

Political horse-trading to form government after Spanish election

Alejandro López
30 July 2023

Negotiations between Spain's major parties to form a government from the highly fragmented parliament have begun following the July 23 general elections.

None of the outcomes being discussed by the media, however, will solve any of the fundamental problems facing the working class. War, climate change, deteriorating living standards and the danger of the far-right cannot be solved on a national basis and without a frontal social assault on the wealth of the financial aristocracy.

On Saturday, the external vote of 233,688 ballots deposited by Spaniards living abroad led to a minor but significant redistribution of seats in the Spanish parliament. As a result, Spain's social democratic Socialist Party (PSOE) lost one of its seats, which will now go to the right-wing Popular Party (PP). The result complicates the possibility of forming a government.

To form a government, an absolute majority is needed in a first parliamentary vote in the 350-seat assembly. If it fails, a second vote with a simple majority is required.

According to the revised seat count, the right-wing bloc of the PP and neo-Francoist Vox can count 171 votes—137 from the PP, 33 from Vox and one from the right-wing regionalist Union of the Navarran People. This is five short of the absolute majority of 176 seats.

Traditionally in these circumstances, PP minority governments relied on either the right-wing Basque nationalist PNV or the Catalan nationalists to support them. These parties have been key pillars in bourgeois rule in Spain, supporting entry into NATO, the European Union, the eurozone, post-2008 austerity on the working class and war abroad.

After the July 23 elections, the PNV currently holds five seats and the right-wing pro-separatist Catalan Junts controls seven seats. Last week, the PNV refused the PP's appeal for support over its alliance with Vox. Vox has called for a ban on separatist parties, abolishing the regional system in which the Catalan and Basque nationalists enjoy a privileged position, and for the suppression of linguistic Catalan, Basque and Galician rights.

Over the weekend, the PP opened the door to negotiating with the pro-separatist Catalan Junts in the "framework of the Spanish Constitution". But this scenario is hardly likely. The PP minority government of Mariano Rajoy launched a brutal crackdown on the Catalan nationalists following the 2017 independence referendum that left over 1,000 injured. This was followed by threats to impose a military-led state of emergency on Catalonia, the removal and the detention of top officials of the Catalan regional government, and a show trial condemning nine of them to a decade in jail for sedition.

Ever since, regardless of who holds power in Madrid, whether the PP or, as now, the coalition government of the PSOE and Podemos—now integrated in Sumar—the ruling class has used the Catalan national question to shift politics to the right, build a police state, and promote far-right forces. Vox grew out of this wave of Spanish chauvinism promoted by the ruling class.

Another scenario is that the PSOE supports a PP-minority government, either through some sort of unprecedented grand coalition bargain or through abstention.

In 2016, the PSOE abstained to allow the PP to form a government after two inconclusive elections. This was done through an internal coup within the PSOE removing the current prime minister and then PSOE leader, Pedro Sánchez, that forced the PSOE to abstain.

The political cost was enormous. The PSOE was exposed as a free-market, pro-war party run by the banks, the intelligence agencies, and the military. It also exposed the "left populist" Podemos, which had promoted the PSOE as its likely partner in government.

Once the PP was installed, Sánchez was brought back in to lead the PSOE. In 2018, amid mounting popular opposition to the PP and its repressive policies in Catalonia, Podemos organised a parliamentary maneuver, ousting the PP and replacing it with a minority PSOE government led by Sánchez. The Podemos-backed PSOE government continued the PP's austerity attacks on the working class and the right-wing's repressive campaign against Catalan nationalism.

The PSOE has so far refused to cede so openly to the PP and is seeking to form a government, aware that to do otherwise would provoke an angry response in the working class.

In the July 23 elections, despite four years of pro-war, pro-austerity policies carried out jointly with Podemos since 2019, the PSOE obtained 7.7 million votes (31 percent) and 121 seats. This was a significant rise on the 6.7 million votes in the 2019 general elections, or the 6.2 million votes in the recent local elections last May.

Most of its votes came from prior voters of the Catalan and Basque nationalists and from Sumar, which includes the massively discredited pseudo-left Podemos, led by acting Deputy Prime Minister and Labour Minister Yolanda Díaz. Sumar lost 600,000 votes as compared to the votes of Unidas Podemos in 2019, confirming the party's downward spiral after pro-war, pro-austerity measures in office.

As the WSWS noted in its election perspective, "The PSOE's vote increase, despite its political record, can only be understood as a partial and highly distorted class response directed against the threat posed by a PP-Vox government and the return of undisguised Francoites to power for the first time since the fall of the dictatorship and the 'transition to democracy' in 1978."

The PSOE will try to utilize the desire among workers to prevent a Francoite government to try to renew a pro-austerity, pro-war government with Sumar, backed by regionalist and separatist forces. PSOE and Sumar have already pledged €24 billion in cuts over the next year and to intensify Spain's contribution to the US-NATO led war against Russia in Ukraine.

Such a government would be even more right-wing than the current one, largely adopting the PP and Vox's programme while seeking to demobilize the class struggle with the threat that its collapse would herald a far-right government. It would count on the support of its affiliated trade unions, CCOO and UGT, which have worked to shut down a wave of strikes amid mounting opposition to the PSOE-Podemos government and the US-NATO war.

Prior to the loss of the seat on Saturday, the PSOE-Sumar, with 153 seats, 23 short of a majority, required the support of the ERC (7), PNV (5), EH Bildu (6) and the BNG (1) to secure 172 votes against 171 for the right-wing bloc. With the loss of an additional seat to the PP, the PSOE now needs the pro-separatist Catalan Junts to vote in favour, rather than an agreement to abstain.

Junts, the kingmaker of the elections, is publicly demanding a referendum on secession and amnesty to 3,000 activists and voters persecuted over the anti-Catalan campaign. Its leader, the former Catalan regional premier and now Member of the European Parliament Carles

Puigdemont, faces possible arrest. In early July, the European Union's General Court of Justice stripped Puigdemont's parliamentary immunity. He has been living in exile in Belgium since 2017.

Negotiations are problematic, especially given that the PSOE cannot be seen by the bourgeoisie to give ground to separatism. But they are proceeding nevertheless. On Saturday, Puigdemont tweeted that Junts would be open to vote for a PSOE-Sumar government if an agreement is reached on the "Catalan conflict". This is an ambiguous term leaving open the possibility of shelving the referendum demand.

The separatists are aware that support for independence has dwindled to historic lows. With less than a million votes in the elections, it was their worst result in over a decade since they started agitating for independence in 2012.

In a clear indication that the Spanish bourgeoisie currently prefers a minority PSOE-Sumar government continue war at home and abroad, Supreme Court judge Pablo Llarena—who is close to the PP—agreed not to present a European Arrest Warrant against Puigdemont, rejecting the request from Vox and the Public Prosecutor's Office.

If negotiations between PSOE, Sumar and the separatists fail, a repeat vote in December or January cannot be ruled out.

Whatever government is formed, there is no golden road out of the crisis. A PSOE-Sumar government is not the answer to the far-right. To the extent that workers continue to accept the PSOE and Sumar as a lesser evil, this will only disarm them politically.

The urgent task for the working class and youth is to secure their political and organizational independence from the PSOE, Sumar and the trade union bureaucracy and to prepare for mass struggles against austerity and war in a revolutionary socialist and internationalist offensive against capitalism. This means founding a Socialist Equality Party in Spain as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact