



It used to be the Free Associated State of Puerto Rico was touted as the Showcase of Progress and Democracy in the Caribbean as a result of its accelerated industrialization, the development of its infrastructure, education and health systems and a constitutional system of government in the 1950s and 60s.

At present, however, many United States news outlets and economic reviews are writing about Puerto Rico's astronomical public debt, its economic crisis and its ramifications. At present the debt is estimated at 73 billion U.S. dollars – up from 32 billion dollars in 2006, one year after the beginning of a recession in Puerto Rico that is expected to persist until 2018, although given the present fiscal crisis that is doubtful.

Beyond the junk bond status of Puerto Rico bonds, with unemployment estimated at between 13 and 14 per cent, a 44.9 per cent poverty rate, with 84 per cent of its children living in poverty stricken areas, only four out of ten of those able to work doing so, and at a \$19,000 median annual income that is half the income of Mississippi, the United States' poorest state, Puerto Rico can hardly be called a showcase of anything but the failure of a dependent economy based on foreign, predominantly U.S. investment, low wages, tax exemption for foreign corporations, and dependence on U.S. federal funds.

Population and other demographic data are also indicators of a showcase gone sour. The new wave of Puerto Rican migration to the United States has been continuous and massive numbering 84,000 in 2014 alone, including professionals, with a population of 5.1 million in the United States while an aging population 3.6 million remains in Puerto Rico.

Thus the constitutional system of government established in Puerto Rico in 1952 with the founding of the Free Associated State was a misrepresentation and also a failure as it left intact the backdrop for the present crisis which is the colonial status of Puerto Rico. Despite its autonomy in fiscal affairs, U.S. Congressional laws govern over Puerto Rican legislation in the

areas international relations and commerce, monetary issues, migration and emigration, maritime traffic (with U.S. Maritime Law applied to Puerto Rico), customs, labor relations and trade union organization, border patrol, airspace and transportation, communications, defense, and many other areas.

In terms of its environmental protection and policy, ecological balance, climate change, global warming Puerto Rico is also subordinate to outside United States agencies, interests, policies, and power. This is very dangerous for the Puerto Rican population as Puerto Rico is a small island country in the Caribbean. In this regard, Puerto Rico's internationally known geomorphologist, Dr. José Molinelli, recently warned that the Puerto Rico Planning Board lacks protocols for handling events in tsunami prone zones.

In the present situation of fiscal and economic crisis, the Puerto Rican legislature adopted a bankruptcy law which would have made it possible for public corporations on the Island to declare bankruptcy and thus be enabled to restructure their debt. The debt of the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority alone is estimated at 9 billion U.S. dollars. However, this legislation was overruled by the United States extraterritorial Federal Court which operates in Puerto Rico. Action which followed by Puerto Rico Resident Commission in Washington, Pedro Pierluisi, for a law to be enacted in order that the Federal bankruptcy law be applicable to Puerto Rico has gone unheeded. A broad movement in Puerto Rico attempting to have Puerto Rico exempted from application of U.S. maritime law has also gone unheeded.

Response by the government of Puerto Rico has been to raise taxes, fees for a broad spectrum of services, as well as reducing services, and budget cutbacks in general – in general, a neo liberal austerity program styled after International Monetary Fund formulas that will lead to much hardship for the people of Puerto Rico.

Convoking of a Constitutional Status Assembly to deal with the colonial status, unity of purpose, greater protection of local business... are some of the objectives voiced in interviews of Puerto Rican leaders by Cándida Cotto, a reporter with the Puerto Rican pro-independence newspaper Claridad, on necessary actions in the face of the present fiscal and economic crisis hitting Puerto Rico at present and the hands off position of the United States president and Congress which have negated Puerto Rico the tools necessary for confronting this crisis. The answers included that the United States must be forced to address the crisis in Puerto Rico, including putting an end to its colonial relationship with the United States.

However, as noted in a number of editorial appearing in Puerto Rico major daily newspapers, El Nuevo Día and El Vocero, responds by the three branches of the United States government have been non-committal and even indifferent.

Puerto Rican pro sovereignty legislator Luis Vega Ramos, said "We need to understand, once and for all, that we can only depend on ourselves for moving forward, although many actors were involved in creating this financial bubble, we should not be hopeful that our creditors will negotiate with consideration of our better interest. And the three branches of the U.S. federal government have been reluctant to allow us necessary tools and support such as exemption from U.S. Maritime Laws, applying Federal bankruptcy law to our public corporations or support

from the Federal Reserve of the U.S. Treasury.”

Vega Ramos also referred to the fact that other jurisdictions and countries have also been affected by the financial bubble that has now exploded, including as a result of the actions of creditors.

“We must act with unity of purpose if we are to be successful in the difficult upcoming negotiations and to accomplish this we must have full transparency and citizen participation as never before seen in Puerto Rico. We need to all feel a part of the solution.”

According to Pro Independence Party leader, Juan Dalmau, the Puerto Rican community in the United States has a determining role because more than half of the Puerto Rican population is presently living in the United States where they participate in politics and form public opinion regarding Puerto Rico. When Puerto Rico is not a problem it can be swept under the rug. However, now that Puerto Rico is a theme, a problem, it can exert pressure.

He noted that all international financial analysis that have been done regarding the situation in Puerto Rico closely connect the situation to Puerto Rico’s colonial situation, political subordination and lack of powers therein, and the need to resolve that.

Wilma Reverón Collazo, a leader in the National Hostos Movement for the Independence of Puerto Rico, and others have called for an independent audit of Puerto Rico’s public debt, reparations to Puerto Rico for the exploitation, repression and environment damage the Puerto Rican people have endured at the hands of United States colonialism and solution of the colonial status through a Constitutional Status Assembly and independence.

The power relationship and political subordination of Puerto Rico to the United States points to a colonial status issue. Colonialism is an historical anachronism that has long been declared contrary to international law and human rights, from which emanates, in the case of Puerto Rico, the injustices inherent in the colonial relation which the United States has maintained with Puerto Rico since its invasion of the Island in 1898, one hundred and seventeen years ago.

Commitment to grassroots democracy is totally consistent with support for the decolonization of Puerto Rico as colonialism is also totally contrary to democracy. For the country ruled, democracy is non-existent where one country rules over another, if even if there are elections every four years to elect local authorities. Taking into account that in Puerto Rico the United States controls commerce, international relations, immigration, monetary issues, communications, postal matters, defense, labor relations, and others, to truly support democracy in Puerto Rico, its decolonization has to be supported as the first step for the Puerto Rican people to live in a democracy.

The issue of the support of the Puerto Rican people for independence and there not being enough support, therefore, is not an impediment for solidarity with Puerto Rico. Support for decolonization is a matter of principle precisely because colonialism is contrary to human rights, contrary to self-determination and contrary to democracy.

Regarding decolonization, what comes into play is what should be the mechanism in order that the Puerto Rican people freely exercise their sovereignty and their right to self-determination which are the inalienable rights of all peoples as recognized by international law, specifically by Resolution 1514(XV) of the United Nations General Assembly (1960), which is considered the Magna Carta of Decolonization.

Further, it must be stated that regarding the future status of Puerto Rico, the only option recognized by international law as inalienable, is the right to independence. International law maintains that all peoples have the inalienable right to self-determination and independence. The Free Associated State status, free association under international law and statehood for Puerto Rico are not inalienable rights. Further, Puerto Ricans are a separate people from the people of the United States.

Before the United States invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, the nationhood of the Puerto Rican people had been forged during more than four hundred years during which our culture and national identity became clear and distinct from that of any other people in the world. The Free Associated State status and statehood for Puerto Rico are not inalienable rights. Besides being an inalienable right, because Puerto Rico is a nation, international law posits that independence is the natural aspiration of peoples who have not yet acquired full self-government.

The plebiscites, referendums and the like carried out in Puerto Rico are not the solution precisely because they have not been free exercises of the will of the Puerto Rican people. They have taken place in the context of colonial rule, military occupation, repression and persecution of the independence forces, economic dependence and colonial legislation and U.S. Congressional legislation. Thus, their results cannot be said to reflect the true will of the Puerto Rican people. For these reasons they have not been an exercise of self-determination.

While the United States has maintained that it will accept the will and decision of the Puerto Rican people regarding its status, it has obstructed the process by maintaining that the issue is its internal matter and not recognizing the role of the United Nations. Precisely through these referendum and plebiscite processes, it has used its power in Puerto Rico to maintain the present status, which is the option most consistent with its economic, political and other interests in Puerto Rico.

These are the reasons that the Puerto Rican pro-independence forces and even some supporting other options continually resort to United Nations Resolution 1514(XV). It is recognized that the United Nations has a role to play. In order for an expression of the will of the Puerto Rican people regarding its future relation to the United States to be a free exercise, it must be supervised by the United Nations because it is understood that otherwise the determining factor in any exercise will be the power relationship of domination of the United States over Puerto Rico.

As regards the present situation as regards the fiscal and economic crisis, the situation is increasingly billed as a political crisis which will force attention to the colonial status and the need to resolve it if the fiscal and economic situation are to be addressed. Regarding the political status and independence, while it is true that a lot of work needs to be done by the

pro-independence forces in order that support for this option grow substantially, there is in Puerto Rico an overall sentiment that the present situation and the colonial status must be resolved.

Cleavages along which Puerto Rico's main political parties are divided delineate options which, according to the rhetoric of leaders of even the pro statehood and pro Free Associated State parties, move the country away from the colonial status. Even those supporting statehood (which would be the culmination of colonialism in Puerto Rico) continually attack the Free Associated State as colonial and the second class U.S citizenship of Puerto Ricans under the Free Associated State as the root of the country's problems.

Meanwhile, within the pro Free Associated State Popular Democratic Party, there is a growing so-called autonomous, pro sovereignty wing, which espouses greater powers for the Free Associated State, including to freely engage in international trade relations, and that outside of certain areas only powers specifically delegated should be exercised by the United States over Puerto Rico.

The vibrant social movements active today in Puerto Rico regarding women's rights, civil rights, community empowerment, the environment, youth, sports, culture, labor, cooperative economic endeavors, and many other areas, are in constant encounter with the colonial status as an impediment to their objectives. Thus, these social movements are also a base of the anti-colonial, potentially pro-independence movement that will participate in any future exercise in self-determination supervised by the international community, specifically the United Nations.

These movements and the pro-independence movement and organizations overlap in many scenarios, and along with the action of the United Nations and international solidarity, especially that of the people of the United States and our Latin American and Caribbean region, are the basis for the future possibility independence and democracy in Puerto Rico.

The inalienable right to self-determination is for all of the Puerto Rican people to exercise including those who do not support independence, but in order to be legitimate and a true exercise of self-determination with a level playing field for all options, including independence, the mechanism for its exercise but must a fair one that abides by international law, not any plebiscite or referendum.

Such is the case of a Constitutional Status Assembly, a mechanism for decolonization which is gaining ground in Puerto Rico as it becomes more urgent for the colonial status issue of Puerto Rico to be resolved. Within the United States progressive sectors, support for Puerto Rican decolonization and a fair mechanism for the decolonization process and independence to take place, is crucial.

*Magazine Green Horizons of the Green Party of the United States*