

Portugal returns an anti-austerity government

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Portugal went to the polls on Sunday October 6 and gave the biggest share of the vote - but not an outright majority - to the Socialist Party. Instead Socialist Party government will be dependent on other parties - quite possibly the two on whom it has been dependent since 2015: the Bloco Esquerda (Left Bloc) and the Portuguese Communist Party.

At the 2015 elections the Socialist Party didn't get the largest share of the vote - that was the centre-right Social Democratic Party.- but when they were unable to put a government together, PS leader António Costa was able to put together this unique arrangement known in Portugal.

This was an important defeat for the right wing parties which together got just over 30% of the votes, though the election of the first ever deputy for the far right Chega is worrying. But overall working people obviously preferred the limited but significant anti-austerity policies of the last four years over a return to the vicious neo-liberal measures following the 2008 crash.

Abstention however remained very high at 45.5% and much remains to be done in a country where low wages, poor job security and a squeeze on public spending are still affecting the majority of working people. Nevertheless it is a good example of a government not delivering hard line neo-liberal austerity, defending some key elements of working people's living standards and remaining popular. It shows the potential for a Corbyn government with even more radical policies.

Three other parties got one seat each for the first time: Liberal (pro-business) Chega (Enough. far right populist) Livre (Free - left pro-Europe, DIEM affiliate, led by Rui Tavares ex Bloco leader).

PS = Socialist Party which led previous government with external support from BE (Bloco Esquerda/Left Bloc) and CDU (PCP Communist Party and their ecologist front). PSD- Social Democratic Party but right of centre, CDS - right of centre Christian Democratic, PAN - People Animals and Nature - ecologist.

A key difference between Portugal and Britain is that in the former a fairer voting system with almost complete proportionality allows radical alternative parties to the left of mainstream social democracy to emerge. This system was a gain of the 1975 Portuguese revolution that overthrew the Salazar military dictatorship through the mutiny of officers and soldiers combined with mass mobilisations both in the cities and countryside as well as a massive upsurge in the former colonies. One of the reasons Corbynism emerged as a radical left movement inside the Labour party is that it is so difficult for new parties of any significance to emerge in Britain.

Just having a fairer system does not guarantee the growth of a left movement - Italy and the Spanish state have a fairer voting systems than Britain but their left upsurges gained electoral traction only for a while. In Italy they have disappeared (Italy) whereas they seem to be floundering in the Spanish State.

What you also need is a clear political strategy and competent leadership that can relate to the needs of working people in a given situation. In Portugal in 1999 three disparate forces, the PSR Trotskyists, the UDP Maoists and the split from the PCP came together to form the Bloco. They did not focus on full programmatic unanimity but rather on drawing up a series of tasks that were politically urgent and tried to find ways of communicating in a practical way to win support for their policies. Take a look at their [website](#) and view the campaign videos – the Bloco doesn't do wooden propaganda.

After twenty years of steady work this election confirms them as the third placed national political force. As they have increased, the traditional left of reformist party, the PCP, has stagnated and declined. The PCP are consistently around 3 or 4 percentage points behind the Bloco and have an ageing electorate. Bloco maintaining the number of seats and getting just below the percentage of votes they scored last time is particularly impressive given the emergence of the green vote and Livre, the Diem (Yaroufakis pro-European current) franchise, both of whom attract a similar demographic to Bloco voters.

Catarina Martins challenged Antonio Costa, the PS leader and current prime minister, during a TV debate in the run up to the 2015 election to reverse certain austerity measures and indicated that the Bloco could support a future government on the basis of such concrete measures. A small party can take initiatives that pay off. The PCP then also signed agreements with the SP around a number of issues: raising the minimum wage, reversing the pensions changes and protecting education and health. The PCP however refused any joint discussion – they were parallel processes. Both the BE and PCP stayed away from the ministerial limousines and allowed the government to survive but with external support. This means these left parties were free to campaign over areas where they disagreed (e.g. changing labour laws) with the government while supporting in a responsible way those defensive gains that they had signed up to. At the same time the BE (unlike the socially conservative PCP) campaigned strongly on the issues of abortion, LGBT rights as well as leading on the climate emergency.

If you read the press or watch TV in Portugal the way in which a socialist, anti-capitalist party like the Bloco is at the centre of political debate is quite impressive. For example the news media headlined on the Bloco's call for another Geringonca – even negotiated on a yearly basis if necessary. Again access to the mass media, once you become the third party, is much easier. There is always pressure to get bogged down in managing the institutional work since they have so many elected representatives but the Bloco tries to support every strike and social movement. It is still weaker than the PCP in the unions – although the level of activity has declined as we have seen elsewhere. It is stronger in the big cities rather than the countryside or smaller towns.

During the election campaign the Socialist Party began to talk about the need for an absolute majority i.e. without the need for the BE or PCP but that did not go down too well in a country which has lived through the absolute majorities of a military dictatorship. So this was modified into a position of appealing to the electorate to make sure its 'hands are not tied'. Once you are in a sort of alliance with the radical left that can have an impact on your membership and we have seen over the last period a clear tendency within the PS to escape dependency on the radical left as well as currents who are much more attracted by working closely with it. Some press commentators have even suggested that the PS hierarchy are worried that the Bloco will start to have the same effect on their party as it has had on the PCP.

Early indications after the results are that there will be negotiations for a renewal of the external support formula. Alberto Costa has stated clearly that there will be a new Geringonca. If the PS decided on some other alliance, such as previous ones with centre right, it would be very vulnerable on its left today.

The PS increased their percentage share and number of seats but are still way short of an absolute majority. During the election campaign the Bloco was very clear about the demands it would put on the incoming PS government: a further big increase in the minimum wage, a change in the labour laws to give workers more rights and security, free nursery places, take back the postal services into public ownership, properly funded health, affordable housing, accessible higher education and real action on the climate emergency.

This time around it will not necessarily be the same. The PS is already saying its increase in seats gives it more power – will they concede less to their external partners? Also as Bloco founder, Francesco Louçã suggests, in [an interesting interview from Jacobin](#), reprinted by *International Viewpoint*, there were some favourable economic factors that facilitated the previous government's successes – the oil price, tourism boom and low interest rates. State resources are still squeezed and there may be less leeway for progressive measures.

The Bloco understands that their tactic cannot be based solely on institutional negotiations but has to be combined with a higher level of social mobilisation, in the workplace and the community. Despite the left success in the elections remember that 45.5% did not vote so there is a degree of confusion and apathy too. Fortunately the relative strength and vitality of the left in Portugal has meant far right populism is much weaker than in other European countries although it is disturbing that Chega (Enough), a far right outfit managed to win one seat in these elections.

Across the border in the Spanish state there is an illuminating contrast since the radical left Unidad Podemos led by Iglesias had been negotiating in a quite different way with the Spanish Socialists. There Iglesias focussed on trying to get ministers for his group rather than prioritising the concrete progressive measures that Podemos might support. In the end his pleadings left him emptyhanded and many of his members disoriented. The Anti-Capitalista current in Podemos has argued for a 'Portuguese' approach.

Can we learn anything from the Portuguese experience despite the very different institutional constraints here? Certainly the way in which different left currents came together around a credible political project is something that has not happened successfully in Britain. Similarly the way in which the left in Portugal talks the language of ordinary people and eschews ultra-left propagandism is something to study. Choosing to develop a political line based on what people's concerns actually are rather than some abstraction sucked out of a historic programmatic text is another topic we should explore.

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