

Democratization



Year 6, Issue 28

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and the desire for freedom seeps
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When dictatorships make mistakes and the desire for freedom seeps through

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Early Sunday. Venezuelans timidly went out to vote. By mid-morning, long lines formed outside polling stations. Neighborhoods and slums exercised their right. The Venezuelan opposition's primary elections took place this past Sunday, October 22nd, and this article is a live analysis of what we experienced in recent days. I must issue a warning before proceeding: I will share reflections written from experience. These are not sterile lines, born in the comfort of an office. I am a politician. And it is my greatest desire to contribute to the debate about what is happening in my country.

I will share three brief ideas that can help us understand the political moment we are experiencing: (i) on miscalculations; (ii) on the underlying current, and (iii) on the results. I do not expect to exhaust any topic. I will be satisfied if these lines arouse the political and intellectual curiosity of the reader. This process is ongoing and far from over. Therefore, these paragraphs are an on-the-go approximation to a political moment that may be significant for the democratic history of Venezuela and Latin America.

The dictatorship made a mistake. In Venezuela, we live under a dictatorship. The primary election was held in an especially

hostile environment, marked by a complex humanitarian crisis and severe limitations on the political rights of all Venezuelans. From the beginning, it was a besieged process. Undoubtedly, it was a complex and challenging endeavor. It would take a complete article to specify and describe the threats and abuses faced by the National Primary Commission, chaired by Dr. Jesús María Casal, the political parties, and civil society: bribery, undue pressures, harassment by state security forces, blocking of websites, disinformation campaigns, media censorship, and political violence, among others.

So, given that the Chavista-Madurista dictatorship appears to be consolidated in power, it is logical for us to ask: Why did the dictatorship allow the primary election to take place? Why didn't the regime, which is apparently powerful, stop the initiative in its tracks? There is no simple answer to these questions. Dictatorships are essentially opaque, and attempting to understand them is risky. However, as a hypothesis, I venture to say the following: *the dictatorship made a mistake*.

Nicolás Maduro thought the following: the opposition –political parties and civil society– is weak and disorganized. The country is disheartened and downcast. In such an environment, it was not worth paying the internal and external cost of open repression. In political terms, it was cheaper to foster division within the opposition, deepening its differences or bribing, while simultaneously discouraging the country's participation with disinformation, invasive propaganda, and terror.

Let's not overlook another matter that is not of minor importance: the primary election process coincided with the outcome of negotiations between the dictatorship, the Biden administration, and *Plataforma Unitaria*. The Maduro regime

attended these meetings with the firm purpose of achieving the lifting of economic sanctions by the United States. And, interfering with the primary would have meant jeopardizing that purpose, which is absolutely existential to them; Nicolás Maduro needs money to sustain the consents that keep him in power.

In this way, the regime bet on the following: signing the Barbados agreement to achieve the easing of sanctions and creating political conditions for the primary election to be another political failure for the Venezuelan opposition. The first happened; the second did not. The primary election was successful because the dictatorship did not foresee two things: the opposition's political resilience and the country's support, which reserved its desire to participate until the day came to go out and vote.

Civic underlying current. Six days before the primaries, I published an article titled: "Primaries in a dictatorship: consciousness and vote." I enjoyed organizing my thoughts, writing them down, and publishing them. In those paragraphs, I tried to convey my optimism. An optimism based on the reality I perceived in my grassroots political work. Week after week, in every meeting with the parish structures of Primero Justicia, I began noticing two things: firm enthusiasm and extraordinary civic heroism. In short: a good fighting spirit.

Some were surprised when they read my article. Respectfully, they commented that it seemed overly hopeful. Even voluntaristic; "wishful thinking." And I don't blame them. I myself hesitated to publish it. It was a risky text. Today, I am glad I did, but I acknowledge that I was on the border of political and intellectual daring. The truth is that it was very difficult to anticipate the outcome of October 22nd. Like the dictatorship, we were prone to making miscalculations and being filled with good intentions

that would not yield the expected results. After more than twenty years of democratic struggle, it is logical that we find it hard to get excited and that we view any illusion of change with caution.

Therefore, I believe that one of the great lessons of October 22nd concerns the democratic soul of the country, which is neither dormant nor extinct, and our ability to connect with it. Long-lived dictatorships seek to colonize the consciousness of those who oppose them. They strive to build psychological dungeons that limit our understanding of reality. I am referring to that discouragement that nests within us and extinguishes our desire to fight. We begin to confuse audacity with courage, realism with pessimism, and voluntarism with magnanimity. It is that continuous questioning of effort. It is the loss of meaning and direction... it is despair.

I acknowledge the need to break down these mental barriers, open ourselves to the country, and reconnect with it. After October 22nd, I perceive that the underlying current I described in previous lines has become deeper. I dare say it is more turbulent. Therefore, I consider that the great challenge for an important part of the political and business elite is to reconnect with the country that wants change and that has bet on a political option that firmly opposes the dictatorship. Note that I deliberately avoid using the term "radical." It seems to me to be a futile category when facing a fierce dictatorship like ours. Dissent is allowed.

On the results. At the time of writing this article, the National Primary Commission released the final results. María Corina Machado is the undisputed winner. She obtained 2,253,825 votes, with 92.35% of the votes cast. The total participation was 2,307,635. As I mentioned in the previous sections, this result is

extraordinary and unexpected. So, what interpretation can we give to this performance? Let's consider five ideas:

First, the primary was a success. The participation of over two million people in an election under a dictatorship is an undeniable triumph for the entire country. Furthermore, its main objective was achieved: Venezuela has a presidential candidate who holds the legitimacy conferred by an electoral process that was transparent, fair, and reliable. Today, the leadership of María Corina Machado is supported by over two million voices.

Second, the dictatorship is not infallible. Nicolás Maduro's mechanisms of domination have limits and are defeatable. I don't mean to imply that the future is simple or that democracy is assured. Far from it. I refer to our obligation to build achievable and bold paths of struggle that mobilize the country and allow us to create more opportunities like the one we experienced last Sunday.

Third, the opposition is united. Nine out of ten opposition voters cast their ballots for María Corina Machado. This means that her proposal resonated in the hearts of almost everyone who voted on October 22nd. Her emotional, close, and humane speech managed to unite the opposition spectrum into a single bloc. I reiterate: nine out of ten opposition voters chose her. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that this unity among voters does not necessarily translate into practical unity among opposition political parties. That is perhaps the greatest challenge heading into 2024.

Fourth, the political parties that have led the political struggle so far are experiencing a profound crisis of representation. Only one in ten Venezuelans voted for any of the political parties that

make up *Plataforma Unitaria*, which is the political body that brings together electoral groups opposing Nicolás Maduro's dictatorship. An important detail: Vente Venezuela, the political movement led by María Corina Machado, is not part of it. This figure is truly concerning for two reasons: the party system is very weak, and such an overwhelming result could open the door to the temptation of exclusion. Certainly, the winner might think she can do without these organizations. I believe that would be a big mistake and would only benefit Nicolás Maduro. These political parties, even though they are blurred in terms of elections, are valuable operational arms needed for the electoral challenge of 2024. Therefore, we must build paths of representative rehabilitation that allow us to maintain these structures and encourage them to strengthen for the near future.

Fifth, the opposition country wants change. Venezuela wants Maduro to go, and in that aspiration, there seems to be no middle ground. Those voices that have insisted for years on cohabitation as a method of political struggle encountered the unpopularity of their proposal. The country does not want to coexist with corruption, poverty, and violence. The country wants to defeat Nicolás Maduro electorally and move towards democracy. Although it may sound redundant and cacophonous: the country wants an opposition that opposes the dictatorship. An opposition that challenges and gives voice to discontent. In this sense, I observe a polarization marked by the democracy-dictatorship cleavage. This disposition of the voter imposes a great challenge on those who lead the political change. Eventually, if we manage to free ourselves in 2024, the time for moderation will come. Undoubtedly, political and psychological paths must be prepared for that moment.

* * *

It is time to conclude this article, and I do not want to do so without briefly mentioning the two major challenges these results impose on us. Many ideas remain unsaid, which I will surely develop in subsequent articles.

The first challenge is *the construction of a superior unity that is representative, inclusive, and efficient*. This task will be complex. I can foresee tensions between representation and inclusion. Strictly speaking, one might think that including factors other than Vente Venezuela in the new opposition picture should be minimal. María Corina Machado garnered almost all the votes. However, since we are not in a democracy and the winning option is still weak in its organizational capacity, it is urgent to include those who are in the diametrically opposite position: with little representation and high organizational capacity. The reconciliation between representation and inclusion will allow us to be efficient in the electoral event that unites and calls us in 2024. It is time to be meticulous and build a house for everyone. The elected candidate has stated this in her initial interventions. I trust she will continue on this path with firmness and generosity.

The second challenge is *to stay on the electoral path*. The dictatorship acknowledges its miscalculation and has quickly activated its main mechanism of authoritarian resilience: repression. As I write this article, regime representatives have threatened the National Primary Commission, requested a review of the agreements signed in Barbados, and appealed to the Supreme Court to challenge its results. The engine of this violence is a challenging reality: Nicolás Maduro knows he is beatable. And that makes him especially dangerous. In this regard, we must act boldly; we must set ourselves an unyielding strategic goal to participate in the presidential elections scheduled for next year

and come together for the appointment. Only then will we defeat the dictatorship at the ballot box and open doors to democracy.

Jesús María Casal:

“People want to vote, and we must never lose sight of that”

Paola Bautista de Alemán

October 22, 2023. Primary election of the Venezuelan opposition. The people went out and voted. At the end of the day, there were 2,440,415 participants, and María Corina Machado was elected with 92.35% of the votes cast. It was a citizen event that brought together all democratic sectors of Venezuela. And, against all odds, it was a milestone that allowed for the integration of the impulses of freedom that abound in our country and to have an undisputed leadership for this year's (2024) presidential elections.

Jesús María Casal played a fundamental role in this process. He chaired the National Primary Commission and led it to a successful conclusion. He is from Caracas. He is 58 years old and holds a doctorate in Constitutional Law. He is the dean of the Faculty of Law at the Andrés Bello Catholic University and has completed academic courses at world-renowned institutions such as the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law.

His tone of voice is low. He speaks slowly, and his analyses are moderate. His conversations are grounded in reality and lack any exaggerated gestures or expressions. In this interview, we delve into his work leading the National Primary Commission and reflect on its achievements. Jesús María Casal recalls the recent past with calmness and looks to the future with caution. He is not one for triumphalism, and his testimony reminds us that the real challenge is to persevere.

–For decades, Venezuelans have been living in a hostile environment. Undoubtedly, leading democratization initiatives can be challenging. How did you come to preside over the National Primary Commission?

In 2022, *Plataforma Unitaria* was preparing regulations for the presidential primary election the following year and was looking for people to work on that. They were seeking individuals with a different profile: representatives of civil society. I participated in some initial meetings, but no proposal was made to me. Some time later, they did make me a proposal. I thought about it and accepted. I had recently returned to Venezuela after spending three years on an academic course in Germany, and when one is abroad, the desire to help grows. Furthermore, I am convinced of the importance of positioning ourselves in the electoral path. That is why I accepted the challenge and moved forward with this work.

–How was the process of creating the National Primary Commission?

The process of creating the Commission was led by *Plataforma Unitaria*. They issued a public call to civil society organizations

to submit their names for consideration. After the nomination period, consultations were conducted, and members were subsequently selected. Thus, a Commission of individuals who were not affiliated with political parties was formed. The National Primary Commission was installed on November 15, 2022.

–In Venezuela, the relationship between political parties and civil society is wary. How did the National Primary Commission manage to gain the trust of a broad and fragmented opposition political spectrum?

From the beginning, we understood that our mandate was to earn everyone's trust. That's what *Plataforma Unitaria* expected. Those who appointed us insisted that our task was to transcend political parties and place the process in the hands of civil society. Therefore, we saw clearly that this had to be a different process.

The first thing we did was initiate a period of consultations. This action was not originally part of the roadmap. However, we did it to gain legitimacy with the country. We met with all civil and political organizations in the country, both within and outside *Plataforma Unitaria*. In fact, we prioritized those who were not part of it. It was a process that enriched our work and helped us build trust with everyone, without distinction.

–You even met with individuals and organizations of dubious opposition credentials...

Yes, we were contacted and met with individuals whose opposition affiliation we couldn't really determine. Nonetheless, it was only logical to engage with them. We consistently upheld that the consultation phase remained open, and deviating from that principle was not an option.

–Why was there such an insistence on that commitment to openness from the Commission?

We stated that this process had to be different. And the consultations provided the space to understand and clarify what ‘being different’ meant. We were obliged to listen to every group, even those that were very small and had little representation capacity. That sign of openness was necessary, and I believe it benefited the process. During those days, we gained identity, allowing us to present our first assessment to the country on December 12, 2022, where we presented the roadmap we followed in the following months.

–In contexts like ours, there is a tendency to sacrifice pluralism due to the risks it may bring. Faced with this dilemma, you decided to be open: At this moment, what lesson can that stance offer the country?

In our case, openness was very positive. We welcomed everyone, and overall, everyone was loyal to the process. It wasn’t an easy decision, but I believe it was the most appropriate one.

–How was your relationship with the National Electoral Council?

I couldn’t describe it as bad. The meetings were institutional and within a framework of respect. We were close to reaching an agreement, but it wasn’t achieved.

–Why was no agreement reached?

The main obstacle was disqualifications. That was the point that halted the negotiation. Our stance, which arose from the

consultation period I mentioned earlier, was that all candidacies had to be respected. The National Electoral Council held a different opinion. And, considering what has happened since then, that was the main barrier to reaching an agreement. That's why the primaries were self-managed.

–You are a man of laws brought into the realm of politics: Where is the boundary between the legal and the political?

Previous experiences helped me see that boundary: My work at the Fermín Toro Institute, alongside Dr. Ramón Guillermo Aveledo, and my involvement in parliamentary work, as legal consultant to the National Assembly in 2016. That prepared me to take on this challenge. Those years helped me gain trust with the various opposition political organizations. I believe it's crucial to differentiate the role of an advisor from that of a politician. I am cautious and do not rely on legal arguments to impose my political position. All of this helped me gain trust. It was understood that I acted seeking a common good.

–Rafael Arraiz Lucca resigned from the National Primary Commission on June 27, 2023, and a month later, María Carolina Uzcátegui did the same. How were these resignations received?

These resignations affected our work. I respect personal decisions, but these actions coincided with a narrative that said that carrying out the self-managed primary was impossible. It was claimed that overcoming the operational challenges, which were not few, was unfeasible. Undoubtedly, there were many difficulties. However, at that moment, we saw the citizens' enthusiasm, the commitment of the members of the Regional Boards, and the party bases. That commitment was significant and was evident on

many occasions. Even when some organizations publicly stated that the primary wouldn't be possible, their bases reached out to us to assure us of their support.

On the other hand, the technical teams were working very well. There were meetings until late at night to reach agreements on the locations for the polling stations. Sometimes the search engine would get blocked, and we had to unblock it. We found a solution to every problem. We experienced very difficult moments. Perhaps the toughest were the threats against the members of the Regional Boards. All of this was to ensure that we would be ready by October 22 and that Venezuelans could vote.

In the end, we decided to bring in Mildred Camero to fill the vice presidency vacancy. We acted quickly to avoid delaying the process. We had little time, and we decided to move forward.

—I would like to emphasize the positive. You speak of 'the citizen's enthusiasm' After 25 years of Chavismo-Madurismo and all the obstacles you have described: Where does that enthusiasm come from?

I believe that this enthusiasm is sustained by the vast electoral citizenship in our country. Electoral democracy is ingrained in the people. Despite all that we have experienced and the institutional blockades, people want to vote. In 2023, the country was in an electoral drought, and when they saw the opportunity, they went out to exercise their right. That's why I believe we achieved a major objective, one we had set from the beginning: repositioning the electoral path. We managed to place the electoral path at the center of the political debate. I am aware of the difficulties of the context that shape this path; undoubtedly, it is and will be challenging. But people want to vote, and we must never lose sight of that.

–There are two versions regarding the primaries. One suggests that the primary was held despite the political parties, and the other proposes that it was done thanks to the effort of its members. Which narrative is more in line with what you saw and experienced?

Without a doubt, both things. Political parties were involved. The only way to identify polling stations and employ the proper electoral dynamics was with the support of the political party structures. Similarly, the commitment of the people was irreplaceable. One-third of the polling stations were in family homes. The support of *Plataforma Unitaria* was very important. And the support of the citizens was also crucial.

–Tensions increased as the election day approached. The threat of suspending the process through a ruling from the Supreme Court of Justice was casting a shadow. And amid this uncertainty, the political Barbados agreement was signed. In your opinion, what relationship exists between this agreement and the primary election on October 22nd?

Hubo muchas amenazas y había temores, como la sentencia del Tribunal Supremo de Justicia. When Barbados was signed, the process was well advanced. Including in that agreement the allowance for political organizations to choose their candidacy helped realize the primary election. We perceived it as something positive, and the primary election was carried out.

–The dictatorship had institutional and coercive tools to stop the primary election from taking place. Why didn't it stop it? Why did they allow it to happen?

It's a question I've asked myself. The primary was a civic, peaceful, and constitutional act. It was a process for the country to choose a unitary candidate and to start reclaiming the electoral path. It was a democratic event.

–After the primary, the National Primary Commission faced persecution. The Supreme Court of Justice issued a ruling, and days of tension followed. Did you foresee this?

I didn't expect it. I thought it could happen before holding the primary election, but not afterward. That's where the importance of the Barbados agreement became evident. It served to contain some impulses and overcome the threats.

–When this conversation began, you referred to the importance of the electoral path. In recent weeks, we have seen the institutional blockade reaffirmed, especially concerning the disqualification of the candidate who won the primary. Do you believe an electoral solution is possible? Is it truly achievable?

I believe it is possible, and it requires actions from both sides. The essential thing is for both parties to do their part. The opposition must do everything in its power to keep the electoral path clear. Certainly, the conditions are difficult and will not be ideal. But we must seek acceptable conditions to have minimal competitiveness: international observation, restoration of political rights, etc. We must make every effort to achieve that. I don't think it will be easy. But we must persist and not abandon those efforts.

Jesús María Casal: "People want to vote, and we must never lose sight of that"

–How would you like the country to remember the primary?

Sometimes, I'm with my wife somewhere, and people I don't know come up to me to thank me for the effort of these months and to tell me that they have regained hope in the country. We must ask ourselves how to prevent that hope for change from fading again. Certainly, our despair is not arbitrary and has its reasons. We have suffered a lot. But I believe that reflection on hope is important and transcendent. Hope and the electoral path... I think that was the primary election.

MCM: “The primary election is the conclusion of a political and social cycle, although some still resist understanding and accepting it”

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

To the Chavistas who ask her if there is life for them after a potential transition, she responds: “Of course there is! That said, in a country with clear and democratic rules of the game.” The Venezuelan opposition’s presidential candidate clarifies that she will not marginalize the parties “because I’m not a fool,” and points out the need to politically and spiritually defeat the regime to achieve change.

—How do you assess the impact of the primary election on October 22nd on Venezuelan politics?

I believe it is the most powerful event that has occurred in Venezuela in a long time, and it still has ripple effects that we have not finished evaluating. For me, the most important aspect is what it generated emotionally among Venezuelans: the awareness of our strength. It signifies aspirations, desires, and hopes transformed into organization and action.

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A silent majority that sensed and spoke out despite everything, despite the lack of money and information, despite last-minute changes to polling stations, despite transportation challenges, and despite the scarcity of gasoline. It was an event for the citizen, for the individual. I believe it had a tremendously powerful impact on morale and awareness of our strength.

It had a decisive impact on the international community because it shattered all the narratives that had been built around a fractured opposition, incapable of coordinating, and a country that was sad and defeated. When they had made the international community believe that not even half a million people would turn out, it was almost 3 million. Above all, there was an awareness before the world that the regime had completely lost its social base. After they had made them believe that we would have to wait until perhaps 2030 for a political change, the world said it is now, it is possible, it is a country willing to fight for it. The international reaction is a consequence of internal forces, and we must be very aware of that.

There is the internal impact within the regime. It exposed its vulnerabilities to all sectors and the pillars that sustain the regime: the judicial system, which has been the great cover-up for all the abuses and violations of the Constitution, the Armed Forces, and the police. They were there, and they saw it. They forced us to set up polling stations in the streets because they did not lend us the schools, and that backfired on them because it made us visible to everyone. The PSUV itself realized that they do not have that mobilization capacity, and they know it. It created an internal turmoil that has resulted in them continuing to make mistakes in the face of the consciousness and public exposure of their weaknesses. It's another country after the primary election.

It's the closing of a political and social cycle, although some still resist understanding and accepting it.

—Aside from the sectors that opposed the primaries in favor of the consensus formula, during the campaign, it seemed that the attacks intensified not so much because of the primary itself but because of who would win them. Did you have that perception?

Absolutely. Because, in some way, for those sectors, we represent the end of impunity and privileges. There are sectors that thrive on cronyism, and since they know that I don't owe favors to anyone and they can't control or subdue me, that exacerbates them, worries them. Those are the ones who call me radical and extremist.

What do they want? Someone dominated and subjected to their personal projects, not someone who answers to the people of Venezuela. I am at the service of the Venezuelan people, not of those dark interests.

I make something clear: I am in favor of economic and financial sectors that can prosper and make a lot of money and generate wealth and employment in Venezuela, of course, but with clear and equal rules of the game for everyone. And to those entrepreneurs, media owners, journalists, traders, producers, to those Venezuelans, I say: they will never be better off than with a government like the one we are going to install, with the Rule of Law, openness, clear rules of the game, and respect for private property. They are monitoring how they can divide up a tiny pie, when I say to them: let's think about a country that starts to value itself, that starts to soar.

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–At the time, how did you interpret Henrique Capriles' decision to withdraw from the race and Manuel Rosales' decision not to participate in the election? Did you fear that this would affect the legitimacy of the process?

I saw it as a highly personal decision, which probably frustrated their followers. But in any case, the result of the primary election speaks for itself about the determination of the people to make themselves heard. We must listen to the people. They were determined to assert their voice, their decision, and not have it imposed by elite groups meeting in secret conclaves. They wouldn't accept it.

–At one point, it was said: if the primary is about political machinery, María Corina Machado will lose them, as it was believed that her vote was mainly spontaneous due to the absence of a strong party. How much did organization weigh in your victory?

I believe that organization weighed a lot, and not only that of Vente, but also the parties that allied with our movement and the Venezuelans who genuinely, independently offered to support the Primary Commission in all operational and logistical aspects. Undoubtedly, there was a monumental spontaneous vote. Now, in all the centers, tables, and corners, our teams responded.

However, I want to tell those teams: the primaries were 5 thousand tables, now we are heading to a presidential election with 50 thousand. Ten times more. That's why since the day after, since October 23, I've been dedicated body and soul to organization. It seems important to me to convey a message outward, make contacts, I have to appear in the media so that people know what we are doing, and I have to travel the country, but my absolute

priority is organization. Setting up *Red 600K* –a network of 600 thousand citizens trained to ensure electoral transparency–, *Gran Alianza Nacional* (GANA), and getting the command posts to start showing up all over Venezuela.

–The opposition delegation has pointed out that the primary took place thanks to the Barbados Agreement. Now, what's the point of allowing the primary if they don't respect the result, which involves accepting her candidacy?

Undoubtedly, the Barbados Agreement was one of the most important factors for the primary to exist. Not the only one. Everyone was making scenarios, evaluations of contributions, thinking about all imaginable actors inside and outside, and there's always one missing factor: the people. It's like the people don't matter. The pressure that existed since the primary was proposed and how this grew made opposition and international political actors understand that the people would not accept any other mechanism than the primary.

Now, the first point of the Barbados Agreement establishes that the parties can choose their candidates however they want, and Venezuelans have already done so. The democratic forces have already done so through the primaries; the candidate of the people is chosen by the people. I have received the support of all the candidates and parties that participated in the primary, and those that did not.

For there to be a clean and free election, as stated by the European Parliament, the winner of the primaries must participate. Period. Because it's in the Constitution, because it's the international electoral integrity standards, and because it's explicitly stated and signed in the Barbados Agreement.

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–As a result of the primaries, you are the opposition's presidential candidate. But you are also considered the leader of the opposition. How do you exercise that leadership, particularly in relation to the parties and their leaders?

We all know that we are in a very complex process, that this is not a conventional election. The regime tells you, in the words of Nicolás Maduro: "This is by fair means or foul". Please, let's not be naive, we are talking about a process that has neither a date nor conditions. It has absolutely nothing.

I want to say precisely what needs to be achieved: for there to be an electoral defeat, first there must be a political and spiritual defeat. That is much more than a candidacy, and that is already happening. That's why the regime acts like this, because it knows that we are delivering an irreversible political defeat, and the spiritual defeat at the level of each Venezuelan and their relationship with the country and the system.

This obviously makes them see it as impossible to avoid a defeat if there is a competitive election. And today, they do not accept the possibility of leaving power. They haven't accepted it; they don't assume the possibility of a transition. That's why they say "by foul means." And by foul means, it's not about removing María Corina; it means they will not accept losing.

The political defeat is realized on the day they accept that a transition is coming. And from there, everything else is secondary. I value all the points, but I want to say that they are easy to execute if the political defeat is consolidated. All the discussion about the rest, enabling, electoral card, and conditions, is administrative and subsequent to achieving the regime's acknowledgement that a transition is coming. When they accept that a transition is coming,

it will be the result, among other things, of them recognizing that there are guarantees for that transition to be reasonable for them and favorable for Venezuelans.

This is how I am engaging with all the parties that want to contribute and understand the complexity of this moment. This is not a campaign with bells and whistles, because there's no money for that anyway. This is something else, this is a movement of depth, not surface. What we are reaching is people's consciousness and homes.

—What do you respond to those who fear that due to having obtained such an overwhelming victory in the primary, you might believe that you can “go it alone” and leave the parties aside?

I'm not a fool. That would be foolishness. Besides, we're not thinking about the present moment; we're thinking about what comes next, how we give governability to Venezuela. We are building governability starting now. To some of them, I say: you can be sure that I won't do to you what you did to me, because I'm not a fool.

This is not about quotas. It's about finding the best people to do what they do best. And I do know how to do that, to build high-performance teams, and we have done it. In all the command centers, there are technicians and leaders from all parties. This is happening at the national, state, municipal, and parish levels. And if anyone feels like I haven't called them, call me because we need everyone here. That is, those who are rowing in the same direction. I don't want those who disguise themselves and come to row in the opposite direction, I don't want those. Just as I don't

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want the corrupt, nor their money, nor their support, nor their media, nor their votes.

–How can we make the Chavismo accept that the favored candidate competes in the presidential election?

That's the crux of the matter. Why don't they want me? Because they know I will defeat them. What does Maduro want? Someone he can defeat. Period. The problem isn't me; the problem is that they still haven't accepted they're going to lose.

That's what we're building. That's why we need more strength every time. I want to reach the heart of every Venezuelan who may have doubts about me today. Justified and legitimate doubts, because they've said horrible things about me, that I'm some sort of local Savonarola coming to chop heads and settle scores. I want to reach the heart of every Venezuelan, even those in the PSUV who have approached me, by the way, and ask me, "Is there life for me after the transition?" Of course, there is! That is, in a country with clear and democratic rules of the game.

That's already happening, PSUV members are saying: "I want to choose my candidate, our leaders, not have one imposed on me by a party leader based on their internal feuds and loyalties." They know that will only happen with us. So, what's happening? Pieces of this system are starting to break apart because, in the end, all of them, PSUV members, military personnel, police officers, judges, prosecutors, go home and talk to their husbands, wives, and see their children leaving, just like us, and ultimately, they want the same thing: for their kids to come back, for us to live well.

A country where there is order, where the territory is under the control of the Venezuelan state, a country where children go

to school every day and not just two days a week. The regime knows that the spiritual defeat has already occurred, and we will complete the political defeat when they understand that their best option is a transition. Why is it their best option? Because the alternative is to end up like Nicaragua, and this country cannot withstand it institutionally or emotionally; the people will not tolerate them seizing power by force.

If this is to be done peacefully, then, who do we negotiate the transition with and on what terms? Because, in the end, the terms of a negotiation must be presented to the country and accepted by the country. And the country will only accept the terms of a negotiation if it trusts the leadership representing them, not just anyone. That's why Maduro will ultimately understand that his best option is negotiating with us.

–Although the candidate was chosen through primaries, the discussion about consensus reappears with the new disqualification...

A few days ago someone answered that by saying: but the primaries were by consensus. They don't understand anything; they don't understand what happened. Whoever does that, does the same thing as the Supreme Court of Justice, which said that the primary did not exist. What do people do about that? They don't even laugh anymore; they don't even listen to them; what they do is expose themselves in terms of who they serve.

Trust, the Great Lesson from the October 22 Primary

Pedro Urruchurtu Noselli

“(...) ‘‘The vital attributes of a leader in these tasks, and the bridge between the past and the future, are courage and character – courage to choose a direction among complex and difficult options, which requires the willingness to transcend the routine; and strength of character to sustain a course of action whose benefits and whose dangers can be only incompletely glimpsed at the moment of choice. Courage summons virtue in the moment of decision; character reinforces fidelity to values over an extended period (...).’’

Henry Kissinger, *Leadership* (2023)

Primary elections in democratic contexts are typically a genuine opportunity to stimulate internal democracy within political parties and a chance for citizens to actively participate in the selection of candidates for electoral processes. This serves as a means to reduce personalized influence and to promote and develop institutionalism and clear rules of the game.¹

In fact, in these contexts: *“(...) the unrestricted advancement of democracy in recent times has entailed a triple process. Firstly, the need to articulate rules of the game embraced by the majority while also composing*

1 José María Pérez Gómez, “Partidos políticos, democracia interna y las elecciones primarias - HayDerecho”. HayDerecho, July 29th, 2015. <https://www.hayderecho.com/2015/07/29/partidos-politicos-democracia-interna-y-las-elecciones-primarias/>

*minimum organizational spaces where political competition will take place. Secondly, the incorporation of social mobilization through forms of participation and representation. And finally, the creation of channels for selecting political personnel who will lead and manage everyday politics (...)."*² This justifies the existence of primary elections to settle differences and facilitate contests for access to power.

However, in situations as complex as that of Venezuela, a primary election can become a catalyst for the hope of a society that has progressively been forced to forget what it means to be able to choose freely. Venezuelans stopped exercising democracy and, with that, lost it due to the arbitrary power that took it away. Thus, the primary is an opportunity to restore the freedom to choose. Moreover, the primary allows for the coordination and alignment of democratic forces that do not individually select their candidate but come together so that there is leadership that represents them all, stemming from the cohesion provided by its outcome. It is, ultimately, a democratic way to provide leadership for a struggle in a democratic context. That is tremendously valuable, powerful, and challenging.

If, at the beginning of 2023, someone had imagined how the year would end in the country, they could hardly have guessed the momentum with which it closed. It was no secret to anyone that the year began with disillusionment as its calling card, with the apparent resignation of a society in search of answers and political change seeming so distant. This set the tone for a year that was perceived as just another one, with 2024 offering

2 Manuel Alcántara, "Experimentos de democracia interna: Las primaria de partido en América Latina", in *Working Paper #223 of The Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies*, April 2022. https://kellogg.nd.edu/sites/default/files/old_files/documents/293_0.pdf

an opportunity that nobody believed possible to achieve and still appears difficult.

There were only three certainties in the atmosphere: that constitutionally, presidential elections were due in 2024, that they would hardly be free elections, and that in 2023, the opposition had to choose the candidate for such a complex process. Since 2022, the opposition, gathered in *Plataforma Unitaria* along with other actors, had been hinting at what the selection method could be. The debate of “*Consensus versus primaries*” framed the political concerns of the democratic forces in a context of leadership burnout and progressive loss of legitimacy and support following the interim government.

Each option posed enormous challenges. Consensus had a fundamental problem: who defined it. The titanic task of bringing together opposition forces was already complex enough to leave the selection of a candidate accepted by all solely in the hands of the parties. Furthermore, the representativeness and breadth of the mechanism meant that even with a candidate, it did not have the necessary legitimacy to represent the democratic opposition. What made one candidate better than another? Surveys? Credentials? It was a tough challenge, although logistically, it was the simplest way to resolve the issue.

The option of holding primaries was logistically the most difficult and also the riskiest. Questions about who organized it, how it was done, how it was financed, and countless others, set the tone. However, few doubted that it was the right choice because it meant giving people the opportunity to choose. The democratic opposition came from successful examples of primaries in the past, which was an additional incentive that sparked other concerns but generated enough acceptance to assume it as the best alternative.

The first major civic victory of this process that began in 2022 and was lived intensely in 2023 was the decision to hold a presidential primary. From then on, discussions about the process started from the premise that it would be the people who would choose the opposition candidacy for the new stage of the struggle, and that was something that no one could change.

Starting in mid-2022, after that decision, the democratic opposition began the collective effort to have a successful primary. Thus, came the second civic victory of the process: the announcement of a National Primary Commission (CNdP)³, with prominent figures from civil society who bravely undertook the commitment to bring the ship to port, and its regulations, which confirmed that there would be a process in 2023. Throughout that year, a process was shaped that resulted in clear rules and, most importantly, the beginning of 2023 with the certainty that Venezuelans would choose new opposition leadership through the vote, which the regime has systematically denied for years in a free and democratic manner.

Thus, with minimal exceptions along the way, the members of the National Primary Commission became civil heroes and symbols of civility in a historic process. Therefore, those who brought the ship to port, under enormous pressure, deserve recognition: Jesús María Casal, Mildred Camero, Corina Yoris, Guillermo Tell Aveledo, Carmen Martínez de Grijalba, Victor Márquez, Roberto Abdul, and Ismael Pérez Vigil. They already have a place in the history of the civility of a country building its memory.

3 <https://runrun.es/noticias/485467/plataforma-unitaria-anuncia-aprobacion-de-reglamento-para-primarias/>

Thus, a path was undertaken that had already turned the primary into an act of resistance and citizen organizational capacity, despite the pressures and countless obstacles that appeared along the way in a clear attempt by the regime and the operators of demoralization to take over the process. The courage to preserve the primary as a product of organized civil society contrasted with the temptations of those who preferred an apparent process coordinated with the regime's National Electoral Council (CNE) under the logic that the CNE would organize the presidential election and that leveraging its infrastructure would facilitate the primary process.

That had a fundamental problem: it meant handing over on a silver platter to the regime the opportunity for people to trust again, without anything having changed, simply causing people to turn away from what the challenge of voting in a self-managed primary represented. Therefore, it is no secret to anyone that 2023 was a challenging year throughout its course, as the threats and bets on the failure of the primary did not stop. Another great civic milestone came at this point: formally deciding that the regime's National Electoral Council (CNE) would not interfere in carrying out this civic act. That decision, announced on June 16, 2023⁴, gave all the sense and purpose to what would come months later, on October 22nd.

But despite that enormous burden of civic heroism and republican virtues, one cannot be naive. From its conception to its realization, the primary had a huge problem of skepticism on the part of a considerable segment of the international community as well as political and opinion sectors within Venezuelan society - a

4 DW. "Oposición de Venezuela irá a primarias sin ente electoral". June 16th, 2023. <https://www.dw.com/es/oposición-de-venezuela-irá-a-primarias-sin-autoridad-electoral/a-65946314>

significant portion of the elites. This skepticism stemmed from four concrete elements:

- Viability in the process.
- Scope of the call (who could be candidates).
- Levels of participation.
- Legitimacy and recognition of the results (cohesion).

Although at first glance these concerns seemed valid, at one point, this was seen as an immutable truth, which turned the pessimism of those sectors into a rule. And there, civility –the people– once again emerged to teach lessons. Beyond the technical and logistical limitations that a process like this could have, the National Primary Commission (CNdP) did everything in its power to minimize the factors of concern that sought to snatch away the opportunity for a viable election. No one can say that the process was not broad in its outreach, participatory in its design, and democratic in its essence. No one can question the effort to make it possible and to ensure that the candidates remain committed to respect and democratic coexistence in a country without democracy, debate included. What a titanic task!

But we made it. There's no concept more powerful than that of "self-management", because in a country lacking institutionalism, every effort to make possible what seems impossible, with risks and fears in tow, makes it more commendable than in any other context. And that's why the people factor was decisive. Not to mention the milestone of an agreement for the recognition of the result, for supporting the winner and for a minimum program⁵. A true feat.

5 *La Patilla*. "Candidatos a la Primaria firmaron acuerdo de «Programa mínimo de Gobierno»". August 4th, 2023. <https://www.lapatilla.com/2023/08/04/candidatos-primaria-acuerdo-programa-minimo-gobierno/>.

It was precisely the energy created around that effort that allowed us to achieve extremely difficult things and made many skeptical about the likelihood of the primary's success. Amid legitimate concerns and unfounded campaigns, there was an effort to portray the path as rockier and steeper than it actually was. These campaigns were aimed directly at the CNdP, against the possibility of a broad process, against the almost impossibility, according to them, of conducting it without the CNE, insisting that voting abroad was not feasible, and a myriad of obstacles.

But from the moment people took ownership of the process, day by day, each of those campaigns and impossibilities began to crumble, leading to an impeccable October 22nd. Yes, the fact that the primary was a civic feat demonstrated that it could be manual, without control from the CNE, with voting from abroad, and representative. Thus, every *"it can't be done"* became a *"yes, it was done"*.

Two moments from María Corina Machado's Campaign Command, #ConMaríaCorina, were key in understanding the magnitude of what was to come. One had to do with the change in people's attitudes towards the political issue; the other had to do with the heightened spirit of struggle upon knowing that the process would be done without the National Electoral Council.

March 16th. 2023⁶. María Corina begins travelling through Venezuela, starting from Mérida, with a tour as intense as it is decisive to understand the moment. A country that in January was dispirited suddenly finds, in the municipalities of Mérida,

6 Zubillaga, Jorge. "María Corina Machado inicia recorrido por Venezuela en el estado Mérida #16Mar". *El Impulso*, March 16th. 2023. <https://www.elimpulso.com/2023/03/16/maria-corina-machado-inicia-recorrido-por-venezuela-en-el-estado-merida-16mar/>.

people pouring into its streets to welcome Machado in a sort of apotheosis. Without fully understanding it from the command center, but knowing that it was the result of many years of hard work and struggle, people everywhere were saying, *"I'm going to vote for you," "I'm going to vote in the primary, wherever it may be," "you are the hope that my children will come back,"* even without her being an official candidate yet. Without a doubt, everything had changed. From then on, every trip carried the same charge of energy among large crowds: excitement, commitment, demand, and readiness. People were upbeat again, which already implied a great responsibility, especially when the primary still seemed distant.

Amidst this new reality, a pivotal moment confirmed what people were eager to know to reaffirm or validate their commitment. June 17, 2023, in Valera, Trujillo state. A state once supportive of Chavismo had come out like never before to acclaim an opposition political leader. Three months had passed since the start of the tours in Mérida, and just a day earlier, the CNdP had announced to the country that the primary would be held without the National Electoral Council (CNE) and with manual voting. Machado publicly announced, surrounded by thousands of people, that she would register as a candidate for the primary process. The country connected with her, and nothing was the same from then on.

Those months of intense debates within the opposition and numerous pressures from the regime, ranging from harassment to threats, passed by as the reality of the streets confirmed what the polls were predicting. Machado would win the primary by a significant margin while her leadership continued to grow as she visited Venezuela.

Many times, it was perceived that analysts, pollsters, and opinion makers were moving in another direction, dismissing the human factor as decisive, while María Corina, wherever she went, placed people as the main and definitive variable. Every testimony she encountered was becoming a collection of messages pointing to three things: the reunification of families, living better, and having justice. While many pointed out that the primary was a fanciful idea, despite being an announced reality, María Corina always said that one had to listen to the people and that citizenship had already taken ownership of the process. There was no turning back, and every civic triumph confirmed it.

Thus, a great national and cross-cutting movement had been realized, no longer confined to just the major cities, where consolidation was even more challenging. While it was difficult in urban areas, in the most remote and populous locations, the clarity of the people's voice was overwhelming. It was not exclusive to party machinery, which, although helpful, did not reach the level of spontaneity found in the streets. And so, an entire nation was infected with the notion of the primary as an opportunity and the leadership that could be elected through it because people would vote manually, *"one piece of paper at a time,"* as they hadn't done in a long time. It was about giving citizens back the possibility and freedom to choose; it was about trust.

October 22 arrived. The day that seemed so distant was now a reality. Amidst unease about the response of a regime that until hours before had threatened that the process would not take place, it did. Reports began to trickle in slowly. Discussions about centralized centers, security, difficulties, and so on were left behind. With last-minute changes but an impressive determination to do things right, the process started in an exemplary way. Reports from all over the country, including the most popular areas

traditionally controlled by Chavismo, indicated a phenomenon that even the most optimistic did not expect: people turned out massively. The excitement had begun the day before, with the first vote in Sidney, Australia⁷, and so, within the country as well as in the 85 cities around the world where there was participation, the national tricolor waved with the strength of a society determined to embrace freedom and change.

Just over three million printed ballots, with an estimated 600,000 people participating or a million at best, were becoming a big question mark in the face of what was happening. Some embassies inside and outside the country were writing about “huge results” before noon. It was clear: the country was speaking; with patriotic civic spirit, the country honored the trust it was given. Thus, fear was left behind, and where there were no tables, an ironing board served its purpose. And where pens were lacking, others appeared. Suddenly, reports arrived of people upset in the interior because the ballots had run out, and it was evident: another great citizen victory had been achieved.

Night fell. As the hours passed, the excitement grew because the atmosphere was crystal clear: the massive participation alone warranted celebration in a country that months earlier seemed resigned but had risen. Rumors, threats, and obstacles from the regime also grew, attempting to tarnish what was already a historic outcome due to its turnout, not to mention what the will of the citizens had expressed. Thus, with nearly three million Venezuelans, inside and outside the country, and with 92.35%

7 Yanuacelis Aure, “Venezolanos en Australia ya comenzaron a votar en la elección primaria”. *El diario*, October 23st, 2023. <https://eldiario.com/2023/10/21/venezolanos-australia-eleccion-primaria/>.

of the votes⁸, María Corina Machado was chosen to lead the opposition for the presidential election and the next stage of our struggle.

Citizens once again rewrote history. The same citizens who have protested, marched, spoken, and voted did it again. In an unequivocal message and with a clear mandate, it was evident that they want to vote freely in a truly competitive process. Similarly, the overwhelming majority that welcomed María Corina led her to vow to embrace all those committed to change in Venezuela. The reading of this mandate was not only in terms of a way of doing politics and a transformative power project, but around the possibility of reuniting an entire country, setting aside many differences, in the civic and peaceful spirit of the lost democracy that must be found and recovered.

The primary election solved a fundamental problem associated with the legitimacy of the opposition leadership. It also addressed an issue of representation both domestically and internationally, facing a chorus so diverse that it was sometimes unintelligible. Now, there were no excuses for the international community regarding the lack of a legitimate voice capable of representing the new and decisive moment for Venezuelan politics. Through coordination and a broad embrace of change, the opposition achieved unequivocal consensus on two essential pillars: unity and legitimacy. A new opportunity –perhaps the last for a long time– emerged, incorporating all those committed to achieving freedom.

8 Sofia Nederr, “Último boletín: María Corina Machado gana primarias con 92,35% de los votos”. *Diario Las Américas*, October 23rd, 2023. <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/america-latina/ultimo-boletin-maria-corina-machado-gana-primarias-9235-los-votos-n5345527>

María Corina knew how to interpret the sentiment of an entire country and turn it into energy and organization. While many calculations were made around machinery, polls, and commentators, she chose to believe in the people who embraced her everywhere, from all political sectors, including disillusioned Chavismo represented in the face of a mother who, despite being part of the official system, decided to support María Corina because she understood that a change through this movement was an opportunity for her son to return.

Faced with underestimation, resignation, and pessimism, confidence in the people emerged as the fundamental force and driving factor for what Venezuela experienced just a few months ago, but also for what the country will go through in this stage of struggle that will require courage, character, magnanimity, but above all, a great collective effort to succeed. That is neither transferable nor replaceable.

If there is one lesson that the primary election left, it is this: trust in the people; and the people are the strength that democrats rely on today to prevail, until the end, because Venezuela will be free.

The digital battle in Venezuela: Social networks as allies against censorship

Marivi Marín Vázquez

The Venezuelan opposition is gearing up in 2024 for one of the most complex and decisive elections in recent years. Amidst an ecosystem stacked against them, the challenges they face are enormous. Besides navigating the obstacles imposed by the Supreme Court of Justice, such as the disqualification of Maria Corina Machado's candidacy and being at the mercy of decisions regarding election dates and conditions, they must also confront the regime of Maduro's disproportionate media apparatus. It's evident that they have strategized to nullify dissent and any critical voices that could influence, lead, and organize the will for change among Venezuelan citizens. Instead, Chavismo pursues, censors, and imposes its propaganda narratives and disinformation aimed at a common goal: lying to stay in power.

The communicational dominance of Chavismo has been expanding over the years, permeating all media and information spaces. It has been highly successful in imposing narratives that divert attention from the real problems Venezuelans face or distort the opposition, whether it is by silencing dissent or attacking it with misinformation.

The Opposition Primary, held on October 22, 2023, is another clear example of what the communicational apparatus of the Venezuelan regime is capable of, promoting its propaganda in traditional media under its control, massively amplified on social networks. Censorship, intimidation, and self-censorship were the main weapons to silence the media, while misinformation and the imposition of narratives attempted to infiltrate social networks in order to disrupt the conversation around the process. However, the high participation in the opposition primary and the event's positioning on social media were a demonstration of the success of the elections and a reminder for the opposition that citizens want political change and can engage in it as long as they see a clear direction from a coherent leadership aligned with a common goal.

The opposition absent in traditional media

The Opposition Primary took place in a scenario where the absence of traditional media was not only noticeable but also enforced. The Venezuelan NGO *Espacio Público* documented¹, one day before the primary elections, informal calls and communications from regional and national authorities of the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) to radio and television station executives and owners. Their messages aimed to remind these executives of their 'non-obligation' to cover the event because, according to them, it was not 'official' as it did not have the endorsement of the National Electoral Council (CNE). This practice is not new. Censorship of Venezuelan media and the broadcasting of campaigns or messages from opposition

1 "Conatel censura contenidos y cobertura en elecciones primarias de la oposición venezolana". *Espacio Público*, October 21st, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://espaciopublico.org/conatel-censura-contenidos-y-cobertura-en-elecciones-primarias-de-la-oposicion-venezolana/>

leaders has been happening for a long time, albeit with increasing intensity.

In 2015, amid the campaign for parliamentary elections, in which the opposition ultimately emerged victorious, many media outlets were already censored. The construction of a communicational hegemony by the Chavista government to silence independent media and opposition voices was underway. It had begun years earlier with the non-renewal of the concession to the television channel RCTV, with the purchase of television channels and national-level print media by businessmen aligned with Chavismo interests in 2013, and with the escalation of radio station closures across the country since 2003.

For the parliamentary elections in 2015, I remember that the Chavismo regime prohibited the country's telephone companies from sending mass text messages from opposition campaign commands, further reducing the opposition's ability to mobilize and reach a wider audience and tilting the balance more in favor of the regime. Despite this entire ecosystem, the opposition achieved an electoral victory that set a precedent and serves as an example of the power of organized citizens, who despite clear censorship, intimidation, and electoral disadvantage, can express their will for change through their vote.

What happened in 2015 can be extrapolated to what was experienced last October in the opposition primary election. Despite the event's minimal exposure in traditional media, the reported high participation in the primary process once again showed how civil society can come together at the ballot box and in political discourse, despite significant limitations on freedom of expression.

In 2023, the restriction on access to information was greater than what was experienced in 2015, primarily in traditional media. The absence of opposition spokespeople in these outlets was total after the proclamation and recognition in 2019 of Juan Guaidó as interim president following the rejection of the results of the 2018 presidential elections. Censorship was imposed, and the closure of radio stations across the country became Conatel's flagship method to suppress freedom of expression and maintain an informational blackout in much of the national territory.

The *Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad de Venezuela* (IPYS Venezuela) in its study "*Atlas del silencio*"², reported that by 2022 more than 7 million (21% of the population) would live in news deserts, which are areas where access to local information is insufficient.

According to the project's results, radio was mentioned as the medium that produces daily local information with the greatest presence, being registered in 308 localities, which represents 84.38% of the 365 evaluated areas. It is no coincidence, therefore, that state censorship has focused on radios, leading to the massive closure of stations in all regions of the country.

In a report about the situation of the right to freedom of expression and information in Venezuela³ published by *Espacio Público* in 2022, the closure of at least 285 radio stations nationwide since 2003 is documented, which is equivalent to 71% of the total number of media outlets closed during that period.

2 Instituto Prensa y Sociedad de Venezuela. Estudio "*Atlas del silencio*". Retrieved from <https://ipysvenezuela.org/atlas-del-silencio/>

3 Espacio Público, *Informe 2022: Situación del derecho a la libertad de expresión e información en Venezuela*. (2023). Retrieved from <https://espaciopublico.org/informe-2022-situacion-del-derecho-a-la-libertad-de-expresion-e-informacion-en-venezuela/>

Digital media outlets are not immune to authoritarian attacks either. The new community of independent media outlets that have found refuge on the internet amidst the paper crisis and censorship, which wiped out most of the print press in Venezuela, are also affected by Conatel's decisions. The regulatory body keeps media outlet websites and organizations that provide information about the structural crisis the country is facing blocked in Venezuela in an attempt by the regime to hide this information.

The blocking of websites and digital harassment of citizens, political actors, and social leaders on social media clearly violates digital rights, which the United Nations considers to be equivalent to fundamental human rights⁴. In this way, the Chavista government adds more violations to the list of human and constitutional rights of Venezuelans.

However, in the face of an information blackout, social media is emerging as one of the communication channels through which censorship can be partially circumvented. This censorship aims to limit people's ability to freely participate in public affairs, often for political purposes divergent from the partisan interests of the Maduro regime.

Calling fraud: The strategy to sabotage the primaries

Despite social media being the space where civil society, leaders, and opposition political parties typically operate more freely, this does not imply that the Chavista government's communication apparatus does not permeate and promote or amplify disinformation campaigns within these platforms.

4 United Nations Organization, *Digital Human Rights*, (2018). Retrieved from de <https://www.un.org/techenvoy/es/content/digital-human-rights>

In the case of the opposition primaries on Sunday, October 22, 2023, both misinformation and conversation surrounding this election began long before. A monitoring conducted by the organization I lead (ProBox) recorded that the first hashtag on X (former Twitter) about the topic was *#LaPrimariaVa*, promoted by the National Primary Commission on February 15, the day of the official presentation of the process. From there, the digital troops of chavismo took on the task of generating a large amount of misinformation, hoaxes, and attacks on the process and its candidates, which intensified until days after the election.

However, since July 2023, the radical government narrative on social media about the primaries revolved around the slogan *#NoTeVistasQueNoVas*, mainly promoted by Diosdado Cabello on his show *Con el Mazo Dando*. But with the successful execution of the process, the message shifted to labeling the event as fraudulent, not only to discredit the results but also to directly attack the National Primary Commission.

With the momentum of the hashtag *#MegaFraude*, the government attempted to shape a new narrative around the digital conversation about the primaries. What started as an online smear campaign ultimately materialized on October 25th with the opening of a criminal investigation against the directors of the National Primary Commission.

The disinformation surrounding the primaries can be traced back to July 2023, with at least 10 monthly publications on the subject, and there is a clear pattern of how this narrative circulated. Its initial point originated from the television program *Con el Mazo Dando*, hosted by Diosdado Cabello and broadcasted by the state-owned *Venezolana de Televisión*. From this platform, the radical government directed the digital battle over the opposition

elections, promoting the first electoral trend against them on June 14th with the hashtag #NiPorLasBuenasNiPorLasMalas.

Since then, ProBox managed to register seven more trends promoted by Cabello on the subject during eight programs broadcast between June 14th and October 25th. Using the State channel, *Venezolana de Televisión*, the Vice President of *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV) dedicated the daily program to talk about the country's elections, especially about the opposition primaries on October 22nd, as well as the disqualification of some candidates. In doing so, he implied that even if the opposition carried out its internal elections, if the winner were to be "disqualified," they could not participate in the presidential elections scheduled for 2024. This makes Cabello and his program one of the protagonists of the disinformation strategy surrounding the primary process.

The use of hashtags from Con el Mazo Dando to promote hateful and defamatory narratives against the Venezuelan opposition is a practice that goes back many years⁵. On July 28, 2021, the social network X (Twitter at the time) suspended the official account of this program⁶ for its repeated violations of the platform's policies such as posting misinformation, discriminatory messages and hateful narratives. However, a few months after

5 C-Informa. #CiberalianzaAlDescubierto: El Mazo y las redes anónimas se unen para desinformar. Retrieved from <https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/ciberalianzaaldescubierto-el-mazo-y-las-redes-anonimas-se-unen-para-desinformar>

6 Observatorio Digital ProBox. ¿Por qué Twitter suspende la cuenta del programa Con el Mazo Dando? (2021). Retrieved from <https://proboxve.org/es/publicacion/claves-por-que-twitter-suspende-la-cuenta-del-programa-con-el-mazo-dando>

Elon Musk bought Twitter, the @ConElMazoDando account was reinstated; just in time to act against the opposition primaries.

The insistence on attacking the candidates and the elections did not remain only on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter). A study⁷ by the Coalition against Disinformation (C-Informa) managed to identify that “*no te vistas que no vas*” (one of the most repeated phrases by Cabello) was used in posts on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok.

Additionally, ProBox also identified that the attacks on opposition primary candidates varied depending on their gender. Female candidates faced a greater number of false information and attacks linked to their gender compared to male candidates. At least 71.4% of online gender-based attacks and disinformation were directed towards female candidates⁸.

The citizenry made itself heard on social media

Despite the disinformation strategy by Chavismo to taint the conversation about the primaries with falsehoods and

7 ProBox conducted a search for trends promoted on Con el Mazo Dando and keywords associated with the process (#PrimariasEsFraudeYDesastre, #PrimariasNoHay, #NoVasNiQueTeVistas, #AsiChillesOPataleesNoVas, Primarias oposición fraude, inhabilitados no van, inhabilitadas moralmente, Maricori no va) using a social listening tool –to monitor social media– to study this conversation in detail between October 2 and November 3, 2023. The study yielded a sample of at least 1,175 mentions, highlighting October 19 (with 127 mentions), October 25 (120 mentions), and November 1 (108 mentions) as the days with the highest use of these words and hashtags..

8 C-Informa, #CiberalianzaAlDescubierto: desinformación y ataques en línea con tinte de género, (2024). Retrieved from <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/ciberalianzaaldescubierto-desinformacion-y-ataques-en-linea-con-tinte-de-genero>

misinformation, independent media, citizens, and political actors managed to keep #Primarias2023 trending for three consecutive days as a hashtag used for communication among political parties, activists, journalists, political leaders, and citizens inside and outside the country.

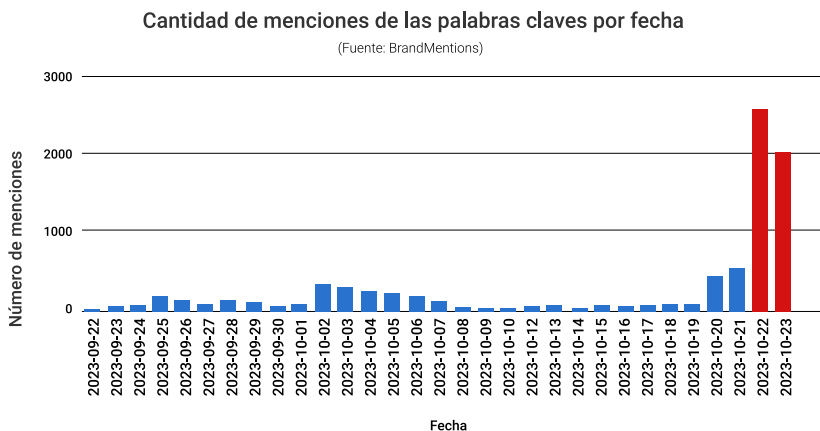
#Primarias2023 is the largest trend that ProBox has recorded since August 23, 2023, in Venezuela. This hashtag generated nearly 8 times more messages than the average recorded in trends promoted by the Ministry of Communication and Information (MIPPC) between October 1 and 23 (29 thousand tweets).

Every day, trends are shared from the Ministry of Information and Communication (MIPPCI) account that government entities and Chavista troops replicate to artificially position narratives aligned with the State. This strategy has worked for the Maduro regime to maintain digital communication hegemony⁹ in spaces like X but, on the weekend of October 22, 2023, this dynamic was completely disrupted with the positioning of #Primarias2023.

The trend about the opposition primaries registered by ProBox was not only successful during the day of the elections but started emerging a day prior and remained among the top hashtags until a day after the elections. Another significant aspect regarding this trend is that out of the 230 thousand tweets recorded in this conversation, the majority (92.3%) were generated by real users¹⁰.

9 Observatorio Digital ProBox. *Informe Anual 2022*. Retrieved from <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/la-protesta-ciudadana-vs-la-ficcion-estatal-en-linea>

10 When exploring the conversation about the Primaries using a social listening tool using keywords such as “#Primarias2023”, “plataforma unitaria”, “elecciones primarias Venezuela”, “Comisión Nacional de Primarias”, “primarias oposición Venezuela”, “#ElecciónPrimaria”, and “#HoyVotoYDecido”, the ProBox Digital



What happened in the Opposition Primaries should be taken as an example of what can happen amidst what will be the most important elections in the country in recent years. The decision of the political leadership to carry out a democratic process for the selection of the candidate who will confront the regime in the presidential elections, the primaries being held in all states of the country and in 80 cities abroad, with the participation of more than 2.3 million Venezuelans; and the active participation of citizens in positioning the electoral conversation on social media amidst a sea of disinformation and Chavista propaganda, is a demonstration of how society and political actors can break into different spaces that authoritarian regimes seek to control but where, despite all obstacles, the democratic spirit remains alive.

Social media is a vital space for building public opinion and freedom of expression, especially in authoritarian contexts,

Observatory obtained a sample of 9,004 mentions, generating content analysis between September 22nd and October 23rd. The highest activity was recorded on October 22nd and 23rd, primarily focusing on October 22nd with 2,583 mentions.

making them a fundamental tool for reclaiming civic space. Their proper and coordinated use is essential to turn them into spaces where information and opinions flow freely, unlike in other media censored by the government's institutional apparatus. Thus, platforms such as X, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok become a new tool for advocacy and activism.

It is essential for citizens and various groups to get involved by activating and strengthening digital protest as a way to raise the flag in favor of democracy and the human rights that come intrinsically with it.

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