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## How a Venezuelan Opposition Leader Secretly Communicates from Solitary Confinement

*While Leopoldo López languishes in a prison outside Caracas, his kite-surfing wife persists with his message.*

By Jeffrey Tayler

“The last days of a dictatorship are when the dictatorship becomes the most dangerous and uses, regrettably, its worst weapon: hatred,” says Lilian Tintori, the 37-year-old wife of Leopoldo López, the charismatic leader of the Venezuelan opposition party Voluntad Popular. She’s speaking by phone from Caracas on a recent Monday. Her husband, López, is internationally recognized for his efficient, transparent governance of one of Caracas’s most prosperous districts from 2000 to 2008. He has called for Venezuela to undergo a peaceful transition to democracy involving the lawful—and early—departure of President Nicolás Maduro. Since February 2014, López has languished in the Ramo Verde military prison outside Caracas.

Following a trial later labeled a “farce” by the lead prosecutor, López received a sentence of almost 14 years for “subliminally” inciting violence during the countrywide anti-government protests of 2014. “Leopoldo is innocent,” Tintori insists. “He never called for violence. He is being persecuted for thinking differently.” At Ramo Verde, López is kept in solitary confinement, she says, in a separate tower in which he is the only prisoner, in a two- by three-meter cell without electricity, with only a small, high window for light. Guards routinely subject him to what Tintori calls “cruel, humiliating searches.”

“Very often, in the middle of the night, more than 10 officers dressed in black and wearing ski masks burst into his cell and search it violently, throwing all his books, clothes, food, and

pictures of our children on the floor,” Tintori says. “They overturn his mattress and strip off his sheets and destroy everything. They have thrown human excrement and urine through his window and insulted and threatened him.” Though she fears for her husband’s life, she says he is strong: “He isn’t breaking, nor will he ever break.”

The Venezuelan government did not respond to requests for comment on these or other allegations made by Tintori.

Were he free, López, 44, would make a promising candidate for president in a country deep in crisis. Since he replaced the late Hugo Chávez, Maduro, a high-school dropout and former bus driver, has presided over a slow-moving disaster. (“Catastrophic” is how 80 percent of Venezuelans evaluate Maduro’s running of the country, according to a March opinion poll.) In 2015, the economy, now the worst-performing on earth, contracted by 10 percent and is expected to shrink by an additional 6 percent this year. Inflation is hitting 720 percent, the currency has devalued by 93 percent, and Venezuela, dependent on oil for 96 percent of its state revenues, will probably default soon on its foreign debt. Food shortages result in hours-long, often violent lines. Water cutoffs and electrical outages are common, with power plants operating at less than 30 percent of capacity. Medicines have largely disappeared, even in hospitals. (The National Assembly has declared a nationwide humanitarian health crisis, and Human Rights Watch has likened the situation to that of a war zone). Murders and kidnappings have proliferated. The looting of supermarkets has spread. The country teeters on the brink of anarchy, famine, and revolt.

The Maduro government has done little more than address this unfolding national disaster with nasty rhetoric, blaming the country’s ills on Venezuela’s “far right elite,” scheming “*Yanquis*” of the reviled “*imperio*,” and the “parasitic bourgeois,” all the while imprisoning and harassing opposition members. More than seven out of 10 Venezuelans now want Maduro to quit office before his term expires in 2019.

Clearly perceived as a threat, López has been forbidden by prison authorities to correspond in writing with anyone, even his children. Tintori’s visits to her husband at Ramo Verde have served as the only means by which he has continued to communicate his message, at times explained in op-eds. (See, for example, here [[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/venezuela-needs-the-worlds-help/2015/05/15/ac9edc32-f97a-11e4-9030-b4732caefe81\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/venezuela-needs-the-worlds-help/2015/05/15/ac9edc32-f97a-11e4-9030-b4732caefe81_story.html)] and here [[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/three-steps-venezuela-must-take-to-turn-the-country-around/2016/02/26/55fffc46-dafa-11e5-891a-4ed04f4213e8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/three-steps-venezuela-must-take-to-turn-the-country-around/2016/02/26/55fffc46-dafa-11e5-891a-4ed04f4213e8_story.html)].)

“I write down what he says on my arms and legs. When I leave the prison, I take pictures of what I’ve written and send it to journalists” and other members of the democratic opposition.

The prison authorities attempt to humiliate her as well, at times forcing her to wait for hours before visits and stripping her naked for searches—making her open her legs for inspection, a treatment they have imposed on her aging mother-in-law—even in front of her children. “The last time, I refused to be stripped,” Tintori says. “I asked the other women visiting if they’re ever strip-searched and they said no. When I do see Leopoldo, a military officer is always standing nearby and eavesdropping on what we say.”

She also believes that the authorities have taped their conjugal visits, which take place in “a dirty room with cockroaches, on a filthy mattress. But the roaches and the filth give us strength; they remind us of what our country is living through—dirty, without rights, without food, without light, without water. They remind us that our struggle is for the entire country.” All this mistreatment comes, she claims, “on direct orders from Nicolás Maduro.”

A former kite-surfing champion and television personality, Tintori has become her husband’s spokesperson since his imprisonment began, and she has waged an international campaign to free him. She has met with, among others, Pope Francis, U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden, and the presidents of Spain and Latin American countries. Though she has bodyguards, she believes she is also at risk. “I’m being persecuted by the government at this moment, with cars without license plates following us right now. At night, cars follow us without turning on their headlights.” The government spies on her at home, using drones that hover outside, monitoring even her bathroom window and her children’s room. “The regime is trying to intimidate not only Leopoldo, but us as a family, but they will not break us,” she says.

“Every day, I wake up with the hope that Leopoldo might be freed,” she adds. “After the elections of 6 December”—which saw the opposition gain control of the National Assembly for the first time in almost two decades—“there is so much hope. The entire country wants change. Leopoldo has proved to the world and Venezuela that in Venezuela we have no state of law, no justice, and no democracy. He has unmasked the regime and shown that we have a regime that represses those who think differently.” He has, she says, achieved “the complete unity he called for two years ago in demanding the exit of Nicolás Maduro and [his] failed system of government.”

Tintori is counting on passage in late March of a constitutional amendment and an amnesty law that would free all of Venezuela’s political prisoners, including her husband. She confirms to me that once freed, López intends to seek the presidency. “Nicolás Maduro will have to resign,” she says. “As I see it, he already has. He’s quit governing the country in any real sense. He’s quit respecting our human rights. He’s quit respecting truth and justice. He will leave office peacefully and democratically. I have no doubts. Leopoldo wants to exchange hate for love, injustice for justice, retaliation for forgiveness.” (Maduro could employ various legal maneuvers, however, to kill the amendment and amnesty law.)

Since Chávez's final days, high-ranking members of the military are rumored to be governing from behind the scenes. Allegations of drug-running and money laundering (which include a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration investigation centering on the former head of the National Assembly) surely make holding onto power a matter of liberty, lest they face prison in Venezuela or in the U.S., if extradited. While a solution might involve promising them immunity from prosecution, Tintori rules that out. "The amnesty law will apply only to political prisoners, not to those who have committed crimes. Those who have committed crimes will have to understand the country has decided to change."

She then turns somber. "Something could happen to me, to Leopoldo, to my family. If my voice goes silent, I ask you to remember my words in this interview. I will not rest, even for a minute, until we achieve democracy in Venezuela."