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Puerto Rico

Challenges and opportunities in Puerto Rico

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After a series of twists and turns, Puerto Rico's Supreme Court has ruled that a number of opposition candidates are illegal. Our comrades analyse the contradictions of this anti-democratic decision and how to build a democratic and anti-capitalist project in this context.

Just over a week ago, the New Progressive Party mobilized 292,332 people to vote in its primaries. This number barely exceeds that of the 2020 primaries, in the midst of a pan-demic. Moreover, no internal force has triumphed over the primary process: Jennifer González will be the candidate for governor, but she will support Pedro Pierluisi's candidate for resident commissioner, William Villafañe. Similarly, the choice of other candidates does not seem to reflect the existence of a strong sector in particular, but rather support for isolated individuals. In addition, the results of the primaries themselves are being challenged due to mismanagement of the process, suggesting a wider crisis.

Also just over a week ago, the People's Democratic Party mobilized 134,579 people to vote in its primary. That's 82,452 fewer than in the 2020 primary, in the midst of the pandemic: 217,031 people. The final result reflects the process that preceded the primary: bland. And finally, this week, a majority of the Puerto Rico Supreme Court ruled in favor of disqualifying the coalition candidacies of the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (Citizens' Victory Movement).

If we juxtapose the low turnout in the bipartisan primaries and the Supreme Court ruling, it is to emphasize that they go hand in hand. Faced with the collapse of the neo-liberal political parties and the threat posed by the progressive alliance of the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana with the Puerto Rican Independentist Party (PIP), the property-owning classes and neoliberal parties have sought to maintain themselves in power and government by manipulating the electoral process. They have used the electoral process for as long as it has been useful to them, but their commitment to democracy stops when it comes into conflict with their interests, and they defend them by every means at their disposal, including the repressive institutions and forces of the state that they still control.

Political and judicial disqualification during bipartisan crisis

In a leaflet distributed at the first demonstration organized at the start of this political and judicial coup d'état, we wrote: "The disqualification of Victoria Ciudadana's candidates is part of a wider strategy aimed at defeating Alianza País, the union of progressive electoral forces that has challenged the domination of the employers' parties in power over the last six decades and, consequently, the big economic interests that hide behind them.

The Alianza País program includes decolonization, debt cancellation, the cancellation of privatizations and the strengthening of unionization rates and labor rights. It is therefore a program that reverses decades of neoliberal, colonial and anti-worker public policies. The sectors that make up the Alliance include important sectors of environmentalists, trade unionists, feminists and communities in struggle. The Alliance therefore defends the cause of working people in order to increase their political participation in the spheres of government in Puerto Rico. The disqualification is not the first blow, but the most recent and strongest in a process that has included the imposition of a new electoral code, the outlawing of coalition candidacies and a process of lawfare against active members of the movement."

While the above refers to the Court of First Instance, the content is unfortunately not rendered obsolete by the

Supreme Court ruling. The fact that a legal appeal was lodged to maintain Ana Irma Rivera Lassén (a member of the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana, editor's note) as a candidate for the post of Resident Commissioner may have more to do with political fears than legal considerations: if her candidacy was not certified, the real possibility that the Alliance would opt for Rivera Lassén to stand on the PIP ballot paper as a candidate for Resident Commissioner must have shaken the two-party system (in particular the Popular Democratic Party) and the dominant classes

Our struggles within the movement

Democracia Socialista is one of the founding forces of the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana, and a significant number of our activists are actively involved in this project. For us socialists, electoral participation is a tactic for advancing our demands in a political arena that attracts the attention of large sectors of the population. Electoral participation in no way implies blind faith in electoral processes or institutions. As socialists, we also recognize that most institutions are founded to defend the interests of the powerful.

In this sense, we not only saw the court's decision as a blow to Victoria Ciudadana and Alianza País, but, from our point of view, it can also be seen as an opportunity, as a chance to continue to denounce the deep crisis of the existing institutions and the possibility of overcoming it, of replacing these institutions with others that are at the service and within the reach of the majority, through democratic mobilization and the collective actions of workers. We have succeeded in promoting the idea internally, in the various networks that function as the movement's base committees, that the ruling of the Court of First Instance was political and not judicial: the real motivation for this ruling is not a failure on our part to comply with the rules, as various commentators have claimed, but the fear of the parties in power of losing this power, and of seeking to remain in government under any pretext.

Faced with a political coup d'état, we proposed a political response: growing mobilizations, the search for international support, the creation of a broad front that would go beyond the movement but defend the candidacies and the right to decide at the ballot box. We believe that political struggles can be strengthened when social contradictions are accentuated, which enables us to put forward our proposals and our transitional demands as an alternative, while reiterating the need for social mobilization to achieve this. We know that the fear of the dominant classes is that the electoral participation of the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana, through the Alianza País with the Puerto Rican Independence Party, will substantially increase its presence in the legislature or even that it will defeat the two-party system in the vote for the executive. Both are possible at the moment. And those adversely affected by the Supreme Court's decision are not just the voters of Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana and Alianza País, but all the social sectors involved in the struggle.

The difficulties of the struggle

As members of the Victoria Ciudadana leadership, we were not so successful in convincing people of the importance and, above all, the urgency of militancy and mobilization in defense of the candidacies. While the grassroots of the movement demanded and expected more action, more mobilization, the Day for Democracy demonstrations were insufficient and sporadic. This is not to say that we really believed that a reversal by the Supreme Court was possible. But in the absence of massive mobilizations, it could only be - and it was - unfavorable to democracy. On the other hand, it should be noted that the political possibilities of Alianza País are paradoxically emerging at a time when existing social organizations are weakening: the workers' movement is still weakened - despite some important recent victories - and the environmental movement is in disarray. Only the feminist and LGBTIQ+ movements retain a strong capacity to mobilize, although they are also fragmented.

This situation has severely hampered one of our calls expressed in the leaflet quoted above: “As Democracia Socialista, we consider that denouncing this judicial coup d’état should not be the responsibility of the organizations that make up the Alliance alone, but of all the progressive sectors in the country: trade unions, community organizations, environmentalists, feminists. The partial initiatives of each sector are important”. Whatever the reason, the reality is that few organizations or sectors responded to our call. The problem for the capitalists, however, has several dimensions: the blows dealt to Victoria Ciudadana and Alianza País may lead to its strengthening in the eyes of the electorate; they have not strengthened the New Progressive Party or the People’s Democratic Party, while Proyecto Dignidad has yet to present itself as a force capable of winning key seats in government. [1]

What’s more, the Supreme Court ruling has deepened the crisis of the ruling classes by continuing to expose their desperate desire to maintain political power. Neither the whitewashing by the employers’ press nor the “independent” analysts have been able to halt the rapid discrediting and bankruptcy of the parties and institutions.

The struggle continues

With the Supreme Court’s decision, there is no institutional possibility of obtaining the possibility for these candidatures to appear on the ballot paper. However, just as political creativity led to the formation of Alianza País despite the ban on coalition candidacies, Victoria Ciudadana and Alianza will have to find a way to promote as many candidacies as possible in 2024. This could involve strategic direct nomination campaigns, combined with mobilization days with other sectors, militant activities that should include the formation of a veritable army of activists to monitor the ballot. This is the only way we can achieve a breakthrough in the electoral field.

But for any electoral breakthrough not to be ephemeral, it will require the strengthening and continued growth of social mobilizations, which in turn could contribute to the development of class consciousness in ever wider sectors. Within and outside Victoria Ciudadana, socialists must continue to build democratic alternatives, taking advantage of all that the crisis of the existing institutions continues to reveal. In this sense, the Alliance will have to use the electoral terrain to go much further than it has done so far.

Developing self-activity

The *Verano del 19* - which celebrates its fifth anniversary this year - should serve as a framework or example of what can be done: large-scale mobilizations that go beyond institutional frameworks to achieve their objectives. [2] Pressure exerted on the streets can transform social structures in ways that are impossible through traditional channels. Contrary to what was widely believed in the summer of 2019, we must now encourage - with conviction - greater self-organization of the sectors in struggle, rather than praising spontaneity, and promote the consolidation of the Alliance as a political alternative capable of transforming this country. Above all, we need to consolidate a movement of hope based on the possibilities of change. Although the two-party system is still in crisis and continues to lose support, apathy, disinterest and demobilization are capable of developing and could halt the long-awaited transformation. We must therefore fight to counter these potential apathy, disinterest and demobilization with proposals for participation, mobilization and concrete action.

Faced with the disqualification of the four candidates, what demands should we put forward? Once again, as the summer of 2019 has shown, the rejection of what already exists sometimes proves to be a sufficiently strong demand. Victoria Ciudadana and Alianza with the PIP have hundreds of viable candidates at all levels: mayoralties and municipal mandates, the two bodies of the national legislature, the resident commissioner and the post of governor. The mobilizations should push for the rejection and left-wing reclamation of what is possible, which should

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include defending the vote for all these candidates while fighting against the corruption, looting and usurpation of agencies, structures and all that remains of government institutions.

However, there is no doubt that this will not be the last blow that the big economic interests will seek to inflict. There is no doubt that they will seek to further block Victoria Ciudadana's participation in 2024. To anticipate and take the offensive, we propose the self-organization of the sectors in struggle, their organic link and their constant mobilization. Let the fear of the ruling classes be justified and let their nightmares soon become reality

12 June 2024

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[1] Proyecto Dignidad is a political party founded in 2019. In the 2020 general elections, it ran on a Christian Democratic and anti-corruption platform.

[2] *Verano del 19* is a series of protests that began on 13 July 2019 following the public leak of private conversations in a Telegram group between the country's governor, Ricardo Rosselló, and his collaborators and former collaborators. In these, homophobic, discriminatory and mocking comments were allegedly made about the victims of Hurricane Maria in 2017. Participants in the protests - including artists Ricky Martin, Residente, Bad Bunny and Ñengo Flow - accused the government of corruption and demanded the resignation of Rosselló and his collaborators. Rosselló's resignation came on the night of Wednesday 24 July and took effect on 2 August. He was the first governor of the island to resign from his post.