

**FREE  
LEOPOLDO**



## **Exclusive Interview with Leopoldo López: Part 1**

### **Boris Muñoz**

On September 18, Leopoldo López completed his seventh month in Ramo Verde Military Prison. So much has happened in that time: a government carrying out open repression, the worst economic crisis in generations, violations of human and civil rights, and a general population subjected to the inefficiency and arbitrary impositions of those in power. The opposition, too, is battered, broken, and erratic. It is a brand new era in Venezuela.

During these months, details have also emerged regarding the preparation and development of #LaSalida, a political proposal launched by López together with former congresswoman María Corina Machado and the Mayor of Caracas, Antonio Ledezma.

We have also seen that the legal process Leopoldo López is going through is flawed to its very core. Juan Carlos Gutiérrez, the politician's defending lawyer, announced after the hearing of September 10: "Today it was irrefutably proven... that... there was never a fire in the Public Prosecutor, either in the entrance or the library; there was no burning of documents or goods. This charge against Leopoldo López and the students is absurd, it is false, and... they were undermined today as a result of the experts' statements." Other allegations, such as criminal conspiracy, have been undermined due to lack of substantiation and witnesses.

But what the lack of Rule of Law has incontrovertibly demonstrated is the refusal of Control Judge Adriana López to admit the evidence and witnesses provided by the defense. In other words, it is not just that López is paying a high price for having been heard by his fellow citizens, but that along with him, the four students Cristian Holdack, Marco Coello, Damián Martín, and Ángel González have been stripped of the most important resources an accused person has to defend themselves. This is not to mention that since the start of the hearings, only five of the 76 witnesses have been called by the Prosecutor, which slows the process to a glacial pace, possibly delaying justice by up to 14 months. All of this lends credence to the defendants' claim that they have been submitted to an "unjust justice".

However, prison has had a strange effect on López; it has isolated him from the streets and the political fray, but it has also spared him from the war of attrition suffered by other government actors and the opposition, almost as though he were enclosed in an anti-corrosive chamber. Another effect is that his political image has improved markedly since his imprisonment. The IVAD [Instituto Venezolano de Análisis de Datos – Venezuelan Institute for Data Analysis] poll at the end of August regarding governmental management and the political situation placed him between the national leaders, slightly above Henrique Capriles Radonski and well above President Nicolás Maduro.

Furthermore, an overwhelming majority considers that the government’s accusation against López for inciting a coup is false. As an avid reader of polls, Leopoldo López knows that until now, rather than stigmatizing him as a public enemy, prison has instead sparked an unprecedented validation of his image that keeps his leadership and political future alive far beyond the walls of Ramo Verde.

In this two-part interview carried out via questionnaires sent back and forth over a number of months, the leader of the Popular Will Party gave handwritten responses from his cell to many questions about the current political crisis. He answered both broadly and in minute detail in order to clarify numerous gray areas around various controversial subjects: his call for public protests, his being subjected to “an unjust justice”, and Diosdado Cabello’s participation in the same, as well as his political differences with Capriles Radonski and the MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable).

He also sets out his vision of the current nature of the ‘Chavista’ government and what the strategies and tactics should be to confront it, which has been one of the most hotly disputed points between leaders of the opposition. When asked if La Salida was a hasty option with a high cost for the opposition, he defended the reasons for his action and reiterated non-violent action, using the militant rhetoric of someone who insists on being “on the right side of history”.

Prodavinci is a digital platform. Given its nature, Leopoldo López mentions various links to contextualize periods of recent political struggle or to reinforce his responses.

**Question:**

***What is your assessment of the situation in Venezuela since your imprisonment on February 18? Please focus your answer on three specific areas: the economy, society, and politics.***

***Finally, please conclude with a commentary on the general situation in the country.***

**Leopoldo López:**

Regarding the general situation in the country, you could say that we are approaching the collapse of the poorly-named model of “21st-century socialism”, and the majority of Venezuelans are paying the price for that failure. It should also be clarified that the bill is being footed by everyone minus the most corrupt and inefficient governing elites in our country’s history, who have plundered and robbed the riches of all Venezuelans.

In terms of the economy, the model based on the destruction of national production that could sustain itself, thanks to income from petroleum, has been exhausted with worrying and unfortunate consequences for our people. The highest inflation in the world, scarcity reminiscent of living in a war zone, unemployment, and dehumanizing waiting lines to buy any necessary items or medicines. We are witnessing the derailment of national production and of the value chains, and an economy full of distortions that favors illicit businesses instead of promoting productive work.

In terms of society, the symptoms of failure are obvious. In spite of living in the cycle of a price-driven oil boom, the most significant prosperity in 100 years of petroleum in Venezuela, poverty has increased, the health system has collapsed, unemployment has risen, the infrastructure has been destroyed, and social security is non-existent.

Today in Venezuela, we have a health system that does not cure the sick; an education system that does not teach; social security that does not care for the vulnerable people in society; police, judges, and prosecutors who do not protect; an economy that produces neither employment nor wellbeing. All of this is the product of a failed model protected by a system of domination. That is why we say that this is not just about changing a model of public policies – this is about changing the system.

**Question:**

*Any analysis will show that you and Popular Will, the movement for which you are the National Coordinator, were indisputable winners in the election of December 8, 2013, when you obtained 15 wins, some of which were in 'Chavismo'-controlled territory.*

*That same analysis might show that, as the leader of an emerging party, you should have concentrated on making successes of structural efforts and consolidating positions and advances. But that was not the case. On December 9, one day after the elections, you announced in a press article that you would defend the votes that were not defended in the presidential elections of April 14. On the other hand, various reliable sources agree that in November 2013, you were already considering calling for a public protest against the government.*

*Within the broader context that I just described, could you explain why you had that idea, and how it was developed before January 23, the day when, together with former congresswoman María Corina Machado and Mayor Antonio Ledezma under the banner of #LaSalida, you called for the people to mobilize through citizens' meetings and street protests?*

**Leopoldo López:**

Just as you described in your introduction, Popular Will was the Unity party with the most victories in the municipal elections, and the most relevant thing is that only two of those victories (El Hatillo and San Cristóbal) were in areas that were historically in opposition. The vast majority were obtained in bastions of the USPV [United Socialist Party of Venezuela], such as in Marigüitar, Mario Briceño Iragorry, Chaguaramas, Piar, Torbes, Cárdenas, and Ureña, to name just a few.

But it is also important to note our triumph in territories controlled by guerilla and other irregular groups like Guasdualito and others where the duo of USPV/PDVSA is most strongly felt, such as the municipality of Maturín, capital of Edo Monagas. Victories in opposing areas (San Cristóbal and El Hatillo) are also particularly significant, because they represent the triumph of a generation thrust into the political struggle since 2007, like Daniel Ceballos (today imprisoned with me in Ramo Verde) and David Smolansky, who has stood out for knowing how to balance his role as the Mayor with that of a political leader facing the national situation.

These victories against the USPV, and in municipalities from large capitals such as Maturín to small towns in deepest Venezuela are, to my mind, the product of three factors: strong social and political leadership in each one of the municipalities (the vast majority were legitimized in primaries, another theory driven by Popular Will), social work based in

communities and public sectors with popular networks, and a face-on discourse against this disaster of a government.

We are sometimes criticized for having a face-on discourse against what we consider a dictatorship and we are told that this discourse is not popular or does not reach the people; to that, we say with both words and actions, that nothing could be further from the truth. The intelligence of our people should not be underestimated.

Without a doubt, the people of Venezuela are overwhelmed by problems that should be resolved by any remotely competent government, such as scarcity of products, inflation, insecurity, and problems with basic services such as electricity, water, and gas. But our people are also strangled by a regime that wants to control everything, wants to ration food, marks people with numbers in order to purchase ingredients, tells people what they must listen to, read, or see – in other words, a dictatorship that seeks to remove our freedom. Venezuelans have both material and basic needs as well as spiritual needs for freedom, and any political discussion or position must understand the needs of our people.

After the mayoral elections, Popular Will took a firm step forward in establishing itself as a young party, for young people, and a promoter of leadership. The majority of elected mayors consolidate their leadership step by step. First, in the open election in Popular Will, then in the Unity primaries, and finally, in the 2013 elections. When Popular Will was founded in 2011, it did so by holding elections to choose the authorities in the whole party, from individual parishes through to national leadership. We put into practice what had previously been an illusion: internal democratization of the parties. Some 170,000 people participated at that time to directly elect four thousand authorities for the party; something never before seen in the history of political parties in Venezuela and which represents a commitment that we want to continue.

This determination to open ourselves up to the people, to build from the ground up, led us to take up the banner for the primaries and the single candidate for the Unity. At first, we were criticized or maybe misunderstood by some, but finally this theory was adopted by the entire Unity, and more than three million Venezuelans participated in the primaries of 2012.

I give this brief summary of Popular Will because along with the facts, it captures our belief in democratic and electoral participation. It has been and continues to be the voice of the people, the majority of the people, in electoral processes, and the only way to legitimize a change in the direction that the State and the Nation are heading. However, we are obliged to ask ourselves: what election and when? What electoral process can give birth to real change? How can we arrive at that moment with a popular and organized force?

After the elections of April 2013, when we absorbed the fact that just as Henrique Capriles said, Maduro had stolen the elections, we started an intense discussion about how to characterize the regime and how to get out of this disaster. We held this discussion within Popular Will and put it forward in several Unity meetings.

Regarding how to characterize it, we concluded that this was a corrupt, inefficient, repressive, and anti-democratic regime.

We concluded that with these characteristics, the regime could not be called democratic, and that it was therefore a dictatorship – a 21<sup>st</sup> century dictatorship, a dictatorship with certain popular support, as many dictatorships had in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but a dictatorship nonetheless. A dictatorship in full color. I grew up listening to stories about the Gómez dictatorship, as my great-grandfather was a political prisoner, and my grandfather lived in exile. I had always imagined that era, but in black and white. This dictatorship is in full color - it is right in front of our faces, here in the present.

The characterization of the regime as a dictatorship is a significant step, given that it casts aside any ambivalence, very often formed by intellectuals, that the regime suffers from a democratic “deficit” but it is still a democracy. Not having a clear and firm position about what it is that we democrats are facing runs the risk of continuing to allow the consolidation of the dictatorship and the destruction of our country.

And to be clear, these two conditions move in the same direction if there is no democratic responsive action. It is not true that economic and social decline alone is the dominant factor for political change. There is the example of Cuba, which for Venezuela is not a theoretical or distant example, but a driving force. More than 50 years of massive economic decline, parallel to the consolidation of the regime.

Continuing that logic, if we are in a dictatorship, how do we confront it and get out of it? We have spent many hours discussing that subject, exploring all the options, and arriving at the conclusion that we should activate one of the constitutional pathways to political change. In particular, the promotion of a constitutional reform to limit the terms of public powers and bring forward elections (a proposal that was recently mentioned by Gerardo Blyde), the call for a constituent assembly in order to reorganize all public powers, a definition of the institutional and economic model to follow, and a call for general elections or a recall referendum.

These being the vehicles for change, we concluded that we could only activate these alternatives from the street, with organization and non-violent protest.

This vision of political change is not incompatible with the promotion of efficient and transparent local management. But what is true is that it is not possible to achieve the true potential of local and regional governments without national political change. Recently, mayors exposed the institutional trap and economic asphyxiation to which they are subjected, whether in the opposition or in USPV (even if the latter are prohibited from complaining democratically, they suffer problems just the same).

In this situation, at the start of 2014 alongside other social and political factors, we prepared an agenda of actions within a framework of a route for change, which combined non-violent protest with popular gatherings to reinforce the popular organization for

change. This is how we did it. Here is the [pamphlet](#) we used for the call and which is today an example of evidence used by the prosecutor in the court proceedings against me. In that pamphlet, we present the route step by step. It is a route, which, in our opinion, is still valid after six months of my being in prison and seven months after the call. This route to building a popular and organized force that opens the constitutional gates for change was and is our proposal to exit this disaster and conquer democracy. This proposal became known as #LaSalida.

**Question:**

***How did #LaSalida develop after January 23, particularly in light of the student protests that broke out in Táchira and Mérida?***

**Leopoldo López:**

On January 23, within the framework of popular uprising that gave rise to democracy in 1958, a date celebrated by the regime and by the opposition, we called for the journey towards conquering democracy to begin with non-violent gatherings and protests. January 23 was the peak of a struggle fought from underground; the protest and the political attrition of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship.

It was within this context that we proposed an agenda that had the first step of calling Popular Assemblies throughout the country to discuss the route to take in order [to leave the dictatorship](#). The first date proposed was February 2.

On February 2, the assembly in Caracas met in Plaza Brión. There were more than 100 other assemblies throughout the country. The response surprised even those of us who called for them. It was not only [massive](#), it was representative. Students, union leaders, workers, and social organizations all attended, but most importantly, there was a lot of people and a lot of commitment.

On that day, the students called for February 12, Youth Day in Venezuela, to be celebrated on the streets. While the assembly in Caracas went off with no problems, the first arbitrary detentions were seen in other parts of the country. In Margarita they imprisoned six students and in Táchira, four.

**Question:**

*How were the events of February 12 carried out? What were you seeking with that mobilization? Many Venezuelans in the opposition were in favor of mobilizing and protesting against governmental repression, but they criticized the lack of a plan of action for what was going to happen at that moment. Please explain how you visualized February 12 ahead of a long-term widespread public protest, aiming for the exit of President Maduro. Do you not consider that your movement played 'offside'?*

**Leopoldo López:**

After February 2, many factions joined in the call for February 12, primarily students. The call was massive and national. There were gatherings all over the country, and they were accompanied by all, and I do mean all, factions from the Unity. In Caracas, after the gathering in Plaza Venezuela where we presented the route of assemblies and non-violent protest to spark a constitutional and democratic way out, it was agreed to [march to the Office of the Public Prosecutor of the Republic](#) (a Public Ministry) to demand the release of the detained young people who became the first of more than 3,500 demonstrators arbitrarily detained between February and May 2014.

The march to the Prosecutor was massive but peaceful. We were protesting there for a couple of hours and demanding the release of those detained. It passed without incident. At the decision of the government and the Prosecutor, there was no police or National Guard presence when we arrived. Later, the Bolivarian National Guard and the Bolivarian National Police arrived and stayed a distance away from the Prosecutor, where the gathering was. We maintained the call for calm and non-violence [as our strategy of struggle in the streets](#). Once we found out that armed '*colectivo*' groups were approaching, protected by the BNG and the BNP, we decided to stand down from the protest.

The majority of the demonstration stood down peacefully and without violence. However, a number of demonstrators stayed, the majority of whom were students, among them Bassil Da Costa, a young student 23 years old who was murdered by SEBIN officials [SEBIN: Bolivarian National Intelligence Service of Venezuela].

The murder of Da Costa and later of Juan Montoya happened after we had called off the protest, and caused outrage among the demonstrators, who threw rocks at the officials, and later at the entrance to the Prosecutor. There were rocks against bullets that were fired from official arms carried by uniformed and civil officers, from weapons so often denounced by the very '*colectivo*' groups who were present there. It is very important to note and reiterate that all photo and video evidence shows officials shooting firearms that caused these regrettable deaths. There is not one photo or testimony that indicates any of the demonstrators firing shots.



I have had to study what happened on February 12 in great detail, because my trial is precisely due to these events, and everything points to the conclusion that what happened that day was a trap set by the regime. Various questions lead us to this conclusion, which all Venezuelans would do well to ask themselves:

1. How did Maduro know that there would be a death, as he declared publically on the eve of February 12?
2. Why did the BNG and the BNP not protect the demonstrators?
3. Why did the BNG and the BNP stand down from the headquarters of the Public Prosecutor while rocks were being thrown at its entrance for 45 minutes?
4. Why did the BNG and the BNP give protection to the armed '*colectivo*' groups?
5. Why did a SEBIN unit go to the area, if Maduro said that he had ordered them to stay away? Who gave the order for SEBIN to go?
6. Who gave the order to shoot?
7. Why were two of Minister Rodríguez Torres's guards among those who fired shots, and why hasn't he clarified his responsibility before a court?

There was a third death on the evening of February 12; that of Roberto Redman, murdered in Chacao while demonstrating, also presumably by police officials.

That same night, when I found out about my arrest warrant for crimes of instigation, conspiracy, damage, arson, terrorism, and homicide, I had three options. The latter two crimes were dismissed by the Prosecutor in the formal accusation, but it is important to point out that they were present when I attended the Supreme Court of Justice, and they were on the arrest warrant with which they raided my house, my parents' house, and the headquarters of Popular Will at gunpoint. That the Prosecutor had approved this warrant for crimes of terrorism and homicide just four hours after the events goes to show the brutal and political nature of that warrant, the preamble to my imprisonment.

I knew that this point would come. I knew it because after January 2013, for a year Maduro and his officials threatened me with jail on more than 100 occasions. These threats, always accompanied by a fascist type smear campaign, had the aim of marking a "Trilogy of Evil" – they always mentioned me together with Henrique Capriles and María Corina Machado as responsible for the problems in the country. Maduro was just waiting for an excuse to throw me in jail, and on February 12, he got it. It was an excuse for a strictly political decision, just like the one made by Hugo Chávez against me when he politically disqualified me from serving as mayor after 2008.

I would also say that it was a decision made by someone who was so insecure and fearful that he had to hide behind manipulation of power in order to confront his enemies. A person who is not man enough to meet political contention head-on in the landscape of ideas, people, and democracy. Maduro is an illegitimate president who stole the elections, and as a consequence, he owes his power not to the people, but to his partners, who manipulated institutions (the National Electoral Council, the Supreme Court of Justice, the Public Prosecutor, and the Comptroller General of Venezuela), took the Venezuelan State by

force, and today remains in power by stealing, covering up their crimes among themselves, trampling over the Constitution, selling our heritage, burying the country in debt, and starving its people. Today, clearly and openly, the State is criminal and a rogue State.

In making these affirmations, there will be no shortage of analysts who say that my words are very radical and that this is not the way to win elections. I totally disagree with that for two reasons: first, because we are bound to call things what they are, and second, because those who were in favor of the ruling party and aren't any longer want a different alternative. This latter point is proven by very symbolic victories in the municipal elections (Maturín, Guasdalito, Torbes, Cárdenas), elections in which I actively participated. In all of these municipalities, we won because of the leadership of those who are now mayors, and because they denounced the criminal State head on.

***Question:***

***Let's return to the events of February 12. How would you summarize your vision of that day?***

**Leopoldo López:**

The detailed summary I gave of February 12 is important because these facts served to spark a massive and outraged protest that spread throughout the country over the following days. I read a poll in which 70% of those interviewed confirmed that there had been protests in their town or city.

I confess to being surprised at the size of the protests. We knew before February 12 that there was significant unease building, but we had thought that it would grow more gradually. The fact is that the combination of growing unease for social reasons, the economic crisis, and the strangulation of liberties with police and legal repression was unleashed on February 2, and accentuated on February 12 and beyond. This was the basis for a protest lasting for more than three months, the reasons for which, in my opinion, are more valid than ever.

It is important to remember that the violence during those months started due to police and legal repression. It is an error to echo the claim that the violence came from the side of the demonstrators. The facts show the opposite: 3,500 detainees, excessive repression of all demonstrations, 42 deaths, for which the only clearly responsible parties identified have been officials or group members. There is not a single case where perpetration of the homicides has been materially linked to any of the demonstrators.

What happened is that the regime mounted a vicious campaign with a media siege and strangled communications, labeling the students and general demonstrators as terrorists,

fascists, and murderers. Rather than inhibiting outrage, this provoked an even stronger reaction.

**Question:**

***What happened on February 18?***

***There are a lot of gaps around the circumstances of your arrest amidst mass activism on February 18. These circumstances have justifiably sparked rumors and speculation.***

***That same day, President Maduro announced that there had been a plot against you orchestrated by “the far-right in Miami” and that he had commissioned Diosdado Cabello, who had met with your family for three nights, to negotiate your arrest.***

***In Maduro’s words, broadcast by Venezolana de Televisión, “an amicable agreement was reached to obey the Law, and Leopoldo López agreed to turn himself in to justice peacefully which is what we did today. At this moment, Comrade Diosdado is transporting Leopoldo López to a prison outside of Caracas in order to bring him to justice.”***

***Please tell the country what happened. What role did Diosdado Cabello play in your arrest? What was the supposed opposition conspiracy to kill you? Does President Maduro have grounds for his announcement? What does having arrived at an “amicable agreement” for your arrest mean? Many say that you negotiated with the government and that your arrest was a media show.***

**Leopoldo López:**

When I was in hiding, my political and family circles were besieged by the dictatorship. They violently raided the headquarters of Popular Will, with guns in their hands and breaking down doors. They arrested various people in my team seeking clues as to where I could be and they raided my home. Early in the morning of Sunday, February 15 they raided my parents’ house, where my wife Lilian was with my children. Twenty men arrived, dressed in black, with hoods, rifles, and an arrest warrant for terrorism and homicide. After requisitioning my house and intimidating my family, they told them that the president of the National Assembly, Diosdado Cabello, was on his way and they he wanted to speak to them.

Diosdado Cabello arrived with a very firm plan and proposal: that the best thing would be for me to leave the country and that he could even “amicably” help to arrange things with various countries to that end. Before the unexpected visit that day, I was able to let my family know my decision. The only person I met with while I was in hiding was Carlos Vecchio and it was on exactly that Saturday. I asked Carlos to communicate to my family that I had decided to present myself voluntarily before an unjust justice and that I would do so on Tuesday, February 18. It was fortunate that the message had got to my family beforehand; that I had said to Carlos they would try to convince me to think carefully about the option of leaving the country. After Carlos told them my decision, they respected it and they let Diosdado Cabello know.

After I refused the option of leaving the country, Cabello proposed another “helpful” option to my family, which was for me to seek asylum in an embassy. The answer was the same, because my conviction was, is, and will continue to be, that I will not leave Venezuela.

According to what Lilian and my parents tell me, the meeting was as civil as you could hope for at a time like that. When faced with Lilian’s insistence that they were pursuing me unjustly, Cabello even acknowledged to my family that I was innocent and that this was a political measure. He told them that our call for people to take to the streets took them by surprise, especially after the results of the municipal elections in which Popular Will had emerged as the Unity party with the greatest number of mayors, the majority of whom had won in places that had always been governed by the USPV (including the Municipality of Maturín, capital of Monagas State, the second most important state for production capacity of petroleum and coincidentally, the birth state of Diosdado Cabello where he was elected to office). That first meeting ended cordially, but without any agreement, for the simple reason that there was nothing to agree on.

That Sunday, in hiding, [I recorded a video](#) asking Venezuelans to accompany me on February 18, when I had decided to turn myself in to an unjust justice. It was a simple and direct message, in which I also asked people to wear white as a symbol of our conviction of non-violence. The video had an enormous impact on social media overnight on Sunday and into Monday. On Sunday night, Maduro attacked me again on national networks, calling me a terrorist murderer and reiterating that the police force were out looking for me. During that broadcast, he also alluded for the first time, to “having received” information that there were sectors (in the opposition) looking to kill me.

Early Tuesday morning, Diosdado Cabello communicated with Lilian again requesting another meeting. He went to my parents’ house once again. They met with a new proposal. He had information that I was going to be assassinated; that there were plans to kill me if I handed myself in in public. His proposal was that if I was going to hand myself in, I should do it in a controlled location with witnesses, but not during a demonstration because they were going to kill me.

Logically, a proposal of that caliber, given by the strongman of the dictatorship, was taken seriously by my family. At 3:00am I communicated with Lilian and she asked me not to turn

myself in, to think about our children. The anguish caused to Lilian and my parents was beyond comprehension. The threat had escalated to the worst it could be: death. Lilian and my parents insisted up to the last minute and I maintained my desire to stay in the country at any cost. I had made a decision that I stand by, which is the right one: to confront the dictatorship on all grounds, especially moral ones.

That Tuesday, I left my place of hiding at 4:00am. I was staying with a very kind family to whom I shall be eternally grateful. I met them the night I arrived at their house. I had never even been in their area before, never. They were days of extreme pressure and the final hours would be even more so.

At 4:00am I left, hidden in the trunk of a car, and travelled 45 minutes to a place close to the gathering. During those 45 minutes, which seemed like hours, I could not stop thinking about victims of kidnappings who are subjected to travelling that way. I was sensitive to the subject, given that days before, the brother of one of my good friends had been kidnapped and murdered. I also thought about my family, my children, and above all, where my day would end on February 18. What my future in prison would be like.

At 5:30am, I arrived at a friend's house and waited for the moment to come to leave for the demonstration. Those hours were calm; we talked about the country and what was happening with the protests. Lilian, who was with my parents, kept insisting that I thought carefully about what I was doing. At 11:30am, it was time to leave. We left the building, and the streets were full of officials from SEBIN, DIM [Venezuela's military intelligence agency], and the National Police. I had decided to go on a motorcycle I drove myself, accompanied only by a friend on another motorcycle.

I managed to get to the gathering. They were some tense minutes; in fact, I had to go through a checkpoint but I managed to slip through without taking off my full helmet. I knew that once I got into the crowd they would not be able to stop me. Arriving at that protest was like getting to the finishing line of a marathon. Once I arrived, I took off my helmet and started walking towards Plaza Brión. There was no stage, no sound. There were just people, so many people – far more people than I had ever imagined, especially because the call was amateur and spread via social media. I will never forget the immense solidarity and affection shown to me by the Venezuelan people; people for whom I would turn myself in a thousand times more.

When I got to the end of the demonstration, I decided to climb onto a statue of José Martí, which, just as an anecdote, we had remodeled during my time as mayor. [I gave a short address](#) from there. I explained that I was presenting myself before an unjust justice because I had not committed any crime and that for me, leaving Venezuela was not an option, nor was staying in hiding. I was innocent of the crimes they had accused me of, and I took responsibility for calling for protest, which was, and continues to be, my greatest strength.

The General Commander of the National Guard, General Noguera, was at the police line when I got there. I did not know him. He and General Benavides arrested me and insisted that I wore a bulletproof vest and helmet, which I refused. We walked over to a number of white vehicles, very slowly due to the number of people. They pushed me inside the vehicle, but the crowd did not allow the door to close, and in fact, the vehicle's door fell off. After a few minutes, my lawyer arrived, Juan Carlos Gutiérrez, who accompanied me for the rest of the journey, as he has accompanied me for more than ten years of legal persecution, in which I have faced the most absurd and unjust accusations again and again.

The people stayed in front of the vehicle and we could not move. We were there like that for almost three hours. The people did not leave, and we moved very slowly. Several times I had to address the people with a megaphone and ask for calm. In fact, what happened was what I said to General Noguera; "if there is no repression, there will be no violence, we are peaceful people". And so it was. Throughout that journey, Noguera's phone did not stop ringing. He was called by Arreaza, the Vice-President of the Republic; Diosdado Cabello, the President of the National Assembly; and on various occasions, Nicolás Maduro. His response was always the same: "we are making slow progress because of all the people."

We finally managed to get out, and once we got onto the highway we went to the La Carlota Airbase. We got to the National Guard hangar and from there, you could see the crowds coming through the airport doors. Half an hour after we arrived, Diosdado Cabello appeared. The last time I had spoken with him was in 2007, when he was Governor of Miranda and I was the Mayor of Chacao municipality in the same state.

I greeted him and immediately asked how it could be that there was a plan to kill me. He told me he had proof and that there were various recordings. To this day, that proof has not been presented. This is surely because it does not exist. He then asked me, "Well, what shall we do?" "What shall we do? You are the ones holding me prisoner," I answered him. To that, Diosdado replied, "The only way out is in a helicopter and the plan is for three helicopters to leave. We will go in one to Fort Tiuna (another military base in Caracas) and from there to the courts". I agreed on the condition that they would allow my lawyer and my family to come too. I was mindful of the moment when the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez called Jóvito Villalba after the fraud of '52 "to talk", which resulted in his forced exile. I was afraid that they would take me out of Venezuela in that helicopter, like Diosdado's "suggestion".

The deal with Diosdado was cordial. Despite my situation, I must say that I enjoyed the helicopter flight. It is a privilege to be able to see Caracas from the air, and I was filled with strength on seeing the sea of people filling the streets. The last time that I had done so was with Iván Simonovis, another political prisoner years before, when he was the Secretary of Metropolitan Security and I was the Mayor of Chacao.

We arrived at Fort Tiuna and from there, we went to the courts in a truck driven by Diosdado Cabello, president of the National Assembly and now the personal executor of my detention. During the journey, we talked about the situation in the country. I told him that

they were committing a serious injustice detaining the young people in Táchira and Nueva Esparta, and they should be released, as they were innocent. He admitted serious concern for the economic situation and between the lines, he harshly criticized those whom he called “the geniuses driving the economy who always have an answer to everything, but the situation is critical”.

When we got to the courts, we had to wait in the car because the court was not in session; the police report and the Prosecutor’s charges were not there either. I witnessed Cabello calling the President of the Supreme Court and the Prosecutor directly to ask them, in the tone of one giving orders, why my case was not ready. I asked him what was happening and he said, “It’s nothing, I thought that you were going to appear and they don’t have anything ready.” We went into the courts and he said to me, “This is the first time I have set foot inside this building”. And I thought, but not the first time you have called a magistrate, the Prosecutor, and the President of the Supreme Court to see “how things are going”.

That night, after my first encounter with the 16<sup>th</sup> Control Judge, I was ordered to be deprived of my freedom in Ramo Verde.

They transferred me to Ramo Verde in a convoy of motorcycles and trucks. In the truck I traveled in was Cabello, the director of the DIM, and General Noguera, Commander of the National Guard.

Ramo Verde is a military detention center. We were received there by the officers and the director, Colonel (BNG) Humberto Calles. His greeting was “*Chávez vive, la lucha sigue*” [“Chávez lives, the fight goes on”]; a phrase which, after 210 days here, despite being repeated every morning in custodial formation, I know is not shared by the vast majority of the soldiers.

The first night in prison is the longest. After the intense hours and days leading up to it, finding myself in the solitariness of a cell hit me hard. For the first time in many hours, I could absorb what had happened during February 18, which I started in the trunk of a car.

The following day, I had the presentation hearing, which should have been in the courts of the Palace of Justice. The regime’s decision was not to remove me from Ramo Verde and to do the hearing on a bus known as a “mobile court” at the doors of the prison. The point of this was keeping up appearances that I was not being tried in a military prison. The hearing lasted 12 hours, and at the end, after hearing the absurd allegations of the Prosecutor, they kept me prisoner. The Prosecutors would not meet my eyes, and at the end, one of them simply said to me, “I’m really sorry”.

They imprisoned me in a cell known as “The Little Tiger”, the place where criminals are punished, in a separate annex from the rest of the prison population. I have been in this cell since I arrived, isolated from the other inmates, without the schedule of activities that the rest of the prison population has, and prohibited from having visitors who are not immediate family.

**Question:**

***If you so strongly insist that the Venezuelan government is a dictatorship and that the country is under the rule of an “unjust justice”, why did you turn yourself in? Surrendering to a dictatorship is a contradiction, something not seen in the long history of resistance.***

**Leopoldo López:**

To that question, I still respond that first, I did not surrender. I presented myself due to my own convictions of innocence before an unjust justice. Although I never thought of doing anything other than presenting myself, during my week in hiding, without communication and with only a radio for company, the accusations against me were very strong and loaded with manipulation and lies, as this whole process has been. Declarations from Maduro saying that the entire police force has been deployed “to find the terrorist”, and accusations against me of homicide and terrorism from all the dictatorship’s spokespeople filled the news. So the decision was made: they wanted me prisoner and I was already declared guilty before public opinion as responsible for the violence that they themselves had generated. I knew that what was coming was going to be very difficult because I was facing the entire machinery of the State. A State in which a corrupt and inefficient leadership has installed itself, concerned with nothing more than keeping itself in power, which makes it all the more dangerous.

Although certain of being on the right side of the truth, the right side of history, and being innocent of the crimes I am accused of, I also knew that the propaganda machines for moral assassination used by the State to which I had already been exposed for years could have some effect, and that in turn could affect support for our cause.

But I have nothing to fear and my conscience is completely clear. In facing this dictatorship I have fought them on all grounds. I have participated in electoral processes through my political organization, Popular Will, and through support for Henrique Capriles in October 2012 and April 2013. I could not do this directly, because this cowardly government barred me in 2008, six years ago. I have done battle in the streets and with legitimate and peaceful protest, I have done battle again and again against a system of corrupt justice, fighting against two prohibitions, seeking international justice when justice was not done in my country, and now I am doing battle on moral grounds. I am convinced that those of us who want to lead should do so by example. I was not going to flee from my country; I was not going to hide. I am convinced that those of us who want to lead should not act through political calculations. The truth is that I do not know how long I will be here, but I do know that for as long as my imprisonment lasts, I will be calm, serene, and clear on my principles and my convictions.



**Question:**

*If justice is as you describe, does it make sense to martyr yourself before a system that does not offer autonomy in its decisions and which is markedly biased, as you know very well, both from this and other episodes such as your prohibition? A justice which, when all is said and done, can only guarantee flawed decisions? Is that an example of the moral battle? So, to repeat the question, why hand yourself in? What perspectives of justice do you see, and how do you think your case can be resolved?*

**Leopoldo López:**

Firstly, it seems necessary to clarify that I am a prisoner due to a decision made by the dictatorship; by Maduro and his cronies, who threatened me with imprisonment in the national news no less than 20 times in the year 2013. Facing the arrest warrant, I had three options: the first was to leave the country, which I will never consider. The second was to go into hiding, which would have limited the possibility to express myself even more and which would have exposed me to assassination, already announced by Diosdado Cabello to my family and by Maduro in the national news. Assassination which, according to the regime, was being planned by opposition sectors, but which we know that in a situation of hiding, could have been carried out by the regime itself or its armed groups. The third option was presenting myself before an unjust justice voluntarily. I chose the third.

I think that my leaving the country would have been demoralizing to the opposition. Also, going into hiding with the consequent risk of assassination would literally have left the movement “headless”, although I don’t consider myself irreplaceable, because when people have the clear conviction of fighting for its rights and recovering democracy, hundreds of leaders will pop up in every corner. But being a prisoner does not leave the movement “headless”, it is being in a distinct position of struggle. Difficult, but active within all limitations.

I think that leaving a democratic society “headless” is not leading at all, as well as waiting for the unfortunate possibility that a situation nobody wants, due to the economic and social conditions running through the country, is exploited. When faced with a crisis, the political leadership should have a plan of action and not simply wait, as is the dominant policy. Our proposal is La Salida, which of course has a sense of urgency, but does the situation causing the destruction of our country and suffering of our people not warrant that urgency? Venezuela is falling to pieces before our very eyes.

There is a reaction to these injustices, abuses, and rights violations. Injustice is fought: it is faced up to with decisiveness, determination and without calculations. You suggested that

it was unusual for me to have handed myself in. It is not unusual; in fact, I have found some inspiring examples in the actions of leaders who faced an unjust injustice in their countries, handing themselves in and challenging the system, precisely so that they could strip that system bare before the eyes of their compatriots and the world. Witness Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. Presenting myself before an unjust justice represents a new opportunity to confront the lies, abuses of power, and the need for change at the very root of the system.

Mandela said again and again that there are no better defenders of Human Rights than those who have had their own rights violated. Being held prisoner has led me to experience first-hand the decay of Venezuelan justice being suffered by thousands of Venezuelans. Manipulation, the delay of process, corrupt judges, and political manipulation of judges and prosecutors in their provisional roles makes them dependent, vulnerable servants of a system and not of justice. For me, they are much more than facts and figures. They represent an experience that obligates me to have a moral and patriotic responsibility to change it.

I am imprisoned physically, but not in my convictions, and I know that one day – may it be one day soon, although time is something I have learned to master and not allow to torment me – I will leave in freedom and have even more strength than before to fight for change, and for a clear democracy for Venezuela.

A leader should be capable of inspiring a dream in their followers. With the hard circumstances in which Venezuela is living, I have understood that political calculations remain and that I should take on that risk in aid of Venezuela's freedom.

**Question:**

*Six months into your detention, it is not difficult to observe that although the country is in a profound crisis, the opposition is also experiencing one of its greatest moments of eclipse. You are in prison, María Corina Machado was removed from office, and MUD (Democratic Unity Roundtable) is bankrupt. The repression has reached breaking point, there have been 42 deaths and 3,500 detained. Students, the main protagonists of the protests, were severely punished and forced to retreat; the opposition population is seen to be largely disappointed and apathetic. 'Chavismo' is also starting to waiver, but it is still in control of the government and institutions. Today, in spite of the efforts of some spokespeople, the possibility of a solution via a Constituent or the resignation of President Maduro seems unlikely.*

**Leopoldo López:**

Regarding the situation in the Unity, I think claiming that it is bankrupt and that “the opposition population is seen to be largely disappointed and apathetic” is nothing more than an opinion; worth respecting, of course, but one that I absolutely do not share. In the last *Datanalisis* survey omnibus, we observed that Maduro would lose any election to the opposition by almost ten percentage points, and we saw that the opposition bloc represents almost 34 percent versus 29 of the governing party. In contrast, the most recent figures from IVAD, whose camp closed on September 8, reveal that the opposition bloc is at 47 percent, versus 30 for the bloc supporting the governing party. That is a difference the likes of which have never been recorded, at least since 2002.

That there is debate within the Unity is healthy and certainly does not mean that it is bankrupt. The Unity, which we all made great efforts to construct many years ago is primarily characterized by one thing: plurality. Various political movements and parties exist within it, and all of them have their own colors and ideas, but united there is only one purpose: the path to a Better Venezuela.

What is happening is a natural and proper process of revision and renovation that we had to enter into after the electoral process in April and December of the past year, and which without a doubt accelerated what happened in our country in the first quarter of the year. It is the logical way for things to be. It is not just La Salida, which pushed this debate, or does what happened in April and December 2013 with the municipals, not merit a revision of the Unity's strategy? Within the framework of plurality, it is natural and even healthy for differences to be publically raised and discussed. An example is the famous debate between those in the Unity who believed that the presidential candidate for the 2012 elections should be named through a consensus between political parties, while others believed that

they should be chosen through a process of primary elections participated in by all Venezuelans.

Equally, the debate between those who believed that we should go with the party candidates and those who believed we should go with a single Unity candidate. And the current differences between those who believe in mechanisms such as Constituents and that we should get out of this disaster as quickly as possible, and those who propose to wait until 2019. The Unity is only strengthened by these differences, despite those, like you today, who say that they will divide it.

**Question:**

*In this context, did you not push La Salida in the country, to a blind spot where it goes back to being an opposition sector newly vulnerable to accusations of coup and conspiracy? If you could go back in time, what would you do differently? Would you hand yourself in again?*

**Leopoldo López:**

Saying that La Salida has brought the country to a blind spot has a similar logic to the claims made by those who say the demonstrators who went out to protest in the street were the ones that caused the violence. The country has been brought to a blind spot, the darkest one in its history, by the government! La Salida is precisely a political proposal in the face of the disaster being endured by our country and the suffering of our people. The proposal has its name because it is seeking to show Venezuelans that there is a solution to the political, social, and economic crisis running through Venezuela.

It is not true that it consists solely of trying to change the system by means of protest. The proposal of La Salida sees popular, constitutional, peaceful, and non-violent protest as the necessary path to take to activate any constitutional mechanism, because we are facing a dictatorship that will not give a thing to democratic society. Popular pressure through peaceful and non-violent protest and the activation of constitutional mechanisms: these are the elements that form the central proposal of La Salida.