

# Trust, the Great Lesson from the October 22 Primary

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

Henry Kissinger, *Leadership* (2023)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That had a fundamental problem: it meant handing over on a silver platter to the regime the opportunity for people to trust again, without anything having changed, simply causing people to turn away from what the challenge of voting in a self-managed primary represented. Therefore, it is no secret to anyone that 2023 was a challenging year throughout its course, as the threats and bets on the failure of the primary did not stop. Another great civic milestone came at this point: formally deciding that the regime's National Electoral Council (CNE) would not interfere in carrying out this civic act. That decision, announced on June 16, 2023<sup>4</sup>, gave all the sense and purpose to what would come months later, on October 22nd.

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

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

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

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

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

But we made it. There's no concept more powerful than that of "self-management", because in a country lacking institutionalism, every effort to make possible what seems impossible, with risks and fears in tow, makes it more commendable than in any other context. And that's why the people factor was decisive. Not to mention the milestone of an agreement for the recognition of the result, for supporting the winner and for a minimum program<sup>5</sup>. A true feat.

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

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

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

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

March 16th. 2023<sup>6</sup>. María Corina begins travelling through Venezuela, starting from Mérida, with a tour as intense as it is decisive to understand the moment. A country that in January was dispirited suddenly finds, in the municipalities of Mérida,

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

traditionally controlled by Chavismo, indicated a phenomenon that even the most optimistic did not expect: people turned out massively. The excitement had begun the day before, with the first vote in Sidney, Australia<sup>7</sup>, and so, within the country as well as in the 85 cities around the world where there was participation, the national tricolor waved with the strength of a society determined to embrace freedom and change.

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

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

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

of the votes<sup>8</sup>, María Corina Machado was chosen to lead the opposition for the presidential election and the next stage of our struggle.

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

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

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

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

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

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