

On governability

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The events that have unfolded since election night, casting uncertainty as to the results of the election for governor, and the probability of a shared government between the Popular Democratic Party and the New Progressive Party have led many serious people in Puerto Rico to worry about the governability of the Commonwealth during the coming years.

I address this matter in this column, not as a problem that has just dawned upon us, but rather as one that goes beyond the results of the past election and that has been creeping up on us for about two decades.

I served three terms as governor of the Commonwealth. During my first term—1973 to 1976—Puerto Rico faced a major economic and fiscal crisis due to the Arab oil embargo of 1973 and the ensuing stagflation. We were able to weather the storm with minor consequences because we had the capacity and the instruments of government. At that time, experienced and highly talented public servants, such as Teodoro Moscoso, Guillermo Rodriguez Benitez, Salvador Casellas, Ramon Garcia Santiago, Victor Pons, Salvador Rodriguez Aponte and Francisco de Jesus, were on board; also a trained cadre of middle management imbued with the tradition of excellence in public service still existed in the executive branch within respectable limits as to its size.

When I returned in 1985, the instruments of government had been blunted by the politicization of public service, the bloating of personnel in government agencies, and the gradual departure of the experienced middle managers left over from the Muñoz era, the heyday of public administration in Puerto Rico. It was also more difficult to recruit highly capable people for top-management positions in government. The individualist yuppie culture of the Reagan years was setting in.

In comparison with my first term, it was much harder to get anything done during my second term. It became more so during my third and last term. I began to sense that government, as we knew it, didn't function anymore. It is my impression as an outsider looking in that the matter has gotten worse since I left office. This and the results of the last election have given rise to the issue of governability.

I hesitate to use the term governability in as much as that term implies that the problem is with the governed, that is, with the people of Puerto Rico. Such a thesis is an excellent excuse for doing nothing about the problem. If the people of Puerto Rico are ungovernable, then nothing remains to be done. This is sheer nonsense.

The problem is not the people, but our capacity to govern our society. This capacity is measured by our means to recruit capable men and women to whom we may entrust our well-being and our destiny and by the instruments they have available with which to govern.

With development, our society has become more dynamic and complex. Development has brought its own problems, such as inadequate infrastructure (transportation, water, sewers, clean energy), crime, drugs, the disintegration of the family, structural unemployment, and others. These problems seem intractable to us, but they aren't exclusively ours. They pervade, in differing measure, more developed countries. Thus the capacity to govern is an issue of international currency. This is so, only if we just address the domestic aspect of the question, but this is only one side of the coin.

The other side of the capacity-to-govern issue is the international aspect, which raises questions, such as how nation states cope with problems whose scope extends beyond their borders. These include environmental issues—climate change—or terrorism and security. This side of the coin raises questions just as serious or even more so than those incumbent in a domestic sense.

The question of the capacity to govern presents itself at all levels of government: local government, metropolitan areas such as our own, civil society, state government, national governments, and global governance. It is one of the fundamental questions facing humanity today, as has been pointed out by the forward-looking Club of Rome. In addressing the issue in a domestic sense, we must look both at the capacity of those who govern and at the instruments they have at their command.

To govern is not only to rule by right of authority, but also to guide with the common good as the objective to which we are directed. To govern in this 21st century, governors, mayors, and legislators must have the capacity to make critical decisions in a timely fashion in order both to attend to current problems and to provide guidance and direction to our society towards the loftier goals of humanity.

In order to do that, governance must be moral in the broader sense. Not merely ethical in personal conduct, it must be moral in terms of the values that inspire its decisions. Luis Muñoz Marin inspired values of democracy, social justice, and the dignity of men and women in his legislators and functionaries and that government in turn inspired Puerto Rico with a sense of purpose which government must give society. That is what government is about. In order to be moral, governance must be based on shared values and aspirations of society, not on partisan preferences that set us apart in tribal fashion. It must also be dynamic—not bureaucratic—in order to respond to the accelerated rate of change which Puerto Rico faces.

Governance in the 21st century must be profound; it requires intellect and reflection, creativity, and an ability to learn. It requires the vision, the will, and the know-how to cast aside the monolithic system of government of the past in order to allocate decisional power to lower levels and other spheres, such as civil society, so that decisions can be made rapidly.

Recruiting men and women with these capacities is a tall order for Puerto Rican society in an age where television campaigns have turned politics into a circus. It is the task of civil society to educate and demand from our political parties, leadership at all levels of such quality that has the capacity to undertake the more effective and deeper tasks of government that the 21st century requires.

