

From Greece, taking the risks into account: Some thoughts on the situation in Portugal

Tuesday 10 November 2015, by [KOUVELAKIS Stathis](#) (Date first published: 8 November 2015).

I am very hesitant commenting on the recent developments in Portugal and I listened yesterday with a lot of attention the arguments of comrade Mariana Mortágua at the plenary session of the *Historical Materialism* conference. I also read the interview Francisco Louçã , the historical leading figure of the Left Bloc, gave to Ugo Palheta in the *Contretemps* website [[1](#)].

However, on the basis of the Greek experience, the lessons of which have now begun to be widely understood by the European radical Left, I feel I have some responsibility issuing a comradely warning to the comrades of the Portuguese radical Left (Left Bloc -BE- and PCP).

I understand the situation is far from simple for them. There is huge pressure from the electorate to “give a chance” to the Socialists to form a government and bring down the attempt to constitute a minority government of the Right, staged by Cavaco Silva and Passos Coelho with the full backing of the EU. It’s clear that a socialist government dependent on the support of the radical Left and, at least formally, committed to reverse some austerity measures, will be from the outset under the fire of both the EU and the domestic ruling class. In this context one could perhaps understand the tactics of “external” support to a socialist government on the basis of some common agreement which becomes void if violated by the socialists.

The risks are however immense and seem to me to outweigh by far the expected gains. There are three ways of summing this up.

1. The first is the idea that a party such as the PSP would be ready to confront the EU and the domestic bourgeoisie to implement some, even modest, anti-austerity measures seems to me a complete illusion. Even a party of the radical Left such as Syriza, in a country which has experienced social movements of a magnitude unknown in Portugal, proved utterly unable to pursue the confrontational approach that is necessary to get even the most minimal of “concessions”. To put it very simply, it is just impossible to see how even a “relaxation” of austerity can take place without dealing head-on with the issue of the debt and the straitjacket of the eurozone, and it is just crazy to imagine for a second that the PSP is willing/prepared to do that (actually even the BE and the PCP are relatively cautious on these two issues).

2. Secondly, the Greek experience has also shown that between full scale confrontation and capitulation there is no no intermediate way. And this applies not to some kind of radical anticapitalist set of demands but to the very moderate programme on the basis of which Syriza won the January 2015 elections. Even the current Syriza government, which has signed up a horrendous Memorandum and is committed to its implementation, is totally unable to get the slightest concession from the EU on issues such as an ultra-minimal and incomplete protection for home repossessions by the banks. The EU institutions will be even less inclined to be lenient with a PSP government supported by the BE and the PCP and they will most certainly behave in a way comparable to the blackmailing to which the first Syriza government was subjected.

3. Of course supporting a government without being part of it is less risky than full participation. It

is conceivable to withdraw support if the government crosses some “red lines” (but experience shows that defining those “red lines” is far from being simple). In any case, it’s quite likely that the PSP leadership will use the agreement with BE and the PCP the way Tsipras behaved vis-à-vis the left of his own party when he entered the downward spiral of concessions paving the way to surrender. That is constantly blackmailing it by saying “don’t you dare overthrowing the leftwing government of this country”. And his calculation proved right: he trapped Syriza’s left until it was in way “too late”, that is until the cost of withdrawing from the government became costly for the left opposition and quite manageable for him. The experience of Rifondazione Comunista “external support” to the first “centre-left” Prodi government (1996-1998), a support that was withdrawn after two years, also showed that a “junior partner” to the left has more to lose in such an exercise than the main “moderate left”.

Concerning more specifically the BE, to which I feel very close, I think this move contradicts the lucidity with which these comrades drew the lessons from the Greek tragedy and changed significantly their position on the euro - a point emphasized in both interventions of Mariana and Francisco mentioned above as well as the great piece of Catarina Príncipe in *Jacobin* [2] published after the elections.

It’s always a very sensitive issue to express disagreements with comrades giving the fight in another country but I fear that the Portuguese radical Left is entering a road that will end up dilapidating the precious political capital it has so painfully succeeded gaining these last years. However, the extent of the disaster suffered by the Greek people and the Left of my country, and my own personal responsibility in this outcome, oblige me however taking that risk.

Hoping of course, as I did when I was writing on Syriza in these last months, that I prove wrong.

Dixit et salvavi etc...

Stathis Kouvelakis, London, November 8, 2015

P.S.

* “Some thoughts on the situation in Portugal”. 8 novembre, 18:52:
<https://www.facebook.com/stathis.kouvelakis/posts/10153613578870470>

Footnotes

[1] Available on ESSF (article 36298), [Une nouvelle situation politique au Portugal ? L’après élections, les leçons de Grèce et le Bloc de gauche](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36298):
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36298>

[2] Available on ESSF (article 36300), [Hope for the Portuguese Left - “The election’s silver-lining came from the forces to the left of social democracy”](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36300):
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article36300>