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We Must Reclaim Democracy in Venezuela

President Nicolás Maduro has held Venezuelan democracy hostage. On Dec. 6, voters must take it back.

By Leopoldo López

RAMO VERDE PRISON, Venezuela — On Dec. 6, my country will hold legislative elections. Unfortunately, Venezuela is the first Latin American country to imprison leaders of the opposition during an election since Uruguay’s dictatorship imprisoned Wilson Ferreira Aldunate in 1984. Here in Nicolás Maduro’s Venezuela, four of us are in prison, along with 71 other political prisoners.

When I turned myself in to a government that actually accused me of using “subliminal messages” to incite violence, I knew that this would be my fate. Venezuela’s current regime has always gone to great lengths to neutralize my engagement in politics, along with the engagement of so many others. Even as I sit in a small jail cell in Ramo Verde Military Prison, I do not regret surrendering to an unjust government in the name of democracy.

Though I have been condemned to serve nearly 14 years in prison, the United Nations recognized that my arrest and detention were arbitrary, and has called for my release. President Barack Obama, Organization of American States’ Secretary-General Luis Almagro, the European Parliament, and numerous world leaders — including President-elect of Argentina Mauricio Macri — have demanded my release. And Amnesty International has labeled me a prisoner of conscience.

I directly confronted the injustice and turned myself in on these false charges because I wanted to expose the illegitimacy of the Maduro regime. I hoped that my unjust persecution would inspire greater local and international support to advance change peacefully and democratically. As our parliamentary elections approach, our people have realized that the repressive, anti-democratic regime that currently rules Venezuela suffocates us. Recent polls show that, for the first time in 16 years, the opposition coalition, the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD), currently leads the ruling party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), by 30 points. The opposition should win in a landslide.

And it must win, for our current humanitarian crisis will only worsen under PSUV rule. Our economy is expected to contract 10 percent in 2015, and inflation is expected to jump to 204 percent in 2016. Shortages of food and medical supplies have become standard, and our murder rate has more than doubled within a decade. The Venezuelan people have realized that change is the only way forward.

Dec. 6 is our opportunity for a better Venezuela.

But there is a chance that we will lose this opportunity because of the government's systematic actions to undermine the elections.

The recent assassination of Luis Manuel Díaz — a union chief and leader of the Democratic Action party in Guárico state — at a rally where my courageous wife Lilian Tintori had just finished speaking, exemplifies the government's campaign of intimidation directed at human rights defenders and political leaders.

Seven opposition leaders have also been arbitrarily banned from running for office. And four of us are imprisoned. An election cannot be considered free or fair if opposition leaders are imprisoned or banned from seeking office. Additionally, the government has refused to allow qualified electoral observation from the Organization of American States and the European Union. What more are they trying to hide from the international community? The government has already gerrymandered districts so that 52 percent of voters, in pro-opposition urban areas, elect just 39 percent of parliament, and has set up fake parties with names mimicking legitimate opposition parties to confuse voters.

These tactics are hard to confront, as the government has made it nearly impossible for the opposition to campaign. A government-imposed state of emergency in swing states in the west prevents opposition campaigning. Additionally, the government's refusal to renew broadcasting licenses to opposition media effectively ensures that no opposition candidate can utilize the media for his or her efforts. But despite holding all the power to rig the system in his favor,

President Maduro is still losing, and now threatens us with further violence. He says his party “will win by doing whatever it takes.” We Venezuelans understand exactly what he means.

Despite these obstructions, the Venezuelan people will turn out and vote so that their voices are heard. There can be no democratic change if people do not participate in the democratic process. We must vote, and if this election is stolen from us, then we must protest non-violently in the streets. Enough with our suffering: it is time for the return of a prosperous Venezuela. The United States and Latin American leaders must join Secretary General Almagro in demanding change from the Venezuelan regime. They should not recognize the election results unless certain conditions are met: an end to fraud, gerrymandering, and rigging; the acceptance of independent election monitors; and the release of all political prisoners.

This is in their best interest — for without justice, there will be no peace.