

The Hon. Pedro R. Pierluisi
Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico and President of the New Progressive Party
Prepared Statement
U.N. Special Committee on Decolonization
June 17, 2013

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Pedro Pierluisi. I am Puerto Rico's sole representative in the United States Congress, known as the Resident Commissioner.

I also serve as the President of the New Progressive Party, which supports statehood for Puerto Rico—and I am testifying in that capacity.

I asked to participate because an event has taken place that fundamentally changes the terms of the debate on Puerto Rico's political status.

On November 6, 2012, Puerto Rico exercised its right to self-determination by holding a free and fair vote on the status question. The results demonstrate that 54 percent of voters do not wish to maintain the current status. To the extent that the people of Puerto Rico ever gave their consent to the current status, that consent has now been withdrawn.

The results further demonstrate that, among the three internationally recognized alternatives to the current status, 61 percent of voters support statehood.

Finally, the results demonstrate that, for the first time in Puerto Rico's history, there are more people who want Puerto Rico to become a state than who want to continue the current status.

I have described the significance of this vote to the President of the United States, my colleagues in the U.S. Congress, and the American public—and I believe it is appropriate for me to inform the community of nations as well.

I am honored to speak on behalf of those men and women who proudly carry the Puerto Rican flag in one hand and the American flag in the other, and who know that their love for Puerto Rico and their love for the United States complement, rather than contradict, one another. Our party believes that statehood is in the best interest of Puerto Rico, and so we seek to perfect our union with the United States, not to dilute or dissolve the political, economic and social bonds that we have forged—in peace and in war—over the past 115 years. As the November vote reveals, the statehood movement has become the predominant force in Puerto Rico, and it grows stronger by the day.

I want to clarify an important point. On the surface, those who want Puerto Rico to become a state and those who want Puerto Rico to become a sovereign nation appear to

have little in common, given our different visions for Puerto Rico's future, but we actually agree in fundamental respects.

We are the reality-based movements in Puerto Rico.

We recognize—rather than refute—the fact that Puerto Rico is an unincorporated territory of the United States.

We understand—rather than deny—that, although the United States approved a constitution for Puerto Rico in 1952 and was released from its reporting requirement under Article 73 of the U.N. Charter in 1953, Puerto Rico is still a “non-self-governing territory” if that term has any meaning at all.

We recognize that, under U.S. law and international law, as enshrined in U.N. General Assembly Resolution 1541, there are three status options that would provide Puerto Rico with a “full measure of self-government”: independence, nationhood in a free association with another nation, and integration through statehood. We do not misrepresent what Puerto Rico is, or what it might become, for the sake of political advantage.

We recognize that Puerto Rico remains an unincorporated territory of the United States despite the fact that it has been allowed by the U.S. Congress to exercise authority over its local affairs similar to that to which the U.S. states are entitled. We likewise recognize that the U.S. Congress could unilaterally rescind the powers it has delegated to Puerto Rico if it saw fit to do so.

We recognize as self-evident that Puerto Rico does not have democracy at the national level. The United States government makes and implements laws for Puerto Rico. But island residents cannot vote for the U.S. President, are not represented in the U.S. Senate, and elect one member to the U.S. House of Representatives—the Resident Commissioner—who can vote in committees, but not in the full House. Moreover, the laws enacted by Congress and enforced by the president may—and often do—treat Puerto Rico unequally.

As Resident Commissioner, I regularly experience firsthand the injustice of our current status. I must fight to ensure that Puerto Rico is not excluded from job creation, health care, or border security bills that automatically include the states. As my fellow representatives in the U.S. House vote on legislation that affects every aspect of life in Puerto Rico, I can only watch, even though I represent about five times as many U.S. citizens as any of my colleagues. I must rely on the goodwill of U.S. senators who were elected to protect the interests of their constituents, not mine—and, naturally, such goodwill is not always forthcoming. And I must request assistance from a president who, however strong his affinity for Puerto Rico might be, is not required to seek or earn our vote. To expect that his administration would feel the same urgency to produce positive results for Puerto Rico as it does for the states is, frankly, to substitute hope for experience.

Furthermore, those who want Puerto Rico to become a state and those who want Puerto Rico to become a sovereign nation—whether in a free association with, or fully independent from, the United States—all recognize that Puerto Rico’s territory status is the root cause of the economic and social problems that impair quality of life on the island. We categorically reject the backwards view, embraced by certain political leaders in Puerto Rico, that the status debate is somehow a distraction from efforts to address these challenges.

Finally, and above all, *estadistas*, *soberanistas* and *independentistas* share a deep conviction that the people of Puerto Rico, 3.7 million strong, deserve a fully democratic and dignified status.

In November, Puerto Rico took the initiative, exercised its right to self-determination, and unequivocally withdrew its consent to the current territory status.

This means that the current status has lost its democratic legitimacy. The only path forward is statehood or nationhood. And between those options, the people of Puerto Rico clearly prefer integration through statehood.

It is now incumbent upon the United States government to respond by enacting legislation to offer Puerto Rico one or more of the status options that would provide its people with a full measure of self-government. I have emphasized that action is necessary for both legal and moral reasons.

As a legal matter, the U.S. Constitution vests Congress with broad authority over its territories. For Puerto Rico to evolve and to become a state or sovereign nation, it is not enough to just seek such a change; U.S. Congress and the President must act to enable that change.

As a moral matter, the U.S. government rightfully prides itself as a champion of democracy and self-determination around the world. Therefore, it should—indeed, it must—adhere to those principles with respect to its own citizens, or it will lose credibility at home and abroad.

I have faith that the U.S government will fulfill its legal and moral obligation to facilitate Puerto Rico’s transition to a democratic and dignified status. But my faith is not blind. Meaningful action from Washington will be required to sustain it.

I am fully cognizant that the wheels of government often take longer to turn than one might prefer, and I therefore appreciate that a degree of patience is in order. But I also know that justice too long delayed is justice denied. And—after 115 years as a territory—Puerto Rico’s patience is understandably running out.

Let me be clear. In the absence of concrete and timely action from the U.S. government, I will not hesitate to raise this case before the United Nations or any other appropriate international forum. As the leader of a party that aspires for Puerto Rico to become a full and equal member of the American family, I have no desire to publicly criticize the United States. But it is more important for me to secure justice for my people than it is for me to be polite.

That said, I am encouraged by the response I have seen to date. President Obama has sought an appropriation from Congress to conduct the first federally sponsored vote in Puerto Rico's history, with the express goal of "resolving" the territory's future status. It goes without saying that this issue cannot be resolved by continuing the current undemocratic status.

Last month, I introduced legislation, the *Puerto Rico Status Resolution Act*, which proceeds from the indisputable premise that statehood obtained more votes than any other status option in the November referendum. The bill, which already has 72 cosponsors from both U.S. political parties, outlines the rights and responsibilities of statehood, and then asks the people of Puerto Rico to accept—or reject—those terms in an up-or-down vote. If a majority of voters accept those terms, the bill provides for the President to submit legislation to admit Puerto Rico as a State after a reasonable transition period. The bill also expresses Congress's commitment to act on such legislation.

In closing, I want to express my belief that the international community, like the U.S. government, should honor the will of the people of the non-self-governing territory of Puerto Rico. Consistent with the U.N. Charter and Resolution 1541, the international community should support a process of self-determination that will result in a fully democratic and dignified status for Puerto Rico, whether that status be statehood or nationhood. The principle of self-determination so requires.

Thank you.