

# The experience of Podemos in the Spanish State, its originality, its challenges

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You have presented “Podemos” as the surprise that comes from Spain. And, indeed, Podemos is an excellent surprise for the popular classes and a nightmare for the ruling classes of the Spanish State. But it is above all, an unprecedented movement.

Unprecedented in the rapidity of development of a political-electoral movement: between 15 and 20 per cent of votes, confirmed by clear gains in the recent municipal and regional elections; 200,000 people have joined online; between 60,000 and 120,000 have voted in internal elections; there are 20,000 to 30,000 activists in the circles (local branches), to which can be added some of the thousands of people who participated for the first time in the municipal and regional campaigns; a national demonstration in Madrid, with more than 120,000 people. In short there is an upward spiral, massive and rapid. Rapid, because this situation is very recent: it started just before the European elections in 2014.

It is also unprecedented by the convergence of forces: Podemos is not the result of internal reorganizations of the workers’ movement or the Left, nor of convergences between substantial organized forces. It is the meeting of personalities: the political communication team of Pablo Iglesias at the University of Complutence in Madrid, personalities coming from Eurocommunism, the Black movement, Chavism, facilitators of the CIM - the Miranda International Centre- the cadre school of Chavism and of its left wing, and the participation of Izquierda Anticapitalista (IA). [[1](#)]

On this point, we often associate Syriza and Podemos. There is a point that is common to the two forces and specific to these two countries, in Europe: these political parties have managed to build the political expression of a social mobilization against austerity and the regimes that are in power. But there is this difference: Syriza is the result of a long history, of a reorganization of the forces of the workers’ movement, of youth, of the global justice movement, linking together currents of various origins, in the first place currents from the Communist Party and from what was called Eurocommunism, Trotskyist currents and various sectors of the critical Left.

Podemos, unlike Syriza, is a movement exterior to the traditional Left, which while having a great influence in activist sectors - socialists, communists, trade unionists - is not the product of a reorganization or a recomposition of the workers' movement.

\* Its strength is the expression of the radicalism of an important sector of society, and especially the youth.

\* Its weaknesses and fragility result also from its youth, its relative inexperience, its organizational difficulties.

## **1) Understand Podemos in its relationship to the Spanish situation**

Podemos cannot be understood without understanding the specific nature of the crisis in the Spanish state.

a) First, the depth of the economic crisis: 25 per cent unemployment, 40 per cent among youth; a massive phenomenon of emigration, a 17 per cent decrease in purchasing power; massive impoverishment of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie. Slightly compensated, in some cases, by family solidarity.

b) Next, by the emergence of social and socio-political movements, with the M 15 (May 15 movement) in 2011. The movement of the indignados, which was then relayed by the marches for dignity; the coloured "tides" (white in the health sector, green in education); national one-day strikes, mobilizations in the health sector, mobilizations against evictions, targeting the banks; the successful challenge by residents in the Gamonal neighbourhood of Burgos to a plan to build an underground car park.

c) By the outbreak of a crisis of the "post-Franco transition" that began in 1978: the crisis is shattering the policy of social pacts between unions and management; corruption and various affairs have rendered the politico-institutional structure unstable; the manner of the abdication of the King (Juan Carlos) revealed a state of panic in the leading circles of the state. The problem of nationalities, with the Catalan crisis and those of other nationalities, has also weakened the regime. It was the combined effects of the social crisis and this political crisis that created a social and institutional crisis of legitimacy for the ruling classes - what Podemos calls the "caste" - which would give democratic political dynamics to the indignados movement and to social mobilizations, with the demand for "real democracy" and the challenge to the powers that be, in many forms: criticism and challenges to decisions of the banks, refusal of evictions, popular debates on how to change the way democratic decision-making is exercised.

d) The combination of economic and political crisis is leading to the crisis of bipartisanship (between the People's Party, PP, on the right and the Socialist PSOE on the centre-left) which has just exploded into the open following the regional and municipal elections. The PP obtained 27 per cent with 6 million votes, but lost 2.5 million votes compared with the 2011 elections; the PSOE got 25 per cent with 5.5 million votes, but lost 775,000 votes. Podemos made a breakthrough in its first participation in these kinds of elections, with between 15 and 20 per cent of the votes. Ciudadanos - which was formed to be the "Podemos of the right" - got 6.5 per cent with 1.5 million votes. Izquierda Unida, the coalition led by the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), emerged considerably weakened, being no longer considered as one of the four political forces that count. We have moved from the bipartisan system to a quadripartite one.

e) If we project these results on to the coming parliamentary elections, it gives the following results:

PP: 120 (-66); PSOE: 108 (-2); PODEMOS: 37; Ciudadanos: 18. The situation is therefore totally open: will the November elections be brought forward? Will there be a cumulative dynamic that will continue to propel Podemos beyond 20 per cent? The present results, in particular in Madrid and Barcelona, may indeed give a new impetus to Podemos.

## **2) The positive dynamics of Podemos**

There is a new political period, new relationships of forces, opening up new possibilities on the basis of politics that represent a break in the equilibrium of the Spanish state.

Podemos expresses:

- \* The rejection of austerity;
- \* Popular sovereignty;
- \* The idea of a constituent process, with a constituent assembly;
- \* A movement exterior to the system, against the caste.

It is a radical anti-system force that situates itself in a perspective of change, combining mobilization and the conquest of power through the ballot box, through reforms of the state. So, there are strengths and weaknesses in the approach: its programme is anti-austerity, but remains in a more or less Keynesian framework, limiting itself to a radical redistribution of wealth and the necessary inroads into property in key sectors of the economy. It poses the problem of social transformation, but by starting from the state. This radical reformism is also inspired by the Latin American experiences, precisely those of Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, where the state has represented a point of support in the resistance, even partial, to US imperialism. The problem, in this conception, is that we are in a state of the imperialist centre and not in a Latin American country dominated by US imperialism. The state is the direct instrument of the ruling classes, linked to international capital and in particular the institutions of the European Union. These conceptions of social transformation, starting from the state, populist or Eurocommunist references, can be those of reformism. But Podemos cannot be put in the category of the reformism of the traditional parties of the Left. We are not dealing with traditional bureaucratic apparatuses. This reformism is not crystallized, with a material basis, compared to that of the social-democratic apparatuses or those of the union leaderships. This opens up spaces and new possibilities. The lines can shift.

## **3. The need for new strategic thinking**

At this stage, the more substantial problem is to rethink the tactical and strategic schema that prevailed in the leading group of Podemos.

The basic schema of Pablo Iglesias was the following: it was a question of practically organizing a "raid" or a "blitzkrieg", a lightning war to win a parliamentary majority in the elections of November 2015. The rapidity of the phenomenon led them to focus their policies on the idea of "winning", of winning quickly, on the basis of a collapse of the traditional parties, and therefore of building an "election machine" that was hyper-centralized - hence the choices made by the leading group at the congress of Podemos. It was this schema, in any case, which served as argument to limit the expression of pluralism and impose single lists for the election of the leadership at the Podemos congress - on the basis of a lowest-common-denominator popular national programme.

Reality is not confirming this schema, or is at least bringing serious nuances to it. The crisis in Spain is admittedly impressive, in particular youth unemployment, but Spain is not Greece. Its level of economic development, its productive base, its banking system are on another level. The country has been attacked by austerity policies, but not bled like Greece.

The state has not been dislocated as it has in Greece. As a result, the PSOE is not experiencing at this stage a process of "Pasokisation". It is still at 25 per cent. The bourgeoisie still has room for manoeuvre: the People's Party remains the largest party. The PSOE is not collapsing. Ciudadanos, even if it has not had the results it hoped for, can still use its influence to save the regime, in alliance with other parties; in these circumstances, a Podemos government after the next general election is unlikely. From there, all combinations are possible: from "ungovernability" to systems of alliances that ensure the continuity of the regime.

Flowing from this, the project of the last congress of Podemos must be looked at again: a raid with an electoral machine that wins on the basis of a minimum programme cannot function with the present relationship of forces. The debate must be enriched with new tactical and strategic thinking, which has to combine a "war of position" and political accelerations.

#### **4. Minimum programme or dynamics of a break**

The leadership of Podemos, and in particularly Pablo Iglesias, has shown itself to be very capable, by choosing to concentrate on the political battle and by its political communication skills, especially regarding the target of "building a national popular movement against the caste". One of their references is Ernesto Laclau, the Argentine philosopher who theorized on the concept of "populism", starting from the experience of Juan Peron in Argentina. Laclau's populism is based on the objective of bringing the national community together around the leader on the basis of a lowest common denominator. This approach has been updated, according to him, by Chavism. These references formed the basis of a strategy based on mobilizing people around "empty signifiers", general references that can bring together and constitute the people. These are the concepts of national sovereignty, justice, social rights, the public interest.

Iglesias, who knows the history of the Russian revolution, tries to interpret this strategy in a more radical way, going so far as to draw a parallel with the slogans of the Bolsheviks on "bread, peace, freedom, land." There are two questions in this approach, which need to be unravelled. The first preoccupation, which is correct, is to try to concentrate the political programme of a party in a few demands or slogans. I will be criticized by some people for saying this, but I think the leadership of Podemos is right to want to break with programmes that are too full, too detailed. But the second thing, questionable in some of its dimensions, of this policy of Podemos is, in the name of simplification, to moderate some demands because they would divide "the community" or lead to class confrontations in the broad sense of the term. This reductionist conception can lead to the avoidance of key problems, for example, on the following questions: debt cancellation; how to organize the banking system; the question of nationalization and property. This reductionist conception can also lead to avoiding or underestimating questions like that of nationalities and the right to abortion. If we have to focus on one or two central demands, they must make the connection between what millions of citizens and workers are feeling and another logic that starts to break with capitalist austerity, with the power of the ruling classes.

Especially now with the emergence of Ciudadanos, the "Podemos of the right", we need clearer delimitations. And there was a debate in the leadership of Podemos around the concept "occupation of the centre or of the centre of gravity of political life" With two approaches: either you remain in

the “ambiguity, or signifier ambiguity” in order to win votes in the centre, in fact by moderating the programme, or else you put the emphasis on the need for a response to the crisis of the capitalist system and not just financial corruption, and you bring together the forces of your social camp: workers, the unemployed, the popular classes and even the “people of the left”, especially in the face of the centre-right politics of Ciudadanos. In any case it was necessary to draw a dividing line on the level of the fight against austerity. That is what Iglesias did at the end of the campaign, when he put more emphasis on the original Podemos. He spoke of left populism and not just populism, as does another leader of Podemos, Inego Errejon.

## **5. On the concept of “people”**

Lastly, on the question of the concept of “people”, there is also room for discussion. If it is a general formula that covers the popular classes, and “the people against the caste” or those below against those at the top, and tries to get round the references to the Left that are discredited by the leadership of the traditional Left, why not?

But if the concept of people means to no longer think in terms of confrontation and the clash in terms of class struggle, in the broadest sense, to no longer think about the struggles that arise around specific topics, but are articulated around the struggle against the capitalist system, that is quite questionable. Another pitfall to be avoided is the concept of people which replaces parties, organizations and associations. But we have seen that the reality of the municipal elections imposed a policy of unity on Podemos. Imposed, because the leadership of Podemos did not in the beginning want to participate in the municipal elections. It tolerated unitary coalitions, but by a cunning trick of history, these lists had good results. They even expanded the influence of Podemos. And there was even the building from below of what our comrades call “popular unity” around representative assemblies which established lists and organized the campaign. We can already see that in Madrid, but also in Barcelona, Cadiz, Zaragoza and other cities. The dynamic was very positive.

## **6. And the national question**

The national question, namely the Catalan, Basque and Galician questions, are central issues in a state that did not experience a bourgeois revolution and which therefore has not ensured the conditions for the formation of a unified state. This is not the opinion of the leadership of Podemos. When Iglesias speaks of national sovereignty or constituent process, he is thinking of Spain and not of the nations of Spain. He approaches the constitutional process as a break with the constitution of 1978, but one that that does not incorporate constituent processes on the level of the Catalan and Basque nationalities. He does not defend, explicitly, the right to self-determination of these nationalities. He says that it is for the Catalans to choose their destiny, but he does not specify in what form. He even tells us that his preference is that they remain within the Spanish state. In fact the national question, in Catalonia as in the Basque Country, is a question that is a source of tension in the popular camp; on the one hand, part of the popular classes is “independentist”; on the other hand, immigrant workers in particular, coming from other regions of Spain, especially from Andalusia, do not share that feeling. We must therefore look for ways to unify the popular camp, taking into account its differentiations.

A policy aimed at constituting a social and political bloc that unites all the popular classes, with all their sensibilities, must start from the right to self-determination. It must allow the question of independence to be posed, without making it a pre-condition of unity. That is what the principal of *Barcelona en comu*, especially Alda Colau, have done. In Catalonia, it would be extremely

regrettable for progressives forces to fail to integrate into an alliance the forces of *Barcelona en comu* and the CUP - anticapitalist nationalists - and that they, in the name of independence, would refuse to build an anti-austerity bloc. We must therefore discuss the conditions of such an alliance.

## **7. What political alliances?**

Another complicated question is that of alliances. The perspective of a Podemos government is not for the immediate future: it is therefore necessary to define a unified policy that takes account of popular aspirations.

At this stage, the leadership of Podemos has given two main indications: first, do everything to drive the People's Party - a party covering sectors of the Right and the far Right - from power. To give an idea of the violence of the confrontation with the People's Party: the Mayor of Madrid called, for example, on the people of Madrid to mobilize against "communism", "against the Soviets." The social and political polarization is therefore very sharp. The second indication is to refuse any regional or municipal government with the PSOE, the second party of austerity and of the "caste". This policy is fundamental, because if Podemos was to take part in a subordinate position in coalitions dominated by the PSOE, it would mean the end of the singularity of Podemos: its rejection of the caste system and its externality from the system, which is its strength.

Once these two great principles have been highlighted, many situations will arise concerning votes for the positions of mayor or president of the regional executive. Agreements to prevent the People's Party from taking control of a town hall or to make possible the election of a Podemos mayor will surely be discussed case by case. In Andalusia, Podemos and Teresa Rodriguez have asked for minimum measures as a condition for voting for the investiture of the Andalusian government: zero corruption, budgetary transfers to health and education, and for the Andalusian region to break with the banks who have evicted people from their homes. The PSOE has refused, and consequently there is a blockage. It is necessary at the same time to take on responsibilities, to implement the mandate given by the voters, but not to ally with the caste or sectors of it, in this case by forming executives along with the PSOE.

## **8. What kind of structure for a new political formation?**

Finally, there is the problem of the reorganization of Podemos. The complexity of the present situation poses the problem of structuring a new political formation, a kind of party, in a way, by organization - the organization and the coordination of the circles, the organization of political action and not just communication, the organization of debate and political pluralism within Podemos. There is, moreover, a paradox: on one side the libertarian allure of the 15 M movement and Spanish sociopolitical dynamics, and on the other the temptation of centralization around the leader and the electoral machine; but there again the reality is more complicated, because the members of Podemos want to be represented. For example: Teresa Rodriguez in Andalusia, the Madrid coalition, the representatives in Zaragoza and Barcelona.

But above all, the municipal elections are creating a new situation for Podemos. Through organizing or participating in unitary coalitions and in the organization of representative assemblies to select candidates for the municipal lists and discuss local platforms, these elections can represent a new phase in building a movement for popular unity. After these elections, it is a question of demonstrating the ability to govern of the newly elected representatives of Podemos, but above all of these electoral positions being a springboard to link up with struggles and social movements. All the



more so, as our comrades of IA have pointed out, in that the institutions are not neutral, and that many traps will be set for the newly elected representatives, to try and “institutionalize” them. From this point of view, the position adopted that the salaries of elected officials should not exceed 1,930 euros is an excellent measure to ensure that elected officials and employees are citizens and workers like everyone else.

A turning point in Europe? We have pointed out the specific situation in Greece and in the Spanish State, but the scale of the crisis in Spain and of a popular alternative represents a radical change in the situation in Europe. Of course situations cannot just be reproduced, but the Podemos wave is arousing considerable interest, not only in activist circles, but among young people, and more broadly. That indicates that change is possible, that austerity policies can be blocked and especially that new political forces can emerge that stand up for justice and equality.

**François Sabado**

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

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Izquierda Anticapitalista is the former name of the Spanish state section of the Fourth International, since December 2014 it is known as Anticapitalistas.