

Democracy and Its Limits: Press Coverage of the 2019 Rosselló Protests and Puerto Rican Citizenship

In July 2019, hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans filled the streets of San Juan to demand the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. The trigger was a massive document leak: the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPI) had published nearly nine hundred pages of private Telegram messages between the governor and his aides, exposing corruption, mockery of Hurricane María victims, and language full of misogyny and homophobia. After twelve days of sustained protest, Rosselló resigned, marking the first time in Puerto Rico's history that popular mobilization had removed a sitting governor. Journalists covering these events faced a fundamental tension their own coverage rarely resolved. On one hand, the protests appeared to demonstrate that Puerto Rican citizenship carried real democratic power. On the other, the conditions that had produced the crisis, like federal debt oversight, failed disaster recovery, and a political status Puerto Ricans cannot resolve alone, remained in place after Rosselló left office. This paper argues that press coverage of the 2019 Rosselló protests portrayed Puerto Rican citizenship in two conflicting ways: as a powerful force capable of democratic action, and as a fundamentally constrained form of citizenship limited by colonial governance. Read alongside historical scholarship on Puerto Rico's political status, this coverage reveals what journalists often documented without fully articulating: Puerto Rican democracy operates within a colonial structure that limits its reach.

The dominant narrative in both U.S. and Puerto Rican press framed the 2019 protests as an extraordinary democratic achievement. AP reporter Dánica Coto's coverage from July 22, 2019 captured the scale of the moment, describing tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans demanding the

governor's resignation and situating the demonstrations as the largest the island had seen in over two decades.¹

Central to this democratic-triumph narrative was the role of investigative journalism itself. CNN Business reported that the CPI, a nonprofit newsroom with only ten full-time staff, had published the nearly nine hundred pages of Telegram messages — quickly named “RickyLeaks” across the press — that set the protests in motion.² The coverage framed the CPI as performing a classically democratic function: delivering information to citizens who then exercised their political power in the streets.³

Press coverage of Rosselló's resignation on July 24 extended this triumphant framing. Democracy Now!'s reporting described celebrations lasting through the night in Puerto Rico, quoting activists calling the moment a victory for the Puerto Rican people.⁴ The Columbia Journalism Review subsequently noted that what followed was widespread press coverage presenting the resignation as a clean democratic outcome — a framing that was not inaccurate but that left significant dimensions of the story underexamined.⁵

The problem was not that this narrative was wrong but that it treated the governor as both the cause and the conclusion of the crisis. Removing Rosselló was framed as resolution rather than as an opening move in a much longer struggle.

A second layer of press coverage complicated the victory narrative by situating the protests within structural conditions that the governor's resignation could not alter. Through outlets like Democracy Now!, the CPI itself, and the Committee to Protect Journalists, this counter-narrative drew explicit connections between the 2019 crisis and Puerto Rico's broader colonial status.

Journalist Ed Morales argued on Democracy Now! the morning after the resignation that while the protests represented a genuine democratic expression, they also exposed the fragility of

Puerto Rican governance. With multiple cabinet positions vacant and a succession crisis unresolved, Morales noted that the unelected Financial Oversight and Management Board, established under the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), was positioned to expand its authority as the government destabilized.⁶ The same democratic action that removed Rosselló had also created an opening for deeper colonial intervention.

The Committee to Protect Journalists documented another dimension of the colonial-limitation story that mainstream coverage underreported. A CPJ interview with Orlando Jesús Rivera Martínez, reporter for NotiCentro WAPA-TV, described conditions in which journalists were tear-gassed, struck with rubber bullets, and hit with rocks, all while attempting to cover events he described as the most significant in Puerto Rico's modern history.⁷ The police response to the protests, including the use of force against members of the press, embedded a form of state violence within the same democratic moment that other outlets were celebrating.

The CPI's reporting pointed mostly toward structural limitations. The July 19 piece "The Pillage of Public Funds in Puerto Rico Going on Behind the Chat" demonstrated that the corruption revealed in the Telegram messages was not Rosselló's personal failing alone, but a systemic network involving lobbyists, public contractors, and government agencies.⁸ Removing the governor addressed only the most visible node of a much larger structure of corruption inseparable from the conditions of colonial governance: the debt crisis, the PROMESA oversight board, and federal control over Puerto Rico's fiscal policy that predated Rosselló and outlasted him.

The Columbia Journalism Review's analysis of the RickyLeaks coverage also notes how the mainstream press had largely overlooked the fact that Rosselló and his aides had spent considerable attention in the Telegram chats strategizing against journalists and news outlets.⁹ The

press that celebrated its democratic role in exposing corruption had missed the story of how deeply the colonial government had viewed an adversarial press as a political threat. The gap between what was covered and what was overlooked is itself evidence of the limits of democratic journalism within a colonial context.

The tension between the two narratives is not a failure of either side, but rather reflects the structural conditions in Puerto Rican political life that historical scholarship has long documented. Read alongside the longer history, the press coverage of 2019 is seen not only as a record of a particular political moment, but as evidence of a condition that has characterized Puerto Rican citizenship for over a century.

César Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, in *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, trace the long history of how the United States managed Puerto Rican political aspirations by offering limited forms of self-governance while retaining ultimate federal authority.¹⁰ The mainstream AP framing, which celebrated Puerto Ricans exercising democratic power while treating the colonial infrastructure as background noise, reproduced this historical pattern without naming it. What looks in press coverage like a democratic victory is understood through Ayala and Bernabe as another iteration of constrained self-governance: Puerto Ricans could remove a governor, but they could not dismantle the fiscal control board, cancel the debt, or alter the territorial status that made PROMESA possible.

Marisol LeBrón's *Policing Life and Death* highlights what the CPJ's reporting on police violence at the protests only partially mentioned. LeBrón argues that policing in Puerto Rico has functioned as a colonial instrument, managing and suppressing political resistance under the guise of public order.¹¹ The rubber bullets and tear gas documented in the CPJ interview were not accidental; they were the colonial state's predictable response to democratic citizenship claiming

political space. LeBrón's framework makes visible what the CPJ coverage documents: democratic action and state violence were happening in the same place at the same time — a coexistence the victory narrative consistently minimized.

Jorell Meléndez-Badillo's *Puerto Rico: A National History* provides the longest view. His account of Puerto Rican political identity across multiple periods shows that this tension between democratic aspiration and colonial constraint is part of Puerto Rican political life, not a feature unique to 2019.¹² The protesters who renamed Calle Fortaleza "Calle de la Resistencia" were not just reacting to Rosselló; they were participating in a long tradition of Puerto Rican claims to political space within a colonial geography, which the press largely treated as a colorful detail.¹³

Together, these frameworks reveal what the press coverage contained but rarely articulated: Puerto Rican citizenship has always operated in the space between democratic possibility and colonial limitations, and the history explains why both narratives could be simultaneously right.

Mainstream outlets documented a truly democratic achievement: popular mobilization had removed a governor for the first time in Puerto Rican history. Investigative and alternative outlets documented what the resignation left intact: the federal oversight board, the debt crisis, the slow Hurricane María recovery, and a political status that no local election can resolve. Historical scholarship on Puerto Rico makes clear that these are not competing versions of events but complementary ones. Colonial citizenship produces exactly this contradiction: democratic enough to remove a governor, constrained enough to leave the structure intact.

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