

Puerto Rican Politics Will Never Be the Same

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Disgraced Puerto Rican governor Ricardo Rosselló is slated to leave office today. It's a victory for the mass protest movement — but as elites struggle to name a successor, the colony's future remains uncertain.

For weeks, Puerto Rico has been rocked by mass protests against the governor, Ricardo Rosselló. The protests began after the Center for Investigative Journalism in Puerto Rico released hundreds of pages of private chat logs, revealing conversations between Rosselló and his political associates in which they mock hurricane survivors, use misogynistic and homophobic slurs, and display a stunning lack of political commitment to ordinary Puerto Ricans, to say nothing of personal compassion. After initially trying to weather the storm and remain in office, Rosselló announced last week that he would resign from his position as governor — a first in Puerto Rican history. His resignation is slated to take effect today.

Nearly all of Rosselló's cabinet resigned in scandal over their own participation in the leaked chat logs, leaving the governor without an obvious successor. After justice secretary Wanda Vásquez announced she didn't want the job, Roselló nominated Pedro Pierluisi to be his secretary of state on Wednesday, placing the former resident commissioner for Puerto Rico first in the line of succession. After a grueling day of confirmation hearings yesterday and an ongoing special legislative session today, it's not clear whether Pierluisi has the votes necessary to become secretary of state. (Vásquez, for her part, has reluctantly announced that she'll accept the governorship if it comes down to it.) The stage seems set for a constitutional crisis in Puerto Rico.

Although the leaked text messages were the immediate cause of the unrest, popular discontent goes back much further. Puerto Ricans have lived under punishing austerity since the island's financial crisis began in 2006. And in 2016, the United States imposed the colonial Fiscal Control Board to protect the interests of private lenders who owned portions of Puerto Rico's sovereign debt. (Pierluisi has faced blistering criticism over the past several days for his strong ties to the Fiscal Control Board, which senate president Thomas Rivera Schatz called "Puerto Rico's number one enemy.") Oftentimes with Rosselló's collaboration, the unelected junta — as it is known in Puerto Rico — has slashed public education on the island, raised tuition at public universities, and decimated Puerto Rico's health care system. In 2017, Hurricane Maria brought even more devastation — and further revealed the gulf between ordinary Puerto Ricans and the elite political class.

Jacobin's Jonah Walters spoke with author Yarimar Bonilla about the anti-austerity movement, the limits of popular democracy in a US colony, and the political establishment's attachment to the colonial status quo.

JW | What has happened in Puerto Rico in the past couple of weeks?

YB | I have to say, this has taken everyone by surprise, myself included! The outrage over the governor's text messages was the spark for a much bigger fire. It was the final straw, after years of

anger over the austerity measures imposed after the debt crisis and outrage over how everything was handled after Hurricane Maria.

The text messages seemed to have galvanized everybody: from university students, to retired folks with pensions, to people in motorcycle clubs and car clubs, bicycle clubs, people on jet skis, scuba divers. All sectors of society, across class lines. Feminist groups and the LGBTQ+ community have also played a crucial role. And groups beyond Puerto Rico, in the global diaspora, have participated in solidarity protests.

Many people who aren't usually involved in political protest suddenly joined this larger movement. And to everyone's surprise, it seemed to have a rather immediate effect — getting the governor to step down. Of course, now everything is a little bit murky. It's hard to know what's going to happen next.

JW | Why were these protests so galvanizing? Besides the governor's text messages, what contributed to people's outrage?

YB | I think, in some ways, this protest is a result of Hurricane Maria. People were so outraged about the chats because Rosselló and his political associates were making fun of everyone — and possibly even enriching themselves — at the time when Puerto Ricans were suffering the most, when Puerto Ricans were going through their greatest hardships.

The chats revealed that while ordinary Puerto Ricans were clearing their streets, taking care of their families, burying their dead, the government was solely focused on spinning the crisis to its benefit. People on the island spent a year without electricity. Even today, there are still many traffic lights not working in Puerto Rico. There are still people living here under tarps. To see the government not only fail us in that situation, but actually make light of it and mock the dead, was too much to accept.

It's also important to remember the current of *autogestión* (self-management or mutual aid) that has emerged here since the debt crisis. For more than a decade before Maria, Puerto Ricans were thinking, "Well, we have this broken bankrupt state that can't really help us. We need to figure out how to do things on our own." In that context, numerous social networks emerged. These networks are what saved Puerto Ricans after Maria. People were able to organize collectively, on a community level, to get food, to get water, to get solar lights, exchange batteries, charge phones, get insulin — all the things that you would expect a government to do.

As a result, the governor celebrated Puerto Ricans for being "resilient." He even emphasized this when he was selling Puerto Rico to investors. A big selling point for him was the fact that companies could come here and claim that their products were "made in the USA" even as they paid their workers lower wages than in the fifty states, and he also emphasized that Puerto Rican workers were "resilient": they could live without basic services.

It turns out that what the governor called resilience was actually empowerment — and it backfired against him. It was precisely that "resilience" that allowed Puerto Ricans to stay out on the streets, marching every day, for two weeks. They weren't afraid of tear gas. They weren't afraid of threats. That really caught the political class by surprise. The political elites didn't realize that they had, inadvertently, empowered people to not only take care of themselves but to also change their government. They had no idea what they had created.

JW | Let's talk about the disgraced governor, Ricardo Rosselló. What did he represent politically in Puerto Rico?

YB | I think a lot of people know this already, but his father was governor before him. He comes from a very elite class. He graduated from this private school, Colegio Marista, which produced the previous governor and Pedro Pierluisi, Rosselló's possible successor, as well. Rosselló is a symbol of an entrenched elite class that has dominated Puerto Rican politics for a long time — and that dominates the economy, as well.

During this time of austerity, when so many folks have had to deal with budget cuts at the universities, budget cuts in healthcare, and the closing of public schools, the ability of these elites to hold on and even expand their power has caused great outrage.

Ricky Rosselló — and everyone who appears to be a possible successor for him — represents an entrenched, corrupt political class that people want to get rid of.

JW | He came into political office as an avatar of the statehood movement in Puerto Rico, right?

YB | Yes. It's important to remind people outside of Puerto Rico that the political parties here are not organized according to Republicans and Democrats, or even according to left or right in the traditional sense, but by the political relationship with the United States that each party advocates — be it statehood, independence, or commonwealth status. Rosselló is a member of the New Progressive Party (PNP), the only party that is firmly in support of statehood. In many ways, this movement, and the inability of the PNP to respond to it, represents a real blow to that party.

Before Maria and the economic crisis, I was actually doing research on the statehood movement. A lot of the people I interviewed made it very clear that they supported statehood, but they were *not* loyalists to the PNP. A lot of ordinary voters have long felt hostage to that party, which has a proven record of corruption.

Many young people involved in the protests feel that the political parties have hijacked governance on the island, by focusing narrowly on their aspirations for a future relationship to the United States. PNP politicians have said, literally, that their economic program is statehood! That's no way to address the very dire economic conditions that are impacting Puerto Ricans *now*. For many of the young people I've interviewed, removing this governor from power is a way of approaching new democratic possibilities, a way of acting politically in a different way from their parents.

At the same time, we still have to ask: What are the stakes of carrying out an anti-corruption and pro-democracy movement in a colonial context? How democratic can a colony be? To what extent can you ever clean up corruption in a place that doesn't have sovereignty or true self-governance?

JW | To what extent are the protests not only about the personal corruption of Rosselló, but also about the existence of the colonial Fiscal Control Board?

YB | A lot of the chants at the protest site were for Ricky to leave and to take the Fiscal Board with him. I think, for the great majority who protested, getting rid of Ricky was just the beginning of a larger movement. This movement is still taking shape, of course, and has all the complexity of an emerging social movement. Nobody wants to see this become co-opted by an opposition party or a narrowly defined political group — we want it to remain a broad clamor. But that's also the challenge: how do you channel this political energy?

In the past few days, we've started seeing people's assemblies forming in towns outside of San Juan, to discuss the future of the movement. Now is the time when folks are coming together, talking about politics in a different way, daring to dream about something different than the options that are

always presented to them in the ballot box, none of which speak to their desires and to the realities of how to decolonize Puerto Rico now, in the present moment. The decolonial options of the mid-twentieth century don't respond to the political realities of the present day — the fact that there are more Puerto Ricans living in the United States than on the Puerto Rican archipelago, for example — nor do they address the enduring lack of sovereignty faced by former colonies around the globe.

These spaces of assembly are going to be really key for thinking through political questions going forward. What is the relationship Puerto Ricans want to have with the United States? But, more concretely: What kind of schools do they want? What kind of health care do they want? What forms of governance do they desire? And how can we achieve these aims (or not) within the constraints of our colonial situation?

The full impact of this moment can't possibly be assessed right now. There is no doubt that this is a turning point, which will transform the next elections and change political thinking for years to come.

JW | But US colonialism puts some significant limits on this kind of popular democracy in Puerto Rico, right?

YB | Yes, and we have to be really attentive to the federal agenda in all of this. Something people in the United States can do to show solidarity is to keep a close eye on how the federal government might use the protests to impose further anti-democratic policies in Puerto Rico, or strengthen anti-democratic entities such as the Fiscal Board. Immediately after the protests began, there was a series of op-eds in almost all the major US newspapers saying that the movement should be followed by increased federal oversight. That's very concerning.

Some people try to represent the Fiscal Board as an alternative to corrupt politicians. But the Board has not done anything to deal with corruption. It never served as a monitor, as some people here hoped it would. In reality, it has had severe conflicts of interest. In fact, Rosselló's possible successor — Pedro Pierluisi — personifies some of those conflicts of interest. He was involved in the creation of the Board and has been serving as its lawyer. His wife's brother is the president of the Board.

It's really suspect, actually, that he's the one who has emerged as a possible elite solution to the current crisis. I think, in some ways, the traditional political class is closing ranks and trying to bring an end to this democratic moment in the streets. Personally, I think this will backfire because it will show how connected the board is to entrenched politicians here, and how scared they are of more radical forms of democracy.

JW | One of the most significant things about these protests, it seems to me, is that they weren't organized by the traditional political parties. What comes next for Puerto Rico?

YB | The future is still unclear. I do worry that some elites — especially foreign investors — are preparing to take advantage of the situation. Some of those people may be thinking of the change in government as something akin to bringing in a new CEO, someone who will clean up things and make the island an even better climate for investment.

We need to be attentive to what comes next. It could go in any number of ways. One possibility might be doubling down on austerity in the name of cleaning up corruption and establishing good governance — to attract foreign investment, specifically, while pushing Puerto Ricans out. But, on the other hand, people have become very empowered after Maria, through their own efforts to help one another survive through *autogestión*.

Until these protests, things looked very bleak — I, myself, was doing a lot of writing about pessimism, about the political consequences of living at the intersection of austerity and climate change, when all the future seemed to promise was further decay. But now we're seeing that one effect of that pessimism might be that it takes away the fear of change. If the status quo offers nothing but gloom, perhaps that makes you more courageous, more willing to think about changing the future. It's too soon to offer grand conclusions, but it certainly seems to be a time of new possibilities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yarimar Bonilla is professor of Puerto Rican studies and anthropology at Hunter College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, the author of *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment*, and the editor, with Marisol LeBrón, of *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*. She is in Puerto Rico conducting research on the political impact of Hurricane Maria and interviewing protestors.

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