

**Testimony of Leopoldo Lopez**  
**Venezuelan Freedom Activist,**  
**Co-Founder of the World Liberty Congress, Wilson Center Fellow**  
**US Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing**  
**“U.S. Support of Democracy and Human Rights”**  
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In February of 2014, after calling for non violent protests against the corrupt and autocratic regime fo Nicolás Maduro, I was arrested, sent to a military prison, kept in solitary confinement for almost four years, and sentenced to 14 years of prison after a manipulated trial concluded I was guilty of inciting violence through subliminal messages during my public speeches. In 2017, I was sent to house arrest until I escaped in April of 2019 to seek refuge at the Spanish Embassy in Caracas, where I stayed until late 2020 when I escaped Venezuela to meet my family that had been in Spain since 2019. My struggle against the regime has now spanned decades. I was elected mayor of Chacao in Caracas in 2000, reelected in 2004, and since then I was banned from running for office and became the target of widespread attacks that included two murder attempts. My story is one of many; I have not been alone in this struggle. Hundreds of activists, social leaders, journalists, union leaders, business people, students, military officers, and individuals willing to stand up and fight for freedom around the world.

Last November, we launched the World Liberty Congress to gather pro-democracy leaders from more than 40 autocratic countries. The first day, we heard 40 delegations. It was eye opening that for hours we heard the same story repeating itself in different contexts and voices, the stories at the frontlines. It is from that perspective that I speak to you today, from the viewpoint of men and women who are willing to risk their freedom and lives to achieve freedom and democracy. The WLC is a non-ideological action oriented alliance of democracy

defenders and freedom activists. We seek to provide pro-democracy movements with political, legal, financial, and strategic assistance to enhance







thought, and religion. This means that authoritarians will always have enemies, both within and beyond their borders. Dictators must always direct most of their energy, funds, and influence into terrifying and suppressing the will of their people, or their grip on power will slip.

We have spoken of the advantages autocrats have over democrats. This, however, is an inescapable disadvantage of the dictators. They rely on terror, extortion, and the steady flow of funds and weapons to remain in power. Their opponents, however, are motivated by much more powerful, incorruptible ideals. Victims of authoritarianism have had their basic humanity stolen from them. This is why across the world, pro-democracy demonstrators are willing to take to the streets week after week, willing to be shot at, beaten, imprisoned, and tortured. In many places, dictators are finding that their habit of abusing and humiliating their populations creates a determined, and with the help of free nations, increasingly organized and well funded resistance. Even after 7 months, the people of Iran continue to fill the streets. When we see the images of Iranian women resisting a brutal theocracy, I ask you; what could be a better use of US influence and leadership, than to embolden these people? What is a better demonstration of the American ideals of democracy and liberty than the Iranian, or indeed the Cuban, Hong Kongese, Sudanese, or Venezuelan people at this moment?



The United States Government should make supporting organic, localized pro-democracy movements a central focus in its foreign policy. In other words, irrespective of political denominations, the US should seek to identify pre-existing movements who are struggling for democratic change and provide them with technical and financial support. All foreign policy decisions should take into account potential consequences for human rights and democracy. It is necessary to coordinate efforts within and beyond the US government. Different US



Simultaneously, it's important to make consumers aware that the goods and services they are consuming are manufactured or extracted in autocratic regimes. For example in Xinjiang, the slave labor of Uyghurs is widespread in the production of consumer goods. Corporations which operate in autocratic countries should be exposed as being complicit in these human rights violations. Their economic activity is instrumental in propping up the regime of Xi Jinping, and US consumers and investors should be confronted with this reality.

*Recommendation #5: Consistency in Denying Legitimacy to Dictators*

The US should not send any financial or military assistance to regimes who are anti-democratic and commit human rights violations.

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disobedience, activist leaders need uncensored and widespread methods of communication which circumvent the control of autocrats.

A program to distribute smartphones en masse in autocratic countries is a practical way to do this. It would assist not only in effective communications and combating misinformation, but also for access to different innovations and services

The Department of State estimates that there are over one million political prisoners around the world. These people are not afforded legal protections and are regularly subjected to heinous forms of physical and psychological torture. They are not allowed visitation or the right to appeal, and are frequently unaware of what they have been charged with. We should elevate the voices of these people whenever possible. The US should apply diplomatic, economic, and political pressure to countries who have political



Transnational repression is the attempt by autocrats to commit crimes against their opponents outside of their borders. This is an extremely common occurrence, and methods can include kidnapping, murder, extortion, unlawful deportations, coercion by proxy, or assault. Within our activist network at the World Liberty Congress, Masih Alinejad was subjected to an assassination attempt in New York earlier this year. Paul Rusesabagina, who we are glad to report was released from prison this week, was kidnapped in 2020 by the Rwandan government, boarding a plane he believed would take him to Burundi, but instead flew him to Kigali where he would be imprisoned. Another case within our network is that of Palestinian activist Fadi Elsalameen, who has been subjected to assassination attempts by the Palestinian Authority despite being a US citizen and living in Washington. US security and intelligence services should find effective methods to protect human rights defenders whose lives are threatened by dictators. There should be efforts to pre-empt attacks, and also to provide consequences for dictators when they send their agents to commit crimes against people in other countries.

*Recommendation #12: Use of FinTech and Bitcoin/Lightning to overcome the obstacles of autocracies to bring financial support*

We must use new technologies to move resources inside autocratic regimes without the surveillance of dictators. This includes using FinTech and Bitcoin/Lightning to transfer resources to activists. We have seen in recent periods that autocratic regimes seek to limit the access of NGOs by controlling their ability to use external financing. Providing reliable financial support is critical for democratic movements' success, so new methods of financing which circumvent the financial systems of autocrats are required.

*Recommendation #13: An Alliance for Freedom*

The cooperation of autocrats has been spoken about extensively. The central thesis of the World Liberty Congress is the need to articulate a global alliance of activists and leaders who not only advocate for freedom internationally, but are willing to risk their lives inside their countries to achieve a democratic transition. We seek to identify concrete ways in which we can empower one another and cooperate to make our own movements more effective. By pooling together our experiences, resources, and strategies, we