

Spain: Popular Party loses control of its heartland

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Recent regional elections in the north-western province of Galicia have dealt another blow to the right-wing Popular Party (PP). In its fourth consecutive election defeat since being removed from power nationally last March, the PP has lost control of Galicia for the first time since the region was granted autonomous status in 1981.

The PP lost four seats in the 75-seat parliament, leaving them with 37, one short of an overall majority. The new regional government will be formed by a coalition of the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG). The BNG also lost four seats, taking 13. The only party to gain was the PSOE's regional sister organisation, the Galician Socialist Party (PSdeG), which gained eight seats. Its share of the vote was up 11 percent, giving it 25 seats. The election was decided ultimately by the large postal vote of emigrants from the province.

The result underlines the degree of hostility to the PP's support for the Iraq war and its attacks on social and democratic rights that led to the downfall of José Maria government in March last year. Galicia has long been seen as the historic base of the PP. The region was home to fascist General Francisco Franco. At the end of his dictatorship, the PP was formed from the members of his Falange party. The PP's current president, Mariano Rajoy, is himself from the province.

If any one politician embodies the impact of the result on the PP, it is the former regional premier Manuel Fraga. The 82-year-old Fraga had been Galician President since 1989. He sought a fifth term in office, with the intention of, as he put it, dying "with his boots on". Fraga, a controversial figure even among his own supporters, constituted a direct link between the PP and its Francoist forebears. A founding member of the PP, he was the last serving politician who had held ministerial positions under Franco.

He had served the dictatorship variously as minister of education (he had previously held a chair at Madrid's university) and as ambassador to London. When he was minister for information and tourism, Fraga had responsibility for the censorship system. Commentators have

noted that he showed "special zeal" in persecuting artistic and cultural productions related to the university world.

He had a reputation for having a thorough knowledge of the state's legal system. As such, he became an important figure when the dictatorship was looking to transform itself. When Franco died in 1975, Fraga was seen as "the great white hope of the Spanish right", in the words of Charles Powell, an historian at the University of San Pablo-CEU in Madrid.

In the first post-Franco government, Fraga took the post of interior minister. He was responsible for suppressing the strikes and protests that followed Franco's death. At the height of this wave of popular opposition in 1975, he boasted: "The streets are mine." During the "Transition to Democracy", when Spanish capitalism was looking for other ways to prevent this popular unrest getting out of its control, such arrogant championing of repressive measures was not seen as helpful, and Fraga was sidelined.

He had, though, succeeded in forming the PP as a parliamentary vehicle for former Falangists. As its leader, he was often observed to be bored or even asleep in parliamentary sessions. He was already seen as something of an electoral liability in the early 1980s, when the PSOE first came to power. He stepped down as the party's leader at this time, and concentrated his work in Galicia, where his autocratic style continued unabated.

His reactionary and backward comments continued to make headlines. He described gays as "unnatural". Shortly before the election he described undecided voters as being like unfaithful wives, unlikely to tell the truth when asked about former lovers. He continued to treat Galicia almost as a personal fiefdom. Galician novelist Manuel Rivas went so far as to accuse the PP of operating the policy: "If you aren't in the PP, look for somewhere else."

Luis Ventoso, of the regional daily paper *Voz de Galicia*, claimed that it was not the content of his speeches that led voters to reject Fraga, but his age. Ventoso's warning was aimed at Rajoy, who campaigned extensively in the province during the election. Ventoso said that leaving Fraga in place

before the elections made Rajoy look weak, and gave “the impression that Mr Rajoy cannot handle tough issues; that he prefers to let problems fester until they rot”. Fraga has said he will continue to head the party in opposition, although Rajoy has called for time to analyse the situation.

In part the election result reflects the support Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has been able to sustain through popular measures like the removal of Spanish troops from Iraq. It also reflects changes within the province. Galicia, Spain’s third-poorest region, was traditionally primarily rural, which provided the PP’s base of support. The PP’s vote held up in these rural areas. They polled up to 70 percent in some places.

As a result of poor infrastructure and systemic industrial backwardness, unemployment increased steadily through the post-Franco period. Wages remained low, and the labour market was extremely restricted. As late as 1997, when some 61 percent of the population were employed in the service sector, the regional government noted that labour costs in Galicia were 21 percent lower than the Spanish average. Consequently the region has seen a huge emigration of its workforce.

Over the last few years, the province has undergone a belated and rapid process of industrialisation and urbanisation. Modern communications and transport networks have been developed, largely through EU aid funds. One commentator suggested that the effect of this was simply to ensure that emigrants now left Galicia “on better roads”. But it has enabled the introduction of international industrial complexes. The car industry, for example, accounts for some 20 percent of Galicia’s GDP. Government statistics show the industrial sector continuing to grow. There has also been a massive industrialisation of some of the traditional employments in the region, particularly the fishing industry with its canneries.

The cities returned a larger vote for the PSdeG and the BNG, while the PP also lost local support over their handling of the *Prestige* oil spill in 2002. Turnout was very high—68 percent. Socialist Party commentators noted that a high turnout of new voters would (because of the recent industrialisation process) tend to favour them.

In election campaigning, Zapatero stressed that the PSOE would look towards measures to improve youth employment. Both the PSdeG and the BNG had criticised the region’s persistently high unemployment rate. Emigration was not raised as a campaign question, perhaps because it was too risky a subject when emigration continues to dog the region. The PSdeG had pledged to form a coalition to remove Fraga and the party’s leader, Emilio Pérez Touriño, promised not to undertake any radical policy to achieve this end: “We have no intention of turning things

on their head,” he said after the election.

Fraga campaigned on the basis that he alone could continue to win the aid and investment required to modernise the region. If the PP lost, he threatened, Galicia would go back to “oxcarts on the roads, garlic soup and goat’s milk”.

For all the PP’s opposition to extending regional autonomies, Fraga himself was a keen exploiter of local negotiating rights on behalf of the local ruling class. He had wanted, for example, to negotiate a separate fishing deal with the European Union for the region.

The PP was hoping to pick up emigrant votes, which have historically gone their way. But their share of this vote fell sharply, with a shift towards the Socialist Party. Some 305,000 expatriates (around 12 percent of the electorate) were eligible to vote. Of these, some 72,000 had registered.

Scrutiny of these votes lasted more than a week after the ballot. PP sources dropped unsubstantiated rumours that Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez was deliberately withholding sacks of postal ballots on behalf of the Socialist Party. During the recount of postal votes, the PP requested that the count included votes without a postmark, and votes posted outside the electoral period. Both requests were rejected, but the PP hinted they might yet contest the results.

As at recent regional elections in the Basque country, the PSOE’s regional organisation did well against both the PP and the regionalists. As with the Basque election, however, the vote for the PSOE and its regional sister party has actually been used to strengthen regionalism. Zapatero had been discussing widening the debate on the regional autonomies after this election. The coalition government is likely to give credence to the PSOE’s regionalist policies, even though the election result saw a decline in the vote for regionalist parties. The coalition is aiming to create a new government before the end of July, so that Touriño can be present at the next conference of regional premiers organised by Zapatero.



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