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Spanish State

Podemos : An inside view of a radical left sensation

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What is the thinking and strategy behind Spain's new radical political sensation ? Podemos European election campaign chief Iñigo Errejón explains.

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In Spain, the surge of discontent caused by structural adjustment policies and hostage taking of popular sovereignty by the oligarchic powers gave rise to a series of protests and created spaces for social cooperation. However, it had no effect on the political system and its internal balance.

Until now, despite its difficulties and its crisis of hegemony, the dominant power bloc has been leading an adjustment process (we should not reduce this to economic policies because it also has a political horizon to transform the state to bring about the domination of a smaller oligarchy and to a post-political governance which reduces the scope of the issues being debated in the political system). The goal is to reduce the power of subordinates within the system in order to carry out the offensive against the social pact of 1978. [1] The strength of the state apparatus and government has ensured that no "catastrophic eruption" of popular protest has been able - beyond important local victories - to bypass the country's political impoverishment or of preventing the sacking of Spain and its inhabitants.

The European elections of May 25, 2014, occurred at a time when social mobilisation had been in retreat. Among large sections of the left the most pessimistic assumptions prevailed, and that despite the rapid loss of credibility of political elites and major institutions of the political system. In addition to the social crisis and the crisis of legitimacy, the main feature of the day is the rise of inorganic widespread discontent that has been expressed outside the codes of traditional political identities within a civil society in general disarray. This has been accompanied by a breakdown of community ties and decades of decline in the values of social cooperation. A state of self-denial that is diffuse and fragmented.

European elections

In this context, the European elections were conducted along a purely national lines, with a predominance of Spanish political themes, and it is in this light that we must read the results. The first and most important of them is the resounding failure of the two dynastic parties, the Popular Party (PP) that emerged victorious yet lost 2.6 million votes, while the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) lost 2.5 million. The crisis of PSOE is central, if not fundamental, to the crisis of the system introduced in 1978.

The two main political parties have lost 30% of popular support and their cumulative scores fallen from 81% to 49% of the the total votes cast between the European elections of 2009 and those of 2014. For the first time, parties that have been in power have not convinced half of the voters. The game of communicating vessels, which breathed life into the political system in providing its central consensus, did not work and the losses of one of the duo were capitalised upon by the other. This is a historic event that reconfigures the entire Spanish political system.

In Catalonia, Esquerra Republicana (ERC) won with its independence project. And an array of parties elected significantly expanded their share of the vote. Izquierda Unida (United Left), in coalition with other groups, won 10% of the vote and six MEPs.

Podemos

But the big event of the election, however, was the emergence of Podemos, which was created only four months earlier with the aim of "transforming the hard hit social majority into a majority for political change". It received 1,250,000 votes, or 8% of the total, establishing itself as the fourth-largest party vote in the country, and even third in some regions such as Madrid (11%) and Asturias (13.67%). Podemos' votes seem to come from very diverse sectors : abstainers, traditional PSOE voters and other formations, some of which are difficult to fit into a rigid ideological arithmetic.

Sociologically, defying labels again, this is a thoughtful vote (45% from the age group 35-50 years) ; an electorate of cities and urban peripheries beaten down by austerity measures ; an educated electorate that is far from recognising itself in the stigmatising label of "extreme left" the conservative media have wanted to put in circulation (3.7 on a scale of 0 to 10) ; a very diverse electorate, for the most part, escaping from the traditional identifications and loyalties.

Breaking PP/PSOE's symbolic monopoly

Beyond its quantitative dimension, the emergence of Podemos should be measured by its qualitative impact : the interest it has elicited within the media ; the fierce attacks suffered at the hands of the most conservative forces and their opinion formers ; the appearance of new terms in the political lexicon to evoke a cultural emergency that is at least as important as its electoral impact. Taken together, the "small earthquake" of Podemos has helped break the symbolic monopoly of political representation of the PP and the PSOE, paving the way for new possibilities.

Podemos was born as a tool in the service of "popular unity and citizenship", namely the articulation of "floating" discontent in order to create a popular mobilisation to reclaim sovereignty and democracy held hostage by the oligarchic "caste". The election campaign was riddled with unpleasant comments and harsh criticism from some sectors of the left, essentially a static shared vision of the political spectrum. They thought that, at best, Podemos would get a seat at the expense of Izquierda Unida. A quarrel between rag and bone men disputing votes at the left margins.

Throughout the campaign, however, we advanced in the polls and the media were finally forced to take into account. As the election date approached, the curve for Podemos climbed. If the election were held today, the result would probably be higher than that « shock' » outcome that was obtained.

Podemos is a very new initiative, but it is rooted in an intellectual and political hypothesis developed in the academic and activist movement, particularly in the Complutense University of Madrid. This hypothesis is as follows : Spain faces a crisis of regime resulting primarily by a breakdown in consensus and the dislocation of traditional political identities ; the conditions exist for a populist left - which does not consist in symbolically carving out positions within the regime, but seeks to create another dichotomy - articulated in a new political will with a majority vocation.

This initiative would not have been possible without the climate of rejection of elites born out of the great cycle of social mobilisation ("indignant ones") commenced May 15, 2011 (15M) at the Puerta del Sol de Madrid, and by changes in the political culture that this has caused.

However, nothing in this cycle necessarily leads to an electoral expression. In different countries of the European Union, the dissatisfaction with elites has led to abstention, a simple alternation of traditional parties, or an extreme

right-wing vote. This ensures that, in politics, there is no "space", but sensibilities that emerge and confront each other.

Pillars supporting a dangerous assumption

This assumption is based on three pillars. The first is a particular reading of the 15M movement or indignados, in which the plebeian eruption would not have any effect on the electoral balance, but would have changed the key aspects of the political orthodoxy of the moment. This would start a process or at least make possible a new political frontier which symbolically postulates the existence of a people not represented by the dominant political castes, and which is beyond left and right metaphors.

The second pillar is the development of a theoretical-communicative practice, combining the analysis and creation of unique programs for community television channels. This experiment sought to learn to translate complex analysis and diagnostics into discursive narratives and direct stories broadcast in the programs La Tuerka and Fort Apache and the high media profile of Pablo Iglesias, head of the Podemos list for European elections on major television shows. This visibility turned into a particularly powerful communication tool and symbolic catalyst for popular articulation of the campaign.

This work, sometimes depreciated by parts of the left, for being "simplistic", created a crucial discursive style in a campaign where emotions and symbols carried much weight and in the key decision to give "new meaning" to the main signifiers of the moment and so to lead the fight on favourable terrain and not one where our opponents or ideological inertia led us. Guiding this practice is the belief that politics is a struggle to build shared sensibilities that do not necessarily arise from a social condition. From this point of view, politics is not only about listening ; we must also speak and create. Taking risks and check whether the practice validates them.

Latin America's influence

The third pillar is a thorough analysis and learning of recent Latin American processes of popular rupture and constitutional overhaul. Processes driven by new national-popular majorities that required profound political changes demanding access to power and that sparked a war of positions for the conquest of the state. During these processes, and at a time when the traditional order was in a state of decomposition, virtuous interventions have opened completely new political opportunities, almost always causing shock and discomfort within the traditional left. A number of Podemos leaders went to Latin America to observe what was happening and we recognise that without the on-the-ground learning of Latin American experiences, the launch of this new political experiment in Spain would not have been possible.

Upon these three pillars, we have built a very dangerous assumption. It starts from the premise that to successfully establish a connection with a large number of disgruntled Spaniards, offering a narrative in which they can positively fit, it is necessary to mark a distance with respect to certain taboos of the traditional left. Notably, three of them.

Breaking traditional left taboos

For example, we dared to criticise the rigidity of the concept of "social", which constitutes a separate entity that

precedes politics, and which needed first to accumulate forces, and only then could translate electorally. Contrary to the argument claiming that there is "no shortcut", defended by "movementist" currents and the extreme left, Podemos - born from "above" and not "from below" - argues that election time is also a time of articulation and construction of political identities.

We also challenged the leadership taboo. According to certain liberal ideas - but also those rooted in the left - a charismatic leader is incompatible with real democracy. For Podemos, the use of the media leadership of Pablo Iglesias was a condition sine qua non of the crystallisation of political hope that allowed the aggregation of dispersed forces, in a context of disarticulation of the popular camp.

The decision, unprecedented in Spain, to use the photo of Pablo Iglesias on the ballot paper as the best-known communicative sign, has been strongly criticised by purists. But it proved decisive in an election where voters decided their vote at the last minute. This strategic use of leadership was not a complement or even an anecdote, but a central component of the political process.

Finally, the third taboo, that of words. The Podemos campaign assumed that, in politics, the signifiers themselves live within struggles to give them one direction or another, and that the choice of one depends on all positions of the authors of them. This constructivist view of political discourse has allowed a transverse appeal to a disgruntled social majority, which is beyond the left-right divide. It is these kind of divisions that the regime positions and ensures its stability. But by offering the dichotomies "democracy/oligarchy", "citizenship/caste" or even "new old" Podemos established new borders to isolate elites and propose a new identification to better position ourselves in relation to them.

Walking between precipices

Such a "secular" rather than religious use of political terms has enabled our campaign to produce a vast narrative with one foot in the specific sensibilities of the time and another in emancipatory perspectives. Lenin said that politics is "walking between precipices". Podemos built its campaign positioning itself in a still unstable balance between the powerless marginality and the full integration into the system, traversing a large consensus and assuming the risks of hegemonic politics, always impure, not to be on the left margin of the chessboard, but to reorder it. Decisive breaks usually result from a different production of meaning, always heretic and against the flow of text books and certainties.

The Spanish political system, born in 1978, is breaking up. The system is not yet broken, but it is showing large cracks and its intellectual and political elites appear to be retreating, and are on the defensive ; they are visibly worried, as has been shown with their haste in organising the monarchical succession.

The emergence of Podemos shows a possible way to attack the existing order. This raises as many hopes as questions, as many perspectives as responsibilities and difficulties, amid an accelerated time in politics where the intimidation by the powers that be will become increasingly aggressive. Contenting ourselves with recent gains is not an option. The nature of the new cycle that seems to be starting depends on the open audacity and speed of protagonists favourable to change and democratic rupture. We don't have to witness an oligarchic restoration, but focus on opening a constituent process that is built, from a plurality of positions, on a new popular will. And those who dare to propose a new project for Spain.

4 July 2014

[Revolting Europe](#) [2]

[1] The author alludes to the "Moncloa" agreements signed in 1977 between the political forces represented in the Congress of Deputies (National Assembly) and the main trade unions as well as the Spanish constitution adopted by referendum December 6, 1978.

[2] From the French; <http://www.medelu.org/L-irruption-d...>