

Puerto Rico: It's About More Than Ricky

Friday 6 September 2019, by [MORALES Ed](#) (Date first published: 2 August 2019).

The toppling of Puerto Rico's centrist governor is a beautiful display of people power. The next target: La Junta, the Washington-imposed board pushing austerity and privatization.

What has happened on the streets of old San Juan and the distant west coast and mountain towns of Puerto Rico has been stunning, a hauntingly beautiful display of people power — a full-on awakening augured by the decades-invoked “*Despierta Boricua*” slogan, one that allows islanders to say things like “*ya no es el mismo país*” (it's no longer the same country) and revel in the revolutionary awareness that “*somos más, y no temenos miedo*” (there are more of us than them, and we are not afraid).

Personally, I'm overjoyed. I have friends out there singing, dancing salsa, doing yoga, banging kitchen pots every night at 8 PM, [gyrating to reggaetón mixes](#). Ricky Rosselló has resigned, and the people have identified a corrupt class of elites while creating momentum to overturn the United States's [neoliberal-colonial project](#), put in place fresh leaders, and generate a new sense of progressive politics. Their anti-austerity resistance seems to have worked.

Yet, on the other hand, sitting in New York, the hometown of Trump and Wall Street, I'm worried. The removal of Rosselló and the apparent collapse of his pro-statehood, ironically named New Progressive Party (NPP), seems also to coincide with the most sinister of elite desired outcomes: the decimation of Puerto Rican democracy. The current internecine NPP power struggle over who will be the next governor — between Tomás Rivera Schatz, (known locally as “Tommy”), a sinister hard-right figure who prefers to rule with an iron fist, and the moderate wing represented by Rosselló and his secretary of state nominee Pedro Pierluisi, who had [dubious connections to lobbying](#) when he was resident commissioner a few years ago — is more evidence of this.

But these maneuverings are also just a distraction from a dark reality. Puerto Rico's government has already been reduced to a shell of itself since the imposition of the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board (known as La Junta on the island) in 2017.

The Invisible Hand: Propping up “La Junta”

In strictly political terms, as disgustingly sexist and homophobic as the 889 pages of the famously [leaked chat](#) were, Rosselló's government was also pretty centrist, in the style of the Democratic National Committee and mainstream liberalism. Just a month and a half ago, Rosselló refused to sign a “religious freedom” law that would allow business owners to legally discriminate against LGBT people (a decision seemingly influenced by [pop singer Ricky Martin](#), who would later become his tormentor at the Ricky Resign protests). He [held court](#) at a meeting with a democratic congressional delegation in San Juan in early January.

But he was also stuck in an untenable position: having taken power at the same time as La Junta, the only way to gain political currency was to pretend to fight the austerity measures that the previous NPP governor Luis Fortuño championed in the early 2010s. At one point, Rosselló [absurdly claimed](#) that he would go to jail before allowing La Junta to impose furloughs on government workers. More

recently, he had strongly opposed cutting pensions to government workers.

While Rosselló's tentative resignation was celebrated wildly by protesters, who had been in the streets for almost two weeks, Wall Street and Washington chimed in quickly, apparently thrilled with the way things turned out. The *Wall Street Journal* published an [editorial](#), "Puerto Rico's Political Meltdown," that was a virtual rewrite of former IMF honcho Anne Krueger's 2015 report about Puerto Rico, which claimed that wages and benefits on the island were too high. "Puerto Rico's main problem is democratic socialism, and Mr Rosselló is typical of a political class that buys votes with handouts," the editorial proclaimed.

The *Washington Post*, whose editorial board member Fred Hiatt is on the Aspen Institutes' [board of trustees](#) with La Junta chairman Natalie Jaresko, avoided red-baiting but felt that Puerto Ricans "deserved better" and that their precarious situation would be remedied by Congress taking "steps to strengthen the [oversight] board." (The editorial failed to mention that La Junta had the final say in all budget decisions and restructuring plans, since it is authorized by Congress to act as the Puerto Rican people's representative in the debt restructuring process.)

All of this seems to imply that both New York and Washington had grown annoyed at the role Puerto Rico's government was playing in resisting an agenda of total austerity and privatization, even if it was mostly ineffectual. Talk about getting greedy.

On the mainland, something of a resistance to the Trump agenda has been mounted by Representative Raúl Grijalva, chairman of the House Committee of Natural Resources, who is [said to have drafted legislation](#) that would create a "reconstruction czar" to oversee funds directed to the island, as well as allow the Puerto Rican government to cancel some of the \$72 billion debt and authorize a commission to conduct a debt audit. Yet Trump and the Senate are still in charge of reappointing its members by August 30, and Grijalva's ambitious proposals will face considerable opposition.

Judge Laura Taylor Swain has called for a 120-day moratorium of Title III bankruptcy court procedures, one of the requirements of the PROMESA debt-restructuring act, but island activists like Representative Manuel Natal Albelo fear that could be a cover for negotiations to be carried out behind closed doors. The board itself continues to be active in setting the agenda for debt restructuring, although it now has no real relationship with the government, given that Rosselló has resigned and the governor's non-voting representative on the board, Cristian Sobrino, stepped down weeks ago after the chats revealed he had joked about feeding Hurricane Maria's dead to vultures. While the leaked conversations indicate that Rosselló ignored complaints from four people in the government about corruption, the board had been informed as well and took no action. (The board's chair, José Carrión, took part in an event in Miami last month announcing the launch of a group called "[Latinos for Trump](#).")

There are plenty of unanswered questions about how the scandal unfolded in the first place. The two pivotal events in late June that culminated in the leaking of the chats — the arrest of six government officials, including the US-born, pro-privatization Secretary of Education, Julia Keleher, and the sudden resignation of Secretary of Commerce Raúl Maldonado — originated in the US Department of Justice. It's unclear whether the actions can be traced to Attorney General Bob Barr, but the aggressive, wide-ranging nature of the investigations were unusual even for Puerto Rico, where, notwithstanding a 2015 [corruption arrest](#) of a popular Democratic Party fundraiser, most federal probes target drug money laundering and identity theft used for Medicare fraud.

The source of the chats may well be Maldonado, who told San Juan daily *El Nuevo Día* in June that there was an "institutional mafia" in the government. Natal Albelo speculated that since Maldonado

had been talking to the FBI they may have gained access to the chats directly or by other means. “It all points to Raul Maldonado and the FBI but I wouldn’t know how to tell you, because it seemed to me to be something strategic, the way the chats were divulged little by little, until they were completely divulged,” he said. Maldonado’s son, Raul Jr, also informed the daily that he had been in a room with the governor when he ordered an accounting firm to change unfavorable information in an audit of a post-hurricane nonprofit with which his wife had been associated. On July 15, Raul Jr [suggested that there were additional leaked chats](#), and just a few days ago the Maldonados’ lawyer had to deny a report that Raul Jr was offered \$100,000 not to release them. All of these developments occurred after Maldonado and his son had been cooperating with the FBI. A second, smaller trove of chats, featuring equally repugnant attacks on Natal and his political ally, Alexandra Lúgaro, was [published on Wednesday](#).

There’s a danger here. Not only does the focus on Puerto Rico government corruption serve to divert attention away from a possible power grab by the board, it hands Trump and Congress a cynical justification for delaying or micromanaging further aid to Puerto Rico. It also distracts us from the corruption and influence-peddling that characterizes Trump’s style of government, where cabinet positions are given to those best positioned to take advantage of granting contracts to their closest business associates with impunity. The [complex political trolling machine](#) used by the Rosselló government is business as usual for right-wing Republicans, and the FBI doesn’t seem to be investigating that efficiently enough to provoke the release of a chat storm.

Long, Hot Summer

There’s been much speculation about why the Puerto Rican Spring (in Summer) hasn’t been replicated in the United States, where a far worse government is in charge. Two factors are key: as much as 45 percent of Puerto Ricans live below the poverty line, and they endure daily reminders that they’ve been colonial subjects for over five hundred years. When Trump said, disgustingly, that he is the best thing that ever happened to Puerto Rico, it’s not all that different from what islanders have been hearing for centuries.

As for the resistance, it’s part socialist, with roots in labor and student groups. One notable group is the openly socialist [Colectiva Feminista](#), which advances a vision of revolutionary feminism and antiracism. The movement is also suffused with a kind of millennial nationalism, where oppressed groups come together in an alternative universe that creates a constituency ready-made for something like Occupy Wall Street, except more inclusive. And it’s been building for years, since the 2010 protests at least, when students I interviewed breathlessly described their egalitarian, democratic assembly decision-making they learned from Spain’s Indignados, months before Occupy.

In some ways, I wonder why it took this long. The obvious answer, I guess, is the aftershock of Hurricane Maria, a catastrophic event set off by climate emergency. Maybe we’ll see the same upsurge in New York when Zuccotti Park, sitting in vulnerable Manhattan, creeps closer to a rising sea. But hopefully, we won’t have to wait that long.

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