

Separatist parties gain in Spanish regional elections

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The collapse in support for the governing Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) benefited separatist parties in regional elections in the Basque Country and Galicia last week, deepening the social and political tensions that are tearing Spain apart.

In the Basque Country, the PSOE affiliate, the Socialist Party of the Basque Country–Basque Country Left (PSE-EE), suffered a catastrophic defeat, losing office after ruling the region with the support of the right-wing Popular Party (PP) for the last three years. The PSE-EE's share of the vote slumped from 30.7 percent in 2009 to 19.1 percent, and its seats in the Basque parliament fell from 25 to just 16.

A new administration will be headed by the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), which remained the largest party, with 35 percent of the vote and 27 seats. Because it failed to get a parliamentary majority, it may form a coalition with the new separatist Basque Country Assembly (Euskal Herria Bildu, EHB), which stood for the first time and came second with 25 percent of the vote and 21 of the 75 seats.

The EHB's web site reported its win with the words, "276,898 votes in favour of sovereignty and change. We are the most powerful union of independentist and left wing forces that there has ever been in the Basque Parliament." EHB leader Laura Mintegi told supporters, "It is time to start thinking as a people, as a nation. It is time to stop the orders from Madrid [the seat of the national government]".

The EHB, a coalition of five organisations, was officially launched on June 10. It was only allowed to stand in the elections after a last-minute reversal of a ban by the Constitutional Court related to the inclusion on its slate of members linked to Batasuna, the former political wing of the terrorist group ETA.

The organisation announced the "definitive cessation of

its armed activity" a year ago following a catastrophic loss of support after the 9/11 bombings in New York and the arrest of most of its leading members. Other organisations now in EHB also made the ceasefire a condition of their collaborating with Batasuna, after the PNV government gave up on plans for an independence referendum in 2007—the "Ibarretxe Plan"—when it was rejected by the Spanish parliament.

The EHB campaigned in the election on a platform of mild reformist demands including renegotiation of Spain's debt, an audit of empty houses and an end to forced evictions, a 35-hour working week, lowering the pension age back to 65 and more investment funded by increased taxes, fighting tax evasion and ending "white elephant" infrastructure projects. There were a number of environmental proposals and a call for "linguistic normalisation"—making the Basque language, spoken by a minority, "the customary and preferred language of the Basque citizenry in all daily settings."

However, the EHB's manifesto contained no specific proposals or time frame for independence in order to haggle with the PNV after the election. The vague prescription of Mintegi—"We are talking about increasing quotas of autonomy as a process leading towards independence. We are not talking about launching a demand for independence right away"—chimed in with statements made by PNV leader Iñigo Urkullu about "becoming less dependent every day until we achieve independence."

Urkullu has indicated that he might copy Catalan regional president Artur Mas, leader of the nationalist Convergence and Union (CiU) coalition, and call a referendum on independence, perhaps, in 2015.

The PNV could also form a coalition with the PSE-EE, but the collapse in its vote shows it is thoroughly discredited. Voters saw through claims by Basque president Patxi Lopez that the PSE-PP had been

responsible for the ETA ceasefire when he declared, “We have done what we promised. We have ended terrorism. We have brought normality back to the Basque Country.”

But above all, it was the PSE-EE’s pact with the PP and Lopez’s declaration, “We will strictly enforce the deficit target of 1.5 percent,” imposed by the PP national government, that made a mockery of the PSE-EE election promises to oppose cuts and defend the welfare state.

In theory, the PNV could also ask the PP, which lost 3 of its 13 seats, to form a coalition government in the Basque Country, but the PP is a bitter opponent of anything that hints at the break-up of Spain. PP Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy has vowed to block any independence referendums called by regional governments.

Of all the regions in Spain, the Basque Country is the most devolved and the most developed, with GDP per capita of more than €31,000 per year—higher than the average in Spain and Europe. Its unemployment rate is at 14.5 percent, less than the 25 percent nationally.

That the Basque ruling elite are now contemplating the creation of a new capitalist mini-state is in order to sever remaining links to the poorer regions of Spain and obtain a greater share in the exploitation of the working class by transnational corporations, to be secured by cutting taxes on business and slashing social spending. The former terrorists and lefts are signalling their willingness to jump on board and secure their own privileges in the new set-up.

However, polls continually show that the majority of Basques show “little or no” interest in independence. It is clear that because of the betrayals by the PSOE and the trade unions, and in the absence of a revolutionary party, layers of workers and youth have been attracted to the EHB by its promises to tackle the social disaster caused by the 2008 global financial crash.

Spain’s recession is forecast to deepen, with the economy shrinking five quarters in a row and the likelihood that this year’s budget deficit may exceed the target of 6.3 percent set by the European Union despite non-stop austerity measures. A €100 billion bailout earlier this year may be followed by another, far larger one. On October 19, Rajoy declared, “When I make the decision... I will say so.”

This can only mean more cuts. Rates of unemployment, homelessness and poverty will continue to spiral upward. Health, education, social services and cultural provision, for which the 17 regional governments are mainly responsible, will be decimated.

In Galicia, the result for the PSOE’s sister party, the Socialist Party of Galicia (Partido dos Socialistas de Galicia, PsdeG), was just as disastrous. It polled 20.5 percent—down from 30 percent in 2009—and lost 7 of its 25 seats in the Galician parliament. The main beneficiary was the new separatist Galician Left Alternative (Alternativa Galega de Esquerda, AGE), which ended up the third largest party with 9 out of 75 seats (14 percent of the vote). The AGE is a coalition of ANOVA-Nationalist Brotherhood, the Communist Party-led United Left, the green party, Equo, and Galician Ecosocialist Space. It was created out of a split earlier this year in the Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG), which also fared badly. Back in 2005, the PsdeG and BNG formed a coalition government, but now the PP is able to rule with an overall majority, having won 41 of the 75 seats.

Polls for the regional election to be held on November 25 in Catalonia also suggest support for the PSOE’s affiliate, the Socialist Party of Catalonia (Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya, PSC), will nose-dive. Its percentage of the vote stands at 13.4 percent (down from 18.3 percent in 2010 and 26.8 percent in 2006) and its number of seats estimated at 18 (down from 28 in 2010 and 37 in 2006).

The fact that the PP maintained its electoral position is being utilised by Prime Minister Rajoy as proof of agreement with his policies of austerity to reduce the country’s deficit.

The regional election results have thrown the PSOE deeper into crisis and brought forward calls for the resignation of General Secretary Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, only eight months into the job following the retirement of José Luis Zapatero.

Under these conditions, the manipulation of nationalist tensions increases and more and more petty bourgeois nationalist parties emerge in order to block the development of a unified movement of the working class.



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