

INTERVIEW

Portugal and Bloco's Anti-Austerity Gamble

Sunday 10 June 2018, by [KREVER Tor](#), [LOUÇA Francisco](#) (Date first published: 2 December 2015).

The founder of Portugal's Left Bloc on the party's history, electoral strength, and support for the new Socialist Party government.

Last month, Portugal's minority right-wing government fell, rejected by a coalition of left and center-left parties in parliament.

Its creation only weeks earlier, following the October 4 elections, had been controversial. Rather than appoint a left government with majority support in parliament, Portugal's right-wing president had chosen to instead reappoint Pedro Passos Coelho's minority center-right Social Democratic Party–Popular Party coalition, insisting that the radical left had no place in government.

However, following parliament's rejection of his continued austerity program on November 10, Passos Coelho resigned. Two weeks later, on November 24, Portugal's president backed down and appointed Socialist leader António Costa prime minister. Costa's center-left Socialist Party will govern with the support of a parliamentary majority following agreements with the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the Left Bloc.

The Left Bloc swept to prominence with an unprecedented 10.2 percent of the vote in October's elections. Its emergence as government-maker, following a successful anti-austerity campaign and its backing by a growing popular social movement, is the most important development in recent years for the Portuguese left.

Earlier this month, before the new government was formed, Tor Krever spoke with Francisco Louçã, the founder and former leader of the Left Bloc, about the party's history, its electoral success, and its priorities — as well as the risks entailed — in supporting a Socialist Party government.

**Tor Krever (TK-
In 1999, as leader of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, you brought together a number of far-left groupings to form the Left Bloc. What was the motivation for doing so at that particular time?**

Francisco Louçã (FL)

There were two primary motivations. One was an immediate reaction to the defeat of the referendum on abortion in 1998. It was unexpected as most of the polls indicated that the majority of the population did not favor jailing women for abortion. But turnout for the referendum was so low that the Right was able to win.

This was revealing as it demonstrated that the organization of the Left in Portugal in social and cultural terms was very deficient. So there was a short-term motivation to get people together and to think about correcting the dispersion of left forces and to have instead a convergence: a grouping that could effectively pursue progressive social and cultural goals.

TK

And the second?

FL

The second motivation, which was perhaps more important, was the culture of the anti-globalization movement, very important at the time. New movements were emerging in Europe pushing, for example, for a Tobin tax, while also critiquing imperialism and globalization — and that was before the war in Yugoslavia and of course before September 11 and the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq.

TK

The most prominent grouping on the Left at that time was the Communist Party. Did you see Bloco as challenging their hegemony?

FL

Yes, for almost forty years parliament was divided among four forces: the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, and then the two right-wing parties. The Communist Party had been very strong — for some time they had forty-five members of parliament (now they have seventeen).

But the political game was so well established for so long that a large part of the Left, one that did not accept the Communist Party's views, were marginalized. Small parties like the Popular Democratic Union or the Revolutionary Socialist Party could play a role in social movements, but were not strong enough to present a political alternative. So there was an effort to form more than just an alliance — to redefine the political landscape.

TK

Those smaller parties and political associations that joined to form the Left Bloc each had their own distinct identities within the Marxist tradition. The Popular Democratic Union was Maoist in orientation, while the Revolutionary Socialist Party was a Trotskyist formation. To what extent did those sectarian identities continue?

FL

There was already a lot of convergence even before the formation of the Left Bloc. Not exactly in political terms — sectarian attitudes came from the past and were still very important — but certainly from a cultural point of view. So the gap was already closing, and there was a lot of common ground: open Marxist views on left-wing movements, what was to be done politically, the role of social movements, the rejection of Stalinism, and so on.

Of course, some old connections and networks survived for a long time, and they still exist in a sense, although none is dominant as far as the Left Bloc is concerned. The current leaders of the Bloc come from independent traditions and do not represent any of the past political forces.

TK

Is the party still guided by a Marxist theoretical outlook?

FL

There are a lot of Marxists, but the party itself is not ideologically committed in that sense. It's a party that is socialist-left so it favors socialism and anticapitalism in a very coherent way and many of the people are Marxist, but other people are not — coming from the Catholic tradition and so on, while still others have no such ideological identity.

But if you look at the official documents of the Left Bloc, you see a lot of references in the Conferences and Congresses to a Marxist analysis of class struggle and the formation of social

classes.

TK

What about the party's social base? Did it initially attract disaffected Communist and Socialist Party members?

FL

No, not so much. There was a small group of ex-PCP members, but it was not dominant. Mostly the base was made up of people who were not previously in any party — who were independent, with some defined left political or cultural attitude, but no party-political experience.

TK

That base has grown slowly but significantly, as has the party's electoral success: from 2.4 percent of the vote in 1999 to 9.8 percent in 2009, and now 10.2 percent in 2015.

FL

It is very difficult to create a new alternative in parliamentary terms. The Left Bloc had no representatives elected to the European Parliament when we presented a list in our first electoral campaign in 1999, but then we had two members elected to the national parliament that year.

That proved we were breaking ground. The vote then went up to almost 3 percent in 2002, and then to 6 percent in 2005, and then to 9 percent with sixteen members elected in 2009. So it was for a decade a small, slow growth, but a consistent one.

TK

What accounts for the surge in support in 2009, when the party doubled its parliamentary representation from eight members of parliament (MPs) to sixteen MPs? The economic crisis was just beginning and had not yet hit Portugal hard.

FL

Yes, the recession in Europe began in 2008, but 2009 was still a year of fiscal expansion in Portugal so the effects of the crisis were not yet felt so much.

Our growing support reflected more a rejection of the absolute majority and social and economic policies of the Socialist Party under José Sócrates. His was a very authoritarian government, and most young people and those on the Left generally felt that it was very excessive.

TK

The Socialists lost their majority in parliament in the 2009 elections but continued in power as a minority government, passing an austerity budget in 2010 but then falling in 2011 when parliament rejected a further austerity pact.

FL

Yes, the right-wing parties opposed the budget for political reasons: they saw an opportunity to defeat the government. Sócrates had the choice of presenting a new plan to parliament or of asking for elections. He decided to ask for elections, although he was not forced to do so.

TK

In those elections, where the Social Democrats (the main right-wing party) emerged as victors and formed a coalition government with the second right-wing party, CDS-PP, the Left Bloc lost a lot of the ground it had gained in previous years. In fact, it lost half of its seats in parliament, and its share of the vote dropped below 2005 levels. What was the

cause?

FL

The election occurred after the signing of the first memorandum with the troika. After the government's fall in 2011, Sócrates remained as a caretaker prime minister leading a management government.

It was during that interim period, before new elections, that the Socialists requested a bailout and signed the memorandum. And the right-wing parties cosigned it because the troika asked them to do so. So there was a big majority of parties, center and right-wing, favoring the memorandum as the only option. And that was the common belief in Portugal.

TK

You took a strong anti-austerity line at the time.

FL

Yes, we put forward a proposal for the renegotiation of the debt, but the country was under enormous pressure to accept austerity, and so the left-wing forces, namely the Left Bloc, lost a lot of votes.

We returned to the previous vote — let's say the party's historical base — which was five percent, losing a lot of the votes we had gained from the Socialist Party and the political center in 2009.

TK

The four intervening years have seen growing disaffection with Passos Coelho's government and its austerity policies — pay and pensions slashed, record unemployment. The Left Bloc has clearly benefited from the resulting anger, as well as the Socialist's inability to present a convincing alternative. The party enjoyed its best election results yet with 10.2 percent of the vote, some half a million votes.

Do you think that improvement on the party's 2009 performance represents a permanent shift of allegiances, or is there a risk that some of those electoral gains might swing back to the Socialists in the future?

FL

Well, we don't know. You can't predict that. But you can measure the consistency of the social movements, where there has been an important resistance against the troika and austerity. Not so much as in Spain and Greece, but still significant.

Here of course the fact that the Socialist Party was outside the government for the past four years meant that it could present itself as an alternative. But only an alternative within the narrow horizons of a European consensus, which meant that the Bloc could gain strength by receiving credit for radical and consistent proposals against austerity.

We succeeded in making the country's debt a national discussion, the need for renegotiation being much more widely accepted than before. There was a manifesto signed by seventy-four people, including even ex-finance ministers of right-wing governments, but also trade-union leaders and left-wing spokespersons asking for the renegotiation of the debt. So it became a national issue.

TK

My sense is that the party's electoral success mirrors a groundswell of popular support for the party, a real mobilization of Bloco supporters much more visible than in the past.

FL

Yes, that's true. We ran a very powerful campaign: Catarina Martins was the only political leader who was willing to debate both the Socialist Party and the Communist Party as well as both leaders of the right-wing parties, the prime minister, and the vice prime minister.

Jerónimo de Sousa, the leader of the Communist Party, for instance, did not accept a debate with the prime minister and the vice prime minister. Catarina did. So she was brave enough to do so, and she was very successful in that debate. It had an enormous impact in confirming the authority and capacity of the Left Bloc's proposals, and public support grew during the campaign.

TK

Nonetheless, popular support for radical alternatives, although impressive, is overshadowed by that seen, as you just noted, in Spain and Greece. Indeed, political apathy here remains widespread — there was a record-low turnout for the vote. Why do you think that is?

FL

Well, in Greece, the social-democratic party, Pasok, was in government and disappeared, so the center was not an alternative anymore; there was a real polarization between the left and the right wings. Pasok had a coalition with the main right-wing party. That was not the case in Portugal. The Socialist Party is not Pasok, so it still has the capacity to advance some critiques of austerity.

In Spain, the general perception of corruption of the political system implicated both the Right and the Socialist Party for very real reasons. The emergence of a new party, Podemos, was a response to that perception of corruption that did not attain the same level in Portugal. So the social and political histories are very different.

But it's true that in a sense the ideology of austerity made greater gains in Portugal and most people accepted that austerity was, if not desirable, unavoidable — that the EU would force austerity on Portugal anyway. That was common sense.

TK

One of Bloco's major achievements has been to push back against that, to undermine that commonsensical understanding.

FL

Yes, to undermine it, although we did not vanquish it. Winning 10 percent of the vote is not enough to defeat it. It is an important result and a challenge to the majority views, to the orthodox economic proposals, but it's still only a lever, not a triumph.

TK

After the disappointment of 2011, the Left Bloc reorganized itself, changing its leadership structure, and you resigned your position as leader. A number of prominent members also split from the party — Left Bloc MEP (Member of the European Parliament) Rui Tavares, for instance, who went on to found the Livre Party, which was open to alliance with the Socialist Party.

FL

I favored a change and a renewal of leadership. That is important for a party, to create the best conditions for different cadre to learn and to get experience. Furthermore, I had been elected five times to parliament and had already thirteen years as an MP. A good republican principle is not to have anybody for too long in a position of power.

As far as those having left the Bloc by that time, the number was not very important, but they were relevant personalities, yes.

TK

Do you think that was beneficial to the party?

FL

Well, when you lose some people it is never beneficial. But it finally cleared the way in the sense that an unspoken alternative inside the Bloc, which was to turn the party into support for the Socialist Party, was finally presented to the electorate, and that was defeated. Badly defeated. It will be very difficult to present it again.

TK

Yes, Livre received a humiliating 0.7 percent of the vote. Another interesting feature of the Left Bloc is the prominence of women in the party's leadership. There was an article a few days ago in the Guardian about this.

FL

The article [\[1\]](#) was about the success of some women leading the party. and that's quite true and quite interesting. The Left Bloc has favored parity and a balanced role for men and women for a long time.

Of course, when Catarina was chosen as the party's spokesperson, it was not because anyone computed the difference a woman would make, but simply because she was the best person to represent the political activities of the party. And she's done wonderfully. Now, the fact that she's a woman means that she is attacked more than a man would be. So in fact she's required to be even braver than a man.

TK

Yes, I'm always struck by the absence of female voices in so much mainstream political discourse here. Each time I turn on the television news I'm confronted once more with an all-male panel discussing the country's future.

FL

Well, it's very recent that women came to be candidates for presidency. In the last forty years there was only one. And now we have two including Marisa Matias for the Left Bloc. There was one female prime minister for a very short period, but that was quite exceptional.

I remember when I first came to parliament the Communist Party had sixteen elected MPs, of whom only one was a woman. And the most important right-wing party had around seventy-five MPs, of whom only five were women.

So it was totally unbalanced. But in 2006 a new parity law was approved [requiring all candidate lists to include a minimum representation of 33 percent for each sex] and, at least for Bloc, there is now an important presence of women on the political landscape.

TK

The Left Bloc has made it clear that it is prepared to support a Socialist government and that in doing so, it is prepared to drop, at least for now, its demands for renegotiation of the debt, withdrawal from the euro, reconsideration of NATO membership, and so on, so as to prioritize, as Catarina put it, "what's truly essential": the poverty and unemployment facing so many Portuguese.

FL

Yes, the Left Bloc has been consistent with what Catarina said during and even before the electoral campaign: that the most important things are very urgent measures for pensions and wages and avoiding some of the Socialist Party's proposals for cuts in social security.

This is a political decision to prioritize reversing wage and pension cuts as soon as possible. The unemployed, and people under stress in general, should feel that there is at least a small difference going on. That is what the agreement signed between the SP and Bloco is about.

Now, can a new government manage the country for four years under pressure from the European Union without a restructuring of the debt? That I don't think so. I don't think enough investment and creation of employment is possible under the stress of the financial rent which is imposed on public debt.

But still, I think most on the Left understand very well the enormous difference it makes not to go on with the right-wing government and to disrupt it and have a sense of progressive measures which can be very concrete in the next month or even years.

TK

What happens when those measures cease to be possible due to the burden of debt and the EU's financial strictures? Some predictions suggest even the Socialist's modest proposals for increased spending on basic social services are not possible in the face of the country's enormous debt.

FL

That we will see. The debate on the concrete alternative of debt restructuring will in any case reemerge.

TK

Alright, but even putting aside financial constraints, the Socialists appear ideologically committed to some form of austerity-lite. Mário Centeno, their likely finance minister, has said it's not the direction of the last government's austerity programme he wants to change, just the "speed of travel."

It seems inevitable that at some point there is going to be a clash between the Left Bloc's program and the Socialists' centrist commitments. Is the Left Bloc prepared to bring down a Socialist government?

FL

It would not be very intelligent now to discuss in public such future scenarios, as if we were doomed to fail on the immediate measures which make a difference for most of the workers and retired people.

What is clear is that the written agreement between the Socialists and the Left Bloc is very concrete on what cannot be done even if the national accounts turn out to be worse than what we know today or if new austerity measures are pushed by the European Union.

What can't be done is to increase taxes on labor or to decrease pensions or wages. So there is a limited scope of viable alternatives outside that. If we assume that the Socialist Party and the new government fulfills that agreement, even if some shocks or conflicts are unavoidable, the only alternative will be some tax changes on capital or debt restructuring.

TK

Syriza's experience, I assume, has been very much present in the party's recent deliberations. What lessons do you draw from Greece? Some on the European left have warned that the Syriza example shows that compromise inevitably leads to capitulation.

FL

That's a little excessive, since this is a political choice, not so much a moral issue. My impression of Syriza was that they hoped for good and faithful negotiation on the debt and they could never get it.

They underestimated their enemies, so they negotiated without any powerful alternative. They did not believe Plan B was necessary and so they had none. And they were not prepared for the only measure that would allow them to impose a renegotiation of the debt, which would be an exit from the euro.

Their problem was not the requirement of compromise, but because the other side did not want any compromise at all. And the new memorandum is no compromise, it's just destroying the Greek economy. At the end of the day, Greece will be forced to leave the euro and to try to salvage what it can, to navigate on its own. But it will be in a much worse situation than it was one year ago or five years ago.

TK

What of a Portuguese exit?

FL

If a real negotiation on the debt is pursued, the alternative of an exit should always be present and duly prepared for for the most difficult scenario of failing negotiations. It is the only possibility of imposing a restructuring of the debt if the creditors do not accept meaningful change.

TK

But debt restructuring is precisely what the party has agreed to take off the table in order to reach agreement with the Socialists. Is this not the risk of aligning with social democracy to form a government?

FL

There is no sympathy for social democracy in the Left Bloc. There is a very politically astute view of what should be done in the short term in order to save our people and regain sovereignty of our own economic choices. Ultimately there is no possibility of having a left-wing policy towards fighting inequality and fighting unemployment unless there is a deep debt restructuring in Portugal.

But we have an exceptional situation in that we have the possibility of defeating a right-wing government and are trying to have a government with some compromises on urgent measures for wages and pensions. In any case, not only has the Left Bloc not abandoned this idea but it emphasizes it in public, and very strongly.

For the moment, the agreement with the SP accepts a commission on the debt that will be forced to report briefly, and the different views on the question will be discussed and publicly known.

TK

And tackling the debt head on is going to require not just parliamentary gains but the mobilization of Portuguese workers.

FL

Yes, certainly serious political change in Portugal cannot be achieved unless through a very powerful democratic and active social movement. That will be the way forward for the Left Bloc.

P.S.

* Jacobin, 12.02.2015:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2015/12/portugal-left-bloc-catarina-martins-francisco-louca>

* ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Francisco Louçã is the founder and former leader of the Left Bloc.

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/14/women-portuguese-politics-left-bloc-party-sexist-attacks>