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Venezuela's people need the world's help

By Leopoldo López

Leopoldo López was mayor of the Chacao district of Caracas from 2000 to 2008 and is the leader of Venezuelan opposition party Popular Will. He has been jailed since February 2014 and is being held in the Ramo Verde military prison outside of Caracas.

It has been almost a year and a half since the people of Venezuela took to the streets demanding change, and my country's crisis has only gotten worse. Venezuelans of all backgrounds denounced our failed state and marched for a constitutional change of the current regime. It was because we spoke out publicly against the government's corruption and inefficiency that I and so many others are in prison. Last year, the United Nations found that I am being held in violation of international law, and I will not relent until the people's demand is met: Democracy must be restored to Venezuela. To achieve this critical goal, we need an end to state repression, the release of all political prisoners and free and fair elections.

The Venezuela we live in today calls itself a democracy, but this is a facade. Under the heavy hand of President Nicolás Maduro, our country is in a profound economic, social and political crisis. We have a government that fears its people. Rather than listening to what its citizens have to say, it seeks to silence us. Forbidden from speaking out, from exercising our constitutional rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly, we are persecuted; we are imprisoned; we are killed. Our media are silenced. And now the president has even authorized the use of deadly force against protesters. At a time in our country's history when we have the potential to be one of the world's largest oil producers, our children have less food to eat, our sick can't find medicine, our inflation rate is the highest in the world, our murder rate is the second highest

and we have one of the most corrupt governments on Earth. All we seek are the rights guaranteed by our constitution.

Change can start with an end to the state-sponsored persecution of those who think differently from the Maduro regime. This repression delegitimizes the ruling government and makes a functioning democracy impossible. We also demand the release of all political prisoners. The more than 70 in Venezuela are merely a symptom of the overall poor state of democracy in the country. Our liberation, however, cannot be an isolated event but must be part of a process in which we restore a functioning democracy to our people. Those committing or complicit in serious human rights abuses must resign. And the judiciary and electoral commission must be free from the influence of the executive branch.

Maduro claims that those of us demanding change want to carry out a coup against the government. That is false. Let me be clear: The only transition of power I would ever accept is that prescribed in our constitution: Maduro's resignation, a recall referendum, a constitutional assembly to review and propose amendments to our constitution or a change through the ballot box.

Venezuela is supposed to have parliamentary elections this year, but already we see worrying signs of electoral corruption. It is almost halfway through the year, and no date has been set for the vote. Should there actually be elections, we must have experienced, independent, international observers in the country, not just on election day, but in the months leading up to it. For us to have full faith in these elections, we need to know that those monitoring it will be impartial — a basic right that has become a luxury in today's Venezuela.

To restore our democracy, we will need the support of the international community. Already, more and more countries are recognizing the human rights violations in Venezuela. Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Spain, the United States and others have called for the respect of democracy in Venezuela and for the release of its political prisoners. I would like to thank these governments, especially the governments of the region, for their vocal support, but this rhetoric must be followed by action.

This month, Uruguayan diplomat Luis Almagro will become the new secretary general of the Organization of American States, and he has the chance to demonstrate that the OAS still has relevance. Almagro has promised to return the organization to the principles of "democracy, liberty and human rights." The OAS cannot say that it is a community built upon these values and then ignore the

suffering of the Venezuelan people. We must bring an end to this double standard for the sake of the millions of citizens dreaming of a peaceful democratic transition in Venezuela. We need change now.