

Three historical years in Puerto Rico

Escrito por José (Tato) Rivera Santana | Co-president National Hostos Movement for the Independence of Puerto Rico

Martes, 21 de Enero de 2020 07:02 -



At the onset of a new year an overview and comments are necessary on developments during this period in order to identify their interrelationship and possible consequences. The exercise inevitably takes us to 2016 and the process of a recent episode in our history. Several significant events took place that year. In particular, the U.S. Supreme Court decision which delegitimize the Free Associated State of Puerto Rico, while the U.S. Congress simultaneously adopted the PROMESA Law, which imposed a Fiscal Control Board on the Government of Puerto Rico.

That was the background to the 2016 elections in Puerto Rico and the inauguration in January 2017 of the Ricardo Rosselló administration. The new governor was barely able to initiate his work and much less consolidate his government team or recruit the minimal talent necessary or an acceptable and mature leadership – finances were out of his hands. His was an outcome that never was. Probably, the same would have happened had another candidate been elected. Anyone would have faced enormous difficulty managing a government structure without the power to do so. Imposition of the Board and the PROMESA law ultimately took over what little self-government the "Free Associated State" had left.

Regardless of the elected governor, the only possible route for his own government action was political confrontation against Board policies and, thus, against the U.S. Congress. Rosselló had that option during his first and only two years. At times it seemed he would take that route which would have situated him in another dimension in our history. However, he bowed down to the Board and its demands.

He issued executive orders and signed laws consistent with the Board's agenda. He finally

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succumbed to the Board's fiscal plan and the budgets it has imposed on the government of Puerto Rico. Clearly, his government collapsed once he succumbed to the mandates of the Board. From that point on the seven members of the Board and their entourage of exorbitantly paid law firms and consultants in practice govern and even administrate Puerto Rico's public agencies. Besides that, at present Puerto Rico's main agencies have been taken over and monitors abound as do frequent and selective FBI interventions.

In the two and a half years that Rosselló governed everything became worse. The country does not and has not had economic development plans. The Fiscal Control Board and the PROMESA Law also did not plan for Puerto Rico's economic development. The only related action was the creation of a Work Group whose report and results are not binding for the U.S. Congress or the Board. Thus, the Group's report issued in December 2016 to this day has had no consequences.

Meanwhile, the Board has not hesitated to accelerate payment to creditors and hedge fund bond holders as demonstrated by its COFINA debt payment plan and will be demonstrated by the Board's payment plan for the Puerto Rico Electrical Power Authority. This is the one and only role of the Board. That is why its letters to the Rosselló administration repeatedly demanded adoption of drastic austerity measures, as they were described by economics laurate Joseph Stiglitz when he visited Puerto Rico. Their only purpose is to have money set aside for generous payment of the debt.

Therefore, absent Board economic development plans, it is far from being the tool for addressing Puerto Rico's economic and financial crisis some thought it would be. Rather, it has become the main obstacle to Puerto Rico's economic development. Puerto Rico's economic situation is unprecedented and extremely serious, and the role of the Board does nothing but aggravate it.

The panorama is further complicated by the climate change reality which once again alerted us to our geographic location. Hurricanes Irma and María were natural events that uncovered and deepened a broad range of already existing problems that were at a boiling point. The President of the United States, with his disdain and ridicule added insult to injury in the face of the institutional incompetence of a government administration castrated by corruption to the point of incapacity of the urgent response the situation merited. But the worst of it were not Trump's offenses, it was also irresponsible management by the Federal Emergency Management Administration, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Congress and the rest of the U.S. federal agencies that have used blackmail as a norm in their treatment of Puerto Rico and for whom four thousand lives are a mere statistic. As though that were not enough, now we have the slow and uncertain post hurricane disbursement of funds. This behavior is prevalent throughout the permanent government of the United States. Trump is nothing but a vulgar accident.

In this context, the fiscal problems are aggravated and complicated. There is no formula or model that can state that a 100 billion dollar-plus debt can be paid in the context of economic shrinking and an uncertain panorama. Where will the money come from? What is the new source of income?

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Nonetheless, Rosselló's substitute, Wanda Vázquez, seems alien to the situation – she is oblivious to the disastrous route taken by her former boss. In her first statements and later ones, she has not ceased to express her agreement with the first plans and the Board's debt restructuring. She even identified herself as the person that can maintain a "cordial" and "respectful" relationship with the seven lords as Rosselló did and Pierluisi now does.

Fortunately, there has been an encouraging response to this chapter in our history. It has been the response of our people and its diverse sectors. There has been a social protest response to this crisis despite the constant, sophisticated and overwhelming ideological campaign which seeks to give the impression that Puerto Ricans are standing idle.

Not true! Since 2016 the protest, activism and mobilization of different levels of intensity and dimension have not ceased. A university strike in 2017, massive May Day mobilizations and, more recently, the summer of 2019, headed by our Puerto Rican flag being waved unaccompanied. Yes! The flag the United States outlawed, the flag defended with blood, sweat and tears, with courage and sacrifice by our patriots, was and is today a symbol of the struggle of our indomitable nation, upheld in the face of tyrants and traitors.

It is important to point out everything that has happened in these three years, including during the period of suffering that followed hurricane María when mobilization did not cease. The overwhelming courage and anger we saw during 15 days in July 2019 were a reflection of tensions, abuses and frustrations that are the undercurrent of the collapse and the end of an economic and political system that is yet to be buried.

Although we have yet to decipher the breadth and consequences of the summer of 2019, we can affirm that we learned that the strength lies within us and its collective use. We learned that the common will is capable of everything despite laws, the Constitution and many other institutions.

These developments were correctly interpreted by the heads of federal "security" and political persecution agencies. They wasted no time and immediately launched operatives intended to diffuse the impact and consequences of the social mobilization and protest.

A case in point is that against Nina Droz which was initiated by the Federal District Attorney in Puerto Rico as a lesson; so were the anti-worker laws adopted by the New Progressive Party legislature with the purpose of intimidating the trade unions. Further, the selective and abusive persecution by the Puerto Rico Department of Justice, where now governor Wanda Vázquez was then at the helm, against a group of university students who took part in the 2017 strike in defense of the University of Puerto Rico. But these tactics have not worked. No repression and abuse policy can continue without a response from social classes and groups.

Today, as has rarely happened before in our history, it is evident that we must maintain a collective response and mobilization in all areas. In recent decades this has been the most effective way to demonstrate our rights and to get a response to our demands. There are many recent examples, the Vieques victory, the defeat of Fortuño's so-called "green" pipeline which was really a gas pipeline, the release from prison of political prisoner Oscar López Rivera, for

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the first time in our history our expulsion of an elected governor, and so many regional and local victories.

That is to say that practice has demonstrated to us the route for taking over small private spaces and for generating strong movements which in and of themselves become expressions of social power.

It is under this premise that we must propose the conquest of the indispensable political powers that have been taken from us by the United States government. There is no way we will be able to address our economic problems and the challenges of the general development of our country without the power to design the tools to implement our policies, programs and plans.

At the present time, a priority task of our agenda continues to be to rearticulate the patriotic and anticolonial forces and sectors that will confront Washington and demand, with the support of the diaspora exiled in the United States and the international community, the self-determination and independence of our people.

Translation by Olga Sanabria
National Hostos Movement for the Independence of Puerto Rico

[Read also here the original in Spanish: Tres años para la historia .](#)