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Portugal

A shift to the right but an uncertain future after elections in Portugal

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Overall, the right won 53% of the vote in Portugal's parliamentary elections on Sunday 10 March 2024. The Aliança Democrática (Democratic Alliance - AD), led by Luís Montenegro's Partido Social Democrata (Social Democratic Party – PSD, a member of the European People's Party), won 29.5% of the vote. The ultra-neoliberal Iniciativa Libera (Liberal Initiative -IL, a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), won 5%, while the far right CHEGA (Enough!) party, founded in 2014 and affiliated to the PID (Identity and Democracy Party), got a whopping 18%, securing 48 of the 230 seats in parliament. [1]

The Partido Socialista (Socialist Party - PS), the outgoing government party and until now holder of an absolute parliamentary majority, fell from 41.6% (2022) to 28.6%, following its overthrow as a result of questionable prosecution action against prime minister Antonio Costa, who resigned on 7 November 2023. Its government experienced an accelerated erosion, mired as it was in cases of alleged patronage and unable to respond to the housing crisis, wage erosion due to inflation and the weakening of public services. This paved the way for the right's biggest victory in decades. On its left, the Partido Comunista Português (Portuguese Communist Party -PCP) went from six to four seats, after the loss of its last elected representative in the Alentejo, and the loss of one of its two elected representatives in Setubal, despite the fact that these are its traditional strongholds. Its score dropped to 3.3%. On the other hand, the Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc – BE) managed to increase its votes slightly, maintaining a parliamentary group with 5 MPs (4.5%). On the centre-left, the LIVRE party (PVE - European Green Party) went from 1 to 4 MEPs (3.2%), forming a parliamentary group, while the animal rights party PAN retained its only MP.

Far-right win more than 1 million votes

Since the fall of the Socialist Party's government with an absolute majority, announced on 7 November 2023, polls have continued to highlight the rise of the far right. Until 2019, Portugal was an exception in a Europe where the far right was gaining ground in national parliaments. Elected as a single MP in 2019, former PSD leader André Ventura has brought the method of global Trumpism to the Portuguese context. Relying on an image of fighting corruption and launching a repressive, misogynistic, xenophobic and authoritarian agenda, Ventura has managed to drain the traditional right, combining hitherto suppressed themes such as praise of the colonial past in political articulation with sectors such as the police force. By reaching 7% in the 2022 elections, CHEGA had erased the CDS-PP, a Christian Democratic party that was the most right-wing party in the system for decades, from the benches of parliament.

Financed by the rentier sectors of the bourgeoisie and with marginalized members of the Portuguese right as its cadres, CHEGA has equipped itself with a powerful system for disseminating content on social networks, capturing the votes of thousands of abstentionists and, more worryingly, young voters. By coming out on top in the Algarve, a region that suffers from the neglect and abandonment of successive governments in terms of access to housing and public services, CHEGA has proven its ability to capture the frustration and resentment of part of the population. This is based on hate speech that blames immigrants for the housing problem and the lack of places in public services.

Throughout the campaign, Ventura, supported by Santiago Abascal himself and praised by Bolsonaro and Viktor Orbán, made a distinction between “legal” immigrants (from the former territories colonized by Portugal) and growing “uncontrolled” immigration, in his own words, from the Indian subcontinent. To be a true Trumpian avatar, ticking all the boxes, Ventura also questioned the reliability of the electoral process. Now with 48 MPs, he claims a place in the sun in the new balance within Parliament and thanks to the influence he can have on the government. In recent

years, Ventura has tried to conquer a place on the streets through demonstrations, which have proved unsuccessful, and he will now do everything he can to ensure that his electoral strength translates into a socially integrated organization, under the aegis of the “fight against corruption” and an authoritarian program. What has so far been a virtual and electoral phenomenon could take on the dangerous contours of a hate organization present in the streets.

A right victory fraught with problems

The AD (PSD+CDS) won the elections with barely more votes than in its 2022 electoral defeat, even losing votes in several districts of the country. In addition to CHEGA, it is also being squeezed to the right by the IL, whose agenda is to cut taxes, impose privatizations and slash employment laws. The AD ran a disastrous campaign, with successive appearances of former rulers from the Troika and austerity era. [2] Many of its leaders evidently still envisage restricting abortion rights, denying the climate crisis, and attacking immigrants. For the time being, we can expect a reduction in taxes for businesses, a strengthening of the private sector in the health care sector and increased protection for property owners.

After years of hesitation and while in the last election maintaining ambiguities on CHEGA's participation in a right-wing government had contributed to strengthening the absolute majority of the PS, the PSD this time adopted a “cordon sanitaire” electoral slogan promising not to govern with CHEGA, while seeking to integrate only IL. However, there is no guarantee that this solution will be stable. Now in opposition, Pedro Nuno Santos, secretary general of the PS, said on election night that this government could not count on its votes to approve the state budget in October, so the AD will depend on the votes of CHEGA. It is not yet clear whether Montenegro will anticipate the crisis before the 2025 state budget (which will be voted on in October this year), either by presenting an amending budget, or by showing himself ready for new elections or by taking the risky gamble of negotiating with CHEGA. The right will therefore govern by a thread.

PS pays the bill for the “absolute majority”

In 2019, after rejecting negotiations with parties to its left, the PS put in place a strategy aimed at winning its “absolute majority”. Using the “Macronist” tactic of presenting himself as the barrier against the far right, António Costa won this absolute majority, but he stopped dead in their tracks the gains made in previous years on issues such as the national health service, the housing crisis and the valorization of wages eroded by the effect of inflation. For two years, the PS operated at a slower pace while suspicions of mismanagement and even corruption multiplied within the government.

The new leadership of the PS, under Pedro Nuno Santos, initially presented as a representative of the “left wing” of the party, turned out to be a hoax, embodying the defence of the legacy of the “absolute majority.” During the campaign, he proposed a reciprocal agreement to the AD so as not to prevent the other from governing if it did not have an absolute majority in parliament.

This orientation proved unable to attract the votes of young people and abstentionists. The PS has thus discredited the hypothesis of a new parliamentary majority, defended by all parties to the left of the PS, to confront the right and respond to the failures of recent years. And the PS campaign facilitated a right-wing victory, the most significant in the history of Portuguese democracy.

Now in opposition, the PS promises not to vote for motions of censure in the Assembly, which allows the AD to form a government. And at the same time, it is betting on the rapprochement of the AD with CHEGA and says that it will not vote on the state budgets. Without an alternative program on the issues that led to the discrediting of the “absolute majority,” this opposition will be meaningless, and there will be no shortage of voices within the PS calling for salvaging the budgets presented by the right.

Left must put forward clear programme and unitary policy

The electoral erosion of the PCP is the result of political mistakes and permanent sectarianism. By rejecting three-way negotiations (PS, BE and PCP) during the years of the *geringonça* (the “thing,” as the PS government formed in 2015 with the support of the BE and the PCP) was called, the PCP left the PS with the role of the left’ political centre. In parliament and in the social and trade union movements, the PCP hindered unitary initiatives on issues where the PS was a blocking force. Two years ago, its campist stance on the invasion of Ukraine led the PCP to a strong isolation, even in sectors of the population where it still had some influence. During the campaign, the oscillation between claims of political autonomy and unclear calls for a left-wing majority led to its worst result since 1975.

One of the protagonists of the evening was LIVRE (“free” in Portuguese). Initially founded as “the party of one man” (Rui Tavares, a former MEP who broke with the BE in 2011), LIVRE has followed a trajectory of political realignment and organic growth, gaining membership in the European Green Party and basing its entire programme on fervent praise of the European Union. Analysed in this way, it is to the right of the PS, which puts forward a muted and cynical criticism of the European establishment. Banking on an environmentalist agenda and innovative rhetoric, Tavares embodies a subordinate annex of the PS. During the campaign, he supported a three-camp theory, according to which the exclusion of CHEGA (the first camp) from any governmental solution or parliamentary majority should allow the second camp, made up of the PS, BE, PCP, LIVRE and the pro-animal PAN party to govern with more MPs than the AD and IL (the third camp). This thesis has fizzled out: in the elections, we witnessed an unprecedented growth of the far right, due to the decline in abstention, and any government resulting from an agreement between the PS, the BE, the PCP, LIVRE and the PAN would fail in the face of a joint rejection of AD, CHEGA and IL.

In this unfavourable context, the BE was able to maintain its parliamentary representation and even win 35,000 additional votes. As stated in the resolution of the Bloc’s National Office, “the Bloc’s resilience is due to its clarity on three essential aspects: 1) clarity of the content of governance of public services, social rights, labour and income; 2) confrontation with the economic power, by denouncing the right-wing tax counter-reform and by confronting the rentiers, real estate and all the beneficiaries of inflation (banks, hypermarkets, energy), who have moreover shown their hostility to the Bloc; and finally, 3) confrontation with the far right, creating for it the only serious difficulty it has faced in the entire campaign: explaining the millions at the origin of its financing”.

Faced with the rise of the far right and the announcement of a radicalized right-wing government, the left has a dual mission: to organise the struggle against the new government and to present a credible alternative. Popular mobilization against the conservative agenda must take place in the streets, relying on the strength of the LGBTQI+, feminist and anti-racist movements and by contestation of the dominant ideology, on social networks and in schools, currently under the strong influence of the far right and ultra-neoliberals. Spaces for meeting and convergence will be essential to build a unitary policy that offers the country hope for an alternative government, on key issues such as wages, housing and public services. This struggle has already begun and will be an essential step in the gigantic popular mobilization expected on 25 April 2024 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution.

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PS:

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[1] In Portugal there are just over 9 million registered voters – 6,140,289 people voted in this election, or a rate of participation of 66.2 %.

[2] The Troika is the term used for the three signatories of the 2011 memorandum with the Portuguese state, namely the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission and the European Central Bank.