

Angelo Palmeri: “Political parties must become useful entities for citizens and the state”

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The national organization secretary of *Un Nuevo Tiempo* warns about the dangers of anti-politics and emphasizes that unity will not only be important to achieve a change in power but also to build the democratic Venezuela of the future.

–Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) turned 17 on March 3, 2023. What were its origins?

UNT emerged mainly in the state of Zulia as a regional proposal. It resulted from the grouping of several leaders who came from dissidents of *Acción Democrática* and other social democratic parties. After consolidating as a real political force in Zulia, with the governorship, mayoralties, and deputies to the Legislative Council, the presidential candidacy arises in 2006 with Manuel Rosales, who enjoyed considerable national support at that time due to the success of the management in the state of Zulia. It was a difficult moment because Hugo Chávez enjoyed great popularity and that the opposition had not participated in the 2005 elections. However, the party decided to resume the electoral path and make an opposition proposal to the government.

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After that journey through the country, building a solid, well-made campaign, and being in contact with Venezuelans, the proposal to nationalize UNT was raised. Therefore, leaders, officials, militants, sympathizers, and volunteers from other parties and independents joined, and thus, a great national force was consolidated. The UNT ballot had more than 1.2 million votes in the country at that time, being the most-voted opposition ballot. That helped us to become a national party.

–How complex was that transition from a regional to a national party?

It was a fairly complex process because it also sought to articulate and organize different thoughts and actions into a single structure. Initially, it was difficult to generate synergy in the midst of so much heterogeneity. But over time, it was achieved, especially because we made an effort to propose political discussion, unification, and party work based on the postulates of social democracy, with it being our fundamental ideological basis. In a way, the principles of social democracy go hand in hand with leaders with more social vocation, who are closer to the people, and that nourished the party at that time.

The vast majority of our leaders had quite a social vocation. Despite having some different ideological conceptions, everyone easily identified with the ideology of social democracy, and that became the glue that held all that heterogeneity together. In my case, I came from a dissent of *Primero Justicia* (PJ), which is also an extraordinary party, for us, a sister party. But just as I came from PJ, others came from La Causa R, MAS, and the AD diaspora migrated mainly to UNT.

What we tried to do at that time, through the main postulates of social democracy, was to unify that heterogeneity on a single policy. Solidarity is a fundamental value for all of us involved in politics, thus, focusing politics on the citizen, and building healthy market economies that will result in the citizen's quality of life is a healthy management of the State in public policy. Our main postulates point towards progress, social well-being, and equality, which worked for us so everyone could feel more comfortable and move forward.

–How is UNT organized?

Our party is organized from the national to the community level. We have a Federal Executive Board, which is the product of the National Federal Congress, the highest instance of the party, which makes major decisions about strategic lines, candidacies, and statutes, among other issues.

The Federal Executive Board largely represents the regions and has an executive body of directors, which includes a president and secretaries for organization, politics and legislation, women, youth, elections, and professionals and technicians. The party covers sectoral and work areas that are essential for the development of the party's politics and for sustaining the social democratic ideology. For example, the LGTBIQ and Women's coordinations claim inclusion, equality, and the fight for the rights of the most vulnerable sectors. We also have the Social Care area since each area of our programmatic proposal is covered by a coordination. This is replicated regionally and municipally, except for areas such as the International, which is exclusively national. We also have representation of the diaspora in the Federal Executive Board.

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We have two levels as a basic structure: family committees, a kind of nucleus for social democracy that groups around voting centers, and neighborhood networks, which are interest associations. That is, for example, someone that is perhaps inactive in their voting center, someone that is not a political or electoral activist, but someone that is concerned about the water problem, or that wants to become active with the issue of cleaning the stream that passes their house, like other neighbors.

This allows us to generate policies and structures based on interests. All that participation goes into a categorized database, where we can generate policies towards those specific sectors and promote the registration of party members, sympathizers, and volunteers. We now have about 140,000 party members, sympathizers, and volunteers in our database. Sympathizers and volunteers are very close to the party, although they do not live an active life as leaders.

–As a wave of anti-parties and anti-politics gains strength, how can the validity and importance of these political organizations be defended?

I think that parties as institutions are absolutely necessary. However, parties have to become entities that are useful for citizens and the State. A symbol, a flag, two T-shirts, and a statement do not make a political party. A party has to be an institution that serves the people, with a solid foundation of ideological postulates of social, political, and economic action. It has to have the possibility of being a reference from a social point of view, and in that sense, I believe that we have had many shortcomings. In the last year and a half, some parties have understood that they must rethink their role and adapt to new policies beyond using TikTok.

It seems that now, since my party uses TikTok, it is aligned with the new generations and needs, but that is not entirely true. A party will be in tune with social advances to the extent that its militants feel that it responds to the needs of society, from the most basic things like food, public services, and quality of life, to more transcendental things like freedom, inclusion, and equality.

To the extent that we respond to the current needs of Venezuelans, then our party will be referenced. I believe that one of the biggest dangers we face is demonizing political parties, allowing the discourse that political parties are the problem. Parties are not the problem. They can be part of the problem, but they can also be part of the solution. The truth is that anti-politics is the problem. Well-done politics that build, that have done good things, is the politics that we need. Successful health and education systems are part of positive and constructive policies.

The issue is how we get to nourish parties with capable Venezuelans, with good intentions and projects, and give them a platform to grow, in a way that could be beneficial to society.

–How does UNT face the challenge of unity within the opposition?

In UNT, historically, we have tried to be a glue for unity. I always say that we must remember that unity is the exception, not the rule. For us, it became a rule because we realized at some point that Chávez was the minority due to discontent and that all of us were the majority together, but not individually.

At the time when Chavismo disillusioned Venezuelans because the truth was revealed that it was a farce and a scam and that there was no type of policy towards citizens but to enrich

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some groups of power, we did not manage to consolidate power because we were divided. Obviously, the need to unify arose in order to consolidate that majority as it effectively happened in cases such as the 2015 parliamentary elections, and even in 2012-2013 with the candidacy of Henrique Capriles Radonski. But unity is the exception, the rule is difference, plurality, heterogeneity.

UNT has always been a promoter of that understanding, even in some cases where we did not agree, we respected the opinion of the majority because that is how democracies work. We have brought distinguished leaders such as Dr. Omar Barboza, who has led unity despite being a UNT militant, but that has a moral and ethical entity. Dr. Barboza is the founder of Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), a great promoter of that initiative, and now he is the executive secretary of the Democratic Unitary Platform. We do this with the best unitary spirit of building a true political coalition.

Unity is not taking a photo of us all together, it is not saying "here are the parties" and showing off all the t-shirts. Unity is about action, but also about objectives. Unity is about word and thought. We have to be clear about what our strategic objective is, where we want to go, voluntarily share it, understand it, digest it, and make it a reality together, understanding that after recovering democracy, heterogeneity must be the rule. But, for now, egos, individualities, and particular agendas must cease, and the collective agenda must prevail.

Above everything else, what matters most is to unitedly achieve political change to give Venezuelans a path that will begin at that moment, but will not end there. That is the first phase. The great national unity of purpose, vision, and action will be seen when we, once in government, can generate successful public

policies to change the lives of Venezuelans and give progress and prosperity to this country. It is a long journey that we must travel together if we want to fulfill political parties' objectives.