

The Puerto Rican Summer

January 11, 2020



The summer of 2019 will go down as a major moment in Puerto Rico's history. Between July 10 and 25, street protests—unprecedented in their intensity, persistence, diversity, and size—led to an unprecedented result: The Island's highest government official was forced to resign. Never, under Spanish or U.S. rule, had a governor been forced to leave office through mass mobilizations from below. An indignant population was not willing to wait for the 2020 elections, not even for an impeachment process to be initiated and completed, to remove Governor Ricardo Rosselló from office: Bypassing institutional forms and calendars, unflagging protests demanded and obtained the departure of Rosselló, who until the end claimed that he had not broken any laws.

The July Days

Two events triggered the first picket lines in front of La Fortaleza, the governor's residence in Old San Juan, and the initial calls for Rosselló's resignation. On July 9 the press leaked several pages of a conversation on the messaging app Telegram between Rosselló and some of his closest collaborators. The chat was full of sexist and homophobic comments and of attacks formulated in vile and vulgar language on the press, political opponents, and even some members of the governor's own party. The following day, several members and former members of the Rosselló administration (among them Julia Keleher, former secretary of education) were arrested by the FBI and indicted for corruption.

Beginning on July 9 with a few dozen activists, pickets grew in size with each passing day, reaching several hundred by Friday July 12. Early on Saturday, the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, a noncommercial independent press center, released an 889-page transcript of Rosselló's Telegram chat with his aides and collaborators. The level of chicanery, contempt for others, dishonesty, sexism, and homophobia was sickening. That day, close to a thousand gathered in front of La Fortaleza in a protest that ran continuously from noon until past midnight. At one point the protestors moved to the back gate of La Fortaleza (the access actually used by vehicles entering or leaving the governor's mansion), where the first serious skirmishes with the police took place.

On Sunday July 14, a march by several public school teachers organizations, planned before these

events, became a major protest, with several thousand participants demanding Rosselló's resignation. Protests continued after the march arrived at La Fortaleza in midafternoon. By nightfall, the first significant violent confrontation ensued, as the police tried to clear the streets around La Fortaleza. This became a fixture of these demonstrations: At some point around midnight the police moved to clear the streets of Old San Juan, pepper-spraying the crowd, inundating the city with tear gas, and sometimes firing rubber bullets. As the saying went at the time, "In Puerto Rico the Constitution goes to bed at midnight."

On Monday July 15, the mobilizations took a huge step forward, as two protests, a march from the Capitol building to La Fortaleza called by the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (Citizens Victory Movement) and several labor organizations, and a rally in front of La Fortaleza called by the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción (Feminist Collective in Construction), the well-known singer iLe, and other individuals and groups, converged and flooded the narrow streets of Old San Juan with close to 20,000 protestors. That night, while the latter battled with the police in the streets of the Old City, several labor unions, political organizations, and collectives, in collaboration with a set of artists (including iLe and representatives of Residente, who was in contact with Bad Bunny and soon joined by Ricky Martin) agreed to call a new march for Wednesday July 17, from the Capitol to the Plaza Quinto Centenario.

The gathering also agreed on a set of basic demands besides the resignation of Rosselló, including the audit of Puerto Rico's debt and a moratorium on debt payments until it was completed, an end to austerity measures against working people, and the declaration of a state of emergency to address violence against women.

On July 17 around 200,000 marched demanding the governor's resignation. This was already the second-largest march ever held in Puerto Rico, only surpassed at that moment by the February 2000 march against the occupation of Vieques by the U.S. Navy. The daily rallies continued in front of La Fortaleza, while protests erupted in towns around the Island. On Friday July 19, a march called by the union movement again filled the streets of San Juan with several thousand protestors.



* "I march for Rosaura Roque who died in darkness for lack of basic necessities"

By then a call for a *paro* (one-day strike) on Monday July 22 had begun to circulate on Facebook and other social media. On Saturday July 20, a meeting of the major unions decided to pick up this call and to provide the logistics to make the mass protest action possible.

On July 22 between 800,000 and a million people filled San Juan's broadest highway, the Expreso Las Américas. This is close to a third of Puerto Rico's total population. The equivalent would be a march of 80 or 100 million in the United States. The following day another major march, from the financial district in Hato Rey to the centrally located Hiram Bithorn Stadium, was called for July 25.

By then the pressure from the street could not be resisted: Just before midnight on July 24, Governor Rosselló announced he would resign effective August 2.

The Road to 2019

What caused this tremendous social explosion? The indictment of Keleher and other government officials and the indignation provoked by the Telegram chat played a role. But government officials had faced similar accusations in the past without provoking such a response. Nor is it likely that the text of the chat alone, offensive as it is, could provoke marches of 20 thousand, then 200 thousand, then 800 thousand or a million persons. The arrests and the chat were the drops that made the proverbial cup overflow. The causes of the summer of 2019 run deeper.

Three processes were particularly significant: first, Puerto Rico's economic depression since 2006; second, the harsh austerity policies imposed on Puerto Rico's working people since 2006 by the insular government and, after 2016, by the Federal Fiscal Oversight Board; and third, the criminal mismanagement by both insular and federal agencies of the emergency provoked by the catastrophic impact of Hurricane María in September 2017.

Puerto Rico's economy, measured by real GDP, has shrunk by about 1 percent annually since 2006. Close to 250,000, or 20 percent, of the jobs that existed in 2006 have disappeared. The number of manufacturing jobs, which was close to 180,000 in the late 1990s, now hovers around 70,000. The labor participation rate fluctuates around 40 percent. Migration to the United States has accelerated, as thousands seek employment they cannot secure in Puerto Rico. Population has fallen from around 3.8 million in 2010 to an estimated 3 million today (some estimates go as low as 2.9 million). Many in the younger generation feel that they have no future in Puerto Rico. Over this period of worsening material conditions, a feeling combining anger and hopelessness simmered in many minds. People were torn between resignation and the desire for change.

Since 2006, the government of Puerto Rico responded to the worsening economic situation and its decreased income with increased borrowing. Total public debt grew 64 percent between 2006 and 2014, from \$43 to \$73 billion. Inevitably, servicing the growing debt demanded an increasing portion of the public budget. By 2014 more was spent servicing the debt than financing the public school system. Default on debt payments was a matter of time. On June 29, 2015, the governor of Puerto Rico admitted that Puerto Rico's debt was, as he put it, "un-payable."

Congress responded with the adoption in June 2016 of the Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Stability Act, or PROMESA (*promesa* means promise in Spanish). PROMESA created a nonelected, federally appointed oversight board, with broad powers over Puerto Rico's state finances. Since its installation, the board's proposals and plans have followed the neoliberal script. The debt crisis is attributed to "big government"; economic stagnation to excessive regulation plus labor benefits and protections. The desired cures follow from this diagnosis: cutbacks in government spending, privatization, and attacks on labor rights and benefits.

Thus, since 2017 Puerto Rico's working people were faced with intensified austerity measures that worsened their material prospects, already shaken by the economic crisis. But such measures did not begin with the oversight board, or the Junta, as it is called in Puerto Rico: They go back to 2006, when the government of Puerto Rico encountered its first budget crisis, which forced it to close many agencies during a two-week period. Such austerity measures have included a new sales tax (originally 4 percent in 2006, later raised to 11 percent); mass firing of government employees (around 20,000, through Law 7 of 2009); attacks on public employee benefits and rights (Law 66 of 2014, for example); reform of the public sector pension systems, reducing benefits and making them market dependent and thus uncertain; and the gradual elimination of around 90,000 public sector

jobs through attrition. In 2017, the Rosselló administration began its tenure with a labor law reform reducing private sector workers' rights to paid vacations, sick leave, and end-of-year bonuses. To this the Junta has now added further cuts in government spending (halving the budget of the University of Puerto Rico, for example), increases in the cost of government services (such as tuition at the university), proposals for further attacks on labor rights (for example, repeal of protection against arbitrary firings), and the closing of more than three hundred schools (a policy pursued by Secretary of Education Julia Keleher, now under indictment for corruption).

Hard hit by economic crisis and austerity policies, Puerto Rico was overrun by Hurricane María in September 2017. The Island's deteriorated infrastructure and public services collapsed. The storm itself killed around thirty persons, but more than 4,000 died in the following weeks due to breakdown of electricity, water, transportation, and medical services and the criminal incapacity of the insular and federal governments to adequately and rapidly address the emergency. Besides this, the storm caused an estimated \$80 billion in material damage. While protests were hard to call during the worst moments of the emergency, by 2018 memorials for the dead of María had been organized by different groups, which denounced the role of the government's negligence in this tragedy.

It is not a coincidence that the summer of 2019 was sparked by the arrest of Keleher, who is associated with the closing of schools, and that some of the comments in the infamous chat that caused most indignation were the callous jokes about the bodies of the dead still stored in trucks used as makeshift morgues. Rosselló thus became the focus and target of the resentment, anger, and frustration generated by a decade of economic crisis, austerity policies, and government insensitivity and inefficiency. Needless to say, the mass rejection of sexist and homophobic comments was also magnificent and an indication of the significant, if still not sufficient, shift in Puerto Rican culture provoked by years of struggles around women's and gay rights: Comments that in the past would have been ignored or excused were massively considered sufficient grounds to demand Rosselló's resignation.

The Myth of Spontaneity

Perhaps the greatest gift of the summer of 2019 was a revived feeling that things can change, that people can change them if they mobilize massively and persistently enough—in other words, that protest and struggle do work, contrary to what the commercial media and political commentators constantly assert. Fatalism and a sense of impotence were suddenly replaced by a feeling of hope and of possibility, best exemplified by the slogan “We are more and we are not afraid” (“Somos más y no tenemos miedo”).

These events demonstrate that success depends not on the increasingly radical actions of a small but militant minority but rather on the incorporation of ever-growing sectors into the movement. But this lesson should not be turned into a denial of the importance of activist organization. The summer of 2019 had no individual or collective leader or spokesperson. This has given rise to the notion that the movement was an event not prepared by previous initiatives, that it was a spontaneous mobilization, promoted by “the people,” without the need for “traditional” organizations or structures.

This is wrong on two accounts. The explosion of 2019 was prepared over the years by a long series of large and small protests (pickets, rallies, *paros*, other strikes, marches, acts of civil disobedience) by student, women's, environmental, and working-class organizations. The amazing speed with which the movement “spontaneously” embraced the idea of the *paro* cannot be explained without the many similar actions against privatization and austerity measures in the past. Those who had participated in those mobilizations easily recognized many of the “old” slogans that were now picked



✧
"Rise up
Puerto Rican"
with the black flag
of Puerto Rico,
symbol of mourning
and resistance

up by an unprecedented number of people.

Second, the largest marches, above all the July 15, 17, 22, and 25 mobilizations, did not and could have not unfolded as they did without the planning, coordination, staffing, and financing of many organizations, and, above all, labor unions, whose role in this process has not been duly recognized. Sound systems, water stations, route coordinators, speakers' platforms do not spontaneously materialize: They are the result of conscious initiatives by organizations that complemented the desire to protest and mobilize that went far beyond their ranks. If anything, the summer of 2019 exemplified the fruitful interaction of massive, spontaneous initiatives and of organized support for them: It is that interaction that we must seek to maintain in the future.

Moving Forward

On many occasions the protests against Rosselló expressed rejection of the Junta and vowed to continue the struggle against its policies once the governor was forced to resign. In order for this to happen the movement needs to acquire several aspects it still lacks.

The many groups that participated in the summer of 2019 need to create a coordinating organism, a democratic, flexible structure, but a coordinating structure nonetheless. They need to formulate and agree on a minimum program to inform and guide their actions (including such issues as the debt, privatization, pensions, austerity measures, women's needs and rights, economic reconstruction, renewable energy, food sovereignty, and decolonization, among others). And the movement needs to elaborate a political orientation: It must determine how to transform its demands into state policy, something that cannot be done through the two ruling capitalist parties, the Partido Nuevo Progresista and the Partido Popular Democrático (the New Progressive Party and the Popular Democratic Party).

Put otherwise, the movement must make sure that its merits do not become the source of one-sided conclusions. The movement was characterized by the healthy absence of self-proclaimed "vanguards," the lack of bureaucratic control by union or other leaders, and by a widespread mistrust and rejection of traditional politicians and of the two corrupt dominant electoral machines. But these strong points must not become the source of self-defeating practices. Rejection of "vanguards" and of bureaucratic control should not lead to a cult of spontaneous action or an underestimation of the need for organization and coordination. Rejection of corrupt politics and electoral machines should not collapse into rejection of politics, dismissal of the need for political organization, or a blanket opposition to electoral participation. Recognition and celebration of the wonderful commitment of Puerto Rican artists and stars must not lead to reliance on celebrities (which the press is always happy to promote) nor obscure the need for a well-defined program.

An unfortunate discourse present in the mobilizations and in some of the assemblies organized in the following weeks called on participants not to bring the banners or insignias of political parties to the

mobilizations. This idea was rooted in the justified rejection and mistrust of the two corrupt electoral machines, but it was also linked to the notion that parties and political “colors” divide the people and that unity requires or benefits from their suppression. In some cases, the argument seems to be that parties and party politics are Puerto Rico’s fundamental problem.



This, which we have called the “politics of anti-politics,” is wrong on several accounts. It confuses unity with uniformity. It censors political expression. Unity does not require either. All groups and organizations, even political organizations and parties, should be free to bring their banners, flags, or literature. Furthermore, it is wrong to think that parties divide the people: Class and other divisions exist, with or without the presence of political parties. Puerto Rico’s problem is not “party politics” but neoliberalism, the crisis of its dependent capitalism and colonialism. The movement cannot ignore politics or the need for a political program. Such a program can only emerge through open debate and the critical examination of different proposals and political projects, whose advocates should be welcomed to present and circulate them.

To orient our present struggle, we have suggested a minimum program, which is, of course, subject to discussion and amendment:

1. Revoke PROMESA.
2. Maintain the stay on claims by creditors on Puerto Rico’s public debts.
3. Audit the debt, annul the illegitimate portion of it, and renegotiate the remainder with three priorities: protecting pensions, protecting essential public services, and retaining resources required for economic renewal.
4. Declare a moratorium on debt payments until the audit has been completed.
5. Adopt an economic reconstruction plan, centered on reinvesting profits generated in the Island, that must include a reconsideration of the existing tax-exemption policies.
6. Stop austerity and privatization measures and revoke recent labor law reforms.
7. Democratically reform the public sector with active labor and citizen participation.
8. Self-initiate a process of decolonization and self-determination through a constitutional status convention.
9. Seek and obtain sizable funding from Congress for Puerto Rico’s economic reconstruction as well as action for Puerto Rico’s decolonization.

We are sure that this program is quite compatible with the needs and orientation of progressive forces in the United States. Joint work against our common enemies must be an essential part of our shared agenda.

Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of this background, see Rafael Bernabe, "Puerto Rico: Economic reconstruction, debt cancellation, and self-determination," For wider background see César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
2. Lara Merling, Kevin Cashman, Jake Johnston, and Mark Weisbrot, "Life After Debt in Puerto Rico: How Many More Lost Decades?" (Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2017), 6.
3. Merling et al., 6.
4. Tax revenue fell in real terms since 2005. See José Caraballo Cueto and Juan Lara, "From deindustrialization to unsustainable debt: The case of Puerto Rico" (2016), 12.
5. For further analysis on the debt crisis, see Rafael Bernabe, "Detrás de la crisis de la deuda de Puerto Rico," *CADTM*, July 30, 2015, and "El régimen de los acreedores y la crisis de la deuda: aspectos del contexto general y el caso de Puerto Rico (2014-16)," *Revista Jurídica de la UPR*, 85:3 (2016), 6. For our analysis at the time see Rafael Bernabe, "Puerto Rico's New Era: A Crisis in Crisis Management," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 40:6 (Dec-Nov. 2007), 15-20.
6. For further on the austerity policies and their ideology, see Rafael Bernabe, "Punitive Neoliberalism in Puerto Rico," *Against the Current*, 191 (Nov.-Dec. 2017), 8. For an analysis and proposal written soon after Hurricane María see Rafael Bernabe, "Some lessons of the hurricane," *International Viewpoint* (7 October 2017).
7. La política de la anti-política," and Verano 2019: balances y perspectivas."
8. In 2015 the government of Puerto Rico created a Commission for the Comprehensive Audit of the Public Credit. It was ignored by Governor Alejandro García Padilla's administration and dissolved by the present administration. It managed to prepare two preliminary reports on central government bond issues since 2014 and Electric Power Authority bonds issued in 2013. Both found irregularities that make more than \$30 billion in debt illegal. The initial report, *Commission for the Comprehensive Audit of the Public Credit: Pre-audit Survey Report* is found here. The second pre-audit report is here. For well-documented arguments for radically reducing or canceling Puerto Rico's debt see Merling et al., cited above; Pablo Gluzmann, Martin Guzman, and Joseph E. Stiglitz, "An Analysis of Puerto Rico's debt: Relief needs to restore debt sustainability," *Espacios Abiertos*, 2018, 2, 3, 5.; and Joanisabel González, "Paying bondholders not viable," *Nuevo Día*, English web version, December 12, 2017.
9. See Rafael Bernabe and Manuel Rodríguez Banchs, "Open Letter to the People of the United States from Puerto Rico, a Month After Hurricane María," *International Viewpoint*, October 19, 2017.