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Keep Up the Pressure on Venezuela

Three Ways the Trump Administration Can Continue Reversing Obama's Failed Strategy in Venezuela.

By Jared Genser

Some three years ago, hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans dressed in white filled the streets of Caracas. Red, blue and yellow interrupted the sea of white, as many held up the Venezuelan flag. For many of them, protest had become their new normal. Since early January 2014, they had been in the streets protesting the high crime rates, corruption and inflation that plagued their nation. On this day specifically, they had once again filled the streets to watch my client, Leopoldo Lopez, turn himself over to Venezuelan security forces.

Lopez had been at the center of the January protests. Working with the youth movement and other opposition leaders, he advocated nonviolent resistance as a way out of the country's crisis. To silence an inspirational and charismatic leader, the government issued a warrant for his arrest, accusing him of using "subliminal messages" to incite violence. The subsequent trial was a farce; the judge denied Lopez the opportunity to present any witnesses, while the prosecution presented over 100. Despite no legal basis for his imprisonment, Lopez was convicted and sentenced to almost 14 years in prison.

Since then, Lopez has been held in Ramo Verde military prison. As Lopez's imprisonment continues, the tortuous conditions he is subjected to have become even more severe. Lopez has been held in solitary confinement from 20 to 24 hours a day for more than a year. Guards strip search Lopez up to 10 times a day, and he is not allowed any reading material that is political, about Venezuelan or world history or in English. Lopez is often denied access to his lawyers, and when he is permitted to see them, guards listen to their conversations and read all materials entering or exiting the prison.

The deteriorating conditions of Lopez's imprisonment tragically mirror the mounting human

rights crisis in Venezuela. Three hundred Venezuelans are fleeing the country daily. There are unprecedented shortages of food and basic medical supplies. The crime rate has increased with one Venezuelan murdered every 20 minutes, and police brutality is commonplace. Throughout this increasingly dire crisis, President Nicolas Maduro has only tightened his grip on power. He uses intimidation, violence and politically motivated arrests and prosecutions to maintain his power and persecute his opponents.

The Trump administration has now dramatically and unequivocally reversed the failed engagement policy of the Obama administration. In a frontal assault on the legitimacy of Maduro's regime, Trump first sanctioned sitting Vice President Tareck El Aissami and his bag man as "drug kingpins." In response to this move, Maduro tried to sidestep its significance by claiming this was just unfinished business of the Obama administration. And then in an unprecedented action, Trump and Vice President Mike Pence together met with Lilian Tintori, Lopez's wife, who has campaigned relentlessly for the release of her husband and the more than 100 political prisoners of Venezuela with Republican Florida Sen. Marco Rubio. Meeting with the wife of a man who sitting in jail is now out-polling Maduro by more than 30 percentage points in a hypothetical presidential election sends a message even Maduro will understand. In quick retaliation, the very next day after the meeting Venezuela's Supreme Court rejected Lopez's final appeal.

One could hardly imagine a more rapid change in U.S. policy. But much more needs to be done. First, the United States needs to abandon the failed dialogue process that has been facilitated by the Vatican and the Union of South American Nations. When we met former Vice President Joe Biden in February 2015, he personally promised Tintori that the Obama administration would not support any dialogue that did not begin with the immediate and unconditional release of political prisoners, a position abandoned months later. This is a principled position that must be restored.

Second, the Trump administration should make a renewed push to censure Venezuela before the Organization of American States, or the OAS. In courageous efforts, OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro placed Venezuela onto the organization's agenda. But rather than pressing hard for invoking its democratic charter, the United States soft-pedaled its support for Almagro's work, hoping to lure Venezuela into making concessions in the dialogue. It didn't work. Almagro is about to update the OAS about the free-fall of Venezuela's political system, including Maduro illegally quashing a presidential recall referendum and his postponement of national gubernatorial elections. It is time for the OAS to take action.

And finally, the United States needs to identify, target and sanction those bankrolling the Maduro regime as well as gross human rights violators. The regime abuses its population with total impunity, and those responsible for these abuses and Venezuela rapidly become a failed state

must be held to account and impeded in their actions.

It is a new day in U.S.-Venezuela relations. Trump's actions have given extraordinary hope to the aspirations of the Venezuelan people who want nothing more than a peaceful and constitutional restoration of their democracy. It is crucial that these strong actions be only the first step.

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