

## Exposing the Shadows of Civil Rights in Puerto Rico

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Washington, DC - I find it peculiar how we Puerto Ricans continuously complain about our lack of voice and power in Congress, but when any Island issue is discussed on the floor someone always jumps at the opportunity to cry foul. As a collective, we all should praise the efforts by any Member of Congress to elevate our issues in the halls of democracy. Freedom of speech is paramount to our democracy, but the approach that if you are not one hundred percent with me then you are against me has destroyed our ability to collaborate and improve the economic and social stability of our people.

I assume that in a moment of frustration and courage on February 16<sup>th</sup> Congressman Luis Gutierrez (D – Illinois) answered the call to leadership by denouncing the most recent civil rights violations that occurred at the University of Puerto Rico and the abuse of power by federal Judge Fusté in helping dismantle the Puerto Rican Bar Association. I have not spoken with Congressman Gutierrez about his action or intentions, but anytime a Member of Congress brings to the floor the issues of my people, I see a glimmer of hope. Unfortunately, his delivery generated an overreaction by supporters of the local government which in response spun his decry by engaging in cultural divisiveness and the always dynamic political rhetoric. I believe that Congressman Gutierrez had the right to denounce the violations for the following three reasons: (a) anyone of Puerto Rican descent or with family alive or deceased on the Island should care about their people; (b) given the fact that around 46 percent of the population depends on federal assistance, any American that pays federal taxes is a shareholder for the well-being of the people of the territories; (c) lastly, any member of the human race has the right to denounce negligent human treatment, as we are doing for Libya.

It is disappointing when politically biased commentaries like the ones made by Mr. Rafael Rodriguez on his recent op-ed calling Congressman Gutierrez “a paradoxical obstructionist” are made. I believe Congressman Gutierrez was trying to shed some light on the dark shadows of social deterioration that our people are facing. This social deterioration is the result of desperation and fear that plagues our people. It is said that in Puerto Rico you cannot live, you can only survive (unless you are part of an elite that controls the political and economic channels). It is this elite that believe they have the right to dictate what the people want or need. It is this elite that hide behind the face of congressional processes to manipulate the political outlook of the Island. It is this elite that engage in manipulating the information instead of exposing the truth and generating trust. It is this elite that continues to enlarge the gap between Puerto Ricans on the mainland and those that remain on the Island. It is this elite that call those who are trying to defend the true elements of democracy and human respect obstructionist.

The issues of Americans in Puerto Rico and the territories are continuously overlooked by the Congressional collective. Even Presidents neglect to mention the people of the territories in their State of the Union speeches. So we are very hypersensitive about our place in the world, which in turn fuels the political philosophy frenzy that has become our white whale, the status of the Island. Although I have my own personal philosophy for the Island, I'm bound to protect the neutral integrity of the organization that represents the voice of the entire community inside the beltway. It is our mission to enhance the social and economic well being of our 8 million plus constituents and nothing is more divisive than the status issues. We are in favor of a fair and executable process for self-determination, and we also believe that for that process to be legitimate we have a principled responsibility to act civilized and respect all views. Change can only be accomplished when trust is at the core.

As the future of our Island we call on all students, educators, and administrators to hold each other to a higher standard.

Respect those that want to express their frustrations and protect those that want to exercise their right to an education. To all local government institutions, we encourage dialogue, tolerance, professionalism, and personal restraint; for it is your duty to protect a functioning society. To our elected officials, engage in integrative processes for the benefit of your constituents and not for personal political gain. Only then will we be able to call ourselves both American citizens and responsible citizens of the world.

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