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Harsh sentence for Venezuela opposition leader widely condemned

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Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo López is seen during a press conference in Caracas on Oct. 18, 2011. (Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters)

U.S. officials, international rights groups and foreign leaders widely condemned the prison sentence issued to Venezuela opposition leader Leopoldo López on Thursday, with some calling him a political prisoner of President Nicolás Maduro's government.

López was given a maximum term of 13 years and 9 months in a military jail by Judge Susana Barreiros on Thursday night, sending him back to the isolation cell where he has spent the past 18 months

following his arrest at the peak of anti-government street protests last year that left 43 dead. Barreiros found López and three co-defendants guilty of inciting violence and other crimes, blaming him for the country's worst unrest in more than a decade.

In a statement, Secretary of State John F. Kerry said the U.S. government was “deeply troubled” by the ruling.

“The decision by the court raises great concern about the political nature of the judicial process and verdict, and the use of the Venezuelan judicial system to suppress and punish government critics,” he said.

“We have underscored our concern with the charges brought against Mr. Lopez — which we consider illegitimate — and we have repeatedly called for his release and for the release of all Venezuelans who are imprisoned for political reasons,” Kerry said in the statement.

The harsh term, and the judge's refusal to admit defense witness testimony or exculpatory evidence during more than 600 hours of court proceedings, led many rights groups to repudiate the trial as a farce and denounce its verdict.

“The charges against Leopoldo López were never adequately substantiated, and the prison sentence against him is clearly politically motivated,” said Erika Guevara-Rosas, Americas director at Amnesty International, which [considers](#) López a “prisoner of conscience.”

“His only ‘crime’ was being leader of an opposition party in Venezuela,” she said.

New York-based Human Rights Watch [condemned](#) the trial as “a farce.”

The Obama administration has told the Maduro government that it is open to better relations, but Thursday's verdict is likely to introduce new tensions. U.S. officials had warned Venezuela that they viewed López's arrest as politically motivated and urged his immediate release.

Criticism of the verdict came from world leaders across the political spectrum, although the response from Latin American heads of state and government — many of whom are leftist sympathizers of the Maduro government — was notably more muted.

Pablo Iglesias, leader of Spain's left-wing Podemos party, joined Spanish President Mariano Rajoy in condemning the trial, telling reporters that "no one should be jailed for political reasons" and urging that López be released and allowed to run for office. "Let the Venezuelan people decide with their vote who should govern their country," [he told](#) Spain's ABC newspaper.

Attorneys for López said they would appeal the ruling.

In polls, López ranks as Venezuela's most popular opposition leader — and far ahead of Maduro.

At a rally in Caracas on Friday, López's wife, Lilian Tintori, read a letter from her husband calling for protest marches against the government on Sept. 19. Other opposition leaders have rallied behind López and said they will organize marches across the country on that day.



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