

EL PAÍS

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Just Causes Without Borders

Europe should demand the freedom of Leopoldo López and all the political prisoners in Venezuela

By Lilian Tintori

It has been three years since my husband Leopoldo Lopez called for a peaceful, constitutional exit from the grave crisis that even then was affecting Venezuela. Leopoldo, together with the Mayor of Caracas, Antonio Ledezma, the congresswoman Maria Corina Machado, other leaders of the opposition and thousands of students understood, already in 2014, the need to exercise our right to protest as a way to pressure and push back against the authoritarian aims of a regime that had come to violate the Constitution and the human rights of Venezuelans.

Venezuela has changed since 2014, but it has been for the worse, reaffirming itself as a dictatorship that systematically violates human rights and has had its social conditions denounced by international organizations. Thousands of Venezuelans eat garbage, newborns are delivered in cardboard boxes in delivery rooms, medicine is scarce, our terminally ill experience truly inhumane agony, and violence has taken hold of our cities, making our communities bleak prisons where we citizens seek shelter to stay safe. The situation is unbearable. One cannot ask death, illness and hunger for more time and to be patient.

But the change of Venezuela over these past three years has not only been negative. The organized opposition has managed to take back the legislative branch with an overwhelming majority, a concrete demonstration that Venezuelans no longer support a system that has subjected them to the worst crisis in our nation's history. Venezuelans – like my husband Leopoldo did on 18 February 2014, when he decided to be the face of the injustice of the dictatorship that persecutes him - have woken up and have done so with force. Today, more than 90 percent of our people reject the management of Nicolas Maduro and demand an immediate change.

Has this been worth all the sacrifice? Have these years of suffering and anguish been enough to, as Leopoldo would say, "awaken the people"? The answer in my heart is unequivocal: a resounding yes. So said my husband from the military prison where he is kept in isolation: he would do this a thousand times more in order to contribute to the liberation of his people and the return of Venezuelan democracy.

It is necessary to understand that we democrats must mobilize without rest to not give respite to this dangerous dictatorship. Its involvement in the activities of drug trafficking and terrorism, which Leopoldo denounced three years ago, must be more than enough to spur the entire international community into generating concrete and real actions for the rescue of Venezuelan democracy. It is in this sense that we expect of the Governments of Europe and the Governments of the Americas to take action to demand the release of Leopoldo Lopez and all political prisoners as well as presidential and regional elections in order for us Venezuelans to be the ones who peacefully decide our destiny.

The regime, in the final months of 2016, revived a false dialogue in which it deceived the entire country and the entire international community. Already in those months my husband Leopoldo warned that conditions for a sincere and credible dialogue did not exist, as the regime had given no indication of willingness to do so. If at that time the conditions did not exist, today they are worse. And to reaffirm its status as a dictatorship, the regime has unconstitutionally prevented a recall referendum of Nicolas Maduro's term in office.

We Venezuelans are the ones who must rescue Venezuela. It is our responsibility and I am convinced that we will do so and very soon. This February 18 and in the following days, weeks and months we will be reclaiming our democracy in all the streets and corners of the country.

To our Spanish and other European brothers and sisters, we ask you to support us in this heroic deed. I know that we Venezuelans are not alone and that you are with us. From our heart we appreciate it and my husband Leopoldo Lopez has asked me to let you all know this as well.

Love is greater than the difficulty of ending this dictatorship. Faith and Strength! Just causes do not have borders...

Lilian Tintori is a human rights activist