

Another governor ousted in Puerto Rico as protests continue

By Andrea Lobo
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Five days after the swearing-in ceremony of Pedro Pierluisi as Puerto Rican governor, the US territory's Supreme Court ruled unanimously Wednesday morning that his appointment was "unconstitutional" and ordered his removal from office by 5 p.m.

Heralding a new wave of mass protests, the streets around the governor's mansion, called the "Fortress," were already full of demonstrators by the evening celebrating Pierluisi's ouster while demanding the removal of the island's new governor and third one in a week, Wanda Vázquez.

The court found in favor of a lawsuit filed by the Puerto Rican Senate arguing the unconstitutionality of the provision in a 2005 law that a nominated secretary of state, such as Pierluisi, doesn't need the confirmation of the local legislature to succeed a governor.

On Friday, the former governor, Ricardo Rosselló, had stepped down in response to three weeks of mass demonstrations triggered by the publication of leaked text messages exposing influence peddling and jokes about shutting down public utilities, killing opposition politicians and dead hurricane victims.

Before officially resigning, Rosselló nominated Pierluisi as his secretary of state, the next in line to the governorship (the post was vacant because its previous occupant had already resigned in the scandal that swept away Rosselló). Only the House of Representatives had confirmed Pierluisi by Friday, but Pierluisi still claimed power, leading to the legal challenge by the Senate.

The Senate and the Supreme Court are now rescinding the 2005 stipulation 14 years after its approval, not out of any concern for democratic rights, but as a politically-calculated conspiracy to install a different representative of Wall Street, which is demanding that the political crisis be used to push through even greater social cuts.

As signaled by the thousands demonstrating on Friday

evening outside the governor's residence, with chants and signs calling for the immediate resignation of Pierluisi, his government would have immediately generated an even greater social upheaval due to opposition against his right-wing background.

As resident commissioner (Puerto Rico's nonvoting member in the US Congress) from 2009 to 2017, Pierluisi backed the creation of the Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB), a colonial outfit stripping Puerto Rico of any self-governance, to implement brutal austerity measures on behalf of the island's creditors on Wall Street. After leaving office, he rejoined a private law firm whose main client was the FOMB.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that soon after the announcement of the ruling Wednesday, protesters were already outside the governor's mansion, yelling through a loudspeaker, "Pierluisi out! The constitution of Puerto Rico should be respected!"

Fearful of feeding the escalating social explosion, with demonstrators placing at the center of their demands the expulsion of the FOMB, Washington, which is ultimately pulling the strings in Puerto Rican institutions, has sided with a different but equally despised faction of the ruling New Progressive Party (PNP), to which Rosselló and Pierluisi both belong.

In another concocted legal interpretation, Pierluisi handed power Wednesday to Wanda Vázquez Garced, the secretary of justice, who is the next in line of succession according to the 2005 law now deemed partially unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. The Constitution, on the other hand, stipulates that the legislature is responsible for picking a successor for governor if there is no confirmed secretary of state.

After weeks expressing reluctance to becoming governor, Vázquez said Wednesday she was ready to accept the office, publishing a communiqué shortly after the court ruling. "Given that the position as secretary of

state is vacant, I'll accept the Governorship of Puerto Rico, as stipulated in our Magna Carta," the statement reads.

Popular opposition against Vázquez, however, is if anything more intense than against Pierluisi. As soon as Rosselló announced his resignation on July 24, Puerto Rican workers and youth on the streets adopted the chant, "Let it rain, let it rain, Wanda is on her way out as well!"

Among several direct corruption allegations against her, Vázquez is identified above all with covering up the corruption under Rosselló, as well as the official disregard of her department toward the disappearance of truckloads of aid for the victims of the 2017 Hurricane Maria.

Acknowledging the explosive opposition against Vázquez, marching orders were sent out by the White House to replace her with Jenniffer González, a Trump supporter, resident commissioner since 2017 and chair of the Puerto Rico Republican Party since 2015. *El Nuevo Día* reported yesterday, "Several sources said that ... Vázquez, as governor, will name González as her secretary of State."

"Sources indicate that, under this scenario," the Puerto Rican daily adds, "Vázquez would quit and allow González to take the governorship. This move, according to the sources, was already agreed to by the president of the Senate, Thomas Rivera Schatz, and with the president of the House of Representatives, Carlos Johnny Méndez." González, when asked for comment about this, simply said, "I'll support whomever they choose."

As early as July 26, the *New York Times* hinted to her installation as a possible solution to the political crisis, writing a commentary titled "She's Puerto Rico's Only Link to Washington. She Could Be Its Future Governor."

The US ruling class has pursued these antidemocratic maneuvers behind the backs of the Puerto Rican people and even used the political crisis to suspend \$8 billion in federal aid to the island, acknowledging that it counts with the compliance of the so-called "progressive" wing of the Democratic Party and their partners in Puerto Rico.

For all their crocodile tears over the criminal neglect by the White House toward the devastation wrought by Hurricane Maria and over Rosselló's outrageous texts, figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Bernie Sanders and the trade unions have worked to chain the protests and mass anger behind bankrupt appeals to the colonial institutions in Puerto Rico.

The forceful intervention of hundreds of thousands of workers into the political arena on the island has exposed

these forces, which pose as friends and defenders of the working class and the oppressed, as indispensable tools of the US financial oligarchy to protect colonial and bourgeois rule and intensify their attacks against the social and democratic rights of workers.

Their deceitful efforts have become increasingly self-condemning as the political crisis deepens. Carmen Yulín Cruz, a national chair for Sanders's 2020 presidential campaign, and mayor of San Juan, tweeted Wednesday: "At 5:00 pm Wanda Vázquez will take the oath of office. That is the proper order. We'll see now who gets named secretary of state. No, Wanda is not the right person either, but that is the power that the people gave the PNP. We'll take that power through votes, votes and more votes in 2020."

Cruz, who is exploiting the notoriety she gained for criticizing the Trump administration's relief efforts after Hurricane Maria to run for governor next year, blames those who voted for the PNP for the social crisis fueling the protests, while legitimizing in the process the succession of PNP right-wingers being installed extra-legally. At the same time, she all but confessed to being aware and covering up for the conspiracy to install Jenniffer González as secretary of state/governor, a leading Republican and also vice-chair of the PNP.

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