marked escalation of violence since 2003. The early attempts of the Funes administration to change the focus of public security proves that there is still a political will to restart the course of democratic development even for those who are at risk of committing crimes. The adoption of the Law of Proscription and the declaration of the Supreme Court of gangs as "terrorist groups" has increased the legal barriers to

deescalate widespread repressive policies in the future. However, if there is any hope of a true “social pacification” process in El Salvador, it must start with the political commitment to reform the country’s public security institutions away from authoritarianism and into a democratic model of security. The country has suffered a long and arduous path towards democracy, and many achievements have been made. However, many changes need to be made in order for El Salvador to become a true democracy that protects the rights and duties of its citizens.

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