After 2019 uprising, a new socialist formation and new political party, change the electoral game

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Any attempt to address the electoral issue in Puerto Rico from a socialist perspective must begin by pointing out the limits of the electoral process in the island. It is important to recognize the broad restrictions that the colonial status imposes on the elaboration of a national policy. This limitation is stronger under the federally-appointed Fiscal Control Board, which oversees the fiscal policies of Puerto Rico's government.

While acknowledging these limitations, we must also acknowledge that electoral politics and the electoral process attract considerable attention and that laws affecting the lives of the working-class majority are debated and adopted by the insular legislature. In addition, an important part of the colonial impositions (such as the Fiscal Control Board itself and its austerity measures) are enabled by the parties that have dominated island politics, and have not been challenged in the only representative political space that the existing colonial status allows. Undoubtedly, we cannot be indifferent to the electoral process. Thus, it is a terrain of struggle in which the socialists can intervene, if they deem it opportune, a space through which a considerable part of the population could be reached. **In what follows, we explain why *Democracia Socialista* chose to call for a vote for *Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana*** (http://mvcpr.org) in the 2020 elections.

The current historical context of Puerto Rico is that of a deep economic and structural crisis that began in 2006. This collapse, which represents the crisis of the existing Commonwealth status and its weak economic foundations, has also led to the crisis of the ruling traditional parties, the Partido Popular Democrático (PPD) and the Partido Nuevo Progresista (PNP). Although it is true that there are differences between them, they can be described as representatives of the same interests and the same ideology: both parties, since the second half of the 1980s, have internalized and represent the policies of the neoliberal capitalism, that is, policies that privilege the market, privatization, the downsizing of the public structures and the reduction of state intervention in the economy.

This neoliberal process in Puerto Rico is part of the worldwide reconfiguration of capitalism. The processes of privatization and elimination of labor and social rights are not exclusive to Puerto Rico. However, the colonial condition of the island magnifies them. When the United States or Europe catch a cold, the poor, exploited and colonized countries get pneumonia.

With neoliberalism as an ideological justification, important services in the country have been privatized, more than 30,000 public employees have been fired, bosses have dealt heavy blows against the rights acquired by the working class, all of this not to revive the economy, but rather to weaken the working class in the correlation of forces, favoring capital and its profits in an overwhelming way.

The neoliberal model deepened the crisis in Puerto Rico: it implies an increase in the profits of some corporations and the accelerated impoverishment of the majority of the population. The contradictions resulting from the crisis have not gone unobserved by the majority in the island. Every year, the two dominant parties lose support, votes, and affiliates. In this sense, there is a space for an alternative movement that participates in the elections but is not limited to them, a movement that positions itself against the neoliberal ideology and encourages the struggle in the street. There is, therefore, the possibility of having an effective socialist intervention in the electoral process.

But what does socialist intervention in the elections mean? The question cannot be answered out of context. At different times in the history of Puerto Rico, there have been socialist parties or parties that proclaimed themselves socialist, such as the Socialist Party of the first half of the 20th century and the Puerto Rican Socialist Party that participated twice in the electoral process (although their history and activities went beyond the electoral arena). At one point, the Puerto Rican Independence Party also adopted a socialist discourse. Socialist discourse is not a new phenomenon for electoral politics in Puerto Rico.

The need for a transitional program is among the programmatic principles of Democracia Socialista: “We cannot settle for reforms to the existing society, on the one hand, nor for abstract revolutionary statements, on the other. The vast majority learn to question the existing society and discover their ability to transform it through experience and their own practice. To guide such experiences, a transition program needs to be elaborated and disseminated, which must be accessible of the great majority with their current level of consciousness, but which allows them to discover the limits that capitalism places on their aspirations for well-being.”

It is of little use to shout in favor of the overthrow of the capitalist state while one is unable to mobilize the majority. But it would be even more dangerous to fall into reformist positions, which are satisfied with slight changes in society. Herein lies the importance of the socialist organization and the transition program, which always must be articulated and promoted with the revolutionary objective as a compass.

We recognize that some people will opt for the electoral boycott. The electoral boycott could be a collective expression of discontent and a rejection of the two dominant parties and the neoliberal policies that they promote. It could also be a rejection of the colonial government structure as a whole. However, our goal, as revolutionaries, is not to put our rejection of existing institutions on record. Our goal is to attract ever wider sectors to question and reject these institutions. As Lenin suggested, as long as we cannot replace these institutions with more democratic ones, we must use them to present, promote and disseminate our ideas and program. A substantial part of our people, and of the working people in particular, participates in one way or another in the electoral process. Therefore, it must also be a field in which we present our proposals and it must be an objective to elect socialists to elective positions, from which, in constant contact with the struggles outside the

legislature, they can contribute to the socialist project. We consider electoral participation, rather than boycott, to be the most appropriate form of participation at the present time. We add that the electoral boycott campaigns in Puerto Rico have been ineffective. A boycott requires real organizing work. Only rarely have massive boycott campaigns been organized. Many times, the boycott becomes an individual act on election day. Nothing indicates that the 2020 elections will be different. The scope of a boycott in this context, therefore, is limited. Accordingly, we discard it as an option to follow.

We are supporters of independence and socialists. As a new socialist organization, we try to recruit people who agree with our General Declaration that are willing to organize according to our norms. However, we understand that, at the present time, there is an increasingly broad sector in Puerto Rico that is abandoning the traditional parties of the bourgeoisie (the PPD and the PNP). They lose faith, respect, and loyalty for those parties. They question their styles and many of their policies. Many take or sympathize with progressive positions on environmental protection, the right to health and education, and other issues. They are open and looking for new political alternatives. However, at this time, the vast majority will not join socialist or pro-independence organizations. To promote our ideas, we have to transparently, openly and loyally state that together with these sectors we are willing to build a new political movement, with electoral projection, with a clearly defined program, committed to working people, to the fight against all forms of oppression, to environmental protection and decolonization. Building such a movement would be an extraordinary step forward in the political development of our people.

We recognize that the *Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño* (PIP) has many good candidates. Furthermore, its program also has many points of contact with proposals that we consider should be promoted. They represent a rejection of the two dominant parties and of neoliberal policies. We understand why progressive and socialist people will support, with good reason, the PIP and its candidacies. The PIP plays a creditable and important role in representing the perspective of independence in the electoral process. As supporters of independence we recognize this. But the PIP, due to its closed and often sectarian policies, has been unable to incorporate the majority of the independence movement in Puerto Rico. More importantly, the PIP exerts little attraction on the increasingly large sectors that are abandoning the PPD and the PNP, who seek new options, but which at this time do not identify as pro-independence. In several consecutive elections, this historic party has failed to maintain its electoral franchise through the support received by its candidates for governor. It has largely succeeded in getting some of its legislative candidates elected. In 2020, at most, it will be able to elect a Senator and a Representative. We believe it can achieve this, and we want them to. But this alone is insufficient to begin to change the political game in Puerto Rico.

Most members of the *Democracia Socialista* militancy (prior to its creation) supported the founding of the *Partido del Pueblo Trabajador in* 2010 and called on people to join it and support it in the 2012 and 2016 elections. The PPT functioned as a broad political movement that, while participating in the elections, was not limited to them. Under the slogan “in the streets and at the polls,” it adopted a program that promoted working class consciousness, militancy, and struggles, feminist and LGBT + struggles, and the environmental struggle. Without being a revolutionary party, it was a progressive party, which, in practice, stood for a transitional program. However, after two elections, and although it contributed to the public discussion on a number of important issues, it was clear that it had not been able to bring together a considerable part of the real and growing discontent against the two dominant parties and neoliberal policies. The electoral results were a reflection of the social isolation in a broad sense of the revolutionary left, on the one hand, and of the particular logic of electoral competition, on the other, in which factors such as the “usefulness” or “lesser evilism” of the vote are decisive.

Recognizing these limitations, and after a series of discussions and assemblies, **the PPT decided to**

pursue the creation of a new broader movement, with various sectors and individuals, with a program similar to the PPT. This process went through several stages, different names and the participation and withdrawal of several groups and organizations, but ultimately led to the creation of the *Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana* (MVC).

Victoria Ciudadana included people with different perspectives, status preferences and experiences of struggles that have come together on the basis of a minimal program, known as the Urgent Agenda (Agenda Urgente). Although the Urgent Agenda has not yet been developed as a government program, it coincides with the fundamental ideas of the PPT's program.

Some of the elements of this agenda are:

- combat austerity policies promoted by both the PNP-PPD governments and the Fiscal Control Board.
- challenge the Fiscal Control Board and PROMESA
- fight to audit and cancel Puerto Rico's debt
- defend pensions
- defend the budget of the University of Puerto Rico and the public-school system
- fight for sustainable economic development that includes the development of agroecology
- stop and reverse the privatization of essential services such as education and energy production
- move immediately to renewable energy sources
- attack corruption head-on by banning the "revolving door," fighting impunity, eliminating private financing of political campaigns, among other measures
- promote an electoral reform that democratizes our political system (second round, proportionality, allowing alliances, among others)
- implement a labor reform that restores and expands rights to the working class, both in the public and private sectors
- promote the organization of workers in the public and private sectors
- develop a true process of decolonization that is transparent, binding and fair, through the mechanism of the Constitutional Status Assembly

It is worth highlighting the double aspect of this program: it allows us to seek the support of broad sectors of our people, beyond the pro-independence and socialist sectors, at the same time that it constitutes a radical challenge to the dominant policies in Puerto Rico. Generalizing this program and implementing it would be an extraordinary step forward in our political development. For example: putting into practice the provision of the Urgent Agenda that proposes ending the financing by the people of Puerto Rico of the federal Fiscal Control Board would imply a confrontation with that body and with PROMESA.

In this sense, we believe that, in the electoral field, Victoria Ciudadana is the project that has the capacity to challenge the current state of politics in Puerto Rico, given that there is no other option in these elections that could attract a significant number of people under a program against neoliberal policies and capable of delivering a distinct blow to the corrupt and colonial two-party system.

We recognize the challenges and weaknesses of this movement. As an organization, it has not had the participation that it should in the various struggles in the island (which is not to deny the participation of its most progressive militants, many of whom are already well-known figures). On the other hand, it is a heterogeneous movement, in which, despite its Urgent Agenda, disparate and sometimes contradictory ideological visions coexist. But that heterogeneity and breadth are also its merit. Victoria Ciudadana has a large number of candidates with a recognized trajectory and

militancy, and many young people or people new to politics who are on the right path of struggle and challenge of existing society. In all the districts, progressive people can be identified who are capable of challenging neoliberal politics and are contributing to the development of a resistance that favors changes in the correlation of forces. As socialists, we consider it important to strengthen ties and bond with these people, without renouncing our ideas, nor imposing them.

For all these reasons, Democracia Socialista favored supporting Victoria Ciudadana in the 2020 elections. Recognizing its limitations, we understand that Victoria Ciudadana is the project that, at the present time, best allows us to promote our ideas and, together with people from different backgrounds, reject the two dominant parties and neoliberalism. It is a space in which we can advance our program and our ideas, get in contact with different people, make our voices heard and promote our candidates. We call on all to join the regional committees of the MVC or its thematic networks, like the Diaspora Network MVC Diaspora Network Public Group, to strengthen the movement and defend the principles outlined in the MVC’s Urgent Agenda.