

LEOPOLDO LOPÉZ ACCEPTANCE LETTER: ON BEING AWARDED ALUMNI ACHIEVEMENT AWARD FROM HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

The following letter was written by Venezuelan opposition leader and prisoner of conscience Leopoldo Lopéz, upon being awarded the Alumni Achievement Award by the Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Leopoldo was imprisoned for speaking out against the abuses of the current government. He remains in prison, having been denied a fair trial. The award was accepted on Leopoldo's behalf by his wife, Lilian, and his sister, Adriana.

To my fellow alumni, faculty and students: first I want to thank you for this recognition. It means a great deal to me, and I am honored.

Most of all I want to thank the esteemed faculty of the Kennedy School for providing a foundation of knowledge that I have turned to again and again in my life: as the mayor of a city, as the founder of a political party, and now as a prisoner of conscience in a country that is on the brink of economic, political and social collapse.

| Since I have been in prison, I have had ample time to reflect on the lessons of our situation, and what it means to the wider world.

At the Kennedy School we learned about the many models of good government. How to get things done. How to make good policy. How to design systems that work to support the social good. And importantly, how to measure results.

We also learned that healthy civic institutions matter.

| In Venezuela, we see the value of these institutions even more clearly because of their absence. When a judiciary is beholden to the executive, justice is perverted. When the ruling party controls the governance of elections, democracy is subverted. And when the media can no longer report freely and independently, the pressure on a government to perform simply withers away.

These institutions matter. When we take them away, the consequences are clear and measurable. Venezuela now sits atop the world rankings in all the wrong categories: #1 in the Western Hemisphere for inflation, #1 in the Western Hemisphere for scarcity of basic goods, #2 in the world for murders.

This is what millions of people in Venezuela are experiencing. This is why we protest and work for change.

When the government issued a call for my arrest, I had a choice to make. I could flee the country. Or I could remain in hiding – which other persecuted leaders have managed to do successfully.

As I thought through these options, I returned to the values that brought me to the Kennedy School as a young man. I remembered the passion I felt, the excitement of making a difference for my country. The lessons that were instilled in me here allowed me to make a choice that the ruling party probably never expected: to face my accusers peacefully and publicly and hand myself in for the world to see.

Even though my weeks in prison have now stretched into months and possibly far longer, the choice is worth it if it wakes the Venezuelan people – and the world – to the injustice that is taking place.

I hope all of you will take a few minutes to learn more about what is happening in Venezuela. Read the news, ask questions, make your voice heard.

The resolution of our crisis is a priority for the world. If abuse and injustice prevails with little consequence, it will send a terrible message to dictators and would-be dictators in other countries. You have an opportunity to send a far different message: that the weight of the global community is on the side of human rights and dignity.

I want to thank all of you at the Kennedy School for teaching me what it means to make a difference – and for your role in developing the future leaders of the world.