Opinion – The Best Attribute of the Nobel Peace Prize Is Its Power to Provoke

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MUKESH KAPILA, OCT 12 2025

I am anxious for the people of Venezuela because one of their political icons, María Corina Machado, got the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize. My disquiet is not around her admirable struggle for democracy and justice, but from apprehension that the plaudit will trigger further strife – which occurs wherever the Nobel Peace Committee decides to give democracy and human rights a fillip. For example, Martin Luther King's 1964 Nobel Prize was followed by his assassination and years of racial confrontation. The Irish rights activist, Sean MacBride, got his Nobel in 1974 with the worst of the Northern Ireland Troubles yet to come. Nuclear scientist turned rights campaigner Andrei Sakharaov earned the Nobel in 1975 along with Soviet designation as "Domestic Enemy Number One" and a decade of KGB clampdowns on civil society.

Other examples of peace awards that opened new chapters of domestic violence or repression include the Dalai Lama (1989), Iran's Shirin Ebadi (2003) and Narges Mohammedi (2023), China's Liu Xiaobo (2010), Russia's Dmitry Muratov (2021), and the 2022 Prize-sharing between Belarus's Ales Bialiatski and Russia's Memorial. The 2015 award to Tunisia's National Dialogue Quartet and 2026 recognition of Maria Ressa (Philippines) previewed continued instability. The Peace Prizes for Argentina's Adolfo Perz Esquivel (1980), Poland's Lech Walesa (1983), and South Africa's Desmond Tutu (1984) were better timed as the peace transitions there were irreversibly underway by then. That indicates the importance of judging the optimal moment to award: get it right and turn a nation on the right path or, conversely, add fuel to the fire. These difficult political judgements are not the Nobel Committee's forte. And its beloved democracy-human rights-peace equation is increasingly challenged by prevailing geopolitics. That raises a dilemma: how ethical is it, from the safety of Oslo, to risk others by provoking the conflict that is inevitably triggered by an award?

Thus, as Venezuela finds itself under the Nobel spotlight, its struggling people should brace for furious reaction from the country's authoritarian leadership at the same time as belligerent signalling by the US whose navy is parked off shore. Venezuela could look to Colombia, spotlighted in 2016 by a Nobel for Juan Manuel Santos for ending a ferocious civil war, suffering new instability augmented by criminal drugs violence and American ire.

The Colombia case illustrates that Nobel Peace Prizes can be a poisoned chalice that bring misfortune for the worthy endeavours they applaud. Take, for example, the 1950 Nobel to Ralph Bunche (US), for mediating the Arab-Israeli war in 1948–49. The associated 'Nakba' uprooted 750,000 Palestinians to entrench regional problems. Anwar Sadat (Egypt) and Menachem Begum (Israel) shared the 1978 Nobel for making mutual peace that caused considerable long-term Arab dis-harmony. The 1994 Nobel, shared by Yassar Arafat (Palestine) and Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres (Israel) for the Oslo Accords, ultimately disappointed. The Arab-Israel theatre has endured the world's most intractable conflict while winning the most Nobel Peace Prizes. That embarrassing correlation should make us thankful that President Donald Trump has not received this year's Nobel as that could have jinxed the fragile Gaza/Israel process underway.

In the 120-year history of the Nobel Peace Prize,140 people and organisations have been awarded. Americans top the list with 23 laureates. Does that make the United States the most peace-loving nation? Especially when that includes four presidents. No other country has been blessed with so many peace-promoting leaders. Meanwhile,

some other Nobel awardees have been let-downs. The US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, got the 1973 Nobel for accord with victorious North Vietnam. But the war continued including the secret US bombing of Cambodia. Multitudes of massacred and displaced Rohingya lament the 1991 Nobel award to Aung San Suu Kyi who turned into a principal apologist for Myanmar's military dictators. And Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali appeared much invigorated by his 2019 Nobel award when waging his genocidal campaign against Tigray.

Several multilateral agencies have also been honoured. Some like the League of Nations were recognised through its founder, Woodrow Wilson (1919). Toothless to stop Mussolini's brazen aggression on Abyssinia, the League, collapsed un-lamented, with the Second World War. The United Nations got the Nobel in 2001 even as its peace and security mission faltered and concerns multiplied over its continued relevance. UN peacekeeping got its own Nobel in 1988 followed by egregious failures to stop genocides in Rwanda (1994) and Srebrenica (1995). Nowadays, UN peacekeeping is known for bad behaviour as in DR Congo and considered ineffective, or accused of contributing to insecurity, as in Lebanon. Understandably, no one sees a role for UN-led peacekeeping in Gaza.

A shameless aspect of the Nobel Peace Prize is that it cannot be reclaimed from those who betray its ideals. At least US President Barack Obama (2019) had the insight to acknowledge that he was not yet worthy of it. But only one person has honourably declined: North Vietnam's Lê Đức Thọ refused to share with Kissinger in 1973 because "real peace had not yet been established". He also accused the Nobel Committee of "putting the aggressor and victim on the same par". One wonders if such disappointments led the Nobel Committee to co-opt humanitarianism into its peace model. Several UN agencies such as the World Food Programme, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and UNICEF have been appreciated with Nobel Prizes. Also, other humanitarian bodies such as the International Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, and MSF, as well as extraordinary individuals with saintly attributes such as Albert Schweitzer (1952), Mother Teresa (1979), and Denis Mukwege (2017).

Perhaps humanitarians should have their own dedicated Nobel because instrumentalising the humanitarian endeavour for peace is dangerous. It creates a linkage between avowedly neutral humanitarian work and the quintessential political endeavour of peacemaking. This does no favours to humanitarians paying with their lives at the contentious frontlines of war where belligerents manipulate access. Neither does it help to conflate the development-peace mission with, for example, the 2007 award to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which is, at best, premature in the face of inexorably rising global temperatures.

Do these contradictions arise from the original will of Dr Alfred Nobel? He stipulated the Prize for whoever "shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses." Certainly, intergovernmental and civil society peace groups working for "fraternity among nations" have mushroomed. The business of "peace congressing" has also proliferated with the UN General Assembly leading the way. But Dr Nobel would be alarmed to see the accompanying expansion – not reduction – of armies. The paradox is that Alfred Nobel made his fortune from inventing dynamite and owning numerous munitions, explosives, and armaments factories.

Its current version is the "peace through strength" doctrine as nations arm themselves with ever-more lethal weaponry while creating "new fraternities among nations" i.e. confrontational military blocs. On this basis, perhaps NATO deserves a Nobel Peace Prize? Its track record of enabling practical Western peace for so long outshines the success of distinguished peace laureates. Such is the absurd logic of contemporary war and peace that ensnares the Nobel Peace Committee. The problem with the Committee's postulate that peace comes through democracy and human rights is that gaining these through non-violence has rarely worked without a leavening of "just war".

Can the Nobel Peace Committee update its thinking? This is unlikely, not least because its annual awarding is a chore that the Swedish Alfred Nobel thrust upon the good people of Norway (no one knows why). Then there is the profanity of the world fighting and abusing its peoples without compunction, thereby violating our collective living will that is expressed through many noble UN resolutions. In contrast, the archaic will of a long-dead businessman is considered sacred. However, the principal problem is not Dr Nobel's will that he scoped broadly, wisely anticipating a world that would keep changing. But sadly, the Nobel Committee lacks sufficient re-visualisation capacity as an elected group that reflects the political balance of power in the parliament of a rich but sparsely populated country on

the fringes of Europe. And so, the Nobel Peace Prize bestowals are best taken with a hefty dose of circumspection. Perhaps the greatest benefit of the ritual is to invite humanity to reflect periodically on the vicissitudes of war and peace, even if our models to understand this vexing phenomenon are often wrong.

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