



Venezuelan activist sentenced in Miami for immigration fraud

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On the anniversary of her arrest at Miami International Airport when she tried to flee to Caracas in 2015, former South Florida Venezuelan activist Maylin Silva was sentenced to two years and six months in federal prison for immigration fraud and the escape attempt.

“I beg you to forgive me,” a sobbing Silva told the court Wednesday after U.S. District Judge Darrin Gayles pronounced the sentence in his courtroom in the federal courthouse in Miami. “But I cannot forgive myself.”

The sentencing ends a case that drew wide attention in the South Florida Venezuelan community, where Silva was well known for her involvement in opposition activities against the Venezuelan government. Silva was also known among some Venezuelans who had arrived as immigrants or

refugees for her efforts to help them secure legal immigration status.

It was her involvement in immigration matters on behalf of some undocumented Venezuelan immigrants that got the 64-year-old Silva in trouble.

A federal grand jury in Miami last year indicted Silva on immigration fraud charges following an investigation by federal agents, who found that for almost 10 years she had helped undocumented Venezuelans to seek immigration documents in exchange for illegal payments.

Silva was in New York when federal agents detained her. She obtained bond and was allowed to travel alone to Miami with instructions to appear in court here to respond to the charges.

But when she landed back in Miami on Nov. 2, 2015, Silva purchased a ticket and was about to board a plane to Caracas when agents showed up at the gate and arrested her.

The original indictment on immigration fraud charges cited a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison if she were found guilty at trial. For contempt of court, the escape attempt, Silva faced a maximum penalty of life in prison had a federal jury found her guilty. Silva eventually pleaded guilty to immigration fraud and contempt of court.

Marc David Seitles, Silva's attorney, sought to persuade Judge Gayles to sentence his client to no more than two years in prison instead of the three years and a month pursued by the prosecution.

Seitles told the judge that while the accusations against his client were true, it was also true that she had helped many other immigrants and never collected money from them. Seitles also said that Silva, who sat in a wheelchair, suffered from diabetes and vascular and heart problems.

The judge did not seem convinced, but said that to be more equitable he had decided to impose the 30-month sentence. Gayles said the sentence included 24 months for immigration fraud and six months for contempt of court.

Gayles also told Silva at the sentencing that she must cooperate with immigration authorities if they decide to put her in deportation proceedings. Seitles said in court that Silva does not want to be deported to Venezuela because she opposes the government there.

After the sentencing, Seitles told el Nuevo Herald that "while Ms. Silva committed a crime against the United States, she did so while helping Venezuelans escape from an oppressive and tyrannical regime. Let that not be forgotten."



Maylin Silva gives a talk in 2006. **Pedro Portal** - El Nuevo Herald File
