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Portugal

Presidential elections marked by the pandemic crisis and the aggressiveness of the ultraright

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The National Committee of the Left Bloc welcomes the commitment and dedication of Marisa Matias and notes the importance of a socialist, feminist, anti-racist and ecological campaign, in affirming a response to the crisis and fighting the aggressiveness of the ultra-right. Marisa led a campaign that was courageous and well-focused, the results of which were far from reflecting the real impact of the candidacy and its objectives.

In the midst of the pandemic crisis, which reduced the visibility of the campaign, it was more difficult to expose the obstacles promoted by Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa's presidency, whether in terms of the troika's continuing influence on labour legislation, the protection afforded to private health corporations or the European programme of bank concentration paid for by countries on the periphery of the euro. [1] On the contrary, the years of the "geringonça" government have given Rebelo de Souza some credit as a guarantee of stability. [2] The confrontation with Andre Ventura made the serving president look like a buffer blocking the growth of the ultra-right. [3]

His easy victory in the first round was made possible by the more moderate voters of the right, but above all those of the Socialist Party and even of the left. The votes for Ana Gomes (who came second but with far fewer votes than those won by Antonio Sampaio da N6voa (5) five years ago) and for Jo6o Ferreira (on a par with those for Edgar Silva in 2016) (6) also confirm this reading. [4] The results, along with various studies and polls, indicate that many of those who identified themselves as Bloco voters on Sunday, chose to vote for Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. In this highly polarized situation, Jo6o Ferreira, who had expressed his hope of receiving votes from some socialist sectors, did not even win all the votes of the PCP electorate. Not surprisingly, most of the PS voters who had mobilized especially for the candidacy of Sampaio da N6voa in 2016, this time concentrated on re-electing the president. Ana Gomes, who sought to exploit internal tensions within the PS, captured a very small part of her party's electorate. The expectations of those, particularly in the PS, who hoped these presidential elections would deliver a people's verdict, by way of prize or punishment, on the different positions of the left in relation to the state budget for 2021, were not confirmed. [5]

The elections did confirm the reconfiguration of the right. With the CDS collapsing and the PSD losing ground, the most reactionary sectors of these parties came together around Andr6 Ventura, himself from the PSD. Ventura would try to imitate Donald Trump's strategy, and use this increased visibility to attract impoverished popular sectors frustrated with the government, as well as sectors of the bourgeoisie that hope to crush social rights. But the supposedly "anti-system" party had already made clear where it was going, promising the PSD positions of power. On election night, Rui Rio reciprocated and admitted that the PSD's plans for government also included Chega. But the right is far from having a majority that would allow it to take any decisive stance. On the contrary, in trying to normalise the Chega, the PSD has limited itself to the hardcore section of the electorate that would accept the perspective of a government with the extreme right, leaving Ant6nio Costa to represent the political centre uncontested. [6] Instead of showing a political system in crisis, the results of the presidential elections show a reshaping of the traditional right, which includes the governmental plans of the two biggest parties.

In this context, the Left Bloc stresses that the crisis that needs to be tackled as a priority is the pandemic and social crisis. The fight against the extreme right cannot allow it to occupy the centre of the political stage. Only by affirming alternatives to the left and demanding responses against the crisis can we relegate extremism to the marginal place it deserves.

The Bloc's priority is to respond to the crisis

in health, jobs, the economy and society

Portugal registered the first cases of Covid almost a year ago and is now reaching the most critical period of the pandemic. Pressure on the National Health Service and the social and economic crisis are worsening. The pandemic crisis is not a temporary shock; the health disaster is prolonged and its effects will be structural.

The Bloc puts forward a left-wing response to the crisis and confronts the government with the central issues of the day: the strengthening of the National Health Service, the response to the social crisis and investment to restore employment and the economy. It is these measures, left out of the 2021 budget by the government, which remain the priority for Portugal.

The requisitioning of the social and private sector, placing all existing healthcare capacity under the supervision and organization of the NHS, is essential to increase the capacity to respond in priority care, Covid and non-Covid, thereby ensuring equal access to urgent care. This integration of the available staff and facilities must be accompanied by an increase in investment and in the worth given to careers in the NHS. If this is not done, the impact of the pandemic on the NHS will not be overcome and will lead to irreversible deterioration of the NHS. This is the plan of private health groups, which are trying to protect themselves, hoping to absorb a good part of the current efforts of the NHS and its funding.

The lack of investment and the absence of solutions to structural problems in the state schools is also a weakness in the response to the pandemic. The return to remote teaching for an indefinite period of time was not prepared by the government, especially with regard to the promise to distribute computers, and threatens to exacerbate inequalities.

The combination of the closure of social facilities, the lack of support for informal carers and the fragility of public services disproportionately hits women. Women enter any crisis at a disadvantage; they earn less and are more precarious, but are mostly in the front line of the battle against Covid-19 and in the sectors most affected by the crisis. The fact that aggressors and victims are now living together constantly has provided the ideal conditions to exert more control and less opportunity to report abuse and ask for help. The data from the most recent study reveals an even more devastating reality: 34% of the victims suffered domestic violence for the first time during the pandemic.

People in marginalized communities and migrants and racialized people are also disproportionately exposed to the crisis and suffer its effects with aggravated violence. Measures to combat the crisis must take account of structural inequalities.

Social support, protecting jobs and strengthening essential public services are central to promoting social and territorial cohesion and combating poverty. The effects of insecure employment have been exacerbated in recent months: without job security, large sections of the population are facing the economic and social storm without access to extended unemployment benefits, and are excluded from extraordinary support because of the conditions attached to it, or have support payments well below the poverty line. The correctness of the Bloc's criticism of the backsliding of the state budget in the area of social protection is now evident. The immediate strengthening of social support, and the need for new goals in social security, with more comprehensive support and thresholds above the poverty line, is a fundamental demand for the country and the left.

The country's difficulties are aggravated by the limited response to the crisis. Today we are among the European countries worst hit by the pandemic but also among those that invest least in responding to it. The 2020 deficit was lower than expected because the government, in the face of the crisis, chose not to spend 3.5 billion euros budgeted for 2020. This choice is outrageous given the effects of the crisis and the scarcity of support set in 2020 and for 2021.

Budgetary restraint is now extremely imprudent: low investment accentuates the dynamics of the crisis and hampers and slows down economic recovery.

Mobilization, debate and organization in times of pandemic

The Bloc has adapted its activity to the conditions required to protect public health, but this adaptation does not mean less activity or less participation of supporters.

The National Committee will promote with all the district branches, plenaries of supporters to take stock of the presidential elections and discuss the priorities for the Bloc's intervention in the current political situation.

The National Committee will call for a debate on the strategy and priorities for the local elections, delegating to the Political Committee the organization of a Local Conference to be held next month.

The National Committee also resolves to launch a recruitment campaign. In the aftermath of the presidential elections, many decided to join the bloc. This process of reinforcement can and must be extended.

All initiatives, including the preparation and holding of the National Convention, must be adapted to ensure public health protection.

The Left Bloc welcomes the parliament's approval of the decriminalization of assisted suicide. Against the campaigns of fear and fundamentalism, a broad movement of unity for tolerance and respect for the rights of each person has triumphed in parliament and, more than that, has won the vast majority of Portuguese society for this cause. In all this, the role of João Semedo was fundamental. [7] His exemplary struggle is a challenge for all the struggles in which the Bloc is involved.

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[1] Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa has been President of Portugal since 2016. He is a long-standing member of the PSD (Social Democratic Party), the main right-wing party in Portugal, but he suspended his party membership for the duration of his presidency. He has been serving as president alongside a Socialist Party prime minister, Antonio Costa. Rebelo de Souza was reelected President of Portugal with 60.7% of the vote on 24 January, 2021.

[2] The "geringonça" government (literally contraption) began in November 2015, when Antonio Costa became prime minister at the head of a minority Socialist Party government, enjoying parliamentary support from, but not a coalition with, members of parliament from the Left Bloc, the Portuguese Communist Party and the Green Ecologists. See "[Left Bloc closes negotiations with the Socialist Party](#)" and "[What will happen after this weekend's agreement between the Socialists, the Left Bloc and the Communists?](#)". The arrangement broke down in 2019.

[3] Andre Ventura, the candidate of the far-right Chega Party, came third on 24 January with 11.9%. It was the biggest vote the far right has ever scored in Portugal.

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[4] Ana Gomes is a former MEP for the Socialist Party, who stood as an independent in these presidential elections. She came second with 13% of the vote. Antonio Sampaio da Nóvoa stood as an independent in the previous presidential elections in 2106, also with a lot of Socialist Party support, and won almost 23% of the vote. Joao Ferreira, the candidate of the Portuguese Communist Party, won 4.3% on 24 January, just ahead of the Left Bloc's Marisa Matias, who won 3.95%. The PCP candidate in 2016, Edgar Silva, had won 3.94%.

[5] See "[2021 Portuguese State Budget: Bloco de Esquerda will vote against the document](#)".

[6] Antonio Costa is Secretary General of the Socialist Party and has been Portuguese Prime Minister since 2015.

[7] João Semedo was a leader of the Bloco and one of its members of parliament who presented a first bill for the decriminalization of assisted suicide. He died in July 2018 after a long battle with cancer.