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Portugal

Socialist Party Set for Election Comeback?

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On February 20 Portugal goes to the polls. Since the middle of last year, the right-wing Portuguese government has been in crisis - a crisis which led to the resignation and flight of its prime minister Durao Barroso. The Right tried to hold on with a new premier, but faced with popular indignation, the president was compelled to call elections. How is the militant left approaching this event?

Announced to the country the last day of November, the decision taken by the President of the Republic to dissolve Parliament put an end to four months of populist and erratic government by the right wing PSD-PP alliance. [1] [<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/leftblocstar.gif>] Symbol of the Portuguese Left Bloc

From the working class to various sectors of industry and banking, the country more than celebrated President Jorge Sampaio's decision, which his electors had been expecting from him since July, the only thing he was reproached with being that it had come so late.

The degradation of economic and social indicators, the lack of confidence in the government of Santana Lopes, which was beginning to affect conservative sectors, in particular in the world of industry and finance, as well as the untimely resignation of a minister three days after his nomination, were the decisive factors in the president's decision.

After Durao Barroso's abandonment of the government, the opinion of all the left parties was finally taken into account and the early elections offered the chance for a new political cycle in our country.

The flight of Barroso and the attempted coronation of Santana Lopes

In the European elections last June the right-wing alliance experienced the worst electoral defeat in its history. Addressing the country on election night, Durao Barroso announced that he "would draw the consequences of it". But in fact, a few days later, he changed his name to José Manuel Barroso and announced that he was a candidate for the post of President of the European Commission, designating as his successor Pedro Santana Lopes, vice-president of his party and Mayor of Lisbon.

The argument of the "prestige" of the responsibility to which he had been appointed by the Council of Europe was used ad nauseam, in an attempt to wipe out from the collective memory two and a half years of a government that had worsened unemployment, provoked the degradation of the quality of life of a big majority of the population and had no scruples about favouring the big economic and financial groups.

The result that came from the ballot box in June was obviously more than just a judgement on the different projects and conceptions of Europe: it was a condemnation of the government because of its domestic policies, its participation in the Iraq War, its choice of playing the role of Bush's lackey during the war summit held in the Azores [2] and the demagoguery of its discourse on cutting back and controlling public spending at the same time as privatisation was advancing in sectors like health and energy.

This argument about the prestige that the country would gain by having a Portuguese at the head of the European

Commission influenced the SP and a large part of the press and of opinion formers, putting into the background the question of the succession to the government of the Republic.

The two weeks between the announcement of the dissolution of the Barroso government and the President's decision to accept the nomination of his chosen successor were days of acute anxiety and indignant protests. Those were the days that saw the Belem gardens, in front of the presidential palace, filled with demonstrators demanding that the president call elections. The joyful and creative atmosphere of these demonstrations, the first called by SMS, will be long remembered.

Sampaio's decision to appoint Santana Lopes's government led to the resignation of the general secretary of the SP, his friend and political companion in arms [3], provoking a congress and the election of a new leader of the party. Ferro Rodrigues, the leader who had faced up to the strongest attacks against his party on the occasion of a judicial process, still in course, concerning sexual abuse of children and a paedophile network, who had always stood up to the governing majority party and who had just won a resounding victory in the European elections, couldn't go on after Sampaio's decision.

His resignation opened the way to the return of previous SP leader Ferro ('General') Guterres, a mixture of social-democratic conformity and technocracy who is today fighting for power without the slightest significant project for a change in the policies conducted over recent years by the Right.

Between absolute majority and change

Leading in all the opinion polls, the SP is getting ready to start governing the country again, and is gambling on winning an absolute majority in the elections on February 20, 2005. The disaster of the Right is so profound and obvious that the Socialists don't need to do much to win. But the real question is: how are they going to govern if they don't win an absolute majority? What policy of alliances, what parliamentary majority will they be able to have?

The Right has lost no time in accusing the SP of wanting to govern with the Left Bloc. The bourgeois press quotes anonymous SP sources favourable to an agreement with the Bloc and categorically opposed to any agreement with the Communist Party. In a campaign that is being conducted in the political centre, where the SP is aiming at the conservative electorate, this impossible hypothesis is the Right's argument and the SP's nightmare. The party is denying, through the official voice of its leadership, the rumours from anonymous sources, but it isn't succeeding in silencing the chorus of these false rumours.

On the Bloc's side, all the clarifications concerning this scenario are being marginalised, absorbed in the tumult of a manipulative campaign organised by the Right.

Everything indicates that the SP campaign will bring the clarification necessary, because of its content and the proposals it will put forward. And first of all because of the author of the Socialist Party programme: former European Commissioner Antonio Vitorino, from whom we can only expect a programme of continuity of austerity budgetary policies and their social consequences for the country.

Secondly, because as the political debate clearly shows, the SP will seek its absolute majority by trying to turn the generalised indignation against the government of the right-wing alliance into votes, all the while fighting it for space and for the electorate with propositions that continue anti-social policies and the destruction of public services. In this respect the declaration by SP general secretary José Socrates is blindingly clear, affirming his intention to keep

"what was good" in the policies of the Right, in several domains:

- ▶ **Health:** the previous Socialist government of Guterres introduced the formula of privatising public hospitals by privatising the management of two new hospitals. The Barroso government privatised 32 more. The Socialist leadership has already indicated that it intends to go further and apply this model of private management to the country's thousands of health centres. And this at a time when the problems of functioning of these models of privatisation are starting to become quite obvious to the general public.
- ▶ **Obsession with the budget deficit:** like the Right, the SP prefers to continue to look for extraordinary recipes via the sale of state assets in order to make up the deficit, rather than renegotiating the Growth and Stability Pact in the European institutions and admitting that this pact represents a model that limits the possibility of social policies and justifies the destruction of vital public services.
- ▶ **Unemployment:** half a million unemployed, with an increase of 400 new unemployed every day, that's the balance sheet of the right-wing government. But this reality isn't making the SP promise to go back on the whole of Barroso government's labour legislation. The end of collective bargaining agreements and the extreme insecurity of labour relations are the hallmark of the Right in the field of labour relations: the SP and José Socrates, its general secretary, seem to be taking over the inheritance.
- ▶ **Incineration of dangerous industrial waste:** as Minister of the Environment in the previous Socialist government, José Socrates launched a project of co-incineration in cement works. This excellent piece of business for the bosses of the cement industry was then challenged on all sides for environmental reasons and also by the populations most directly concerned. Today, the SP isn't saying clearly what its policy will be on this question.
- ▶ **Iraq and NATO:** In spite of the promise to withdraw from Iraq the soldiers of the National Republican Guard (GNR), the SP hastened to make it clear that an agreement with the Bloc would only be possible if Portugal's membership of the Atlantic Alliance was not questioned. For the Bloc, that is quite clearly an unacceptable condition.

Decline and schizophrenia of the PCP

While maintaining considerable influence in working-class areas and in the unions, the Communist Party is an organisation in difficulty. First of all because of its internal debates, which are invariably settled by means of expulsions.

Secondly, by the contradiction between its official propaganda, avowedly Marxist-Leninist, and its desire to be seen as a possible government partner for the SP. Its new leader, Jeronimo de Sousa, has already announced that the party has excellent cadres available for such a role.

But the growing sectarianism of the road followed by this leadership is isolating it from the world and transforming the PCP into a party whose electoral decline is becoming accentuated, without proposals for the crisis the country is going through and without any dynamic that might bring a hope for change [4]. The participation of leaders of Renovação Comunista - a small organisation of the most recent dissident cadres of the CP - on the Bloc's lists, confirms us as the main enemies of the Stalinist leadership. But at rank and file level there are many points of convergence, we are involved in the same struggles and the question of influence in the social movement is a permanent battleground between the Bloc and the PCP.

Abortion: the national shame

In 1988, with more than 60 per cent of abstentions, the Right won a narrow victory in the referendum on the modification of the law on abortion [5] For the Left, the defeat was so significant that in 2000, on the night of their first election victories, the Bloc's MPs committed themselves to do everything possible to change the law in the direction of making abortion on demand possible up until the twelfth week of pregnancy.

This was also the first point of the post-electoral agreement of the PSD-PP alliance which has governed us for the last two and a half years. The PP, a party of the radical Right, managed to impose the law of silence thanks to its government agreement with the PSD. This silence became all the more difficult as the injustice of the law became obvious, with a succession of legal verdicts and humiliations against poor women who had had to resort to abortion. Each verdict made more evident the hypocrisy of a system that considers women who abort as criminals.

The obvious changes in Portuguese society show that there exists on this question a new social majority that doesn't agree with judging these women. But the question was blocked by the parliamentary majority and at the end of 2003 the Bloc launched an enormous campaign of signatures to demand new referendum.

More than 120,000 signatures obtained in the streets, with huge popular support, allowed us to put the question back at the centre of the political scene and in spite of the failure in Parliament, abortion has not ceased to be a permanent and decisive theme in the country, to divide the Right itself, and to force the new Socialist leadership to commit itself.

There was a comic episode around this question last spring, when the organisation [Women on Waves](#) arrived in Portugal with its clinic-ship. Paulo Portas, Minister of Defence and leader of the PP, in violation of all the laws of the community, sent out the Navy to stop the ship from anchoring. For many weeks, the ship belonging to the Dutch NGO was kept under surveillance on the high seas by warships. On land a noisy discussion broke out over abortions and over the government's authoritarianism and led to it becoming clear that the country was being held hostage by a small party of the Radical right that was sharing power in the government.

Another issue that did the Right a lot of damage was the question of the control of the means of communication, in particular when a private TV channel carried out a purge, removing a very popular political commentator. This person was none other than Barroso's predecessor as leader of the PSD, a man of the organic Right, but who on several occasions criticised the government's policies. Santana Lopes's government couldn't put up with these criticisms and used the state's capacity for blackmail on the question of the privatisation of the telecommunication network, for which the TV channel was a candidate, to force it to get rid of the offending commentator.

This affair and others on a smaller scale highlighted the strategy of manipulation and control of information by a government which had not been legitimised by an election and which was ready to do anything to stay in power.

For the Left, the question that is posed, more than the scale of the defeat of the right, is: what will the next government be? Will it be a government of an absolute majority for the SP, with a bit of social rhetoric, but which will fundamentally continue liberal policies? Or will there on the contrary be a left majority capable of forcing a minority Socialist government to give clear commitments for the changes the country needs?

APPENDIX: Ten priorities for the first hundred days

From the electoral programme of the Left Bloc, ten measures have been extracted, which could be immediately

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applied and could open the way to a profound change. They represent clear priorities, concrete and capable of mobilising, which rely on social forces to impose a new cycle of policies.

1. **Create jobs and reduce job insecurity** - Repeal of the Labour Pact (a whole series of measures against collective bargaining agreements, extending limited-term contracts, adopted by the right-wing government), re-establishment of collective bargaining agreements and reduction from six years to one year of the period for limited-term contracts. An emergency plan for jobs, with investment in the creation of jobs for the long-term unemployed and for young people.
2. **An end to the prosecution of women who abort** - An immediate change in the law, to put an end to the criminalisation of women and authorise abortion in the framework of the National Health Service during the first twelve weeks of pregnancy, at the demand of the women concerned.
3. **Restore the National Health Service** - Bring privatised hospitals into the public administrative sector, creation of a Central Health Administration with powers to co-ordinate and plan the whole public sector.
4. **Fight corruption and tax fraud** - Abolish banking secrecy in order to be able to confirm tax declarations, under the control of a specialised unit, with rigorous guarantees of professional secrecy.
5. **Regularisation of immigrants without papers who have made an application to have them** - Immediate regularisation of the nearly 70,000 immigrants who have already applied for residents' permits.
6. **Withdraw the GNR from Iraq** - Withdrawal of all Portuguese military forces and ending of all political or military collaboration in the occupation of Iraq.
7. **Change education** - Suspend the Ninth Year exams, which it is impossible to organise correctly, reconsider the model of competitive examinations for attributing teaching posts and increase full-time staff in schools.
8. **Improve food safety** - Imposition of a national moratorium on cultivation of Genetically Modified Organisms, introduce compulsory labelling and information for consumers.
9. **Revise the Growth and Stability Pact** - Argue, on the level of the European Union, for a revision of the restrictive conditions of the pact, stop including public investment in the calculation of deficits.
10. **Stop the abuse of detention on remand and facilitate access to justice** - Modification of the Code of Penal Procedure to limit the use of remand to particularly serious and dangerous crimes, carrying sentences of more than five years; encouragement of alternative measures. Reduction of costs to facilitate access to justice.

[1] The Social-Democratic Party (which in spite of its name has no links with European social democracy) and the Popular Party were strongly rejected in the European elections last June. The right-wing governmental alliance PSD-PP got 33.2 per cent of the vote, the Socialist Party 44.5 per cent, the Communist Party 9 per cent and the Left Bloc 4.9 per cent.

[2] Barroso was, along with Blair, the only European leader to claim that he had seen with his own eyes the proof of weapons mass destruction. The Summit of the Azores brought together Bush, Blair, Aznar and Barroso to announce the beginning of military operations in Iraq, which were unleashed a week later.

[3] Sampaio and Ferro Rodrigues had followed together the trajectory of the MES, a left-wing organisation, half way between the reformist left and the revolutionary left, which had had some influence at the time of the 1974 Revolution and died out in the 1980s. They were considered to be the "left of the SP".

[4] Although it still has a significant electoral representation, 6.9 per cent and 12 MPs at the 2002 legislative elections, the PCP is losing votes to the Bloc in all the polling stations where young people vote and is starting to lose overall in the big urban centres.

[5] At the time, Socialist Prime Minister Antonio Guterres announced that he would vote with the Right and the Catholic Church, although the SP had campaigned for a "yes" to a change in the law.