

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 (¹⁴⁶⁵, 13). Consequently, in 1958, the Salvadoran legislature declared that “in our country indigenous populations do not exist” (cited in ¹⁴⁶⁶, 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” (¹⁴⁶⁷, 27). Faithful to this widespread myth, Levinson (¹⁴⁶⁸, 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.

¹⁴⁶⁵ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁶⁶ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁶⁷ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁶⁸ [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 (¹⁴⁶⁹) 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 Salvador’s western coffee region attacking and occupying a number of towns. However, the government reacted swiftly, and within a few days they sent in army troops to crush the poorly armed and poorly organized rebellion – which was in fact an ethnic rebellion, “one of the last great

¹⁴⁶⁹ [Tilley, 2005]

Indian uprisings of the twentieth century" (¹⁴⁷⁰, 140). Tilley (140-154) also dismisses the idea that the communists had "duped" the indigenous into rebellion, the communists' position in those years being too weak and the indigenous people's ambitions being rather ethnically based). The repression that followed was one of the bloodiest events in modern Latin American history: More than the army, 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 role in that, too. Targeted persecution of indigenous people which were "shot on sight" (¹⁴⁷¹, 159), mass executions, looting and killing by ladino civil patrols during weeks were the ingredients of an ethnic vengeance endeavor amounting to a project of genocide (¹⁴⁷², 154-64). Basically, 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 (¹⁴⁷³). 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 (¹⁴⁷⁴, 138, 168).

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 (¹⁴⁷⁵, 164-7). Politically, it did signify the beginning of the social erasure of the indigenous 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 (¹⁴⁷⁶, 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 (¹⁴⁷⁷, 181-6). In fact, the indigenous "disappearance" was a deliberate administrative policy pursued by the Salvadoran state following strategic political interests (¹⁴⁷⁸, 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 concerning the indigenous population (¹⁴⁷⁹, 256).

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", freed them from any collective guilt. And it de-legitimized any political claim of ethnic/racial injustice or oppression (¹⁴⁸⁰, 16, 25, 60). The "matanza" served to shore up the country's international image as a truly mestizo, i.e. modern and civilized, nation. Salvador's progress was not to be hindered by a poverty-stricken, racially inferior indigenous popu-

¹⁴⁷⁰ [Tilley, 2005]¹⁴⁷¹ [Tilley, 2005]¹⁴⁷² [Tilley, 2005]¹⁴⁷³ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]¹⁴⁷⁵ [Tilley, 2005]¹⁴⁷⁶ [Tilley, 2005]¹⁴⁷⁷ [Tilley, 2005]¹⁴⁷⁸ [Tilley, 2005]¹⁴⁷⁹ [Brockett, 1991]¹⁴⁸⁰ [Tilley, 2005]

lation (¹⁴⁸¹, 23, 31). Thus, 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” (¹⁴⁸², 25). Under these conditions, with an official state policy of denial of their very existence, El Salvador’s indigenous people have to be coded as “discriminated”.

¹⁴⁸¹ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁸² [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, founded (probably) in 1965. At the beginnings of the 1990s, splits occurred in the movement and a series of new indigenous organizations were born (¹⁴⁸³, 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 homogenous” 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 (¹⁴⁸⁴, 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 (¹⁴⁸⁵).

¹⁴⁸³ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁸⁴ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁸⁵ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

A final point needs to address the coding and naming of the ethnic categories used in the above table. Salvador’s indigenous population is mainly composed of two different groups with distinctive cultures and a separate political history: the Nahua (Pipiles), living in the western coffee highlands and the southwestern coastal region, and the Lenca located in the northeast (¹⁴⁸⁶, 35). I combine these two distinct groups into one “umbrella” group of “Indigenous peoples” because they were discriminated as indigenous (regardless of their precise ethnic identity) during most of the time since 1946 by a state that excluded them from the officially recognized society precisely because of being indigenous. 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 (¹⁴⁸⁷, 36-7) shows 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 presumably connected to “blood” and descent (¹⁴⁸⁸, 56-8).

¹⁴⁸⁶ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁸⁷ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁸⁸ [Tilley, 2005]

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 ¹⁴⁸⁹, 171), which is the number I will use 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 (¹⁴⁹⁰, 172).)

¹⁴⁸⁹ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁹⁰ [Tilley, 2005]

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.

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.

1995-2017

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) (¹⁴⁹¹, 32-3). Thus, from 1995 on the indigenous people are coded as "powerless". According to Van Cott (¹⁴⁹², 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.

¹⁴⁹¹ [Tilley, 2005]

¹⁴⁹² [Van Cott, 2007]

This state of affairs remains unchanged through 2017 (¹⁴⁹³; ¹⁴⁹⁴; ¹⁴⁹⁵; ¹⁴⁹⁶; ¹⁴⁹⁷; ¹⁴⁹⁸: 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 (¹⁴⁹⁹) 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." According to the same source, 99% of all indigenous people in the

¹⁴⁹³ [Freedom House, 2013]

¹⁴⁹⁴ [U.S. State Department, 2009-2013]

¹⁴⁹⁵ [Bertelsmann, 2003, 2006; 2008, 2010]

¹⁴⁹⁶ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

¹⁴⁹⁷ [Freedom House, 2017]

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 (¹⁵⁰⁰; ¹⁵⁰¹: 21 ; ¹⁵⁰²: 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 (¹⁵⁰³: 27). Indigenous peoples in El Salvador still face drastic poverty and socio-economic discrimination and are not represented in national or regional politics (¹⁵⁰⁴; ¹⁵⁰⁵: 18).

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Political status of ethnic groups in El Salvador

From 1946 until 1994

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

From 1995 until 2017

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

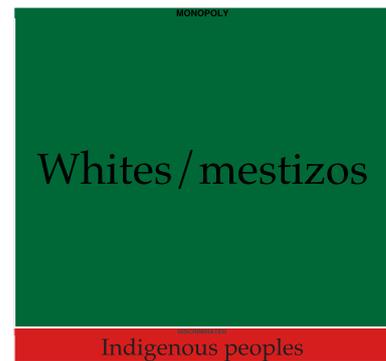


Figure 281: Political status of ethnic groups in El Salvador during 1946-1994.

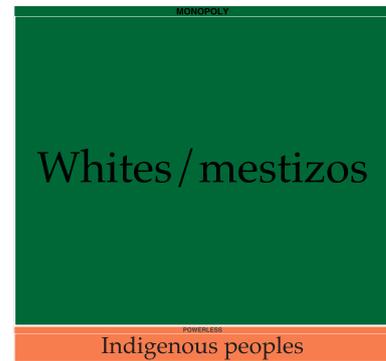


Figure 282: Political status of ethnic groups in El Salvador during 1995-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in El Salvador

From 1946 until 2017



Figure 283: Map of ethnic groups in El Salvador during 1946-2017.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Whites/mestizos	20 629	Statewide
Indigenous peoples	9869	Regionally based

Table 92: List of ethnic groups in El Salvador during 1946-2017.

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			