



The OAS and the Crisis in Venezuela: Luis Almagro and his Labyrinth

*By Patricio Zamorano,
Guest Scholar at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs
Translated into English by Frederick Mills*

In a shameful series of events that transpired this past April 3, a group of member countries decided on their own to convene the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States (OAS) without authorization of the President of this body, Diego Pary, the representative of Bolivia to the OAS. This meeting was without doubt one of the most controversial moments of Secretary General Luis Almagro's performance as a controversial figure since assuming his post in May 2015.

On Monday, April 3 of 2017, over the objections of Bolivia, various representatives of right wing governments opposed to the administration of Nicolas Maduro, called for a meeting with the aim of condemning the government of Venezuela for alleged anti democratic behavior and advocated for its suspension from the OAS. To this end, they elected, without any valid protocol to justify their action, the representative of Honduras, Leonidas Rosa, to preside over the Permanent Council as president solely for the purpose of bringing to the floor a resolution against the Venezuelan Executive. Amidst all of the confusion present at the chaotic meeting, which broke with all of the organization's internal norms (a breach, supported by the Secretary General who sat at the table of the Honduran representative who was acting as de facto President of the Council) the body proceeded to approve a resolution "by consensus" despite not having sufficient votes. In fact, there were four abstentions, and the proponents of the resolution only had 17 votes, short of the 18 minimum required to approve any resolution according to the statutes. Moreover, only 21 of 34 countries even had representatives present in the room during the tabulations.

This lamentable episode, which has no precedent in the history of the body, clearly exemplifies the personal commitment that Luis Almagro has expressed publicly and blatantly, against the government of Venezuela, when alluding to the economic and political crisis in that country. During the past year, the secretary general has also developed an extremely offensive and crude narrative that he unleashed against the government of Venezuela, and in particular its President, Nicolas Maduro, that breaks with all the norms of diplomatic statesmanship that the office of the secretary general of the OAS has exhibited for decades. However serious the situation in Venezuela may be, it is actually surprising to listen to Almagro, a functionary who was not elected by popular vote, expressing himself in such harsh terms, verbally and in writing, against a

democratically-elected government that forms part of the membership of the body that selected him for the post.

For good or bad: the OAS has a duty to its member governments

Previous secretary generals of the OAS have also been in a vulnerable position in the face of those countries that feel impacted by their own internal opposition, by other countries, or by the internal pressures of their own allies. Ex-Secretary General José Miguel Insulza was criticized not only by the US for rejecting sending emissaries to Venezuela if they were not authorized by the government (respecting the statutes of the OAS), but also by President Chávez who characterized him as a “puppet” of the power to the north.

In this sense, Luis Almagro is in a labyrinth that is extremely difficult to navigate. He has been confronted with a concrete reality as old as the OAS. Nevertheless, the OAS body has a primary duty and responsibility to The Governments, not the rest of the institutions of the countries or to civil society. As Insulza himself said, “there is one thing that will not change: this is a body consisting of 34 states, not a supranational power. I am not the president of the OAS, nor the president of the Americas. I am the secretary general that implements the resolutions of the Permanent Council, and this is something that no one will change.”

Looking to reform the OAS of the US

The OAS has been faced with criticism based on their omissions in certain moments of the region’s history, when the groups at the margin of governments have struggled to evoke a response from the OAS to address internal crises, or to address massive levels of homicides, torture, and disappearances provoked by the dictatorships that have run amuck the rest of the hemisphere. In almost all of these cases the OAS has failed to meet the challenges of the very serious violations of human rights or the breaches in the democratic orders that have impacted the continent in recent decades. Affiliated organizations such as the CIDH have been able to take on part of these lapses. But the OAS has not been capable of processing, in a positive manner, the reformist current that opened in the continent since 2000, with the election of Chávez, the end of the rein of the PRI and later the surge of the new leaders of non-traditional groups (Correa in Ecuador, Morales in Mexico, Lula in Bolivia, Lugo in Paraguay and others). One may see, without doubt, that one result of the inability of the OAS to deal with these crises has been the emergence of alternative multilateral organizations that have absorbed some of the political influences of the OAS and the US. Secretary Almagro, out of step with tendencies toward regional integration and independence, has clearly been involved in an effort to rebuild the hegemonic role and influence of the US within the OAS and within the Latin American continent. But despite all of the efforts to get the necessary votes of the Permanent Council, the issuing of pro-opposition bulletins that are directed against the government of Venezuela, all being very closely coordinated with the leaders of the right wing opposition, and the multiple press conferences and

meetings organized in the Hall of the Americas, Almagro has not been able to advance with the speed that he no doubt desires or anticipated.

Almagro prevents the OAS from pursuing a peaceful solution to the hemispheric crisis

The break in the institutional protocols of the OAS on April 3 demonstrates this impatience. Almagro created his own labyrinth when, far from imitating the good offices of the Vatican and other Latin American countries to mediate between the government of Venezuela and the opposition, he declared the negotiations in which he plays no part as “over” and commenced a narrative of ultimatums against the government of President Maduro, descending into the inappropriate position of “demanding” that a sovereign government hold elections at some arbitrary time. To put this in perspective, one could imagine this highly implausible scenario: in light of the series of scandals of the Trump administration, his anti-democratic measures against immigrants (put on hold by the courts) or the bombings of Syria and Afghanistan, Luis Almagro organizes a press conference to demand that Trump call for elections in 30 days...

The OAS and its Secretary General Luis Almagro ought to, following the letter and spirit of the Inter-American Charter, serve as constructive players with regard to the crisis in Venezuela. Even a preliminary analysis of the situation in this country clearly demonstrates that there can be no positive result from trying to bolster the international standing of an opposition that is capable of anything, including anti-democratic practices against a government, that of Maduro, who is engaged in a constant struggle against those parties and a social class that has lost political, economic and social power at the hands of Chavismo. There is no doubt that the government of Venezuela is partly responsible for the economic debacle in the country, exacerbated by a disastrous currency exchange policy, an uncontrollable black market, and an economic boycott of basic products controlled by wealthy and influential elements of the opposition.

In short, the Venezuelan opposition has never accepted, since the election of the ex-military person of color, Hugo Chávez, as president, the legitimacy of the government of the Bolivarian Republic. And Chavismo, since the failed coup of 2002 against the democratically elected government of President Hugo Chavez, has never regained confidence in an opposition it perceives as disloyal and linked to US interests. In this situation of intense polarization the role of the OAS, given its influence with the opposition, ought to be to obligate it to sit at the negotiating table that has been offered by the Maduro administration as well as the Vatican and other regional authorities. Instead, Almagro has done a major disservice of calling this process aimed at restoring co-existence “finished” though he has played no part in it.

Almagro has gone all out against the government of Venezuela and no doubt feels emboldened by the support of the US and Canada, the two countries that are excluded from the continental associations of UNASUR and CELAC. He has exceeded the traditional functions of his post and the expected dignity of the discourse of a Secretary General in order to represent one group of civil society (in this case, the Venezuelan opposition). One can hear the expressions of discontent in the halls of the OAS that

many countries, among them the Caribbean nations who though small in size have valuable votes, with the way in which Almagro is unraveling. They do not say so in public, for many of them depend upon the international cooperation of Canada and the US, but the results are there, plain as day, as reflected in the meager vote of April 3 that left Almagro frustrated, denied the substantial support he had been working to achieve.

Why only support the Venezuelan opposition?

The problem is that in the exercise of his post, which is not one of “president of the Americas” to cite Insulza, Almagro has demonstrated chronic partiality, a narrowness in his choice of actions and selective in his campaigns. Almagro’s entire agenda of attack and all of his political energy is centered only and exclusively on Venezuela. He has been transformed, without a doubt, into the spokesperson of the Venezuelan opposition, against the administration of Maduro, which, along with the other 33 countries of the OAS, form part of his principal constituency. Almagro is providing a formidable advocacy, without a doubt, considering that other groups in the region at the margin of their governments (the indigenous, women, political parties, legislatures, judicial powers, and others) do not have either formal representation nor a vote in the OAS.

What is at the root of the failure of Almagro’s political campaign? The same thing that makes him a force to be reckoned with, undermines his legitimacy, for so many groups that face a dramatic situation in the region do not count on the same good offices of the Uruguayan. When 43 young Mexicans disappeared from the face of the earth in Ayotzinapa, with clear indications that state security forces were involved, the OAS, despite having collaborated in the investigation of the case, did not once mention the idea of suspending the government of Mexico from the Permanent Council.

Although the Senate of the United States documented and acknowledged in an official report the clandestine jails of the CIA and the fact that their military forces engaged in the torture of prisoners at the prison in Guantanamo (denounced by the Red Cross and the United Nations for years), the newly elected Secretary General of the OAS did not even suggest a vote of censure against the Administration in Washington. The US is the only country of the Americas that engages in military operations directed at intervention, bombing with conventional weapons, drone attacks and the deployment of troops with or without sovereign authorization against countries of other latitudes. No one imagines at this moment that Almagro could initiate a campaign to immediately suspend the United States from the Permanent Council after the latest bombings in Yemen, Afghanistan, and Syria. According to statistics of the United Nations, the US drone campaigns alone have caused hundreds of civilian victims, including women and children. This is a very serious matter but it provokes absolutely no reaction of repudiation by the multinational body.

When in Brazil there was a political trial of President Dilma Rousseff, one could see the profound corruption in which her accusers were involved, yet the OAS of Almagro still declined to invoke the Democratic Charter. To be sure, Almagro did critique the decision of the Brazilian Congress against Rousseff, but he did not call for the suspension of the

de facto government of Brazil of Michel Temer, a country that also is submerged in a serious economic and public security crisis.

Honduras itself (whose representative before the OAS served as usurper of the presidency of the Permanent Council), is a country with a deplorable record of having the highest homicide rate per 100 thousand inhabitants in the world, [according to a United Nations report of 2014](#). In Honduras many opposition leaders, peasant leaders, journalists, union leaders, human rights defenders, gender rights advocates, and an overwhelming number of others are assassinated each month. Most of them have been Americans assassinated with complete impunity. Colombia has suffered a daunting number of massacres, perpetrated by regular and irregular forces of different political tendencies, including narco-traffickers and paramilitaries; they have targeted regional leaders, candidates for office, social movement leaders and elected authorities to a variety of posts. Neither the governments of Colombia nor Honduras have faced the possibility of being suspended by the OAS.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have denounced each year the violence and use of anti-terrorist legislation applied by the State of Chile against its Mapuches, or the fact that uniformed police of the Carabineros still resort to the use torture. Or that the indigenous peasants of Peru are brutally repressed by the mining industry that indiscriminately contaminates the water and land. Neither the government of Chile nor Peru have faced the selective questioning of the secretary general, nor do they fear a prompt suspension from the OAS.

Are not all of these groups of civil society of all the peoples of our countries more or less important than the Venezuelan opposition which from the start has never been able to rid itself of the stain that it organized a short-lived coup against the government of Chavez in 2002? Do not the Mapuche of Chile, the Peruvian peasants, the social movement leaders of Honduras and Colombia, all deserve the same level of treatment of the OAS? But lamentably, Secretary Almagro exhibits within this entire narrative a selective indignation over “human rights” in the political attack against the government of Maduro. This selective indignation weakens the very struggle for human rights of the entire region. It is quite evident that universal human rights is not the central theme of his mission. The theme of human rights in Venezuela is serious and of great concern, just as it is in the United States, Colombia and Honduras.

Maintaining the financing of the OAS

Without a doubt one has to celebrate the active attitude of secretary general Luis Almagro in the case of Venezuela and the economic and political crisis afflicting that country. But the narrow-mindedness of his actions undermines much of the credibility of the OAS. This erosion of credibility is even more blatant when right wing U.S. senators led by [Marco Rubio publically calls for the OAS to be used as the launching point](#) against Venezuela, [threatening El Salvador, Dominican Republic and Haiti to cast their votes in the OAS](#) in line with the governments allied with Washington.

The fact that the U.S. has great leverage over the OAS, given its inadequate budget, is disconcerting to the fair-minded analyst, especially when the CIDH is made to confront the possibility of being without sufficient funds to carry out its human rights missions. There is a well known expression in Washington that when the U.S. closes its wallet, the OAS groans, for the U.S. is the principal funder of the organization and its secretary general: almost 35% of the budget is covered by the country to the North [according to a U.S. Congressional investigation](#). That is to say, the other 65% of the funds should be covered by the other 33 countries and other cooperating agencies. This is not the fault of the OAS but of the inaction (and lack of financial cooperation) of the rest of the continent.

If there were some even-handedness in the efforts of the current secretary general of the OAS, other groups confronted by terrible situations of misery at the hands of their executive branches of power would be able to count on the numerous press conferences and invitations to the halls of influence in Washington that Almagro has conferred in an almost exclusive fashion on the Venezuelan opposition. This is an opposition that, unlike the grassroots groups of the countries of our continent, have at their disposal formidable media and international forces, a lot of money, many right wing governments, an open door to the corridors of Washington, and a majority of the legislators of the U.S. Congress. With such resources at their disposal, they are determined to remove the Bolivarian Revolution from power in Venezuela.

Almagro is, by his actions, attempting to close off every way out of a labyrinth of his own making in the heart of the OAS. The humanitarian consequences of this inside Venezuela will not only be the responsibility of Maduro and that country's opposition, but also the secretary general of the Organization of American States.

***By Patricio Zamorano, Guest Scholar at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs
Translated into English by Frederick Mills***

***With additional editorial support provided by Larry Birns, Director at the
Council on Hemispheric Affairs as well as Alex Rawley, Taylor Lewis and Kayla
Whitlock, Research Associates at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs***