

Toast to Freedom by Ana Corina Sosa

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Good evening, everyone. It is an honor to be here with you.

I am part of the generation that was born in a country with the strongest democracy in Latin America. A nation admired for its academic institutions and envied for its energy sector. A place with plenty of opportunities. A place where we opened the doors to millions of people around the world who came to Venezuela in search of a better life.

But I did not grow up in that Venezuela. I grew up in a country destroyed by the Chavista regime, where misery and repression became the norm. Where our institutions collapsed. Where one quarter of the population had to leave the country, separating millions of families. And our opportunities disappeared. But what the regime did not realize is that it is precisely this reality that awakened a firm commitment within my generation to rebuild and recover our country.

My mother, María Corina Machado, has fought and struggled for the freedom of Venezuela for as long as I can remember, and for this reason we have confronted, along with thousands of other Venezuelan families, the true face of tyranny. It was in 2004, the first time I really felt the weight of injustice when my mom was charged with conspiracy and treason, with a possible sentence of 12 years in prison. I was 12 years old at the time and didn't know when I was going to see my mom again.

During these two decades my mother has been assaulted, persecuted, and arrested. The government has harassed my family. My grandfather's company was expropriated. His life's work was a product of honest labor. They took it because he did not bend his values in the face of the corruption of the Chavista government. Thousands of Venezuelans are out of work, and right now my grandmother's house

is surrounded by armed policemen from the Bolivarian National Secret Police harassing an 84-year-old woman. In a dictatorship there is no room for humanity.

My mother has not been allowed to leave Venezuela for more than ten years, and today she has been in hiding for more than six months, isolated, with constant threats against her life. Only a few weeks ago, on January 9, when she came out of hiding to accompany Venezuelans in their peaceful struggle, she was violently detained, kidnapped, shot at, and the brave man driving her motorcycle was shot in the leg and is still in prison today.

At that moment, my siblings and I received the call we have feared all our lives telling us “the regime has your mom.” What followed were hours that I would not wish on anyone. Twenty years of this struggle taught us very well what they are capable of doing. But even in the darkest moments, I never doubted that she was fighting for what was right. In Venezuela, Venezuelans have lived two decades under tyranny, marked by humiliation, without freedom, without dignity, under a crude discourse of lies that seeks to make us doubt ourselves with a rhetoric of hate that seeks to separate us.

But we have said enough! *Basta!* They have taken everything from Venezuelans. They took away key moments of our lives, with our loved ones. We have been robbed of opportunities. They have shut down the media so that we cannot raise our voices. They have expropriated the companies and small businesses that gave us prosperity. And they have destroyed our universities and colleges so that we are not trained. But they can never take away our will to be free.

Under this oppression, resistance is not an option. It is a moral obligation. And what has happened in Venezuela over the last year and a half is proof of just that. We never believed possible what was achieved last year under threat. Against all odds, millions of Venezuelans went out to vote on July 28 and gave a decisive victory against the dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro, with almost 70% of the votes in our favor and the results in our hands as proof for the whole world. But the most

important thing is that a historic civic movement was built, unprecedented in Venezuela, which spread throughout the country to defend the electoral process and a movement composed of all sectors of the country.

There are no longer Chavistas versus opponents. There are no longer rich versus poor. There are no longer even left versus right. There is a united country asking for the same thing. My mom is talking about an existential struggle that goes far beyond the defense of a presidential election. She appeals to the freedom of the individual, human dignity, and for the reunification of our families. The first freedom, the first struggle, is fought in our minds and in our hearts. And that is what has awakened Venezuelans this past year. And that is why we have already defeated the dictatorship.

Let there be no doubt, we defeat it because our strength comes from our commitment to defend the truth, because good will triumph over evil and because we have conquered fear once and for all. Our struggle in Venezuela is an ethical struggle for truth, an existential struggle for life, and a spiritual struggle for freedom. And if there is one thing I want to tell you tonight, it is that freedom will always be worth fighting for.

We will take our fight to the end. This toast that weighs heavily on me, I want to dedicate to all the unnamed Venezuelan heroes who have dedicated their lives not only to the freedom of Venezuela and the future of our country but to the future of generations to come. This is for them. Thank you.