

Venezuela to Face Serious Challenges with Unknown Retired Professor Leading the Polls

By [Uriel Araujo](#)

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*With the Venezuelan presidential election coming up on July 28, retired diplomat **Edmundo González** is reported to be leading the polls, even though the former ambassador was unknown to the majority of the population up to a few months ago and never sought elected office. By his own admission, he had "absolutely no plans to be a presidential candidate... much less to be president" until April this year when he was invited by the Venezuelan opposition to be their presidential candidate after the authorities prevented both **María Corina Machado**, the former candidate, and her stopgap from running.*

The whole issue about María Corina Machado's would-be candidacy is controversial. It is worth highlighting that by the end of March this year there were no less than 11 opposition candidates in Venezuela – albeit the country is often described as dictatorship. Each and every one of those was able to register as candidates without issues, Machado being the only one refused.

It would be fair to describe Machado as an extremist: for example, she took part in the Pedro Carmona's 2002 attempted military coup, [signing](#) the infamous [Carmona Decree](#). Carmona was a business leader (president of the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce), who acted as de facto president of Venezuela for just one day. During his brief rule, both the Supreme Court and the National Assembly were dissolved, with the Constitution being declared void. There were various arbitrary detentions, including that of then president Hugo Chavez, Maduro's predecessor. With the support of crowds of demonstrators and the military, Chavez was then restored to office. Carmona is also known to have defended sanctions against his own people.

Last week, the Venezuelan government arrested some people involved in Machado's campaign (including her campaign manager), under the accusation of having taken part in a violent plot. Considering their record, such accusations should be taken seriously, albeit one

is tempted to quickly denounce them as political persecution and nothing else.

Machado in fact faces a 15-year disqualification for her involvement in the whole **Juan Guaidó's** affair. Her alternate, **Corina Yoris** (a little known academic who has never held public administration positions) was similarly unable to register due to technicalities. Namely, Yoris own political party was an unregistered one (all she had to do was to find a registered political party and join it).

Then, without many alternatives, the little known academic and retired diplomat Edmundo González Urrutia was named as a kind of temporary replacement. And now he seems to be leading the polls.

In 2021, after the [Juan Guaidó's imbroglio](#), the Venezuelan opposition itself recognized **President Nicolas Maduro's** government, as I [wrote](#) at the time – although it oscillates between participating in elections and boycotting them. For years, the South American nation has been facing heavier US sanctions and falling oil prices, which contributed to an oil production collapse, export revenue being the cornerstone of the Venezuelan economy. On top of that, Washington plus several European governments blocked Maduro's government's access to over \$7 billion of state funds held overseas. It did bring about a national catastrophe. In a bizarre situation, control of the nation's bank accounts (frozen by the US) [is given to the opposition](#), without accountability – unsurprisingly, [corruption charges](#) against opposition leaders abound since at least 2019.



Image: Hugo Chavez (Source: CADTM)

Some context is needed. **Hugo Chavez**, whether one likes him or not, was indeed a very popular president in his country and, contrary to what many believe in the West, he and his Bolivarian Revolution did bring about a number of [social advances](#), pertaining to education, inequality, health and income. Even the [2010 OAS report](#) which denounces Venezuela's human rights standards acknowledges that "in terms of economic, social, and cultural rights, the IACHR recognizes the State's achievements with regard to the progressive observance of these rights, including, most notably, the eradication of illiteracy, the reduction of poverty, and the increase in access by the most vulnerable sectors to basic services such as health care."

According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), poverty rates fell from 49.4% in 1999 to 23.9% in 2012, this being the [largest success in poverty reduction](#) among 11 countries in the region. All of this explains the long-lasting cult of Hugo Chavez to this day among sectors of the population. However, the country has been facing serial economic problems for a while, and Maduro's popularity is clearly declining for a number of reasons.

Besides the aforementioned economic and humanitarian catastrophe, geopolitically-wise, the country faces challenges pertaining to the oil discoveries in Guyana and [Suriname](#), amid the Washington-Beijing trade war. The [geopolitical dispute between these two superpowers](#) actually goes beyond trade, encompassing the [diplomatic and military](#) realms. The specter of a US intervention still haunts the region, with rising tensions [involving Colombia](#). Venezuela largely counts on both Iran and, indirectly, on [China](#), to counter American sanctions and to project its oil market share. It would not be reasonable to expect the current Venezuelan opposition to have the diplomatic wisdom to pursue a pragmatic foreign policy, given their ideological profile and lack of experience.

Venezuela faces many problems which also include bad policy choices, mismanagement and issues involving freedoms, with a PSUV (the hegemonic party) in crisis. It cannot live on Chavez's nostalgia forever. One however would be mistaken to assume that the Venezuelan opposition today represented by the likes of María Corina Machado and Juan Guaidó are some sort of "democratic" alternative. They are not and their records speak otherwise. They are part of a violent radicalized minority heavily funded by the US without training in politics or public policy.

There are indeed cultural and social reasons beyond the phenomenon of newcomer Edmundo González leading the polls - if the group behind takes over Venezuelans could face problems similar to the ones one can see today in Argentina, with **Javier Milei**. And this could have serious impacts on the continent.

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Uriel Araujo is a researcher with a focus on international and ethnic conflicts. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

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