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A Venezuelan opposition leader's absurd sentence

By: Editorial Board

WE'VE OFTEN written about one-sided political trials, which appear to be on the rise as a means of repression in unfree countries that attempt to maintain a veneer of international respectability. In recent months we've seen journalists and political activists cynically railroaded to prison in Azerbaijan, Egypt, Russia and elsewhere. But for sheer brazenness, nothing quite matches Venezuela's prosecution of opposition leader Leopoldo López, who on Thursday was sentenced to nearly 14 years in prison.

Mr. López, 44, is, like much of the opposition movement, a reason for hope in Venezuela's future despite the country's disastrous political and economic collapse under the regime founded by Hugo Chávez. A moderate leftist educated in the United States, Mr. López favors peaceful democratic change; in calling for anti-government protests last year, he gave several speeches calling on his supporters to act nonviolently. Not surprisingly, his popularity in polls exceeds that of the current president, Nicolás Maduro, by more than 20 points.

The regime responded to Mr. López's speeches by arresting him in February 2014, claiming he was responsible for clashes that occurred after a demonstration even though he was not present when they took place. To explain away his clear calls for nonviolence, the government claimed that Mr. López's tweets contained "subliminal messages" that inspired violent acts. Yes, really.

Then came his trial, which was closed to journalists and independent observers. In 70 hearings extending for more than 600 hours, the government presented 108 witnesses for the prosecution — none of whom, according to a statement by Human Rights Watch, offered evidence backing up the charges. Mr. López was then offered three hours for his defense. The judge rejected 58 of 60 defense witnesses, and the other two refused to testify. She then delivered the maximum sentence requested by the prosecution.

To call this case “a complete travesty of justice,” as did Human Rights Watch, gives it more credit than it deserves. It was nothing more than a crude propaganda show and a device for shutting down an opponent the regime greatly fears.

The Obama administration and several Latin American governments pushed Mr. Maduro both in public and private to end the prosecution of Mr. López and to free him to participate in the legislative election promised for December. They were ignored. Now those governments must consider whether their strategy for Venezuela — which amounts to hoping that the elections will proceed and be reasonably free and fair — is still workable.

Very likely, it won't be unless there are clear consequences for the imprisonment of Mr. López. Already the government is working to manipulate the vote: A number of other opposition leaders have been banned from participating. To deter more lawlessness, the United States should sanction every person who participated in the prosecution of Mr. López, starting with the judge and prosecutors. If Venezuela is to have a democratic exit from its mounting chaos, clear and concerted action by the United States and other outside powers will be essential in the coming months.