

Leopoldo López: "When I am free, my body and spirit will be stronger"

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Nearly a year after being imprisoned for criticising the Maduro regime, ABC has obtained an interview with the Venezuelan politician.

The opposition leader **Leopoldo López** is the political prisoner most closely watched and [harassed by the Venezuelan authorities](#), and one whose most basic human rights have been the most curtailed. In spite of the severity of his imprisonment, ABC was granted an interview with written questions. On February 18th, the ex-Mayor of Chacao will have spent **a year in the Ramo Verde military prison**, just 30 minutes outside of Caracas. The Government accuses him of instigating violence by proposing "**la salida**" of **President Nicolás Maduro** ["**la salida**" means "**the exit**" or "**the solution**" in Spanish].

-What do you think of the negotiations made by some parties, such as the opposition to the Democratic Unity Roundtable, (DUR), with the government, in order to have roles in the Electoral Council and the high court?

-Serious and regrettable. Serious because of their short-sightedness, and regrettable because it has been done behind the back of the Venezuelan people who want change, and of the other organizations that form part of the DUR body of parties. But it is also clear that they were totally ineffective in their negotiations.

-How do you perceive the situation of the DUR and its leadership?

-The DUR is an institution that should be understood for what it is: an alliance of parties. But that does not mean that it is without opposition, let alone unity. The DUR is a necessary institution and it must be permanently under review and reinforced.

-Is the unity of the DUR at risk?

-I don't think so. We in the political parties have worked very hard to build the DUR, which is primarily characterized by its plurality. At its heart live various political parties and movements, all with their own colors and ideas, but united with a single purpose: marching towards a better Venezuela. In the framework of that plurality, it is natural and even healthy for differences to be publicly raised and discussed.

-Do those differences collide between those who seek a rapid change and others who want a slow change?

-There are those who believe in mechanisms like the Constituent [Assembly], and that we should get out of this disaster as soon as possible by constitutional means, and there are others who propose waiting until 2019. Unity, the opposition, and the DUR itself came out of those differences stronger than ever, despite many who, like today, said that it would be divided.

-Has prison affected your leadership within the opposition?

-The day I handed myself in to the unjust justice system that exists in my country, I said that if my imprisonment serves to rouse the people, I would submit to it completely. Now, I believe that millions of Venezuelans and the entire world are very clear about what we are up against, and that is a fundamental step in achieving change. Injustice will be faced decisively, ruthlessly, without suspicion or calculations. I don't think whether imprisonment has affected my leadership or not is important; what I can say is that when I am free, I will be stronger, in mind, body, and soul. I will leave spiritually fortified, and bearing no grudge. Hatred and resentment are what have brought this country to stagnation.

-What is happening with "La Salida"?

-As a political proposal, "La Salida" is more valid than ever, to the point where those colleagues in the unit who criticized it have fortunately retracted those criticisms. They don't call them as such, but that really isn't important. Today, 80% of Venezuelans want change, and 60% want Maduro to step down.

-Isn't it somewhat forceful to ask for the exit of a leader?

-That proposal that we made to the country a year ago has the name "salida" because it seeks to show Venezuelans that there is a way out of this whole political, social, and economic crisis our country is living. We have said it loud and clear: La Salida is a political proposal in the face of the disaster being felt by our country, and the suffering of its people.

-But the proposal hasn't led to a change in the system, or the resignation of the president...

-It is not true that it consists solely of trying to change the system by means of protest. The proposal of La Salida considers popular, constitutional, peaceful, and non-violent protest as the necessary route to activating any constitutional mechanism, because we are facing a dictatorship that will not give an inch to democratic society. Popular pressure via peaceful, non-violent protest, and the activation of constitutional mechanisms is the central proposal of "La Salida."

-Will the economic crisis end by throwing out this regime?

-Without a doubt, in a democratic system with periodic, transparent, and competitive elections, the economy and the performance of the government in that respect has a fundamental role in changing that government. But that is not the case in Venezuela.

-What is the case in Venezuela?

-In Venezuela there is a dictatorship. We have been working to educate the people so that Venezuelans are more aware of the type of regime we are faced with. And our people are very wise. Today, around 60% of Venezuelans believe that we are not living in a democratic system.

-Can the economic crisis produce a political change?

-It is not true that the economic and social decline is the only factor to determine political change. There is the example of Cuba, which for Venezuela is not a theoretical example, nor a distant one, but rather the driving force. More than 50 years of enormous economic deterioration, parallel to the consolidation of the regime.

-International organizations and ex-presidents support you and call for your liberation; what is missing for the government to grant it?

-It is a matter of time. I have not set any deadlines. I know that I will leave in freedom. Every day, it clearly becomes more and more unsustainable for Maduro to keep me unjustly and arbitrarily deprived of my freedom. It is not just the most important global human rights bodies that have taken up the cause, calling for my freedom and that of all political prisoners in Venezuela. Some 80% of Venezuelans believe I am innocent, according to recent opinion polls.

-What do you think of the renewed relationship between the US and Cuba?

-It is a positive step towards the convergence of the continent's peoples and governments. It creates an expectation to be validated over time, which is that Cuba can become increasingly open and give the Cuban people the democratic change they so demand. On the other hand, it saddens me to see that while this is happening, my own country isolates itself more and more from the international stage due to its antidemocratic actions and its violations of human rights.

-How do you see the US sanctions against Venezuelan officials who have violated human rights?

-Maduro and his corrupt leadership's reaction was to try and manipulate the sanctions, saying that the sanctions were against the people and the country. They are not; they are against those who are corrupt, and those who violate human

rights. Maduro is far from representing the people and the country. Our people will not be in the least bit affected by these sanctions.

-How do you think the government will come out of this storm that lies ahead?

-I hope that the storm will bring a new dawn, without corruptors and repressors in power. Leadership is necessary if the people and the Constitution are to be energized to bring about that change legitimately, peacefully, and democratically, which is what we want and seek. And that is how it will be.

-What is your opinion of the exchange that Nicolás Maduro proposed about you to the US government?

-[Maduro's proposal](#) demonstrates that I am a political prisoner. He acts like a guerrilla leader and proposes a prisoner exchange for me. He also controls the entire political process against me, and it just goes to prove what he set out to do a year ago which I did not accept: his hope that I will abandon Venezuela. That will never happen.

-You have a courageous wife and family; what is your message to Venezuelans?

-[My primary bastion of support has been my wife Lilian](#), my children, and my parents. If I was in love with my wife before this process, today I love her so much more. My message to Venezuelans is this: the situation in our country today is especially serious, due to the shortage of food and medicine. Regardless of social class or ideology, Venezuelans are subjected to waiting in long lines come rain or shine due to this shortage. I invite you to see opportunity within this adversity. This opportunity for change depends upon our ability to organize, unite, and politically motivate ourselves.

An interview twice confiscated

It has never been more difficult to obtain an interview than it was with Leopoldo López. Since the day on which he handed himself in to the authorities - February 18 last year - I have sought to interview the leader of the Popular Will party, but it has been a path strewn with obstacles. On April 26 2014, the photographer David Maris and I accompanied López's wife Lilian Tintori to the doors of the Ramo Verde military prison. The guards held us back for three hours without an explanation and confiscated the photographer's camera.

The cruelty with which the prison guards have treated the leader Leopoldo López is extensive. They review every piece of paper, book, and pen that enters and leaves his cell. Our questionnaire-type interview was confiscated on two occasions after having been written in López's own hand - also twice - before it could leave

under the table. His handwriting is tiny but firm, as though the paper were a crib sheet for an exam, or destined to be hidden in a crack.

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