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American Colonialism in Puerto Rico: President Trump's Response to Hurricane Maria

The international community learned about colonialism through the “salt water doctrine” under which a territory is considered a colony if “a body of salt water separates it from the ruling country.”¹ Colonies are possessions of the parent country, have no statehood or sovereignty and their inhabitants are denied the right to choose their political representatives. Even when granted some degree of autonomy, no privileges eradicate the colonial relationship between the parent state and its colony. The Caribbean island of Puerto Rico used to be a Spanish colony. In 1898, after the Spanish-American War, the United States took control of the island and made it a so-called “independent territory” which in reality means “colony.” Since the word “colony” carries negative connotations, the U.S. government refers to the island as the “Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.” In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Jones Act, which granted the people of Puerto Rico U.S. citizenship.² U.S. citizenship has enabled Puerto Ricans to migrate between the island and the American mainland without travel documents or immigration checks.

Although the islanders do not pay federal income taxes, they contribute billions of dollars annually to the federal treasury, mostly through Social Security, Medicare, and a few other taxes and fees.³

¹ E. Román, *Empire Forgotten: The United States's Colonization of Puerto Rico*, “Florida International University College of Law” vol. 42, 1997, p. 1137.

² J.A. Galván, *Culture and Customs of Puerto Rico*, Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport, Connecticut, 2009, pp. 11-13.

³ P.A. Malavet, *America's Colony. The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico*, New York University Press, New York, 2004, p. 2.

The inhabitants of the island are indeed American citizens; however, they have no voting representative in Congress and do not have the right to vote in U.S. presidential elections. Despite the fact that the majority of Puerto Ricans speak only Spanish, the federal courts carry out their functions only in English.⁴ This arrangement leaves Puerto Rico in the grey zone familiar in Latin America and the Caribbean, which are economically dominated by the USA.⁵ As written by Pedro Cabán

This unilateral and arbitrary authority to determine the political conditions of Puerto Rico is the essence of colonialism. Colonialism has been and continues to be an essential element of the Puerto Rican condition and identity.⁶

The U.S. Constitution provides the legal framework for territories under American sovereignty but it implies their temporality, lasting only as a period of adjustment before annexation. However, this is not the case of Puerto Rico which has the status of a non-incorporated territory. Cabán states that Puerto Rico is an American colony because “its people lack sovereignty and are denied the fundamental right to freely govern themselves.”⁷ Instead, it is Washington D.C. that determines the political affairs of the island. The commonwealth status of Puerto Rico and the island’s relationship with the United States are often examined within the colonial discourse. In the words of Edgardo Meléndez “Colonialism and citizenship remain at the heart of the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.”⁸ Pedro Malavet in his book titled *America’s Colony. The Political and Cultural Conflict between the United States and Puerto Rico* concerning the relationship between the USA and the island of Puerto Rico uses the word “colony” in the meaning of:

... a polity with a definable territory that lacks legal and political sovereignty because that authority is exercised by the people other than the inhabitants of the colony. Puerto Rico, with a definable territory as well as an indefinable culture that is different from that dominating in the colonial power (the

⁴ H. Reyes, *Puerto Rico: The Last Colony*, “International Socialist Review” vol. 3 (winter), 1997; web. 12 July 2018. www.isreview.org/issues/03/Puerto_Rico.shtml

⁵ K. Vick, *Desperation and Resilience in Hurricane-Battered Puerto Rico*, “Time” web. 12 February 2018. <time.com/a-land-they-no-longer-recognize/

⁶ P.A. Cabán, *Constructing a Colonial People. Puerto Rico and the United States, 1898–1932*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1999, p. 1.

⁷ P.A. Cabán, *Puerto Rico, Colonialism In*, “Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latino Studies Faculty Scholarship” vol. 19, 2005, p. 516.

⁸ E. Meléndez, *Colonialism, Citizenship, and Contemporary Statehood*, [in:] E. Meléndez and E. Meléndez (eds.), *Colonial Dilemma. Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Puerto Rico*, South End Press, Boston, 1993, p. 41.

United States), is a “cultural nation” that lacks sovereignty; it is, therefore, an “American” colony.⁹

The aim of this article is to present the treatment of residents of Puerto Rico by President Trump's administration in the context of Hurricane Maria. The paper is based on press articles published by BBC, CNN, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Huffington Post*, *El Nuevo Dia*, and other newspapers that discuss the response of American government to the disaster caused by Hurricane Maria. The article compares this response with the activities performed by President Trump in the cases of Texas after Hurricane Harvey and Florida after Hurricane Irma. It also presents the decline in approval and criticism for Trump's handling of the federal response to the disaster from both the island residents and mainland Americans. Finally, the article links the inferior treatment of Hurricane Maria survivors with the ambiguous political status of Puerto Rico.

2017 was a year of natural disasters in the USA as between the 17th August and the 20th September, three hurricanes hit the United States: Hurricane Harvey struck Texas on the 17th August; Hurricane Irma hit Florida on the 30th August; and finally, Hurricane Maria formed on the 16th September in the Caribbean. The last one struck the island of Puerto Rico near the southern city of Yabucoa on Wednesday the 20th September 2017. Maria made landfall on Puerto Rico as a Category 4 hurricane. Winds were measured at 155 mph (249 kph), not 157 (253), the minimum for Category 5. According to National Hurricane Center spokesman Dennis Feltgen, the storm was even stronger than Harvey and Irma upon landfall, but, “operationally it was a Category 4 hurricane.”¹⁰ According to research by the climate Impact Lab, Hurricane Maria could be the most destructive Atlantic storm on record and no larger area has been hit so comprehensively anywhere in the world in the past 60 years. Estimates also suggest that the hurricane could knock back per capita economic output by 21 percent over the next 15 years.¹¹

President Trump visited the island and remarked that the death toll—which officially stood at 16 at the time—was much lower than the 1,833 people who died in 2005 due to Hurricane Katrina. Héctor M. Pesquera, Puerto Rico's public safety secretary, said he did not think the count would

⁹ P.A. Malavet, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Fact Checking Trump's Statements About the Puerto Rico Hurricane*, “Fortune” 6 October 2017; web. 22, January 2018; fortune.com/2017/10/06/donald-trump-puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-fact-check/

¹¹ K. Vick, *op. cit.*

rise by much.¹² Shortly after President Trump departed the island, Governor Ricardo Rosselló announced at a news conference in San Juan that the number of deaths related to Hurricane Maria had risen to 34. Rosselló said that 19 of the total 34 deaths were directly related to the storm, such as drownings; the others included electrical failures of oxygen tanks, suicides and natural causes like heart attacks.¹³ The lack of electrical power and resources worried medical professionals who saw the health risks as multiple individuals felt suicidal.¹⁴ Subsequently, the official death toll rose to 64, but the island's government announced that two independent reports estimated that more than 1,000 people had died.¹⁵ In June 2018, the U.S. commonwealth government released data showing high mortality rates around the time that Hurricane Maria hit. The data show an increase of 1,431 overall deaths on the island in September, October and November 2017 compared with the same three months a year earlier. However, the data do not specify whether this increase in the number of deaths is related to the hurricane.¹⁶ Another study conducted by Harvard University estimated that 4,645 people died as a result of Maria and its aftermath which is 70 times more than the official death toll.¹⁷ In fact, it is difficult to provide the exact estimates for the number of people who died directly because of the hurricane and those who died because of the negligence or failure of government's long response to the disaster.

¹² P. Mazzeidec, *Puerto Rico Orders Review and Recount of Hurricane Deaths*, "The New York Times" 18 December 2017; web. 12 February 2018. www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-death-toll-review.html

¹³ M. Landler, *Trump Lobs Praise, and Paper Towels, to Puerto Rico Storm Victims*, "The New York Times," 3 October 2017; web. 12 January 2018. www.nytimes.com/2017/10/03/us/puerto-rico-trump-hurricane.html

¹⁴ According to the local government's report, the suicide rate in Puerto Rico increased after the hurricane. Claire Howard, *Puerto Rico's Suicide Rate Continues to Rise*, "Mental Health," 2 April 2018; web. 26 March 2018. <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/external/2018/04/puerto-ricos-suicide-rate-continues-rise/>

¹⁵ M. Perez and L. Sanders. *Puerto Rico is 'Broken' 100 Days After Hurricane Maria and Trump Is No Help, Locals Say*, "Newsweek" 28 December 2017; web. 4 February 2018. www.newsweek.com/puerto-rico-recovery-100-days-hurricane-maria-760965

¹⁶ J. Hanna and L. Santiago, *Puerto Ricans lost to Hurricane Maria remembered as new reports question low death toll*, "CNN" 2 June 2018; web. 12 July 2018. edition.cnn.com/2018/06/02/us/puerto-rico-deaths-hurricane-maria/index.html

¹⁷ J. Bacon, *Hurricane Maria killed more than 4,600 people—more than 70 times the official toll of 64, study says*, "USA Today" 29 May 2018; web. 12 July 2018. eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2018/05/29/hurricane-maria-killed-thousands-puerto-rico/650942002/.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)¹⁸ called the mission to help Puerto Rico to recover the “largest federal response to a disaster” in American history. The reconstruction of Puerto Rico was the most challenging mission ever for the FEMA agency which moved from emergency response to recovery mode. In fact, Congress was slow to respond and Congressional leaders did little to help the island beyond voting to schedule more financial resources for FEMA’s disaster-relief fund.¹⁹

President Donald Trump visited Puerto Rico two weeks after the storm and instead of offering condolences, he offended the inhabitants of the island by reminding them how much money it was costing the federal government to respond to the crisis. He showed his complete lack of sympathy by saying that Hurricane Maria was not “a real catastrophe” like Hurricane Katrina. During a briefing as part of his visit Trump said:

Every death is a horror, but if you look at a real catastrophe like Katrina, and you look at the tremendous—hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people that died—and you look at what happened here with really a storm that was just totally overpowering, nobody’s ever seen anything like this.²⁰

President Trump warned Puerto Rico that the US government could not keep sending help “forever” and suggested that the island was to blame for its financial crisis and “a total lack of accountability.” The president praised the federal assistance and emphasized that disasters were straining the boundaries of the US budget.²¹

While visiting Puerto Rico, at a church converted into a relief center, Trump handed out bags of rice and threw rolls of paper towels into the crowd like basketballs.²² The mayor of San Juan—Carmen Yulín Cruz—said in an

¹⁸ “FEMA’s mission is to support our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from and mitigate all hazards.” Available at: <www.fema.gov/about-agency>

¹⁹ A. Fernández, *5 things to know about Puerto Rico 3 months after Hurricane Maria*, “Vox” 23 December 2017; web. 2 February 2018. www.vox.com/2017/12/23/16795342/puerto-rico-maria-christmas

²⁰ A. Abramson, *President Trump Says Hurricane Maria Was Not ‘a Real Catastrophe Like Hurricane Katrina’*, “Time” 3 October 2017; web. 20 January 2018. <http://time.com/4967645/donald-trump-puerto-rico-hurricane-katrina/>

²¹ *Donald Trump says Puerto Rico cannot rely on hurricane help ‘forever’*, “ABC News” 13 October 2017; web. 22 January 2018. www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-13/donald-trump-labelled-hater-in-chief-over-puerto-rico-tweets/9045888

²² D. Jackson, *Trump praises Puerto Rico recovery, but critics assail comments on budget and death toll*, “USA Today” 3 October 2017; web. 12 January 2018. www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/10/03/trump-puerto-rico-survey-hurricane-maria-damage/726352001/

interview with MSNBC “This terrible and abominable view of him throwing paper towels and throwing provisions at people, it’s really—it does not embody the spirit of the American nation.”²³ This behavior stands in sharp contrast with his visit to Houston after Hurricane Harvey when Trump was encouraging, hopeful, kind and even kissed a few kids.²⁴

President Trump’s administration responded differently to the disaster in Puerto Rico than in similar cases in Texas and Florida. There were lower numbers of federal employees sent to help Maria survivors than when Harvey and Irma made landfall. The amount of food and water supplies and the number of helicopters were smaller and slower in delivery in Puerto Rico in comparison with Texas and Florida. Trump’s administration argued that the delay of financial assistance provided to Puerto Rico was based on geographic limitations. However, the variations in disaster responses to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria are difficult to explain by geography.²⁵

González and Goodman from the news and commentary website *Truthout* published an interview conducted by Nicole Salazar²⁶ with the Puerto Rican activist Oscar López Rivera who had been in federal prison for 35 years after being convicted on charges of opposing U.S. authority over the island.²⁷ In the interview, conducted in San Juan a month after the hurricane, Rivera expressed his view of President Trump with the words:

I think that it’s reflective of the colonizer and how the colonizer treats the colonized. He has no respect for Puerto Rico. He has demonstrated it clearly already by doing what he’s done. It is shameful for me to see a president tossing things to people who are suffering so much as Puerto Ricans are.

Then he added:

And I think—I think that once we see the results, because we have not seen the results from the medical side of Puerto Rico—once we see the results, we see we are being killed—we are being killed by neglect. So, I think that it

²³ A. Saenz and A. Kelsey, *San Juan mayor tells President Trump ‘it’s not about politics’*, “ABS News” 4 October 2017; web. 2 February 2018. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/san-juan-mayor-tells-president-trump-politics/story?id=50241205>

²⁴ T. Stanley, *Trump’s response to hurricane was perfect*, “CNN” 5 September 2017; web. 2 February 2018. edition.cnn.com/2017/09/05/opinions/trump-harvey-response-was-perfect-opinion-stanley/index.html

²⁵ Ch.E. Willison, P.M. Singer, M.S. Creary, and S.L. Greer, *Quantifying inequalities in US federal response to hurricane disaster in Texas and Florida compared with Puerto Rico*, “BMJ Glob Health” 2019, p. 1-6.

²⁶ Nicole Salazar is a reporter of *Divided Films* and *Ed Mariota*.

²⁷ President Obama commuted Rivera’s sentence in January 2017 and he was released in May 2017.

reflects the response of Donald Trump and the US government to the crisis in Puerto Rico.²⁸

Trump repeatedly criticized Mayor Cruz on Twitter with the words: “such poor leadership ... they want everything to be done for them” and attacked the Mayor for criticizing the White House on their slow federal reaction concerning hurricane relief efforts in Puerto Rico. Then he threatened to withdraw FEMA workers and repeated his earlier criticism that some Puerto Ricans were not doing enough to help themselves.²⁹ Trump’s behavior met with a lot of criticism. Russel Honoré, a retired general appointed by President Bush to take over the federal response to Katrina in 2005, told CNN that the President’s response to Maria shows that he does not care about the poor or people of color.³⁰ Trump renewed his criticism on Twitter, saying that the island was a wreck before Maria hit from a “financial crisis largely of their own making.”³¹

In fact, before the hurricane, the island was already in a deep economic recession and already had \$74 billion of debt.³² The public utility company, PREPA, was bankrupt and understaffed as the majority of electrical workers had either retired or moved to the US mainland.³³ However, after years of economic challenges, Puerto Rico was already in the process of restructuring much of its \$74 billion debt before the hurricane struck.³⁴ According to Maru Gonzalez from the *Huffington Post* “Puerto Rico’s worsening economy is largely rooted in its colonial status” which prevents Puerto Rico from seeking help from international financial institutions, which independent countries can do. Moreover, insolvent municipalities and public corporations cannot declare bankruptcy. The economy of the island is constrained by U.S. federal

²⁸ J. González and A. Goodman, *Freed Puerto Rican Political prisoner Oscar López Rivera on US Colonialism After Hurricane Maria*, “Truthout” 18 October 2017; web. 12 July 2018. <http://truthout.org/video/freed-puerto-rican-political-prisoner-oscar-lopez-rivera-on-us-colonialism-after-hurricane-maria/>

²⁹ M. Landleroct, *op. cit.*

³⁰ J. Summers, *Trump attacks San Juan mayor over hurricane response*, “CNN” 1 October 2017; web. 14 January 2018. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/30/politics/trump-tweets-puerto-rico-mayor/index.html>

³¹ M. Landleroct, *op. cit.*

³² M. Moore, *Trump gives himself a perfect ‘10’ for hurricane response in Puerto Rico*, “New York Post” 19 October 2017; web. 4 February 2018. <http://nypost.com/2017/10/19/trump-gives-himself-a-perfect-10-for-hurricane-response-in-puerto-rico/>

³³ Fernández, *op. cit.*

³⁴ *Donald Trump says Puerto Rico cannot rely on hurricane help ‘forever’*, “ABC News” 13 October 2017; web. 22 January 2018. www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-13/donald-trump-labelled-hater-in-chief-over-puerto-rico-tweets/9045888

laws and regulations and because Puerto Rico has no actual representation in Congress, decisions are made with little consideration for the island's residents. The words of President Trump show that he does not realize or refuses to acknowledge that it is the American government that is largely responsible for the poor economic standing of the island.

Mayor Cruz described in an interview with CNN the briefing she attended with the President and said that the White House staff were helpful and receptive but President Trump's communications style "gets in the way" and "rather than commander in chief, he sort of becomes miscommunicator in chief."³⁵ A desperate Mayor Cruz pleaded for help in an interview with the *Huffington Post*, saying "It may be easy to try to disregard us ... because we're a U.S. territory and a colony. But we are people dammit and don't care what the political status is."³⁶ It is interesting to notice that Americans very rarely use the word "colony" in the context of Puerto Rico while the inhabitants of the island, including the mayor of San Juan, are not reluctant to define their land as a colony.

The Hurricane knocked out 80 percent of Puerto Rico's power lines and destroyed its generators. Despite official federal help, the situation on the island was dramatic. Before Christmas 2017, a third of the island still had no power and some towns relied on food and water supplies sent by federal workers. This led to massive protests across the island, in towns such as Trujillo Alto and Aguas Buenas. Lack of electrical power, food shortages and problems with water supplies after Maria have triggered an exodus from the island. It is difficult to provide exact estimates for the number of Puerto Ricans who have left the island, but more than 269,000 people arrived in Florida on flights from Puerto Rico within the period of three months after the hurricane, according to the Florida Division of Emergency Management. Demographers expect an even larger migration from the island in the long term. According to the estimates of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at the City University of New York, Puerto Rico will lose about 14 percent of its population by the end of 2019.³⁷ Puerto Rico's historic exodus of residents to the mainland is causing a shrinking tax base which additionally weakens the economy.³⁸

³⁵ M. Landleroct, *op. cit.*

³⁶ M. Papenfuss, *Trump's Approval For Hurricane Response Plunges 20 Points After Puerto Rico Storms*, "Huffington Post" 17 October 2017; web. 20 January 2018. www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/trump-approval-puerto-rico-hurricane_us_59e582b3e4b02a215b3288ee

³⁷ A. Fernández, *op. cit.*

³⁸ M. Gonzalez, *4 Reasons Independence Is the Right Path for Puerto Rico*, "Huffington Post" 30 July 2016, web. 12 July 2018. www.huffingtonpost.com/maru-gonzalez/4-reasons-independence-is-the-right-path-for-puerto-rico_b_7907434.html?guccounter=1

What caused the critical response of Puerto Ricans was not the lack of actual financial help but rather a low efficiency of federal activities. Puerto Ricans also complained about President Trump's negative attitude, his evident lack of empathy towards the survivors and lack of visible identification with the American islanders. President signed a relief bill that gave \$4.9 billion in loans to help Puerto Rico.³⁹ Congress approved a \$36.5 billion disaster relief bill to provide emergency support for Puerto Rico, Florida, Texas, the US Virgin Islands, and wildfire-ravaged California. In response to it, Mayor Carmen Yulin Cruz said: "It is not that you do not get it. ... It is that you are incapable of empathy and frankly simply cannot get the job done."⁴⁰

The attitude of Presidents Trump may be partly explained by the fact that Puerto Ricans are not always perceived as Americans. Although the island of Puerto Rico is home to 3.4 million American citizens, soon after the hurricane it turned out that not all Americans identified with the disaster in the same way that they did in the cases of the hurricanes that occurred in Texas and Florida. Just after Maria made landfall, a poll conducted by *Morning Consult*⁴¹ found that only 54 percent of Americans know that people born in Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens.⁴² Trump's response to Hurricane Maria's survivors differed from the activities performed after hurricanes struck Texas and Florida. In Texas, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) operated 50 Disaster Recovery Centers to help residents recover from Hurricane Harvey. In Florida, FEMA was running 18 Disaster Recovery Centers to help residents after Hurricane Irma. In Puerto Rico, in October 2017 (a month after Hurricane Maria), 83 percent of residents remained without power.⁴³ While much of the island has restored electricity, some Puerto Ricans still manage without power. The Trump administration gave

³⁹ M. Perez and L. Sanders, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ *Trump puts Puerto Rico on notice over hurricane aid*, "BBC" 2017; web. 22 January 2018. www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41598616

⁴¹ *Morning Consult*—based in Washington D.C. and New York City, a media company that specializes in online surveying and market research. *Morning Consult* data was collected in the period 22–24 September 2017, among a national sample of 2,200 adults. The interviews were conducted online, and the data were weighted to approximate a target sample of adults based on age, race/ethnicity, gender, educational attainment, and region.

⁴² K. Dropp and B. Nyhan, *Nearly Half of the American citizens Don't Know Puerto Ricans Are Fellow Citizens*, "The New York Times" 26 September 2017; web. 2 February 2018. www.nytimes.com/2017/09/26/upshot/nearly-half-of-americans-dont-know-people-in-puerto-ricans-are-fellow-citizens.html

⁴³ A. Gomez, *Trump's wildly different responses to hurricanes in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico*, "USA Today," 12 October 2017; web. 12 January 2018. www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/10/12/tweets-visits-threats-how-trump-takes-different-approach-hurricane-relief-puerto-rico-texas-florid/757201001/

excuses for their lack of efficiency in handling the situation in Puerto Rico and repeatedly stated that it is an island surrounded by the sea, so it is tougher to serve with massive aid effort than in a state like Florida or Texas.⁴⁴ The response of the federal government was slower and less attentive to Puerto Rico after Maria than to Texas after Harvey and Florida after Irma. To the victims of Harvey, Trump contributed \$1 million from his personal fortune. The inferior treatment of Puerto Ricans in comparison with the inhabitants of Texas and Florida seems to suggest that a population of brown-skinned, Spanish-speaking Americans counts for less.⁴⁵

Trump was strongly criticized for the way his administration responded to Hurricane Maria, which decimated Puerto Rico, compared to the way he handled Harvey and Irma. The president visited Texas four days after Harvey made landfall and Florida four days after Irma hit. It took him 13 days to visit Puerto Rico after Maria made landfall. In Texas and Florida Trump spoke of the great job carried out by his administration, praised local officials for their hard work, and promised residents that the federal government would be there for a long time.⁴⁶

The Department of Homeland Security released a report on federal activities related to the 2017 hurricanes. In this report, FEMA acknowledged that it was not prepared to deal with a disaster like the one caused by Hurricane Maria. The report indicated that FEMA underestimated the need for food and water supplies. Moreover, the number of supplies available on the island was deficient due to their shipment to the Virgin Islands after Hurricane Irma. Another acknowledged fact was a delay in distribution of meals as FEMA had fewer available employees than the number needed for the hurricane season.⁴⁷

A team of four scholars from the University of Michigan School of Public Health, and University of Utah examined differences in disaster responses across the hurricanes with focus on the distribution of federal resources and direct and indirect storm-mortality counts. The results of their research were published in the article titled *Quantifying inequalities in US federal response to*

⁴⁴ S. Collinson, *Hurricane Maria shows Trump revels in conflict, chaos amid crisis*, "CNN," 2017; web. 2 February 2018. <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/02/politics/president-donald-trump-puerto-rico-crisis/index.html>

⁴⁵ K. Vick, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ A. Gomez, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ J.A.D. Robles, *FEMA response to Maria 'was not the best'*, "El Nuevo Dia" 15 July 2018; web. 18 July 2018. www.elnuevodia.com/english/english/nota/femaresponsetomariawasnotthebest-2435364/

*hurricane disaster in Texas and Florida compared with Puerto Rico.*⁴⁸ They based their study on FEMA records and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reports. According to this research, the federal response was quicker and conducted on a larger scale in the cases of Hurricane Harvey and Irma, compared with Hurricane Maria. The authors of the report state that insufficient response may affect the public health of the community inhabiting the affected area and cause increases in mortality rates. Their examination showed that within the first 9 days after the hurricanes, both Harvey and Irma survivors had each received about US\$100 million, whereas Maria survivors had been awarded only US\$6 million in recovery aid. Other discrepancies included allocation of FEMA employees to disaster areas in the days of post-landfall. There were 30000 federal rescuers in Texas; 16200 in Florida; and only 10000 in Puerto Rico. The authors of the report note that “the degree of variation between the disaster responses is problematic.” The researchers point to the huge undercount of deaths associated with Maria and estimate that the total excess mortality postland fall between September 2017—February 2018, totals 2975.

The hurricane had negative consequences for the health of survivors. American scholars from the University of Miami and Boston University conducted a study to assess the mental health characteristics of Puerto Ricans who stayed on the island and those who moved to Florida six months after Hurricane Maria. The results of the study show that nearly half of the 213 survey participants showed symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); they could not stop re-experiencing the catastrophe and were not able to calm down. The scholars determined that survivors in Florida experienced higher rates of PTSD (65.7%) than those who remained on the island (43.6%).⁴⁹ The post-Hurricane Maria adjustment must have been more challenging for those individuals who not only experienced the hurricane but also left their homes and migrated to the US mainland. The American press alarmed about visible symptoms of PTSD among Maria survivors. The exemplary headlines were the following: “After Hurricane, Signs of a Mental

⁴⁸ Ch.E. Willison, P.M. Singer, M.S. Creary, and S.L. Greer, *Quantifying inequalities in US federal response to hurricane disaster in Texas and Florida compared with Puerto Rico*, “BMJ Glob Health” 2019, p.1-6.

⁴⁹ The research was conducted by Carolina Scaramutti, Christopher P. Salas-Wright, Saskia R. Vos and Seth J. Schwartz. They published their findings in *The Mental Health Impact of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and Florida*, “Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness. RWJF-funded special issue: Serial hurricanes” November 2018, pp. 1-17.

Health Crisis Haunt Puerto Rico” (*The New York Times*),⁵⁰ “The hidden injury Puerto Ricans still feel a year after Hurricane Maria” (*Detroit Free Press*),⁵¹ “PTSD and Suicide After Natural Disasters” (*Psychiatric Times*),⁵² “Weeks after hurricane a critical window for PTSD, experts say” (*CBS News*).⁵³

The activities performed by the federal government after Hurricane Maria were criticized by both sides of the American political scene: Puerto Rico’s Republican Resident Commissioner, Jennifer Gonzalez and Puerto Rican Democrats in Congress. Gonzales expressed her criticism in the following words: “The lack of a detailed plan to replenish supplies in Puerto Rico, when 80 percent of the supplies located on the Island had been sent to the U.S. Virgin Islands after Hurricane Irma, left Puerto Rico destitute in the middle of the hurricane season.” Democratic Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez from New York said: “This Administration failed 3.3 million American citizens in Puerto Rico.” Another Democratic Congressman from New York, Jose Serrano, stated: “FEMA’s lack of planning and coordination made a bad situation worse, and many Puerto Ricans needlessly suffered as a result. We can’t allow a crisis like this to happen again.” The most severe criticism came from Hector Figueroa, president of the 32BJ Service Employees International Union and coordinator of the Vamos por Puerto Rico (Vamos4PuertoRico) coalition, who said: “The response of the federal government to the crisis in Puerto Rico was criminally negligent and, in fact, worsened the situation.” He also talked about “the racist and anti-Latino attitudes of the Trump administration.”⁵⁴

According to a CNN poll, 64 percent of Americans approved of how Trump managed the federal response after hurricanes struck Texas and Florida in late August and early September of 2017. But another CNN poll conducted a month after Puerto Rico was hit by Hurricane Maria showed that approval for Trump’s actions plunged to 44 percent, and 47 percent of

⁵⁰ C. Dickerson, *After Hurricane, Signs of a Mental Health Crisis Haunt Puerto Rico*, “The New York Times” 13 November 2017; web. 26 March 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/us/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-mental-health.html>

⁵¹ P.W. Howard, *The hidden injury Puerto Ricans still feel a year after Hurricane Maria*, “Detroit Free Press” 29 August 2018, web. 26 March 2019. <https://eu.freep.com/story/money/cars/ford/2018/08/23/puerto-rico-hurricane-maria-ford/913183002/>

⁵² C.A. Alfonso, *PTSD and Suicide After Natural Disasters*, “Psychiatric Times” Vol. 35, Issue 4, 2018 (April); web. 26th March 2018. <https://www.psychiatristimes.com/ptsd/ptsd-and-suicide-after-natural-disasters>

⁵³ A. Welch, *Weeks after hurricane a critical window for PTSD, experts say*, “CBS News,” 21 September 2017; web. 26 March 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hurricane-maria-harvey-irma-ptsd-mental-health/>

⁵⁴ J.A.D. Robles, *op. cit.*

Americans expressed their disapproval for the federal response. The approval for Trump's handling of the response dropped among non-whites, from 52 percent in September to 25 percent in October; among Hispanics—from 49 percent to 22 percent. The CNN poll was conducted by SSRS⁵⁵ by telephone between the 12th and 15th of October 2017 among a random national sample of 1,010 adults.⁵⁶

The U.S. government never admits that Puerto Rico is an American colony but what matters is how the people of Puerto Rico feel about their relationship with the United States. Such figures as the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz, and political activist Oscar López Rivera are not hesitant to call Puerto Ricans a colonized nation. Although the colonial relationship cannot be acceptable on permanent terms to either Puerto Rico or the United States, little is being done to change it.

The political debates concerning the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States focus on three possible alternatives: (1) breaking ties with the USA and becoming an independent nation, (2) becoming the fifty-first state of the USA, (3) maintaining its commonwealth status. Unfortunately, Puerto Ricans themselves are not in agreement on this topic.⁵⁷ The 20th-century history of Puerto Rico has been characterized by persistent resistance to Americanization. However, over time, more and more islanders have expressed the desire to integrate into the United States.⁵⁸ The pro-independence option in the “status” referendum of November 1993 was approved by only 4 percent of the votes, which shows that the separatist ideology is only powerful among elite minorities and the majority of Puerto Ricans reject nationalist discourses.⁵⁹ Other status referenda were held in 1967, 1998, 2012 and 2017. All of them proved that Puerto Ricans cannot resolve their differences between stateholders, commonwealthers and independence supporters. This allows the American government to retain the status quo on the island.

The option of becoming the fifty-first state has both advantages and disadvantages. It would enable Puerto Ricans to vote in federal elections

⁵⁵ SSRS—a full-service survey market research firm, managed by dedicated professionals in the social sciences.

⁵⁶ M. Papenfuss, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ J.A. Galván, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁵⁸ N. Morris, *Puerto Rico: Culture, Politics, and Identity*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 1995. p. 69.

⁵⁹ R. Grosfoguel, F. Negrón-Muntaner, and Ch. S. Georas. *Beyond Nationalist and Colonialist Discourses: The Jaiba Politics of the Puerto Rican Ethno-Nation*, [in:] F. Negrón-Muntaner, and R. Grosfoguel (eds.), *Puerto Rican Jam. Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1997, pp. 4-5.

and have representatives in the U.S. Congress. On the other hand, Puerto Ricans would have to pay federal taxes which would be hard for economically disadvantaged families. They also worry about their vibrant culture, which may disappear in the American mainstream. There is also a threat of losing Spanish since Puerto Ricans would have to accept English as the only official language of the state.⁶⁰

One of the most recent initiatives toward statehood for Puerto Rico was undertaken by the island's governor, Ricardo Rosselló, who addressed the 2018 NAACP⁶¹ National Convention in San Antonio, Texas on the 17th July 2018. The governor asked the members of the convention to support the creation of a Congress Working Group aiming to achieve the admission of Puerto Rico as the 51st American state. In his speech, Rosselló said: "Colonialism is political segregation and it has no place in our country."⁶²

The United States imposes on Puerto Ricans the duties of American citizenship, such as military service and taxation but at the same time limits their rights and gives them fewer federal benefits than to citizens living in the mainland. The efficiency of federal help allocated to the island during the Hurricane Maria crisis is lower than in the case of American states in similar circumstances. Clearly, the relationship of Puerto Rico to the USA is that of a colony to its colonizer. Moreover, the treatment of the Hurricane Maria survivors by the Trump administration clearly proves that American citizens from the "independent territory" are valued less than Americans inhabiting the U.S. states. As long as the commonwealth status of Puerto Rico continues, its residents can neither have political representation in the American Congress nor vote for the American president. They cannot have a guarantee to be treated on equal bases with the inhabitants of American states as well. The current status of the island legally constructs Puerto Ricans as second-class citizens. It seems that the option of becoming the fifty-first state of the USA may be the only solution to save the island from its present colonial status and enable Puerto Ricans to exercise their full rights as American citizens.

President Trump's rhetoric on Hispanics has caused controversy since the beginning of his campaign during which he talked about the dangers posed by Central American migrants trying to enter the USA. His migration policies have proved highly unpopular among Latinos, especially the practice of separating migrant families, or the idea of the wall constructed along the border with Mexico. According to the survey conducted by the

⁶⁰ J.A. Galván, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁶¹ NAACP—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

⁶² J.A.D. Robles, *op. cit.*

Pew Research Center in 2018, about half of U.S. Hispanics said that their situation had worsened over the previous year and majority of them worried that a family member or a close friend could have been deported.⁶³ Trump has been trying to win over Latino votes for his reelection in 2020 but faces an enormous challenge given his relationship with the Hispanic community. Vice president Mike Pence traveled to Florida on 25th June 2019 to launch a national “Latinos for Trump” initiative aimed at winning support for the Republicans.⁶⁴ Florida has more than 2 million Hispanic registered voters and is a key state for Trump’s reelection. After Hurricane Maria, Florida has become a home to a growing number of Puerto Rican migrants who can register to vote once they move to the U.S. mainland. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2018, island-born Puerto Ricans made up nearly a fifth (18%) of Hispanics eligible voters in Florida.⁶⁵ Trump’s path to reelection can narrow significantly because most Floridians born in Puerto Rico, or of Puerto Rican descent, align with Democrats.⁶⁶

⁶³ M.H. Lopez, A. Gonzalez-Barrera and J. M. Krogstad, *More Latinos Have serious Concerns about their place in America Under Trump*, “The Pew Research Center” 25 October 2018; web. 7 July 2019. www.pewhispanic.org/2018/10/25/more-latinos-have-serious-concerns-about-their-place-in-america-under-trump/

⁶⁴ J. Wagner, *Pence launches ‘Latinos for Trump’ as new polling shows most Hispanics want a Democrat to be president*, “Washington Post” 25 June 2019; web. 7 July 2019. www.washingtonpost.com/politics/pence-launching-latinos-for-trump-as-new-polling-shows-most-hispanics-want-a-democrat-to-be-president/2019/06/25/2dbfaf4c-9749-11e9-916d-9c61607d8190_story.html?utm_term=.59d7025acc52

⁶⁵ A. Flores, M.H. Lopez and J.M. Krogstad, *Hispanic voter registration rises in Florida, but role of Puerto Ricans remains unclear*, “The Pew Research Center,” 12 October 2018; web. 7 July 2019. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/12/hispanic-voter-registration-rises-in-florida-but-role-of-puerto-ricans-remains-unclear/

⁶⁶ S.V. Date, *Dems Hope Florida Puerto Ricans Dislike of Trump Translates to Actual Votes Next Time*, “Huffington Post” 21 April 2019; web. 7 July 2019. www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-florida-puerto-rico_n_5bccca5e4b068d795cdde60?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLnBsLw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHCSUGSVSI7jxQDadLrOtz_2NBOE0FLPKaEUTGLseN4yY60AUbPkGT_loglv-GeKNHcirjuXGFdYbJoEePAsI-EhGm9Bf0IJTI0M9cMb3lM3XH537NIbdJtiQHjWb2iGz00BIsYzsK4Ivkh1aOVr8h1bVPS_HND4G2xsDr4Jhva

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American Colonialism in Puerto Rico: President Trump's Response to Hurricane Maria

Abstract

The article is devoted to the commonwealth status of Puerto Rico which through its territorial annexation by the United States has become an “independent territory” controlled by the USA. It presents the treatment of Puerto Rico residents by President Trump's administration in the context of Hurricane Maria. The paper is based on press articles published by *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Huffington Post*, *El Nuevo Dia*, and other newspapers that discuss the response of American government to the disaster caused by Hurricane Maria and compares it with the activities performed by President Trump in the cases of Texas after Hurricane Harvey and Florida after Hurricane Irma. Finally, the article links the inferior treatment of Hurricane Maria survivors with the ambiguous political status of Puerto Rico and raises the issue of American statehood as an option for consideration to solve the colonial status of the island.

Keywords: Puerto Rico, colony, Hurricane Maria, President Trump.