El Salvador

Ethnicity in El Salvador

Group selection

We identify two politically relevant ethnic groups in El Salvador: **Indigenous peoples** and **Whites/Mestizos**.

At first sight, this might seem counterintuitive in the case of El Salvador. According to the common myth, El Salvador is an ethnically homogenous country with no significant indigenous population left, "the most mestizo nation" as the country liked to call itself. This myth says that in the course of a 1932 rural upheaval, orchestrated by communist forces which "duped the Indians into rebellion", Salvadoran state forces and paramilitary troops brutally targeted the indigenous, killing several ten thousands. In the aftermath of this genocide-like massacre, commonly known as "la matanza", the indigenous ostensibly "disappeared" from Salvadoran society withdrawing into the forests, gradually losing their own distinct culture. Thus, they could not be regarded as truly indigenous anymore, as they lacked the key cultural practices, dress, language etc., typical to indigenous peoples ([1737], 13). Consequently, in 1958, the Salvadoran legislature declared that "in our country indigenous populations do not exist" ([1738], 20), and when it ratified international conventions on indigenous rights (such as the ILO convention 107) it was doing so "only on principle, because it had no such 'tribal' populations" ([1739], 27). Faithful to this widespread myth, Levinson ([1740], 349) writes that it is the Spanish heritage that is important for Salvadorans' ethnic identity, that the indigenous population was virtually eradicated in 1932, and that the remaining few thousands are assimilated into the mainstream society and do not uphold a distinct indigenous culture.

[1737] [Tilley, 2005]

[1738] [Tilley, 2005]

[1739] [Tilley, 2005]

[1740] [Levinson, 1998]

This vision of El Salvador, propped up by the memory of the "matanza", is a political narrative that does not reflect Salvadoran reality, nor its true politically relevant ethnic cleavages. Tilley's ([1741]) pioneering book on indigenous people in Salvador clearly rebuts the myth of the indigenous extinction so propitious to the country's self-image. The "matanza" is certainly a fact; In January 1932, a popular insurrection was launched in El Salvador's western coffee region attacking and occupying a number of towns. However, the government reacted swiftly, and within a few days sent in army troops to crush the inadequately armed and poorly organized rebellion, which was in fact an ethnic rebellion, "one of the last great

[1741] [Tilley, 2005]

Indian uprisings of the twentieth century" ([1742], 140). Tilley (140-154) also dismisses the idea that the communists had "duped" the indigenous into rebellion, the communists' position in those years was too weak, while the indigenous people's ambitions was rather ethnically based. The repression that followed was one of the bloodiest events in modern Latin American history. Local paramilitary forces led by ladino landowners took advantage of the situation to settle long-standing ethnic rivalries between ladinos and indigenous in the region. Tangible economic interests certainly played a crucial role. Targeted persecution of indigenous people which were "shot on sight" ([1743], 159), mass executions, looting and killing by ladino civil patrols during weeks were the key components of an ethnic vengeance endeavor amounting to a project of genocide ([1744], 154-64). To be more precise, the government and ladino society responded to the death of about 35 ladinos during the uprising with the killing of over 30'000 indigenous people ([1745]). These very events later gave birth to the myth of the indigenous "extinction": that the indigenous people, terrified by the mass killings, fearfully abandoned their ethnic identity in order to escape the violence ([1746], 138, 168).

[1742] [Tilley, 2005]

[1743] [Tilley, 2005]

[1744] [Tilley, 2005]

[1745] [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

[1746] [Tilley, 2005]

The reality is somewhat different. The immediate economic consequence of the "matanza" was a dramatic, sometimes state-driven land "transfer" from indigenous into ladino hands ([1747], 164-7). Politically, it did signify the beginning of the social removal of indigenous people in El Salvador. However, not quite in the manner the common belief holds. Interestingly, in the decades after the "matanza", the Salvadoran state suddenly dropped racial categories from the census and the civil registry replacing indigenous identity by a generic peasant identity and deliberately introducing the new "racial" concept of mestizo ([1748], 31, 173, 178-81). But birth registries up to 1950 make one thing clear: the indigenous people did not just disappear following the "matanza". Their number remained even more or less stable ([1749], 181-6). In fact, the indigenous "disappearance" was a deliberate administrative policy pursued by the Salvadoran state pursuing strategic political interests ([1750], 186-8): It served to reject any ethnic demand and to maintain the existing system of racial inequality. Indeed, together with Guatemala, El Salvador exhibited the most exploitative and coercive rural class structure in the post-World War II period, not only but especially towards the indigenous groups ([1751], 256).

[1747] [Tilley, 2005]

[1748] [Tilley, 2005]

[1749] [Tilley, 2005]

[1750] [Tilley, 2005]

[1751] [Brockett, 1991]

Having fabricated this myth of indigenous disappearance after the "matanza" itself, the Salvadoran state subsequently drew on it in order to deny the existence of any real indigenous people in the country in later decades. This denial freed the state and the dominant society from redressing the "matanza" and freed them from any collective guilt. Moreover, it de-legitimized any political claim of ethnic/racial injustice or oppression ([1752], 16, 25, 60). The "matanza" served to shore up the country's international image as a truly mestizo nation. Salvador's progress was not to be hindered by a poverty-stricken, racially inferior indigenous population ([1753], 23, 31). Thus,

[1752] [Tilley, 2005]

[1753] [Tilley, 2005]

both domestic and international motives led the Salvadoran state to "orchestrate the Indians' official erasure" and to "naturalize the Indians' disappearance as a central point of distinction for the national identity" ([1754], 25). Under these conditions, with an official state policy of denial of their very existence, El Salvador's indigenous people are coded as discriminated.

[1754] [Tilley, 2005]

The turning point in the country's ethno-political history came at the beginning of the 1990s. A broader indigenous movement emerged in the early years of the decade. The oldest indigenous organization in El Salvador is ANIS (Associacion Nacional Indigena Salvadorena) , founded (probably) in 1965. At the beginnings of the 1990s, splits occurred in the movement and a series of new indigenous organizations were born ([1755], 37-41). Even more importantly, under international pressures for greater recognition of indigenous rights and in the context of a changing international environment increasingly concerned with ethnic pluralism, all of a sudden the Salvadoran state began to adapt its indigenist rhetoric. Indigeneity now became a celebrated component of the once completely homogeneous nation. In 1991, the National Council for Culture and Arts (CONCULTURA) was established, a state agency concerned with rediscovering the country's indigenous roots. In 1994, with the creation of CONCULTURA's Office of Indigenous Affairs, the revivalist effort began to include the present-day indigenous population, even recognizing a few indigenous movement organizations. However, these gestures remained within very narrow political confines, and the relevant state policies still followed the "no Indians" doctrine ([1756], 32-4). Also, indigenous people still constitute the poorest strata of society, their living conditions being clearly below those of the non-indigenous rural poor ([1757]).

[1755] [Tilley, 2005]

[1756] [Tilley, 2005]

[1757] [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

A final point needs to be addressed with regards to the coding and naming of the ethnic categories used. Salvador's indigenous population is mainly composed of two different groups with distinctive cultures and a separate political history, namely the **Nahua (Pipiles)**, living in the western coffee highlands and the southwestern coastal region, and the **Lenca** located in the northeast ([1758], 35). We combine these two distinct groups into one umbrella group of "Indigenous peoples" given that they were discriminated (regardless of their precise ethnic identity) by the state who excluded them since 1946 from being officially recognized in the Salvadorian society because of their identity. Similarly, political mobilization and emerging state recognition since the beginning of the 1990s has occurred on the basis of the eclectic racial category of "indigenous". Tilley ([1759], 36-7) maintains that Salvador's indigenous people - contrary to the widespread perception - do uphold certain traditional cultural practices, values, visions and even organizational features (the characteristic Nahua dress, the religious "cofradía" brotherhoods etc.), and that ethnic divisions between ladinos and indigenous remain very much alive. Also, (self-)identification as indigenous and ladino is possible and occurs based on customs, behavior, and appearance

[1758] [Tilley, 2005]

[1759] [Tilley, 2005]

presumably connected to "blood" and descent ([1760], 56-8).

The size of this indigenous population is an issue of heated debate in itself. Estimates range from 2% (Salvadoran government) to 45% (ANIS). The most reasonable figure might be Mac Chapin's estimate of 10% in 1990 (all figures cited in [1761], 171), which is the amount used in this coding. (Fact is that a summary of all sources up to 1927 shows a flattening out of the indigenous population decline after independence and suggests an indigenous population of about 20% in the 1920s ([1762], 172).)

Accordingly, mestizos and whites - in line with the common practice in EPR labeled Salvadorans here - make up 90% of the population. They have always held a monopoly of political power and are coded here as such.

[1760] [Tilley, 2005]

[1761] [Tilley, 2005]

[1762] [Tilley, 2005]

Power relations

1946-1994

The era of repression described above dominates the period from 1946 through 1994. Indigenous peoples were clearly discriminated, so that we code their political status as such, whereas Whites/Mestizos held a monopoly on power.

1995-2021

The Salvadoran state's handling of the indigenous question has noticeably changed beginning in the mid-1990s from an official state policy of denial to one of social and political neglect without any targeted actions of political exclusion (a state behavior towards ethnic minorities that can be found in other Latin American countries as well) ([1763], 32-3). Thus, from 1995 on the indigenous people are coded as "powerless". According to Van Cott ([1764], 132) the situation of the indigenous people in El Salvador today is comparable to that of Chile's or Guyana's indigenous population, all three countries being placed by her in the lowest category as regards indigenous rights and autonomy.

This state of affairs remains unchanged through 2017 ([1765]; [1766]; [1767]; [1768]; [1769]; [1770]: 18). Indigenous people are still refused entitlement to ancestral territories, and suffer from pronounced poverty and widespread socio-economic discrimination. Their political leverage at both the national and regional levels remains absolutely marginal. However, some incidents are noteworthy. The U.S. State Department Human Rights Report from 2011 ([1771]) states that on July 6 of that year, the municipality of Nahuizalco "enacted the first municipal law in El Salvador recognizing the origin and existence of indigenous persons and their right to practice their customs and beliefs and outlawing all forms of discrimination." On April 25, 2012, according to the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report from that year, "the Legislative Assembly passed a constitutional reform recognizing the existence and the rights of indigenous peoples."

[1763] [Tilley, 2005]

[1764] [Van Cott, 2007]

[1765] [Freedom House, 2013]

[1766] [U.S. State Department, 2009–2013]

[1767] [Bertelsmann, 2003, 2006; 2008, & 2010]

[1768] [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

[1769] [Freedom House, 2017]

[1770] [USDS, 2016]

[1771] [U.S. State Department, 2009–2013]

According to the same source, 99% of all indigenous people in the country live below the poverty level. In 2014 the constitution was amended to officially recognize the rights of indigenous peoples in El Salvador and to adopt policies that support their culture as well as respect their language ([1772]; [1773]: 21 ; [1774]: 27). However, there has been no demarcation in favor of indigenous communities and no right to any share of revenue from exploitation of natural resources on their lands is guaranteed ([1775]: 27). Indigenous peoples in El Salvador still face drastic poverty and socio-economic discrimination and are not represented in national or regional politics ([1776]; [1777]: 18).

[1772] [Freedom House, 2017]
[1773] [USDS, 2014]
[1774] [USDS, 2016]
[1775] [USDS, 2016]
[1776] [Freedom House, 2017]
[1777] [USDS, 2016]

Presidential elections took place in 2019, where voters elected Nayib Bukele as president for a five-year term ([1778]). According to international observers the election was in general free and fair. Legislative elections also took place in 2018. That being said, there is still no indigenous representatives in the legislature up to this date and these communities continue to suffer from racial discrimination, economic disadvantages and land demarcations remains unsolved. Nevertheless, in 2021 running candidates have started to pay more attention to the rights of indigenous people by publicly promising to promote their rights at the legislative level if elected ([1779]).

[1778] [Freedom House, 2020]
[1779] [SWI, 2021]

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Political status of ethnic groups in E

From 1946 until 1994

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.9	MONOPOLY
Indigenous peoples	0.1	DISCRIMINATED

Figure 330: Political status of ethnic groups in El Salvador during 1946-1994.

From 1995 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.9	MONOPOLY
Indigenous peoples	0.1	POWERLESS

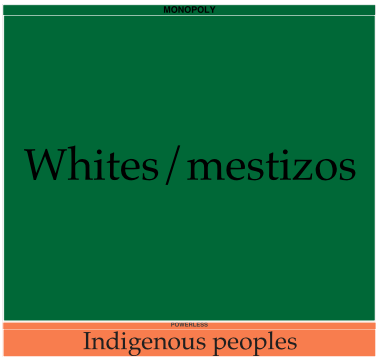

Figure 331: Political status of ethnic groups in El Salvador during 1995-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in El Salvador

From 1946 until 2021

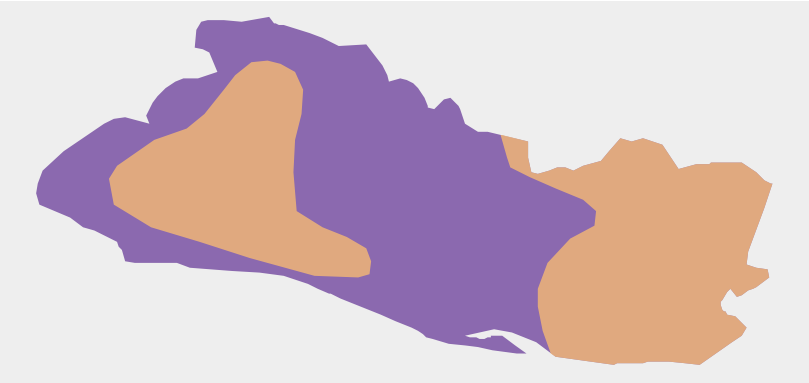

Figure 332: Map of ethnic groups in El Salvador during 1946-2021.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
	Whites/mestizos	20 552	Statewide
	Indigenous peoples	9832	Regionally based

Table 116: List of ethnic groups in El Salvador during 1946-2021.

Conflicts in El Salvador

Starting on 1969-07-02

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of El Salvador	Government of Honduras		1969-07-02			

Starting on 1972-03-24

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of El Salvador	Military faction (forces of Benjamin Mejia)		1972-03-24			
Government of El Salvador	ERP		1973-03-01			
Government of El Salvador	FPL		1977-05-10			
Government of El Salvador	FMLN		1980-05-17			