CARACAS, Venezuela — A few weeks ago, Edmundo González Urrutia was just another grandfather visiting his daughter and grandchildren, who live abroad, enjoying two months of family time in retirement. But the leisurely pace - and the anonymity - will have to wait as he now campaigns to become Venezuela’s next president.

President is not a title González ever sought. “Never,” he emphatically told The Associated Press in an interview Thursday at his apartment in his country’s capital, Caracas.

In the whirlwind world of Venezuelan ***politics***, the former ambassador is now crucial to efforts to oust President Nicolás Maduro as the main opposition faction's presidential candidate.

“I have never held an elected position. I have never participated in partisan ***politics*** of positions of elected office,” he said. “I accepted it with enormous responsibility and as a contribution on my part to the democratization of the country, to the process of trying to seek the understanding, reconciliation, of Venezuelans.”

González became the opposition Unitary Platform's candidate last month after former lawmaker María Corina Machado, who [*easily won the group’s presidential primary*](https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-opposition-primary-machado-winner-5d3c4c4b9a4cd42f52729fc0e798954f) last year, and her handpicked alternative were banned from registering. The coalition’s leaders selected him 15 days after he returned from vacation, and he accepted under a few conditions, including that his wife be convinced of the decision.

The July 28 election will have 10 candidates, but apart from the Unitary Platform, none are expected to pose a threat to Maduro’s power base. Maduro officially launched [*his candidacy*](https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-opposition-candidate-corina-yoris-7a7abaea209ea632ad5c3a56a5500ac6) in March for a third term that would last until 2031.

Machado has been campaigning for more than a year, including after Venezuela’s ruling party-loyal top court affirmed an administrative decision blocking her candidacy. She recently began instructing supporters gathered by the thousands at rallies to vote for González, but he is yet to appear before crowds. He said he plans to kick off his campaign later this month and explained that Machado and other opposition leaders will continue to host events around the country.

“The important thing about this is the enthusiasm with which it is happening,” he said of people’s support, which comes after years of calls from the opposition for election boycotts and a sense of general apathy from voters who were repeatedly disappointed by the faction’s earlier promises of change. “Those feelings of joy – of a democratic party at its core – are awakening.”

Asked what role Machado would have in his government should he win, González said it was “premature to think what position she is going to take." What matters at the moment, he said, is that Machado and the Unitary Platform are “rowing in the same direction.”

Machado is not a member of the platform, but she was allowed to participate in its Oct. 22 primary, which she won with more than 90% of support.

Even among Venezuela’s opposition, few have heard of the 74-year-old former diplomat. González began his professional career as an aide to Venezuela’s ambassador in the U.S. He had postings in Belgium and El Salvador and served as Caracas’ ambassador to Algeria.

His last post was as Venezuela’s ambassador to Argentina during the first years of Hugo Chávez’s presidency. More recently, he worked as an international relations consultant, writing about recent political developments in Argentina as well as authoring a historical work on Venezuela’s foreign minister during World War II.

His years in El Salvador and Algeria coincided with periods of armed conflicts in both countries. For a time, his whereabouts were tracked by locals in El Salvador, and he would get calls at home meant to intimidate him, with the callers saying they were aware that González had just gotten home.

Although those countries’ conditions were entirely different from Venezuela’s current political situation, they have prepared González for the unique stress that can come with being a candidate or political leader in the South American country, where real and perceived government adversaries, including campaign staffers of Machado, have been detained, threatened and charged ahead of the election.

Maduro's government has cracked down on the opposition despite promises to pave the way to fair elections in exchange for relief from economic sanctions imposed by the United States last decade as democratic and human rights conditions deteriorated in Venezuela. The recent moves prompted the Biden administration to re-impose crushing oil sanctions last month.

“They are situations that teach one to live in stressful situations, in dangerous situations, in risky situations, in situations where personal insecurity is evident,” he said of his experiences in El Salvador and Algeria. “So yes, in that sense they are experiences that help you manage, function, in an environment that is complicated and difficult.”