

Spanish State: Left strengthens in Podemos internal vote

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Spanish anti-austerity party Podemos held a series of internal elections over November 7–9 throughout seven regions across Spain — Madrid, Andalusia, Extremadura, La Rioja, Castilla y Leon, Navarra y Aragón — and 12 different cities.

The elections were centred around the positions of the general secretaries in each region and territory, as well as the Autonomous Citizens' Councils that form an integral part of the relatively new party's political direction and organisation.

In Madrid, Ramon Espinar won the position of general secretary with 50.8% of the total vote, garnering the support of 13,686 active members of the party. Espinar ran on the ticket of J@untas Podemos with the backing of national Podemos secretary-general Pablo Iglesias, Juan Carlos Monedero (one of the party's early co-founders), and Miguel Urban, the Podemos member of the European Parliament and a key figure within the Anticapitalist Left (IA) internal section of the party.

J@untas Podemos also gained control of 27 of 34 seats of the Citizens Council in the Community of Madrid.

His rival, Rita Maestre, is a key ally of Inigo Errejon, and Madrid politicians Tania Sanchez and Jose Manuel Lopez. Maestre won 43.75% and 11,783 votes running on the ticket of Adelante Podemos con la Gente.

In Andalusia, incumbent general secretary Teresa Rodriguez, a prominent IA leader, was re-elected in a landslide. She won 75.6% of vote and the ticket won 27 out of 34 seats on the Citizens' Council. In Extremadura, the incumbent general secretary and another political ally of Iglesias, Alvaro Jaen, was also re-elected with 64.05%.

The internal elections were marked by a high degree of participation by Podemos members. This was particularly the case in Madrid, where 54.52% of the active members voted, and Andalusia (43.34%).

The results of the elections mark a significant boost for the left-wing and anti-capitalist segments of the party, as well as the leadership of Iglesias.

After the emergence of political differences and debates over strategy between Iglesias and Errejon, the chief political strategist and organiser of Podemos, the elections were seen as an important test of confidence in Iglesias' strategy towards re-energising the political movement.

Podemos's disappointing results in the June 26 general elections — when it failed to beat the traditional social democratic party PSOE — has sparked debates. The recent success of right-wing Popular Party (PP) leader Mariano Rajoy in remaining prime minister has increased the challenges Podemos faces.

The questions around the most effective way for Podemos to advance as the main anti-austerity

political movement in the country have dominated its internal debates.

The most prominent of these have centred around Iglesias' approach of re-engagement with the grassroots Podemos Circles, a sharper and more critical approach against the PSOE and PP as well as an alliance with the IA and some of its major figures, including Teresa Rodriguez and Miguel Urban.

Errejon, for his part, has promoted a more catch-all approach towards attracting the less radical and left-wing sections of Spanish society, including the disenchanted PSOE voters. Errejon pushes a broader political strategy and a discourse that centres around social democracy and the ultimate goal of winning electoral challenges to take control of state institutions.

Battle For Madrid

Of all the contested regions in this round of elections, the Community of Madrid was seen as the most crucial. Apart from being one of the most populated regions of Spain and the epicentre of the biggest protests and gatherings of the Indignados movement that gave rise to Podemos, Madrid was also seen as a key battlefield between Iglesias' and Errejon's candidates.

Both J@untas Podemos and Adelante Podemos acknowledged the need to recuperate and revitalise the participation of citizens within the movement. However, the main differences surrounded the Podemos strategies for achieving political power, while simultaneously implementing its program of anti-austerity and tackling the challenges of presiding over or being part of the institutions of the Spanish state, such as the Madrid City Council.

Espinar, is a member of the Spanish Senate and the speaker of the joint left grouping Unidos Podemos (Together We Can). The key aspects of the ticket's program centred around moving away from the initial electoral strategy of the Podemos Conference of Vistalegre, and towards forming popular unity alliances with other political spaces and groups.

One of the key aims is to "Reinitiate Podemos", returning it back to its original foundations of a rupture with the traditional Spanish regime, aiming to build a "plurinational" and counter hegemonic block of forces. This includes the re-foundation, vindication and reconstruction of the social movements and popular empowerment.

Maestre is a sitting member of the Madrid City Council and the Speaker of the Ahora Madrid (Now Madrid) grouping that forms a core part of the left-wing Mayorship of Manuela Carmena.

Among the key stated goals of Adelante Podemos is ensuring that Podemos was capable of securing key goals in the regional elections of 2019. It also wants to convert the party into a "plural organisation that looked outward" with a more decentralised structure among the regions.

Above all, it seeks to turn Podemos into an organisation that "knows how to govern" and become a useful instrument of the social majority. The overall strategy has been called "win before winning".

Media cooks up a storm

One of the biggest controversies of the whole campaign was alleged case of property speculation on the part of Espinar. Allegedly, the Podemos Senator acquired a public housing flat in the Madrid suburb of Alcobendas for €146,244 in March 2010, before selling it several months later for €176,000.

According to *El Diario Publico*, Espinar later explained that he asked for authorisation from the

Madrid City Council to sell the property, the payment of which was conducted through a family loan and as part of a “Youth Housing” program in the city at the time, without any legal or ethical breaches.

Nevertheless, the story dominated the headlines and pages of a large number of Spanish media outlets, such as *ABC*, *El Mundo* and *La Vanguardia*. It tried to portray the story as a case of embezzlement and effectively tarnish the public image of Espinar within Podemos.

In response, Podemos political figures from across the board, including Maestre, Errejon and Iglesias, defended their comrade and called on the media to cease intervening into the internal process of the party.

For his part, Espinar denounced the hypocrisy of the media attacks. He pointed to the years of corrupt dealings and misappropriation of funds under the PP-led regional government of Madrid, which has “sold over 2000 public housing units to vulture funds”.

The “Espinar case” shows yet another attempt by the right-wing media to continue its slander of Podemos and its leaders, especially Iglesias. It shows elite concerns of Podemos’s rise to become the de facto main opposition to the minority right-wing government of Mariano Rajoy.

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P.S.

* <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/spain-left-strengthens-podemos-internal-vote>