

A historic responsibility II

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This is a sad column for me to write. The outcome of the election weighs heavily on my soul for I gave the most precious years of my life to a cause that has been severely battered at the polls, not for its intrinsic values, but for the vagaries of human emotions, personal interests and a lack of generous patriotism. Not that I think that given the state of the economy the Popular Democratic Party (PDP) could have prevailed, but that the outcome would have been much more respectable for us had Aníbal Acevedo stepped down when he was indicted.

I feared this time would come when in May (CB May 1) I wrote a column in these pages entitled “A Historic Responsibility.” Some paragraphs of that column bear repeating here.

“Last Sunday, the General Assembly of the PDP ratified Aníbal Acevedo Vilá as the party’s candidate for governor in the general elections 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 party’s Governing Board 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.”

“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 attempting 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 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 governor's speech raised the status issue and staked out a claim for sovereignty as to the relationship with the U.S. that was more based on emotion than on precise juridical content. This rhetoric would lead to confusion as to where the party stood. In the column, I wrote the following:

"I don't think 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 that it is a strong rallying call for the party faithful, but the November elections won't solely be decided by 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 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 Congress can't 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 isn't the sovereignty the PDP has defended for the Commonwealth. The difference between these two types of sovereignties is a critical issue to Commonwealth voters. An emotional campaign isn't 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 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."

And so it happened. The party suffered its worst defeat in history. Thousands of *populares* left the party because of the indictments and the confusion over the issue of sovereignty. Thousands of *populares* stayed home.

We now have to pick up the pieces. To do so, the values for which we stand must be clarified and reaffirmed. The party must be reorganized and new leadership selected, but we must not rush into the nomination de facto or otherwise of a gubernatorial candidate. This must come at the proper time. The task at hand is daunting. It will require a great deal of time and effort by all who value the essence of what it means to be a *popular*.

Upon us devolves the responsibility that this great party continues to serve the hopes and aspirations of the Puerto Rican people, who we hold dear. Come January, the PDP will assume the role of the opposition party. The example just set by the New Progressive Party in the Legislature isn't the model we must follow. We must be the loyal opposition; loyal as to the better interests of the Puerto Rican people. I would like to see our senators and representatives with an open mind as to Fortuño's proposals.

An opposition party that opposes everything the government proposes just because it is proposed by the government is backward in its instincts. An opposition party must discern wisely between good proposals and bad proposals. It should cooperate with the good, try to improve the bad and, if that isn't possible, fight against that which is bad, explaining to the public the reasons for doing so.

Fortuño won by espousing change. Let the PDP legislators show that change is a two-way thoroughfare upon which both parties can travel for the good of Puerto Rico.

