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Let Us Free Venezuela

By Lilian Tintori

This weekend, as 35 Latin American heads of state convene in Panama City for the Seventh Summit of the Americas, my husband, Leopoldo López, will be just one week shy of his 15th month in Ramo Verde Military Prison. It is in this moment of regional solidarity, I ask the participants of the Summit to recognize the injustices that are occurring today in my country. We need the leaders of Latin America to do something on behalf of the Venezuelan people.

Today, in Venezuela, we live in hardship. We have no security. Shortages of basic supplies have resulted in the rationing of staples, hours-long lines for groceries, and the transformation of supermarkets into military zones. My husband, a civilian politician in a military prison, is just one of many examples of this government's cruelty.

It was a little over a year ago that my husband issued a non-violent, constitutional, and democratic call for change against a corrupt, inefficient, and repressive government that violates the rights of its people. Leopoldo, along with other members of the opposition organized a massive protest with student leaders to respond to the rapidly deteriorating economic and security situation in our country. Called *La Salida* ("The Exit"), they advocated for nothing more than the options legally prescribed by the Constitution of Venezuela: to hold a referendum, a Constituent Assembly, a constitutional amendment, a constitutional reform, or the resignation of the President. On that day and over the subsequent months, the government responded with an iron fist, killing 44 people, arbitrarily detaining more than 3,716, and keeping more than 70 political prisoners in jail.

To this day, the Venezuelan Government blames its problems on my husband and anyone else whose opinions differ from the ruling regime. Those sympathetic to

the tyranny call my husband a criminal and accuse him of trying to orchestrate a coup. The irony is that my husband is not a coup-leader, but rather a devoted father, husband, and proven democratic politician who called on Venezuelans to stand up for democracy. He sits in jail on charges of public incitement, property damage, and criminal conspiracy, which Amnesty International has called a "politically motivated attempt to silence dissent." And despite the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Secretary-General of the Organization of American States, Human Rights Watch, and countless governments calling for his release, the Venezuelan Government has vowed to keep him in prison for a decade.

In its eagerness to imprison my husband, the government has attempted to provide the appearance of a legitimate judicial process. But make no mistake: the normal rules of evidence and due process have not been applied. My husband was arrested in February 2014 without investigation, on the order of the President and without evidence. Numerous violations of legal and human rights standards have been documented. The government's main argument is that my husband's clear calls for nonviolence actually contained coded, subliminal messages to provoke violence. This argument fell apart 8 months into his trial, when the government's main witness, Dr. Rosa Amelia Asuaje León, affiliated with the ruling party and a PhD in Linguistics, revised her testimony and admitted that López had never called for violence. She stated "López's messages are not subliminal; they are clear, direct, and specific. They call for non-violence. There was never a call to violence by López." Without this evidence there is nothing linking Leopoldo and the violence the Government claims he caused. But there is no sign as of yet that the Government is prepared to yield. On the contrary, the Government arrested recently the Mayor of Caracas Antonio Ledezma with fabricated arguments just as implausible as those made in the case of Leopoldo.

If my husband weren't facing 12 years imprisonment, I would think this was all a sick joke.

No one should doubt why Leopoldo is in prison: Maduro is afraid of him, and he has great reason to be because Maduro has failed the people of Venezuela. Chávez did not deliver and Maduro has not delivered on their promises, and they have systematically dismantled our fundamental freedoms — freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of the press, and freedom of opinion. My husband has never been afraid to call attention to the rampant poverty, widespread violence, and broken political system that plague our country. As the founder and national coordinator of the political party Voluntad Popular, Leopoldo has

mobilized millions to advocate nonviolently for the constitutional and democratic exit of Maduro. My husband believes that the Venezuelan people deserve a better future, one of peace, prosperity and well-being. And it is this fear of Leopoldo that causes Maduro to keep Leopoldo in a 2-meter by 2.5-meter jail cell.

We need to send a message to the Venezuelan Government that it cannot trample on the rights of its people with impunity. Accordingly, I call on Maduro to release my husband, the 47 political prisoners of this regime and the more than 30 from the past regime currently being held in Venezuela. But my voice alone is not enough. My husband and the other political prisoners need the support of all countries that unequivocally stand for democracy, freedom and the respect for human rights. We need the support of all acting heads of state to take meaningful action to protect the rights of the Venezuela people and to free the political prisoners in Venezuela.

Leopoldo is strong, and the longer he is in prison, the stronger his resolve becomes. And while the Venezuelan political, social and economic landscape looks dark, the leaders of the region have an opportunity to materialize their aspirations for the inhabitants of Latin America by guaranteeing in the twenty-first century the full exercise of democracy with respect for human rights at its core.

Lilian Tintori is the wife of Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López.