

Spanish State/Catalonia: Triumph for “Barcelona en Comú”

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The most obvious significance of the triumph of the candidacy of in Barcelona en Comú (Barcelona Together, BEC) and of Ada Colau is that yes, we can win because the working classes have a deep desire for change.

But it was necessary to meet two conditions:

- To have a project capable of generating broad unity and of making it possible to bring together different organizations - Podem (Podemos in Catalonia), Initiative for a Green Catalonia (ICV), the United Alternative Left (EUiA), ecologists (Equo) and Procés Constituent - as well that many more people who are not members of these organizations (who were attracted by BEC, built its grassroots groups and deployed extraordinary activity throughout the campaign).
- To have as a candidate a person who is recognized by the public, able to deal with the media and ready to put their leadership in the service of this plural project. Ada Colau played this role.

It is not easy to bring together all these ingredients, but if we could do it once we can do it again. It is a factor of hope whose impact may turn out to be stronger than the electoral triumph itself.

But even when all these conditions are met, things are not easy. Only 17,000 votes and one council seat separated Ada Colau from Xavier Trias, the outgoing mayor from Convergence and Union (CiU). And the alliances that have to be formed in order to govern are looking complicated: in order to have a majority to govern, you need 21 municipal councillors, whereas BEC has only 11. The closest political party is the Candidacy of Popular Unity (CUP, nationalist organization of the radical left), which ran a good campaign and managed to make its first entry into the municipal council, but with only three councillors. Beyond that, alliances look very difficult: the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) has three councillors, then there is the Party of Socialists of Catalonia (PSC) with four, the CiU with ten, Ciutadans (the Catalan version of Ciudadanos) with five and the Popular Party (PP) with three. With the last three formations, alliances are excluded. Everything will depend, to a large extent at least, on citizens' mobilization, maintenance of the activity of the grassroots groups, the ability to forge broad alliances in the neighbourhoods and to know how to “command by obeying”. A real challenge.

However, the triumph of BEC has a significance that goes beyond just the city, because Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia and we knew from the start that both the campaign and the election results would be interpreted as a key element on a national scale. This is what is happening.

The Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (CDC, principal component of the CiU) and its nationalist leader Artur Mas presented the municipal elections in Barcelona as a kind of primary for the Catalan elections to be held on 27 September. They explained that to strengthen the independentist process it was necessary for Xavier Trias to win. Artur Mas may now be tempted to postpone the vote or - as they are already starting to demand - to insist again on the necessity of a unitary candidature of independentist forces. But the fact of identifying Trias with independence is only half true, insofar as

Trias represents only neoliberal independentism and it is obvious that those below are tired of neoliberal policies.

The idea of presenting the municipal elections of May 24 as the “primary” was also highlighted by the leadership of the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), which requested that the various candidacies adhere to the Municipal Association for Independence (AMI) and work on the plebiscite character of September 27 by building independentist local governments capable of supporting the Parliament and the government that will come out of the election in the process towards independence.

In Barcelona this agreement has been signed by the CiU, the ERC, the CUP and Millor Barcelona (a candidacy that did not obtain representation). However, the agreement has not been signed by BEC, although three of the first four people on its list explained that they had voted yes to the two questions in the referendum of November 9, 2014 [1]. Jordi Sanchez, the new president of the ANC, called on people to make no mistake and to vote for independentist candidates in Barcelona. In the context of these elections, this meant calling on people not to vote BEC, in other words not to vote for the only concrete possibility of change in Barcelona and to support the other candidacy that was capable of winning, that of Trias, representing neoliberal independentism. The results were clear, the working classes have had enough of neoliberalism and they voted for Ada Colau.

Did the ANC choose the right option? Fortunately the independentist movement was not unanimous on this question: there were intelligent voices, although in a minority, who warned of the danger. For example, Vicent Partal: “That sovereignism should launch anathemas against a movement like Barcelona en Comú is a mistake, just as it is a mistake to present the municipal elections as the first round of September 27. Now it has been done, and if things turn out badly it will be difficult to resolve the problem.”

Does the defeat of Trias represent a brake on the independence movement? That is what several newspapers have announced. But do not forget that the process goes well beyond Trias and Mas and its decline has been proclaimed repeatedly, without it being confirmed in reality. Moreover, even though some media try to argue that all is well, we must recognize that there are problems. The sovereignist parties (CiU, ERC, CUP) won 300,000 more votes compared to the 2011 elections and their representation rose from 33 per cent to 45 per cent. But in Catalonia as a whole they won 1.4 million votes, which is less than the 1.9 million obtained on November 9, 2014, and is insufficient to ensure the triumph of independence on September 27, 2015.

Furthermore, a contradiction has arisen between the political orientation of the party of Artur Mas and the evolution to the left of the independentist vote, confirming the slogan: “independence yes, inequalities no!” The CiU lost 110,000 votes in the whole of Catalonia, while the ERC has gained 250,000 and the CUP 160 000. In terms of absolute votes, the CiU won 667,000 votes, the ERC 508,000 and the CUP 221,000. In other words, the base of the independence movement is mostly on the moderate left (ERC) or anti-capitalist (CUP), while neoliberalism (the CiU) governs and wants to continue to govern.

The challenges for the future have not changed much since November 9. We must maintain the Catalan elections on September 27 and work to get a majority in favour of independence, if we want to maintain the thrust of the sovereignty movement and create a relationship of forces sufficient to make independence effective (something which is very difficult) or oblige the state to accept a Scottish-style referendum. But we can only ensure that majority by attracting a lot of people (between 250,000 and 500,000 more than on November 9, 2014) who are not at present favourable to independence, or who are still undecided. For this it is necessary for independence to come across as being committed to eradicating corruption, to winning more democracy (in particular, with

a participatory constitutional process) and putting in place a social emergency plan to counter the damage inflicted by the crisis. But this is impossible with the trajectory and the concrete policies of the CiU and Artur Mas. If on the one hand the ERC and on the other the ANC do not dare to take the lead for an independence without corruption, without attacks on democracy, without gross inequality, the most likely outcome is that there will be no victory on September 27 (assuming that this election takes place). At present the only movement that dares to put forward a programme of this kind is the CUP, but is still too weak to impose a turning point in the situation.

Would it not be possible to repeat the success of Ada Colau with a Catalunya en Comú? That would please many of us, but it appears extraordinarily difficult. The unit of BEC was possible (unfortunately without the CUP) because it was only a municipal alternative and the national question played only a small role in it (in my opinion, too small). Furthermore, on this subject unity is very problematic, between Podem, a party that is ambiguous about supporting the right to self-determination and is not in favour of independence, the parties that are sovereignist, but not independentist (ICV, EUiA), and an independentist party (the CUP). Besides, Podem has already taken the decision to stand on its own in the September 27 elections and the CUP has shown itself to be very unwilling to make alliances with forces that have exercised governmental responsibilities in the past (ICV, EUiA).

In spite of everything there is still hope that the repercussions of the triumph of BEC and the gains made by the CUP, the importance of the challenges and the consciousness of the opportunities that could open up will help them all to change their positions. There is still a chance to make up for lost time.

Martí Caussa, Barcelona, May 25, 2015

P.S.

* Published on Viento Sur:

<http://www.vientosur.info/spip.php?article10120>

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

Footnotes

[1] The two questions were: Do you want Catalonia to become a state? If you reply in the affirmative, do you want this state to be independent?