

Romney and Fortuño: A man is known by the company he keeps

Escrito por Pedro M. Anglada Cordero
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When it comes to reaching out to attract the Hispanic vote, Mitt Romney did not hesitate to acclaim Governor Luis Fortuño for executing an unprecedented political program in Puerto Rico.

Romney's approval of Fortuño came in a time in which Rick Santorum was still a threat during the Republican Primaries. To receive Fortuño's endorsement, Romney went on to promise and compromise with Fortuño and his political party in issues related to the political status of Puerto Rico that are troubling to Republicans abroad, and that are in conflict with Romney's previous positions about Puerto Rico. Mitt Romney's ongoing change of direction regarding his stance on key political issues, even if this constitutes a contradiction in his political positions, have been a major trend throughout his entire political career, with the 2012 Presidential race not being the exception. Romney has managed to frame many of his setbacks using rhetoric that confuses voters, or helps them to forget the damage caused by his administration. For many, Romney's political relationship with Fortuño may be viewed as just another strategy to create a spectacle for electoral support. But for those who are aware of Fortuño's record, Romney's willingness to gravitate closer and closer to such a figure most not go unnoticed as this reveals how the Presidential candidate is disposed to support and maintain a political leader who has used colonial rule to abuse power, and has worsened the already deteriorated economy of Puerto Rico. In past elections, it was not necessary for presidential candidates to seek political support in Puerto Rico. Time has changed the game; the constant movement of Puerto Ricans to the states is now, one big reason for Romney to remain close to Fortuño.

The massive migrations of Puerto Ricans to Florida and areas other than New York, Illinois and Pennsylvania have made Puerto Rican voters a relevant political minority in the states. Indeed, the last United States census revealed that the Puerto Rican population has doubled in the states of Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia during the last 10 years. The unresolved dilemma

of the political status of Puerto Rico, or the fact that the massive migration of Puerto Ricans to the states is an indicator of a failing colonial government, have not generated as much attention as the present importance of Puerto Ricans and Hispanic voters in the general in the upcoming elections, especially in the state of Florida, which is considered a political battle ground.

For Mitt Romney, this is when Puerto Rico's Governor, Luis Fortuño becomes important. As the Hispanic population is the largest growing voting minority, which has the potential capacity of deciding the elections in states such as Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, Romney and the Republican Party have struggled to attract this population; when it comes to immigration issues and the need for reform, the conservative speech causes discomfort and skepticism. Among Hispanic leaders, Luis Fortuño, is one of the few politicians who have received notoriety as a conservative and GOP member. Throughout the states, Mr. Fortuño has been upheld as a champion of political conservatism for implementing a political agenda that goes completely hand-in-hand with that of the GOP and the Republican Party: small government, tax-cuts, reduced government spending, the reliance on the private sector for job creation, and the sacrifice of non-renewable natural resources for short- term economic recovery.

Based on his reputation, Fortuño has boasted throughout the United States media that he has been successful in creating jobs in Puerto Rico by implementing austerity measures, and the proposed agenda of the Republican Party as mentioned above. For this purpose, Fortuño is considered a key figure to attract the Hispanic vote (especially in Florida), and was invited by the Romney Campaign to deliver a speech about the economy at the Republican National Convention. But for those who are aware of the political reality in Puerto Rico, such claims about Fortuño don't add up.

On August 28th, in an interview with Gwen Ifill on Public Television during the Republican Convention, Fortuño delivered the classic Republican speech by criticizing Washington for their policies of over-regulation, which according to conservatives, hinders job creation. Fortuño went on claiming that his administration "has created jobs in Puerto Rico for the first time in 6 years", and went further sustaining that government grants for job-creation would be better managed at the state level without Washington's intervention. Fortuño's record regarding job-creation shows exactly the opposite of his statements, and his backing for deregulation comes with a premeditated agenda that have characterized his administration and, his political party (the PNP) for decades. A path of corruption, embezzlement of public and federal funds, unethical behaviors, and serious violations of human rights has branded the PNP for over thirty years. The fact is that Fortuño would have not dared to make such statements in any Puerto Rican media, where he is well known.

Fortuño and the political program that Romney acclaims

As soon as Fortuño took office in 2009, a fast-track legislation created the Law 7 of Fiscal Emergency. The original bill was converted into law with Fortuño's PNP overwhelmingly dominating the Commonwealth's Senate and the House of Representatives, and with an evidently politicized Commonwealth Supreme Court. The constitutionality of Law 7 was seriously questioned by multiple stakeholders, and the case was brought to the Supreme Court, but the debate in question about the proposed law was short-lived. Justice Eric Kolthoff, an

obscure Judge from the appellate court, was appointed by Fortuño to the Commonwealth Supreme Court despite his lack of history of relevant rulings. Without hesitation, Kolthoff redacted the opinion that declared Law 7 constitutional. In fact, as the constitutionality of Law 7 was being challenged in court, the massive firings of public workers were executed. According to El Nuevo Día (END; February 4th, 2010), before the Supreme Court rulings, about 6,000 public workers were already laid off while another 3,000 settled by resigning with some benefits. After Law 7 was declared constitutional, the firings of more than 15,000 workers were put in effect. The firings continued over the next months, and by the end of May 2010, more than 20,000 workers were unemployed. According to the The Economist (July, 2010), by the month of April, unemployment in Puerto Rico rose to an all-time-high (16.9 %). The same article confirms what was well-known in Puerto Rican media; Fortuño advocated and welcomed the \$6 billion in stimulus money from the Obama administration as part of his plan “to boost investments and economic activity” in his government. Indeed, Fortuño did not hesitate to balance his government’s budget based on the assumption that Puerto Rico would receive the funds from Obamacare.

Who benefits in Fortuño’s administration

As Fortuño articulates the need of severe austerity measures such as Law 7 to fix Puerto Rico’s economy, his record shows that cutting spending or reducing government size are far away from his agenda. The same day Law 7 was declared constitutional (February 4th, 2010), END published the results of a journalistic investigation that revealed serious problems of nepotism and politically-motivated contracts by the PNP legislature and Fortuño’s administration. It was found that the PNP employed 17 close relatives of PNP legislators, and other governmental officials to work in privileged positions with high-paid salaries. The list, which was limited to those relatives working at the Capitol House, includes the parents, siblings, spouses, and progeny of several PNP elected officials. The contracted relatives, whose payroll totals \$858,000 a year, includes Irmgard González, sister of Jennifer González, President of the Puerto Rican House of Representatives, and José Aponte Sánchez, son of Representative José Aponte Hernández; Senator Itzamar Peña has her husband, Marcelino Moyett with various contracts as an advisor, and her father, Angel Peña Rosa as Director of the Office of Governmental Affairs. One of the most pathetic cases of nepotism by the PNP is the one of Christian Soto Mujica, brother of Senator Lorna Soto. Senator Soto initiated her career in politics through the connections in the PNP of her father, José “Chemo” Soto, who is the mayor of the municipality of Canóvanas. Once in office, Senator Soto connected her brother with a position as a “technician” in the House of Representatives’ Commission of Public Security. Soto Mujica, who until September 2011 was running for office in the House of Representatives, used his position to run a major drug-trafficking operation to introduce marijuana to Puerto Rico from México and California using the US Postal Service.

The misuse of public funds by Fortuño’s government is not limited to the hiring of close relatives. The aforementioned END investigation also found that the PNP maintains on its payroll 36 out of 46 defeated and retired politicians of that political party working in the legislature. Historically, the PNP and the other dominant political party of Puerto Rico, the PPD, are known for using this tactic to maintain political power and the status quo in the Island. However, in Fortuño’s administration, politically motivated contracts became outrageously out of control

when compared to previous administrations. At the time the END investigation was released, the PNP was dedicating over \$2,778,000 a year on this 36 political friends in the legislature. This way, the PNP hired a significant number of politicians that were voted out during the 2008 elections, and others that are no longer politically viable. In this fashion, politicians who no longer receive support from the people are being part of the decisive political process of the Island. None of these politically motivated contractors were laid off when the Law 7 took effect.

The trend of keeping friends close and well paid goes further when it comes to contractors outside the legislature. Still, it reveals a most concerning pattern of corruption and unethical behavior. Dennis Medina Rivera, a businessman closely linked to Fortuño and the PNP received more than \$20,000,000 in contracts since the beginning of the current administration. END (October 5th, 2012) revealed that through his company, New Start Acquisition, Corp., Medina Rivera executed appraisals, repossession of land and other real-state related transactions without proper licensure as required by law. According to END, for Via Verde alone, an ill-fated Gas Pipeline development that was recently discontinued, Medina Rivera received \$6.3 million in a contract through the Authority of Electric Energy (AEE). Roger Iglesias, a legislator from the district of Carolina, was under investigation until recently because before he was sworn to replaced the convicted PNP ex-legislator Hector Martínez, he had founded Engineering & Communication Group; a consulting agency in which he provided services as an engineer without formal academic training or credentials. Iglesias ceded E&C Group to his daughters after becoming a legislator. E&C Group's contracts sky-rocketed once Iglesias became a legislator. Iglesias was acquitted despite the fact that the Puerto Rican Bar of Engineers found substantial evidence indicating that the legislator committed a crime by signing documents in which he claimed to be an engineer without being one. This case acquired notoriety as the President of the Senate of Puerto Rico, Thomas Rivera Schatz was reluctant to move forward to open an investigation against Iglesias. It turned out that Rivera Schatz's own father, José Rivera Díaz, was engaging in exactly the same behavior as Iglesias through a corporation named JRD Consultant Group Corp. Rivera Díaz had contracts with Fortuño's administration for more than \$770,000. It remains unclear whether a formal investigation was ever opened against Rivera Díaz; however, the telenovela-structure of Puerto Rican politics carries on with revolving plots, secret relationships, and scheming characters.

The truth about Fortuño's job creation plan

On August 29th, 2012, the morning after Governor Fortuño told Gwen Ifill that his administration was "creating jobs for the first time in six years", END released another journalistic investigation that revealed that the government opened numerous career positions in more than twenty governmental agencies including the Governor's Office, the Tourism Company, the Department of State, the Department of Corrections, and the Department of the Family, and the AEE among others, which were filled by "trusted" employees. The term "trusted" or *empleados de confianza* as known in Spanish, refers to those public employees who are recognized to be in their positions for being supporters of the ruling political party regardless of their merits or qualifications to performs the duties of their jobs. The two dominant political parties in Puerto Rico are known for using this practice as another tactic to maintain colonial power and the status quo. This strategy is so common, that the colonial government passed legislation establishing a deadline in which the government can no longer hire public employees during an

election year. Thus, due to the upcoming elections, the government was not allowed to hire public employees for permanent career positions after September 7th, 2012. END found that the Fortuño administration announced the positions internally on June 1st, kept them open for 14 days, and filled them within record time during the summer. The investigation also found that the newly hired employees were already working in their respective agencies since 2009 after Law 7 took effect, and were promoted to permanent positions with higher-paid salaries. These actions are in contracts with Fortuño's political program, which advocates for government reduction. Governor Fortuño denied that his administration engaged in such practices during a radio interview with NOTIUNO, but the spoke-person of the agencies, and other internal sources confirmed the massive hiring in the governmental agencies. In the AEE alone, the president of the UTIER Workers' Union, Ángel Figueroa Jaramillo confirmed that the trend of new promotions started in the AEE during March and intensified in June.

After all of the colonial government's moves, the general consensus without a doubt is that in Fortuño's administration, the execution of harsh austerity measures was not a strategy to reduce government and restore the economy, but to shield and promote friends and cronies of the PNP.

The hypocrisy of the sterile game of colonial politics

While Fortuño presents himself critical of the Obama administration in the United States, his closest colleague in the PNP stationed in Washington, Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi; well-known as a member of the United States Democratic Party, and who was a guest-speaker at the 2012 Democratic Convention, openly advocates and lobby for Puerto Rico to receive equal treatment from all federal programs and from all passed legislations in the United States' Senate related to economic recovery including the Affordable Care Act. From one end, Fortuño walks shoulder to shoulder with Mitt Romney criticizing the Obama administration and advocating for a conservative agenda, and from the other end, uses his PNP connections in the Democratic Party to present a façade of political support to Obama's administration. Meanwhile, Fortuño administers his colonial government at the beck and call of the Republican Party's agenda. Out of the political program of the Democratic Party in Washington D.C., Fortuño and Pierluisi support each other unconditionally as consolidated and established in the PNP political program where criticism against one another is non-existent; their political ideology is the result of the hypocrisy inherent in the sterile game of colonial politics. From a distance, the Obama administration and the Democratic Party may not be aware that while they are under the impression that they have the support of the PNP and its colonial government, the PNP used the support from the Obama administration to execute an abusive government that fired thousands of public workers.

There is no question that the United States Government real agenda in Puerto Rico is to maintain colonial rule. Presidential candidates have maintained a vague position about this issue, as ultimately is up to the US Congress to decide whether they want to engage in a legitimate de-colonization process. Meanwhile, Congress has completely evaded this issue. Romney, in a matter of a simple visit to Puerto Rico, compromised with Fortuño and the PNP in not demanding English to become Puerto Rico's official language if the Island were to become a state. Regarding an up-coming referendum in which Puerto Ricans will be able to vote for a new

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political formula, Romney compromised to support the federal statehood in Congress even if this formula does not obtain absolute electoral majority. Previously, Romney has maintained his distance from supporting federal statehood for Puerto Rico, and has been a solid supporter of US for English, and other conservative organizations who advocate maintaining the colonial status in Puerto Rico, and for English to become the definitive official language of the United States. However, for the purpose of the presidential elections, Romney not only maintains his support for Fortuño and his support for statehood in Puerto Rico, but goes out of his way to make the Republican Party change its position in order to align himself with the agenda of Fortuño and his cronies. For the first time in United States-Puerto Rico relations, a question rises, who is the puppet, and who is the puppeteer?

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