



**Puerto Rico Actually: The Power of the People
(Presentation by Wilma E. Reverón Collazo,
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After 121 years of U. S. colonialism what happened during the summer of 2019 in Puerto Rico was way beyond any prediction, analysis or wishful thinking of those of us who have dedicated our life to the quest for decolonization and independence. An awakening of the masses of the people, a potent cry of indignation against corruption, discrimination, abuse of power and economic exploitation. A rejection of the power exercised by the U.S Congress by imposing a dictatorial Fiscal Oversight Board per the legislation passed by the U.S. Congress known as PROMESA (PROMISE). The July 22, 2019 march demanding the resignation of Ricky Rosselló, the elected governor, by CNN and CBS estimates could have mobilized between 700,000 to 1 million people out of a population of 3.2 million.

The slogans chanted by the people are revealing: "Ricky renuncia y llévate a la Junta" in English means, "Ricky resign and take the Board with you.;" "Somos más y no tememos miedo", in English "We are more and fearless."

Can we say it was an uprising against U.S. colonial rule? No, it was not. But all the demands that surfaced during the demonstrations are unequivocally identified with the demands and revindications that the independence movement has been putting forward for decades. I will

give you a broad background to what happened in the Summer of 2019 in Puerto Rico.

In 2007 an international economic crisis brought down financial giants in the U.S.. The mortgage bubble exploded, trashing prime and subprime bonds in the financial market. Puerto Rico was already struggling as far back as the decade of the 70's. Puerto Rico had enjoyed some economic advantages during the years after WWII by participating in the U.S. economic boom after the war. Operation Booth Strap brought labor intensive manufacturing industry to the Island that aided in the creation of a middle class. But this change from an agricultural to an industrial society also brought with it massive migration and the almost disappearance of a subsistence economy. Agriculture had already been badly hurt by the devaluation in January 20, 1899 by a 40% the value of our currency, the foreclosure of farms, the substitution of a crop agriculture to a monocrop of sugar cane agriculture. The coming of the industrial age was the last nail in the agriculture coffin. We thus became importers of food from the U.S.. Today 85% of all our consumption is imported from United States.

In 1996 Section 936 that provided tax incentive to U.S. industries located in Puerto Rico, was eliminated as a result of intensive lobbying by the pro-statehood leaders of Puerto Rico. Massive lay outs ensued as the industries moved out. This was preceded by the adoption in January 1, 1994 of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This took away the commercial advantages that Puerto Rico enjoyed with the U.S. vis a vis a foreign countries like México.

Economic growth had been stalling since 2006, a year before the U.S. financial crisis. Only Greece has had a worse economic contraction, a 28% loss of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Puerto Rico has suffered a 14% cumulative loss of its GDP.[1]

"The capacity of the Puerto Rican authorities to face the crisis is extremely limited due to the lack of the traditional instruments of macroeconomic policy. It lacks, first of all, autonomous monetary and exchange rate policies. This is the principal reason why the Commonwealth's crisis has been compared to that of Greece—"the Greece of the U.S." But, due to the deep deterioration of its public finances, it also lacks the space to undertake a counter-cyclical fiscal policy. Finally, its subordinate political status makes it dependent on decisions by U.S. Congress and Federal Courts without much of a voice on those decisions."[2]

A \$167,846 million dollars debt[3], a decade of negative growth, the adoption of austerity measures, the stripping of labor rights and benefits mandated by the Fiscal Supervisory Board, had already created a perfect storm, and then we were hit by two category 4 to 5 hurricanes in September 6 and 20 of 2017. The electric infrastructure was completely wiped out. Months without electricity, weeks without drinking water, deteriorating health conditions, massive migration of around 90,000 people in one year, including young working and professional persons, had left the Island in a sorry state.

The U.S. and the colonial administrations acted with criminal negligence. The situation was seen as a gold mine for the corrupt government of Ricardo Rosello who surrounded himself by insensitive, elitist and incompetent officials and advisors whose only interest was in giving away lucrative contracts to their cronies. Lifesaving aid received went to waste, like thousands of

bottled waters, while people were exposed to deadly diseases such as leptospirosis that claimed the life of many for drinking out of creeks and other unfiltered waters. The exact number of deaths due to lack of access to life saving equipment due to lack of electricity and health care, will never be known. The numbers run from 3,000 to over 4,000 deaths.

The lack of care the U.S. and colonial administrations demonstrated throughout the humanitarian crisis may have killed some, but the survivors, like a saying of our ancestors, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. And that's what happened in Puerto Rico. Our people have come out stronger out of this crisis and are not willing to bear any more abuses and lies.

Where does all this leave the decolonization and independence movement? People realized that the U.S. is not their benefactor. President Trump's callous and insulting tweets against the people of Puerto Rico, calling us lazy, corrupt and incompetents, not only at the government levels, but in general; his antics of visiting Puerto Rico and diminishing our humanitarian crisis by saying that compared to Katrina we had not suffered anything significant; his throwing of paper towels rolls at a gathering and considering it a joke to be laughed at; the insistence in lying about the amount of aid that was supposed to be received saying that Puerto Rico has received more than any state, when in reality out of \$92 billion promised only around \$17 billion has been actually received, much less than the states of Florida and Texas; Trump's actions in delaying the disbursement of badly needed reconstruction fund; all of these actions of the President of the U.S have confronted the people of Puerto Rico with the racist and imperialist reality of our relationship with the United States.

The people of Puerto Rico have not rendered the fight for decolonization and independence in the 121 years of U.S. colonialism. We have faced crude repression and assassination, like the Ponce massacre of March 21, 1937, in which peaceful protesters of the Puerto Rico Nationalist Party, led by Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos, were gun fired by the police under the commandment of the U.S. Colonel Riggs. Incarceration of the Puerto Rican independence fighters was implemented in the 1930, 40 and 50. When armed struggle was seen as an imperative answer to U.S. colonialism, a nationalist revolution took to the streets on October 30, 1950, together with an armed action against President Truman in the U.S. on November 1st. 1950. One nationalist was killed and another, Oscar Collazo, served prison for 29 years.

In 1953 the U.S. managed to deceive the international community at the United Nations (UN) by passing Resolution 748 (VIII) delisting Puerto Rico from the list of Non-Self-Governing Territories (NSGT), by representing that we had exercised self-determination by adopting our own constitution and having an elected local governments. As a response to the farce, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party staged an armed attack in the U.S. Congress. Four nationalists led by Lolita Lebrón, together with Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irving Flores and Andrés Figueroa Cordero, attacked the U.S. Congress on the day of that the Tenth Interamerican Conference was taking place in Caracas, Venezuela and where refusing to discuss U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico.

In the 60 and 70, Puerto Rico was a cauldron of activism against U.S. Military Service, students and labor strikes. The Nationalist Party leaders incarcerated had left a void that was soon to be filled by the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) founded in 1946 and led by Don Gilberto

Concepción de Gracia, and the Movement Pro Independence (MPI) led by Juan Mari Brás, founded on January 11, 1959. As the economic conditions started deteriorating in the 70's, labor activism gained momentum. Most of the labor unions at the time were led by Puerto Ricans for independence labor leaders. The 80's was marked by student protests and the emergence of clandestine groups for independence, that staged successful attacks on U.S. military targets, such as the explosion of nine U.S. military aircrafts stationed at Muñiz Military Air Base, as what is known as Pitirre II. Dozens of pro- independence fighters were incarcerated and served from 19 to 34 years, in jail for their activities, as in the case of Oscar López Rivera. In 1999 we started a second round of struggle against the presence of the U.S. Military maneuvers in the Island of Vieques, in which through civil disobedience we stopped the bombings and in 2003 the U. S. Navy finally left not only Vieques but also the Roosevelt Roads Station at Ceiba, in mainland Puerto Rico. Nearly 1,500 people were incarcerated by the U.S. for civil disobedience activities between 1999 and 2003.

While the resistance has continued uninterrupted in Puerto Rico and the U.S., the independence movement has at the same time managed to maintain a respected international presence in various state multilateral organizations, such as the UN and the Non-Aligned Movement, in social and political movements, such as the Foro de Sao Paulo, the Socialist International and in as many forums, congress and conferences where colonialism and social justice issues are discussed.

And here we are today, thousands of miles away from home to exchange with our brothers and sisters from the Pacific Islands that share a history of U.S. colonialism with us in the Caribbean. What is the state of the movement of self- determination today, we are asked to answer. We are living the awakening of our millennials and centennials who took to the streets in the thousands. The young women and men that led the demonstrations are fearless. They faced police attacks with pepper sprays and tear gas with defiance. They threw back the tear gas canisters to the police. They retreated and promised to come back each time, and they did. Their motto: Yo No me Dejo means "I will Not Let You Get Me". They have stopped marching after effectively making then Gov. Rosselló resign, but are participating and organizing people's assemblies all over the Islands discussing how to achieve truly democratic rights, dissecting the public debt and denouncing the illegality of the same, demanding that a state of emergency be declared to protect women from domestic violence, defending the University of Puerto Rico that has been defunded and tuition raised, proposing amendments to the Constitution of Puerto Rico to achieve truly participative democratic rights and proposing a new constitution for a new country, debating decolonization options and mechanisms to achieve it, rejecting bi partidism, corruption and cronyism.

There is ample consensus on the convening of a Constitutional Status Assembly in which non-colonial and non-territorial options would be represented by elected delegates. The options included are Independence, free Association and Statehood. Though the option for statehood had a momentous growth between 1968 and 2012 when it obtained the favor of over 800,000 voters, in the 2017 plebiscite held by the gone Gov. Rosselló, in which his pro-statehood party participated alone due to all the opposition's boycott, the voter's turnout was only a 23% of those able to vote and obtained slightly over 500,000 votes, which represented a 97% of the participants. The corruption scandals that has surrounded this administration appears to have

dealt a mortal blow against the pro-statehood. movement. This September 1st. a group of statehooders called for a March in support of statehood and per the newspapers count barley 500 people showed up.

Millennials and centennials are saying they do not support statehood as a decolonization option for Puerto Rico. Sovereignty in its option of Free Association has been garnering sympathies amongst ample segments of the population. A new political movement is trying to organize, register and participate in the 2020 upcoming elections. Bipartidism and representative democracy is rejected by the new generations. They demand participation, horizontal organizations, they are ecologically educated and reject consumerism, they prefer a rich family relationship than material riches. They want time for sharing with friends and family, arts, travel and reject capitalist rat race as a way of living. They are independent and solidarious.

So, as we look back of all the years and efforts of decolonization having used all possible methods of struggles, armed, civil disobedience, elections, we find that everything has served to maintain a conscious of our singularity and uniqueness as a people, the love of our country and the desire to make the best country possible for all. All the bets are on the U.S. recognizing Puerto Rico's right to sovereignty. Everything that the independence movement has denounced and predicted has become reality. The U.S. is practicing crude colonialism and, in the end, there is no other alternative than decolonization.

CONCLUSION

In the words of independence leader, Noel Colón Martínez: 'When the people united, through direct and peaceful action, decide to put an end to the tenure of the leader of a government that represents unconditional adherence to U.S intervention in Puerto Rico, it must be considered as a profoundly decolonizing act of self-determination, similar to the movement that forced the exit of the U.S. Navy from our national territory.

We are not merely a territory of the United States, we are a Latin American and Caribbean nation, with a historical development that antecedes that of the United States."

1 Centro Nueva Economía: "Devising a Growth Strategy for Puerto Rico" June 15, 2016.

2 Idem, page 13

3 This amount includes the General Obligations (GOs) of the Government of Puerto Rico, Public Corporations, Municipalities and Pension Funds.