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Venezuela Arrests Activist Ahead of National Opposition Protest

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Venezuelan authorities have arrested a once prominent anti-government activist just days before the opposition is set to stage a national protest against the rule of President Nicolas Maduro.

Yon Goicoechea, a former student leader who helped the opposition mount one of the most significant challenges to the late Hugo Chavez, was arrested on charges of possessing detonating cords for explosive devices, the ruling socialist party said Monday. Freddy Guevara, a leader of the opposition Popular Will party, told El Nacional that the charges against Goicoechea were baseless. Goicoechea, who helped organize a wave of protests in 2007, returned to Venezuela in July after completing graduate studies in the U.S. and Spain.

“That man was trained by the U.S. empire for years,” congressmen Diosado Cabello said at a socialist party rally, in western Venezuela. “It looks like his money ran out and he wants to come here to seek blood. They gave him the order there in the United States.”

The opposition plans a demonstration Thursday aimed at pressuring the government to hold a recall referendum against Maduro’s rule. While dogged by record-low approval ratings and an economy in tatters, the president has repeatedly rejected holding a referendum this year while his government has cracked down on dissent.

After participating in protests in 2007 that helped defeat Chavez’s bid to expand his constitutional powers, Goicoechea was awarded the Cato Institute’s Milton Friedman Prize of \$500,000. Since returning to Venezuela in July, he enlisted in the hard-line Popular Will party that spearheaded nationwide anti-government protest two years ago.

Goicoechea's arrest comes on the heels of the transfer of Daniel Ceballos, a popular former mayor and member of Popular Will, from prisoner to house arrest, for allegedly planning to escape and stoke violence at the upcoming march.