



Puerto Rico is in a state of emergency. Its public debt, which Governor Garcia Padilla recently declared unpayable, is \$73 billion and counting. Unemployment is hovering at a dismal 14 percent and 46 percent of the island's inhabitants are living below the poverty line, a rate higher than that of any state on the mainland.

Puerto Rico's recent surge in out-migration is also cause for concern. Spurred largely by the economic crisis, a historic exodus of residents to the mainland translates to a shrinking tax base which, in turn, puts additional strain on an already weakened economy and burdens those remaining on the island with higher taxes and dwindling resources.

Although a variety of suggestions have been proposed to save the island from default, here are

four reasons a clearly articulated, multi-year transition to independence is the only long-term viable solution for Puerto Rico.

### 1. Puerto Rico's serious and worsening economy is largely rooted in its colonial status.

As a U.S. colony, Puerto Rico's insolvent municipalities and public corporations cannot declare bankruptcy. And because Puerto Rico is not independent, it is prohibited from seeking help from international financial institutions, leaving it with few options in the face of what seems like inevitable default. Yet while the right to declare bankruptcy is important in helping the island restructure its mounting debt, it is only part of a short-term solution to a crisis that is, at its core, deeply structural.

Puerto Rico's economy is both limited by and dependent on Washington. Constrained by U.S. federal laws and regulations, the island's economy lacks the structural capacity to thrive on its own. Puerto Rico has no control over its monetary policy and little control of its fiscal policy. Issues related to immigration, foreign policy and trade are dictated by U.S. law and U.S. regulatory agencies.

Further, because Puerto Rico has no actual representation in Congress, decisions are made with little to no consideration for the needs and general welfare of the island's residents. Indeed, Puerto Ricans must adhere to laws passed by a government in which they do not participate. Independence would grant Puerto Rico a platform to address the debt crisis on its own terms and afford the island's 3.5 million inhabitants the right to self-determination.

### 2. Statehood is a pipe dream.

Economic and cultural arguments aside, statehood has never been a real option for Puerto Rico. Contrary to Alaska and Hawaii, which were deemed "incorporated" territories with the intention of moving toward annexation to the Union, the decision to keep Puerto Rico as "unincorporated" was a ploy to avoid statehood.

Indeed, Puerto Rico's status as an unincorporated territory means that it "belongs to, but is not part of the U.S." And that is unlikely to change. A Republican-controlled Congress would never admit Puerto Rico -- with its massive debt and overwhelmingly Democratic (and non-white, Spanish-speaking) voting base -- into the Union, even if such a determination is made by the island's residents.

### 3. Other nations have proved that independence is possible.

For far too long, the people of Puerto Rico have chosen to accept the comfort of a familiar yet broken status quo over the uncertainty of real, revolutionary change. Indeed, many on the island and in the diaspora adhere to a colonized mentality, one that believes an independent Puerto Rico is economically unsustainable. But liberated nations across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America have demonstrated otherwise.

Singapore is a prime example. With a size 14 times smaller than Puerto Rico, less natural

resources, and a significantly higher population density, Singapore has thrived socially and economically since gaining independence -- even exceeding the per capita income of the United States.

4. An independent Puerto Rico would more readily protect the welfare and the rights of its people than the United States.

Since the U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico in 1898, Washington's relationship with Puerto Rico has been one of exploitation and convenience. From the Ponce Massacre and government-sanctioned programs aimed at forcibly sterilizing working class Puerto Rican women to unethical testing and human radiation experiments on Puerto Rican prisoners, the U.S. government has a shameful track record of transgressions on the island.

And let's not forget Vieques: for more than 60 years the U.S. Navy used the island of Vieques as target practice. Though the bombings stopped in 2003, the U.S.' legacy on Vieques continues in the form of destroyed land (over half the island is uninhabitable), shattered livelihoods, and increased rates of cancer, birth defects, and illnesses -- the result of contamination from years of continuous bombings.

Yet because Puerto Rico lacks any real autonomy or representation, these and other travesties -- both social and economic -- are largely ignored. Independence would hold accountable elected representatives at all levels of government and restore power to the people.

Maru González, Scholar-Activist, Educator