

A historic responsibility

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Last Sunday, the General Assembly of the Popular Democratic Party ratified Aníbal Acevedo Vilá as the party's candidate for governor in the general election to be held Nov. 4. It was a huge, emotional event that went as expected. Fifteen thousand *populares* met to stand by the governor against his indictment in federal court and to breathe new life into the party's purpose regarding the status of Puerto Rico. There was no dissent.

Fully aware that this would be the result of the General Assembly, and being in principle against the governor running under these circumstances, I tried to persuade him to postpone the assembly until the Governing Board of the party had a chance to meet and commission a survey to determine who was the best candidate to stand for the party in November. The Governing Board is charged by party regulations with planning party strategy and advising the governor on the direction of the General Assembly. But he was convinced he was the better option. Determined not to call a meeting of the Governing Board, he went ahead with the General Assembly.

The General Assembly held last Sunday chartered a course for the PDP campaign for the elections in November. The emotion driving this course is the feeling within the party that the governor has been abused by the indictments in federal court. Victoria "Melo" Muñoz, the founder's daughter, set the tone when the indictments came down a month ago. Puerto Rican democracy was at issue, she said; the federal government is mounting an attack against the candidate we have nominated.

Former Senate President Miguel Hernández Agosto sharpened the focus set by Melo Muñoz in his introductory remarks on behalf of the governor in the General Assembly. It is not only the governor but also the PDP as an institution that is the target of political persecution by the federal law enforcement powers in Puerto Rico. The call to action from Hernández Agosto was to disabuse the governor and the party through the ballot box in November.

The PDP as an institution was made a rhetorical target of the indictments to get the party faithful to close ranks in spite of the fact that when the indictments were announced it was expressly stated by the U.S. District Attorney that the PDP was not involved and was not a target of the investigation. The argument plays into the hands of the New Progressive Party, which is already charging the PDP with institutional corruption. The fact that funds were raised for the governor's defense among the delegates and the public attending the General Assembly will also give fodder to the NPP.

The governor's discourse stemmed from his reaction against the indictments and from a long-standing grievance of the PDP against itself. For as long as I can remember, even going back to the days of Muñoz

Marín, there has been a feeling among the more progressive wing of the party that we have not been forceful enough on the status issue with the U.S.; that the federal government disrespects Puerto Rico and that we do not challenge Washington. The indictments against the governor have exacerbated this feeling.

The emotions behind these frustrations led the governor, the leadership and the delegates to resolve to push aggressively for the resolution of the status issue through a Commonwealth based on the sovereignty of the people of Puerto Rico. This is the discourse that the party will follow in the campaign for the November election.

I share these frustrations, and I share the desire to resolve the issue on the status of Puerto Rico through an enhanced Commonwealth based on the sovereignty of the people of Puerto Rico. I have devoted all my adult life to the effort to achieve this result. But I do not think that involving the status issue in this election with the emotions stemming from the indictments against the governor will achieve our objective. There is no doubt it is a strong rallying call for the party faithful, but the November elections will not be decided solely on the status issue. The economy will have the greater weight in determining electoral behavior.

The emotions involved in this particular campaign will generate confusion on the issue of sovereignty. The PDP has always stood for Commonwealth based on the sovereignty of the people of Puerto Rico. The Constitution of the Commonwealth proclaims the sovereignty of the people of Puerto Rico. In this sense, it means sovereignty within the U.S. constitutional system, a sphere of government that Congress cannot encroach upon. It is premised on the union with the U.S. based on common citizenship.

There is another type of sovereignty, which is the sovereignty of independent countries under international law. This is not the sovereignty that the Popular Democratic Party has defended for the Commonwealth. The difference between these two types of sovereignties is a critical issue to Commonwealth voters. An emotional campaign is not the vehicle to make the differences clear to the voters.

The result of the General Assembly held last Sunday is that the indictments against the governor—and now against the party, according to the rhetoric—plus the push for the resolution of the status question, will be at issue in the next general election. In framing the matter this way, the leadership incurs a tremendous historical responsibility because, when the polls close in November, we will have the verdict.