Venezuela opposition hold defiant rally one month before election

AFP – The lights of several thousand mobile phones illuminated a main boulevard of Venezuela's San Cristobal city in a euphoric welcome to opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, one month ahead of a deeply contentious presidential election.

The fiery 56-year-old is not a candidate, having been declared ineligible by institutions loyal to President Nicolas Maduro. But she is the figurehead everyone has come out to see, and residents clogged the roadway Friday waving national flags, blowing horns and cheering.

Machado has been calling relentlessly for Venezuelans to vote for her lesser-known replacement, diplomat Edmundo Gonzalez, and defeat Maduro in the July 28 election.

Polls consistently put the opposition ahead of the incumbent, who has been in office since 2013 and is seeking a third term.

But in a country mired in an extended economic crisis, with government leaders slapped with international sanctions, experts and the opposition alike are warning of possible fraud or other foul play in the month to come.

"We won't accept them stealing the elections from us," Machado told AFP. "We are an organized civic movement, but not a weak one: it is profoundly strong."

Standing on a flatbed truck, she waved to a sea of supporters, and as night fell they turned on their phone lights.

"Yes we can! Yes we could!" they chanted in the main street of

San Cristobal, a city near the Colombian border and one hard hit by the economic crisis.

Supporters, some in tears, ran alongside the truck hoping for a glance, a wave or a greeting from the woman fans have dubbed “the iron lady.”

Machado blew kisses and received gifts, including rosaries which she draped around her neck, paintings, shirts, even a lucky two dollar bill.

“I am a soccer coach, and thanks to that bill I have won two tournaments with my 10-year-olds. But I gave it to her because that bill will provide the luck to get rid of this dictatorship,” Pedro Miguel Suarez told AFP.

– ‘Our hope’ –

Machado is a fervent opponent of Chavismo, the brand of populist leftist ideology championed by the late firebrand president Hugo Chavez and inherited by Maduro.

In San Cristobal she gave no speech, and her aides did not bring sound equipment for fear of reprisals by pro-Maduro authorities against those who provided it.

Officials have closed or inspected some 16 establishments including hotels, restaurants and bars which have served Machado and her team during her electoral tour, according to Acceso a la Justicia.

The non-governmental organization has denounced 46 “arbitrary” arrests in the run-up to the election, including 18 members of Machado’s Vente party.

As the caravan progressed, some shouted “Freedom!” or played bugles and violins.

“This was a pilgrimage never seen before,” said Trina Rosales, age 60.

“She is our hope, our freedom,” added her 40-year-old daughter Michelle Rosales, as they followed the opposition leader for blocks.

Along the route, supporters broke into a cappella rendition of the national anthem.

“I can’t believe it,” Machado said. “We’ve won!”