

AMERICAS

Opposition in Venezuela Is Unsettled by Leader's Sentence

By WILLIAM NEUMAN SEPT. 11, 2015

CARACAS — A year ago Leopoldo López, a Venezuelan opposition leader, walked at the head of rallies of tens of thousands of people, calling for the exit of President Nicolás Maduro and setting off a wave of demonstrations and unrest as the country boiled with discontent. But on Friday, only a few hundred people showed up at a demonstration to support him, a day after he was convicted and sentenced to nearly 14 years in jail for his role in leading last year's protests.

The small size of the crowd told the story: The opposition finds itself discouraged and off balance even as it retains hopes of winning crucial legislative elections scheduled for December.

“In Venezuela, since there is no justice, protest is useless,” said Sergio Reyes, 23, a flight attendant at the rally on Friday. Referring to last year's protests, in which dozens of people were killed on both sides, he said, “Lots of people have taken to the streets, like the students who died last year, but they did not get results because the government doesn't pay attention when people ask for change.”

Mr. López's wife, Lilian Tintori, read a letter to the demonstrators that he had written from prison. “This sentence is not directed only against me,” he wrote. “It seeks to weaken the spirit of all of those who are fighting for a better country.” Mr. López urged his sympathizers not to become demoralized or frustrated.

The gathering was held on a cramped traffic island where at times members of the news media seemed to almost outnumber those who had come to support the jailed leader. It was here last February that Mr. López turned himself in to

authorities after giving a defiant speech to masses of sympathizers. Many of those who showed up on Friday left before Ms. Tintori arrived — she said that after visiting her husband in jail in the morning, prison guards had not allowed her to leave promptly.

Flanked by opposition leaders, Ms. Tintori sought to direct anger over her husband's sentence toward preparations for the coming elections. She called for a march on Sept. 19 to be led by opposition candidates. An opposition victory in the elections, which analysts say could come as a result of widespread discontent over a disastrous economy, would upend the balance of power here.

Mr. López's trial ended on Thursday. Hours later the judge, Susan Barreiros, found him guilty of inciting violence, arson and other crimes linked to a peaceful protest he helped lead on Feb. 12, 2014, which later turned violent. She sentenced him to 13 years, nine months, seven days and 12 hours behind bars, to be served in a military prison.

Three student protesters put on trial with Mr. López received sentences from 10 and a half years to four and a half years. A fourth student who was also a defendant fled the country last week and was reported to be seeking asylum in the United States.

Mr. López is the most prominent of a group of opposition leaders and ordinary protesters who have been arrested and charged with crimes since Mr. Maduro, a leftist, was elected in 2013 to replace his mentor, the country's longtime president, Hugo Chávez.

Critics of the government inside and outside Venezuela say that there is no evidence that Mr. López committed any crime and that he is being punished for his role in leading the opposition.

Secretary of State John Kerry released a statement on Friday saying that the United States was "deeply troubled" by the conviction and sentence, adding that "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."

The European Union issued a statement calling the verdict harsh and saying that the trial lacked "adequate guarantees of transparency and due legal process."

A spokesman for the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights also expressed concern over a lack of due process during the trial.

“It’s clear this case is politically motivated, that the public prosecutor’s office has never had the intention to truly base the process on the protection of human rights, due process and fair trial,” said Erika Guevara-Rosas, Americas director of Amnesty International, who is based in Mexico City. “The government wants to give an example that any opposed idea or opposition demonstration against the government is going to be punished.”

Governments in Latin America, however, remained mostly silent. The Union of South American Nations, a regional group, said in a statement that it “reiterates its respect for the decisions taken by the judicial authorities of its member states.”

The foreign minister of Venezuela, Delcy Rodríguez, defended the verdict during a visit to the United Nations in New York. “The public powers in Venezuela are independent,” she said, according to news media reports here. “A decision has been made, due process has been respected, human rights have been respected.”

In a series of comments posted on Twitter, she lashed out at the United States, painting Mr. López as a terrorist.

Referring to Mr. Kerry’s statement, which came on the anniversary of the terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, she said that “the double standard towards terrorism that it portrays is enormously worrisome, especially on such a sensitive date for the people of the United States.”

Mr. López regularly advocates nonviolent protest, yet the government’s case against him rested heavily on two experts who testified that his speeches and Twitter posts provoked antigovernment feelings among his followers that spurred them to violence.

In a news release on Friday, the national prosecutor’s office said that Mr. López had inspired a “negative euphoria” among his sympathizers and that evidence in the trial showed that “the statements made by López through the media and on social networks incited his followers to commit violence in the streets and to disavow the national government and its institutions.”

Patricia Torres and María Eugenia Díaz contributed reporting.

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