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Portugal

“Socialist” Party wins but defeat for left in Portuguese elections

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Sunday’s [30 January] general election in Portugal was triggered last October by the decision of the anti-capitalist Bloco Esquerda (Left Bloc) and the Portuguese Communist Party to vote down the proposed budget of Antonio Costa’s Socialist Party government. [1] The left was opposed to the creeping privatization and lack of resources allocated to the SNS – the national health service – and the failure to increase sufficiently the national minimum wage.

The Costa government had not achieved an absolute majority in 2015 but these two parties had agreed to let it form a government after an agreement on certain policies that defended living standards and some other progressive measures. [2] It was external support on a policy by policy basis, the left did not join the government and take ministerial positions. In this way they had a different approach to the Unidos Podemos left party in the Spanish state which is a full part of a PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party, similar to Costa’s PSP) led coalition. Unidos Podemos has moved away from its original position of a radical break with the system.

Costa had always been constrained by the arrangement struck with the left parties so he was quite prepared to carry out the break with the left and try for an absolute majority. He needed 116 seats and at the time of writing has 117 so it is a political victory for him and his party. From the point of view of the working people of Portugal – who already are among the poorest in Europe – this is a real defeat. Here was an opportunity to strike a blow against the pro-capitalist moderation of the PS and to reinforce the weight of the left to put forward policies to defend their living standards and progressive policies. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Costa will have no need of an arrangement with the left going forward even if he will make a great play of his openness to dialogue. Obviously, the left will be discussing this defeat in more detail in the coming days and months but we can already suggest a few reasons for the setback.

In a time of Covid there is probably a greater concern among people for stability and security. Costa played this card very well, emphasizing how the deal with the left was preventing this moderate government from managing the country out of the crisis and using its share of the EU recovery funds. It was easy for the government and a supportive mass media to present the left parties as being the disruptors, the splitters who were sabotaging a ‘national’ recovery. We have seen elsewhere national leaders getting an electoral “bounce” from their leadership during the pandemic – even Boris Johnson benefited here [in Britain] for a while.

Costa’s declaration after the vote said the Portuguese people had “showed a red card to the political crisis” and a “desire for stability and security”. For his part, he promised a “dialogue with other parties” and to promote “the necessary consensus in Parliament and between employers and working people”. He announced that in the next few days he will meet with all the parties, except Chega, and that he will form a “smaller, leaner” government with the mission of “reconciling the Portuguese with the idea of an absolute majority”.

Incidentally, for opponents of proportional representation, including those on the left, this election shows you can get absolute majorities under a fairer electoral system. Also, despite the left’s defeat, the more democratic proportional representation system in Portugal means the Bloco has kept a parliamentary group and therefore benefits even in defeat from a national presence in the media and guaranteed voice in parliament.

During the campaign there was a growing polarization between the two majority blocs – the PS and the right of centre PSD (Social Democratic Party but actually on the right). Indeed the polls suggested that the PSD was neck and neck with the PS. This may have impelled former Bloco or PCP voters to vote usefully for the PS to ensure that the PSD would not get into government.

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In the absence of big mass struggles and campaigns – not helped by Covid conditions – it must have been difficult for the left to win support for its rejection of the Budget. A principled position does not always lead to success electorally. The Bloco lost over half its votes and went down from nineteen MPs to five. The PCP won slightly fewer votes but kept six MPs. From being the third national political party the Bloco is now the fifth. It shows how anti-capitalist parties can develop a strong core vote of around 5% but can also get into double figures if they successfully relate to mass concerns and struggles. When working people are in retreat and right wing populist ideas are on the rise it is difficult to sustain the support of those less radical layers who will vote for you in certain periods. One of the difficult tasks of a radical left group is how to sustain the current through those difficult periods. It is easier if the political culture of the group does not become too electoralist and maintains a primary orientation to developing self-organization and in the workplaces and the communities. Resources available for the party and media presence will rise and fall with changes in electoral fortunes. So far the Bloco has managed these ups and downs relatively well compared to some other currents such as the Rifondazione Comunista experience in Italy for example.

The Bloco does not see itself as primarily an electoral party but rather as a useful instrument for building a socialist alternative on the ground. To give one example, one of its comrades, Alberto Matos is a leader of *Solidariedade Imigrante* which works with migrant communities. *The Guardian* recently ran a story about how British supermarkets were selling soft fruits picked by exploited migrant workers in Portugal and it referenced Alberto and his work. [\[3\]](#)

The rise of the far right Chega (literally, Enough!) was previously forecast by the 11% vote its leader, Andre Ventura, got in the 2021 presidential elections. Although he got around 7% and 12 MPs for his party this time, it consolidates a presence in parliament and guarantees regular airtime for its anti-migrant, nationalist poison. Until 2019 when he set up Chega there had been a minimal presence of neo-fascist or far right parties in Portugal where a fascist style regime had been swept away by the revolutionary upsurge of 1974. During the campaign Ventura made a particular target of the ‘communist’ Bloco. Anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigning will be at the forefront of the Bloco’s work in the coming period.

Alongside the rise of Chega we also saw an increase in support for the “modernizing” neo-liberal, pro-business party, Liberal Initiative which just pips the Bloco support at nearly 5%. The success of both these groups reflects the crisis of the right of centre parties. For the first time the historic CDS (People’s Party) which was in government in 2015 has failed to win any seats in parliament. The absolute stalling of the PSD vote has resulted in its leader announcing he will go. Today the dominant sectors of the ruling class are quite happy to have a moderate Socialist party protect their interests and maintain stability.

To complete the whole picture the animal rights and ecological party, the PAN now has only one MP and halved its vote to 1.6%. Polarization towards the PS has affected all parties.

Last but not least, the abstention rate was less than in 2019 but there are still 42% who did not bother to vote. Costa is not leading some sort of mass upsurge for his version of social liberalism. This figure expresses a trend seen elsewhere in Europe and reflects a growing alienation from the political process. For the left it sets out an audience that we need to address and win to a radical alternative. At the same time it is a reservoir of potential support for the right wing populists and the neo-fascists.

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“We will know how to carry out our commitments to this country and to working people”

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Catarina Martins (Coordinator of Bloco Esquerda)

On election night, Catarina Martins stated that the party will face up to “the current difficulties ” and will continue the struggle. The electoral result is also bad because of the growth of the extreme right and “each racist MP elected in the Portuguese parliament is one more racist deputy” that the Bloco promises to fight. The results “do not make us forget our mandate” and that the Bloco will know how to “live with” the consequences of the vote.

The Bloco’s coordinator considered that “the PS’s [Socialist Party, current government] strategy of creating an artificial crisis was successful”. At the time of this statement, the PS was “close, or had already won an absolute majority”. The bipolarization developed during the electoral campaign “was false” and that’s why the campaign was “very difficult”, since it created “enormous pressure to vote ‘usefully’ that penalized the parties to the left” [of the PS].

Besides the likely absolute majority being bad news for the country, the result is also poor, according to Catarina Martins, “because of the extreme right” vote of the Chega party. Although its result falls “short” of the one André Ventura obtained in the presidential elections, “every racist deputy elected in the Portuguese parliament is one too many”. “We will be here to fight it,” she promised.

Given tonight’s results, causes like the defence of the National Health Service (SNS) or the fight for a decent salary and against precarious jobs “don’t get any easier”. But we also know that we will not be absent from these struggles” and “we will be side by side with the people in the struggles”.

Questioned once again about how the party voted on the Budget, Catarina Martins added: “we didn’t reject the Budget because of any electoral tactic.” “We knew that we ran an electoral risk”. We voted that way with the “deep conviction” that the Budget worsens the situation of the National Health Service and of those who live from their work and have had “salaries frozen for so long. Pensioners have also been losing out as their pensions are worth less and less”. What happened this Sunday “doesn’t mean that we start believing that the Socialist Party Budget was good. It wasn’t.”

For the Bloco, “the reasons for opposing it are not invalidated by our result” and, in fact, “parties should not change their convictions for electoral reasons like the way you change their shirt”. Thus she concluded, “it is necessary to continue to fight for our demands. There are a million people without a family doctor. Hospital emergency rooms that are daily not able to respond to the needs of the country. So many people live in increasingly worse conditions because their salary is stuck at the minimum wage and has not progressed for more than a decade.”

30 January 2022

From esquerda.net.

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[1] See Adriano Campos “[The deadlocks of the left: health, pensions and employment](#)” 9 November 2021.

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[2] See Francisco Louçã [“What will happen after this weekend's agreement between the Socialists, the Left Bloc and the Communists?”](#), 10 November 2015.

[3] *The Guardian*, 25 January 2022 [“Workers paid less than minimum wage to pick berries destined for UK supermarkets”](#).