

NO means NO: A people's victory in Puerto Rico

Escrito por Ed Morales

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All month long the people of Puerto Rico have been assaulted by a barrage of advertising on television, radio, and billboards urging them to vote for two constitutional amendments that would eliminate the absolute right to bail for the accused and decrease the size of the legislature by 30 per cent.

They were told these changes to the constitution, which had not been amended for nearly 50 years, were not political in nature—they merely were intended to address the increasing problem of violent crime on the island and save the government some money by cutting back on the costs of voter representation.

But Puerto Ricans knew different—they saw the proposed amendments in their proper political contexts and voted them down 54% to 46%, causing a stunning political defeat for not only the ruling New Progressive Party, but electoral politics as usual on the island. They knew that Governor Luis Fortuño's administration was engaged in a demagogic campaign to manipulate the fear factor among citizens weary of the daily reports of murder, mayhem, and domestic abuse and the failure of a corrupt and deficient police department to contain it. They understood that the elimination of absolute right to bail, a provision of a constitution more progressive and humane than the U.S. constitution it was based on, was a threat to the sacred right to the presumption of innocence, and that poor people and people of color would be most vulnerable. They understood that the reduction of the size of the legislature, currently the pet project of ALEC devotee, Republican Representative Sam Smith in his own state of Pennsylvania, would result in a contraction of democracy. So they went to the polls in massive numbers as they do in Puerto Rico on Sundays, the way they vote in the rest of Latin America, and they said No and No. Loudly.

All month long, the common wisdom would be that the referenda would be passed, that the people were too cowed by the relentless domination of the New Progressive Party, which controls both houses of the legislature, the executive branch, and by virtue of expanding the number of judges in its Supreme Court, the judicial branch as well. They had control over the

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political system and seemed to have control over most of the established media, and in their arrogance they pushed this vote to happen less than three months before the election, seemingly part of a strategy to all but assure victory in November.

Part of that arrogance was fueled by the fact that the current candidate for the opposition Popular Democratic Party, Alejandro García Padilla, is perceived as so ineffectual that even though most of the body politic is dying to excise the cancer of Fortuño and his henchmen, they would not be energized enough to go out and do so because García Padilla's current profile is a little bit below buffoon status. He even proved his craven nature by refusing to oppose the referenda, for all intents and purposes going into hiding when he had the opportunity to take a courageous stand that might finally energize the PPD base. His appearance tonight on local television was so stilted and absurd in claiming "victory" over two amendments he voted for that it could go down in history as the night the PPD began its irreversible decline into irrelevance.

Tonight belonged to the people, even though the media focused on the two major political parties, and even though there were several PPD members celebrating at the Colegio de Abogados in Miramar, it was almost as if that party didn't mean anything anymore, that the politics of status, long rumored to be in decline, didn't mean anything anymore, and what meant something was saving democracy and a sense of dignity among the people. It was about the chance to address social, political, and economic crises long neglected. It was a chance to restore a national and cultural identity that somehow is carefully protected at this institution that is ostensibly about the law, but is ultimately a bastion of the arts, philosophy, and culture. An institution under attack by the PNP, whose members belong to both the Republican and Democratic parties.

This is where the President of the Colegio, Osvaldo Toledo, stood next to Carmen Yulín Cruz, progressive PDP candidate for mayor of San Juan, and union leader José Rodríguez Báez, not extolling the virtues of the nebulous Commonwealth, but chanting, with the gathering throng, "El pueblo, unido, jamás será vencido!" That's when the television cameras shut down, and there was a pause for a commercial, and when we returned, it was to reveal the angry authoritarian sneer of Senate President Tomás Rivera Schatz, who looked like an annoyed car wash owner forced to come into work on the weekend, chastising García Padilla for being a loser for voting for the amendments his own party had just been humiliated over.

No, as much as the media tried to avoid it, the people were gathered around Toledo, Yulín, Rodríguez, three passionate Puerto Ricans who just over two years ago were tear-gassed and clubbed by the NPP's storm troopers at the Capitolio and the Sheraton Hotel. Last summer all three of them told me, sometimes, haltingly, others defiantly, always with an incredulity of what they had experienced, that, for exercising their constitutional right to protest, or in Toledo's case, observe and offer to negotiate between parties in a protest, they were met with the most crude violence seen here in years, orchestrated by a party whose leader claims to bring peace to this island's citizens, and who instead is presiding over a corrupt and violent dismantling of a democracy that again and again outdoes that of a country that despite its claim to being the leader of democratic ideals continues to hold this island and its people as a colonial possession.

They were not swayed by the cowardly displays of the steel baton, or those who would try to

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use fear and demagoguery to manipulate the people. That is why this is a night to celebrate. Ganó el pueblo.

Puñeta.

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