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Portugal

After the presidential elections

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The erosion of Portugal's Socialist government is accelerating. At the beginning of March, the tragic collapse of the bridge at Entre-os-Rios, in the north of the country, led to 70 deaths and to the fall of Jorge Coelho, minister for infrastructure and strongman of the Socialist Party (PS) apparatus.

Instead of taking the opportunity to remodel the government, replacing the most unpopular members, prime minister António Guterres has chosen to leave things as they were, placing his confidence in the polls published before the accident which guaranteed him an advantage over the opposition Social Democratic Party (PSD).

Incompetence and negligence in the maintenance of the road network in Portugal has become the most widely debated issue in recent weeks. It is clear that Portugal holds the European record for road deaths, that the causes of these accidents are linked to speeding and drink driving, and that the parlous state of the roads is revealed in every bout of rainfall.

However the collapse of this century old bridge over the river Douro was not an unexpected tragedy.

On the contrary it had been predicted by local representatives and people, who in recent years have demanded that the government build a new bridge given the precarious state of the existing one. When the bridge collapsed the government met with criticism from every side.

Many other areas of governmental policy have come under fire from the opposition and the social movements. In education, secondary pupils have protested against a proposed 'reform' which forces them to choose aged 14 or 15 whether they wish to opt for a university or technological training in the final years of high school. If they opt for this latter, it will be hard to change their choice without losing a year of work or more.

The government also wishes to end restricted intakes in the universities, leading to street protests by students. More generalised protest is taking form in the universities, after some years in which the student movement has been quiet, especially against the system of financing: the registration costs paid by students go to pay the running costs of the establishments, above all wages, which the government had promised to meet. The absence of a just system of social action and poor employment opportunities after examinations are the other central themes of protest.

The chaotic state of the health system in Portugal remains one of the main concerns for the public. Inefficient budgeting in the health system, the absence of doctors and health centres capable of meeting needs in the interior of the country; the lack of qualified nurses; and the enormous waiting lists in dentistry have all been major issues.

The most visible opposition came when the government expected it least: at the concluding ceremony of the government's programme for reducing waiting lists the minister was to visit the hospital which had best fulfilled the plan, in Santarém.

However, the director of the hospital refused to be present at the ceremony, saying he would not participate in a government propaganda stunt. The minister had seen his party spoiled and announced live on television that he expected the resignation of the director. Filipe Rosas, a militant of the Left Bloc and brother of its candidate for the presidency of the Republic, refused to resign and faced with the opposition of the doctors at Santarém, the minister was forced to withdraw his threats.

Among the most significant workers' struggles has been that at the Clarks shoe factory in Arouca in the north of Portugal. This multinational proposed dismissing more than 350 workers and transferring the factory to India, where the working conditions would guarantee it easier profits. The situation led to a great wave of solidarity from the people of the area, who filled the streets of this village in the biggest demonstration anyone can remember since the April 25 revolution.

Left Bloc continues to grow

The presidential elections confirmed the beginning of the decline of the Socialists. President Sampaio was re-elected, although with a narrower margin than the opinion polls predicted. At the end of the day he had 56% of the votes, in an election where half the registered voters abstained.

The candidate of the right, a former minister of public works in the PSD government, won 34% and the Communist (PCP) candidate scored hardly more than 5%. Fernando Rosas, the Left Bloc candidate, received 3% of the votes while Garcia Pereira, a media friendly lawyer and the eternal candidate of the MRPP (Maoist) scored 1.5%.

Analysing the results from a nation-wide point of view, Fernando Rosas did better than the candidate of the PCP in nearly half the country's municipalities - a clear trend in the interior and the north, even on the islands of the Azores and Madeira.

However, the results of the Bloc candidate show substantial differences with those in the parliamentary elections where the vote was concentrated in the big urban centres. This time, the Bloc lost votes in absolute terms in Porto and Lisbon, while gaining significantly in the areas where the movement has had a weak implantation.

This growth represents a natural tendency in as much as in the presidential election 'every vote counts', whereas in the parliamentary elections the election of a deputy is much more difficult in the small constituencies.

In any case, in absolute terms, the Fernando Rosas vote remained a little below the best result of the Bloc (131,000 votes in the parliamentary elections of 1999) but this time with a much higher rate of abstention.

The dominant theme of the Bloc's campaign centred on the question of the effects of depleted uranium during NATO's bombings in Yugoslavia.

The news of the death of a Portuguese soldier that the army had tried to conceal, by refusing to pass on to the family the reports of the results of the autopsy, brought Portuguese participation in these operations into the debate and highlighted the role of those candidates (Sampaio included) who had involved Portugal in this senseless war.

In the final days before the election the government sent three ministers to the zone where Portuguese soldiers are operating to measure the contamination. Although the results of the analyses have still not been produced, on their return to Lisbon the ministers claimed that there was no danger of contamination, appealed for calm, and offered some precious assistance to the president whom they represented.

The PSR's 12th Congress

The 12th Congress of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR) [\[1\]](#) takes place on April 21st and 22nd. It is the first

Congress since the foundation of the Left Bloc, so the balance sheet of this experience will be one of the important points of debate.

The agenda of the Congress also includes discussion of the PSR's political manifesto: a text which traces the fundamental political axes which characterise the Portuguese section of the Fourth International, its evolution since the Revolution of April 25th 1974 and the debates it has experienced, oriented towards the elaboration of proposals for the definition of a third camp on the Portuguese left and for the renewal of the opposition.

Another substantial point to be debated at this Congress is the resolution on the construction of the Party, which continues the discussion opened at the organisational conference of October 2000. The debate here concerns the role of the PSR inside the Bloc and the characterisation of the Bloc itself:

"The systematic development of a strategy of transitional demands which tend to raise political and social demands originating in the immediate consciousness of the masses and extending to more direct confrontation with the regime and aiming to construct social organisations which are autonomous from the bourgeois state is a programmatic element the PSR has valued historically. However it has never been a significantly important reference in our public identification, essentially because of the lack of political weight of our current.

This dynamic of demand and action was formulated in a text at the end of the 1930s, the Transitional Programme, which Trotsky put forward on the basis of the political programmes of Marx (Programme of the German Communists) and Lenin (The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It), and applied in the Russian and German revolutions.

"Paradoxically it is a unitary policy, and not simple self-affirmation, which has allowed the PSR to be part of a movement which for the first time has given substance to the strategy of transitional demands: for example, the proposal for a wealth tax instead of abstract propaganda on the expropriation of capital. Such is the essential basis of identification between the PSR and the Bloc, and that has been the touchstone of the political impact of the Bloc's proposals.

The essential reason for all of its founding currents to have confidence in the future of the Bloc should be the same: the certainty that the concretisation of its essential programmatic objectives in the class struggle flows from the stability of its unitary policy which has given birth to a movement with a life of its own".

Left Bloc leadership meeting

The National Round Table of the Left Bloc will hold its second Convention on May 19 and 20. One of the subjects to be considered by delegates is the manifesto on local government, a document that in the (as yet incomplete) version discussed by the Round Table includes 21 electoral commitments for Bloc candidates.

Participatory and democratic planning, one of the big ideas in the document, implies the renovation of the traditional organisation of local elections, which is on the verge of exhaustion. Also proposed are the limitation of mandates; the training of local representatives and technicians; the creation of 'observatories' to evaluate local government involving associative movements; and public debate about urban planning projects.

Popular participation in drawing up the Budget and Plan of Activities is another key point of the Bloc proposals. This starts from a simple principle: between April and September of each year, it is possible to organise decentralised debates where each citizen is presented with alternatives and priorities for investment in their neighbourhood and in

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the rest of the municipality, in the short and medium term. Such would be the basis for a participatory budget in Portugal.

Another commitment is resistance to attempts to entrench a PS-PSD monopoly of local government, through draft laws ending proportional representation in the municipal executives, without substantially enlarging the powers of municipal councils.

To ensure transparency in the use of public money, the Bloc defends the necessity of inquiring into the complex of institutes, foundations, municipal enterprises and private concessions set up by local collectives.

Beyond these commitments applicable to all municipalities, the Bloc will also campaign around certain questions which are part of its political heritage: like the restriction of car circulation in the towns; and the social and ecological contract; heavy tax penalisation of unoccupied buildings; an end to the urban expansion of metropolitan areas through the renovation of existing housing; a new policy of combating drugs dependency through combating the sources of insecurity, among other measures.

To deliberate these matters among others, the Bloc has held a series of conferences from March onwards. However, local government issues will not dominate the agenda of the Convention.

The draft political resolution proposes that the central campaign for 2001 will be the question of abortion, which is still banned in Portugal. In 1988 parliament approved a law allowing the termination of pregnancy up to 12 weeks. Since then, the PS and PSD concluded an agreement to submit the question to a referendum, an instrument never before used in Portugal.

Although the polls predicted the victory of the 'Yes' camp the terrorist campaign of the Church distanced many people from the debate and the rate of electoral participation was less than 40% of those registered. Hence technically, the referendum was invalid.

Among those who voted, the majority was opposed to decriminalisation of abortion. It is this situation that the Bloc now wishes to change, with a parliamentary initiative capable of unifying the women's movement and building a campaign that wins a new referendum.

[1] The Revolutionary Socialist Party (PSR - Portuguese section of the Fourth International) was one of the founding organizations of the Left Bloc along with the Popular Democratic Union (of Maoist origin), Politica XXI (originating from a split inside the Portuguese Communist Party) and independents.