

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

LATIN AMERICA AFTER COVID-19:
A CONVERSATION WITH OAS SECRETARY GENERAL LUIS ALMAGRO

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Welcome Remarks:

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. ALLEN: Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. My name is John Allen. I'm the president of the Brookings Institution. And it is with great pleasure that I welcome everyone today to this important discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on Latin America, and the challenges and the opportunities that lie ahead as the region begins to reopen to the world.

We are deeply honored to be joined today by the Organization of American States Secretary General Luis Almagro. Who was reelected to his second term. Congratulations, sir, as the secretary general this past march. And who remains an absolutely crucial leader and advocate of democracy and human rights.

Now, unfortunately, as with so much of the world in this extraordinarily difficult moment, the advent of COVID-19 has introduced major challenges to the OAS's mission as a regional organization. For as much as COVID-19 has affected the world, Latin America has sadly quickly become an epicenter of the virus having lost over 75,000 precious lives thus far. The region now accounts for roughly 45 percent of the average daily global deaths despite the population being only 8.5 percent of the world.

In turn, what appears to be an exhaustive cycle of cause and effect, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to worsen and be worsened by Latin America's longstanding vulnerabilities. Indeed, long before COVID-19, much of Latin America was mired and suffered from issues of poverty rates, extreme social inequality, poorly resourced health care systems, and at times, political turmoil. Last year alone saw the rise of one of the worst humanitarian crisis in recent memory as Venezuelans fled en masse to find refuge from their country.

Now, amidst the COVID-19 crisis, which has taken more than 450,000 lives globally, these economic, social, and political issues seem to only magnify, often at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of people of the region. As numbers and cases continue to rise, we must then ask ourselves what Latin America can do, not only to contain the outbreak, but also to prevent the pandemic from leaving long lasting irreconcilable scars, especially as the region struggles to reopen and to seek long-term recovery.

Moreover, we must also ask what the U.S. and other nations can do to help, especially in

a time when global cooperation remains essential, but is frequently lacking. I have no doubt that organizations like the OAS will be at the forefront of answering such questions. And as much as there are challenges ahead, I am confident that you, Mr. Secretary General, and your team, will rise to meet them.

Now, today's conversation will be moderated by Brookings Senior Fellow and my good friend Dany Behar. Dany, alongside other scholars from across the institution, have been at the forefront of Brookings' institutional commitment to reopening America and the world in the safest and most efficient way possible.

Last week, we were proud to launch the second part of the reopening America and the world effort here at Brookings, which examined lessons learned from the global community in the wake of COVID-19. In the coming months, we look forward to contributing a substantial effort looking at a blueprint for long-term recovery and renewal of our societies.

So, with that a quick reminder, ladies and gentlemen, that we're recording and streaming this session live today. And should you like to ask any questions throughout the event, please feel free to submit them by emailing events@brookings.edu. That's events@brookings.edu or on Twitter using #LatinAmericaCOVID. Twitter using #LatinAmericaCOVID.

So, now, let me turn the floor over to my colleague and dear friend Dany Bahar. Over to you, sir. You're muted, Dany.

MR. BEHAR: Hello everyone. Welcome to Brookings. Thank you very much, John, for your remarks and your leadership. My name is Danny Behar. I'm a senior fellow in our Global Economy and Development Program here at Brookings. And I'm really humbled and honored to be moderating our discussion today with our very special guest the Secretary General of the OAS Luis Almagro. And, Secretary General, it's really a pleasure to have you with us today.

Everybody know very well the secretary general, but I think I do want to take a minute to acknowledge really his extensive career in public service. He's a career diplomat from Uruguay. Secretary General Almagro was his country's foreign minister between 2010 and 2016. By the way, that's a position that is now held, incidentally, by a former Brookings scholar and director for the Latin American Initiative, Ernesto Talvi.

And under Almagro's tenure as foreign minister, Uruguay set a new record for exports year after year, took in former prisoners from Guantanamo, granted asylum to dozens of Syrian families who were victims of their country's civil war. Almagro was also ambassador to China for three years. And he occupied other senior diplomatic posts in his country's foreign ministry in embassies like in Germany and Iran. The secretary general became -- took the lead of the OAS in 2016, and on March 20th of this year, he was reelected for a second term by a majority of the OAS member states.

Secretary General Almagro has tirelessly prioritized the defense of democracy and human rights, both in his words and actions through multi-lateral diplomacy predicated on principles. An example is the case of Venezuela, the country where I was born and raised, where he has pressed for the enforcement of the inter-American democratic charter. And has fully supported the democratic actors trying to peacefully restore democracy to the country.

Almagro has also played an instrumental role in the search for solutions to the crisis in Nicaragua. He has put the struggle to restore democracy in Cuba at the very top of the regional agenda. He has increased OAS support for the mission to support the peace process in Colombia. He drove the creation of the mission to support the fight against corruption and impunity in Honduras. And as importantly, he has reinvigorated and expanded the OAS Electoral Observation Missions. The latest one, I think, was in Surinam, just a few weeks ago.

Almagro has played a key role in ensuring elections in Haiti, mediated the migrant crisis between Dominican Republic and Haiti. And I know for a fact that, of course, we all know that he has actually set up a new office, a recently new office in the OAS, fully devoted to create the basis for a regional consensus on the Venezuela migrant and refugee crisis, which is one of the largest refugee crisis we know of in modern history.

And I know that here's an issue that has been really close to the secretary general's heart. We all remember, actually, those moving pictures. I remember them very well of his visit to the Venezuelan-Colombian border where a U.S. secretary general, actually, consoled one-on-one many of these Venezuelan refugees who were in tears. And I think this is a testament of your humanity and compassion.

So, we really cannot be more honored to be joined today by Secretary General Luis

Almagro from whom we would like to know more about his vision for his second term as the head of the OAS, and the challenges ahead, many of which John Allen, the president of Brookings just referred to.

So, Mr. Secretary General Almagro, welcome to Brookings. And I'd like to give you the stage, maybe, to address some of the main things that are on your mind now as you start your second term. And, again, thank you for joining us.

MR. ALMAGRO: Thank you very much, Dany. And I'm very pleased to be with you. Good morning, everyone. I am pleased to be here with you today. John Allen, my thanks to you and to the esteemed Brookings Institution for the invitation. Dany, I look forward to our discussion. And, of course, I was chatting some minutes ago with Ernesto Talvi, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uruguay. He sends all of your best regards. He has very pleasant memories of his work at the institute.

Five years ago, when I was first sworn in as secretary general of the Organization of American States, I made the theme, More Rights for More People. The raison d'etre of the organization. I made the promise that it was incumbent on us in the hemisphere to achieve greater equality for the people. I am proud to say that in my first term, we, as an organization, have taken important steps in the organization of this institution to meet the demands of the 21st Century.

This is where we addressed the most important issues and challenges facing our community, and we have restored the OAS to its place as the hemisphere premier political forum. We have made important steps in advancing and protecting the rights of the people of the Americas. We have implemented the OAS first institution on policy and gender equality, diversity, and human rights. We took the important and urgent steps to support regional adaptation to climate change, main framing disaster management across all OAS projects and problems. Our member states have adopted the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. And our leaders unanimously agreed to the Lima Commitment on the Democratic Governance Against Corruption.

We have worked diligently to strengthen our organization as a vital instrument for development in the region taking a leadership role in building consensus for development policies. We identified and made important progress on key areas of action including the promotion of inclusive and competitive economies. Support and implementation of sustainable development goals. Promoting education and human development, dignified work, fostering development, cooperation, and partnerships,

and thicken our support for small and medium enterprises.

Amidst this effort to further strengthen the consolidation of democracy and human rights in our region, we also found ourselves tested in ways that this organization and our hemisphere had thought were long behind us. Devastating impacts of the Maduro regime's elimination of democracy in Venezuela has reverberated throughout the region. Rampant corruption and criminal mismanagement by Maduro and his cronies desperate to cling to power has created an unprecedented humanitarian crisis that has forced more than 5 million people to flee their homes in search of food, healthcare, and personal security for their very survival.

As a region, we can be proud of our efforts to welcome and shelter Venezuelans who are fleeing for their lives. Especially as it comes at a time when our economies, healthcare system, and social services are already under significant distress. But the harsh reality is that this compassion has come late. And well after the crisis has reached the scale that demands our response, well beyond already stretched capacities and resources of Venezuela and neighboring countries.

The crisis needs more than empathy. It needs more than statements of concern. It requires meaningful action to back up these words. Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, we have seen the high cost of corruption and autocracy. The cost of allowing a criminal state to consolidate itself in our region. The price of inaction is being paid by the innocent people forced to leave under these regimes. The Cuban playbook to weaken democracy in our hemisphere serves no one but the corrupt autocrats who profit from this chaos and suffering.

It was only a few short years ago that this hemisphere proudly declared southern hemisphere of democracies. The resurgence of tyranny in our hemisphere is a sobering reminder of the extreme diligence we all must have in the fight for democracy and human rights. This is why it is ever more urgent to restore our faith in democracy as the ideal political system for our hemisphere without exception.

Yes, we need to return to an approach of consensus building. But that consensus must be on the values and principles of which this organization is founded. We must revitalize the consensus on the rule of law, our consensus of human security and our consensus to do more to improve the well-being for all people of the Americas. Our work to eliminate dictatorships and authoritarianism in our

hemisphere must continue.

As I begin my second term, the world is overshadowed by a new crisis, the global pandemic of the coronavirus. The world was not prepared at all, nor did we predict the scale of the COVID-19 crisis or the impact it could have on each of the OAS key pillars of democracy, human rights, security, and development. This crisis has been a test on all these points. It has led our vulnerabilities bare. Puts to the test, not only our communities and our economies, but also the very functioning of our institutions and our political systems.

As Latin America becomes one of the latest epicenters of the crisis, we must remain focused on the human dimension and build a holistic approach to respond to and take care of each person while preventing the further spread of the disease. As an institution, we have been forced to adapt quickly to a new way of operating in a safer working environment while ensuring that the vital work of this organization continues.

As a multilateral body, we have been quick to leverage our platform for greater coordination and between the states for sharing best practices and models for a successful response. This pandemic more than anything is a stark reminder that many of the challenges facing the world today are not confined by borders and require an international response. It is an important reminder of the central role (inaudible) play in our modern globalized world. The approach we take in addressing the region key structural challenges including how we treat our society's most vulnerable people, how we tackle poverty and inequality, as well as our democratic consolidation and our commitment to separation of power is more important than ever.

We are already starting to see the corresponding economic impact of this crisis. Already suffering from the drop in oil prices both the OECD and the IMF have predicted a drop in the region economic growth. Caribbean member states have lost their expected economic growth and now are looking at 30 percent contractions. This reality will significantly impact the ability of the region to not only respond to the crisis, but will also undermine our capacity to respond to other challenges already facing the region, including the instability that the collapse of dictatorships has brought.

As an institution, based on hemispheric cooperation and solidarity, our work is laid out for us and unity is key. We cannot afford to allow ourselves to engage in petty partisan battles. We must

stay focused on the principles that present the ideology, working on sustainable development by strengthening our democratic institutions to increase transparency and accountability. We must take seriously our fight against the scourge of corruption and seek to rot our system from the inside out. We need to demand leadership from global financial institutions from the G7 and the G20 to work real and sustainable financial solutions for development in the hemisphere.

We need to focus on the elements that will help transform our societies. We need a greater commitment to location and a more radically feminist OAS. We need to work together to ensure our countries have food security, access to healthcare and medicine, and that the main framing of our human rights becomes the norm.

As I conclude my initial comments, I will come back full circle to the beginning. More rights for more people can no longer seem (inaudible) a theme or a goal. We make this promise a reality for all people of the Americas. Thank you very much, Dany. Thank you all.

MR. BAHAR: Thank you, very much Secretary General. You've covered a lot of the ground of things I wanted to ask, but I will, you know, I will actually follow-up on the pandemic, right? Because that's, of course, one of the things that has kept you very busy in the past few weeks and months. And, of course, as John said at the beginning, by most measures, Latin America, the region is the new epicenter of this pandemic and it looks like things are getting worse, unfortunately.

So, Brazil has, I think, the last numbers were above 70,000 people who have died from this pandemic, almost 80,000. And in contrast, like Chile and Mexico, the trends are going up and, you know, this doesn't distinguish between party lines or political ideologies. It seems like to be very present.

So, you know, I just want to think -- I guess, the big questions, some of them actually came also from the audience, from our journalism audience. It's like what can the inter-American system do now? It seems like some of the trends we've seen in the world in the past few months is that countries have moved more to have leave aside, to some extent, the multilateralism, trying to deal with this crisis on their own. And, you know, you standing at the head of the OAS, I wonder what message do you have to the people and to the leaders of what -- how can this be achieved better if we worked together through the multilateral system?

MR. ALMAGRO: Yes, in fact, some -- most of these regions have been planned in a

national way and practically every country has adopted different measures according to what they feel was necessary -- they felt it was necessary for each country. And, of course, all those measures were different with we have some countries where we had very drastic measures implemented from the very beginning. And we had some countries that opted for a more gradual approach, and countries that opted for a very gradual approach. And you see that, of course, when you are facing this pandemic, nobody is completely satisfied with what has been achieved because, of course, everything has been done at certain costs. Costs, of course, the most dearest of -- the dearest of them all, human lives. But also social costs, economic costs, production costs. We have costs all across.

But there are examples of solidarity. And, for example, reparation of nationalists. And it's something that has been done and it has -- and the network has worked completely in a reasonable way very well. We have faced some challenges also to assure transparency in public purchases these days. I mean, the health sector is -- not in this hemisphere, but worldwide, it's the most corrupt sector that exists. And cost \$500 billion per year worldwide. Now, that the costs and expenses are concentrated there, it is necessary to assure transparencies, necessary to assure mechanisms to fight corruption, and to have a better result that the money it will be well spent.

We have done that. We have also promoted some measures of coordination with us, the general secretariat coordinates the joint group of summits that puts together something like 14 international organizations including the international financial institutions. We have passed the messages that we have said here that it's necessary more flexibility, more flexibility for countries in order to pay their debts. More debts, more flexibility for countries in order to obtain new loans. New flexibility for countries in order to reassign the loans that they received before. So, we still have been working on that.

We applaud the coordination between ICA (phonetic) and the Inter-American Development Bank for to assure food security in the hemisphere. Somehow appear after some meetings when we have received this interest and a need from our countries. We are the hemisphere that produces more food in the world. Nevertheless, we have very strong vulnerabilities that needs to be addressed. And populations that have to be taken care.

We have practically, we have been working in trying to promote better understanding

across borders and beyond boundaries, which have done a lot of the specific works related to that mainly at taking care and attending requests from the different countries.

So, a lot --

MR. BAHAR: Right.

MR. ALMAGRO: -- has been done and a lot will have to be done. And a lot of these problems even about what works better for the health systems and what works better to assure food security and what is better to assure security and what is better to assure our strong recovery of the economy as soon as possible. All that in fact, is based on that our democracies work better and that our democratic institutions work better. And that our democratic institutions are more efficient. And that is definitely part of the work of the organization.

And definitely this solution will never -- cannot be a partial solution. Never. It doesn't have any sense for example, when the vaccine is discovered that we vaccinate half of the world or we vaccinate half of the hemisphere. It's unthinkable. It's irrational. So, everything will have to be a global solution and a very extended solution reaching practically everybody in every society.

MR. BAHAR: Right. Thank you for that because I think one of the issues that it's clear from this crisis, is that Latin America and the Caribbean are countries that have, you know, started this crisis with a lot of vulnerabilities in certain populations in particular like indigenous populations or, of course, the poor. And, you know, it's a region plagued with high poverty rates, huge inequality, large employment markets, but specially, and that's why I may want to go back to one of the things you said, little fiscal space.

You know, you have a huge disparity in countries like Peru, you know, they actually were able to put forward a very strong package to help the poorest of the poor in terms of their like, you know, the government was able to find the resources it needed to put space. Some people claimed that more is going to be needed, of course, but there's some other countries that in a much worse position, right? So, you talked a little bit about these, but I wonder if you can expand maybe on how, you know, whether you see here a solution to go and look for that funding as a group together in a multi-lateral sense as opposed to each -- every country fighting for the resources, which is, of course, to some extent what has been happening in the world today.

MR. ALMAGRO: Yeah, I share your concerns and your opinions. And it is quite natural that these financial solutions in the future will have to come from donor countries and from financial institutions. We will have something like 40 to 60 million more poor. We will have 13 million more people is extreme poverty. So, it's definitely not something that we cannot raise by ourselves. It is not something that we'll be able to do it with our resources, financial resources, with our productive systems. That it will be definitely needed some -- a lot of foreign aid in order to resolve these matters. If not, it will be unthinkable. I image the economic recovery will be faster and easier for those that they have the possibility of financial -- better financial accumulation. That they have the possibilities of better technology capacities and more prepared human resources.

In our hemisphere, we have some difficulties in order to make these financial accumulation. We are far behind in our technological development and we are -- I'm talking about Latin America and Caribbean countries. And we are people that are very eager to work, but nevertheless, our human resources some of them are not -- they have not had the capacity building that will help in order to bring back a new level of production.

So, all that will have to be assisted somehow by donor countries, financial institutions, international organizations. And all that will have to be delivered because our response will be extremely necessary after this. And we'll have to share a lot more of our capacities as international organizations and to deliver to the needs of the countries. And that is a moral imperative these days. And will be definitely a much more moral imperative in the days to come.

MR. BAHAR: Right. Secretary General, you know, there's many analysts out there that are looking at the world as a whole, they're worried that this pandemic has created an opportunity to leaders in the world to actually weaken the democratic institutions in their country rather than strengthening. Taking some measures that, you know, can take us some years back or doing things that could be, you know, taking rights out of the people, which is, of course, contrary to the mode of the OAS. Are you worried about this in the region or are you actually optimistic that this crisis actually could result in even more democracy over the country?

MR. ALMAGRO: You know, there is a narrative that is coming mainly from the dictatorship of -- or even some NGOs that they try to create dictatorships where they are not and they

forget that real dictatorships that we have in the hemisphere. And it is quite clear what the authoritarian niche that we have in the hemisphere is clearly in Cuba, clearly in Venezuela, clearly in Nicaragua. And we need to address those issues properly.

These days, it wouldn't be fair. I mean, if I have to apply the Inter-American Democratic charter today, maybe it should apply particularly to everybody. Because everybody has restricted in a way or the other the freedom of transit, freedom of circulation, freedom of association, freedom of meetings. All these basic fundamental civil rights, they have been put down of extreme need of public order, of social distancing, of isolation or quarantine. So, but it is too early to judge anybody. And because it's applying drastic measures in some very populated countries in the hemisphere, some very poor countries in the hemisphere, trying to control COVID-19 that escape out of control. Definitely country aid a big mess in the countries. So, it is too early to judge that. It is too early --

MR. BAHAR: Okay.

MR. ALMAGRO: -- to judge countries that with the resources that they have and the way and the possibilities that they have to confront COVID-19 and you have to do that with what you have.

So, I would say I am not worried. I'm not worried. I will see when the dust comes down and COVID-19 cycle is over if all these rights are back in place. But today, I mean, we have reasons of public order in order to confront COVID-19 that they have proved to extremely necessary in most of the countries. So, I can't judge that. It is unfair. It isn't reasonable. It serves to a political agenda of I don't know what kind, but and definitely I know what kind, it serves the political agenda of the real dictatorships in the hemisphere.

MR. BAHAR: Okay. Thank you, that's fair. We're going to talk about some of those dictatorships. But before that, I have a question related to continue on COVID, but also to talk about something that is more long-term, which is the refugee crisis. You, yourself, has been very bold. There's an office in the OAS that you set up led by David Smolansky. And for full disclosure, I was part of the group of independent experts that wrote the first report on the Venezuelan refugee crisis that we presented already a year ago in the region. And, you know, that's an additional challenge for Latin American because as opposed to other places, you have a particularly vulnerable population that are much more exposed to informal labor markets that are already, of course, come with a lot of humanitarian

needs.

And, you know, the research that we've done here at Brookings shows that in terms of magnitude, the Syrian and the Venezuelan refugee crises are very similar in terms of magnitude and speed. But yet, it's the most underfunded refugee crisis in modern history. There was a donor conference that happened a month ago in which, I mean, it was announced that \$2.7 billion was pledged to this cause, but out of which only 400 million approximately are donations and the rest are loans.

So, you know, in the short and the long-term, how do you see -- this is, I guess, one of the biggest challenges of the region right now. So, how do you see this in the context of COVID and also in the future, you know, how countries should keep dealing with this refugee crisis?

MR. ALMAGRO: We can make a follow-up of the previous question and previous answer. There is a very necessary combination these days of the democratic rule of law and public order. And this combination of these two elements is extremely necessary in order to face COVID-19. What happened in -- and I say democratic rule of law because that is an important concept because democracy is part of our identity in the hemisphere. Most of our countries that were born as independent aren't democratic. So, democracy's an identity that our countries definitely have enjoyed for the past 200 years with some interruptions, of course, some of them. Some of them with some very long interruptions like the Cuban case.

The Venezuelan case is like extreme case. It's the most tyrannical state that we have had in the hemisphere where you don't have any way of making your guarantees and fundamental freedoms possible. And we can have -- we have had some like one year ago, a conference of donors too. We have had one month ago when practically in order to attend the Venezuelan crisis, we should be having one conference of donor practically every month because the problem is not that. The problem is that the country has that awful dictatorship of the worst kind with based on the criminal way of organizing themselves and criminal way of reacting against political solutions that may come from anywhere.

So, we have that going on. And so long we have this going on and we'll be facing the same kind of structural problems that these dictatorships have brought to the country. Especially executions by thousands, 7 to 9 million people at risk of hunger. People not able to take -- to have food and to have medicines or medical treatment. So, that is the situation of the country. That is a structural

situation of the country. It's a country that is living mostly on illegal activities. It's living on drug trafficking. This dictatorship is living on illegal mining and the collapse of the environmental system of the Arco Minero. We have this regime living off money laundering and that you have used the pelavesa (phonetic) for that for quite a while.

That is the situation of the country. And if we don't fix the political situation of the country, we should keep doing conference of donors for I don't know how long. Because the problem will go on and the problems of the Venezuelan people will go on. And we will not be able to resolve this without democracy in the country. And we will not be able to fix this if the criminal autocrats out there rule Venezuela today leave the country. So, that is the situation. It's a clear case of how the lack of institutions, the lack of democratic institutions can bring a whole collapse to a society and to a country.

MR. BAHAR: So, on that, because, of course, that's a very big topic of your first term and probably it's going to continue to be. I mean, it's very hard even to formulate a question on this topic nowadays. But I don't know if you can give us a sense of what's your vision for this new term. So, you know, the movement led by President Guaido that started almost a year and a half ago, you know, unfortunately hasn't been able to achieve the main goal, which is to take -- to restore democracy and to take those that are occupying power and there's some extreme voices out there that are, you know, calling for military intervention, which, you know, I think it's a terrible idea. But also completely unfeasible, seems like.

So, you know, we're also approaching 2021 where the national assembly is set to expire in theory. And, of course, there has been some developments in the late -- in the past month where the dictatorship appointed its new electoral council, which has no credibility at all. So, what's your vision, right? You know, do you see that there's a space for a new type of policy from your office? You know, what are the kind of things that you think now can be done that based on the fact that many of the pressure that has been put on so far hasn't worked?

MR. ALMAGRO: First of all, something that I think is very important because to blame President Guaido for not achieving the final goal of this -- for this that is to restore democracy in Venezuela, it is very unfair to say the least. I mean, --

MR. BAHAR: Yeah, I'm not -- just to be clear, I'm not blaming him --

MR. ALMAGRO: Yeah, no, no.

MR. BAHAR: -- at all. I'm just stating the fact that, yeah, yeah.

MR. ALMAGRO: This is part of what I am -- of this thought. Then --

MR. BAHAR: Yeah.

MR. ALMAGRO: He has received a lot of international recognition, that's true, worldwide. But he has not received enough financial or natural resources in order to achieve that. And if we can't all what they may -- he might have received as interim government, it doesn't count enough. It's a little bit more maybe, you know, of a dozen million dollars. And with that you cannot confront a regime that counts by billions and billions and billions their financial resources, their material resources. They are human resources. Their possibilities to move through criminal activities, the possibility to move syntax here in the United States journalists all across the hemisphere and Europe.

So, I mean, what Juan Guaido has been doing is what he has been able to do according to the resources he has had. So, if we don't back him in a more assistive manner, it will not be able to achieve the restoration of democracy in the country because we have counted the dialogue processes in Venezuela. There have been 12 at least, maybe there's one missing there, but at least 12. The regime has always used this dialogues in order to perpetuate, in order to gain time, and to consolidate its position, always systematically.

We have seen that the criminal structure and nature of this regime is it makes the things a little bit different for a political solution. The political solution has to put some pressure there. If the pressure won't exist, it will be very difficult to achieve that political solution because definitely I have never seen a criminal, a drug trafficker, a martyr coming to the police station or to the judge and say, look I am guilty of this and this. Please put me in jail. Here is my confession. They may do that after you have put an unsurmountable amount of pressure on them.

And that is something that has not been done by the international community so far. And I doubt a lot about the level of pressure that can be put on the dictatorship maybe because most of the time it is the pressure that you put against a dictatorship. Of course, it has some feedbacks from people that have to stop doing business with these dictators and so they may have a nervous breakdown. Or they may want the measures to be reversed. Or they may want sanctions to be put down. And a lot is

still needed to be done. And we cannot leave this as it is.

As I said, democracy is part of our identity. That's why we always react against dictatorships. But this time, it's not -- the reaction is not enough. These people will not leave because of our reaction. Will leave because of action and a strong political action is needed. A lot of strong diplomatic action is needed. And so far, the regime is on holiday. So, definitely international community needs to show much more commitment and needs to build much more pressure on these dictatorships.

MR. BAHAR: Do you see -- I mean, I'm wondering what is an example of that? I mean, you're talking maybe about more sanctions about pressuring maybe countries like Russia and China and Cuba particularly to retreat. I mean, what are the things that you're thinking of when you say more pressure?

MR. ALMAGRO: Sanctions are necessary. And sanctions that they have a possibility of really putting the regime under pressure. Sanctions have been hardly been enough in order to achieve that goal. And they have not been from everywhere and that would have helped it also to achieve that goal. And some of these issues have moved forward, but most of the time, not.

And I have something to say here also because some people say, oh, sanctions -- these sanctions are affecting the Venezuelan people. And that is really a very bad joke and a disgusting one. Because it is like saying that say, for example, the \$800 million that Tareck El Aissami has frozen here in the United States because of drug trafficking, would be in the hands of the Venezuelan people today if they were unfrozen. I mean, that is -- it is unthinkable. Will never -- will not have happened and will never happen. Not one of these the testafellos, not one of these criminals, would have delivered that money to the Venezuelan people. They have not done it in the past.

I have been denouncing the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis since 2015, 2016, and that was far before any sanction was remotely implemented, not remotely sanctioned. So, that is a very disgusting joke of, let's say, of very disgusting people sometimes.

MR. BAHAR: Yeah. That is true and we actually have put up already a year ago, just to self-advertise, our report that shows exactly that by 2016, a year before the sanctions, the imports of food and imports of medicine were down by 60-70 percent. So, you know, most of the damage has been done much before.

MR. ALMAGRO: Most of the income -- most of the income of the regime, as I said, is coming from illegal activities that I mentioned. It's coming from drug trafficking, illegal mining, smuggling, money laundering, and some other organized crime activities.

All that, it is very difficult to control all that and without sanctions. And would be very difficult to control all that if you don't have some specific actions there to -- in Caribbean -- in the Caribbean or in the Pacific in order to stop some of this illegal trafficking that is going on. That is --

MR. BAHAR: Do you see, Secretary General, -- sorry, to interrupt you. But do you see, generally, I mean, what are your thoughts in terms of the national assembly expiring in theory in 2021? Is that, you know, how do you think that's going to play from your perspective?

MR. ALMAGRO: Well, the problem is that if we are not able to have a proper parliamentary election in Venezuela, this term will have to be extended. In fact, we are doing that today because of COVID-19. So, we may think about that for the national assembly too. Because if it -- there is a legal term in Spanish that says, un pleito no le correct termino (phonetic). It is true when you are blocked or stopped to exercise your right, the term it doesn't run for you. And that is a reality in Venezuela today, and, clearly.

And this you will see today the regime what it has been doing. It has been corrupting in an illegal manner, unconstitutional manner, the different branches of government. Where first they corrupted the supreme court. They corrupted the electoral authority. And the electoral authority has been a way of corrupting the national assembly in the future. It's clearly going that way of corrupting, again, all the different branches of government. And so it's something that needs to be addressed --

MR. BAHAR: Right.

MR. ALMAGRO: -- and stopped by the international community. We cannot allow that to be implemented in that way and we cannot allow that to legitimate itself. It's crazy.

MR. BAHAR: Right, understood. We can talk about Venezuela for hours, but I'm --

MR. ALMAGRO: That also --

MR. BAHAR: -- I know that there's many more topic and we're running out of time. But, you know, there's another controversy that has happened in the past week or so. Well, in the past few months, but in particular, in the past week on Bolivia. There were some reports recently in the media by

the *New York Times* that were challenging parts, not all, but part of the conclusions of the OAS electoral mission in the Bolivian elections last year. And your office responded with its own criticism of the reports. And I just want to give you an option to expand on that response today if you -- if you would like.

MR. ALMAGRO: Yes. I have seen this strategy before. And I have seen something that appears in the press, then it has a political statement, and then tries to confirm that's a narrative. So, it is sort of also not ethical at all that people that have not been on the ground. They have not observed the election. They have not been there before the elections, not there after the elections, and during the process. Eight months later comes with an article referring to a instrumental tool that was a statistical analysis and it's just a instrumental tool in order to appreciate how the different ways that the fraud was implemented. It was to direct the mission in order to now, okay, the irregularities might have been there, or the irregularities might have been there or there. And that was -- and to take that, isolate that part, and try to say because of that, that there was not fraud in the elections in Bolivia is completely irrational. It's not scientific. It's not sounded academically at all. What is that joke?

And so it serves, of course, a political purpose. And, regrettably, we have to answer in a very clear way because when you have altered, prefilled of the tally sheet of the elections. Where you have made dead people vote. You have done servers to fill in votes into the system. All that is what we found. And we based the fraud on all of that information.

MR. BAHAR: Right.

MR. ALMAGRO: And the statistical analysis helped us to identify, okay, it might have been there, it might have been there, it might have been there. They appeared -- they of course, confessional evidence, scientific evidence, technological evidence that we have all to there. And that -- nothing of that has been answered or challenged --

MR. BAHAR: Addressed.

MR. ALMAGRO: -- by anybody. So, I have to go, of course, we have worked seriously. And you know the assumption is there because it sort of -- it's sort of in very bad faith that this was done. In very bad faith because I paid a high political cost in order to observe that election. You know that I was severely criticized when I visited Evo Morales and all those matters from May to October, I paid a very high political cost in doing so. And once I did, then we -- then we opened two possibilities for Evo

Morales. One, he didn't have that was to win in a fair way. The other one was to lose in a fair way. And the other was that we closed the possibility for an electoral fraud.

I don't know why he decided to go for the third one. Because he had the other two that were much more reasonable and much better for him. And I have been with him practically all the way trying to give this sound advice. I mean, you lose, you lose. That's it. You can't start inventing things. And then there are people that have said, no, we have not touched a single thing there, and were people in charge of doing so. So, the credibility of that people doesn't exist. It doesn't exist for me, I mean. Thank you.

MR. BAHAR: And I have to say, I mean, I did read, actually the OAS report and I agree with you. It goes much beyond the statistical issue. I mean, they're talking about servers that were not there, that they were there. I mean, there's a lot of things happening at the same time. So, I do think actually the report of the OAS was very sound and looking at just one particular set of data doesn't give you the full picture of --

MR. ALMAGRO: It was a tool. It was not -- we didn't base it on that. Because it is something that a statistical report can be discussed and the whole time. Even I didn't want to be -- if they could have asked me, I would said, this shouldn't be part of the report because it was a tool in order to find things, and to make our findings. But it was not -- but, okay, in a way of transparency, we probably showed this. But this sounds to isolate that. That is not -- it's --

MR. BAHAR: Right.

MR. ALMAGRO: -- it's not proof of anything. That is an instrumental --

MR. BAHAR: Correct.

MR. ALMAGRO: -- tool that we used. Not a proof of anything. That's crazy.

MR. BAHAR: Correct. Secretary General, we just have a few minutes left. I know you have to go promptly at 11:00 and we too. But just to close maybe with a little bit of optimism. I want to, you know, --

MR. ALMAGRO: I smile.

MR. BAHAR: -- we have a lot of students watching us --

MR. ALMAGRO: I always smile.

MR. BAHAR: -- and (Laughter) -- You know, what are the lessons that you learned in your first term that are you thinking apply in the second term? You know, are you coming with a fresh mind? Just in a couple of minutes, if you can give us the hopeful message before we leave.

MR. ALMAGRO: Yes. You know that you have to be committed permanently. You cannot leave things for later. You cannot work based on interests of any kind. That you have to be committed to these principles. Or if you need to condemn a crime because of racial roots, you have to do it. If you need to condemn bad practices in the democratic system anywhere, you have to do it. If you have to put down some evils around in the hemisphere, you have to do it. You have to call the things by their name from the very beginning, because it helps. It helps. Most of these dictators the problem was that they played free for quite a while. And they were able to build narratives on all this.

And not to be afraid of anything. I mean, just to keep going and to be responsible for the mission and the work that we have in the organization. This organization is relevant if it's attached to principles and values of democracy, human rights development, security.

So, to close, I will try to be as close as possible to these principles. That doesn't mean to be a hysterical voice that I see most of the time that they start jumping at the first -- we are not reactive. We need to work in an institutionalized way. We need to build in a solid way. And we don't have to -- we cannot work based on hysterical reactions of any kind. We have to be a solid and serious work, institutional work. And that is how we should be.

MR. BAHAR: Secretary General, thank you so much for your time, for your leadership. We at Brookings are at your disposal in the OAS to support, you know, the policies that you want to implement. We're always trying to do the research that hopefully will help you and your team. So, again, thank you so much for your time, for your leadership, and for all your insights. This has been really, really informative.

MR. ALMAGRO: Thank you very much. A great pleasure to be with all of you. And we'll be in touch. A great -- it's always a great pleasure --

MR. BAHAR: Definitely.

MR. ALMAGRO: -- to talk to you.

MR. BAHAR: Thank you. And thank you, everybody, for being with us. And until next

time. Bye-Bye.

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