

Corruption crisis prompts demand for snap elections in Spain

Alejandro López and Paul Mitchell**30 May 2018**

The National Court last week found 29 top officials linked to Spain's ruling Popular Party (PP) government guilty of corruption. Those convicted forged documents, took bribes and laundered money siphoned from kickbacks linked to public works contracts. They were sentenced to a total of 351 years in prison.

The court declared that the PP had spawned "an authentic and efficient system of institutional corruption."

The Gürtel case, as it has become known, is the largest and most pervasive political corruption scandal since the end of the Francoist dictatorship in the mid-1970s.

On Friday, Socialist Party (PSOE) General Secretary Pedro Sánchez announced a no confidence vote aimed at him replacing the PP's Mariano Rajoy as Spain's prime minister—with the intent of preventing a general election and exacerbating Spain's economic and social crisis.

The no confidence vote is due to take place on Friday.

Sánchez, whose party has connived in keeping Rajoy's minority government in power, appeared before the press to claim the PSOE would "Return [Spain] to political and institutional normality, regenerate democratic life, and set in motion a social agenda that would attend to urgent social issues."

Such words are cynical. The Gürtel case has been around for years. It is almost a decade since it came to public attention. Most suspects were put on trial in 2016. Throughout this time, the PSOE covered for the PP's corruption, kept it in power and backed its austerity measures and anti-democratic assault in Catalonia during the independence crisis.

The PSOE's support of the PP was also covered up by the pseudo-left party, Podemos, which suppresses any independent mobilisation of the working class in its

pursuit of a "progressive alliance" with the PSOE. Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias has now offered his party's unconditional support for the PSOE motion of no confidence.

It was also left to Podemos to make a direct appeal to the right-wing populist Citizens on behalf of Sánchez. Podemos number two and candidate for regional premier in Madrid, Íñigo Errejón, broadcast a video on social networks calling for an end to the PP government, regardless of "political names." He declared that "Acronyms cannot become a trench from which to reproach us while Spain is still blocked." He warned Citizens leader Albert Rivera that he will be "co-responsible" for the "blockade" and "shame" if Citizens keeps the PP in power.

Citizens, however, is demanding the PSOE withdraw its no-confidence vote. They do not want to replace Rajoy with Sánchez but want new elections in the hope they will become the main party in Spain. Citizens General Secretary José Manuel Villegas said that "the solution passes through elections, there is no government programme to discuss" with the PSOE.

With the exception of the pro-PP *ABC* and *La Razón*, most of the Spanish media has dismissed Sánchez's grab for power and are calling for snap elections. They are using the Gürtel corruption crisis to prepare the way for a right-wing replacement to the unstable minority PP government, which has seen its share of the vote at the last election in 2016 slump, in the space of just two years, from 35 percent to around 20 percent.

The main right-wing Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* proclaimed that the country was suffering a "very deep political crisis" that "could lead to the fall of the government." It demanded Rajoy call an early ballot.

The nominally liberal and pro-PSOE *El País*, Spain's largest newspaper, declared there was a

“moment of national emergency.” It said an early election would be the “least damaging” option in order to produce a new “stable and coherent government.”

Both newspapers warned, however, about an unstable PSOE government coming to power when the economy was under pressure and having to rely on Podemos and regional nationalist parties in the Basque Country and Catalonia to rule.

El País declared, “making concessions to the secessionists is to cross a red line”.

El Mundo railed against “Catalan and Basque separatists, and the populist anti-system Podemos,” claiming they wanted to “cause a territorial breakup of the state.” They declared that any PSOE government would be a “hostage” to such forces.

Another right-wing publication, *El Español*, expressed most clearly what all of them are working for, declaring, “The best solution for Spain is an agreement between Sánchez and Rivera. Sanchez should add to his no confidence vote a specific day for elections... And Rivera should support this scenario and allow the socialists access to the Presidency of the Government even for a few months.”

The neo-liberal Citizens has been nurtured by the Spanish press, helping it grow from a small anti-Catalan independence party to threaten the PP and jockey for position as number one in the national polls. Citizens is seen as the force most prepared to use whatever means are necessary to drive through structural reform of the Spanish economy, repress the working class, prevent the breakup of the Spanish state threatened by regional separatism and defend Spain’s geo-political interests.

New elections in Spain would represent the third since December 2015, all of which produced hung parliaments. Such instability is symptomatic of the breakdown of the post-World War Two order and the two-party system, through which the Spanish bourgeoisie has ruled through the PP and PSOE in the post-Franco era.

Growing sections of the ruling class see the Gürtel case as the last straw, which is worsening already explosive class relations. After Greece, Spain is the country in western Europe where the financial crisis and austerity policies have created the greatest devastation. Despite a slight economic upturn based on rock-bottom wages, cheap oil and a weak euro, Spanish

capitalism is moribund.

According to a study by Fedea and Accenture, Spain has almost five million people living lives of precariousness, labour poverty and unemployment.

The European Commission, which has backed Spain’s austerity packages, was forced to describe the inequality situation in Spain as “critical... either not improving sufficiently fast or deteriorating further.” It noted that the 20 percent of those on the highest incomes make 6.6 times more than the 20 percent with lowest incomes, placing the country in a bottom group that also includes Bulgaria, Lithuania and Greece.

In contrast, the richest Spaniards—in the top 10 percent—saw their share of household wealth balloon from 44 percent in 2008, the year of the global financial crash, to 53 percent in 2014, according to a report published by the Bank of Spain.

Such conditions are provoking growing social opposition. In 2017, the number of days lost due to work stoppages rose almost 53 percent. *El Economista* recently warned that “the labour conflicts in the air and rail sectors threaten Spain with a hot summer.”



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