

The New York Times

September 21, 2014

Venezuela's Crackdown on Opposition

By Editorial Board

The Venezuelan government early this year responded to a wave of street protests by jailing opposition leaders, [deploying the army](#) against unarmed protesters and tightening control of the media. The deplorable tactics have largely driven an inspiring opposition movement underground, depriving Venezuelans of the right to challenge a leader who has put a once-prosperous nation on a perilous track.

The imprisonment and trial of an opposition leader, Leopoldo López, show how far President Nicolás Maduro is willing to go to stave off legitimate grievances in a country he and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, mismanaged. [Mr. López](#), a 43-year-old Harvard-educated politician, has been jailed [since Feb. 18](#), when the authorities accused him of instigating violent demonstrations. Some 1,700 demonstrators are awaiting trial and more than 70 remain jailed.

Mr. López's trial, which began in July, is a travesty. The indictment [bizarrely contends](#) that Mr. López, who peacefully called for Mr. Maduro's resignation, incited violence through "subliminal" messages conveyed during public speeches demanding change that won him strong public support. The judge in the case approved more than 100 witnesses for the prosecution and rejected all but two defense witnesses. Mr. Maduro, who has called Mr. López an American pawn, [has told reporters](#), "He has to pay, and he's going to pay," all but determining the outcome.

The human rights abuses and Venezuela's ailing economy are an

outgrowth of the political crisis that has gripped the country in the past decade. The socialist policies [Mr. Chávez](#) adopted after taking office in 1999 markedly [reduced poverty](#) and expanded opportunities in a country with a long history of entrenched inequality. But his despotic governing style led the country down a dark path. And he drove out capital and talent by [nationalizing key industries](#) and asserting greater government control of [the oil sector](#), the country's economic engine. Insecurity and [inflation soared](#) during his years in power.

Mr. Maduro, [lacking Mr. Chávez's charisma](#) and shrewd political instincts, has proved to be an even more dangerous and divisive leader. Venezuelans now suffer from shortages of basic commodities, including milk. Inflation surpassed 60 percent this summer. Leading economists have suggested that Venezuela, which has the world's largest oil reserves, could default on its foreign debt this fall. Unable to reverse the decline, Mr. Maduro rails about foreign conspiracies and has throttled [a once-free press](#). Several news organizations that used to be critical of the government have been forced by mysterious new owners to take pro-government stances.

Venezuela's dismal state has alarmed its neighbors, but those with influence over Caracas have not wanted to appear to interfere with the internal affairs of others. The Maduro government's abuses are dangerous for the region and certainly warrant strong criticism from Latin American leaders.

Next year, Venezuela is expected [to get a seat for a two-year term](#) on the United Nations Security Council, based on a rotation that countries from the region negotiated several years ago. This would give the Maduro government an important and prestigious appointment on a body that is expected to tackle critical issues, including the global response against fighters of the Islamic State. Colombia, Brazil and other Latin American countries should lead an effort to prevent Caracas from representing the region when it is fast becoming an embarrassment on the continent.