

# Puerto Rico vis-à-vis the globalization process

## The language question

The history of Puerto Rico is very different from that of the rest of Latin America. To begin with, the island has never been an independent nation and certainly has never enjoyed sovereignty.

Before it was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493, it was inhabited by Tainos, who lived in small villages made up of huts. This peaceful group was forced to fight against the Caribs, who constantly invaded their villages in search of human meat and women.

More than ten years passed before the Spaniards returned to Borinquen, a Taino word which means "island of enchantment", and which Columbus later named San Juan Bautista. Since Puerto Rico became widely used in referring to the island, San Juan was reserved for the capital city.

In 1504, the Tainos welcomed the first Spaniards with open arms; but when they were subjected to over-exploitation, they rebelled. Before the end of the 16th century, the indigenous population had practically disappeared as a result of disease and battles against the conquistadores. The Spaniards then began importing slaves from Africa.

As in many other Latin America countries, no indigenous peoples remain in Puerto Rico today. The only testament to their existence is the island's racial mix of black, white and Taino origins.

In 1898, the island came under US control, when Spain lost the Spanish-American War. The following year, its name was changed to Porto Rico, for "linguistic reasons." In 1932, Puerto Rico was restored as its official name.

In 1902, Spanish and English were declared the official languages. In 1991, Rafael Hernández Colón—then governor of the island and a good friend of King Juan Carlos of Spain, and currently a university professor in Madrid—signed into law a measure that recognized Spanish as the island's only official language. As a result, the Spanish government awarded the *Príncipe de Asturias* prize to the people of Puerto Rico.

On the island, the "Spanish-Only" act brought forth protests from various sectors of independent professionals, because even though Spanish is widely spoken as the native language, many official documents are written in English. Translating them into Spanish would imply an increase in costs, and thus appeals and requests for exceptions to the law multiplied.

This situation was short-lived. At the beginning of this year, the island's new governor, Pedro Rosselló, reestablished English as the official language in Puerto Rico, together with Spanish.

The statement of reasons for the law now in effect emphasizes that: "For historical reasons, since Puerto Rico is part of the United States and Puerto Ricans are American citizens, our people have been using both English and Spanish indiscriminately for more than nine decades [in order] to facilitate communication in industry, commerce, finance and in the Puerto Rican government's dealings with the federal government, without renouncing or disregarding our vernacular, Spanish, nor surrendering our culture or our language."

## The status question

In 1900, American President William McKinley signed the Foraker Act, which stated that the inhabitants of Puerto Rico were "citizens of Puerto Rico"; they thus acquired the

*In the eyes of many Latin Americans, this beautiful little island has become the black sheep of the family. This is the result of misleading information and a lack of knowledge regarding Puerto Ricans.*

status of citizens of a nonexistent country, similar to the status ascribed to Native Americans living in the US. Seventeen years were to pass before Puerto Ricans were granted American citizenship.

The island's current status as a Freely Associated State of the United States was established in 1952, and is open to subsequent modifications in the island's relationship with the United States, based on the free expression of mutual consent.

Fifteen years later, a referendum on Puerto Rico's status was held on the island. The Freely Associated State won 60% of the votes, while the vote for independence did not even win one percent. The rest of the votes were in favor of annexation to the United States.

Towards the end of 1991, ex-governor Rafael Hernández Colón held a referendum which consisted of voting "yes" or "no" on a law which guarantees democratic rights, that included six rights related to the island's political status.

The fact that six issues were to be voted up or down in one package (see *Voices of Mexico* No. 19, pp. 72-75) caused a great deal of confusion. The vote was against claiming democratic rights regarding the island's political status, not because Puerto Ricans are not interested in their rights, but because they feared losing their American citizenship.

That "no" cost Hernández Colón—who had been elected governor in 1972, 1985 and 1988—his reelection that year. Before the referendum, he had stated his intention of accepting nomination for a fourth term in office. However, shortly after the results were known, he announced, one year in advance, his retirement from public life.

On January 2, 1993, in his inaugural address as governor of Puerto Rico, Pedro Rosselló announced his intention of holding a plebiscite regarding the island's status when he said, "We are looking for a star... a star that we deserve... a star that is ours by right... won with blood and by justice."

The people of Puerto Rico have recently given signs of not wanting a change. But by setting the date for the plebiscite in November of this year, Rosselló attempts to take advantage of his popularity as incumbent governor in order to make Puerto Rico the 51st state of the Union.

#### The question of convenience

In 1960, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a resolution regarding the "Independence of Colonial Peoples and Countries" which stated that an associated territory has the right to determine its internal affairs without outside interference.

Nevertheless, in 1967 Puerto Ricans voted in favor of continuing as a Freely Associated State. After 26 years, what motives can governor Pedro Rosselló have for holding a new referendum to define Puerto Rico's status?

Section 936 of the Internal Revenue Code, which grants fiscal exemptions for a ten year period to American companies that set up operations in US territories—not states—, has led many of them to do so in Puerto Rico, thus creating jobs and developing manufacturing and service sectors.

Thanks to this exemption and to the federal aid which Puerto Ricans receive from the United States—housing, unemployment, food stamps, etc.—the islanders are not destitute. In fact, Puerto Rico has the highest per capita income in Latin America.

And this, precisely, is one of Rosselló's concerns in view of the Free Trade Agreement between Mexico, Canada and the United States. He foresees the possibility that many American companies may move to Mexico, since the minimum wage here is almost five times less than in Puerto Rico, and the geographical proximity to the United States is greater (the island's nearest point to the US is more than 900 miles distant).

Another source of concern is Cuba. The Puerto Rican tourist industry trembles at the prospect of Cuba without Fidel Castro. The decrease in Cuba's strategic importance since the end of the Cold War, has already had repercussions in Puerto Rico.

Those who favor strengthening the Freely Associated State argue against annexation, claiming that Puerto Rico would become the poorest state in the Union. But Rosselló maintains that "in 37 cases in which territories that were colonies of the United States became states, their economic level and social development improved."

On the other hand, Puerto Rican analysts have pointed out that the US Congress is not willing to grant more power and privileges to the Freely Associated State. In view of President Clinton's proposal of substituting "workfare" for "welfare," they think that the days of the Section 936 exemption are numbered.

And it is precisely within the current process of globalization that Rosselló hopes to make Puerto Rico more productive and competitive. His campaign slogan was *¡Se Puede!* (It Can Be Done!). In his inaugural address he said: "They will tell us, in Puerto Rico and abroad... that it can't be done. One can't be big, being so small... One can't progress, in the middle of the Caribbean... I say to you... and all of Puerto Rico will say it... It can be done!... Puerto Rico can be greater!"

It will be interesting to see, at the end of this year, how Puerto Ricans will vote on the referendum and, if they chose annexation—the statehood option—to see if the United States will be willing to accept Puerto Rico as the 51st state of the Union ❧

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