

El Salvador: An Anarcha-Feminist Perspective

The Final Straw Radio

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We are happy to present a conversation with an anarcha-feminist comrade, Elisa, in San Salvador, El Salvador. Elisa shares her perspectives on the neo-liberal regime of Nayib Bukele's GANA party which took the presidency last February, El Salvador's relation to the US, the former FMLN government, immigration and anarchist organizing. We generally only produce our weekly podcast and radio show in English but, thanks to community support in translation and transcription, we present this conversation in Spanish here. The full script follows in both English and Spanish as well. More information on the projects Elisa mentions can be found at ConcienciaAnarquista.NoBlogs.Org, the Libertarian Youth Commune and the San Jacinto Collective (Comuna Estudiantil Libertaria and Kolectivo San Jacinto).

TFSR – *Would you please introduce yourself for the audience and state your preferred gender pronouns. Are there any political positions you identify with or any projects you work on that you feel are relevant to this conversation?*

Elisa – Hello, thank you to the space and greetings to all of the people that are listening to us. My name is Elisa, I'm from El Salvador, my preferred pronouns are she/her and, well, I identify as an anarcha-feminist. I participate in projects like the Anarchist Conscience Formation collective and also in the Not One (Woman) Less Collective.

TFSR – *It is almost a year since the presidential elections took place in El Salvador, bringing the GANA party to executive power. For those of us who don't know, can you describe the Salvadoran political system for context?*

Elisa – To say a little about government power in El Salvador, it's distributed between the Legislative, Executive and Judicial branches. The Legislative branch is unicameral with 84 representatives elected every 3 years and a president every 5 years, 2019 having been the most recent presidential election. In that election, the winner was Nayib Bukele of the political party GANA (an acronym meaning to gain or earn or win), a party arising from former members of the rightist ARENA party that had been in power prior to the last two election cycles of rule by the leftist FMLN party. Nayib Bukele was formerly of the FMLN and was kicked out and because he didn't have time to register his own political party, Nueva Idea (or New Idea) in time for elections he used GANA as a vehicle for his candidacy in the elections and therefore arrived at the presidency with GANA.

TFSR – *You’re in San Salvador, the city that president Nayib Bukele was formerly mayor of. What can you say about his time as mayor and the condition of the city? What are his political practices? Do they reflect the positions of the GANA party?*

Elisa – Nayib Bukele was the mayor of the capital, San Salvador, while a member of the FMLN and formerly mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán, which is a city on the outskirts of the capital. In time, his record as mayor began to show irregularities. For instance, during his time as mayor of San Salvador, there was a market that was renting its space which signed a 25 year rent contract but the payment would be of much greater value than the worth of the building. There was an investigation made to assess the worth of the building among that showed that it didn’t have the value being paid for it. But it turned out that what he was looking for was a place to house San Salvador’s many street vendors. A thing to know about San Salvador is that the traffic is very bad in the historic city-center because the streets are filled with vendors and Bukele’s plan was to move the vendors into the building. But when I investigated this, I found that there was not room for many of the vendors to relocate inside and anyway not very many of the vendors had begun renting spaces in the indoor market. Other things he has done are mainly limited to aesthetic changes around the capital’s historic district, the recuperation of the district has taken place with the financial support of Spain and the US in order to remodel the large park in the center of the city, Cuscatlán Park. Seeing how the administration of the park has been handed over to large foundations gives some sense of how the privatization of public space—public space that is very important for day-to-day recreation—is happening here.

In the case of open-air sellers, there are reported various public cases of politicians having closed door meetings with street gangs. Former administrations of San Salvador have always tried very hard to find ways to displace and relocate those street vendors. The gangs are very present, which is to say that the historic district of San Salvador is controlled by street gangs, each gang having its own zone. As the public has become aware of these cases of public officials and gangs coordinating in support of elections, it is safe to assume that Nayib Bukele had his hands in these negotiations, and this explains how he has been able to implement some of the reorganizing of the city center.

As to his time as mayor of Neuvo Cuscatlán, it was mentioned that it sits on the outskirts of the capital. His administration was seen to be permissive, the area having many businesses and the residences of many rich people. We can see that Nayib Bukele’s government benefitted many businesses by giving environmental permits, allowing deforestation of formerly conserved and protected areas followed by the building of new housing. This area along the road to Puerto de la Libertad was lush with plant-life and now has been given over to the businesses holding environmental construction permits.

As an integral part of the GANA Party, I believe that yes, he has similar positions to the party, a party that I have told you arose from the ARENA Party and that we see has stated its functions for the benefit of businesses and business owners, Nayib Bukele came from a family of business owners. Therefore, I think it should not be surprising that he holds that same perspective as the party does.

TFSR – *How has GANA affected the social safety net and democratic responsiveness of the government since taking office?*

Elisa – The government of Nayib Bukele came to national power in June and we see have in these six months how he has driven the state into debt with loans, to the tune of two billion dollars. Most of this has been invested in the Territorial Control Plan, the security plan implemented to

handle the problem of the street gangs. We can see that the streets have become militarized, more soldiers have gone into the streets. By August of 2019 there were 7,300 soldiers in the streets and it has been announced that another 3,000 will join them at the turning of 2020. Also, in July there was a visit from the Massachusetts National Guard with the intention of developing a relationship of support for the Territorial Control Plan here. They intend to build a permanent base of operations by 2021 for implementing the security plan that will be handed over to the military.

The president has claimed that the Territorial Control Plan is working because the reported homicides in the country have decreased, however the reality is that disappearances have increased with the military in the streets under past governments and continuing. Journalists are investigating reports that the government is faking the statistics and NGOs are reporting about human rights violations and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by police and the army. In recent days we have seen an increase in femicides as well as the killing of trans women or transfemicides and yet the government has made no public note of these hate crimes. In fact, we see a decrease in funding in next years proposed budget for institutions supporting womens care. The Secretary of Social Inclusion has reduced funding for programs for the youth, while health support for LGBTI communities and the system of preventative medicine for rural communities (including paying for doctors travels) have also suffered deep cuts. Additionally, there was the elimination of literacy programs, and reductions in gas subsidies... The program for youth I mentioned was reduced by 23%, along with the elimination of scholarships and youth internships. Simultaneously there was an increase in state advertising budgets by \$22 million. There was effectively tax evasion by companies of \$600 million the other year, they only paid \$100 million. Next year, households will pay \$3.3 billion in taxes while businesses will only be paying \$1.6 billion.

TFSR – *As an anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist and feminist, can you reflect on the differences and similarities between presidential rule by former president Salvador Sánchez Cerén of the leftist FMLN party and the GANA party in their first year in office?*

Elisa – While speaking of the similarities and differences between the governance of the FMLN and the government of Nayib Bukele, well we see many of the same things. We saw how the FMLN criticized ARENA for taking the army into the streets but the FMLN continued using the army in the same ways. Now Nayib Bukele also has increased the number of soldiers in the streets. We see that repression is a part of both governments.

What happened with FMLN was that when they won the elections their first time in 2009, social movements were supportive of their campaign because there was a desire to kick ARENA out of the government. In the wake of their victory, the power of social movements decreased because people expected large changes to be implemented by the FMLN than materialized. And there were some improvements in social programs, for example in education students were given uniforms to use because before they had to pay for their own. Also there was a snack provided for students during the school day. They eliminated existing charges for access to public hospitals. The literacy program, which I mentioned that Nayib Bukele has eliminated, was also implemented during this time. A similar thing happened with the agricultural packages, which started with the FMLN government purchasing seeds from agricultural cooperatives because there is a seed monopoly here. A former president holds the seed monopoly and now Nayib Bukele has resumed business with the former president and has eliminated some of these agricultural packages.

What the FMLN could not do was to break with the Neoliberal economic system, which is what continues to this day. Because of this, disgust developed in the population which had hoped for large scale social changes. For instance, one thing the government didn't do from the beginning was to diminish existing inequality. The budget for 2020 that has households contributing so much more in taxes is possible because the FMLN did not recalibrate the tax collection system. There was no room for criticizing the FMLN, it wasn't open to it. This built resentment from the population, from its forgotten power base, the most needy of the population. Like most other political parties, it only sought votes for the election. But, really, they weren't interested in organizing people to become more independent, that was not the will of the party.

So then what happened with Nayib Bukele, was that he was able to win by means of a significant presence on social media. We can even see that in the current budget he has given himself a raise, and this is possible through a large advertising effort. Really, he hasn't even done many actual visits to the communities in the country, but he has directed support and positive coverage through social media, not just here in El Salvador but on an international level. Many of his followers on social networks aren't even real people. You can rather easily see that they're fake profiles, but nevertheless this has a real impact on public opinion. With all of this we can see that what appears to be a small social advance with FMLN can bring someone like Bukele who is a genuine step backwards.

TFSR – *Bukele's government has built a relationship with the Trump administration in the U.S.A. At least as concerns immigration, can you describe the relationship between the two countries and the so-called 'third safe country' status?*

Elisa – Concerning the relations with the US, I have already spoken a little about military support. In visits that have taken place Bukele has called his friend a very cool president, in spite of what Trump has said about countries like ours. I believe it's a case of total submission, actually. Even the Chancellor, before the current government took the office, was asked what the relationship was going to be like and retorted with the question, "How are we going to bite the hand that feeds us?" It is worrying, like leaving the door completely open to US intervention. And now with the theme of "Third Safe Country" so as to avoid all immigration to the US, it is said that the three countries of the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador), that the people seeking asylum from the US can do it from within these countries. And that is totally contradictory the immigrants who are escaping these countries are leaving precisely because they are not safe countries, people are fleeing their countries for all of the political and social situations that there are. So this lets the US prevent immigration, and while Trump is talking about building a wall, this is building a wall by another means.

TFSR – *Talk of immigration relationships between the United States of America and El Salvador would be lacking greatly if it did not mention the terrible tragedy of the 12 year civil war in El Salvador from 1979 until 1992. Under U.S. president Jimmy Carter and continuing through Reagan, the U.S. began supplying between \$1-2 Million per day to the Salvadoran government for its counterinsurgency against the population, including massacres by government allied, US trained death squads. Can you talk about this history, how it fits in to the story of immigration and the state of social conflict in El Salvador today?*

Elisa – With respect to immigration and the relation to the Salvadoran Civil War, during this period many people were forced to flee. After the the peace treaty was signed, some people returned to El Salvador that had been in the US, others were eventually deported. Of all these people who returned one way or another, some had had to defend themselves from street gangs in

the U.S. by forming their own gangs while they were there. These gangs were later reconstituted here, so yes, there is a big relationship here between migration and street level gang violence. Migration also resulted in separation of many families. Sometimes it was the mother or the father that had immigrated to the US and left their children with their grandparents or other family members. This made many kids and adolescents vulnerable since they didn't have support, any caretaker. They had to live, sometimes in precarious communities, many times without access to the basics like healthcare, education and are looking for an exit wherever they can find it. Many times that security is in the gang. So, all of this has a relationship to immigration.

TFSR – *What sort of organizing are anarchists in El Salvador doing? How do y'all relate to civil society and NGO's? Are there any victories or lessons learned that you'd like to share?*

Elisa – As to anarchist organizing, we have been working to disseminate ideas via magazines, we have hosted dialogues, debates. We have also tried to have a social center where there could be activities like conversations, film forums, that sort of thing. There are also organizations outside of the capital, including in the eastern and western parts of the country. I think that the sharing of knowledge has been taking place but much of it has been among students in relation to the University and even upon graduation only speaking with other students, with the result being that their groups remain small. It must reach a greater part of the population. So, I think that a community approach to organizing from a popular knowledge standpoint is needed to reach a larger population, people who may not have a university education. Additionally, there's the challenge of putting knowledge into practice. Much has been done by way of debate, learning, but there is a lack of ideas being put it into practice.

With respect to Non-Governmental Organization, well the power that we have built has been through self-organization (autogestion), sometimes with donations. We have had donations from abroad at times, for instance when we were trying to build a social center. We haven't wanted to have a reliance on NGO's but on the other hand, yes, some of our people have worked with NGO's. So, that could be said to be our relationship.

TFSR – *In 2015, an article in LibCom announced the creation of Anarchist Federation of Central America and the Caribbean. Does this factor into organizing in El Salvador against the reaction? Are there other regional relationships with activists that you'd like to share about?*

Elisa – Yes, the Anarchist Conscience Association that we formed is a part of AFCAC and it has tried to be in communication but there has not been another AFCAC gathering since 2015. Yes let's say it is about continuing to have communication but we have not yet been managed to do many activities together. As we wait to see if we can put together another AFCAC gathering, we have yet to see what activities can really be done together.

TFSR – *How can listeners continue to inform themselves on the situation in El Salvador and the work that you and other comrades are doing? What sort of solidarity could be helpful from abroad?*

Elisa – Y'all can look up information about the Anarchist Conscience group. There's a facebook page and there's also a blog at concienciaanarquista.noblogs.org. You can also find the Libertarian Student Commune and the San Jacinto Collective (Comuna Estudiantil Libertaria and Colectivo San Jacinto). And, well, I think part of solidarity is making visible the interferences of the US in El Salvador, distributing material about this, about what's going on here... So I think that's a form that y'all could demonstrate solidarity.

TFSR – *And are there any words for Salvadoran people in the United States maybe hearing about news from their home from mediocre or bad sources that you'd like to share?*

Elisa – For those of you who are following things, who are seeing the news from here, I'd tell you to not stick with a single news source. Like I said, the government is selling itself really well with the media to those outside the country, but the things that are happening here don't look good. So I'd suggest to not stay with one single news source. Look for multiple sources of information so you can have more to go through and find out what's going on. I guess that'd be it, and thank you very much for listening.

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