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No More Hiding From Venezuela's Abuses

By Desmond M. Tutu

Don't be misled by news about elections—the government violates human rights, emboldened by the international community's silence.

The Venezuelan government announced last week that it will hold parliamentary elections on Dec. 6. This news wouldn't have attracted much attention if it weren't the result of a 30-day hunger strike by imprisoned opposition leaders Leopoldo López and Daniel Ceballos. It is encouraging to see the Venezuelan government make motions toward respecting democracy—but a true election cannot be held when more than 75 political prisoners languish in jail.

Venezuela must be held accountable for its human-rights abuses. We can start by speaking out against the imprisonment of the numerous opposition figures. Unfortunately, important voices—namely, Venezuela's neighbors in Latin America—have remained muted.

This reluctance to take a stand is startling. Venezuela's economic and security situation is dismal, as is the government's response to citizen frustration. Since the 2014 street demonstrations, during which hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans protested against the corruption and repression that plague the country, President Nicolás Maduro's government and state-sponsored thugs have killed at least 43 people and arrested more than 3,000.

Mr. López recently completed his 16th month in jail for his role in helping organize the protests. This is not a criminal offense, and he should be a free man. He has advocated peaceful responses to injustice; he has urged the people of Venezuela to resolve their problems in accordance with the country's constitution. Much as with other practitioners of nonviolence—Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.—Mr. López is paying a high price for his pursuit of justice. Now

that the hunger strike has ended, I urge the Maduro government to allow the Red Cross access to the 100 or so citizens who joined the hunger strike in solidarity.

During all this, Latin American leaders have been hiding behind excuses. When the U.S. in March imposed sanctions on human-rights violators in Venezuela, Latin American countries responded by adopting a resolution in support of the country, citing “the principle of nonintervention.”

I understand the trauma of colonialism. Yet without the international community, my home country of South Africa would have suffered a lot more bloodshed. It was the boycott and sanctions regime, coupled with internal resistance, that ended apartheid, the darkest chapter in South Africa’s history. The international community did not really mobilize, however, until after the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, in which 69 people were murdered for protesting peacefully. The world should not wait for a similar massacre to take action in Venezuela.

The way to address the grave human-rights situation in Venezuela is not to protect the leaders who manipulate postcolonial sensitivities and history to maintain an iron grip on power. Latin America and the world must go beyond rhetoric. Governments must demand the immediate release of all political prisoners as an imperative to global engagement with Venezuela. It is also time for Latin American governments to work with multilateral institutions like the Organization for American States and the United Nations to demand that Venezuela respect the dignity and humanity of all its people. Their inaction gives Mr. Maduro license to act with impunity.

Yet I also believe, like the Catholic Church, in mercy and forgiveness. It is not too late for President Maduro to change course. In 2016, the Catholic Church will celebrate the Holy Year of Mercy, which, according to the Vatican, “serves as an invitation to follow the merciful example of the Father who asks us not to judge or condemn but to forgive and give love and forgiveness without measure.” With the support of Pope Francis, I pray that Nicolás Maduro will honor the Holy Year of Mercy early and free Venezuela’s political prisoners.

Mr. Tutu is archbishop emeritus of Cape Town and recipient of the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize.