

## The unreal world of Puerto Rico's politics

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A few days ago, I opened a Spanish-language daily and, as I flipped through it, I came upon two adjoining pages bearing three news items with large titles and long stories. The stories gave me a sense of déjà vu. I felt I had been there before. As a matter of fact, many times I have found myself trying to reason from a factual perspective with many of our political leaders immersed in the unreal world of Puerto Rican politics.

The first story was about a resolution presented by Sen. Eudaldo Báez Galib to the Popular Democratic Party convention that met in Río Mar the 15th of this month. The resolution would notify the president of the United States that he has a five-year deadline to obtain from Congress a bill that would fully develop Commonwealth status or, if he should fail to do so, the members of the Popular Democratic Party would be free to support other status alternatives beside Commonwealth.

The second story was about a committee formed by Julio Fontanet, the president of the Bar Association, to procure from our bicameral Legislature that a referendum be held July 9, 2007 to establish a unicameral legislature in Puerto Rico. The third was a speech by Fernando Martín, the executive president of the Puerto Rican Independence Party, at a memorial for Gilberto Concepción de Gracia, the founder of the party, where he announced that in the current political context—whatever that may be—the U.S. will be forced to conclude it has to put an end to Commonwealth and grant independence to Puerto Rico.

If there is a common thread that connects these flights of fancy, I would venture to say that it is denial, concealing a deep sense of powerlessness. A denial of realities that are too hard to bear: the frustrations in improving Commonwealth, the profound disgust with our Legislature, and the lack of popular support for independence. But denial does not solve problems; it only makes them worse.

Báez Galib's proposal stems from his conviction that only if it faces a crisis, will the U.S. act on the political development of Commonwealth. He may be right on this point, but he certainly is not going to create a crisis for the president of the United States by means of a resolution from the PDP convention giving him a deadline to act upon the development of Commonwealth. If the convention had adopted his proposal, which it did not, such a resolution would have been handled in the White House by a lower-level staff aide who would have courteously acknowledged receipt of the same and would have informed the PDP the White House has taken the matter under advisement. That would have been the end of the matter with the president of the United States. So, in accordance with Báez Galib's resolution, PDP members would have fled to the alternatives of statehood or independence, thus leaving Commonwealth—which happens to be our constitutional reality—bereft of support. So much for this flight of fancy.

The proposal by the committee created by the president of the Bar Association, which has been presented at his request to the Senate by its president, Kenneth McClintock, pretends to enforce a dismal mandate, not legally binding, to establish a unicameral legislature resulting from a referendum disdained by three-fourths of the electorate. Unicameralism has been proposed in Puerto Rico as a remedy against the incompetence and insensitivity of the Legislature. As an institutional remedy to human failure it will not work. Instead of punishing the legislators, which is what the people want to do, establishing a unicameral legislature would be rewarding the legislators they despise by granting them more power.

Legislative power is now vested in 78 legislators in two houses, both of which must act on a bill for it to become law. If it is vested in just one House with 51 legislators, this House and these legislators will have much more power than before and will thus be able to create much more mischief. This fact escapes those immersed in the unreal world of Puerto Rican politics. Just imagine where we would be now if in the recent battle over the 5.5% or 7% sales tax, instead of having the bicameral legislature, which we now have, there would have been just one House with a majority opposed to the governor.

A unicameral legislature will only make matters worse in Puerto Rico. What we need is to do away with full-time legislators and limit the sessions of the Legislature to only one of four-month duration per year. This framework will be a disincentive to those who wish to make the Legislature their stairway to a higher standard of living and an incentive for competent people willing to give a part of their time to public service.

The final flight of fancy reported in the pages of the Spanish-language daily that caught my attention was former Sen. Martín's independence forecast. This political status prognosis rests upon an intellectual construct: "Colonialism in Puerto Rico," says Martín, "has left a complicated framework in Puerto Rican existence with a life of its own. This framework is not going to break up from the inside, it is going to break up when the United States verbalizes the contradictions that this colony represents for them." Martín concludes the present political context in which the U.S. finds itself will lead it to grant independence to Puerto Rico.

The U.S. took over Puerto Rico without the consent of the Puerto Rican people, but it cannot grant independence to Puerto Rico without our consent. Having granted U.S. citizenship to all of those born in Puerto Rico, the only way Congress can grant independence is if a majority of Puerto Ricans freely votes for it. This truth was expressed in the Report of the Joint U.S.-Puerto Rico Status Commission established by Congress in 1964. The principle upon which it stands was affirmed by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1967 in the case of *Afroyim v. Rusk*, which held that not even Congress can deprive a U. S. citizen of his or her citizenship without his or her consent.

Congress cannot force U.S. citizens to pledge allegiance to a republic they have not voted for, nor wish to create. This goes against the grain of American citizenship. But in the unreal world of Puerto Rican politics, it would appear the Republic of Puerto Rico can come about by fiat from the Congress of the United States.