

El Salvador's civil war

El Salvador's civil war (1980–1992) was one of the most violent conflicts in Latin America's modern history — a brutal 12-year struggle that left about 75,000 people dead and displaced more than a million others. It pitted a U.S.-backed right-wing government and military against a leftist guerrilla coalition fighting for social and economic reform.

Background and Causes

- For decades before the war, El Salvador was controlled by a small elite of landowners — the “Fourteen Families” — who owned most of the country's farmland.
- The majority of Salvadorans lived in deep poverty, working coffee plantations and subsistence farms.
- Efforts at reform, especially land redistribution, were violently suppressed.
- Political opposition was often met with death squads and assassinations.
- By the late 1970s, widespread frustration, economic decline, and government repression pushed many activists, union leaders, and students toward armed resistance.

Outbreak of War (1980)

- In 1980, several leftist guerrilla groups united to form the **Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)**, named after an earlier revolutionary leader.
- That same year, Archbishop Óscar Romero, who had become a voice for the poor and critic of the military's brutality, was assassinated while saying Mass — a shocking act that galvanized opposition.
- Soon after, the country plunged into open civil war.

The Conflict

The war was fought between:

- The FMLN guerrillas, who sought to overthrow the government and establish social justice reforms.
- The Salvadoran military, backed by right-wing paramilitary groups and supported by U.S. funding and training (as part of Cold War anti-communism policy).

The U.S. provided more than \$4 billion in aid, fearing that El Salvador could become another “Cuba.” The Salvadoran army was notorious for human rights abuses — massacres of civilians, such as at El Mozote (1981), where more than 800 villagers were killed. Guerrilla forces also carried out kidnappings and bombings but had less firepower.

By the mid-1980s, the country was in ruins — infrastructure destroyed, thousands disappeared, and the population terrorized.

Path to Peace

- By the late 1980s, neither side could claim victory. The Cold War was ending, and international pressure grew for a negotiated peace.
- Talks began under U.N. mediation, leading to the Chapultepec Peace Accords, signed in Mexico City on January 16, 1992.

The accords called for:

- Ceasefire and demobilization of the FMLN.
- Purging and reforming the armed forces.
- Creation of a new civilian police force.
- Land reform and protection of human rights.
- The FMLN later became a legal political party.

Aftermath and Legacy

Post-war El Salvador struggled to rebuild:

- Many former combatants reintegrated into society, but violence persisted, shifting from political to criminal gangs (maras).
- Deep inequality and emigration (especially to the U.S.) continued.
- In 2012, the government formally apologized for wartime atrocities, though few perpetrators were held accountable.

Today, the war remains a defining event in Salvadoran identity — shaping politics, migration, and memories of trauma and resilience.

The U.S. role in El Salvador's civil war was central and highly controversial. It reflected Cold War priorities more than local realities, and its legacy still shapes Salvadoran-American relations today.

Here's a clear summary of how and why the United States became so deeply involved:

U.S. Policy Goals

The U.S. government viewed El Salvador's civil war through the lens of the Cold War — specifically, as part of the global struggle to contain communism. After the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua (1979) brought a leftist government to power, Washington feared another domino would fall in Central America.

Successive administrations — Jimmy Carter, then especially Ronald Reagan — saw the FMLN guerrillas as Soviet- and Cuban-backed insurgents, not as homegrown reformers. The official goal was to prevent another “Cuba” in the Western Hemisphere.

Scale of U.S. Support

Between 1980 and 1992, the United States sent over \$4 billion in aid to El Salvador — most of it military. This included:

- Weapons, helicopters, and ammunition
- Training and advising the Salvadoran armed forces
- Funding for civic-military programs meant to win “hearts and minds”

The U.S. trained thousands of Salvadoran soldiers, including many officers at the School of the Americas in Georgia (now called WHINSEC).

Unfortunately, some of these same units were later implicated in major human-rights violations — including the El Mozote massacre and the 1989 murders of six Jesuit priests.

Controversy and Domestic Debate

- U.S. involvement sparked fierce debate at home:
- Critics — church leaders, human-rights groups, and members of Congress — argued the U.S. was funding repression and death squads, not democracy.
- Supporters claimed it was necessary to stop communist expansion.

- The Reagan administration often downplayed reports of atrocities, insisting the Salvadoran government was improving its human-rights record — a claim later proven false.



Shift Toward Negotiation

- By the late 1980s, as the Cold War thawed and U.S. public opinion turned against prolonged involvement, Washington began pressing both sides for a negotiated peace.
- U.S. diplomats helped broker talks that led to the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords, marking the official end of the war.



Lasting Consequences

Migration:

- Hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans fled the violence during the 1980s — many to Los Angeles, Houston, and Washington, D.C.
- These refugee communities laid the foundation for today's large Salvadoran-American population (over 2 million people).

Violence's Legacy:

Many young Salvadorans in exile faced poverty and marginalization in the U.S., contributing to the rise of street gangs like MS-13 — which later spread back to Central America.

Politics and Memory:

- The war, and U.S. involvement in it, remain deeply controversial topics.
- In hindsight, many analysts say the U.S. could have achieved greater stability by promoting reform and justice, rather than primarily funding military repression.

The story of El Salvador after the civil war is one of fragile peace, political transformation, and deep social challenges.

Here's how the country evolved following the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords and how the former rebels and ruling elites reentered civilian life:



The Peace Accords and Transition (1992 – mid-1990s)

The Chapultepec Accords, signed in Mexico City in 1992, formally ended twelve years of civil war. They were brokered by the U.N. and guaranteed by several countries, including the U.S. and Spain.

Key outcomes included:

-  Cease-fire and demobilization of the FMLN guerrilla army.
-  Reduction and reform of the armed forces, including disbanding the notorious National Guard.
-  Creation of a new civilian National Police drawn from both sides.
-  Establishment of a Truth Commission, which documented more than 22,000 serious human-rights violations.

The Truth Commission concluded that the vast majority of abuses had been committed by government forces or associated death squads. However, a subsequent 1993 amnesty law shielded nearly all perpetrators — a major blow to justice that lasted for decades.

Political Transformation

- The peace accords transformed El Salvador into a multi-party democracy.
- The former guerrilla movement, the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), became a legal political party in 1992.
- The long-dominant right-wing party, ARENA (Nationalist Republican Alliance), retained control of the presidency through the 1990s and early 2000s.
- This created a two-party system that mirrored the divisions of the war:
- ARENA = conservative, pro-business, and U.S.-aligned.
- FMLN = leftist, reformist, representing the poor and unions.

FMLN in Power (2009 – 2019)

- After years in opposition, the FMLN finally won national elections:
- Mauricio Funes (2009 – 2014) became El Salvador's first FMLN president. A former journalist, he emphasized social programs and anti-poverty initiatives.
- Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2014 – 2019), a former guerrilla commander, succeeded him.
- Their governments expanded health and education programs but struggled with:

- Endemic corruption,
- Weak economic growth, and
- Escalating gang violence, which by the 2010s made El Salvador one of the world's most dangerous countries.

The Gang Crisis and Social Strain

The post-war demobilization left tens of thousands without jobs or support. Meanwhile, U.S. deportations in the 1990s sent many young Salvadorans — including members of MS-13 and Barrio 18 — back to the country. Gang violence and extortion crippled communities, prompting new waves of migration northward.

Governments alternated between “mano dura” (“iron-fist”) crackdowns and short-lived truces, but the root causes — poverty and inequality — persisted.

Rise of Nayib Bukele (2019 – Present)

In 2019, voters rejected both traditional parties.

Nayib Bukele, a young former mayor once allied with the FMLN but running as an independent populist, won in a landslide.

- He presented himself as a modernizer and anti-corruption reformer.
- His party, Nuevas Ideas, soon dominated the legislature.
- He launched massive public-works projects and an unprecedented crackdown on gangs, jailing over 75,000 people under emergency powers.

Supporters credit him with drastically reducing homicide rates and restoring public safety; critics warn that he's eroding democratic checks and civil liberties.

Bukele also made El Salvador the first country to adopt Bitcoin as legal tender (2021) — a bold but controversial experiment.

Legacy and Outlook

The civil war ended more than 30 years ago, yet its social scars remain: extreme inequality, distrust in institutions, and widespread emigration.

The FMLN, once a symbol of resistance, has largely faded as Bukele's movement reshapes politics.

Many Salvadorans today feel they've traded some democratic freedoms for security and stability — an echo of the old dilemma between order and justice.