

When dictatorships make mistakes and the desire for freedom seeps through

Paola Bautista de Alemán

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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