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Portugal

No absolute majority for the SP, the right suffers an historic defeat

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV537 - October 2019 -

Publication date: Saturday 12 October 2019

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The 6 October general election saw the left increase its parliamentary majority thanks to the increase in votes for the PS (Socialist Party). However the latter did not achieve its objective of a working parliamentary majority on its own. The Bloco de Esquerda (BE – Left Bloc) consolidated its position as the third national political force.

The big question at the beginning of the election campaign – would the SP win a working majority which would allow itself to be freed from the ‘comrade’ parties on its left with formed the *geringonca* – was answered negatively in the final weeks of campaigning as the PSD (Social Democrat Party – right of centre) climbed back in the opinion polls. [1]

It was a sign that the disappointment of rightwing voters would not be as great as predicted earlier. Nevertheless this recovery was not enough to avoid and historic defeat of this political force: the PSD finished with less than 28% - its worst result this century - and the CDS fell to 5%, going from 18 to only 5 seats.

This fall in support for the right was not a surprise and repeated the same tendency seen in the May European elections. It was due to the lack of a political alternative to a PS government whose popularity was based precisely on reversing austerity measures implemented by the 2011-2015 PSD/CDS (CDS-Peoples Party – right of centre) government. The recovery in salaries, employment and the economy as a whole left the right without a consistent political project for this general election. So it tried to fill this vacuum with attempting to take political advantage from some ongoing legal cases such as the robbery of arms from a military barracks in 2017 (and their later recovery achieved after negotiations with the robbers). This rather bizarre episode has meant the then Defence minister has been charged in the courts.

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The first table above compares the results with the last general election and the second one shows the percentage of votes and the number of seats.

The PS increased its share from 32.4% in 2015 to 36.7% in 2019 and won 106 seats, 21 more than in 2015. There are still four seats to be allocated from the overseas emigrant votes which are normally split between the PS and the PSD. The new parliament sees a strengthening of the PS ranks which, despite not winning an absolute majority, has more MPs than all the right of centre parties put together. Nevertheless it still depends on the positive votes or abstention of the other left parties in order to get its policies through.

The Bloco got 9.6% of the votes, down from 10.2% in 2015 but kept its 19 MPs although these were elected in a different spread than last time. The loss of an MP in Porto and another in Madeira was compensated by an increase in representatives in Braga and Aveiro. For the first time the Bloco’s parliamentary group has a majority which comes from constituencies outside of the two big metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto. This tendency marks a greater homogeneity in the Bloco’s electoral support across different areas of the country and has been happening for some time now.

Only the PS has managed to reap an electoral dividend from the positive results of its minority government while the parties to its left that supported it have seen the electorate react in a different way. While the Bloco has maintained its seats and widened the gap with the fourth national political party, the PCP has lost 116,000 votes and won 12 seats, 5 less than in 2015. This was no surprise and confirms the tendency expressed in the European elections when the PCP lost one of its three MEPs. On the other hand, the PAN (People, Animals and Nature party), which emerged as

a an animal rights party but has expanded its political framework to environmental issues and voted in favour of the PS budgets – has continued its rise in support, from one to four MPs.

Something else novel about this election was the entry of three new parties in parliament – each with a little more than 1% of the vote: Libre (Free) linked to the European Greens, Iniciativa Liberal (Liberal initiative) with ultra-liberal policies and a campaign based on the social networks and Chega (Enough) whose main leader is a TV football commentator with a xenophobic attitude and is supported by sectors of the extreme right wing in the Portuguese police. The entry of an MP from the extreme right into parliament ends the Portuguese ‘exception’ - of which there is less and less in Europe. However a counter-tendency is the election of three black women for the first time in Portugal on the Bloco, PS and Libre slates.

Tensions between the PS and the Bloco featured in the election campaign

Given the dissatisfaction of the right wing electors in relation to their traditional leadership, Antonio Costa (SP leader and Prime Minister) aimed to attract this key sector in order to win a working majority. He did this by repeated attacks on the Bloco, including by comparisons with the Spanish political situation. The socialist leader said that a weak PS and a strong Bloco, similar to the PSOE (Spanish social democrats) and Podemos (radical left) after the April elections there, would lead to the same political deadlock and instability. Costa even ended up re-writing history, belittling the role of the Bloco in establishing the *geringonca*, saying that it came about ‘in spite of the Bloco’. The Prime minister heaped praise on the PCP for its role in the government stability which contrasted with those attacks on the Bloco. The high point of this tension happened in the television debate with Catarina Martins (Bloco leader) reminding the PS leader about the meeting that took place between representatives of the two parties on the morning of the 2015 elections, even before the results were known, where the road was opened to the formation of a government supported by the left.

We also saw a PS strategy of trying to make a link in voters’ minds between the Bloco, instability and profligacy. This was headed up by Mario Centeno, a Finance minister, (and leader of the Eurogroup meeting of finance ministers) after another TV debate where a Bloco leader discussed the financing of the investment proposals in the PS programme and the absence of clear accounting of other important initiatives. In the hours that followed Centeno was forced to reveal to journalists an updated version of what the promises would cost. It was therefore established that these were far from those figures given to Brussels for the Stability Mechanism.

In response to the PS attacks the Bloco put forward as the central message of its campaign that it was the party that ‘guaranteed stability in peoples’ lives’ in terms of their salary, the pension and employment. It pointed out to the PS the damage of political instability with the threat of the backtracking of the government last May over the then imminent approval of a measure that would restore to teachers all the career progression that had been frozen in the last decade. But the big difference between the Bloco and the PS has always been on the question of the Labour Laws after the government signed an agreement with the bosses in negotiations and then got it passed in June with the votes of the right wing. These measures will increase precarious work since it lengthens the probationary period and generalises very short term contracts.

Negotiations are taking place now...

On election night the Bloco and the PCP made it clear that in spite of the PS not getting a working majority there was no doubt about its legitimate right to form the next government. The president will ask Antonio Costa to form a

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government this week and negotiations will start over the government programme. Costa stated on election night that he would first look to get the eventual support for the whole parliamentary term from his two comrades of the *geringonca*, but would also negotiate with PAN and Libre

The PCP leader, Jeronimo de Sousa, said he was open to dialogue with the PS although he voiced a preference for approving each government action and a written agreement for the four year term. We will see whether he sticks to this or if the disappointing results on Sunday will lead him to keep to this line. For her part Catarina Martins, stated that the Bloco was ready to negotiate an agreement for the whole term which included key elements of its platform such as the reform of the labour laws, an increase in salaries and the recovery of public services. Although she accepted in the case of this agreement being impossible her party could negotiate the viability of each state budget.

In the talks now underway it will be up to the Socialist Party to choose if it wants to invest in the National Health Service, in public education, in sustaining employment, in increasing the national minimum wage or in a national housing programme. This would be the true stability that the country needs. Antonio Costa promoted the Portuguese exception outside the country, referring to a Portugal that had managed to roll back austerity while being faithful to European treaties and agreements. In the end it was only an exception because it managed to break with those agreements and increased salaries and pensions, stimulating the economy through increased consumption and internal demand. After reversing the worse policies of the Troika and the right wing government the Bloco wants to be the guarantee that there will be no retreat but new advances in favour of working people.

9 October 2019

PS:

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[1] The *geringonca* was a signed agreement between the PS and the BE and PCP (Portuguese Communist Party) around key government policies which meant the two smaller left parties facilitated the formation and subsequent maintenance of the PS government while remaining outside the government itself. *Geringonca* literally means contraption testifying to the rather unusual and unexpected nature of this agreement.