

Election polls point to breakdown of two-party system in Spain

James Lerner**14 December 2015**

Campaigning is underway for general elections to be held in Spain on December 20. After years of social misery brought on by the economic breakdown in 2008 and the imposition of savage austerity policies by both Socialist Party (PSOE) and Popular Party (PP) governments, the political crisis in the country has resulted in four parties contending for power.

The two-party setup that had prevailed in Spain since the end of the Franco regime in 1978, with power handed back and forth between the PP and the PSOE, has collapsed, giving way to a highly unpredictable election result. The only certainty is that no single party will attain an outright majority, and some sort of post-electoral coalition or pact will be needed to form a government.

The political volatility is indicated by poll results published December 11 which show the PP stands to win approximately 26.5 to 28.8 percent of the vote (down from 44.6 percent in 2011) and the PSOE 19.3 to 22.7 percent (down from 28.8 percent).

The Stalinist-led United Left, traditionally the third most voted party since its foundation in 1986, is in danger of being excluded from parliament altogether, polling between 2.7 to 4.1 percent of the vote. Votes are going to two parties, absent at the last general election, the right-wing Ciudadanos (Citizens) Party (17.5 - 20.3 percent) and the pseudo-left Podemos (17.7 - 20.4 percent), which could lead to the PSOE coming in fourth.

It is highly likely that the PP will fall far short of the 176 seats needed to remain in power with an absolute majority. The number of seats it is predicted to win has slumped from 186 in 2011 to around 117, meaning it will be forced to rely on the votes of the Citizens' party in order to return Prime Minister Rajoy to office. The other possibility is a PSOE minority government

supported by Podemos and small regional parties.

During the campaign, Rajoy has sought to project an aura of continuity and experience, in contrast to the past "failed recipes" of the PSOE and the inexperience of the new parties, and a firm stance against Catalan secessionism. He has tried to portray himself as being above the fray, refusing to participate in televised debates that have included the new parties.

In terms of policy, Rajoy has promised to create 500,000 jobs a year over the next five years at the same time as cutting corporate and income taxes—after significantly raising taxes on working people in his first term. Some tax breaks are promised for those who get their first job and those who extend their working life past the age of retirement.

The PSOE and its new leader, Pedro Sanchez, have presented themselves as the only "left" force capable of defeating Rajoy and the PP. Sanchez has repeatedly staked his claim to voters' support on the PSOE's responsibility for creating Spain's bare bones social welfare state back in the 1980s. However, the PSOE is also responsible for beginning the largest attacks on welfare and the jobs and wages of the working class since the death of Franco, during their period in office from 2008 to 2011.

Citizens, led by Albert Rivera, is the only party likely to support any PP bid to govern. Virtually unknown nationally until a few months ago, Citizens has been dubbed "the IBEX 35 party"—a reference to the stock exchange index for Spain's largest multinationals—and was manufactured from scratch by the national media following the call made last year by a leading banker for a "sort of right-wing Podemos."

The leaders of Citizens present the party as one free of ideology, but the measures they have supported and their policies tell a different story. They support the

creation of a single employment contract that would strip better-paid workers of rights and wages, tax cuts for companies and the rich and the introduction of co-payments for visits to the doctor.

Podemos's support went down to around 10 percent in October in some polls, down from the 28 percent the pseudo-left formation achieved in January of this year, when it was briefly the most popular party in Spain. However, the polls show its support rising upwards in recent weeks.

Podemos has maintained its alliance with Greece's ruling Syriza party and the Tsipras government, even after the latter's utter betrayal of its election promises and imposition of mass austerity on the Greek population. Podemos has virtually abandoned the left-sounding pretensions of its May 2015 programme for the European elections, and included an ex-general, who played a leading role in the imperialist invasion of Libya of 2011, on its electoral lists. This shift to the right resurrected media interest in the pseudo-left outfit.

Increasing anger aimed against the entire political establishment is reflected in numerous opinion polls, which show as much as 41 percent of the electorate still undecided, and a projected abstention rate in the election even higher than in 2011.

A major factor has been the concerted campaign to deceive the working class, by removing from the political debate two of the key threats it faces from the ruling class: austerity and war.

Austerity has devastated the working class in Spain, creating social misery on a scale not seen in decades, depressing the economy and raising unemployment levels to roughly one-fourth of the working population, and about half of Spain's youth.

Spain has the second highest rate of child poverty in Europe—second only to Romania—and a large portion of its youth have left the country in search of opportunities abroad. The few jobs being created at present are low quality, low-wage temporary work.

Yet austerity has barely figured in the election at all, with candidates preferring to trade barbs about corruption, gender violence, and Catalan secessionism, whilst showing their most "humane" side by appearing on entertainment shows, cooking programmes and acting as sports commentators in what has been dubbed the "Americanisation" of Spanish politics.

What is clear is that the next government will deepen

austerity measures. The European Commission had no qualms about intervening directly into the election campaign last week, in order to issue a report praising the Rajoy government's "reforms" and demanding further austerity and labour-market measures aimed at stripping workers of even more rights.

According to sources quoted by the daily pro-PSOE *El País*, "Brussels says more austerity is required, and is concerned about whoever takes office after December 20 continuing to follow its counsel".

No party, least of all Podemos, aims to reverse or even halt the austerity drive that is decimating Spanish households and boosting the power and profits of Spain's biggest companies.

On foreign policy, none of the parties are opposed to Spanish imperialism: indeed, they are vying with each other to prove they will assert Spain's national interests most strongly. A division of labour is emerging with the PP, Citizens and the PSOE calling for intervention on a larger scale in Africa and the Middle East, while Podemos seeks to demobilize popular opposition to war.

The potential for the eruption of a Third World War driven by the major powers' attempts to re-divide and re-colonise the world, with proxy wars developing against Russia in the Middle East and provocative actions against China in the Pacific, is simply ignored by all the parties participating in the election.



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