

## **A Letter to the Democrats of the World**

Time. Time is the main enemy to overcome in prison.

I share this reflection because on several occasions, I have been asked about my expectations for my freedom and I always answer with the advice of Cardinal Van Thuan: I have set no deadlines. On August 15, 1975, this Vietnamese Cardinal was imprisoned for thirteen years, after having been summoned to the presidential palace under false pretenses and then accused of being part of “a conspiracy between the Vatican and the imperialists in order to organize a takedown of the Communist regime.” Later, the Cardinal published some reflections where he described that, for the prisoner, the main frustration is thinking one will be released as soon as possible and then suffering disappointment each day when this does not occur. Faced with this reality, Cardinal Van Thuan tells how he found his strength and stability, on the one hand, through his relationship with God, and on the other hand, by living life to the fullest every day, taking advantage of the time to train and prepare himself even more.

I know that one day I will go free – I do not doubt this – and when I do, I will be stronger in mind, body, and soul. I know that I will leave without bitterness, strengthened to continue fighting for the same causes for which I have always fought, and I will continue to fight, for as long as I’m alive, for the same noble causes for which I was imprisoned: the welfare and prosperity of our people, the defense of democracy, and the freedom of Venezuelans.

But while, from an individual point of view, these lessons have helped me to face my unjust sentence, they have not served to calm the anguish that I have for the situation that my country is experiencing. Venezuela and Venezuelans are running out of time.

The crisis currently affecting Venezuela is systemic in nature. There is no area of public or private life that escapes this terrible situation unscathed. Socially, our people suffer from a lack of basic supplies such as food and medicine, which has prompted increasingly more Venezuelan families to eat fewer than two meals a day and has led to the deaths of many people who were unable to get necessary medicines to address basic conditions like high blood pressure. Economically, our country is suffering from hyperinflation that dramatically decreases the purchasing power of our currency, something that, without any doubt, is most harmful to the poor. And politically, the regime has advanced their persecution against the opposition through the manipulation of public authorities, translating this into the existence of more than a hundred political prisoners in military prisons, the national authority’s use of torture and degrading treatment against people exercising their constitutional right to protest, and even the use of weapons of war to disperse public protests, as happened a few days ago in the town of Cariaco, a poor village in eastern Venezuela.

In this crisis, it is clear who is responsible: a dictatorial regime that is stubbornly and irresponsibly clinging to power, and that has decided to deny, by any means necessary, the right of the Venezuelan people to protest and to bring about, through a universal, direct, and secret vote, the change that is desired by all.

Venezuela's democratic opposition has been given the task of denouncing the anti-democratic

nature of the government of our country. It has not been an easy task to make the international community see the true nature of the regime that governs Venezuela, as well as the danger posed to all free and democratic peoples of the Americas by the mere existence and shameful tolerance of a new dictatorship on our continent.

For a long time, the Venezuelan government unscrupulously took advantage of the vast amount of financial resources that entered our country through the sale of oil to get political favors through the exacerbation of electoral populism at the domestic level, and to gain influence and sanitize their authoritarian image internationally. And all of this happened as we were advancing at a rapid pace towards a political, economic and social crisis that was totally foreseeable and for which the Venezuelan people would bear the brunt of the suffering.

But today, there is more than enough evidence pointing to the degradation of our political system, to the loss of our civil liberties and to the "alteration of the democratic order" over the past 17 years.

Given this scenario, the unification of all democratic forces is necessary, both inside and outside of Venezuela, around a common goal: the establishment, maintenance, and defense of regimes that sustain civil liberties and, above all things, respect human beings.

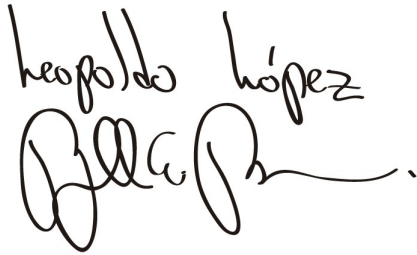
Brothers and sisters around the world, but especially on the American continent, we need your solidarity tomorrow, June 23rd. Solidarity with Venezuela, solidarity with the defense of democracy. We celebrate the holding of sessions to discuss the case of Venezuela and to discuss the application of the Democratic Charter, because the mere fact that these discussions have taken place belies the Venezuelan government's shameful argument – one which they've repeated in a various international bodies – that "democratic normality" exists in Venezuela.

In the same way, the Venezuelan government now claims that the Democratic Charter is not necessary, that it would impede the process of dialogue that is so necessary in our country. The Democratic Unity Roundtable argues the exact opposite. The Democratic Charter would facilitate a process for dialogue – which today does not exist in Venezuela – to take place, and would allow for that dialogue to be effective and based on an agenda and clear deadlines.

All members of Venezuela's Democratic Unity Roundtable have expressed their desire to rebuild and reconcile Venezuela and they have expressed their desire for a dialogue that would give real and concrete solutions to Venezuelans. And our demands in order for this dialogue to be fruitful are merely the respect of human rights and the Constitution through the opening of humanitarian channels to allow food and medicine to reach Venezuelans, the release of political prisoners, and the realization of a recall referendum. We can discuss and reach agreements on such fundamental issues as democratic coexistence, economic reconstruction, and the security of our country, but I believe that everyone can understand that human rights and compliance with the Constitution are not subject to negotiation. No dialogue can supersede the constitutional right of our people to carry out a recall referendum against Nicolás Maduro in 2016. I respectfully invite anyone to read Articles 72 and 233 of our Constitution, which confirm the legitimacy of our demands.

Today, Venezuelans fight peacefully and constitutionally against a dictatorship that only benefits itself and takes advantage of those who live in fear or who are otherwise unaware because of simple ignorance. A newly-minted dictatorship adapted to new times, but essentially the same as the ones that preceded it – murderous, exploitative, and without respect for human rights. A dictatorship that, for the good of our future and the futures of our children, deserves to be defeated. A dictatorship that brings us to a defining moment, because, as Nobel Peace Laureate Desmond Tutu once said: “if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

The people of Venezuela will not tire in our fight. We are convinced that Venezuela has to overcome this situation, and that we can get our country out of the mess it is in today. I am an optimist and this optimism is fed by my faith in the Venezuelan people and their endless thirst for freedom. The aspiration of liberty among the people is a force greater than any adversity, it goes beyond the here and now and permits us to dream and plan a country where we can all live a better life.

A handwritten signature in black ink. The name "Leopoldo López" is written in a cursive style. Below the name is a stylized signature consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke ending in a dot.

Leopoldo López  
Ramo Verde Military Prison