

Who are the candidates
for Secretary-General
of the Organization of
American States?

María Fernanda
Espinosa

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Former President of the UN General Assembly

María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés is an Ecuadorian politician, diplomat, professor, and poet. She has a license in Applied Linguistics from the Catholic University of Ecuador. She holds a postgraduate degree in Anthropology and Political Science, and a Master's degree in Social Sciences and Amazonian Studies from the Latin American School of Social Sciences of Quito.

María Espinosa was President of the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly (2018-2019) and she has served as Ecuador's Minister of Foreign Relations (twice), Minister of National Defense, and Minister of Natural and Cultural Heritage. She was also political advisor for Biodiversity and Indigenous Peoples (1999-2005), and later Regional Director of the International Union of Nature (2005-2007). As Ambassador, she acted as Ecuador's permanent representative to the United Nations in New York (2008-2009), and in Geneva (2014-2017).

The candidacy of Mrs. Espinosa was presented by Antigua and Barbuda, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.



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What are the main attributes that make you the suitable candidate to assume the position of Secretary General of the OAS, or be reelected to the position, for the period 2020-2025?

From all the functions that I have performed, I have demonstrated my absolute respect for international law, my unrestricted defense of human rights, and my permanent willingness to engage in dialogue to overcome differences and reach agreements.

My candidacy is precisely a response to a conscious evaluation of the challenges facing the hemisphere and the organization, and the profile and characteristics of the person who will serve as Secretary General. From 1990 to today, I have followed an intense path of training and experience that gives me the necessary credentials to fill this position. My professional training and my national and international experience allow me to understand not only what the OAS requires here and now, and the role that I will have to play as its new Secretary General, but also to know how to do it.

The OAS should focus its work on the four pillars established by the Charter: democracy, integral development; multidimensional security; and human rights. These four pillars must be approached in an articulated, inter-dependent manner, and while optimizing efforts and resources. The organization additionally has a complete regulatory system from its founding Charter to the Declarations,

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Conventions, and decisions of ministerial and presidential summits, and there is also a profuse foundation for the protection of human rights, such as the Court and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the rapporteurships. However, the Organization's management has not sufficiently exploited its immense potential to promote hemispheric solidarity, for the development and well-being of our peoples, as established by the founding Charter. The most important political efforts have focused on few specific issues, neglecting others of enormous importance to our nations.

The integral development agenda, for example, has been subject to weak performance. The OAS has been absent from major international debates where the hemisphere could have a powerful voice, on multiple issues that unite the Americas and the Caribbean. Hemispheric cooperation to move towards compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals is not part of the organization's

agenda. The great negotiations about climate change, peace and security, the impact of new technologies on the future of work, just to name a few examples, do not have a hemispheric voice.

My practical experience, gained from my time in civil society, from academia, from senior government positions, from spaces of international representation as an ambassador, and from my role as president of the UN General Assembly, has given me the opportunity to speak from my experience in the construction of the sustainable development agenda, both in its international political negotiations and in the design of public policies for its implementation. That is why I believe that I am fully prepared to promote and direct the organization's comprehensive development agenda. I know the challenges that countries face in achieving sustainable development, especially in the field of financing, development cooperation, and promotion of successful public policies.

I am internationally recognized in the fields of environmental affairs and the climate change agenda, which will be extremely useful for incorporating the OAS into global efforts to confront these challenges. As a former official of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and as Minister of Cultural and Natural Heritage, I speak with over 25 years of experience in this area.

Additionally, I have a long history in human rights issues; with a recognized work in favor of the rights of indigenous peoples, the rights of women and the rights of persons with disabilities. As Ecuador's ambassador to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, I have been recognized for my defense of freedom of expression and civil and political rights. I actively helped to improve the Universal Periodic Review and the mechanisms for monitoring and implementing recommendations. I have worked from various spaces in the promotion and implementation of the Inter-American system and the universal system for the protection of human rights, which is why I believe that I am qualified to lead the implementation of the strategic objectives of the organization's human rights pillar, and

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contribute to the strengthening of the system with respect to its autonomy and independence.

For the pillar of democracy, I have firsthand knowledge of the political dynamics of the electoral process, and the need to strengthen institutions and the rule of law. I have advised constituent processes, I have held the highest positions of political decision-making, and the highest position of political representation of international election as UN General Assembly President. These experiences give me the knowledge necessary to work effectively to achieve the strategic objectives of the pillar of strengthening democracy.

My experience in the field of foreign policy, in the elaboration of government plans, in my performance as Minister of National Defense, in charge of security policies, defense and fight against organized crime, and my management of issues related to peace and security in various crises and international conflicts in my capacity as President of the UN General Assembly, allow me to have an integral vision of all dimensions of security and the challenges facing our continent.

Additionally, for the institutional strengthening of the OAS, I offer my experience as a planner and manager, as a public servant, and a wide network of professional relationships with key international actors. This will provide the opportunity to strengthen dialogue and cooperation with regional and extra-regional partners of the organization. In the same way, I maintain an active relationship with academic, intellectual and scientific contacts as well as with world leaders of the most representative religions of the continent, which will also serve to expand the alliances of the organization and strengthen the scope of its mandates.

I have promoted South-South and triangular cooperation, and have led global development financing efforts so I have close working relationships with the donor community and the multilateral Banking system that I will put at the service of the OAS Member States.

Last but not least, my election on March 20th would mark the first time in the 71-year history of the organization in which a woman would become chief executive officer. As I have pointed out on several occasions, my election would constitute recognition of the abilities and merits of women. This fact will represent one more step on the ladder towards gender equality and will demonstrate that women, like men, are capable of fulfilling the highest responsibilities of the international public service. For me it

will be a great honor to fulfill this milestone on behalf of the women of the Americas and the Caribbean.

Some of the main obstacles to the proper functioning of the OAS have to do with the lack of financial sustainability, the administrative challenges of the organization and the political challenges in the region. Could you share with us some of the strategies that you propose to face them?

There is a definite need for the complete modernization of the operation and management of the Secretary General of the organization, to support and advise States in meeting the challenges facing the continent, but also to ensure financial sustainability and administrative challenges, such as transparency and accountability. That is why it is essential to undertake an urgent process of renewal and revitalization.

An organization that carries a chronic financial deficit for several years, that uses almost 80 percent of the quotas of the States in personnel, that has more than 50 percent of contracts under occasional and consulting modalities, and that keeps mandates that grow exponentially and with the same resources for at least 10 years needs a profound and urgent transformation.

The sustained financial crisis of the OAS is not really the problem but a symptom. My purpose is to contribute to the construction of a clear and shared vision that prioritizes the work of the OAS based on a prioritization of mandates, a realistic analysis of the added value it offers to the states and societies of the hemisphere, and a positive agenda that responds to the four pillars of the organization.

An effective, transparent strategy, agreed with the States, is required to mobilize resources based on priorities and with clear mechanisms of transparency and accountability. It is also necessary to implement modern systems for monitoring, impact evaluation and efficiency in the management of the Secretary General.

The OAS was created to strengthen the peace and security of the continent, consolidate democracy, protect human rights, prevent conflicts and ensure the peaceful settlement of disputes among member states, among other reasons. In this framework, what would be the three main challenges to address in the region during your term? What is the role that the OAS Secretary General should have in the current crises in the region?

The challenges are many. However, if I had to prioritize the three main challenges we face as a continent, the

ones I should pay special attention to during my term, I would summarize them as the following:

- I. End the polarization and fragmentation experienced by the countries of the continent, recovering trust, respectful dialogue, the ability to process differences, and making the OAS a space for hemispheric meeting, solidarity and cooperation.
- II. Renew and revitalize the OAS as a modern, efficient, solid, and effective multilateral agency that responds to the common interests of its States and the peoples of the Americas and the Caribbean based on a comprehensive agenda that reflects the four pillars of work that set the Charter.
- III. Relaunch a programmatic agenda that responds effectively to the common challenges of the continent, related to security, the promotion of integral development, and human rights in the framework of democratic governance. Based on my consultations with States, organizations and experts, I have proposed an agenda of 10 priority issues that must be validated by the Member States.

First. The first major challenge is to restore the dialogue and trust of a fragmented and polarized continent. For this I have proposed to look back at the founding Charter of the organization. If the OAS turns its back on its Charter, not only will it be failing its role as a hemispheric multilateral entity, but it will lose its source of guidance for relations and coexistence between its states.

It is essential to remember the fundamental articles of the Charter, which will help us assess whether the Secretary General is connected to the organization's founding principles.

The OAS is defined in Article 1 as an international organization intended to achieve an order of peace and justice, foster solidarity, strengthen collaboration and defend sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. To what extent are we building peace and fostering solidarity in the hemisphere?

Article 2 of the Charter establishes its foundational purposes, and we may ask ourselves: Are we working on the peaceful settlement of disputes between States? Is the OAS promoting the economic, social and cultural development of our peoples? Are we really working to eradicate critical poverty, which constitutes an obstacle to the full democratic development of the peoples of the hemisphere, as expressly stated in the Charter?

Regarding the principles of the organization established in Article 3 of the Charter: Is international law the norm of conduct between member states?

With the analysis we make of these questions, we will know whether there is a deficit in the fulfillment of the foundational purposes and principles of the OAS. I dare to point out that there is indeed a deficit and that we must return to the founding spirit of the organization, to rebuild the trust and heal the wounds of a fragmented continent.

Also, in the answers to these questions is the future that we must build for the OAS. These purposes and principles constitute the heart and backbone of the multilateral nature of the OAS, which starts with the recognition of the sovereign equality of member states.

Second. The second major challenge is the construction of a strong, effective, credible multilateral agency that responds to the common interests of its States and of the societies of the Americas and the Caribbean. In a globalized world with multiple challenges, our continent deserves to have a modern organization that is accountable, that measures its impact and effectiveness, and that prioritizes, plans, and fulfills.

The main function of the OAS is to accompany, advise, and support the States to strengthen their democratic institutions, fulfill their human rights obligations, meet the objectives of integral and sustainable development, and aid in the construction of peaceful and prosperous societies.

Multilateralism exists to balance power, to equalize inequalities. To promote collective action that allows us to respond to global and regional challenges and manage our common assets. The most important common good is the peaceful coexistence between the states and within them. Therefore, as I have indicated on several occasions, the power of multilateralism lies in the principle of sovereign equality between states. This means that each Member State has equal rights and equal responsibilities.

To truly be effective and fulfill its purpose, a multilateral organization has to act collectively in terms of the common good. And one of the biggest challenges is to process differences and dissent in a democratic, constructive and tolerant way.

The OAS is irreplaceable but must evolve over time. To renew and make this organization a solid multilateral body, I have proposed to guide my work based on seven strategic guidelines:

- I. Strengthen the leadership role of the OAS on the hemispheric stage with renewed legitimacy and credibility around its four pillars of work.
- II. To work for the construction of a greater sense of hemispheric community in which we recover the principles of cooperation and solidarity contained in the Charter.
- III. Strengthen the organization's capacity for dialogue with other regional integration mechanisms and international organizations. Our organization cannot continue to be absent from the great global and regional debates.
- IV. Ensure and guarantee the respect of the collective and individual rights of all people, and especially listen to the voice of the groups whose rights are most at risk.
- V. Strengthen the voice and participation spaces of civil society in the hemisphere and bring the organization closer to the societies of the Americas.
- VI. Ensure respect for the sovereignty of the States, and base the decisions and management of the organization, in strict adherence to the procedures, on the principle of legality and international law.
- VII. Ensure respect for the sovereign equality of States, which establishes equal rights and responsibilities for each member of the organization.

The fifth strategic guideline on civil society participation deserves special reference here. Although there are approved guidelines to ensure their participation, it is necessary to maintain permanent, predictable and sustained channels of dialogue and interaction. Civil society organizations must have an advisory, guiding, and support role for the management of the OAS and its General Secretary. To this end, the counterpart that manages the relationship with civil society cannot have two officials to serve 573 registered organizations. The participation of civil society cannot and should not be limited to its attendance at the General Assemblies. I will establish audiences for topics of interest, dialogues, and permanent interaction mechanisms.

I will include in these dialogue spaces academic networks and think tanks linked to the themes of the OAS.

Likewise, we must strengthen the role of the 72 Observer States beyond their status as donors, as they must become strategic allies for the execution of the priorities, agendas, and plans of the organization.

Third. The third major hemispheric challenge is to face together, and in a coordinated way, the challenges we face, especially those related to security, integral development, and human rights. The articulated umbrella of these three pillars is the strength of the institutions and the rule of law.

Through my conversations and analysis, I have been able to confirm that one of the pillars, where more agreements and shared visions exist, is in the multidimensional security pillar. And this is because this is precisely an issue that more countries in the continent face a challenge and where cooperation is essential if we want to be effective.

Therefore, my proposal is to strengthen the successful actions of the security pillar, especially the good practices related to the Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism that measures progress in addressing the drug problem and related crimes; good practices to prevent intentional homicide; to eradicate human trafficking and trafficking; to combat illegal mining, among others.

In particular, I have also proposed a hemispheric coordination initiative conducted by the Armed Forces and civilian experts to help serve in emergency situations caused by disasters. This is a common challenge to our countries and an issue in which cooperation and solidarity are necessary, considering the spirit of the Charter.

Integral development is also a shared challenge for the entire continent, even for the more developed States, as the Charter calls for solidarity and cooperation to achieve it, and because many challenges such as migration, transnational crime, the fight against drug trafficking, Climate change, among others, requires coordinated strategies to address them. And they also require countries to reach levels of development that allow them to address the structural causes of many of these problems.

The integral development pillar has a great institutional and programmatic fabric built throughout the history of the organization. Despite this, I believe that this pillar urgently requires a new pact between the States to be launched; one that identifies the added value and comparative advantages of the organization in order to offer concrete and measurable results.

I am aware that there is no unanimous position on the role that the OAS should play in this area. We are not and cannot be an agency or a development bank. But, we can be a great platform for intelligence generation, capacity building, networking, and efforts connected with regio-

nal and international initiatives, within the framework of sustainable development goals, and the efforts that our countries are making to achieve them. In this regard, I believe that we should prioritize the following actions, which were presented in greater detail at the hearing with the States on February 12:

- Establish a hemispheric alliance to advance in the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals, and join the OAS in global development efforts, as an international strategic actor.
- Evaluate our national policies and efforts to face the climate crisis. I will promote a dialogue to identify actions and minimum standards for good practices in mitigation and adaptation, access to mechanisms and sources of financing and transfer of low carbon technologies, and building resilience to disasters.
- Strengthen early warning and demographic systems to provide timely, impartial and quality information to States about possible crises in the hemisphere and propose scenarios for their decision.
- Strengthen efforts related to migration and refugees. I have pointed out that there is no other similar space, in any other region of the world with the institutional capacity to deal with migration and refugee issues such as the OAS. Countries of origin, transit, and destination of migrants and refugees converge in our hemisphere. Addressing these issues within the organization is therefore a natural obligation.

Cooperate strategically with the development initiatives of the Caribbean States. Caribbean countries have great development potential, constitute a hemispheric example of regional integration, and also have great human capital. Its particular challenges related to climate change, financial services, and capacity-building demand special attention from the organization and the Secretary General.

Finally, on the question, what is the role of the OAS Secretary General in the current crises in the region?

There are several countries on the continent that face conflict situations and social protests. The OAS and its Specialized Bodies must operate in strict accordance with international law and Inter-American instruments. It is important that human rights bodies act in a timely, impartial, independent and effective manner when there are situations that violate human rights. While decisions on crisis situations lie with the Permanent Council and the

General Assembly of the organization, the Secretary General should establish an effective early warning system, and impartial, quality, technical, and timely information, to ensure that States make informed decisions and avoid unnecessary confrontations between Member States. Once the States make decisions, the person who occupies the Secretary General must lead its implementation and manage its compliance. In no case should the General Secretariat advance personal positions or value judgments before the competent specialized bodies operate and the States take a position in situations of crisis or conflict.

The Inter-American human rights system plays a fundamental role in the hemisphere. To fulfill its mandate, the Commission and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights require adequate resources, as well as independence and autonomy in the development of their work. If you are elected Secretary General or re-elected to office, what measures will you take to guarantee the independence, autonomy and adequate financing of the organs of the Inter-American human rights system? What are the main challenges you identify to implement these measures and how would you address them?

One of the greatest legacies and contributions of the OAS has been the Inter-American human rights system. Despite the significant advances, we can still do much more and better.

In the first place, I will work to provide all possible support to the strengthening and free exercise of the functions of human rights organizations, respecting their areas of competence, ensuring due care and respect when issuing opinions, and promoting activities that may affect their role of responsibility of the promotion and defense of human rights.

The Commission and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights must have all the necessary support from the States and the Secretary General. They will have my personal commitment and my institutional obligation and mandate, to contribute at all times to their autonomy and institutional strengthening.

To contribute to the work of these bodies, the human rights rapporteurs, and strengthen the mandates of the organization in this area, I will promote the following actions:

- I will promote the review of the administrative and financial status of the organs of the Inter-American Hu-

man Rights System, and I will support the mobilization of resources required to fulfill their mandates. Special attention should be given to personnel hiring issues, ensuring agility, transparency and the highest standards in the recruitment and management processes of human resources.

- I will promote a special initiative for the universalization of all Inter-American human rights tools and the implementation of their plans of action. This would contribute to strengthening the role of human rights bodies, increasing their visibility, while informing others of the role that they play in the implementation of the Inter-American instruments.
- I will promote efforts to protect and promote the rights expressed in the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- I will promote the implementation of the Action Plan of the Decade of the Afro-descendants of the Americas and will convert this plan into a central instrument of reference for national policies.
- I will promote the implementation of the Inter-American Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities and the Declaration of extension of the Decade of the Americas for the Dignity and Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- I will establish the Quinquennium of Women's Rights in the OAS. Equality, rights and the empowerment of women will be a common thread in the daily management and actions of the organization. My proposal will be to enter the moment of implementation, results and impact of all the political tools and instruments generated in the last 25 years of commemoration of the Belem Do Para Convention and the Beijing Plan of Action.
- I will establish a mechanism for dialogue and exchange of information and experiences between the Inter-American human rights system and the universal system.

The OAS has demonstrated its technical capacity for monitoring elections in recent years. What is the main contribution of the OAS when carrying out electoral monitoring actions in the hemisphere? Do you think that some changes or adjustments to this mechanism should be implemented?

The Electoral Observation Missions have been a hallmark of the OAS. It is imperative that these Missions maintain a technical, impartial and independent character. It is imperative that these Missions be planned in a timely, austere and transparent manner. They must be organized in advance to optimize costs and efficiency. The reports of the Observation Missions must include financial reports.

The work of the MOEs must necessarily be linked to preventive work and support to the strengthening of national electoral institutions. The implementation of the recommendations of the MOEs should have their due process and accompaniment according to the States' needs and request.