Spain: The Two-Party System Still Hangs On

written by Jaime Pastor | July 1, 2016

With abstention up by 4% from the last parliamentary elections in the Spanish state on December 20, 2016 (69.84% participation against 73.2%), the results of what we might call a "second round", with the right wing Popular Party (PP) increasing its number of votes (600,000 extra votes and 33% of voters) and its number of seats to 137 (against 123 previously), and a Socialist Party (PSOE) which, despite losing 100,000 votes (22.7% of voters) and five seats, remains the second biggest political force in the country.

There is relief for the regime which had to deal with the pressure of Unidos Podemos (UP) which, losing more than a million votes, has not managed to appear as the political expression of change. The good news comes in the substantial decline of Ciudadanos which lost 400,000 votes and eight seats to the benefit of the PP which was able to exploit the theme of the "useful vote". In Catalonia, one can only note the persistence of a majority in favor of autonomy with 56.6% of the vote going to the autonomist/pro-independence parties.

It will take time to analyze this result, very different from what most polls predicted, and among the explanations, study notably the impact of Brexit on the movement of votes of the undecided in favor of the right. Nevertheless, we can see now that it will not have tipped the balance toward change, but on the contrary towards conservatism and reaction.

In any case, it will not be easy to put a government in place: the PP must rely not only on the support of Ciudadanos (32 seats) and "Coalicion Canaria" (1 seat) but also on the abstention of the Basque PNV (right autonomist- 5 seats) and the PSOE (82 seats) to form a government. Ciudadanos and the PSOE must also accept, under pressure, that this government would be led by Rajoy (PP), who emerges strengthened from these elections, after having ruled out this hypothesis during the campaign. A pressure which is already at work, particularly on the PSOE, if we look at today's editorial in *El Pais* (the largest Spanish daily newspaper), which says that it is necessary that the PSOE "allows, with its abstention, the establishment of a government by those in favor of what the ballot boxes have decided".

While Brexit demonstrates the failure of the project of the European Union and that the euro area is still more polarized between creditors and the debtors, we find ourselves in a situation of uncertainty where the only thing that is certain is the growth of inequality and the social and political movements against austerity.

The challenge remains knowing which forces are able to respond to this real malaise: either those who surf on "the politics of resentment" against refugees and immigrants to rebuild a neo-fascism which accommodates to economic globalization or new socio-political alternatives that militate for a restoration of solidarity between the peoples, starting in the south of Europe, and against the

dictatorship of debt and xenophobia.

As to UP, in spite of coming first in Catalonia, the Basque Country and Navarre, it is obvious that the hopes raised by the coalition of Podemos and Izquierda Unida (IU) have not been fulfilled in the ballot boxes and it did not outpoll the PSOE as the polls had predicted. We will of course need to analyze the reasons and the choices of more than a million lost voters. One reason could be the juxtaposition of different discourses in a short period of time which must surely have confused the potential electorates of both IU and Podemos.

Thus, after a "national-populist" discourse which had shown its limitations in the Catalan elections of September 27, 2015, a more "pluri-national" approach was adopted before finally returning to a new idea of "homeland", which, as we see it, was counter-productive. Simultaneously, from December 20, 2015, we have gone from the discourse of the "people against the caste" to a more conventional "left" discourse, including classifying the PSOE as part of the left. This is to respond to the aspirations of IU, who wanted to regain the space of the so-called left of rupture and were finally taken by the somewhat chaotic discourse of Pablo Iglesias, whose erosion as a charismatic leader is now palpable.

The limits and contradictions of this discourse have only been more flagrant with the programmatic ambiguity around the fundamental questions like the attitude to be taken to the Troika, the debt or again a critical assessment of the experience of Syriza, to mention only the most obvious. These limits have been all the more important because UP has not reached its goal of winning a territorial anchor with an organization different from the other parties. This "model", that of the electoral war machine, proved to finally be very conventional, top down and not very pluralistic, which has generated numerous internal crises and sapped the efforts to construct the organization needed to irrigate the territories and complete the very necessary but insufficient television and internet campaigns.

However there is no question of self-flagellation or settling of accounts, what matters is rebuilding an atmosphere of solidarity, fraternity, respect of pluralism, to seek a new framework of consensus to work together because "yes, we can". For this, we need more "wars of position" on all fronts. It is now our role as an opposition to reformulate what unites us and to propose politically in a coherent fashion so as to rebuild links with the social organizations which support change and a rupture with austerity and with the regime which applies them.

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