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Venezuela Sets a Date for Change

By Jeffrey Tayler

Finally: a ray of light in Venezuela's ever-steeper, ever-darker descent into an inferno of repression and chaos. Yesterday the Venezuelan government announced December 6 as the date of the next elections to the National Assembly, after a delay so long that some surmised that President Nicolás Maduro had simply decided to violate the constitution and not hold them at all. Maduro had — and still has — good reason to fear the polls. His popularity is down to 22 percent, with his socialist party, the PSUV, garnering only 16 percent. The opposition looks set, as of this considerable remove, to win by a large margin.

What could have persuaded Maduro to take such a risk? One thing only: the imminent death in prison of Leopoldo López, the charismatic, 43-year-old leader of the Venezuelan opposition party, Voluntad Popular. Imprisoned since February 2014 on what look to be fabricated charges, López declared a hunger strike on May 25. He ate nothing for the next 30 days, sending his health into catastrophic decline. Yesterday, responding to the news that the government had given in to his key demand by finally setting a date for the elections, López announced that he was finally breaking his fast.

Such an outcome certainly didn't look like a given a few weeks ago, when he recorded a video address in his cell in Ramo Verde military prison in which he described the relentlessly depressing reality his countrymen and women have been suffering through since Maduro took office in April 2013. (The video was smuggled out and disseminated over social media.)

“The situation,” he said, “is worse than it was a year ago [when Maduro became president]. More queues, more inflation, more shortages, more crime, more corruption, and even accusations of drug trafficking at the highest levels of our government... [T]he immense majority of Venezuelans want change. But just as we are prisoners [in Ramo Verde], so are average Venezuelans and democracy in Venezuela prisoners of a corrupt elite that has only one interest: to hold on to power.”

López then declared that he and another key opposition figure would begin a hunger strike, and that they would stop only when the government met three demands: set a date for elections to the National Assembly; promise that the elections be carried out under international supervision without censorship or repression; and liberate all political prisoners. He also called for peaceful demonstrations against the Maduro regime the following Saturday.

On May 30, hundreds of thousands answered López’s call in cities across Venezuela. A hundred and four members of the opposition joined him in his hunger strike.

The risk was growing that López would die in his cell, with unforeseeable negative consequences, both international and domestic, for the regime — not the least of which would be mass unrest, potentially far more serious than the protests that shook the country in 2014. Despite the state-controlled media news blackout on López’s health, Venezuelans kept abreast on social networks.

Twenty-four days into his hunger strike, one of López’s Venezuelan lawyers, Roberto Marrero, gave a press conference with the former minister of health, Guillermo Seijas. They warned that losing some thirty-three pounds had surely compromised López’s immune system and that he needed urgent medical attention, which was being denied by prison authorities. Seijas warned that López had entered into the third stage of his hunger strike, when his body, bereft of fat, would begin consuming protein in his liver, heart, and kidneys, which would cause “irreparable damage” and threaten his life.

Five days later, the Maduro government announced the elections. López’s lawyers visited him in Ramo Verde and informed him of this. López gave them a handwritten note addressed to Venezuelans to be published on social networks and read by his wife, Lilian Tintori (who has been leading an international campaign to win his release) at a press conference the next day.

“*El cambio*” — the change — “now has a date,” López wrote. He described the long, slow days of hunger, nurtured only by the conviction he and his fellow strikers had in the justness of their cause. He thanked the Organization of American States, the Union of South America Nations, and the European Union for their support, which “represents a clear commitment to democracy in Venezuela.” (So far, no international body has agreed to monitor the elections.) He asked that those “brothers and sisters” who had joined him in his hunger strike start eating again, that they be “as our people needs us, healthy and full of life to achieve peace and freedom for all Venezuelans... We are ceasing our hunger strike but the struggle continues... Venezuelans, I swear to you that I will never surrender, and please don’t surrender either. He who tires loses, and we will never tire.”

Was the threat of López’s death really the reason the Maduro regime decided to hold elections? It appears so. The *Washington Post*’s Jackson Diehl reported that the possibility that López might expire behind bars spurred the Obama administration into action. It arranged a meeting between “a smiling senior State Department official” and Diosdado Cabello, the president of the National Assembly, so that the Americans could, according to Diehl, “broker a soft landing” for the collapsing state. Presumably it was clear to all involved that, had López died in prison, the consequences would have been catastrophic and long-lasting for Venezuela, its immediate neighbors, and the United States.

No one knows what exactly was said by Cabello or the State Department official. Now, though, with elections set for December, and López having called off his hunger strike, Venezuela has a chance to begin the transition to democracy it so desperately needs.