

Primero Justicia: 2021 -2023

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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-primero-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-primero-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.

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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.