

The Miami Herald

June 8, 2015

We will never tire of demanding our rights

By Lilian Tintori and Patricia Ceballos

On May 30, the Venezuelan people came together to pray for a better Venezuela and to demand an end to the authoritarian rule suffocating our nation.

Today in Venezuela we live in fear because of the insecurity that defines our lives under the regime of Nicolás Maduro.

Our desperate economic situation has resulted in shortages of food, medicine and even toilet paper, and Maduro relies increasingly on tools of unprecedented repression.

This year in Venezuela, we are supposed to have parliamentary elections, but while June is upon us, the relevant electoral authorities have yet to set a date. Already we have foregone one election promised to us by law, as the Latin American Parliament elections were hijacked by the National Assembly in April. We cannot afford to lose another.

This is a fight over values. Today, 79 political prisoners are behind bars in my country, and the courts dismiss 97 percent of complaints of state-sponsored human-rights violations put forward by citizens. The government enjoys impunity because there is no separation of powers.

The most recent gathering was originally called for by Lilian's husband, Leopoldo López, in a video released two weeks ago from his jail cell. In the video, Leopoldo lamented the worsening political, economic and social crisis in our country today. He called for the Venezuelan people to protest these conditions in the street and he

began a hunger strike as his own personal form of protest.

Through his protest, he is demanding the release of all political prisoners, the end of repression, persecution and censorship; and the setting of a date for this year's parliamentary elections.

Sixteen other political prisoners and students, including Patricia's husband, Daniel Ceballos, the former mayor of San Cristóbal, joined Leopoldo in his hunger strike. Recently, Daniel was forcibly taken from his cell and transferred to another prison far from his family and the court where his trial is taking place. His transfer is the government's way of punishing him for winning his party's primary election for the National Assembly.

Why does the Maduro government continue to punish and repress all those who oppose it? Because they are afraid — afraid of the Venezuelan people, who will no longer tolerate the injustice and who will do everything they can through democratic means to reclaim their rights. Leopoldo, Daniel and their peers have undertaken the extreme act of a hunger strike as a pledge to the Venezuelan people who are suffering. If our husbands are ready to give their lives for Venezuela, then we should support their efforts to demand respect for the universal rights for all people.

The international community can take concrete steps to help Venezuela.

- First, it can pressure the Maduro regime to finally set a date for parliamentary elections. Once an election date is set, it can send qualified electoral observers from the Organization of American States, other regional groups, and the European Union to ensure the legality and impartiality of the elections.
- Second, prominent global leaders can continue to visit Venezuela to experience our crisis firsthand, to share with the world our plight, and to remind Maduro that he is being watched and that there will be no impunity for his actions.

On May 22, Lilian saw Leopoldo for the first time in 35 days, and on May 31, Patricia saw Daniel for the first time since his illegal transfer. Our forced separation is how the government punishes us for our activism and our husbands' courage. These months have been difficult, but also marked by our shared strength and faith in risking our lives for the dream of a better Venezuela.

Through our speaking out, we have become targets of the Maduro regime. Slandered on state-owned media, we have been accused of betraying our country. We speak out because we love our country and because we believe in a free, unified Venezuela that respects the rights of all its people.

Our husbands always say, He who tires, loses. We will not tire because their lives and the lives of all Venezuelans are at stake.

*Lilian Tintori is the wife of imprisoned opposition leader Leopoldo López.
Patricia Ceballos is Mayor of San Cristóbal, Venezuela. She was elected after her husband, Daniel Ceballos, was imprisoned and stripped of his elected office.*