



EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

El Salvador



About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.



The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Central America (CENTAM).

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Salvadoran society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.



For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ or contact the AFCLC Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil.

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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing.

For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story



of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing

constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to

perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better



understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains –which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival,

although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal

standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless.

Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true — regardless of whether there is evidence to

support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people

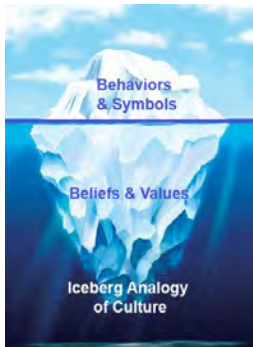
classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our

personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel through CENTAM, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning



that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

CENTAM occupies a narrow isthmus that connects the continents of North and South America and comprises 7 countries: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Archaeological finds suggest nomadic hunter-gatherers inhabited the region as early as 9,000 BC. Eventually, these groups adopted small-scale agriculture, and beginning around 2,500 BC, erected permanent farming settlements.



Around 1,000 BC, the Maya civilization emerged in southern Mexico and Guatemala, flourishing over subsequent centuries as it spread across Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and parts of Nicaragua. At their civilization's height from 250-900 AD, the Maya excelled in mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, and art, constructing magnificent cities featuring massive stone pyramids, temples, and palaces. Although Maya society and culture encompassed nearly the entire CENTAM isthmus by the 10th century, the Maya remained politically fragmented. The Maya world was characterized by independent, adversarial city-states competing for power and resources.

In the early 16th century, Spanish explorers arrived on the Panamanian coast, while others entered the CENTAM isthmus

from Mexico. Seeking wealth and enhanced social status, along with an ambition to spread Catholicism, the Spanish swiftly and violently subdued the Maya and other indigenous communities. By 1540, the Spanish had consolidated rule over most of CENTAM as conflict, disease, and famine decimated the region's indigenous population. Uniting all CENTAM territories except Belize and Panama as the Kingdom of Guatemala, the Spanish ruled the region for the next 300 years. Meanwhile, Panama became part of the Spanish-ruled Viceroyalty of Peru, while most Belizean territory came under British control.

In the late 18th century, mounting unrest over colonial tyranny led to nationalist independence movements. All the CENTAM states but Belize and Panama briefly united as the Federal Republic of Central America in 1821. Politically fractured, the union quickly disintegrated, and within 2 decades, most CENTAM territories had become independent nations. Panama was a part of Colombia until it gained independence with the support of the US in 1903. Meanwhile, Belize remained under

British control well into the 20th century.



Following independence, the CENTAM nations grappled with decades of political upheaval, poor governance, and poverty. By the 1960s, right-wing military dictators ruled over much of the region.

Years of profound economic disparities and government-sponsored abuse flamed insurgencies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, eventually flaring into brutal civil wars. As part of its anti-communist agenda, the US was highly influential, even actively involved, in many of these conflicts. By contrast, Costa Rica and Belize experienced relative peace. Costa Rica even abolished its military amid other progressive political, social, and environmental reforms.

By the mid-1990s, civil conflict across the region had significantly reduced. Since then, most CENTAM governments have supported mostly stable democratic systems, expanded

economic opportunities, and invested in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Despite these improvements, the CENTAM nations remain in various stages of development. Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama have seen the greatest stability and economic growth. By contrast, residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua continue to face high rates of poverty, unemployment, and violence.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. All CENTAM states except Belize are presidential republics led by an elected President and legislature. By contrast, Belize is a constitutional monarchy with a democratic parliamentary government led by an elected Prime Minister and legislature. The United Kingdom's hereditary monarch serves as Belize's head-of-state.

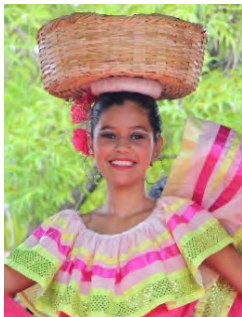


While El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua emerged from years of repressive dictatorial rule and protracted civil war by the 1990s, they and the other CENTAM states continue to face challenges to

the democratic process. Corruption is widespread, contributing to instability and stifling political and economic progress. In some states, corruption engenders public distrust of democratic institutions and public officials and results in frequent and occasionally violent public protests.

Moreover, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (collectively known as the “Northern Triangle”) struggle to curb the illicit drug trafficking industry and high rates of gang violence. In stark contrast to the other states’ internal volatility, Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama enjoy minimal violence within stable democracies marked by peaceful and transparent democratic elections.

While some bilateral tensions exist, notably Guatemala's claim to over 1/2 of Belize's territory, most states cooperate in strong regional alliances focused on economic, security, and governance issues. The Northern Triangle nations, for example, work closely to halt the movement of narcotics across borders and diminish the power and influence of organized crime networks. All CENTAM states actively cultivate relations with



the US and rely on substantial US military and financial assistance to address regional security and economic concerns.

CENTAM is ethnically diverse. **Mestizos** (people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry) comprise about 72% of CENTAM's population, some 20% claim European (white) ancestry, and about 8% are Amerindian or members of indigenous communities. The region is also

home to smaller numbers of people of mixed African descent and other minorities. The ethnic makeup of each CENTAM nation varies. For example, a majority of Guatemalans identifies as indigenous, yet few Salvadorans and Costa Ricans do. White and *mestizo* populations hold most of the wealth, political power, and social prestige. By contrast, Amerindians and those of African ancestry generally lack political representation, suffer disproportionately high rates of poverty and disease, and are subject to discrimination and social stigmatization.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. The region's early inhabitants followed a variety of indigenous religious traditions, worshipping spirits and deities who inhabited the natural environment. The Maya enjoyed a particularly rich and complex belief system that included ancestor veneration and the worship of over 250 gods.

The Spanish introduced Christianity to CENTAM in the early 16th century, forcefully converting the indigenous population to Catholicism, while suppressing traditional beliefs and practices. As a result, Catholicism spread quickly, and the Catholic Church became entrenched in daily life, fundamentally influencing education, social services, and colonial policy. After independence, Church power fluctuated as various political factions supported or opposed Catholicism's influence in the social and political spheres. Meanwhile, Protestantism grew in popularity in British-controlled Belize. In the 20th century,

Protestant evangelical movements thrived across the region following the arrival of North American missionaries.

In the latter half of the 20th century, ongoing violence prompted clergy to advocate on



behalf of victimized populations and assume influential roles in the resolution of regional conflicts. Across the region today, some religious organizations remain politically involved while others focus on providing important social services. While the Roman Catholic Church still enjoys a privileged status in most countries, all nations but Costa Rica name no official religion and explicitly separate church and state.

The region's population is overwhelmingly Christian: 55% of CENTAM residents identify as Roman Catholic, while 30% are Protestant. Many CENTAM Christians fuse elements of indigenous beliefs with Christian rites and traditions.

Some 9% of regional residents claim no religious affiliation, while some 6% are adherents of traditional beliefs or followers of other faiths, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Baha'i (a belief system that recognizes the essential worth of all religions and the unity and equality of all people).

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional

bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are valued greatly within CENTAM. While the traditional family unit consists of a husband, wife, and their children, Central Americans also maintain strong connections with extended family members. Accordingly, extended kin are influential in family matters, typically live nearby, and are important sources of physical, emotional, and financial support. Children often live with their parents until they marry, though some choose to stay longer. In poorer families, children contribute to the family income from an early age by performing tasks like washing cars, shining shoes, or selling food and trinkets. By contrast, children of wealthy families have comparatively fewer responsibilities.



Urbanization has resulted in changes to family life. Urban residents tend to marry later and have fewer children, resulting in more diverse urban family structures. In the Northern Triangle and other areas, widespread poverty and social instability have significantly disrupted traditional family life, forcing some members to migrate within the country or leave CENTAM altogether.

While close kin ties mean family members have some influence over children's choice of spouses, men and women generally choose their own partners. Both Spanish traditions and Roman Catholic teachings strongly emphasize the value of marriage as an institution and discourage divorce. Nevertheless, divorce rates have risen in some areas.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

CENTAM's traditional Spanish and indigenous cultures privileged men as providers and leaders, while casting women in subordinate roles. **Machismo** (strong masculine behavior and pride) remains an important element of male identity in the region. While today women and men have equal rights before the law, inequalities between the genders remain.



Women often face discrimination in hiring and promotion, and although they face some barriers to their participation in the political sector, the

number of women serving in public office across the region has steadily increased in recent years. Today, women hold a considerable proportion of national and local government positions, and Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica have had female Presidents. Female participation rates in the national legislatures of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua are higher than the US.

Gender-based violence is widespread in some areas. Women are often reluctant to leave abusive partners or report incidences of gender-based violence, considering the abuse to be a private matter. Among reported cases, the prosecution of perpetrators is rare. Abortion laws across the region are highly restrictive and in recent years have caused significant public debate. Although homosexuality is legal in every CENTAM nation, homosexuals suffer discrimination, stigmatization, and violence.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

As a result of centuries of Spanish colonialism throughout the region, Spanish is an official language in every CENTAM country except English-speaking Belize. Despite the prominence of Spanish, the region is linguistically diverse: 26

languages are spoken in Guatemala, 10 in Honduras, 15 in Panama, 14 in Costa Rica, 11 in Nicaragua, 9 in Belize, and 5 in El Salvador. Though most of these languages are indigenous to the region, a few are so-called creole languages combine vocabulary and grammar from indigenous or African languages with English or Spanish.

Some of the region's most widely spoken indigenous languages are Mayan, notably K'iche', Q'eqchi', and Kaqchikel. The systematic suppression of indigenous communities during the colonial era contributed to the demise of many of the region's indigenous languages. In some regions, government-sanctioned violence against indigenous residents in the 20th century prompted many native speakers to abandon their heritage, notably also their languages, to avoid persecution. Despite recent revitalization efforts, some of the region's native languages remain nearly extinct. English is taught in schools across CENTAM as a 2nd language and is especially popular among the educated elite and in the business community.

While communication patterns vary among ethnic groups, CENTAM residents generally demonstrate courtesy, respect, honesty, and patience in interpersonal relations. When conversing, Central Americans tend to be warm, friendly, and eager to extend hospitality, particularly when speaking with family and friends. By contrast, some indigenous groups, such as the Maya, are more reserved in their communication styles, especially with strangers.



7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors,

and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers. Education in early CENTAM societies was primarily an informal transfer of skills, values, and beliefs from parents to their children. Scholars believe the Maya employed a more formal education system in which religious leaders taught medicine, history, math, and science to elite children.

During the colonial era, Roman Catholic religious orders became the primary providers of education. While these institutions eventually established schools and universities throughout the region, educational infrastructure remained limited through the 19th century. Moreover, Catholic orders provided only limited instruction to indigenous inhabitants, largely restricting secular education in subjects like math, science, and the humanities to a small population of male Spanish elites.



In the early 19th century, CENTAM states began to expand educational offerings to women

and indigenous groups, eventually establishing free and compulsory public-school networks. Today, enrollment rates in primary education are high across CENTAM. Adult literacy rates have risen in recent decades and range from about 83% in Guatemala to 96% in Panama. Challenges to the education systems include uneven access to secondary and post-secondary education, particularly in rural areas, a lack of government funding, and low teacher salaries. In some areas, gang violence and poverty significantly disrupt children's access to education.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management,

devoting less effort to relationship-building. By contrast, in most CENTAM societies, establishing and maintaining relationships with others often takes precedence over accomplishing a task. Consequently, business tends to move more slowly in CENTAM than in the US. To build relations with business partners, Central Americans often engage in a **sobremesa**, a period of coffee and conversation at the end of a meeting that may include personal questions about family, relationships, or other light topics.



Concepts of personal space in CENTAM also differ from those in the US. Generally, Central Americans stand closer when conversing than Americans. Moreover, while men shake hands in greeting and parting in a similar style to the US, CENTAM women typically greet both men and women with a kiss on the cheek.

The rhythm of daily life changes during national holidays and local celebrations, when most businesses shorten their operating hours and residents engage in various festivities such as parades, feasts, and religious ceremonies. While the CENTAM states observe a variety of public holidays, popular ones include Christmas, Easter, indigenous celebrations, and independence days.

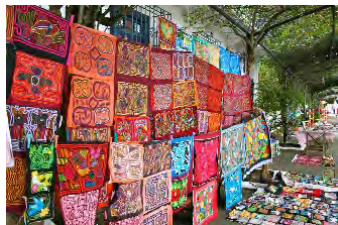
9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of CENTAM's forms of artistic expression – including its art, architecture, dance, music, and theater – reflect a rich combination of Spanish, indigenous, and African influences as well as modern global trends.

Salsa, calypso, and Spanish reggae are prominent musical genres across the region, while jazz is especially popular in Panama. Meanwhile, Afro-Caribbean culture influences music and dance along CENTAM's Caribbean coast. In Belize and Honduras, coastal residents enjoy the rhythmic and drum-based

punta, a modernized interpretation of the Garifuna ethnic group's songs and dance. By contrast, Panamanians enjoy the **congo**, a dance with African roots whereby performers portray a fight with the devil.

Central Americans are skilled in various traditional handicrafts and folk art such as weaving, woodworking, and ceramics, among many others. Maya artisans are famed for their vibrant,



woven textiles, while members of Panama's Guna ethnic group weave **molas**, intricately cut and sewn panels featuring geometric patterns. In El Salvador, artists mimic indigenous weaving techniques to create baskets, hats, and other

items from palm leaves. Visual arts traditionally reflected indigenous and Christian motifs but today often incorporate brightly colored rural landscapes.

In the 20th century, poetry became the region's most popular and politically influential literary genre. Today, the work of Rubén Darío, Nicaragua's national poet, is celebrated across Latin America. The region also has produced critically acclaimed novelists, who have chronicled the region's tumultuous history while living in exile abroad. Soccer is by far the most popular sport throughout CENTAM. Residents closely follow local, regional, and international teams, and many enjoy playing in amateur settings in their spare time.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While CENTAM cuisine reflects the region's ethnic and geographic diversity, most dishes tend to be simple and prepared from fresh, seasonal ingredients. Corn is CENTAM's primary staple and prepared in a variety of ways but most

commonly as the **tortilla** (round, flat bread of ground corn). Rice and black beans are also featured at most meals. Chicken, beef, and pork are prevalent forms of protein in interior regions, while an assortment of seafood is more readily available to residents living along CENTAM's coasts. In addition to native vegetables, the region's residents also enjoy numerous fresh fruits year-round, often juicing or blending them into refreshing drinks.



The overall health of the region's population has improved significantly in recent decades, evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Nevertheless, non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases are on the rise and today account for most deaths in the region.

Moreover, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and hepatitis are prevalent in some rural regions, particularly in areas where residents have limited access to clean water and modern sanitation.

CENTAM nations face several challenges to providing healthcare to their populations. Significant disparities in access to modern healthcare exist between urban and rural areas, where facilities tend to be understaffed, ill-equipped, and limited to basic health services. In some remote rural regions, residents lack access to modern healthcare and instead rely on traditional medicine to treat diseases and ailments.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, the region's larger and wealthier communities produced luxury items such as ceramics, art, and woven textiles for local consumption and regional trade, while also practicing subsistence agriculture.

After their 16th century arrival, Spanish colonists developed an agricultural economy centered on the production of various cash crops for export to Europe, primarily on large estates with forced indigenous or African slave labor. The region's first cash crops included cacao and indigo, yet by the 19th century, tobacco, sugar cane, cotton, and bananas dominated exports.

Following independence, conflict and political instability largely hampered economic growth. In the early 20th century, several states came under the economic control of large, multinational

corporations that reaped large profits but did little to improve the conditions of the working populations.

By contrast, coffee production in Costa Rica allowed the nation to largely avoid economic downturns, while the



1913 construction of the Panama Canal (a shipping route crossing the CENTAM isthmus) amplified Panama's strategic and economic importance. Today, several states have diversified their economies across numerous sectors, including manufacturing, food processing, transportation, and agriculture. Belize, Costa Rica, and Guatemala have also developed robust tourism industries.

The economic outlook in CENTAM is varied. While all the states struggle with substantial unemployment and poverty, their economies differ significantly. For example, Panama's GDP per capita is CENTAM's highest and more than 5 times that of CENTAM's lowest, Nicaragua and Honduras. While some 22% of Panamanians live below the national poverty line, rates in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras are 25%, 26%, and 64%, respectively. Nevertheless, wealth is unequally distributed in all the states. Across the region, residents of indigenous or African heritage are much more likely to live in poverty than white or *mestizo* residents.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Since the end of the colonial period, CENTAM states have developed their transportation and communication infrastructure at different rates. As a result, the quality of roads and modern technology varies throughout the region.

Roads form the primary transportation infrastructure across CENTAM, though regularly maintained, paved roadways are generally limited to cities and major highways. Unpaved, poor-quality roads coupled with mountainous terrain and aggressive driving habits make road travel dangerous in some areas. Violent crime and social unrest also threaten some travelers.



While modern information technology is available across CENTAM, Internet usage is highest in Panama, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, where more than 1/2 of the population are regular users. Many CENTAM residents access the Internet primarily through mobile phones.

The region has abundant renewable energy resources. In 2023, renewable sources accounted for almost 98% of electricity production in Costa Rica, 62% in Panama, 74% in Guatemala, and 62% in Honduras compared to just 23% in the US.

The US, European Union, and Canada are the region's largest trading partners. Moreover, the US, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica belong to the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), which liberalizes trade among its members.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize CENTAM society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in El Salvador.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Central America's (CENTAM's) most densely populated country, El Salvador has experienced tragedy and oppression since the 16th-century arrival of Spanish conquerors. After its 1841 independence, the country came under the control of a small class of coffee-growing landowners then endured decades of authoritarian military rule. In 1992, El Salvador emerged from a 12-year civil war that left deep scars and political polarization. A multiparty democracy today, El Salvador continues to confront significant governance, security, and economic challenges.

Early History

Prior to the early 16th-century arrival of the Spanish conquerors (an era referred to as the "Pre-Columbian" period), El Salvador was home to several indigenous groups. Cave paintings in eastern El Salvador



indicate humans inhabited the region as early as 7,000 years ago. Between 4,000-1,000 BC, hunter-gatherer communities gradually adopted farming, growing primarily corn, beans, and squash. By about 1,000 BC, sedentary farming communities became common as trade networks developed across CENTAM.

The Emergence and Spread of the Maya

Around 1,000 BC, Maya civilization emerged in southern Mexico and Guatemala. Over subsequent centuries, it spread across El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, and Belize.

Maya civilization reached its zenith during the Classic Period (250-900 AD), when urban centers featured large stone pyramids, ball courts, and elaborate temple complexes. Besides adopting advanced irrigation and terracing techniques, the Maya were expert astronomers, who developed an accurate solar calendar. They were also accomplished artists and architects, who used a complex writing system to record dynastic histories, rituals, and astronomical tables. While Maya culture spread to encompass a vast region between southern Mexico and modern-day Nicaragua, it never developed a unified empire. Instead, individual city-states remained independent, often competing and warring against each other.



While Maya influence spread through much of the western half of modern-day El Salvador, the region remained on the fringes of Maya civilization.



Nevertheless, El Salvador features several notable Maya archaeological sites. For example, Tazumal, a district within the ancient city of Chalchuapa on the Guatemalan border, was a trading and ceramics production center featuring several pyramids, a ball court, sculptures, and gold artifacts. Meanwhile, the Maya farming community of Joya de Cerén was buried and preserved under ash during a 7th-century

volcanic eruption, giving contemporary scientists unique insight into the lives of Maya farmers during the Classic Period.

The Lenca: Meanwhile, most of the inhabitants of eastern El Salvador belonged to a different group, the Lenca, which was the predominant group in neighboring Honduras. Archaeological excavations at Quelepa in eastern El Salvador reveal that the Lenca were expert stone craftsmen, who also cultivated maize, beans, cacao, and cotton, while maintaining trade relations with the Maya.

The Arrival of the Pipil

Between 900-1200, another group entered the area, eventually dominating central and western El Salvador. Originating in the highlands of central Mexico, the Pipil were related to the Nahuatl group, which later gave rise to Mexico's famed Aztec Empire (see *Language and Communication*). Displacing or absorbing local Maya communities, the Pipil established 2 kingdoms in El Salvador, Izalco in the West and the larger Cuscatlán in the center. The label Cuscatlán, meaning "land of the jewel," is still a popular nickname for El Salvador today. By the beginning of the 16th century, the Pipil inhabited about 2/3 of El Salvador, and the population of the region as a whole is believed to have reached as high as 1 million.

The Arrival of the Spanish

In the decades following Christopher Columbus' 1492 "discovery" of the Americas, Spain sent various expeditions largely staffed by unemployed soldiers, impoverished nobles, and young men seeking their fortune. Across the Americas, these **conquistadores** (conquerors) subjugated indigenous societies. In 1519, *conquistador* Hernán Cortés vanquished Mexico's powerful Aztec Empire and turned his sights south, delegating pacification of southern territories to his lieutenant, Pedro de Alvarado. In 1522, Alvarado began his conquest. Known for both his cruelty and military skill, Alvarado defeated groups in Mexico and Guatemala, then recruited them to his ranks by promising to target their own enemies.



In 1524, Alvarado reached the territory of El Salvador with some 250 Spanish and nearly 6000 indigenous soldiers. With their superior firepower, the Spanish won their initial battles against the Pipil, notably taking the Pipil capital at Cuscatlán and forcing the Pipil to withdraw to the mountains. Alvarado established a Spanish settlement but was forced to withdraw by the legendary Pipil chieftain Atlacatl. Returning with reinforcements in 1525, the Spanish re-took Cuscatlán, and over the next few years, the conquest continued with a scorched-earth strategy. By 1528, the Spanish had subjugated the Pipil and established the settlement of San Salvador, El Salvador's modern-day capital.

In the eastern regions of El Salvador, the Lenca kingdom of Chaparrastique also fiercely resisted the Spanish. Yet by the 1530s, a smallpox epidemic had decimated the Lenca population. Taking advantage of the Lencas' weakness, the Spanish invited the Lenca leader for peace talks, then murdered him. The Spanish conquest of El Salvador was thus complete, setting a pattern of conflict and military repression that would continue for the next 450 years.

Spanish Colonization

The Spanish settlement of San Salvador subsequently became the capital of a Spanish province of the same name, controlled

by Alvarado and encompassing some 3/4 of the territory of modern-day El Salvador.

Meanwhile, the former Izalcos kingdom became the autonomous Spanish province of Sonsonate and would remain separate from El Salvador until 1824.

Alvarado retained control of the colony of San Salvador until his 1541 death. In 1543, the Spanish crown unified



the territories of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua,

Costa Rica, and the Mexican state of Chiapas, renaming this entity the Captaincy-General of Guatemala in 1609. The region would remain a Spanish colony until 1821.

Colonial Economics: Because El Salvador had little gold or other minerals to exploit, the colonial authorities concentrated their efforts on agricultural development, granting Spanish settlers' large tracts of lands that came to be called **haciendas**. Meanwhile, El Salvador's indigenous population continued to decrease dramatically – historians estimate that perhaps 3/4 of the population died within decades of the conquest due to conflict, disease, famine, and their mistreatment in the **encomienda** (Spanish labor system).



Within this system, indigenous people worked on *haciendas* in exchange for food and housing and a small salary that was immediately paid back to the Spanish Crown as a tax. Widespread abuse of this system led Spain to replace it in the mid-16th century with **repartimiento**, which required male indigenous inhabitants to work 1 out of every 4 weeks for landholders, the Roman Catholic Church, or the government. In reality, landholders also tended to abuse *repartimiento*, forcing many indigenous inhabitants to toil in slave-like conditions.

In subsequent years, the colony experienced a “boom-bust” economic cycle. The Spanish initially took over existing cacao and balsam plantations, realizing substantial export profits in the mid-16th century. By the late 16th century, the lack of a workforce to support the labor-intensive cacao crop compelled landowners to import indigenous workers from Guatemala and also some 1000 African slaves. By the 18th century, most landowners had switched to the more lucrative indigo, which became the region’s primary export until the late 19th century.

Colonial Society: Almost 300 years of Spanish colonization entrenched a strict class system that supported very little social mobility. At the top were the **peninsulares**, (people born in Spain), followed by **criollos** (Spanish people born in the New World). In addition to holding all economic and political power, the Spanish also enjoyed the highest social prestige. Next came the **mestizos** (people of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent) and finally, the **indios**, the indigenous people, who the authorities largely confined to **pueblos de indios** (indigenous villages) in order to “civilize” and Christianize them (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Struggle for Independence

In the early 19th century, internal and external events combined to breed resentment. Indigo growers began to question colonial policies that imposed high taxes and restricted their freedom of trade. A locust plague destroyed the indigo crop in 1802-03, contributing to economic hardship.

Meanwhile in Europe, French Emperor Napoleon I removed Spanish King Ferdinand VII and appointed his own brother King of Spain in 1808. Several Spanish colonialists refused to recognize the new monarch and unrest spread.

On the eve of independence, El Salvador was home to some 250,000 people. Of those, about 50% were *mestizo* and around 40% indigenous peasants who lived as illegal squatters, tenant farmers, or laborers. By contrast, just 3% were Spanish, mostly wealthy *criollo* landowners. Inspired by the successes of the



French and American revolutions and fed up with Spain's economic policies, the *criollos* revolted.

In late 1811, the arrest of a member of a prominent planter family prompted an uprising led by *criollo* priest José

Matías Delgado. Supported by his nephew Manuel José Arce, Delgado famously issued CENTAM's **primer grito de la independencia**, first shout of independence, and led an

insurrection. Although that movement and another 1814 uprising were suppressed quickly, revolution fever spread.

Brief Mexican Control: In September 1821, the Spanish crown conceded, releasing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Mexican state of Chiapas from Spanish rule and declaring the region's independence. Just weeks before, Mexico had achieved its independence. Seeking to form an empire, it incorporated the CENTAM states. While Guatemala supported the incorporation, El Salvador, led by Manuel José Arce, staunchly opposed the plan, resulting in standoffs with the Guatemalan and Mexican armies. The crisis ended when the Mexican Empire dissolved in early 1823.

That summer, El Salvador joined Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica to form the Independent Provinces of Central



America, soon renamed the Federal Republic of Central America. A year later, the autonomous province of Sonsonate joined, giving El Salvador its modern borders. In 1825, Arce became the Republic's first President. A new Constitution based on US federal principles abolished slavery and granted limited suffrage. Initially united in compromise and cooperation, the Republic soon fractured. Generally, the smaller provinces, El Salvador in particular, distrusted Guatemala, which was home to both 40% of the Republic's population and Guatemala City, the region's traditional seat of power. Soon, petty feuds and regional rivalries came to dominate politics.

Liberals and conservatives formed the largest divide. Broadly, liberals concentrated in San Salvador sought a decentralized, secular government and were open to foreign ideas and investment. By contrast, conservatives, generally in Guatemala City, advocated for a strong centralized government, protectionist economic policies, and alliance with the Catholic Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Conflict between the 2 camps resulted in a brief civil war in 1827 and even caused El Salvador to attempt secession in 1832. Trying to appease his Salvadoran liberal allies, the Republic's President, Francisco Morazán since 1830, relocated its capital to San Salvador in 1834. Meanwhile, a series of earthquakes



damaged Guatemala and El Salvador in 1830-31, and CENTAM's largest volcanic eruption occurred in Nicaragua in 1835.

Within El Salvador, most of the population still lived in poverty and unrest grew. In 1832-33, charismatic indigenous

leader Anastasio Aquino led a rebellion that attracted up to 5,000 indigenous fighters. Although authorities soon defeated and executed him, his calls for land and labor reform and justice for the poor reverberated across society.

Meanwhile, political instability across the Republic continued. Following a series of coups, countercoups, assassinations, executions, and invasions, the Republic began to collapse. By 1839, only El Salvador remained loyal to the federation before finally abandoning it and declaring independence in 1841.

Independence and Instability

Independence did not bring stability and prosperity. On the contrary, El Salvador continued to experience civil strife and international conflict for several decades. Until 1863, only 1 Salvadoran leader retained power for more than 2 years, with Guatemala frequently meddling in Salvadoran politics and installing a series of conservative Presidents.

Attempting to remove El Salvador from Guatemala's control, a liberal President declared war against Guatemala in 1863 but was quickly defeated and executed. The last of the Guatemalan-designated conservative leaders presided over a period of relative stability from 1863-71. In 1871, a liberal assumed the Salvadoran Presidency, beginning a 60-year period of liberal rule that ushered in relative stability and economic growth.

The Coffee Republic

In the 1840s, farmers discovered that coffee thrived in the Salvadoran highlands. As prices and demand for indigo decreased due to war in Europe and the invention of a synthetic dye, coffee quickly became El Salvador's primary export. By 1890, coffee comprised as much as 80% of exports, and from 1870-1914, earned more than half of government revenue.

To support the coffee industry, the government initiated road and port development. It also forced indigenous communities to divide their communal lands into private plots which gradually came under the control of large landowners, an elite group known as the oligarchy. Reputed to consist of 14 families, the oligarchy likely comprised closer to several hundred. The class as a whole exerted considerable power and influence for decades. Between 1913-27, just 2 families, the Meléndez and Quiñónez, directly controlled the Presidency.



Meanwhile, facing displacement from their traditional communities, indigenous people increasingly assimilated into the *mestizo* class and adopted Spanish culture and language.

By the late 19th century, coffee growers controlled about 1/4 of all Salvadoran lands. Meanwhile, the government implemented anti-vagrancy laws that forced displaced farmers and peasants to labor on coffee plantations. With no access to land for subsistence agriculture, the living standards for poor Salvadorans continued to deteriorate.

Recognizing that the coffee industry relied on a compliant workforce, the government began to transition the armed forces from enforcing border defense to ensuring domestic stability. In 1912, the government established the ***Guardia Nacional*** (GN

or National Guard) to provide security for coffee plantations and suppress rural dissent. Meanwhile, the gap between rich and poor continued to widen. By the 1920s, social, economic, ethnic, and political conflicts often erupted into violence. Denied political representation, economic opportunity, healthcare, and education (see *Learning and Knowledge*), some peasants and workers formed trade unions and self-help guilds that launched literacy campaigns while promoting workers' rights.

Depression, Repression, and Revolt

Almost totally dependent on coffee, El Salvador's economy collapsed when demand fell and prices dropped by some 54% as the Great Depression began in 1929. As incomes fell and food prices rose, social unrest grew. The government responded to strikes and demonstrations with violent retaliation, further aggravating the situation.

Founded in 1930, the Communist Party of El Salvador quickly gained the support of peasants, workers, students, teachers, civil servants, and entire indigenous communities. Led by Agustín Farabundo Martí, a Marxist agitator who had fought the dictatorial Somoza regime in Nicaragua, the communists organized for an insurrection.



Following the country's first free elections in late 1930, Arturo Araujo assumed the Presidency in spring 1931 with significant reform plans. Yet within a week of taking office, Araujo faced unrest among the civilian population which soon spread to the military. In December, a group of young officers staged a coup, ousting Araujo and installing Vice President General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez as Araujo's replacement. This act ushered in a period of military rule lasting almost 50 years.

La Matanza: In early 1932, rural farmworkers led by Communist Party leader Martí organized a revolt. Forewarned, the military acted before the rebellion could launch, arresting Martí and other

leaders. Nevertheless, the rebels proceeded with the revolt as planned some 4 days later. They managed to occupy a handful of communities in the western countryside for several days before the military regained control and proceeded with an indiscriminate killing spree as President Hernández Martínez ordered the execution of suspected participants. In a particularly harsh attack, the government invited rebels to assemble, promising discussion and pardon. Instead, the military opened fire on the crowd, brutally slaughtering some 10,000 or more **campesinos** (peasant farmers) in an event known as **la matanza** (the slaughter). Because indigenous Salvadorans comprised a large proportion of the rebels, they suffered disproportionately in these military reprisals. Many indigenous Salvadorans (estimated at 5-20% of the population at the time) abandoned any outward sign of their heritage, discarding



elements of indigenous culture such as dress, names, and language (see *Language and Communication* and *Political and Social Relations*). The government also executed Martí, cementing his status as a martyred hero and inspiring revolutionary movements in subsequent decades.

Military Control

La matanza effectively eliminated all political opposition, and President Hernández Martínez would remain in office for 13 years, bringing dictatorial stability and largely supporting the elite-dominated economic system. Gradually, large landowners expanded their plantations to include tracts unsuitable for coffee production but favorable to cotton and sugarcane. Expansion often displaced peasants, who migrated to urban areas or became seasonal agricultural laborers.

President Hernández Martínez adopted limited measures to improve conditions for these members of the lower classes, instituting a form of government welfare, implementing land reforms, and protecting the domestic handicraft industry. Despite his personal admiration for the fascist regimes of Nazi Germany and Italy during World War II, President Hernández

Martínez supported the Allies, earning good will and economic support from the US. Nevertheless, his repressive regime eventually alienated even his supporters, while inciting various opposition groups. President Hernández Martínez resigned in mid-1944 under US pressure following a failed coup and a general strike that brought the country to a standstill and resulted in the death of an American student.

Revolution of 1948: A military regime maintained control until a revolt by young Army officers installed a military junta under Major Óscar Osorio, who was then elected President in 1950. Osorio and his successor, Lt Col José María Lemus, used high coffee and cotton revenues to fund economic development and a variety of social services. Nevertheless, El Salvador's poor saw little improvement in their standard of living. Faced with growing discontent in the late 1950s, Lemus initiated repressive measures, persecuting or exiling opponents while rewarding loyalists with government posts.



Inspired by a popular revolutionary movement in Cuba, student groups, trade unionists, political dissidents, and a revived Communist Party staged demonstrations. Lemus lost the support of the oligarchy following government authorities' brutal suppression of a demonstration by university students and professors in fall 1960. When reform-minded officers attempted a coup, a conservative faction launched a counter-coup, taking control in 1961.

New Parties Emerge: The faction formed the *Partido de Conciliación Nacional* (National Conciliation Party or PCN), which would control the government for the next 18 years. Representing the interests of the military and oligarchy, a succession of PCN Presidents established economic stability through the 1960s, largely through El Salvador's participation in the newly-formed Central American Common Market (CACM).

Founded in 1960 by middle and upper-class activists as a centrist party seeking social and economic reform yet rejecting

extremist solutions such as Marxism, the ***Partido Demócrata Cristiano*** (Christian Democratic Party or PDC) arose as the primary opposition party. In 1964, PDC leader José Napoleón Duarte won the mayoral election in San Salvador, while PDC candidates won 14 seats in the Legislative Assembly – a significant feat after so many years of one-party rule. Winning re-election several times, Duarte won national acclaim.

The Soccer War

By the late 1960s, El Salvador had a population density more than 4 times the CENTAM average. Despite limited land reform over the years, some 2% of Salvadorans still owned 60% of the country's land. Lack of land and rapid population growth compelled some 300,000 Salvadoran peasants to cross illegally into neighboring Honduras looking for jobs or land to practice subsistence agriculture.

Meanwhile, Honduras was experiencing an economic crisis and resented El Salvador's relative prosperity. Viewing the Salvadoran migrants as illegal squatters, Honduras implemented agrarian reform in mid-1969 that included expulsion of the Salvadorans. As tales of mistreatment by Honduran authorities spread, tensions between the 2 countries escalated during a series of World Cup soccer qualifier games in June. Fans scuffled and harassed players, and when Honduras was eliminated, anti-Salvadoran feelings soared.

In July, El Salvador launched a military strike against Honduras. Honduras quickly retaliated, and before the Organization of American States could broker a cease-fire several days later, several thousand people had died. It was 11 years before the 2 countries signed a peace treaty, and because of the conflict, the CACM was suspended for almost 25 years.

The 1972 Election

The influx of returnees following the Soccer War plus a decline in world prices for coffee and cotton significantly stressed the economy. As the PDC's Presidential candidate in the 1972 election, Duarte seemed poised to defeat the PCN's candidate, Col Arturo Armando Molina. Sympathetic to the returnees' plight, Duarte pressed for agrarian reform. As his calls for land expropriation and redistribution gained support, the PCN and the oligarchy became alarmed. During the election, the government-sponsored paramilitary organization **Organizacion Democratica Nacionalista** (Nationalist Democratic Organization or ORDEN) "supervised" voting in rural provinces, ensuring Molina's victory. Outraged at the fraudulent results, a small group of reform-minded military leaders launched a coup against Molina, intending to install Duarte as President. Yet the military as a whole sided with Molina, bombing demonstrators and detaining Duarte before forcing him into exile.



Prelude to Civil War

During the 1970s, agricultural mechanization and the expansion of land for grazing cattle caused a substantial reduction in the demand for rural labor. Further, landowners made few permanent hires, believing seasonal employees were less likely to organize protests. From 1961-80, the landless rural population increased from an estimated 12% to 65%, while only about 30% of rural laborers had full-time work in 1975.

Meanwhile, various left-wing opposition groups were growing, with some advocating armed struggle as the only way to end political corruption, social injustice, and economic exploitation. Government repression of these groups contributed to the growth of an opposition movement, notably the **Comunidades Eclesiasticas de Base** (CEB or Christian Base Communities – see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*) within the Catholic Church, which organized public demonstrations, strikes, propaganda campaigns, and building seizures.

In response, President Molina significantly expanded ORDEN to some 100,000 members in an attempt to control events in rural areas. While he introduced limited land reform, President Molina also stepped-up repression. Between 1972-79, political assassinations increased tenfold, political prosecutions tripled, and “disappearances” doubled. Meanwhile, oligarchy-funded mercenary groups known as “death squads” assassinated leftist members, particularly targeting supporters of CEBs. Despite mass protests against election fraud, PCN candidate General Carlos Humberto Romero assumed the Presidency in 1977.

Descent into Civil War

Under President Romero, the government abandoned reform efforts as political violence escalated rapidly. Marxist groups conducted assassinations, kidnappings, and bombings in retaliation for government actions, in self-defense, and as part of a strategy to create conditions for insurrection.

Seeking to prevent a Communist revolution similar to the 1979 Marxist revolution in Nicaragua, a group of military centrists staged a coup, ousting President Romero in fall 1979. Until the end of 1980, 4 successive military juntas attempted to temper the violence. Nevertheless, the military was often unable to

control the conflict, even the activities of its own forces, several of which gained global attention.



For example, the GN abducted, sexually assaulted, and executed 4 American Catholic nuns who had been working with rural peasants.

Then, government forces shot and killed the Archbishop of El Salvador, Óscar Arnulf Romero y Galdamez, as he was celebrating mass. A vocal opponent of the brutality of government forces

against innocent civilians and the clergy, Romero was an internationally-known figure in the fight against injustice and poverty. The following day, government forces massacred dozens of mourners attending his funeral.

Civil War

Ex-Presidential candidate Duarte returned from his exile in early 1980 and joined the military junta, becoming its leader later that year. Under Duarte, the government attempted to establish a legitimate government and enact agrarian reform. In 1981, the oligarchy and some disgruntled right-wing military members formed the ***Alianza Republicana Nacionalista*** (ARENA or Nationalist Republican Alliance).

Meanwhile, El Salvador's leftist guerrilla groups had sought guidance from Cuba's communist revolutionary leader turned dictator, Fidel Castro. In May 1980, the groups unified in what would become the ***Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional*** (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or FMLN), named after the fallen revolutionary leader from 1932, Agustín Farabundo Martí. In early 1981, the FMLN began a guerilla offensive, starting a 12-year civil war.



Under President Reagan, the US substantially increased its military and economic aid to the Salvadoran government as part of a broader anti-Communist initiative. Over the next decade, the US provided some \$4 billion in financial aid; organized and trained elite military units; provided advanced weaponry, particularly helicopters; and used its influence in an attempt to guide the country's politics.

With US support, the Salvadoran armed forces grew substantially, from 17,000 troops in 1980 to 56,000 by 1987. During the first 3 years of the conflict, government forces and the FMLN were evenly matched. In an effort to gain the upper hand, the military implemented large-scale scorched-earth campaigns while supporting the activities of paramilitary death squads. As a result, some 1,000 Salvadorans died each month from 1980-83. By 1984, the FMLN comprised about 12,000 well-trained guerrillas and received financial support from the USSR (Soviet Union) and its satellites via Cuba and Nicaragua.

In response, US President Reagan increased support to the Salvadoran Army, causing a shift in the conflict. No longer able

to match the military on the battlefield, the guerrillas began a war of attrition, while attacking important infrastructure such as bridges, factories, and dams. By 1984, the conflict had reached a stalemate. Both sides had committed violent atrocities and used child soldiers, though a UN commission later found that 85% of human rights violations were attributable to the military and government-sponsored paramilitaries.

Talks between the government and the FMLN in late 1984 ended without result. Although the ARENA and other right-wing groups advocated a scorched-earth policy against the FMLN, Duarte resisted and instead continued to pursue a negotiated end to the civil war through his 5-year term. Nevertheless, Duarte was ultimately unsuccessful. Neither was he able to advance any real social and economic reforms.

In 1989, ARENA candidate Alfredo Cristiani won the Presidency. Soon afterwards, FMLN forces invaded several urban centers, notably San Salvador. Surprised by the attack's ferocity, the military struggled for weeks to regain control of the capital. During the fighting, a US-trained battalion killed 6 Jesuit priests and their 2 housekeepers. Cristiani bowed to international pressure to prosecute the perpetrators, and losing faith in the military's ability to defeat the FMLN, he committed to a negotiated settlement of the war.



In spring 1990, Cristiani entered into United Nations-mediated peace negotiations with the FMLN.

In January 1992, the 2 parties signed the Chapultepec Peace Accords in Mexico City, officially ending the civil war. Besides causing significant infrastructure destruction and damaging the economy, the war resulted in some 75,000 deaths, primarily noncombatants, and caused thousands to flee to refugee camps in Honduras or emigrate to the US.

The Post Conflict Era

The 1992 peace agreement called for a significant reduction of El Salvador's armed forces, the formation of a democratically-elected civilian government, and the creation of a new, civilian police force to replace the GN and national police. The agreement also required the guerrilla forces to disarm and disband, while allowing the FMLN to become a political party.

Nevertheless, ARENA dominated the political landscape for the next 15 years. As the country began to rebuild, many entrepreneurs who had fled the fighting began to return. The government invested heavily in infrastructure, particularly roads (see *Technology and Materials*), and landowners took advantage of ARENA's free-market economic policies to diversify beyond agriculture and invest in business, banking, construction, and electronics. Nevertheless, social instability remained a problem.

The government failed to deliver the land and agricultural assistance promised to former combatants, prompting protests by demobilized soldiers.



Violent crime increased, fueled by continued assassinations and terrorism by right-wing death squads, the ready availability of weapons, poverty, and a weak law enforcement and criminal justice system. Further, a major hurricane in 1998 and a series of earthquakes in 2001 posed additional challenges.

FMLN candidates won seats in the 1997 municipal and national legislative elections, though ARENA prevailed again in 1999 when its candidate Francisco Flores Pérez assumed the Presidency. In the early 21st century, Flores focused on modernizing the economy, notably substituting the US dollar for the Salvadoran currency (see *Economics and Resources*) and entering the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (see *Economics and Resources*).

The FMLN continued to gain support, leading to a hotly contested 2004 Presidential election. Pressing concerns were the growing influence of **maras**, Salvadoran street gangs involved in drug trafficking and kidnapping, and El Salvador's involvement in the Iraq War. Following a bitter campaign, ARENA candidate Elias Antonio (Tony) Saca won.

El Salvador Today

The ARENA relinquished its hold on the Presidency in 2009, when FMLN candidate Mauricio Funes emerged victorious. The first Salvadoran President to acknowledge government human rights crimes during the civil war, Funes identified neither as a Marxist nor a Socialist but instead emphasized his social reforms and poverty alleviation measures, notably free healthcare and pensions for the elderly.

Nevertheless, gang activity was the predominant issue during his term. The **maras** increasingly undermined domestic stability through widespread criminal activity including drug trafficking, homicides, kidnappings, and rape. Gang violence discouraged foreign investment, and in 2015, displaced some 320,000 Salvadorans. Many families even attempted to send their unaccompanied children to the US to escape the danger (see *Political and Social Relations*).

In 2012, Funes backed a Catholic Church mediation between the 2 most prominent gangs, *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and the

18th Street Gang (M-18), which resulted in a temporary decline in the nation's homicide rate until the truce collapsed in 2013.

Violent gang activity remains a primary issue for El Salvador's former and current presidents,

Sánchez Cerén and Nayib Bukele, respectively. A former guerrilla commander, Sánchez Cerén took a hard line against gangs, increasingly deploying military forces in a public security capacity and targeting gangs' finances. Nevertheless, El Salvador had the world's highest homicide rate in 2015. While



rates have dropped since then, gang violence costs El Salvador between 6-15% of its GDP annually. Although El Salvador had been divided politically and socially, Nayib Bukele, a populist candidate, won the presidency in 2019 and was re-elected in 2024. The Salvadoran Attorney General has recently investigated several past Presidents on charges of corruption and embezzlement (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Salvadoran Myths

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Some Salvadoran myths exhibit both indigenous and Christian traditions and beliefs, while others provide examples of good and moral behavior.

El Justo Juez de la Noche: The Just Judge of the Night is a ghost who travels the roads on horseback, usually late at night. Instead of having a head, the tall, cloaked figure has only a column of smoke. Upon encountering a fellow traveler, the Just Judge warns him that he should return home. If the traveler refuses, the Just Judge whips him, proclaiming that the night belongs only to him.

El Cadejo: According to legend, God created the *cadejo*, a being in the form of a white dog with glowing eyes to protect and guide the faithful. When the Devil saw the white *cadejo*, he became jealous and created a black *cadejo* with eyes like burning coals. Unlike his white counterpart, the black *cadejo* roams at night seeking nighttime wanderers, especially those with a guilty conscience. Upon encountering a victim, the black *cadejo* uses its burning eyes to hypnotize the person and steal his soul.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

Republic of El Salvador

República de El Salvador

Political Borders

Guatemala: 124 mi

Honduras: 243 mi

Coastline: 191 mi

Capital

San Salvador

Demographics

El Salvador's population of about 6.6 million is growing at an annual rate of 0.34% but has slowed considerably since the 1970s due to several factors. These include a significantly decreased birthrate (see p. *Sex and Gender*), Salvadorans' search for employment abroad, and emigration related to natural disasters (see "Natural Hazards" below) and internal instability, notably a 12-year civil war and persistent gang violence (see *History and Myth*). El Salvador is Central America's (CENTAM's) most densely populated nation, having a population 15 times that of Belize, despite being smaller in land area.

El Salvador is primarily urban: over 75% of the population lives in metropolitan areas, mostly in and around the capital city of San Salvador.



Flag

The Salvadoran flag consists of 3 equal horizontal bands of cobalt blue (top and bottom) and white (middle). The blue bands symbolize the Pacific Ocean and

Caribbean Sea, while the white represents both the land between those 2 bodies of water and peace and prosperity. El Salvador's national coat of arms is centered in the middle of the flag, encircled by the words "***República de El Salvador en La América Central***" (Republic of El Salvador in Central America).

Geography

El Salvador borders Honduras to the North and East and Guatemala to the West. In the South, El Salvador's long and jagged coastline runs along the Pacific Ocean, curving inland along the Gulf of Fonseca in the East. El Salvador's total land area is about 8,000 sq mi, making it about the same size as New Jersey and slightly smaller than Israel.

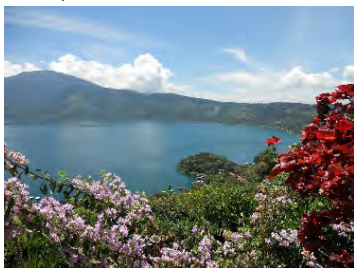
Towering, rugged mountains dominate much of El Salvador's interior, spanning the nation east-to-west in 2 parallel ranges, the Sierra Madre in the North along the border with Honduras and a coastal volcanic range in the South. The southern range comprises a chain of some 20 active volcanoes, some featuring steep slopes that drop directly into the Pacific Ocean.

The nation's highest peak, Cerro El Pital, rises to 8,957 ft in the North. Between the 2 ranges lies a large, rolling central plain characterized by subtropical grasslands and strips of deciduous forest. Numerous volcanic lakes also dot the interior.

Along the coast, a narrow belt known as the Pacific Lowlands follows the Pacific Ocean. Forests cover about 14% of El Salvador, while agricultural land, including arable land and permanent crops and pastures, extends across an additional 75%. El Salvador has over 300 rivers, the longest and most important economically is the Lempa.

Climate

Along its coastline, El Salvador experiences a hot and humid tropical climate divided into rainy (May-October) and dry (November-April) seasons. By contrast, upland regions experience a more temperate climate, with rainfall and air temperatures varying by elevation. Accordingly, coastal regions experience temperatures of about 80°F year-round. San Salvador and the central plateau average 73°F, while mountainous areas are coolest, with minimum temperatures at times dropping to freezing.



Natural Hazards

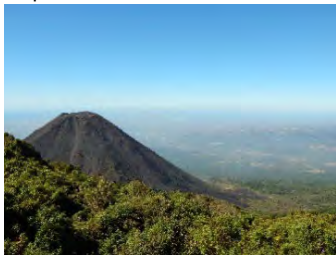
El Salvador is vulnerable to numerous natural hazards, particularly frequent and destructive earthquakes. The nation suffered its most devastating earthquakes in 1951, 1986, and 2001, which together killed over 3,300 people and destroyed significant infrastructure, notably in the capital city of San Salvador.

El Salvador's location on a sub-section of the 25,000 mi long Ring of Fire, a geographic region comprising volcanic mountain chains along the continental margins of the Pacific Ocean, make it particularly vulnerable to volcanic activity.

San Salvador lies at the foot of the San Salvador volcanic peak, which last erupted in 1917 and has the potential to cause significant harm to the heavily populated city.

Other historically active peaks include San Miguel, which last erupted in 2013 and is one of El Salvador's most active

volcanos, as well as Conchaguita, Ilopango, Izalco, and Santa Ana, which erupted in 2005.



El Salvador also experiences floods, landslides, hurricanes, and tropical storms, which occur periodically and typically kill hundreds,

displace thousands, severely damage infrastructure, and cause millions in economic losses. A 2010 United Nations (UN) report estimates some 95% of Salvadorans are vulnerable to natural disasters, one of the world's highest rates.

Environmental Issues

Illegal logging, the harvesting of wood for cooking, and the clearing of land for farming leads to deforestation, which in turn causes soil erosion, reduces agricultural yields, and impedes the natural retention of water. In addition, overuse of pesticides and the large-scale, improper disposal of toxic industrial waste introduces dangerous levels of harmful chemicals into soil and water supplies.

According to UN-Water, 80% of El Salvador's territory is under water stress, and more than 60% of the available water is polluted, making Salvadorans' access to potable water difficult, particularly for rural residents, and contributing to various health issues (see

Sustenance and Health). While the government has implemented some protective measures, notably limiting poisonous acidic runoff through a ban on metal mining, progress has been slow. Air pollution caused by automobile emissions is a persistent concern in San Salvador and other urban areas.



Government

El Salvador is a presidential republic. The country divides into 14 **departamentos** (departments) administered by elected governors and local councils. Adopted in 1983, El Salvador's latest Constitution divides power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. It also outlines the basic rights and freedoms of the Salvadoran people.

Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President, who is both chief-of-state and head-of-government. A council of ministers and Vice President (VP) support the President. Both the President and VP are elected by popular vote to serve single 5-year terms. The current President and Vice President, Nayib Bukele and Félix Ulloa, assumed office in June 2019 and were re-elected in February 2024.

Legislative Branch

El Salvador's legislature is a 1-chamber **Asamblea Legislativa** (Legislative Assembly or LA), composed of 84 members directly elected through proportional representation to serve 3-year terms. The LA controls most legislative powers, including amending the Constitution, appointing positions in government, and approving declarations of war.

Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Court, Appellate Courts, Courts of First Instance, Courts of Peace, and a system of lower courts which oversees minor cases. As the highest court, the Supreme Court is the final court of appeal for both civil and criminal cases and divides into constitutional, civil, penal, and administrative divisions. The National Council of the Judicature, an independent body elected by the LA, and El Salvador's Bar Association nominate judicial candidates who are elected by the LA to serve renewable 9-year terms.

Judges are vulnerable to intimidation by criminal groups (see "Security Issues" below), and judicial power is consequently weak and fragmented in some regions. In an effort to bolster El Salvador's anticorruption capacity, the UN and the US have recently provided El Salvador's judiciary with financial aid, training, and physical protection for prosecutors facing risk of violence or retaliation. A 2016 US-backed program also supports El Salvador's Attorney General with the investigation and prosecution of corruption among high-profile public officials.

Political Climate

After enduring decades of authoritarian rule and brutal civil war (see *History and Myth*), El Salvador successfully transitioned to a multiparty democracy in 1992, holding 5 consecutive peaceful transitions of power since then. Successive governments have sought to strengthen democratic platforms, implement market-friendly economic reforms, and increase residents' access to public services.



In recent years, foreign governments and organizations have also provided financial aid to stimulate job growth, improve public safety, and increase the effectiveness of the legal system, among other stabilizing initiatives.

Despite some progress, corruption and widespread crime undermine the success of these programs and impede

economic, political, and social growth. Generally, state institutions remain underfunded and weak, criminal groups continue to gain power and influence, and gang-related violence remains rampant.

Amid this tense environment, many Salvadorans are increasingly disillusioned with politics, further threatening stability and the democratic process. Moreover, some Salvadorans express concern that foreign governments and non-governmental organizations have inappropriate access to and influence over El Salvador's political landscape.



While El Salvador has numerous active political parties, the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) (see *History and Myth*) – have tended to dominate the

political arena in the past. ARENA, country's second largest party, led El Salvador for nearly 2 decades after the end of the civil war. El Salvador's third largest party, FMLN was established as a former rebel group that became an officially recognized political party upon the conclusion of the civil war (see *History and Myth*). In the 2019 presidential elections, conservative Great Alliance for National Unity (GANA) party broke 30 years of two-party dominance by the traditional political parties FMLN and ARENA. The New Ideas (NI) is a new Salvadorian center-right populist political party founded in 2017 by now current President Bukele. This new party, Nueva Ideas, dominated and won the legislative elections in 2021 with NI gaining 56 seats, ARENA 14 seats, GANA 5 seats, and FMLN 4 seats.

The 2021 legislative elections served as a turning point for Salvadoran politics in that the recently formed New Ideas (NI) populist party overtook both ARENA and FMLN in the LA by obtaining a majority (56) of seats. NI is, according to its statutes, a democratic, decentralized, plural, and inclusive party which seeks equality for all citizens, a free market and social economy,

and the exercise of political activity as a commitment to the country.

Defense

El Salvador's Armed Forces are a unified military force consisting of ground, maritime, and air branches, with a joint strength of 26,000 active duty troops and 9,900 reserve personnel. The Armed Forces are charged primarily with defending against foreign and domestic threats, aiding civilian authorities, and supporting disaster relief efforts. Nevertheless, recent internal instability from a rise in organized crime has prompted domestic counter-gang and counter-narcotics efforts to dominate operations.

Army: By far the largest of the 3 military branches, El Salvador's Army is a well-equipped, well-trained force of 22,000 active-duty troops consisting of a Special Forces unit, 7 maneuver brigades and regiments (including reconnaissance, light, and special), and 2 combat support brigades and commands.

Navy: Consisting of 2,000 active-duty personnel, El Salvador's Navy is equipped with 12 patrol and coastal combatants and 4



amphibious vessels and landing craft. The Navy also includes a naval infantry division comprised of 90 Special Forces commandos.

Air Force: El Salvador's Air Force also consists of 2,000 active-duty personnel and has a fighter/ground attack/intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance squadron, transport squadron, training squadron, and transport helicopter squadron with 25 combat capable aircraft and 26 helicopters.

Paramilitary: El Salvador's Paramilitary consists of 26,000 National Civilian Police members equipped with several aircraft and helicopters.

Salvadoran Air Force Rank Insignia



Major
General



Brigadier
General



Colonel



Lieutenant
Colonel



Major



Captain



Lieutenant



Lieutenant
Second
Class



Air Force
Command
Sergeant
Major



Chief
Major
Sergeant



Sergeant
Major



Sergeant
First
Class



Sergeant



Sergeant
Second
Class



Corporal

Security Issues

El Salvador's security environment is dominated by internal threats related to rapidly growing and increasingly powerful organized crime networks and a prolific regional illicit drug trafficking industry.

Internal Violence: Organized crime spread after the 1992 conclusion of the civil war, which left many Salvadorans unemployed, marginalized, and easily able to access weapons. Subsequently, widespread poverty has contributed to the growth of crime, with many young Salvadorans becoming increasingly vulnerable to recruitment both by various **pandillas** (street gangs) and larger, transnational **maras** (criminal organizations).



The 2 dominant *maras* operating in El Salvador today are *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (M-18 or Barrio 18). Both groups initially formed in the US: MS-13 by Salvadorans who had fled the civil war and M-18 by Mexicans who migrated to California. During the mid-1990s both *maras* grew in popularity throughout CENTAM following the end of conflicts across the region. Today, they comprise the region's largest and most powerful gangs with an estimated 90,000 members combined.

Significantly, MS-13 and M-18 operate in territorial zones, resulting in regular violent clashes between the 2 *maras* and security forces. Moreover, *maras* habitually extort Salvadorans residing in their territories, collecting an estimated \$390 million in extortion fees in 2015 primarily from small businesses, inhabitants of rural communities, and public-sector workers.

In addition to *pandillas* and *maras*, various international drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) use the CENTAM region as a transshipment point for US-bound narcotics. Over the last decade, international efforts to curb the drug trade in Colombia, Mexico, and the Caribbean pushed trafficking routes into

CENTAM. Consequently, nearly 80% of illegal drugs flowing into the US today pass through CENTAM. Large DTOs often partner with *pandillas* and *maras* to distribute and transport narcotics, occasionally prompting turf wars and other bouts of violence.

Significantly, gang-related activities make El Salvador one of the world's most violent countries. For example, El Salvador's 2015 homicide rate of 102 deaths per 100,000 people constituted the world's highest among countries not at war. Poverty, violence, and forced gang recruitment have also led to a regional migration crisis. Thousands of Salvadorans have fled northward



to Mexico and the US and, to a lesser extent, Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama, straining relations with receiving nations.

Weak state capacity, political instability, and widespread corruption

impede the government's ability to curtail gang activities. Further, international observers increasingly express concern over criminal groups' growing political influence and sway over El Salvador's weak and vulnerable judiciary.

Moreover, many Salvadorans distrust the police and security forces – a legacy of the military and other government forces committing serious human rights abuses during El Salvador's civil war (see *History and Myth*). Consequently, residents generally are reluctant to seek help, allowing the overwhelming majority of crimes to go unprosecuted and criminal groups to act with relative impunity.

Foreign Relations

Internal instability largely limited El Salvador's foreign interactions to the CENTAM region until 1992, when it emerged from a brutal and tumultuous civil war. Over the decades since, El Salvador has expanded its role in various global institutions while also prioritizing the development of closer military and economic ties with its CENTAM neighbors, most notably Honduras and Guatemala.

Today, El Salvador takes an active role in regional and global institutions such as the Organization of American States, Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, Central American Integration System, UN, International Monetary Fund, Inter-American Development Bank (IADP), World Trade Organization, and Community of Democracies.

Regional Cooperation: Collectively known as “The Northern Triangle,” El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have worked in recent years to foster military, economic, and political cooperation, primarily to counter gang operations in the region.

In 2014, the Northern Triangle nations partnered with the IADP to create the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P), a 5-year security and development initiative to boost regional economic growth,



improve public safety programs, strengthen civil society and public institutions, and promote job creation.

From 2016-17, the 3 nations collectively contributed over \$5 billion to the A4P and today continue to cooperate militarily to help limit the cross-border movements of organized criminal groups and narcotics.

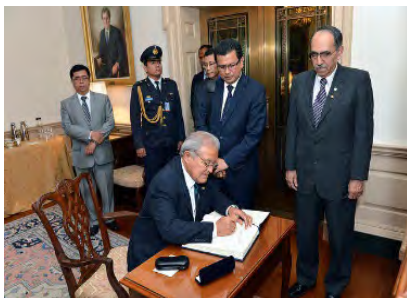
Relations with the US: The US and El Salvador share a long history of political, economic, and military ties since 1863. During the civil war, the US provided significant financial and military aid to the Salvadoran government (see *History and Myth*). Since the 1992 civil war peace agreement, US aid has decreased and focused on the development of El Salvador's economy, rule of law, democratic institutions, civil society, human rights organizations, and other stabilizing agencies.

Today, the US partners with El Salvador in its battle against transnational criminal organizations, domestic gangs, and drug smugglers. Funneling over \$1 billion to the region in security aid

from 1998-2015, the US sought to diminish gang-related violence and curtail narcotics traffic in the Northern Triangle nations under the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Supplementing its financial assistance, the US regularly provides military training and equipment to El Salvador's armed forces and police to help bolster their counter-gang and counter-narcotics operations.

In addition to addressing El Salvador's security concerns, the US has increasingly fostered its political and socio-economic development. For example, the US targets the broader causes of transnational crime and irregular migration through its "US Strategy for Central America," which guides US diplomatic efforts for all 7 CENTAM countries. Specifically, the US strives to promote regional prosperity, the efficacy of El Salvador's governance structures, and security cooperation among El Salvador and its neighbors.

Finally, El Salvador and the US share strong economic ties. Along with several other CENTAM nations, the US and El Salvador participate in a free trade agreement which allows



goods, services, and capital to move freely between the member nations (see *Economics and Resources*).

Remittances from some 2 million Salvadorans living in the US comprise a

significant portion of El Salvador's GDP (see *Economics and Resources*).

These payments serve as a key source of income for many Salvadoran families and further deepen bilateral economic and social ties between the US and El Salvador. Although the intermittent influx of Salvadoran migrants fleeing internal unrest into the US occasionally strains relations, tensions generally subside quickly.

Ethnic Groups

El Salvador's population divides primarily into 3 groups that broadly correspond to the class lines of colonial society (see *History and Myth*): **mestizo** (people who have a mixed European and indigenous ancestry), white (Salvadorans of Spanish or other European descent), and Amerindians or indigenous groups. As the largest group, *mestizos* make up about 86-90+% of the population and comprise the majority of the lower and middle classes.

Predominantly members of the upper class, El Salvador's white minority comprises between 5-13% of the population. Status and prestige among these elites is directly connected to ancestry, with the most prestigious families tracing their roots to Spanish



colonists. Other white families descend from European immigrants arriving in the 18th-19th centuries to work primarily as bankers and financiers. Lowest in the elite rank are recent Lebanese, Palestinian, and Jewish immigrants, sometimes collectively referred to in a derogatory manner as **Turcos** (Turks) by older white elites.

According to the 2007 census, indigenous people make up a small minority (0.2%) of the population, yet observers estimate the proportion may be closer to 10%. Most indigenous people are Pipil (see *History and Myth*) who primarily concentrate in Izalco and Nahuizalco in the West, Cacaopera in the East, and Panchimalco near San Salvador. Lencas (see *History and Myth*) also reside in the East. Members of several other smaller groups live throughout El Salvador. Typically working as wage laborers or subsistence farmers, most indigenous inhabitants concentrate in underdeveloped rural areas, with 61% living below the poverty line and 38% in extreme poverty. The small group (0.1% of the population) of Salvadorans who identify as black likely descends from the around 1000 African slaves brought to El Salvador to work plantations in the 16th-17th centuries (see *History and Myth*).

Social Relations

Since the colonial era, El Salvador has divided heavily along class lines (see *History and Myth*), with a small and wealthy elite maintaining power over a large population of poor Salvadorans. With the support of the military, the elite class (also known as the oligarchy) long suppressed the lower classes. Frustration over the unequal distribution of wealth and status in Salvadoran society eventually led to a brutal civil war (see *History and Myth*). Today, the elites remain powerful, the middle class is growing, and the conditions of the very poor have begun to improve. Nevertheless, according to one 2022 estimate, some 30% of the population is poor or on the edge of poverty, while the middle

class comprises just 28% of the population.

The civil war resulted in a massive population upheaval, forcing many Salvadorans to move to the central cities in order



to avoid rural conflict zones in the North and East. Meanwhile, an estimated 1/5 of the population fled to neighboring countries or the US. Migration continued through the 1990s-2000s prompted by the emergence of gangs (see “Security Issues” above), frequent and destructive natural disasters, and the desire to reunite with family members living abroad. Today, remittances from Salvadorans living in abroad contribute to the country’s growing middle class.

El Salvador’s indigenous population has endured a long history of violence and discrimination. Under repressive regimes over the 16th-20th centuries, many indigenous people abandoned their traditional languages and cultures (see *History and Myth*). Today, most indigenous Salvadorans speak Spanish, and few maintain historic customs or traditions. The Salvadoran Constitution prohibits discrimination based on race and 2014 amendments offer special protections for indigenous culture. Nevertheless, discrimination remains widespread, and indigenous people disproportionately comprise the very poor.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

El Salvador's population is primarily Christian. According to a 2023 survey, about 44% of Salvadorans are Roman Catholic, around 40% Protestant, and about 16% claim no religious affiliation. The 3% who claim another affiliation include Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, followers of the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. A few Salvadorans adhere to traditional religious beliefs.

El Salvador's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits religious discrimination. It also mandates the separation of church and state, specifying that religious leaders and members of the clergy cannot belong to political parties nor occupy senior positions in government or the judiciary. While the Constitution names no official religion, it does formally recognize the Roman Catholic Church, thereby granting it a privileged status in the country.



For example, the Catholic Church is exempt from the registration process which all other religious groups must complete before receiving tax exemptions, building places of worship, and establishing schools, among other benefits.

Early Religions and the Introduction of Christianity

El Salvador's early inhabitants – notably the Maya, Lenca, and Pipil peoples (see *History and Myth*) – had a rich spiritual life. Archeological discoveries from Santa Leticia in Apaneca suggest the settlement was likely an important Maya ceremonial site. Similarly, intricate tombs unearthed in Tazumal, an ancient Maya city situated on the border with Guatemala, shed light on the region's importance as a Maya religious center (see *History and Myth*).

Scholars believe the region's various indigenous groups followed a variety of traditional religions that recognized different spirits and gods who constructed the universe, created the earth and humans, and influenced daily life. Followers of these religions often consulted spiritual leaders to communicate with the divine entities, who in turn could guide or obstruct human behavior.

Besides seeking wealth and new territories for the Spanish Crown, the Spanish conquerors who began arriving in the region in 1524 (see *History and Myth*) also sought to convert the indigenous population to Catholicism. Reflecting the religious zeal in Spain at the time, the conquerors viewed traditional indigenous beliefs and practices as manifestations of the devil. Consequently, the Spanish destroyed indigenous temples, shrines, and other sacred sites, burned libraries containing historical and religious texts, and forbade rituals, dances, and other traditional practices. Over subsequent decades, Spanish missionaries traveled widely across the region, proselytizing even among remote populations.



By the end of the 16th century, Spain's forceful and violent integration of El Salvador's indigenous population into a new social, economic, and religious order had devastated

indigenous culture and religion. Appalled at the brutal and repressive policies of the newly governing elite, Catholic missionaries advocated for the better treatment of indigenous populations. Eventually, the denunciations of the barbarism from prominent Catholics led to the creation of the Laws of the Indies (see *History and Myth*). While the laws were intended to curb the religious fanaticism of zealous priests and the abuses of Spanish conquerors, colonial authorities rarely enforced them, allowing the harsh treatment of local populations to continue.

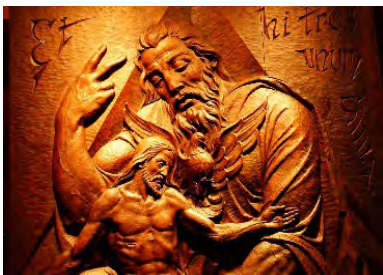
Religion during the Colonial Period

Over nearly 3 centuries of Spanish colonial rule, the Catholic Church became central to education, politics, and economics. By the mid-18th century, association with the Catholic Church came to signify status in Salvadoran society, with many elite families choosing to send at least 1 child into the priesthood.

Meanwhile, proselytization of the surviving indigenous population continued at **pueblos de indios** (indigenous villages), closed villages administered by members of the Catholic Church and individual religious orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans.

Within each *pueblo*, priests and monks taught basic literacy and religious education but demanded significant tribute from residents, while forcing them to work as servants and laborers.

In the years leading up to El Salvador's 1841 independence from Spain, Catholic priests became increasingly involved in the political arena, assuming key roles in El Salvador's struggle for



independence. One notable example is the revolutionary priest José Matías Delgado, who led El Salvador's 1st nationalist uprising (see *History and Myth*).

Religion and Politics in Independent El Salvador

Much of the 19th century saw friction between the Catholic Church and the new Salvadoran state, stemming from power struggles between liberal and conservative political factions (see *History and Myth*). Conservatives believed the Church to be a spiritual basis for Salvadoran society and encouraged its involvement in social and political spheres. By contrast, liberals associated the Church with colonial repression, exploitation, and privilege and sought to curb its power and influence in such areas as marriage, divorce, and education.

Disagreement over the role of the Catholic Church continued to be a significant aspect of political divisions in subsequent years. Church power, political involvement, and relations with the state shifted with transitions in government. For example, under the conservatives, the Catholic Church enjoyed broad governmental support. By contrast, the liberals undertook various initiatives to weaken the Church, such as expelling monks for meddling in state affairs.

The Catholic Church in the 20th Century

Repressive military dictatorships throughout most of the 20th century led to widespread public discontent and clashes between right-wing governments and primarily poor, rural communities loosely organized in leftist political movements.

Deteriorating economic and social conditions in the latter half of the 20th century eventually led to the emergence of Roman Catholic groups known as ***Comunidades Eclesiásticas de Base*** (Christian Base Communities or CEBs). Organized by grassroots pockets of activist clergy, CEBs supported various opposition efforts.

A few CEBs even endorsed political groups engaging in left-wing terrorism against the authoritarian and coercive ruling elite. By the early 1970s, El Salvador had approximately 60,000 CEBs, each with membership ranging from 10 individuals to 50 families.



As political activism and popular support for CEBs grew, mercenary groups funded by El Salvador's elite class increasingly

targeted outspoken religious leaders. Confrontations between government forces and leftist organizations became more violent through the late 1970s. These conflicts motivated some members of the Catholic Church to become even more deeply enmeshed in partisan politics.

Some progressive Salvadoran priests and Church leaders became followers of "Social Christianity." This Roman Catholic

school of thought born in Latin America advocates freedom from oppression, poverty, and injustice through political action.

Perhaps the most prominent advocate of Social Christianity was the Archbishop of El Salvador, Óscar Arnulf Romero y Galdamez, who attempted to use his prominent position in the Church to promote social change until his 1980 murder by government forces (see *History and Myth*). Scheduled for canonization in 2018, Romero's life and death inspired thousands of Salvadorans to join the opposition movement during the subsequent civil war.

As violence and the killing of civilians intensified during the 1980s (see *History and Myth*), the Catholic Church maintained an active but more cautious role in the conflict.



Religious leaders continued to promote the need for social and economic reforms, although many clergy denounced the more radical elements of the opposition. Instead, they urged their congregations to peacefully stand against injustice.

The Catholic Church Today

Despite some recent secularization of Salvadoran society, the Catholic Church's influence remains strong. For example, abortion remains illegal even in extreme cases (see *Sex and Gender*). In addition, most Salvadorans' homes feature religious symbols, while both men and women commonly wear crosses to demonstrate their faith. The widespread belief that life events are a consequence of God's will is demonstrated by the frequent use of the term "**Ojala**" ("God willing").

Besides its social influence, the Church continues to be involved in the political sphere, notably helping the Salvadoran government mediate a 2012 truce between rival gangs. Although temporary, the negotiations consequently contributed to a significant reduction in otherwise persistent violence afflicting the nation (see *History and Myth*). Moreover, in 2016,

Catholic leaders and other members of civil society participated in a government-led initiative to develop counter-gang and counter-narcotics political strategies. Generally, Salvadorans believe the Church plays an important role in maintaining social order and government policies should promote religious values and beliefs.

Other Christian Churches

Although the first Protestant missionaries arrived in the late-19th century, Protestant churches experienced very little growth until the 1970s. Today, Protestants and other non-Catholic Christians form an increasing proportion of El Salvador's Christian population. Generally, non-Catholic Christian churches exist across the country.

Religion and Indigenous Salvadorans

Christian evangelization of El Salvador's indigenous groups continued with the support of the government well into the 20th century. Moreover, the 1932 government-sanctioned slaughter of primarily indigenous peasant farmers known as ***la matanza*** (see *History and Myth*) resulted in many members of these communities abandoning their traditional religious practices. As a result, most indigenous Salvadorans today are Catholic, though some practice a "folk" form of Catholicism that

incorporates elements of indigenous religious traditions. Featured most prominently in the communities of Izalco, Panchimalco, and Cacaopera (see *Political and Social Relations*), practitioners typically rely on Catholic saints



to protect them from supernatural forces. These indigenous Catholic worshippers also hold ceremonies to mark the rainy season and celebrate rites of passage (see *Family and Kinship*) with songs and dances rooted in pre-Columbian culture and tradition (see *History and Myth*). Some indigenous people in remote areas follow only traditional beliefs and practices.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

The family is the center of Salvadoran life, and historically, the Catholic Church has had a major influence on family size, structure, and values. Over the last decades, violence and economic hardships have caused significant emigration and familial stress. Nevertheless, Salvadorans continue to prioritize their families, sharing good fortune with their relations and involving them in important life decisions.

Residence

El Salvador experienced rapid urbanization during the 20th century, and by 2023, over 75% of the population lived in urban areas. Today, 1/3 of the population lives in the greater San Salvador metropolitan region, often in overcrowded conditions. While just 73% of the population had access to electricity in 1990, that proportion had risen to 100% by 2022. As of 2022, 99% of the population had access to at least basic sanitation services and 98% to at least basic drinking water, an increase from 81% and 80%, respectively, in 2000.



Urban: El Salvador's urban areas

demonstrate significant wealth disparities. Upper-class Salvadorans tend to live in luxurious apartment buildings or single-family homes with pools and gardens. By contrast, middle income Salvadorans often occupy 2-story cinderblock townhouses with a living room and kitchen on the ground floor and bedrooms on the second floor. Most homes also feature an outdoor patio housing a latrine and a large cement sink for washing clothes and dishes. Such dwellings typically house several separate families, who divide the interior spaces with curtains or low walls. The poorest Salvadorans typically have inadequate shelter, often occupying temporary shacks constructed of plastic, scrap wood, and corrugated sheet metal.

Rural: Rural homes are usually constructed with mudbrick or concrete walls, a corrugated metal or thatched roof, and an earthen floor. Although often consisting of just 1 room, rural homes typically house several family members. Furniture usually includes beds and a table plus several hammocks hung outside. The kitchen is typically a separate structure housing a stove or open fire and constructed of corrugated metal, bamboo, mudbrick, or wood.

Family Structure

In Salvadoran families, the father is traditionally the primary breadwinner and head of the household, while the mother is typically responsible for all domestic tasks and childcare. Households typically include extended relatives, and even if they do not share a home, relatives traditionally live in close proximity.



This traditional arrangement has changed over the last several decades. Several Salvadorans have migrated within the country to seek economic opportunities in urban areas or avoid

the effects of natural disasters. Furthermore, some 3 million others have left the country altogether, fleeing violent conflict caused by the civil war or, more recently, the activities of criminal gangs (see *History and Myth*). As a result, many Salvadoran families have been separated, and the number of female-headed households has risen significantly.

Nevertheless, the extended family remains an integral part of daily life, with relatives frequently spending time together over meals, at religious services, and during holidays and special occasions. El Salvador's Family Code mandates financial support to one's children, spouse, parents, siblings, and grandparents. Even without these legal obligations, family members typically share a strong sense of commitment to their extended family members, traditionally providing physical and financial care for their aging parents at home.

Children

While Salvadoran families historically had many children, most today have far fewer, particularly urban families who typically have just 2 (see *Sex and Gender*). Children usually live with their parents until they marry, although some young people move away for education or employment opportunities. A child's life experiences are largely shaped by his socioeconomic status. Children in lower income families are expected to work to supplement the family's income from a young age. Their duties typically include washing cars, shining shoes, or selling food and trinkets.



Other childhood responsibilities include caring for younger siblings and assisting with household or farm chores. By contrast, children from upper class families have fewer responsibilities.

Children living in poverty face several hardships, such as malnutrition and restricted access to education (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Child abuse and sexual exploitation are widespread yet often unreported (see *Sex and Gender*). Persistent gang violence also contributes to elevated school dropout rates and compels some parents to move or even send their unaccompanied children to the US to escape danger (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Birth: Before a child is born, the mother's family and friends typically hold a baby shower, bringing gifts for both mother and child. Most births occur in hospitals, where extended relatives wait in eager anticipation. Following the birth, family and friends visit the baby and bring gifts.

Rites of Passage

Because most Salvadorans are Christian (see *Religion and Spirituality*), they mark life's milestones with Christian rites of passage. For example, families usually baptize their children within a few weeks of birth, then celebrate their first communion and confirmation around age 10 and 14-16,

respectively. Salvadorans also celebrate non-religious milestone events, such as birthdays and graduations, with parties and gifts.



Quinceañera:

Salvadorans typically celebrate their daughters' 15th birthdays and entrance into womanhood with a formal party called a **Fiesta de Quince** (Party of 15) or

quinceañera. A typical *quinceañera* celebration begins with a special Catholic mass in which the honored girl receives blessings from a priest.

A party follows during which the young woman, dressed in a pink-colored formal gown and tiara, ceremoniously replaces her flat shoes with high heels to enjoy a first dance with her father. Guests enjoy music, dancing, and food. Families often spend months planning and years saving for the celebration.

Dating and Courtship: Boys and girls typically interact from a young age, though most families approve of dating only after age 15. Socializing rarely involves a couple spending time alone. Instead, groups of friends usually get together in public settings, such as dances, parties, holiday celebrations, and religious festivals. Among urban residents, trips to malls, restaurants, and movie theaters are also popular activities. After dating for a period, a couple may decide to become exclusive. Such steady, long-term relationships typically lead to marriage, usually occurring when the couple are in their early or mid-20s.

Weddings: Most weddings include both civil and religious components. By law, all couples must have a civil ceremony performed by a notary, mayor, or governor typically attended by a small group of family and friends. A few weeks later, couples typically have religious ceremonies. Afterwards, the entire community traditionally gathers for food, drink, and dancing that often lasts into the next morning.

Because formal weddings can be expensive, some Salvadorans enter into an **acompañamiento** (common-law marriage), which the government recognizes after 3 years. While couples in this arrangement enjoy the same rights of property, custody, and alimony, they lack some of the privileges of legal marriage, such as medical and tax benefits.

Divorce: Although recent statistics are unavailable, the divorce rate in El Salvador is likely very low, around 0.8 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants, significantly lower than the US rate of 2.4. Although this rate is almost double the 1970 rate, observers believe it has remained relatively stable for the last 20 years.



Both the dominant Roman Catholic and most Protestant churches oppose divorce. While Salvadorans increasingly consider filing for divorce acceptable for men, it remains highly stigmatized for women.

Death: Following a death, the family typically holds a wake at home or in a funeral facility that that often includes an all-night vigil. During this period, the family provides special food and drink for mourners who come to express their condolences and pay their respects.

Following this 24-hour period, family and friends attend a church service and graveside burial.

For the 9 days following the funeral, a period known as the **novena**, Catholic families say special prayers at home or attend special church services. On each anniversary of the death, family members may attend church services to pray for the deceased. On November 2, Salvadorans commemorate **Día de los Difuntos** (Day of the Deceased or All Souls Day) by gathering at cemeteries to decorate family graves with flowers and ornaments.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Traditionally, El Salvador is a male-dominated society where the ideal of ***machismo***, strong masculine pride, is counterbalanced by female subservice. The Salvadoran social system is patriarchal, meaning that men held most power and authority. Today, both genders have equal rights before the law, yet, traditional attitudes continue to hinder women's full participation in educational, economic, and political spheres.

Women and Work

Salvadoran women traditionally hold responsibility for household chores and childcare. Among the middle and upper classes, women often oversee the duties of ***empleadas*** (female domestic workers). In rural areas, women also perform agricultural chores such as planting and harvesting crops.



In 2024, about 47% of women worked outside the home, higher than neighboring Honduras (39%), but lower than and Nicaragua (50%) and the US (57%). While women concentrate in jobs traditionally considered “female” such as childcare, nursing, teaching, and domestic labor, many women are also entrepreneurs, running small stores out of their homes or making and selling food and handicrafts.

Recent government programs aim to help women expand their businesses and achieve financial independence. Nevertheless, women across the labor force experience discrimination in hiring and promotion and receive lower wages than men with comparable education levels and work experience.

Gender and the Law

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality in employment, property, inheritance, and family law, women routinely face

unequal treatment. Harassment and discrimination in the workplace are widespread, and some employers illegally fire women who become pregnant. Nevertheless, recent policies aim to bring change. In 2010, President Funes issued a decree banning discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation in public services, and a 2011 law improved judicial processes and accountability regarding women's issues.

Furthermore, the Family Code (see *Family and Kinship*) grants



equal rights and responsibilities to both spouses and forbids 1 spouse from preventing the other from getting an education, taking a job, or opening a bank account. Despite this legal foundation, laws and policies are not always enforced. For

example, women are approved for loans at much lower rates than men, hindering their economic independence.

Gender and Politics

Slightly over 32% of national Legislative Assembly members are women, a higher rate than both regional neighbors Guatemala (20%) and Honduras (27%) but lower than the US (29%). Over the last decade, the number of women serving in public office has steadily increased.

While traditional attitudes tend to discourage women from serving in the government and military, female guerrillas rose to prominence during the civil war (see *History and Myth*), notably Virginia Peña Mendoza and Marianela García Vilas. Some Salvadoran women today continue this tradition of activism, often organizing around political and social issues.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Salvadoran women are sometimes victims of GBV. According to 2024 data, El Salvador has one of the world's highest violent death rates for females, the among the top five Latin America. Meanwhile, women who survive violence and sexual assault

lack adequate support. Despite legal measures to address violence against women, few women trust that reporting a crime will result in conviction or that authorities will protect them from retaliation.

Much GBV is tied to criminal gangs (see *Political and Social Relations*), who often forcibly recruit girls and young women for illegal activities such as sexual slavery. Should a young woman attempt to resist, she and her family risk becoming targets for rape and murder.

Domestic abuse is also widespread, with 3/4 of all acts of sexual violence taking place in the victims' homes. Experts trace El Salvador's domestic violence against women to various causes, notably the widespread *machismo*-related notions that men naturally wield power over women. Likewise, women are sometimes accused of "provoking" violence when they do not comply with male expectations regarding their dress or behavior. To escape sexual violence, many young women and their families flee to neighboring countries, Mexico, or the US. Between 2014-16, Mexico's immigration authority apprehended some 15,000 Central American girls aged 12-17, who claimed to be escaping sexual violence in their home countries.

Lastly, early marriage or partnership (before age 18) is common yet illegal. In 2018, some 26% of girls were married by age 18, 6% by age 15. A 2018 law closed a loophole in the Salvadoran Family Code that allowed girls as young as 13 to marry if they became pregnant.



Sex and Procreation

In adherence to Roman Catholic teachings, Salvadorans traditionally view sexual intimacy as a private matter appropriate only within marriage. At 1.8 births per woman, El Salvador's fertility rate is higher than regional neighbors Nicaragua (2.2) and Costa Rica (1.3), as well as the US (1.4).

While legal, contraceptives are inaccessible to some Salvadorans due to cost and the lack of reproductive health services in rural areas. Frequent incidents of sexual assault and limited availability of contraceptives result in some of Latin America's highest rates of teen pregnancy. Some 1/3 of all pregnancies in El Salvador occur in girls aged 10-19. Because teen pregnancy is highly stigmatized, it is a leading cause of suicide among girls.

Since 1998, abortion is illegal under all circumstances, even if the mother's life is at risk, and offenders can incur an 8-year prison sentence. The government historically has broadly interpreted the law, charging women who suffer miscarriages or whose babies die after birth of aggravated homicide,



a crime that incurs a 30 to 50-year sentence. In 2018, the Supreme Court commuted the sentence of a woman who had been imprisoned for 11 years following a late-term miscarriage. Some legislators, doctors, and government officials are currently seeking to change the law.

Homosexuality in El Salvador

The law recognizes neither same-sex marriage nor civil unions, but it does criminalize discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Nevertheless, inequalities persist, and discrimination is widespread in healthcare, education, and the workplace. Homosexual individuals frequently experience harassment when they interact with governmental authorities, and law enforcement routinely declines to investigate homosexual hate crimes.

At this time, the US State Department has a Status of Forces Agreement in place for El Salvador. Service members will be held accountable to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

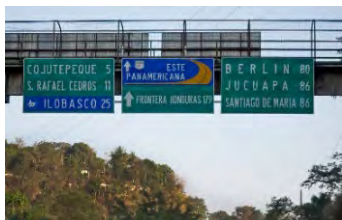
Overview

Spanish is the native language of the majority of Salvadorans. Very few residents speak an indigenous language.

Spanish

Spanish explorers and conquerors brought their language to the region beginning in the early 16th century (see *History and Myth*). Today, Salvadorans refer to their language as **castellano** (Castilian) after a region of Spain rather than

español (Spanish), the term used in Mexico and the rest of Central America.



Spanish uses the same alphabet as English with 3 additional consonants – ch, ll (pronounced like “y” as in yam), and ñ

(pronounced like the “ny” in the word canyon). The similar alphabet, consistent spelling patterns, and Latin base make Spanish relatively easy for English speakers to learn.

Salvadoran Spanish differs from that spoken in most other Latin American countries through the use of certain words and grammatical structures. Most significantly, Salvadorans use **vos** in addition to **tú** for the informal “you.” Nevertheless, Salvadoran Spanish is mutually intelligible with other Spanish dialects from around the world. An informal variant of Salvadoran Spanish known as **caliche** includes many colloquialisms and terms from **Nahuat**, one of the country’s indigenous languages.

Indigenous Languages

Following a 1932 massacre of indigenous peasants by the Salvadoran military (see *History and Myth*), many indigenous Salvadorans discarded their heritage, notably their own languages. Today, just 1,300 Salvadorans speak **Nahuat**, also known as **Pipil**, the native language of the Pipil people (see *History and Myth*). A member of the Uto-Aztecan language

family and distantly related to **Nahuatl**, the language of Mexico's Aztec Empire, *Nahuatl* has been the focus of government-led language revitalization efforts in recent years.

English

English is a common second language in El Salvador, especially among the educated elite and refugees who fled to the US during the civil war (see *History and Myth*). Although there is a strong emphasis on English in public schools, the quality of instruction is typically poor.



Communication Overview

Communicating competently in El Salvador requires not only knowledge of Spanish but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Communication patterns reflect the value Salvadorans place on personal relationships, honesty, loyalty, and respect. Salvadorans are especially courteous and deferential towards elders and persons of high social class.

Salvadorans tend to speak more directly in informal situations. Among friends, good-natured teasing is common and a sign of close camaraderie. As is common throughout Latin America, ***machismo*** attitudes (see *Sex and Gender*) are widespread among Salvadoran men, who tend to make derogatory and suggestive comments about women to their male friends or directly to women. Foreign nationals should avoid participating in such discussions about women.

Greetings

Like Americans, Salvadorans typically shake hands when greeting and commonly shake hands with everyone present, even children. Among urban residents, the handshake is generally brief and firm, while rural inhabitants prefer a weaker grip.



Urban Salvadorans greet close friends and family with a kiss on the cheek and a hug, while in rural areas the hug is sometimes

omitted. In the most informal situations, Salvadoran men often give a high 5 followed by a fist bump.

Forms of Address

Salvadorans' forms of address depend on age as well as social and relationship status but are generally highly formal and courteous. In all but the most informal situations, Salvadorans use titles of respect such as **señor** ("Mr."), **señora** ("Mrs."), and **señorita** (for young/unmarried women).

To demonstrate special deference to elders or those of a higher social class, Salvadorans use the honorifics **Don** (for males) or **Doña** (for females) along with the first name.

Professional titles such as **doctor** (for males) or **doctora** (for females), **profesor/a** ("professor"), **ingeniero/a** ("engineer") are sometimes used alone, with the last name(s), or with the full name. Similarly, Salvadorans refer to those who have completed a university degree as **licenciado/a**.

Spanish has different "you" pronouns and verb conjugations depending on the level of formality and respect required. Salvadorans tend to use the formal "**usted**" in all formal and business transactions. By contrast, they reserve the less formal "**vos**" for family, friends, and younger people. Foreign nationals should always use *usted* with all conversation partners unless directed otherwise.

Names: A Salvadoran name typically comprises 1-2 first names and 2 last names. For example, a man with the first names Jesús María may be known by both or simply Jesús. The 2 last names indicate the person's family heritage. For example, in the name of current President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, Sánchez is his father's family name, while Cerén is his mother's. Salvadorans often shorten the full name by omitting the maternal family name. Upon marriage, a woman may keep her 2 family names or replace her maternal family name with her husband's paternal name, while adding "**de**" ("from" – as in María Arroyo de Gonzalez). Salvadorans often use nicknames that reference a person's personal characteristics such as ethnicity, height, and weight.

Conversational Topics

After initial greetings, Salvadorans typically engage in light conversation about work and family. Soccer is also a popular topic (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). El Salvador's recent history, notably its 12-year civil war (see *History and Myth*), continues to polarize society. To avoid offense, foreign nationals should avoid discussing politics and religion.

Gestures

In informal situations, Salvadorans tend to use gestures to accentuate or replace spoken words but avoid them in formal settings. As in the US, a wag of the index finger means "no." To point, Salvadorans purse their lips in the indicated direction.

Among friends, it is acceptable to summon another using hand gestures, a head nod, or even a hissing sound. By contrast, Salvadorans summon strangers verbally.

Language and Training Sources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.



Useful Words and Phrases

English	Spanish
Hello	Hola
How are you?	¿Cómo está usted?
I am well	Estoy bien
Yes	Sí
No	No
Please	Por favor
Thank you	Gracias
You are welcome	De nada
I'm sorry	Lo siento
I don't understand	No entiendo
What is your name?	¿Cuál es su nombre? / ¿Cómo se llama?
My name is ____	Me llamo ____
Where are you from?	¿De donde es usted?
I am from the US	Yo soy de los Estados Unidos
Goodbye	Adiós
Good morning/night	Buenos días / tardes
What does ____ mean?	¿Qué significa ____?
What is this?	¿Qué es esto?
I would like a ____	Quisiera un/a ____
How do you say ____?	¿Cómo se dice ____?
...in English?	...en inglés?
...in Spanish?	...en español?
What do you want?	¿Qué quiere usted?
What time is it?	¿Qué hora es?
Where is the doctor?	¿Dónde está el médico?
Who?	¿Quién?
When?	¿Cuándo?
Where?	¿Dónde?
Which?	¿Cuál?
Why?	¿Por qué?

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 90%
- Male: 92%
- Female: 89% (2023 estimate)

Early Education

Before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors (see *History and Myth*), most regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations. It is also likely that religious specialists taught math, science, astronomy, medicine, and writing to the children of nobles (see *History and Myth*).



Formal Education in Colonial El Salvador

Following Spain's conquest and colonization of the area of modern-day El Salvador, most colonial education efforts were associated with attempts to convert the indigenous inhabitants to Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Throughout the 16th century, various Roman Catholic religious orders established missions to instruct indigenous peoples in the Catholic faith.

Over the next centuries, the Spanish viewed the indigenous population largely as a labor pool for plantations (see *History and Myth*) and consequently saw little reason to expand educational offerings to them. By contrast, schools focusing on the humanities and classics opened for the children of Spanish elites (see *History and Myth*), with the first such school opening in 1548.

While the earliest schools offered only instruction to boys, convent schools later opened offering education to the daughters of elite families. Nevertheless, education offerings

remained limited. By the turn of the 19th century, El Salvador had just 86 schools with about 1 teacher each, and the capital of San Salvador had no school at all.

Education after Independence

The 1824 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Central America (see *History and Myth*) enshrined education as the responsibility of the legislative branch. Some 8 years later, the government passed a law requiring the construction of a school in every town in the Republic. Nevertheless, this edict was largely ignored.

Following the 1841 collapse of the Republic, newly-independent El Salvador founded the country's first post-secondary institution, the University of El Salvador. In the 1860s, the government opened 3 teacher training schools and declared its intention to build schools in all towns with a population of 500 or more. While this goal remained unreachd, some 800 public and 141 private schools were operating throughout the country by 1887.

Education in the 20th Century

In response to their deteriorating standard of living in the early 20th century, some poor peasants and workers began organizing in an attempt to improve their conditions (see *History and Myth*). Instead of expanding education to the lower classes, the government actually limited educational reforms



during this period, reasoning that literacy could stimulate workers to reject laboring on coffee plantations.

Consequently, guilds and self-help groups formed to fill the gap, organizing literacy campaigns and

founding a network of night schools that offered weekly lectures on health, politics, and workers' rights. By contrast, government offerings remained limited to 1-room schools staffed by a single teacher for multiple grade levels.

During the period of military rule in the mid-20th century, the government adopted limited measures to improve life for the poorest Salvadorans (see *History and Myth*), notably also educational reforms. In 1940, the newly-created Ministry of Education introduced new curricula and an accelerated teacher training program.

In 1968, additional reforms extended basic education to 9 years and increased secondary education to 3 years while consolidating training institutes into a single institution. This period also saw the introduction of **Televisión Cultural Educativa** (Cultural Education Television) as a new method to provide standardized instruction to rural students.

The 12-year civil war (see *History and Myth*) had a devastating effect on El Salvador's education system, with spending on education falling from 23% of the budget in 1978 to 1.5% by 1992. Many schools were closed or destroyed, illiteracy rates rose, and by 1991, an estimated 11,000 teachers were unemployed.



Meanwhile, the educated members of opposition groups, such as teachers, professors, and university students, tried to fill the education gap, providing literacy and other training for other activists. These groups incurred substantial government reprisal, resulting in the deaths or jailing of opposition supporters. For example, government-sponsored paramilitary groups murdered Félix Ulloa, the director of the University of El Salvador in 1981. In 1989, members of a US-trained battalion of the Salvadoran Army murdered 6 Jesuit professors at the José Simeón Cañas University of Central America in San Salvador.

Following the 1992 peace agreement (see *History and Myth*), El Salvador proceeded to rebuild its devastated education system. Between 1994-99, the government focused on 4

areas: access, quality, human rights, and institutional modernization.

Modern Education

Today, El Salvador's education system consists of basic, secondary, and post-secondary programs. Government spending on education as a percentage of total expenditure rose to 18.5% in 2022, a substantial increase since the civil war, yet less than Guatemala (19.4%) and Costa Rica (21.5%).



The Salvadoran education system remains significantly underfunded despite

sizeable amounts of foreign aid. Access to education is unequal, with both poor urban neighborhoods and rural areas lacking quality schools. While education is free, the costs of school supplies, uniforms, and shoes prevent many families from sending their children to school. Others drop out due to personal or other reasons, increasing their vulnerability to gang recruitment (see *Political and Social Relations*). As of 2022, around 10% of children were not attending school. Even students who manage to graduate often find their education has not adequately prepared them for the work force.

The government has made repeated attempts to improve its education system, most recently Plan 2021. Introduced in 2005, the plan calls for improvement in 4 areas: access, effectiveness (encompassing infrastructure and teacher training), competitiveness (focusing on English, science, and technology curricula), and management best practices.

While Plan 2021 has resulted in some progress, challenges remain. School infrastructure is largely inadequate, and classrooms are usually overcrowded. Especially concerning are the enrollment rates at the primary level, which have steadily decreased in recent years, primarily due to disruptive gang activities (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Pre-Primary: Salvadoran children aged 4-6 may attend free public or tuition-based private pre-primary programs. Attendance is not compulsory, and about 67% of children of the appropriate age attended such programs in 2018.

Basic Education: Comprising 9 grades starting at age 7, basic education is compulsory and divides into 3 cycles of 3 years each. In the first 2 cycles (grades 1-6), the curriculum focuses on Spanish, math, science, social studies, art, and physical education. In the 3rd cycle (grades 6-9), English instruction is added. Approximately 81% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in basic education in 2023.



Secondary Education: Students have 2 options for their non-compulsory secondary education: 2-year general or 3-year vocational. Graduates of both programs may continue to post-

secondary programs. About 55% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary education in 2023.

Post-Secondary: Higher education comprises technical-vocational institutions, teacher training institutes, and universities. Technical institutions award several degrees, such as **técnico** (technician) after 2 years of study and **tecnólogo** (technologist) after 4 years. Teacher training institutes award the title of **profesorado** (teacher) after 3 years of study. Five years of university study leads to several degrees, such as the **licenciado** (equivalent to a US Bachelor's degree), **arquitecto** (architect), and **ingeniero** (engineer). After another 2 years of study, students may receive their Master's degrees, while Doctorates typically require 3 additional years.

The University of El Salvador (UES), with its main campus in San Salvador and 3 branch campuses, is the nation's only public university. Some 30 private institutions, many of which opened during the 1980s when the UES was closed, also offer post-secondary programs of study, though their quality varies widely.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Salvadorans consider personal relations as key to conducting effective business discussions. A casual attitude towards time and punctuality prevails alongside a strong work ethic.

Time and Work

El Salvador's work week runs Monday-Friday. While hours vary, most businesses open from 8:30am-5:00pm, with a midday break for lunch in rural areas. Restaurants typically serve meals Monday-Saturday from 12:00pm-3:00pm and 7:00pm-10:00pm, though rural restaurants may open only during the day.

Banks typically are open Monday-Friday from 8:00am-4:00pm, with branches in urban areas also open Saturday morning. Post office hours extend Monday-Friday from 8:00am-5:00pm and Saturday from 8:00am-12:00pm.

Working Conditions: The legal work week in El Salvador is 44 hours. The law mandates that employers pay their workers for an 8-hour day of rest each week, so, for example, workers who

log 44 hours actually receive pay for 52 hours. The law also mandates a monetary Christmas bonus; double-time pay for work on national holidays; and at least 15 days of compensated leave each year. In practice,



lax enforcement and a large informal sector enable violations like overtime without pay, workplace discrimination, and deficient work safety standards.

Time Zone: El Salvador adheres to Central Standard Time (CST), which is 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 1 hour behind Eastern Standard Time (EST). El Salvador does not observe daylight savings time.

Date Notation: Like the US, El Salvador uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans, Salvadorans usually write the day first, followed by the month and year.

National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- March/April: Holy Thursday (dates vary)
- March/April: Good Friday (dates vary)
- March/April: Holy Saturday (dates vary)
- March/April: Easter Sunday (dates vary)
- May 1: Labor Day
- May 10: Mother's Day
- June 17: Father's Day
- August 3-6: Feast of San Salvador
- September 15: Independence Day
- Nov 2: All Soul's Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

Time and Business

Successful business dealings typically depend on personal connections. Salvadorans value the trust that comes from personal relationships and prefer that business associates also become friends. Consequently, colleagues often share dinner or weekend excursions that include their families. Similarly, friendly conversation about family life and sports is common and key to building positive work relationships.

Hierarchical power structures are common within the workplace. Most offices practice top-down management, whereby leaders make the decisions and give directives to subordinates. Communications are typically formal, with subordinates addressing their superiors with their titles (see *Language and Communication*). Managers mediate disputes but avoid critique in public, preferring to convey negative feedback privately, sometimes through a 3rd party. Most Salvadorans have a relaxed attitude toward time. Consequently, punctuality is often disregarded and tardiness is acceptable. Meetings are often subject to last-minute changes

or cancellations. Nevertheless, Salvadorans are typically dedicated, hard workers who make up for any tardiness by staying late or working overtime.

Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in El Salvador depends on the nature of the relationship but is generally closer than in the US. Distance between conversational partners tends to diminish with familiarity. Consequently, Salvadorans tend to maintain some space when meeting strangers, yet friends typically stand much closer when conversing.

Touch: Salvadorans tend to engage in more conversational touching than Americans. For example, Salvadorans frequently touch the other person's arm or shoulder to emphasize points in conversation. Likewise, friends of the same gender often hold hands or rub each other's backs to demonstrate the depth of their platonic bond.

Eye Contact: Salvadorans consider direct eye contact during conversations as evidence of honesty and engagement yet consider prolonged staring rude or a sign of dishonesty.

Photographs

Military sites, bridges, bus terminals, and airports generally prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should acquire a Salvadoran's consent before taking his photo. Some Salvadorans may expect compensation in return while some indigenous inhabitants prefer not to be photographed at all.

Driving

While city streets and highways are typically well maintained, most other roads are in poor condition. Inadequate signage, potholes, and crime make driving at night particularly dangerous. Drivers



frequently disobey traffic laws and ignore lane markings. In 2021, El Salvador's rate of 22 road traffic deaths per 100,000 people was higher than that of neighboring Guatemala (13) and Honduras (19) and higher than the US (14).

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

El Salvador's dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's indigenous customs, colonial influences, and religious traditions.

Dress and Appearance

Salvadorans generally favor a neat and clean appearance. Men typically wear collared shirts with slacks, while women favor skirts/pants with blouses or dresses. Despite the tropical heat, only children or those engaging in athletic activities wear shorts.

Traditional: Salvadorans typically wear traditional attire only for special events. Traditional female dress varies by region and reflects both indigenous and Spanish colonial influences. For example, the *Izalqueña* and *Nahuizalco* styles of the indigenous Pipil people of western El Salvador feature brightly colored woven skirts and shawls. By contrast, Spanish colonial styles are evident in the costumes of some traditional dancers.

These outfits usually combine long, ruffled skirts with blouses of silk or cotton trimmed with lace and sometimes a headscarf or shawl. Traditionally, the skirt's color indicates the wearer's marital status, with red reserved for married women and yellow for unmarried.

Traditional male clothing typically consists of a collared, long-sleeved shirt and pants, sometimes in bright, contrasting colors. Some outfits include a black leather belt, a hat of woven palm fronds, and scapulars (a symbol of Roman Catholic devotion, consisting of 2 small cloth squares connected by a long string worn draped over the shoulders).



Recreation

Salvadorans typically spend their leisure time with family and friends. Common activities include sharing meals, listening to music, dancing, and playing pick-up soccer. Most towns have a central plaza used for meeting friends, people watching, or enjoying a cup of coffee in a café. Salvadorans also enjoy weekend trips to beaches, archeological sites, volcanoes, and festivals. To make these excursions more affordable for the less privileged, bus fares often are subsidized, while schools and churches organize affordable group trips.

Festivals: Salvadorans enjoy a variety of festivals and community celebrations. Festivals typically reflect the country's

Catholic roots (see *Religion and Spirituality*).



For example, each community celebrates its patron saint every year with days of festivities that include religious ceremonies and holy processions

as well as parties, carnivals, and feasting. The August celebration of San Salvador's patron saint, Jesus Christ, is a national holiday (see *Time and Space*).

Salvadorans celebrate Easter and Christmas with unique traditions. During **Semana Santa** (Holy Week or the week preceding Easter), some towns hire artists to create elaborate designs of colored sand, leaves, and salt in the street called **alfombras** ("rugs") that create a colorful path for religious processions. During Christmas, children wear costumes and journey from house to house to recreate Mary and Joseph's search for refuge in a ritual called **las posadas** ("the inns").

Despite their predominantly Christian themes, celebrations often also feature elements of pre-Columbian traditions (see *History and Myth*). For example, on **Día de la Cruz** (Day of the Cross), celebrated on May 3, the faithful share a communion of tropical fruit blessed by a cross made of ajoite wood, a tree associated with the Pipil god of rebirth (see *History and Myth*).

Similarly, during **La Calabiuza** festivities in Tonacatepeque near San Salvador on All Saints' Day (November 1), celebrants dress as pre-Columbian mythical characters such as **el cadejo** (see *History and Myth*).

Sports: Football (soccer) is El Salvador's favorite sport and pastime.

Local recreational leagues and pick-up matches are popular among adults and children alike. Avid soccer fans typically follow the Salvadoran national team, though it has had few international



successes. Other popular sports include basketball, boxing, and baseball. Softball is particularly popular among girls.

Toys: Salvadoran children enjoy a variety of traditional toys, many with pre-Columbian roots. For example, **capirucho** is a toy consisting of a wooden cup tied to a stick. Players hold the stick and try to flick the cup onto it. To play **trompo**, a child ties a small wooden ball to their ankle with a string then moves their leg in a rhythmic motion to jump over the ball.

Music

Salvadoran folk music, or **canción popular** ("popular song"), utilizes a variety of traditional instruments, such as various drums and flutes plus a **marimba** (wooden xylophone). Musicians sometimes also incorporate pre-Columbian instruments, such as **chinchines** (pebble-filled gourds) and the **tortuga** (an empty turtle shell played with sticks). The **caramba** (gourd attached to a wooden shaft with strings) is a uniquely Salvadoran instrument that combines string and percussion elements. The lyrics of traditional songs typically explore themes of love, history, and daily life. Many Salvadorans also enjoy other Latin music genres like Colombian **salsa** and **cumbia**, Dominican **merengue**, and Puerto Rican **reggaetón**. Salvadoran Álvaro Torres won acclaim across Latin America in the 1990s for his soulful ballads.

Dance

Community celebrations often feature dances, some reflecting aspects of pre-Columbian rituals and traditions. For example, during the ***Baile del Tigre y del Venado*** (Dance of the Tiger and the Deer) and ***Cuyan-Cuyamet*** (Dance of the Mountain Pig in Nahuatl – see *Language and Communication*) dancers represent these sacred pre-Columbian animals by wearing masks and animal hides.

By contrast, in the ***Jeu Jeu***, dancers represent warriors with feather adornments and bows and arrows who plea to the gods to bring rain for their crops.



El Carbonero (“The Charcoal Man”) is a beloved Salvadoran song from the mid-20th century. Considered a celebration of the ordinary ***campesino***

(peasant), the accompanying dance mimics the collection and transport of charcoal. Scholars and musicians work together to preserve and promote both traditional dance and instruments.

Theater

Performed since the colonial era, ***Historiantes*** are dramatic, historical pageants that represent Christian Spaniards’ struggles against Muslim North African Moors during the Middle Ages. A more contemporary popular performance is ***bombas***, during which 2 challengers use jokes and innuendo in a public battle of wits about a range of topics, often government officials and other public figures.

Literature

Following independence in 1841 (see *History and Myth*), Salvadoran literature began to blossom. In the late 19th century, poets writing in the Romantic style focused on the individual and his emotions yet also fostered a sense of Salvadoran national consciousness. Prominent authors of this period include Juan José Cañas, who authored the words of the national anthem, and Antonia Galindo, El Salvador’s first female poet to win renown. Her ode to women, *A mi madre*

("To My Mother"), remains a celebrated piece of cultural literary heritage. Early 20th-century poet, dramatist, and essayist Francisco Gavidia is widely considered the founder of modern Salvadoran literature. Many of his works combine ancient and more recent national history with his personal memories.

Following the government's massacre of a large group of indigenous peasants in 1932 (see *History and Myth*), many writers and intellectuals began to produce works critical of the military regime. Others focused on the lived experiences of the country's poor or explored themes of exploitation. As the decades of authoritarian rule continued (see *History and Myth*), authors debated the connections between art and politics.

Some of them explored universal themes like truth and beauty, while others focused on patriotism and rebellion. The height of literature's commitment to revolution emerged in poet, novelist, and political activist Roque Dalton. Writing in the late 1960s-early 1970s, Dalton viewed the writer's pen as powerful a tool of armed struggle as a rifle. His emotional and sometimes sarcastic works inspired a generation of writers in El Salvador and across Latin America.

Folk Arts and Handicrafts

El Salvador's rich tradition of folk art varies by region. For example, the northern town of La Palma is known for its hand-crafted wooden objects, such as instruments, toys, dolls, furniture, religious memorabilia, and masks. Meanwhile, artisans in the central town of San Sebastián specialize in brightly-colored woven textiles such as hammocks, blankets, pillows, and clothing.



By contrast, the community of Llobasco near San Salvador has a long history of ceramics for both practical and aesthetic purposes. Many Salvadoran artisans work within profit-sharing cooperatives.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Salvadorans value time spent with friends and relatives, often socializing over long meals at home or cafés and restaurants. While Salvadoran cuisine varies by region, dishes tend to be fragrantly seasoned and prepared from fresh, local ingredients.

Dining Customs

Salvadorans typically eat 3 daily meals, supplemented with light snacks throughout the day. While the mid-day meal is typically the largest in rural areas, dinner may also be substantial in urban settings. In rural areas, many families cook their meals outdoors, preparing food on a large iron griddle

(**comal**) over a fire (see *Family and Kinship*).



Guests often drop by unannounced, particularly in rural areas. When

formally invited to a Salvadoran home for a meal, guests tend to arrive a few

minutes late, typically bringing gifts of flowers, pastries, fruit, or other small items.

Hosts usually serve their guests first. After guests finish their portions, they usually must decline several offers of additional servings if they do not want more food.

Diet

Considered a sacred crop by the region's pre-Columbian populations (see *History and Myth*), corn remains El Salvador's main staple. Corn is a part of most meals and is served in a variety of ways, such as roasted, ground into flour and transformed into round, **tortillas** (flat bread), fermented into beverages, or incorporated into soups, stews, and other dishes. **Frijoles** (beans) are also abundant and served boiled, fried, or stewed, often alongside rice or as filling.

Salvadorans also enjoy assorted meats, such as beef, chicken, and sausage, served with staples like *tortillas*, grilled corn, and rice. Rabbit, **cusuco** (armadillo), and **garrobo** (iguana) are delicacies in some regions. Shellfish, red snapper, and white seabass are notable dietary components of coastal residents.

Besides corn and beans, Salvadorans consume a variety of other native vegetables, such as **pacaya** (date palm fronds), **chayote** (green gourd), carrots, beets, squash, onions, avocados, and potatoes. Available year-round, popular fruits include **nance** (a sweet and fragrant yellow berry), **jocote** (a small, acidic fruit similar to a plum), bananas, mangos, papayas, watermelon, strawberries, and apples.

Popular Dishes and Meals

Popular breakfast foods include fruit, bread or *tortillas*, eggs scrambled with chopped vegetables, cheese, stewed beans, and boiled or fried plantains (member of the banana family), accompanied by milk and coffee.

For both lunch and dinner, poorer rural families often pair *tortillas* with a spread of cheese and **crema** (a thick, savory cream) with eggs and fresh, seasonal home-grown vegetables. By contrast, wealthier urban-dwellers typically dine on beef, chicken, or fish served with *tortillas* or bread, salad, and steamed, lightly seasoned rice or **casamiento** (rice cooked with red beans). Alternatively, lunch and dinner may consist of a hearty soup, such as **sopa de pata** (made from cow feet, tripe, bananas, corn, green beans and seasoned with coriander, lemon, and chilies) or **mariscada** (a creamy seafood chowder) for coastal dwellers.

Other popular dishes include **pupusas** (thick corn *tortillas* stuffed with cheese, meat, beans, or other fillings that vary by region and are served with **curtido**, a spicy slaw of cabbage, carrots, and onions pickled in vinegar or **salsa roja**, tomato sauce); **tamales** (cornmeal dough stuffed with cheese, meat, or vegetables and steamed in a corn husk or banana leaf); **arroz**



con cerveza (rice, vegetables, and chicken cooked in beer); and **sopa de gallina india** (chicken and vegetable soup). On special occasions, families often serve **gallo en chicha** (rooster slow cooked in a rich, sweet stew of prunes, carrots, onion, chilies, and numerous spices). Fresh fruit, **pan dulce** (sweet bread), pastries, or **minuta**, crushed ice flavored with sweet syrup are popular desserts.

Eating Out

Urban dwellers tend to eat out regularly, often spending several hours at a café or restaurant socializing with friends and family. Serving a variety of cuisines, restaurants range from upscale establishments to inexpensive **comedores** (small, casual eateries) serving hearty meals and a range of **boquitas** (small snacks) like **yuca** (cassava – a tuberous starchy root) and **panes rellenos** or **tortas** (hot sandwiches filled with meats and vegetables).



Common across the country, street stalls and small shops called **pupuserías** specialize in *pupusas* stuffed with diverse ingredients like **chicharrón** (crispy pork skin), **pepescas** (salty fried fish), **chipilín** (a legume), **camarones** (prawns), and **ayote** (pumpkin). Many establishments automatically add a 10% surcharge to the bill, and servers generally do not expect an additional tip.

Beverages

Salvadorans tend to drink coffee, hot chocolate spiced with cinnamon, and tea in the mornings and evenings. During the day, they enjoy **licuados** and **refrescos**, cold drinks made from various combinations of local fruits and spices. A popular **refresco** is **horchata** (a paste of seeds, nuts, rice, and cacao blended with sugar and water or milk).

Salvadorans also enjoy freshly squeezed juices from coconuts, oranges, papaya, pineapples, mangos, passion fruit, and strawberries as well as **atol** (a thick, milky corn-based drink served hot). Popular alcoholic beverages include **chicha**

(made from fermented corn), **aguardiente** (an anise-flavored sugarcane brandy), and locally-brewed beer.

Health Overview

The overall wellbeing of Salvadorans has improved significantly since the end of the civil war (see *History and Myth*). Between 1992-2023, life expectancy at birth steadily increased from about 66 to 76 years. Meanwhile, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1), decreased



dramatically from 42 to 9 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Moreover, maternal mortality fell from 140 deaths per 100,000 live births to 39, lower than the Latin American and Caribbean averages (77)

yet considerably higher than the US rate (17).

Despite these positive trends, quality of care varies greatly among private, public, urban, and rural facilities. Moreover, hospitals and clinics concentrate in urban areas, significantly underserving rural dwellers.

Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Salvadoran medicine centers on the use of herbal remedies to identify and treat illness and disease.

Traditional medicine is a popular supplement to modern medicine and is especially widespread among rural Salvadorans who lack access to modern medical facilities. Some rural dwellers rely entirely on medicinal plants to treat diseases and other ailments. Merchants in both urban and rural areas commonly sell medicinal plants and herbal remedies, used by families to treat an array of health issues such as tooth decay, skin infections, and digestive problems, among many others. For more serious maladies, Salvadorans consult **sobadores**, **curanderos**, or **brujos** (traditional healers) who have expert traditional medical knowledge. Besides treating

specific illnesses, these healers may also use their remedies to ward off spirits who bring sickness, remove curses or spells, and generally restore physical and spiritual wholeness.

Modern Healthcare System

El Salvador's government offers free, universal healthcare to all Salvadorans through a large network of public hospitals and clinics. In recent years, the government has sought to improve access and quality of care for poor, rural, and indigenous populations. It has also sought to strengthen coordination among national, regional, and local public health institutions.



In remote rural regions, mobile units comprised of a doctor and several nurses deliver basic healthcare to El Salvador's isolated populations, often traveling long distances on unpaved roads to make house calls. For each network of several mobile units, specialty clinics offer more complex services. These include emergency services and limited surgical procedures, maternal and pediatric care, psychological consultations, and dental treatments, among others. In urban areas, hospitals and clinics provide a wide range of preventative and curative care for major illnesses like HIV/AIDS, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases.

Despite recent improvements, several challenges continue to hinder the delivery of quality healthcare. While private urban facilities staffed with highly-qualified doctors offer first-rate care, public urban hospitals generally remain ill-equipped, understaffed, and poorly maintained. Quality of care diminishes further in rural areas, where residents' access to modern medicine is limited to mobile units or small clinics offering basic services.

According to recent estimates, El Salvador has about 2.87 physicians per 1,000 people, notably lower than the World Health Organization's recommendation of 23. This shortage of medical professionals plus inadequate hospital capacity means

patients are unable to receive timely medical treatment and procedures. Moreover, as El Salvador's population ages, rising demand for long-term care associated with non-communicable diseases and the needs of the elderly could further burden the healthcare system in the coming decades.



Health Challenges

Today, El Salvador's leading causes of death and illness are chronic and non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases,

such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases. Such diseases together accounted for about 65% of all deaths in 2019. Preventable "external causes" such as suicides, car accidents, and other injuries resulted in about 19% of all deaths – a rate that is elevated by incidences of gang-related violence (see "Interpersonal Violence" below). This rate is significantly higher than the US rate (7%) but slightly higher than rates in neighboring Guatemala (16%) and Honduras (18%).

The Zika Epidemic

Transmitted by mosquitos, the Zika virus is widespread in El Salvador and many other parts of Latin America. Because infection during pregnancy can cause severe birth defects, the Salvadoran government fumigates vulnerable areas to decrease mosquito populations. In 2016, the government urged women to postpone pregnancy, and as of mid-2020, the US government continues to recommend that pregnant women avoid visiting El Salvador.

Communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, malaria, and dengue fever caused 16% of all deaths in 2019. Frequent and severe floods, landslides,

tropical storms, and other natural disasters (see *Political and Social Relations*) lead to shortages of clean water, food, and medicine, leaving affected communities particularly vulnerable to outbreaks of communicable diseases. For example, flooding creates large pools of standing water, worsening the spread of vector-borne diseases carried by mosquitos and other insects.



Communicable diseases are especially prevalent in rural regions, where residents may lack access to clean water and sanitation facilities, placing them at risk of infection from parasites and bacteria.

Interpersonal Violence: Interpersonal violence primarily stemming from ongoing gang-related conflict (see *Political and Social Relations*) is considerably high. In 2022, killings of police and their families, extrajudicial murders of suspected gang members, and other crimes contributed to one of the world's highest homicide rates overall and the Latin America's third highest violent death rate for females. According to a 2016 report, more than 1 in 5 Salvadoran families had experienced some form of violent crime, such



as murder, maiming, and the sexual exploitation of women and children (see *Sex and Gender*). The government reported 154 murders in 2023, a decline from the 496 murders in 2022, amid widespread crackdown on gang violence. Gang-related crime is especially prevalent in El Salvador's border regions and disproportionately affects poor, rural residents.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

For centuries, regional inhabitants engaged in agriculture and long-distance trade (see *History and Myth*). Following their 16th-century colonization of the region, Spanish authorities oversaw the development of an agricultural economy centered on the production of balsam and cacao for export to Europe (see *History and Myth*). When cacao prices fell, Spanish plantation owners introduced other commercial crops, notably indigo, a natural dye. Indigo cultivation reached its peak in the mid-1800s, when it comprised some 85% of exports.

The market for indigo collapsed in the late 19th century with the invention of a synthetic dye. Again, growers switched to a new crop, coffee, which became the country's most important crop by 1879. In 1882, the government sought to boost coffee production by seizing communal holdings and forcing many indigenous Salvadorans to work on coffee plantations (see *History and Myth*).

In the early 20th century, the government and US foreign direct investment (FDI) combined to initiate infrastructure modernization projects linking the country's rural areas to its ports.

Nevertheless, El Salvador's reliance on a single agricultural export proved disastrous when coffee prices collapsed during the Great Depression (see *History and Myth*). Again, landowners pivoted, expanding their plantations to include cotton and sugarcane.

El Salvador retained its primarily agricultural economy through the 1960s, with approximately 80% of the labor force working in agriculture. During the same period, it sought regional economic integration through the **Mercado Común Centroamericano** (Central American Common Market or



CACM – see *History and Myth*), a regional trade bloc encompassing Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

In the 1970s, El Salvador's economy began to diversify with the introduction of light manufacturing. Most of that occurred in **maquilas**, export-oriented factories operating in free trade zones, a model that proved particularly successful in El Salvador. Meanwhile, agricultural mechanization and other developments reduced the demand for rural labor, increasing the landless peasant population and feeding growing unrest (see *History and Myth*).

The subsequent 12-year civil war (see *History and Myth*) devastated the economy. While \$4 billion in US financial support through the 1980s helped sustain the economy, much of that aid went directly to El Salvador's military (see *History and Myth*). Fleeing the violence, many Salvadorans emigrated to the US. The remittances they sent back to their relatives who remained in El Salvador became vital to the country's economic health, comprising some 12% of GDP by 1994.



Economic recovery was rapid following the 1992 peace accords (see *History and Myth*). In 2001, El Salvador adopted the US dollar as its currency in order to avoid inflation and introduce monetary stability.

In 2005, El Salvador became the first country to join the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), a trade bloc comprising the US, Costa Rica,

El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. In 2006, remittances increased to an all-time high 18.7% of GDP.

Post-war economic growth ended with the 2008-09 global financial crisis, when GDP decreased by 3.1%. In the following

years, El Salvador experienced sluggish growth, averaging just 2% between 2010-18, Central America's (CENTAM's) lowest rate.

The government implemented several measures to stimulate economic growth, such as its 2015 Secure El Salvador plan, a \$2 billion violence prevention program that featured a significant job creation element.



Further, the government sought to incentivize FDI through public-private partnerships, these programs attracted \$662 million in 2019, a decrease from the \$826 million of 2018.

Today, the smallest country in Central America, El Salvador has experienced modest economic growth in recent decades, with annual GDP growth exceeding 3% only three times between 2000 and 2022. Still, the country achieved a significant decline in poverty and inequality. Recently, GDP growth has been moderate, just 3.51% in 2023. Meanwhile, remittances from Salvadorans living abroad remain significant part of the economy, comprising some 24% of GDP or close to \$8.1 billion in 2023.

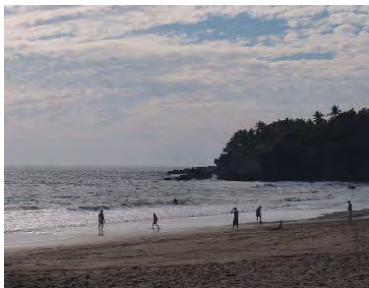
El Salvador faces several challenges to economic growth. Complex regulations, ineffective legal enforcement, and other hurdles discourage public and private investment. Additionally, FDI inflow averaging 3/4 that of neighboring Guatemala and Honduras. The use of the US dollar prevents inflation yet raises labor costs, making the country's exports less competitive. The budget deficit reached 4.4% of GDP in 2024, and with no plans to reverse this trend, government debt (87.58% of GDP) is expected to continue climbing. Finally, according to some experts, the violent activities of El Salvador's criminal gangs (see *Political and Social Relations*) cost the Salvadoran economy up to 16% of its GDP annually.

Services

Accounting for about 60% of GDP and 62% of employment, the services sector is El Salvador's largest and comprises tourism, retail, financial services, and telecommunications.

Tourism: International arrivals to El Salvador reached 2.64 million in 2019, up from just over 1 million in 2009. In 2023, international arrivals were 3.4 million. While many of these visitors are Salvadorans living abroad who return to visit family and friends, tourism is a significant part of the economy, bringing in about \$3.1 billion in 2023.

Popular attractions include colonial architecture, pre-Columbian ruins, and nature sites such as beaches and volcanic lakes.



Call Centers: As of 2022, over 70 call centers operate in El Salvador, employing approximately 28,000 Salvadorans.

Industry

Comprising 25% of GDP and 24% of employment, the industrial sector is composed primarily of

manufacturing which occurs in free trade zones where companies enjoy tax and duty exemptions.

El Salvador's *maquilas* employ about 10% of the country's private sector work force. Textiles are a primary focus of the subsector and comprise some 36% of El Salvador's exports, mostly destined for the US. In an attempt to reduce surface water pollution, El Salvador became the world's first country to ban metal mining in 2017.

Agriculture

The agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry. Once the backbone of El Salvador's economy, agriculture now accounts for just 5% of GDP and 15% of employment.

Farming: About 11% of Salvadoran land is dedicated to permanent cultivation, while about 31% is used as pasture for livestock.

Some Salvadorans still live as subsistence farmers, cultivating corn, sorghum, rice, and beans. Coffee remains an important cash crop, comprising 2% of export revenue in 2023 but it has now



been surpassed by sugar (4% of export revenue).

Fisheries: In 2018, some 14,000 commercial fishing vessels caught 62,000 tons of fish. About 70% of the catch was tuna processed in-country and then exported.

Currency

El Salvador has used the US dollar (\$) as its currency since 2001.

Foreign Trade

El Salvador's exports, totaling \$6.62 billion in 2023, primarily consisted of textiles and apparel, sugar, coffee, offshore assembly exports, ethanol, chemicals, electricity, and iron and steel products delivered to the US (36%), Guatemala (18%), Honduras (16%), Nicaragua (8%) and Costa Rica (5%). In the same year, El Salvador imported \$15.4 billion of primarily raw materials, consumer goods, capital goods, fuel, foodstuffs, petroleum, and electricity from the US (29%), China (15%), Guatemala (10%), Mexico (8%), and Honduras (6%).

Foreign Aid

The US is El Salvador's largest donor, providing an average of \$243 million in Official Development Assistance between 2020-2022. Between 2020-2021, Japan provided an average of \$51 million, Spain provided an average of \$42 million, and France provided an average of \$24 million. Of the foreign aid received, 11% was earmarked for education, 10% for health, 19% for economic infrastructure, and 10% for humanitarian aid.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Salvadorans enjoy a relatively extensive physical infrastructure and access to modern telecommunications. While free speech is constitutionally protected, the government occasionally infringes on that right.

Transportation

Few Salvadorans have a privately-owned vehicle (POV). Instead, they rely on public transportation, such as buses, taxis, and motorcycle taxis. In rural areas, pick-up trucks carry passengers in their truck beds. Buses provide transport between urban areas, with most routes passing through San Salvador. Generally, 3 classes of buses offer service: refurbished American school buses without assigned seating that make frequent stops; **Especial** (Special), coach-style

buses with infrequent stops; and **Super Especial** (Super Special), air-conditioned luxury models that offer direct service.



Roadways

Of El Salvador's 4,300 mi of roads, some

63% are paved. El Salvador's highway system is one of Central America's best and is oriented around the **Carretera Panamericana** (Pan-American Highway), a major transportation artery through CENTAM that passes through San Salvador.

Railways

While El Salvador has about 350 mi of railway, the only section in use as of 2018 is a 7.7 mi passenger line operating between San Salvador and the city of Apopa. The government has considered reinstating service between the Guatemalan border and the port city of La Unión as of December 2023, design plans are being finalized.

Ports and Waterways

El Salvador has about 190 miles of coastline on the Pacific Ocean. The largest port is Acajutla, home to El Salvador's main offshore oil terminal, though La Libertad and La Unión also offer port facilities.

Airways

El Salvador has 27 civilian and military airports. The primary air transport hub is Monseñor Óscar Arnulfo Romero (see *History and Myth*) International Airport in San Salvador, which is the third of Central America in movement of passengers with 5.3 million in 2024. The country's main airline, Avianca El Salvador, was previously known as TACA until it merged with Colombia's Avianca airlines in 2010.



Energy

In 2023, El Salvador generated about 9% from fossil fuels, 31% hydroelectric, 25% geothermal, 14% biomass, and 19% solar. With no domestic oil industry, El Salvador must import all its fossil fuels. Taking advantage of its location in a volcanically active region, El Salvador is a producer of geothermal and renewable energy, generating 77% of its electricity from such sources.

Nevertheless, El Salvador is unable to generate all the power it needs and must import some 8% of its total usage from neighboring countries. Salvadoran government is expecting that together with other renewable sources the two newly constructed geothermal plants will soon represent 100% of the country's energy generation.

Media

El Salvador's constitution protects freedoms of speech and press, and the government generally respects those rights. Nevertheless, journalists tend to self-censor for 3 reasons. First, some government officials occasionally harass or threaten members of the media, even launching cyberattacks on newspaper websites. Second, journalists are subject to both

threats and acts of violence from gangs (see *Political and Social Relations*), who object to their reporting. Finally, just a handful of owners controls Salvadoran media outlets, effectively restricting press freedoms. For example, 3 of 5 major TV stations are controlled by the **Telecorporación Salvadoreña**, which is closely aligned with the ARENA political party (see *History and Myth* and p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*). Other media outlets rely on government advertising funds, causing some reporters to self-censor for fear of offending their patrons.

Print Media: El Salvador's largest newspapers are *Diario de Hoy* and *Prensa Gráfica*. Prominent periodicals include *El Faro*, *El Mundo*, and the government-operated *Diario Oficial de El Salvador*.



Radio and TV: Radio is popular in El Salvador, with several private stations operating alongside *Radio Nacional*, the country's public station. El Salvador also has 42 TV channels, 35 of which are commercial and 7 operated by the government or religious organizations.

Telecommunications

Due to its small size and high population density, El Salvador has relatively high telecommunication penetration rates, with about 14 landlines and 182 mobile phones per 100 people. Foreign companies have invested significant resources in bringing cellular service to much of the country, with 4 companies largely controlling the market.

Internet: Some 68% of Salvadorans regularly used the Internet in 2023. Increasing numbers of Salvadorans access the Internet through mobile devices: in 2022, El Salvador counted 53 mobile broadband subscriptions compared to 11 fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 people. Generally, government authorities neither restrict access nor block or censor content.



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