

BUILDING DEMOCRACY FROM BELOW IN VENEZUELA

An Interview with María Corina Machado

YJIA: As a cofounder of *Súmate*, you helped organize a national referendum on President Hugo Chavez in 2004. Although the referendum did not unseat the President, you and several *Súmate* cofounders were charged by the Chávez administration with conspiracy and treason for having accepted funding from the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy. But now six years later, you have been elected to the Venezuelan National Assembly on an opposition platform, and you have received the highest number of votes of any candidate in the election. Can you describe your decision to seek elected office given these political circumstances?

María Corina Machado: I have to start by saying that I'm an engineer. My postgraduate degree is in corporate finance. So I actually never imagined myself as a public servant and even less as a member of the Parliament. But the Venezuelan situation has turned so critical. In 2002, I realized we needed to find a way in which we could peacefully channel the growing social tensions that were happening in my country. So we decided to stop warring and start acting as citizens. A group of friends—mostly engineers—and I decided to create the organization, *Súmate*, that had a more managerial and technical perspective. We never imagined that an organization promoted by five engineers could in less than a year turn into an organization with more than 50,000 volunteers throughout the whole country.

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After the referendum, we realized that citizen participation was critical and that we needed to strengthen responsibility on the citizens' side. Thus, *Súmate* started working

María Corina Machado is the cofounder and former president of the all-volunteer electoral watchdog group, *Súmate*, in Venezuela. A champion of civil society development and community participation, Ms. Machado was a Yale University World Fellow in 2009 and currently serves as a representative in the Venezuelan National Assembly.

as an electoral watchdog, launching the long process of understanding the importance of building democracy every single day, of understanding our rights and duties and how to exercise them. After many years in this process, I started realizing that unless you have a responsible government, all these efforts would not produce a better country, a better nation. So I thought about the possibility of serving the public myself and about how to make government more responsible from within.

YJIA: How does your international experience inform your work in Venezuela? At the same time, how does your work in Venezuela have applicability for activists in other parts of Latin America?

MCM: Leadership – political leadership, in particular – has to have a global view and a global understanding. Five years ago, I was selected as a member of the Young Global Leaders of the World Economic Forum, which was the first important step in getting to know incredible people from different sectors – such as science, culture, business, and politics – and there I realized the necessity of recognizing the complex processes taking place around the world in order to understand the potential of my own country.

YJIA: The United States is the largest importer of Venezuelan oil exports and relations between the two countries have been fraught. What unique insights do you think your ties here in the United States provide in terms of a roadmap to inform how the Obama administration might best promote democracy and human rights in Venezuela?

MCM: This is not an easy question because I think we have to revisit relations over a longer period. I believe the United States has not quite understood the potential of a mutually beneficial relationship with Latin America. Today, even under the current administration, Latin America is quite far down the list, and I think that is a big mistake because the opportunity cost for the United States is huge, as well as the cost for Venezuela because of issues such as drug trafficking, immigration, and corruption. We are very close as countries, making it harder today to separate these problems.

On the other hand, I think that President Chávez has been profoundly misunderstood in terms of what his model represents. Not long ago, I read in the *New York Times* the claim that Chávez is a nuisance but not a threat, so why bother? But the fact is, putting aside the huge destruction and pain that the Venezuelan society is suffering in the name of social justice and inclusion, a democratic society has been destroyed and an authoritarian regime is being imposed. A government that has no governability, that cannot enforce law and order in its borders, and that promotes and supports certain kinds of groups and activities throughout the region is a problem. It is a big problem for not only Venezuela but also the United States. I have to insist, though, that I am absolutely convinced Venezuelan problems have to be solved by Venezuelans.

YJIA: With this election, President Hugo Chávez's socialist party no longer holds a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. You have been quoted as saying this indicates that, "Venezuela said no to Cuban-like communism." What are the implications of this election for Venezuela in its role in Latin America?

MCM: We need to understand how important the issue of legitimacy of origin is for the current regime. Promoting elections is a way to give the government a democratic façade inside and out. In the last eleven years, we have had nineteen elections, so if a leader wants to stay in power indefinitely – which I believe is Chávez’s aim – and he or she accomplishes this through elections, then the next step is to control the electoral process because he or she would not want to risk losing the only legitimacy he or she has left, which is that of origin.

The first strategy of an authoritarian regime is to convince dissenters that they are a minority and that they do not have the incentive to organize and take risks. When the minority believes that they are few in number and lack majority support, most of them will stop dissenting. So I think we need to empower people and convince the dissenters that the majority of Venezuelans want to live in a democracy with progress and respect.

Our great challenge now is how we can have a process of transition for the country that is inclusive. We need a new emerging leadership that is an alternative to the current leadership and that understands the good things we had in the past – particularly from the last decade – and the big challenges we have in front of us. It is going to be a difficult moment.

YJIA: Speaking of the façade of legitimacy, now that this election has taken place and it is clear that there is a strong, vital opposition movement, and now that your party is in the national assembly, what do you see as your mandate? What is your legislative agenda?

MCM: Venezuela will start changing when we have a leadership that comes not to seek revenge and division, but to reunite the country. I am not talking about impunity because people get very scared when you say this. There has to be justice. In my case, I have had several trials in which my rights were violated. My commitment is to work for a country and a society in which even the rights of those who violated me will be respected.

I think the biggest challenge now is how we can prevent violence and crime from happening in the process of transition. Venezuela has around 75 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, which is 10 times as many as Mexico has. In this sense, the first thing we need to do is have a profound change in the rhetoric of current leaders that unites and respects. But we cannot be naïve. The government has a majority in terms of the number of seats. Nevertheless, we have the majority of the votes, which gives us the strong moral authority to speak up and fight.

YJIA: In this effort and your transition from non-profit work to elected office, can you talk about the challenges of getting private organizations, NGOs, and the government to partner more effectively on democracy promotion?

MCM: I believe this is absolutely necessary. Especially in countries like Venezuela where there exists political polarization and a situation moving away from democracy, in the long term, the only way we will efficiently solve our main problems in education, health, security, and housing is through the partnership of the three sectors. You have to get people involved. One thing that has been perhaps the most significant lesson

in the last decade is the importance of citizen organization and participation. The idea of empowering people has been a part of President Chávez's discourse since the beginning, which has been valuable, and I agree with the notion. The problem is when participation is translated into an instrument of political control and when a leader only supports those who follow his or her orders. In the end, this leader is not giving power to the people. He is taking it away.

The notion of citizens' demands for results and citizen participation in how budgets are prepared in the implementation of local solutions is fundamental. I think this is the irreversible direction in which Venezuela will move.

YJIA: How will your work specifically impact women's social and political rights in Venezuela and beyond?

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MCM: When you look at the numbers in Venezuela, 52 percent of the population is female, six out of every ten households are run by women, and seven out of every ten individuals who do social work are women. However, when you look at our National Assembly, only 17 percent of members are women. In the next National Assembly – I am ashamed to say – this number is going to be even lower. I was the only woman from the opposition alliance in my home state, and only five of us from the whole opposition have been elected. So I realize I have a huge responsibility.

There are issues critical to society that women must live and suffer, and these issues should be prioritized in discussions, in funding, and in public policies. These critical issues include the non-existence of programs to support working mothers, the non-existence of programs for sexual education, and the prevention of abortion. In Venezuela, abortion is prohibited; however, two

young women die every week because of abortion malpractice, and nobody wants to discuss this issue. Another problem is the growth of gender-based violence. Today, 95 percent of all complaints received by the courts concern violence against women in their houses. One of my goals for the next country council elections is to look for women to run for office because men essentially run the political parties in Venezuela. There are many willing women, and the whole perspective is necessary. It is an interesting moment for the world. ▼

– Interview conducted by Audrey Latura.