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## Even in Jail, I Will Fight for a Free Venezuela

By: Leopoldo López

RAMO VERDE PRISON, Venezuela — ON Feb. 12, 2014, the repressive and inept elite that governs Venezuela ordered my arrest on charges of conspiracy, arson, inciting violence, damage to public property and other crimes. Later that week, after two surprise visits from the president of the National Assembly to my family's home, it was suggested to me that I should seek refuge in a foreign embassy.

I decided instead to turn myself in on Feb. 18, 2014, and confront the trial the regime had planned. I made this decision fully aware of the risks I was facing and the possible consequences of a politically motivated trial with a compromised judiciary. So when, on Sept. 10, 2015, Judge Susana Barreiros — a mere puppet of those rulers intent on defending their wealth and privilege — sentenced me to more than 13 years in prison, I had no regrets about the decision I had made. I was convicted on the absurd basis that I used “subliminal messages” in my speeches about nonviolence to inspire violence during the February 2014 protests.

I am now in solitary confinement in a 7-by-10-foot cell that has nothing more than a single bed, a toilet and a small shelf for my few changes of clothes. I am not allowed writing materials, and the only book permitted is the Bible. I don't even have a light or candle for when it gets dark outside. While this has all been hard for my family, they understand that great causes require great sacrifices.

I am convinced of the justice of our cause: the liberation of a people from the painful consequences of a system of government that has failed economically, socially and politically. Our economy is the worst-performing in the region: Gross domestic product is forecast to fall by 7 percent in 2015, and we suffer from the highest inflation in the world. This inflation has led to a devastating scarcity of basic staples and has destroyed domestic production, the oil industry included. The desperation these conditions have created, paired with widespread failures of law enforcement, has made ours one of the most violent countries in the world, with nearly 25,000 murders in 2014 alone.

What's more, we have lost our democracy. The government targets those who disagree and

uses repression to stay in power. The judgment against me is intended to send a message to all Venezuelans who strive for a better country that, unless they desist and concede to the regime, they will be next. Our government wants to crush our aspirations and make us believe that this fight is hopeless. They want us to surrender. But we cannot afford to surrender, for he who tires, loses.

We are working toward a Venezuela where rights are guaranteed for all, including the right to a life with dignity. We want regular changes in power through free and fair elections, so that all Venezuelans can respectfully coexist, regardless of ideology.

For the economy, we want a model that allows everyone to benefit from growth — especially those who have less. We want to promote local industries and encourage private investment to increase production and provide employment. We want to increase oil production and use the revenue to diversify our economy, rather than buy votes. And we want to provide the high-quality education necessary for all Venezuelans to prosper.

Our plans are ambitious, but they have the support of millions. For Venezuela to move forward, we must first change the system by democratically removing the corrupt ruling party that governs us. The parliamentary elections set for Dec. 6 present this opportunity. But to succeed in the polls, we must unite. An opposition alliance, the Democratic Unity Roundtable, has already formed, but we want to expand this unity to all members of society who desire change.

We cannot do this alone. Those around the world who have spoken out on our behalf I thank sincerely. That support gives us faith, but these efforts must not end today. We need the international community to lobby for our democratic rights by raising abuses directly with the Venezuelan government, condemning repression and promoting solidarity on human rights issues in the region. We need the United Nations to make these matters an agenda item for the Human Rights Council. And we want the Organization of American States to invoke its democratic charter to discuss our dire situation.

For the December elections, pressure must be applied on the government to allow electoral observers from the O.A.S. and the European Union, which has not occurred since 2006. Their independence and impartiality are needed now more than ever to ensure that our opportunity for change is not compromised.

Finally, the government of Venezuela must end its baseless disqualifications of opposition leaders from the coming election. The ten who are banned from running include the former state governors Manuel Rosales and Pablo Pérez, the opposition leaders María Corina Machado and Carlos Vecchio, and myself. The regime should also release all 76 of its political prisoners, including those under house arrest, like the mayor of Caracas, Antonio Ledezma, and the illegally ousted mayor of San Cristóbal, Daniel Ceballos.

An election cannot be free or fair when those who think differently are barred from running or are even behind bars.

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