

November 14, 2016

For Leopoldo López, 1,000 Days as Maduro's Hostage

By José Miguel Vivanco

A thousand days ago, the Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López turned himself in to Venezuelan authorities only to face a classic example of injustice. He was subjected to a politically motivated prosecution, and sentenced to nearly 14 years in prison—all based on fabricated charges. As if that weren't enough, López and his family are suffering countless humiliations and abuses. Maduro seems obsessed not only with isolating López from Venezuelans and the outside world but with breaking him.

At the Ramo Verde military prison, López is held in a separate building from other detainees. When he's given permission to leave his cell, it is for an outdoor cement slab all his own. On the rare occasions that he is allowed to play basketball, he does so with guards, with whom he is not allowed to speak. During his first months of detention, López had permission to confide in a priest, but authorities cancelled that by 2015. He is occasionally allowed to go to religious services but never to talk to the other inmates there.

Guards control everything that López reads and sees. They've censored poetry and history books, any material written in English, and publications ranging from *The Economist* to a magazine on surfing. In a separate cell in his building, López is allowed to watch TV for a few hours a day, on a set that offers only the overwhelmingly pro-government open-air channels or movies selected by guards.

López's lawyers are forbidden to bring legal documents when they visit, and for months now, López has been banned from keeping a pen and paper in his cell, which means he can't jot down thoughts, feelings, or ideas for his legal defense.

For three weeks, López has not been allowed to phone his family—when he could, guards would often cut the line when they decided he had made “political” statements.

On repeated occasions, masked raiders have violently entered López's cell. They took away his Bible. They took away drawings by his two children. When his defense team files complaints about such attacks—or, say, the time when somebody threw excrement in through the window—the courts reject them.

Often, the authorities impose bans on visits by López's family or lawyers. The last time, after López questioned the Vatican-mediated dialogue between the government and the opposition, the authorities shut down visits for several days. When visits are allowed, prison guards routinely force López's wife, mother, sister, and defense team to strip naked before and after seeing him. López's mother was once forced to strip naked in front of his children.

The detention of López is a nightmare that has lasted for almost three years. It is essential that heads of state, the Vatican, and global and regional agencies press Maduro to release him, immediately and unconditionally. Words are no longer enough.

Without strong international pressure, López will remain Maduro's hostage.

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