

Spanish State: Debate erupts in Podemos around agreement to join PSOE government

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On September 26 last year, José García Molina, the secretary-general of Podemos in the central Spanish autonomous community (state) of Castilla-La Mancha, announced that his party's agreement keeping the regional Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government in office had «died of disappointment and shame».

According to García Molina, the agreement had expired «waiting for one of its signatories to breathe life and inspiration into it, waiting for justice to be done to what had been presented and signed, but most of all it died from shame at realising some people's lack of commitment to their promises and undertakings.» This was despite the Castilla-La Mancha government's claim that of the 72 points agreed with Podemos as a basis for its support, 49 had been completed and 19 were in the process of being implemented.

The unfulfilled commitments of the PSOE—which with the exception of the 2011-2015 legislature has ruled Castilla-La Mancha since the first post-Franco dictatorship election in 1983—included laws on a guaranteed minimum income, transparency in administration and citizen participation in government.

The announcement by Podemos Castilla-La Mancha that it would no longer necessarily support premier Emiliano García-Page opened up the possibility of an early election for the 33-seat Castilla-La Mancha parliament, where the PSOE (15 seats) has relied on Podemos (2 seats) for a one-seat majority over the formerly governing People's Party (PP).

It also turned García-Page—who supported the PSOE allowing the PP to govern in the Spanish state after the inconclusive June 2016 Spanish general election—into a more determined conspirator against Pedro Sánchez, the PSOE's then general secretary. After that election Sánchez had not only refused to allow the PP to return to power, he had also spooked his regional «barons» like García-Page by putting out feelers about the chances of their supporting a minority PSOE administration towards Podemos and other left forces as well as to Catalan nationalist parties.

When Sánchez, deposed last October by the barons' conspiracy, stood again as PSOE general secretary, García-Page was an enthusiastic attack dog on behalf of Sánchez's main opponent, Andalusian premier Susana Díaz. The premier of Castilla-La Mancha specialised—vainly—in accusing the soon-to-be reborn Sánchez of having «podemosised» the PSOE.

'A Podemos of government'

Now fast forward to July 13 last. García-Page has just announced to the media that the PSOE and Podemos have reached an in-principle agreement: Podemos will approve the regional government's 2017 budget and will have two seats in an expanded ministry, with García Molina as García-Page's deputy premier and another Podemos member in charge of a department of social income guarantees (covering welfare payments, access to housing and the supply of energy to the most needy).

As a result, García-Page, from being the scourge of «podemosisation» in PSOE, has now become its leading exponent. The «back-stabbers» (García-Page on Podemos after they voted down the budget) have become trusted partners. García Molina, who last year described the premier as «more concerned about beheading Sánchez than restoring life to Castilla-La Mancha», told the media: «Let's not get tied up in what in what happened but in what should happen. We should concentrate on what unites us. On building confidence so that there is stability.»

Just three months previously, Podemos had voted with the PP to block the Castilla-La Mancha regional budget, claiming that the García-Page government had ignored its amendments. The main additions to the budget that now made it supportable were a €120 million «integral plan of citizen income guarantees» and €14 million in increased funding to make Castilla-La Mancha's agriculture more ecologically sustainable.

Once the in-principle agreement was reached it received the immediate support of Pablo Iglesias, Podemos general secretary for the Spanish state. Iglesias saw the deal as an example that could be used in pressuring the PSOE in the Spanish parliament to work more closely with Podemos and its allies. It would, for example, further legitimise the work of a parliamentary liaison committee set up on July 17 to probe areas of potential agreement between the two sides but which mutual distrust between their two parliamentary groups was still putting at risk. After the Castilla-La Mancha agreement was reached, Iglesias tweeted: «We do politics to change things. At times, only governing brings change. Now the membership decides.»

What, however, was the Podemos membership in Castilla-La Mancha actually going to be asked to decide? After the regional Podemos executive («Citizens Council») voted by 26 votes in favour to nine abstentions to support the agreement with the PSOE, Podemos members in Castilla-La Mancha were presented with this gnarled question:

“Do you think Podemos Castilla-La Mancha should vote in favour of the budget if on the basis of a government agreement there is a guarantee that its own policies such as the Guaranteed Income or the Plan of Citizen Support will be launched and be under its control?”

This formulation tied support for the new budget measures to support for Podemos entering the García-Page administration. Within Podemos opponents of the agreement immediately called for the two issues to be put separately and decided by a regional congress («Citizens Assembly»), launching the campaign #TwoQuestions to that end. The Podemos Toledo branch called for the existing consultation to be cancelled, stating that «we consider that the consultation as proposed does not allow us in the rank and file to exercise our right to decide with democratic guarantees.» According to a report in the July 23 web-based daily Confidential, supporters of cancelling the consultation also claimed that «no document has been made available and no debate has taken place.»

For his part, García Molina sought to swing support behind the deal by promising that the Podemos ministers would refuse perks like the use of official cars and that «we won't be renouncing anything in our DNA».

Opposition

Opposition to the content of the deal quickly emerged within and beyond Castilla-La Mancha, with the Anticapitalists current, representing around 10% of the total Podemos membership, prominent but not alone in its criticism. Declaring his support for #TwoQuestions, Podemos's second MP in the Castilla-La Mancha parliament, Anticapitalists' sympathiser David Llorente, said that «an agreement to govern with the PSOE as a minority would be a mistake».

On July 21, Isidro López and Raul Camargo, Podemos MPs in the Madrid regional parliament and supporters of Anticapitalists, dramatised what they saw as the stakes in the Castilla-La Mancha vote with this comment on the web-based daily *Público*:

“Over the last week we have seen a profound shift in the political direction of Podemos. Contrary to the majority understanding of what the results of Vistalegre II [Podemos’s February all-Spanish congress] meant, there is a turn towards a dynamic of governmental agreements with the PSOE... Given a correlation of forces favourable to the PSOE, a policy of generalised governmental agreements means ... accepting our conversion into the left wing of the regeneration of the regime.”

A well-known supporter of Pablo Iglesias also issued a warning shot. Diego Cañamero, former leader of the Andalusian Workers Union (SAT) and a Podemos MP in the Spanish parliament, wrote in July 18 discussion section of the web-based daily *El Diario*:

“In this complex context, I believe—with prudence, modesty and all the respect in the world towards the comrades who are designing our political strategy—that the PSOE is not our natural ally ... Getting closer to the PSOE while Podemos does not greatly surpass it in popular and parliamentary support, will only serve to rehabilitate, cure and clean up the worst PSOE. And worse still, we could get so seriously contaminated that ordinary people stop seeing us as an alternative.»

In answer to the campaign for the issues of budget support and entry into the government to be put separately, García Molina asked Podemos members over the social networks whether they considered «the Socialist Party or ourselves as more to be trusted in the implementation of our own policies». He added (as quoted in the July 19 *Diario de Castilla-La Mancha*):

“Voting for the budget without being able to enter government would be to go back to the starting line. To go back to giving the PSOE tools that are ours but which we would leave in their hands and which would be subject to their wishes as to whether they are used or not, and without any control mechanisms or guarantees.”

García Molina also attacked the «marginal» and «residual» Anticapitalists, concentrating his fire on Teresa Rodríguez, his counterpart as regional general secretary in Andalusia and one of Anticapitalists’ best-known spokespersons. Rodríguez had told Radiocable on July 21 that «governing as a minority within PSOE governments means sending the message that there’s not much else you can do»:

“It limits the possibilities of criticism and of building an alternative in the medium term ... [the message is] that the best policy possible is one of soft cuts and that an alternative to the general framework of austerity—one that presupposes a 180 degree turn in economic policy—isn’t possible ... We don’t want to communicate the impression that «Yes, We Can» [sí, se puede!], but only a little bit ... we need to challenge the general framework and that’s difficult when you join a government and have to defend the management of the executive of which you are part.”

García Molina replied on Radiocable on the same day that Anticapitalists «never stop claiming that at the moment of decision the regions should have more decision-making autonomy» but that «it seems that from Andalusia they have to tell us in Castilla-La Mancha what we have to do in our own land.»

“I would ask for a bit of respect and a bit of trust. That they don’t trust the Socialist Party is fine, but that they don’t trust us really doesn’t seem to me quite so fine.”

The ballot result

The criticism had little effect on the membership ballot on Podemos's agreement with García-Page. With just under half the active membership participating, 77.98% voted in favour of the agreement and only 22.02% against. María Díaz, Podemos's local organisational secretary commented: «It is a historic result, surpassing all previous levels of participation in membership consultations in Castilla-La Mancha.»

She added that «we are in no way going to disappoint the confidence of the overwhelming majority who have understood that this is the moment to show that we know how to fight and we know how to govern.»

Calling on the minority to accept the result of the vote, García Molina said that «we are maturing without getting old» and that «the question is not so much about being in a government with the PSOE, but rather about whether we are capable of sharing the business of government with the PSOE, knowing we are two different parties.»

The minority welcomed the high level of membership participation in the consultation, but added that the agreement should have been debated at the level of the Spanish state. According to David Llorente (*Diario de Castilla-La Mancha*, July 25):

“Podemos has to be an alternative to the two-party system and stay loyal to its original project. This debate will have repercussions at the level of the [Spanish] state, because it represents a very sharp turn with respect to the original project and to that approved at Vistalegre II.”

Llorente also added that the question put to Podemos members was «very confused» and that it would have been very interesting to know what the opinion of members would have been if the issues of supporting the budget and taking part in government had been put separately.

The regional PSOE government welcomed the result as «reinforcing the economic, social, political and institutional stability in Castilla-La Mancha—it will be tremendously beneficial for the region» (parliamentary spokesperson Fernando Mora on July 25). At the same time it stressed that the deal was without implications for the politics of the Spanish state, where the PSOE and Podemos and its allies are engaged in an intensely «friendly» struggle for hegemony over the left.

The PSOE avoided having a ballot on whether its membership supported the agreement for Podemos to enter government (as required under a new statute adopted at its June congress), arguing that the issue being decided was basically a change to the budget. As such it could be reported on and discussed branch by branch without a vote of the whole membership.

As for the PP, it saw the arrival of Podemos people on ministerial chairs as introducing a «left-wing radicalism that will turn Castilla-La Mancha into Spain's Venezuela» (Francisco Núñez, PP president in the regional capital of Albacete).

The result of the consultation would seem to show that that the bulk of Podemos members in Castilla-La Mancha were anxious to see the introduction of the guaranteed minimum income and other social guarantees and accepted the risk of Podemos participating in a PSOE government if that was the price of getting the reforms.

Pablo Echenique, Podemos's secretary of organisation at the level of the Spanish state observed in a press conference after the result that the key to the agreement was the possibility that it would be Podemos that could directly design and manage the plan of social support:

“In Castilla-La Mancha there'll be no-one living without a roof over their head, without a basic supply of energy and water and without income ... We are joining the government to make sure this

takes place and that agreements are honoured. Time will tell if that commitment is well-judged, but what is obvious is that it has been courageous and that it also shows the way forward for what might happen in Spain.”

This comment represented an effective change of position from the Podemos secretary of organisation, who is also the secretary-general in the region of Aragon, where Podemos had become, as in Castilla-La Mancha, very critical of the local PSOE administration of premier Javier Lambán. Podemos Aragon’s orientation of distancing itself from the PSOE was adopted by a large membership majority in November last year following the performance of the PSOE Aragon administration after the Podemos membership had previously voted to support the 2016 regional budget. According to the July 14 *El País*, Echenique said of relations with the PSOE in Aragon:

“In the weeks that have followed the approval [of the budget], we had a government that disappeared and was weak, proving incapable of siding with the social majority. At the moment, we do not have the conditions of trust and political agreement that would allow Podemos Aragon to enter a government with the PSOE and the CHA [left regionalist Aragonese Union].”

A critical and unfinished debate

In his comment on the result García Molina recognised that «in Podemos there’s an in-depth debate that remains to be resolved.» In this he was echoing the comments by Teresa Rodríguez, who told the July 25 *Confidential*:

“There’s a legitimate and reasonable debate about how we relate to the PSOE. The only way to propose alternatives to the policies of austerity is via agreement with the PSOE, I agree with that. However, there’s an in-depth strategic difference, one which could put our own future at risk, about whether we can be in PSOE governments without getting ground down.”

A wide span of opinion exists in Podemos on this issue: it runs from those for whom the low level of social struggle and the PSOE’s narrow but apparently consolidated lead over Podemos in recent opinion polls should rule out any idea of joint PSOE-Podemos governments, to those, led by Secretary of Strategic Analysis and Political Change Iñigo Errejón, who believe that Podemos urgently needs to show that is capable of governing usefully or risk irrelevance. For Errejón, even as a minority in a PSOE-led government Podemos can set the intellectual and strategic agenda.

The majority position of Pablo Iglesias has oscillated between these two poles: at Vistalegre II it shared Anti-capitalists stress on the need for a revival of social struggle as a precondition for winning the struggle for left hegemony with the PSOE. However, since then the ongoing low level of social resistance—and the inability of Podemos by itself to reignite it—plus the dramatic defeat of the old PSOE establishment by the Pedro Sánchez campaign for PSOE general secretary has changed the Spanish political landscape quite a bit. With Susan Díaz, the barons and their media backers now on the back foot, a strong sentiment has emerged that the Sánchez-led PSOE and Podemos and its allies just have to try to get together to throw out the hated, ultra-corrupt and anti-democratic PP government.

The Castilla-La Mancha vote also reflects that sentiment: despite negative examples like those provided by past United Left (IU) minority participation in PSOE governments in Andalusia (an assessment now accepted by IU Andalusia leader Antonio Maíllo), the chance of Podemos improving the lives of the worst-off in Castilla-La Mancha looks to have been the overwhelming determinant of the vote in favour of the Podemos-PSOE deal.

In this context, outright rejection of any governmental alliance with the PSOE runs the risk of

confirming the PSOE's own anti-Podemos messaging, namely that «We Are The Left That Doesn't Just Protest But Knows How to Govern to Improve Peoples' Lives». The challenge for Podemos would then seem to be to have a serious, thorough and reasoned debate about its bottom lines for (a) participating in or (b) supporting from outside a Sánchez-led PSOE government.

In a July 18 contribution to the web-based review *Cuartopoder*, Manuel Monereo, an intellectual long associated with the Communist Party of Spain and a Podemos MP in the Spanish parliament, commented on the complexity of the situation in which Unidos Podemos (the electoral alliance between Podemos and the United Left) has to work out its tactics towards Sánchez's party:

"Pedro Sánchez's project was clear from the beginning: limit—reduce the political and electoral weight of—Unidos Podemos. To do that it was necessary to have a strong polarisation against the PP, to hegemonise the opposition and to reclaim a monopoly of the values and imagery of the left."

Has Pedro Sánchez now really changed? I don't know...[But] Sánchez has constructed a clear majority on the leading bodies of his party, still has to face an internal opposition front of barons and a baroness [Susana Díaz] and—this is fundamental—has revitalised and politicised a party and an electoral base that was vegetating half-way between resignation and nostalgia."

Monereo spelled out his view of the tactical challenge for Unidos Podemos in the face of the emergence of an apparently different PSOE:

"The struggle for unity has to be carried out with sincerity and right to the end. The social perception is that with Sánchez a Socialist Party is winning that has turned to the left, that defends social rights and firmly opposes the policies of the PP. Independently of what we might guess or think about this new PSOE, it is necessary to respond to the challenge of unity."

What should be our political tactic? To make unity, political alternative and the overall project a mass discussion, one that brings us closer to the demands of citizens, that again politicises a society that shows signs of disenchantment with politics and that also—this is a paradox of reality—wants political alternatives that are simultaneously possible, viable and radical.

Hopefully, Podemos Castilla-La Mancha's life as a small minority within a PSOE government will provide useful experiences that can further clarify how Unidos Podemos can best engage with Spain's social democracy.

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P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/spain-debate-podemos-psoe-government>

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