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Puerto Rico

A New Alliance Could Change Puerto Rican Politics

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Puerto Rico has been a territory of the United States since the 1898 Spanish-American War. It had only US-appointed governors until 1948, and in 1952, Congress passed a joint resolution that approved its first constitution, which provided for limited autonomy. It would become a “Commonwealth,” but the island remained an unincorporated territory that lacked sovereignty and full rights afforded to US citizens, despite the fact that residents of Puerto Rico were granted citizenship in 1917.

Since then, the island's politics have revolved around three political parties whose platforms are focused on its political status: the pro-Commonwealth Popular Democratic Party (PDP), the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP), and the pro-sovereign Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP). Beginning in the 1930s, a series of uprisings by nationalist forces have been met with repression by US agencies (notably the FBI, which maintained extensive files of suspected “subversives”), minimizing the voter base for the Independence Party and creating a two-party duopoly consisting of the PDP and PNP.

In the 2010s, the combination of Congress's imposition of a Fiscal Oversight and Management Board (FOMB) to restructure Puerto Rico's \$72 billion debt and the devastating natural disaster of Hurricane Maria had the effect of shaking the island's residents' faith in the two-party duopoly.

The FOMB made it clear that the local government was not in charge of the island's finances, neutering the Commonwealth's illusory autonomy, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) poor response to Maria made Puerto Ricans doubt the pro-statehood party. As a result, a new, possibly game-changing element will be a feature of the elections in Puerto Rico this November. The newly created Citizens' Victory Movement (MVC) and the PIP will form a coalition (called La Alianza) to pool their growing constituency in an attempt to further erode, if not destroy, the existing two-party system comprised of the PNP and PDP.

Earlier this year, I [Ed Morales] visited Puerto Rico and sat down with the MVC's Rafael Bernabe, who was elected as senator at-large in 2020, engaging in a dialogue with him about the new alliance. The following is an edited version of our conversation.

Forming the Alliance

Ed Morales: The deterioration of Puerto Rico's economy and the US Congress's imposition of the FOMB to manage the \$72 billion debt crisis has led to Puerto Rico's people losing faith in its traditional electoral politics. What are the conditions that lead to the emergence of the alliance between the MVC and the PIP?

Rafael Bernabe: When you look at what has happened in the past fifteen years in Puerto Rico, it's not too hard to see the reason La Alianza came about. The economy of Puerto Rico went into a very deep depression in 2005. If you look at the numbers, the economy of Puerto Rico has been in a depression. We have had fifteen years of economic stagnation, no growth whatsoever. About two hundred thousand jobs have vanished; thousands of people have had to leave the island because they can't find them. They can't live here. And at the same time, you have all of these terrible corruption cases in the government. The result of that crisis (which people feel very deeply), the fact that the two major parties have not been able to offer any alternative to that crisis, and that they are increasingly corrupt machines has meant that the support for these two political parties is decreasing sharply.

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These parties combined used to get around 97 percent of the votes between them. The PIP got 3 percent, and they got the rest. And now that's down to like 64 percent: the PNP gets 33 percent; the PPD got 31 percent. These political parties have basically collapsed over the past ten years. In 2016, [ousted former governor] Ricky Rosselló won the governorship with 42 percent of the vote, which was already low enough, and then he was not even able to complete his term because the people got so fed up with his government that they mobilized and they overthrew him. It's the closest thing we've had to a revolution in Puerto Rico. People were in the street mobilizing for twenty days nonstop and forced the governor to resign. In the election in 2017, the PIP jumped from 3 percent to 14 percent. And the MVC, which was participating for the first time, gets 14 percent, which is an indication that people are very much open to new alternatives. So the rise of the vote for the MVC and for the people is very much part of the same process, because many of the people who were on the streets trying to get rid of him were seeking new alternatives. Now that we are in an alliance, we have come together in one single force.

Ed Morales: Has there been any inspiration from these types of alliances that have happened in multiparty democracies in Europe and Latin America?

Rafael Bernabe: In Uruguay, there's the Frente Amplio, which includes many parties of the Left that governed Uruguay for a long time. Some of us may not necessarily agree with exactly the policies or the lines adopted by the Frente Amplio, but the notion of an alliance of the Left parties, yeah, that's an inspiration. And we know that alliances of parties of the Left are rather common, have been experienced and tried out in many places around the world.

Ed Morales: The last time we talked, about a year ago, you talked about legal strategies to formalize an official alliance. Have you exhausted those legal strategies?

Rafael Bernabe: Well, the situation is as follows: up until 2011, this type of political alliance in general elections in Puerto Rico was legal. It was not uncommon in the past for that to happen in New York, for example, where you could have the same candidate in the column of different political parties. Going back to the 1930s, there was an alliance between the Socialist Party and the Republican Party, and it was called a coalition. Alliances or coalitions like these were eliminated in 2011 when they rewrote the electoral law in Puerto Rico. Back then, they prohibited having the same candidate in several columns. After the 2020 elections, the PIP and the MVC became interested in forming a coalition or an alliance. So we knew we had to deal with that prohibition.

The first angle of attack was to enact legislation to reform the law so that it would go back to the way it was before this prohibition. But the PNP and PDP majority are not interested in facilitating us having an alliance, so they blocked that, and there was no chance that they would approve the legal reestablishment of the possibility of having an alliance.

The second angle of attack was to challenge this prohibition in the courts. We argued that this prohibition is a violation of the right of association and the right of free expression, and that there's no reason why the state should prohibit two parties from forming an alliance in the electoral process. And the courts ruled against us. It's really an absurd ruling, holding that even though we do have a right to associate, the state has the right to limit such rights if there's enough reason for doing so. And they decided that there was enough reason because allowing for a candidate to appear in the column of more than one party would generate confusion in the electorate and would lend itself to some sort of manipulation of the voter. So they're basically saying that people are too dumb in Puerto Rico to understand something that is done everywhere else. We appealed to the appellate court, which ruled similarly. So we were left with the other option, which is to work around the law.

Ed Morales: In [MVC leader and former Puerto Rico representative] Manuel Natal Albelo's explanatory address at the MVC Assembly in December he referred to a "no competition" arrangement, and a fraternal competition. Could you describe those?

Rafael Bernabe: We cannot establish officially an alliance between the two parties, but we can come to an agreement, which would make it a de facto alliance. A very clear example is in the race for the mayor of San Juan. In cases such as this, we run a candidate, in this case Manuel Natal, and the PIP doesn't run a candidate. We call on our people and the PIP people and everybody else to vote for the candidate of the MVC. The same thing happens, for example, in Caguas, the other way around — we don't have a candidate for mayor of Caguas. The PIP has one, and then over there we vote for the candidate of the PIP.

It's a little bit more problematic regarding the national posts, the governor and the resident commissioner, because in the case of the governor, the electoral law forces all parties to have a candidate in order to participate in the elections. So in that case, the MVC agreed that the gubernatorial candidate of the alliance is going to be Juan Dalmau, who is the candidate for the PIP. We are calling on everybody to vote for Juan Dalmau, but the law forces us to have a candidate of the MVC. We have a candidate for governor, Javier Cordova, and he's officially the candidate for governor of the MVC. But he's telling people, don't vote for me, vote for Dalmau, who is the candidate of the alliance.

There are other cases in which, for whatever reason, we were not able to come to an agreement. There are towns in which the people are going to have a candidate for mayor and we are going to have a candidate for mayor; they're going to compete. And the idea is that we are not going to compete in a negative way. It's a fraternal competition. We basically allow people to vote for whoever they want to vote for.

Ed Morales: I see in the local press there is this derogatory term, “*candidatos de agua*” (“*water candidates*”), that refer to candidates who are not asking for votes. What does that mean?

Rafael Bernabe: That's a term that you use traditionally for candidates who are placed on the ballot because they want a placeholder. But in this case, it's not really a *candidato de agua*, because Cordova is fulfilling a role. We prefer to call it a spokesperson candidate or *canidato portavoz*, a candidate who is carrying the message of La Alianza. We have several people who are aspiring to the post of resident commissioner, but it's almost sure it's going to be Ana Irma Rivera Lassén, my fellow senator. The PIP has somebody who is their candidate for resident commissioner, but that candidate is supporting the vote for Ana.

The other element of the alliance is that Puerto Rico has eight senatorial districts. Each one of them elects two senators. So you have sixteen senators elected from all over the island and in each senatorial district, and a voter can vote for two candidates. If you live in Arecibo, you can vote for two candidates to the Senate and so on. In each one of those eight districts, the PIP and the MVC are each presenting one candidate, so it's split halfway. If you live in San Juan, you can vote for the candidate of the PIP and the candidate of the MVC. Instead of having two candidates for the PIP and two candidates for the MVC, we have one and one. So the people vote for one of the MVC and one of the PIP. And that's basically how it's organized.

Ed Morales: But it's still a victory for you if one of the two candidates wins.

Rafael Bernabe: Yeah, absolutely. We think we have a good chance of winning in some municipalities. And there are other municipalities in which both parties are relatively weak. So we both have candidates and most probably neither of them is going to win. The fact that we have two candidates is not really preventing us from winning in a municipality that we would otherwise win. And in the most significant contests, we have agreed to support either candidate, one candidate of the PIP or the MVC.

Possible Victory

Ed Morales: So the goal is to continue to raise awareness that the prevailing two-party duopoly is not working, and more and more people are feeling dissatisfied with it.

Rafael Bernabe: You could clearly see that with Natal — if you go by the official results, he lost the election for mayor of San Juan by around two thousand votes. He almost won. And many of us think that he won. It was just stolen.

Ed Morales: What is the basis for saying that it was stolen?

Rafael Bernabe: Because there were a lot of irregularities, particularly regarding the absentee ballots and mail-in ballots. There were a lot of problems with that, and we denounced it at the time, and it was a matter of much discussion afterward. But regardless, let's assume that he lost by three thousand votes. If he had gotten the votes that the PIP candidate got, he would've won. So he stands a very good chance of winning the majority of San Juan in the capital city, and that would be a major thing.

In the 2020 elections, the MVC candidate for governor got 14 percent of the vote. Dalmau, the PIP candidate, got 14 percent of the vote. Those two added to 28 percent of the vote. [Current governor] Pedro Pierluisi won the governor's race with 33 percent of the vote. So again, it's within reach. If Dalmau were to get an increase in votes greater than these two parties combined receiving the last elections, which he could very well do, he could become the next governor.

It's not easy. I cannot say it's even probable, but it's quite possible. There are also district candidates for the legislature that have a very good chance of getting elected. Eva Prados was a candidate of ours in the last elections, and she lost by a very slim margin and is now running as a candidate of the alliance. She has a very good chance of getting elected. Rosa Segui, who worked with me here, was a candidate for the Senate. She did very well, and now she's running as part of the alliance and also has a very good chance of getting elected. So it's going to be a very close, interesting race. It's not like in the past, when the Left and the progressive forces just ran to bring a message and educate people on certain ideas and raise awareness. There's a real chance that we are going to win many important races this time.

Ed Morales: And so how would it work in the legislature? The last time we talked, you described some elements of La Alianza were already working in the legislature, right?

Rafael Bernabe: Through the last three years of legislative work here in the capital, we have been collaborating: the PIP, us, and an independent senator, Vargas Vidot. So the PIP, Vargas Vidot, and us most of the time agree on just about everything, all the issues, and we work together. We vote in the same way and so on. So we are practicing the alliance already in terms of what we do here in the capital. Now we're trying to do it more widely.

Ed Morales: What is your take on the PIP? It's not just focusing on the status issue; it has been focused on a left progressive position, and I guess the idea that independence would bring an opportunity for more leftism and progressivism.

Rafael Bernabe: The independence movement for the longest time is not a movement that's limited to the goal of making Puerto Rico independent. It's very much involved in all sorts of social struggles: the labor movement, the environmental movement, the student movement, the women's movement, the LGBTQ movement, and so on. So most of the independence movement is very much active in all of these struggles. The MVC has the particularity that there are many independentistas in it, but not everybody is an independentista. We include people who are not independentista, but most of the people who are in the MVC are also active in all sorts of other social struggles. The

agenda of both movements includes the colonial question and the status question, and the need to determine how we are going to define or redefine the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States, but includes all sorts of issues as well, like the fight against privatization and the defense of the environment.

One indication of how significant this possibility of the alliance is, is the fact that you have this very strong effort organized by the business class. Last March, many important members of the Puerto Rican business sector organized a super PAC called Democracia es Prosperidad (Democracy Is Prosperity) to gather funds and intervene in the elections. The official reason for this super PAC is to combat what they think is the threat of forces that want to limit free enterprise in Puerto Rico. They're very afraid of La Alianza because they know that we have presented legislation to increase the minimum wage, eliminate the subminimum wage of the people who receive tips in Puerto Rico, and reestablish many labor rights that were eliminated back in 2017 when they approved this labor reform law.

If La Alianza wins or gets a lot of votes, important social and labor legislation is going to be approved, and they want to avoid that. Until recently, these business sectors were happy to rely on the PDP and the PNP to defend their interests. They have this whole campaign against La Alianza, saying that this is a socialist alliance. There has been a Left in Puerto Rico for the longest time, and they didn't feel that threatened, but now they do.

Building a Platform

Ed Morales: In terms the messaging, this idea of attacking corruption seems to be the main messaging I hear in the media. But are you using that a lot to just get people's attention so you can also talk about things like decolonization?

Rafael Bernabe: The alliance as a whole and the MVC in particular have varied interests. Depending who you talk to, you will see a different emphasis. You need to fight corruption, and you need to have people who are honest occupying government posts. But if you talk with Ana Irma Rivera Lassén, that's not her main issue. She talks a lot about women's rights, about reproductive rights, about the fight against racism, the fight against transphobia and homophobia and so on and so forth. I tend to emphasize more labor issues, labor rights and trade-union rights and so on and so forth. And Mariana Nogales, who's a representative in the House, emphasizes environmental questions. The MVC and PIP have supported measures protecting the University of Puerto Rico and defending public education from the projects of privatization. I would say that corruption is an issue, but by no means is our campaign reduced to the question of corruption.

Ed Morales: Sometimes much of the anti-corruption narrative comes from the Feds and the FBI, who carry out these investigations.

Rafael Bernabe: I guess there is an element that they don't want their money stolen. The United States sends millions of dollars to Puerto Rico. So there's a problem there. I understand that if they are going to send some money, it's supposed to be used for certain things. There's a problem if you tolerate violation of the law, and it's also true that a lot of people see them in a positive light, given the fact that the Puerto Rico government agencies have not been up to what they should be doing regarding these things. Many of the investigations carried out by federal agencies could have been carried out by Puerto Rican agencies, but they weren't.

Ed Morales: You've said that the degree of leftism and progressivism between the two parties is very similar. That is to say one party is not necessarily more about socialism or workers' rights than the other?

Rafael Bernabe: I would say neither party is a socialist party. They are both prolabor, pro-women's rights, and pro-LGBTQ rights. They both defend that public services should be essential, that services should be publicly owned, and the guarantee that includes electricity, water, education, and health. Both parties support the creation of public health system. These are by any account left-wing parties, progressive parties, whichever term you want to use.

In the MVC, there are people who are socialists, myself included, and everybody knows that we are socialists and it's no secret, but there are many people who are not socialists. And we agree to struggle for certain immediate reforms and things that working people need to defend the environment, that we need to defend women's rights and so on and so forth. As a socialist, when I have the opportunity and the occasion, I explain why I am against capitalism. I think in the end we have to abolish capitalism in order to solve our fundamental problems. But I always make it clear that I'm speaking for myself. The MVC as such is not a socialist movement. It includes people who are and people who aren't socialists. If you look at the program of these two parties, they're very similar.

Ed Morales: So are you going to have two different party platforms, or are you going to put out one platform?

Rafael Bernabe: The idea is that both parties will retain their individual programs. That's fine. And then we are going to have sort of a basic program of La Alianza, and the way it's envisioned right now is a relatively short document that has ten, fifteen basic points. I'm sure it is going to include the creation of a single-payer type health insurance system and eliminate this system that we have now. I'm sure it will include some sort of mechanism to try and solve the status question. It's going to include the defense of the autonomy and the finances of the University of Puerto Rico, the defense of labor rights and restoration of labor rights as well. The PIP program is two hundred pages long, and the MVC's is like 150 pages long. We're going to have a much shorter document that consolidates, underlines, or emphasizes those issues that we think should be in the center of the campaign of the alliance.

Ed Morales: There's a theoretical question that I wonder if you could talk about that is in the US right now. There's a lot of discussion about this conflict between people who favor class politics and people who are involved in identity politics. There's an idea that supporting class struggle is somehow mutually exclusive from identity politics, which many believe has been co-opted by neoliberalism. Does this sort of conflict exist in Puerto Rico?

Rafael Bernabe: No, not really. No, no. I mean not at all.

Ed Morales: You said that you were interested in class issues and are anti-capitalist: Do you think you are among the furthest to the left in the MVC?

Rafael Bernabe: I'm the most leftist, okay? There's nobody to the left of me. [Laughs] There's a big abyss. There's nothing. If you go to the left of me, you're dead. But I cannot think of anybody that sees these different topics as contradictory or antagonistic. You could find people who would say, "I'm interested in the LGBTQ struggle," but it's not like LGBTQ activists are against labor struggles. I would say most people on the Puerto Rican left see these struggles as complimentary. And most of the people I know on the Left would go to a march defending the environment and another day will go to a gay pride parade, and the next day they will go to some labor mobilization. I would say there are people who emphasize one thing more than another. That's inevitable, I guess. But no, I would say there's not such a sharp debate between the different approaches. Most people mix these things.

Ed Morales: In the United States, discourse on "decolonization" can get trapped in a theoretical framework, but here you're literally living in a colony, and decolonization is an immediate, tangible issue. How does that

affect the political dynamic on the Left?

Rafael Bernabe: Here, the Left is made up mostly of people who are active in different struggles. There's an element of that, but it's not an academic left, let's say. And I don't say academic in a bad way. I'm an academic, I work at the university, but the people who are active in the Left are active in movements. There are people in the university theorizing things, but they're really not part of the Left. Not long ago, there was a march here in support of Palestine and denouncing the genocide. There must have been like a thousand people or something. But most of the people who were there in that march were basically the same people from the labor mobilizations or the environmental mobilizations or the women's rights mobilizations.

Ed Morales: I covered a little bit about the University of Puerto Rico protests in 2010, and saw that they had assemblies and this notion of horizontalism. The assemblies that the MVC functions through seem to echo this kind of organizing and party process.

Rafael Bernabe: The MVC has a very strong element of promoting participation and promoting debate and discussion and openness. If you look at our assemblies, not only are they open to everybody — anybody can speak, everything is put to a vote. All of it is transmitted over social media, so there's no secret decision-making and so on. We decided in an open assembly where we discussed the two candidates for Puerto Rican senators at-large, and we just finished the process of people registering who want to aspire to be a candidate. I am one of the candidates. So whoever's going to be the candidate is not decided by the leadership of the movement. It is going to be decided by many people. There's very much that culture of participation and debate and discussion.

Ed Morales: From below.

Rafael Bernabe: Yeah, yeah, from below, absolutely.

Ed Morales: I saw that in Claridad that the Hostosian National Independence Movement (MINH), which has roots in the old Puerto Rican Socialist Party, had expressed a desire to cooperate with La Alianza. Are there more parties like that?

Rafael Bernabe: Yeah, the MINH officially approved supporting the alliance. And there are some members of the MINH who are running as candidates for the MVC within the list of the MVC. They are running as candidates. And there are other left-wing groups that are also either already supporting or will probably endorse voting for the alliance; I wouldn't be surprised.

Ed Morales: How about the unions?

Rafael Bernabe: In the case of the MVC, we've had a lot of support. One of the founding organizations of the MVC is the Sindicato Puertorriqueño de Trabajadores (SPT), which is the Puerto Rico local of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). And the SPT had a long process of internal discussion and debate in which it officially, through several assemblies, determined that it didn't want to support candidates in the old traditional parties anymore, and that it wants to engage in the construction of a new political party that would be capable of defending the interests of the labor movement. But we've also had established links with labor leaders and labor activists in many other unions, and many of them are very sympathetic to La Alianza.

Ed Morales: One more question. You're going to have the constitutional convention as part of your platform. I think I saw somewhere a quote of you saying, "We can't keep waiting for Washington to push that

through.” How much of a priority is the constitutional convention?

Rafael Bernabe: Normally, in Puerto Rican politics, people are taught and people are told that we have to wait for the United States and for Congress to take action to solve this status question. As I argued, many times, they want us to be spectators to the process of determining what it's going to be our future. We just watch to see what Congress is doing, what it's not doing, whether such certain congressperson is willing to support something or not support something, whether a committee acts or doesn't act.

But the process of self-determination is not going to come that way; it should start with us. We should take action so that we begin the process of self-determination, and we sort of serve notice to the US Congress that we, the Puerto Rican people, have organized ourselves to solve this problem as urgently as possible. The way to do that is to call an Asamblea Constitucional de Estatus, which means that people vote, they elect delegates to this assembly. These delegates will be elected on the basis of what status they represent. There will be some who support statehood. There will be some who support independence. There will be some who support free association. People will vote for whoever they want; if people choose a statehood majority, that's it. Independence majority, whatever. And that assembly then, as a representative of the will of the Puerto Rican people, will have the task of reaching out to the US Congress and telling them, well here we are.

We have to figure out how we are going to decolonize Puerto Rico. The bill that was presented by Nydia Velázquez and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez several years ago was probably the best, because that bill said that the US Congress recognized that Puerto Rico is in a colonial status. The bill was good, but it died. So our position is that we have to take action as soon as possible in the direction of solving this issue. And the first action we could take is electing this assembly as a representative of the Puerto Rican people in order to start the ball rolling.

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Source [Jacobin](#).

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