

Lawrence Sacks:

Welcome, everybody, and thanks so much for joining us today for Democracy Is: A Virtual Democracy Day Conversation. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Larry Sacks, and I'm the USAID mission director in Columbia. And I'm honored to be moderating today's important discussion. Because today we recognize International Day of Democracy and the culmination of USAID's Democracy Is campaign, which was launched last January. The campaign exemplifies USAID's unwavering commitment to strengthening democratic governance and highlights our investments and partnerships to advance democratic consolidation around the world.

Lawrence Sacks:

I was thrilled when I was asked to moderate the session, as I've seen firsthand the impact that our democracy assistance has achieved to prevent violent conflict, to protect and guarantee human rights, to expand the rule of law, to give every person and every community, a voice to determine their future, and to bring hope and opportunity to where it's needed the most. I'm a true believer, so much so that I've even tried to inculcate these same democratic principles at home, by letting my kids vote on what they'll eat for dinner. Last night, for example, they proudly cast their ballot for pizza, but I made tacos because, I mean, come on, it's not like they live in a swing state.

Lawrence Sacks:

But back to the topic at hand, when we're talking about the Democracy Is campaign, we should first ask ourselves, "What is democracy?" So, fully embracing President Lincoln's view that democracy is government of the people, by the people, and for the people, I thought that I canvas the streets of Bogota to get the views of the people. The only question being, who to talk to first. Let's roll the tape.

Lawrence Sacks:

Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay. Come on. Got to get this figured out. Who would be the voice of the common people but also somebody who's got their finger on the pulse of democracy? Come on, Larry, think. You got this. You got this. The voice of the common people, the voice. The voice, of course. I got it. How about 25-time Latin Grammy winner, two-time regular Grammy winner, Juanes. He's got to know, right? Besides, that guy loves talking to me. I'll just FaceTime him. We'll talk for a minute, see what he has to say. [foreign language 00:00:02:21].

Juanes:

[foreign language 00:02:25]

Lawrence Sacks:

That was awesome. Insightful. Done. I wonder if people are really going to take the analysis of democratic governance seriously from a rockstar. Maybe I need somebody with, I don't know, a little bit more political street cred. Somebody who's actually governed. I got it. [foreign language 00:03:41]. You opted to negotiate Columbia's way out of over five decades of violent conflict, so I wonder what do you think about when you think about democracy?

Juan Manuel Santos:

For me, democracy is freedom. Democracy is the rule of law where everybody is equal before the law and nobody is above the law. For me, democracy is the will of the majority, but respecting the rights of

the minority. And as Churchill used to say, "Democracy is the worst of all political systems, excluding all others."

Lawrence Sacks:

Look, I know I've asked you this question a million times, but we're vibing here, so what do you think, can I finally see the Nobel Peace Prize?

Juan Manuel Santos:

I've told you, I will not show my Nobel Prize to you until we finish that very important work of reconciliation, where USA is doing a great job and for which I am very, very thankful.

Lawrence Sacks:

Very powerful and thought provoking words from President Santos. And of course, we're deeply focused on reconciliation, so we hope to see that Nobel Peace Prize soon. But this got me thinking, Columbia is a country of strong democratic institutions and a vibrant civil society, but what about those countries that are backsliding or where that space is actually closed? Can we really talk about democracy without talking about freedom? So, I thought I'd asked my old friend, Leopoldo Lopez a politician, a political activist, a political prisoner, and a source of inspiration for so many in Venezuela. Let's find out what Leopoldo has to say.

Leopoldo Lopez:

In countries like Venezuela, where we don't have democracy, but we strive for democracy, we understand what our hopes are in the future, and that's what we fight for. So, we fight for a society very different from what we have today. I understand democracy in a very simple way, as the best way to organize our societies in order for all the people to have their own rights, all rights for all the people. And the only way in which that could happen is to have the rule of law, to have free and fair elections, and to have a strong civil society. We don't have that in Venezuela. And in order to have that, we need to first reach the most important goal that we have as a society, freedom. Because freedom is the beginning of everything else. Without freedom, we cannot even think about democracy.

Lawrence Sacks:

Wow. That really, really brings it home. "Without freedom, we can't even think about democracy." Think about that for a minute, and take it from all of them, but also take it from our distinguished group of panelists who have graciously joined us today. Because we are extremely fortunate to hear from five democracy heroes who will share their stories about strengthening democratic governance and civic engagement in their countries. But first to kick it off, in earnest, it's my honor and my privilege to introduce USA's acting administrator, John Barsa, and it's appropriate that I'm introducing him, given that his first field visit at USAID was to Colombia, where mission staff and leaders of Columbia's democratic institutions and active civil society raved about his three-piece suits, which President Duque, a renown student and expert of democracy, affectionately referred to as George Washington [Wear 00:00:07:22]. So, without further ado, it is my pleasure to introduce acting administrator John Barsa, the closest USAID has come to having an administrator who looks like a Founding Father. Acting administrator Barsa.

John Barsa:

Thank you very much for that introduction, Larry. And in honor of the memory of that incredible visit, I again wore the three-piece suit in honor of that. So, thank you so much for that. Everyone, thank you so much. It's an honor to be with you all today. Today on International Day of Democracy, we celebrate all that USAID has accomplished in the realm of democracy and governance, and we look ahead to the opportunities and challenges that the future holds. Your accomplishments are too many to name, but through the successful Democracy Is campaign, we highlighted some of the inspiring work that our agency does to promote democratic ideals around the world. You'll be hearing from our democracy champions later in this event, and I'm proud of the Democracy Is campaign for telling the story of our work in such a compelling way.

John Barsa:

While we celebrate the success of Democracy Is, also want to highlight some of the good things that are coming in our work. In particular, I'm happy to announce three new programs in the area of democracy and rights. The first of these is a \$36 million Sudan elections program. The program, which will run through the end of 2023, ensures that the people of Sudan can participate in free and fair elections. We'll be laying the groundwork for transparent and inclusive electoral processes that reflect the will of an informed and active citizenry. Sudan is in a period of transition, and our engagement there will help make sure that the country's future is a democratic one. Second, is the Greater Internet Freedom Program, or GIFP. GIFP will support the digital security of civil society and media organizations, encourage citizen engagement in internet governance, and promote the recognition of human rights online. GIFP is a three year \$15.5 million activity that will operate in 40 to 60 countries around the world.

John Barsa:

Finally, in support of the \$20 million religious freedom directive and executive order in advancing international religious freedom, the DRG Center is shifting to prioritize efforts that are promoting and protecting religious freedom. I commend the DRG team for pivoting through a focus on such important work. We know this work is essential, but I want to take a moment to step back and talk about why that is. Democracy is the basis of our other freedoms. It creates accountability in elected leaders, and that accountability helps ensure that those leaders guarantee and protect basic rights. On the other hand, when dictators were in charge, we know that freedoms of speech, religion, and the press are often the first casualties. I understand this dynamic well. My mother fled the authoritarianism of the Castro regime in Cuba, and she never let me forget the importance of democracy and its relationship to the core rights we cherish as Americans.

John Barsa:

What we at USAID do to protect democracy improves lives, but it also serves as a foundation for all of our other work and our missions to ensure US national security. Societies that defend human rights, democratic institutions, and the rule of law are more stable and more equipped to respond to the needs of their people. They make for better partners in development, because they know they must deliver on promises made. When a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic hits, democratic leaders are best equipped to respond transparently and effectively. Taking all of this together, democracies are better allies and better trading partners. When democracy is strong, the world is a healthier, safer place.

John Barsa:

All this good that you do to promote security for our country in democracy in the developing world is now facing a daunting range of threats. In the context of the destabilizing global pandemic, extremist violence, corruption, and authoritarianism continue to threaten democracy. We've already seen emergency powers invoked [inaudible 00:11:24] essential rights, and we know that anti-democratic forces will continue to use instability as an excuse to abuse their power. I hope that all of you USAID who worked to promote and defend democracy around the world treat these threats as motivation. We do not back down from a challenge. This agency needs your knowledge and dedication, so do our partners around the world.

John Barsa:

I've heard it said that rational people do not expect to change the world. Of course, the flip side of this mindset is that the world is not changed by rational people. You can alter the course of history with your work. This isn't just a job for you. It's a calling. We are here to celebrate those of you who have answered that call and to look with optimism and renewed vigor for the work you will do in the future. I thank you for all your commitment to the work and cause of democracy and for the work you do each and every day. And I'm grateful to Larry for trying to demonstrate the values democracy in his own household and giving his children a chance to petition, even though their vote was not successful. So, thank you, Larry. Thank you all for everything you do.

Lawrence Sacks:

Thank you so much Administrator Barsa for your eloquent, inspiring, and thoughtful words on such a critical aspect of our assistance. And we very much hope to see you again soon in Columbia. I would now like to introduce our first democracy hero, Judge Aferdita Bytqi from Kosovo, who courageously broke through multiple barriers to become the first female president of the court of Pristina. Since Kosovo's independence in 2008, USAID has stood firmly beside citizens and the judicial branch to strengthen rule of law and expand access to justice. Under Judge Bytqi's bold leadership, and with USAID's support, the judicial system has become more efficient and more transparent. And the door has been kicked wide open for other women who dream of bringing justice and the rule of law to a wider swath of citizens in Kosovo. Let's roll the first Democracy Is video, Justice for Kosovo, which features Judge Bytqi's remarkable story in gender equity, rule of law, and ping-pong skills that are matched only by Forrest Gump himself.

Aferdita Bytqi:

[foreign language 00:13:59]

Lawrence Sacks:

Welcome to the program, Judge Bytqi, and thank you so much for joining us today. It is a real honor to meet you. You've really excelled in your role as president of the Court Pristina for some time now, and your ability to reduce the case backlog has been exceptionally impressive and a model of USAID support to justice systems worldwide. So, what advice can you offer other countries grappling with similar challenges, and what were the most effective measures that you took to reduce the case backlog by 30%?

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:17:04]

Lawrence Sacks:

I think you're on mute.

Justice Bytyqi:

It's okay.

Interpreter:

Can you hear us? I'm the interpreter speaking now. [foreign language 00:00:34].

Speaker 1:

Yes. Please go ahead.

Interpreter:

Hello? Can you hear us?

Justice Bytyqi:

Yes.

Speaker 1:

Please [inaudible 00:17:45].

Justice Bytyqi:

[foreign language 00:00:47].

Interpreter:

Yes, it is true. It's the fourth year now that I'm heading the basic court of Pristina. So I've been working with dedication, courage, professionalism, and I have tried to convey all these features to my fellow judges and the support staff of the court.

Interpreter:

Through open communication and continuous communication with my colleagues that we have to addressed problems and solved numerous problems by often working over time, always with the purpose of providing best quality services to the citizens.

Interpreter:

So the Pristina court is the biggest court regarding the cases it deals with in the Republic of Kosovo. And it wasn't easy to get here.

Interpreter:

So during this journey, there were many obstacles, but I was committed to work and had a great sense of responsibility, and I had to use them in order to address the needs and the requirements of the citizens. And they were the biggest impetus behind the success.

Interpreter:

So due to the work I have been doing, I managed to get the support of the Kosovo Judicial Council, and they have approved my request to increase the number of judges. And this has had a great influence in reducing the backlog.

Lawrence Sacks:

Well, thank you so much for that answer. And it's clear that you've not only succeeded in improving the administration of justice, but you've also made the court's leadership more inclusive. But what message has your appointment as the first female president of the court sent across the judicial system, and the country writ large? And have you heard from other aspiring female judges, or young Kosovars, who have been inspired by your story?

Justice Bytyqi:

Okay. [foreign language 00:04:20].

Interpreter:

So my appointment on the top of the biggest court in the country has had a positive effect amongst the female colleagues, judges, and the women community in Kosovo in general. And their self-confidence increased, and they had bigger ambitions because they found out that the culminating achievements and managerial achievements and the proven results are able to happen irrespective of the gender, race, or nationality.

Interpreter:

That is enough to have commitment and to be decisive. Then you will not be lacking the results.

Justice Bytyqi:

Thank you.

Lawrence Sacks:

Well, thank you so much, Justice Bytyqi, for sharing your incredible story with us. We are really inspired by it, and we commend your leadership and appreciate your time.

Lawrence Sacks:

And now we're going to head over to Zimbabwe to meet our next democracy hero, Munya Dodo, a Zimbabwean journalist, an alum of the International Republican Institute's Generation Democracy Program supported by USAID, and a former participant of the State Department's Mandela Washington Fellowship Program for Young African Leaders. In recent months, Munya has worked tirelessly to keep citizens well-informed about the pandemic's developments, the impacts on their health and on the economy, and plays a crucial role in holding government officials accountable for delivering life-saving solutions.

Lawrence Sacks:

Munya, thank you so much for joining us. The media and brave journalists everywhere play such-

John Barsa:

Thank you.

Lawrence Sacks:

-you're welcome... play such a fundamental role in shaping public opinion and serving as a watchdog to protect the public interests. Some even consider it to be the fourth branch of government. So how do you see the role of media in a democracy? And tell us a little bit about your experience training aspiring young journalists who inform the populace, and to hold leaders accountable.

John Barsa:

I think the role of journalists is to stand up for the unpopular opinions, to disseminate information, and to be the voice of the voiceless, and to provide access to information to communities that would have otherwise not have access [inaudible 00:24:02] decisions.

John Barsa:

So in my work in Zimbabwe, I run a project called Open Parliament Zimbabwe. So basically, it's an open government data project. So we take government's data, parliament's data, council data, and we aggregate it to citizens. In a country where all of the mainstream media is controlled by the government, citizens turn to platforms like the one that I run for credible information that's not biased, and that holds the elected leaders to account.

Lawrence Sacks:

[inaudible 00:24:43] to the voiceless. In the wake of the pandemic here in Columbia, civic leaders have stepped forward to advocate for greater security, transparency, food security, and a range of other services. So I wonder, how has the pandemic impacted citizens in Zimbabwe, and what demands have they channeled to democratic leaders and institutions? And on a related note, what do you consider to be your primary role as a journalist, particularly when you think about the ways in which Zimbabwe has been impacted by COVID-19?

John Barsa:

I think the role of the media is to paint a picture, a true representation of the facts of what's happening on the ground. In Zimbabwe right now, the COVID pandemic highlighted inequalities that are existing in communities, and the real cost of corruption, and the consequences of not investing in infrastructure when that time was available. And I think the best case in recent days, a journalist by the name of Hopewell Chin'ono spent 40 days in jail after exposing how government was awarding COVID tenders to people who were related to government officials.

John Barsa:

And I think that's the best example because he stood up for the little people and showed that it is very important for the people's investments, the people's taxpayer's dollars to be used in a transparent and an accountable manner. And I think that's the best example of what journalism should be: holding elected officials to account.

Lawrence Sacks:

Thank you so much. And that is definitely a critical role of the media. And as you mentioned, looking at the cost of corruption, as well. Thank you so much, Munya, for your willingness to inspire other young

Zimbabweans who want to play their part in strengthening democracy in your country. People tend to look at youth as a generation of tomorrow, but you might agree youth truly represents a generation of today. So thank you so much for all that you do both as a journalist, and your work with youth. Thanks for joining us.

Lawrence Sacks:

And speaking about strong advocates, let's head over to Nepal to meet Mr. Arjun Koirala, a Deputy Chief of Party of the Nepal Reconstruction Engineering Services Program. After an earthquake that measured 7.8 on the Richter scale rocked Nepal and killed nearly 9,000 people, destroying over 600,000 homes, Mr. Koirala played a central role in helping Nepal take an historic step forward by mobilizing one of the largest homeowner-driven housing reconstruction programs ever. His work in USAID's ongoing support also helped to ensure that women in marginalized communities had equal access to reconstruction resources, and a strong voice in governance process. And now I'd like to invite you all to watch our next Democracy Is video. Meet Nepal's democracy defender.

Voiceover:

I saw that there was not a single woman. I just found topi, topi, topi, topi. Topi is the Nepali hat, so it was just men. My name is Archana Tamang. With support from USAID, I was placed at the National Reconstruction Authority as the gender equality and social inclusion advisor. When the earthquake struck Nepal, it was a turning point in my life. Nepal has been suffering from the societal discriminatory practices, which were derogatory to the rights of women. Then there are communities that have been excluded from the political economic and social processes. But in spite of the devastation, I view the earthquake as an opportunity to correct the social mistakes of the past, doing away with discrimination, inequality, and exclusion.

Voiceover:

In 2015, we got the new constitution, which mandates that every process, whether it is reconstruction or governance, has to include persons from marginalized communities. We took this challenge to make sure that all the representatives within the government system abide by the constitution. In any democratic process, the voice of the people who have been voiceless counts because it is about processes that affect their lives.

Voiceover:

There have been some noticeable changes. 40% of the elected representatives are women, more girls are being educated. We're seeing more women in bureaucracy. Perhaps in the very near future, you will see more women over here. Not only topi, topi.

Lawrence Sacks:

Arjun, thank you so much for taking the time to join us. We're deeply inspired by the success of Nepal's reconstruction efforts after the devastating earthquake that affected so many people and so many families. [inaudible 00:30:11] affected Nepal, and what you focused on in order to increase resilience as part of this program.

Arjun Koirala:

Thank you so much, Larry. A great honor, indeed. Well, there was a huge loss of people, property, religious, housing, even public infrastructure and services that Nepal never had witnessed, but as a direct result of USAID support, 23,000 missions had been trained on disasters of reconstruction. More than 250,000 Nepalis now reside in [inaudible 00:30:45] at homes.

Arjun Koirala:

Now over 180,000 have access to quality health and education services from hospitals and schools built with USAID assistance. We have [inaudible 00:30:56] communities in planning, designing, constructing, and operating these infrastructures, which are based on the principles of disaster readiness with minimum operating and maintenance costs and inclusive design.

Arjun Koirala:

For example, the designs are compliant to the Americans with Disabilities Act idea. The designs have separate girls quarters with changing rooms, sanitary bins, privacy for a pregnant woman in those facilities, even including neonatal care [inaudible 00:14:31].

Lawrence Sacks:

And thanks for that. That's extremely impressive. And shifting gears just a little bit, I understand that Nepal doubled down on its commitment to more inclusive and transparent governance by adopting a new constitution in 2015, and in 2017 successfully completed the first local elections in about two decades. So I wonder how has that changed people's views on governance? And what impact has it had on constructive civic engagement? Have you seen a shift in the power structure to lean more towards local interests?

Arjun Koirala:

Oh yes. The new constitution mandates that people from marginalized communities must be engaged in every process of reconstruction or even in governance. And every citizen now wanted to make sure that all representatives abide by the constitution. So with federal system in place, and this new constitution, local government had been more powerful and have even started delivering services to citizens, keeping them at center. And there have been noticeable changes over...

Arjun Koirala:

For example, 33% of the federal parliament representatives are now woman, more girls are educated. Now Nepal has a great gender parity index of about 1.04. And we are seeing more women in higher levels of bureaucracy. Also, I'd like to add, like in USAID's public infrastructure reconstruction projects, we have taken opportunities to ensure representation of women from disadvantaged communities during the decision making processes in the facility management committees.

Arjun Koirala:

Now this, of course, has helped increase the interactions between communities and local government to ensure implementation of policies that support civic engagement. Yes. However, we are yet to witness a meaningful impact at a larger national level, but we're really glad that every programs of the USAID does include elements of engaging excluded communities and help strength democracy.

Lawrence Sacks:

Thank you so much. And it sounds like you're on an impressive trajectory in democratic governance and inclusive practices. I want to thank you again, Arjun, and congratulations to you and to all of USAID Nepal on the impressive work in mobilizing one of the largest homeowner-driven housing reconstruction programs ever. Clearly, there are countless lessons for reconstruction and humanitarian responses worldwide, and we look forward to learning from your successes.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:34:04]

Lawrence Sacks:

... responses worldwide. And we look forward to learning from your successes. Thanks again for joining us.

Arjun Koirala:

Thanks again, Larry.

Lawrence Sacks:

Really appreciate it. Our next democracy hero. Really appreciate it. Our next democracy hero is Shahd Altrawnah. She's the graduate of the I Participate program implemented by the National Democratic Institute and supported by USAID. It promotes youth engagement in Jordanian electoral and political processes through civic education. Shahd is both a journalist and a youth activist, and we're extremely fortunate to have her with us this morning. Thank you so much for joining us.

Shahd Altrawnah:

Thank you, Larry.

Lawrence Sacks:

From your vantage point as a journalist, what opportunities and what challenges do you see for youth to find their voice and engage in the political processes in Jordan?

Shahd Altrawnah:

Yes. First of all, I want to say thank you all for hosting me on this special day. And I wanted to say happy International Democracies Day. And allow me to speak in Arabic, because we're talking about democracy and democracy for me is the first ID that any human being can take and can have since he came into the world. So let me speak in Arabic now I want to thank my colleague Mohammed for being with me today and to translate my speech.

Interpreter:

Thank you, [inaudible 00:01:16].

Shahd Altrawnah:

[Arabic 00:01:21].

Interpreter:

Yeah, actually ... Yeah. First of all, I'd like to thank you for giving me the chance to speak. I'd like to emphasize on the fact that the Arab youth and especially the Jordanian youth doesn't have the proper chance to be represented in the parliamentary elections. Yes, they have a little chance in local elections and some syndicates and work [inaudible 00:00:36:40], but globally, or generally speaking, our youth doesn't have the chance and the proper representation in parliamentary elections, because they still strive to find proper opportunities to work in their countries. Thank you.

Shahd Altrawnah:

Thank you.

Lawrence Sacks:

No, thank you. Thank you so much. And as a graduate of the I Participate program, what did you learn that has been most valuable to you in your career as a journalist?

Shahd Altrawnah:

[Arabic 00:03:23].

Interpreter:

Yes. Participating in the I Participate program, it gave me so many skills. And I was fortunate and lucky to be one of those enrolled in this program. And it also, I think, if my mind didn't give for the exact time, there may be six or seven years in the program. I've gained so many skills like leadership skills, management skills, social skills. In addition to, the program encourage me to be actively participating in the parliamentary life in Jordan. And I'm thinking to run for the elections, not this current elections, but for the common connections or for four years from now. And also it gave me the courage to think of curating a political party that represents the youth, the Jordan youth in my country, that advocate the youth agenda in my country. Thank you.

Shahd Altrawnah:

Thank you.

Lawrence Sacks:

Okay. Well, thank you so much for that. And I would just say that we and the people of Jordan are actually the fortunate and lucky ones for your participation in the program, and we wish you all the best of luck in your future elections. But before you go, if you could very briefly tell us about some of the most inspiring stories of youth engagement from your reporting.

Shahd Altrawnah:

[Arabic 00:06:29].

Interpreter:

Yes. I have so many success stories in my last career as a journalist, and I will just mention two success stories just for the time constraint. The first is that one of our neighbors, he was graduated from the university in civil engineering, and he was trying to find a proper job after graduation from the university. And we helped him to run for the local elections and our governate, this is a current

governate. And luckily, he was the youngest president of the election. He went the local elections in our government. This one story.

Interpreter:

And the second story was for the participation in the digital Arab summit that included 1,500 youth from Jordan that ages ranges from 13 to 25 years old. Most of them are Jordanian and other nationalities. They participated in the digital enterprises and the electronic projects in order to solve the economic, social, and global issues in robotics algorithms, These modern and digital programs, such as mobile applications, an application called Aman application, that's concerned to limit the COVID-19 virus by trying to count the people who are affected with the virus and in order to count the people and take the precaution actions in order to limit the effects of the COVID-19 and our country. And this is also a very promising project for those youth. Thank you.

Lawrence Sacks:

And, well, thank you so much. And it's really inspiring to hear those stories of youth who are catapulting themselves into the political processes or looking for creative and innovative solutions to COVID-19. Thank you so much for joining us, for your commitment to youth and democracy, and for sharing your impressive story. We're exceptionally grateful for your time. Thank you.

Lawrence Sacks:

Our last democracy hero is Dr. Albert Coba from the Erasmo Meoz University Hospital located in the border city of Cúcuta, Colombia. Dr. Coba has been working on the front lines to alleviate suffering along the Columbia/Venezuela border as nearly 2 million people have already fled Venezuela into Colombia in search of basic services and a better life. In many ways, Cúcuta has become the epicenter of solidarity in response to Latin America's largest migration crisis in history. And Dr. Coba is a hero deep in the trenches of that effort. And you might be surprised, in the face of so much suffering and so much despair, he draws much of his inspiration from none other than Disney characters. And now let's watch the last Democracy Is video, the Cúcuta doctors.

Dr. Albert Coba:

[Spanish 00:11:50].

Lawrence Sacks:

[Spanish 00:14:36].

Lawrence Sacks:

So I mentioned to Dr. Coba that like so many others, he had to choose between facing hardship and Venezuela, or starting over in Colombia. He now works at Erasmo Meoz Hospital, which has set new standards in its efforts to serve both Colombian and Venezuelan patients. It's almost impossible to articulate the strain and challenges he and his colleagues at the hospital face every day, which are now of course exacerbated by the pandemic. And he has graciously agreed to share with all of you what his average day looks like.

Lawrence Sacks:

[Spanish 00:16:07].

Dr. Alberto Coba:

[Spanish 00:16:12].

John Barsa:

Good morning to everyone. I wish you a great Democracy Day. This is a blessing for all constituencies that can have it. And of course, it's a loss for those of us who lost it.

Dr. Albert Coba:

[Spanish 00:16:43].

Lawrence Sacks:

Colombia is not only a sister nation, but has proven it has a sister links with us in such hard times of our Republic.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [00:51:04]

Lawrence Sacks:

... Republic.

John Barsa:

Both Colombians and Venezuelans are served at the university hospital day-to-day with no type of discrimination. Service is cost free and it's continuous and a high quality and tries to calm human suffering. In these five years I've been working here, I've felt a part of a family. And I thank the hospital for that. I've also been very grateful being able to serve my fellow citizens who come for aid. [inaudible 00:52:23] bridge has become an escape for two Venezuelans to all the crisis at the social economic and health level that Venezuela is undergoing.

John Barsa:

The crisis is not only humanitarian, but also now we have the COVID-19 pandemic and the strategy is to provide bio security to all the staff to avoid contagion.

Lawrence Sacks:

Okay. [foreign language 00:02:38] So just to translate into English in the film, as you all saw, Dr. Coba said that a good smile calms the pain. So I asked him how does he help encourage his patients to persevere, especially those who have literally walked to and through Colombia and Venezuela, and have faced a measurable hardships from economic collapse, food shortages, separation from family, and the lack of adequate healthcare? So let's listen to what he has to say.

John Barsa:

The fact that our fellow citizens come so far away from Venezuela exhausted, and that the hospital has many multi-disciplinary services makes us receive them always with a smile. I've seen parents relieved for finally receiving help after their trips, their [inaudible 00:55:19].

Lawrence Sacks:

[foreign language 00:04:29] Thank you for your heroic service and your ability to generate hope for so many who faced unimaginable challenges in Venezuela. [foreign language 00:04:37] Okay. I'm in full Spanglish mode now and just hoping to see Dr. Cobo soon. [foreign language 00:04:45].

Lawrence Sacks:

Thank you so much to all of our esteemed panelists for a fascinating discussion. We are grateful for your courage and proud to stand aside you, as you strengthen democratic governance and civic engagement in your home countries. You are the true heroes. And now it is my honor and privilege to welcome USAID assistant administrator of the Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment, Michelle Bekkering, to make a few closing remarks.

Michelle Bekkering:

Great. Thank you so much, Larry, first of all, for moderating such a wonderful event. I could not say it any better. You all are the true heroes here. It's almost really a hard act to follow, as we say in English. I'm delighted to be part of this. You know, I know I speak for all of our participants when I say you've inspired us. You have really put a face to the [inaudible 00:56:42] in USAID's own democratic governance in response and our work in the sector, and you make it really real to us. You're showing us exactly what democracy looks an action. And I just want to thank you. Thank you for your courage, thank you for your activism, and thank you for your dedication to this noble cause.

Michelle Bekkering:

Promoting democracy, human rights and governance, it's critical to all our development goals here at USAID. We truly and proudly believe at USAID that democracy is the best form of government. It provides the foundation for a society that respects the rights of all people, it advances human dignity, and it gives all citizens the opportunity to thrive. Frankly, democracy is what gives each and every one of us here today the freedom and opportunity to deliver lives to the fullest and to talk and to be heard. And the ongoing struggle by the incredibly brave people around the world for democracy and freedom is really what inspires our work at USAID and I know what's why I personally come into work each day.

Michelle Bekkering:

Despite our hard work, and USAID has devoted so much of our time and our attention and our programs and our funding to this work over the years, we do see around the world that there are a growing number of peoples who are yearning for democracy, that they face growing challenges. And we see authoritarianism and corruption threatening civil society, it's muzzling journalists, it's silencing critics and it's stripping our religious and minority groups of their most basic human rights. I was really astounded when I was confronted the other day with evidence that there's a total of 92 countries around the world right now that are categorized as autocracies. Think of that. Those 92 countries, that equals 54% of the global population. And that's really concerning. It's concerning to me and I know it's concerning to all of our advocates.

Michelle Bekkering:

And this authoritarian approach, it puts private gain above the public interest and it feeds into this destruction of democratic gains. I would be remiss if I didn't call out the recent August 9th presidential election in Belarus, which was neither free nor fair. We saw peaceful protesters and journalists facing brutal violence and abuse. We saw opposition candidates and peaceful protestors arrested. Internet service was blocked and detainees were abused. And those actions serve as powerful reminders that we

must continue to fight for and preserve the freedoms of expression, of religion, of peaceful assembly and democratic voice. And we must and will stand with those around the world like the citizens of Belarus who yearn for a democratic future.

Michelle Bekkering:

As you have noted probably today, we are holding this event virtually. It's one of the many changes we have made in our operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But these changes have not just been operational. They've also required us to re-look at our programming and our response. While our immediate COVID-19 international response will always be focused on medical and humanitarian assistance, we're also recognizing the cascading impacts the pandemic has on many of the areas where we work. And the democracy rights and governance sector is critical to USAID's COVID-19 response so that we can protect democratic principles and rights, that we can bolster citizen trust, and ultimately build a more effective and accountable response. Think about this statistic. To date, 71 countries and territories around the world have had to postpone national and sub national elections to COVID-19. Colleagues, we cannot let COVID-19 set us back when it comes to our efforts in this sector.

Michelle Bekkering:

In closing, the ongoing quest by people around the world for democracy and freedom guides and will continue to inspire our work here at USAID. But we recognize we cannot do this alone. We need to collaborate with the many democracy heroes that we have with us here today, and especially the many other around the world whose voices we hear, but whose faces we don't always see. And we want to thank the other partners that we have joining us today on this call. It's only by combining our efforts that we are going to achieve democracy for all. So thank you for that. And thank you very much for joining us today.

Lawrence Sacks:

Thank you so much, Assistant Administrator Bekkering for that powerful orientation into democratic challenges, our assistance, and your very thought provoking remarks. We're extremely grateful for your time. And let me take one final moment to thank all of our democracy heroes here on the panel and from across the globe for your courage and for sharing your inspiring stories. You constantly remind all of us that our work in this sector is the underpinning of inclusion and equity and rights that sustain all of our development assistance and that amplifies the voice of all people and all families and all communities in a way that could bring hope and opportunity and shape a better future for so many. And that democracy is hard work and that it can never be taken for granted.

Lawrence Sacks:

Thanks to everybody for joining us today. We would really appreciate it if you took just a moment to complete the brief survey that our producers are now dropping in the chat box. We use your feedback to help guide future events like this one. A special shout out to Juanes and Leopoldo Lopez for your generous contributions. And to everybody else, enjoy an inclusive, fair, just and transparent International Democracy Day. Thank you so much for joining us.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:04:48]