



INDEPENDENT

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Leopoldo Lopez: Venezuela opposition leader jailed for his 'art of words' while leader of protest movement

Sentencing document reveals Lopez was jailed for 14 years for inciting violence, but critics claim his trial was 'conducted behind closed doors and was marked by serious irregularities'

By: Raquel Leon

Living in a two metre square cell at the Ramo Verde military prison outside Caracas, Venezuela's jailed opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez is given few opportunities to use the "art of words".

He was jailed for 14 years in a "politically motivated and deeply flawed" trial in September, convicted of inciting violence in his role as the leader of a 2014 protest movement.

Almost a month after his conviction, the reasons for his sentence emerged after the Venezuelan newspaper El Nacional published excerpts from the sentencing document.

"It is clearly determined that... Leopoldo Lopez did not use the appropriate mediums established by the constitution for his demands to be met, he instead used the art of words to make his followers believe that a constitutional solution existed, while the conditions for his requests were not suitable," it said. "He sent an unsuitable message to his followers, most of whom are young people..."

The legal basis for his conviction amounts to only nine pages of the 283-page document. It fails to provide the precise relationship between the alleged offences and the laws governing them.

Human rights campaigners claim that his isolation "enhances his risk of abuse or other mistreatment" and a United Nations working group on arbitrary detention has demanded his

release following a trial “conducted behind closed doors and marked by serious irregularities”.

The opposition leader’s arrest came after weeks of demonstrations in Caracas over inflation, shortages, corruption, and rising crime rates. Lopez, a 44-year-old US-educated economist, has advocated the removal of the leftist government led by President Nicolas Maduro.

Jose Miguel Vivanco, the director of Human Rights Watch’s Americas division told The Independent: “It is absurd to convict Lopez on the basis of an analysis of his speech that does not include any serious evidence that anything he said actually incited violence. On the contrary, the evidence points to a baseless conviction... after a trial that involved egregious due process violations and failed to link him to the commission of a crime.”