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Three steps Venezuela must take to turn the country around

By Leopoldo López

Two years ago I was imprisoned for calling for a constitutional, democratic and peaceful change in the Venezuelan government. Our plan was called La Salida, “the exit.” Not everyone agreed with our approach, and some called it radical. Today, the consensus is much stronger — President Nicolás Maduro must step down to save Venezuela from one of the greatest calamities in our history.

The people of Venezuela want this change to be peaceful and swift. The harder and more important question is: What comes next?

Venezuela faces a long and difficult road to recovery. Things may get worse before they get better. Deep damage has been inflicted on the pillars of our economy, the fabric of our society and the soul of our country. Deciding where to begin will be overwhelming. When everything must be fixed — at once — where does one start?

A hundred things must be done with urgency. I will single out three that rise above the rest. First, we must restore our democratic and governance institutions. Those who believe that ideology alone caused the crisis in Venezuela are deeply mistaken. It was the systematic dismantling of checks and balances, oversight mechanisms and civil rights protections that led us to this collapse. Without strong institutional protections, no system of government can succeed, and the country will cease to function. Repairing this area cannot wait. It must be our first and highest priority.

Key steps that must be taken include restoring the impartiality and effectiveness of the judicial system — from the criminal courts to the Supreme Tribunal of Justice. We need a return to due process and equal rights under the law so that people can only be charged based on real evidence and judges must rule according to the legal code and not political orders. We must restore the independence of the National Electoral Council as an effective referee of the election process.

We must end the practice of arbitrarily disqualifying candidates for political reasons and unwind the myriad ways in which elections are secretly stacked in favor of the ruling party. We must protect and encourage freedom of speech — especially for news organizations, which must be allowed to pursue the truth with freedom and independence.

Leopoldo López was mayor of the Chacao district of Caracas, Venezuela, from 2000 to 2008 and the leader of the Popular Will opposition party.