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By: Leopoldo López, Dec. 26, 2014

Los Teques, Venezuela – My country, Venezuela, is on the verge of social and economic collapse. This slow-motion disaster, nearly 15 years in the making, was not initiated by falling oil prices or by mounting debts. It was set in motion by the authoritarian government's hostility toward human rights and the rule of law and the institutions that protect them.

I know this on an all-too personal level. I am writing from a military prison, where I have been held since February as a result of speaking out against the government's actions. I am one of scores of political prisoners in my country who are locked away because of their words and ideas.

This unjust incarceration has given me a firsthand view of the pervasive abuses—legal, mental and physical—perpetrated by the ruling elite in my country. It has not been a good experience, but it has been an enlightening one.

My isolation also has given me time to think and reflect on the larger crisis facing my country. It has never been clearer to me that Venezuela's road to ruin was paved years ago by a movement to dismantle basic human rights and freedoms in the name of an illusory vision of achieving greater good for the masses through the centralization of power.

When the current ruling party, the United Socialist Party, first took power in 1999, its supporters viewed human rights as a luxury, not a necessity. Large segments of the population were living in poverty, and in need of food, housing and security. Protecting free speech and the separation of powers seemed frivolous. In the name of expediency, these values were compromised and then dismantled entirely.

The legislature was neutered, allowing the executive to rule by decree without the checks and balances that prevent government from veering off track. The judiciary was made accountable to the ruling party, rendering the constitution and the law meaningless. In an infamous 2009 case, Judge Mary Lourdes Afiuni was imprisoned for ordering the release of a businessman and government critic who had been held for three years in pretrial detention, one year more than allowed under Venezuelan law.

Meanwhile, political leaders—myself included—were persecuted and imprisoned, stifling the competition of ideas that could have led to better

decisions and policies. Independent news organizations were dismantled, seized or driven out of business. The “sunshine that disinfects,” and the scrutiny that motivates good decision-making, no longer benefit our leadership.

Venezuela’s current president, Nicolás Maduro, has taken this to a terrible new low. Rights are rationed as though they were scarce goods to be traded for other means of subsistence: You may have employment if you give away your free speech. You may have some health benefits if you give away your right to protest.

Apologists, many from other countries, including the U.S., say these sacrifices were and are for the collective good of the country. Yet the lives of Venezuelans, especially the poor, are worse by every measure. Inflation, at more than 60%, is rampant. Scarcity of basic goods has led to empty shelves and long lines. Violent crime is skyrocketing and the murder rate is the second highest in the world, behind only Honduras. The health-care system is collapsing. And many financial experts are predicting a default on the country’s debts in a matter of months.

The challenges now facing Venezuela are complex and will require years of work on many fronts. That work must begin with restoring the rights, freedoms and checks and balances that are the proper foundation of civil society.

The international community has an important role to play—especially our neighbors in Latin America. To remain silent is to be complicit in a disaster that doesn’t just impact Venezuela but could have implications across the hemisphere. Organizations such as the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) and the South American trade bloc Mercosur must come off the sidelines. Countries such as Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Argentina must get involved.

At home, our constitution provides a way forward if we will heed its words. Our proposal is simple but powerful: All rights for all people. Not some rights for some people. No regime should have the power to decide who gets access to which rights. This idea may be taken for granted in other countries, but in my country, Venezuela, it is a dream worth fighting for.

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