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Puerto Rico

Freeing Oscar López Rivera

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The widespread jubilation over Oscar López Rivera's release shows that anticolonial struggle still resonates in Puerto Rico. The campaign to free Puerto Rican nationalist Oscar López Rivera, a political prisoner confined in a US federal penitentiary since 1981, has dominated various sectors of Puerto Rican activism for the last decade. The [34 Mujeres Por Oscar](#) has been a fixture at Union Square Park and other locations around New York for years, and when the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage in 2015, posters of Oscar [festooned](#) with a rainbow-pride flag around San Juan were ubiquitous.

So when President Obama [announced on Tuesday](#) that he was commuting López Rivera's sentence and permitting his release in May, it set off an outpouring of emotion on the island and the many urban centers where the diaspora lives.

The jubilation over López Rivera's commutation "not a pardon, but a curtailing of his sentence" has cut across all political tendencies in Puerto Rico, from the socialist left to the Green-ish Independence Party to the centrist Popular Democratic Party to the increasingly hard-right Statehood Party.

The widespread support for someone like López Rivera, a former leader of the militant leftist group, the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), is a reflection of the colonial yoke that Puerto Ricans have suffered under for centuries.

The Anticolonial Spirit

The roots of the FALN lie in the violently repressed nationalist movements in Puerto Rico in the 1930s and '40s led by the Harvard-educated Pedro Albizu Campos, who spent many years in prison for his role in fomenting uprisings and labor strikes across the island in protest of colonial rule. A 1954 attack on the House of Representatives in Washington resulted in the arrests and imprisonment of a group of four nationalists, including the legendary Lolita Lebrón.

When the FALN [burst onto the scene](#) with a series of bombings of corporate buildings in 1974, one of its demands was for the release of Lebrón and her fellow prisoners. Yet the FALN also embodied a different kind of nationalist militancy, one forged by the experience of Puerto Rican migrants and their children, who grew up in cities like New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia and were directly impacted by racism, segregation, and social injustice.

Like the violent SDS offshoot the Weathermen, the FALN believed in armed confrontation with the US government and multinational corporations, and like the Irish Republican Army, it argued that its members had the right to militarily struggle for national sovereignty, distinguishing them from the nihilist pursuits of so-called "terrorist" groups. The FALN's first action "coordinated bombings of Exxon, Union Carbide, and Federal Reserve Bank buildings, among other targets" came the day before a pro-independence rally to be held at Madison Square Garden and three days before hearings about Puerto Rico's colonial status at the UN Special Committee on Decolonization.

While the Puerto Rican Socialist Party initially objected to the FALN's use of violence, in the early 1980s Puerto Rican nationalist movements warmed to the idea that imprisoned FALN members were "freedom fighters" and "patriots." Eventually, the group began to garner sympathy from the broader Puerto Rican community.

Freeing Oscar López Rivera

López Rivera had joined the FALN after working as a community organizer in Chicago and serving in Vietnam. The latter has been cited as a key element in his radicalization. As the United States tried to inherit the burden and spoils of France's occupation of Southeast Asia, he witnessed firsthand the colonial racism at work and connected it to the what he viewed as the internal colonialism hindering Puerto Ricans, other Latino groups, Asians, and African Americans in the United States. Political radicals of color like López Rivera saw antiracist struggle as part of a global confrontation with class-based imperialism and colonialism. Linking up with the FALN was a logical, if not inevitable, next step.

While López Rivera was never charged with or found guilty of direct involvement in any of the FALN's violent acts — which included various bombings, some lethal, in New York and Chicago — he was convicted in 1981 of seditious conspiracy (essentially a thought crime) and sentenced to fifty-five years. He's spent more than twelve of those years deprived of all human contact.

In 1999, López Rivera turned down a release deal from Bill Clinton, because a) it would have required him to serve an additional ten years and b) it would have left some of his fellow FALN prisoners languishing in prison. (Clinton's deal ultimately set free eleven of López Rivera's co-defendants.)

For the last twenty years, López Rivera and his remaining FALN comrades have renounced violence — a path borne out by other Puerto Rican militants like Dylcia Pagán and [Elizam Escobar](#) — making it easier to attract broad swaths of support from Puerto Ricans as well as high-profile supporters like Representative Luis Gutiérrez, Lin Manuel Miranda, San Juan mayor Carmen Yulín Cruz, LGBTQ activist Pedro Julio Serrano, and rapper René Pérez Joglar (Residente).

Yet the deep support for López Rivera among mainstream Puerto Ricans is still notable. What does it mean that the average Puerto Rican sees the colonial reality as so unjust that they can embrace someone who once believed in violent confrontation? On some level, it has to mean understanding that despite the United States's purportedly anticolonial foundation, it has blatantly held and exploited an island as a de facto colony for over one hundred years, while artificially constructing its economy as a dry run for free-trade extraction of corporate profit long before NAFTA. Indeed, even as the island prepares a massive celebration for López Rivera's release, and Mayor Cruz [offers](#) López Rivera a job in the "community," Puerto Rico faces harsh austerity measures courtesy of a fiscal oversight board whose imposition was signed, sealed, and delivered by Obama, the Senate Democratic majority, and [Lin Manuel Miranda](#) as the island's last, best hope to manage its \$72 billion debt crisis.

Just last week a [labor reform law](#) passed by the Puerto Rican House of Representatives, pushed by the newly installed statehood party, whose governor was among those calling for and celebrating López Rivera's release, proposed a series of changes that would reduce salary, benefits, and overtime pay for thousands of employees in an effort to show the board that it would play along with austerity.

Yesterday, as a crisis in health care funding looms — and doctors and specialists continue to leave the island — the employee union for one of the island's largest hospitals, Auxilio Mutuo, [called](#) a twenty-five-hour work stoppage. Meanwhile, Trump has named as one of his close economic advisers the billionaire hedge-fund owner John Paulson, a major player in Puerto Rico real estate, and the new governor Ricardo Rosselló has reached out to ex-Trump cohort Corey Lewandowski [to lobby](#) the incoming president on the debt crisis.

Despite Oscar López and the FALN's flawed strategy of violent confrontation, the explosion of support for his release demonstrates his popular purchase as an anticolonial freedom fighter. As Puerto Rico faces down multiple crises, the island will need a considerable dose of that anticolonial spirit to win a measure of freedom and sovereignty.

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