

Introduction

Struggle and Change in Puerto Rico

Expecting Democracy

by

Jean Díaz

*Preciosa serás sin bandera,
sin lauros, ni gloria;
Preciosa, Preciosa te llaman
los hijos de la libertad.*

Precious you will be without a flag,
without laurels, without glory;
Precious, Precious you are called
by the children of liberty.

—Rafael Hernández

These well-known lyrics of the anthem “Preciosa,” written by Rafael Hernández (“El Jibarito”) over a half century ago, express the spirit of Puerto Rico’s national sentiment and consciousness. National culture is an integral part of one’s sense of self and even of empowerment. The accomplishments of the struggles waged by the Puerto Rican people for over a century can be measured vis-à-vis that which identifies them as a people. What we are willing to defend depends upon our identity. It is what motivates us to action, to defend our right to exist as human beings, with a sense of dignity tied to our history and heritage. This year the UN Special Committee on Decolonization has once again affirmed that Puerto Rico is a Latin American and Caribbean nation with its own particular national identity and that its people have the right to democratic self-determination. The objective of this issue is to recognize the centrality of popular struggle to the advancement of democracy and democratic practices. In an interview in August 1999 at the encampment of protesters against the presence of the U.S. Navy on Vieques, Rubén Berrios, president of the Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Independence party—PIP), explained national culture as a product of the historical process:

How much sweat, how many tears, how many dreams, how much struggle,
people fighting for their lives, struggling for their rights, how many peasants
and the sweat of their brow, how many industrial workers have had to dream

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and to fight and to suffer in order to produce a nation? Because that is what a nation is. It is not a bourgeois concept. It's something of great value. . . . I think it is a value which transcends all. So, that within the context of people being able to buy and sell their products the world over, respecting other nations, and not thinking that because their nation, their culture, involves 300 million people it is better than some other country which involves far fewer. We should all have a place on this earth. That's what modern believers in nationality would say because most of us who believe in nationality in the modern era, especially in Latin America, are profound socialists who also believe in democracy and socialism and in the right of nationalities to exist and command their own destinies. I think for a long time we socialists and social democrats have let patriotism and nationality be played by the hands of reactionaries, which are really not interested in the cultures of people but in their own petty class interests. Starting in the First World War, they co-opted all that, and they abused the working peoples of the world because the banner of nationalities, and diversity, and human beings being different was left to be taken up by reactionaries. That's horrible. That should never be happening, and Puerto Rico is in the forefront.

Identity and culture continue to be salient. The article by Samiri Hernández Hiraldo deals with identity, equality, and community control. Reporting on an anthropological field study based on extensive interviews, it exposes racial discrimination in development policies that affect the citizens of Loíza, a coastal town that has been marginalized in all aspects of development. Race has played a big part in this condition. Of all the municipalities, Loíza exemplifies most impressively the cultural heritage of the three races that make up the Puerto Rican nation because of its specific historical realities. It is named for Yuisa or Luisa, a valiant Taíno leader who was a cacique when the Spanish arrived. The region is famous for its Taíno legacy and archaeological sites, dating back centuries. It was also settled by Nigerian slaves of the Yoruba tribe in the sixteenth century. Loíza is a center for African-inspired traditions, retaining one of the highest percentages of African descendants of all island towns. It is renowned for its African character, which is prominent in the local art, music, dance, and the people themselves. This is the whole island's cultural heritage. As Estéban Taronjí put it in his "Sueño de Diso," "*Somos taínos, españoles y se sabe que del Africa nos vino nuestro auténtico sabor*" (We are Taíno, Spanish, and it is known that from Africa came our authentic flavor). It is in Loíza that the trilogy of the races is particularly evident. This regional distinctiveness, though a source of pride, has worked against the people of Loíza. Even as the beauty of this mix of people is extolled, the reality of discrimination in political and economic spheres has created problems in power relationships, representation, and development. There is continuing controversy regarding how investment should occur in Loíza, with the community torn between allowing the construction

of a resort that would generate employment and tourism and preserving its original character by supporting the small entrepreneurs who have historically been the lifeblood of the city. Presently, the city government is leading those in favor of touristic development. The author's interpretation of conditions in Loíza raises some interesting questions related to religious and political exigencies and issues of race and racialization. Still, Loíza and its local attributes are profoundly linked to the national culture.

Political culture is part of national culture. Puerto Rican political culture is democratic at its core because the people believe they should have democracy. This issue centers on democratic action and empowerment—on people's ability to wage a struggle and make social gains. The people's movement has played a progressive role in its insistence that the interests of ordinary people be represented by the state. Today the biggest challenge to the government of Puerto Rico is coming from its people's demanding the fulfillment of their expectations of a representative democracy, thus questioning the foundations and legitimacy of the state. This year alone the people have changed the structure of government, stood up to government assaults on the working class through strong union and grassroots activism, continued the Vieques struggle, seen the status issue provoke renewed debate and be brought before the United Nations, witnessed a major split in the statehood Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive party—PNP), confronted attempts at privatization, protested the rising cost of living, and maintained a powerful presence in all island politics. People are demanding their rightful place in the body politic, and activism is alive and well.

The people's ability to forge broad-based coalitions that bridge ideological, religious, and party differences and incorporate unions, community leaders, environmentalists, social movements, professionals, artists, students, and a few politicians merits recognition and even emulation. It has certainly contributed to the kind of sustained activism that is evident on the island today. Alliance building and networking are paying off. United-front coalitions continue to draw a vast cross section of the population, bringing together leaders and perspectives from many social spaces and creating a substantial power base that has achieved significant gains.

Nothing less than commitment has been required to address the objective socioeconomic crises and conditions that confront the population and to ensure that the people's voices are heard, and Boricuas (the people of Boriken [the Taíno name for Puerto Rico]) have risen to the challenge. People are politicized and politicizing. The consensus is that democracy must be measured by the government's responsiveness to the obvious needs of the masses and the working classes as opposed to the needs of the rich. There is concern with democracy as it relates to Puerto Rico's political status. It is

acknowledged, even by the commonwealth Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic party—PPD), that democracy exists only to the extent that the U.S. government allows it—that the Estado Libre Asociado (Free Associated State—ELA), by its own constitution, is subject to the federal government yet has no representation in it. People want more democracy and have expectations of real representation. They believe that they have a right to a democratic form of government and are prepared to demand it. The following very brief overview of the most publicized political events of 2005 is intended to provide a degree of understanding of island politics today.

The 2004 election produced a voter turnout of more than 80 percent overall. The major players continue to be the PPD, the PNP, and the PIP. The Movimiento Independiente Región Este (MIRE—Eastern Region Independent Movement) and Partido Alternativo Ciudadano (Citizens Alternative party) each garnered .2 percent of the vote. The gubernatorial election was the closest and most contested in island history. Acevedo Vilá received 48.4 percent of the vote and his main challenger, Pedro Rosselló of the PNP, 48.2 percent. It led to a two-month recount and a court challenge. On January 2, 2005, Aníbal Acevedo Vilá of the PPD was declared governor by the Puerto Rican Supreme Court after a United States federal appeals court ruled that the insular court in fact did have jurisdiction over the disputed election. The legislative branch is now controlled by the PNP, creating the perfect environment for consistent legislative impasse. Of the island's senators, 9 are PPD, 17 are PNP, and 1 is PIP. As for the House, representatives are 18 PPD, 32 PNP, and 1 PIP. Party politics have been intense, with shifting alliances and deal making among the contending forces (see http://electionspuertorico.org/home_en.html for more information).

The results of the general election demonstrate that shifts in power between the PPD and the PNP resulted in margins of less than 8 percent for each victory, with the result depending upon a mere 3,000 votes. This places the PIP in an interesting position in terms of political pull. It also places the ongoing people's movement in a position of influence, given the widespread disillusionment with the way people are represented by their elected officials. This movement has made real organizational progress on the national as well as the local level. Its components range from the large, entrenched union movement, which has shown itself very strong in recent conflicts, to the Vieques movement and ad hoc national and local groups that materialize to deal with issues as they arise.

In February the new governor presented an initiative to the Puerto Rican Legislative Assembly calling for a referendum on two procedural mechanisms that would place the issue of Puerto Rico's status on the table again. The first would have been a formal request to the U.S. Congress to authorize a

federally mandated plebiscite on the island with the standard alternatives of commonwealth, statehood, or independence, as defined by Congress. The second would have created a local Constitutional Assembly on Status, selected by the people of Puerto Rico, for the purpose of establishing a dialogue with the Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status, which was appointed by President George W. Bush in 2003. The rift between the executive and legislative branches of government was evident immediately as the best approach to resolving the status issue was disputed along party lines. The new Senate instead approved a PNP proposal calling for a referendum petitioning the federal government for status options that are fully democratic and noncolonial and nonterritorial in nature. The difference is that this referendum will not include the present status as an option. This ruling-out of the present ELA or commonwealth leaves the nonterritorial options previously defined by the U.S. Congress—sovereign statehood, full sovereignty through independence, and independence coupled with a treaty of association with the United States that could be abrogated by either party at any time. The Legislative Assembly refused to endorse the governor's proposal, judging the idea of a Constitutional Assembly undemocratic, and no further legislation regarding status has been passed at this time. The result has been another stalemate between the executive and legislative branches; however, the legislature is moving ahead with its proposal. A march on September 23, 2005, in Washington, DC, expressed support for this unanimous request of the Puerto Rico Legislature: "We, the People of Puerto Rico, in the exercise of our right to self-determination, demand that the President and the Congress of the United States of America, before December 31, 2006, express their commitment to respond to the claim of the People of Puerto Rico to solve our problem of political status from among fully democratic options of a noncolonial and nonterritorial nature" (<http://www.letpuertoricodecide.org/index.php>).

Since the establishment of the ELA in 1952, three plebiscites have been held. Both the first, in 1967, and the second, in 1993, resulted in a small margin for retaining ELA status. The last, in 1998, represented the first time that the U.S. Congress had defined the terms of each of four options. These were (1) sovereign statehood as a member of the United States, (2) continued commonwealth affirming Congressional sovereignty over Puerto Rico, (3) free association, defined as insular sovereignty as a noncolonial, nonterritorial state, coupled with a treaty arrangement with the United States, and (4) independence with all rights of a sovereign nation. But voters rejected all four in favor of the alternative "None of the Above". All three referendums have seen a voter turnout above 70 percent, yet a satisfactory conclusion to the status issue remains illusive. The reality is that the future appears much too

uncertain under any option other than the one that has been in place for over half a century. The contradiction is that the ELA cannot be considered a democratically controlled state, as it is subject to the U.S. government.

The PPD has proved politically astute in maintaining the support of approximately half the island for more than 50 years. It was born of contention and class conflict and has played a historic role. The articles by Marietta Morrissey and Ismael García Colón explain how the PPD has integrated and supported the nationalistic, culturally based popular sentiment and a free enterprise system that could accommodate the changing needs of the U.S. market. Both analyze how Puerto Rico's most pressing and recurrent problems—the economy, the state of the state, poverty, and social unrest—dialectically interface to determine policy and promote political stability. Structural adjustment to a changing economic environment dominated by foreign capital has had to contend with the political pressures of social sectors that are divided along gender, racial, industrial, agrarian, and class lines. The PPD has been able to promote the interests of the nascent entrepreneurial class, support foreign capital, and simultaneously incorporate popular nationalist sentiment into its program. These articles describe the changing political landscape and show how party positions have adapted to them.

It is the cultural foundation of the commonwealth alternative that has given it strength and kept it ever so slightly more popular than statehood. The economic consequences of independence are seen by many as too unpredictable. The economic benefits of statehood could exceed those of commonwealth status, though this is a seriously disputed point, but the probability that the national cultural identity would be compromised in the process is the critical factor. In the interview mentioned earlier, Berrios said that he was convinced that the reason statehood had never won a majority vote was concern for cultural integrity and the right to maintain one's culture.

The only way they get 40 or 45 percent [of the vote] is that, besides the food coupons, they tell the people they're not going to lose their nationality. Statehooders here are very careful to say, 'It's in Spanish. Puerto Rican culture.' They insist that the nationality is not going to be lost. So, you know, even the anti-nationalist movement has its nationalist line in Puerto Rico.

Thus the right and desire to perpetuate one's cultural heritage and identity continue to have a dominant impact on sociopolitical attitudes and actions.

In June 2005 the UN Special Committee on Decolonization emphasized that the Puerto Rican people form a Latin American and Caribbean nation with its own particular national identity and called on the United States to support the Puerto Rican people's inalienable right to self-determination and

independence in conformity with General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV). During the hearing representatives of a variety of groups including United for Vieques, the Partido Nacionalista de Puerto Rico (the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico), the Human Rights Committee of Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rico's Speaker of the House summarized their concerns and grievances regarding Puerto Rico's colonial status. There was strong criticism of commonwealth status, which was viewed as essentially responsible for the subjugation of the people and their lack of authority over their own island and of representation in the federal government. The essential message of the combined testimony was that self-determination had not been achieved in Puerto Rico and that democratization both in terms of making an ultimate decision on status and in terms of autonomy over one's own lands was required. The committee's resolution pointed to the debate in Puerto Rico on a mechanism that would ensure the full participation of representatives of all viewpoints so that any initiative for the resolution of Puerto Rico's political status would come from the people of Puerto Rico themselves. (For a complete account of the hearing, see <http://www.independencia.net>.)

The UN Special Committee also addressed the ongoing problems with Vieques and urged the U.S. government to return the occupied land and installations on Vieques Island and the Ceiba naval lands to the people of Puerto Rico. It called on the United States to respect fundamental human rights, assume responsibility for and cover the costs of decontaminating the areas previously used in military exercises, and address the serious consequences of its military activity for the health of the inhabitants. The Vieques struggle is exemplary as a grassroots campaign to gain the basic democratic right of sovereignty over land. Two articles in this issue, by Katherine T. McCaffrey and by Sherrie Bayer, provide coverage and analysis of the development and operation of the movement in support of the rights of Puerto Rico and the Viequesenses. McCaffrey discusses the activism that resulted in a united front that politicized the island. Her article provides the necessary historical perspective for appreciating the significance of the successful Vieques struggle. It clearly describes the grassroots nature of the mobilization, who the activists were, and how the issues coalesced to draw together very diverse social sectors and even unite the Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal churches in favor of the general concept of peace. It makes important points regarding women's position within the movement. It links the success of the Vieques mobilization to the history of antimilitarism and the development of mass action in the recent past. Bayer's piece discusses what the future of Vieques might be, considering the question of control of the land that keeps democracy and self-determination on the agenda, along with the goals of



Figure 1 Mural showing the David-and-Goliath metaphor on Vieques in Barrio Ensenada, Summer 1999, reading: “We all know that the national security of PR and the US requires our participation, but though the road to liberty demands much of us, too much has been demanded of Vieques”

decontamination, development, devolution (the three “Ds”), and improved health care. Humanitarian issues remain at the core of the movement. (For more information see <http://viequeslibre.org/>; for views of the struggle, see fig. 1–6.)

On July 10, 2005 a referendum was held to determine whether to change the legislative branch of government from a bicameral to a unicameral structure. The unicameral option won with over 80 percent of the votes; however, only about 20 percent of eligible voters participated. Both the PPD and the PIP had given their full support to the unicameral alternative, arguing that it would reduce the likelihood of the kind of impasse that had interfered with effective legislative action, make representatives more accountable to their constituencies, and significantly reduce costs. The PNP had opposed the unicameral option as limiting the number of representatives and thereby reducing the democratic potential of the system. Differences of opinion on this within the PNP were ultimately a factor in the internal split between the Roselló (party president’s) leadership and the McClintock (Senate president’s) faction.



Figure 2 Site of the Protest/Occupation on the Naval Base, Summer 1999



Figure 3 Posters Regarding the Vieques Struggle Found across the Island



Figure 4 Protesters at an All-Day Festival in Lares, Summer 1999



Figure 5 An Ongoing Vigil in Front of the Prison in Guaynabo after the Arrests of Many Vieques Activists, Summer 2000



Figure 6 People Marching on the Major Thoroughfare passing the Guaynabo Prison, Summer 2000

Many felt that this reform was sending a message to those who govern that the people take the power that they have delegated to them seriously. This type of referendum, giving the public the authority to decide what form the legislature would take, was historic and profoundly significant. As the editors of *Claridad* (July 7–13, 2005) put it, the result emphasized a popular consensus that all branches of government are subordinate to the people, that the three branches serve to balance power, and that the purpose of the government structure is to ensure and protect the liberty and security of individuals in the society. The only requirement for the legislative branch is that it be rooted in the people. The change to a unicameral system is widely considered a way for the population to tell governing officials that their power depends on the consent of the governed. It is viewed as a first step toward a true reform of the system of governance that will include civil society. It is assumed that with a unicameral structure the legislature will be much more likely to act expeditiously on the legislation before it. There has been much resentment by the people as they have witnessed the government's course of action over the years. Although there is no inherent reason that a unicameral structure will be more democratic than a bicameral one, continual disappointment with the present state of the legislature and resentment regarding policies favoring the rich moved the people to take this opportunity to at least assert their right to determine for themselves the form their government will take, in

contradistinction to that which was previously decided for them. It provided a means to demonstrate the power of the people to make the kinds of changes that will benefit them. It is expected that the change will help transform the government into a system that is more compact, economical, and efficient. It is one step in the process of democratization that the government requires. People want an assembly that does not disregard their needs, that defends and protects the majority (workers, women, children, the dispossessed, and elderly) rather than serving the interests of the rich and powerful. The people are giving notice that they are ready to act in their own best interests by ensuring that their government represents their needs. This is what happens when people believe in democracy. They are willing to take the steps necessary to ensure that their government lives up to its democratic responsibilities.

In mid-July the island's independent truckers went on strike over very basic economic issues such as increased costs of operation. As the strikers went into action, a local radio DJ began playing Daddy Yankee's popular reggaeton hit "Gasolina" over and over again. One of its lines had been changed from "Dame más gasolina" to "No hay más gasolina." Though the commentary was difficult to hear above the music, it soon became clear that the truck drivers' strike was on. Cars jammed the streets, forming lines to each and every local gas station in both directions—long, long lines. Most people handled the situation very well, expecting the strike to be over quickly because of its real and immediate economic impact. Truckers are central to the moving of commodities throughout the island, and the economy is seriously dependent on daily truck service. The three-day strike was enough to prove their power. The Frente Amplio de Camioneros and the Teamsters united to lead and support a solid strike that resulted in some satisfactory negotiations and proof of their economic strength. There was support for the strike from other unions as well. Public sympathy was with the truckers. The governor called out the National Guard to escort gas trucks to particularly important destinations (airports were one) and there were confrontations, but the power of this economic sector was conspicuous. Beginning the strike on the holiday weekend of July 25, Constitution Day, had its own significance, adding a dimension of urgency and import to the workers' decision.

No sooner had the strike ended than Governor Acevedo Vilá called a special session of the legislature to deal with the fiscal crisis and announced a work-reduction/pay-cut plan to deal with the \$900 million deficit (this figure is disputed). Many criticized this session as a waste of time and public money and even as a political ploy, but the governor maintained that the gravity of the situation required immediate attention. His initial plan called for an across-the-board cut of one day from the work week (20 percent) and a 15 percent cut in pay for public-sector workers. The immediate outcry of 30,000

public workers and their unions caused him to amend this plan. In the new proposal, workers would have the option of taking the 20/15 adjustment on the condition that enough of them volunteered to do so. Acevedo Vilá stated that his plan would give many workers the flexibility that they wanted so that they could spend more time with their families and cut child-care costs. The plan would reduce the average worker's paycheck by \$3,235 per year. Pay is already relatively low for public-sector workers—for example, a general secretary makes \$18,366, a receptionist \$15,611, and a chauffeur \$15,517 a year—and 15 percent is significant (*San Juan Star*, August issues). The governor and some cabinet officials announced that they would voluntarily reduce their own salaries by 20 percent. Workers responded that this could not be considered a point of comparison because officials' salaries were so much higher than average workers', and this is clearly correct. Workers and their families will suffer; officials and their families will not. It should also be mentioned here that the week before the plan was announced there was a 128 percent hike in water rates and a double-digit increase in fees at the University of Puerto Rico, adding to already rising highway tolls and gas costs.

The unions mobilized immediately to oppose the governor's proposal and offer a set of alternatives to placing the burden on the working class. There was an immediate large-scale demonstration (drawing thousands) in front of the Capitol and a march to La Fortaleza, the governor's residence. The simple explanation for such united opposition is that any such cut in pay would be financially devastating to most families. There is a clear call for government action on the budget crisis but not for balancing the budget on the backs of the workers. A general strike has been mentioned as a possible tactic. Picketing, marches, and other actions distributed among the various public offices continue. The workers intend to defend their livelihoods and quality of life. Some of the alternative budget-balancing proposals they have suggested are (1) a 4 percent tax on banks, (2) a tax on the profits of the megastores, (3) a tax on luxury items (yachts, jewelry, etc.), (4) an increase in the capital gains tax to 20 percent, and (5) an end to paid escorts for current and former government functionaries (*San Juan Star*, August issues). Ultimately, the emergency session yielded no action on the budget. It did, however, seem to intensify the conflict within the PNP and call into question the alliances between some PNP and PPD members. The legislative branch was at a stalemate with the executive. The people stood united as workers in opposition to the work-reduction/pay-cut plan.

In 1998 the people of the island, led by the working class (Puerto Rico Telephone workers and others), conducted a two-day general strike. This is the highest form of workers' struggle, one that demonstrates the centrality of

the workers to the health of the economy and in keeping the country moving forward. The general strike has historically been the workers' greatest show of force, and this one was no exception. People are empowered by their successes. They understand clearly what works for them politically. That is why each successive struggle and its outcome have built upon the lessons of their rich history, inspiring the people to act on their own behalf. There has even been talk of engaging in another general strike unless the governor and the legislature take up the interests and proposals of their working-class constituency. There is no doubt about the capacity of the people to engage in sustained democratic action. They have proven it through struggle and they have no intention of backing down now.

Addendum: The history of repression against political dissidents in Puerto Rico is long and brutal (see, e.g., <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/separatists.htm>). As this issue goes to press, the assassination of Filiberto Ojeda Ríos by the F.B.I. is in the headlines. Ojeda, a leader of the militant independence group Ejército Popular Boricua (Los Macheteros), had been living clandestinely for 15 years because of charges against him. The raid was carried out on September 23, a date known as El Grito de Lares. This day is significant in Puerto Rican history, as it commemorates a 1868 popular uprising, violently suppressed, demanding independence for the island. This has added to the perception that the attack was more than against an individual but an act of intimidation. The extent of popular reaction was so significant as to prompt Senator Hillary Clinton to cancel a planned trip to the island. It has since been confirmed that Ojeda bled to death after the shoot-out because of lack of medical attention for a period of approximately 20 hours (for more information, see <http://www.endi.com>, <http://www.vocero.com>, <http://www.redbetances.com>, and <http://www.claridadpuertorico.com>). Citizens on the island and throughout the United States, Amnesty International, and the American Civil Liberties Union, among others both nationally and internationally, are demanding a full investigation. We must denounce this kind of action, which clearly contravenes the most basic principles of a democratic society and justice based on constitutionally guaranteed procedures.