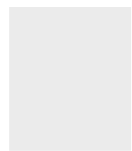


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ISSUE DESCRIPTION



COMMITTEE Special Political and Decolonization Committee

ISSUE Addressing the Question of Puerto Rico's Independence

SUBMITTED BY Janka Juhász and Eszter Kovács, Chairs of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee

APPROVED BY Vilmos Eiben, President of the General Assembly

Introduction

The aim for self-determination has been a recurring theme in the history of humans, shaped mostly by things such as economy, cultural identity and political governance. Puerto Rico consists of the main island of Puerto Rico and various smaller islands; Vieques, Culebra, Mona, Desecheo, and Caja



de Muertos. The island lies at the boundary between the Caribbean and North American Plates and is constantly being deformed by the tectonic stresses caused by the interaction of these two. These stresses may cause earthquakes and tsunamis. These seismic events, alongside landslides, typify some of the most dangerous geologic hazards in the island as well as in the northeastern Caribbean.

As of 1898, Puerto Rico has been one of the United States' so-called unincorporated territory, that only has limited autonomy. This was declared after Spain was overturned during the Spanish-American war and Puerto Rico, along with Guam, was forced to cede to the US. This way, Puerto Rico's political status remains one of the most debated legacies that is tied to colonialism. Over the years, debates over the future of the island have been continuous, with three major options presented: continuing the Commonwealth status, statehood or full independence. There have been a number of non-binding referendums over the years but numerous factors, such as low turnout, boycott of the voting and narrow plurality have affected these and none of them are generally viewed as outstandingly informative. Still, independence has historically faced challenges, as dependency on the United States is clear, including economic dependency on U.S. aid and limited public support when compared to statehood.

Definition of Key Terms

Unincorporated Territory - An unincorporated territory of the United States is a self-governing country which is, however, dependent on the absolute power of the U.S. Congress, and the U.S. armed forces exercise extensive control over it. The citizens of an unincorporated territory are under the control of the Department of Interior and thus, they are not given the full rights of US citizenship.

Insular Cases- A series of early 20th-century U.S. Supreme Court rulings that determined the constitutional rights of territories, such as Puerto Rico. These cases established that territories are "foreign in a domestic sense."

Plebiscite/Referendum- A vote in which all the people in a country or an area are asked to give their opinion about or decide an important political or social question

Economic Viability - Economic viability for a country refers to its ability to generate enough resources to sustain its economy, maintain public services, and ensure long-term growth without relying excessively on external support. It involves managing income sources, such as taxes, exports, and natural resources, to meet the country's expenses and obligations. A viable economy can also adapt to changes, manage risks, and provide a stable standard of living for its population.

Sovereignty - the power of a country to control its own government.

Non-Binding Resolution- A non-binding resolution is a written motion adopted by a deliberative body that can or cannot progress into a law. Most Puerto Rican referendums fall under this category.

Statehood- the condition of being a country or a part of a large country that has its own government.

General Overview

SELF-DETERMINATION AND ROLE OF THE SPECPOL

Self-determination, sovereignty, independence are core principles of international law, yielding people the right to their political status and to work towards their desired economic, social and cultural development. The Special Political and Decolonization Committee (SPECPOL) also known as the Fourth Committee of the United Nations General Assembly, plays a key role within the UN in promoting it. The committee addresses the issue on all levels, such as decolonization, peacekeeping and the right of non-self-governing territories. In issues related to self-determination, SPECPOL offers various solutions, including mediated negotiations, autonomy arrangements, referendums, cultural and economic protections, issuing Advisories and Monitoring Missions, establishing International Trusteeship Systems and Power-Sharing Agreements, and federalizing.

An example attempt for self-determination could be mentioned as regards New Caledonia, a French territory in the South Pacific. The people of the territory held multiple referenda, the last one being in December 2021, in which the results were 96.5% against independence. The numbers are deceiving, however, as the turnout number was really low due to the COVID-19 pandemic, even though the pro-independence standpoint was high priorly. The French government's decision to carry on, however, caused tension, which is still present. Although Puerto Rico's situation is somewhat, if not entirely different, it is crucial to learn from the mistakes committed in previous attempts of independence, supposing it is needed.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Puerto Rico's political status remains globally significant and locally debated, due to centuries of colonialism. Christopher Columbus claimed the territory making it a Spanish colony in 1493, before it ceded into the United States in 1898 after the Spanish-American war. Since then, it has existed as an unincorporated territory of the USA. Although people have been granted citizenship in 1917, they still remain without full representation in politics or the right to vote in federal elections. Additionally, even though the island is under the U.S. Constitution, many federal laws are applied unevenly. This state of the island has been met with three options as turnovers, such as full independence, becoming a fully acclaimed state of the United States and Commonwealth status.

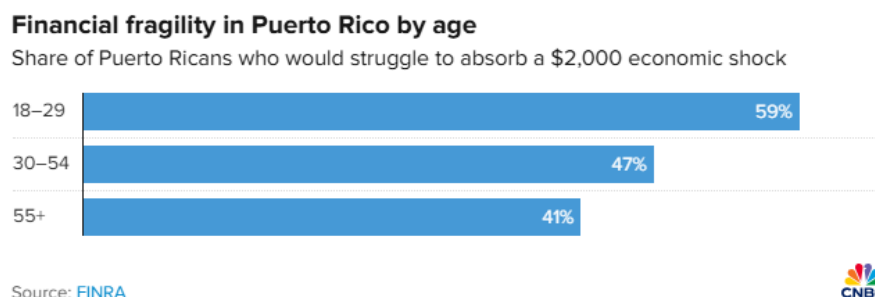
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DEBATE OVER INDEPENDENCE

The independence movement is deeply integrated into Puerto Rican people's lives as a desire for sovereignty. Promoters of independence dispute that detachment from the United States would allow Puerto Rico to establish its own government, manage its own economy without external influence and it would allow the island to participate in international politics as a sovereign nation. However, opposers argue that the island is too heavily dependent on the U.S. economically, there is a high level of public debt, and many rely on the distribution of federal assistance programs. Public opinion remains divided, though statehood has been gaining more support recently, independence advocates uphold that decolonization aligns more with international law and human rights principles overall.

ECONOMIC HARSHIPS



“Financial fragility, particularly for young adults, is much higher in Puerto Rico than on the mainland U.S. More than half, or 59%, of 18 to 29-year-olds are financially struggling in Puerto Rico compared to 38% of the same age group in the U.S., according to FINRA data.” - reports CNBC. It is not all, however, the population of the island is struggling more than mainland U.S.

citizens in other aspects as well, including emergency savings, retirement savings, home ownerships, and economically in general. The fleeing of many exacerbates the situation even more, leaving the territory without sufficient workforce.

GLOBAL AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization identifies Puerto Rico as one of the world's last remaining non-self-governing territories, so the U.S. has been repeatedly called to address the issue. The state of Puerto Rico highlights the importance of autonomy and the responsibility of the colonial powers to fix injustice in history.

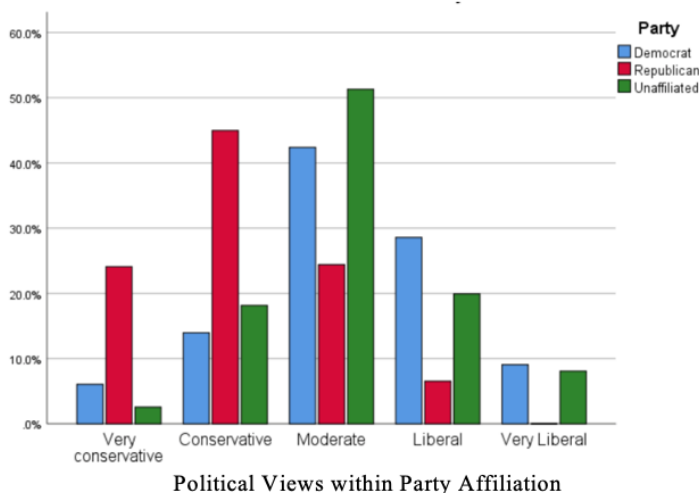
The way Puerto Rico's future plays out will have significant impacts regionally and throughout the Caribbean as well. Its location in the Caribbean results in it being vital for its proximity to major shipping routes. As a U.S. territory it also benefits from inclusion in the U.S. Custom system, which makes trade with the U.S. seamless. This agreement expands, of course, to other U.S. agreements that further enhance its appeal to trade. If it was to claim independence, and join the United Nations, or get integrated back to Spain, it would receive the benefits of the UN trading system, allowing it to access international trade agreements, for example becoming a member of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. As an independent country it could also join the World Trade Organisation and a chance to start trade beyond the United States, opening a potential market, for instance, in Europe or Asia.

Independence, however, would inevitably mean not being part of the U.S. economy. This means that Puerto Rico would lose the benefits from federal funding, legal protections and duty-free market access. In short, the economy would face a number of challenges, new infrastructure, tariff system and new diplomatic relations would have to be considered in case of independence.

STATISTICS ON PUERTO RICO'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The outcomes of recently done referendums show how the debate of independence is controversial, even within. In the 2020 non-binding referendum, 52.5% of voters supported statehood, while 47.5% opposed it. The turnouts were also quite low with 55%, reflecting political passivity. In contrast, support for independence has consistently been less than 10% in past referendums, although it holds symbolic importance among a vocal minority. With the

island receiving over \$20 billion annually in federal aid, it is obvious how Puerto Rico is dependent on the U.S. The island's poverty rate stands at approximately 40%, compared to a national U.S. average of 11.6%.



Major Parties Involved

The United States of America: Puerto Rico has been under U.S. control since 1898, and as it governs the island, it makes the United States a central player in any discussion related to the independence of Puerto Rico. Any movement for the island's independence requires addressing U.S. laws, and the country resisted efforts for activities of this nature.

Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP): The Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) is trying to achieve Puerto Rico's full independence from the United States and is the largest of independence parties. It promotes cultural preservation, social justice, and economic sovereignty but recently the PIP has struggled to gain significant electoral support. The party was started as a response to the change in the Popular Democratic Party's ideologies. Despite its latest struggles, it remains a vocal advocate for self-determination internationally.

Popular Democratic Party (Puerto Rico): Originally a centre-leftist party, the Popular Democratic Party (PPD) supports keeping Puerto Rico's Commonwealth status while seeking more self-governance. In recent years they lean more towards centrist ideas

but still, ideologically the PPD differs from other parties on the island. It has been a major political force historically as well but is also one of the two major parties on the island today. Its opponent is the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP).

New Progressive Party of Puerto Rico (PNP): The New Progressive Party is the largest pro-statehood party in Puerto Rico. Also, it is one of the two major parties on the island with significant political strength and currently holds both the seat of the governor and of the resident commissioner.

Puerto Rican Nationalist Party (only historically): The Puerto Rican Nationalist Party has played a key role in the island's independence movement. Under Pedro Albizu Campos in the 1930s, it was a seriously strong anti-colonial party, leading protests and uprisings, such as the 1950 Jayuya revolt. While its influence has faded and after the death of Campos the party dissolved, it remains an important symbol of resistance in the ongoing fight for Puerto Rican independence.

United Nations Committee on Decolonization: The United Nations Committee on Decolonization plays a crucial role in Puerto Rico's independence movement because it focuses on issues of colonialism and also promotes self-determination. Even though Puerto Rico is not on the United Nations' official list of Non-Self-Governing Territories, the committee has reviewed its status at the request of independence supporters, bracing the push for Puerto Rican sovereignty.

Timeline of Events

1493 - Christopher Columbus arrives on the island which is now known as Puerto Rico, on his second voyage to America.

1508 - Juan Ponce de León founded the first European settlement, Caparra. Owing to him, the territory is now part of the Spanish Empire.

April 21, 1898 - The Spanish-American war commences, which results in the defeat of Spain eventually

December 10, 1898 - Treaty of Paris is signed, Puerto Rico and Guam cede to the United States. Puerto Rico becomes an unincorporated territory of the U.S.

1900 - Foraker Act (Organic Act of 1900)

1917 - The Jones Act (Jones-Shafroth Act)

July 25, 1952 - Puerto Rico adopts Commonwealth status.

2022- The U.S. House of Representatives passes the Puerto Rico Status Act, which seeks to provide a binding process for Puerto Ricans to choose between statehood, independence, or free association. However, the bill does not pass the Senate.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

One of the few attempts to regulate the territory could be traced back to 1917. The Jones Act (Jones-Shafroth Act) separated the Executive, Judicial, and Legislative branches of Puerto Rican government, provided civil rights to the individual, and created a locally elected bicameral legislature. However, the Governor and the President of the United States had the power to veto any law passed by the legislature. Also, the United States Congress had the power to stop any action taken by the legislature in Puerto Rico. The U.S. maintained control over fiscal and economic matters and exercised authority over mail services, immigration, defence and other basic governmental matters.

Another key point in history came with the introduction of the Foraker Act (Organic Act of 1900), which was passed by the U.S. Congress, establishing a civilian government for Puerto Rico. The act granted limited self-governance, and Puerto Rico remained under U.S. sovereignty, not having full political rights. With the aforementioned two attempts, it is showcased that there have been regulations and steps taken by the United States to, at least to some degree, help the case move forward, however, it is clear that future intervention is required.

Possible Solutions and Approaches

Puerto Rico's political status requires a solution that respects the will of the Puerto Rican people while also considering legal, economic, and geopolitical factors. Any resolution should guarantee long-term stability and a well-functioning economy. In the short term this may be approached economically, by restructuring the country's debt, which would further enhance independence. The UN Special Committee on Decolonization could clear the way for

constructive discussions between Puerto Rican leaders, the U. S. government and other key figures.

INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

As for long-term solutions, if Puerto Rico chooses independence, the United Nations could help with a smooth transition by providing governance training, trade agreements, and economic aid. However, if the island is pro-statehood, the U. S. should take matters into their own hands and create a plan to tackle legal and economic issues. In case of maintaining Commonwealth status, reforms should be implemented in order to provide Puerto Rico with greater autonomy.

POPULAR ENGAGEMENT

Moreover, a binding referendum could provide a clearer decision on the country's future. The engagement of Puerto Rican people is necessary for a legitimate resolution, so inclusivity is crucial in this question. Additionally, regional organizations could play a role in supporting Puerto Rico's decolonization process. Despite potential solutions, the chances of implementation are low. Resistance in the U. S. congress can easily slow down the progress on Puerto Rico's status, making diplomatic efforts and public awareness significant for change.

FOLLOWING EXAMPLES

There are several similar previous cases that can offer insights into possible approaches. For instance, Greenland's 2008 referendum on autonomy from Denmark is a great example of a self-determination process.

Ultimately, for stability and growth on the island, it is essential to settle Puerto Rico's political status. Transparency and international support are keys to achieving this long-desired goal.

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