

# The Washington Post

July 21, 2014

WASHINGTON POST

## Leopoldo Lopez's Jailing Is a Symptom of a Sick Venezuela

By Lilian Tintori

*Lilian Tintori, wife of Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López, lives in Caracas.*

This year, my husband, Venezuelan opposition leader [Leopoldo López](#), spent [his 43rd birthday](#) behind bars. To mark Leopoldo's birthday, our children, Manuela, 4, and Leopoldo, 1, and I tried to bring him a birthday cake at the Ramo Verde military prison. We were turned away. We were forced to celebrate on the street outside the prison, where our family sang "Happy Birthday" to a life-size picture of him.

For our children, this was a poor substitute for seeing their father. It's been a month since we last visited Leopoldo, and we miss him each day. In his absence, I am a single mother, a circumstance that has taken a toll on our family.

The irony is that my husband is not a criminal but rather a devoted father, husband and politician whose "offense" was urging Venezuelans to peacefully exercise their rights to gather, protest and express their views of our government. He sits in jail on charges of public incitement, property damage and criminal conspiracy, which [Amnesty International](#) said "smack of a politically motivated attempt to silence dissent." The government has vowed to [keep him in prison for a decade](#).

In its eagerness to imprison my husband, the government has attempted to provide the appearance of a legitimate judicial process. But make no mistake: The normal rules of evidence and due process have not been applied. [My husband was arrested](#) in mid-January without investigation, on the [order of the president](#) and without evidence. Numerous violations of legal and human rights standards have been documented. In a recent hearing, the government actually argued that my husband's clear calls for nonviolence actually contained coded, [subliminal messages](#) to provoke violence.

If my husband weren't facing 10 years imprisonment, I would think these charges were a sick joke.

Leopoldo is a politician. I am not. Elected mayor of the Chacao municipality of Caracas in 2000, he served until 2008, when a wrongful disqualification from running for office went into effect.

If not for the ban, Leopoldo had planned to run for mayor of Caracas in 2008, a race he was predicted to win. Further, a [poll at the time suggested](#) that in a hypothetical presidential election, Leopoldo would have received a greater percentage of the vote than Hugo Chávez.

No one should doubt why Leopoldo is in prison: Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is afraid of him, and he has great reason to be. Chávez did not deliver and Maduro has not delivered on their promises, and they have systematically dismantled our fundamental freedoms — free speech, freedom of association, freedom of the press and freedom to vote for candidates of our choosing.

But despite more than a decade of persecution, my husband has not been afraid to call attention to the rampant poverty, widespread violence and broken political system that plague our country. As the founder and national coordinator of the political party Voluntad Popular, Leopoldo has mobilized millions to advocate nonviolently for the constitutional exit of Maduro. It is my husband's success — and the forthcoming expiration of [the political ban](#) imposed on him in 2008 by Chávez — that scared Maduro.

Leopoldo's trial is scheduled to resume this week, but let no one be fooled. There is no presumption of innocence or due process of law for a political prisoner in Venezuela, whose judicial system the [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights](#) has repeatedly found to lack independence and impartiality. And in so-called talks, which Leopoldo expected to be fruitless, Maduro rejected all compromises and a call to [release all political prisoners](#).

We need to send a message to the government that it cannot trample on the rights of its people with impunity. Accordingly, I call on President Maduro to release my husband and the more than [100 political prisoners](#) being held in Venezuela. But my actions alone are not enough. My husband needs the support of all countries that stand for freedom. I urge governments around the world to take meaningful action to press Maduro to free the political prisoners in Venezuela.

Leopoldo is strong, and the longer he is in prison, the stronger his resolve becomes. Things do look grim, however, for the Venezuela whose political system, economy and society have been pushed into a downward spiral. Unless the international community takes targeted actions against the Maduro regime, the Venezuelan people will face further suffering.