

EL MUNDO

October 25, 2015

Leopoldo López Cannot Go Another Day in Prison

By The Editorial Board

The confession of the prosecutor that accused Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López that the evidence used against him in the trial was false is an incident of extraordinary gravity. Franklin Nieves revealed the judicial farce yesterday after fleeing his country with his family. He explained that he had been forced to incriminate López, pressured by his superiors in the Attorney General's office, and that they had threatened him with dismissal if he did not comply with the order. But after months of anguish, he made the decision to leave Venezuela and tell the truth. And the moment was not chosen randomly, as next week the Venezuelan Attorney General must respond to the appeal filed by Leopoldo López's lawyers, after the recent judgment that sentenced him to nearly 14 years in prison.

First of all, in any democratic country this confession would have already led to a true political and judicial earthquake, with a corresponding purging of responsibilities at the highest level. And, in parallel, Leopoldo López would have been released immediately, to await a new, impartial trial with all the guarantees of due process. But, of course, we are talking about Venezuela, a country that long ago slid down the slope of authoritarianism and is, in many ways, a true dictatorship. Therefore, the only response that the prosecutor's revelation has garnered from Caracas is an attack on the same, tiresome line as always: that of blaming the opposition for orchestrating conspiratorial campaigns in order to destabilize the regime. And – it is clear – the release of the opposition leader will not be considered either.

Everything in the case of Leopoldo López has demonstrated since day one how the Government of Maduro is not afraid to imprison its political rivals in order to get rid of the opposition, as has been the case, for example, with the Mayor of Caracas Antonio Ledezma. López was arrested in February of 2014, after leading a massive demonstration against the regime. In those days, all of Venezuela was burning in protests that caused more than 40 deaths, many on account of police excesses. NGOs denounced the government's repression.

Well, López has spent more than a year and half imprisoned under draconian conditions leading up to the trial. And last month a court sentenced him to 13 years for public incitement, conspiracy, damage to property and arson. A conviction that was already unprecedented, with which the trial judge went even further than the sentence requested by the prosecutor. The same

prosecutor who, we now know, could not fall asleep for the anguish of knowing that it was all a judicial farce with evidence invented ad hoc.

The United Nations Human Rights Council demanded the release of López months ago. And numerous heads of state from around the world interceded on his behalf in a campaign that had former President Felipe González as adviser to the defense lawyers, although Maduro's regime prevented him from ever gaining access to a court session. But the new turn in the case should compel everyone in the international community to act. And there is hope that that the political pressure will mean that the trial against López is revoked. The role of the countries neighboring Venezuela is key. They cannot remain silent in the face of the systematic trampling of human rights and individual liberties by the Bolivarian regime. And before a case so glaring, to continue looking away would make them complicit in this huge outrage.

And worst of all is that the blatant lack of separation of powers in Venezuela, with a judiciary that is completely dependent and committed to the official cause, makes it impossible to trust that the crucial parliamentary elections on December 6th will develop cleanly and in accordance with the rules of democracy.