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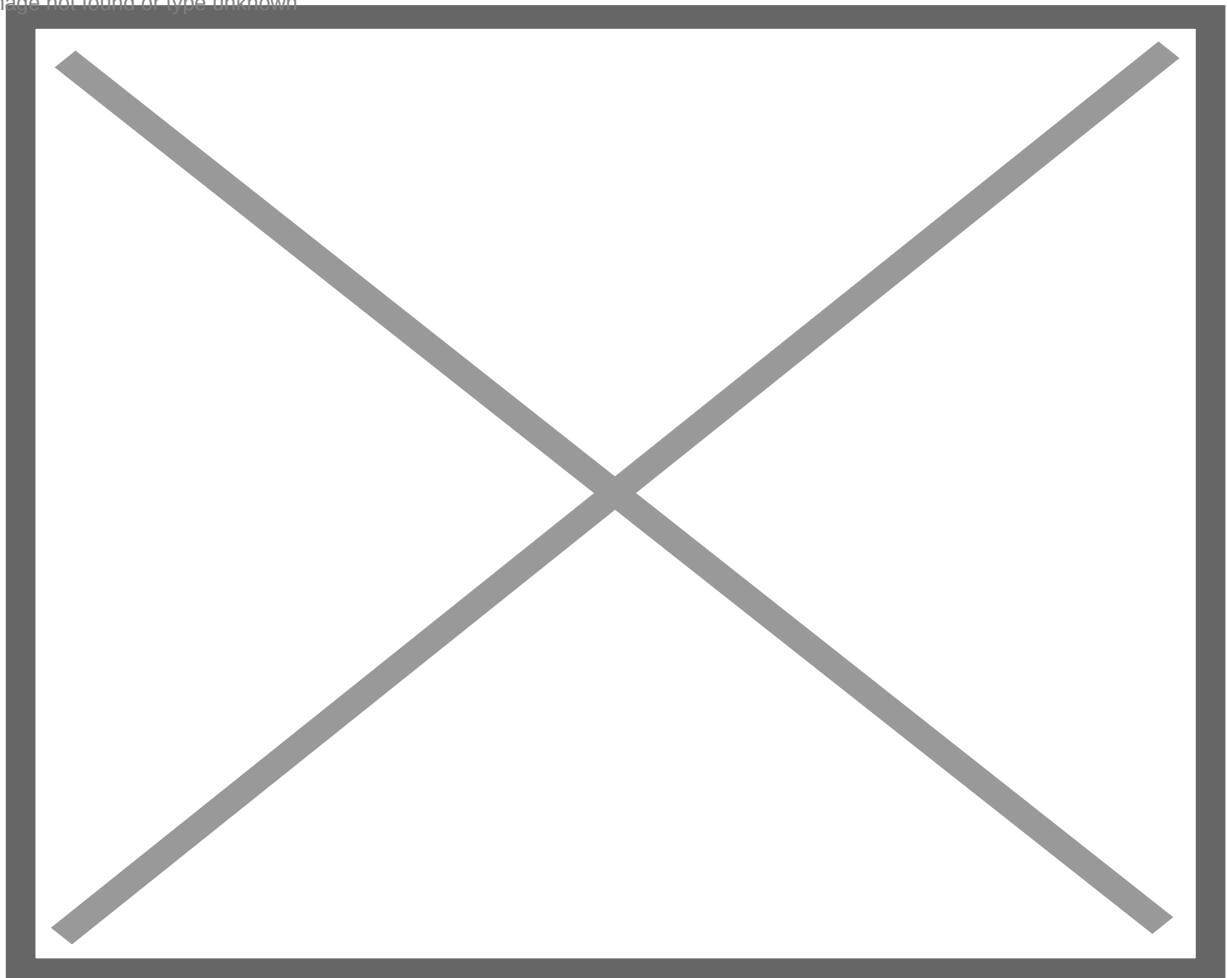
Days Before Bad Bunny's Super Bowl Halftime, U.S. Territory Representatives Criticize America's 'Colonial' Behavior

Days before Bad Bunny's Super Bowl halftime spotlighted Caribbean identity, territorial leaders warned Greenland that U.S. rule limits autonomy and concentrates power in Congress, even as Washington spends tens of billions each year on its territories.

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Days before Benito “Bad Bunny” Ocasio commanded the NFL half-time show with a musical discourse on identity and politics, residents of United States territories came together to advise Greenlanders on what might be waiting for them should they ultimately join Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Marianas as territories of the United States.

Organized by Right to Democracy, “What Greenlanders Should Know About Becoming A. U.S. Territory” was held on Thursday and explored themes of political rights, self-determination, mineral extraction, and more. “We’re all constantly trying to clarify this relationship we have with the United States,” said Sheila Jack Babuata, former member of the Northern Mariana Islands House of Representatives.

The discussion began by highlighting the differences between how Greenland interacts with Denmark and how U.S. territories interface with their colonial power. Greenland, said Right to Democracy co-founder Neil Weare, has representation in the Danish parliament and forms a critical component of the voting bloc that usually decides the next prime minister of Denmark. Greenlanders also reserve the right to call a referendum on independence at any time they choose. “They have much greater autonomy over local decision-making,” said Mr. Weare, noting that they have exercised that autonomy to decide to exert full control over their mineral resources and mineral extraction. The revenue from that industry stays completely in Greenland, while Denmark provides local government support and funding of about \$10,000 per resident. Greenlanders, meanwhile, are exempt from Danish taxes.

The panelists contrasted Greenland’s political relationship to Denmark with their territory’s relationship with the United States. “I was actually very envious of what goes on in Greenland,” said Robert Underwood, a former Congressional delegate from Guam, noting that United States territories have much less political autonomy. “It kind of reflects the fact that almost all responsible nations in the world have an understanding of their role as colonizers...that lesson in the United States’ thinking seems to have not been learned.”

“Now,” Mr. Underwood continued, “whatever remnants of that lesson that had been learned are now being unlearned under the current administration.”

The territories’ shared history of being traded, sold, and used as geopolitical bargaining chips have left a mark on the psyches of residents, argued Ms. Babuata. “It really embeds and plants the seed of feeling like an object,” she noted. She also spoke about how the power imbalance between colonial power and territory means that negotiated rights are often unilaterally abrogated by the more powerful party when convenient. “Our immigration rights were taken away in 2009,” noted Ms. Babuata. “The minimum wage laws in 2007 were imposed upon us,” she continued, also pointing to the 2018 federal ban on cockfighting, a move that made a longstanding cultural practice in many territories illegal.

At the same time, any discussion of the United States’ relationship with its territories must grapple with the sheer scale of federal spending that flows to them each year. Collectively, the federal government spends tens of billions of dollars annually across the territories through Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, SNAP, education funding, infrastructure grants, defense spending, and federal payrolls. Puerto Rico alone receives well over \$20 billion annually in federal transfers, while the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa each receive hundreds of millions to several billions of dollars per year, depending on population, federal installations, and program eligibility. That baseline funding expands dramatically after disasters: following major storms, earthquakes, or typhoons, federal outlays surge into the tens of billions more, as seen after Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Typhoon Yutu, and other catastrophic events. These funds finance long-term recovery, housing reconstruction, power grid rebuilding, and public services—creating a reality in which U.S. territories are simultaneously constrained politically yet deeply embedded fiscally within the federal system. The USVI, according to the V.I. Office of Disaster Recovery, is [projected to receive \\$24 billion](#) in funding to rebuild the territory following the storms of 2017.

Ms. Babatua highlighted the stark difference in attitude between Denmark and the United States when it comes to mineral extraction in the territories. While Greenland has full control over how and when mining activities will take place within its jurisdiction, Ms. Babatua noted how united opposition to deep sea mining in American Samoa was given short shrift by the United States. “The federal government responded to American Samoa’s opposition in a way that was so disrespectful in our eyes and just discarded the community’s response, just disregarded the elected officials’ response and continued with the process...even worse, they nearly doubled the size of the zone being considered,” she noted.

That dynamic exists for many aspects of territorial life. “That’s just been the nature of our relationship from the beginning with the United States...always just trying to assert our rights and always fighting, there’s always something,” said Charles Ala’ilima, an attorney from American Samoa.

Solidarity in adversity is one positive outcome for U.S. territories, noted Mr. Underwood. “This is the first issue in which American Samoa and the Commonwealth and Guam are all on the same sheet,” he said, referring to the issue of deep sea mining. He believes that with some effort at the leadership level, this unity could extend to the other territories as well. “A lot of people are suffering a kind of like, historical delusion about their relationship with the United States....that historical delusion can only be unpacked if we kind of focus on how all our delusions sort of coalesce and come together,” Mr. Underwood argued. “These historical delusions really empower federal officials.”

Hadiya Sewer, founding member of the Virgin Islands Studies Collective, spoke about her territory’s struggle to draft its own constitution. Now in its [sixth attempt](#), she noted that the previous draft contained clauses objectionable to federal authority. Despite the Virgin Islands’ authority to draft its own constitution, “it becomes abundantly clear that that constitution cannot conflict with federal law, must preserve US sovereignty, does not change political status in and of itself,” she noted. “It really forces us to grapple with our colonial relationship with the United States of America and address fundamental questions about who we want to be as a people.”

Harkening back to the revolutionary origin of the United States, Ms. Sewer wondered rhetorically what would have happened if “the United States of America was required to have the UK approve of a constitution that was being created.”

Noting that the constitutional development process “reflect[s] in many ways a freedom pathway that requires the authority but also to some extent the approval of the colonial authority,” Ms. Sewer wonders whether Virgin Islanders in general have confronted these questions of cultural and political identity. “Who gets to define who we are as a people? How do we understand conflicts around identity and rights and protections or privileges being extended to people who are ancestral Virgin Islanders or native Virgin Islanders?”

“I think our constitutional development process really sits at the heart of our tensions around coloniality and also territorial status,” she concluded.

In concluding the discussion, speakers had one overarching question for the people of Greenland - “do you really want to be subject to the plenary authority of Congress?” Given the panelists’ recitation of broken treaties, unilateral imposition of restrictive strictures, and the outlining of “second-class citizen” relationship between territorial residents and mainlanders, the question to Greenlanders seemed rhetorical.

