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## FEATURED Q&A

# Can The Dominican Republic Hold Free & Fair Elections?



Protesters in the Dominican Republic have taken to the streets in recent days following the country's halted municipal elections. // File Photo: Somos Pueblo.

**Q Election officials in the Dominican Republic halted their nationwide municipal elections on Feb. 16 due to a massive failure of the country's electronic voting system. In the incident, opposition parties said some of their candidates were not appearing on the ballot. How likely are the problems to have been intentional and related to fraud? To what extent will the halted election affect the eventual results? Are officials in the Caribbean nation taking the right steps in order to ensure free and fair elections both at the municipal level and in the upcoming presidential vote?**

**A Ernesto Sagás, professor of ethnic studies at Colorado State University:** "The sudden cancellation of the 2020 municipal elections because of problems with the electronic voting system came as a rude wake-up call for millions of Dominicans who thought that electoral irregularities were a thing of the past. As of this writing, the Dominican government has suspended its own investigation into the matter (opting to defer to international organizations) and new municipal elections have been scheduled for March 15. But the electoral fiasco is already having serious ripple effects, as thousands of youth have taken to the streets demanding transparency and the resignation of the Central Electoral Board (JCE), the political opposition points fingers at the incumbent party (in power since 2004), and the government is short on answers. The embarrassing electoral mess has exposed the institutional weakness of Dominican democracy. In the best of cases, the JCE was caught off guard by malicious hackers; in the worst of cases,

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For last year overall, the state-owned company reported a 346-billion-peso loss, 91 percent higher than the 180-billion-peso loss registered in 2018.

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Discussions between the International Monetary Fund and the Argentine government are "going well," IMF Spokesman Gerry Rice said Thursday. Argentine Economy Minister Martín Guzmán and his team met with IMF representatives in Washington this week.

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Guzmán // File Photo: Argentine Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Latin America Braces for Coronavirus

The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Thursday braced for the consequences of the global coronavirus outbreak following the first confirmed case in Brazil this week. Brazil's health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, sought to assure the public, saying there is no reason to panic. "If China's scenario repeats, the coronavirus is manageable in Brazil," Mandetta told Folha de S.Paulo in an interview. Mandetta added that he thinks it is only a matter of time before the World Health Organization declares the current situation a pandemic. One factor that could play in Brazil's favor is the concurrence of the outbreak with summer in the southern hemisphere, Mandetta said, although he cautioned that it is not yet known how coronavirus will spread in tropical climates. Brazil's stock market fell sharply Thursday amid a global rout in equities markets, and Brazil's real currency fell as low as 4.50 per U.S. dollar, making it one of the worst-performing currencies in the world against the greenback this year, Reuters reported. Meanwhile, Colombia's interim health minister, Iván Dario González, said he was raising the alert level from low to moderate, even though the country has yet to confirm a coronavirus case. At least 260 cases are being monitored for coronavirus in Chile, but there are no confirmed cases

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it is thoroughly unprepared to guarantee the accuracy, security and transparency of Dominican elections. It also reflects poorly on the administration of President Danilo Medina, now increasingly besieged by the political opposition and popular protests. The government needs to re-establish trust in the electoral authorities, but it has little political capital left, whereas an aloof JCE remains oblivious to its own mistakes. These unfolding events seem to parallel similar political crises in the region and make us

there yet, Health Minister Jaime Manalich said. Peru's head of the National Institute of Health (INS), Omar Trujillo Villarroel, reported Thursday that of the 37 coronavirus suspects detected in different regions of the Andean country, none tested positive for COVID-19, El Comercio reported. Jamaica on Thursday expanded travel restrictions to four more countries amid a global spread of the coronavirus. In addition to China, the restriction now applies to travel from Italy, South Korea, Singapore and Iran, the Jamaica Gleaner reported. Mexican officials have promised not to be caught unprepared, the Los Angeles Times reported. Critics have accused Mexico of being too slow to respond to the swine flu outbreak in 2009, which allowed the virus to spread faster and farther than it otherwise would have. "We are ready," President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said earlier this month.

## BUSINESS NEWS

## Mexico's Pemex Nearly Doubles Annual Losses

Mexican state oil company Pemex virtually doubled its losses last year and failed to meet production targets despite a turnaround in its coffers, the Financial Times reported Thursday. Pemex posted a loss of 169.8 billion pesos

wonder if the Dominican Republic is having its own 'Chile moment,' with a weakened, unpopular administration trying to buy time at any cost."



**Christopher Mitchell, professor emeritus of politics at New York University:**

"It is too early to tell whether the collapse of electronic voting on Feb. 16 was intentional. However, the automated ballot system had been repeatedly vetted by external experts,

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## NEWS BRIEFS

## Colombian Ambassador to Uruguay Takes Leave to Prepare Drug Defense

Colombia's ambassador to Uruguay, Fernando Sanclemente, has asked President Iván Duque for six weeks off to "prepare his defense and be with his family" following the discovery of cocaine producing labs on properties he owns, Semana reported this week. Sanclemente told local media that his brother, who managed the property, had rented the area where the labs were found, according to Colombia Reports.

## Talks With Argentine Government 'Going Well': IMF Spokesman

Discussions between the International Monetary Fund and the Argentine government are "going well," IMF Spokesman Gerry Rice said Thursday, Reuters reported. Argentine Economy Minister Martín Guzmán and his team met with IMF representatives in Washington this week, following a meeting with IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva in Saudi Arabia over the weekend. The IMF last week described Argentina's debt situation as "unsustainable." Rice said the informal talks will continue.

## Mexican Central Bank Sees Risks to Use of Monetary Policy

A majority of the Mexican central bank's board sees using monetary policy to stimulate the economy as risky and the benefits it could bring as modest, minutes from the bank's latest interest rate decision showed on Thursday, Reuters reported. Mexico's economy fell into a slight recession last year, and the bank on Wednesday revised down its growth forecast, citing uncertainty over the effects of the coronavirus outbreak on global supply chains. Earlier this month, Mexico's central bank cut its benchmark interest rate by 25 basis points to 7 percent.

(\$8.7 billion) in the fourth quarter, compared to a 157-billion-peso loss in the same three-month period a year earlier and a loss of 88 billion pesos in the previous quarter. For last year overall, the company reported a 346-billion-peso loss, 91 percent higher than the 180-billion-peso loss registered in 2018. Debt at the end of last year stood at \$105 billion, down 0.6 percent from the end of 2018, Reuters reported. Pemex's crude production was also down in the fourth quarter, to 1.69 million barrels per day (bpd), compared with 1.72 million bpd in the same quarter of the previous year. Including production from private sector partners, total output was 1.71 million bpd, higher than the 1.74 million bpd in the same quarter in 2018 but below the company's target of 1.8 million bpd by the end of last year. During a conference call, Pemex executives highlighted a slight rise in crude production during the first months of this year. Credit ratings agencies are widely expected to downgrade Pemex's rating to junk status in the first half of this year, amid concerns over the company's ability to achieve a sustained increase in production, the Financial Times reported.

## Indian Oil Refiners to Halt Purchases from Venezuela: Report

Oil refiners in India are planning to wind down purchases of Venezuelan oil in April due to sanctions the United States has placed on state-run oil company PDVSA, Reuters reported Thursday, citing three sources with knowledge of the matter. Reliance Industries and Nayara Energy currently serve as some of Venezuela's last big export destinations, with India accounting for about a third of Venezuela's oil shipments in January. The move follows U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to New Delhi this week. Reliance, an Indian conglomerate controlled by billionaire Mukesh Ambani, and Nayara have major operational and financial exposure in the United States, according to Reuters. Trump said on Tuesday that the United States is preparing to impose more sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector soon, The New York Times reported.

## HEALTH BRIEFS

### Paraguay Registers Worst Death Toll From Dengue in a Decade: Public Health Ministry

The number of deaths from dengue fever in Paraguay rose to 16 in the South American country's worst outbreak of the disease in the last decade, Reuters reported Feb. 14. In addition, there are 89 deaths under review to determine if they were also a result of the mosquito-borne disease. The count indicates a sharp increase from the previous week, when the Public Health Ministry recorded six deaths from dengue and another 50 deaths under review. The outbreak prompted the Senate to call a 90-day health emergency earlier this month. The government has said the emergency measure is not necessary and that it has the adequate tools to deal with the dengue outbreak. Health officials said there were 85,000 cases of dengue fever in Paraguay the week of Feb. 14, up from 57,000 cases the previous week. "We have an increase, but it has slowed down in the last two weeks of the epidemic," Public Health Minister Julio Mazzoleni told journalists. The ministry said the number of cases in the first weeks of this year were the highest in the last 10 years, but the death toll remains lower than the 250 deaths registered in the 2013 epidemic, Reuters reported.

### López Obrador Comes Under Pressure Over Shortages of Medicines in Mexico

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has come under pressure in recent weeks in news conferences over a shortage of medicines in the country following procurement changes under his administration, Reuters reported Feb. 17. News media have circulated photographs of sick children and concerned parents criticizing the government from crowded hospitals, which has led to tough questions for the president during his news conferences. His administration has centralized drug purchases in a bid to reduce corruption and overpricing, which led to the shortages, according to the report. López Obrador in recent weeks has said Mexico now has enough medicines, adding that the scarcity over the past months was linked to Mexican pharmaceutical distributors resisting the procurement shake-up, hospital officials who he said hoarded medicines, and supply issues from drug companies in China and India, Reuters reported.

### Costa Rica Health Ministry Supports Initiative to Ban Vaping in Public Spaces

Costa Rican Health Minister Daniel Salas last month expressed the ministry's support for an initiative to ban the use of vaping devices in public spaces, the Tico Times reported. The bill is currently under review in the Legislative Assembly. "I think this project is extremely important for the country. It has the full support of the Ministry of Health," Salas told deputies of the Committee on Social Affairs in late January. "It is completely in line with the health alert we already issued regarding the use of vaping devices, where we have been very clear that there is no study that can show e-cigarettes are a smoking cessation therapy ... On the contrary, we have to disincentivize the use of cigarettes and the use of vaporizers," he added. The bill under review calls for a tax of 1,000 colones (approximately \$1.75) for each vaporizer, as well as for vaping liquids. The funds recollected would go to the Costa Rican Social Security Fund and be used for the treatment of tobacco-related diseases, according to the report.

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and there were grounds for the Dominican Liberation Party (PLD), which currently controls the central government, to fear defeat in local races. The PLD experienced a bruising leadership split in late 2019. The opposition, led by the Modern Revolutionary Party (PRM), was tied with the PLD in surveys of municipal-level voters; the ruling party had prevailed by 12 percent in local elections four years ago. Possible municipal losses in February would likely strengthen the impact of recent polls showing the PLD's presidential candidate trailing, ahead of voting slated for May 17. The search for central-government patronage is a major axis of Dominican politics, and demonstrated electoral weakness of the PLD

“It is possible that this very unfortunate event will affect the results of the rescheduled municipal elections and perhaps even the presidential election...”

— Mary Fernández Rodríguez

might motivate anxious voters to become clients of competing parties. The delay in the municipal elections (now re-scheduled for March 15) gives the PLD an additional month to campaign, aided by state resources unavailable to rival parties. Protests by the opposition and especially by Dominican civil society have led the government to arrange investigations of the computer-voting malfunction by reputable international bodies including the OAS; these probes have already begun. Dominican supporters of free and fair elections have pledged to be vigilant over at least the coming six months, focusing on both municipal and presidential/congressional elections. An unintended but possibly positive dynamic is also at work:

increased attention to municipal voting may enhance the emergence of local politics as a pluralizing arena, where new leaders and policy ideas can enter national affairs.”

**A** **Mary Fernández Rodríguez, founding partner at Headrick Rizik Álvarez & Fernández in Santo Domingo:** “The electoral authorities halted the municipal elections on Feb. 16, three hours after voting had begun, due to alleged technical problems in the automated voting system that was being used in 18 municipalities that accounted for 62 percent of the total votes. Whether these problems were unintentional or due to fraud is still to be determined—the OAS and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) are investigating the matter. However, it is the first time in the history of the Dominican Republic that a suspension of an election has happened. It is a challenging situation and represents extraordinary waste of money for the country in the organization of the elections and for the candidates in the promotion of their campaigns. Fortunately, the elections have been rescheduled for March 15. It is possible that this very unfortunate event will affect the results of the rescheduled municipal elections and perhaps even the presidential election, which will take place on May 17. Protests targeted at the electoral authorities, the government and the governing PLD party have been taking place every day. The protests continue to grow, both in terms of the number of people participating and in the number of places around the country where they are taking place. However, with cooperation from civil society organizations, it appears that the electoral authorities are implementing the necessary steps to ensure that both upcoming elections are transparent, free and fair.”

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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