

Spanish State: Unidas Podemos turns on left rivals in Andalusia

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Forward Andalusia leader Teresa Rodríguez.

Maribel Mora, representing the radical left coalition Forward Andalusia on the Andalusian parliament's speakership board, got a nasty surprise on October 27.

Minutes before the board was due to meet in Seville, fellow Forward Andalusia MP Inmaculada Nieto, spokesperson for the parliamentary caucus, told Mora she would be asking it to expel eight MPs from their 17-member group for being "defectors".

The founding affiliates of Forward Andalusia were the United Left (IU), Podemos Andalusia and the two smaller left-nationalist parties Andalucist Left and Andalusian Spring. Anticapitalists, which had been the major tendency in Podemos Andalusia from its foundation in 2014, became the coalition's fifth affiliate after it left Podemos in February.

That move followed the decision of Unidas Podemos (basically Podemos plus IU) to take part in the Spanish government as junior partner to the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE).

Six MPs in the caucus, including Nieto, were from IU: the other 11 were either members of or, like Mora, close to Anticapitalists.

After two years in their seats they were now being branded as usurpers, retaining their positions without the consent of Podemos Andalusia, the organisation for which they had stood on the Forward Andalusia ticket in the 2018 Andalusian election.

Seven of the MPs named were from Anticapitalists, including Teresa Rodríguez, Forward Andalusia's leader.

'Divorce settlement' ignored

Nieto's letter argued the eight MPs should be given the status of "unassigned MP". Nieto said she had received a communication from the Podemos Andalusia organisation secretary Jesús de Manuel, advising they were no longer members of Podemos Andalusia and were "thus in a state of defection".

If the board voted to support the petition they would, as unassigned MPs, lose speaking time, a range of rights and access to parliamentary funding provided by the Spanish state (€1.6 million a year in the case of Forward Andalusia).

De Manuel's move effectively tore up an agreement reached between Rodríguez and Podemos general secretary Pablo Iglesias at the time of Anticapitalists' departure from Podemos.

Under that "amicable divorce settlement", done as a joint video statement, Anticapitalists would not stand a ticket in the forthcoming Podemos regional congress, but its members elected on the Forward Andalusia platform would continue to hold their positions.

In response to Nieto's bombshell, Mora wrote to the board that the petition "does not have the support of the parliamentary group, does not reflect any agreement taken through formal and democratic channels, but is a personal, unilateral action without any legal backing."

From unity to split

Why did matters reach this point, only two years after Rodríguez and Antonio Maíllo, former IU leader in Andalusia, came together to launch their unified left challenge to the corrupt PSOE's 40-year-long regime?

The glue that held the project together had two main ingredients: the prospect of increasing the 21.7% vote that Podemos and IU won running separately in the 2015 poll, and agreement that the PSOE was, in the words of Maíllo, "not an agent for change".

However, the Forward Andalusia result in the 2018 election (5.5% less than for IU and Podemos in 2015) and the first time investiture in Andalusia of a PP-Citizens government dependent on the far-right Vox shifted the political ground, helping differences resurface.

Next, after their poor results as Unidas Podemos in the 2019 elections, Podemos and IU sought junior partnerships in a PSOE-led Spanish government. That brought the tensions in Andalusia to breaking point: Podemos Andalusia had always opposed entering government as a subordinate to the PSOE.

When the Podemos membership overwhelmingly voted to support entering government — in an online plebiscite in which no alternative was offered — Anticapitalists decided the time had come to leave.

That should have been the end of the matter, as Anticapitalists continued to support Forward Andalusia's platform. However, with IU and Podemos Andalusia now embracing the prospect of an Andalusian PSOE-UP government as an alternative to the right, agreement over the content of the "Andalusian political space" had become impossible.

A split within Forward Andalusia was only a matter of time.

Expelled...

When the seven-member speakership board next voted, the two PSOE and PP representatives and the Vox representative backed Nieto's proposal. The two representatives of Citizens, one of them the board's chairperson, abstained.

Rodríguez, who was on maternity leave when the expulsion happened, said on Spanish national broadcaster RTVE on October 29 that the vote had been "pre-cooked" between the IU minority and the other parties: "The fact is that all the organisations that formed part of Forward Andalusia took part together in its primaries, and the result of the elections was the election of a Forward Andalusia ticket, and all MPs elected form part of this political group."

Toni Valero, IU coordinator-general for Andalusia, replied: "There has been a clear, patent and obvious case of defection of which IU is victim, Podemos is victim and, it has to be said, all those who voted for this ticket are victims. A moment came when the situation had to be resolved, and it has been resolved."

Mora and the two other Podemos MPs (both from Anticapitalists) who were not expelled from the caucus demanded reversal of the decision, suggesting that they were spared "so as to avoid drawing attention to the fact that IU has only 6 MPs out of 17 and that a minority would be expelling a majority of the group."

...readmitted...

The board's vote was also taken against the advice of the parliament's chief legal officer, who maintained that the targeted MPs should be allowed to present their case and that documentation had to be provided supporting the claims in Nieto's letter. On his recommendation, the board majority retreated on November 5, leaving its expulsion decision "without effect".

Nieto had 48 hours to provide evidence that the MPs had effectively left the Forward Andalusia parliamentary group as a consequence of leaving Podemos Andalusia: the legal service would prepare a report evaluating whether that documentation justified expulsion.

The pressure was now on Podemos Andalusia to provide evidence. At issue, too, was whether any resignation, if confirmed, entailed automatic resignation from the Forward Andalusia caucus.

Claiming evidence of resignations existed, de Manuel nonetheless told the Granada-based web daily *Ideales*: "For me, the fact of being on the membership list does not mean being in a party. You have to have loyalty and a minimum of honesty when taking decisions ... How can you open a bank account in August and ask the parliament's legal officer to pay the allowance into it without even mentioning that to your coalition partner, IU?"

With this comment de Manuel, who found resignation statements for five of the eight MPs and sacked the other three, articulated the real grounds for the charge of defection: the fear by IU and Podemos that the caucus majority was moving to secure control of Forward Andalusia's finances.

The legal service's report, delivered on November 11, noted that the parliamentary regulation was silent about grounds for expulsion from a caucus and that "resignation from a party does not automatically imply resignation from a parliamentary group": expulsion in such a case could violate MPs' constitutional rights. Nothing, moreover, empowered a group's spokesperson to propose expulsion of members.

...and expelled again

It next emerged that the developing scandal "down south" had been getting close attention in Madrid political circles.

The same day the legal service's opinion was tabled in Seville, an "agreement for institutional stability" was released within the Monitoring Commission of the Anti-Defection Pact of Spanish registered political parties. This commission had not met for 10 years.

The agreement, not signed by all pact members, proposed that elected representatives who leave parties that allowed them access to broader coalitions be considered defectors: it would also be up to the parties to rule whether MPs had committed defection, even if the defectors were a majority in the group.

The statement was made-to-measure for IU and Podemos's operation in Forward Andalusia. Citizens, citing it, announced that its two board representatives would now vote for expulsion, a change of mind that allowed the ruling PP to now feign concern about due process.

When the board voted on November 18, the PSOE, Citizens and Vox representatives backed expulsion while the PP abstained.

Conclusion

For IU and Podemos, this vote "restored democratic normality" (Podemos secretary general Martina Velarde) and "guaranteed the preservation of popular sovereignty" (Valero).

But for Mora, "they have stolen the seats of these comrades ... this is going to be a stain and a disgrace in the history of our parliamentarianism".

The affected MPs have appealed the decision to the Constitutional Court, demanding that it be suspended while the appeal is heard.

With Unidas Podemos in government, its worst nightmare is of a left opposition with enough social and institutional weight to become a pole of resistance: that explains its thuggish operation against the Forward Andalusia majority.

Now its spokespeople are talking as if their operation was a regrettable necessity best put behind, given the pressing tasks of the pandemic and the economic crisis.

The duty of any democrat is to help make sure they don't get away with it.

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P.S.

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