

Spanish State, PSOE & Podemos: A progressive government born under the gun in Spain

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Amid rising tensions in a badly fragmented parliament (including 10 parliamentary groups and 22 parties), the leader of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), Pedro Sánchez, won a very tight second vote (167 to 165 with 18 abstentions) to be confirmed prime minister of the first coalition government in the history of post-Franco democracy, which has until now rotated between two dominant parties.

Undoubtedly a historic moment, the new PSOE-UP government comes to power in the context of a crisis in the Spanish regime unfolding along multiple fronts. On the socioeconomic front, the turn to austerity initiated by previous PSOE prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in May 2010 led to one of the most unequal and precarious societies in the European Union and provoked the emergence of the mass occupation movement in public squares on in May 2011 - predating the Occupy movement in the U.S. by six months. On the institutional front, the judiciary has acted as a "government of the judges," there is a crisis of political representation, and more and more people question the role of the monarchy. And on the national-territorial front, the Catalan movement has challenged the central government's rule while simultaneously shedding light on a crisis of depopulation known as *España vaciada* ("empty Spain").

Although uncertainties abound as to its longevity, this unprecedented PSOE-UP coalition was concluded after two elections that failed to give any party or parties the votes to form a stable government. Further complicating matters, the PSOE-UP accord relies on agreements with other political forces to succeed, including affirmative confidence votes by the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), the Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG), More Country (Más País), Commitment Coalition (Coalició Compromís), and Teruel Existe (a small regional party), while counting on abstentions from the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and Basque Country Unite (Euskal Herria Bildu) to achieve the narrow 167-165 parliamentary majority. The agreement with the ERC is by far the most important and commits the government to establish a Dialogue Roundtable in the short term to take on the Catalan "political conflict" between the central Spanish government and the Catalan government to consider a possible agreement culminating in a consultation (referendum) with the

citizens of Catalonia as to their status. In other words, a process will begin whose result is yet to be defined and with an obligatory ambiguity built in regarding the legal framework and the exact path to be taken, as Martí Causa explains in an article titled “The ERC-PSOE agreement: finally time to sit and talk?”

Likewise, the document signed with the PNV is relevant as it reinforces the need to address the plurinational reality of the Spanish State but also establishes an obligation on the part of the central government to consult with the PNV (and it should not be forgotten that the PNV is a conservative party, although one without genetic links to Franco’s fascist regime) prior to decisions affecting the Basque country, especially in fiscal matters.

All of these agreements can be characterized as social-liberal, complying with Brussels’ dictates of Brussels in economic terms (here, I refer readers to articles published by Viento Sur on how issues such as labor rights, health, and pensions are addressed in the government’s program [2]) and reformist in terms of national-territorial questions. However, we must also point to the growing alarm spreading among most of the establishment in recent days. This was reflected in the parliamentary debate over the SPOE-UP coalition government (investiture) and by the belligerence of and open competition between the three right-wing parties – the mainstream conservative People’s Party – PP, the right-populist Ciudadanos, and hard-right Vox party. The jockeying on the right to take credit for most loudly denouncing the impending catastrophe and national betrayal to be brought on by Pedro Sánchez was obviously intensified by the far-right Vox placing third in the national vote, winning 15 percent, second only to the PP and the PSOE.

This reaction has been on display on many fronts: from most of the media to the Episcopal Conference of Bishops (“pray for Spain”) to large corporations and, above all, to the judiciary and even administrative bodies such as the Central Electoral Board (JEC). It was the latter that, on the eve of the parliamentary investiture debate, decided by 7 votes against 6 to disqualify the president of the Catalan government, Joaquim Torra, from the vote. Torra was convicted of disobeying an order to remove a banner calling for freedom for Catalan prisoners. The JEC next demanded keeping ERC leader Oriol Junqueras in prison despite a ruling issued by the Court of Justice of the European Union and, now, a communication from the European Parliament in which they definitively recognize him, together with Catalan politicians Carles Puigdemont and Toni Comín, as MEPs (Member of the European Parliament). The fact that PP leader Pablo Casado was the first to disseminate the resolution regarding Torra clearly confirms the complicity between that party and the majority of the JEC in their desire to create a last-minute obstacle to the ERC’s possible abstention in the investiture debate.

Once again, the sacred unity of Spain and... ETA

Regarding the on-going debate over the new government, if the right wing has broadly criticized the moderate socio-economic measures announced thus far (partial repeal of the PP’s neoliberal labor reforms, an increase in the minimum wage, increases in some direct taxes on wealth, etc.) as well as offered their inevitable references to Chavez’s Venezuela and the anticipated appointment of populist and communist ministers, the principle target of their diatribes against the PSOE leader has been his agreements with nationalist and independentist forces (mainly the ERC but also EH Bildu).

Using Pedro Sánchez’s own openly anti-Catalan independence discourse (on full display during the last campaign), the right accuses him of being a “traitor” to Spain and the Constitution. PP leader Pablo Casado has typically warned of a “Frankenstein government nightmare,” “Spain breaking with constitutional socialism,” and of “violations of national sovereignty,” while Vox MP Santiago Abascal

has echoed Casado and added his own well-known attacks on feminism, environmentalism, and immigration, tracing these supposed transgressions to the history of the PSOE before the 1936 civil war and denouncing that the new governmental agreement as a coup. And this time around, Teruel Exists' single MP has been subjected to a hostile social media campaign and attacks in his home province including him in the list of "traitors to the country" for his willingness to vote in favor of Sánchez's investiture. After both of these interventions, there was little left to add by the Ciudadanos leadership (even as the right-populist party suffers an accelerated electoral decline) beyond denouncing the "ideological counter-reform" in education that he fears the new government will pursue and to continue with paranoid criticism of all nationalist forces as "not Spanish" and calling on PSOE members to switch parties.

However, when the spokeswoman for the Basque EH Bildu party criticized King Felipe VI for his speech of October 3, 2017, the right's particularly crass conception of freedom of expression was exposed, as was their nostalgia for Basque Homeland and Liberty (ETA - formally dissolved in May 2018), which the right relied on to criminalize the Abertzale (Basque nationalist) left and accuse Sánchez of being an accomplice of terrorism.

In response to these provocative speeches, the Socialist leader has avoided explaining his changed attitude, reflected in the agreement he reached with UP and ERC. In fact, regarding his previous speeches, Sánchez has limited himself to arguing that, in the face of stonewalling by the three right-wing parties, concluding such agreements with the left and the nationalists was the only alternative to avoiding a third election. Of course, Sánchez has tried to narrow the scope of the document signed with ERC, making it clear that he is seeking a solution "within the framework of the Constitution" and that he continues to reject the right of self-determination.

Within the framework of this polarization, Podemos leader (and now deputy prime minister) Pablo Iglesias sought simultaneously to raise hopes and defend his role in the negotiations, referring demagogically to social movements as "architects of the Agreement" and pointing to the struggle for social justice as an alternative to the extreme right and to plurinational Spain against the "anti-Spain" Vox. However, Iglesias failed to acknowledge the parts of UP's electoral program he was forced to relinquish in order to accept the limits established in the new government's program. It was left to ERC spokesman, Gabriel Rufián, to speak directly to Pedro Sánchez's past contradictions, citing Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges to remind the new prime minister "no nos une el amor sino el espanto" [3] ("it is not love that unites us but horror") facing a common enemy in a "feral right wing" and warning that "if there are no negotiations, there will be no legislature."

Only Mireia Vehí of the Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) offered a left-wing criticism of the coalition government's program, denouncing that tragedies such as those on the southern border and in the foreign detention centers (CIES) will continue to occur. And she reminded the PSOE that it had once defended "the right of self-determination of all Iberian nationalities" during the end of the Franco era.

Few developments have reached us from the brief second session of debate beyond the right's insistent rejection of the right to criticize Felipe VI in any manner, its denunciation of the "socialist surrender" to the nationalists, and its vehement attacks on the legitimate demand by Catalan MP Montserrat Bassa for the release of her sister, jailed Catalan Counselor for Labor, Social Affairs, and Families Dolors Bassa, and the other Catalan political and social representatives who remain in jail. And, of special interest to us, EH Bildu MP Oskar Matute offered a timely reference to French revolutionary socialist Daniel Bensaïd who, when taking stock of his organizing history, concluded that "We have sometimes, even often, been wrong, and on quite a few things. At least we have not made a mistake either in combat or in enemies."

A narrow road, full of obstacles and retreats

We are entering, therefore, a new phase in which the investiture of Sánchez as president of the government does not in the least guarantee the governability of a regime facing a structural crisis, not only at the state level but also across the EU as a whole. The maximum to which the government aspires is to offset a part of the neoliberal cuts to social services and rights carried out in the recent past. Yet even these reforms are conceived of as operating within restrictions imposed by article 135 of the Constitution (requiring a balanced budget), to which the European Commission has already referred to mandate an 8-billion-euro reduction in the GDP. The new government hopes to compensate for this limitation with a tax reform that will not even rise to the European tax average and, above all, with progressive measures on other fronts such as civil rights and civil liberties (repealing gag laws, legalizing euthanasia, legitimizing historical memories of the Franco era, taking measures against macho violence, etc.), a timid energy transition, and a willingness to “channel” the Catalan conflict through dialogue.

However, despite the restraint reaffirmed by Sánchez in his last speeches, the fundamental problem he faces will be opposition from a right whose origins spring mainly from Francoism, a right that holds a patrimonial conception of the regime. This explains his fear that a reform, even a partial one, of one of the right’s untouchable dogmas – that is, the unity of Spain, understood as the a single nation within a State whose borders are inviolable – may open the Pandora’s box of constitutional reform and even the possibility of sparking a constituent process in which the fundamental pillars of the regime, such as the monarchy and the authoritarian enclaves inherited from the dictatorship, are challenged.

Even a seemingly moderate Spanish right-wing columnist, José Antonio Zarzalejos, has compared Sánchez’s alliance with nationalist forces to the 1930 San Sebastián Pact, which preceded the fall of the monarchy and the proclamation of the Republic in April 1931. I wish it were so, but unfortunately the new government has no intention of generating a scenario that might lead to a rupture like the one that started back then. Rather, the new government aims to mitigate political instability, but the crisis in Spanish governance that will undoubtedly continue unabated.

So, despite this new government’s moderation, we must prepare to respond to the reactionary bloc’s professed strategy of heightening tensions, a strategy it is learning rapidly from the new form of constitutional coup spreading in Latin America in recent times, one that has led the right to consider the new government as “illegitimate.” We are already seeing them apply these conceptions in their attempt to disqualify the president of the Catalan Generalitat, Catalonia’s home government. And thus, we return to the old discussion about legality and legitimacy, resurrected in the wake of the Catalan conflict, a discourse that all three of the right-wing parties are now resurrecting for their own purposes. The right has tried this before, for instance, in the wake of the Madrid train bombings in 2004, PP prime minister José Aznar initially tried to pin blame on ETA, leading to popular outrage and an electoral victory by the SPOE in subsequent elections and the appointment of Zapatero as prime minister.

How to form a left-wing alternative?

Based on this polarized framework and the right’s radicalization, it is not possible to foresee, at least in the short term, how the PSOE can maneuver the political geometry to align its current agreements with any that might be compatible with PP and Ciudadanos in terms of the state, although there is no doubt the Socialist leaders will try to do so when the waters calm down.

Additionally, taking into account the discursive and tactical turns that Sánchez has shown himself willing to pursue (and not forgetting the pressures that he will come under within his own party, especially the autonomous party strongmen) and the hegemony that the SPOE will hold in the new government in relation to UP (whose appointees are relegated to portfolios outside the ministries of state but are nonetheless obliged to act in a loyal and disciplined manner, including in parliamentary initiatives, according to the Follow-up Protocol signed by the UP and the PSOE), we cannot have any confidence that this “coalition for progress” will firmly face off against the reactionary bloc and the economic powers that sustain it. It will be necessary to appeal, as is already being done with the mobilization of a general strike announced for January 30 in the Basque country [4], to the urgency of reopening a new cycle of struggles that fight for a social, ecological, feminist, anti-racist, and solidarity-based agenda among our peoples, struggles that go beyond the systemic limits that Sánchez himself will assume from day one. Further, we must not renounce our right to disobey any laws and or court rulings that attack our rights and freedoms, including the demand for freedom for political prisoners. These are all tasks which must be accompanied and promoted by the reconstruction of a left that is not subordinated to the new government and reaffirms the necessity of waging on a project of rupture with this regime and with the rules of global neoliberalism.

In sum, in the face of the threat of a coup by the right with which this new phase has begun, we must not become more moderate, quite the opposite. The period requires building a social bloc of the popular classes willing to embark on a process that goes beyond a regime which, at its core, contains forces that are not even willing to allow the timid reforms promised by this new government. A government, by the way, that will soon have to respond to the threat of war that Trump has stirred in the Middle East for which the U.S. military will no doubt want to use the Spanish Naval Station Rota once again. We will have to demand that Sánchez says No to War, just as we shouted at the beginning of this century when the “trio of the Azores” dragged us into war in 2003. Two of the trio, Bush and Blair, have since departed the world stage, but the current head of Spain’s three right-wing forces, José María Aznar, has yet to be defeated.

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P.S.

• NO BORDERS ON JANUARY 12, 2020:

<https://nobordersnews.org/2020/01/12/jaime-pastor-a-progressive-government-born-under-the-gun-in-spain/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://vientosur.info/spip.php?article3614>

[2] <https://www.vientosur.info/spip.php?article15478>

[3] <http://www.filosofia.org/hem/dep/clc/n75p010.htm>

[4] <https://www.vientosur.info/spip.php?article15472>