

Mass disaffection in Portuguese elections

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The October 4 Portuguese parliamentary election results indicated mass disaffection among workers and youth. A record 43 percent of the country's 5.4 million eligible voters did not cast a ballot.

The ruling Social Democratic Party (PSD)-Peoples Party (CSD-PP) coalition government, which campaigned under the slogan "Portugal Ahead", lost its parliamentary majority. Its share of the vote fell from 50.4 percent in 2011 to 36.8 percent and the number of seats from 132 to 104—well below the 116 needed in the 230-member chamber to form a majority government.

This did not stop European Union (EU) leaders from rallying round to applaud Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho for being the first Eurozone leader to carry out an austerity programme and win re-election. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker congratulated Passos Coelho on his "victory", which he said "confirms the desire of most of the Portuguese people to continue the course of reforms."

German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble said the result was "a great success" for the coalition and "an encouragement to the policy that has been followed in Portugal."

In neighbouring Spain, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy who faces a general election on December 20 added, "Your government has had to take difficult decisions, but, thanks to those decisions, Portugal is now in condition to create jobs and grow."

The Socialist Party (PS) failed to overtake the PSD-CSD-PP, as polls earlier this year suggested it would. The party clawed its way back from the all-time low 25 percent support it had after its 2011 defeat to reach 38 percent in June, but it dived to 32.4 percent on election day. The feeble increase in deputies from 74 to 85 has led to immediate calls for António Costa, who was only installed as party leader a year ago, to resign.

The disastrous result confirms that the PS was unable to capitalise on the disaffection with the government

despite years of deeply unpopular spending cuts, wage freezes and tax increases, record unemployment and massive emigration.

It was the PS which agreed to the €78 billion bank bailout in 2011 and the accompanying austerity measures and then signed up to the EU's Budgetary Pact controlling public spending.

In a belated attempt to distance itself from the PSD-CSD-PP coalition and steal the ground from under the Left Bloc (BE) and the Democratic Unitarian Coalition (CDU)—comprising the Communist Party (PCP) and Green Party (PEV)—the PS proclaimed itself to be anti-austerity. It promised increased spending on health care and education, raising public-sector pay, reversing labour reforms and reviewing planned privatisations and cuts to corporate tax. Costa was lauded as a critique of the old guard.

The main political beneficiary of disaffection with the two traditional parties was the BE, which despite predictions, doubled its share of the vote to over 10 percent (some 550,000 votes) and increased its seats from eight to 19.

It has made a recovery following its disastrous showing in the last European elections, despite the taunts of Passos Coelho who warned that the election was a choice between building on the "painful sacrifices" made over the last few years or endangering them with a Greek-style "adventure". He declared that a PS victory would "open the doors to the Portuguese version of Syriza gaining access to power"—a reference to the BE.

Coelho was seeking to make capital from Syriza's betrayal of the mandate it won to oppose austerity, but was not in the best position to do so. Nevertheless should BE be in a position to form a government, it would behave no differently than has its Greek counterpart.

The BE is now the third-largest party in the

Portuguese Assembly, overtaking the Stalinist-led CDU coalition, which only increased its votes by 3,400 and its number of deputies by one to 17.

The PCP Stalinists call for a mixture of meagre reforms based on economic nationalism, explicit acceptance of capitalism and support for the state. A constant PCP theme has been to blame “big capital and its power centres” for increasing exploitation, liquidating social rights and destroying “what remains of our country’s sovereignty.”

Through its control of the main trade union confederation, the CGTP, the PCP played the role of limiting strikes and conducting protests urging President Aníbal Cavaco Silva (a leading member of the ruling PSD) and the Constitutional Court to veto some of the government’s austerity measures.

Following the result, BE spokesperson, Catarina Martins, warned Cavaco Silva against making a “hasty decision” to ask the PSD-CSD-PP to form a minority government. She insisted that “the forces that are today more than 50 percent of voters have a democratic legitimacy to break with austerity... these three million voters must be respected.”

Martins appealed to the PS and CDU to form a left coalition government and said that it “will be tragic if the forces that fought against the right are not up to their responsibilities.”

She declared, “The Left Bloc is available to speak about a government solution if the Socialist Party accepts abandoning some points of its programme”, specifying only cuts to pensions and social benefits and a measure which facilitates layoffs. “We are sure that the CDU will also be present and will not miss the call”, Martins added.

“Portugal needs us to join forces with an emergency plan” she continued. “It needs care to the wounds of poverty, needs investment for employment, an increase to the minimum wage and to ward off threats to pensions. We need tranquility and to make sure we do our best against financial blackmail, in order that the debt is restructured so that there is public health, quality education and stability of pensions.”

Costa, while accepting that the “left” had won a clear majority, said that he would not support “a negative coalition” with the BE and CDU and that he would rather take part in negotiations with the PSD-CSD-PP. Passos Coelho said he was would be willing to

cooperate with the PS in talks about a new government.

The likely outcome is that the current government will remain in power with the tacit support of the PS or that some form of grand coalition is formed.



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