

# Democratization



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# Edinson Ferrer: “We must serve citizens and fight for elections”

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

Venezuelan political parties are going through dark times. Or red. Nicolás Maduro’s regime is executing a plan of harassment and demolition that aims to erase them from the map. Its leaders are disabled, persecuted, imprisoned or forced into exile. Their acronyms and cards are stolen. They are outlawed and declared “terrorists.” And they are denied the minimum conditions to put up a fight on the ground they know best: the electoral one.

Faced with an adversary who does not respect the minimum standards of democratic play and the anti-party discourse that even feeds on its errors, the secretary of the national organization of Primero Justicia Edinson Ferrer (Maracaibo, 1982) points out that political organizations should strengthen their ties with citizens and enhance their vocation of service to promote the transition to freedom in Venezuela.

- Are parties like Primero Justicia, which are formed and developed under democratic principles, prepared to face the challenge posed by an authoritarian regime?

Primero Justicia is a party that was born with an absolute democratic spirit. Facing an authoritarian regime, we must rethink our ways of acting precisely by recognizing the environment in which

we are in order to strengthen our structures while at the same time we fight to rescue democracy.

At this time, democracy does not exist in the country, which is a challenge for building efficient ways of doing politics. Political activism, standing in street corners, going house to house, social complaint, everything has to be adapted. It is not just about looking for a position.

For Primero Justicia, there are two strong things in development. The first thing is to accompany the citizen. We, Venezuelans, want free and transparent elections, but we also want to be able to live. We need our leadership to be by our neighbors' side when facing their problems and when looking for solutions. This accompaniment to the citizen is vital, and thus, little by little, we have been strengthening our militants in that sense. In parallel, we have been structuring the political fight to rescue democracy. Obviously, it represents a challenge because it is not the natural way of working for a political party under democratic conditions.

- How should democratic parties act in an environment marked by the persecution and violation of fundamental rights?

We have to focus on the essence. A political party should not exist just to participate in elections and win. Of course, we have a vocation for power, and we want to reach that place through free elections in order to transform society from there. We have always told our leaders that we do not want to hold power per se, but rather transform and humanize Venezuelan society.

Amid this environment of persecution and violation of fundamental rights, we are committed to strengthening our team, not

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to be a political machine, but to be human, to be people. That is why we have strengthened the body of the party, but also its soul.

The body is the structure, the militancy, the people made of flesh and blood in each community, the vigilante at all levels of the organizations that helps to build and organize the citizens themselves. Our goal is to accompany our neighbors in the construction of solutions.

The soul lies in the righteous feeling that our people live according to our values of solidarity, search for peace, putting people first, making the militant feel that we are there to solve Venezuelans' problems.

In this way, we have to strengthen political parties along with our fight for free elections. We cannot neglect the internal strengthening of the parties. If we manage to make all the parties in Venezuela strong, to ensure there are militants and leaders in all municipalities and parishes and that those leaders are trained to serve, once we manage to rescue democracy, the most difficult work will already have been done. With organized citizens, we can win the elections and rebuild the country.

- The regime has judicially intervened parties and taken away their cards and symbols. How to maintain the identity and the link with the militancy amid these outrages?

In the case of Primero Justicia, we have always told vigilantes that our vocation as political leaders has to be to serve our neighbors, to put human beings first. That is why we are a central-humanist party.

We see power as a tool to be able to serve our neighbors and citizens with much more strength. But the purpose cannot be to win an election, the goal must be to be able to rebuild and humanize

Venezuelan society. As a party, we have always instilled those values. After 21 years since the party was created, having our card or name taken away is not an issue, since there is already a sense of belonging in our leadership and membership.

It is not a selfish sense of belonging, it is a sense of understanding that whoever calls themselves a vigilante is clearly dedicated to serving. That is why we have greatly strengthened the training of our leadership, to remain in our course of serving all Venezuelans. All the political and judicial games of the regime to try to hit the spirits of the leadership fail because there is already a sense of belonging in this fight.

Beyond these stunts, we have defined several lines of action to maintain cohesion. The first axis is training. We keep up an education that is not only academic but also human, of vocation, understanding that we decided to be in Primero Justicia to accompany others. Since the priority of our citizens is currently for free and transparent elections be held in Venezuela, we are of course committed to achieving that goal.

Secondly, we maintain permanent activism. Our vigilantes are always asked to visit their neighbors, discuss what is happening and listen to the citizens. This feedback strengthens a bond that keeps us informed of what is happening in all communities.

Thirdly, we always hold weekly meetings with each of the party structures throughout the country. This helps to keep an identity knowing that there is a national leadership that provides guidelines and is attentive to our continuing to grow as people, always remembering that the vocation is to serve the people.

We have social programs and various secretariats –female, family, youth, defense of workers, union, citizen security, “justice in

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the street" – accompanying all sectors of Venezuelan society, not only those within our structures.

- Elections are critical to the organization, mobilization, and dissemination of party projects. To what extent has the decision not to participate in the last elections weakened the democratic parties?

From a formal point of view, there have been no elections. I think this has been understood not only by our leadership but by all Venezuelans. There have been political events that the regime calls elections but that do not meet the requirements to be so. They have the name, but not the content to be an election.

Our purpose is not to get to office, but to transform Venezuelan society. If that is our main goal, there are sacrifices and examples that we must make. Among our ranks is one of the great examples in that sense, which is Juan Pablo Guanipa, who won the governorship of the state of Zulia. That decision taken by Juan Pablo Guanipa to not recognize the fraudulent National Constituent Assembly shows what a vigilante is. We are training political leaders to rebuild the Venezuela that we all want, to transform and humanize politics in our country, where there is a real bond between Venezuelans and leaders.

We have a vocation for power to transform Venezuela, but that happens first by ensuring that there are free and transparent elections, that the institutions really work, that the public forces have autonomy, and that the legal framework is respected.

The citizen knows that our fight is for there to be a real electoral process, where Venezuelans not only go to vote but also to choose, that the vote is to decide. Venezuelans want to decide who should govern the destiny of the nation, that is why our struggle continues

to focus on being able to rescue the vote as a decision factor and hold free elections.

- Does abstention end up blurring parties that only know how to fight in the electoral field?

I think we have to train our leadership to deeply understand what the struggle of a political party is. The most valuable instrument is to come to power through the vote to rebuild and make life much easier for Venezuelans who, in the end, vote to improve their quality of life.

But in an authoritarian regime where the struggle is for free and transparent elections to be held, the political parties must deepen their vocation of service, even when we are not in power. Our political leadership must be formed to understand that our vocation is to serve from where we are.

The fact that there have not been free elections hits the spirits of all citizens because people want to decide, but that is where we have to train leaders who are always there to serve others. In the end, the political leader is the one who makes dreams a reality, and we have to do that conversion whether we have a position of power or not.

Obviously, our goal is to have popularly elected positions thanks to the trust of citizens, because we can do much more from there, but not having a position cannot be an obstacle to our vocation of service in the communities.

We at Primero Justicia have groups of lawyers who provide free legal advice throughout the country, as well as doctors and medical students from recent years, and dentists who provide care. Citizens must be served, while also continuing the political fight for free

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elections. What you cannot do as a party is sitting still while fighting for elections.

- In recent times, it has become fashionable in Venezuelan politics to speak of "scorpions», or *alacrán*, pointing out that the regime has bought out leaders of the Venezuelan opposition. When making a self-critical evaluation of this situation, what share of responsibility do the parties have in this? Why did the parties not foresee that this could happen?

This happens in all families, but of course, you can always do things better, you can always have better controls for people who are going to reach positions of popular election.

We have worked on these types of controls through our disciplinary court and our training officers so that this does not happen again. However, what stands out is that with all the millions that the regime spent to buy these scorpions in different parties, they cannot reverse the illegitimacy of what they are doing. On the contrary, they confirmed what they are: an authoritarian regime that wants to buy determinations through money and corruption.

We must have many more controls over the men and women who are going to represent our parties and citizens. They must be the best in comprehensive and human training, in leadership, in a vocation for service, we all have to work on that. The important thing is to be honest and sincere, and to understand the authoritarian attitude of the regime that through money, blackmail and persecution will continue to seek to break the unity of the parties and the opposition.

Each party has the duty to strengthen its own body and soul, to have a clear identity, to have leaders feel that they are there, that



they are a family, and that they are very clear about their values and principles.

We have the responsibility to organize the parties in all sectors because when we achieve a free and transparent election, we have to win it in unity. We have to defend and deepen democracy so that all Venezuelans have a greater quality of life and progress. That is only possible if we have strong political parties. There is no democracy in the world that will survive if it does not have strong political parties.

And when I speak of strong political parties, I am not only referring to having men and women throughout the national territory, that is the body, but they also have to have a soul, principles, values, training, and a vocation for service.

- Does the exhaustion of being in the opposition without having the prospect of reaching positions of power in the short term affect the discipline of the parties?

The continuous fight for free elections always gives an impression that those elections are just around the corner. Our leadership sees that this change is close. If you are fighting for something, you have to be prepared for when you achieve that goal. If we are fighting for free and transparent elections, it would be disrespectful if we are not prepared to win them. That is why we all have to organize ourselves, not just the parties.

When you decide to be a political leader, you decide to take a step for the common good. You are committing yourself not only to citizens but also to God and yourself, because from that moment on you will be taking care of everyone.

In Primero Justicia, there are always many ideas that are discussed internally, which is part of democracy. Although the forms may

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change from one person to another, the goal is the same: to achieve free and transparent elections. Therefore, we tie that objective with the discipline of the party. When they see us organizing ourselves, forming us in that continuous work, it is because while we fight for the goal, it is also our responsibility to Venezuelans to be prepared and to have the best men and women to represent them in those free and transparent elections.

- Like so many other times, the unity of the opposition is once again at the center of the debate. What should the parties do to promote consensus building and end internal fights?

In the union of all of us who want this to change, there is the strength to keep moving forward. Primero Justicia has always been clear about this and that is why we have made all the necessary efforts to confront the regime in unity.

Unity will always merit efforts and sacrifices. We have to put aside our individual or collective aspirations as a party. We must understand that the only objective, the only candidate that unity must have today must be called conditions for a free and transparent electoral process. We have to get all Venezuelans to unite based on conditions that allow us to go to a free and transparent electoral process.

There may be different ideas and ways of doing things and all of them must be respected, the important thing is to have the necessary analysis to know when it can be worked in one way or another. But we must always understand that we are all democrats and what we know how to do is politics to serve Venezuelans.

The best way we have today to serve Venezuelans is for them to see us fighting for what they want most, electing a new president and all positions through free and transparent elections. We want to choose, not just vote, and to choose we need conditions. If we

understand that this is our only path, to achieve conditions for free and transparent elections, I am sure that the consensus will come alone, because when the objective is very clear, the ideas will come together until it is achieved.

- For unity, the parties have had to put aside their particular agendas, support other people's leaderships and even sacrifice their symbols to get all under a single card. Is unity for the parties too demanding?

On the contrary, I believe that unity is a necessity for everyone because it what allows us to build together towards our common goal. But that unity cannot break the identity of each of the parties. Each party has a personality, a way of being, and adds value from its strength.

As vigilantes, our lifestyle is designed to serve the community, always putting the person first, being in solidarity, seeking peace and justice, that is our style. Then, if your lifestyle is to serve the citizen and be aware of how to work the problems to solve, there is continuous activism. Each game has its quality, its personality, its strength, and when you add all the pieces within the unit, then you are gaining strength.

If we build unity in a strategic way, aware of where each one should be, it is very strong. Unity cannot break the identity of each party. When we rescue democracy, we are going to need that political diversity, that plurality for Venezuelans to decide as it is done in the great democracies of the world.

Unity will always make us all strong, as long as the particles of that whole are also strong. Unity has to be dedicated at this time to achieving a free and transparent electoral process together. My call to citizens who have never been in politics is that they review within

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the range of parties that make life in democratic unity the ideas that they feel they can build something, and that they come work together with us.

# Conclusion: organization, unity, and representation

The tenth issue of *Democratización* ends. It was dedicated to the study of political representation and featured articles by Tomás Straka, Héctor Briceño, Guillermo Aveledo Coll and Pedro Pablo Peñaloza. By way of conclusion, we share three ideas that can contribute to the analysis of the current moment:

1. **Organization and representation:** Tomás Straka, in “We, the Representatives”, establishes the relationship between organization, representation and legitimacy. The author highlights that those who carried the weight of our independence on their shoulders faced anarchy and tyranny by resorting to tools of territorial political organization –Congresses– that allowed the creation of formal mechanisms of representation –the vote– that gave political legitimacy to the triumphs achieved with arms. This legacy of our national history reaffirms the importance of political organization as a ferment of real representation that can offer legitimacy to the actors and their decisions. This key can be useful when those who today usurp power in Venezuela have hijacked our right to choose and we face the challenge of promoting a real representation that rescues the mechanisms –the vote– that allow the democratic system to recover.
2. **Mechanisms of representation:** Héctor Briceño, in “Society, parties and elections: how to rebuild political representation?”, described the autocratic advance of

the Chavista revolution in electoral matters. The author explains that after the parliamentary defeat of 2015, the Nicolás Maduro regime further limited the conditions of electoral justice and Venezuela became a traditional, closed, or hegemonic dictatorship (depending on the political terminology that you want to use). This autocratic consolidation took away our vote and has meant a substantial setback in our democratic tradition. In this sense, Chavismo has turned out to be a leapfrog for more than 200 years in our republican history, and the democratic forces in Venezuela today fight for the same thing that the “representatives of 1811” defended: the right to choose and own our own destiny.

3. **Unity and representation:** Urgent calls to rebuild the unity of the opposition are frequently heard in everyday, academic and political environments. Certainly, it is urgent to join forces to resist and, as far as possible, to advance in the liberation of our country. However, after twenty years of the Chavista dictatorship and considering the current situation in Venezuela, it is convenient to ask ourselves about the foundation of unity and its scope. I do not pretend to be exhaustive in this reflection, but I place this premise on the table: the recomposition of the unit must be accompanied by the reconstruction of the capacity for political representation of the forces that comprise it, with organization and political formation as the main working tools. If the institutions that make up the unit are empty shells that do not represent the wishes of the country, the agreements reached will be artificial and will not be reciprocated with obedience by the entire society. Without real representation, there will hardly be efficient unity.