

General elections called in Spain

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26 October 2015

In a recent TV interview, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy announced that general elections in Spain would be held on December 20.

The announcement comes just as the latest figures show that Spain's already weak economic recovery has run out of steam.

The most recent polls confirm the continuing crisis in the Spanish political system. After more than 30 years of rotating governments between the Popular Party (PP) and the Socialists (PSOE), the rise of the right-wing Citizens and, to a lesser extent, of the pseudo-left Podemos almost certainly means that no single party will win an outright majority in parliament. Some sort of coalition or pact will be needed to form a government.

Recent polls put support for the PP at 25-30 percent and the PSOE at 20-25 percent, compared to the 40 percent support each party had in the years prior to the 2008 economic crash. Citizens is polling 17-22 percent, Podemos 11-15 percent and the Stalinist-dominated United Left around 5 percent. Barring any major surprises, Citizens will have a "kingmaker" role in forming a new government.

Tensions have increased in the PP as a result of the polls and the party's results in the Catalan regional elections in September. It saw its share of the vote drop from 13 percent in 2012 to 8.5 percent and its number of seats from 19 to 11, relegating the party to fifth place in the region.

Former PP Prime Minister José María Aznar (1996-2004) accused Rajoy—without naming him—of responsibility for the loss of the eight seats in Catalonia and the meteoric rise of Citizens, which saw its seats increase from 9 to 25. Aznar declared, "This is the worst scenario possible for the PP. Our rival to the left [referring to Citizens] has been strengthened, our space has been shaken, and the [Catalan] secessionists are going to continue with the [independence] process."

Days later, PP deputy Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo accused Rajoy of being weak in the face of Catalan nationalism, and of not "hearing the internal and external warnings, nor the loss of local and regional power, nor the eruption of a powerful rival in the PP electoral space."

Citizens, until last December virtually unknown outside of its home base in Catalonia, has been abruptly catapulted to national prominence by wall-to-wall favourable coverage by the Madrid-based national media. The party and its leader, Albert Rivera, had previously been a small anti-separatist group in Catalonia, but have sought to overcome criticisms of being a single-issue party. It claims its ideology is based on "progressive liberalism" and "social democracy" and that it is "committed to bring realism and common sense to politics, based on the great values of liberty, equality and solidarity."

Citizens has benefited politically from the austerity measures imposed by the PP and the PSOE and the corruption scandals that have surrounded them. Speculation is rife over the role that it will play in the formation of the next Spanish government. A party that has cultivated an image of "clean hands" and "honest politics" will be faced with the dirty reality of having to support one or the other of the two corrupt and discredited traditional factions of the country's political class—more than likely the PP, with which it shares a virtually identical economic programme.

Nicknamed "the Ibex 35 party" after the Madrid stock exchange index, Citizens wants to cut the corporate tax rate to the European average of 28 percent, cap the income tax rate, currently at 47 percent, at 40 percent, and reduce VAT.

Other policies include tax credits for workers below the minimum wage, incentives to employers to prevent redundancies, a labour reform to reduce temporary contracts, legalising prostitution and marijuana, and

easing restrictions on immigration (for economically “useful” individuals).

Citizens politicians have sought to present these measures as “socially progressive.” But, in reality, they are designed to reduce the burden on businesses and court the middle classes. When in positions of authority, as in the Catalan Assembly, its deputies have pursued a right-wing agenda, proposing a ban on the burqa, ending health care for undocumented migrant workers, tightening up the abortion law and opposing funding for activities investigating the crimes of the Franco dictatorship.

Citizens is being groomed by Spain’s ruling class to provide a facelift to the image of the country’s despised PP politicians and to ease simmering frustration among the disillusioned populace. It fulfils the call made last year by one of Spain’s leading bankers for “a sort of right-wing Podemos” to provide a more reliable force to ensure that even if the faces in politics change, everything else will remain the same.

The latest polls, and the poor 10 percent result in the Catalan regional elections, further confirm the decline of Podemos. In January it was polling 28 percent support and was briefly the number one party on the Spanish political scene. Podemos has been severely affected by its watering down of the mild reforms contained in its original programme, and its embrace of the Syriza-led government in Greece. Former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis recently recognized this, telling *Catalunya Radio* that Syriza’s agreement to the austerity memorandum “has done much damage to Podemos.”

Podemos, however, continues to serve its main purpose: keeping the masses within the confines of Spain’s political system and preventing the emergence of an independent working class movement.

Meanwhile, the economic and social crisis in Spain is intensifying. Recently published figures show that economic growth in the third quarter in Spain slowed to 0.8 percent, down from one percent in the previous quarter. The European Union is also increasing its pressure on Spain to take further action to lower its budget deficit, which is forecast to be 4.5 percent this year and 3.5 percent in 2016, above the official targets of 4.2 per cent and 2.8 percent.

The OECD has reported that wages in Spain have not yet returned to pre-2008 levels. The wages of young

people aged 15-24 remain 35 percent below those of 2008.

The OECD also found that it takes young people in Spain six years to find stable employment, in contrast to the two years in Denmark. Rather than being a step towards a permanent job, temporary work has become a way of life. Over one third of young people are classified as being in poverty.

Inequality has also skyrocketed, with the top 10 percent of the population owning 43 percent all household wealth compared to the bottom 60 percent with just 20 percent.

No party in these elections represents the interests of the Spanish workers. All the political parties—Podemos no less than the PP or the PSOE—play one role or another in enforcing the rule of the financial aristocracy.



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