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## Venezuela sinks deeper

By: Editorial Board

The trial and conviction of opposition leader Leopoldo López by a kangaroo court in Caracas last week is more than just another outrage by the political gang running Venezuela.

It sends an unmistakable signal that President Nicolás Maduro's regime has reached the point of no return in its determination to stay in power no matter what. If ever a slight hope existed that Mr. Maduro could be persuaded to engage in a reset of his reckless policies and return to democracy, that hope is now gone.

The late Hugo Chávez, Mr. Maduro's mentor, was the first to criminalize political activity. But the López prosecution was something else: a show trial, designed to quash political opposition and instill fear in adversaries who believe that peaceful change is still possible.

The trial was a mockery of justice, the culmination of a process started by Mr. Chávez to turn the judiciary into an arm of the repressive machinery of the politicians in power. "Out of 700 hours of trial, López's legal team only had three hours to argue in his defense," the Human Rights Foundation noted. The judge allowed 108 witnesses and 30 exhibits presented by the prosecution, but only two of the 60 witnesses proposed by the defense. The trial was closed to reporters and independent observers.

In the end, Mr. López was sentenced to 13 years and 9 months in prison for allegedly committing the crimes of arson, damaging public property, incitement to commit a crime and conspiracy. Yet no evidence has ever been put forward. The only evident fact is that Mr. López was turned into a prisoner of conscience for having exercised his right to free speech in leading peaceful protests.

The U.S. government should sanction everyone involved in this scandalous incident and lead a regional campaign to support fair elections in Venezuela later this year. That will be Venezuela's last chance to have a peaceful exit from its mounting chaos.