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Venezuela Tries to Silence Critics

By: Editorial Board

Polls suggest that the political party of President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela could take a beating during congressional elections in December. It would be richly deserved for a ruling party that has mismanaged the oil-rich nation's economy, triggering soaring inflation and food shortages. Whether the opposition will get to compete fairly, though, is in doubt. On Monday, officials in Venezuela announced that a leading opposition politician, María Corina Machado, will be barred from running, along with a handful of other government critics. Another leading opposition leader, Leopoldo López, has been imprisoned since February 2014, facing spurious charges.

The action against them is outrageous. Opposition leaders have offered sensible ideas to start addressing the country's monumental problems. In recent days, politicians critical of Mr. Maduro have taken steps to close ranks, which could strengthen an opposition movement that had been beset by divisions in the past. Voters should be allowed to consider whether they represent a better alternative to Mr. Maduro's United Socialist Party.

The United States has called on Venezuela's National Electoral Council and the country's comptroller general to allow Ms. Machado and other banned candidates to appear on the ballot on Dec. 6. "These decisions clearly have the intention of complicating the ability of the opposition to run candidates for the legislative elections and limiting the range of candidates that can be presented to the Venezuelan people," the State Department said.

Ms. Machado was one of the leaders of street protests in early 2014 that were crushed by the authorities. Late last year, Venezuela's top prosecutor filed charges against her for supposedly plotting to assassinate Mr. Maduro. Like the allegations against Mr. López, the charges against Ms. Machado are ludicrous. Opposition leaders have refrained from endorsing acts of violence.

Ms. Machado has offered a substitute candidate for the election in December, but vowed to keep pursuing public office. Latin American leaders should insist that she be allowed to compete. Letting Mr. Maduro weaken his rivals ahead of the election would increase the likelihood that they would see no choice but to take to the streets again. A new round of demonstrations would further destabilize a country already roiled by an economic crisis.