Hung parliament emerges from Spanish elections as traditional parties collapse

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The Spanish parliamentary elections held yesterday resulted in a hung parliament and a historic collapse of the two party-system that emerged from the political transition at the end of the fascist dictatorship of Generalissimo Francisco Franco in 1977. Initial reports last night all pointed to unprecedented uncertainty over who, if anyone, would be able to form a government in Spain.

The ruling Popular Party (PP) won the single largest share of the vote, with 123 seats (28 per cent) in the 350-seat Congress, nearly a third fewer than the 186 it secured in 2011.

The Socialist Party (PSOE), the traditional counterpart to the PP in the post-Franco era, collapsed to a historic low of 90 seats (22 per cent). It was the worst result since 1977 for this party, which ruled Spain for 25 of the 38 years since the end of the Franco regime. Having imposed painful austerity measures, it was unable to capitalise on broad popular opposition to the PP, which has overseen deep spending cuts, labour reforms, tax increases and mass unemployment of 20 percent (56 percent among youth).

The United Left (IU) alliance led by the Communist Party of Spain, long the decisive political force in demobilizing the working class and channeling any discontent back to parliamentarism, has also collapsed, going from 11 seats to 2. Since the eruption of the 2008 global economic crisis, IU has imposed austerity in the regions of Andalusia and Asturias and propped a PP government in Extremadura.

Together, the PP and PSOE won just 50 percent of the popular vote, their worst combined result ever in any general election.

This marks the first time that neither the PP nor PSOE single-handedly commands a government majority. Nor can either easily find a sufficiently powerful coalition partner to form a government. The two new parties, the Podemos party led by Pablo Iglesias and the right-wing Citizens party led by Albert Rivera, won 69 and 40 seats, respectively.

This leaves both PSOE-Podemos-IU and PP-Citizens coalitions well short of the 176 seats necessary to obtain a parliamentary majority and form a government. Other possibilities exist, such as a minority PP government relying on PSOE and Citizens not to vote against it in parliament; or a PSOE-Podemos government relying on similar tacit support from all the parties except the PP. Other unlikely scenarios, such as PSOE-Citizens-Podemos or PP-PSOE coalitions, are also being broached.

In any possible ruling scenario, the coalition government or minority government supported by other political forces would be deeply unstable.

Another likely possibility that is emerging are new elections. In all cases, the parties now have three weeks to reach an agreement.

The bewilderment expressed in the media underscores the fact that the Spanish ruling establishment is in unfamiliar political territory: “The PP wins but it will find it very difficult to form a government” (El País); “The Popular Party wins but it will find it impossible to rule” (El Español); “Spain without a government” (ABC); and “Spain overthrows the two-party system and a possible government is left in the air” (El Mundo).

The collapse of the old PP-PSOE duopoly points to the deep crisis of capitalist rule in Spain. The country has been devastated by unprecedented austerity imposed on the working class by both the PP and the PSOE since 2008.

The election results also underscore that neither of the newly-minted parties, Podemos and Citizens, could win

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the loyalty of a decisive section of the electorate. There is tremendous social anger in Spain, but the major parties ignored and despised the concerns and demands of the working class. Neither Podemos nor Citizens offered a political alternative to the PSOE-PP establishment: both supported policies of austerity and imperialist war.

Citizens, a party composed of former PP and PSOE officials, campaigned on a right-wing and populist programme—calling for tax cuts for the wealthy, budget cuts, labor law reforms, and a "technocratic" regime to impose policies on the population. For all the media promotion of Citizens, and political commentators' claims in the run-up to the elections that it would poll second and become the king-maker in a new PSOE- or PP-led government, it came in fourth, winning 40 seats and 14 percent of the vote.

Citizens was able to exploit the bankruptcy and treachery of the organizations posing as "left," above all the new Podemos party.

Podemos was founded in January 2014 by a conglomerate of former IU officials, Stalinist academics and members of the Pabloite Izquierda Anticapitalista (IA) party. Their initial posturing as an anti-austerity or left-wing party rapidly proved to be a fraud, however. They soon abandoned the limited social promises of their January 2014 manifesto, began recruiting in the army and praising the pope and the Catholic Church, promoting patriotism, and backing the austerity policies imposed in Greece by its ally, Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left").

After aggressively campaigning for Syriza during the Greek election campaign, Pablo Iglesias infamously backed Syriza's austerity measures, declaring: "What the Greek government has done is, sadly, the only thing it could do."

After its endorsement of austerity and Syriza, Podemos collapsed in the polls, reflecting popular disillusionment in Syriza and Podemos. After having led the opinion polls with 24 percent, Podemos then fell to around 10 percent as the election campaign began.

Podemos ultimately made a comeback, however, by intensifying right-wing appeals that succeeded in winning it positive coverage in the corporate media. It recruited former judges, police officials, and the former Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff General Julio Rodríguez, the leader of the Spanish participation in the 2011 NATO war in Libya that devastated the country and left 30,000 dead.

The trajectory of Podemos underscores that all of the political parties represented in the legislature are fundamentally hostile to the interests of the working class and support austerity and war.

The Real Instituto Elcano state-funded think tank pointed to this in its special dossier "The 2015 Spanish General Election: political parties' international priorities." Based on interviews with each of the main foreign policy officials of the four leading parties, it concluded that there is "a high degree of convergence in terms of identifying the elements that may form the basis of consensus on foreign policy."

"Thus, despite the criticisms of the three opposition parties towards the current orientation of Spanish diplomacy, they all agree that there is potential for Spain to have greater sway and projection in the world," it wrote.

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