

LEOPOLDO LOPEZ

Venezuelan opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez attended college in the United States, where he graduated with honors from Kenyon College and earned a master's in public policy from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

He returned to Venezuela and began his political career as the popular mayor of the Chacao district of Caracas, serving two terms from 2000 to 2008, earning an 80% approval rating. He fought a move in 2008 by the Chavez administration to ban him, along with hundreds of other politicians who opposed the regime, from running for public office. In response, he cofounded and became national coordinator of a new political party, Voluntad Popular (Popular Will) in 2009, dedicated to overcoming poverty and securing democracy for all Venezuelans.

Two years later, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that Lopez's rights had been violated when he was banned from running for office, though the ruling was rejected by the Venezuelan Supreme Court which upheld the ban. A day later, Lopez vowed to run for president, later withdrawing to back Henrique Capriles, who ran in 2013 as the united opposition candidate against Chavez protégé and acting president Nicolas Maduro. Widespread charges of election irregularities followed Maduro's narrow victory.

After a 2014 anti-government protest in Caracas resulted in the deaths of three people, authorities charged Lopez with conspiracy, murder, and terrorism, and a Venezuelan court issued an arrest warrant. Protests were held declaring his innocence and though the charges were later reduced, Lopez, denied a legitimate legal defense, was convicted and sentenced to 14 years in prison, sparking further mass protests and international condemnation.

He was declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and his incarceration was denounced with calls for his immediate release from world leaders across the political spectrum, along with Nobel Prize recipients, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the UN Committee Against Torture. In recognition of his courageous leadership, he received Harvard's Alumni Achievement Award in 2014, later receiving the Sakharov Prize from the European Parliament.

After serving three years in prison, Lopez was released to house arrest in 2017 where he continued to lead the opposition movement in concert with Juan Guaido, whom he has closely mentored and fiercely supported. Freed by the resistance in April of 2019, Lopez appeared in a video with Guaido during an address in Caracas, triggering the Venezuelan Supreme Court to issue an arrest warrant based on the violation of his house arrest. Lopez sought diplomatic asylum in the Spanish Embassy in Caracas, where he lived until he fled the country in October of 2020.

Leopoldo Lopez is currently living in exile with his wife, activist Lilian Tintori, and their children in Spain and remains more deeply committed than ever to the struggle for freedom in Venezuela.