

# The May 24 Elections in Spain: A new era in the regime's crisis

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The local and regional elections of last May 24<sup>th</sup> arrived four years after the great social upheaval symbolized by the 15M Movement and the Indignados. The starting point of a long and deepening political crisis, the 15M was both a moment of change and a genuine foundational event within the contemporary political and social history of the Spanish State. The popular mobilizations of May and June 2011 inaugurated a cycle of social struggle that translated during 2012 and 2013 into the so-called "citizenry tides" against cutbacks, particularly those regarding public health and education. Although they had few concrete victories, the "tides" witnessed the capabilities of popular resistance and its limits vis-à-vis austerity measures.

The electoral repercussions of the dynamics created by the 15M in 2011 were not felt until the European Parliamentary elections of May 24, 2014. They were characterized by a double effect. First, a deep crisis was forced upon the semi-bipartisan system that dominates Spanish politics. The main parties, Partido Popular (Popular Party PP) and Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Workers' Socialist Party PSOE), obtained 4,070,643 votes (26.06%) and 16 seats and 3,593,300 votes (23%) and 14 seats respectively. Taken together, they added up to 7,663,943 votes (49.06%) and 30 seats; — only 60% of what they obtained in the previous European Parliamentary elections of 2009, when both parties reached a total of 12,812,161 votes (80.9%) and 47 seats.

Second, there was the entrance of Podemos, with 1,244,605 votes (7.96%) and five seats. Not content to be a new minor actor, Podemos emerged with the aim of destabilizing the entire political map. On election night Pablo Iglesias commented:

*"Few were expecting this kind of outcome for us, but allow me to make a call for mourning and to be on alert. The caste parties have obtained one of their worst results in history. But I have to say that, for now, we have not achieved the objective of overcoming them ... Podemos was not born to play a beholding role; we were born to get everything and we are going to get everything. It might be that for many this outcome has been a success, but we are not satisfied."*

Therefore, after the European elections, a twelve-month period of exciting opinion polls commenced in which Podemos experienced continued growth in the Spanish electoral polls, catching up with and surpassing the voting prospects of both PP and PSOE. January 2015 was the outstanding moment of such lineal progression, when several polls situated Podemos ahead in voting intentions. Since then, with the local and regional elections in sight, Pablo Iglesias's party started to witness a tendency toward stagnation and decline in the polls, which occurred within the context of strong attacks from the media and political establishments against Podemos's leading team and the media fabrication of a new political alternative, an "ideal brother-in-law" called Ciudadanos, imagined as a kind of "right wing Podemos" and headed by TV-star Albert Rivera. Rivera's party introduced a discourse focused on democratic regeneration and anti-corruption and a lampedusian recipe of "reasonable change" that did not alter the neoliberal agenda and aimed at reviving the idealized post-Franquist transition's mystified spirit of "consensus." Rivera was thus able to have a niche in the Spanish political agenda by appropriating Podemos's novelty effect, dangerously closing in the voting intentions.

The appearance of a new and unexpected rival created some doubts for Podemos leaders. Some of them advocated turning toward the center in order to compete with Ciudadanos for the votes of the moderate and less politicized middle classes. Others, with Iglesias at the front, chose a return to the origins to recuperate the freshness lost since the May 2014 European elections' campaign, favoring a discourse that used the struggle against austerity and the crisis as its focal points, and which linked corruption with neoliberal policies. Behind this strategy there was the recognition that Podemos's natural social electoral base was mainly comprised of the most crisis-affected popular layers, with the pauperized middle classes and the working class having predominant weight. Reinforcing a hold on those sectors was Iglesias's self-imposed challenge for the coming elections.

The 24M certified the deep transformation of the party-system that had been underway: a hit-but-not-sunk bipartisanship (PP-PSOE), a steady and rising candidate (Podemos), and a fourth in discord (Ciudadanos), which was gaining strength, though it gained less of what was expected and was far from taking first place (one million votes, 4.49%, in the municipal elections and results in the thirteen regions that go from 2.9% to 12.5%). The new political map forged after Podemos's surfacing in Spanish politics is characterized by a bipartisanship in crisis, following a sinking trend with an unimaginable rate. Seriously damaged, with an unprecedented credibility crisis, PP and PSOE still possess important social anchorages and have yet to succumb to free-fall mode. PP got six million votes in the local elections (27%), two million less than in the previous ones in 2011, and suffered an electoral punishment of huge proportions by losing in most of their strongholds, such as Madrid and Valencia. PSOE obtained its worst municipal electoral result since the first democratic elections in 1979, although its 5.6 million votes (25%), 775,000 less than four years ago, showcase that it still has not entered into an irreversible "pasokization" mode and can still aspire to become part of a government coalition.

Podemos achieved unheard-of results for a newly created party, obtaining an exceptional institutional weight for a political force that aspires to incarnate an alternative for change, with percentages that go from 7.9% to 20.5% in the thirteen regions where elections were held (Aragón 20.5%, Castilla la Mancha 9.7%, Murcia 13.1%, Asturias 19.02%, Castilla y León 10.2%, La Rioja 11.2%, Baleares 14.7%, Extremadura 7.9%, País Valencia 11.2%, Canarias 14.5%, Madrid 18.5%, Cantabria 8.8%, and Navarra 13.7%). It was not able to overcome either PP or PSOE in any of the regions, but those remarkable results allow Podemos to maintain its aspiration to become a winning party with the capacity to contest for the electoral victory against PP and PSOE in the next general elections. In real terms, Podemos by itself is not a party that could assert itself vis-à-vis the PP or PSOE. However, the possibility of that happening in the future cannot be discarded. This is the paradox of the current situation.

Podemos only ran in the regional elections and declined to do so in the local ones because, as the party acknowledged, it would not have been able to manage the explosive institutional growth that an opposite decision would have entailed: the election into office of thousands of councilors. Podemos's decision of not officially running in the local elections opened the door to the setting up of the so-called candidacies of "popular unity," which were constituted by local Podemos affiliates, independent activists, and other minor left-wing forces. This way, municipal candidacies became experimental channels for new unity and junction frames, strongly rooted in local realities. These tickets obtained the best results for the left, reaching historical milestones like the victory in Barcelona (with 25% of votes) by Barcelona en Comú, led by activist Ada Colau, speaker of Plataforma de Afectados por las Hipotecas (Platform of People Affected by Mortgages-PAH), the most popular social movement in recent years; or in second place, with 31.85%, Ahora Madrid (which will obtain the Mairie with support from the PSOE), headed by Judge Manuela Carmena. Besides Barcelona and Madrid, a considerable number of medium-sized cities have also seen victories by these popular candidacies.

The municipal successes open the door to a previously unknown situation: access to the heights of institutional power by breakthrough forces. Therefore, a new era emerges in which they will have to face how to govern relevant localities like Madrid or Barcelona and implement, under adverse conditions, a program favorable to the social majority and opposed to the financial and business sectors, whose nervousness is already palpable. Undoubtedly, the credibility of Podemos and the other popular forces will depend on the scorecard of these new governments. The results will be instrumental in reducing or augmenting the expectation for social change.

Without having acquired the historical importance of the municipal elections of April 12, 1931, which propitiated the proclamation of the Second Republic two days after, the local and regional elections of May 24<sup>th</sup> have been a relevant moment in this long political crisis that began with 15M and was propelled by the emergence of Podemos one year ago. With 24M we have one landscape, fluid and unstable, where it is difficult to discern the underlying trends and the conjunctural rallies. Just a few months away from the general elections that are going to be held in November, the traditional parties have not been able to stabilize the situation, nor have the new breakthrough forces been able to assert themselves. Cracked by an unprecedented crisis, the post-Franquist political regime faces the general elections with equally encompassing uncertainty in both those who fight to keep it afloat and those who advocate for a “democratic revolution,” to use Ada Colau’s expression. A new period in the history of the Spanish State is opening.

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\* Public Seminar. July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015:

<http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/07/the-24m-elections-in-spain/#.VZ425yS174f>