

Puerto Rico's Governor Wants 'Independence'

The United States is backtracking from its historic position acknowledging Puerto Rico's right to self-governance, Puerto Rico's governor says in a pending U.S. Supreme Court case over so-called double jeopardy laws.

In a letter to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon released on Sunday, Puerto Rico Governor Alejandro Garcia Padilla said Washington is reversing a decades-old understanding that Puerto Rico, while a U.S. commonwealth, governs through its own constitution.

The case plays out against a massive debt restructuring in Puerto Rico and could be a political lightning rod on an island where commonwealth status is the key issue dividing political parties.

A 1950 agreement "emphasized that under the Puerto Rico constitution, the political power of the commonwealth emanates from the people and shall be exercised in accordance with their will," Garcia Padilla wrote in the letter.

It came in response to a friend-of-the-court brief filed by U.S. Solicitor General Donald Verrilli in a Supreme Court case over whether Puerto Rico can prosecute people for crimes of which they have already been convicted in federal court.

Verrilli argued that unlike states, Puerto Rico is not a separate sovereign, so prosecution would violate double jeopardy laws that ban trying a defendant twice for the same crime in the same jurisdiction.

Puerto Rico could become sovereign "only if it were to attain statehood or become an independent nation," the United States argued.

The U.S. Congress is divided on whether and how the federal government should step in to help Puerto Rico sort out \$70 billion in debt, while the island's financial creditors have been resistant to voluntary cuts on repayments.

The Supreme Court case is not directly related to the debt crisis, nor to a separate pending Supreme Court case over whether the island can enact local bankruptcy laws to help it enforce cuts on creditors.

Still, the dispute highlights one of the key political issues at the center of Puerto Rico's restructuring: the nature of its relationship with the United States.

Puerto Rican leaders who support statehood, like Pedro Pierluisi, the island's representative in Congress, say the solicitor general's brief captures the problem with territory status. "Any lingering illusions about Puerto Rico's status should be shattered" in light of Verrilli's brief, Pierluisi said in a statement. "Puerto Rico is a territory – an undemocratic, unequal and undignified status."

Garcia Padilla—a member of the party that opposes statehood for Puerto Rico—believes the island can be independent as a commonwealth.

(Reporting by Nick Brown; Editing by Dan Grebler)

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