Country in Central America, bounded north and east by Honduras, south and southwest by the Pacific Ocean, and northwest by Guatemala.

**Government** El Salvador is a presidential democratic republic, with a multiparty system. The 1983 constitution, amended in 1985, provides for a president elected by universal suffrage for a five-year term, assisted by an appointed vice-president and a council of ministers. The presidential election is held on a fixed date every five years and if a candidate does not receive over 50% of the vote a run-off race is held 30 days later between the two candidates with the highest shares of the vote. There is a single-chamber legislature, the legislative assembly, which comprises 84 members, elected by universal suffrage for a three-year term under a proportional representation system: 64 from 14 multi-member seats and 20 from a national constituency.

**History** The original inhabitants of the area were Indians, who arrived from Mexico around 3000 BC. From the period of the Maya Indians, AD 100–1000, remain huge limestone pyramids built by them in western El Salvador. The Pipil Indians were in control of the area at the time of the Spanish conquest in 1525. El Salvador and other Central American Spanish colonies broke away from Spanish rule in 1811 and, after a decade of internal fighting, an Act of Independence of Central America was signed in 1821. It was part of the United Provinces of Central America between 1823 and 1838, when it became an independent republic.

**Power held by army and oligarchy** The history of El Salvador has been marked by a succession of military revolts, with periods of tyrannical rule, violence, and political assassinations. An effort to form a Greater Republic of Central America, with Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, failed in the 1890s. The economy became based on coffee production for export and economic and political power became concentrated in the hands of an oligarchy of a small number of coffee planters, who ruled with the military.

After relative stability from 1900, General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez ousted the centre-left President Arturo Araujo in a December 1931 military coup, and ruled until 1944. He brutally crushed an indigenous peasant uprising led by Augustín Farabundo Martín in 1932, and killed over 30,000 people in what became known as ‘the massacre’ (La Matanza).

**Military-backed PCN in power: 1962–79** Two political parties were formed in 1960: the conservative, military-backed National Conciliation Party (PCN) and the middle-class oriented Christian Democratic Party (PDC). After a military coup in 1961, the PCN won all the seats in the national assembly. It remained in power, with reports of widespread human-rights violations, until challenged in 1979 by a socialist guerrilla movement, the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN), which launched a civil war that lasted 12 years.

**Start of civil war** In October 1979, a civilian-military junta deposed President Carlos Humberto Romero of the PDC, in power since 1977. The junta nationalized some private companies and privately
owned land, but, with left-wing guerrillas active, the country descended into a civil war, lasting which lasted until 1992.

In 1980 the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, a champion of human rights, was shot dead in his cathedral. This, and the murder of three US nuns and a social worker, prompted the USA to suspend economic and military aid. Backed by the USA, the PDC’s exiled leader, José Napoleón Duarte, returned to become president, heading a right-of-centre coalition.

The conservative US administration of Ronald Reagan provided Duarte with substantial economic aid and helped train government troops from 1981, while the leftwing guerrillas received backing from Cuba and the USSR.

**PDC in power** The left-wing parties refused to participate in the 1982 legislative assembly elections, which were held amid great violence, with over 40 people being killed on election day. Duarte’s PDC won the largest number of assembly seats. However, a coalition of right-wing parties blocked Duarte’s continuation as president and he was replaced by a provisional chief executive, Álvaro Alfredo Magaña Borja, who was selected from a list of candidates acceptable to the military.

However, Duarte returned to power in 1984, after winning presidential elections held under a new constitution. He defeated Roberto d’Aubuisson, of the right-wing National Republican Alliance (ARENA), who was suspected of having links with the right-wing death squads which killed Archbishop Romero.

In 1984 President Duarte’s daughter was abducted by guerrillas, forcing him to negotiate with them, in the face of criticism from opposition parties and the military. However, in 1985 Duarte’s PDC won a comfortable victory in the legislative assembly elections, defeating ARENA and the PCN, who had fought on a joint platform.

Meanwhile, the guerrilla war continued, with peace talks brokered by the Contadora group collapsing in 1987.

**Peaceful transfer of power to Arena** The election in 1989 of Cristiani’s ARENA party saw El Salvador’s first peaceful transfer of power between elected civilian leaders, although there were allegations of ballot-rigging. Cristiani took a hard line against the FMLN rebels, and there were arrests of activists in trade-union, cooperative, and human-rights organizations, and a high level of ‘disappearances’. The guerrillas mounted a surprisingly effective offensive in the wealthy suburbs of San Salvador but subsequently agreed to peace talks. ARENA continued in power after 1991 general election when it gained a narrow majority of assembly seats.

**Peace accord signed to end the civil war** United Nations-sponsored talks in April 1991 between the government and the FMLN brought agreement to establish civilian control over the armed forces and reduce their size. This provided the basis for the signing in December 1991 of a peace agreement and cease-fire, which came into force in February 1992. This brought an end to a civil war which had claimed 75,000 lives, caused $2 billion of damage, wrecked agriculture, and led to mass emigration, particularly to the USA.

The FMLN transformed itself into a political party and the military was halved in size, banned from playing an internal security role, and purged of officers accused of human rights abuses. In 1993 UN-sponsored Truth Commission published evidence of human-rights violations by senior officials during the civil war. Those implicated were later cleared under a government amnesty, but President Cristiani
carried out a purge of senior military leaders.

**ARENA remains the dominant party and promotes economic liberalization** ARENA dominated the country's politics from 1989, but became more moderate, attracting business support, and its presidents followed more open, free-market economic policies. In June 2000, El Salvador entered, with its neighbours, a free-trade agreement with Mexico, and in January 2001 adopted the US dollar as its currency, phasing out the colon.

ARENA's candidate Armando Calderón Sol won the 1994 presidential election and he was succeeded in 1999 by Francisco Flores Pérez. The March 2000 assembly elections saw the FMLN displace ARENA as the largest party in Congress, but the FMLN fell short of an overall majority.

The FMLN's success was an indication that the economic reforms were not bringing significant improvements for the country's poor. And in October 2000, more than 2,000 protesters, armed with machetes and home-made bombs, held 500 government employees and legislators for several hours in the capital. The demonstrators, who were a mixture of ex-paramilitaries and peasants, demanded that President Flores make reforms to reduce poverty. Police responded by firing tear gas and the hostages were released after several hours.

**Earthquakes** A powerful earthquake, measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale, struck El Salvador on 13 January 2001, triggering landslides across the region. Over 1,000 people were killed. Over 800 aftershocks, some measuring 5 on the Richter scale, followed over the next two days. A second earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale followed exactly one month later, centred on San Vicente, 65 km/40 mi east of San Salvador. A further 300 people were killed, and over 1 million people, a sixth of the population, were now homeless.

**Victory for ARENA under Saca** The politically inexperienced former sports broadcaster and media tycoon, Antonio Saca, contested the March 2004 presidential election as ARENA's candidate and won a clear victory, with a record 58% of the vote. He embarked on a pro-business and pro-US programme, entering into a free-trade agreement with the USA and the Dominican Republic in March 2006.

**Left-wing FMLN in power** ARENA's candidate, Rodrigo Ávila, lost the March 2009 presidential elections to Mauricio Funes, a former journalist who was candidate for the FMLN. Funes won 51% of the first round vote to become El Salvador's first left-wing president, in June 2009.

President Funes re-established diplomatic relations with communist Cuba after a break of 50 years, and Venezuela, led until 2013 by the anti-American Hugo Chávez, grew in influence. However Funes, a former TV journalist who admired US president Barack Obama and Brazil's centre-left presidents Lula and Dilma Roussef, was an FMLN moderate. Also, the FMLN lacked an assembly majority and lost ground in the March 2012 assembly elections. This meant that President Funes followed a centre-left course, agreeing to retain the US dollar as the country's currency and to focus on improving health in rural areas, as well as a reduction in street gang violence, which claimed thousands of lives, through negotiating gang truces.

Vice-president Salvador Sanchez Ceren of the FMLN succeeded Funes as president, very narrowly defeating the Arena candidate, Norman Quijano, in the March 2014 presidential elections. Sanchez Ceren had been a commander in the FMLN during the 1979–92 civil war and so was the first former guerrilla to become president of El Salvador. On taking office in June 2014, he pledged to fight corruption and tackle a resurgence of violence by criminal gangs.
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