

Early Andalucía elections mark growing political volatility in Spain

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The holding of early elections on March 22, a year earlier than planned, in the southern region of Andalucía is another indication of the highly volatile political situation in Spain. The country has seen the collapse of the two-party system of the social democratic Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) and conservative Popular Party (PP) that has dominated Spanish politics since the transition from fascism to bourgeois democracy after the death of dictator General Francisco Franco in 1975.

The combined vote of the PSOE and PP has fallen to less than 40 percent compared to 80 percent in 2009. According to the latest Metroscopia poll, support for the PP has plummeted from 44.6 percent in 2011 to 18.6 percent. For the PSOE it is 19.1 percent, down from 28.5 percent in 2011. Polling for the pseudo-left party Podemos (We Can), created early last year, stands around 25 percent while support for the right-wing Ciudadanos (Citizens) party has risen dramatically, from four percent in January to 18.4 percent.

Created in 2006 in the north-eastern region of Catalonia on an explicit anti-nationalist programme, Ciudadanos has now spread to other regions. Its main base of support is among the urban middle class—disenchanted voters from the PP (40 percent); the UPyD, a right-wing, centrist and anti-nationalist split from the PSOE (15 percent); and people who never vote, 21 percent.

The Andalucía elections are the first of several this year—municipal elections in May, regional elections in 13 other Spanish regions in May and in Catalonia in September, and a general election in October or November.

Andalucía, Spain's most populous region, has been ruled by the PSOE since 1982, but in the 2012 regional elections the PP won more seats as a result of the

PSOE's austerity measures and corruption scandals. Andalucía has Europe's highest regional unemployment rate, standing at 34.2 percent, 10 points higher than Spain's national average. In April, three former PSOE prime ministers of Andalucía will appear in Spain's Supreme Court as suspects in a billion euro fraud trial that siphoned money from public funds meant to provide severance pay to laid-off workers.

Of the 109 seats in the regional Congress, in 2012 the PP won 50, the PSOE 47 and the United Left (Izquierda Unida—IU) 12. To prevent the PP taking power, the PSOE formed a coalition with the IU comprised of middle-class parties led by the Communist Party of Spain (PCE).

The latest polls suggest all three parties will lose seats, with the PP ending up with around 35, the PSOE a possible 42, and the IU six or less. Podemos could win up to 22 seats and Ciudadanos up to 13.

In percentage terms, the PP is polling 24.6 (down from 40.7 in 2012), the PSOE 33.4 (39.6 in 2012) and the IU 6.4 (11.3 in 2012). Neither Podemos nor Ciudadanos stood for election in 2012, but are now polling 18.3 percent and 10.4 percent respectively. The situation is even more uncertain, as almost half of respondents told pollsters that they had not yet decided which party they will vote for.

The holding of early elections was announced by PSOE regional premier, Susana Díaz, in January claiming there was too much “instability” in the regional coalition. The government nearly collapsed in April 2014, following an IU publicity stunt related to evictions. The IU was planning to hold a referendum among its members later in the year on whether to leave the coalition if the PSOE continued to refuse to carry out social reforms promised in the post-election “Agreement for Andalucía.”

A major consideration for Díaz in calling early elections was a desperate attempt to shore up the PSOE, which polls higher in Andalucía than nationally, and to take advantage of the lower poll results obtained by Podemos in the region and the fact that it has no structure there as yet. Díaz told IU leader Antonio Maíllo of her decision to end the coalition and sack the IU's three ministers on January 27, just as the election of Podemos' ally, Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left), was confirmed in Greece.

Ciudadanos has been heavily promoted by the media recently, with *El País* calling for a PSOE-Ciudadanos coalition to prevent a Podemos government. Other voices, such as former PSOE Prime Minister Felipe González, have pressured the PSOE and the PP to form a Grand Coalition to neutralise Podemos.

In a television interview, PP Secretary General María Dolores de Cospedal stated that her party would “contemplate” a German-style “grand coalition” with the PSOE if it failed to secure an absolute majority at the next general election. Although PSOE leaders have not commented openly about a coalition with the PP, they have made it clear they will not consider one with Podemos.

The collapse of the IU's support exposes all those pseudo-left organizations, including the Pabloite Izquierda Anticapitalista (re-named Anticapitalistas since they entered Podemos) and the state-capitalist En Lucha (In Struggle), which hailed the IU as the real left alternative to the PSOE when the PCE launched it in 1986. They liquidated themselves into IU, only to split again once it lost credibility and proved itself a loyal defender of the ruling elite.

En Lucha and Anticapitalistas are now repeating the same mantras for the pro-capitalist Podemos, which uses vague anti-austerity rhetoric to dupe workers—including calls for a regional wealth tax, a law guaranteeing access to water, electricity and gas supplies, and the temporary suspension of evictions in the region. It is clear that, like its counterpart Syriza, which capitulated to the troika in less than a month, even these meagre proposals will be forgotten should Podemos help form the next government in Spain.

The fraudulent character of Podemos was exposed in the statement made by Luis Alegre, the party's candidate for the Madrid region. He announced a possible pact with the PSOE in Andalucía if the latter

accepts a “ruthless struggle against corruption”—a demand placed on the same party that is embroiled in mass corruption in the region and has been regularly castigated by Podemos as being part and parcel of the “caste.”

The candidate for Podemos in the region is Teresa Rodríguez, current member of the European Parliament and leading member of Anticapitalistas. In a recent interview, she was already warning: “The budget of the regions, especially in Andalucía, does not depend on Andalucía. Our revenue capacity is quite limited. In this case we propose a project that is at state level and that has to do with a series of measures related to debt. One is related to a restructuring of debt with a cut and a [debt] audit.”

In reality, Podemos has already rejected such steps. Last October, the two leading economists that wrote its economic programme stated that the objective is “negotiating with the markets flexible payments of debt”, “grace periods” and “partial ‘haircuts’.”



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