

Venezuela Strategy Group Statement on Leopoldo Lopez Conviction

Leopoldo López, a leader of the non-democratic faction of the Venezuelan opposition was convicted by a trial judge on Sept. 10, 2015 and sentenced to 13 years and nine months in prison.

Charges were brought against Lopez for inciting violent events that occurred in a march he organized in 2014, which called for the ouster of Venezuela's democratically elected President Nicolas Maduro. In this protest a government supporter and an opposition supporter lost their lives, the public prosecutor's office was vandalized and cars were torched. This protest was followed by weeks of opposition riots in which 43 people -- about half of them government supporters or members of the security services -- were killed. Numerous government buildings, as well as public health clinics and children's nurseries, were also destroyed or vandalized in the riots. The evidence against Lopez was his own public speeches and tweets calling people to the streets to remove a democratically elected government that had won more than 70% of local elections several weeks earlier.

The Venezuelan Judicial system is an independent branch of government under the 1999 Constitution written and approved by a national referendum. Trial judges are appointed by the Supreme Court, which in turn is appointed by civil society and the National Assembly. The Judicial system has taken firm action against both opposition activists and members of the security forces who broke the law. In connection with the events of February 12, 2014, 5 members of SEBIN, the Venezuelan equivalent of the FBI, were arrested and charged for the use of excessive force in the killing of two opposition members. The head of SEBIN also resigned and President Maduro made a clear statement that members of law enforcement who break the law will be prosecuted. Despite this even-handed approach, Lopez refused to cooperate with the trial and even implicitly threatened the judge before the sentence was read out, declaring, "you are going to be more afraid reading this sentence than I will to hear it."

Speaking prior to the sentencing, Yendry Velásquez, whose husband was killed due to the opposition's violent protests, called for a firm sentence for López, to set an example. She also expressed hope that this would discourage opposition politicians from making further calls to violent protest.

While lauded by some in Washington, Lopez is an isolated figure within the Venezuelan opposition, many of whom have repudiated Lopez's methods. In a U.S. Embassy cable from 2009, entitled "The Lopez Problem," U.S. State Department officials referred to López as a "divisive figure within the opposition" who is "often described as arrogant, vindictive, and power-hungry."

López's democratic credentials have always been questionable. He participated in the 2002 coup attempt against President Hugo Chavez and abused his authority as Mayor of Chacao to illegally arrest Ramón Chacín, the Minister for the Interior – Venezuela's equivalent of the Department for Homeland Security. Unlike other opposition figures who, at least in public, distanced themselves from pursuing a violent road to power, he continued to defend the coup attempt years later.

Venezuela is a democracy. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter has called its election process the "best in the world", and the democratic arena is the legitimate forum for changing the government.

As Hermann Escarrá, a major figure on the opposition and one of the principal architects of the Venezuelan constitution has commented: "In the United States, [what happened in the 2014 protests] in Venezuela would not have happened and won't happen. No one would think to burn cars or tires, set fire to a street leading up to the White House, because the punishment would be truly serious..."

We, the undersigned members of the Venezuela Strategy Group call on the US government to respect Venezuela's sovereignty, to stop funding opposition groups and otherwise interfering in Venezuela's internal affairs, and to normalize relations between our two countries based on respect, peace, and friendship.

Signators

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