

Portugal's Socialist Party wins legislative election as Left Bloc collapses

Alice Summers
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Portugal's social-democratic Socialist Party (PS) was returned to power in the January 30 legislative elections, winning a surprise absolute majority.

The PS gained 117 seats in the 230-seat Assembly of the Republic, and just under 42 percent of the total vote. This is only the second time in the country's history that a single party has been able to govern alone. The other was in 2011, when the right-wing Social Democratic Party (PSD) won over 50 percent of ballots.

Meanwhile, the petty-bourgeois Left Bloc (BE), the longstanding parliamentary ally of the PS, saw its vote collapse, going from the third-largest party in the Portuguese Assembly to the sixth. In the last election in 2019, the BE had won 19 seats and almost 10 percent of the popular vote, plummeting to only five seats and 4.5 percent of the vote on January 30.

The Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU), an electoral alliance between the Stalinist Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the Greens (PEV), also saw a significant drop in its support, going from 12 seats and 6.3 percent of the vote in 2019 to six seats and 4.4 percent this year. All six of these seats went to candidates of the PCP, with the PEV losing all its parliamentary representation for the first time.

The election took place as the pandemic continued to rage in Portugal. As with the rest of the world, COVID cases have exploded in this country over the last two months, fuelled by the much more contagious Omicron variant of the coronavirus. The seven-day average reached an all-time peak of around 55,700 daily cases on the weekend of the election, with deaths rising to an average of 40–50 a day by the end of January, the highest since last February.

Around 1 million people were self-isolating due to infection with COVID or contact with a confirmed positive case on the day of the election, according to health authorities—almost 10 percent of Portugal's

population. Those in quarantine were permitted to leave their homes to vote in the election, however, due to fears that skyrocketing infection rates may lead to mass abstention, in what was already a widely unpopular election.

While abstention was ultimately the lowest since the 2011 elections, only 57.9 percent of eligible people cast ballots, in a country in which voter participation has continuously fallen since 2005. When turnout is factored in, the PS received the support of less than one-quarter of Portuguese voters.

No party had been expected to obtain an absolute majority, with opinion polls in the run-up to the election predicting stagnating or falling support for the PS as compared to their 36.3 percent vote in 2019. Surveys had anticipated a close race between the PS and the PSD, which had been expected to increase its parliamentary representation.

This had prompted speculation about whether a minority PSD government could be formed with the support of the fascistic Chega party. The PSD's leader, Rui Rio, however, had ruled out forming a coalition government with Chega, declaring in a debate, "I don't want power at any price", and that there are "fundamental differences [between Chega and the PSD] which hinder an agreement."

The snap elections were called in early November after Prime Minister Costa's six-year minority PS administration collapsed amid mass strikes. The previous week, Costa's government had failed to pass its 2022 budget in parliament, as the BE and PCP unexpectedly voted against it. It was the first time that a budget had been rejected since the 1974 Carnation Revolution toppled the *Estado Novo* regime of fascistic dictator António Salazar.

The vote against the budget by the BE and PCP was not an indication of any principled opposition to the austerity

measures the PS government planned to impose and has already been imposing for years. Both parties have loyally supported every PS budget since the party came to power in 2015 and are fully complicit in the attacks on workers' living standards that have come with them.

Between 2015 and 2019, the minority PS government ruled thanks to an alliance known as a *geringonça* (an "odd contraption" or "improvised solution") with the BE, PCP and PEV—a confidence-and-supply arrangement whereby the pseudo-left and Stalinist parties agreed to support the government on all major votes. Since the elections of 2019, the BE and the PCP have continued to back the PS from outside the government, with no written agreement in place.

The last-minute decision of the BE and PCP to vote against the budget came amid a wave of strikes across Portugal, involving tens of thousands of workers from different industries. Rail workers, pharmacists, teachers, subway workers, firefighters, nurses, civil servants and prison guards all took part in industrial action between September and November, mostly calling for increased wages in the face of a significant increase in the cost of living. Terrified of the growing working class anger at years of declining living standards, the BE and the PCP felt compelled to vote against the government they supported, to maintain the charade that they oppose austerity and to stifle social opposition.

During the election campaign itself, the BE had groveled before the PS government, pleading with Costa to bring them back into a formal coalition. "For five years, the BE made the budgets possible for the minority PS based on agreements to resolve the country's problems," BE leader Catarina Martins declared in November. "This is our willingness."

While tactical voting to prevent a far-right coalition of the PSD and Chega may have played some role in the increased vote for the PS at the expense of its pseudo-left props, the roots of the disintegration of the BE and the PCP lie in broader processes.

The BE and PCP are deeply discredited after years of openly supporting the right-wing policies of the PS government. They no longer have any credibility as a supposed "alternative" to the PS, having worked hand in glove with the government to impose austerity and break strikes for seven years. Many voters would have seen no reason to cast a ballot for parties which are, in all but name, an appendage of the PS.

The other main beneficiary of the collapse in support for the pseudo-left parties has been the far-right Chega

(Enough), which increased its seats from one to 12. Its share of the vote, while still small, increased by almost six times, from 1.3 percent in the last elections in 2019 to 7.2 percent this year.

Chega emerged as the third-largest party after the PSD, which obtained 76 seats (three fewer than in 2019) and 29.3 percent of the vote. While Chega won a smaller percentage of the ballots than in last year's presidential elections—when their candidate and the party's leader André Ventura received almost 12 percent and over 100,000 more votes—it has made significant gains in the three years since its founding.

Ventura celebrated the party's surge in votes, declaring in a speech on the night of the election "What a great, great, great night." He continued: "António Costa, I'm going after you now," stating that he wants to build a "great right-wing alternative to replace the PS in power... We will be the opposition in Portugal."

Chega's ability to posture as the only "opposition party" in Portugal is due to the reactionary role played by the Left Bloc and PCP. The example of numerous petty-bourgeois "left populist" parties across Europe shows the bankruptcy of any perspective oriented to pressuring the ruling class to adopt "progressive" policies.

Wherever these pseudo-left tendencies have come to power, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the Left Bloc in Portugal, they have demonstrated their hostility to the working class, loyally carrying out the austerity diktats of the banks, big business and the European Union. Workers in Portugal, Europe and internationally must break definitively with these pro-capitalist organisations and build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in every country to fight for socialism.



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