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Free Venezuela's Leopoldo López

By: Editorial Board

Upon hearing he had been sentenced to more than 13 years in prison on Thursday night, the Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López extended his arms to a bailiff to be handcuffed. “These handcuffs will be removed by the Venezuelan people,” he said.

The outcome of the trial was unsurprising. The justice system in Venezuela has long been at the service of its authoritarian government, which has grown increasingly brazen in its efforts to sideline the opposition as confidence in President Nicolás Maduro has plummeted.

At a demonstration in Caracas on Friday, Lilian Tintori read a letter that her husband, Leopoldo López, an opposition leader, had written in prison. Opposition in Venezuela Is Unsettled by Leader's Sentence SEPT. 11, 2015

The charges against Mr. López, a Harvard-educated former mayor of one of the municipalities that make up Caracas, were scurrilous. Mr. Maduro ordered his arrest in February 2014 and charged him with stoking violence as demonstrations against the government were spreading. The government, in its criminal complaint, preposterously claimed that Mr. López had incited Venezuelans to violence through subliminal messages. Three students were also convicted of stoking violent protests.

Venezuela's judicial system ceased being independent after Mr. Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chávez, wrested control of the Supreme Court in 2004.

The persecution of Mr. López shows Mr. Maduro's desperation. He has driven Venezuela, which has the world's largest crude oil reserves, into a severe economic crisis that has led to food shortages, currency devaluation and soaring inflation. Instead of taking responsibility for the country's problems, he has turned political opponents into scapegoats and started unnecessary fights with neighboring Colombia and Guyana.

So far, there has been little international response to the Maduro government's growing repression. The Organization of American States, the Union of South American Nations and Latin American presidents all should be denouncing the imprisonment of an innocent man and demanding his release.