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A youth draped in a Puerto Rican flag attends a rally to celebrate the resignation of Puerto Rican Gov. Ricardo Rosselló in San Juan July 25. (CNS/Reuters/Marco Bello)

by Eric LeCompte

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After demands for his resignation, Puerto Rico Gov. Ricardo "Ricky" Rosselló agreed to leave the governor's palace in old San Juan, effective Aug.2. Calls for Rosselló's resignation erupted for two weeks because of his offensive language in leaked communications and FBI arrests of former members of his administration on corruption charges.

The main daily newspaper on the island, El Nuevo Día, reported that more than half a million people participated in protests calling for his resignation, shutting down the major highways on the Caribbean island. This level of protest was last seen in Puerto Rico when the U.S. Navy was thrown out of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, which the Navy used for bombing practice through the early 2000s.



Puerto Rican Gov. Ricardo Rosselló announces his resignation in San Juan late July 24. (CNS/La Forteleza de Puerto Rico handout via Reuters)

Since Rosselló's election in 2016, I had come to know him while my organization, Jubilee USA Network, worked with Puerto Rico religious leaders to deal with the island's financial crisis, child poverty epidemic and disaster relief efforts. He hosted me in the centuries-old La Fortaleza, the official residence of the governor.

When the governor and I met, we didn't see eye to eye on a number of issues, but he had great interest in many of Jubilee's proposals to stop austerity, reduce child poverty and restructure the overwhelming $72 billion debt that suffocates Puerto Rico.

In many ways, the governor was too friendly to many of Puerto Rico's creditors. He ran for election on a promise to pay the debt. In fact, the governor led the fight to prevent the debt from being audited and to dismantle an audit process that Jubilee USA had protected in U.S. law. But on a personal level, I felt he had a commitment to public service and wanted the best for his people.

Two weeks ago, when Puerto Rico's Center for Investigative Journalism released the private leaked chats of Rosselló and his close advisers, the language shook me. Dubbed "Rickygate," nearly 900 leaked pages were filled with violent, hateful language. Language demeaning political opponents, women and homosexuals.

The abusive comments from the governor enraged people and that rage boiled over into the massive demonstrations. However, the people were in the streets about much more than the governor's inappropriate, startling language.

Puerto Ricans marched because they are tired of corruption, tired because six out of 10 kids live in poverty, tired because of hundreds of schools shuttered from a debt crisis, tired because of lost health and emergency services. They are so tired of waiting for promised hurricane disaster aid to arrive almost two years after Hurricanes Maria and Irma hit. Some 20,000 homes across the island are still covered with emergency blue tarps.

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Rosselló's resignation is not enough to answer Puerto Rico's endemic corruption, high poverty levels, the economic crisis or being forgotten after hurricanes ravaged the island. Puerto Rico needs serious debt relief, sufficient disaster aid, strong public budget transparency laws and economic investments in growth, not more austerity policies. Puerto Rico needs real pathways to economic growth that include a new electric grid harnessing God's plentiful gifts of wind and solar power on the island.

Since 2015, my greatest personal and professional privilege has been working with faith leaders in Puerto Rico who call for an economy that serves all of the island's people. San Juan's Archbishop Roberto González, the Rev. Heriberto Martínez-Rivera of the evangelical Biblical Society of Puerto Rico, and Fr. Enrique Camacho of Caritas Puerto Rico are examples of moral leadership in their words and actions.

Our interfaith Jubilee USA coalition, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Jewish leaders, Catholic Charities, and the Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and United Church of Christ churches walked with Puerto Rico's religious leaders. Because of this partnership, because of their courage, their moral leadership and strategic engagement, together we pushed Congress to pass debt crisis legislation and move forward disaster aid and call powerfully for transparency and anti-corruption laws.

There is much more to be done, but much of what was achieved is because of the leadership of several of the island's religious leaders.

Days before Rosselló's chats broke and the FBI arrested former members of his administration, I gathered with several of the religious leaders at the oldest cathedral in the hemisphere, the 500-year-old Cathedral of San Juan Bautista, a few blocks from the governor's palace in old San Juan.

Like a prophecy, González, Martínez-Rivera and Camacho released a statement at a press conference in the cathedral. They lifted the outrage over corruption in their government, the challenges of austerity, the high levels of child poverty, and "crises created from unpayable debts and unavoidable disasters."

Before a million people gathered in the streets of San Juan, again the religious leaders called for their colonial status to be resolved. As they voiced the concerns of their people, they also continued to call all of us to deal with these challenges. They

reminded us of God's promise and that our efforts must continue:

"Recovering from hurricanes, wrestling with debt crisis, we still are a people of hope — a people that know that our hope is tied to the Paschal Mystery. Resurrection conquers death and light always illuminates the darkness."

[Eric LeCompte is the executive director of Jubilee USA Network.]