

Democratization



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The redefinition of multipartidism in Venezuela

Heladio Hernández Muñoz

Political parties in Venezuela have a close and historical relationship with participation and political leadership in their daily work as institutions of the political order of society, in their relations with the State, and in their daily development through citizens, groups of interest, unions, guilds, student bodies, and even neighborhoods, if I may.

Their manifestations are historical since 1936 with the democratic opening spearheaded by General Isaías López Contreras's government (1936-1941) after General Juan Vicente Gómez's (1857-1935) passing, when, following his personalistic and dictatorial rule since 1908, the at the time incipient trade union and business movements, as well as student –especially college– demonstrations, awakened aspirations and new anti-dictatorial and democratic values in Venezuela. A society interested in joining the modernization and expansion of its organizational needs and aspirations, which had already been making a dent in the autocratic behaviors of old authorities, fostered a new political and social reasoning of significance in the country.

The Venezuelan political system already had the space for more adequate and convenient development of its public institutions and authorities, which supported and promoted a new

type of politics. New parties arose, such as *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action, AD), founded in 1941 and whose antecedents as a political group date to 1931 as the *Agrupación Revolucionaria de Izquierda* (Left Revolutionary Group, ARDI), then to the *Movimiento de Organización Venezolana* (Venezuelan Organization movement) in 1936, and later as the *Partido Democrático Nacional* (National Democratic Party, PDN).

Another party with strong local roots was the *Comité de Organización Política Electoral Independiente* (Independent Electoral Political Organization Committee, COPEI), founded in 1946. Its historical background can be traced back to 1936 as the National Union of Students split from the Student's Federation (FEV), founded that same year. Later, they united electorally (1938) with the *Partido Acción Electoral* (Electoral Action Party) to participate in the 1941 elections. The following year (1942), they merged with the *Movimiento Acción Nacionalista* (MAN) to be called *Acción Nacional* (National Action), and, finally, in 1946, they definitively became known as COPEI or the *Partido Socialcristiano* (Social Christian Party).

Similarly, the *Partido Comunista de Venezuela* (Venezuelan Communist Party, PCV), founded in 1931, has a long tradition. Its origin is remote in its particularities for the definitive foundation. The first contacts between prisoners, who identified with Marxist ideology and were called *La Carpa Roja* in the Castillo Libertador in Puerto Cabello, a group of students linked to the 1928 generation, the movements that emerged in the so-called *Grupo del Caribe*, *las Células de Caracas*, and the definitive entry into the Communist International group in 1935 that linked them with other Marxist-Leninist parties internationally, gave them significance in the partisan spectrum in Venezuela.

The last significant political party in Venezuelan history after 1936 was *Unión Republicana Democrática* (URD), founded in 1945 by various personalities from other organizations such as PDN and *Partido Democrático Venezolano* (Venezuelan Democratic Party, PDV). The latter was founded by President Isaías Medina Angarita (1897-1953), who replaced General López Contreras in the National Executive for a new period (1941-1946), but was overthrown in 1945 in the so-called October Revolution of 1945 and the Revolutionary Government Junta made it illegal.

President Rómulo Gallegos was the first president to be elected by direct, secret, and universal vote as established by the 1947 constitution, which was a product of the National Constituent Assembly of Venezuela (1946-1947) that originated the first essentially democratic constitution. Until he was overthrown in November 1948, there was no important transformation in the subsystem of political parties in Venezuela until after January 23, 1958, with the definitive advent of the democratic regime in the Venezuelan political system and its political and legal definition with the National Constitution of 1961. But, yes, this is what we could call the reconfiguration of citizen and institutional power in Venezuela.

This brief and very transitory account clearly defines the main actors in the formalization of political parties in Venezuela and their transcendental significance. Firstly, most protagonists come from unions and student organizations, while few come from the business or intellectual world. Secondly, they are personalities formed in ideopolitical criticism or opposition to Gómez's military dictatorship, yet, after the general's death and following the initial opening of the Government of General López Contreras, even throughout the first years of the administration of General Medina Angarita, the socio-political scenario, the new

democratic vision of the country and sympathies were enriched, which translated into the incorporation of political parties as fundamental channels for the citizens' new aspirations and social needs. Thirdly, the sympathies and adhesions are defined, many of them in the new party organizations according to each party's ideas, values, or beliefs in the political environment, although very precariously in the political spectrum of the time. Still, the electoral processes of 1946, 1947, and 1948 defined political parties' ideological and functional formalities. This is how they gradually won more sympathizers and militants, establishing themselves by 1958-1959 as true political participation and organization instruments and a new reconfiguration of citizen and institutional power.

The history of political parties as fundamental actors of the democratic regime and the Venezuelan political system acquires true relevance in the political development of citizenship and militancy. But its organic decomposition is also triggered through segmentations and fractures that conspire against the development and strengthening of the democratic regime. We cannot ignore the coup attempts after January 23, 1958, and until 1992 that affected the free deployment of the new parties and the disposition of power in Venezuela, among other things, that of its enemies, who have not entirely disappeared from the national stage.

My perspective is situated in the new -and not so new- political parties and their resignification on the national stage: their development and evolution as the primary guarantors of democracy, the institutional balance of the SPV, the strengthening of the Nation as a sovereign people, the Rule of Law and its legal system, citizens' rights and duties, and relational intermediation with social elites, leaders and people who, from all angles of

cultural, social, and economic activities, make up the instruments of every democratic regime.

The segmentation of political parties affects the tools that guarantee an adequate evolution of society and its institutions. Fragmented opinion or organization is inexorably reflected in the social group. Thus, I deal with political parties' division as a possible and probable cause of the Venezuelan democratic regime's deficiencies and insufficiencies. And although it may seem a paradox, since pluralism is a socio-political value of any democratic regime, it does not seem evident that this multiplicity of organizations develops or strengthens democracy. On the contrary, their political purposes and goals decrease, and citizen detachment from them increases.

Electoral systems can reduce these tensions in the division of parties, for instance, through the double electoral round, but this needs to be demonstrated. The multiplicity of political-partisan organizations that can form governments with important and disparate government coalitions, both presidential and parliamentary, as are usually formed in double-round electoral systems, have yet to demonstrate more legitimacy in their performance in public management than others.

The first divisions dating back to 1959 occurred within AD when an important group of its youth sector, due to the ideological motivation of its main actors and inspired by the triumph of the Cuban revolution in January 1959, declared themselves in rebellion against the party and Rómulo Betancourt's government (1959-1964), starting a period of armed civic-military insurgency and attempted coups together with the Communist Party of Venezuela with whom they founded a coalition of subversives called the *Fuerzas Armadas para la Liberación Nacional* (FALN). However,

the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario* (The Movement of the Revolutionary Left, MIR), as a political party, was founded as such in 1967. In 1962, another group of leaders broke away from AD, formalizing a new party called *Fuerza Democrática Popular* (Democratic Popular Force, FDP) and, in 1962, another group of AD leaders, called ARS at first and then *AD-Oposición*, withdrew from AD and founded the *Partido Revolucionario de Integración Nacionalista* (Revolutionary Party of Nationalist Integration, PRIN) in 1963. In 1968, there was a new division in AD with the creation of the *Movimiento Electoral del Pueblo* (People's Electoral Movement, MEP) party. Factions and divisions did not cease in the coming decade. In 1997, AD leaders and independent technocrats founded a new organization called *Apertura a la Participación Nacional* (Opening for National Participation, APN). Later, this organization merged with *Un Nuevo Tiempo* (A New Time, UNT), a party of regional origin founded in 1999. Its leaders were former *adecos* (militants from AD) and, later, as a national party in 2006, leaders and militants of the *Polo Democrático* (Democratic Pole, 2005) were incorporated, where *Solidaridad*, *Vamos*, and the social democratic group parties united. *Polo Democrático* was also nourished by other parties such as *Alianza Bravo Pueblo* (Bravo Pueblo Alliance, ABP) (2000), *Podemos* (2002), and a split from the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement Toward Socialism, MAS) (1971) together with *La Causa Radical* (The Radical Cause, LCR) (1971). These last two came from an important PCV division. Later, MAS merged with MIR, and *Patria Para Todos* (Homeland for all, PPT) (1997) split from LCR. All these movements are social democratic. Some were of Marxist inspiration, at least in its programmatic beginnings, and others were inspired by Merxist revisionism in the 60s and 70s to the present day. With these mergers and detachments, some leaders retired to private life and unsubscribed from their activism.

The undergoing of the PCV has been reviewed. Its permanent divisiveness has persisted since its foundation, just like AD's, even today. Another political party with ideological and electoral relevance that saw few, yet significant ruptures was COPEI. In 1993, it had its most important division, and the party *Convergencia* was born, founded by one of its main founders and in coalition with other minority political parties that formed what became known as the *Chiripero* (electoral integration of various minority parties) and some contrary to the traditional social Christian ideology of COPEI. The division was fundamentally electoral, with a strong dispute over the presidential candidate for the 1994-1999 presidential term. In 1998, *Proyecto Venezuela*, of regional origin, was founded with antecedents in another party called *Proyecto Carabobo* (1995), also a split from COPEI. In 2000, a new division mainly for the youth sector was born in the party with the creation of *Primero Justicia* (PJ). In 2011, *Voluntad Popular* (VP) was founded. Its main leaders were also closely linked and were part of PJ, although VP defined itself as a social democrat at its definitive foundation.

Multipartidism in Venezuela and its party system is inclined and established paradoxically. While the main postulates of democracy are developed, the parties multiply due to internal disagreements where personal differences stand out, fundamentally, around internal leadership or organizational control and not so much because of ideological discrepancies. Some of these divisions are indeed the product of significant political discontent among their leaders, as was observed in debates, including some public ones where it was evident that conflict was seasoned by leadership struggles with effects on the party's internal and electoral processes.

On the other hand, these fractions gave rise to the party system disintegrating in public opinion as sociopolitical intermediaries of the national collective's aspirations and needs. Even in the different formations of civil society and institutionalized organizations such as unions, syndicates, student movements, and civil and business associations, the conflict became increasingly irritating for society, and another form of disagreement with the parties began to manifest itself. Its most immediate effect was dispensing them for their claims and vindictive activities, acquiring a new dimension as social mediators.

Subsequently, the so-called pressure and/or interest groups appear in the national environment, which produces anti-political movements with strong intentions of undermining political parties as intermediaries between the incumbent governments and society, violating relations between state institutions and society.

Without the slightest doubt, this significantly affected not only the party system itself but also the political system and the consolidation of democracy, producing a kind of sociocultural entropy, losing an essential part of the political system's homogeneity and very little reversibility. Thus, Venezuela returns to its previous party-system conditions; that is to say: Multipartidism is here to stay, and Venezuelans must deal with that.

This may be one of the excesses among the current leadership of the Venezuelan political parties. As has been said on several occasions by self-confident personalities who venture through the media and social networks, the rescue of the democratic values essayed in the recent past, and the re-establishment of the democratic political system is imminent, as was achieved with the

rules of the political game that acceptably configured power and allowed the 1961 Constitution to endure, as a product of pacts and agreements, for more than thirty years, the longest-lived of all the constitutions we have had as a Republic.

The 1999 constitution does not deny the democratic regime in its legal, administrative, or political form, yet it does so expressly against political parties. It intends to ignore them and produce a break with the predominant party system and expand the participatory and leading powers of the citizenry through “organizations with political purposes”. This resulted from several public and private interventions of groups and people against the political parties and was yet another manifestation of social rejection.

Even so, as of 2007, more than 100 political parties are registered in the National Electoral Council, which were forced to re-settle or legalize themselves due to their low electoral participation, which some achieved (i.e., AD, COPEI, PCV, and twenty others) while others did not. This is how a subsystem of multiple parties has been formed in the national shadow with little harmony and roots among citizens, voters, and society, with significant disagreements, strong personalism, ideological, programmatic, or dogmatic deficiencies, altered ideals, and substantial inconsistencies with the current political reality of Venezuela.

It is true that the government party, *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV), founded in 2008, is a product of a merger with *Movimiento Quinta República* (Fifth Republic Movement), established in 1997, and other minority parties (more than twenty) dissolved or merged with PSUV. However, PSUV is not yet the hegemonic party it aspires

to be. On the contrary, it suffers from the usual wear and tear of all government parties, such as the disincorporation of previously affiliated organizations –which have also suffered to an equal or greater extent, the withdrawal of important political leaders, militants, and sympathizers, as well as the decline in support in the elections. In other words, its history has not been different from that of traditional AD and COPEI. It has been a ruling party with average influence on State officials, on important actors in the military sector or fractions of the military sphere, and on one or another social organization. Another thing is to consider its electoral effects, which are the result of exclusive conditions of the last processes and, particularly, the legislative ones of 2015 and the presidential ones of 2018, which had unfavorable results in the former and deeply controversial ones in the latter due to the poignant abstention of the main political parties in participating and recognizing results.

In summary, today, the Venezuelan political system has been established with a subsystem of multiparty, multi-electoral parties with weak ties to citizenship. The demand for unity is constant in parties of the democratic opposition and those that still support the regime. Unity is the aspiration of many, but political egocentrism, electoral personalism, and organic manifestations saturated with ideopolitical incoherence express the opposite within and between parties.

Agreements, pacts, or cohesion that draw a different purpose or panorama in the political environment seem to be very far away. Past experiences have yet to serve to reflect on the possible results for better development of the political system. The persistent demand for freedom that contributes to a quality democracy backed by autonomous institutions is unforeseen in the immediate future for Venezuela.

From the current predominant multiparty system in the country, in addition to the purpose of unity in diversity, consistency in the approaches that have been carried out to achieve a coherent political leadership of all can be envisioned or rescued to either get out of the ruling party and its circumstantial allies or significantly affect them by reducing their ability to lead the most important State institutions, starting with the National Executive. Expectations of foreign interventions, *coup d'état*, or social insurgency have been left aside.

Recent political organizations have appeared on the political spectrum, which might enable unitary elections that favor a different perspective. But it is also very likely that the ruling party will continue to act as it has until now, harming unitary attempts with its dark actions. Recent history has also taught them, consequently, to keep watch on the unscrupulous wishes of the ruling party.

In 2022 there were approximately 53 parties, including some of the traditional ones such as COPEI, AD, PCV and its ramifications, PJ, VP, UNT, ABP, MAS, LCR, PPT, and more recent ones such as *Vente Venezuela* (VV) (2012) and another of a Liberal-Republican orientation whose leaders have played a role in a radical confrontation with the incumbent party, *Avanzada Progresista* (Progressive Advance, AP). Founded in 2012 with a progressive orientation, its main leaders are Eduardo Semtei and Political Scientist Luis Augusto Romero, and its main founder and spokeswoman is Engineer María Corina Machado Parisca, who has had an important participation in the National scene. Another recent political and organizational movement is *Alianza Lápiz* (2017), which has a center-liberal orientation, and its main leader is lawyer Antonio Ecarri Angola with considerable political and electoral participation. In 2018, *Esperanza por el Cambio* (Hope

for Change) was founded as a political party, with a Christian Democratic orientation. Its main leader is evangelical Pastor Javier Alejandro Bertucci Carrero, with an electoral display in the 2018 presidential elections and recurring theopolitical propaganda. *Encuentro Ciudadano* (Citizens Encounter, EC) (2018), of a center-liberal character, has also shown strong opposition, as declared by its main founder and privileged spokesperson, lawyer Delsa Solorzano. The political movement of metropolitan mayors that became the most recent political party is *Fuerza Vecinal* (Community Strength, FV) (2021) with a centrist orientation, and its current president, lawyer Gustavo Adolfo Duque Sáez, is among its main representatives.

There have been numerous divisions within political parties, but also mergers and electoral agreements whose results are instructive for their historical development and political purposes. However, the trend is not unequivocal regarding the end that they should aspire to as representatives or social mediators between citizens and government institutions. As in almost all Western societies, ideological divergence becomes divisions that, in many cases, are goaded by political personalism and encouraged by the egocentrism of some of its leaders. Nothing is surprising in the entire cultural and organizational framework that seeks to interpret the general will of any society and represent citizens in their needs and pressures.

Renewed intentions and purposes can be observed in the immediate political and electoral landscape. Unity is not an end but an instrument to reconfigure political power in Venezuela and favor the everlasting freedom of humanity and citizens against barbarism and its representatives, as well as the quality of the Democracy as a political regime and the development of the

political system and its institutions. This is a historical design for its future as a Nation.

The new directions are yet to come. They are envisioned, though not without obscure stumblings and setbacks. The paths will have to be overcome. There is not the slightest doubt. But political and institutional responsibility, including parties, will inevitably be imposed by imminent reasonableness or by the simple common sense of history: "freedom of judgment cannot be suppressed from the human condition". The redefinition and prominence given by the novice partisan political movements and their leaders to the reasoning and environment of political power now nurtured in conjunction with the most traditional and experienced allow us to foresee unprecedented effects on the Venezuelan political event.

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

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

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.

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 LGBTBIQ 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.

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

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.

Political Parties' Role and Fight for Democracy in Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Acción Democrática in the Venezuelan political system

Evelyn Pinto

The struggle of political parties in authoritarianism is complex and can vary according to the political and social context of each nation. Generally, the main objective of political parties in authoritarian regimes is to achieve national democratization, defend human rights and civil liberties, and repurpose participation, with parties as mediators or links between society and the State, through representation and consensus.

Political parties in authoritarianism face many obstacles and challenges in their fight for democracy. In many cases, regimes may try to repress or co-opt political parties, limiting their ability to organize and mobilize the population. This includes judicialization of the parties' internal processes, media censorship, persecution, detention, torture, and murder of leaders, prohibition of public financing and retaliation against private donors, prohibition of registration of new dissident parties, disqualification of candidates, co-optation of political leaders, violent and/or judicial attacks on headquarters, intimidation of supporters

through the control of points near voting centers, the community leadership of the party/regime (the *jefes de calle* have sectorized every corner of the territory), and even though the armed threat of organized crime¹. This is not a general systematization of how authoritarianism limits the actions of political parties, which could well be found in academic theorizing. Yet, Venezuelan political parties have been targets of these aggressions and limitations in the past 20 years.

Despite these obstacles, political parties can continue fighting for the country's democratization and the defense of human rights and civil liberties designing context-appropriate strategies that lead to a transition towards democracy. To do this, they must provide answers to problems and move past complaints, they must have the capacity to anticipate, articulate, and strategically coordinate internally, with other parties and with the citizenry. They must also innovate so people can regain their trust in politics.

However, the last two decades of Venezuelan political history have shown that it is not easy, specifically to achieve unity. In the past, it also cost those who fought against the dictatorships of Juan Vicente Gómez and Marcos Pérez Jiménez. And I am not referring to a homogeneous whole, where there is no discernment and the identity, ideology, and political culture of each organization are blurred, but rather the existence of a minimum of understanding that guarantees system functioning, avoiding conflicts and personalized confrontations. As the famous Punto

1 In Venezuela, more than 9 witnesses have given testimony of the threats made by *El Conejo's* gang in Las Tejerías, Aragua State, for the electoral process of November 2021, where they convened local leaders to a community meeting. When the citizens arrived at the scheduled site, gang members, while holding heavy weaponry, informed that the incumbent mayor, from the government party, had to win again.

Fijo Pact established well, a unity that recognizes, beyond the differences between the different parties, the more relevant common interests that all must defend and which are expressed in a common and minimum government program that does not exclude the right of political organizations to defend other issues not included in it².

And precisely because of how unity can weaken authoritarian regimes and enable transitions to democracy, is that the dominant coalition strategically focuses on generating division, mistrust, and diminishing the opposition. This has not only affected the relations between parties that oppose the regime, but has added to the disconnection and distrust of citizens with political parties.

Although Venezuelan parties have been created at the vanguard of struggle and as a means of political participation, the distance between parties and the population has caused the latter to feel more identified with social movements, which is not new, but that appear on the political level as an expression of values, as guides, in claiming a specific struggle or as generators of structural changes in society. And if the power of this situation is understood, progress could be made in the breakdown of the regime.

Social movements are not only oriented toward changing policies or replacing certain elites, but towards broader transformations that affect social priorities and the basic mechanisms through which society operates³. Although they have traditionally been identified merely due to their ideological scope,

2 Translated from Juan Carlos Rey, *Problemas Sociopolíticos de América Latina* (Venezuela: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1998), 246.

3 Donatella Della Porta & Mario Diani, *Los Movimientos Sociales* (Spain: Editorial Complutense, 2011), 98.

when they can effect structural changes, people join movements not just for a cause, but to contribute to collective action. Alternative movements (e.g. feminism, Christianity, environmental, or union movements) have existed and continue to exist to directly impact some type of struggle or another. Thus, there is a certain tendency of social movements to represent the interests of civil society in alternative ways.

Now, what about political parties as an instrument of participation, as a channel and guide of claims? This question does not seek to generate a dichotomy between political parties and social movements, but rather, emphasize the need to articulate the work to achieve collective action that leads to a transition to democracy. Collective action is determined by solidarity, that is, by a system of social relations that links and identifies those who participate in it, as well as by the presence of conflict. Collective action is the set of conflicting behaviors within a social system⁴. One of the conditions for collective action between political parties and the population, conflict, already exists in Venezuela, which generates a powerful and solid political and social movement. We are still to work on the solidarity and relationship between them, to break the rules of the game imposed by authoritarianism, and to be able to transform the relations of force in the political system.

Political parties today must seek to connect with citizens to push democracy forward. Parties must cease to function as if they were in a democratic system. Therefore, it is necessary to have a partisan structure in harmony with the abnormal situations to which authoritarianism submits them, strengthen

4 As defined by Alberto Melucci in "Las Teorías de los Movimientos Sociales," *Estudios Políticos* 5, no. 2 (1986), <https://doi.org/10.22201/fcpys.24484903e.1986.2.60047>. (Consulted on February 20, 2023)

the grassroots organization of each party (local committee, cell, popular networks, family commands, etc.), create surveillance organizations, structuring an agile and secure militancy in the face of the regime's abuses, political and ideological training of its members, an extension of the zones of influence of the parties, articulation with the diaspora and the leadership in exile, boycott activities against the regime to prevent stability and fragmentation, and pursue a strategy that establishes a sense of urgency, builds a coalition for change, develops a vision, communicates the vision for change, sparks widespread action, creates short-term wins, consolidates gains, and produces more changes. To achieve all this, each pro-democracy party should identify its role in the current Venezuelan political system. In this sense, the next half of this paper will focus on *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action, AD). AD has been transcendental in national politics and can continue to play a key role after its vast 81-year experience participating in Venezuelan and international political processes.

AD's place in the Venezuelan political system is a topic of great importance in our national history. It was one of the most relevant political parties in the country during much of the 20th century and has been a key player in State democratization. To understand their role, we must look back to its inception, when it was doctrinally defined as a revolutionary and multi-class party, underscoring the latter as a priority since a large part of its development and evolution is attributed to the participation of the masses, of its political culture, of the treatment among its peers, and it continues to be a fundamental value despite the transformations it has undergone in almost a century.

Polyclassism might also represent the party's strategy today. Through class diversity, AD is founded not as the party of a

single social class, which would prevent any solutions to our problems, but as the party representing the feelings of the workers, farmers, students, professionals, merchants, and producers. As such, it became a party uniting the national sentiment, which built a realistic program that interpreted the needs of the people throughout the national territory and looked after everyone and not just the elites and the development of their capital, as had been happening in dictatorial regimes.

That vision was reflected in its policies, starting with the promotion of universal, direct, and secret voting, the massification of education through the construction of elementary and high schools, later the creation of the Gran Mariscal de Ayacucho Scholarships, which allowed young people from any sector of the country to study in the most prestigious universities in the world, among other policies. Objectively, one must also address their internal and public management crises. One of them was precisely that distance the political leadership had with the current Venezuelan reality, that which at its foundation had been a bastion.

Even with its mistakes and successes, AD has been very important throughout history and has played a key role in establishing democracy in Venezuela. Despite the challenges it has faced in recent years, AD remains a major political force in the country. At present, their call within the political system is, firstly, to recover the national feeling from the most remote places of our country, to be the channel of demands that are not found on social media, to once again be the people's trusted organization, one which represents their true interests. And that this plan has a logical and coherent sense for the recovery of the nation. If it is possible to connect again with those unsatisfied demands, with an honest speech, AD will become an energy catalyst for

Venezuelans to overcome the difficulties that they will face in that reconquest of democracy.

They mustn't forget the polyclassism on which it was founded, and work to understand and channel the new global demands, which today, despite the complex national humanitarian emergency, move the sentiments of the new generations and are demands that go hand in hand with social democracy. It must, therefore, update its programmatic thesis, and adapt it to a society where more and new forms of inequality are experienced. And, as in its beginnings, it was everyone's party. Today, it must include women, the LGBTIQ+ community, indigenous people, entrepreneurs, workers, professionals, technicians, freelancers, and people from all social sectors.

AD's experience should function as the basis for a transparent route, aiming to rebirth Venezuela instead of the deification of an individual. Moreover, it should understand the challenge of answering to the most immediate needs of the population, which are many. At the same time, it strengthens democratic institutions to avoid future authoritarian rules, corruption, and Human Rights crimes, so Venezuelans may stop dreaming of superheroes with magical solutions.

In this sense, an inclusive coalition must be proposed to fight against the regime, and once the democratic forces have power, they must organize a diverse and representative government, moralize the public administration and purify it of corruption to work on economic development and the improvement of living conditions. Without the rule of law, there can be no democracy, so first, there must be a restitution of guarantees.

This is not a matter of excessive optimism with the prognosis of our country. Yet, just as countries can inexorably deteriorate, progress in rights and democracy is also possible, and I'd rather bet on the latter. Neither is this the matter of AD's divine call to the nation's transformation. It is not the only wise political party capable of solving Venezuela's problems. However, it does have valuable experience in recovering the country from neglect.

Some affirm that this country is lost, but an excerpt from the speech given by Rómulo Betancourt on September 13, 1941, is still valid: "We, the men and women of *Acción Democrática*, an affirmative party and with faith in the reservations of nationality, say that Venezuela is not lost. It can be saved, it must be saved, and it will be saved"⁵.

5 Rómulo Betancourt's phrase was translated paraphrased to add: "and women".

How was Voluntad Popular formed?

Javier Martucci

Voluntad Popular (Popular Will) is a democratic movement that emerged during a dictatorship. Starting with this fact is key because it sets the context for a political party born to rescue democracy in Venezuela.

On December 5th, at the Valencia Forum, *Voluntad Popular* was presented to the country in a large gathering of thousands of activists who reaffirmed their commitment to being a part of a vanguard organization representing democratic values.

Voluntad Popular was born with a fundamental belief in being an organization that practices democracy internally and externally, where popular participation and the selection of its authorities through nationwide open voting are paramount, allowing all Venezuelans to participate in the decisions and actions carried out by VP.

Plurality is the framework for articulation, where a fundamental value is that all rights are for all people, as stated by Leopoldo López, founder, and leader of the organization. This pillar is crucial because, for *Voluntad Popular*, it is a faithful reflection of the vision of a plural society. It is a decisive value, as plurality and democracy reflect a modern framework that sought to involve Venezuelans, with their particular characteristics, in a common space that represents their plurality based on the belief

that democratic and participatory spaces generate a free society that debates ideas.

This debate must be carried out from a social leadership perspective, a pillar of the organization, as *Voluntad Popular* promotes that its members should play a fundamental role in understanding society, interacting with it, creating spaces for encounter, and fostering a connection to the reality of what we are and, above all, what we want to achieve. A member of *Voluntad Popular* is called to be a leader in all spaces, to promote participation, discussion, and debate on how we perceive Venezuela.

Our leader Leopoldo López has always expressed a thought that has become a maxim within the party: “To be a political leader, one must first be a social leader”. It is a reality that goes hand in hand with the concept of political leadership promoted by the party. It is through grassroots participation that a strong foundation is built, capable of generating transformative changes in society.

All these elements define how *Voluntad Popular* believes in a leadership that, as a reflection of society, manages to have the values of plurality and respect for the rights of all Venezuelans as its roots. It may seem obvious, but in a dictatorship, seeking respect for all rights is crucial to carry out a political and social movement that becomes an enemy of the dictatorship by the mere fact of believing and living by such values.

The main element that defines *Voluntad Popular* and its purpose is the rescue of democracy. In a context like the one we are in, where there is repression, human rights violations, and disregard for private property, where people are humiliated, subjected to control, and persecuted, the fight to rescue democracy

becomes fundamental. When the regime acts the way it does, when the references that the dictatorship wants to promote are what they are, and when Venezuelans are subjected to terrible conditions in the country, with millions having to emigrate, fleeing the crisis generated by that perverse system, that is when promoting democracy and its rescue makes the most sense. It is precisely in this context that the fight for democracy must become a fundamental pillar, as it is today for *Voluntad Popular*, in order to build the best Venezuela, a prosperous Venezuela that promotes what we have been speaking about, a plural Venezuela where all rights are for all people and where participation is not a crime but a way to organize society.

In this context, promoting these values is a crime. We are the most persecuted party in the country, with a large part of our leadership in exile, including our National Coordinator and leader Leopoldo López, along with many other prominent figures who have had to leave the country. Many others are detained, and unfortunately, some have been killed for believing in what we believe and, promoting it in a country controlled by those who see anyone who fosters democracy, plurality, and respect as an enemy.

Voluntad Popular envisions a different way of doing politics, free from traditional schemes. Promoting the social aspect as a form of political engagement is necessary to represent the social leadership we believe in. This is reflected in small details in our conduct. We are the only country that elects all its authorities through periodic elections, even in this context of dictatorship that has sought to pulverize political organizations and, above all, the belief in Federalism. This is demonstrated in our highest decision-making bodies, the EFA or *Encuentro Federal de Activistas* (Federal Meeting of Activists) and the ANA or *Asamblea Nacional*

de Activistas (National Assembly of Activists), where activists from across the country participate in the party's decisions. There are clear examples where regional perspectives debate positions alongside the national leadership. This is an example of our belief that shaping the country's vision must be achieved by all regions participating in discussions and decisions.

Another characteristic that sets *Voluntad Popular* apart from the rest is the creation of mechanisms to attend to the millions of Venezuelans who have left the country. With a diaspora already reaching approximately 7 million people, it is difficult to conceive a representative organization that promotes participation without providing these individuals with forms and mechanisms to engage. Nowadays, 2 out of every 10 Venezuelans are not in Venezuela, and the role of any political organization should be to create spaces that bridge and connect rather than separate. That is why *Voluntad Popular* has been creating spaces and mechanisms that allow Venezuelans and leadership abroad to participate and continue supporting the rescue of democracy and the party's activities. We firmly believe that Venezuelans who are abroad, forced to flee by the dictatorship, must be a fundamental part of the fight for democracy.

Many mistakes have been made, and actions and strategies will always be criticized. *Voluntad Popular* has always presented itself as a confrontational party in the face of the dictatorship, which some more moderate voices may label as "radical." In this case, we are convinced that we are facing perverse schemes that cannot be dealt with in half measures. Years of struggle have taught us that the regime advances if it is not pressured, that it leaves no room for democratic spaces if they are not defended, and that our forms of participation are crucial to preventing these abuses from continuing.

The concept of *Voluntad Popular* has been much more than a mere electoral card. Illegalized by the CNE for years, with the dictatorship even handing over the party's name and colors to other authorities through the hijacked judicial power, *Voluntad Popular* remains an organization with a presence inside and outside the country. It has a global leadership that does not normalize this crisis and profoundly believes in political and social participation to mobilize Venezuelans. This historical moment has prompted organizations to aspire to be more than just electoral movements, which is why *Voluntad Popular* has always encouraged all forms of participation and activism, from street protests and organized citizens to international strategies that recognize the democratic fight and shed light on the dictatorship's abuses before the ICC and democratic governments around the world.

An important challenge for *Voluntad Popular* at this moment is to lead the democratic forces in Venezuela. It is not easy to establish strategies for fighting and political paths for generating change without being willing to be the main actors. Perhaps it is due to this characteristic and the commitment to the rescue of democracy that the party's activists hold that *Voluntad Popular* has been subjected to the attacks it has endured.

The rescue of democracy is essential to build a better Venezuela, and we are convinced of that. A change of government is necessary to transform Venezuelan society and overcome this deep crisis we are experiencing.

The question then becomes, “What is a better Venezuela?”

To answer this question, we must start with the fundamental values that our organization represents today, as well as from the

profound crisis our kidnapped democracy is going through and the immense needs of the Venezuelan people.

Thus, oil must be the fundamental pillar of the country's development. In Venezuela, the problem is not PDVSA; the problem lies in the petroleum model managed by the regime, which only allows a few to engage in business and enrich themselves without truly benefiting the country. This primary issue must be addressed so oil, driven by a well-managed state-owned company and institutionally oriented petroleum policies, can truly generate the wealth needed to rebuild the devastated nation.

One of the main proposals developed by Leopoldo López has been the concept of an “energetic Venezuela”. It is an important source of leverage aimed at recovering oil production in the country and making it the cornerstone of economic reactivation and development, which has been denied to the nation due to corruption that currently affects the oil sector at all levels.

But we must also support Venezuelans who are in immense need, those Venezuelans who, due to years of poor governance, lack access to public services, education, and financial instruments to support their entrepreneurial endeavors. The government should be a tool to develop them rather than control them. Today, it is crucial to address the enormous emergency millions of Venezuelans face, as some pretend to sell them the idea that “Venezuela is fixed” and attempt to cover up these problems with salaries that barely cover basic needs, and in many cases, not even that.

Freedom and democracy are essential to creating a pluralistic Venezuela that allows each person to achieve their development,

knowing that their rights do not depend on their political alignment.

Our organization truly believes in grassroots participation and promotes this vision from the state level. Therefore, through our social movements, we envision a better Venezuela where Venezuelans can come together and organize around their concerns, engage politically in the exercise of politics, and generate proposals based on their interests to bring about the necessary changes. We prioritize ensuring that all rights are for all individuals, especially for vulnerable groups, and strive for their advancement, eliminating discrimination, ensuring accessibility, and promoting sustainability.

The comprehensive vision of the country conceives a state where citizens actively participate, where respect allows for pluralism and recognition, and where the development of all groups and individuals that make up the country is part of the economic revival that guarantees a future for those who currently see it outside our borders and stability for those who have dedicated their lives to working for the country.

This party was born to build a better Venezuela. This party believes in each of its activists and in the fact that all Venezuelans are necessary to construct it, achieve political change, and of organizing themselves to rebuild democracy during this process, enabling a Venezuela where all rights are for all individuals, without exclusion or privileges.

Primero Justicia: 2021 -2023

Paola Bautista de Alemán

A Fernando (Albán) y nuestros muertos

A Juan (Requesens) y nuestros presos

A Julio (Borges) y nuestros exiliados

To the question *What does Primero Justicia mean to you?*, Julio Borges replied¹:

For me, *Primero Justicia* is the satisfaction of building something collective. It is the joy of helping uplift a movement with clear ideas, values, and identity. And I use the word “movement” deliberately because we are called to be more than a “political party”. Because we are in a dictatorship, because there are no elections, because there is no politics, and because there is no normalcy².

In this article, I will delve into the recent history of *Primero Justicia* (Popular Will). I will narrate the internal changes that have taken place within the party between December 2021 and March

1 Between December 2021 and March 2022, I spent hours talking with Julio Borges. These meetings had a specific purpose: to write a book that captured his experiences between 2017 and 2021. It was a close and organized dialogue. There was no improvisation. We researched, reconstructed each year, and prepared for each moment. And amidst the various topics, we talked about Primero Justicia, the political party he founded and of which I am a part.

2 Bautista, Paola & Borges, Julio. *La Patria Que Viene*. 1st ed. Caracas: Dahbar Editores, 2022, p. 84.

2023. And I decided to begin with this reflection by Julio Borges³ because it captures the spirit that has driven those who have led the process I will describe in this text. As we will see, their main motivation has been the updating of organizational structures and the reaffirmation of the ideas that inspire their functioning, with the purpose of building a space that serves with integrity and efficiency in our country's democratic struggle.

Before moving forward, I must clarify the nature of this publication. "Primero Justicia: 2021-2023" is not a scientific text, although it may certainly contribute to future studies of that nature. This article can contribute to the popular literature that delves into the political dynamics of democratic actors in closed contexts. Also, these are lines written from commitment and experience. I am a politician and a member of *Primero Justicia*. Currently, I am the National Vice President of Training and Programs, and I am part of its National Board of Directors. The story I will share, I experienced firsthand. It is a compilation of the testimony of an organization born in the twilight of Venezuelan democracy that has grown while resisting the Chavista-Madurista dictatorship. I make this effort to preserve our institutional memory. It is my greatest wish that our actions lead to our freedom, and that we, from the democratic future we will build, can look back on these memories and say: Dictatorship, never again!⁴

This text is divided into three parts. First, I will describe the context. Then, I will delve into the reforms made between 2021

3 Julio Borges is the founder of Primero Justicia. He has been in exile since 2018 and currently resides in Spain.

4 The use of this phrase is a nod to a photo that is recognized in Venezuela's political history. It refers to an image that captures the celebration that engulfed our country on January 23, 1958, when the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez fled the country.

and 2023. Finally, I will present the immediate results of this process and the current political and institutional challenges.

On the context

The Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy defines “context” as: “Physical or situational environment, whether political, historical, cultural, or of any other nature, in which a fact is considered.” In this section, I will describe the situational environment that motivated and influenced the institutional reforms in *Primero Justicia* between 2021 and 2023. I will focus on historical-cultural, psychological, and political aspects. But before moving forward, I must clarify what is relevant to everything I will describe below: the dictatorship. This political process was, and still is, profoundly conditioned by its rhythms and dynamics.

Living under a dictatorship is difficult. I will not delve into the scope of the previous statement. It would be an ambitious task to summarize such an existential matter in a few lines. However, if I attempted to summarize it, I would say this: living under the current Chavista-Madurista dictatorship requires true intensity and detachment while trying to manage the uncertainty of tomorrow with maturity and composure. The fixation on the present is associated with doubts about the future. We invest in the present because we don’t know what the future will be like... and that insecurity leaves a distinct imprint on our way of being.

With that being said, let’s now examine the historical-cultural, psychological, and political aspects present during the institutional reforms of *Primero Justicia*.

Historical-cultural

At the end of the 20th century, Venezuela was a political hotbed. In the 1990s, we witnessed the decline of our democracy. Two coup attempts⁵, a social explosion⁶, the removal of President Pérez, the collapse of the traditional party system, the election of Hugo Chávez, and the repeal of the 1961 Constitution, among other significant moments. In this way, the foundations were laid for the dismantling of the democratic system that had been established in *Puntofijo*.

It was in this context that the *Primero Justicia* Movement was born. In 1990, a group of law students from the Andrés Bello Catholic University created a civil association to provide free legal assistance in popular sectors. Shortly after, they directed their efforts towards promoting “peace judges” to alleviate community tensions through voluntary reconciliation between the parts involved. Ten years later, this non-governmental organization registered with the Supreme Electoral Council as a political movement named *Primero Justicia* Movement.

A detail in the chosen name gives clues about the founding moment. *Primero Justicia* did not originate as a political party but as a movement. This was a widespread trend in the country⁷. The new forces did not self-identify as political parties because it was a discredited label. It was a way to distance themselves from

5 The two coup attempts (February 4th and November 27th, 1992) were led by Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías, who forcefully burst into the national political scene.

6 I am referring to the so-called “Caracazo” (February 27, 1989).

7 During those years, the political party of Hugo Chávez Frías was created, and it was named “Movimiento V República”.

organizations with electoral purposes associated with dishonesty or corruption⁸.

Another relevant aspect is that the founding group was predominantly male, aspiring lawyers, and from the eastern part of Caracas⁹. They were young middle-class individuals who were concerned about the degradation of democracy and wanted to do something for the country. After twenty-four years of work, the age, territorial, and socioeconomic profile of *Primero Justicia's* membership has changed. Currently, most of the local leadership is located outside the metropolitan area of Caracas, is predominantly female, and is in popular sectors¹⁰.

This brief historical account highlights two aspects of *Primero Justicia's* institutional culture during the reforms under discussion. First is promoting conciliation and consensus as a methodology for conflict resolution. And second, the juridical-institutional formality. Both these aspects reflect foundational traits. In the first aspect, we see the influence of the “*justicia de paz*” (justice of peace). The second aspect is the legal education received at the Andrés Bello Catholic University.

8 In the presidential elections of 1993, the Venezuelan vote put an end to the two-party system of AD-COPEI. The victory of *Convergencia* and the emergence of regional political forces resulting from decentralization accelerated the collapse of the traditional party system that had been functioning for 20 years. Opinion polls from that time reveal that the main causes of this crisis of representation were associated with the poor performance of political parties and cases of corruption.

9 Among the founders, we must mention Julio Borges, Carlos Ocariz, Henrique Capriles, Armando Briquet, and Juan Carlos Caldera, among others.

10 On March 18th, *Primero Justicia* held 1000 Local Programmatic Congresses throughout the country. The occasion served to gather socio-economic data from the party's structures. The results showed that 54% of the local leadership is female.

Regarding promoting conciliation and consensus as a methodology for conflict resolution, I must emphasize that *the approach to political controversies during the reforms was conciliatory*. Let's break down the previous sentence. By "controversies," I mean those issues that generate disagreement among political actors. Later on, I will specify what those issues were and how they relate to the reforms carried out. And by "conciliatory," I mean the willingness to create mutually agreed-upon solutions to disagreements. Between 2021 and 2023, the emphasis on conciliation was also motivated by a political reason: The option for conciliation was a way to measure internal forces. Without agreement, doors would open to an internal election¹¹. And in an authoritarian environment like Venezuela, that democratic instrument would have exposed the institution to its judicialization or co-optation by the dictatorship¹².

11 Regarding the risks of an internal election in the authoritarian Venezuelan context, Julio Borges said: "I also believe that there is an issue that needs to be considered, It is the real danger that, if we engage in a ruthless election, undoubtedly, the regime will interfere or judicialize it, so I think we can do something much more perfect, substantial, harmonious, and much more rational. If we take this step under these terms, we will be closer to achieving a process that is truly legitimate, democratic, and transformative. Rafael Guzmán always quotes a passage from the Bible, from a learned theologian, the passage of King Solomon where there was a false mother and a true mother, and the true mother prefers to give up her child rather than have the test that Solomon proposed, which was to divide the child in half. Although this is not an election of political positions, political visions, or personalism, I don't think that's the underlying problem. I believe it is a matter of preserving, growing, and organizing the party, not fracturing it at a given moment like this, and certainly not handing the baby over to Nicolás Maduro. Therefore, I want us to think big, and that's why I want to bring this debate today" (2021: Personal archives).

12 It is worth remembering that, following the electoral victory of the opposition in the legislative elections on December 6, 2015, the dictatorship began a strategy to destroy the Venezuelan opposition through various means. Among the methods of destruction of the Venezuelan opposition, we can

Let's now delve into *the legal-institutional formality*. As we will see in the second section of this article, the reforms carried out in *Primero Justicia* between 2021 and 2023 were conducted with technical and legal rigor. Each working session was regulated by the internal statutes, and minutes were taken to record the debate. This precision has allowed for the reconstruction of the process and the writing of this article. This orderly disposition, so uncommon in our criollo culture¹³, also provided confidence and stability to the internal process. It is worth noting that any moment of political change is tense. It is natural for tensions to arise between those who wish to move forward and those who resist doing so. This is what Julio María Sanguinetti referred to as the “psychology of political change” in his essay “*El temor y la impaciencia*” (Fear and impatience) (1991).

In summary, the two historical-cultural aspects that influenced the reforms described in this article are consensus dynamics and legal-institutional formality.

Psychological

Let's return to the former Uruguayan president. In “*El temor y la impaciencia*” (1991), Sanguinetti wrote a thoughtful analysis of the inner world of those facing political change. The title reveals an almost universal maxim: the fear of those afraid of losing power and the anxiety of those who see their moment of governance approaching. With that said, let's focus on the emotional climate that prevailed during the reforms studied in this article. Before

mention: judicialization (proscription of opposition political parties) and political bribery (*Operación alacrán*).

- 13 The relationship of Venezuelans with the law is “special”. Remember the famous phrase: “Se acata, pero no se cumple” (It is obeyed, but not complied with).

we proceed, I must make a clarification. What I will present next is a description that other testimonies can complement. I do not intend to exhaust the topic, and I would like this work to encourage others to share their experiences.

The period of reforms between 2021 and 2023 was conditioned by what the institution and its main leaders had experienced in the previous years. It is fitting at this point to refer to the famous quote by Ortega y Gasset in “*Meditaciones del Quijote*” (*Meditations of Don Quixote*) (1914): “I am myself and my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I do not save myself.” Below, I will list facts and realities that shaped the emotional climate in *Primero Justicia* during the reforms.

1. *2017 protests.* Julio Borges was the President of the National Assembly in 2017. In March of that year, the Supreme Court of Justice issued two rulings (155 and 156) that stripped the Parliament of its powers. This was followed by a period of social mobilization in defense of the Legislative Power, which sparked the repressive anger of the dictatorship. The protests lasted for three months, resulting in over 150 deaths, hundreds of political prisoners, and the establishment of a torture system that has been denounced in the three reports published by the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission¹⁴.
2. *2017-2018 Dominican Republic Negotiation.* The period of protests in 2017 led to the negotiation process that took place in the Dominican Republic, which received significant support from the international community. This process aimed to achieve better electoral conditions

14 It is recommended to expand on this information in the following context: <https://www.ohchr.org/es/hr-bodies/hrc/ffmv/index>

and move towards a moderately competitive process in the presidential elections scheduled for 2018. However, the negotiations did not yield positive results, and the dictatorship called for “elections” on Sunday, May 20 of that year. The opposition did not participate in the event, and the results were rejected by significant sectors of the international community, who denounced its illegitimacy and manipulation.

3. *Regional elections on October 15, 2017, and municipal elections on December 10, 2017.* Constitutional timelines established that there should be regional elections (governors) and municipal elections (mayors) in 2017. The former took place on October 15, and the democratic forces won in 5 states. There were serious allegations of irregularities in the state of Miranda, and the dictatorship, in violation of the Constitution, forced the elected officials to be sworn in before the Constituent National Assembly. Juan Pablo Guanipa, leader of *Primero Justicia* and the clear winner in the state of Zulia, refused to do so, and he was deprived of his victory. These setbacks created disagreements within the opposition forces and in *Primero Justicia*. Two months after the regional elections, the municipal elections were held. After a heated debate between those who believed in participating and those who argued otherwise, the National Leadership Board of the party decided to abstain from the municipal elections on December 10, 2017. Subsequently, members from the metropolitan area of Caracas resigned from their membership, ran as candidates, and founded a new political party called “*Fuerza Vecinal*” (Community Strength)¹⁵.

15 Currently, *Fuerza Vecinal* is a political party that holds government positions in municipalities such as Chacao, Baruta, El Hatillo, Los Salias, and Diego

4. *Detention and torture of Juan Requesens*. On August 7, 2018, Juan Requesens was arrested by state security forces. Three days later, Jorge Rodríguez, the Minister of Communication and Information, held a press conference and presented videos where the deputy appeared “confused, in underwear apparently stained with feces, and not uttering a word.” Subsequent investigations have revealed that he was subjected to physical, chemical, and psychological torture. In 2022, Juan Requesens was declared guilty of treason against the country, a charge for which he was never formally accused. Currently, he is serving his sentence under house arrest¹⁶.
5. *Detention, torture, and murder of Fernando Albán*. On October 5, 2018, Fernando Albán was detained by a SEBIN commission at Maiquetía airport. Three days later, he died due to torture inflicted by the dictatorship. Fernando Albán was a councilman in Caracas and a personal friend of Julio Borges.
6. *Exile of leaders of Primero Justicia (2018-2020)*. Starting in 2017, the persecution intensified, and Julio Borges (National Coordinator), Tomás Guanipa (Secretary General), Gustavo Marcano (Mayor of Lecherías), Jorge Millán (Head of the Parliamentary Faction), Miguel

Bautista Urbaneja, among others. However, in recent months, it has been involved in corruption cases, raising doubts about its opposition stance. I recommend reading the article titled “El «factor Fospuca» en la nueva realidad política venezolana” by Jessica Vallenilla, published in *La Gran Aldea* on June 27, 2022. <https://lagranaldea.com/2022/06/27/el-factor-fospuca-en-la-nueva-realidad-politica-venezolana/>.

- 16 “Cronología del caso de Juan Requesens”. Acceso a la justicia, August 4, 2022. <https://accesoalajusticia.org/cronologia-del-caso-de-juan-requesens/>.

Pizarro (Deputy), Dinorah Figuera (Deputy), and others had to leave the country.

7. *Interim government.* Juan Guaidó was sworn in as the interim president of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on January 23, 2019. The political and constitutional logic behind this decision was as follows: The presidential elections held on May 20, 2018, were illegitimate, and their results had no effect. Therefore, Venezuela did not have a president, and the head of the Legislative Branch was required to assume the position. The interim government, established in 2019, has lasted for four years. This topic is complex, and I will not delve into it. For the purposes of this analysis, I must make two considerations: First, the interim government failed in its objective to liberate the country. And second, it became a source of dissent within the political leadership of *Primero Justicia*.
8. *Regional elections held on November 21, 2021.* On November 21, 2021, there were regional elections in Venezuela. We voted for governors, mayors, regional deputies, and council members. After a deep internal debate, the Venezuelan opposition decided to participate in the elections and confront the irregularities of the Venezuelan electoral system in the political field. We must specify some of the difficulties faced by the democratic forces: the judicialization of political parties, the seizure of their electoral cards, censorship, self-censorship, political violence, and the creation of political forces that pretended to be opposition but confused the voters, among others. Despite these obstacles¹⁷, *Primero Justicia* obtained more

17 It is recommended to review the report of the European Union Electoral Observation Mission.

than 400 council members, 75 regional deputies, 12 mayors, and 1 governor.

9. *Complex humanitarian crisis.* The expropriatory policies, corruption, and irresponsible management of the Republic's finances led by Hugo Chávez Frías and Nicolás Maduro have brought Venezuela into a complex humanitarian crisis marked by forced migration, hyperinflation, hunger, and disease. The members and leadership of *Primero Justicia* engage in political work within this context, which is not only politically hostile but also demanding on a human level.

The realities and events listed above shaped the emotional climate that influenced the period of reforms in *Primero Justicia* between 2021 and 2023. These were times marked by uncertainty, where both positive and negative emotions¹⁸ crystallized. Among the positive emotions, we can identify the predominance of generosity, humility, and pride. And among the negative emotions, fear, frustration, and sadness.

The positive emotions –generosity, humility, and pride– find their explanation in the sense of common good that was reaffirmed and extended within the political body during the selected period. Despite the differences, a broad vision and a desire to transcend persisted. This disposition, present in the doctrinal principles of the institution, was particularly promoted by Julio Borges, who, in the debate within the National Leadership Board that initiated the process, pointed out:

18 We understand emotion as “an intense and transient alteration of mood that is accompanied by a certain somatic disturbance.”

I believe that at this moment –for better or for worse– when people think that we need a process of renewal, strategy, and reinstitutionalization, we must understand that we cannot tell the country that “everything has changed” and keep the party practices the same without reviewing its authorities. I think that is a huge contradiction, and we must prioritize the party over “where will I stand.” Otherwise, we will simply reinforce the idea to the country that we are all just more of the same. (2021: Personal archives).

Alongside generosity, humility, and pride, negative emotions emerged in response to the tensions inherent in times of change. On the one hand, there was fear of the unknown, and on the other, the weight of uncertainty. *Primero Justicia* is a young political party and had not yet experienced successful reform processes in its institutional history. This was the party’s first structural update, and it occurred under a dictatorship. Therefore, the proposal to renew and rethink itself in a hostile context generated internal tensions that had to be managed and addressed.

Frustration also manifested itself. The life of political parties in a democracy is different from their existence under a dictatorship. In a democracy, political leadership can secure positions through popular elections, and these victories can pave the way for the natural renewal of internal structures. This allows political leaders to hold positions in government and provides space for developing new party leadership. However, this is not the case in a dictatorship, and the situation worsens when dictatorships persist over time. Political leaders may not achieve their expectations of power, leading to the temptation to entrench themselves within the party to cope with the disappointment of

not fulfilling their legitimate personal ambitions. This dynamic can generate disillusionment and a sense of dismay.

Furthermore, sadness crept into some debates. There was sorrow over the bitter moment being experienced, the pain of having foundational leadership in exile, and a sense of disorientation regarding the political moment unfolding. Thus, positive and negative emotions shaped the emotional climate of the discussions that extended for months. Fear, frustration, and sadness coexisted with generosity, humility, and pride, influencing the pace of the debate and political decisions.

Political

I come back to Julio Borges' intervention at the National Board of Directors meeting in December 2021:

We must recognize that we are in a difficult moment, facing many dilemmas, contradictions, and crossroads. Some of them we have created ourselves, while others have been imposed by the regime, which has all the power to create as many as they want. We have to figure out how to navigate through them. Perhaps, the first task is to identify which contradictions are our own and which have been imposed by the regime. It's not easy to distinguish, but we must make that effort. (2021: Personal files)

In the previous paragraph, Borges referred to "dilemmas, contradictions, and crossroads." Specifically, he was referring to three issues on which there was no consensus in the National Leadership Board of the party and that needed to be resolved: (i) the electoral strategy and the interpretation of the results of the

regional elections held on November 21st, (ii) the continuity of *Primero Justicia* in the Interim Government, and (iii) the challenges of internal party governance. Let's examine the dissents:

1. *First dissent. On the electoral route and the interpretation of the results of the regional elections of November 21:* Two positions crystallized. Both acknowledged the return to the electoral arena as a form of democratic fight. However, they differed in their assessment of the electoral system and the significance of the victories achieved on November 21, 2021. Some celebrated the return to elections, viewed the advances in electoral matters as positive, and saw the conquest of local spaces as an opportunity to progress toward democracy. Others did not perceive substantial progress in electoral conditions, warned of the risk of participating in non-competitive events, and approached the extent of the results obtained with caution.
2. *Second dissent. Regarding the permanence of Primero Justicia in the Interim Government:* Two perspectives were shown: those who demanded that *Primero Justicia* withdraw from the Interim Government and those who proposed to remain, promoting political reforms that would adapt to the country's new context.
3. *Third dissent. Regarding the challenges of the party's internal governance:* This dissent was based on a consensus: everyone understood that *Primero Justicia* needed internal changes to better confront the dictatorship. The dissent arose regarding the scope of the reforms that needed to be made. There were three positions: one was conservative, another was reformist, and the third, we could say, was revolutionary. The first resisted pushing for substantial

changes, the second advocated for changes rooted in political reality and the tradition of the institution, and the third called for radical changes: completely new faces and ways.

Reforms: 2021-2023

In the previous section, I described features of the historical-cultural, psychological, and political context that influenced the period of reforms in *Primero Justicia*. That was the climate in which work was carried out, deliberations took place, and decisions were made. Let's take a look at a timeline that describes the institutional itinerary that was built and the results it yielded.

December 2021: Start of the reforms process

After the regional elections on November 21, 2021, five extraordinary meetings of the National Board of Directors of *Primero Justicia* were held. The purpose was to assess the results obtained and evaluate the institution's future. In the third meeting, held on December 5, Julio Borges said the following:

We are here to discuss a topic that currently has the focus of attention within Primero Justicia, politics, and public opinion, both in Venezuela and abroad. This is the issue of the political leadership of the Unity (MUD) and particularly of PJ. I believe that the fundamental issue we need to address in this session is precisely how we give a concrete and real expression to the desire and demand for renewal that exists in the country. (2021: Personal archives)

This intervention sparked an honest and in-depth debate that continued for two more meetings¹⁹ and culminated in the creation of the Proposal Drafting Commission for the reforms of *Primero Justicia's* Bylaws. This body consisted of the party's Executive Committee members²⁰ and worked for 5 months.

May 2, 2022: Approval of the reforms to the Bylaws of Primero Justicia in a session of the National Executive Board

In January and February 2022, the commission responsible for the reforms drafted a foundational document that was presented to the National Executive Board. In March and April, the proposal was debated and enriched. Three guidelines guided the process: (i) the inclusion of PJ's women in political decision-making spaces, (ii) the promotion of youth, and (iii) the broadening of the presence of regions in political leadership. This exercise concluded with the approval of the reform to the Bylaws of *Primero Justicia* by the members of the National Executive Board.

Next, I list the main reforms:

19 The National Board of Directors of *Primero Justicia* was composed of its elected members and the elected deputies to the National Assembly in 2015. In total, it consisted of 60 individuals. The meetings were conducted via Zoom, which facilitated the participation of individuals who were in exile.

20 The Executive Board was the highest instance of political leadership in the party. It was composed of: Julio Borges (National Coordinator), Tomás Guanipa (Secretary General), Edinson Ferrer (National Secretary of Organization), Carlos Ocariz (Founder), Henrique Capriles Radonski, Juan Pablo Guanipa, Jorge Millán (Head of the Parliamentary Faction), José Manuel Olivares, and Juan Miguel Matheus.

	Statute 2014	Statute 2021
Regarding the positions of national, regional, and municipal Political Directorate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ National Coordinator▶ Secretary General▶ National Secretary of Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ President▶ Vice President▶ Vice President of Organization▶ Vice President of Political Affairs▶ Vice President of Communication and Strategy▶ Vice President of Training and Programs▶ Vice President of New Generations
Regarding territorial entities	24 States: 23 Federal entities, and Libertador municipality.	25 States: 23 Federal entities, Libertador municipality, and "State 25". In "State 25," PJ members abroad are organized and represented.
Regarding the National Board of Directors	It was composed of 60 individuals (It was expanded when the elected deputies of 2015 were incorporated).	It was reduced to 35 people.

	Statute 2014	Statute 2021
Regarding the National Political Committee	<p>It was composed of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► 24 Regional Coordinators ► 24 Secretaries General ► 24 Regional Secretaries of Organization ► Regional Delegates per State ► National Secretaries ► Members of the National Board of Directors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► 25 Presidents ► 25 Vice Presidents of Organization ► 25 Vice Presidents of Political Affairs

May 5, 2022: Approval of the reforms to the Bylaws of Primero Justicia in a session of the National Political Committee.

The National Political Committee is the highest political decision-making body of *Primero Justicia*. Following the provisions of the current Bylaws, the National Leadership Board of *Primero Justicia* presented the proposal for reforms to the National Political Committee, which was unanimously approved by its members. The meeting was held via Zoom. Reformas: 2021-2023

May 24, 2022: Press conference to inform the country about the start of the internal process for the election and revalidation of authorities of Primero Justicia.

On May 24th, at noon, Juan Miguel Matheus held a press conference where the start of the internal process of election and revalidation of authorities of *Primero Justicia* was announced to the country. He was accompanied by the Regional Secretaries

of Organization, representatives from the Juan Germán Roscio Foundation, and members of the National Executive Board. The press conference took place on the ground floor of the Credicard Tower in Chacaíto. Subsequently, the Electoral Commission was installed, and the schedule to be followed was made public.

*July 9, 2022: Internal election*²¹.

On July 9, 2022, *Primero Justicia* held internal elections nationwide. By the end of the day, a total of 103, 211 people participated. In 22 states, voting was done for a consensus slate. In Monagas and Trujillo, there was a second ballot. In these states, the internal election took place without any issues.

*September 24, 2022: Swearing-in of the new National Political Committee and the new National Board of Directors*²².

On Saturday, September 24, the first National Political Committee was installed, with the authorities elected on July 9. It took place at the Vinicio Mata Sports Center, located in El Hatillo, and served as an occasion for the voting and swearing-in of the new National Board of Directors. It was a carefully planned and meaningful event that was broadcasted on YouTube for the entire diaspora. It featured speeches by Julio Borges, María Beatriz

21 Primero Justicia Press Release: “103,211 members nationwide voted in internal elections to renew the authorities of Primero Justicia.”. www.primerojusticia.org.ve/, July 9, 2022. http://www.primerojusticia.org.ve/cms/index.php?option=com_flexicontent&view=item&cid=158:en-la-prensa&id=42840:103-211-militantes-justicieros-a-nivel-nacional-votaron-en-elecciones-internas-para-renovar-autoridades-de-primero-justicia&Itemid=500

22 “María Beatriz Martínez, new president of Primero Justicia.” Exclusive, September 24, 2022. <https://primicia.com.ve/nacion/maria-beatriz-martinez-nueva-presidenta-de-primero-justicia/>

Martínez, Paola Bautista de Alemán²³, Edinson Ferrer, and Tomás Guanipa²⁴.

October 6, 2022: Expansion of members of the National Board of Directors.

On Thursday, October 6, 2022, a National Political Committee meeting was held in which four additional members were elected to the National Board of Directors. The motivation behind the expansion of the body was political. Some sectors of the party demanded more representation in the decision-making organ. The following individuals were nominated: Carlos Paparoni, Jhonny Rajal, José Guerra, Miguel Pizarro, Milagros Paz, Liz Carolina Jaramillo, and Bernalda Suárez. At the end of the day, José Guerra, Miguel Pizarro, Milagros Paz, and Liz Carolina Jaramillo were elected.

October 22, 2022: Youth Elections²⁵.

The youth structures of *Primero Justicia* are independent and have their own regulations. On October 22, elections were held

23 Bautista de Alemán, Paola. "Paola Bautista: «We are ready to heal the moral and material wounds of the dictatorship»". *La Gran Aldea*, September 26, 2022. <https://lagranaldea.com/2022/09/26/paola-bautista-estamos-listos-para-sanar-las-heridas-morales-y-materiales-de-la-dictadura/>

24 The organization of this event was led by the National Vice Presidency of Organization and the National Vice Presidency of Training and Programs. Both teams worked to create an event befitting the occasion. Some of the setup details were inspired by the National Convention of the CDU, which took place weeks earlier in Hannover, Germany.

25 Primero Justicia calls for internal elections for its youth authorities. www.primerojusticia.org.ve, September 26, 2022. http://www.primerojusticia.org.ve/cms/index.php?option=com_flexicontent&view=item&cid=158:en-la-prensa&id=43024:primero-justicia-convoca-a-elecciones-internas-de-sus-autoridades-juveniles&Itemid=500

throughout the country. Luis Palacios was elected as the National Youth Coordinator.

October 2022 - January 2023: Debate on the selection rules for the presidential candidacy of Primero Justicia.

Once the process of renewing the authorities was completed, the issue of the presidential candidacy was addressed. Three national leaders put their names at the service of the country. This was the first time this had happened in our institutional history. The pre-candidates were Carlos Ocariz, Juan Pablo Guanipa, and Henrique Capriles Radonski.

Following our culture of conciliation, the first step was to seek an internal agreement, and a commission was created for this purpose²⁶. This body did not achieve its purpose, and the issue was returned to the National Board of Directors. For this reason, it was decided to create an internal regulation for selecting candidacies that would respond to the political situation and set an institutional precedent.

February 10, 2023: Approval of the Primero Justicia Candidacy Selection Regulation²⁷.

Following the provisions outlined in *Primero Justicia's* internal bylaws, the National Political Committee approved the proposed Candidate Selection Regulations presented by the National Board of Directors. In this article, I will not provide a

26 The Commission was coordinated by Juan Miguel Matheus and comprised Alfonso Marquina, Carlos Altimari, and Carlos Ocariz.

27 Primero Justicia Press. "María Beatriz Martínez: «Primero Justicia has always demonstrated to be synonymous with participation and democracy»". www.primerojusticia.org.ve, February 10, 2023. <http://www.primerojusticia.org.ve/>

detailed description of the instrument that was created. However, I will highlight that it is a mechanism that sought to reconcile the demands for participation from the party's structures, the opinion of the country, and the request for transparency from the pre-candidates. In this way, two mechanisms were established to gather input and make the decision: conducting consultations with the Regional Political Committees and conducting a national survey²⁸.

February 25, 2023: Consultation on the presidential candidacy in 25 Regional Political Committees.

On Saturday, February 25, 2023, 25 Regional Political Committees were held throughout the country²⁹. PJ members expressed their will directly and confidentially. At the end of the day, Henrique Capriles Radonski received support from 19 states, Juan Pablo Guanipa from 5 states, and Carlos Ocariz from 1 state. That same afternoon, Juan Pablo Guanipa withdrew his candidacy and pledged his support to Henrique Capriles³⁰. On the following Monday, during a regular session of the Junta de Dirección Nacional, it was decided to invoke the article of the regulations

[cms/index.php?option=com_flexicontent&view=item&cid=158:en-la-prensa&id=43259:maria-beatriz-martinez-primer-justicia-siempre-ha-demostrado-ser-sinonimo-de-participacion-y-democracia&Itemid=500](https://www.mundour.com/index.php?option=com_flexicontent&view=item&cid=158:en-la-prensa&id=43259:maria-beatriz-martinez-primer-justicia-siempre-ha-demostrado-ser-sinonimo-de-participacion-y-democracia&Itemid=500)

28 "This is how the Primero Justicia candidate will be chosen for the primaries of the Unity Platform." Unión Radio, February 10, 2023. <https://mundour.com/2023/02/10/asi-se-elegira-el-candidato-de-primer-justicia-a-las-primarias-de-la-plataforma-unitaria/>

29 The *Primero Justicia* diaspora, represented in the 25th state, was also consulted.

30 Juan Pablo Guanipa (@JuanPGuanipa). "The result of the consultation in @PrimeroJusticia was resounding. That makes @hcapriles' candidacy unquestionable. The formalities will be fulfilled and..." Twitter, March 1, 2023. <https://twitter.com/JuanPGuanipa/status/1630736297793933312>.

that allowed Henrique Capriles Radonski to be nominated as the presidential candidate of *Primero Justicia* for the opposition primaries on October 22, 2023, before the National Political Committee, the body responsible for making that decision.

March 10, 2023: Proclamation of the presidential candidacy of Henrique Capriles Radonski in the National Political Committee.

On March 10, 2023, a National Political Committee was held at Trini Park, located in the Baruta Municipality. During the event, the members of the National Political Committee proclaimed Henrique Capriles Radonski's presidential candidacy.

Achievements and lessons

In the previous sections, I described the context in which the reforms were made and the itinerary that was followed to achieve them. It is now time to conclude this article. To do so, I will focus on two subjects: achievements and lessons.

Achievements

Let's look at the achievements reached during the period of reforms described in this article. I must make a side note before proceeding. Speaking of achievements, just a few months before the completion of such processes, can be speculative. Perhaps, it is too early to consider them a certainty. However, I believe that identifying them is a beneficial exercise that can help identify good practices that can be replicated in the future. With that said, I identify five advancements: political culture, internal democracy, leadership, diaspora, and political education.

Political culture. One of the causes of the shipwreck of traditional political parties in Venezuela was their inability to reform and renew themselves without experiencing scandals or internal ruptures. We carry a tradition of rupture. It has been difficult for us Venezuelans to bend without breaking. And what happened in *Primero Justicia* between December 2021 and March 2023 is a precedent that can reverse that dynamic that has marked the political culture of our country. Faced with the need for internal changes, *Primero Justicia* reformed itself without breaking apart. This detail is not insignificant.

Internal democracy. A recurring complaint against organizations with electoral purposes is the lack of internal democratic mechanisms. It is common to hear dissatisfaction and allegations in this regard. The period of institutional reforms described in this article was a path of political participation for the membership and leadership. Certainly, the inclusion dynamics made the process particularly slow. However, considering the result, it was the cost that had to be paid to gain internal legitimacy and move forward strengthened.

Leadership. A third achievement refers to the inclusion of women and regional leaderships in national political leadership positions. *Primero Justicia* was born in the state of Miranda, in the capital of the Republic. In its early days, it was a “Caracas-based” party. After 23 years, the situation has changed. We are a national party. And this quality is expressed in the profile of its national leadership. Its president, María Beatriz Martínez, is a woman and hails from the state of Portuguesa. Out of its 5 vice presidents, three are from the state of Zulia and two are from the state of Miranda³¹.

31 Edinson Ferrer, Tomás Guanipa, and Paola Bautista de Alemán were born in Maracaibo, Zulia state. Julio Borges and Juan Requesens were born in Miranda state.

The change in the demographic profile of national leadership can offer greater representativeness to political decision-making spaces and provide tools to understand the different realities that coexist in the country.

Diaspora. The new structural design of *Primero Justicia* includes the creation of the “State 25”. We understand “State 25” as the organizational space for PJ members who are outside the country. With this decision, we give a voice to the diaspora and prepare ourselves for a democratic future where Venezuelans abroad will have parliamentary representation.

Political education. The creation of the National Vice Presidency of Training and Programs, along with its state and municipal counterparts, demonstrates *Primero Justicia*’s understanding of the Venezuelan problem. For the party, the democratic struggle is not limited to a regime change but requires an awakened and conscious citizenship capable of giving meaning to the efforts demanded by reality. For this reason, spaces for political education serve as platforms for debate and have been elevated to the level of a vice presidency³².

Lessons

I have identified three preliminary lessons that may be particularly relevant for political organizations working in closed contexts similar to Venezuela: the irreplaceable nature of grassroots work, the limits of consensus, and the importance of emotional intelligence.

32 Bautista, Paola. “El cuerpo y el alma del partido - El Pitazo”. *El Pitazo*, December 3, 2019. <https://elpitazo.net/opinion/el-cuerpo-y-el-alma-del-partido/>.

The irreplaceable nature of grassroots work. In a democracy, the work of political organizations can be divided into grassroots and aerial tasks. With the rise of digital media, efforts are increasingly focused on that terrain. However, in a dictatorship, where public space is marked by censorship, self-censorship, and limitations on digital reach, the distribution of efforts must necessarily vary. This doesn't mean abandoning communication and outreach tasks. It means complementing them with traditional party organization work: getting closer to people, offering them a message of change, building a robust database, and establishing community-based electoral work dynamics.

Over the course of twenty-three years, *Primero Justicia* has expanded territorially throughout the country. During moments of electoral uncertainty, the party dedicated itself to strengthening its structures through almost artisanal work³³. And currently, we have validated structures in all 335 municipalities of the country. Edinson Ferrer, who is currently the National Vice President of Organization, has led this work, combining humanity and discipline in a hostile environment with severe material limitations. Perhaps, this topic requires a dedicated article where the strategies and dynamics employed are shared. For the purpose of this publication, I must emphasize that grassroots organizational work is irreplaceable in closed contexts like Venezuela's.

The limits of consensus. Consensus is a desirable mechanism for resolving conflicts. And for it to be effective, there must be a prerequisite: the capacity to represent the people involved. If

33 Sanfuentes, Isabella. "Edinson Ferrer: "Hay que servir a los ciudadanos y luchar por elecciones" - Red Forma". Red Forma, August 3, 2022. <https://red-forma.com/edicion-10/edinson-ferrer-hay-que-servir-a-los-ciudadanos-y-luchar-por-elecciones/>

those who create and endorse the agreements do not represent the conflicting parties, the resolutions reached will be weak and will not fulfill their purpose.

As we saw in the first section of this article, the reforms carried out in *Primero Justicia* were based on consensus among the parties. So far, the political agreements reached have fulfilled their purpose. The new structure and dynamics of internal governance are functioning. The new leadership has the obedience of the political body. However, this consensus must be updated and strengthened through good political performance. The legitimacy achieved through consensus must be consolidated in the exercise of power. Otherwise, it can weaken and open the doors to an internal crisis that requires other mechanisms for conflict resolution, such as internal elections.

Emotional intelligence. Political change has a psychological dimension that has been little explored in political science. Perhaps due to being a human and complex topic, it has not been sufficiently addressed in academic texts. In fact, I dare say that the main inputs for this line of research can be found in the testimonies of those who have dedicated themselves to the democratic struggle in different countries.

From the experience narrated in this article, I can highlight the importance of emotional intelligence and human qualities in political work in hostile contexts. Authoritarian environments exert psychological pressure on those who resist them. Opponents face persecution, threats, and constant harassment. They live close to terror and uncertainty. This difficult and oppressive environment strains human relationships and adds complexity to political processes. Therefore, I can affirm that personal emotional reserves and the effective management of individual

emotions are tools that facilitate conflict management in hostile contexts. Certainly, this is a complex topic that deserves to be deeply explored. It will be necessary to address it in future studies and publications.

...

Everything mentioned in this article was done under dictatorship. Behind each narrated episode, there are people who work with rectitude and selflessness for the country. Men and women who have overcome the unimaginable and with profound resilience dedicate themselves to the cause that unites us. Those Venezuelans are *Primero Justicia*, and they have turned our political home into a school of democracy in the service of all. It would be audacious to know what the future holds for us. And I am fully aware that everything narrated in these pages will truly be relevant to our future only if we manage to move towards freedom... I hope that God rewards us and lets it be.

The promise of the democratic project: fertile soil for freedom and social justice

Hildebrand Breuer Codecido

Turning a model that does not serve the majority into politics as a common good

Two phenomena have been persistent in the political model installed in Venezuela for more than two decades: the illiberal character and patrimonialism in the exercise of public power. The opacity in the exercise of government, the disrespect for human dignity and fundamental rights, the inefficiency of the state apparatus in the management of public affairs, and the breach of fundamental obligations of the State are epiphenomena of the first and consequences of arbitrary usufruct power. This way of exercising public power is contrary to the principles of democracy, a political project anchored in the recognition, respect, and guarantee of human rights. Therefore, it is a way of exercising power that cannot serve the majority.

If the democratic project is, in essence, a rights project, we can say that the Venezuelan crisis is a political and rights crisis in all its dimensions.

The demise of liberal democracy in Venezuela has occurred hand in hand with electoral procedures¹, at least in a formal dimension, and what some have called the non-republic², characterized by the corruption of public discourse, the government of men instead of the law, power turned into an end and not a means, which adequately represents the state of things and accounts for the complexity of what our society faces.

If it wishes to redirect its course, Venezuelan social democracy must review its practical relationship with its two main sources: political liberalism, from which it draws its inescapable commitment to freedom in a broad sense, and the rejection of any form of arbitrariness, nemesis of the basic idea of the Rule of Law; and democratic socialism, from which it learns its unwavering fight against inequality and the effects that this may have on effective access to fundamental rights. This revision implies continuing the democratic project's evolution, which had two moments, political and social, where the former is the inexcusable assumption to achieve the latter, and this is, in turn, the full realization of freedom and equality values proclaimed by the former³.

If social democracy has immense challenges ahead in other societies, it finds conditions that increase the common difficulties in Venezuela. To common clichés, such as the one according to which social democratic governments squander public money⁴,

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- 1 Martínez Meucci, Miguel Ángel. *Apaciguamiento: El referéndum revocatorio y la consolidación de la Revolución Bolivariana*. Caracas, Editorial Alfa, 2012.
 - 2 Matheus, Juan Miguel. *Ganar la república civil: Reflexiones sobre la reconstrucción nacional y la crisis de la hora presente*. Caracas, La Hoja del Norte, 2014.
 - 3 García-Pelayo, Manuel. *Las transformaciones del Estado contemporáneo*. Madrid, Alianza, 1977.
 - 4 Paramio, Ludolfo. *La socialdemocracia*. Madrid, Libros de la Catarata, 2009.

the Venezuelan case adds, to cite one no lesser example, the mistaken perception according to which social democracy is somehow related to the model that controls power in Venezuela, which poses powerful symbolic obstacles to the incorporation of narratives that gravitate to social justice as one of its axes.

Some questions are necessary before any State project is built from the social democracy in a context like ours:

- Can social democracy be helpful to the Republic in its attempt to make society and its individuals truly free subjects, given the unbalanced relationship between them and the State, as a consequence of the historical role of oil in our development model? Assuming, furthermore, that development's fruits should increase well-being for all⁵.
- Given the inescapable nature of the fundamental values of social democracy, freedom, equality, and solidarity, what type of institutional model would be the most appropriate to materialize these values in society?

This last point seems vital to us since it introduces the need to think deeply about the scaffolding that will support not social democracy but democracy itself, making it and politics a common good.

The practice of democratic virtues and the sense of politics

Democracy needs democrats. This phrase is attributed to Friedrich Ebert, a social democrat and the first president of the

5 Casanova, Roberto. *Libertad, emprendimiento y solidaridad: 10 lecciones sobre economía social de mercado*. Caracas, Alfa, 2015.

so-called Weimar Republic in interwar Germany. That democracy needs democrats is obvious, yet we must remember it. Being a democrat is a verb, a practice; it is to make public virtues the norm and their non-observance the exception; it is to build certainties from absolute respect for the dignity of people and the desire for a good life for all members of society.

At least in practice, the loss of validity of many of those certainties inherent to a liberal democratic system demands we consider the system's bases where all democratic political forces can meet, raise their differences, and assume the disputes that will define the course of society. We believe that it is imperative to ask ourselves about the conditions that must be created so that a democratic dynamic can occur in the country since a space for basic and legitimate agreements is essential, allowing a democratic administration of the typical conflicts of life in society.

The re-democratization of Venezuelan society thus requires a prior political reliberalization in a Rawlsian sense, a reliberalization of society as a whole. As a component of his Political Liberalism, John Rawls proposes a notion that seems necessary to establish the foundations of any modern democratic society:

"The idea of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. In such a consensus, reasonable doctrines subscribe to the political conception, each from their viewpoint. The social unit is based on a consensus on the political conception. Stability is possible when politically active citizens affirm the consensus-forming doctrines, and when the requirements of justice do not conflict too much with the essential interests of

citizens, as formed and promoted through their social arrangements”⁶ (Own translation).

In this sense, social democracy is nothing more than a doctrine in dispute with many others while not endangering the existence of a consensus that must be legitimate for all and, most importantly, for society. Preserving such a consensus is a challenge in itself, of course, and will depend on the capacities of political and social organizations to keep it current.

This is why the fight for the restitution of democratic institutions in Venezuela seems impossible without the active participation of society and political parties, where the latter ideally represent genuine aspirations for the well-being of the people. However, this collaborative action between society and partisan organizations seems unlikely without a profound transformation in the ethos of the parties, that is, in the character and culture of political organizations that make them worthy of the trust of as many people and as many sectors as possible. We believe that an important part of this transformation is to make empathy, creativity and inspiration, valid emotions and attitudes in political action and the functioning of partisan organizations so that they may have genuine relationships with society and, thus, leave behind the widespread and harmful idea according to which these organizations exploit people and communities. From our perspective, this variable, the transformation of political organizations’ culture, is essential to generate the necessary changes to achieve the country’s democratization. It is transversal to all partisan organizations and must be addressed with the priority it deserves. It is unavoidable to overcome the abyss between what those who make life in the parties say when they

6 Rawls, John. *Liberalismo político*. 5a ed. México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006.

are in spaces, for example, of formation and training, and what the political organizations do in their daily lives and facing society. As long as that abyss exists, building trust between society and parties seems unlikely. Not carrying out these transformations can lead to numbing our capacities as a society, as organizations, as parties, and as individuals.

This reliberalization, anchored in a radical return to freedom and notions of equality without which we cannot be truly free, is the expression of the need to put limits on power at the center of our anxieties, but also of our actions, the accountability mechanisms that contain arbitrariness, and the congruence between what we proclaim and what, in effect, we practice; all of us, political parties and civil society.

Social Democracy: Freedom and social justice so that life is good

The democratic project of social democracy is simultaneously a rights and development project. However, since politics is not designed or implemented on ideal grounds but rather on specific material conditions, it is necessary that the discussion about the type of society and institutions that we can be built in Venezuela incorporate concrete elements of our material, institutional, and organizational reality so that our approach overcomes a static view of democracy, and recognizes the idea of conflict as an inescapable part of social reality.

The common agenda that global social democracy has been designing in recent decades addresses challenges regarding demographic transformations that undermine the classic support of the Welfare State, such as financial pressures on the entire social security system; the digitization of the economy and life with its

consequent gaps in inequality; climate change and the need to mitigate its effects, which require discussions on development models based on social and ecological justice; new identities that require new social agreements and recognition; and gender-related inequities in the field of labor or care rights. In Venezuela, the structural weaknesses of local public institutions are added to all this. The challenge of social democracy in Venezuela is not exhausted, then, to the question of access to power, which is determined by conditions that differentiate it from most cases in the hemisphere, but rather the underlying question about how to ensure that its public power serves in the future when it is administered democratically to respond effectively to the great issues of the global and domestic agendas. We are talking about the capacities that will be necessary among the civil servants of the State to be able to fulfill their part in Venezuelan society's task in terms of the country's development.

The focus on democracy that social democratic organizations have required in Venezuelan to seriously rethink the fundamental factors of an economic and public apparatus that should contribute to financing the guarantees of social rights. Any design of public policies in the social field that fails to reflect on the origin of necessary financing will be simple demagoguery, especially in a country that, since the beginning of democracy, has had such a major dependency on the tax contribution of oil origin, and a low presence of progressive taxation⁷. Moreover, we should look at the experiences of pioneering countries in the implementation of social intervention policies aimed at guaranteeing rights such as health, education, housing, labor rights, social security, etc.,

7 Vera, Leonardo. *La tributación en Venezuela: desafíos con sentido de equidad*. Bogotá, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2017.

which were not developed at the time of implementation but rather leveraged their development processes on these policies⁸.

This point is of great importance because it intends to answer substantive and very basic questions about what can be raised in the Venezuelan scenario concerning the maintenance of a State that, on the one hand, will assume an immense social debt and, on the other, from the social democratic perspective, phenomena such as the commercialization of fundamental rights should be avoided.

To the previous questions, it is necessary to add: What can social democracy and political organizations of the same spectrum offer, for example, to the youth and women of Venezuela, the groups most profoundly and negatively affected by recent policies? How should the economic and developmental proposal of Venezuelan social democracy distinguish itself, considering the need to generate and promote wealth through innovation ecosystems, the incorporation into global value chains, diversification, etc.?

Findings such as those from a recent survey on living conditions⁹ indicate that, although poverty indicators have decreased, the inequality gap has widened, making Venezuela one of the most unequal countries in the world. These findings become a daunting political task for any government of a social democratic nature. This edition of the ENCOVI also underscores

8 Lessa Kerstenetzky, Celia. *El Estado de bienestar social en la edad de la razón: La reinversión del Estado Social en el mundo contemporáneo*. México, D.F., Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016.

9 Encovi 2022: "Cae la pobreza, aumenta la desigualdad y se agrava la crisis educativa", *El Ucabista*, disponible en <https://elucabista.com/2022/11/10/encovi-2022-cae-la-pobreza-aumenta-la-desigualdad-y-se-agrava-la-crisis-educativa>

the ethnic-racial condition as a factor that specifically influences how poverty is experienced in the capacities to materialize rights such as education, which verifies what many suspected and represents important challenges to public policy committed to social justice.

Furthermore, we cannot forget the urgent need that we as a society will have for the Venezuelan State to be in conditions allowing it to implement institutional reforms that guarantee justice and reparation for victims of human rights violations and, somehow, the State's compromise to non-repetition. This is also a dimension on which proposals will have to be designed, and, most likely, the positions in this regard will be diverse.

The task of Venezuelan political organizations that define themselves as social democrats transcend the mere conquest of power and the political displacement of the forces that control it today. Access to power is the 100-meter dash, while an expanded design of the social, economic, political, energy, and ecological transformations that the country needs is the marathon of efforts and long-term commitments.

Social democracy must incorporate the reading that the base communities and the periphery of our society make about it, according to which conflict is strongly marked by the absence of guarantees to their fundamental rights, mainly health and quality education, work dignity, personal security, basic services, etc. A good part of the political message must be built on this interpretation. This message must be affirmative and capable of representing the most diverse sectors of the population in a transversal manner and above ideological segmentations.

The belief that life can be good, that it can offer real opportunities for self-fulfillment, and that the State can be useful for these purposes is an idea that speaks to everyone for the simple reason that we all want our life to be good. You don't need to convince anyone. Aside from establishing this regarding rights and daily life, we must make people believe that politics and its organizations want and can do something in that direction. The scope and depth of the Venezuelan crisis have made the entire society the recipient of this message.

The recomposition of our society passes simultaneously, on the one hand, through material and concrete areas, such as the provision of services without which every day carries enormous weight, decent wages, and real opportunities to access rights such as education and health quality. At the same time, it has to do with symbolic and abstract spheres, which is not without its impact on people's lives. It is necessary in an existential way to build trust, the centrality of human dignity, and plurality as a value. Let us ensure that politics, parties, and the State are all useful to this end.

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