

San Juan: Protesters Reject US Colonialism on the Island

Escrito por Belén Marty

Miércoles, 17 de Junio de 2015 07:13



Independence from the United States. That's what almost 2,000 Puerto Ricans in the island's capital of San Juan demanded on Sunday, June 14.

Protesters also called for the release of Oscar López Rivera, an independence activist and former member of the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), who has been locked up in a US federal prison on conspiracy charges since 1981.

The march comes just days ahead of a meeting of the UN Special Committee on Decolonization scheduled for June 22, where nation members are expected to discuss the commonwealth's case, officially an unincorporated US territory.

The groups involved in organizing Sunday's protest included the Nationalist Party, the Workers' Socialist Movement (MST), New School, Caribbean and Latin American Coordinator, the Resistance Collective, and the Revolutionary Workers' Party-Macheteros.

At around 10:40 a.m. local time, the activists began their march on Ashford Avenue toward the Dos Hermanos bridge, and finished at Antonia Quiñones Plaza. Group representatives then gave speeches and artistic performances.

"We doubled our numbers this year," said Juan Dalmau, general secretary of the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP). "The march has been a resounding success. We demand independence, and this year we also demand that Oscar López be freed. Ashford Avenue has been flooded with patriotism and commitment to independence."

Héctor Pesquera, spokesman for the Hostosian National Independence Movement (MINH), says it's been a long time since an event for independence was so successful. "Necessity is forcing us to come together. It's the only way out for this country facing colonial collapse."

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During the protest, activists burned a US flag, and Puerto Rican Senator María de Lourdes Santiago, vice president of the PIP, read a letter from Rivera: “The Puerto Rican diaspora should remain united and feel the power that it has the potential to achieve,” said the activist, who has spent the last 12 years in solitary confinement.

“The same should happen inside Puerto Rico. We should see ourselves as 8 million strong, not divided in half. We cannot allow the colonial situation to last much longer.” After reading Rivera’s letter, the senator called on her fellow Puerto Ricans to join the independence movement.

Liliana Laboy, spokeswoman for the Independence Dialogue Roundtable, says the protest proves that several socialist organizations can work together toward the same goal.

Representatives of the Sovereign Union Movement (MUS) participated in the event, but did not play a central role. “Besides independence, we also need to demand sovereignty, and the sovereignty of free association is on the path toward independence,” MUS member Rosa Bel Bayrón said.

Who is Oscar López Rivera?

Since the 19th century, the Puerto Rican independence movement has oscillated between violent, revolutionary tactics and peaceful, institutional strategies to try and liberate themselves, first from Spain, and then from the United States.

In 2012, Puerto Rico carried out a referendum to determine whether or not residents wanted to become a US state. Only 5.5 percent of the population favored independence.

In total, 809,000 Puerto Ricans voted to integrate further with the United States, while 441,000 wanted the island to become a free associated state, and just 73,000 cast a ballot for full independence. Controversy erupted over the high number of blank votes.

In 1981, the FBI arrested López Rivera and accused him of seditious conspiracy, use of force to commit robbery, interstate transportation of firearms, and conspiracy to transport explosives with intent to destroy government property.

A federal grand jury sentenced Rivera to 55 years in prison the same year, later receiving an additional 15 years after he tried to escape from jail in 1988.

Before he was arrested, Rivera was an active member of the FALN paramilitary group fighting to bring independence to Puerto Rico. In 1999, he rejected a conditional pardon offered by former US President Bill Clinton.

For some, Rivera is a political prisoner and a revolutionary hero, while for others — such as the victims of FALN attacks and their families — a terrorist.

On June 10, the New York City Council, presided over by Puerto Rican Melissa Mark-Viverito,

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passed a resolution urging President Barack Obama to grant the 72-year-old clemency. “[Rivera’s] continued incarceration is unjust and serves no legitimate purpose,” Mark-Viverito said.

Translated by Daniel Duarte.

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