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Canada Can Help Save Venezuela's Democracy

By Lilian Tintori

Since April 4, hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans have taken to the street to peacefully advocate for change. President Nicolas Maduro's government has responded to the exercising of our constitutional rights by dropping tear gas from helicopters, sending military and armed gangs to shoot at crowds and arresting more than 1,900 of us. The violent response of the regime has left at least 37 protesters dead – one of them only 14 years old – but we remain undeterred. Our demands are as clear as they are compelling: the unconditional release of all political prisoners; the holding of general elections; the opening of a United Nations-run humanitarian effort; and a full restoration of the rights of governance for our National Assembly, which has been substantially stripped of its powers by Mr. Maduro's Supreme Court.

We protest amid a humanitarian crisis unseen in Venezuelan history. Hyperinflation, expected to be 1,600 per cent in 2017, has caused severe shortages of food and medicine. Half of Venezuelan children do not get three meals a day and more than a million students have dropped out of school because of hunger. Hospitals are unable to treat curable diseases and both infant and maternal mortality are skyrocketing. Our desperation has led to more than 150,000 people fleeing the country in 2016. As our conditions worsen, we can expect that number to increase.

With the world's largest oil reserves, Venezuela should be prosperous. But today, more than 80 per cent of Venezuelan households live in poverty. This paradox weighs heavily on me. While we used to be the richest country in Latin America, poor governance has led to the implosion of our economy – a collapse mirrored by the demise of our democracy. Political mismanagement and corruption have bankrupted our country and killed our democratic institutions.

To further sow fear and quell dissent in face of this democratic breakdown, this repressive dictatorship has arbitrarily imprisoned more than 180 political prisoners. One of them is my husband Leopoldo Lopez, who has been wrongly detained for the past three years for calling for

a change in our current government through peaceful, democratic means enshrined in our constitution. He is serving 14 years in prison after a sham trial, which even the lead prosecutor admitted was a farce. Though a civilian, Leopoldo is being kept in a military prison where he is routinely denied his legal right to see his family and lawyers. Just recently, he was held incommunicado for more than a month.

Many other civilian political prisoners are being detained in military prisons and tried in military tribunals – after the Attorney-General, Luisa Ortega, announced that her office would no longer prosecute cases against protesters. As more government leaders publicly critique Mr. Maduro's actions, the reliance on the military as a tool for repression highlights the current fractures in the government that worsen our institutional crisis.

In the face of these crises, more than 80 per cent of Venezuelans say they want a new government. But the current government has undermined any attempts for change. After elections in late 2015 resulted in an opposition supermajority in the National Assembly, the government declared a state of emergency and started ruling through decree, further eroding any separation of powers. Since then, it has refused to schedule any elections and, in the past month, it has led two self-coups to invalidate and undermine the National Assembly. With no domestic political recourse, we have taken to the streets.

But our efforts in the streets must be amplified by our international allies' efforts to rebuke the Maduro regime's anti-democratic acts. Canada has been a strong supporter of our cause. Together with other leaders in the region, the Canadian government has helped move the Organization of American States toward invoking its Inter-American Democratic Charter in the case of Venezuela. Even as the Maduro regime seeks a way out by initiating its withdrawal from the OAS, Canada has not allowed it to escape its responsibilities. I am in Ottawa this week to publicly thank the Canadian government and its citizens for their support. I am also here to ask Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to call for the release of political prisoners and to spearhead an international effort to open a humanitarian channel to Venezuela. Given the regime's openness to humanitarian aid from the UN, I call on Canada to mobilize its significant resources to work with the UN to conduct an independent needs assessment in Venezuela and then develop a plan for aid distribution that focuses on those in most need.

As we continue to protest peacefully in the streets for our rights, the international community must move swiftly and beyond diplomatic statements to help us. And we need their support in alleviating our country's suffering and keeping our most vulnerable alive.

Lilian Tintori is a Caracas-based human-rights activist and wife of Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez.