

Spanish political system in turmoil over hung parliament

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Spain is in turmoil since Sunday's elections resulted in a hung parliament and a historic collapse of the two-party system that has dominated Spanish politics since the end of the fascist Franco dictatorship in 1977. At 123 and 90 seats, respectively, the Popular Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSOE) are both well short of the 176 seats needed for a majority in the Congress.

European leaders expressed their concern almost as soon as the polls closed. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was reported to be "interested and alarmed" at the result, and spokesperson Christiane Wirtz told reporters that it was "not very clear yet" who to "congratulate" in Spain.

The main beneficiaries of electoral opposition to the two main parties were the Podemos party (20.7 percent, 69 seats) and the right-wing Citizens party (13.9 percent, 40 seats). These parties, which both received extensive media coverage amid rising popular anger with the austerity policies of the PP and the PSOE, criticised corruption and presented younger candidates, claiming a new generation would shake up political life.

What dominates currently in the Spanish media and political establishment is perplexity over how to form a new government. However, it would be a dangerous illusion to believe that the emergence of an unstable, four-party system in Spain marks a real political break with policies of austerity and war pursued by the European Union (EU) and the Spanish bourgeoisie. While Podemos in particular has marketed itself as a critic of austerity, it has no fundamental differences with the agenda of the PSOE and PP.

Following the election result, Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias declared, "A new Spain has been born." He declared that this marked the end "of the alternate political system" in which power oscillated between the

PSOE and PP.

In fact, the Spanish and international bourgeoisie is working with all its might behind the scenes to cobble together some sort of coalition government or pact. But all the possibilities are unstable, raising the prospect of fresh elections next year.

On Monday, incumbent PP Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy pronounced himself the election winner, saying his party had won the most seats. Rajoy declared, "Whoever wins the election must try to form a government, and I will try to form one. Spain needs a stable government."

On Monday evening, the PP executive met to discuss the results with former president José Aznar, who is still the party's honorary chairman but has not attended such meetings since 2011. Aznar called for a party conference and leadership contest "as soon as possible."

PSOE organisation secretary César Luena left open the possibility that the removal of Rajoy may be the signal for the PSOE to support a minority PP government, declaring that the Spanish people had "voted for change from Rajoy".

Several PSOE "barons" led by former PSOE Prime Minister Felipe González have indicated they oppose any "pact of the left" that involves a government alliance with Podemos. PSOE leader in Extremadura, Fernández Vara, declared, "We cannot accept Catalonia independence or self-determination. Either they [Podemos] renounce it or there is no government pact."

Citizens party leader Albert Rivera has also called on PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez to back a minority PP government "with budgets already approved" and refrain from trying to form a government with Podemos and the separatists.

Popular opposition to austerity and militarism

supported by the four leading parties hardly featured in the Spanish election. Podemos has made clear that it was ready to carry out austerity policies by supporting Greece's Syriza government as it capitulated to the demands of the European Union (EU) for stepped-up austerity measures.

Podemos will follow the same path. Any government it is part of or supports will comply with IMF demands for "a clear commitment to continue structural reforms and to put the level of sovereign debt on a firmly declining path [that] would help anchor confidence." It will also carry out the EU Commission's recent declaration that further labour reforms are needed "as soon as possible" to further cut wages and increase "flexibility".

The media is once again questioning Spain's much vaunted return to growth this year, following years of economic collapse. This growth, however, has been based on an unsustainable policy of forcing down wages and prices relative to other eurozone members, stimulus from cheap oil and a weak euro, and the ECB's Quantitative Easing programme.

Podemos has already abandoned the social demands it adopted at its founding in January 2014, including nationalising top companies and banks, exiting from NATO, lowering the retirement age, raising pensions, and introducing a basic universal wage. These measures, it must be said, were always a fraud. Leaders of the Pabloite Anti-capitalist Left, who helped write the programme, said it was never taken seriously and that Podemos' main concern was building an electoral machine headed by the "media commando" Iglesias.

In its trajectory to the right Podemos also made overtures to the army and the Catholic Church and began promoting patriotism. It backed the austerity policies imposed in Greece by Syriza and campaigned for Tsipras' re-election last September.

In the closing weeks of the campaign, Podemos changed its policy toward the regions under pressure from some of its regional leaders to call for a referendum on Catalan independence. Iglesias declared that although "Catalonia is a nation and must have a different constitutional framework," Podemos was the only force that could ensure the unity of Spain, because it recognises the "pluri-national" character of Spain.

Podemos then won by a considerable margin in Catalonia and won the most votes in the Basque

Country.

With Podemos concentrating on the corruption of the "caste" and promoting its alliances with the military and the Church, the ruling elite was able to mount an attempt to construct a "Podemos of the Right". Thus was born Citizens, a party of former PP and PSOE officials, which sought to use similar populist rhetoric to bolster the PP.

For all the media promotion of Citizens, and political commentators' claims that it would poll second and become the king-maker in a new PSOE- or PP-led government, its support slumped in the last week of the election. Party leader Albert Rivera gave the game away on Friday when he declared that he would "abstain in a vote to form a government by the party receiving the most votes". That was seen as making a vote for Citizens tantamount to a vote for the PP, undermining their previous "anti-corruption" posture.



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