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Puerto Rico Update bulletin

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THE ROAD THAT LEADS TO FAILURE

The ideological offensive towards the annexation of Puerto Rico to the United States

The ideological offensive launched by the government of Dr. Ricardo Rosselló and the New Progressive Party (NPP) to make Puerto Rico the 51st state of the United States of America has not ceased or wavered since they took control of government last January 2017.

The offensive is a two prong approach in two parallel fronts in order to pressure the Congress of the United States to make an expression about the annexation of Puerto Rico. The effort includes the so called plebiscite on the people's status preference, that took place on 11 June^h with a failed outcome for statehood and the approval of the so called Tennessee Plan, a lobbying campaign similar to the one used in that territory when they were trying to be annexed to the mainland.

The effort has been organized and financed by the pro-statehood government of Dr. Rosselló in the midst of Puerto Rico's worst financial and economic crisis of the last 50 years. While the country has declared bankruptcy – bankruptcy proceedings are already underway before a federal bankruptcy judge appointed by the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court- the closing of schools, the cuts to benefits of private and government workers, the possibility of cuts in workdays for government employees and in the pensions for retired governmental workers, the \$500 million cut in the budget of University of Puerto Rico - the only public university on the Island- and the rationing of health and education services to the most vulnerable segments of the population - the government has used millions of dollars of public money to finance the statehood effort that the majority of the people has rejected overwhelmingly.

The following journalistic pieces analyze the so-called plebiscite of 11 June and the resounding rejection to annexation expressed by the Puerto Rican people. The people resisted one of the costlier media efforts for such an event, in which more than \$2 million were invested in a very short period of time, in ads in TV, radio and print. The plebiscite, which was supported by the ruling party and boycotted by all other significant political parties and forces, only attracted a minority of 500,000 voters to the polls, 23% of the people registered to vote. In this plebiscite, statehood lost more than 300,000 votes if compared with the results of the 2012 plebiscite, where more than 800,000 people favored statehood.

In another article there is an analysis of the so-called Tennessee Plan, a high cost and complex lobbying plan in favor of statehood that, just like the plebiscite, has nil possibilities of success with the federal government in Washington. In the last year only, all branches of the U.S. Government have sent clear signs that they are not willing to consider any possibility for Puerto Rico's statehood now or in the near future.

An announced fiasco

(The following analysis, by lawyer and journalist Manuel de J. González, is taken from the 14 June edition of CLARIDAD, the weekly pro-independence newspaper)

If the press acted as the Puerto Rican people did, it would ignore the so called plebiscite and turn its attention to other more interesting things. Because an electoral event in which, the obvious manipulation notwithstanding, only 23% of the electorate voted, shouldn't be regarded as if it were a real happening. The people decided to go to the parks or the beach in a particularly hot day, leaving the annexation forces all to themselves in a feast that was more like a wake and, to make things worse, was shamelessly financed with public funds taken from a bankrupt treasury.

But even though the people's rejection was overwhelming- three fourths of the voters opted out of the polling booths- the headlines in the digital media that Sunday evening claimed that statehood had "won", as if it were possible for a runner to win, while running alone in a race invented by him. Next day, the mood changed. The press in the United States was not impressed. From the first moment, their emphasis was on the "historic" (the word is from one of their pieces) low turnout. There, where the Puerto Rican annexation forces will go to promote their cause, nobody believed the story about "the victory of statehood".

Beyond the 23% debacle (notwithstanding the manipulation), the question that some are asking is why the annexationists kept their "plebiscite" alive after the U.S. Department of Justice denied them the use of the previously appointed funds for this purpose, and also demanded that they include the colonial system, called "territory"- among the options in the ballot. The tone of that letter (signed by an Under Secretary of Justice) did not leave any doubt that the present U.S. administration does not want to leave any space open to the possibility of supporting statehood for Puerto Rico. They denied the use of funds, changed the options and the wording of the ballot, and- ahead of another possible manipulation- made clear that any new petition from the Puerto Rico government would take them a "long time" to evaluate. As you see, they closed all doors and, on top, reiterated that the claim by the annexation forces that only statehood "guarantees the U.S. citizenship" to Puerto Ricans was false.

In protection from the thunderstorm, the Puerto Rican annexationists could have taken shelter on the argument that including the colonial system as an option in a plebiscite aimed at solving our political status was not dignified. It is patently absurd that that which is effectively the problem - the colonial system - would appear as an option for its solution. And it was even more outrageous that it was the colonial power that asked for its inclusion in the ballot. After the Justice Department's letter, the correct and dignified way, from a political standpoint, would have been to postpone or cancel the plebiscite.

Its postponement would have also made sense in light of the chain of events that have taken place in Puerto Rico during the first five months of 2017, while annexationists were in full campaign mode for the so-called plebiscite. What started as the non-payment of the debt and severe austerity fiscal measures imposed by the Fiscal Control Board, ended up in a formal declaration of bankruptcy before a judge brought from the United States. That fact signifies that practically the whole country was formally declared bankrupt and that all government operations would be, from there onward, under the scrutiny of a judicial proceeding.

This chain of events and the growing economic tightness of the people have created an uneasy and uncertain environment that logically would affect any voting process. So was said by a mayor from the governing party: "this country is not in the mood for plebiscites". Moreover, that same mayor warned in advance about the electoral debacle that would ensue.

Outside of Puerto Rico the news about the bankruptcy merged with those of the plebiscite, and with evident contempt many newspapers in the United States commented with awe that a plebiscite for statehood would be taking place in Puerto Rico at the same time that the formal bankruptcy proceedings had begun. These simultaneous circumstances didn't make sense to foreign journalists and they are right. Any petition for the annexation of Puerto Rico at this time

can only be laughable. One after the other, the main media outlets in the United States published reports questioning how was it possible that under the current circumstances in Puerto Rico, a status plebiscite that could end in a statehood petition would take place.

None of this stopped the young annexationist governor. He insisted in the plebiscite and spent more than \$7 million of the public funds of a bankrupt country so that he could claim a “victory” in a contest in which statehood obtained 100,000 less votes, than those that that same governor obtained as candidate of the statehood party seven months ago.

When they present those numbers in Washington, people there will laugh at them. But for Puerto Ricans who have witnessed how \$7 million of our much needed money have been wasted in a dumb plebiscite, the issue is not laughable. It’s enraging.

Before ending this piece, an important question needs to be asked: who made the poll for El Nuevo Día* that predicts a 72% participation of voters in the plebiscite? The results of that poll were announced just a few days before the event and nothing happened in the meantime that could alter the voters’ intentions. It is evident, then, that the poll was also a fiasco, as big a fiasco as the plebiscite itself, or that it was made with an obvious intent to manipulate.

**El Nuevo Día is Puerto Rico’s largest and most influential daily newspaper.*

Plebiscite results in Puerto Rico

regarding support for statehood

1967 274,312

1993 788,296

1998 728,157

2012 834,191

2017 502,616

Source: El Nuevo Día,

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| Puerto Rican daily newspaper. |
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Puerto Rico's resistance defeated the pro-statehood plebiscite

(The following editorial commentary was published in the 14 June 2017 edition of Claridad, the pro-independence weekly newspaper of Puerto Rico)

In the midst of the discussion, analyses and commentaries about the failed status plebiscite that took place last Sunday in Puerto Rico, there are two outstanding truths about its outcome. First, that the boycott campaign against the plebiscite was a triumph of the people of Puerto Rico's resistance to said sham, which was orchestrated and put in place by the groups that pursue the annexation of Puerto Rico to the United States, headed by the Governor Ricardo Rosselló and

the major players in his administration and the New Progressive Party (NPP). Second, that support for statehood is deflating in the same measure that citizens come to the realization that the attitude that the United States shows toward Puerto Rico is in opposition to the promises made by local statehood leaders about its “fantastic benefits” for Puerto Ricans. Precisely, said “benefits” have been the bait used by annexationists to try to guide our people through the route of its dissolution. This time their strategy failed and only half a million voters turned out at the polls, a 23% of the total voter register and 300,000 votes less than what statehood obtained in the 2012 plebiscite. Statehood turned into a balloon that loses air as it falls from the heights to the abyss. From now on, statehood for Puerto Rico will be treated as an empty balloon in the United States and everywhere they go with their quest.

The media in the United States gives a measure of the attitude there for statehood for Puerto Rico. Without exception, all U.S. media emphasized the poor attendance of voters to the polls as the most significant aspect of the event. The supposed 97% of support obtained by statehood was buried under the shower of questions by the press about the premises for the plebiscite and the low turnout of the electorate. A perfect example of said trend is the article titled “Puerto Rico votes again on statehood, but U.S. not ready to put 51st.star on the flag”, which was published by Yahoo News. It is interesting material not only for its description of our colonial predicament and the different positions about it, especially that of the U.S. Congress, but also for its revealing comments section in which 622 regular Americans give their opinions about Puerto Rico and the Puerto Ricans. They overwhelmingly call us “leaches, lazy and free-loaders”, among other epithets, and advocate for Puerto Rico’s independence as a way to get rid of us forever. As more Puerto Ricans have access to information as the one mentioned above, more of our people will become resistant to join a nation where there is so much contempt and ignorance about us, especially after having colonized our country for 119 years.

This simulation of a plebiscite also revealed that the intelligence of our people cannot be insulted without suffering consequences. That is why the memes campaign in the social media was so successful - as well as creative and ingenious - and swelled in the days previous to the event. The memes campaign ridiculed the supposed “benefits” of statehood and revealed the triviality of a plebiscite predicated in the “selling” of a status formula as if it were a product, or the result of an act of magic. Magic is exactly what annexationists and their communications advisors will need from now on as they try to find something positive in the abysmal results obtained by their formula this past Sunday.

It is as if history would like to make them pay for what happened in July 2005 with the referendum to reduce Puerto Rico's legislature to just one chamber. The same NPP leaders that praise the results of this plebiscite intentionally ignored and ridiculed the majority of 467,000 voters that wanted a one chamber legislature, because they were opposed to that amendment. Those results, representing 22% of the electorate then, were very similar to those of last Sunday's plebiscite.

Fortunately, the quagmire that this plebiscite could have become for our people was averted by the victory of the resistance and the defeat of the statehood pretension. Now it is time for us to focus our efforts towards the bigger and more important objective of defending our country from the Fiscal Control Board and from a fiscal plan and a government budget that will mean the ruin of many among our people. Also, it is time for us to contribute to unite our best minds and wills in a broader and well-structured effort to rethink Puerto Rico, help bring it back to its feet and pave its way toward political sovereignty and social justice.

The Tennessee Plan: only for annexationists but paid by all the people

Notwithstanding that their plebiscite failed, that they spent close to \$8 million of people's money in financing it, that it had the lowest voter participation in the history of plebiscites in Puerto Rico - with more than 300, 000 votes less for statehood than in 2012 - the annexationist government of Dr. Ricardo Rosselló and the NPP approved a new law, called the equality law and known as

The Tennessee Plan, to try to obtain statehood using taxpayers money, even though the majority of the people rejects their plan to make Puerto Rico the 51st.state of the United States of America.

In order to implement this lobbying strategy, based on the one that the state of Tennessee used when it was still a territory and wanted admission to the union, the Governor of Puerto Rico will select seven persons who will act as “senators” and “representatives” of Puerto Rico before Congress for an indefinite time to exert pressure in favor of the Island’s annexation.

This is a strategy that only annexationists support and was passed in Puerto Rico’s legislature with only annexationist’s votes. According to plebiscite history, annexationists are a minority in Puerto Rico. Statehood has never obtained more than 46% of the vote in any plebiscite, and now they lost 300,000 votes since the plebiscite of 2012, and mobilized only 23% of the electorate.

The two “senators” and five “representatives” appointed by the Governor to the Tennessee Plan committee will have to be ratified by Puerto Rico’s Senate and House of Representatives. The budget for this effort has not been disclosed, but it is estimated in millions of dollars. Said budget has to be approved by the Fiscal Control Board, the entity that the Congress of the United States created to oversee Puerto Rico’s fiscal matters and guarantee payment of the public debt of more than \$70 billion.

On 1 July 2017 the new Fiscal Plan for Puerto Rico, approved by the Fiscal Control Board, and imposing severe austerity measures to the people, will be effective. The pensions of government retirees will be reduced, the medications for the users of the government's health plan will be rationed, more than 100 schools will be closed and benefits will be reduced for teachers and for students with special needs, the University of Puerto Rico will be impacted by an immediate \$200 million budget cut (\$500 million in 4 years), which will have the immediate effect of a considerable increase in tuition that will hamper the possibility of poor students to attain a college education. Also projected are work hours reductions for government employees and a new labor law for the private sector that has had the effect of reducing the workers' salaries and benefits, without the promised effect on job creation. Notwithstanding this critical juncture, the government is prepared to launch The Tennessee Plan as a sequel to the failed plebiscite.

Undoubtedly, this will spark the vigorous resistance of the Puerto Rican people, which is beginning to show signs of impatience by being forced to carry the major burdens of the crisis, while the government and the NPP throw away our scarce public funds in their ideological obsession for statehood, which is rejected by the majority of the people. An increase in the protests against the Fiscal Control Board and its extreme austerity measures is also expected.

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The ***Puerto Rico Update!*** Bulletin is produced by the Committee for Puerto Rico at the United Nations. Writer: Carmen Ortiz Abreu. Please see information on the situation of Puerto Rico and the struggle for its decolonization at the following web pages:

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