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If the World Lets Venezuela Fall, Democracy in the Region Will Fall with It

This is morally indefensible.

By Lilian Tintori

CARACAS, Venezuela — For the past two months, Venezuelans like myself have taken to the streets to exercise our constitutional right to peaceful protest against the most repressive regime in our nation's history. While the unconstitutional and failed attempt by the Supreme Court to dissolve the Venezuelan National Assembly on March 29 sparked these protests, we have sustained them for so long because we know we are in the fight of our lives. We protest amidst an immense humanitarian crisis. Our failing economy has led to a scarcity of food and medicine, which has in turn led to an increase in the prevalence of malnutrition and other preventable diseases in the country.

Our suffering is gravely compounded by the government's despotic response to our cries for help. Since the start of the protests, there have been at least 60 deaths and about 1,000 people have been wounded, many a result of the indiscriminate violence used by the armed forces. Organizations on the ground have identified almost 3,000 arbitrary detentions, numerous reports of torture and some 303 political prisoners. One of those political prisoners is my husband, Leopoldo López, the opposition leader and a prisoner of conscience.

Leopoldo has been in prison for over three years because he publicly challenged the regime by calling for peaceful protests as a way out of our suffering. Three years later, and the people of Venezuela still hear his call. He remains in jail because the Nicolás Maduro government fears him.

The repression against us becomes more violent every day. Violence, as Mahatma Gandhi once roughly said, is the fear of the ideals of others, and the regime fears our ideals of peace and freedom. There already have been deaths due to tear gas thrown directly at crowds, and armed

tanks have rolled over protesters. Now, facing a shortage of ammunitions, the regime has begun shooting buckshot.

The government's violence has only strengthened our resolve and increased the international support for our cause. But the Maduro regime is now taking illegal and unconstitutional action in an attempt to dismantle that support. When the governments of the region tried to hold President Maduro to account in the Organization of American States for his anti-democratic acts, he responded by choosing to begin the process for withdrawing Venezuela from the organization rather than face his international and legal commitments. When our people gathered signatures for a recall referendum, Maduro stopped it from happening. Now, when we have called for early elections, Maduro says he is going to rewrite the constitution to redistribute political representation in the country so that the voice of the majority will be silenced in favor of dictatorship.

These acts isolate Maduro internationally and draw comparisons to some of the worst dictatorships in the region's past. His control over the country is unsustainable, as is the overall crisis. We have arrived at the inevitable collapse of a failed model where power is corrupted and held in the hands of an elite few. This reality to which we are subjected is inhumane, and it does not correspond to the promises of the 21st century.

We organize in defense of our fundamental rights. We have released our strategy very publicly, a strategy first stated by Leopoldo three years ago. Our method is non-violence, our terrain is the street and our purpose is all rights for all people.

Venezuelans have resisted on the streets, and we will be there for as long as is necessary. But the international community should also recognize that we understand the need to identify constitutional means to usher in a democratic transition.

To start, we have identified four demands for a path forward: the release of all political prisoners, the opening of a United Nations-led humanitarian channel, the immediate scheduling of general elections and the respect for the autonomy of the National Assembly.

We are under immense pressure because what is at stake is not only the survival of Venezuelans, but the survival of democracy in the region as well. How is it possible that a nation with the resources of Venezuela cannot feed its citizens? That our children die of curable diseases for lack of basic medicines? That mothers do not know if their children will return home each day or succumb to the violence on the street? This is morally indefensible.

And the sad truth is that a corrupt few benefit from this chaos, including the government officials who profit off of our misery on the black market and the narco-traffickers who often don't

faces any foreseeable consequences. But there are many who help prop up this regime who do not benefit from this situation — and they are not happy. Those National Guard members under orders to shoot at us protesters fear that their family members and friends may be on the receiving ends of their bullets. They, too, have no way to properly feed their families and no hope if a family member gets sick.

I have talked at length with Leopoldo about the need to build bridges with those factions of the government that want to detach from the dictator and his criminal actions. We know there are very few people who support this instability, which has generated a massive exodus of Venezuelans, skyrocketing rates of crime and rolling blackouts that have come to define life in this energy-rich country. This regime, whose highest officials are accused of drug trafficking, is a stain on the country and the continent. But this dark hour serves as an opportunity. With around 90 percent of Venezuelans expressing a desire for change in the country's current situation, now is the time for us reconcile our differences and come together for the greater good of the country. Reconciliation will bring us peace, and our diversity of thought and background will make us a stronger nation.

Venezuelans have shown that we have the commitment and the courage to rescue our democracy. Despite our differences, we are more united than ever. And we ask that the international community share our solidarity.

As May drew to a close, foreign ministers of the OAS nations met to discuss Venezuela. They deferred taking action this week because they couldn't come to a consensus on a way forward. While this was disappointing, the collapse of Venezuela is only going to accelerate as the humanitarian crisis grows and Maduro is forced to take more extreme measures to maintain his grip on power. When the foreign ministers meet again later this month, I trust that the OAS will take the necessary action, in line with the values enshrined in the Inter-American Democratic Charter, to stand on the right side of history.

Lilian Tintori is a human rights activist and wife of imprisoned Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López.