

Election in the Spanish State, a change of rhythm - Possibilities and dangers

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The May 24 elections mark a new stage in the protracted political crisis, just a year after Podemos erupted onto the scene in the European elections of 2014. It has been a crazy twelve months, sadly lacking in active social mobilizations, but extraordinarily intense in the political arena. The results of the elections will show just how far the ailing two party system has collapsed or been able to resist, as it fights tooth and nail to extend his reign. And they will show the real strength of its opponents: Ciudadanos, with its dual role as a crutch and an alternative, Podemos, and the broader local coalitions which Podemos takes part in, especially Barcelona en Comú and Ahora Madrid.

All the projects that promise change are faced with a possibility that is full of potential and danger: the possibility of acquiring unprecedented institutional power. Never since the transition to democracy in the Spanish state, will organisations that operate more or less consistently outside the established rules of the game, have such institutional weight. It is possible they may even control one or more important city administration, with the city of Barcelona the most likely one. The panic displayed by the Catalan right in the face of a possible victory for Ada Colau is palpable, and a joy to behold. Those of us who live in this city will rarely get to vote with such enthusiasm as we will this Sunday.

So while we are about to pass this new milestone, and while we wait to know the real picture after the 24M elections, it seems important to offer some initial reflections on the role of the elections, the campaigns, the institutions and about the timing and pace of the change that is taking place. Most obviously, we confront a simple equation that is quite difficult to solve: the dialectical link between mobilization, self-organization and elections and, as a result of the latter, the connection between the first two and institutional work. The big problems we have to solve lie.

The dazzling success of the campaign for the European elections and the ability of Podemos to rearrange the pieces across the political board chessboard, forcing the other players to reposition themselves in response to the newcomer, gave impetus and credibility to a conception of political strategy strictly limited to the electoral arena and the short term, focused exclusively on political communication and winning space in the media. Once the explosion of linear growth came to an end, it gave way to a more complex vision of how to think and act strategically. One political message was clear: without real and organic roots in society, there will be no electoral victory, and if there were, it would result in a government with feet of clay, shackled in any attempt to impose an agenda of change, however small these might be. The good dynamic shown in recent days by the strongest unitary municipal candidates confirms the central importance of social implantation and working at the grassroots.

This is not to deny the importance of a “machinery of electoral war”, to use the words of the Podemos leader, Iñigo Errejón, but to understand that the “electoral machine” is just one dimension, and not only one, of building a more complex party. Not everything can be measured by short-term electoral success which, incidentally, will be much greater for a political project committed to radical change if it is socially embedded, if the battle at the ballot box is inserted into a wider political, social and cultural battle and if the electoral triumph is seen as part of a political victory in

the strong sense of the term. This requires a Podemos with real roots, with a presence in the struggles and in the streets, and a close relationship with the social, union and neighborhood organizations and the world of culture, embodying the best of the legacy of the 15M and waves of mobilization.

Political time is anything but linear. It is, as Daniel Bensaid often reminded us, a “broken time”, full of jumps, acceleration and braking. There are authentic wormholes, like those in the film *Interstellar*, which act as shortcuts through space and time and allow us to get to places that once seemed impossible. The crisis triggers threats and opportunities and opens gates that previously have been closed and barred. It is not the time for “going slow because we’re going far”, for “business as usual”. It is the time for understanding the moment and seizing the opportunities. The openings will not be there forever and we mustn’t let them slip away. The eruption of Podemos and the campaign for the European elections hit the nail on the head, based on a good strategic reading of the situation. This should be interpreted, however, in a historical sense and should not confuse the window of opportunity that has opened only with the call for the upcoming general elections. These are just part of a longer political period in which the future of the system’s crisis will be decided. Knowing how to take advantage of a current situation should not be reduced to a short-term mentality that emphasises tactics while evaporating strategy.

Time has accelerated, precipitating a scenario of continuous heart attacks. But this acceleration is not constant. It’s more like a roller coaster than a bullet train. Once the phase of semi-automatic linear growth came to an end, Podemos began to run into obstacles. Political struggle in neither a short-term sprint, not a steady-paced marathon. It is more like a cross-country race over uneven ground full of ups and downs, mud and puddles, that require constant changes of pace. The well-known psychoneuroimmunologist, Xevi Verdaguer, recommends, along with various dietary advice, exercise with changes of pace to maintain good hormonal health. And it’s also good for strategic health. If Podemos wants once again to set the pace, rather than follow the others, now is the time it needs a shake up, a new jolt or a counteroffensive to recover the freshness it has lost. That means linking up directly with social struggles and developing a culture of “the movement” is inescapable. These challenges have already been crucial in this campaign. They will loom even larger after it is over.

The ability Podemos has shown to read the dynamic of the situation, to understand the nonlinearity of political time and to develop a strategy to exploit the opportunities opened up by the crisis, should not lead, however, to a vision of political strategy that pays attention only to the short term (winning elections) and not to the medium and long term. On the contrary, it should enable it to deal with the times and rhythms permanently. The assault on the two-party system may have more than one phase. The elections at the end of this year may be the first round, but not the last one. It does not seem that a Podemos government is a likely outcome at this stage. Although we have to work for that, we also need to know how to manage its impossibility, so as not to be left in a void with no perspectives. There may be partial experiences along the way, such as municipal and regional governments built around Podemos or unitary municipal candidates. The way these develop and their balance sheet will be decisive: they can really help expand the field of popular imagination and make the unthinkable possible, or can they trap hopelessly all hope for change in a tangle of bureaucracy with no real transformation.

Ambition here and now and an unapologetic offensive strategy should go hand in hand with a long-term perspective built on solid foundations. We should neither dissolve the policy of a direct onslaught on the two-party system into an endless, passive and linear accumulation of forces, nor should we convert Podemos into a single-barreled shotgun, reducing its strategy to playing a single hand, a final match-ball, with no possibility of extra time or a return match. However intense it may be, we have to be prepared for a fight which is as extended as its ambitions for change are profound.

So that we can defeat once and for all, as Walter Benjamin put it in the sixth of his Theses on the Philosophy of History, “the enemy who still hasn’t stopped winning”.

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P.S.

* <http://blogs.publico.es/tiempo-roto/2015/05/22/cambios-de-ritmo-y-elecciones-2/>

* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>