

Torture, Jail and Exile –The Risks of Doing Politics in Venezuela.

By: Camila Llorente

Walking in a prison hallway accompanied by the guards, political prisoner Francisco Marquez felt he was entering a cave. The further he walked, the darker it got — soon, he couldn't see anything. When he arrived at his cell, a filthy, cool cement slab was there as his bed.

On the night of June 23, 2016, authorities took Marquez to his cell to spend his first night at July 26th Prison, located in Guárico, Venezuela. It is one of the most notorious prisons in South America.

"July 26th was the worst of all ... I witnessed a torture session for 30 minutes. Every night I heard screams, heard how people were tortured. You had no access to light for weeks, the food was very little and the mosquitoes bite you all over ... I actually got dengue fever," Marquez said in Spanish.

Marquez, a dual citizen of the United States and Venezuela, worked as a lawyer and political activist for Voluntad Popular, a Venezuelan political party. He spent four months detained by President Nicolás Maduro's regime in Venezuela, where he was transferred to four prisons and spent time in seven different cells.

After being released and forced into exile in October 2016, Marquez currently lives in Washington, D.C. On a video call, recounting his prison experience, Marquez laughed, thinking about what he would say to his past self — the one who was working as a political activist and the one who was in jail.

"To the one in jail, I would say: everything you have experienced is for a reason, and that all this will give you a lot of strength for what is to come," Marquez said. "And to the one before jail: keep your convictions but look for other ways. But, what I am sure of is that the Francisco of that moment would not have listened to me."

Marquez was put in jail for money laundering and inciting violence, charges against him without actual proof.

At the time of Marquez's arrest, besides being a political activist, he worked at the Hatillo municipality as the chief of staff under opposition Mayor David Smolansky, the country's youngest mayor and now commissioner of the OAS Secretary-General for the Crisis of Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees. Their office was characterized by its focus on issues that the regime did not like to talk about: insecurity, economy, violation of human rights, and many other things.

"The real reason why they put me in jail was because of my association with Voluntad Popular and my link with David Smolansky," Marquez said.

Like Marquez, many people have gone to prison in Venezuela because of their beliefs or political activities. Currently, a total of 359 political prisoners are in the country, according to the Penal Forum, a Venezuelan network of pro-bono criminal defense lawyers. To be a political prisoner in Venezuela, you do not have to be part of any political party or group. The regime also detains ordinary people.

"What is going to condition the existence of being in prison for political reasons is... the specific purpose that the government wants to fulfill with your arrest," said Gonzalo Himiob, lawyer and Penal Forum director in Spanish.

Smolansky, also forced into exile, said he remembers the day Marquez, whom he calls Pancho, was detained as if it were yesterday. He went to the July 26th Prison, where he was able to see Marquez and his colleague, Gabriel San Miguel, in their yellow uniforms and with their heads shaved. What worried Smolansky the most was how long this would last and what they would deal with inside, since prisons in Venezuela are, as Smolansky said, "hell."

"I always trusted Pancho....he has a great strategic vision and a lot of mental strength," Smolansky said in Spanish. "Something that gave me peace of mind was that I knew that mentally and emotionally, he was going to be able to handle it better than perhaps others."

Marquez always knew that being a politician in Venezuela had its risks, and one of them was going to jail. He knew that if he went to prison one day, he needed to establish a routine because it would give him a sense of control over his life while being confined. Creating a routine and connecting with God during those four months were some of the things that Marquez said helped him deal with prison.

"Your routine, your physical space, is what saves you," Marquez said. "I always had a moment of reading, a moment of prayer and meditation, and a moment of exercise that was key."

Marquez and San Miguel were on a road trip to Portuguesa state to secure signatures for a recall referendum against Maduro. In Cojedes, at a security checkpoint, the Venezuelan National Guard made them stop the vehicle. The guards found all their documents were in order and checked the car.

Inside the car, they found 3 million bolívares in cash along with some pamphlets. At that time, the amount of cash was equivalent to a \$1,000, a common amount of money to carry in

Venezuela. The pamphlets read "Free Leopoldo López," the most significant opposition's political prisoner at that moment. Marquez said the guards linked them to politics because of the pamphlets.

After two long hours of waiting and being taken in for questioning, the men were detained. In 2016, Father's Day in Venezuela was on June 19. It was also the day when Marquez's ordeal for the next four months began.

During Marquez's first night in prison at Cojedes, he slept on a small room floor, accompanied by 19 other cellmates. He was using his shoe as a pillow when two armed guards woke him and San Miguel to interrogate them. The guards were looking for them to say things that were not true. They threatened to take them to Caracas and torture them if they didn't comply.

"There, I thought, they're going to burn me with cigarettes, beat me down, lock me in a closet for a day, electrocute my private parts," Marquez said. "Which were things they've done to others."

Although Marquez said he wasn't physically abused during his four months in jail, psychologically, he went through a lot.

In the July 26th Prison, he ran with dengue fever from the infirmary to his cell in the middle of a shooting between inmates and guards. In the Helicoide, known as a torture prison, he was frequently moved from cell to cell, interrupting his established routine. Marquez was also able to interact with other political prisoners who were already tortured or had been in prison for a long time, making him think about how long he would be in there.

"A Polichacao (a member of Chacao municipality police force and also a political prisoner) lost an eye from being electrocuted so much," Marquez said

But, something that really affected Marquez was the day San Miguel was set free. Marquez experienced a sensation described by him as "falling through a void."

On Sept. 9, 2016, they were both told that they were going to be set free. Marquez and San Miguel both grabbed their pillowcases filled with their belongings and signed their certificates that proved they were being set free. A few moments later, a guard told Marquez he was being set free an hour after San Miguel. An hour turned into a month.

"From that moment on, I thought I was going to be in prison for a long time," Marquez said.

Marquez managed to get out of jail because of international pressure from the U.S. government, Spain and the Vatican City, as well as the support of his family and political team.

The condition for his release was that he had to leave Venezuela as soon as he was free.

Marquez felt a great sense of relief when he saw his mom and dad, but he had little time to process everything that was happening. In just a few hours, he said goodbye to his relatives, grabbed "his life in two suitcases" and went to the airport to get on the plane. That was the last time he set foot in Venezuela.

Marquez spent a lot of time with his mind in Venezuela while physically being in the United States. What helped him deal with that feeling was to continue working for the country from the exterior.

"I want Maduro to regret having freed me," Marquez said. "I want Venezuela to change and be able to return."