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THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

Speech given by

Chair of The Norwegian
Nobel Committee
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Nobel Peace Prize 2025

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Your Majesties,
Your Royal Highnesses,
Esteemed laureate,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Samantha Sofia Hernandez, a girl of 16, was brutally abducted last month by masked members of the Maduro regime's security forces. She was taken from the home of her grandparents. Where she is now, we don't know – probably in one of the dictatorship's detention centres. She may be with her father, who disappeared without a trace in January.

What had they done wrong?

Her brother was a soldier, but refused to follow the regime's orders to commit brutal acts against the population.

For that offence, the entire family must be punished.

Juan Requesens is ordered to turn slowly towards the camera. The video shows him standing with a dazed look, as if in a fog, wearing underwear stained with excrement. He had supposedly confessed to planning a coup. But of course, there was no proof. The day before his arrest, Juan had stood before the National Assembly. He gave a speech in which he repeated one key sentence, a promise to his country and to himself: "I refuse to give up."

Alfredo Diaz, an opposition leader and former mayor, was pulled from a bus last November and thrown into the depths of El Helicoide, Latin America's largest torture chamber. One more political prisoner, in a long line of others. This week came the news of his death. Another life gone. Another victim of the regime.

These stories are not unique. This is Venezuela today. It is how the Venezuelan regime treats its own people. A sister. A student. A politician. Anyone who still believes in stating the truth out loud may disappear violently into a system built specifically to eradicate this belief.

Samantha, Juan and Alfredo were not extremists. They were ordinary Venezuelans dreaming of freedom, democracy and rights.

For this, their lives were stolen from them.

Under this regime, children are not spared. More than 200 children were arrested after the election in 2024. The United Nations documented their experiences as follows:

Plastic bags pulled tight over their heads.
Electric shocks to the genitals.
Blows to the body so brutal that it hurt to breathe.
Sexualised violence.
Cells so cold as to cause intense shivering.
Foul drinking water, teeming with insects.
Screams that no one came to stop.

One child lay in the dark whispering his mother's name, over and over, in the hope she would not believe he was dead.

A 16-year-old boy eventually came home, so ravaged by electric shocks and beatings that he could not hug his mother without pain shooting through his body. For months he jumped at every sound and barely slept. At night he would wake with a jolt -- convinced the soldiers were back, to resume their attacks.

As we sit here in Oslo City Hall, innocent people are locked away in dark cells in Venezuela. They cannot hear the speeches given today – only the screams of prisoners being tortured.

This is how authoritarian powers try to crush those who stand up for democracy.
The United Nations has declared these acts to be crimes against humanity.
This is the regime of Nicolas Maduro.

Venezuela has evolved into a brutal, authoritarian state facing a deep humanitarian and economic crisis. Meanwhile, a small elite at the top – shielded by political power, weapons and legal impunity – enriches itself.

In the shadow of this crisis, thousands of women and children are forced into prostitution and human trafficking. Daughters simply disappear. Children become objects of trade in the hands of criminals who see human desperation as a business opportunity.

A quarter of the population has already fled the country – one of the world's largest refugee crises.

Those who remain live under a regime that systematically silences, harasses and attacks the opposition.

Venezuela is not alone in this darkness. The world is on the wrong track. The authoritarians are gaining.

We must ask the inconvenient question:

Why is it so hard for us to preserve democracy – a form of government that was conceived to protect our freedom and peace?

When democracy loses, the result is more conflict, more violence, more war.

In 2024, more elections were held than in any previous year – but ever fewer are free and fair. The power of the law is misused. Independent media are silenced. Critics are imprisoned.

More and more countries, including those with long democratic traditions, are drifting towards authoritarianism and militarism.

Authoritarian regimes learn from each other. They share technology and propaganda systems. Behind Maduro stand Cuba, Russia, Iran, China and Hezbollah – providing weapons, surveillance and economic lifelines. They make the regime more robust, and more brutal.

And yet – amid this darkness – we find Venezuelans who have refused to give up. Those who keep the flame of democracy alive. Who never yield despite the enormous personal cost. They remind us continually of what is at stake.

Many of them are with us today:

Venezuela's president elect, Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia.

Carlos, the poet.

Claudia, the activist.

Pedro, the university professor.

Ana Luisa, the nurse.

Corina, the grandmother.

Antonio, the opposition politician.

Maria Corina, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

At the heart of the battle for democracy shines a simple truth: Democracy is more than a form of government. It is also the basis for lasting peace.

Millions of Venezuelans know this.

Year after year, students, trade unions, journalists, business groups and ordinary citizens have mobilised in waves of resistance.

They have filled the streets in protest. When their votes were taken away, they banged pots and pans. When state surveillance is inescapable, they whisper.

People across the political spectrum – from communists to conservatives – have risen to challenge the regime. The opposition has tried one strategy after another.

Through it all, they have said: We strive not for revenge, but for justice. For the sanctity of the ballot box. For democracy. For peace.

But they are told, in reply, that those things are impossible. That they will fail.

And when the Venezuelans asked the world to pay attention – we turned away.

As they lost their rights, their food, their health and safety – and eventually their own futures – much of the world stuck to old narratives. Some insisted Venezuela was an ideal egalitarian society. Others wanted only to see a struggle against imperialism. Still others chose to interpret Venezuelan reality as a contest between superpowers, overlooking the bravery of those who seek freedom in their own country. What all these observers have in common is this: the moral betrayal of those who actually live under this brutal regime.

If you only support people who share your political views, you have understood neither freedom nor democracy. Yet many critics stop there. They see local democratic forces cooperating, by necessity, with actors they dislike – and use that to justify withholding support. This puts ideological conviction ahead of human solidarity.

How should we regard those who use all their energy finding fault with the hard choices that brave defenders of democracy have had to make – instead of recognising their courage and their sacrifice, or asking how we, too, can help fight dictatorship?

It is easy to stand on principle when someone else's freedom is at stake. But no democracy movement operates in ideal circumstances. Activist leaders must confront and resolve dilemmas that we onlookers are free to ignore. People living under dictatorship often have to choose between the difficult and the impossible. Yet many of us – from a safe distance – expect Venezuela's democratic leaders to pursue their aims with a moral purity their opponents never display. This is unrealistic. It is unfair. And it shows ignorance of history.

Many who have stood at this podium to receive the Nobel Peace Prize – including Lech Walesa and Nelson Mandela – knew well the dilemmas of dialogue.

In authoritarian systems, dialogue can lead to improvement – but it can also be a trap. Dialogue is often used to buy time, create division and control the agenda. Maria Corina Machado has participated in dialogue processes for years. She has never rejected the principle of talking to the other side – but she has dismissed empty processes.

Peace without justice is not peace.

Dialogue without truth is not reconciliation.

Venezuela's future can take many forms. But the present is one thing only – and it is horrific.

This is why the democratic opposition in Venezuela must have our support -- not our indifference, or worse, condemnation. Every day, its leaders must choose a path that is in fact open to them, not the path of wishful thinking.

Support for democratic development is support for peace.

But since the announcement of this year's Nobel Peace Prize, the question has been posed: Does democracy really lead to peace?

The research findings are crystal clear, and the answer is yes. Not because democracy is perfect, but because the mechanisms of democracy make war less likely.

Democracies are equipped with safety valves: free media, power-sharing structures, independent courts, civil society organisations and elections that make it possible to change leadership without violence. In this political environment, differing opinions are not a threat to be put down, but an advantage.

In a democracy, a leader who ignores facts can be replaced in the next election. In an authoritarian regime, the leader stays in power – and replaces all who tell uncomfortable truths. Loyalty takes the place of reality, and dangerous decisions are taken in the dark. War is always costly – but in authoritarian regimes, it is not the leaders who pay the highest price. This is why democracies almost never go to war with each other, as authoritarian states are more prone to do.

Nicolas Maduro's rule in Venezuela shows why. Conflicts are resolved with brute force, not negotiation. The result is a society where millions are forced into silence, with consequences that do not stop at the border. Instability, violence and systematic destruction of the country's institutions have affected the entire region, and a neighbouring country has been threatened with military invasion. Venezuela demonstrates – with painful clarity – that authoritarian rule both destroys society from within and spreads instability abroad.

Democracy is obviously no guarantee of peace, but it is the most effective system we have to prevent violence and conflict.

This line of reasoning often prompts a well-known counterargument: that democracy itself causes unrest and conflict – that demanding freedom is dangerous. This is an old claim. Authoritarian leaders have used it for generations to defend their positions of power. Today they supercharge the argument with disinformation and propaganda – two of their essential weapons.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As citizens in a democracy we have a duty to be critical of information sources. Alarm bells should ring when the views we express are identical to those disseminated by one of the world's most manipulative disinformation systems. For in that case, we are not just spreading information, we are spreading the strategic propaganda of a dictator.

What are we all to think when we read that it is the Venezuelan opposition that's threatening the country with war – that the democratic movement desires an invasion? When the narrative is turned upside down, and the victims are branded aggressors? This is the version of reality the Maduro regime tells the world: that it is the guarantor of peace. But peace based on fear, silence and torture – is no peace. It is submission, depicted as stability.

No, the source of the violence is not democracy activists. It is those at the top who refuse to cede power. It was not Nelson Mandela who made South Africa violent, but the apartheid regime's crackdown on demands for equality. Opposition groups did not start the imprisonments in Belarus, the executions in Iran – or the persecution in Venezuela. The violence comes from authoritarian regimes, as they lash out against popular calls for change.

Peace and democracy cannot be separated without draining both of meaning. Lasting peace depends on the rule of law, political participation and respect for human dignity.

Before we can discuss our political disagreements, we must establish some form of democracy. Without it, there is no meaningful distinction between right and left, no way to legitimately disagree, no genuine politics.

Democracy is not an expendable luxury.

It is not an ornament to put on a shelf.

Democracy is hard work.

It is action and negotiation.

It is a living obligation.

The instruments of democracy are the instruments of peace.

We gather today, therefore, to defend something far more important than either side of a political or ideological divide. We gather to defend democracy itself – the very foundation on which lasting peace rests.

When people refuse to surrender democracy, they refuse to surrender peace. One who understands this is Maria Corina Machado.

As a founder of Súmate, an organisation devoted to building democracy, Ms Machado stepped forward to advocate free and fair elections more than two decades ago. As she herself put it: “It was a choice of ballots over bullets.”

In political office and in her service to organisations, Ms Machado has spoken out for judicial independence, human rights and popular representation. She has spent years working for the freedom of the Venezuelan people.

The presidential election of 2024 was a key factor in the selection of this year’s Peace Prize laureate. Ms Machado was the opposition’s presidential candidate – and the country’s unifying voice of hope. When the regime blocked her candidacy, the movement might have collapsed, but she threw her support behind Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia and the opposition stayed together.

The opposition found common ground in the demand for free elections and representative government. This is the very foundation of democracy: our shared willingness to defend the principles of popular rule, even if we disagree on policy. At a time when democracy is under threat around the world, it is more important than ever to defend this common ground.

Hundreds of thousands of volunteers mobilised across political divides. They were trained as election observers and used technology in new ways to document each step in the election. Up to a million people stood watch over polling stations around the country. They uploaded vote tallies, photographed records and secured copies before the regime could destroy them. They defended this documentation with their lives, then made sure the world learned the results of the election.

This was grassroots mobilisation unlike any that Venezuela, and probably the world, had ever seen. Ordinary citizens from all walks of life carrying out systematic, high-tech documentary work in an atmosphere of threats, surveillance and violence.

The efforts of this democracy movement, both before and after the election, were innovative and brave, peaceful and democratic.

The opposition received international support when its leaders publicised the vote counts that were collected from the country’s election districts, showing that the opposition had won by a clear margin.

But the regime denied it all. It falsified the election results and clung to power – violently.

For the past year, Ms Machado has had to live in hiding.

Despite serious threats, she has remained in the country – an inspiration to millions.

She is receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for 2025 for her tireless work promoting democratic rights for the people of Venezuela and for her struggle to achieve a peaceful and just transition from dictatorship to democracy.

For a long, long time, the opposition in Venezuela has relied on democracy’s toolbox to wage its peaceful civilian campaign. Over the years, Ms Machado and her allies have had to adapt

and change tactics. They have applied almost every democratic tool: from election boycotts when the system was too rotten, to participation when small openings in the process made it possible. They have tried dialogue, organisation, mobilisation and extensive election documentation.

Ms Machado has appealed for international attention, support and pressure – not for an invasion of Venezuela.

She has urged people to stand up for their rights using peaceful, democratic means.

Peace research shows it clearly: Widespread non-violent mobilisation is among the most effective methods of achieving political change in a dictatorship. When a population mobilises, and the international community exerts strong pressure, and the security forces refrain from using violence against the population – a tipping point may arrive.

As the leader of the democracy movement in Venezuela, Maria Corina Machado is one of the most extraordinary examples of civilian courage in recent Latin American history.

This year's Nobel Peace Prize fulfils all three of the criteria stated in Alfred Nobel's will.

First, the Venezuelan opposition has united political movements, civil society organisations and ordinary citizens in pursuit of one goal: the restoration of democracy. Pulling together diverse groups that previously opposed one another is the modern equivalent of what Alfred Nobel called holding peace congresses.

Second, Venezuela's democracy movement has opposed the regime's militarisation of society. The regime has armed thousands of groups, authorised paramilitary bands to commit abuses and invited foreign military forces into the country, thereby accelerating the militarisation. By documenting abuses and demanding accountability, the opposition seeks to strengthen civilian democratic authority and roll back the influence of weapons. This deprives criminals and regime-friendly militias of their arms and autonomy – and satisfies Nobel's criterion of seeking peace through disarmament.

Third, true fraternity or fellowship – the kind Alfred Nobel envisaged – requires democracy. Only when people are able to choose their leaders and speak without fear can peace take root, whether inside a society or between countries. Democracy is the highest form of fellowship, and the surest way to lasting peace.

Therefore, here today, in this hall – with all the gravity that attends the Nobel Peace Prize and this annual ceremony – we will say what authoritarian leaders fear most:

Your power is not permanent.

Your violence will not prevail over people who rise and resist.

Mr Maduro,

You should accept the election results and step down.

Lay the foundation for a peaceful transition to democracy.

Because that is the will of the Venezuelan people.

Maria Corina Machado and the Venezuelan opposition have lit a flame that no torture, no lie and no fear can extinguish.

When the history of our time is written, it won't be the names of the authoritarian rulers that stand out – but the names of those who dared resist.

Those who stood tall in the face of danger.

Those who kept going, when others gave up.

Carl von Ossietzky.

Andrei Sakharov.

Nelson Mandela.

In its long history, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has honoured brave women and men who have stood up against repression, who have carried the hope of freedom in prison cells, in the streets and in public squares, and shown by these actions that resistance can change the world.

Today, we honour you, Maria Corina Machado.

We pay tribute as well to all who wait in the dark.

All who have been arrested and tortured, or have disappeared.

All who continue to hope.

All those in Caracas and other cities of Venezuela who are forced to whisper the language of freedom.

May they hear us now.

May they realise that the world is not turning away.

That freedom is drawing closer.

And that Venezuela will become peaceful and democratic.

Let a new age dawn.