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European Union/ Spanish State

Decline of bipartisanship, rise of Podemos and strengthening of the Catalan sovereignist movement

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In spite of the fact that participation was only 45.85%, the elections to the European Parliament on May 25, 2014 in became the first test of the evolution of the Spanish political and social situation since the Popular Party (PP) came to power in late 2011. For this reason, although they are not extrapolable to the general elections, the results mark a turning point in the context of the worsening of the crisis of regime and the cycle of struggles inaugurated three years ago by the 15M (the movement of the indignant), indicating a radical change in the political panorama in the years to come.

The most important note to be made is the beginning of the end of bipartisanship (PP-PSOE), as has been recognized by almost all of the media. The decline of the two major parties is beyond doubt, although the PSOE was the primary "victim". The PP went from 42.12 per cent of the votes and 24 seats in 2009 to 26.05% and 16 seats today. The PSOE went from 38.78% of the votes and 23 seats to 23 per cent and 14 seats. Never before has the combined result of the two parties been below 50% of the vote. Therefore, it seems that we can predict that this trend will be difficult to reverse at the level of the state, although it is likely that it will be expressed unevenly (as in the case of Andalusia, where the PSOE held up relatively well) during the autonomous community and municipal elections in May 2015.

Decline of the PSOE

The PSOE is without a doubt the most affected by the election results, which confirmed the prolonged crisis of the party since the last general election. The latter is compounded by the decomposition of the Partido Socialista de Catalunya (PSC) due to its subordination to the growing Spanish centralist discourse of the secretary general of the PSOE, Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba, who has now announced his resignation. The decrease in the number of votes in the Catalan autonomous community, from 36% in 2009 to 14.28%, has corroborated the growing loss of social support in an area which, in the past, was one of the main strongholds of the PSOE.

The reaction of the PSOE leadership direction to the electoral disaster was to convene an extraordinary Congress in July of this year, in parallel with the announcement of "open primary" elections for the purpose of electing Rubalcaba's replacement as leader. A process of internal debate has thus opened which will discuss not only who will assume the leadership, but also the search for a project to make us forget the responsibility of this party in the "austericide" and connect it to a social base. Although a part of the latter is sheltering in abstention, it seems that a fraction has this time expressed its rejection of the PP by voting in favor of other formations (Podemos, Izquierda Unida) or, in the case of Catalonia, in favor of ERC-Catlan Republican Left (with the ex-president of the Generalitat – as the executive of the autonomous community is called - Pasqual Maragall) and Ciutadans (the "Party of Citizens", which is opposed to Catalan independence).

Breakthrough for Podemos

The great surprise of these elections has been, without a doubt - as recognized by the majority of the mass media who ignored it during the campaign - the electoral success achieved by Podemos ("We can"): 1,239,133 votes, 7.96% of votes cast and 5 seats. It has proved to be the third political force in some autonomous communities such as Madrid (with 11.27% of the votes), Asturias, Cantabria and Aragon as well as in many cities and villages. It is

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something new in our electoral history. In just five months, this list has managed to elicit a hope among many different social sectors affected by the crisis, seeking to be the main catalyst for the popular outrage expressed in recent years in the face of the corrupt “political caste” in the service of the Troika and Merkel.

This initiative - born in January 2014, with Pablo Iglesias Turrión as leader and a large number of circles which were created and formed in more than 400 cities, neighborhoods and villages - has developed a campaign based on self-financing (its campaign budget amounted to a little over 130,000 euros) and a participatory method, active in particular in social networks. It was manifested also through primaries to decide the candidates on the list, in which 33,165 persons participated. A “method” which has demonstrated that other ways of doing politics are possible and which has been underpinned by a discourse in which the denunciation of the “political caste” has been accompanied by separate proposals, such as the firm defence of social rights, the denunciation of the “rescue” of the banks and of the illegitimate debt as well as the claim to sovereignty and the right to decide, i.e. to carry out a consultation in favor of independence, in particular in Catalonia.

Its entry into the European Parliament with five representatives has caused concern among the parties of the regime and the right wing media. But this entry also gives Podemos an enormous responsibility in faced with the hope for change caused in so little time on the theme: “Yes, we can” not only resist, but put an end to the dictatorship of the 1%. With its eruption as the fourth biggest political force at the level of the Spanish State, it is forced to convert itself into a reference for new groupings and convergences with other social and political forces in the perspective of a mobilization in the street and preparation for the next autonomous and municipal elections.

Progress of the United Left

Izquierda Unida (IU, United Left, in alliance with other similar forces within the candidacy of the Izquierda Plural) rose from 3.71% in 2009 to 9.99% of the vote, with a total of 1,555,275 votes and 6 seats. The United Left has therefore tripled its results, but has not been able to hide its inability to connect with significant social sectors which, on this occasion, have opted for Podemos, in particular in places as symbolic as Madrid. It is therefore likely that also within this party a process of reflection will take place on the need for a convergence with Podemos which, to be credible, should involve a reassessment of the question of its participation in governments, as in Andalusia, alongside the PSOE, an internal de-bureaucratization and more sensitivity to the claims of new forms of practising politics which have for a long time come from the various social actors (15M, Platform against evictions, the Mareas, Marches for Dignity and so on) that have emerged over the past three years.

Rise of the sovereignist movement

The third new given, although expected, lies in the transformation of the ERC (Catalan Republican Left) into the biggest electoral force in Catalonia, with 23.67% of the vote against 9.2% in 2009, surpassing the right wing nationalist party CiU, which fell from 22.44% to 21.86%. It is necessary to add to these two parties the rise of ICV-EUiA (Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds-Esquerra Unida i Alternativa) which has increased from 6.08% to 10.30%; this formation is also in favor of the right to self-determination of Catalonia. The total vote of these forces was high, at 55%, while those opposed to independence (PSC, PP and Ciutadans) won a little more than 30% of the vote. Thus the rise of the sovereignist and pro-independence movement was confirmed, as well as the progress of a firm desire to call for a consultation - a referendum - on November 9, 2014.

In the Basque Country, EH Bildu - with 2.08% of the votes, becoming the biggest political force in Navarre - won a seat, reaffirming its pro-independence project. Primavera Europea - an alliance between Compromis (a coalition of a

formation originating from IU and another of Valencian nationalist origins), Equo (linked to the European Greens) and Chunta Aragonesista - won a seat, with 1.91% of the vote.

Faced with this set of forces, others like Unión Progreso y Democracia (UPyD) (with 6.49% of the vote and 4 seats) and Ciudadanos (with 3.16% and 2 seats) have obtained a parliamentary presence, whose specific characteristics are based on the claim to lie at the margin of the left-right axis and in favor of the defense of a Spanish nationalism which is secular, but bellicose faced with “peripheral” nationalisms, while affirming a radical rejection of corruption.

New political phase

Thus, we are entering a new political phase in which the weakening of the fundamental pillars of the regime and the rise of new forces which identify with “the spirit of 15M” can help to renew and intensify social mobilization on the path already initiated during the Marches of Dignity of March 22 March last, with the aim of forcing this government and the Troika to end their policies of “austericide”.

In summary, as indicated by Josep Maria Antentas of Izquierda Anticapitalista (in the daily *Publico*) : “This is the time to work to articulate an anti-austerity social-political majority favorable to the opening of democratic constituent processes which break the chains forged by fear in 1978” (the year of adoption of the post-Francoist constitution). A necessary horizon which passes by the understanding, as Antentas also says, that the Catalan consultation of November 9 is far from being the business of Catalans only, since “if Rajoy is defeated in Catalonia, he will be mortally wounded as will be the regime of which he is the guarantor”.