

# María Corina Machado's Promise of Venezuelan Freedom

By Ian Vásquez

When the US military captured Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro in early January, President Trump committed the United States to the South American country's economic recovery and transition to democracy. The administration now risks squandering the moment by trusting Maduro's top lieutenants—all committed socialists who lack legitimacy among Venezuelans—to achieve that task.

If the US is serious about reform, then it should instead begin working with María Corina Machado, the opposition leader whose movement enjoys widespread popular support and represents the country's best hope for democratic capitalism.

Machado, the recipient of the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize, has spent the past two decades building the moral and political foundation for a free Venezuela. Her team is ready to govern, with well-developed plans for opening the economy, reestablishing civil liberties, privatizing the oil industry and other state-owned enterprises, reforming failing public services such as education and health care, and limiting the size and power of government.

In the 2024 presidential election, the Machado-led opposition won the most decisive electoral victory against the Chavista regime in its 25-year history. The Venezuelan people have already chosen freedom. The US should now work with the leaders they chose to deliver it.

## A Longtime Champion of Freedom

Machado is unique among Venezuela's opposition figures, both in her vision and her accomplishments. She's a well-read and sophisticated classical liberal. She understood Hugo Chávez's rise to power in 1999, his threat to liberty, and how best to combat that threat—in part through sheer intuition and in no small part because she understood the late Venezuelan intellectual Carlos Rangel's prophetic analysis of the country's ills.

Rangel explained that a free-market economy had never existed in Venezuela; rather, what prevailed for centuries was extensive state interventionism and corruption. "These two traditions have been monstrously exacerbated by two new factors: socialism and oil," Rangel warned in the early 1980s. Years earlier, Venezuela had created a state-owned oil monopoly that was being used to expand the state by a political elite that had become enamored of socialist ideas.

That deadly combination led to the economic crises and political dysfunction that gave rise to Chávez. Unlike other opposition leaders, Machado accompanied her political activism with a good dose of proselytizing on the importance of freedom in all its dimensions—economic and personal liberty, the rule of law, democracy, and limits to government power.

In 2002, Machado cofounded *Súmate* ("Join Up"), a civic organization focused on vote monitoring. It collected millions of



Venezuelan opposition leaders María Corina Machado (left) and Edmundo González (right) are seen here at a protest in Caracas on July 30, 2024. (Photo by Jesus Vargas/Getty Images)

signatures to organize a recall referendum of Chávez in 2004, an effort that failed in the face of credible allegations of fraud. At a Cato Institute policy forum in 2009, Machado described how Chávez had consolidated authoritarian rule and violated human rights over the previous 10 years while maintaining the formal trappings of democracy. At a time when much of the world still justified Chavista rule on the grounds that it benefited the poor, Machado showed that social policy was failing despite massive oil-boom windfalls.

Even though elections in Venezuela took place on an extremely uneven playing field and the country's democratic institutions were severely damaged, Machado ran for the National Assembly in 2010 and received more votes than any other candidate. In 2011, she announced an agenda of "Popular Capitalism" in which Venezuela would "leave behind the entitlement model in order to build true prosperity for its citizens." She mounted a strong defense of private property, exclaiming that "if you can't own the fruit of your labor, then you don't own your labor and thus you aren't free."

Machado set herself apart by not only challenging authoritarianism, but by also challenging the whole ideology of socialism when other opposition leaders still felt they could make socialistic policies work under democracy. Venezuelans remember when Machado confronted Chávez on national TV on the floor of the National Assembly in 2012, denouncing his disastrous record and calling him a thief to his face because of the regime's unlawful expropriations. They recall too how Chavistas broke her nose in the same chamber the following year in the aftermath of Chávez's death and the fraudulent elections that brought Maduro to power.

In 2014, I was with Machado at a meeting in Lima, Peru, along with Peruvian Nobel laureate in literature Mario Vargas Llosa and other classical liberals from Latin America, when she was informed that she would not be able to leave Venezuela if she returned home. Machado chose to go back anyway, knowing she would face increased persecution. We knew we might not see her in person again for a long while, and indeed, she did not leave her country for almost 12 years until her recent escape.

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## **Taking the Regime by Surprise**

Socialism under Maduro deepened economic hardship and repression, including crimes against humanity. Under his rule, the economy contracted by 75 percent, according to Harvard economist Ricardo Hausmann, who points out that such a collapse “has never happened in the history of humanity in any context outside of war.” Some eight million Venezuelans, about a quarter of the population, fled the country.

Those years also saw an opposition with ineffective, divisive, and even complicit leaders, until María Corina Machado unified it by deciding to run in the 2024 presidential election. After she won 93 percent of the vote in the opposition primary, the regime illegally disqualified her candidacy. Machado then supported Edmundo González to run in her place.

The opposition not only won by a landslide, with nearly 70 percent of the vote, but unlike in past elections,

it was able to prove its victory shortly afterward. For months, Machado’s team had secretly prepared to undertake the logistically complex task of collecting and documenting vote tallies nationwide. The effort involved 600,000 citizen volunteers, who covered more than 80 percent of the country’s voting booths and collected over 80 percent of the tallies.

Machado had outsmarted the dictatorship and taken it by surprise. The ballot-box outcome and scale of the regime’s defeat represented the opposition’s most important victory in more than 20 years of tyranny. By providing the world with undeniable evidence of the Chavista loss, Machado had robbed the regime of its habitual claims to legitimacy. She had not only exposed what turned out to be almost certainly the largest electoral fraud in Latin American history, but she had also revealed the extent to which the regime had lost support from its own ranks, as the opposition could only have collected the vote tallies with the complicity of the soldiers guarding the polling stations. Maduro, of course, refused to leave office, and the world witnessed the brutal repression that followed.

The Machado-led victory thus managed to also discredit much of the Latin American left by putting its hypocrisy and sympathy with extremism on display. The region’s leftist governments that had long provided cover for the Venezuelan regime now had to choose whether or not to condemn their ally. Some did, while others gave the dictatorship outright support or called only for it to provide evidence of its victory, a request that was duly ignored.



At this Cato Institute policy forum in 2009, María Corina Machado warned that freedom requires constant vigilance, and predicted that Venezuelans would one day reclaim it: “We took democracy for granted, and we didn’t realize how much you have to work every day in order to defend freedom. We’re learning it the hard way, but once we achieve it, and we will, I’m sure we will value it much more.”

After the 2024 elections, Machado continued to mobilize mass rallies and display tremendous courage in the face of continued threats to her life and safety, as countless supporters were still being arrested, killed, or tortured. The extreme repression forced her into hiding. She nevertheless used the opportunity to issue regular video messages and calls to action to the nation.

### **Toward a Legitimate Transition**

María Corina Machado has proven herself to be a principled, politically savvy, and effective leader. She enjoys overwhelming popular support and the political legitimacy required for effective governance. Her team has a well-thought-out plan for the transition to democracy and establishment of political and economic freedom. The United States should begin working with her as soon as possible.

Working with what remains of the dictatorship, by contrast, is an unstable arrangement. The regime’s leaders, some of whom have been indicted by the United States, distrust each other and cannot be expected to work together peacefully to

relinquish their power or move toward a transition. In addition, any major decisions made without the involvement of the Machado-led opposition could be questioned or revised by a future legitimate government. These are not ideal conditions for investment or economic recovery.

Venezuela’s transition to a free society will face significant challenges. But Venezuelan society is not politically polarized or fractured along religious, ethnic, or cultural lines; it is much closer to resembling 1989 Eastern Europe than 2003 Iraq. By working with María Corina Machado, the Venezuelan who unified the country and has done the most to defeat its socialist tyranny, the United States can go a long way toward achieving its foreign policy goals while Venezuelans themselves can establish a liberal democracy. ✦

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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