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Spanish State

# After the fall of Rajoy in the Spanish state: the unstable succession?

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**Does the fall of Rajoy open up a new political cycle in the Spanish state? Can Sánchez stabilize the political situation? What will be the attitude of Ciudadanos, which has become the first option of the ruling classes? What role could Podemos play in this new situation?**

1. Without a doubt, to see the Popular Party (PP) driven out of power produces enormous satisfaction. The abrupt and unexpected form - a motion of censorship with highly improbable geometry - that allowed Rajoy to be expelled from the Palace of Moncloa was particularly cruel to the PP, which has an absolutely patrimonial conception of power.

Political crises are generally conducive to surprises and changes of scenario. They operate in the field of political representation, which has its own particular logic, even though they fit into a specific social and economic context, in which determined relationships of forces and of power prevail, defining a given range of possibilities. One of their characteristics lies in the inability of the ruling elite to centralize and unify their interests in a global perspective to avoid a permanent headlong forward rush and the hasty actions of actors in distress in the internal play of the system of representation. There are frequently imbroglios and that of these last few days was a major one.

So this is the end of a stage. What is coming up now is nevertheless uncertain. Certainly better than what we have been given so far, but in no case a government of "change", if we give the term a strong and authentic meaning. The events took place within the framework of the parliamentary logic of a system of representation in crisis and not as an operation emanating from the state sphere.

They are leading to a change that does not enjoy much sympathy among the politico-financial elite and the state apparatus, whose choices for dealing with the crisis of the regime have long been focused on the option of Alberto Rivera (the president of Ciudadanos). It is as if the "spirit of offensive resistance" of the PP and the shadow of a neo-restorationist threat from Ciudadanos had generated enough antibodies, not to provoke a break from the regime or force a solid self-reform from above, but to activate the improbable mechanisms making possible an unlikely resolution of a prolonged institutional crisis.

The rise of Sánchez embodies an imperfect succession, a succession almost against the prevailing wind, which reflects as much the depth of the political crisis as its limits. A PSOE government replaces a PP government, but in unprecedented conditions of weakness.

2. Sanchez is a person with changing ideological convictions. But his principal quality is tenacity. To get to where he is now, he played every possible role, doing one thing and the opposite within in a very short time. Throughout his political career, he has never presented any project that even only timidly stands out from neoliberal orthodoxy.

To survive politically during his first period as general secretary of the PSOE (from July 2014 to October 2016), he had to oppose any logic of "a grand coalition" with the PP, and he realized he was staking his future in the competition with Podemos for the leadership of the left. Following his resignation, after the internal coup that targeted him, he was forced to reinvent himself by engaging in a regenerating rhetoric, left and democratic, and by giving a political meaning and a coherent problematic to his project of resuming his post as general secretary, thus channelling the malaise of the party rank and file towards a project of regeneration of a political force, the mediocrity of whose apparatus was a source of shame for its own militants. But once he reconquered his post in June 2017, he quickly gave up any left-wing inclinations and, engulfed by the Catalan crisis, he bowed to the *raison d'état*, without any ifs or buts.

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All these complicated twists and turns as the head of the PSOE have allowed him to acquire a relative but real autonomy with regard to the economic and media powers and the state apparatus concerning his policy of alliances which, when the time came, proved decisive for being able to present the motion of censure against Rajoy.

3. Sánchez is coming to power with no plan except to try to survive and consolidate a government policy which seeks on the one hand to comply with the strictest neoliberal orthodoxy and on the other to complement that by measures with real or symbolic impact on the democratic and civic terrain and in social policy. In short, a neoliberalism mitigated by social palliatives, progressive values and a de-escalation of authoritarian politics.

He will try to set out a battery of proposals, including the announced reform of the "gag law", [1] intimately linked to mainstream progressiveness and which generally prove to be as spectacular as they are superficial, which does not make them less necessary.

The goal of the head of the government will be to strengthen himself by the exercise of power, to get a weakened PSOE back on its feet and to reaffirm its hegemony on the left by marginalizing Podemos, in order to subsequently be at the head of a government in a less precarious position. Sánchez will not have much room for manoeuvre. What he has may even shrink sharply in the face of the perspective of a deterioration of the economic situation, in a delicate conjuncture on a European level.

He will be faced with the fierce opposition of a right that controls the Senate and holds the majority in the Bureau of Congress, while there is fierce competition between the PP and Ciudadanos to appear as the main spearhead against the left. In 2004, the political, media and cultural right never recognized the legitimacy of Zapatero's victory after the attacks of Atocha on March 11th, nor will it accept the legitimacy of Sánchez today.

Paradoxically, Sanchez's main asset is the strategic disorientation of those who brought him to power, Podemos and the Catalan independentists.

4. Apart from the PP, Ciudadanos is the big loser in this situation. Credited with a meteoric rise by the polls, it had only to continue to contemplate the erosion of Rajoy and harvest the fruit during the next election. The turn of events obviously thwarts the plans of the party of Rivera, a party that in general has a weak capacity for real reaction beyond its opportunist propensity to take advantage of favourable circumstances.

The unpredictability that characterises any situation of crisis confronts Rivera with two opposing scenarios. Either the possibility of remaining confined to opposition over a long period, and seeing whether his rise in the opinion polls will take off again, in a context where Sánchez turns out to be capable of stabilizing the situation; or else to capitalize on the wearing down and possible failure of the PSOE government, to then establish himself as the winner of the next elections and demonstrate the definitive return of bipartisanship.

We must neither take Rivera for dead nor consider that his victory is inevitable. We must rather have a clear idea of the responsibilities of the left: the *raison d'état* to which Sánchez is loyal and towards which Iglesias seems to lean can become the landing strip for Ciudadanos if the new government proves to be incapable of offering something other than the same old politics.

5. Exhilarated by the Catalan crisis and having become the preferred option of economic and financial power, the Ciudadanos project is a combination of youthful modernity and a business friendly approach in the style of Macron, of identity-based Spanish nationalism and exploitation of social resentment, compatible in addition with a slightly modern and liberal-competitive touch in questions of society and lifestyle, such as its position during the women's strike of March 8, when Ciudadanos tried (not without contradictions or ridicule) to stand out from traditional

anti-feminist neo-conservatism.

If we applied the hackneyed term of "populism" to Ciudadanos, we would have to take into account that its populism is neoliberal, nationalist, non-solidarity and modernizing. It sells to the middle classes and to the declassed working classes the meritocratic dream of an employer or a professional who succeeds, in the image and likeness of the party's own leaders. It summons, in a classical schema, national identity as a mechanism for the dissolution of class antagonisms, and exploits in a non-solidarity sense the frustration of the most disadvantaged layers, in order line them up against other sectors of the subaltern classes.

This last aspect, as highlighted by N<sup>o</sup>ria Alabao [2], is the most recent in the politics of Ciudadanos and the most decisive feature in the medium term as to the success or failure of its attempt to convert electoral and media sympathies into a project of socio-cultural hegemony in the longer term. It is not sure that it will succeed, and the shortage of local cadres, the weakness of its organizational base and its lack of punch significantly complicate its progress.

Ciudadanos was born as a party built on television platforms and as the right-wing superficial-mediatised imitation of Podemos, but deprived of the militant and activist dynamic that characterized the formation of Pablo Iglesias in its early days. It is weighed down by its original limits in terms of organization and political culture. But, without a doubt, it would be a very ironic paradox if Ciudadanos turned out to be capable of sinking roots and really implanting itself on the ground, whereas Podemos is undergoing a process which is hollowing out its base as a result of affirming a relationship with society that is more and more exclusively electoral and mediatised.

6. Podemos presents itself on this new scene weakened by its permanent internal crisis and by important errors as regards its relations with the PSOE. After dynamiting the political landscape with its anti-caste, anti-regime discourse and its rejection of bipartisanship, with its eruption in 2014, it took a radical turn once the general elections of December 20th, 2015 were over, setting as an immediate horizon a coalition government of both parties. This proposal of a government with the PSOE resulted in an unnecessary rehabilitation of the latter as a party of change.

It was the same with the abandonment of the schema "pro-regime forces and caste versus. constituent and popular forces", with the acritical and abrupt reappearance of the "right vs. left" schema, moreover in its most superficial version, that is to say by making relations with the PSOE the structuring element of this schema. Furthermore, this turning towards the PSOE in terms of a government of coalition took place without any examination of the situation nor any kind of public programmatic discussion and, therefore, without formulating a clear agenda of anti-austerity and democratic measures (with the exception of the Catalan referendum) which can be used to expose political differences between the two parties.

What has emerged since then is the inability to simultaneously maintain an anti-bipartisan discourse and a unitary policy towards the PSOE.

7. In the new stage that is beginning, the worst scenario for Podemos would be that Sánchez capitalized on its successes and that on the other hand Podemos remained stigmatized by its failures. To avoid this, it must appear as an autonomous force, capable of exerting pressure on the government, in symbiosis with struggles and social organizations. The renewed demand of Iglesias to form a government with the PSOE is, on the contrary, to move in the wrong direction, that of complete integration into the space and the logic of government. Beyond that, the basic question for Podemos is whether it is going to help moderate expectations of social change or, on the contrary, fight to maintain them at a high level by exerting maximum pressure on Sánchez.

In the current historical conjuncture, marked by the harshness of the political and social situation, by the accumulated

weight of decades of retreats in the absence of any decisive victory and by the lack of alternative socio-cultural points of reference, the main adversary of any project of social change is the tendency to conformism. In other words, the abyssal gap between the difficulties of daily life and expectations. This always leads to a lesser evil policy which, in the long run, proves a deadly adversary for forces like Podemos.

Embellishing the "change" that Sanchez claims to be making does not help us to remain vigilant and to prepare for a policy of pushing forward and overflowing. Perhaps this is just a trivial anecdote, but the image of Podemos deputies shouting "SÍ- s'puede!" ("Yes, you can!") In parliament after the investiture of the new president appeared as a sinister self-parody.

8. Different scenarios for the future are imaginable, but schematically three options can be defined. The first would be the relative stabilization of the political situation to the advantage of Sánchez. This requires a government that keeps Rajoy's economic policy intact, while spraying it with some secondary social measures, making some dramatic change on the democratic terrain and relaxing the situation with Catalonia, but without any major changes.

Sánchez's path would then be in a certain sense the most audacious in terms of a stuttering self-reform of the regime, insofar as it supposes the definitive neutralization of Podemos as an alternative and the deactivation of a disoriented Catalan independence movement. But this requires an audacity that has been lacking so far both in the political personnel and in the most intimate circles of power, as well as a consensus in the media and in intellectual circles of which there is no sign today. The PSOE is too weak and Sánchez and his team lack depth and strong links with a financial oligarchy that for the moment is not putting its money on him.

If, in the end, an operation by the left (and by the plurinational flank) was successful at the state level, it would be rather a surprising and almost accidental event, and to a large extent the result of the strategic weaknesses of the opponents of the regime.

9. The second option is that of a precarious, unstable and fragile government, harassed in the media by the right, unable to register visible victories, reduced to a simple transitory change in bankruptcy, which rushes headlong towards elections without being able to reinforce itself. In this hypothesis, two opposite scenarios emerge.

The first, faced with a failure of Sánchez, victim of the harassment of the right and trapped in his social-liberal and pro-regime corset, driven by the expectations of change and his inability to satisfy them, would be that Podemos succeeds in conducting a policy of permanent pressure on the PSOE. This hypothesis is not envisaged today by the majority of forecasters and if it were realized it would probably be due to a relaunch of social mobilizations rather than to the merits of the leadership of Podemos, which has anointed Sanchez without any criticism, thus showing itself to be incapable of appearing as a factor conditioning the action of the government.

The second scenario is that the possible bankruptcy of the government of Sánchez leads to a victory of the right, of Ciudadanos in all probability. As is often the case in history, a pitiful "leftist" government could then be merely the prelude to a new demoralizing victory for the right. Not a mere routine victory, but the access to power of Alberto Rivera's new right with a restorationist project of regeneration.

10. The joy expressed at Rajoy's downfall must be measured against the lack of enthusiasm felt for Sanchez. The challenge now is to push him and Podemos to go further than where they want to go. And to do so starting from organizational and strategic autonomy with regard to the apparatuses of the two political formations. In other words, it is a question of pushing in a conflictual fashion and without illusions those who are specialized in suffocating aspirations, without giving the slightest hope to those who are masters in the art of sowing cynicism.

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## After the fall of Rajoy in the Spanish state: the unstable succession?

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The evolution of the new situation will not only revolve around the question of the government's ability to reconcile its neoliberal agenda with a minimum of democratic and social measures, and thereby consolidate its authority. It will be especially important to know whether the successes appear as merits (and renunciations appear as faults) attributable to the PSOE, Podemos or the mobilization of citizens. The scenario is not the same depending on whether Sánchez imposes his orientation, whether Podemos seems to be taking the initiative or whether the social struggle enters the scene autonomously and thus constrains the movements of the major parties.

The government of Sánchez will be doubly fragile, due as much to the great heterogeneity of its parliamentary support as to the weakness of the PSOE. A situation of this type is always favourable for those who know how to use it wisely. It is not a matter of foolishly joining the hyperbolic applause that completely exaggerates the significance of what has happened and giving up the entire initiative to the government and the party apparatus, nor of falling into a fatalist defeatism that would be content to prepare a minority movement of resistance that would produce its own defeat.

The challenge lies rather in seizing the opportunity of the change of political cycle to free ourselves from the disappointment of the last few particularly sombre months and in trying to revive an agenda of social struggles and socio-political reconstruction that interact in a critical manner and not in a way that is subordinate to the forces that support the new government.

*June 18th, 2018*

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[1] The law of "citizens' security", commonly known as the "gag law", adopted by the right-wing government in June 2015, aims to criminalize a broad spectrum of forms of protest and social mobilization. Resistance to evictions and seizures of property is thus punished by a fine between 600 and 30,000 euros; the occupation of public squares and buildings by a fine between 100 and 600 euros - a measure that also targets the homeless and the migrants who camp out in public squares. The encirclement of parliament is forbidden, as is the dissemination of images of police officers. The law also provides a legal framework for the deportation of migrants to the border of Ceuta and Melilla, Spanish enclaves in Moroccan territory. At the time of the adoption of the law, strongly criticized by Amnesty International and the group of special reporters of the United Nations, the Spanish Socialist Party undertook to abrogate it if it came to power.

[2] N. Alabao, "El peligro 'populista' de C's está in Vallecas o El RavalÃ ", CTXT, May 29th, 2018.