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Venezuela's Last Hope

By Jeffrey Tayler

Leopoldo López embodies the change his country needs. And that's exactly why he's still in jail.

Just over thirteen months have passed since Leopoldo López, the most prominent and charismatic leader of Venezuela's embattled democratic opposition, stood on the pedestal of the statue of José Martí in a commercial district in eastern Caracas. He had just addressed a huge crowd of cheering supporters, calling for a continuation of the nonviolent, nation-wide protests aimed at bringing down the regime of President Nicolás Maduro. He pledged never to leave the country (despite a secret offer from the government that he depart into exile), and to carry on the fight for democracy in Venezuela. He announced that he would, then and there, surrender to the authorities (to face charges relating to the deaths of two protesters a week earlier), and that his "incarceration would be worth it if it woke up the people." He closed with a promise: "Very soon, we will have a free and democratic Venezuela!" Then he waved goodbye and climbed down.

Two officers of Venezuela's Bolivarian National Guard grabbed him by the arms and hustled him through the surging mass of people until they reached an armored vehicle. As López was boarding, he pivoted toward the crowd, raised his arm, and clenched his fist in a valedictory gesture of defiance. The officers then shoved him inside, and the vehicle took him to Ramo Verde military prison in a suburb of Caracas.

He has remained there ever since. Twice Maduro has offered to swap López for Oscar López Rivera, a Puerto Rican nationalist incarcerated in the United States since 1981 for seditious conspiracy, but López has refused.

Since López's incarceration, violence, at times carried out by *colectivos armados* (armed motorcycle gangs of hooded Chavistas), has become a regular feature of the anti-Maduro demonstrations. Students started building *guarimba barricades* to close off streets. Hurling rocks and bottles, they staged pitched battles with the police, who responded with tear gas, water cannons, and, at times, live fire, resulting in forty-three deaths and more than 3,400 arrests. These days, the protests come and go, but tensions run high. The fronts in Venezuela's political struggle have hardened.

As many as ninety-seven other political prisoners languish in Venezuela's jails, but prison authorities have singled out López for especially harsh treatment, hurling excrement and urine through his cell's bars, disrupting his sleep, confiscating his personal belongings and writings, subjecting him to eight months of solitary confinement (torture, according to the relevant United Nations convention), and denying him legally mandated visits from his wife, Lilian Tintori (who has been leading an international crusade for his release) and his two young children. Yet even after a year of such abuses, in February López gave a lengthy interview to CNN en Español in which he sounded upbeat and defiant. He paid for his temerity with twenty-four days of solitude in a tiny, lightless cell known as "el Tigrito." And last month, he managed to publish an op-ed in the Washington Post, in which he restated his demands for a peaceful transition involving "Maduro's resignation, a recall referendum, a constitutional assembly to review and propose amendments to our constitution or a change through the ballot box."

López was healthy and in good spirits, at least until recently, Tintori told me by email, and "at peace with his conscience and decision [to turn himself in], because even if they've imprisoned his body, his spirit remains free. He's fulfilled his obligation to unmask the regime of Nicolás Maduro and show the world that this is an anti-democratic regime." But on May 24, he, along with another prominent imprisoned opposition figure, announced a hunger strike, demanding the liberation of all of Venezuela's political prisoners, an end to state persecution, repression, and censorship, and the setting of dates for elections to the National Assembly (which by law must take place this year). He also called for peaceful demonstrations the next Saturday; in response, some two hundred thousand people took to the streets across the country. A number of other

oppositionists behind bars have joined López in his hunger strike. As of June 2, he had lost more than eleven pounds.

Maduro has called López a “murderer,” a “monster,” and a “fascist,” though he has yet to be convicted of anything. The Venezuelan government originally charged López with incitement to commit public crime, damaging property, arson, premeditated aggravated homicide, and terrorism, but has since dropped the last two charges. His trial is ongoing and, according to his international legal counsel Jared Genser, grossly Kafkaesque: judges have denied López the presumption of innocence and private access to his attorneys. They have refused to allow him to present evidence in his own defense, and have rejected fifty-eight of the sixty witnesses who would testify in his favor, while permitting prosecutors one hundred of their own. The outcome is, thus, preordained. Genser told me he expects his client to be convicted and given a lengthy prison sentence.

During a Skype interview in late March, Tintori told me that “Leopoldo’s is a political case because he’s a national leader representing hope and change for Venezuela, a future for Venezuela.” Few doubt, in fact, that López’s real “crime,” as leader of the progressive opposition political party *Voluntad Popular* (Popular Will), is posing a credible threat to the ever more disliked Maduro, who eked his way into office in 2014 via contested elections with only 50.6 percent of the vote. By winter 2015, Maduro’s popularity had dropped to 20 percent. In contrast, the last poll (conducted in October 2014) measuring López’s standing showed that 45.6 percent of Venezuelans supported him. López’s bloodline only underscores the threat he poses to Maduro. López is descended from Venezuela’s beloved founding father, the revolutionary statesman Simón Bolívar – the namesake of the “Bolivarian revolution” Maduro is supposedly leading. If anyone is fit to unseat Maduro, it is López.

Though López and Maduro are both politicians, the contrast between the two could not be starker. López is fit, handsome, clean-shaven, relatively young at forty-three years of age, and comes from one of Venezuela’s blue-blooded families. Maduro is stout, lumbering, mustachioed, nine years older, and is the son of a Leftist union leader. López attended Kenyon College and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, where he earned a Master’s in Public Policy. Maduro never graduated from high school. Before turning to politics, López worked as a high-level analyst for the country’s state-owned oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela*, and taught economics at the prestigious *Andrés Bello Catholic University* in Caracas. Maduro drove a bus. López entered politics as co-founder of the *Primero Justicia* party in 1992. Maduro, around that same year, joined MBR-200, an

organization campaigning for the liberation of Hugo Chávez, who was in prison for orchestrating a failed military coup. López talks of reforming Venezuela and giving it what it deserves (as the country with the world's largest oil reserves) but does not have: first-rate hospitals, trains, and highways, and an honest, effective police force. Maduro's trademark rhetoric is re-hashed Chavismo, studded with absurdities (he claimed, for example, that Chávez reappeared to him after death as a "little bird"), insults to his opponents, and warnings of "saboteurs" destroying the economy and conspirators plotting to overthrow him.

One of López's strongest assets consists in Maduro's manifest failure to address the mounting economic crisis affecting all walks of life in Venezuela. Inflation runs at 68.5 percent — the highest in the world — and may hit 175 percent by year's end. The currency, the bolívar fuerte, has plummeted, dropping from 23 (when Maduro was elected) to 416 per dollar on the parallel (real-value) market. (During the latter Chávez years, one dollar bought between six and eight bolívares.) Worsening shortages have hit basic foodstuffs and other necessary products, including diapers and toilet paper. Violent crime has spiraled out of control: the number of homicides in 2014 almost reached twenty-five thousand — the second-highest murder rate on earth. (In fact, the murder of a Venezuelan beauty queen and her husband helped spark the 2014 protests.) The worsening dearth of medications and hospital supplies has led Human Rights Watch to compare the country's healthcare situation with that of "war zones," and epidemics of mosquito-born diseases such as dengue and chikungunya are spreading, affecting tens of thousands of people. Power blackouts and water cutoffs are routine.

Some of these problems afflicted Venezuela during the Chávez years, if to a much lesser degree, but the shortages and collapsing currency are new, stemming from structural flaws in the economy, and, of course, from the dramatic drop in oil prices. Hydrocarbon revenues accounted for 96 percent of Venezuela's exports and half its national income. The country relies heavily on imports, but now has few dollars to buy them with — hence the shortages. The GDP may contract by 7.5 percent this year.

Maduro's response has been to blame everything on scheming "Yanquis," Venezuela's "far-right elite," the "parasitic bourgeois," and, of course, the opposition, even though he has effectively neutralized its leadership. In addition to López, he has arrested longtime Chávez foe and mayor of Caracas Antonio Ledezma (for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government), and indicted another key figure, María Corina Machado (illegally ousted from her seat in the National Assembly last year) on charges of plotting *magnicidio*, or the

assassination of the head of state. Only one key opposition leader — Henrique Capriles — remains at large, but after being defeated by Chávez in 2012 and by Maduro in 2013, he has lost considerable popular support. The one who retains it is López.

If Maduro is garnering infamy as a flailing incompetent, López, as mayor of Caracas' prosperous Chacao municipality from 2000 to 2008, earned praise and recognition for effective, transparent governance, and for programs that reduced poverty and crime. He came to office with 51 percent of the vote, but won reelection in 2004 with 81 percent, and four years later enjoyed a 92 percent approval rating. He would no doubt have eventually prevailed in the race for Caracas' mayoralty had Chávez not had him disqualified from office in 2008 on unsubstantiated charges of corruption. Chávez surely viewed López as a threat: a national public opinion poll conducted that year showed him leading El Comandante by two points.

López earned a reputation as a leader with “enduring popularity, charisma, and talent as an organizer” (according to Robin Meyer, a political officer at the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela, as reported in a cable made public by WikiLeaks). Maduro had no political cred to speak of and was known as an uncontroversial Chávez lackey, and least until the latter anointed him successor a few months before his death.

Maduro, in sum, appears to be a quasi-farcical Chávez wannabe harking back to the past, while López looks like Venezuela's JFK-in-waiting — the man of the future.

With Maduro officially instated until 2018 and the country entering a full-blown social and economic crisis, demonstrations broke out in January 2014 following the murder of Monica Spear, a former Miss Venezuela, and her spouse on a highway near Caracas. The protests intensified after the attempted rape of a student in the country's far west. López's moment seemed to have arrived. Though he consistently preached the need for a peaceful transition to democracy, he called on Venezuelans to occupy the streets and demonstrate until the regime gave way. His sulfurous rhetoric included open and humiliating taunts directed at Maduro, and must have persuaded the government that López posed an unmanageable threat.

When Maduro issued an arrest order for López, he went into hiding. This was not to last long. From hiding, López recorded an eight-minute video message, with Tintori seated on a sofa at his side. Dressed in a white shirt and blue jeans, he

declared he would be jailed for “dreaming of a better Venezuela.” He expressed pleasure at the hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans taking to the streets to demand change. “The people has awakened ... every one of you needs to make a commitment to change things. But this commitment cannot be passive. It must be active.” He reminded his viewers that “We’re on the right side of history. We’re on the right side of justice. We’re on the right side of truth. ... Our cause must be *la salida*” — the exit — “of this government [from power].” (“*La Salida*” became the name of the entire anti-Maduro protest movement.) He spoke of finding strength in the eyes of his children, for whom he wanted to build a better Venezuela. After he finished speaking, Tintori hugged him, and the screen went dark. He would reemerge only to turn surrender to the authorities in Caracas.

A former Venezuelan kitesurfing champion and media personality, Tintori has been touring the world and meeting with a range of powerful figures, including Vice President Joe Biden, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, and Pope Francis, seeking their aid in freeing her husband. For his defense team, she has enlisted Irwin Cotler (once counsel to Nelson Mandela) and former Spanish prime minister Felipe González, who is a lawyer by profession, and highly respected for having led Spain to democracy following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975. A wide range of organizations and public figures, from Amnesty International to President Obama, have called for López’s liberation. Not surprisingly, Maduro has dismissed them all.

Yet Maduro has a stormy year ahead of him. By law, the government has to call parliamentary elections later this year — and if it finds no way to postpone them, the opposition will likely triumph. But losing is a frightening option for Maduro and his entourage. The Obama administration’s sanctions against members of his regime, combined with evidence it purports to possess that high-ranking Venezuelan military officers are facilitating the drug trade, leave little doubt that those in power would fear extradition to the United States were they to lose power.

At this writing, the Venezuelan government has announced that hearings for López’s trial will be suspended until July. Felipe González traveled to Venezuela this week, but the authorities refused to allow him access to López, and he left, having made no progress.

“They say the worst year of marriage is the seventh,” Tintori told me by Skype, with evident anguish in her voice, “and in fact the worst was the seventh, when they imprisoned Leopoldo.”

One thing is certain: Until the Maduro government, whether of its own accord or because of pressure from abroad, decides to release López, Tintori will remain very much alone, and Venezuelans will have scant hope for their future.