

Venezuela's Opposition Leader Detained on Anti-Maduro March

Anatoly Kurmanaev and Corina Pons, ©2014 Bloomberg News

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Feb. 18 (Bloomberg) -- Venezuela's National Guard detained Leopoldo Lopez today as the opposition leader, accused by the government of inciting violence, rallied supporters to protest inflation and shortages of goods.

Protesters shouting "liberty" blocked the passage of the black Jeep Grand Cherokee transporting Lopez, national coordinator of opposition party Voluntad Popular. Tear gas was fired to clear the passage for the police car.

Less than 3 kilometers (about 2 miles) from where Lopez was arrested, government supporters gathered in response to President Nicolas Maduro's call for a march. While opposition members blocked highways and lit tires and branches, Venezuelan state television showed oil workers dressed in red at a musical concert in a pro-government "march for peace" outside the presidential palace.

"Lopez is one of the most emblematic figures of the Venezuelan opposition who have been arrested," Juan Carlos Hidalgo, Latin America policy analyst at the Cato Institute, said by phone from Washington. "This is only going to fire up protesters. This is definitely taking the level of repression and antagonism from the government to a new level."

The 42-year old opposition leader, whom Maduro accuses of instigating demonstrations that led to the death of three people last week, asked supporters to dress in white today. Venezuelans took the streets for a seventh day as lack of dollars to import goods fuel the fastest inflation in the world.

'Wake Up'

"I present myself here, willing for my arrest to wake up Venezuelans," Lopez told followers just minutes before being detained. "In Venezuela, there is no justice. This fight is for the students, for those jailed, for the people suffering scarcity, for those without a job, for the youth without a future."

To counter the anti-government protests, Maduro called on 30,000 to 40,000 oil workers to march in downtown Caracas today. Interior Minister Miguel Rodriguez Torres said those demonstrating against Maduro would be blocked from reaching the city's downtown.

“The politician of the Venezuelan fascist right is in the hands of Justice,” Maduro said in a national address after Lopez was detained. “I’m defending the homeland.”

Maduro said that Diosdado Cabello, president of the National Assembly, is driving the car taking Lopez to a jail outside Caracas.

The arrest of Lopez, who has a master’s degree in public policy from Harvard University, may generate more tension in Venezuela, Michael Shifter, president of Inter-American Dialogue, said in a phone interview from Washington.

’Great Injustice’

“We will fight until they let him go,” Fredy Santos, a 32-year-old motorcycle taxi driver, said while he watched the van where Lopez had been placed. “This is a great injustice. This is no way to treat anyone.”

Lopez was mayor of the Caracas municipality of Chacao from 2000 to 2008. He co-founded the party Primero Justicia with Henrique Capriles, who lost to Maduro in the April presidential vote. He left Capriles’s party and founded Voluntad Popular.

He was banned in 2008 from holding public office following allegations by the government that he embezzled public money. He denies the charges.

“Lopez is someone that the government has always been concerned about, that’s why they disqualified him from running,” Shifter said. “Capriles has had his moment, and now Lopez is in the center of action.”

Faster Inflation

Under Maduro’s watch, inflation more than doubled to 56.3 percent in January, according to the central bank. At the same time, the bank’s scarcity index rose to a record 28 percent, meaning that more than one in four basic goods was out of stock at any given time.

Maduro, before the marches started today, said he will import \$1 billion of food and medicine to guarantee supplies for four months. Later he renamed the Orinoco oil belt in honor of Hugo Chavez, who ran the country for 14 years until he died of cancer in March.

“The only way to protect a country from fascism is like when you have a very severe infection, you have to look for the most advanced and strong antibiotic,” Maduro said. The armed forces are with the people to protect the nation, he added.

Recall Referendum

Maduro said Venezuelans were welcome to push for a recall referendum in 2016, adding that anyone who signed it would have to present their fingerprints and photos.

While the president spoke on national television, several thousand protesters gathered outside La Carlota military airport in Caracas, where Lopez was temporarily held, according to Voluntad Popular.

“I’m protesting because I want a better future for my little son,” said 42-year-old truck driver Jose Luis Flores, standing in the rain as protesters blocked a highway. “We have every resource imaginable here but government.”

--With assistance from Matthew Malinowski in Brasilia. Editors: Harry Maurer, Bill Farie