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Tainted Justice in Venezuela

By The Editorial Board

There was never much doubt that the prosecution of Leopoldo López, the Venezuelan opposition leader, was a sham orchestrated by the government of embattled President Nicolás Maduro. That became irrefutably clear last week after Franklin Nieves, one of the lead prosecutors who convicted him, abandoned his post, traveled to the United States and expressed remorse for his role in a travesty of justice.

Mr. Nieves said in a video posted on YouTube that he decided to flee Venezuela because he could no longer defend “the false evidence” that was used to convict the opposition leader. Mr. López, who was sentenced last month to nearly 14 years in prison for supposedly stoking violent protests in 2014, and is being held in solitary confinement, has filed an appeal. Mr. Nieves has said that he was pressured by government threats to rely on bogus evidence. He urged fellow prosecutors and judges to follow his lead and “tell the whole truth” about the trial.

His decision to turn on the Maduro government is another powerful sign that it could be crumbling from within under the weight of a catastrophically managed economic crisis and the president’s bumbling leadership style. Earlier this year, a former bodyguard for Diosdado Cabello, the head of the country’s Congress, fled to the United States to cooperate with federal law enforcement officials investigating the role of senior Venezuelan officials in drug trafficking.

Mr. Nieves’s defection should add fresh energy to the international effort to free Mr. López from his 7-by-10-foot cell. He is not alone; several other politicians have been unjustly barred from participating in Venezuela’s parliamentary election in December. Their voices and vision are essential to start mending Venezuela’s economy and rebuilding its democratic institutions.