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Portugal

# Left Bloc strengthened

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**With nearly 20,000 more votes than it won in the parliamentary elections in 2000, the Left Bloc was the only left current to increase its strength in Portugal's early general elections on March 17, 2002. The poll produced a defeat for the Socialist Party (PS), a generalized retreat for the left - with the exception of the Bloc - and a return to power for the right, after seven years in the wilderness. The elections had been called early after the Socialist prime minister, Antonio Guterres, resigned on the back of his party losing key cities in local elections (see [IV 338](#), March 2002).**

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/bloco.jpg>]

The result is the culmination of a gradual erosion of support for his government, which without an absolute majority in parliament had relied on the right to get through its policies - policies that were either openly neo-liberal and prey to the pressures of the financial lobbies, or simply gutless, like the continuing run-down of public services - health, education and social security - or the endless delays over tax reform, urgently needed to stem massive tax evasion by the rich.

It was a good result for the Left Bloc, which with over 150,000 votes won 2.8% of the national total, moving from two to three seats in parliament. For the first time the Bloc elected a member of parliament for Oporto, the country's second city, and it only just missed winning a fourth seat in Setubal.

But overall it was a bad result for the left and for the country. Even more so because the main right-wing bourgeois party, the Social Democratic Party (PSD), without an overall majority in parliament, will now have to form a government with the support of the Popular Party (PP), which calls itself "centre-Christian" but whose rhetoric and style have moved ever closer to the far right on key questions like immigration and crime.

It's a Portuguese version of the coalition governments that seem set to become the new rage in Europe - after left coalitions in France or Germany, as in Portugal too, have opened the doors of power to a right-wing even more populist and xenophobic than the traditional parties.

## Credit

In fact the number of seats won by the two parties of the right (102 for the PSD, 14 for the PP) gives them an absolute majority over the combined seats of the left (95 for the PS, 12 for the Communist Party (PC) and 3 for the Bloc (BE)), which in theory should allow them to form a stable government. But credit for victory in these elections is unlikely to go to the right itself. Indeed the weak and obviously uncharismatic PSD leader, now prime minister elect, Durao Barroso, is hardly "to blame" at all.

Rather it was down to the classic logic of alternating power between the two main parties and, above all, to a protest vote against the Socialist government and its inability to rule from the left.

On the majority of decisive issues for the country, the traditional parties, that is the PS and the PSD, are indistinguishable, both in their policies and in the arrogant way in which they implement them. These are precisely the issues which the Bloc took up as the main banners of its campaign, in opposition to what its electoral manifesto called the "conservative modernization" which Portugal has undergone over the last 25 years: reform of the

educational and health systems, which have been brought to the verge of collapse by both parties' policies of privatisation and cutbacks; drugs and drug-dependency (a social drama of the first order in Portugal, on which the Bloc has managed to achieve some important legal advances); tax reform (on which the PS repeatedly retreated in the face of pressure from the financial sector); reform of public administration which is slow, bureaucratic and unaccountable; or the decriminalisation of abortion.

The Left Bloc's campaign - dynamic, to the point, irreverent, taking up clear political causes and deliberately seeking to upset the established powers, both elected and unelected - brought fruits even before polling day. For example, by arguing in favour of taxing large fortunes, the campaign drew angry reactions from powerful business interests. Public initiatives like this attracted unprecedented support and involvement in the campaign, opening up an ever broader space for the Bloc's proposals.

Sympathy for the campaign was reinforced by the impact of the exemplary, hard-hitting, parliamentary performance of the two deputies the Bloc elected in 1999. These latest election results confirm this - and show that it's this new, combative left which can best resist the advance of the right in Portugal.

There was such a scarcity of ideas coming from the main parties that the growth of the Left Bloc was only to be expected, in spite of the pressure on electors to cast their vote "tactically" in favour of the PS in order to stop the right getting in. In the first week of the campaign the main topic was the European Football Cup (which Portugal is due to host in 2004) and the lack of sufficient funds to satisfy the appetites of the property speculators who want to build new stadiums. This reduced the level of the debate to zero. There was also increased populism, expressed in the PS's turn towards talking tough on crime and security, in an attempt to occupy the space to its right. Some of this clearly backfired - like the unfortunate play on words on one of the PS's campaign billboards, which had the party leader, Ferro Rodrigues, promising to govern with a "mao de ferro" ("hand of iron" - "ferro" meaning "iron" in Portuguese). This was meant as a reply to the PP's slogan of governing with a "braco direito" (which combined the ideas of ruling from the right, ruling with a "strong arm", and the suggestion that the PP would be the natural "right-hand" support for the PSD). But it just went to show that the right was rather better both at setting an authoritarian agenda and at deploying vacuous marketing techniques.

## Crisis of the CP

The Socialists' defeat was not however the meltdown they had feared. They managed some victories, in Oporto for example, and they prevented the PSD from winning an absolute majority. But this was more a result of tactical voting against the threat of a right-wing government than of any merit of their own. The party had chosen to replace their outgoing leader and prime minister, Antonio Guterres, with Ferro Rodrigues, who had played a co-ordinating role in the previous administration, and therefore had considerable difficulty establishing any critical distance between himself and the mistakes of the past.

The Left Bloc itself reaffirmed its status as a genuinely national movement - securing a significant vote in almost every important town and city, and in some cases almost overtaking the PP and the Communists. But the Bloc lost almost one percent of the votes it won in Lisbon in the previous elections, precisely amongst those urban left layers most vulnerable to the call for tactical voting.

It was the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) that suffered most from this factor. Its slow electoral decline has become more acute in recent elections. This time it was almost a collapse. The PCP lost five of its 17 members of parliament, as well as its position as the country's "third party" - ceded to the PP which also lost votes. It's also been going through unprecedented internal divisions. Shortly after the local elections more than 500 members, including a majority of the party's parliamentary group, made a public appeal for an extraordinary congress to discuss the possibility of a governmental alliance with the Socialists - a position rejected by the party's "hard-line" leadership. In

the wake of these latest disappointing results, more divisions are surfacing.

# Resist, resist, resist

That is the slogan of the moment, given the first measures announced by this right-wing government, which was elected on a very vague programme, and against which, given the generally demoralised state of the left, the Left Bloc will provide the most determined opposition. We can expect a mad extension of selection in education; a tax "shock" which instead of introducing greater justice will treat all, rich and poor, alike; privatisation of state television; a hardening of the police state; the rolling back of some of the social gains won with difficulty over the last seven years; increasing restrictions on immigration and the rights of immigrant communities; a freeze on public sector wages and more under-funding of public services to cope with the public deficit - and these are just the tip of the iceberg which has already been announced.

It's now up to the Left Bloc, as the only left force to come out of these elections stronger, to take the lead in opposing the government. It must also challenge the rest of the left over the causes of those electoral results which let the right in. The Bloc has a responsibility for pushing forward a series of battles for a more humane society - like the decriminalisation of abortion, at a time when women continue to be tried in Portugal for having abortions - battles which a demoralised left might well let drop, but which can in fact be continued in the new situation. And that situation is not necessarily less favourable. The right-wing government is based on a coalition agreement which may prove precarious. Its social base is weak. And the Socialist Party, no longer in government, will naturally tend to assume an oppositional stance.

What is more, the right takes up the reins of power in a new economic context, where the manna of European funds has come to an end and where the promised crisis is already upon us, bringing austerity measures behind it. All this will demand, and permit, new answers and new mobilizations from the social movements.