

Democratization



Year 7, Issue 33

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(part I)

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Caracas.

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2023-2025. How We Made it Happen: The Story of the Triumph of July 28th (part I)

Paola Bautista de Alemán

We are just over five months past July 28. On that day, we voted, we won, and we defended our will. We navigated with remarkable skill through a landscape riddled with challenges. Without a doubt, what theory describes as “non-competitive elections” is a high-stakes endeavor for those of us operating on those grounds. Despite what we experienced, it is still too soon to evaluate the process in its entirety, and this article does not aim to do so.

These paragraphs reconstruct Venezuelans’ journey from the primary election held on October 22, 2023, to January 2025. It is a non-exhaustive account aimed at enriching our historical memory and sharing lessons learned for those who may find them valuable.

This is the first installment of a seminal text that may later evolve into something more comprehensive. In fact, I dare say it is conceived with the intent to be expanded in the near future. In these pages, I will focus on two key topics: (i) Preliminary ideas

to guide the reader and (ii) Three crucial stages in the election process: the primary election, the placeholder candidate, and the presidential candidate. In subsequent installments, I will delve deeper into the election period and the following months.

Three preliminary ideas

I want to start by outlining three ideas that may help the reader better understand this story: the authoritarian context, the *author's perspective*, and its purpose.

Let us begin with the *authoritarian context*. The events described in this article unfolded under a dictatorship. This fact is far from trivial and leaves a profound imprint on the course of events. Opacity, uncertainty, persecution, suspicion, fear, pain –I wish I could find the precise words to describe the human and political challenges we have faced. These variables are difficult to quantify but have undoubtedly shaped our actions. This is why I emphasize this issue, which, although evident, is sometimes taken for granted and overlooked when judging and analyzing the reality we had to endure.

Now, let's consider the *author's perspective*. This text is shaped by both my intellectual training and my political experience. As such, the reader will not find a detached or neutral reflection. Instead, these ideas are born from my commitment to democracy and my yearning for freedom. With this perspective, I have sought to organize and make sense of the challenges imposed by the political dynamics we have faced. This text represents that effort. Its purpose is not to provide a definitive account of this topic but to inspire others to expand upon and enrich these ideas.

To conclude, let us delve into the *purpose* of this text. I am publishing it in advance –before achieving our freedom goals –driven by a desire to bring visibility to the testimony of countless Venezuelans in their struggle and to contribute to our historical memory. In this era of disappearing chats and fleeting posts, there is a pressing need for accounts that preserve our story as a people. That is why I write with our democratic future in mind, one in which we will share everything we did to reclaim our freedom and to ensure it is never lost again with generations to come.

The crucial stages of July 28th

Some moments alter the course of history, defining the before and after in the lives of many. Behind each of these lies a chain of events that paved the way and made them possible. At times, these events are elusive; they may go unnoticed or be underestimated, even by the most discerning observers of their time. Yet, identifying and valuing each of these moments and stages is essential. Delving into these moments allows us to recognize the extraordinary efforts of those who made them happen and to appreciate the role of Providence –or “fortune,” as Machiavelli might call it.

In this section, I will focus on the three stages that allowed us to reach and win the presidential election on July 28: the primary election, the placeholder candidate, and the presidential candidate.

First stage: the primary election

Sunday, October 22, 2023. We went out to vote early. By mid-morning, long lines had formed outside the voting centers. Both urban neighborhoods and rural communities came out to exercise

their right to vote. Against all expectations,¹ we raised our voices and managed to surprise many, both inside and outside the country. Undoubtedly, there were reasons for fear and doubt.² Organizing primary elections under a dictatorship is a risky and uncertain endeavor. For this reason, I would argue that its most significant contribution to the chain of events that led to the victory on July 28 was the empowerment of the people. That day, we came together through free political action and rediscovered our shared longing for democracy.

In this section, I will focus on three ideas that can help explain the significance of the primary election held on October 22, 2023: the regime's miscalculation, the civic groundswell, and the results as a reconfiguration of the opposition spectrum.

The regime miscalculated. The primary election took place in an especially hostile environment, marked by a complex humanitarian crisis and severe limitations on the political rights of all Venezuelans. From the start,³ it was a process under siege.

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- 1 <https://elpitazo.net/politica/diosdado-cabello-afilo-comentarios-en-contra-de-primaria-opositora-en-los-ultimos-meses/amp/>; <https://www.infobae.com/america/venezuela/2022/06/07/henrique-capriles-rechazo-la-realizacion-de-elecciones-primarias-opositoras-excluyentes-y-cerradas-para-enfrentar-al-chavismo/> y <https://www.eluniversal.com/politica/159933/manuel-rosales-sobre-las-primarias-no-se-deben-hacer-elecciones-debajo-de-un-arbol>
 - 2 <https://talcualdigital.com/maria-corina-machado-arrasa-en-ultimo-boletin-de-primarias-con-2-2-millones-de-votos/> y <https://red-forma.com/edicion-28/entrevista-a-jesus-maria-casal-nunca-debemos-perder-de-vista-que-la-gente-quiere-votar/>
 - 3 <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-02-15/la-oposicion-venezolana-convoca-primarias-el-22-de-octubre-para-elegir-al-candidato-que-enfrente-a-maduro-en-2024.html>

Without a doubt, it was a complex and challenging endeavor. It would take an entire article to outline and describe the threats and abuses faced by the National Primary Commission, led by Dr. Jesús María Casal, the political parties, and civil society.⁴ Some of these challenges include bribery,⁵ undue pressures, harassment by state security forces,⁶ undue pressures, harassment by state security forces,⁷ disinformation campaigns, media censorship, and political violence, among others.

At a time when the Chavista-Madurista dictatorship appeared firmly entrenched in power, it's natural to ask: Why did it allow the primary election to take place? Why didn't it issue a Supreme Court ruling to stop it? There are no simple answers to these questions. Dictatorships are, by nature, opaque, and attempting to decipher their reasoning is always a risky task. However, I venture to propose the following hypothesis: *the regime miscalculated*.

Nicolás Maduro likely calculated the following: the opposition –political parties and civil society– is fragmented and demoralized. It is worth pausing here to consider the regime's perspective.

4 <https://elcomercio.pe/mundo/venezuela/roberto-abdul-sumate-ong-de-venezuela-denuncia-detencion-de-uno-de-los-organizadores-de-las-primarias-opositoras-comision-nacional-de-primaria-cnp-nicolas-maduro-alfredo-romero-ultimas-noticia/>

5 <https://efectocucuyo.com/politica/carlos-prosperi-no-cuenten-conmigo-para-reconocer-resultados-sesgados/>

6 <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2023/10/28/la-fiscalia-chavista-cito-a-tres-organizadores-de-las-primarias-opositoras-declararan-en-calidad-de-investigados/>

7 <https://runrun.es/nacional/venezuela-2/164995/conatel-ha-bloqueado-mas-de-mil-paginas-web-en-menos-de-12-meses/>

First, the regime saw the opposition as fractured and believed it was only a matter of time before it broke in two. This perception was fueled by the public disagreements surrounding the organization of the primary election, which were widely aired in mainstream media. The most notable controversy centered on the involvement of the National Electoral Council in providing technical assistance on election day. Two distinct positions emerged: those who favored the council's support and those who opposed it.

Henrique Capriles Radonski, a presidential primary candidate from Primero Justicia, supported the first position. In May 2023, he declared that the logistical support provided by the National Electoral Council (CNE) was essential, describing the event as "impossible"⁸ to execute without its technical assistance. On the other hand, María Corina Machado, the front-runner in the polls and eventual winner of the primary, supported the opposing stance. She repeatedly rejected the CNE's involvement, arguing that the regime-controlled electoral body was untrustworthy and would undermine the process. Ultimately, the primaries were successfully conducted without State intervention and with the participation of all opposition forces⁹.

Second, the regime believed that the opposition base was disheartened and apathetic. This perception was shaped by opinion polls and analysts who claimed that the public was not

8 <https://www.redobservacion.org/2023/05/10/capriles-pide-usar-logistica-del-cne-para-las-primarias/>

9 <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/america-latina/oposicion-rechaza-proceso-primarias-organizado-el-cne-n5344274>

invested in the primary election. Luis Vicente León,¹⁰ president of Datanálisis, was the leading voice of this interpretation, stating, “I can say that very few people are looking out for the primary.” However, reality proved otherwise; the nation rallied and participated.

These perceptions of the environment –division and disheartenment– shaped the regime’s response. The dictatorship concluded that, in such a context, the internal and external costs of heightened repression were not worth bearing. Politically, fostering division within the opposition by exacerbating their differences or buying loyalty was more expedient, while discouraging public participation through disinformation, flawed analyses, and fear tactics.

Another critical factor to consider is that the primary election coincided with the culmination of negotiations between the dictatorship, the Biden administration, and the Unitary Platform. Maduro’s regime entered these talks with the clear objective of securing the lifting of U.S. economic sanctions. Disrupting the primary election would have jeopardized this goal. At that time –and even now– Nicolás Maduro needed financial resources to sustain the allegiances that kept him in power.

Thus, this is where the regime placed its bets: signing the Barbados agreement to secure the easing of sanctions and creating the political conditions for the primary to become yet another failure for the Venezuelan opposition. The first happened; the second did not. The primary succeeded because the dictatorship

10 https://x.com/luisvicenteleon/status/1711767837423931717?t=V--37_dmLJM3wa5tO-kVtw&s=19

misread the moment and failed to anticipate two key factors: the opposition's political resilience and the people's support, which quietly held onto their determination to participate until the day came to cast their votes.

Civic groundswell. Six days before the primary, I published an article titled "*Primaries in Dictatorship: Unity and Consciousness.*"¹¹ I enjoyed organizing the ideas, writing them, and publishing them. In that article, I aimed to convey my optimism. An optimism grounded in the reality I observed through my grassroots political work, which stood in contrast to the firm assertions of some analysts who confidently predicted the primaries would be a failure.¹² Week after week, during each meeting with the local structures of Primero Justicia, I began to notice two things: unwavering enthusiasm and extraordinary civic heroism. In short: a strong spirit of resistance.

Some were surprised when they read my article. Respectfully, they remarked that it seemed overly hopeful, perhaps even voluntaristic –“wishful thinking,” they said. And I don't blame them. I myself hesitated to publish it. It was a risky piece. Today, I'm glad I did, but I recognize that I was walking the fine line between political and intellectual daring. The reality is that predicting the outcome of October 22 was exceedingly difficult. Like the regime, we were susceptible to miscalculations and being carried away by good intentions that might not yield the desired results. After more than twenty years of democratic struggle, it's

11 <https://lga.lagranaldea.com/2023/10/16/primarias-en-dictadura-unidad-y-conciencia/>

12 <https://www.globovision.com/programa/6635/a-cinco-meses-de-las-primarias-datanalisis-estima-una-participacion-de-apenas-10>

only natural that we find it hard to get excited and approach any glimmer of change cautiously.

This is why I believe one of the most profound lessons of October 22 lies in the democratic soul of the nation –one that was neither dormant nor extinguished– and in our ability to reconnect with it. Long-standing dictatorships aim to colonize the consciousness of their opponents. They devote themselves to constructing psychological prisons that distort our grasp of reality. I’m referring to the discouragement that gradually takes root within us, dimming our desire to fight. We start to confuse audacity with recklessness, realism with pessimism, and voluntarism with magnanimity. It’s the relentless questioning of effort, the loss of purpose and direction... it’s despair.

The primary challenged us to dismantle these mental barriers, to open ourselves to the nation, and to reconnect with it. Since October 22, the civic groundswell I described earlier has only intensified. The yearning for freedom has grown steadily stronger. What has unfolded mirrors the dynamics of other liberation processes: the crack opened by the primary was destined to widen, and it has kept growing over time.

The results. María Corina Machado emerged as the undisputed victor of the day, securing 2,253,825 votes –an overwhelming 92.35% of all votes cast.¹³ The total turnout reached 2,307,635. However, when reflecting on the earlier points, it becomes clear that Machado’s triumph goes beyond these impressive figures. She not only achieved a sweeping majority but also earned the trust

13 <https://runrun.es/noticias/511417/boletin-final-de-primaria-2023-machado-obtuvo-2-253-825-millones-de-votos/>

of the nation. Defying bleak forecasts, she became the voice of a country that yearned –and yearns– for political change. Without hesitation, I can assert that the primary was a profound turning point that reshaped the landscape of Venezuela’s opposition.

This outcome was extraordinary and unexpected. Let us consider five insights into its political impact:

1. *The primary represented an electoral and political victory that advanced Venezuela’s path to liberation.* The participation of over two million people in an election held under a dictatorship was an encouraging sign for all of us who aspire to democracy in Venezuela. To start, the primary achieved its main objective: Venezuela selected a presidential candidate who enjoyed –and continues to enjoy– the legitimacy conferred by a transparent, fair, and trustworthy electoral process. The primary bestowed upon María Corina Machado’s leadership the legitimacy of more than two million votes.

2. *The dictatorship is not infallible.* Before the primary, it was widely believed that the regime’s social control mechanisms¹⁴ were highly effective in subduing the political consciousness of the population. However, the outcome on October 22 revealed that while these tools do exist, they are limited and can be overcome. This revelation has been deeply significant. On the one hand, it allows for a more accurate assessment of the obstacles imposed by the dictatorship; on the other, it empowered the citizenry. On October 23, Venezuela woke up filled with hope and renewed

14 By “social control mechanisms,” I mean the social benefits distributed in underserved communities through the Carnet de la Patria system.

determination to fight. We had taken a step forward to the healthy re-politicization of the country.

3. *The opposition stood united in its aspirations for democracy.* Nine out of ten opposition voters cast their ballots for María Corina Machado. Her vision resonated deeply with nearly everyone who participated on October 22. Machado's emotional, relatable, and human-centered message succeeded in consolidating the opposition into a unified front.

The shadow of division within the opposition was left behind, and a new opposition dynamic emerged. This time, unity was different from what had been achieved in previous periods. Between 2005 and 2015, unity was anchored in political parties and their capacity for representation. Starting in 2023, a new form of unity took shape –one that revolved around the people and went beyond electoral organizations. This shift in structure brought about new challenges, which I will explore in greater detail later.

4. *The primary results underscored the profound crisis of representation within the political parties that had, until then, led the democratic struggle.* Only one in ten Venezuelans voted for any parties that make up the Plataforma Unitaria, the political coalition of electoral organizations opposing Nicolás Maduro's dictatorship. A significant detail: Vente Venezuela, the political movement led by María Corina Machado, is not part of this group. This outcome validated what opinion polls had already indicated: after more than two decades of dictatorship, traditional political parties had ceased to represent the voice of the Venezuelan people. This political reality, combined with the leadership of María Corina Machado, forms the foundation of the new unified configuration that emerged after the primary.

5. *The opposition-driven nation yearns for change.* While this may seem self-evident, it is far from trivial. After the primary, it became clear that Venezuela wants Maduro out, with no room for ambiguity in that aspiration. Those who have long advocated for cohabitation as a political strategy faced the stark unpopularity of their proposal.¹⁵ The nation does not want to coexist with corruption, poverty, and violence. Instead, it seeks to defeat Nicolás Maduro at the ballot box and move decisively toward democracy.

Even at the risk of sounding redundant or cacophonous: the nation wants an opposition that opposes the dictatorship –an opposition that challenges the regime and gives voice to the people’s discontent. In this context, a clear polarization emerged, defined by the democracy-versus-dictatorship divide. This voter sentiment presents a significant challenge to those leading the charge for political change. Eventually, if liberation is achieved in 2025, the time for moderation will arrive. Undoubtedly, it is crucial to begin laying the political and psychological groundwork for that eventuality.

Second stage: the placeholder candidate

After the primary election, a period of political adjustment began. Between November 2023 and March 2024, the Venezuelan opposition’s main challenge was the presidential candidacy. It is important to recall that María Corina Machado, the primary’s winner, was disqualified from running for any elected office.¹⁶ Consequently, the opposition had to fight for the removal of this

15 <https://panampost.com/roderick-navarro/2022/04/23/la-cohabitacion-peligro-levantar-sanciones/>

16 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cw9e8n92y89o>

disqualification or, alternatively, identify consensus mechanisms to select a substitute candidate.

Alongside this central challenge, two fundamental tasks were undertaken: First, establishing coordination platforms among the pro-democracy forces that would collaborate in the 2024 presidential election, and second, overcoming the obstacles imposed by the regime aimed at excluding us from the presidential race.

Let's delve into the first task: integrating political forces into the *Comando por Venezuela*.¹⁷ Managing a coalition of eleven political organizations,¹⁸ alongside hundreds of civil society groups, in a hostile environment was a daunting challenge that required significant creativity. This effort was guided by two key pillars: trust and competence, which I will now describe in detail.

First, personal trust. From the start, María Corina Machado and her campaign manager, Magallí Meda, established that participation in unified political working groups would not be dictated by party quotas but by trust in each leader. This approach marked a significant change from the past, when, between 2005 and 2015, such spaces were defined by party allocations –one representative per party. Post-primary elections and amid the

17 The Comando por Venezuela began as María Corina Machado's campaign team for the primary election. Later, it expanded to become the unified campaign headquarters.

18 Acción Democrática, Primero Justicia, La Causa Radical, Voluntad Popular, Movimiento por Venezuela, COPEI (No judicializado), Convergencia, Encuentro Ciudadano, Proyecto Venezuela, Futuro y Vente Venezuela.

crisis of party representation, this shifted. Only individuals trusted by María Corina Machado's team were included.

This decision stemmed from the authoritarian nature of the context. The risks and hostilities inherent in such an environment needed meticulous safeguarding of strategic information. Long-standing and seemingly entrenched dictatorships often develop sophisticated intelligence apparatuses, enabling them to infiltrate decision-making spaces and repress the progress of democratizing forces.¹⁹ Consequently, personal trust became a vital and irreplaceable criterion for limiting the regime's capacity to act while advancing the goals of liberation.

Second, personal competencies. Alongside personal trust, Machado and Meda emphasized the significance of each leader's human, technical, and political skills. On numerous occasions, both declared that the Comando would be comprised of "the best."²⁰ In this way, personal trust had to be paired with knowledge, efficiency, and diligence.

While the reasoning behind this decision is understandable, the shift in criteria for integrating forces marked a substantial departure from previous opposition dynamics and generated resistance among those who did not meet the requirements and who, consequently, felt excluded from decision-making spaces.

19 Fathali Moghaddam in *The Psychology of Dictatorship* accurately describes this dynamic, which is repeated in authoritarian contexts

20 <https://diariodelosandes.com/creacion-de-la-coordinacion-central-estadal-del-comando-con-venezuela-en-respuesta-a-pud-estadales/>

Now, let us examine the primary obstacles faced by the opposition forces. As outlined earlier, the foremost challenge was María Corina Machado's political disqualification. This measure, imposed by the regime, posed a significant barrier to electoral participation and became a source of widespread uncertainty –for the regime itself, certain sectors within the opposition, and the international community.

As expected, the initial course of action by the *Comando por Venezuela* was to pursue the reinstatement of the primary winner's eligibility. To this end, every possible avenue of advocacy was employed: civil mobilization, negotiations with the regime, international pressure, and even filing an appeal with the Supreme Court of Justice.²¹ Despite exhausting all necessary measures, her reinstatement was not achieved.

As this unfolded and as the deadline for presidential candidacies,²² set by the National Electoral Council drew nearer, uncertainty and state repression intensified.²³ In mass media, tightly controlled by the regime's strict censorship, platforms opened for analysts and spokespersons who asserted that the regime would not lift the disqualification and that María Corina Machado would lead the country to abstention.²⁴

21 <https://elpais.com/america/2023-12-16/maria-corina-machado-acude-a-la-justicia-venezolana-para-que-se-revise-su-inhabilitacion.html>

22 March 21. <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20240321-venezuela-comienza-la-inscripcion-de-candidatos-presidenciales-en-medio-de-detencion-de-opositores>

23 <https://talcualdigital.com/saab-anuncia-detencion-de-henry-alviarez-y-dinorah-hernandez-por-supuesta-conspiracion/>

24 <https://2001online.com/nacionales/llamado-luis-vicente-leon-oposicion>

However, when the formal nomination period began at the National Electoral Council, the opposite occurred. Once again, those predicting abstention as a foregone conclusion were proven wrong. When the time came, María Corina Machado convened representatives of the Unitary Platform and proposed Dr. Corina Yoris as her substitute.²⁵ She kept this decision strictly confidential until the timing was strategically appropriate for disclosure. Subsequently, all ten political parties within the coalition endorsed the candidacy. In an inspiring and unified press conference,²⁶ Omar Barboza²⁷ María Corina Machado announced we had a candidate for the upcoming July 28 elections.

Immediately, efforts began to formalize Dr. Yoris's candidacy with the National Electoral Council. In Venezuela, this process is conducted virtually via the Electoral Power's website. However, every attempt failed; the regime blocked the system, and the digital platform repeatedly rejected the candidacy submission.

As hours passed, uncertainty grew, and public warnings about a potential call for abstention resurfaced. During this time, the theory of a "palatable candidacy" theory began circulating in mass media and political circles. This proposal argued that the regime would only allow the registration of a candidate with its approval. Consequently, it suggested that Dr. Yoris's candidacy should be abandoned in favor of someone meeting these criteria.

25 <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/ce5en8pn85yo>

26 <https://youtu.be/XhYpq23Hyug?si=7qFw0R5Zghdju4EC>

27 Dr. Omar Barboza is the Executive Secretary of the Unitary Platform.

This theory suggested that the path of “unity and vote”²⁸ was unfeasible. It argued that if the candidate were unitary, they would cease to be palatable to the regime. Therefore, the unity between María Corina Machado and the political parties of the Unitary Platform had to be sacrificed to preserve the electoral route.²⁹

Those who supported this theory³⁰ missed the findings of all opinion studies. Geoff Ramsey, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Latin American Center, famously asserted that “even a stray dog could defeat Nicolás Maduro at the polls.”³¹ However, opinion polls indicated the opposite. A survey conducted by Clearpath Strategies³² in March 2024 revealed that a candidacy

28 “Unity and vote” was a route proposed by Primero Justicia and embraced by the Unitary Platform. It consisted in assuring the electoral triumph was only possible if there was perfect unity of all opposition factors.

<https://primerojusticia.org.ve/cms/index.php?view=item&cid=148:rotator-articles&id=43482:edinson-ferrer-la-venezuela-del-encuentro-se-lograra-con-unidad-y-voto-para-ello-seguimos-organizandonos&pop=1&tmpl=component&print=1>

29 For further information on this topic, we recommend reading: “La paradoja de la potabilidad” <https://lga.lagranaldea.com/2024/04/09/la-paradoja-de-la-potabilidad/>

30 The source of this information is primary. I participated in these political debates and in this text I leave my testimony.

31 <https://albertonews.com/politica/geoff-ramsey-asesor-principal-del-atlantic-council-ee-uu-busca-salvar-tarjeta-de-la-mud-al-dialogar-con-maduro/>

32 “The survey indicates that the primary driver of voter turnout is the desire for change, with candidate Edmundo González Urrutia solidifying support from opposition voters and capitalizing on the backing of María Corina Machado. The results also show a unified opposition rallying around González; in fact, support for candidates from third parties has essentially dropped to zero. María Corina Machado's endorsement has significantly boosted González's appeal, drawing in new voters who traditionally do not identify with the opposition.”

from traditional politicians, such as Manuel Rosales or Henrique Capriles Radonski, would pave the way for a potential victory for Nicolás Maduro. In other words, the so-called “palatable candidate” was, in fact, a losing candidate.

Thus, we arrived at March 25, 2024, the deadline for registering presidential candidacies. At midnight, the formal submission period would close. As the minutes ticked by, the regime continued to block the registration of Dr. Corina Yoris’s candidacy. Meanwhile, there was mounting tension within the parties of the Unity Platform. Rumors circulated that failing to register a “palatable candidate” under the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) electoral banner would mean forfeiting the electoral option entirely.³³

Amid the mounting pressure, fragmented negotiations began. Those engaging in informal contacts with the regime claimed, “The government will only allow Manuel Rosales to be registered as the unitary candidate,” warning gravely, “We are about to take away the chances for an election in the country.”³⁴

Midnight struck on March 26, marking the end of the formal nomination period. The National Electoral Council blocked the registration of Dr. Yoris’s presidential candidacy. According to

33 The source of this information is primary. I participated in these political debates and in this text I leave my testimony.

34 That night, I participated in a political debate where these arguments were put forward. I reserve the names of the spokespersons in order to respect the place where the exchange took place. The future of democracy that we are building will allow me to publish them at some point.

official accounts from *Un Nuevo Tiempo*,³⁵ in the final moments, the regime allowed the nomination of Governor Manuel Rosales as a presidential candidate under the banners of *Un Nuevo Tiempo* and *Movimiento por Venezuela*. Meanwhile, the MUD ballot line remained vacant, without a candidate.

The situation grew increasingly tense and fraught. Without a candidate registered under the MUD banner, the July 28 presidential election risked losing its political significance for everyone involved, particularly for the regime. Without the participation of the genuine opposition, validated through the primary, the electoral event would fail to serve those aiming for a credible process that could reinforce their legitimacy and potentially lead to the easing of economic sanctions.

Faced with this scenario, the regime opted to open a narrow window of opportunity, which the opposition quickly seized. Jorge Rodríguez,³⁶ through the mediation of Gerardo Blyde,³⁷ informed MUD representatives that they would be allowed to register a “placeholder candidate.” While informal and absent from Venezuelan electoral law, this term refers to a provisional candidate who could later be replaced with a definitive one. The international community, notably through the pressure exerted

35 <https://elpais.com/america/2024-03-27/manuel-rosales-el-candidato-de-la-oposicion-venezolana-menos-pensado.html>

36 Jorge Rodríguez: President of the National Assembly 2021 and head of the negotiating delegation of Chavismo in the Barbados agreements.

37 Gerardo Blyde: head of the negotiating delegation of the Unitary Platform in the Barbados agreements.

by Brazilian President Ignacio Lula Da Silva,³⁸ played a crucial role in creating this opening.

The search for the “placeholder candidate” began, a challenging task given the risks and persecution such a role entailed, even in its provisional nature. The candidate also needed to meet the legal requirements. Several potential candidates were approached, but none accepted –until the name of Ambassador Edmundo González Urrutia emerged.

Given his involvement over a decade ago in the registration process of the MUD electoral card with the CNE, Edmundo González Urrutia was listed in the founding documents of the MUD as the organization’s president. That is why MUD representatives proposed that he serve as the placeholder candidate, and he agreed.

Mrs. Mercedes González has publicly shared how the events unfolded. She recounts that on March 26, 2024, her husband, the Ambassador, left their home for a meeting and returned with the announcement that he had agreed to serve as the “placeholder presidential candidate.” Mrs. Mercedes, though surprised by the news, expressed her full awareness of the risks involved in her husband’s generous and selfless decision.

Third stage: the definitive candidate

Following the nomination period, the opposition landscape was as follows: Manuel Rosales, governor of Zulia, was registered as

38 <https://www.dw.com/es/lula-afirma-que-veto-a-candidatura-de-corina-yoris-en-venezuela-es-injustificado/a-68695632>

the presidential candidate on the *Un Nuevo Tiempo* and *Movimiento por Venezuela* ballots, while Edmundo González Urrutia was registered as the placeholder candidate on the MUD ballot. This resulted in a configuration of one “palatable candidate” (Manuel Rosales), one “placeholder candidate” (Edmundo González Urrutia), and three active electoral tickets (*Un Nuevo Tiempo*, *Movimiento por Venezuela*, and the Democratic Unity Roundtable).

This reality shattered the pessimistic forecasts of analysts and pollsters:³⁹ the opposition remained united and on track for the electoral process. Nonetheless, between March 26 and April 19, 2024, there were moments of intense tension. In this section, I will attempt to organize, describe, and analyze those moments. I want to begin by emphasizing that these were crucial days –those of political zigzagging that ultimately allowed us to secure a unified and winning candidate for the presidential elections on July 28.

This stage was especially difficult for at least three reasons.

First, *the dictatorship*. Always unpredictable and opaque, the regime sought to create a division within the opposition and low electoral enthusiasm among the people. The dictatorship decided to counter the “Unity and Vote” strategy with “Division and Abstention.” It employed three tools to achieve this goal. The first

39 <https://x.com/luisvicenteleon/status/1781002814560350415>
<https://x.com/Pabloquinterove/status/1776354756606275597>
<https://x.com/Pabloquinterove/status/1775151181653754003>
<https://x.com/cocap/status/177567882536121557>
<https://x.com/cocap/status/1772993317728326029>
<https://efectococuyo.com/politica/michael-penfold-debate-opositor-sigue-paralizados-y-mas-divididos/>
https://x.com/penfold_michael/status/1779076089437933903

was the television program *Con el Mazo Dando*. Every Wednesday night, Diosdado Cabello⁴⁰ would threaten opponents and sow discord among them.⁴¹ The second was intimidation and state persecution, with numerous episodes of this nature. I will address these in more detail later. The third was identifying rifts within the opposition and using dissuasive means, such as coinciding political agendas, to deepen them and achieve their division objectives.

The regime's goal was to provoke and create a scenario where the opposition would split into two factions. On one side, María Corina Machado, and on the other, a faction of the opposition led at that time⁴² by *Un Nuevo Tiempo*.⁴³ To break the opposition, the

40 "Venezuelan, Bolivarian, revolutionary, and radical Chavista," this is how Diosdado Cabello Rondón defines himself on his social media. A well-known figure in the country's politics, he is now the newly appointed Minister of the Interior, Justice, and Peace. He has held significant positions within the Chavista framework, such as Vice President, Governor of Miranda, Minister on several occasions, and President of the National Assembly.

41 <https://youtu.be/fpjQY1NcC8?si=NtPFLATaAART77sh>
<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-48473819>

42 Throughout this account, and in the following sections, we will observe the formation of a political group that labels itself as opposition. This group is marked by its rejection of the political agenda led by María Corina Machado and its proximity to the rhetoric of the dictatorship. In this disposition, it will encounter situations where its positions align with those of the regime; it is difficult to determine whether there is coordination between them or not.

43 *Un Nuevo Tiempo* is a Venezuelan center-left political party, aligned with the social democracy trend. It was founded in 1999 as a regional political movement from the Zulia state, with politicians coming from *Acción Democrática*. In 2006, it managed to establish itself as a nationwide organization.

dictatorship had to get the latter to add the votes of their Unitary Platform peers to Rosales' presidential candidacy.

Before moving forward, it's worth taking a brief pause to examine the internal dynamics of the Unitary Platform. Its operating regulations establish three decision-making mechanisms: unanimity, consensus, and qualified majority. Unanimity requires the support of all ten political forces involved; consensus demands the participation of eight; and a qualified majority includes six. Given the importance of the decision regarding the presidential candidacy, most of its members hoped for the decision to be made by unanimity. However, the operating regulations did not include a formal restriction against making it by following a qualified majority.

Considering the above, Un Nuevo Tiempo showed signs of progressing on two fronts: public opinion and political operations. Let's focus on the first. On March 26, after the closing of the candidacy submission period and when the MUD's ticket was still vacant, Manuel Rosales held a press conference at his party's headquarters in Caracas. The appearance stood out for its stridency... the setup and the messages failed to convey the political difficulties of the moment or its provisional nature.⁴⁴ The Associated Press, an international news agency, hit the mark with its headline: "At the risk of fracturing the opposition, Manuel Rosales runs for president of Venezuela."

https://x.com/partidoUNT?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor&mx=2

44 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2BQC_Vh_w

The following day, on March 27, the Governor of Zulia led an event called *Vota por Venezuela*, which he described as a “people’s rally” in the press release distributed by his press office.⁴⁵ The event occurred at the Palacio de Eventos in Maracaibo, with around 7,000 attendees, most of whom wore shirts with messages supporting Manuel Rosales’ presidential candidacy. In a democracy, this might be seen as an ordinary detail, but in a dictatorship, it’s highly significant. In closed systems like ours, few dare to wear shirts with opposition messages, and the regime actively persecutes the mass production of such materials. I will explore this further in the section dedicated to the campaign period. However, this principle of repression did not apply to this political force, which held the event with live media broadcasts and without restrictions from the dictatorship. Neither was it subject to the strict censorship that typically characterizes the regime.

Indeed, these facts are insufficient to claim that there was agreed coordination between the dictatorship and Manuel Rosales’ presidential candidacy. However, the coincidences in agendas and the political actions of the Governor of Zulia raised suspicions. If the candidacy was meant to “not leave Venezuelans without an option,” why hold such a loud press conference? Why print campaign materials prematurely? Why not seek the support of the national leader? Why not adhere to formal procedures? There are more questions than answers.

45 <https://www.infobae.com/venezuela/2024/03/26/manuel-rosales-se-postulo-como-candidato-a-ultimo-momento-y-abrio-una-incognita-sobre-las-elecciones-en-venezuela/> y <https://primicia.com.ve/nacion/manuel-rosales-habria-inscrito-su-candidatura-presidencial/>
https://www.facebook.com/reel/404296902328942?locale=ko_KR

The criticism was so intense that Manuel Rosales had to make the following statement: "I registered my candidacy, but they have waged a war against me on social media. They are spending millions of dollars inventing, slandering, and spreading lies. They say I'm Maduro's candidate. May God and the Virgin protect and favor me..."

Along with its communications efforts, Un Nuevo Tiempo also advanced in political operations, focusing on building a qualified majority. To start, it secured the favorable vote of *Movimiento Por Venezuela*,⁴⁶ but needed the support of four more forces. This led to the pursuit of *Primero Justicia's* vote. On April 1, during a regular session of its National Directorate,⁴⁷ a member of this political body⁴⁸ proposed that they support the presidential candidacy of the Governor of Zulia within the Unitary Platform. Some supported the proposal, but it did not achieve a majority, so it was not realized.

The pressure on *Primero Justicia* –especially on María Beatriz Martínez, its president, and Juan Carlos Caldera, its

46 *Movimiento por Venezuela* (MPV) is a Venezuelan political party of center-left. It was founded on June 25, 2012, originally under the name *Movimiento Progresista de Venezuela*. This was the former logo of the *Movimiento Progresista de Venezuela* before they changed the name to *Movimiento Por Venezuela* (until 2021). It is a small party, with its main leader being Simón Calzadilla, who served as vice president of the National Assembly in 2019.

47 It is the highest decision-making body of the Venezuelan political party *Primero Justicia* (PJ), responsible for making strategic decisions and coordinating the party's activities at the national level.

48 For the purposes of this article, I will withhold the names of those who promoted the proposal. Time and democracy will allow me to recount it with more precision.

representative in the Unitary Platform– was particularly intense. It included episodes of persecution and political maneuvering. The dictatorship, along with those who temporarily shared its interests, believed that by securing the premature support of this party, they could attract the vote of other political forces and gain the Unitary Platform’s backing for Manuel Rosales’ presidential candidacy. This outcome would have benefited both the dictatorship and a sector of the opposition. However, it would have jeopardized the electoral victory on July 28.

In addition to these difficulties, the opposition had few options in the search for a unitary candidate to replace Edmundo González on the ballot. Due to an irregular, biased, and opportunistic interpretation of electoral legislation,⁴⁹ the National Electoral Council imposed that the substitute for the placeholder candidate had to be someone registered during the nomination period on another electoral ticket.

In summary, the dictatorship used all available mechanisms to induce the opposition to make mistakes and prevent them from having a unitary candidate with the people’s support.

Second, *unity*. The political tensions described in the previous lines deepened the agenda differences within the opposition. There were two positions: the pro-normalizers and the democratizers.⁵⁰

49 https://youtu.be/CI0pOL_5T_g?si=0Zc4TzhPclxZhJro y
<https://x.com/unidadvenezuela/status/1772710616534241563>

50 This categorization reflects a deeply personal assessment of the reality and the trajectory of these political groups in the course of our liberation history. After July 28 and the violence of the regime, the group of “protonormalizers” became the “normalizers.” Later in the narrative, I will delve further into their role.

The former proposed sacrificing the unity of the opposition forces and moving forward with a “palatable” candidate, one accepted by the dictatorship. They justified their stance with an apparent political realism, claiming a deep understanding of the regime’s internal dynamics. In short, they argued that Nicolás Maduro would not yield, so concessions had to be made.

The second group, including myself, was determined to fight for a unitary candidate who would have the support of all the political parties in the Unitary Platform and María Corina Machado. All the opinion polls indicated that, only through unity, could we have a chance to win. Otherwise, we would lose the election and, even worse, contribute to the electoral legitimization of a non-democratic system. For us, July 28 would only make sense if it successfully challenged the dictatorship, mobilized the country, and won the election with a landslide of votes. Certainly, this stance was risky and offered no certainty of success. However, it was the one that prevailed.

During this period, the difference in agendas –one protonormalizing and the other democratizing– became transversal across various sectors of Venezuelan society and the international community. The first stance, led by Manuel Rosales and *Un Nuevo Tiempo*, resonated with business, religious, academic, and international sectors. Later, I will delve deeper into this. The majority of opposition voters embraced the second.⁵¹

Third, *the human*. More than two decades of democratic struggle have profoundly impacted the emotional and psychological dimensions of the country and its opposition leadership. We

51 <https://x.com/WSJForero/status/1781410343320690951>

arrived at this moment of liberation with a history of misunderstandings and mistrust that the regime deepened. Suspicion, caution, skepticism, frustration, pain, and fear dominated. These negative emotions undoubtedly affected political work and made the relationship between key players irreconcilable. These hesitations and prejudices severely impacted the political efforts.

Alongside these circumstances, there was a central issue. For the first time in our political history, leadership fell on a woman: María Corina Machado. Without a doubt, this unsettled and confronted some sectors and actors. On many occasions, there were misogynistic and sexist comments, both within chavismo and the opposition. In fact, the derogatory name the regime coined for her was *la sayona*, referring to a Venezuelan legend about a woman who lost her sanity and became a haunting figure. Alongside María Corina Machado, there were also María Beatriz Martínez –president of *Primero Justicia*–, Delsa Solórzano –president of *Encuentro Ciudadano*– and Andrea Tavares –National Secretary of *Causa R*– among others. This qualitative change also affected the political dynamic.

Let's return to the story. These were days of cross-pressure. While the democratizing agenda was silenced and only circulated on social media, the protonormalizing agenda unfolded freely on radio and open television. Alongside this overexposure in the public space, a lobbying effort was carried out to promote Manuel Rosales' candidacy among the diplomatic corps and the political organizations of the Unitary Platform.

One of the notable efforts was the meeting held at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello on April 8, 2024. Alejandro Hernández, director of La Gran Aldea, detailed the content of the

meeting. In *The Long Arm of Analysts and Lobbying*,⁵² he wrote that “a meeting was convened by political opposition figures; individuals like Luis Vicente León, president of Datanálisis, and representatives from civil society institutions such as the Foro Cívico and the Jesuit Order.” Hernández then clarified the purpose of the meeting: “To coordinate a joint statement supporting the electoral path led by the Governor of Zulia and to reject any resumption of sanctions against Nicolás Maduro’s regime by the United States.”

Among the attendees were Father Arturo Peraza, rector of the Andrés Bello Catholic University, who chaired the meeting; Father Alfredo Infante, Provincial of Venezuela; Luis Vicente León, director of Datanálisis; Michael Penfold, political analyst; Colette Capriles and Mariela Ramírez from the *Foro Cívico*; Gustavo Duque, Mayor of Chacao and leader of *Fuerza Vecinal*; Tiziana Polesel, vice president of *Fedecámaras*; Stalin González from *Un Nuevo Tiempo*; Henrique Capriles, Rafael Ramírez, Tomás Guanipa, Paola Bautista de Alemán, and María Beatriz Martínez from *Primero Justicia*, among others. During her speech, Martínez presented ideas that prevented the political objectives of the meeting from being met. The president of *Primero Justicia* emphasized the urgent need for a united and winning candidate. After her intervention, Luis Vicente León brought the meeting to a close, but not before thanking the Jesuit Order for their support.

I must make a point. The rejection of Manuel Rosales’ candidacy was not based on personal reasons. It was a position supported by opinion polls. The decision to seek a winning option

52 El largo brazo de los analistas y el lobby: <https://lga.lagranaldea.com/2024/04/13/el-largo-brazo-de-los-analistas-y-el-lobby/>

was made with surveys in hand. All of them indicated that the country did not support that option, and the opposition leader shared the same opinion. Manuel Rosales' candidacy would have provided the dictatorship with the very scenario they were working towards: division and abstention.

Those weeks were spent wrestling between the certainty of a losing candidate and the uncertainty of a winning one. We placed our bet on the latter. The only winning candidate visible on the horizon was Edmundo González Urrutia, the placeholder candidate. His profile, although provisional, was ideal: an honorable Venezuelan, with family values, and no party affiliation. To move forward, it was necessary to ensure that the Ambassador would accept the challenge of facing Nicolás Maduro in the presidential race. Thus, in the weeks leading up to April 19, the deadline for candidate substitutions set by the National Electoral Council, private meetings took place between the winner of the primary and the Ambassador. These were confidential meetings handled with total discretion. In this situation, the importance of caution and strategic prudence was confirmed. After several meetings, González agreed to run for president, and they decided to keep it a secret until the very last moment.

April 19th arrived. We had a candidate, but few knew it. In the afternoon, Omar Barboza called an urgent meeting for the members of the Unitary Platform to define the presidential candidate, which took place at the headquarters of the political party *Encuentro Ciudadano*. The place was surrounded by state security personnel. Some were in uniform, others were in plain clothes... unmarked motorcycles came and went along Francisco de Miranda Avenue. The watchful eyes of journalists and activists

helped identify them. They were carrying out acts of repression and intimidation.

The evening fell. Little by little, those summoned began to arrive. All the political party leaders showed up, including María Corina Machado and Gerardo Blyde, representative of the Platform at the Barbados negotiation table. The meeting was held behind closed doors, and no cell phones were allowed. This was done to prevent information from leaking to the regime and to avoid undue pressures in real time. I dare say that this decision made all the difference. The protonormalizers entered that meeting blind. And the regime was left wanting to get in.

The press waited outside, and the country was watching closely. There was an awareness of the significance of the moment we were living. The meeting was brief. Omar Barboza began it, and immediately after, Delsa Solórzano, representing a coalition of parties from the Unitary Platform⁵³ proposed that Edmundo González Urrutia's candidacy no longer be provisional, but become permanent. The first reaction from Un Nuevo Tiempo, Acción Democrática, and Movimiento por Venezuela was rejection. They argued that the regime would not allow the candidacy because it violated the commitment to provisionality made on March 26. However, they did not realize that this commitment had never been made.

At that moment, Gerardo Blyde clarified that the registration of Edmundo González Urrutia had occurred on March 26 after an agreement with Jorge Rodríguez, who never specified its

53 Encuentro Ciudadano, Primero Justicia, Voluntad Popular, Causa R, Proyecto Venezuela, Copei y Convergencia.

temporary nature. He clarified that his registration had simply been allowed... no further explanation. With the question of provisionality cleared up, all the political parties unanimously supported the presidential candidacy of Ambassador González Urrutia. Since the “placeholder candidate” figure does not exist in the legislation, it was enough to leave the registration as it was. Subsequently, Manuel Rosales withdrew his candidacy, and *Un Nuevo Tiempo* and *Movimiento por Venezuela* joined the nomination under the MUD’s banner.

After this political maneuver, what has so often happened in our country occurred: the temporary became permanent. Edmundo González Urrutia became the presidential candidate of the Venezuelan opposition. The “Unity and Vote” path had triumphed.

* * *

Thus concludes this first installment of 2023-2025: **How did we move toward democracy?** We reached the presidential campaign of July 28 with a scenario that many considered impossible: a unitary candidate, a national leader, perfect unity, and the country’s support. And although it is still too early to offer lessons learned, I dare to conclude this text with an idea that the narrated period left me, which I recently recalled while reading Angela Merkel’s biography.

The former German Chancellor points out in *Freedom*:

We can do this-*Wir schaffen das*. Throughout the whole of my political career, no phrase has been thrown back at me with quite such virulence as this one. No phrase has been

so polarizing. For me, however, it was quite an ordinary phrase. It expressed an attitude. Call it trust in God, caution, or simply a determination to solve problems, to deal with setbacks, get over the lows and come up with new ideas. "We can do this, and if something stands in our way it has to be overcome, it has to be worked on." That was how I put it in my summer press conference on August 31, 2015. That was how I did politics...

I have closely seen the magic that Merkel's attitude brings to political action. I have witnessed the gaze of that leadership that encourages us to overcome borders and move forward despite difficulties. I have also heard voices that confuse conviction with irresponsibility and courage with recklessness. And from my experience, I have no doubt in affirming the following: *In the difficult context we had to live through, we have learned the benefit of making decisions with the tenacity of someone who follows their clear conscience and with the humility of someone who understands the true dimensions of the moment.*

We have learned that understanding reality is a challenge that often transcends our political and intellectual abilities. We have learned that reality is so complex that it cannot fit within our understanding. We have learned to trust in the country and return to its nobility. And for this reason, we have learned to place in Providence what we cannot control. I have no doubt in asserting that, in this transcendent sense of politics, lies the true strength of our liberation movement...

Caracas, December 28, 2024

Anti-Scenarios for January 10th

Miguel Ángel Martínez Meucci

*Start by doing what is necessary;
then do what is possible;
and suddenly you are doing the impossible.*

San Francisco de Asís
(quoted weekly by Ramón Piñango)

Preliminary considerations

On this occasion, the editorial team of *Democratización* has invited me to comment on the potential scenarios emerging for January 10, 2025, following the electoral victory of Edmundo González Urrutia in the presidential elections of July 28, which has been disregarded by the regime of Nicolás Maduro. January 10, as is well known, is the date established by the Constitution for the president-elect to assume office.

To honor the request of my esteemed colleagues at *Democratización*, I would like to begin by reflecting on the meaning of the word “scenario.” In its most fundamental sense, a scenario refers to a space in which specific events unfold, visible to those who observe them. Every scenario, by its nature, presupposes the existence of both actors and spectators. The construction of scenarios can only be undertaken by someone positioned as an

observer—someone who, in a sense, judges the *vita activa* from the perspective of the *vita contemplativa*.

For those who typically assume the role of observer, the creation of scenarios offers a way to explore the world of action in an organized manner, which they cannot ordinarily experience from within. Conversely, for the person directly involved in action, creating scenarios requires a degree of detachment from their usual mode of engagement with the world. It necessitates stepping back from the facts to assess the factors and variables that may influence them.

In light of this duality, it may be useful to recall the following passage from Alexis de Tocqueville:

I have lived with men of letters who have written history without involving themselves in the affairs of the time, and with politicians who have only ever cared about producing events, without thinking of describing them. I have always observed that the former saw general causes everywhere, while the latter, living amidst the complexities of daily events, tended to imagine that everything must be attributed to particular incidents, and that the small levers they constantly manipulated in their hands were the same ones that move the world. It is likely that both are mistaken.

When creating scenarios, assuming the position of an objective observer is easier when the reality being described does not directly concern us. However, if the events in question deeply interest us, or if we find ourselves inescapably immersed in the unfolding circumstances, the creation of scenarios takes on a different character. In such cases, we are not relatively indifferent

to reality, but rather we seek for it to unfold in a particular direction, towards that which interests us or that which we consider to be good or preferable.

If this desire reaches the point of significantly distorting our perception of reality, the scenarios will become imprecise, lacking objectivity, and consequently, of limited value. Therefore, the greatest risk when creating scenarios is that our interests or desires are not clearly stated from the outset. In these cases, the role of desire –or our ethical assessment– should not lead us to distort the facts, but rather should guide us in shaping the desired outcomes as a goal to be pursued. From this point, the formulation of "reverse" scenarios can help outline possible courses of action in that direction.

Those who operate in this manner essentially adopt a role akin to that of the *intellectuel engagé* as described by Raymond Aron. This figure does not appear indifferent or neutral towards reality, nor do they seek to overlook or conceal their personal preferences. Instead, they consciously acknowledge them as the standpoint from which they can –and want to– perceive reality. It is the only position from which they can aspire to an objectivity that, while never fully attainable, can nonetheless guide them in shaping their impact on the world in an effort to improve it.

This is the approach taken both by the committed observer and the actor who pauses along the way to broaden his perspective. It also aligns, by the way, with one of the moral imperatives of the Torah promoting coexistence: *tikkun olam* (תיקון עולם); “to repair” or “to heal the world”).

In our case, it is clear from the outset that our interest regarding the scenarios envisioned for January 10 is that Venezuela moves towards the effective restoration of the constitutional order –a *conditio sine qua non* for the recovery of freedom, democracy, and prosperity. With this goal in mind, we want to clarify that this article does not aim to offer a detailed analysis of scenarios in the formal sense, complete with all the methodological and analytical apparatus that such an undertaking would require. Instead, we consider it more appropriate to review the issues inherent in scenario creation when the purpose is to facilitate the realization of a desired future. Our focus is to highlight how the language we use to describe reality shapes our perceptions of it, ultimately guiding us toward certain types of concrete realities. In other words, we aim to reflect on the performative nature of language, demonstrating how it influences the generation of thoughts that, in turn, lead us toward specific outcomes.

Studying human beings involves understanding their nature as free agents. Nothing in the human realm is entirely predetermined, for what characterizes and distinguishes us as a species is our free will—the ability to decide based on what we perceive, think, say, and believe. With this in mind, the central point this article seeks to advance regarding January 10 is that the most realistic and objective statement we can make is as follows: everything depends on what we, as Venezuelans, believe is possible to accomplish and choose to contribute to making happen.

In a somewhat playful spirit, we intend to approach scenario analysis in a way similar to what the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra attempted with poetry, by disrupting it through what he termed “antipoetry.” The purpose is certainly not to belittle a discipline

like scenario analysis, which I respect and have practiced for over 20 years; rather, the intention is to encourage us to shift the question from “what will happen?” to “what will we do?”

The materialization of the desired future

No one can know with certainty where we are headed, although many would give anything to know. The fact that so many people make a living by making predictions –ranging from astrologers and palm readers to scenario analysts– serves as evidence of this. I reiterate that I do not question these practices, and in fact, I devote part of my time to similar endeavors. However, we often overlook the fact that if it were indeed possible to know the future with absolute certainty, it would imply that, in reality, our freedom does not exist. There is no freedom without uncertainty, for without it, the possibility of choice vanishes if the future is already predetermined. How –and why– would we rise each morning if we already knew in advance everything that was going to happen?

The inability to know the future is the very condition that allows us to entertain illusions in life. The first meaning of the word “illusion” in the DRAE is, so to speak, “pessimistic”: “A concept, image, or representation without true reality, suggested by the imagination or caused by the deception of the senses.” The second, however, is more “optimistic”: “Hope whose fulfillment seems especially attractive.” The truth is that human beings can hardly live without any illusions, and these illusions arise from the presence of a certain degree of uncertainty.

Naturally, many illusions are never realized, leading to disappointments. However, others come true, or even exceed our

expectations. The possibility of an illusion materializing depends on a multitude of factors, only some of which are within our relative control. As Ortega y Gasset pointed out, “I am myself and my circumstances,” which is equivalent to saying that the very substance of my being is inextricably linked to the world in which I live. Every text finds meaning within a context. That is why the Spanish philosopher remarked that living is akin to rowing through stormy waters; it is a constant effort, a continual struggle to move forward without prior certainties.

Such a struggle only holds meaning (in both senses of the term: significance and direction) when it is driven by a goal, a purpose, or an illusion. This is the conclusion Viktor Frankl reaches in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*: all things being equal, those who tended to survive in the Nazi concentration camps were those who held onto an illusion, a hope, or a desire that they felt an urgent need to fulfill before they died. It could have been the desire to see a relative again, the need to return to a certain place, or the conviction of having work to complete. The important thing was having a reason to live.

Frankl thus demonstrated, under extreme circumstances, the crucial role of willpower and mental disposition in terms of survival and the feasibility of achievement. This willpower, in turn, becomes far more powerful when it is not merely the expression of a fleeting desire, but is also supported by an ethical decision. Indeed, our will is much stronger and more secure when it is not only driven by what we want, but by what we have rationally determined to be good for us and for others; that is, when it aligns with what is right. In this respect, thinkers such as Aristotle, Kant, and Buddha all converge, albeit in different ways.

Moreover, increasing numbers of studies today seem to confirm what almost everyone has always suspected: that the chances of success in life depend significantly on the quantity and quality of our personal connections. Who your friends are, who you studied with at university, and whom you marry are all relationships that have a profound influence on your future possibilities. “Tell me who you hang out with, and I’ll tell you who you are,” or “He who leans against a good tree, finds good shade” – in short, popular wisdom seems to have detected long ago what many scientists are now working to confirm.

In summary, enthusiasm, willpower, and strong cooperation appear to be three essential elements for human beings to develop freely and find meaning (both in terms of significance and direction, and thus, satisfaction) in the life that has been given to them, in circumstances they did not initially choose, and with the cards life has dealt them. The fortunate combination of these three factors has the power to turn the improbable into reality. However, none of them is likely, or even possible, without the predominance of a minimally open and optimistic attitude toward life –an attitude capable of hoping for the best even in the midst of the worst.

Totalitarianism, Newspeak, and Disillusionment

How does the above relate to the political reality of contemporary Venezuela? In an entirely direct and revealing manner, as those who sustain the current regime are well aware. This explains why they have invested considerable time, energy, and resources in suppressing any hopes Venezuelans may have for a future of freedom, attempting to manipulate their will to achieve this goal and neutralizing any efforts at citizen cooperation. The

silencing of the free press, the devaluation of the currency, and the separation of families are all dynamics that point in the same direction.

Let us begin with a general diagnosis: the political dynamic to which the country has been subjected throughout this century is of a distinctly totalitarian nature. We will not delve deeply into this subject here, as numerous articles have already been dedicated to it, some of which are recent.¹ However, we will highlight one essential aspect arising from this diagnosis: totalitarianism replaces the natural and customary social order with an entirely new and abstract system of domination, wherein the individual is subordinated to a purported collective interest, ideologically defined, that encompasses all.

When totalitarian dynamics reach their paroxysm, they subsume all aspects of social reality under their collectivist dictates, until this tendency inevitably collides with the reality it seeks to control. This confrontation may manifest through a war or a general collapse of social order, rendering the continuity of the totalitarian system unfeasible. This leads to what some authors have termed post-totalitarianism –a situation in which the framework of domination persists because society remains traumatized by the effects of totalitarianism and has yet to rearticulate itself to offer an alternative response.

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- 1 Miguel Ángel Martínez-Meucci, “La Revolución Bolivariana: un proyecto refundacional paradigmático de la izquierda revolucionaria iberoamericana”, *Araucaria, Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política, Humanidades y Relaciones Internacionales*, Vol. 26, N°56, 2024. https://institucional.us.es/revistas/Araucaria/56/mon_I/3._miguel_angel_martinez_meucci.pdf

Totalitarian dynamics are reflected and perpetuated through language. A defining characteristic of totalitarian language is its determination to envelop reality in a veil of fallacies, preventing individuals from distinguishing between truth and falsehood. George Orwell vividly captured this condition of totalitarianism in his novel *1984*, where he introduces the concept of *doublethink*, the foundation of totalitarian newspeak. Similarly, Hannah Arendt analyzed the phenomenon, noting how the Nazis referred to mass deportations as “resettlements” and the genocide of the Jewish people as “the final solution,” among other examples.

Words possess the unique ability to evoke thought and provide structure for its development. We relate more easily to those realities that we can name, and the terms we use to describe something shape our perceptions of it. Consequently, the persistent use of Newspeak, combined with the effects of totalitarian terror, can become profoundly effective. It can lead an entire society to abstain from commenting on, or even thinking about, its political reality, or to limit its thinking to the categories imposed by totalitarianism. This is why Václav Havel, leader of the Czechoslovak resistance to the Soviet regime, emphasized the importance of “living in truth” as a personal and collective strategy to neutralize the effects of (post-)totalitarianism and ultimately overcome it.

Electoral Cycle 2023-2024: The impossible is possible

The electoral campaigns that triumphed in the opposition primaries of 2023 and the presidential elections of July 2024 were characterized by a deep understanding of the points raised in the previous sections. These campaigns aimed to break the vicious and paralyzing cycle between newspeak and social demoralization. To

achieve this, it was essential to restore the correspondence between language and reality, a relationship systematically distorted over the years by the Chavista regime. Only by ensuring that the public discourse once again reflected the reality experienced by the vast majority of Venezuelans could hope be revived, the will for change be reinvigorated, and cooperation among citizens be restored. Only then could it be demonstrated that change is indeed possible.

It is important to remember that Chavismo-Madurismo did not come to power through violence. While it initially attempted to seize power through two military coups in 1992, both efforts ultimately failed. The route that enabled Chavismo to capture the state was through elections, which reveals a troubling truth—the root cause of our current crises: Chavismo succeeded in persuading a significant portion, even a majority, of the population. This experience provided a crucial lesson that all autocrats currently presiding over the growing number of hybrid regimes worldwide have come to understand: consented power is far greater and more effective than power maintained through coercion.

However, as Chavismo sought to establish permanent control, it began manipulating elections in various ways, a task made easier by its ability to appoint key state officials at will and to maintain a steady cash flow. This situation persisted for over a decade, until the end of the oil boom coincided with the death of Hugo Chávez. Since then, Nicolás Maduro has been faced with a bankrupt country, an inflationary and unproductive economy, and increasingly complex internal divisions within the ruling coalition.

To maintain his grip on power, Nicolás Maduro has resorted to various mechanisms. One such method has been the use of violence, particularly exercised by state and parastatal repressive entities, which has been especially brutal whenever Venezuelans have taken to the streets to protest. This was notably the case in 2014 and 2017. Another strategy has been to shape a pliant opposition, consisting of politicians, journalists, academics, and businessmen who are either threatened, co-opted, or docile, and who repeatedly participate in fruitless dialogues and tolerate fraudulent elections with little or no objection.

In essence, Maduro has worked diligently to construct a political and party system that ensures his continuity in power, relying on an autocratic model that, nevertheless, must maintain the appearance of being “hybrid” or, in the eyes of obsequious observers, a “defective democracy.” To achieve this, the presence of sectors that, without opposing him, assume the role of opposition is essential. With the consolidation of these sectors and the gradual implementation of their ideas and methods, the real political value of elections has been progressively undermined. Elections ceased to be a mechanism for political change and instead became a parody, a simulation that invariably led to the autocratic consolidation of Maduro and his associates. This, in fact, was the intended objective.

One of the most persistent arguments that helped sustain this dynamic for several years was the notion that the country was divided into two irreconcilable halves, where Chavismo was seen not merely as a political movement, but as a permanent identity or condition. This idea obscured the reality: Chavismo is, in fact, an electoral option that voters can abandon at any time. The citizen who may have supported Chavismo in the past could just as easily

have been a member of Acción Democrática (AD) in previous decades, or today might opt for a party like Vente Venezuela. However, defenders of the status quo made considerable efforts to convince the public that Chavismo is an intrinsic identity, a permanent and unalterable bond, ingrained in the blood of the Venezuelan people. This idea of an immutable and eternal base of support for Chavismo has long been a false narrative, carefully cultivated over time.

Another recurring notion was that there existed two “radical extremes” opposed to any form of election, and that, if allowed to advance their agendas, they would lead the country into a “civil war.” The reality, however, is quite different. On one hand, violence has always been wielded by the same faction –the one that has systematically resorted to force to maintain power, violating human rights and committing crimes against humanity. On the other hand, since the death of Chávez, polarization has steadily decreased in a consistent and systematic manner. Maduro has not demonstrated the same capacity as Chávez in sowing division among Venezuelans; rather, he has inadvertently united the citizenry in their near-unanimous rejection of his prolonged tenure in the presidency.

Furthermore, one of the key ideas that needed to be overcome for elections to regain their significance was the notion that change must be slow, gradual, and progressive. It was argued that securing a few mayoralties, governorships, and seats in the National Assembly was essential for this process. However, this argument is widely understood to be false, as Chavismo has shown it is not hesitant to strip any political authority that does not align with its agenda of power and resources.

Moreover, the Venezuelan autocracy is not merely another regime of coercion; it is a criminal system that has plunged the country into a severe humanitarian crisis and continues to leave permanent scars on every Venezuelan who endures it. The reality is that, for the people, time is of the essence. The population finds little solace in the idea that several dozen opponents may become powerless officials while the country continues its downward spiral, and the only perceived solution to their problems remains emigration.

Finally, another widely promoted notion was that foreign sanctions were the primary cause of the severe humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. This argument was pushed to such an extent that certain sectors, previously opposed to the government, have aligned themselves with Maduro by advocating for the lifting of sanctions abroad. The campaign even extended to the European Union, which imposed sanctions on specific individuals (rather than the country or public companies) and on those supplying weapons to Venezuela. Proponents of this discourse tend to address human rights violations and crimes against humanity in a somewhat indirect manner, assuming that penalizing such actions could be counterproductive to resolving the political conflict. Instead, they contend that the “realistic” approach is to recognize the *de facto* power in place and negotiate a *modus vivendi* that, over time, would become increasingly tolerable.

This narrative contributed to the gradual normalization of the catastrophic situation that Venezuela has endured for at least the past decade, leading to a progressive demoralization among the population and a significant erosion of collective confidence in the opposition leadership. As a result, voter abstention increased

undeniably, and emigration plans proliferated across Venezuelan families.

Thus, the notable achievement of the 2023-2024 electoral cycle was its reversal of this trend, steering the country away from chronic pessimism and the diminishing significance of the electoral process. In an autocratic context such as this one, the primary purpose of elections is to weaken the regime and accelerate the changes necessary to reverse the humanitarian crisis and curb mass migration. To accomplish this, political discourse needed to recover what it must never lose: the capacity to center the population's most pressing concerns in the political sphere, rather than obscuring them to allow agendas that do not address the urgent needs of the general public to prevail. Moreover, it is essential to restore the word to its original purpose –reflecting the reality of events– so as to overcome and ultimately eliminate *newspeak* from the public space.

María Corina Machado was the principal advocate for this alternative course of action, and the results are evident for all to see. Not only did she successfully promote the thesis that the primaries should be conducted independently, without the participation of the National Electoral Council (CNE), which is aligned with Maduro, but she also managed to restore the opposition's unity based on a genuine sense of purpose. She led the democratic forces through a difficult and challenging path, overcoming all the obstacles imposed by the dictatorship to prevent a defeat at the polls.

Throughout this process, the usual critics –who often consider themselves “realists”– were quick to offer accusations at each stage, asserting that none of what ultimately occurred

was feasible. They claimed that Machado opposed any electoral process; that her leadership failed to resonate with the popular sectors; that her electoral support had reached a “ceiling” she could not surpass; that voting for her in the primaries was futile since Chavismo would disqualify her; that the primaries were a divisive mechanism; that they could not be held without the involvement of the CNE; that there was no enthusiasm for participation in the process; that unity would never be achieved because Machado would deviate from the electoral path; that the opposition vote had always been “overestimated” and that, in reality, there was a “technical tie” between Maduro and González Urrutia; and that Maduro would never permit an election he could lose.

In a country with a short memory, it is crucial to recall, time and again, that what ultimately transpired was precisely the outcome that, from the perspective of the most pragmatic –and often self-interested– realism, was deemed impossible.

Scenarios: Advantages and limitations of a rational exercise

In defense of those who held such skeptical positions, it must be acknowledged that any conventional scenario analysis tended to confirm what was widely perceived from the outset: that there was little chance of Maduro being defeated in an electoral contest he controlled nearly absolutely from the start. This conclusion is aligned with the most basic logic... yet, social and political reality does not always conform to the premises of logic, or at least not to those based on linear reasoning. Why?

Any serious scenario analysis is typically grounded in premises from which a series of rational conjectures are logically

derived. However, even the most thorough analysis of this nature must reduce the number of variables considered to a manageable level, simplifying the immense complexity of the relationships between them for the sake of understanding. Nevertheless, social and political reality is shaped by the virtually infinite interactions among millions of actors, each of whom operates based on perceptions, beliefs, interests, and resources that evolve over time. A single unforeseen action by any one of these actors can radically alter the functioning of the entire system.

Consider an additional factor: with each new development, the global possibilities are reshaped, actors recalibrate their options, and the foreseeable trajectory of events often requires re-evaluation. Thus, events do not unfold according to linear calculations; rather, they take variable paths, depending on changing circumstances and their influence on decision-makers, who are always operating with limited information and resources.

Carl von Clausewitz, author of the famous treatise *On War*, referred to this whole problem as “the fog of war.” The expression refers to the impossibility of foreseeing everything in advance so that it works according to a preconceived plan. In confrontations composed of successive actions between rational actors, and where they repeatedly modify their action plans in response to the need to respond to the opponent’s moves, it is highly unlikely that a plan will be executed linearly from A to Z, for the simple reason that “Russians also play.”

The lack of flexibility to understand this frequently leads to defeat, making total attachment to an idea or perception turn a player’s deceptive maneuvers into self-deception. For example, it is very likely that Maduro and company allowed Edmundo

González Urrutia to compete in the elections on July 28 because they considered his victory unviable. However, it was precisely this perception of Chavismo that made the choice of González Urrutia as the opposition candidate the most appropriate, because it would be precisely him, and not another, who was allowed to go all the way. Any other figure who was initially perceived as preferable by the electorate, Chavismo would simply disqualify.

Therefore, scenario analysis usually helps us –when it is carried out with sufficient rigor– to weigh the important factors on the course of events, but it can hardly foresee and weigh the impact of intangible factors or the emergence of events that may seem isolated, but which in the end tend to be decisive. Therefore, good scenario analysis should not be assumed as an x-ray of the future, they do not “show what is going to happen,” but rather they indicate the aspects that an actor must strengthen to increase their chances of achieving the desired objectives.

Leadership: The door from the possible to the impossible

The purpose of political action, in its truest sense, is not to simply adapt to what appears feasible within the current conditions, but rather to strive toward creating the necessary conditions for the realization of the most desirable future. It is not about operating within the confines of what seems achievable today, but about expanding the boundaries of reality to encompass what may appear impossible at present. From the perspective of a genuine political leader, “realism” does not imply stagnation, as the reality to be addressed is not solely the material circumstances of the present, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the ethically desirable potential reality. In the introduction to his book *Leadership*, Henry Kissinger articulates this point with absolute

clarity in the following passage, which we quote in full [Own translation]:

“In human institutions –states, religions, armies, businesses, schools– leadership is needed to help people move from where they are to where they have never been and, at times, to where they can barely imagine they could go. Without leadership, institutions lose their way, and nations are exposed to increasing irrelevance and, ultimately, disaster. Leaders think and act at the intersection of two axes: the first, between the past and the future; the second, between enduring values and the aspirations of those they lead. Their first challenge is analysis, which begins with a realistic assessment of their society based on history, customs, and capabilities. Then, they must balance what they know, which they inevitably draw from the past, with what they intuit about the future, which is inherently speculative and uncertain. It is in this intuitive understanding of the direction to follow that allows leaders to set objectives and establish a strategy.”

If the seemingly impossible became possible during the 2023-2024 electoral cycle, it was primarily due to María Corina Machado’s ability to transform the attitude of individuals who felt condemned by the weight of the facts into that of individuals who recognize their right, need, and moral duty to change reality. This metamorphosis involved activating the three factors we mentioned in previous paragraphs: enthusiasm, will, and the ability to cooperate. Without these intangible elements, which arise from a personal stance where ethical considerations take precedence over pragmatism, no strategy would have yielded results, other than strategies of submission and appeasement.

The importance of strategy –of an ideal plan to achieve the desired objective– is often emphasized. However, we tend to forget not only Clausewitz’s lesson about the “fog of war” but also the fact that no strategy is effective if it lacks the necessary strength for its implementation. History teaches us that even a flawed strategy can succeed if it possesses sufficient force. Therefore, the task of a powerful leader extends beyond merely issuing instructions, although these are certainly necessary; it also involves inspiring others to exert the force required to make the strategy effective. In this regard, nothing is more powerful than leading by example. Only those who believe in and practice what they preach are capable of inspiring the confidence of others. This is precisely what occurred in Venezuela over the past two years. To further illustrate these points, we turn again to Kissinger:

“For strategies to inspire society, leaders must be didactic: they must communicate objectives, mitigate doubts, and mobilize support. While the state, by definition, has a monopoly on force, dependence on coercion is a symptom of inadequate leadership; good leaders awaken in the people the desire to walk alongside them. The vital attributes a leader needs to face these tasks and bridge the past and the future are courage and character: the courage to choose a direction among various complex and difficult options, which requires the will to transcend routine; and the strength of character to maintain a course of action whose benefits and dangers, at the moment of choice, can only be glimpsed incompletely. Courage places virtue at the moment of decision; character strengthens fidelity to values over a prolonged period.”

The political actor, for their part, must not neglect the role played by chance, which is the result of virtually infinite interac-

tions between a multitude of actors and factors. Chance operates when we enter the realm of large numbers, where the factors in play and the interactions they generate among themselves multiply to the point of surpassing our ability to calculate and plan.

At this level, the most effective political leaders understand that their task does not consist solely or primarily in formulating plans for others to execute; rather, it lies primarily in awakening the hope, will, and determination to cooperate in millions of people, until each one becomes a driving force behind the desired change. Great leaders do not change the world alone; they inspire others to do so collectively. When this mindset becomes predominant in a society, chance and the laws of large numbers begin to work in its favor. In hindsight, it will often be the case that these instances of chance are viewed as miraculous, and not without reason.

Consider, for instance, the results achieved by the democratic forces during the 2023-2024 electoral cycle in Venezuela, which were impossible to predict according to any preliminary analysis. We are reminded of the following statements made by a thinker like Hannah Arendt, who was not known for her religious inclinations:

"If the meaning of politics is freedom, it is in this space – and in no other – that we have the right to expect miracles. Not because we believe in them, but because human beings, insofar as they can act, are capable of accomplishing the improbable and the unforeseeable, and of doing so continuously, whether they know it or not."

Anti-Scenarios for January 10th

Based on the considerations raised here, there are two major macro-scenarios to which we will refer in this final section of this article. If we call them “anti-scenarios” it is because we do not intend for them to be taken too seriously; our intention is to break with the logic of spectators and shake them so they find themselves as actors. They are developed based on a single variable: the level of determination that we Venezuelans have to live freely in our own country. For practical purposes, let us consider this variable as the combination of the three elements indicated in previous pages (illusion, will, and cooperation).

1) “Turn the page”

The realization of this (anti)scenario would signify the dominance of the interpretation that certain analysts and political actors are re-attempting to instill in our society. I use “re-attempting” because –oh surprise!– these tend to be the same individuals who, over the past two years, did their utmost to convince us that what eventually transpired was impossible. According to this interpretation, the events of July 28 hold little significance, as the reality is that someone is still in power in Miraflores, and refusing to accept this fact would be akin to a symptom of mental instability.

It is essential to strive for national harmony and avoid the radical extremists on both sides, since, according to the surveys frequently recommended to us, no one in Venezuela desires that human rights violators be punished by foreign governments. Additionally, the continuation of the investigation conducted by the International Criminal Court is not very advantageous, as

it does not contribute to fostering dialogue and understanding between the conflicting parties. If we are opposed to the imprisonment of more political prisoners, we should stop insisting that the National Electoral Council (CNE) present its results and affirming that this regime is undemocratic.

Economic growth must be prioritized, and for this to occur, foreign companies should be allowed to engage in unrestricted trade with the Venezuelan regime. Otherwise, actions like the recent one imposed by the United States Department of Justice on Telefónica could become more widespread: a fine of \$85.26 million for paying bribes to Venezuelan officials. This situation could prompt companies like Telefónica –who, according to a 2021 transparency report, revealed that it had intervened in nearly one and a half million telephone lines in Venezuela that year, at the request of local officials– to reconsider their operations in our country.

We must turn the page and focus on the upcoming regional and legislative elections. The confirmation of Edmundo González Urrutia's victory through the collection and publication of more than 80% of the voting records, despite its lack of recognition by the Maduro regime, is ultimately inconsequential. What truly matters is to continue safeguarding spaces for participation and maintaining some public offices. We must give politics and politicians –those without followers– a chance, for otherwise, the game is lost. It matters little if, in the end, no one votes for them, as there will be no alternative to Maduro and his regime. If emigration increases, it will be due to Trump, sanctions, and the anti-political rhetoric of radicals who insist on imprisoning them.

In short, there is nothing worse than remaining disillusioned; therefore, the wisest course is to act with maturity and stop deluding ourselves. *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate* ("Abandon all hope, ye who enter here") is the inscription read by the damned upon entering Hell, according to the third canto of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

2) "Imminent Change"

In this alternative (anti) scenario, the prevailing position is that it is impossible to turn the page. July 28th stands as a milestone, an irreversible and indelible fact that binds us by both law and conscience. The prolonged usurpation of the presidency of the Republic does not reverse or annul this established fact. Despite the elections not being free, fair, or competitive –and perhaps precisely because of this– they nonetheless conferred a popular and sovereign mandate that demands the materialization of a governmental change in Venezuela. This change is not a mere whim or one possibility among many; it is an imperative necessity for every Venezuelan who wishes to live in peace and prosper in their own country.

The obstacles posed by a minority, violent group to the realization of this mandate are evident and require no further explanation. These difficulties are well known to ordinary Venezuelans, both inside and outside the country. However, the vast majority of our citizens, beyond their natural differences, are clear on the need for change, which they rightly view as vital and necessary. The irreversible existence of the mandate derived from these elections reduces the political issues of the country to a single question: the implementation or non-implementation of the sovereign mandate from July 28th.

The people understand that the country will not improve if those responsible for its ruin continue to control the state apparatus. In that case, the best they can hope for is merely sharing in the ongoing misery, surviving under conditions similar to the present. Lost days of education will not be recovered. The hunger endured will not be alleviated. The consequences of childhood malnutrition will not be rectified in adulthood, if life permits it. The sick who die due to lack of care will not return. Most emigrants will not come back. Many families will remain forever estranged. The time lost can never be regained.

In the face of this imminent reality, 90% of Venezuelans who demand urgent change for the country understand that an opportunity like the present one will not arise again for several years, or perhaps even decades. By heeding the calls and directives of the political leadership that made the victory of July 28 possible, they are becoming increasingly aware of the power they can wield if they act in concert. They recognize that they are not a divided people; rather, they are an oppressed people yearning for their freedom. Only those who are aligned with the regime appear to lack urgency for change, and seem indifferent to the theft of the electoral result. Nevertheless, many of them seem willing to abandon ship if it becomes clear that the vessel they are on is sinking.

As a consequence of this, a series of surprising events –though not necessarily unexpected– begin to unfold. As was evident during the last elections, it is clear that many did not wish to see the current situation continue. Venezuelans are mobilizing in an extraordinary manner, determined to ensure that the results of July 28 are honored. The democracies of the world offer their

support. And thus, against all odds, we Venezuelans are once again making the impossible possible.

Electoral fraud, unmasked: How it operated and how we confronted it

Walter Molina Galdi

Before July 28

For over two decades, Chavismo has entrenched a system of control rooted in censorship, persecution, harassment, and electoral manipulation. State violence and terrorism against dissent have become routine tools. Hundreds of opposition leaders have been imprisoned, independent media shut down, and any critical voice silenced. In this environment, electoral processes in Venezuela have been riddled with various levels of fraud. Since the democratic opposition won the National Assembly in 2015, Chavismo transitioned from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism, and elections ceased to be even minimally free, democratic, or transparent. The majority's demand for freedom became clear, as they rejected the regime's slogans.

Faced with a progressively repressive system, Venezuelans, led by María Corina Machado, along with the candidacy of Edmundo González Urrutia and a robust local organization like the “Comanditos” and the Red 600K, not only went to the polls on July 28 but actively defended their votes. Organized through social media and viral messages, they bypassed the regime's communication controls to mobilize.

July 28 marked a pivotal day in Venezuela's contemporary history. It was the irrevocable decision of a society that refuses to bow down but also a clear demonstration of fraud that laid the system bare. But why did this happen just now? How is it that something we have denounced for years was now evident to the entire world?

The grand masters of deception have always shown that evading justice requires meticulous planning and flawless execution, with the clear objective of erasing any trace pointing to the culprit or revealing the deceit. However, Nicolás Maduro's announcement as the "winner" starkly deviated from these principles. The signs of blatant fraud are undeniable: results defying all mathematical logic, refusal to disclose disaggregated data by voting centers, absence of mandatory audits as per electoral regulations, narrative inconsistencies, and an alleged cyberattack with no evidence. Yet what exposed the farce the most was the actual proof they could not get rid of: the actas or ballots collected by opposition witnesses who defied the entire terror apparatus and made it clear that the true victor was Edmundo González Urrutia, with a margin that left no room for debate.

How did this happen? Let's take it step by step

As we've suggested, the events took place under a non-democratic regime, thus, it was a non-democratic election. Despite certain irregularities, election day seemed to proceed normally. However, by nightfall, Nicolás Maduro's regime unveiled an outcome many had already suspected: manipulated results to remain in power. Throughout the electoral process and the subsequent days, various technical analyses, electoral experts, and even social media users exposed how the fraud was executed

and demonstrated through tools and techniques revealing an irreversible trend towards Edmundo González Urrutia's victory.

Venezuelan laws prohibit showing results before the National Electoral Council (CNE) bulletin, but during election day, the opposition, led by Machado and González Urrutia, shared data pointing to approximately 42.1% turnout by 1 p.m., with over 9.3 million votes cast. Throughout the day, surveys, like Edison Research's, suggested González Urrutia was leading the tally with over 65% of the votes, while Maduro had around 30%. The atmosphere at polling stations and preliminary reports reflected a massive desire for political change in the country, a desire also visible in Venezuela's streets during an atypical yet historic campaign.

At the CNE headquarters, tensions grew by the minute. Without an official explanation, the first results bulletin was evidently delayed. The councilors, who traditionally announce polling station closures around 6 p.m., had withdrawn from the media, nowhere to be seen. Delsa Solórzano, the opposition representative in the CNE, tried to access the tallying room but was barred by electoral authorities. Despite her insistence, she could not fulfill her accredited role. Later, from the opposition headquarters elsewhere in Caracas, Solórzano denounced various irregularities, including CNE officials and Plan República personnel preventing opposition witnesses from accessing ballots.

The worst scenario was confirmed near midnight (five hours after polling stations closed): the CNE leaders, excluding one councilor, and led by the notoriously biased Elvis Amoroso, held a press conference where they announced figures drastically different from expectations. According to the first bulletin, which

supposedly included the results of 80% of polling stations, Maduro had allegedly won with 51.2% of the votes, while González Urrutia received 44.2%. These figures were quickly challenged by several experts, not only for mathematical inconsistencies but also for the delay and opacity of the process.

The next day, both Machado and González Urrutia voiced that the opposition had obtained 73.2% of the ballots and that results did not match the CNE's report. At a press conference, Machado stated, "The elected president is Edmundo González Urrutia, because even if the CNE gave 100% of the remaining ballots to Maduro, it would not be enough for him to win."

Meanwhile, the country witnessed a wave of protests that spread nationwide: from neighborhoods to towns, citizens' demonstrations created unforgettable images, such as the destruction of monuments of Hugo Chávez. The regime responded brutally, with detentions, killings, and violent street repression. Meanwhile, the CNE, again without councilor Delpino, hastily declared Maduro as the re-elected president, despite the lack of definitive results.

In the following days, the opposition gathered 83.5% of the ballots as protests continued. The first week after the elections ended with violent crackdowns, over 2,000 arrests, and 25 deaths. It also saw the launch of an open-access website¹ where the opposition uploaded all collected and scanned ballots, each with verification codes proving their authenticity. For the first time, the opposition had irrefutable evidence of their results and

1 <https://resultadosconvzla.com/>

demonstrated unprecedented transparency by publishing the ballots. The fraud was now verifiable.

Mathematical improbabilities and analysis methods

One of the first fraud indicators was the exact percentages announced by the CNE: 51.2% for Maduro, 44.2% for González Urrutia, and 4.6% for other candidates. This precision raised suspicions among academics and mathematicians who analyzed the figures, highlighting the high improbability of these three percentages coinciding, as it left no room for null votes and suggested the results were fabricated from desired percentages rather than actual vote counts.

This hypothesis was reinforced by the second bulletin's analysis, published on August 2, which presented similarly unlikely statistical coincidences. In this case, the percentage of transmitted ballots reflected the exact percentage of counted voters. Given the variation in polling station size and voter numbers, this coincidence was nearly impossible.

The role of electoral ballots and independent verification

The key to demonstrating the fraud lay in the electoral ballots. The opposition managed to gather and digitize 25,073 of the 30,026 voting ballots, representing 83.5% of stations. These documents contained detailed results from each polling center, with security elements like QR codes, digital signatures, and alphanumeric verifications. Various academics, including Dorothy Kronick from the University of Berkeley and José Morales-Arilla from Monterrey Institute of Technology, validated the authenticity of

the ballots and concluded that the true results gave a significant lead to González Urrutia.

Kronick emphasized the reliability of the verification mechanisms in Venezuela's electoral system, such as manual tallying from a sample of stations, and concluded that the ballots published by the opposition reflected the true results. Morales-Arilla published an analysis based on the print times of 24,102 ballots released by the opposition, showing they were printed before 7:30 p.m. on election day. Since voting station ballots are printed after results are tallied and submitted, by that time –when the supposed cyberattack occurred– 61% of the ballots had already been transmitted. Until then, the results indicated González Urrutia had 68.1% of the votes, and Maduro 29.6%. For Maduro to win, he would have needed at least 79.3% of the votes in all remaining stations. In other words, the election results were “irreversible” early on.

An independent initiative led by Giuseppe Gangi downloaded all the ballots published by the opposition, organized and analyzed the results, confirming the opposition's published data. Additionally, they gathered videos from social media showing the moments after the ballots were printed at polling stations and read publicly. They verified and linked each video to the corresponding record from the same polling station, confirming they matched. Many weeks have passed since the elections, and on the website macedoniadelnorte.com, there are over 800 videos of opposition witnesses shouting the overwhelming difference in favor of Edmundo González at their polling stations, but Chavismo... Chavismo keeps searching.

Ballots around the world

The technical report presented by the Comando ConVzla to the OAS and later to several congressional bodies in different countries provided a comprehensive and verifiable analysis of the votes cast on July 28. This report, based on 25,073 official ballots issued by the CNE, demonstrated that Edmundo González Urrutia had a clear victory over Nicolás Maduro, bringing about a mandate for democratic change in Venezuela.

The Comando ConVzla documented that González received at least 7,303,480 votes, representing 67.08% of the votes, compared to Maduro's 3,316,142 votes, or 30.43%. These results are drawn from a pool of 10,888,475 voters, and with 83.5% of the ballots digitized and tallied, González's victory was mathematically irreversible. The 3,987,338 vote difference between the two candidates made it impossible for the remaining 16.5% of ballots to alter the outcome, even if Maduro received 100% of the uncounted votes, even assuming there was no voter abstention.

The final projected figure, following the electoral trend, was approximately 8.7 million votes for González, surpassing the opposition's 2015 parliamentary election support by one million and exceeding Hugo Chávez's 2012 maximum support by over half a million. These results occurred despite voting restrictions in Venezuela, where at least five million expatriate Venezuelans were barred from voting, and nearly two million youths were prevented from registering.

The Comando ConVzla gathered and published ballots covering 98.8% of the country's municipalities and 95.8% of parishes, spanning results in 24 states and 331 of 335 municipalities.

This coverage demonstrated González's victory was broad-based, surpassing the official party in 24 states and 89% of municipalities, in both urban and rural areas. This election marked the first defeat of Chavismo across all socioeconomic strata, showing widespread and diverse support for change.

International response and technical impact

The fraud did not go unnoticed by the international community. Outlets like The Associated Press and The New York Times conducted their analyses of the ballots published by the opposition, corroborating the researchers' conclusions. The New York Times estimated the vote difference between González Urrutia and Maduro was so vast that reversing it, as suggested by the CNE, was virtually impossible without fraudulent intervention.

Political and mathematical analyses of the July 28 results exposed not only the technical flaws of the Chavista regime but also the growing sophistication of the opposition in defending the vote and revealing the process's irregularities. Electoral ballots, statistical analyses, and civic mobilization exposed the fraud irrefutably, showing that Chavismo persists solely through force and terror. The country is not "polarized"; there is an overwhelming, clear, and emphatic majority desiring change and a minority seeking to prevent it through fraud and repression.

For now...

The evidence gathered by the opposition, the independent analyses, and international pressure have exposed the cracks in the authoritarian system. The fraudulent techniques employed by

the regime, though advanced, failed to entirely conceal the truth: the Venezuelan people voted for change, and the results were manipulated to prevent that change from materializing. That desire, despite state terrorism's efforts to silence it, remains intact.

We all know what occurred before, during, and after July 28, within and outside the country: from the electoral outcome to the number of political prisoners in various torture centers, including many children.

Numbers do not lie. Neither do the desperate cries of mothers. Nor does the desire for freedom. The fraud, like the emperor, was laid bare. Democracy is still on the horizon.

The rise of censorship and cyber blockades post July 28

Marivi Marín Vázquez

The events surrounding the presidential election on July 28 in Venezuela are not without precedent. Despite the fear among the population and the surprise of the international community at the escalation of persecution and repression from the Chavista regime following the election, the reality is that this is a pattern of behavior that the regime has adopted for years now to remain in power –implementing force and undemocratic tactics that violate the fundamental freedoms of Venezuelans.

Before July 28, political prisoners, incarcerated activists, arbitrary detentions, censored and self-censored media, disqualifications from office, repression, and murders in the context of protests were not new in the country. The lack of independence in the public branches of government to safeguard the country's democratic structures was already an illusion. Even before July 28, news websites had been censored, traditional media outlets closed or acquired, and dissenting voices on social media were harassed. For years, the Chavista communication apparatus had been developing propaganda and disinformation strategies at all levels, greatly influenced by the Russian model. However, it wasn't until July 28, and even in the months prior, that the Chavista regime, faced with the potential loss of its hold

on power, fully unleashed its repressive strategies and censorship, which had been practiced over two decades.

Before and after the presidential election, more than 60 informational websites were blocked in Venezuela, critical opinions were prohibited in traditional media such as radio and television, and dissenting voices on social media were also censored with the blocking of the social network X and the messaging app Signal.

Although the speed, intensity, and violence with which the repressive and censoring events unfolded surprised many, and have led the international community –including traditional left-wing Latin American allies such as Lula and Petro– to raise their voices about what is happening in Venezuela, the report from the UN’s Fact-Finding Mission² regarding the Venezuelan case is conclusive in stating that the escalating repression by the Chavista government is the result of a plan designed and orchestrated long ago to retain power.

Pre-electoral propaganda, disinformation, and blockade strategy

The Chavista communication strategy before the July 28 elections was based on propaganda, disqualification, blocking, and disinformation to confuse and generate uncertainty. In fact, this strategy began long before the electoral calendar was announced,

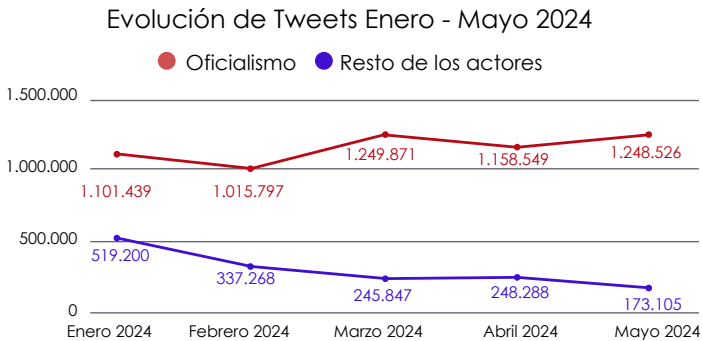
2 ONU. Conclusiones detalladas de la misión internacional independiente de determinación de los hechos sobre la República Bolivariana de Venezuela. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session57/advance-versions/a-hrc-57-crp-5-es.pdf>

before the official candidacy was filed with the National Electoral Council (CNE), and before the formal start of campaigns.

The Ministry of Communication and Information (MIPPCI) began promoting trends in favor of Nicolás Maduro one year before the election, with a post on its X account on July 27, 2023.

In 2023 alone, the ProBox Digital Observatory³ identified 115 trends related to the elections, with around 3.5 million tweets. The government managed to dominate the electoral narrative with 68.7% of the trends and 87% of tweets. By the first half of 2024, these figures doubled.

Between January and May 2024, there were 103 electoral trends, almost the same number as in all of 2023. Of these, 90 trends were driven by the Chavista government, having generated 95% of tweets.



- 3 ProBox, #AlgoritmoElectoral: así se manipularon las redes sociales en medio de la campaña presidencial, (2024). Tomado de <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/algoritmoelectoral-asi-se-manipularon-las-redes-sociales-en-medio-de-la-campana-presidencial/>

Tweet count evolution from January through March, 2024

Pre-election Chavista propaganda on social media was also accompanied by a policy of attacks on opposition figures, mainly María Corina Machado. The second-in-command of the Chavismo, Diosdado Cabello, through his program *Con el Mazo Dando*, was the main promoter of these attacks, driving at least 7 trends against Machado and 2 against Edmundo González in the first five months of 2024.

In addition to the propaganda and attacks, the government orchestrated a disinformation campaign around the possible results of the July 28 elections. False polls were spread to push a narrative of voter intent favoring Maduro, using dubious polling organizations. A study by the *Coalición Informativa* (C-Infoma)⁴ found that six alleged polling firms published 37 surveys between March 2023 and June 24, 2024, as part of a strategy to muddy the electoral climate and discredit opposition candidates.

However, the Chavista apparatus did not limit itself to amplifying propaganda and disinformation: it also relied on digital censorship. As the election date drew closer and with a growing perception that the opposition candidate might win, Chavismo applied a massive blockade to most independent news sites in Venezuela. According to data from Ipys Venezuela and

4 *ProBox* (2024). Seis encuestadoras sospechosas promocionan coordinadamente a Nicolás Maduro como favorito para el 28-J. Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/seis-encuestadoras-sospechosas-promocionan-coordinadamente-a-nicolas-maduro-como-favorito-para-el-28-j/>

Laboratorio de Paz,⁵ by July 28, 2024, at least 58 news sites had been blocked by telecom operators, rendering them inaccessible within the country.

Portales web bloqueados hasta el 28 de julio 2024 (Por orden alfabético)	
antena3.com	Lagranaldea.com
aporrea.org	Lamananadigital.com
armando.info	Lapatilla.com
caraotadigital.net	Maduradas.com
cazadoresdefakenews.info	Medianalisis.org
cronica.uno	Minuto30.com
2001online.com	Monitoreamos.com
Diariolaregion.net	Noticialdia.com
Dolartoday.com	Noticias Venezuela
Efectococuyo.com	noticias.com
El-carabobeno.com	Noticierodigital.com
Eldiario.com	ntn24.com
Elestimulo.com	observatoriodefianzas.com
Elnacional.com	opinionynoticias.com
Elpitazo.com	primerinforme.com
El-politico.com	protonvpn.com
Eltiempo.com	puntodecorte.org
Espaciopublico.ong	runrun.es
Espaja.com	semana.com
Evtv.online	soundcloud.com
Fakenewsvenezuela.org	sumarium.info
Focoinformativo.com	talcualdigital.com
Impactove.com	tvvnetwork.com
Infobae.com	venezuelaaldia.com

5 *Derechos Humanos de Venezuela en Movimiento* (2024). Crisis Poselectoral y de Derechos Humanos 2024 en Venezuela, p. 16. <https://archive.org/details/informe-ddhhvzla/page/16/mode/2up>

Insightcrime.org	vesinfiltro.com
Ipysvenezuela.org	vivoplay.net
Jepvenezuela.org	vpitv.com
Noticiaypunto.com	

But Chavismo didn’t just block news sites –it also went after journalists. Data from the National Union of Press Workers (SNTP) show that by July 28, four journalists had been arrested⁶, a number that grew after the elections; at least 13 journalists and media workers were imprisoned after the election.

Post-electoral terror: Forced peace reached social media

Censorship, blocking, and digital persecution reached exponential levels after the first electoral results were announced by Elvis Amoroso (President of the National Electoral Council, loyal to Maduro). After declaring Nicolás Maduro as the winner, discontent spread across social media and the streets.

Protests, especially from popular areas traditionally seen as “Chavista strongholds,” received an excessive and alarming response from the State, with a tragic toll of 24 deaths and more than 2,000 arrests, according to the UN’s Fact-Finding Mission report for Venezuela.

Amid this context, the hashtags #Paz and #Justicia (peace and justice) were used by various government entities (both military and civilian) in Venezuela to push a false narrative of “peace,”

6 *Derechos Humanos de Venezuela en Movimiento* (2024). Crisis Poselectoral y de Derechos Humanos 2024 en Venezuela, p. 14. <https://archive.org/details/informe-ddhhvzla/page/14/mode/2up>

which actually masked the use of repressive tactics meant to instill fear and anxiety among regime critics.⁷

In fact, on the election day, MIPPCI promoted #VotaPorLaPaz2024 with over 64,600 tweets, and the following day continued this narrative with #GanóLaPazYLaEsperanza, posting a smiling photo of Maduro after voting.

But the government didn't just use social media to promote this false narrative of peace; it also used it as a tool for mass criminalization and persecution of dissent. Maduro's regime weaponized terror to restrict civic spaces, employing various strategies. One of the most striking was an update in the VenApp mobile application, which enabled a "new window" to report anyone considered a "fascist". This led to the largest digital persecution in the country's history, exposing the identities of ordinary citizens without verifying the validity of these denunciations.⁸

This led to a sharp escalation in the well-known "Operation Knock-Knock."⁹ Anyone posting anti-Chavista content or opposing Maduro's alleged victory on social media could be

7 *ProBox* (2024). #TerrorEnRedes: la estrategia digital de Maduro para reprimir las voces críticas. Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/terror-en-redes-la-estrategia-digital-de-maduro-para-reprimir-las-voces-criticas/>

8 *ProBox*, #TerrorEnRedes: VenApp, la aplicación que "evolució" para reprimir, (2024). Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/terrorenredes-venapp-la-aplicacion-que-evoluciono-para-reprimir/>

9 *ProBox*, #TerrorEnRedes: «Operación TunTun», la cacería de voces críticas, (2024). Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/terrorenredes-operacion-tuntun-la-caceria-de-voces-criticas/>

arrested in their homes by police forces, especially if they had been denounced through VenApp.

VenApp, originally created as an application for submitting complaints directly to the government, was transformed after Maduro announced on July 30 the enablement of a “new window” for users to “report those who have attacked the people so they can be pursued and justice can be served.” This new feature allowed users to report “fascist guarimba” activities, such as looting, public disorder, disinformation, and damage to public property.

←

Crear reporte

Continúa paso a paso por el proceso de trámite, puedes volver atrás a revisar lo que has hecho antes de confirmarla.

Denuncia

▼

Denuncia

Guarimba Fascista

▼

Seleccione una subcategoría

▼

Saqueos

Daños al Patrimonio Público

Alteración del Orden Público

SIGUIENTE

←

Crear reporte

Continúa paso a paso por el proceso de trámite, puedes volver atrás a revisar lo que has hecho antes de confirmarla.

Denuncia

▼

Denuncia

Guarimba Fascista

▼

Seleccione una subcategoría

▼

Ataques a personas

Desinformación

Robo

Cierre de vías públicas

SIGUIENTE

Although VenApp was removed from Google Play and the Apple Store on July 31, the Venezuelan government generated uncontrolled and free distribution of the APK file, enabling the app to function on Android devices.

On August 2, from the Miraflores Palace, Maduro claimed to have received more than 5,000 reports via VenApp, accusing citizens of threatening neighborhood leaders, PSUV members, and Chavismo supporters. This number not only doubled the arrests made up to that point but also justified new arrests under the so-called Operation Knock-Knock.

Promoted primarily by Diosdado Cabello, Operation Knock-Knock flooded the Venezuelan digital ecosystem with threats of arrest for posting content that the regime considered “coup-like” or “violent.” In this scheme, doxxing was employed, with personal information of accused citizens published online and live capture operations carried out and broadcasted to intimidate, pursue, and arrest thousands of protesters.

The cases tagged with #OperacionTunTun were particularly alarming, as users of X responded to opposition posts with the hashtag to “mark” those posting content against the regime, even tagging the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (SEBIN).

As if this wasn’t enough, after the July 28 elections, the Maduro regime did not stop at persecuting social media protests; it went one step beyond by attempting to completely eliminate dissenting voices on social media, at least on X (formerly Twitter). On August 8, Maduro declared a “temporary” suspension of X in Venezuela. The blockade was initially set for 10 days but eventually became permanent.

The decision to block X came after a public confrontation between Elon Musk, X's owner, and Maduro, who labeled the billionaire as his arch-enemy, responsible for a "cyber coup" following Maduro's alleged electoral victory.

Maduro's crusade wasn't limited to X. All social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp) were labeled as "fascist," "imperialist," and "conspiratorial." However, this disdainful stance was not always the case. Before blocking X, Chavismo had a different strategy. Rather than shutting down social media platforms, they flooded them with messages, hashtags, and paid X users to spread propaganda and disinformation, creating a communication hegemony in social media for years.

However, the decision to block X in Venezuela reflected a loss of Chavismo's control over the narrative on social media, as evidenced by the campaign led by María Corina Machado and Edmundo González.

Even with the entire communication apparatus against them, the opposition managed to gain momentum, spreading its message across various digital platforms and gaining more followers while turning the polls in their favor. With little to no presence in traditional media, the opposition, led by María Corina, spread its message through different channels and social media platforms. On Instagram, for example, Machado has 8.1 million followers, compared to Nicolás Maduro's 1.6 million.

Amid the waves of protests and detentions carried out by the Chavista government, social media has precisely opened up the channels through which images and videos of arrests, intimidation, and abuse of power by Venezuelan police forces

have been shared. Videos showing how opposition leaders such as Freddy Superlano, Williams Dávila, and María Oropeza were detained circulated globally. In the case of Oropeza, she managed to live-stream the moment when agents broke down the door to her home to take her away without a warrant.

After blocking X, the regime proceeded to do the same with TikTok, though only for a brief period. On Saturday, September 28, for seven hours, TikTok was added to the list of social media platforms blocked by the government of Nicolás Maduro. The restriction began at 9 a.m. on Saturday and lasted until 4 p.m., according to reports from the organization *Ve Sin Filtro*.¹⁰ This blockade occurred two months after the July 28 elections.

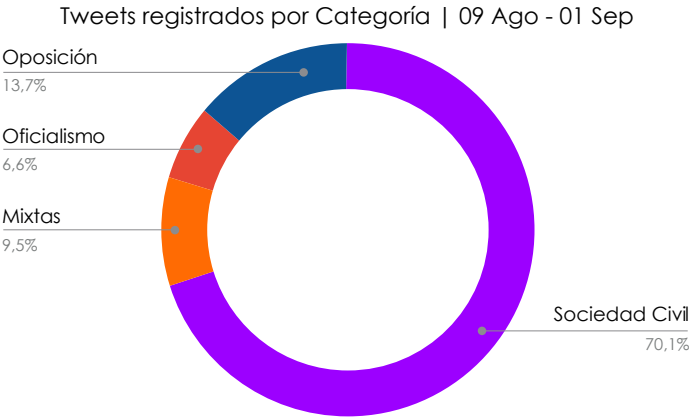
Citizens respond: Digital protest persists

Despite the blocking of X in Venezuela, civil society has managed to grow its influence in shaping sociopolitical narratives and hashtags on this social network. *ProBox* reveals this growth in a recent analysis.¹¹

After the blocking of X, Chavismo was ordered to cease using the platform, which led to a surge in sociopolitical trends between August 9 and September 1, amassing 1.8 million tweets, with 70.1% of them posted by civil society.

10 *VeSinFiltro*, Tuit bloqueo TikTok, (2024). Tomado de: <https://x.com/vesinfiltro/status/1840210903691661522>

11 *ProBox*, ¿Venezuela sin Twitter? Ciudadanos combaten el bloqueo de X, (2024). Tomado de: <https://proboxve.org/publicacion/venezuela-sin-twitter-ciudadanos-combaten-el-bloqueo-de-x/>



Tweets documented by category

This shows that, despite Chavismo’s success in infiltrating and contaminating sociopolitical conversations across social media, civil society (even before the blocking of X) began to become more active in engaging in digital conversations.

Before, during, and after the elections, civil society focused on searching for and disseminating information across digital platforms. It wasn’t just about discussing the electoral process; X also became a network for denouncing the disproportionate violence of the regime against dissent in Venezuela. The data proves this.

Between July 15 and August 8 (before the blocking), sociopolitical trends in Venezuela accumulated around 4.7 million tweets. Of those, civil society and independent media generated 36.92% of tweets, while the government produced 36.16%. This represents a historic milestone when considering that Chavismo used to overwhelmingly dominate the sociopolitical conversation

on X, flooding the platform with propaganda, disinformation, and fake news. For further context, in 2023, the government managed to position 81.15% of the trends and 95.25% of tweets.

Despite the objective to censor public and digital protest, we can see that civil society reclaimed the digital frontlines to amplify their protests against arbitrary detentions, against the electoral results announced by the CNE, and at the same time demanding the respect of human rights.

One example of the organized digital protest came in the form of the hashtag #MaduroSecuestraNiños (Maduro, Children Kidnapper), a digital campaign that denounced the escalation of severe human rights violations in the country, particularly in response to the arbitrary detention of minors following the July 28 elections. This hashtag was trending on Sunday, September 1, and continued as a top trend until the early hours of September 3, accumulating over 380,000 tweets and becoming one of the largest trends of the year.

Although the final tally for 2024 may appear bleak in terms of censorship and fundamental freedoms in Venezuela, faced with a regime accused of crimes against humanity, the resilience of civil society in finding alternatives and spaces for expression amidst limitations and persecution demonstrates the will of citizens to reclaim a democracy crushed by Chavismo.

Miguel Pizarro: “Repression is the core of the regime’s political action”

The Humanitarian Aid Commissioner asserts that the International Criminal Court has the capacity to act with greater urgency, not only in judging and punishing past events but also in playing a key role in preventing current and future occurrences.

On July 28, 2024, more than 7 million Venezuelans took to the polls, marking a significant moment in the nation’s democratic history. However, by disregarding the will of the people, the Nicolás Maduro regime chose to initiate a new chapter of terror, leaving behind a trail of bloodshed, death, and devastation across the Republic.

The history of violence is long and well-documented, with extensive reports and investigations from the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), and other international organizations.

The electoral fraud carried out by Maduro has resulted in lost lives, grieving families, and widespread suffering throughout society. “ It is a grotesque pattern of human rights violations and a new level of repression, but it

must be understood as part of a continuous trend. The regime has consistently intensified its violations of human rights,” warns Miguel Pizarro, a former member of the 2015 National Assembly and spokesperson for the Special Commission on Monitoring Humanitarian Aid in Venezuela.

–What are the key differences or distinguishing factors between the repression that began after June 28 and previous experiences in Venezuela?

Regarding the pattern of repression in Venezuela, rather than focusing on how it differs now, it is more pertinent to discuss the variation in intensity and the integration of various methods of repression.

Some elements that could be considered new in terms of scale or that suggest a heightened level of human rights violations are fundamental in nature. In the past, the regime utilized repression and human rights abuses as tools to direct opposition movements in a specific direction. This repression aimed to force negotiation, participation in political schemes, or to shift the public discourse.

The key difference now is that repression has become central to the regime’s political strategy. It is no longer a clandestine act but a mechanism openly used to maintain power. Repression is now publicly broadcasted through television, state-controlled media, social networks, and even advertisements produced by the General Directorate of Military Counterintelligence (DGCIM). It is now at the heart of the regime’s political operations, establishing a new system of social control through force.

There are patterns of repression that have intensified, such as forced disappearances and arbitrary detentions. The scale of arrests in the days leading up to and following the elections is unprecedented. Venezuela now has more political prisoners than Cuba and Nicaragua combined, surpassing even Russia in this regard. The repression in Venezuela operates on an extraordinary scale.

The mass arrests are also influenced by the use of anti-terrorist and anti-hate laws, as well as the discretionary application of punitive laws developed by the regime. This is significant, as it relates to recent legislation, such as the Simon Bolivar Law and the anti-NGO law, which serve as legal tools to legitimize actions previously carried out outside the law. These laws are part of the broader strategy to deepen the regime's control and instill fear.

Lastly, there has been, as evidenced by reports from detention centers, a significant increase in the transfer of political prisoners to common criminal facilities. The scale of physical and mental abuse suffered by detained women, including the denial of menstrual hygiene and medical care, is alarming. Additionally, children and adolescents have been arrested, charged with terrorism, and put on trial. As the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) rightly pointed out, these minors are being detained without regard for gender or age separation.

–There has been considerable debate regarding the actions of the ICC Prosecutor, with some critics arguing that progress on the Venezuela case has been too slow. What is your

perspective on this, and what can be expected regarding Venezuela's case before the ICC moving forward?

I engage with the United Nations on a daily basis, and these organizations do not always operate at the pace we would desire, nor do they always respond in the manner we expect. However, I am convinced that, in the case of Venezuela, the ICC and the Prosecutor's Office have the potential to do more, and to do so more effectively, in order to achieve a positive impact.

Often, these organizations themselves underestimate their capacity, the level of influence they can wield, and the leverage they hold over state authorities. In the case of Venezuela, the evidence available to the Prosecutor's Office is substantial, as this is not merely a case of autopsy. It is crucial to note that the pattern of human rights violations in Venezuela is ongoing; it is a systematic campaign by the state against the population, as well as against all forms of dissent and social organization. This means that the actions of the ICC and the Prosecutor's Office are not only important for addressing past violations, but they serve a dual purpose: they are one of the few instances where the Court's intervention can help prevent further violations and curb the deepening closure of civic space in Venezuela.

Regardless of personal opinions on the matter, I firmly believe that the Court, along with many other organizations, could take more decisive, effective, and timely action. In the case of Venezuela, it is critical not to underestimate the impact of actions that can not only judge and punish past events, but also play a key role in preventing present and future violations.

–The partial reactivation of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' office in Venezuela was recently announced. What is the significance of this decision, and what potential impact could it have in light of the wave of repression unleashed by the Maduro regime?

I believe it is highly significant that they have regained access. However, this occurs within a framework where the regime attempts to force international organizations into a dilemma between access and reporting –between being present on the ground and maintaining the ability to report. Fortunately, in the case of the UN Office, this dilemma does not exist. They have adhered well to their mandate and have conducted their work effectively, and I hope they can return to normal operations.

So far, they have managed to keep one person on the ground, with a commitment to increasing their presence to three staff members. I sincerely hope they can resume operations with the same number of personnel as before, gain access to penitentiary centers, engage freely with victims and organizations, and document the situation in the country without restrictions.

It is crucial for them to develop a strategy for the protection and prevention of ongoing human rights violations. One of their primary roles is to document, intervene, mediate, and help protect those at risk. I remain hopeful that these efforts will continue, even in a country where such actions are severely restricted.

–The Maduro regime appears to engage in a pattern of initially displaying a willingness to collaborate with organizations such as the ICC and the UN Office, only to later accuse them of serving "imperialism." This creates a

dynamic of constant back-and-forth, seemingly aimed at buying time and securing impunity. Given this context, can we realistically expect any meaningful collaboration or complementarity from the Maduro regime? What steps can be taken to break this cycle and ensure more favorable outcomes for the citizens?

It is utterly naive to expect any form of genuine goodwill or real cooperation from the regime at this point. The regime views technical cooperation merely as a tactic to buy time, attempting to create the illusion that such access can radically alter the situation. However, when the time comes to fulfill its most significant commitments, the regime consistently finds excuses to avoid responsibility.

That said, I firmly believe in the importance of their presence in the country. While there are countless crises around the world, Venezuela's crisis attracts attention because it is well-documented, supported by mandates, a robust and organized civil society, and victims who have a voice. Additionally, there are monitoring and protection mechanisms in place, such as the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Fact-Finding Mission (FFM), and investigations by the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The game the regime is attempting to play has the objective of ensuring that none of this materializes –that reports are never as damning as they should be, that the ICC never issues arrest warrants or takes decisive action, and that the FFM ultimately wears out over time. However, it is important to recognize the changes these mechanisms have already forced. While the regime's repression remains vast, it has been compelled to alter its methods, change commands, and eliminate some of its previous

repressive arms, which is a direct result of pressure from these organizations.

The real challenge is how to avoid naivety disguised as cooperation or complementarity, and how to prevent the genuine goodwill of these organizations from inadvertently causing harm in practice. I believe the only safeguard is the strategy that has been employed thus far: consistent documentation, persistence, and the continuous effort to keep these organizations informed and engaged, ensuring they remain at the center of the conversation.

Furthermore, it is crucial for organizations to understand that Venezuela does not have partial solutions. The solution to Venezuela's crisis is political, and that political solution lies in a transition, which is what Venezuelans expressed on July 28. Without addressing the underlying causes, it is impossible to resolve any of the consequences, from migration to human rights issues.

—While there is ongoing advocacy for human rights at international forums, the mobilization within Venezuela, particularly among mothers, wives, and relatives of political prisoners, has also been significant. How do you assess the impact of this initiative, not only in terms of advancing the release of political prisoners but also as a contributing factor to the broader democratization of the country?

In a country where everything has come to a standstill and fear has effectively stifled most political action, the mothers and relatives of prisoners have displayed an extraordinary level of courage. They have highlighted the crucial importance of ensuring that no one is left behind in Venezuela.

This movement of mothers, which has been instrumental in locating missing persons, compiling lists of prisoners, and mitigating the impact of mass rape, represents a significant driving force. It is part of the most profound and radical changes we have seen since July 28.

By making repression all-encompassing, the regime has inadvertently made the response and solidarity equally pervasive. Ultimately, this has led to a unification and mutual support movement. It has become a powerful means of expression in a country where much has been paralyzed by repression and fear. It demonstrates that fear does not completely paralyze society; although it forces people to become more cautious and limits what they say and how they say it, it has also fueled these movements. These sectors are gaining space and relevance in a context defined by prisoners and repression.

They have become a crucial factor in ensuring that no one is forgotten and that the struggle for the liberation of political prisoners receives the attention and support it so urgently requires.

Macedonia del Norte: Irony in the Face of Oppression

Isabella Sanfuentes Bandrés

In a global context where democracy faces significant challenges, a young Venezuelan migrant has found an ironic way to promote digital activism on the platform macedoniadelnorte.com. Through technology, he seeks to defend human rights in Venezuela, transforming satire into a tool for awareness and citizen participation.

When the Venezuelan dictatorship attempted to justify its electoral defeat by blaming an alleged hacking operation from North Macedonia, Giuseppe Gangi,¹ a Venezuelan programmer based in Spain, decided to transform that excuse into a symbol of resistance and citizen action. Using his skills, he enhanced the tool created by the Comando Con Venezuela, adding features that strengthened the data presented to promote greater transparency. His platform enabled Venezuelans from anywhere in the world to verify voting records, view precise results, and consolidate evidence of irregularities. In this way, North Macedonia ceased to be just a country and became a tool for citizen empowerment,

1 This interview was conducted on December 20, 2024 and updated on January 7, 2025, so it compiles the data available up to that date.

challenging the official narrative and demonstrating that technology can be a powerful weapon in the service of democracy.

This project has mobilized thousands of people both inside and outside Venezuela, from those who collected voting records and evidence to those who provided technical support or massively disseminated the information. For Giuseppe, macedoniadelnorte.com represents hope, collective action, and proof that, even far from home, it is possible to make a difference and contribute to change.

–Tell me a little about yourself. Who are you, and what do you do?

I am a programmer specializing in software development. I have been living abroad for nearly nine years. Initially, I spent six years in Germany working for tech companies, and now I have been living in Spain for three years. I have always been deeply concerned about Venezuela. I feel a strong sense of helplessness about what our country is going through and have constantly sought ways to help and overcome that frustration. Throughout my career, I have worked on software projects aimed not only at being practical but also at making a positive impact on society.

–North Macedonia is a relatively unknown country. On July 28, it became significant for Venezuela for reasons that seem straight out of a fiction book. However, North Macedonia is now something else entirely for you and for Venezuela. Tell

us what it is, how it came to be, and what inspired you to create this project.

Indeed, North Macedonia is a country, but after July 28, it took on a whole new meaning for me, and hopefully for Venezuelans as well. That day marked the presidential elections. The day proceeded relatively normally until the polling stations closed, when many centers began reporting irregularities. That's when we realized something wasn't right. Once the polling stations close, vote counting, citizen verification, and result transmission begin. At a certain point, witnesses designated by the MUD reported being denied entry to the central tallying room at the CNE, and that the transmission of results had been interrupted. As hours passed, at 12:08 a.m., Elvis Amoroso, the principal rector of the National Electoral Council, gave a press conference announcing a supposed cyberattack on the CNE's transmission systems and presenting preliminary results showing Maduro as the winner. In the following hours, María Corina Machado, Edmundo González, and the parties of the MUD rejected this announcement, leading to what I consider the most significant demonstration of citizen organization in recent years in Venezuela. We'll discuss that in more detail later, but first, let me explain why the project is called *Macedonia del Norte*.

On July 29, Attorney General Tarek William Saab declared in a press conference that the attack on the CNE servers originated from North Macedonia, and that was why the CNE could not provide the disaggregated results. However, this hacking or attack never actually took place. Many experts in information technology have issued reports refuting these claims. In fact, the North Macedonian government itself released a statement rejecting the accusations.

Venezuelans love to joke around by nature and often use humor as a form of protest. This time was no exception. We took these statements as rather unserious, and I decided to use that name to call my website.

Continuing the timeline, at 6:00 p.m. on July 29, the opposition rejected the bulletin and published a plan that had been months in the making: a website where scanned voting records generated by the machines at the closure of the voting tables are published. These records contain the total number of votes cast at each table and the results by candidate. Additionally, these records feature a unique QR code, making them singular and irreplaceable. If there is one thing the Chavismo has been correct about, it is that Venezuela's automated voting system is highly secure and transparent from a technical standpoint.

For the first time, the opposition was prepared for a scenario like this and devised a plan to counter it. To this day, the witnesses managed to collect, store, and send voting records that account for 85% of the votes cast. The opposition successfully published them on a website in record time: by 6:00 p.m. on July 29, just 24 hours after the voting tables closed, there was a website where you could look up how your table had turned out and the total results of the election. These records were gradually uploaded in the following days, but the structure and records were already in place; it was just a heavy and labor-intensive task. It's incredible to think that results were visible to all, with scanned records and a search function by ID number.

However, the high volume of people trying to access the site caused it to crash. That's when I saw the opportunity to contribute. I am a Venezuelan migrant, and of course, sleep hours were few

during those days. The anxiety and frustration of not being able to contribute were overwhelming, but I came up with the idea of using my programming skills to support this citizen verification effort that the *Comando Con Venezuela* was undertaking.

The first thing I did was create a mirror of what they already had, essentially a copy of the existing site. This was for two reasons: first, to help divide the traffic that the main site was receiving, and second, to back up the site in case it somehow disappeared and the voting records were lost.

As the hours passed, because everything was happening on the go, I wanted to add more features, like showing both the disaggregated and total results. In other words, people could check the records for each available polling center, but I also wanted them to see how the results were progressing by municipality, state, and nationally, using the vote counts from the scanned records. Additionally, I wanted to include the other candidates' vote counts to give greater transparency and provide more detailed information.

Today, the website also includes videos from some polling stations where witnesses or poll workers read the results and posted them on social media in real time. This represents a third step in the transparency and citizen verification process that we've been building. Now, *macedoniadelnorte.com* is the result of the contributions of thousands of people worldwide who have not only provided records but also shared videos, photos of citizen verification boards, and other audiovisual elements.

–As a software developer and digital activist, you know that 21st-century dictatorships have used technology for political and social control. Countries like China are constantly developing new surveillance mechanisms for domestic use and to export to allied nations. Because of this, there is a perception that technology can be harmful to democracy. However, there are other ways to use technology to strengthen democracy or promote civic engagement. This project is a prime example. What does a project like this mean for democracy in Venezuela and the world?

I believe that the main thing is to use technology to motivate people to participate and demonstrate that their voices can be heard. María Corina Machado referred to all of this as an example of what citizens should do after an election. It's not just about voting; it's about voting, seeing how far your vote goes, and making it count.

While dictatorships use it for surveillance and control, we can use digital tools to connect, inform, and mobilize people. For Venezuela, it means giving people back the ability to participate in the search for freedom. It's a way to show that even though technology has been used to oppress, it can also be used to liberate.

Not only macedoniadelnorte.com, but technology, in general, can also be a space to bring citizens together and create a kind of oversight of what happens in each of our countries, making the most of it to support democracy.

–In this same line, what do you think is the biggest challenge for civil society and democracy when it comes to the use of technological tools?

I believe the biggest challenge is misinformation. Combating fake news is becoming increasingly difficult. Too many technological tools can be used to distort the truth, like creating fake videos with artificial intelligence. It's becoming harder and harder to find the truth amid so much information, but at the same time, I think the antidote is citizen organization. Bringing people together and engaging in debate, returning to human interaction, which allows us to discern what is true and what is false.

I believe this is also a lesson that Venezuelan society has been learning. More and more people see a headline and are motivated to search for another source because they are not convinced. Political leaders and civil organizations must emphasize this point to the people.

–How do you see the future of digital activism in the coming years? What would you like to see in the near future in the technological field and its relationship with politics?

I would like to see more technological tools that unite ordinary people and have no objective other than supporting democracy, without trying to gain political advantage. I would like to see tools that seek ways to gather and spread more truthful information, allowing each person to form their own opinion on what is happening. I believe digital activism should move in that direction: spreading the truth, backing it up with evidence, and creating spaces for debate among citizens.

–What has moved you the most throughout this process?

What has moved and motivated me the most is knowing how connected Venezuelans are to their country and their longing for freedom and democracy, even those who have lived abroad for many years. I feel there is a citizen reconnection in the fight against injustice.

It has deeply moved me to see people, including myself, crying for Venezuela but also wiping away our tears and saying, “I will see how I can contribute because my desire for a better country is greater.”

Since day one, I have received hundreds of messages from Venezuelans saying, “Hey, I do this. How can it help you?” “How can I support the country if I do such and such?” These messages range from high-level technological contributions to coffee producers in Venezuela offering to send me a pack of coffee. I think that connection and intention to support are truly moving.

–Lastly, I want to ask you something personal, as a Venezuelan migrant. What does *macedoniadelnorte.com* mean to you?

For me, *macedoniadelnorte.com* symbolizes hope and connection. It is a reminder that, even though we are far from home, we can always do something for our country and our people. This project is my way of contributing from a distance and keeping the fight for democracy alive. It represents a bridge between the dreams of change and the concrete actions we can take to achieve it.

The great lesson of the last few months is that it doesn't matter how small you think the impact of your actions will be. If you can already help a few people improve something, perhaps their vision of what is happening, that is already more than enough, and it's better to do a little than to do nothing.

–How can our readers contribute to your efforts?

There are many ways to show support. The first and most important is to spread the word about macedoniadelnorte.com. By sharing, you not only reach more people and keep them informed, but you also enable feedback. For instance, thanks to the massive dissemination in recent months, we've continued to gather records and videos that strengthen the information we've published. As a result, nearly six months after the election, we're still updating and adding new material.

Another way to support is by contributing through <https://buymeacoffee.com/giuseppe.gangi>. The donations made there help cover infrastructure costs, such as server fees and website maintenance.

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