

**FREE
LEOPOLDO**



Exclusive Interview with Leopoldo López: Part 2

Boris Muñoz

The Trial

Question:

In the written accusation, the four Prosecutors for the Public Ministry claimed that you “attacked the ‘colectivo’ group, damaging social relations and generating violence, destruction, and chaos in order to socially and politically destabilize the country.” They even accuse you of sending subliminal messages to those who protested on February 12 in the entrance of the Prosecutor to stay on the warpath. What is your opinion of the way the process has been developed?

Leopoldo López:

All of Venezuela knows that the government is pursuing me with a political trial because I have clearly said what all Venezuelans are thinking: this government is a disaster. That is why I am held prisoner. That was clearly proven in the written accusation against me, which sets out that it is a crime to call the government corrupt, inefficient, and anti-democratic. Only in a dictatorship are words and speeches a crime.

The trial is said to be public, but Venezuela cannot see it, and the military are in control of who can and cannot enter the courtroom in a process that should be purely civilian. There are empty seats in the hearings and people who want to come in are not allowed. As well as unjustifiably holding me prisoner for seven months, isolated from other inmates and without visitation rights, they are not allowing Venezuelans to see what is happening. It has been a totally flawed process.

There is no legal and just basis for my trial.

The dictatorship knows I am innocent; that is why it does not accept even one of the 65 witnesses presented in my defense, nor one piece of evidence, while the government presents more than 100 witnesses, including “experts” who are members of the USPV. To justify my case, they have brought four students to trial, one of whom remains deprived of his freedom.

But this persecution is nothing new, it is more than ten years old. Regarding the reasons behind this process, I think it is worth remembering my words during the preliminary hearing.

Question:

Why do you believe that the government wants to remove you from the political scene?

Leopoldo López:

It is nothing new. The late President Chávez barred me from office six years ago in 2008, when I was going to be elected metropolitan Mayor of Caracas, and now in 2014, the year in which my prohibition expired, Maduro gave the order to imprison me. That is more than ten years of continuous persecution that has been manifested in dozens of cases at various times: three attempted homicides that have remained unresolved, two political prohibitions which were upheld in spite of my winning the case at the ICHR [Inter-American Court of Human Rights], and now, imprisonment with an absurd, unjust trial: a trial of my discourse, my ideas. I can give the reason for this continued persecution in a single word: fear. Fear of our ideas for change, fear of a different voice, and fear of a different proposal to the failed model of so-called 21st century socialism.

Question:

What expectations do you have for release, and in what timeframe?

Leopoldo López:

I haven't set a timeframe. I know that I will leave here a free man. One of the first books I read when they transferred me to Ramo Verde was about the experience of the Vietnamese Cardinal Van Thuan, who was imprisoned by the communist regime which alleged that he was part “of a plot between the Vatican and the imperialists to organize a fight against the communist regime”. He was called to the presidential palace, he went, and he was arrested.

He was pursued and incarcerated for ten years. The Cardinal advises that the prisoner's greatest frustration is thinking every day that they will leave in freedom as soon as possible, and when that doesn't happen, they suffer that disappointment every day. Faced with that reality, he explains how he found strength and stability in his relationship with God through two things. The first was occupying himself with living every day to its fullest, and the second was training and preparing himself even more.

I know that I will leave here a free man, and that when I do, I will be stronger in mind, body, and soul. I will leave spiritually fortified and without bitterness. Hatred and resentment are what has led our country to this stagnation. We are going to move forward in our dream, which is nothing less than achieving a better Venezuela and a peaceful Venezuela, of wellbeing and progress.

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The Effects of La Salida

Question:

Let us return to 2013 for a moment. Today we know that there were meetings and discussions prior to the call for street protests. Various opposition figures advised and even asked that you wait a few months, given that all indications were that the socio-economic decline would highlight the difficulties with the government, as has indeed been the case. They felt that the moment to act would be then.

However, according to those opposition sources, you persisted in calling for popular protest. Could you clarify this point, specifying what type of conversations took place before the call to protest?

What were the contrasting viewpoints and why did you decide to call #LaSalida contrary to the opinion of important opposition factors?

Also, I would like to ascertain why you believe that the combination of street action and votes was or is the key to opposing Nicolás Maduro's government. This might help us to understand a background difference with Henrique Capriles Radonski, who claims that forces should first be gathered by building an undeniable majority to overthrow 'Chavismo'. How do you see the subject of the majority? Is the opposition in a majority today?

If so, why did the protest, which exploded on February 12 concentrate mostly on the middle class and the students, and not filter through to the rest of society? Or is it not an issue of majority, but of something else?

Leopoldo López:

We explained our vision of claiming the street under the strategy of non-violent protest and the organization of popular gatherings in order to activate the constitutional and democratic way out of the crisis on various occasions. In fact, from January 6, 2013, when the now-famous "Hospedales Report" was presented, which in reality was never adopted by the Unity, we presented our conviction of adopting protest as the firmest and most committed possible way. Throughout 2013, in ordinary G7 meetings as well as closed ones, we always presented our vision. From October of that year, when we had already come to the conclusion of embarking on direct confrontation with the dictatorship, activating a constitutional solution, in particular the call for a Constituent Assembly, we presented our

proposal to the national management of the Unity parties. We also presented our vision before a Unity assessment team. In that meeting, Pompeyo Martínez surprised and inspired me with his clarity, and at aged more than 90, he insisted in taking up the fight against the dictatorship head-on.

Among the conversations I had with various people at the end of 2013, I met with Henrique Capriles twice, in order to discuss this subject and in particular, the need to take to the streets in non-violent protest to drive political change. Henrique agreed that we could not call this a democracy. He himself had the presidency stolen from him on April 14 due to the constitutional trap, among other things. On that day, Popular Will was not recognized. Capriles himself recognized it several times. However, he showed his differences regarding the protest. When we couldn't reach a shared vision, he said to me, "Well, if you're so convinced about street protests, call one yourself!"

We tried every available path to consultation within the Unity. However, the dominant position in the G7 was that we should wait, without proposing a clear path of political fight against the top leaders of the dictatorship. I say the top leaders of the USPV because the elite government is corrupt, inefficient, and responsible for the crisis that all Venezuelans are suffering today. I am not referring to the bases of 'Chavismo' – I want to make that very clear. We had, and continue to have, the conviction that there is no way of getting out of this crisis if we do not replace those who have hijacked State power in Venezuela.

Question:

Do you not consider that #LaSalida was 'offside' in calling the protest?

Leopoldo López:

I would ask: offside compared to whom? In that moment there was no proposed alternative and we had given thorough explanations within the opposition factors. The MUD, as repeated frequently by all the parties that comprise it, is an electoral alliance that cannot be a straightjacket for its members' initiatives. Therefore, not only did we not play offside, but rather, we complied with political debate and deliberation.

Certainly there were in that moment, as I believe there are today, those who think that continuing to wait for the economic and social decline caused by this government is the best path for political change. But this should be viewed in the reflection of Cuba, a country that has had economic decline for more than 50 years, but where the communist government has been consolidated. In other words, economic decline alone will not necessarily generate political change.

Question:

Today we know that you had a differing stance to the decision made by Henrique Capriles Radonski, who asked his voters to stay at home, after the dubious result favoring Nicolás Maduro in the elections of April 14, 2013 came to light.

Those differences became obvious during the municipal campaigns, when there was a vacuum in the opposition leadership caused by the disappointing result of December 8. Could you tell us your point of view and what caused those differences?

Leopoldo López:

The results of April 14 were close, very close. All previous elections, except the referendum of 2007, which we won and in which we had significant participation together with the students, had been in favor of the regime with wide margins. These differences made it difficult to think that the gross trends were different to the results. The abuse, manipulation, use of public funds, and many other irregularities have always been present, but we had never been able to quantify them in such a way that it would change the election results.

April 14 was different. On April 14, Henrique Capriles won, but he could not or did not know how to fulfill his triumph. I became the national coordinator for the presidential campaign of October 7, when Chávez was re-elected after having mortgaged the country for his last electoral campaign (the economic consequences of which are still being suffered by Venezuelans today). As coordinator, it was my job to set the electoral wheels in motion together with all parties and candidates from the Unity. It was a massive effort by everybody, and I can vouch for the service of all municipal and regional campaign managers. For the first time, the opposition got to the elections with all the electoral mechanisms in place; in other words, all the table witnesses, center witnesses, tallying teams, and records collections.

That was not the case in the elections of October 7, 2013. On that day, at 8:00pm, it was up to me to give the results of our internal count to Henrique Capriles. Armando Briquet, Julio Borges, and Carlos Ocaríz were there. I told them that we had not won and that there was a difference close to ten percentage points. The president of the CNE [NEC – National Electoral Council], Tibisay Lucena, called Briquet 30 minutes later and confirmed that the official figures were close to our internal records. In spite of there being irregularities such as identity fraud, double and triple votes, official violence in voting centers, and abuse on the part of Plan República, the effect of those abuses and incidents on votes was not enough to claim that he would have won the election. That night, Capriles acknowledged his defeat like a good democrat. Realistically, in that moment, there was nothing else to do.

But on April 14, the situation was different. Six months after October 7, the same voting structure, only slightly revised, was present in all voting centers. More than 120,000 men

and women facing all kinds of adversity and opportunism were present at each and every one of the voting centers. From that afternoon, there was a different energy compared to October 7 – there was more spirit in our party and desolation in the government’s camp. The first results started to come in at 7:00 in the evening, and just like what happened when we won in 2007, centers where we had never won, or even lost abysmally, started to give very positive results. In the afternoon, Capriles started to say that the results were going to be close and we were going to win, and he was right. At 8:00pm, Jorge Rodríguez, Nicolás Maduro’s campaign manager, gave a press conference inviting their membership to the Palace of Miraflores. The long faces of the official spokespeople, the State TV stations breaking all the electoral rules, broadcasting desperate pleas for their membership to go out and vote... it was a clear indication of what was happening. They had the mark of defeat and as we had foreseen, in a closed setting, they would seek to steal the victory away.

After Jorge Rodríguez’s press conference, I met with Capriles, Julio Borges, Tomás Guanipa, Ramón Guillermo Avelo, Ramón José Medina, Carlos Ocaríz, Adriana D’ Elia, Roberto Patiño, Miguel Pizarro, and Carlos Altamari. At that moment I said to Capriles: “brother, with all responsibility and my deepest conviction, I recommend that we do a press conference in the same terms that USPV did; let’s call the people to our base to support you and peacefully hear the results in the street.” It was the time to show our conviction in victory with action and simultaneously, send a message to the ruling party that we knew we had won. The feeling was so optimistic, and they were so ready to respond at street level, I feel sure that we would have gotten no less than 100,000 people at that time of night. The people knew that we had won and that a firm demonstration was needed to ensure the results. After hearing what various people had to say, Capriles’s decision was not to assemble that night.

When we assessed the results and irregularities that were showing up, like isolated abuses at the voting tables, cases of identity fraud, manipulation of the voting lists, media opportunism, and violence, I was very mindful that at that time, the cheating could make a difference in votes and change the results, which is what happened, in effect.

At 11:00 at night on national TV, the CNE announced the official results and declared Maduro the winner by a difference of less than 200,000 votes. That close result and the political earthquake that it meant for the ruling party was evidenced in the pathetic gathering organized in Miraflores, where the most visible faces of the USPV were absent and where there were big gaps in the street. However, Maduro announced his victory and said that he was prepared for a recount.

That night back at base, I began to listen to the argument that Capriles could not be another version of Andrés López Obrador in Mexico; that he had to be careful. I voiced my disagreement with that argument.

Capriles, accompanied only by his political management, announced that he was disputing the results and not accepting them. The following morning, I suggested to Henrique that the audit we should request had to be a triage between the voting lists, the proof of voting in

the ballot boxes, and the machine results. The key was in the voting lists. I said that the audit could not be an isolated event and that it should be accompanied by a strong street demonstration of popular support all over the country.

That Monday in a press conference, Capriles called for demonstration in the CNE regions and called for a demonstration on the Wednesday that could go to the CNE in Caracas to demand a comprehensive audit of the voting lists, ballots, and machines. I was totally in agreement with that plan and at the end of the press conference, Capriles asked me to coordinate the audit team. However, later, without giving me any explanation, he gave that responsibility to the attorney Ramón José Medina.

On the Tuesday, the people responded massively to Capriles' call and took to the streets all over the country. The accumulation of strength in the streets was truly impressive; streets which were practically monopolized by the opposition given that the official side had not even gone out to celebrate on the Sunday, and even less so on the Monday. They knew that they had lost, or won with a suspicious victory, and the people knew that we had won, and wanted that victory to be respected.

At 1:00pm on the Tuesday, Maduro ordered soldiers to stop the demonstration from entering the city center on national TV. He did it alone on a stage, and his threat, rather than intimidating, seemed nervous and insecure.

I heard that declaration and, convinced that we were going to challenge it, I went to the campaign's base. In the afternoon, Capriles asked all the Unity's management to trust him and that he would later announce that he did not consider it wise to demonstrate on Wednesday. I expressed my disagreement, but my will was to fully obey him given that we was our legitimate candidate, supported by the entire Unity. That afternoon at a press conference, Capriles asked the country not to take to the streets in order to avoid violence, that he would take responsibility and that we had to take the path of disputing the result. There was no march. The audit was dismissed and Maduro remained President.

Question:

Let us imagine that today is January 20, 2014, and those events have not happened yet. What would you have done differently?

Leopoldo López:

Without a doubt, I would still issue the call to protest, but try to amass through communications what the regime managed to limit, with its manipulation on one side, and the limitations of the media suffered by Venezuela on the other. We always proposed a path that went beyond protest. We always proposed protest as a necessary transition to activate

any constitutional mechanism because a dictatorship is not going to give an inch. We always proposed a non-violent method of fighting.

Question:

How do you assess MUD's response to the crisis, and in particular, to the dialogue for peace proposed, but also boycotted, by the government?

Leopoldo López:

The dialogue was Maduro's tactic to placate the street protests. The facts show that there never was, nor will there be, the intention on the part of those who govern the country, to have a dialogue to change the system. Nicolás Maduro is not Frederick de Klerk who, faced with the impossibility of maintaining apartheid, freed Mandela and promoted elections he knew were lost. Maduro is a moral dwarf who would prefer to flee a country in misery rather than hold a dialogue. His model is Cuba, the misery of a country subdued by the power of an elite government that is corrupt, inefficient, and despotic. We have reached the point where the "Cubanization" of Venezuela is no longer a theoretical threat. It is now repression: the suffocation of liberties, ration cards, and isolation. This is the current scenario that the political leadership must respond to.

Considering this context, what we proposed in January is even more valid than ever: forge a popular path that is peaceful but which will not bow to constitutional abuse, in order to produce political change. An overwhelming majority of the Venezuelan people today want change; they do not want pandering to and they do not want intermediate solutions. Winning mayoral, governmental, or congressional elections only means something if they represent sure steps towards the freedom of Venezuela.

Question:

Faced with the MUD crisis, what do you believe will happen with the political unity that has, until now, made the opposition cohesive?

Leopoldo López:

I repeat: what is happening is natural and proper; a process of revision and renewal that the Unity should enter into after the electoral processes of April and December last year, and which, without a doubt, accelerated what happened in the first quarter of this year. It is the logical way of things. It certainly does not mean that MUD is bankrupt. You asked me about "dialogue". Every organization and every leader who attended the Palace of

Miraflores should answer that, because it is not true that the whole Unity agreed with that call. Every political organization is responsible to its followers, its unit, and history, for explaining the rationale for its participation or lack thereof in one initiative or another. The people who decided to sit down and negotiate with those who were reprimanding our students and our people, appeasing the protests, should be asked that question. Achievements? Mistakes? Each organization is responsible for their own. The Unity should meet the expectations of the vast majority who want change and not the expectations of the few sections of power who don't represent real change.

Question:

You claim that the main objective of La Salida is to change a corrupt system. But in view of the effects that it has had on the previous composition of the opposition leadership – represented by Capriles Radonski and the Democratic Unity Roundtable – one could also say that La Salida was a strategy to provoke internal change within the opposition and drive a new leadership, including your own, that of María Corina Machado, and Antonio Ledezma. How would you respond to that?

Leopoldo López:

We have clearly stated that La Salida is a political proposal that consists of changing not a bad government, but a complete system. Seven months after its proposal, the majority of Venezuelans believed that the system has to change, and today, 60% of the population believe that we are not living in a democracy. The process of internal change of the opposition started not when we set out the plan for La Salida, but during the elections of April 14, 2013 and the municipal elections of the same year.

In any case, debating the proposal itself absolutely takes a back seat compared to the huge challenges facing us as Unity to confront this system and make way for a country that can generate peace, wellbeing, and progress for its people.

Question:

Some 22 years ago, Hugo Chávez also tried to change a system that he called corrupt, inefficient, and anti-democratic. He led a (failed) coup, which led him to the presidency seven years later. Like you now, he went to jail, which gave him a somewhat certified moral superiority. In order to win, he promised to replace a democracy of settlements and seniority and a 'rentier'-type and inefficient economic model with a participatory and inclusive revolution that has resulted in what we have today. Beyond our opinion about these results, the initial urgency - the "for now" - of Chávez connected with the Venezuelan reality and the needs of the majority.

His message somewhat cut to the core of the social problems of our time. Have you viewed yourself in Chávez's reflection? Can you comment on those parallels?

Leopoldo López:

Hugo Chávez attempted a coup d'état, which fortunately failed. Dozens of Venezuelans were killed during that coup by the usurpers' weapons. I am a prisoner because of my words, my discourse, for calling for a peaceful, popular, and constitutional change.

Regarding the jail conditions, yes, I have been able to make a comparison. Along with the other usurpers, Hugo Chávez was kept prisoner in the recently-inaugurated Yare prison. He received as many visitors as he wanted every day; his rights were not violated, as it should be; hooded men never entered his cell with weapons and stole his belongings and writings. He could even record a show with José Vicente Rangel. None of these minimum conditions of respect have been shown to me.

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The Future

Question:

How do you see Venezuela from the small window of your cell?

Leopoldo López:

From my cell window, I see Venezuela from its historical process. I am reading and studying various writers in order to understand more about how we got to where we are. I also see Venezuela through its geography. I have a map of Venezuela that I look at every day, so I can remember the number of times I have travelled through the country, remember our people, and above all, appreciate the immense potential that we have. I also see it through my imagination. I have found drawing to be a way of remembering our geography. My sister Diana, who is an artist, brought me charcoal and a sketchbook so I can learn to draw. I took it up with enthusiasm, and now the walls of my cell are covered with pictures of Venezuela's landscapes and animals, which allow me to leave these four walls and enjoy remembering my country.

Question:

In the difficult conjecture Venezuela is at, what do you think should be done? If you were free, what would you do?

Leopoldo López:

I am convinced that sooner or later we are going to have to move to a constituent process. All of the opposition denounces the system as unviable and the productive sector as threatened by bankruptcy; they are begging for a change of model, the citizens are suffering the consequences of a system that is broken in every sense. That being the reality, the logical thing is for the political leadership to look towards a mechanism that allows a change of system. The constituent process is the most ideal process to achieve the political and social change Venezuela needs. It is the democratic mechanism to give legitimacy to a country model where all sectors are represented. That is why, despite the negativity from some opposition sectors towards the constituent idea, from my prison cell, I insist and invite them to evaluate this path with serenity and sincerity.

The Constitution allows the people to call a constituency with 15% of registered voters' signatures, which represents a huge opportunity to turn the proposal for change into a political and social platform backed up by millions on Venezuelans. It is also a guarantee of a peaceful resolution to the serious conflicts occurring in the country. In every opinion

study that I have read, more than 50% of Venezuelans are prepared to sign, and that is far

Question:

How do you see your own future – say, in five years' time?

more than the minimum required by the constitution.

Leopoldo López:

In the medium- and long-term, I hope that we will be moving towards the consolidation of a better Venezuela, after a process of profound change that has included all Venezuelans.

Question:

What sort of Venezuela would you like your children to grow up in?

Leopoldo López:

The gap between the Venezuela I would like for my children and the Venezuela that is possible can be very small if we want it to be. I have dedicated myself to knowing the country and its problems, I have listened to many people who are full of optimism, just like me. We are Venezuelans with different backgrounds and ways of thinking, but all with one thing in common: we will not lose our optimism and we will not stop dreaming of a country much better than it is at the moment, a better Venezuela: of peace, wellbeing, and progress, where all rights are for all people. It might be ambitious, but it can be done. The petroleum resources are there, monopolized beneath the earth while there is so much poverty in the country, and it is in our hands and consciences to use that for development. With the best proven resources, we should become the biggest oil producer in the world. Sowing the seeds for the petroleum industry has been talked about for years – now it is time to reap the rewards. And that is nothing more than using it to leverage peace, wellbeing, and progress. To leverage the wellbeing of millions of Venezuelans, allowing us to overcome poverty for the first time in our history, and leverage progress through the generation of millions of productive jobs in an economy that is finally diversified. I dream about a country where we achieve the aspirations shared by all Venezuelans. Nothing more; nothing less.
