

Why Half a Million Puerto Ricans Are Protesting in the Streets

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Battered by scandal and exhausted by austerity, they seek to determine their own political future.

This week has been unlike any other in Puerto Rican history. An estimated 500,000 demonstrators filled Old San Juan's cobblestone streets on Wednesday to demand the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. He has lost public confidence because of mounting scandals in his government and damning revelations from [a leaked trove of private chats](#), published on July 13 by the island's Center for Investigative Journalism.

The staggering diversity of the demonstrators—straddling age groups, political orientations, and social class—has elicited fresh declarations of the slogan "*Puerto Rico se levanta*" ("Puerto Rico is waking up"). The phrase, [previously used as a rallying cry for fundraising](#) in the wake of Hurricane Maria, lost its luster as the difficult realities of recovery set in. "We're writing history," said Juan Carlos Rivera Ramos, an activist in Puerto Rico when I contacted him this week. "Our people, in all their diversity of colors and flavors, ideological plurality, are expressing dignity on the streets. My eyes are tearing."

US colonialism may have designated the island as an "unincorporated territory," but its people have always called it a *país* (nation), and it's this spectacular renaissance of nationalism that has allowed for so many different constituencies to come together. The island is suffering the worst political and economic crisis in its history, four years after its previous governor, Alejandro García Padilla, declared its \$72 billion debt unpayable, resulting in the creation of a [fiscal oversight and management board](#) (FOMB, though known locally as *la junta*) a year later to restructure that debt.

But even as the island struggles to recover and wrestles with austerity measures imposed by FOMB, the scandal is personal. The [vulgar nature of the governor's chats](#) (in which his subordinates launch expletive-laden tirades at targets ranging from Ricky Martin to San Juan Mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz) showed that Rosselló's government is more interested in protecting its power through a vicious strain of public relations than actually helping the Puerto Rican people in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

The day after the first massive Monday march, three women went to the Department of Motor Vehicles office in Rio Piedras, a municipality of San Juan, and removed the governor's portrait from the wall in protest, setting off a series of copycat takedowns in other governmental offices. A crew of motorcyclists called to action by a social-media influencer called [El Rey Charlie](#) twice flocked into San Juan after stopping in various public housing projects, called *residenciales* (the crucibles for the creation of reggaetón music). Also spotlighted at marches were a committed group of radical feminists, [Colectiva Feminista en Construcción](#), who had long been clamoring for Rosselló to acknowledge that there is a crisis of violence against women in Puerto Rico.

Prominent in the marches was a new political coalition called [Victoria Ciudadana](#), whose central figures are Rafael Bernabe, former gubernatorial candidate for the Puerto Rico Worker's Party; Alexandra Lúgaro, another gubernatorial candidate who won 11 percent of the vote in 2016, the largest ever by a third-party candidate; Manuel Natal Albelo, a crusading congressman who has withdrawn from the pro-Commonwealth Party; and Ana Irma Rivera-Lassen, a feminist activist and human rights lawyer. Victoria Ciudadana has tried hard not to close itself off to anyone because of party affiliation, and avoided endorsing socialism despite choosing a logo that closely resembles that of the Venezuelan Socialist Party.

The demonstrations have, as is typical, been almost entirely peaceful, with throngs of people singing and dancing to impromptu invocations of *pleneros* (the folkloric, storytelling genre of *plena* has been an ineluctable presence for years at Puerto Rico protests) and generally hanging out on streets. But the ugly specter of aggressive police violence, featuring the long-loathed *fuerza de choque* (riot squad), became visible on both Monday and Wednesday nights.

On both nights it appeared that the police were the ones who initiated the violence, which involved massive and inordinate use of tear gas (some of it apparently manufactured by [Safariland](#), the same company owned by controversial Whitney Museum board member Warren Kanders) and the firing of rubber bullets. The flashpoint of the violence was on Cristo Street near La Fortaleza, the governor's mansion, a block that had been festooned with a display of hanging umbrellas, a kind of art installation intended to attract tourists that was eventually removed by police following Monday's violence.

Video evidence suggests that at about 8:30 pm Monday, the police fired rubber bullets at a woman who was trying to stop protestors from throwing things at the police. This incident was quickly followed by the launching of tear gas that left such a strong stench on the streets that local residents complained. On Wednesday, after thousands of demonstrators had gathered at La Fortaleza, another round of tear gas was set off at around 11:30 pm after some tension at the barricades that involved demonstrators throwing plastic bottles at police.

Police announced that the assembly was no longer legal, and after a few tense minutes, according to videos, a volley of fireworks began to explode on the police side. While there seemed to be some objects thrown from the crowd into the rows of the riot squad, the majority of the explosions occurred several yards back. ACLU Puerto Rico president William Ramírez, who has long been involved in investigating incidents involving the police, said if those fireworks were thrown from the crowd, "it must have been someone who plays for the Yankees to have an arm like that."

Ramírez also complained that not only were there riot squad members behind the lines, but personnel from the Department of Corrections, whose guidelines don't protect the same freedoms for prisoners as the general public. He also speculated that undercover police in the crowd dressed as demonstrators may have provoked the violence. Puerto Rico's police department has been under consent decree since 2011, and former police monitor Arnaldo Claudio, who Ramírez felt was helping to make positive change, was [among those targeted](#) in the leaked chats.

A HISTORY OF CONFLICT AND CORRUPTION

The crass attacks on women and marginalized groups have obscured the revelations of political scandal, fraud, money laundering, and the misuse of government funds. The crisis of confidence in Rosselló's government began in mid-June with the resignation of his secretary of state, Raúl Maldonado, who claimed that there was an "[institutional Mafia](#)" element infecting the government. That day, his son, Raúl Jr., claimed he sat in a meeting during which Governor Rosselló [ordered an accounting firm, BDO, to change a report about Unidos por Puerto Rico](#), a nonprofit run by the

governor's wife, Beatriz, that portrayed it unflatteringly.

The following week the governor's secretary of education, Julia Keleher (who had been criticized for closing public schools in favor of charter schools) and four other government officials [were indicted by Puerto Rico's US Attorney Emilia Rodríguez on fraud and money-laundering charges](#). More bad press for the governor involved accusations of influence-peddling directed at former FOMB representative Elías Sánchez Sifonte, one of the participants of the chat, and Edwin Miranda, the most powerful public relations figure on the island.

The blame for the pervasive nature of corruption in Puerto Rico's government can clearly be laid on the feckless politicians themselves, their privileged boys' clubs and their private-school elitism. But Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States must also be blamed. The fact that Puerto Rico has a representative in Congress that cannot vote, called a resident commissioner, has meant that the only way it can influence Washington is through lobbying. There's a long history there—with roots in the machinations of [convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff](#)—that has blown back to poison politics in Puerto Rico. After all, many of Puerto Rico's governors have gotten to office by springboarding from being resident commissioner, and Pedro Pierluisi, sometimes mentioned as a replacement for Rosselló, [had questions surrounding his time in office](#) just a few years ago.

NEW REVELATIONS PUT ROSSELLÓ DEEPER IN THE HOLE

On Wednesday night, as the record crowd surged into the old city to hear short speeches by celebrities like Residente (René Pérez Joglar), the perpetual agitator and leader of the alternative reggaetón-hiphop group Calle 13; his sister Ile (Ileana Cabra Joglar), who sang a poignant version of the patriotic hymn "La Borinqueña"; the irrepressible trap rapper/singer Bad Bunny (Benito Martínez Ocasio); and actor Benicio Del Toro (who once played Che Guevara in a Steven Soderbergh film), the Center for Investigative Journalism [dropped a major story](#) about the explicitly corrupt actions of Rosselló's chat-room associates.

The most damaging revelations concerned lobbyist Elías Sánchez, a long-time personal friend of Rosselló's (he was the best man at Sánchez's wedding), who became his campaign director and formerly served as a non-voting representative on FOMB. The report revealed that Sánchez intimidated government officials to gain inordinately expensive contracts for his clients, and that Rosselló had been warned various times about this behavior.

But perhaps the worst thing about this Rosselló chat scandal is that it corroborates President Trump's accusations that Puerto Rico's government is corrupt and cannot be trusted with federal funds that Trump has been denying them. Congress is [already moving to impose restrictions](#) on severely needed Medicaid funds because of the crisis.

Even if you set aside the massive disapproval from Puerto Rico's civil society, Rosselló is in an untenable political position: Many key positions in his cabinet are vacant because of the current scandal, a considerable chunk of his own pro-statehood party is calling for him to leave, and he has zero credibility as an advocate for Puerto Rican interests in Washington and vis-à-vis FOMB. Ironically, in his most recent confrontations with the board, he was strongly insistent on preventing cuts to pensions in debt-restructuring negotiations.

Still, a measure in the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act does provide for government pushback on FOMB's agenda: "The board realizes that legislative approval is necessary for the pension cuts. It all depends on how much the government resists the board," says Rolando Emmanuelli Jiménez, an attorney who is part of [a lawsuit by the UTIER electrical workers union](#), which is trying to prove that the appointment of the board violates the Appointments Clause

of the US Constitution. The case will be heard in the Supreme Court this fall.

All signs suggest that Governor Rosselló will likely be forced to resign, despite his continued insistence that there is no proof of any legal wrongdoing in the chats, and that his only offenses were of impropriety. But the challenges of the future are extremely daunting, since the power vacuum left by a reeling government will probably be filled by FOMB.

Since the investigations of corruption and wrongdoing in Puerto Rico are all led by the US Department of Justice, and not Rosselló's own ineffectual anti-corruption board, it seems convenient that the governor's ruin serves Trump's racist agenda, as well as the Wall Street sector's quest for advantageous settlements through a board with no government to block it.

But Rosselló's departure would empower Puerto Ricans by giving them hope that out of this historical moment will come a new consensus that will decide the island's political and economic future. Protests will continue daily, and a national strike that intends to block major highways [has been planned for Monday, July 22](#).

"Rosselló's dismissal comes from the Puerto Rican people, not the federal government," said Emmanueli Jiménez. "We have suffered a lot under his government, and the people made the connection between their misery and the political class. On the other hand, what's occurring now is the consequence of an unchecked implementation of neoliberal policies. The people are resisting that."

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