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Restoring Power Will Not Get Us Out Of The Dark Brought by Hurricane Maria: The Ugly Side of Neocolonialism

A collaboration by Ivan Figueroa-Otero and Yasmin Rodriguez

San Juan, PR - January 2018 -- Neocolonialism according to Wikipedia: the practice of using capitalism, globalization, and cultural imperialism to influence a developing country. In other words, is the use of economic, political, and cultural pressures on countries like Puerto Rico, which have never been on their own.

Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in September of 2017. The storm left behind blocked roads, roofless houses, citizens without water, downed power lines, and all islanders without electricity. However, Maria did not leave Puerto Rico in the darkness. Puerto Rico was already powerless and living in the dark long before the storm.

The destruction left by the powerful winds of Hurricane Maria cannot compare with the devastation caused by government corruption. Those winds have been blowing since the early days of colonialism. We were a Spanish colony, back when human rights were not a thing, and natives were considered currency. The Spaniards decimated our Taino population, and when the U.S. took over in 1898, they found an island populated by a mixture of cultures and idiosyncrasies all blended under a common name: Puerto Ricans. We were not a bunch of hillbillies, though. We had our bank, a telegraph, mature road and rail infrastructure, and a thriving economy. After about 300 years under Spain's strict and unfair hold, we were starting to feel Spanish. We were beginning to believe we belonged.

Then the United States took us over during the Spanish-American war and decided we were a bunch of hillbillies. Maybe it was the color of our skin or perhaps the fact that we spoke Spanish, but the U.S. treated us like we couldn't tie our shoelaces. The succession of U.S. governors brought with it martial law, political suppression, mismanagement of resources, and a general sense of not being "good enough." Laws like the Foraker Act and the Jones Act changed our government structure forever.

Finally, in 1948, an agreement between local and U.S. politicians converted Puerto Rico from a straight, outright colony to a commonwealth. However, while becoming a showcase of political fairness and goodwill, the U.S. camouflaged the spread of neocolonialism even further.

Under the guise of fictional governmental freedom and equality, Puerto Rico's political influencers started a game of power: Create a partisan system based on the island's political status choices as a colony, state or country. This divided the population and created a way for politicians to takes turns dipping their hands in the U.S. treasury goodie basket. It also allowed

the government to distract the population while they built a fake economy with no recurrent cash flow. They called it Operation Bootstrap. It was supposed to improve and industrialize our economy. Conversely, it turned Puerto Rico into a dependent country where we import everything, and the manufactured goods all leave the island, thus not bringing any sustainable income. One of the byproducts of Operation Bootstrap was Section 936 of the Internal Revenue Code. It exempted mainland United States companies from Federal taxes on income earned in Puerto Rico. Also, the Puerto Rican corporate tax code gave significant incentives for U.S. corporations to open local subsidiaries. The economy shifted with the influx of foreign investment, but when President Clinton phased-out the tax provisions in 2006, the following economic crash created a deep recession that continues today.

In the midst of all the economic mayhem, our politicians started pocketing the money. Public utility agencies like our shipping company (bankrupt), the telephone company (sold), water authority, and power authority became repositories for political favors. With inflated salaries and outrageous benefits, the books never balanced, because the influx of resources came from loans and money laundering schemes. In the end, the people of Puerto Rico pay for the lousy administration with each monthly utility bill.

Between the recession, bad administration, and the unsurmountable debt brought by it all, the U.S. government forced a Judicial Control Board on us, with government-appointed members, which can overrule every single aspect of our economy superseding even the governor.

After Hurricane Maria, the island is naked. Not only because people lost their roofs, but because the world can see the reality of our political situation. It became clear how little power our government has. In the aftermath of the worst storm on record we were at the mercy of the U.S. president and Senate. The U.S. can no longer hide our situation. We are a colony, ill-treated and unfairly judged. Locally, the government is also naked. The people are starting to realize how every politician in power is a self-serving pawn of the U.S.

Now, our governor Ricardo Rosello announced the sale of the island's public power authority. The same utility agency that has more than 40% of the island without electricity four months after the storm. Rosello cites the agency's inefficient and obsolete generation system as the reason for his decision. However, the Puerto Rico Power Authority was already a dead entity before the storm. The government hid the fact that it died, making the citizens pay to keep the illusion alive.

Hurricane Maria did not bring darkness to Puerto Rico. It merely unveiled the darkness that already engulfed us, shattering our dreams of freedom and solvency and forcing us to face our reality. Now, in the wake of the power authority's sale announcement, we need complete disclosure and transparency. It is evident that to ensure fair justice for all instead of benefits for some, the people of Puerto Rico have to step in and become an integral part of the processes.

This is the moment to change our history. Now that the winds laid everything bare, there are no excuses. We no longer believe in the rightness of the current order. We no longer believe in the people who we elected to serve us. It is time to voice our opinions, our fears, and our desires. Just like we helped ourselves and our neighbors in the wake of the storm, we need to help our nation become the place we can proudly call home.

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