

Puerto Rican people show the way: Mass protests oust governor in just 12 days

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Paro Nacional in San Juan July 22. Photo: Latino Rebels



Solidarity protest in Philadelphia July 22. SLL photo



Massive demonstrations surrounds the governor's mansion in Old San Juan July 19.

Breaking news: Just minutes before midnight on July 24, Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo Rosselló finally announced his resignation through a recorded message posted on his Facebook page. He did so after keeping the legislature, the people and journalists in suspense for hours, after postponing a news conference scheduled for 4 p.m. — another example of his disdain for the people. Not only did Rosselló delay the announcement, but he proclaimed that his resignation would only be effective one week later, on Aug. 2 at 5 p.m.

But in the streets, the people shouted: “Ricky did not resign! We ousted him!” taking ownership of the victory.

July 24: The enormous outrage felt in every pore by the Puerto Rican people erupted in massive demonstrations July 13 following the revelation of a shameful Telegram chat between Gov. Ricardo Rosselló and 11 of his closest collaborators, all men. Its content, covering only 50 days, reflects the enormous contempt of this pack of wolves towards the Puerto Rican people.

Written in the filthiest and most degrading manner, filled with sexist, homophobic and racist insults, even including threats to civil servants and elected officials, it documents a cruel and perverse elitism towards those who are not white, wealthy men.

The barbarity, mocking even those killed by Hurricane María, has no comparison. The anti-Puerto Rican sentiment of these members of the New Progressive Party—which pursues U.S. statehood—was demonstrated when one of them said that he “sees the future of Puerto Rico and it is so wonderful, without Puerto Ricans.”

The great work accomplished by journalists of the [Center for Investigative Journalism of Puerto Rico](https://www.struggle-la-lucha.org/2019/07/26/puerto-rican-people-oust-corrupt-governor-we-are-more-and-we-are-not-afraid/), which published 889 pages of this chat, began a process of awakening popular awareness never before seen in the archipelago. It is strong proof of the importance of putting truthful information in the hands of the people.

Context of the protests

This publication was like the famous straw that broke the camel's back. It was a consequence of years of economic recession that undermined the country's fiscal sustainability, and the imposition of a Fiscal Control Board (FCB) under the Promesa law passed by the U.S. Congress under the Obama administration to pay an illegitimate debt of more than \$74 billion.

The austerity measures and wave of privatizations, triggered by both the FCB (popularly known as "the junta") and the government that imposed a labor reform law reducing workers' rights, have suffocated the population. Add that to the terrible blow from hurricanes Irma and María, which caused huge economic losses and pushed almost a quarter of a million Puerto Ricans into involuntary exile. More than 400 closed schools, increased public university tuition, reduced medical services, increases in taxes and fees that raise the cost of living while pensions and bonuses are reduced or eliminated, and many layoffs.

All this framed a broad corruption scheme where millions of dollars in federal funds and from the peoples' own local coffers were stolen by government officials and by private contractors who benefited from their relationships with various politicians. This includes Education Secretary Julia Keleher, a U.S. businesswoman from Philadelphia, who was paid a \$250,000 salary in a bankrupt country.

Keleher, responsible for the closure of at least 400 schools and the attempted privatization of public education, has now been arrested and faces federal charges for theft and diversion of education funds. On the same day as her arrest, five more program directors under the Rosselló administration were also arrested, including one from the important health sector.

'We are more and we are not afraid'

Each Puerto Rican is like a pressure cooker, and at the same time there is a collective pressure cooker—the people in general—who have been the recipients of countless offenses. Indignation and pain were felt by the people, who had to unite to recover after the hurricanes because the government, both the federal one on which the colony is forced to depend, and the local administration, failed them terribly.

Now these same Puerto Rican people have said ¡BASTA! — ENOUGH! — and poured into the streets: every day, in every town, especially in front of the Palace of Santa Catalina, La Fortaleza, where the governor resides in Old San Juan.

Without party flags, waving only the Puerto Rican single star banner in its original colors of red, blue and white or the mourning flag in black and white. Not even one U.S. flag, indicating the firm decision to assert Puerto Rican identity in front of a pro-statehood government and the U.S. junta. It was the people, self-summoned, in all their diversity, that abruptly broke with sexism, racism and homophobia in response to the affront presented by the so-called leaders in their Telegram chat — a great leap in collective awareness.

Suddenly they lost their fear while uniting around the demand “¡Ricky Renuncia!” (Ricky Resign!) There were thousands of people of all ages who had never participated in demonstrations before: whole families with their children in tow, older people, and a huge number of young people.

Puerto Ricans outside the archipelago joined in demonstrations, from the diaspora in the United States, to Puerto Ricans in different countries who sent photos or videos through social media, joining the demand. Artists, athletes and Puerto Rican scientists manifested themselves in one way or another. Even astronaut Joseph Acaba sent a photo from space with a sign that said #RickyRenuncia.

In nearly two weeks of uninterrupted demonstrations, Puerto Rican creativity has been shown, from handwritten posters with messages reflecting individual

sentiments to diverse forms of protest, including dancing, banging pots and pans, acrobatics, street theater, motorcycle, bicycle and even boat racing, all demanding the governor's resignation.

An important aspect has been the emergence of new activists such as Rey Charlie, a motorcyclist with exceptional leadership ability. Just 30 years old, he showed great organizing power, bringing together thousands of racing enthusiasts. In the last demonstration, more than 10,000 motorcyclists participated.

But even more significant was his effort to incorporate the people who live in public housing projects, who have been discriminated against for being poor and often ignored by the progressive movement.

Never before have the people on the island flooded into the streets as consistently as they have now. The closest thing was the struggle to get the U.S. Navy off the small island of Vieques. But even then, it was two years after the struggle began before mass demonstrations were held like those that happened this week.

This time, it took the people only days to achieve the unity of nearly a million Puerto Ricans—almost a third of the population—in what was the largest demonstration in Puerto Rico's history, the July 22 Paro Nacional.

What does it mean?

A people that has been under colonial rule for more than 500 years, first by Spain and later by the United States, has also been the victim of great repression. Fear and deception have been constantly imposed by empires that have used the most diverse methods to drown the liberation struggle.

Now, however, the people have lost their fear and entered the streets. They follow the legacy of our liberation fighters, from Ramón Emeterio Betances, Eugenio María de Hostos, Lola Rodríguez de Tío, Lolita Lebrón, Rafael Cancel Miranda, Filiberto

Ojeda Ríos and Oscar López Rivera, our students and teachers who have fought for public education, environmental activists, militant and class-conscious trade unionists, women and diverse gender groups.

All this range of Puerto Rican revolutionaries have kept the torch of the struggle for social and economic justice burning, above all for liberation from colonialism, which is the ultimate source of government corruption.

Now the people have been able to see that they do have power, that unity in action is possible, and that it leads to victory. They have gone from indignation to dignified action. They have made a huge dialectical leap that will be impossible to stop.

The road is long and it's just beginning. As most protesters said, "It's not just Ricky. We want a new country." And that country can only be new and fair when it is free and sovereign.

This new wave of activism, especially of the youth, who were not afraid to confront the criminal police who tried to quell the demonstrations with tear gas, said: "We are more and we are not afraid."

To those worthy and courageous youth who represent the best of our nation, we say "¡Hasta la victoria!"

Long live the Puerto Rican Revolution!

