

Elections in the Spanish State: Unidad Podemos surges forward

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Dave Kellaway looks at the prospects for Unidad Podemos in the elections in the Spanish state on Sunday June 26.

Contents

- [An historic change on the left](#)
- [Why has there been this \(...\)](#)
- [A crisis of the regime](#)
- [What are the likely outcomes](#)
- [Anticapitalistas are building](#)

SI SE PUEDE, UNIDAD PODEMOS SURGES FORWARD IN SPANISH STATE ELECTIONS

While we have been facing a confused referendum debate which has boiled down to preventing a racist shift to the right, in the Spanish State there is a more hopeful, offensive political battle taking place. Unidad Podemos, a new left party, will definitely win more votes and probably more seats than the social liberal PSOE in Sunday's general elections. Unidad Podemos can become the biggest left party.

Polls show this Sunday's second round after the stalemated general elections of December 2015 will not produce a radically different outcome. The main right wing party, the PP (Peoples Party) is still likely to be the largest party and the overall difference between the left, including the social liberal social democratic party, the PSOE, and the right is not likely to be very large as the diagram above shows. No one party will be able to form a government on its own.

An historic change on the left

However the big change is that on the left side of the spectrum the balance of forces has changed. Whereas Podemos had less votes and seats than the PSOE last time, today's polls show that its new alliance with IU (United Left) will result in more votes and probably more seats. A question mark over the seats remains because the PSOE benefits from winning many seats in rural areas where you need less votes to elect a MP.

Why has there been this change around?

On the one hand the Iglesias leadership belatedly recognised that it was short-sighted if not just sectarian to keep the IU out of its electoral coalitions on a national level. Already the 'confluencias' with the radical mayoral campaigns in Madrid and Barcelona had brought a bonus in votes. Looking at the figures in December it was clear that a national coalition would have seen the million plus

votes of IU added to the radical left's seat tally rather than be wasted. For the Iglesias leadership team this meant quietly dropping the illusion that the party was neither right nor left, or that they could take on the PP on its own and defeat them electorally.

On the other hand the Sanchez PSOE leadership attempted during the interminable post-election negotiations from December to May to try and form a government that included Ciudadanos. The latter is the modern, clean cut anti-corruption centre right formation that had been established by farsighted bourgeois sectors as a fall back for an increasingly corrupted PP and to present a counter attraction among younger generations moving wholesale to Podemos. Iglesias firmly rejected any such involvement and it seems this firm stance has been productive in winning over some PSOE supporters.

During these negotiations the more moderate elements inside and outside the leadership team headed by Errejon, considered Iglesias's number two in the team, wanted a softer approach to the PSOE. Iglesias faced this opposition down and replaced Errejon's man who was in charge of party organisation by Echenique. The latter had blocked with the Anticapitalista current inside Podemos at the founding conference against the centralising structure that was adopted. Today the talk is of revitalising the local circles.

Another reason for its climb in the polls is its acceptance of the Spanish state's plurinationality and support for a referendum on self-determination in Catalonia. Again the more positive attitude to the radical nationalists represents somewhat of a shift from some of the leadership's Laclau-inspired theories of building a transversal national popular movement. Finally the electoral campaign allows its voice to be heard. The leadership's performance in TV debates and the incredibly creative videos it puts out all help to win it support.

A crisis of the regime

The political crisis is not just about the difficulty both the mainstream parties, the PP and PSOE, have in managing a very deep austerity but is also a crisis of the institutions designed to manage the transition from the Francoist dictatorship after 1978

The transition was managed by a renovated Francoist political apparatus in alliance with the PSOE led by Felipe Gonzalez who was totally backed up by the Spanish Communist Party (distant forerunners of IU). It ensured that any post-Franco struggles did not spill over to challenge the rule of capital or the structures of the Spanish state. In particular it rejected the national demands of Euzkadi and Catalonia. The electoral system was organised so that there was a bias in favour of the PP both in terms of constituency sizes and the Senate. The latter is important because it is more difficult for the left to win a majority there, so it could be an obstacle to any big reforms made by a future Podemos-led government.

Podemos is proposing constitutional changes and a national debate about a plurinational Spain. A major barrier to getting an agreement with the PSOE for a government of the left is the Podemos demand for the right of Catalonia to hold a referendum on self-determination. Although some Catalan PSOE MPs are indicating a more flexible approach on this the big barons of that party like Susanna Diaz in Andalusia, are totally against it.

What are the likely outcomes after June 26th?

There are only two credible alternatives if the numbers in the polls are accurate (and last time the pollsters got it more or less right). The first is that Podemos is the second biggest party and overtakes the PSOE. It is then able to negotiate from a position of strength and achieve its aim of a government of the left.

The other alternative is that the PP and Ciudadanos agree a grand coalition with the external abstention of the PSOE. For the PSOE to sign up to a full blown coalition might be a step too far even for its leadership. There is support among some of the leaders and the membership for this. Rajoy might also have to step aside for this to work since he is so identified with the corruption running right through the PP. Another figure perhaps from Ciudadanos might also be put forward as premier of such a coalition.

Just this week a scandal has broken out about how an interior minister was scheming to disrupt and smear nationalist parties in Catalonia. Unfortunately for him there are recordings. As Errejon half-joked the other day in a meeting - his advice is that they start burning the documents.

Of course splits and realignments could take place in the mainstream parties. Inside Podemos there are still differences within the leadership between the Errejon people, whose positions were backed by the charismatic mayor of Madrid, Manuela Carmena, and the Iglesias/Echenique grouping. If Podemos stayed behind the PSOE in votes and seats, pressure for moderating its policies might grow.

Iglesias himself veers from position to position. This week he has been attempting to appeal to the PSOE base by saying how good its former leader Zapatero was - before he brought in the austerity measures. He also made sure there was a retired Spanish general in a good position on an electoral slate to reassure people that Podemos was not adventurist or anti-NATO.

Nevertheless he was firm in the previous negotiations and stood up well to the PSOE then and the government programme he is proposing is unacceptable to the Spanish bosses and the EU leaders. Sanchez is attacking him for being too radical, for his alliance with the communists, for supporting the Chavist regime in Venezuela and wanting to spend too much government money. The PP and Ciudadanos are joining in the red-baiting.

Anticapitalistas are building Podemos

Another highly positive aspect of Podemos is the existence of a radical, anti-capitalist current within it that loyally builds it while debating its differences with some of the positions taken by the leadership team. As a founder current of the whole project it has been difficult for the more moderate leaders to prevent its participation. It has nationally recognised leaders like Teresa Rodriguez in Andalusia, Miguel Urban a Euro MP and Kiki Gonzalez the mayor of Cadiz (he even cut the city's debt by 10%, who said the radical left can't do budgets?).

Indeed the recent spat between Errejon and Iglesias gave it more space and retrospectively gave credibility to its positions on internal democracy and the fundamental role of the local branches. Unlike the sectarians who judge Iglesias by his ruminations on Laclau and his national popular coalitions or his support for Tsipras over the Greek capitulation the Anticapitalistas judge him by his actions. The united front approach towards the PSOE and the notion of a government of the Left, the opening to the confluencias in the big towns and the attempt to relate to the radical nationalists

were all correct and are supported by the left current.

In the future this could well change and there could be differences over how to deal with the debt or constitutional changes. However the best place for this debate is inside Unidad Podemos which has managed to draw together all the main forces of the fighting left. Whatever happens with the negotiations for a left government the central task will be to link the institutional struggle with the building of mass self-organisation. As Teresa Rodriguez puts it 'one foot in parliament a thousand feet in the streets'.

The example of Podemos should be an inspiration for us all about the need for unity of the left and for a different type of politics that fundamentally challenges the social democratic management of austerity.

Finally we can share the words of Raul Camargo, a Madrid regional MP and Anticapitalista supporter quoted in the national newspaper Publico es on the 14th June.

"We need to understand that these elections are going to reflect this new polarisation but they will not provide a solution. Political struggle does not finish on the 26th July but rather intensifies between two projects for our society that are incompatible - justice, solidarity and democracy cannot live with corruption, exploitation and oppression."

Dave Kellaway

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<http://socialistresistance.org/8523/si-se-puede-podemos-can-become-the-biggest-left-party-in-spanish-state-elections>