

Spain's conservative Popular Party shifts further to the right

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Pablo Casado was chosen as the new leader of the Popular Party (PP) in the party's primaries. His election marks a return by the PP, Spain's main opposition party, to its Francoite roots under conditions where all mainstream parties, including the ruling minority Socialist Party (PSOE) government and the pseudo-left Podemos, are rapidly turning to the right.

Casado is 37 and served as the party's communications vice-secretary and was also chief of staff to the former prime minister José María Aznar. He took the leadership by defeating his rival, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, former deputy prime minister. Casado won the support of 57.2 percent of voters.

Casado is taking over from Mariano Rajoy, the former PP leader and prime minister who was recently ousted in a no-confidence vote in Congress by the PSOE, with the backing of Podemos and nationalist forces. Soon after, Rajoy resigned, and he refused to handpick his successor, the traditional way the Spanish right has selected its leaders. He also refused to back Santamaria, his deputy prime minister in government, wanting to maintain neutrality to avoid a split in the party.

In the past years, the PP's support has plummeted to levels not seen since the 1980s, when the PP's predecessor, Popular Alliance, was known as "the party of 25 percent" because of its electoral results. The PP has gone from nearly 8 million votes in June 2016 (33 percent of the votes and 137 seats) to 4.7 million votes, according to the calculations and polls by *El Confidencial*. In other words, the PP has lost around 3.2 million votes, or 40 percent of its electorate in two years. It means the PP would become the fourth parliamentary force.

Most of its traditional electorate has gone to the other major right-wing party, Citizens, or the far-right VOX. Both have emerged as the staunchest advocates of the "defence of Spain" against regionalists and nationalists, criticizing the former PP government under Rajoy for not

carrying out more severe repression against the secessionist Catalan parties.

During the party's primaries, while Santamaria represented the line of continuity with the previous PP government and Mariano Rajoy, Casado promised to make the PP return to its Francoite roots. He called for the need to "reconcile [the PP] with the history of the party," a party founded in 1976 by seven former Francoite ministers during the transition from fascism to bourgeois democracy, and do it "without shame".

His programme is a combination of ultra-Catholic demands, support for the dismantling of the welfare state and intensification of attacks on democratic rights.

In a direct appeal to the most right-wing Catholic religious bigotry, Casado advocates rolling back abortion rights 30 years to the 1985 law which made pregnancy termination practically illegal and calls for opposition to the new euthanasia law. Casado has also called for a struggle against "gender ideology"—a favourite term used by the Catholic Church and ultra-right—to mean democratic rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and women.

In education and healthcare, Casado advocates "freedom to choose." He said that no "bureaucrat" should "tell" which hospital or what school to go to. "I want the freedom of choice," he said during the campaign. These are code words for opening the education and healthcare sectors to the market for profiteering, in addition to slotting children into private and semi-private schools, most of which are controlled by the Catholic Church.

Casado's contempt for the pioneering of free, tax-funded and public education and free public healthcare was expressed in his call to "reverse the heritage of socialist party governments" to prevent "society from radicalizing to the left."

The PSOE was the main party to implement nationwide public healthcare and education in the 1980s, while

combining it with deindustrialization, labour reforms, privatisations and free market policies. Casado's words reflect unveiled preparations for a confrontation with the working class by eliminating the concessions the ruling class was forced to make after the revolutionary situation which erupted in the 1970s in the dying days of Francoism.

Casado also promises traditionally neo-liberal measures such as lowering taxes and personal income tax, abolishing inheritance taxes, and introducing new tax breaks for companies.

The new PP leader unveiled a programme of police-state measures under the pretext of defending the state against Catalan and Basque nationalists.

During the campaign, he indirectly accused Rajoy's government of having mismanaged the situation in Catalonia and the secessionist referendum on independence last October, when the PP government tried and failed to crush the referendum, mounting a massive police crackdown on peaceful voters that left nearly 1,000 people injured.

For Casado, however, the police crackdown, the installation of an unelected government in Catalonia and the arrests of the main secessionist leaders under fraudulent charges of "rebellion" were not enough.

Casado wants to outlaw pro-independence parties altogether to avoid future breakaway referendums, strengthen the penal code with new laws against "improper sedition" and the "illegal calling of referendums," and incorporate a 50-seat bonus to the winner of the elections—to prevent situations where minority governments must rely on nationalist forces to push legislation through. He has also called on the PSOE government to reimpose Article 155 to depose the democratically elected Catalan government.

During the Catalan crisis, Casado compared the future fate of former Catalan Premier Carles Puigdemont with that of Lluís Companys, president of the regional government of 1934 that declared independence. Exiled after the Spanish Civil War, Companys was captured by the Gestapo in Paris and handed over to the fascist regime of Francisco Franco, who had him executed by firing squad in 1940.

In Spanish politics, the whipping up of anti-Catalan and anti-Basque sentiment by political forces like the PP, Citizens and the Socialist Party has historically been tied up with the attempt by the ruling class to suppress class tensions by promoting Spanish nationalism and patriotism under conditions of growing social polarisation.

Casado is following a well-trodden path by the Spanish right, while attempting to outflank Citizens which has become the main party promoting Spanish chauvinism and anti-regionalist sentiment.

Something widely ignored in the media coverage of Casado's election is his foreign policy programme. Casado wants Spain to become a great power once again because of "our historical role, our Atlantic link, our position in Latin America and the Mediterranean, our position as a non-permanent member in the Pacific Alliance and our vicinity with the African continent." He added, "If there is isolationism, if there is protectionism, Spain has to return to being the center of action of the European Union, but also of the Atlantic Axis."

Casado is also known for his pro-Trump statements, seeing the US administration as an opportunity for Spanish imperialism. Last year, Casado stated that Spain should replace the UK as the new "priority partner" of the US in the European Union following Brexit, when the UK officially leaves.

This turn to the right does not reflect any broad sentiment among the masses, especially in the case of the younger generation, which is characterized by secularism, a defence of public education and healthcare, hostility to US imperialism and broad opposition to Spanish militarism and attacks on democratic rights, and a defence of abortion, euthanasia and LGBT rights.

Rather, it reflects the bankrupt reaction of bourgeois and wealthy middle-class layers to the break-up of the world economy into competing trading blocs, to the ongoing disintegration of the nation-state system, along with increasing wars and social tensions. The fomenting of Spanish nationalism, chauvinism and Catalanophobia serves to prepare new wars and suppress the class struggle through police state methods.



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