

In El Salvador, “Iron Fist” is a Way of Life| El Faro

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It's strange that El Salvador is not a more peaceful country, given that so many Salvadorans claim to hold the key to ending the violence. If only criminals still had their hands cut off. If only more mothers still punished their children, made them kneel on mounds of hard grain until their knees bleed. If only there were a death penalty. We need to get the military out into the streets, they say; get the pregnant girls out of the schools; the gays out of everywhere. It seems that the secret to achieving peace in El Salvador is as simple as wielding a Mano Dura (“Firm Hand,” or “Iron Fist”)—as simple as having zero tolerance for anyone who breaks the rules.

On January 29, 2020, the Central American University's Institute of Public Opinion (Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública, or IUDOP) published the results of an opinion poll concerning the state of El Salvador 28 years after the signing of the Peace Accords (which, without minimizing their importance, offered little in the way of rebuilding the collective Salvadoran psyche). More than 80% of the representative sample of the population who were polled said they believe that “democracy is the best form of government.” Yet the poll also revealed an alarming level of popular support for government actions typical of authoritarian regimes—actions such as “sacrificing some rights” for the wellbeing of society, implementing Mano Dura policies, and excluding or eliminating people “who cause problems.” We tend to think of authoritarianism as something exercised exclusively by the government, but this kind of support for state action speaks to an authoritarian orientation among the citizenry as well.

To appreciate the seriousness of authoritarian attitudes among Salvadorans, beyond just the percentages, we need to understand what authoritarianism is. The study of the phenomenon emerged with the rise of fascism and World War II. A group of California-based researchers, known as the Berkeley group, proposed a series of nine traits that, they claimed, were constitutive of what they termed the “authoritarian personality.” These studies introduced the idea of an authoritarian syndrome, and over time more research and evidence have shown the ways in which authoritarianism is, of course, constructed culturally as well.

The profile describes a real gem of a person. Imagine someone conventional, which is to say, someone who adheres fervently to the rules. He tends to be as submissive to authority as he is aggressive toward those who deviate from social norms, while avoiding processing the world through his own subjectivity and engaging in self-reflection. He is superstitious, judges others based on stereotypes, and is drawn to power and arrogance, destructiveness and cynicism. He tends to project his own ideas onto other people and is unusually

interested in regulating other people's sex lives. These nine traits of the authoritarian personality are now understood as a group of three attitudes: authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism.

This profile reflects what we now call right-wing authoritarianism. Note that here, "right-wing" does not refer only to right-wing sympathizers, but instead takes on a more literal meaning: the state of being right, or correct, of adhering to the norms established by traditional authorities. Ultimately, authoritarianism emerges in contexts of intolerance, where discipline is seen as the most effective and valuable method of social education. A number of years ago, for example, in a study that applied the Salvadoran Right-wing Authoritarianism Scale, researchers found that eight out of every ten Salvadorans living in the San Salvador metropolitan area favor authoritarian child-rearing values.

Authoritarianism then is more than just a political orientation. Authoritarian attitudes permeate interpersonal life: child-rearing, religion, family structures, relationships with other people, who to love, who to kill. And they assume a dichotomy of good and evil, where any form of disobedience is seen as a threat. As a result of this black-and-white way of thinking, authoritarian personalities tend to be less creative, and thus have a limited understanding of identity—for example, men and women with authoritarian personalities both tend to adhere strictly to conventional gender roles.

Another serious outcome of authoritarian attitudes is the formation of an "us" that shields itself behind an imagined moral superiority. Classifying certain people as "good" can cause others to suffer harm. From the perspective of those in power, it is fortunate—though perhaps not fortuitous—when a good portion of the population also sees themselves as part of this "us." When this is the case, as the IUDOP report warns, if the authorities feel threatened in the face of criticism or accusation, they have the popular support of their followers, who are happy to back them up when they crack down on those who "cause problems for society."

The "us" of course needs its "them," and authoritarians keep these others—those who deviate from the norm—always in their sights. At the same time, authoritarians are incapable of observing and questioning their own actions, blinded by the certainty of their own moral superiority. All this, as the San Salvador population study cited above explains, leads to terrible crimes committed by "good people": the self-proclaimed good citizens who believe they have the moral right to act violently towards whoever they think deserves it. Thus, even if we take the gangs out of the equation, men and women in El Salvador still live in constant conflict, alternating between the role of victim and victimizer, sometimes even murdering each other over a piece of public street.

There is one last point—as relevant as it is counter-intuitive—to make about authoritarianism. Both the previously cited San Salvador-focused study, as well as a study

by Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) that looked at the perception of Mano Dura policies in the Americas, suggest that the perception of insecurity or the fear of being a victim of crime are not actually the most important factors in inspiring authoritarian attitudes. The LAPOP study, which looked at various Latin American countries, found that the strongest predictor of support for Mano Dura policies was the perception of corruption; in the San Salvador study, the fundamental predictor for authoritarian attitudes was anomie, or the gap between established social expectations or desires and the means people have to fulfill them. We lack the research to fully understand such relationships, but what these studies suggest is that authoritarian attitudes are connected both to social inequality and to state spectacles of corruption and the fight against it, which are largely disconnected from any actual crackdown on corruption.

What would be left of El Salvador if we got rid of authoritarianism? Maybe nothing, maybe a nice, peaceful country. To achieve the latter, we would need to transcend our narrow imaginations, interrogate the scripts that model our interpersonal lives, and ask hard questions about precisely those things we are told not to question. Alternatively, we could stay right where we are. If we ask for an accounting of the social gains brought about from the belt-whipping of little children or the militarization of public spaces, the excuse will be that Mano Dura hasn't worked because the hand hasn't been firm enough. In the authoritarian imaginary, if we do away with conventionalism, unquestionable authority, blind obedience, and zero-tolerance, the country will go to hell—as if El Salvador had not long ago already gone to hell precisely because of these things.