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Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico: Summer 2019: results and perspectives

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The days of July 2019 have restored, or, perhaps, have given to the country a sense of possibility: the feeling that things can change, that things can be changed, that people, mobilizing in the street, can change them. [1]

Puerto Rico: Summer 2019: results and perspectives Rafael Bernabe and Manuel Rodríguez*

These two weeks of mobilization provided a great purifying blast against the widespread idea that "nothing can be done" faced with a reality that was considered unalterable. They have expanded our sense of reality. They have shown that what was previously considered impossible is possible.

Since 2016, we have indicated that the country was debating between two mixed sentiments: on the one hand, the feeling that its political, social and economic reality required great changes; on the other, the feeling of helplessness of many, the feeling that nothing could be done, that nothing could be changed. Hence the hope among many that someone, whoever, would make the necessary changes. Hence the initial faith of some people that the Financial Oversight and Management Board would fix things or teach the "politicians" a lesson. And we argued that the only Board, the only supervisory force we needed was the people itself. The defenders, whether open or devious, of the existing reality responded: those are empty phrases. And we see: the country has mobilized as never against a vile and corrupt governor. And it has brought about his resignation.

Do not underestimate the scope of this moment, in which we have had the joy and privilege of participating: for the first time in their history the inhabitants of this island have removed their governor from below, from the street, through intense and incessant mobilization.

From Trump to the Management Board, from the bondholders to the Puerto Rican business class (who until yesterday saw Rosselló as a useful representative), from the *Nuevo Día* newspaper to the PPD, they are now trying to take advantage and kidnap the people's victory against Rosselló. [2] They do this by calling for "normality" and "tranquillity", diverting attention to secondary reforms (such as creating a vice governor), denouncing the politicization of "protest" and in other ways. That is why we must carefully reflect on what has happened and on the tasks that lie ahead for those of us who aspire to deepen democracy, social justice and decolonization.

Unexpected explosion?

Some people talk about an unexpected social explosion. Certainly, nobody could predict what was going to happen in July 2019. To begin with, nobody or almost nobody knew about the existence of the infamous chat, which, together with the arrest of Julia Keleher, detonated the days of July 2019 in Puerto Rico. However, different movements and people have long pointed out the presence of the flammable material that was waiting for a spark to ignite it.

Since 2012 we have argued that Puerto Rico is going through an economic crisis, a true depression, analogous to that of the 1930s. And we argued that this depression caused the division and collapse of the dominant parties of that time (Liberal, Union-Republican and Socialist) and a crisis of legitimacy of the institutions of the colonial state. And we pointed out that sooner or later the current crisis would have the same results. The victory of the PNP with just 42% of the votes and divisions in both dominant parties were already indications that this process was advancing. Now, suddenly, the total discrediting of those two parties has been revealed.

Not only that: the unprecedented mobilization on the street has surpassed the existing institutional arrangements. It is not a revolution, but there is no doubt that it has been a revolutionary action: to get Rosselló out no one waited until 2020, nor for an impeachment process, nor for any legal or institutional mechanism. The people, on the street, took matters into their hands and brought about Rosselló's resignation. For those of us who think that people should one day create new institutional arrangements from below, this is an extraordinary precedent, which we have to value and treasure.

Spontaneity or fruit of seeds of consciousness?

The days of July 2019 in Puerto Rico were not a spontaneous explosion. Thinking they were can lead to future mistakes that we should avoid. What happened was prepared by tens and hundreds of conscious initiatives, near and far, often seen at the time as useless, but now bearing their fruit. The work of the Center for Investigative Journalism, for example, has nothing spontaneous about it: it is a work consciously undertaken by a small group which has suddenly acquired a national and international impact. Other cases could be mentioned. For example: the speed with which broad sectors set up pickets outside Fortaleza, the home of the Governor or the Capitol, the seat of the Parliament, the march and the rally as ways of protesting, the call for strikes as a way to structure the resistance, cannot be explained without the country's long education about these forms of resistance and protest, thanks to the past struggles of students, workers, and women as well as environmental struggles and those around Vieques, among others. [3].

Similarly, we must not forget that the success of the biggest mobilizations (those of July 15 in San Juan and July 22 in Hato Rey, for example) is due, on the one hand, to the very visible call by well-known artists -Resident, iLe, Bad Bunny and Ricky Martin, to mention the foremost - with deep roots in the country, and also to the almost invisible but crucial organizational and logistical contribution of the workers' organizations, which over the decades have acquired the experience and skills to develop these types of activity.

Consider the sweeping rejection of sexist violence and homophobia that followed the publication of the infamous chat of the governor and his friends. The seed for that explosion was consciously sown by the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción and other feminist organizations and the LGBTTIQ community, through dozens of activities and initiatives in the past. We could also talk about the many experiences of community self-organization before, during and after hurricane Maria; as well as the commemorations that sought to express the pain and indignation for the dead like the initiative of the shoes in front of the Capitol.

The same can be said of the left. It can be argued that this uprising took place outside of "political lines" and political organizations or the left. The reality is that almost all forms of struggle and resistance, including the most popular slogans and demands made (on the debt, the Board, privatization, the continuity of the struggle) are not new: they are the ones that the left has popularized in Puerto Rico. We are not interested in stressing this as such. But we are concerned that it will be ignored or denied, especially if denial is used to try to limit the transformative political impact of the movement, an issue we will return to later.

Anyway, what happened in July 2019 is unprecedented. But nobody should think that it renders obsolete or refutes the "old" forms of struggle or all the old forms of organization: they are the result of those efforts of many decades, which we must now update, expand and modernize, but not despise in an erroneous cult of "spontaneity".

Importance and limit of minorities

But while the days of July 2019 cannot be attributed to a sudden spontaneous explosion of the people, they also offer lessons to minority groups that have long been resisting in the street and which hundreds of thousands have joined this summer. It has been shown that the key to victory lies in the massive incorporation of the people into the struggle: from hundreds to thousands (from July 10 to 14 in Fortaleza), to 20 or 30,000 (on July 15 at the Capitol and in Fortress), to about 400,000 (July 17 from the Totem Capitol), to about one million (July 22 in Hato Rey). Thus, the resistance grew.

And it is not just what happened in San Juan: as the days progressed, large and small activities were added in Ponce, Mayagüez, Dorado, Aguadilla, Lares, Guaynabo, among other towns. The route to victory is not the "radicalization" of the action of the militant minority "because pickets and marches do not achieve anything", as it is sometimes posed: the key is to make each activity ensure that the next one is still wider and bigger than the previous one.

We are not pacifists

We know that the state will attack the struggles of the people in a violent and criminal way: this has also been proven. To say, as some people do, that this has been a peaceful struggle is to idealize things. People have exhibited great patience. But the state has been anything but peaceful: arbitrary arrests, illegal searches, gas, macanas and rubber and metal bullets attest to it. [4] We recognize the importance of self-defence and an adequate response to these aggressions. The July sessions show that these actions, such as those of the (mostly) young people who faced the riot police, when they occur in the context of a struggle that has achieved great support, acquire a high degree of legitimacy as a form of struggle and resistance.

That is why it is necessary to prepare this form of resistance, but never in place of or as a substitute for, much less to the detriment of, the task of convincing increasingly broad sectors to join the struggle and mobilization. We saw, for example, calls on the internet that people who were not prepared to face the riot police did not go to San Juan. Not everyone can respond in that way. But they are also part of the fight. The other option is to aspire to the struggle of the militant minority against the state. This leads to isolation and defeat. But let us not be misunderstood: the response against the riot police was correct and had broad support. We just have to try to get the best lessons from what happened.

The ruling class regroupes

The July days have left the ruling classes in panic. Their two parties are more discredited than ever. Much of the press has been exposed as a mouthpiece of those parties. Now comes the campaign to save the existing order. This cannot be done by attacking the mobilization directly. They have to withdraw and make concessions. The demobilization strategy will have several elements.

First it will be recognized that the struggle was justified. It will be recognized that reforms are needed. But everything will be limited to suggesting that adjustments must be made to the political system, to the electoral provisions and so on. We will hear ad nauseam of a "crisis of representation". That is, what is intended is to divorce the fall of the Rosselló government from the other fundamental problems that affect the country: the economic crisis, the debt crisis, the policies of the Board, the colonial condition. The problem will be reduced to the corruption and incompetence of Rosselló and this will be separated from the social class that Rosselló represents. Attention will be diverted to talk of creating a post of deputy governor or similar changes, which will not affect anything essential.

The truth is that most of those who have participated in the mobilizations against Rosselló were motivated by the revelations of corruption and the infamous chat. This revealed to them the real face of the ruling classes: their contempt for the people, their machismo, their racism. It was an invaluable weapon that Rosselló has given us to fight against a class that is inevitably hypocritical: that tries to present itself as a friend, committed to the people, while living to exploit and devalue it.

But most of the participants in the protests still do not make the connection between Rosselló and his friends in the "chat" and their attacks on working people with employment reform, charter schools, austerity policies, cuts to pensions and the University of Puerto Rico. The ruling class, from the PNP and the PPD, to Nuevo Día and Manuel Cidre, do not want them to make that connection. It is our task to have an increasingly large number do so. We have to remember a slogan in the July mobilizations: "Ricky resign and take the Board with you". We have to relay the fight against Rosselló as much as possible to the resistance to the Board and its policies.

Until now we were told that nothing could be done against the Board: now we know that it can be. Many times, we raised the need to mobilize against the Board and the press told us: the Board and Congress do not care what we do in Puerto Rico. Protest is useless. Now we see the potential strength of the people when activated.

The mobilizations in Puerto Rico have had an impact around the world. They have raised sympathy throughout the planet, including the United States. With that strength we can defeat the Board and the bondholders, we can obtain the reparations to which we are entitled from Congress and we can also achieve decolonization. But for this we cannot allow attention to be diverted to mere secondary reforms.

The people need a program and organization

The struggle we have been through had an important but simple objective: to achieve the resignation of the governor. That was enough for mobilization and as an immediate end. Now that Rosselló is leaving, the campaign against his possible substitute Wanda Vázquez is on track. It is good that this is the case, although the mobilization may not be as big as the one generated in the fight against Rosselló (hopefully we are wrong in this). But as we indicated above: such activities are important, although their fruits are not seen immediately.

However, it soon becomes clear that it is not enough to reject Rosselló or Vázquez or the successor who ends up entering Fortaleza. The movement needs a program. That is, a set of proposals on economic development, tax policy, incentive policy, on public services and privatization and on many other issues.

To start with: a citizens' debt audit; a moratorium on any payment of the debt and agreement on it until that audit is completed; an adequate contribution by Congress for the economic reconstruction of Puerto Rico; the restoration of employment rights eliminated by the Rosselló government; a progressive tax reform; the recovery of a greater part of the profits that are now fleeing the country; democratic government reform and zero privatization of essential services; revocation of PROMESA and the neoliberal, anti-democratic and colonial Financial Oversight and Management Board, among other measures; convening of a constitutional assembly to resolve the colonial problem at once.

We need an assembly of movements that allow us to take on this program (or something similar) and promote it through constant mobilization. It must be a simple and flexible structure. A place of meeting and discussion. It should boost demands that have overwhelming support, and everyone should continue taking the initiatives they deem appropriate. In the fight against the privatization of Telefónica, the Comité Amplio de Organizaciones Sociales y Sindicales (CAOSS) made up of workers', student, women's, religious, environmental and political organizations,

among others, worked for one year (August 1997 to August 1998). It is a model that we can adapt to the current situation. But it should be clear: activity now should not be subordinated or waiting upon the birth of such a structure. However, at some point, a coordinating body will be necessary.

The participation of artists has played a central role in this process. This must be recognized. However, we cannot permanently depend on this ability to appeal. Nor can we claim it replaces what only organization and the development of a program can supply. Nor can any supreme leader replace this. This must be stressed: despite the presence of celebrities, this movement has had no identifiable leaders. It has really been a collective movement. We have the opportunity to continue developing it with collective structures and with collective leaders.

Political representation

But this movement also needs political representation. And this is one of the thorniest problems we have to tackle bluntly. There is a position that states that the fight against Rosselló should not be "politicized". That rejects the presence of organizations, flags, parties and political organizations in the fight. Which states that only Puerto Rico flags and perhaps other national flags should be brought to activities, but not political flags. Which objects to the protest activities endorsing the registration of a movement for the 2020 elections.

We fully understand the emancipatory and progressive sense that underlies this position: the rejection of the traditional "politicians", of the usual "parties", of the dirty politics to which we are accustomed. We share that feeling of rejection. But precisely because we want to end the control of those corrupt parties, we reject censorship and the prohibition of political expression in protest activities.

We reject it because we reject censorship wherever it comes from. Because we do not confuse unity with uniformity or unanimity. Because we think that unity occurs in diversity. Because we think that everyone should have the freedom to participate with the national, union or political flag with which they identify: that of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republican, the rainbow, that of feminism, the red of the working class, the black of anarchism, and also that of their party if they wish.

And we reject censorship because it hinders the growth, organization and registration of new options and has the real effect of helping to perpetuate the control of existing parties. If we do not register something new, what options will the people have in 2020? The PNP and the PPD. As usual. Is that what we want? Of course not. Then we must stop celebrating unity above colours and without parties: that is what those who now govern want to hear. They know perfectly well that as long as we do not organize politically they will continue to govern; they will continue to monopolize politics. We do not only want to protest; we want to govern. And for that we need political organization.

The authors of this text are participating in one of these registration efforts. Perhaps the reader does not agree with this project. That is legitimate. This is not the place to debate it. But in that case, you have to create other political projects. What we cannot do is turn our backs on that task. It is not enough to get rid of Rosselló. Without building our political alternative, we stay halfway, under the government of the Board and the same employer class. The July days have begun a new era in the history of the country. Let's take advantage of the possibilities it offers us.

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[1] This was when when a mass movement developed to successfully demand the resignation of Puerto Rico's governor, Ricardo Rosselló. This followed leaked text messages of "chat" showing the governor and members of his inner circle using homophobic and misogynistic language directed at political rivals and cultural figures and joking about the deaths resulting from Hurricane Maria, which killed thousands of people on the island in September 2017.

[2] The financial oversight board or management board was created in 2016 following the passage of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), a US federal law enacted in 2016 that also established a process for restructuring debt, and expedited procedures for approving critical infrastructure projects in order to combat the Puerto Rican government-debt

[3] The island- municipality of Vieques was been used by the US navy as a bombing range until 2003 when protests made their withdrawal inevitable

[4] The term macana, of Taíno origin, refers to various wooden weapons used by the various native cultures of Central and South America