

Spain: what chance for a progressive government?

After the November 10 Elections: a regime of permanent crisis?

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Will outgoing centre-left Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez make concessions to the radicals of Podemos, Más País and the Catalan and Basque nationalists? The radical left lost seats in the November 10 parliamentary election, but it may still has the potential to force concessions from the centre-left PSOE. But is it better to join the government or support it from outside? Jaime Pastor of *Viento Sur* explores the options.

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In a context of a surging far right alongside the consolidation of political forces determined to defend the pluri-national Spanish state, the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), having shown itself incapable of benefiting from either the collapse of the populist right-wing Ciudadanos party (Citizens-CS) or the retreat by Unidas Podemos (United We Can-UP), has suffered a clear failure in its hopes of winning a “cautious majority.” When all is said and done, Pedro Sánchez, the leader of PSOE, may end up confirmed as prime minister by way of one or another possible pathways. However, neither governability nor political stability are guaranteed faced with growing economic shadows in the middle of a climate emergency, not to mention a deficit of legitimacy for the regime in Catalonia.

With a participation rate of 69.87 percent, six points lower than during the last elections in April and probably reflecting a higher rate of abstention among the youth, the most relevant facts among the results was the enormous growth of Vox, the new far-right party that won more than 3.5 million votes, or 14.09 percent growing from 24 to 52 seats in parliament. Next in importance is the decline of Ciudadanos, which fell from 15.86 percent to just 6.79 percent, dropping from 57 to 10 seats, loses which forced the resignation of party leader Albert Rivera. Meanwhile, the center-right Popular Party (PP) rebounded less than expected from 16.69 percent in April to 20.82 percent this weekend, increasing its parliamentary representatives from 66 to 88, plus two more from its Navarra Suma joint list with Ciudadanos and the Navarre People’s Union regional party. All this confirms a tendency of greater radicalization to the right by the conservative end of the electorate stimulated by the adoption of Vox’s talking points throughout the campaign by both the PP and Ciudadanos. This went so far that these parties joined Vox to support a proposal to outlaw pro-independence parties in the Madrid City Assembly.

Faced with this reactionary pole, pro-sovereignty political forces in Catalonia (the Republican Left of Catalonia-ERC won 8 seats, Together for Catalonia-Junts per Cat won 8, and the Popular Unity Candidacy-CUP won 2 after deciding to stand in a federal election for the first time), the Basque Country (the Basque National Party-PNV won 7 seats and Basque Country Unite-EH Bildu won 5)

and Galicia (Galician Nationalist Bloc-BNG won 1 seat), along with others without sovereign state ambitions (the Canary New Left Coalition won 2 seats, the Cantabria Regional Party won 1, and the newly-formed Tereul Existe won 1 as well), confirmed the growing national-territorial fracturing that is extending itself across the entire state.

As for the PSOE, its results fell compared to April from 28.67 percent to 28.00 percent, losing more than 700,000 votes; however, owing to advantages from the electoral system, it only lost 3 seats, ending up with 120. For its part, Unidas Podemos lost nearly 600,000 votes and 7 seats, declining to 35 parliamentary representatives.

Más País (More Country), led by former Podemos leader Iñigo Errejón and allied with Coalició Compromís in the Valencian Community gained around a half million votes, or 2.08 percent, winning just 3 seats compared to the 15 seats projected initially by some polling. This represents a complete collapse for Errejón's aspiration to offer himself as a fulcrum in talks for the formation of a PSOE government by being willing to offer greater programmatic concessions than those Unidas Podemos could.

The campaign

Time will reveal what factors influenced the rise of Vox, but it seems probable that its entry into parliament during the April elections initiated within it a process of normalization achieved through its acceptance as an ally on the part of the PP and Ciudadanos. Both parties have taken on some of its main rhetorical points, especially with regards to Catalonia and they have adopted a policy of expressive silence - when not outright complicit - when it comes to Vox's calamities and lies targeting feminism and immigration. It tested this normalization during the televised debates, allowing it to snatch an important portion of both the PP and Ciudadanos electorate. It does this by presenting itself as the best guarantor of conservative coherence by posing as an outsider, even though its principal leaders emerged from the PP itself. Additionally, this time Vox initiated appeals to the popular classes against the Brussels bureaucracy and "the rich" even if their rhetoric contrasts with their ultra-neoliberal economic policies.

Thus, we find a case of dangerously virtuous transversality that allows them to add their support in authoritarian enclaves (such as those studied by sociologist Manuel Antonio Garretón) inherited from the dictatorship (institutional, ethical-symbolic, and cultural) with new ones derived from exploiting resentment among Spanish-born popular sectors against the weakest and most vulnerable sectors.

As for the PSOE, Sánchez's discourse throughout the campaign has been characterized by a rightward and increasingly authoritarian turn, offering guarantees of continuity in economic policies for the IBEX35 stock exchange (with economist Nadia Calviño tapped to serve as vice minister) and adopting new so-called exceptional measures, such as the digital state decree (already known as the digital gag law) and other tough measures against Catalan independence. This turn likely contributed to the PSOE's losses and, above all, their ill-fated effort to tear left-wing voters away from UP.

Regarding Unidas Podemos, it must be said that the party managed to fend off a major setback predicted in the polls thanks in part to a speech by Pablo Iglesias in which he played the victim, blaming the economic powers that be for vetoing his participation in a government with the PSOE. He also insisted on the defending the Constitution's social commitments and was willing to appear as a mediating force with respect to the Catalan question. Even so, his reduced capacity to push for programmatic concessions from the PSEO does not seem to pose an obstacle for Iglesias to reaffirm

participation in a progressive government with Sánchez. All this despite its right-wing drift, a drift denounced by Iglesias himself during the last phase of the campaign. This is a hypothesis that cannot be ruled out, one that would represent a genuine suicide by Unidas Podemos, and one that would leave Vox all alone - outside of Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Galicia - as the only party able to exercise parliamentary (and extra parliamentary) opposition.

What next?

The new correlation of forces in a more fragmented parliament - including the Senate (key to certain measures, either for the application of article 155 or for any reform of organic laws or constitutional reforms) in which the PSOE has lost the absolute majority - offers a scenario in which the difficulties that Pedro Sánchez faces in order to secure appointment as prime minister (and to then govern) will be greater than those in April.

On the one hand, an agreement with Unidas Podemos and Más País do not constitute a majority if it does not include PNV and ERC - whose support would be premised on them raising demands against a PSOE that has forgotten its federalist proposals and its increasingly criminalizing discourse regarding Catalan independence. On the other hand, the much sought after abstention vote by the PP that would allow Sanchez to form government might seem easy, however, that would leave a flank on the PP's right, allowing Vox to accuse the PP of a cowardice.

Be that as it may, pressure from economic powers is growing in view of a potential economic recession in the European Union, as well as awareness that there is no longer the option of convening a new general election in the face of the enormous wear and tear that would entail for the political class. In general, there is reason to think that the Sánchez will run through all the different options until one that allows him to be confirmed as prime minister arises.

In any case, that investiture can no longer occur as easily as his access to the presidency of the government was achieved in the first place via a censure motion of the previous PP government. Sanchez will be forced to pay a heavy price either to Unidas Podemos, the PP, or PNV and ERC - the latter's price would also be conditioned by the next Catalan elections. Therefore, we should expect to be faced with new tactical versions of a Pedro Sánchez - still advised by his shadow guru Iván Redondo? - who, as a good Marxist of the Groucho variety, has demonstrated that neither principles nor convictions will impede his return to the presidential Moncloa Palace.

Given this scenario, and in the face of the contradictions that would be generated within Unidas Podemos in any hypothetical participation in a coalition government with the PSOE, perhaps it would be better for Unidas Podemos to seek a programmatic agreement with the left-wing, pro-sovereign and independence political forces in order to try to force the PSOE into a radical change of course, both socially and nationally, as a precondition for deciding their joint position before the prime ministerial investiture vote. That is a battle that, although it probably would not to be won, would at least serve to demand a return to the militancy the PSOE displayed on election night as a means to counteract the pressures from above that will intensify in favor of an agreement that guarantees continuing the path towards a neoliberal and authoritarian restoration of the regime.

Whatever hypothesis finally comes to pass, the fractures and polarization reflected in the election results presage future challenges in terms of governance and stability. It is now up to the social and political left that is not willing to resign or adapt to new variants of transformism (that is, of adapting to the institutional parties) to learn from what has happened, to find out how to deepen the cracks, and to undertake a new phase of struggle for our civil, political, and social rights throughout the state. And we must do so in conjunction with the revolts that are spreading across the planet in

the face of an increasingly predatory and authoritarian capitalism. The next mobilizations in defense of humanity will take place during the Climate Summit (the so-called COP25) to be held in early December in Madrid. These must be a first steps in that direction.

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P.S.

• No Borders News, NOVEMBER 12, 2019:

<https://nobordersnews.org/2019/11/12/jaime-pastor-spains-permanent-crisis-regime/>

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