



## **We must shed light on the darkness of 'La Tumba'**

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*La Tumba.* You haven't heard of it. Most American haven't. Seven cells. Three meters by two. No sunlight. No day. No night. La Tumba (Spanish for The Tomb) is the dungeon one hundred meters beneath the city of Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, which has served as the socialist dictatorship's hole of horrors.

When a short film came out about La Tumba and the hunger strikers of 2015, the famous political prisoners were transferred to similar hell-holes throughout the country. Since, the torture and terror of La Tumba has been replicated in petrifying proportions throughout the country.

Two young human rights activists, Lorent Saleh and Gabriel Valles, founding members of a Venezuelan non-governmental organization (NGO) called "Operation Freedom," were arrested two years ago. They were not drug dealers. They were not violent. Their crime was merely speaking their mind. They had been denouncing injustices in Venezuela for almost a decade and had been marked by the government as a target. Their punishment: La Tumba.

Lorent (who's 30 years old), has had a severe urological condition, causing extreme pain in the most sensitive of areas, for over a year and a half. The government has denied any semblance of medical observation or treatment. According to reports, this agony is on par with the officially enforced torture. Lorent has had no fair trial. His hearing has now been deferred 28 times so after two years in prison, there is not even a formal accusation yet. His brave mother — trying to raise awareness — found her way to the Peruvian congress where she detailed his story and the daily psychological tormenting he's experiencing.

Then there is Yon Goicoechea, a 32-year-old lawyer and political activist who was one of the main organizers of the Venezuelan Student Movement. A courageous and outspoken advocate for freedom and democracy, in 2008, he was the recipient of the Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty of the Cato Institute, the leading international award for acknowledging contributions to the promotion of individual liberty.

After receiving the award, Yon's newfound attention and "crimes" (calling for freedom and democracy) led to increased harassment back in Venezuela. At first it was just a broken nose and a few death threats. But the more the harassment continued, the more he realized he needed to get out. After hiding in his friend's house for a period, in 2013 he managed to move to New York with his family, to continue his law studies at [Columbia University](#). However, in 2016, upon returning to Venezuela to go back to his political activities, he once again found himself with a

big target on his back. Within a year, the young Columbia law graduate was detained supposedly with "explosives and detonators." Yeah, right.

Yon has a wife and two little kids. Now he is in one of President Nicolás Maduro's dungeons.

Currently there are over 100 political prisoners in various "Tumbas" in Venezuela. Let's be clear, they are in prison for nothing more than speaking up for basic rights, basic freedoms, collecting signatures for a recall referendum petition, holding a sign at a demonstration, or speaking to journalists about abuses. More famous cases than the aforementioned prisoners, include Leopoldo Lopez, a leader of the opposition sentenced to 13 years in prison, and Joshua Holt, a young American Mormon who came to Venezuela to get married. These tactics are not new. It's how fear societies work.

Dissidents are used as hostages and leverage by the government to discourage any sort of vocal opposition. The mistreatment, humiliations, physical and psychological tortures (including isolation, and extended periods of time in total darkness), refusal of family visits, and multiple unjustified transfers all serve as a warning. Don't mess with Maduro.

At the Venezuelan American Leadership Council we are, however, ready to mess with Maduro. In fact, as representatives of the Venezuelan American community we plan to use our blessed freedoms — those same freedoms which are being denied to our brothers and sisters — to make a difference. We have launched a campaign to raise awareness of the plight of the suffering political prisoners. Every day we use our social media channels to highlight the stories of those suffering. We encourage our large network of Venezuelan Americans who are blessed to actually have elected representatives, to contact their members of Congress, and put this cause on the legislative map.

The darkness of La Tumba was designed to silence, scare and suppress. VALC, with the help of the American people, must bring the light of hope back to Venezuela.