

Interview – Carolina Jiménez Sandoval

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Carolina Jiménez Sandoval is a prominent human rights defender and civil society leader with over 20 years of experience in managing non-profit organizations, advocating for human rights, and shaping strategies to advance social justice. She currently serves as the President of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) in Washington, D.C., where she provides organizational leadership and direction to a team of dedicated researchers and advocates. Before this, she served as the Deputy Research Director for the Americas at Amnesty International in Mexico City, where she oversaw a team of researchers documenting human rights violations in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the U.S. With expertise in international human rights law, Latin American politics, and international relations, Dr. Jiménez Sandoval has been instrumental in fostering strategic partnerships, advocating for policy change, and amplifying marginalized voices on the global stage. Dr. Jimenez Sandoval holds a Ph.D. in International Studies from Waseda University, along with degrees in International Relations and International Law and Business, from the University of Cambridge in the UK and Chuo University in Tokyo, Japan, respectively.

Where do you see the most critical debates happening in your field?

In my view, the most critical issues facing Latin American advocates are related to setbacks in democracy. At the beginning of this century, democracy seemed like a political and social promise for populations that had suffered brutal dictatorships and civil wars in the 20th century. Still, more recently, we have witnessed a hemispheric shift in attitudes towards democracy. According to Latinobarómetro, in 2023, only 48% of Latin Americans supported democracy in the region, down 15% from 63% in 2010. As governments address increasingly complex issues, such as regional migration, the growing power of organized crime, and threats to public safety, citizens are more willing to follow a “strong leader” who promises accelerated results, even if the acceptance of these leaders implies giving up certain rights and democratic practices.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Studying international relations involves constantly trying to understand the world. This has led me to continuously seek reliable and independent information and understand the “pulse” of social, political, and economic changes worldwide through in-depth analysis. Therefore, if anything has defined how I see and analyze the world, it is having had the privilege of access to education, especially international education, learning several languages, and experiencing life in cultures different from the culture or country in which I was born. Understanding differences and embracing diversity impacts us in many ways.

How would you describe the state of democracy and human rights in Latin America?

The state of democracy and human rights in Latin America is worrisome. We are witnessing democratic backsliding at an alarming rate throughout the region. Many countries are also experiencing profound polarization as political parties support and promote controversial anti-establishment candidates. At this moment in time, autocratic leaders such as Nayib Bukele in El Salvador have gained immense popularity for their ability to provide quick and easy responses to complex problems, often at the expense of civil rights. In the meantime, in countries like Venezuela or Nicaragua, despite the unpopularity of their leaders, repression and lack of democratic guarantees have

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consolidated their power.

Serious human rights violations continue to take place in Latin America. In El Salvador, the state of exception established by President Nayib Bukele two years ago after a violent weekend in March of 2022 is still in place, and we have seen over 73,000 people arrested, including 1,600 children. The use of collective trials, as well as the expansion of pretrial detention, is a recipe for human rights abuses. Meanwhile, in Venezuela, the UN Fact Finding Mission continues to find evidence of alleged crimes against humanity, including killings, short-term enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, and sexual and gender-based violence. In Mexico, under President Andres Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, little progress has been made in combatting human rights abuses. Instead, he has continued to militarize public security and has failed to make progress on investigating disappearances, instead claiming the number has been inflated to hurt him politically.

Among cases of democratic weakening in Latin America, which do you consider most worrisome for the future of democracy in the region, and why?

The situation in El Salvador stands out as particularly worrisome for the future of democracy in the region. In recent years, we have witnessed a concerning acceleration in democratic backsliding, with the concentration of power in the hands of President Nayib Bukele. In June 2019, Bukele was elected president with 53% of the vote, remaining as one of the most popular presidents in the world (if not the most popular) despite his hardline security policies. He recently won an unconstitutional second term as president with 84.7% of the vote. His control over all institutions has raised serious concerns about the erosion of democratic checks and balances. Moreover, the implementation of security policies that prioritize short-term successes at the expense of democratic principles is alarming. While addressing security challenges is undoubtedly important, the way these policies have been pursued raises questions about the prioritization of democratic values. Because his policies are popular given the “rapid results” and a very strong propaganda apparatus, the so-called “Bukele model” has become a model to be imitated by other leaders in the region. This is a major threat to democracy.

What opportunities and challenges have you encountered in Washington, D.C., regarding the promotion and strengthening of democracy and human rights throughout Latin America?

In Washington, D.C., promoting and strengthening democracy and human rights throughout Latin America presents opportunities and challenges. For instance, democratic backsliding in the region and the growing influence of China and Russia poses significant challenges. The U.S. faces a delicate balancing act between addressing what it considers external threats and pleasing voters. Throughout the years, we have been frustrated by U.S. administrations that have been friendly towards authoritarian leaders in exchange for tighter control of the drug trade or for stricter migration policies. Additionally, the impact of electoral politics on policy decisions adds another layer of complexity to the landscape; as we’re seeing now, it’s not just Republicans pushing for detrimental changes to immigration policies, but some Democrats trying to keep their seats or gain seats are willing also to negotiate and concede on important asylum rights. Of course, there is also the threat of authoritarianism right here in the United States as a return of Donald Trump to the White House is increasingly possible.

However, amidst these challenges, there are notable opportunities for advancing democracy and human rights in Latin America. The increasingly diverse composition of the U.S. Congress, reflective of shifting demographics, offers a platform for voices advocating for more robust relationships with Latin American neighbors and a commitment to multilateralism. Within Congress, some actors recognize the importance of promoting democratic values abroad and fostering partnerships that prioritize human rights and good governance in the region. By leveraging these opportunities and engaging with supportive stakeholders, there is potential to make meaningful progress in advancing democracy and human rights throughout Latin America, even amidst the complex geopolitical dynamics at play.

What strategies can be employed to enhance the resilience of democracy in Latin American nations and safeguard it against anti-democratic, authoritarian forces?

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I strongly feel that a multifaceted approach is essential. First and foremost, there needs to be more robust support for grassroots movements, particularly among youth and feminist organizations, which have been at the forefront of advocating for democratic principles and human rights. These movements play a vital role in holding governments accountable, amplifying marginalized voices, and challenging authoritarian tendencies. Additionally, protecting civil society is paramount. Civil society organizations act as watchdogs, providing critical oversight and promoting civic engagement. They must be supported through measures that ensure their independence, freedom of expression, and ability to operate without fear of reprisal.

Furthermore, providing support to democratic political actors is crucial. This includes strengthening political parties committed to democratic values, supporting electoral processes that are free, fair, and transparent, and promoting dialogue and collaboration among diverse political stakeholders. By bolstering democratic institutions and processes, we can strengthen the foundation of democracy and create resilience against authoritarian forces.

When discussing orderly migration and human rights, how close—or far—are the U.S. and key sending and transit countries in Latin America from realizing the goals outlined in the 2022 Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection?

Although the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection has brought about some positive changes, significant challenges remain in safeguarding migrants and managing migration flows in the region. We were encouraged by the Biden Administration's call for a regional approach to address migration, as the previous Root Causes Strategy had focused solely on Central America. However, it is important to note that migration from the Caribbean and South America remains high, and as of now, the declaration has garnered support from 21 countries. While the initial response was enthusiastic, and several countries have launched commendable initiatives such as refugee resettlement programs, family reunification schemes, and safe, legal pathways for immigration to the U.S. and other nations, much more still needs to be accomplished.

In addition, we must consider that not all migrants have the end goal of reaching the U.S. every day, as we see people trying to settle in other Latin American countries. Migrants, however, continue to face obstacles to being included socially and economically in these countries. More financial resources and personnel are needed to process migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Most Latin American countries have never experienced this level of migration in their countries, and they do not have the infrastructure in place to deal with governing migration. For example, Mexico in 2023 had 141,053 people seeking refuge/asylum compared to just 70,302 people in 2019 and 2,137 in 2014. Mexico has not kept pace with the increasing number of asylum applications by investing in the necessary asylum infrastructure.

Another obstacle the region faces is that people leave their countries for many reasons. Now, we see families and unaccompanied children move throughout the region in search of safety and security, which means home countries must make structural changes to institutions for people to stay put. We also witness climate change-induced migration while protection mechanisms for people fleeing natural disasters remain nonexistent. Authoritarianism, political persecution, economic inequality, and humanitarian emergencies, among other push factors, are part of a complex mix of migration dynamics in the Americas nowadays.

Finally, while some progress has been made in U.S. immigration, we are worried about the U.S.'s leadership on this issue as the 2024 Presidential election gets underway. Former President Donald Trump was eager to close immigration pathways to the U.S., and now President Biden, under pressure, is willing to concede some previous advances to Republicans on this issue.

How do your previous experiences in multilateral institutions and NGOs, such as the United Nations and Amnesty International, inform your approach to liaising and collaborating with such organizations on Latin American affairs?

Working for an inter-governmental organization such as the United Nations and years later for an international non-governmental human rights organization gave me two unique perspectives on the importance of collaborating with

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stakeholders to meet shared goals. In international organizations such as the UN, state parties move through diplomacy and rules between governments with various protocols for action that are institutional and agreed upon between governments. In the NGO world, human rights activism usually involves questioning the power of states, denouncing human rights violations, and seeking accountability.

Despite the apparent differences between these two “worlds”, the work of international organizations and NGOs can be complementary when pursuing shared goals, such as promoting democracy in a country, protecting the Amazon, or pushing for an international treaty. These two experiences allowed me to understand the differences in both organizational contexts and learn to navigate the diplomatic world and the world of activism, where we can make a difference depending on our professional goals and our vocation for social justice and fundamental rights.

What issues should academics and organized civil society groups prioritize to counter and prevent the negative impact of social media and AI-generated deepfakes on perceptions of democracy, human rights, and migration?

Several key issues need to be prioritized. First, learning and employing creative communication methods that resonate with diverse audiences is critical. This includes building a cohesive narrative rather than operating in isolation, ensuring that messaging is clear, compelling, and accessible to all. Moreover, supporting robust fact-checking processes is essential to combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation online. By promoting accuracy and accountability in digital spaces, academics, and civil society, groups can help safeguard the integrity of public discourse and protect vulnerable communities from the harmful effects of false information.

Additionally, fostering media literacy and digital literacy skills is crucial. By empowering individuals to evaluate information and navigate digital platforms responsibly and critically, we can mitigate the influence of deceptive content and promote informed decision-making. Lastly, collaboration and coordination among stakeholders are essential to effectively address the challenges of social media and deepfakes. Academics, civil society groups, tech companies, policymakers, and other relevant actors must work together to develop comprehensive strategies and solutions that uphold democratic values, protect human rights, and ensure the integrity of migration narratives in the digital age.

What is the most important advice you could give young International Relations scholars?

I am a firm believer in the value of continuous learning and cultural understanding. First, I emphasize the importance of learning languages to bridge gaps and foster meaningful connections across cultures. Proficiency in multiple languages enhances communication and enables scholars to access diverse perspectives and engage more deeply with global issues. Technology is beneficial to bridge the language gap, but learning languages is still a relevant tool for international work.

Secondly, I encourage scholars to cultivate a mindset of openness to new ideas and perspectives. International relations are dynamic and ever-evolving, shaped by complex interactions between states, non-state actors, and global trends. By remaining open-minded and receptive to different viewpoints, young scholars can enrich their understanding of global affairs and contribute to innovative approaches to address pressing challenges.

Additionally, I highlight the significance of cultural competence in navigating the complexities of international relations. By immersing themselves in studying new cultures and traditions, scholars can develop a deeper appreciation for the diverse societies that shape our world. This cultural sensitivity is essential for building meaningful relationships, fostering cross-cultural cooperation, and promoting mutual understanding in an increasingly interconnected world.