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‘This is Norway’s prize, not ours’

María Corina Machado has won the Nobel Peace Prize — yet in Venezuela, the celebration is conspicuously absent

This year’s Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado. According to the Oslo Committee, she is the one ‘who keeps the flame of democracy burning amid a growing darkness’ in Venezuela. The reality on the ground is more complex.

On the one hand, ongoing repression dampens any open jubilation among her supporters. But it is not only fear of home visits by security forces or arrests that tempers enthusiasm. ‘This is Norway’s prize, not ours’, says a Venezuelan woman who heard the news early in the morning. ‘The Nobel Peace Prize — for someone who advocates a military invasion and thereby puts human lives at risk?’ asks a young man on his way to work. Even among Machado’s supporters, doubts exist: ‘She certainly deserves awards, but the Nobel Peace Prize?’ adds a biology student.

Joining the long line of rather controversial laureates

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro only spoke on Sunday – on the Day of Indigenous Resistance – calling Machado a ‘devilish witch’ rejected by 90 per cent of the population. He did not address the prize itself. However, only three days after the announcement of the Nobel Prize Committee’s decision, Venezuela closed its embassy in Norway as part of the ‘optimisation and reorganisation of diplomatic missions’ — according to the official communiqué.

By contrast, democratic forces in the region, in the country and in exile offered congratulations across party lines, primarily welcoming the attention the award brings to Venezuela. The country’s currently most prominent human rights organisation also expressed approval, seeing the award as ‘support in the struggle for change’.

Diplomatic words, such as those by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, capture the essence: according to Steinmeier, the prize recognises 'personal commitment, courage and perseverance' — not any kind of dialogue project or negotiation success. In this respect, Machado joins a line of controversial Nobel Peace Prize laureates.

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Machado's energy in defending her victory in the presidential elections on 28 July 2024 is acknowledged and undisputed. Together with former diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia, who ran after her candidacy had been annulled, she achieved a clear electoral victory. What made it special: thanks to election workers trained in advance at the polling stations, the ballots were documented and her victory substantiated with numbers and percentages — independently of the state electoral authority. This was an unprecedented event in Venezuelan democratic history and earned Machado broad recognition in the country.

But that was over a year ago, and people in the country are now looking ahead: should they cling to something that was stolen and lost, or seek new paths? To play a leading role in today's Venezuela, Machado lacks two crucial things: room for manoeuvre and willingness to engage in dialogue. Her room for manoeuvre is limited, as she has been living in hiding for over a year. This is very much in the regime's interest, which long had the opportunity to arrest her — but has, for good reason, refrained from doing so.

On the occasion of President Nicolás Maduro's inauguration, Machado made one of her rare public appearances at a rally of her supporters. She was then apprehended by state security forces. Several hours of uncertainty followed regarding her whereabouts, accompanied by a video that was difficult to interpret — and finally, she emerged again from her hideout. The message was clear: the government is careful not to create a martyr and ideally seeks an exile deal.

Machado, however, knows full well that exile would amount to political irrelevance — and therefore remains steadfast in the country. Under these circumstances, her scope of action is limited to her social media channels and international networks. Through these, she spreads her positions and tries to mobilise the international community. Within Venezuela, however, there are no visible efforts to maintain the party alliance that carried her to the presidential elections or to develop joint

strategies.

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She is simply *one* of the opposition leaders, not *the* opposition leader, as she is often portrayed internationally. On the contrary: with her uncompromising call to boycott the 2025 parliamentary, gubernatorial and local elections, she has divided the few remaining democratic forces in the country — between those who followed the call out of loyalty and those who, despite all obstacles, refused to leave the political arena without a fight.

Likewise, there is no strategic alliance with human rights organisations in the country, even though there is a strong common interest in view of the political prisoners on all sides. As a side note: Anyone looking for people who keep 'the flame of democracy' alive in Venezuela will certainly find them there.

Forging alliances with regional neighbours — for example, Venezuela's most important economic partner Colombia or the regional power Brazil? No sign of it. Machado's international allies remain in the north. Her close ties to US Secretary of State Marco Rubio are no secret. The two met digitally at the beginning of the year on the occasion of his inauguration and actively support each other on social media. Even US President Trump spoke appreciatively of the laureate, despite his own ambitions. Machado, in turn, dedicated the award to the US President. These connections to right-wing populist international circles have been in place for a long time and are ideologically entrenched, as could be seen, among other things, in February when Machado appeared before the right-wing populist EU parliamentary group in Brussels.

Given this situation, it is hard to imagine Machado being in a position to shape any kind of transition. She neither leads a united democratic alliance capable of taking on governmental responsibility, nor would she be a viable dialogue partner for the regime. Anyone seeking a peaceful transition must make offers to those in power and build bridges. For Machado, however, military invasion remains the preferred means. Whether it will come – and in what form – remains uncertain. The US is, in any case, reinforcing its military presence in the Caribbean Sea. The international community would do well to keep a close eye on this, too.



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