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Portugal

New neofascist advance in presidential elections

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A former leader of the PS and the head of the neo-fascists will contest the second round of presidential elections that confirm Portugal's shift to the right. The concentration of votes on the PS has relegated the left to new historic lows.

The combined votes for the right-wing government and the ultra-liberal and neo-fascist parties exceed half of the votes cast. Despite this, the highest-scoring candidate was António José Seguro (31%, 1.7 million votes). Seguro led the Socialist Party between 2011 and 2014, years in which the PS, outside the government, collaborated in the implementation of the austerity programme under the troika.

Luis Marques Mendes, supported by the PSD and CDS, the governing parties, came in sixth place (11%), surpassed by André Ventura, leader of the neo-fascist Chega party (23.5%), and also by Cotrim Figueiredo, an ultra-liberal MEP (16%). On election night – and to the surprise of many on both the left and the right – the PSD candidate and the prime minister Luís Montenegro, as well as the Liberal Initiative, declared that they would not give any voting guidance in the second round, scheduled for 8 February.

Despite being the favourite in the initial polls, military man Gouveia e Melo, former head of the Navy, finished fifth with 12% of the vote. On election night, this outsider with no political background - who became famous as the person responsible for the Covid-19 vaccine distribution programme and who positions himself as "neither left nor right" - said nothing about the second round.

Despite the large vote for the radical right-wing candidates, the result of the first round was received with relief by those on the left: the latest polls pointed to a technical tie between Seguro, Ventura and Cotrim. To avoid a second round between the ultra-liberal and the neo-fascist, there was a desperate concentration of votes on the Socialist Party. As a result, the candidates of the three left-wing parties – which had won 9% of the vote in last May's legislative elections – now stand at 4.5%. The Livre party (European Greens, 4% in the parliamentary elections) saw its candidate, Jorge Pinto, relegated to 0.7%. The Communist Party candidate (3% in the parliamentary elections) stood at 1.6%. The candidate who fared best was Catarina Martins (former party coordinator and current MEP) from the Left Bloc, who managed to maintain the 2% obtained by the Bloc in May.

This result is due to the exceptional performance of Catarina Martins, who had emerged from the cycle of televised debates with over 5% in the polls. The only woman among eleven candidates, she spoke for social issues and supported the December general strike, focusing on the cost of living and property speculation, as well as the international situation, and was the only candidate to openly advocate Portugal's withdrawal from NATO.

Neo-fascists steering the right

In any case, this is already a major victory for the far right: maintaining the percentage it won in the parliamentary elections was enough to secure a place in the second round. Now, everything it can add will contribute to Ventura being able to proclaim himself leader of the "non-socialist camp", an expression popularized on television to designate a right wing that, in its discourse and in government practice, has abolished all boundaries with neo-fascism. The prime minister himself promoted his candidate by attacking "extremism", both Ventura's and... Seguro's! In this general Trumpization of right-wing discourse, the original always has an advantage over the copies.

All polls point to a comfortable lead for António José Seguro over Ventura in the second round. Rejection of the neo-fascist is still widespread, including among many right-wing voters. But it is difficult to predict with certainty how voters will respond to this unprecedented equidistance from the parties of the “democratic right”, both traditional and ultra-liberal, even though several members of the government and leaders of the IL have already spoken out in favour of the moderate Seguro. What is certain is that in this second round, Ventura will win thousands of votes from right-wing voters who will be undertaking neo-fascist voting for the first time.

His goal will be to exceed the percentage obtained by Luís Montenegro's PSD last May and thus become the most voted right-wing leader and a definitive candidate for prime minister. The current minority government - supported by Chega in approving its laws and backed by the PS in the implementation of the State Budget - may emerge in an even more precarious situation from this presidential election.

The left at historic lows

The reduction in the electoral strength of the left is an invitation for activists to reflect on the fragmentation of this camp. In the downward spiral of the last three years, the only time the left has made its mark on the public debate to contest popular opinion was during last December's general strike, called jointly by the CGTP and UGT against the new labour laws that the government wants to impose. The success of the general strike put Ventura on the defensive - he stopped accusing the strike of being the work of the far left and began to offer to engage in dialogue with the strikers' just causes - and forced Seguro to promise that, if elected President, he would veto the new labour law.

With or without a political crisis on the horizon, the left must, within the framework of social resistance, work towards dialogues that enable it to avoid political marginalization. The experience of the strike is a sign of the way forward: greater participation in struggles and in the extra-party arena, greater commitment to solidarity against fascism, more common ground for understanding the tasks of this period and seeking common platforms – these are the essential conditions for the emergence, in the next electoral cycle, of a united alternative that offers credibility and not dispersion.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint**.

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