

Spanish state & the May 25 European election: Eruption of Podemos sparks turmoil left and right

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July 1, 2014 - *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — The five seats (7.9%) won by the platform Podemos (“We Can”) in the May 25 European election was an earthquake in Spanish politics. It stunned all political trends, including Podemos itself.

Podemos has grown out of the indignado movement that in May 2011 exploded against austerity and for “real democracy”. This was driven by occupations of town squares and mass citizen assemblies, providing a striking counter-point to the Spanish state’s bureaucratic and frequently corrupt “politics as usual”. ANOVA in Galicia and the Catalan left-nationalist Popular Unity Candidacies (CUP) were forerunners of Podemos as forces organising political representation “from below”.

Ten days after the European poll, while the older parties of the left were still adjusting to having to share political space with the upstart newcomer, they were hit by a powerful aftershock. A Gesop poll taken in early June showed that, if a national election were held, Podemos would be the third largest force, with 14% to 15% (over three million votes) and up to 58 seats in the 350-seat congress of deputies.

The newcomer would leave the social-democratic Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) with its lowest vote ever, 19.4%, and would leap over the United Left (IU), the traditional left opposition force, which would score 8.1%. By contrast, the last Gesop poll taken before the February advent of Podemos showed the PSOE with 24.9% and IU with 13.2%.

The newest poll also showed Podemos spokesperson Pablo Iglesias—35-year-old lecturer at Madrid’s Complutense University, co- presenter of the TV program *La Tuerka* and stirrer of renown on political chat shows hosted by right-wing channels—as the only national political leader with a positive rating (more than five out of ten).

Podemos’s 1.24 million votes, extracted with a paltry €150,000 budget, came most of all from disenchanted PSOE voters (36% had voted PSOE in the last Spanish national election in 2011), followed by those who hadn’t voted in 2011 (25%), then those who had voted IU (19%). According to a June 6 Celestetel poll 17% of the Podemos vote came from voters who had previous chosen the

ruling People's Party (PP) and the Spanish centralist Union for Progress and Democracy (UPyD).

A June 26 Gesop poll of voting intentions in Catalonia showed Podemos jumping into the 135-seat Catalan parliament with 9-10 seats. Its arrival would help increase the weight of parties supporting a Catalan right to self-determination to 78% (presently 64%), even while Podemos is an all-Spanish formation.

A separate post-election Metroscopia poll revealed that, while 3.6% of people on the electoral roll actually voted for Podemos on May 25, 9.4% of interviewees claimed they had voted for the new force! Eighty per cent told Metroscopia they would repeat their vote at the next national elections. Moreover, 9% of those who voted PSOE on May 25 would vote Podemos, while 19% of those who voted IU would switch to the new formation.

Such is the Podemos bandwagon effect. The arrival of the new formation, which gained 60,000 supporters in three days after its February launch and whose program and candidate list was decided by the input and votes of over 33,000, has broken a political deadlock. At least a million people, especially the young—angry with austerity, corruption and the lack of any future and who had been unable to identify with any of the existing political options—now have their political home.

The Podemos result has also made clearer that in the Spanish state the overall social mood continues to shift leftward as the two-party system crumbles with increasing speed. The broadly defined parties of the left (from the PSOE through to left and centre-left nationalist forces) won 29 of Spain's 54 seats in the European parliament, representing 8.25 million voters as against 7.06 million for the right and centre. Within that broad left vote, the part belonging to tickets to the left of the PSOE rose, surpassing social democracy's vote in 25 of Spain's 50 provinces, including Madrid.

IU's vote increased to 10% (almost a million extra votes) from the 2009 European poll and evened out across all 17 "autonomous communities" (states), with increases of over 250% in Galicia, Valencia, Castile and Leon, the Canary Islands, Cantabria and La Rioja. The "white zones" where IU support had been under 2% in 2009 all disappeared.

Podemos's vote, averaging 8% (1.246 million) reached high points of 13.7% in Asturias, 11.3% in Madrid, 11% in the Canary Islands and 10.3% in the Balearic Islands.

This leftward swing was also confirmed in Euskadi and Navarra (the Basque regions in the Spanish state) and Catalonia. There the left nationalist EH Bildu and the centre-left nationalist Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) respectively outpolled their right nationalist rivals the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and Convergence and Union (CiU).

The Podemos vote reflected the mobilisation of an inspired support base as sympathisers turned out in their thousands on May 25 to keep an eye on polling stations [1]. And, in a reminder of the early days of 15M (May 15, 2011, the day of the first indignado mobilisation), Podemos circles are now spreading everywhere, with over 500 now established and with some circle meetings so large they have to be held in gymnasiums.

The dramatic eruption of Podemos creates a new political voice for Spain's indignación and the particular movements of social resistance such as the Mortgage Victims Platform (PAH), the white and green "tides" against health and education cuts, as well as protest movements against PP attacks on abortion rights, the environment, local government, and the right to demonstrate.

Just as importantly, Podemos's position in support of the right of self-determination of the traditional nationalities (Catalans, Basques and Galicians) strengthens the voice of those who understand that any new form of plurinational state in Spain must be democratically based on the free choice of its

peoples.

In the caverns of the Spanish right the reaction has been alarm and rage. PP deputy-secretary of organisation Carlos Floriano said: "It's worrying---there are over a million people who are voting for a party that takes as its model Maduro's Venezuela or Castroism in Cuba."

Addressing a London conference of the Thatcherite Centre for Policy Studies, Esperanza Aguirre, former premier of the Madrid region and minister for education in the 1996-2004 PP government, called Podemos "a mutation of the totalitarian virus" and "a mixture of Venezuela's Bolivarian populism and Marxist ideology".

Immediately after the election, Rosa Diez, leader of the Spanish centralist Union for Progress and Democracy (UPyD), was into the media condemning Pablo Iglesias as a supporter of military-terrorist organisation Basque Homeland and Freedom (ETA) because he had a year ago given a talk in Iruñea (Pamplona) in the company of Basque left-nationalist MP Sabino Cuadra.

In mid-June, when Iglesias stated the obvious, namely that ETA terrorism, although it had caused great pain, had political roots that had to be addressed, the Spanish-centralist media went beserk, while on June 29, Josep Duran i Lleida, leader of Unió, the Christian Democrat component of CiU issued an urgent plea for the "strengthening of the political centre against the populisms of left and right".

Game changer

All political trends in the Spanish state—right and left, all-Spanish, nationalist and regionalist—now have no choice but to respond to Podemos if they are to defend their existing bases of support.

The threat for the right is that the "Podemos effect" makes the leftward-moving social mood increasingly visible, delegitimising the ruling PP and its parliamentary majority and increasing the price of its refusing calls for an early national election. It may have temporarily taken wind from the sails of those within the PP who always want to shift even further right—led by former prime minister José María Aznar and PP think tank the Foundation for Analysis and Social Studies (FAES)—but the national government of prime minister Mariano Rajoy now faces an even harder job in winning back the party's departed "non-political" millions, most of whom just didn't vote on May 25.

To date the Rajoy master plan consists of tax cut bribery, a crude crusade to make the Catalan national movement appear like a sinister threat to the living standards and security of everyone else in the Spanish state, a fear-and-loathing assault on Podemos and Iglesias and a fingers-crossed hope that abstainers in the European poll will come back for the municipal, regional and national elections in 2015 and 2016.

The threat for the PSOE is that a sizeable portion of its departed millions have now found a new political home, making the PSOE's message that "there's no realistic governmental alternative to us" more hollow and its long-awaited but never-arriving revival even more difficult. The PSOE's odds of resuscitation will depend more directly than ever on whether the forces to its left can project a convincing governmental alternative in time.

For IU the threat is that sections of its voting base, especially younger voters, will switch to Podemos, and that the raw newcomer will even become its senior partner in negotiations over left unity. The Podemos vote exceeded IU's in seven autonomous communities, including those where the anti-austerity struggle has been fiercest, such as Madrid and the Balearic Islands. Podemos's

emergence has increased tensions within IU between those who tend to treat the newcomer as “radical social democrats” without a “class line”, and those, most prominent at the regional and local level, who seek greater collaboration with the new force in a perspective of increasing unity of all anti-austerity forces.

The June 26 Gesop poll for Catalonia showed that IU will face serious competition even in the regions where the Podemos May 25 vote was lowest (4.7% in Catalonia). While the alliance between Initiative for Catalonia Greens (ICV) and the United and Alternative Left (EUiA, IU in Catalonia) would win 11-12 seats, Podemos would be breathing down its neck with 9-10 seats.

A June 29 Balearic Institute of Social Studies survey of voting intentions showed Podemos winning five seats in the Balearic Islands 59-seat parliament to IU’s 3-4 (with the hated local PP government of Juan Ramon Bauzá losing its majority).

Thus, just when the results of May 25 open for IU “the possibility of unfolding electorally the political and social bloc we have theorised” (IU’s European Elections 2014 Report), the left coalition’s leading role in forming that bloc comes into question and the need to relate seriously and consistently to Podemos becomes a critical imperative.

At first glance, Podemos poses least political challenge to left-nationalist forces like ANOVA, the CUP and the various coalitions centred on the Basque abertzale (patriotic) left and its party Sortu. However, Podemos’s presence in Euskadi, Navarra, Catalonia and Galicia confronts left activists there with the question as to where their energy is best put—into advancing the cause of national independence or into making left gains in the all-of-Spain political struggle, especially as both Podemos and IU stand for the nationalities’ right to decide.

An indicator of Podemos’s potential impact on left nationalism in Catalonia came in the June Gesop poll: with its 9-10 seats Podemos would leap over the CUP’s six.

A month after May 25, and three weeks after the abdication of King Juan Carlos, the new political dynamic is clear. As old political loyalties break down, the normal struggle to defend existing social bases or win away those of rivals, speeds up, especially as the chances of the left achieving a majority over the PP have dramatically increased in a number of autonomous communities as well as in a string of major cities.

If the poll are accurate, the thorny question of how to relate to the PSOE when the broadly defined parties of the left have a majority—and which to date has tested IU in Andalusia (where it governs with the PSOE), in Asturias (where it supports a PSOE-only government against the right) and in Extremadura (where it allows the PP to govern)—will soon land in the lap of Podemos.

The result of the Podemos shock is a flurry of soul-searching and debate about renewal—in the PSOE but also in IU. As for Podemos itself, this politically quite heterogeneous platform now has the job of consolidating itself as a stable organisation, and this under a glaring and usually hostile media spotlight and a now permanent assault from panicked political rivals bent on wrecking it. In this testing context, a quite sharp discussion has broken out about Podemos’s structures and decision-making processes as it heads towards its founding national assembly in October.

Left shift sinking PSOE?

The crisis provoked by May 25 is deepest in the PSOE, which received its lowest ever national vote (23%, down 5% from the 2011 national election). As its vote drops as low as 14% in Catalonia, Euskadi and Navarra, Spain’s oldest party increasingly resembles a slowly sinking hulk. After the

resignation of its general secretary Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba and the secretaries of its Euskadi, Navarra and Castile and León affiliates, the latest leader to depart is Pere Navarro, the secretary of the Party of Socialists of Catalonia (PSC).

Under Navarro, who converted the supposedly “Catalanist” PSC into a franchise of a PSOE opposed to a Catalan right to decide, the party’s vote fell from 36% (2009 European poll) to 14.3%, more than matching the halving of its support in Euskadi and Navarra.

In Navarra, the Socialist Party of Navarra (PSN) could have helped bring down the corrupt ruling regional coalition of the Union of the People of Navarra (UPN) and PP if it had found the will to disobey PSOE headquarters and make common cause with EH Bildu, IU and Navarra left-nationalists. The price of its spinelessness was that on May 25 EH Bildu surpassed the PSN as the second political force in the region.

With its unhappy support base demanding more left-wing policies [2], the PSOE faces impossible choices. First of all, the latest polls show that its remaining electorate sees the decline in the PP-PSOE system as positive (by 56% to 32%). This is a telling indicator that most PSOE voters, unlike grandees like former prime minister Felipe González, are happy to see the party create governing coalitions to its left (as in Andalusia, where the PSOE vote held up most).

The PSOE’s only hope of regaining lost ground is to make a sharp turn to bring the party back into line with popular sentiment on issues such as: a referendum on monarchy or republic; Catalonia’s right to decide; amending section 135 of the constitution to remove the priority obligation to pay back state debt; and a categorical refusal to enter any “grand coalition” government with the PP.

There are left currents within the party that support one or all of these positions against its central bureaucratic apparatus. One of them, the Socialist Left, has already announced its candidate to replace Rubalcaba as general secretary. He is José Antonio Pérez Tapias, who supports repeal of the PSOE vote in favour of section 135, a “new constitutional process to solve the monarchy-republic question” and increased public investment to tackle the country’s 25% unemployment rate.

Tapias might even have a chance of winning against his two rivals for the job (Eduardo Madina and Pedro Sánchez) if the PSOE oligarchy allowed open primaries including PSOE voters. However, the decision on national secretary will take place via a vote of the party’s 200,000 members, most of whom are faithful vassals of its “barons”, to be ratified by a July congress of even more reliable delegates.

In the meantime, the PSOE-aligned media, led by *El País*, will be trying to manufacture as much excitement as possible over a contest between two “fresh faces” who both opposed any referendum on the monarchy, are both against a Catalan right to decide and both in favour of leaving section 135 alone.

Those few currents within the PSOE universe that actually stand up against the machine, like the Catalanist opposition in the PSC, have themselves been falling apart under the pressure of crisis, as some (including former government ministers) depart to other parties (usually ERC) while others just give up or hope for a miracle of revolt from the remaining party ranks.

On June 29, the PSC’s remaining Catalanist minority effectively split, when one group, Avancem (Let’s Advance) left the PSC and decided to stand candidates against it, while the rest decided to continue their affiliation at least until the party’s emergency congress on July 19.

The shambolic state of the PSOE is dramatised by the way its elected representatives are presently voting on the call for a referendum on the monarchy. In the parliament of Navarra, the PSN deputies

lined up with the UPN and PP to oppose the motion; on Barcelona City Council they supported it.

United Left reaction

Debate is sharp in the multi-tendency IU, even at “the best of times”. Since May 25, the discussion that has broken out is, unsurprisingly: (1) how much of the IU vote did Podemos “steal” and (2) what could and should have been done to avoid it.

For some, like IU election campaign head Miguel Reneses, the Podemos vote came overwhelmingly from the PSOE, “including moderate sections of the PSOE”. For others, like an anonymous IU “source” cited by the web site InfoLibre, “whoever doesn’t see what those 1.2 million votes for Podemos mean is making a mistake. They are like a kick in the guts.”

What is undeniable is that Podemos has: trimmed votes off IU (which had been as high as 14.5% in polls leading up to May 25); given disillusioned PSOE voters reluctant to choose IU an alternative to support; and attracted the support of hundreds of thousands who would not have voted if Podemos hadn’t existed.

IU’s European Elections Report 2014 put numbers to its loss of support to Podemos: “The concern, given the the closeness in the profiles [of IU and Podemos voters] is that the 25% to 28% of those who finally decided for Podemos instead of IU...represent a loss to us of from 320,000 to 350,000 votes, which translated into seats means we lost the seventh and eighth European MPs.”

The IU report also noted: “42% of voters were uncertain which party to vote for and finally voted for that to which they felt closest. This figure is even higher for IU and Podemos [respectively 53% and 60%], which reveals a scenario of shifting sands for the parties, who fight over the vote more than ever, given that there are increasingly fewer faithful voters for whom a party forms part of their identity...[T]he vote is no longer the captive of any party, something especially relevant for IU, given that only 18% of our voters support us because they are ‘IU people’.”

The report concluded: “Podemos and IU are in competition for the same vote, that which the PSOE is losing, and from which Podemos has clearly benefited more than us.”

This result showed that the intuition of commentator Rodolfo Crespo, published on the *Rebelión web site* just after the founding of Podemos, wasn’t as wildly exaggerated as it seemed at the time:

“Given the actual voting perspective in Spain, IU will never manage to win more than 15%, a percentage that for the most part would not be a committed but rather a protest vote, and in any case insufficient to allow a challenge to the ruling bourgeois bloc. However, Podemos, by bringing together into a united front all the forces of the left (its own declared goal), can attract to itself besides this 15% the entire social spread of unemployed, victims of eviction, casualised workers, marginalised people and all those who have suffered cuts to their rights and wages, and to their social, education, health and pharmaceutical benefits etc—that is, those who are sociologically the majority.

“In addition it can as a new project draw out of abstention that 30% of excluded people who are overwhelmingly part of “those below” and whom the traditional (actually existing) left has neither represented nor known how to represent and who for that reason would never vote for it because they felt betrayed and abandoned.”

Crespo’s bold (extravagant?) historical analogy is that Podemos has the potential to be the Spanish equivalent of Cuba’s July 26 movement or Venezuela’s Bolivarian movement, leaving the Communist

Party of Spain (PCE) and IU the difficult choice of whether to submit to its hegemony or not.

The open primaries debate

Whether Crespo's theorem of a 15% ceiling for IU was ever true will now probably never be known, because of IU's decision not to negotiate over Podemos's bottom-line demand of open primaries to decide a single ticket for the European poll.

In a January 18 contribution to left web site La Marea IU's leading political asset, 28-year-old indignado MP and author Alberto Garzon argued against open primaries on the grounds that "a party conceived as supply that adjusts to demand is not, by a long shot, an ideological party. It will be an empty, fluid, hazy, party, capable of changing its judgment at the same speed that society's 'common sense' changes. And 'common sense', to paraphrase Gramsci, is nothing but the ideology of the ruling class.

"In fact, open primaries can enable the election of candidates with majority principles and values before candidates with minority principles and values. In an extreme example, a process of open primaries could impose a candidate favourable to the death penalty in a party that is in principle opposed to it...

"In reality, an ideologically based party not only listens to the demands of citizens but tries to change them. That is, it's a party that fights 'common sense' and does not adapt to it. An ideological party does not allow its internal organisation and program to be determined by opinion polls, but rather struggles to create hegemony in the Gramscian sense."

Garzón's piece created a big splash, being interpreted by some in 15M as sophisticated justification of "the party system" and provoking claims that "the general will is above ideologies" and "leaving politics in the hands of parties is to privatise it". With its references to Gramsci, Marx and Robespierre it also left some indignado readers gasping and asking what was the real risk of right wingers "bombing" an open primary pre-selection process, given that within the 15M milieu this was felt to be absolutely necessary to create ownership of any ticket for the European elections.

Fellow IU member Hugo Martínez Abarca answered Garzón on the following day: "I would probably agree with Garzón at other times of our history. But we are now at a moment when a deep repoliticisation of broad layers of society is taking place. Some of the people who have become political in recent times have joined parties, as those of us who were already members have been able to witness (to IU, in my case). But without doubt many of the people whom the process of politicisation has brought into our orbit have not taken this step. That's why it's most functional in terms of growing the organisation to open the door to these people's participation in what is a crucial decision: IU should be tossing the organisation to them as their tool for political and institutional action."

Martínez Abarca asked why, if IU and the Plural Left coalition had opened up its process of election program development to citizen input, it couldn't do the same for its electoral list.

In a practical demonstration of how the concerns expressed by Garzón could be solved in practice, the Podemos open preselection process saw the former anti-corruption commissioner of Catalonia, Carlos Jiménez Villarejo, preelected to third spot on its ticket. In the past Villarejo has been opposed to a Catalan right to decide, but it was the democratically decided line of Podemos in favour of that right which was put during the campaign.

With hindsight it is now clear that the IU leadership helped create the Podemos "problem" for itself

by refusing to negotiate on the issue of open primaries (a “North American invention”, said federal coordinator Cayo Lara). It left Podemos looking like the only 100% genuine indignado political tool on offer and it largely overshadowed IU’s own political campaign (developed by Garzón) for a “democratic and social revolution” and “a constitutional process”. What, for example, would have been the Podemos response if IU had offered to accept open primaries for lead positions on the ticket as long as representation of organisations taking part in the Plural Left list had also been guaranteed?

In the light of its bitter-sweet results on May 25 the IU leadership moved to present various reforms of its functioning at its June 28 Federal Political Council (CPF), including the open primaries that it had rejected in negotiations with Podemos (and which have already been adopted by its powerful Andalusian federation). It has also given Garzón a more prominent role in the organisation, partly as a concession to those arguing that the Plural Left team for the European elections should have been led by its best-known younger activists instead of veteran MEP Willy Meyer.

Various currents within IU question whether such moves will be sufficient. Their alternatives range from implementing a full generational change of leadership, to discussing whether federal coordinator Cayo Lara should remain in the job or share it with Garzón. IU youth in Valencia have already asked for the coalition to organise an alliance with Podemos for the 2015 regional elections.

The June 28 IU CPF meeting was an acrimonious affair, despite the report containing its reform proposal being adopted by 109 to 7, with 29 abstaining. According to the June 29 edition of web magazine La República, criticism focussed on the pre-selection process for the European elections, the tendency not to act on adopted documents, IU’s difficulties in connecting with potential support that ended up voting elsewhere, and difficulties in communication and in differentiating itself from “the regime”. In his summing up Lara challenged critics to call an emergency congress to elect a new leadership, a challenge that was not taken up.

Almost as a sideshow to these tensions was the June 25 decision of Willy Meyer to step down as MEP when it was revealed by InfoLibre that he had unwittingly been participating in a European parliamentary pension scheme that was structured to dodge tax. Meyer ended his participation in the scheme as soon as the facts were brought to his attention, but later decided that only his resignation would achieve the impact of dissociation from tax evasion that IU needs in the present Spanish political climate.

It is certain that other participants in the scheme, including the UPyD’s Rosa Díez and numerous PSOE MEPs, will not be following Meyer’s honourable example.

Podemos debates and background

The post-election waters have not been calm in Podemos itself. The platform is due to have its founding convention (“The Yes We Can Big Citizens’ Assembly”) in October, and on June 5 Pablo Iglesias explained to the media that Podemos’s election campaign committee would be putting forward a list of 25 as a “technical team” to organise the event. That proposal would be submitted to internet vote on June 12-13, and any Podemos member could put up an alternative group (in the six days remaining). The vote would be for the whole list.

When this proposal was announced to a June 8 meeting of representatives from Madrid’s 70 Podemos circles, it sparked a violent reaction and a tense four-and-a-half hour debate, with accusations that the closed list approach went completely against Podemos’s public “democracy now!” message and above all because the proposal had not been voted on by anybody.

According to a report in the June 9 *El País*, close Iglesias collaborator, fellow university lecturer and La Tuerka co-presenter Juan Carlos Monedero at one point explained the need for a closed list in these words: “The idea of the [closed] lists doesn’t seem very sensible to us, but there are people conspiring to lay hold of Podemos and we don’t feel like copping that. People with responsibilities in other parties have sent emails to sympathisers giving instructions as to what to do on June 14 [date of a national meeting of Podemos sympathisers].”

This was a reference to the Anti-capitalist Left (IA), co-founder of Podemos along with Iglesias and his supporters. In response to Monedero’s comments, which included the observation that some Podemos sympathisers wanted to convert the organisation into “the left of IU”, a June 9 statement of IA said: “Whoever sees conspiracies and coups where there is only democracy has very little faith in the intelligence of Podemos people...Only those who are afraid of democracy fear debates.”

Earlier Monedero had said: “Maybe this has to break up, maybe there are two incompatible models inside Podemos, some want to turn it into a party of delegates and into an old party...If we carry on with this line of talk, what happened with 15M could happen again—we were radically democratic and radically ineffective.”

How did matters reach this point just a fortnight after Podemos’s great result? Podemos was initiated on January 14 by the call “Mover Ficha” (Making a Move: Convert Indignation into Political Change), signed by a group of well-known left academics, journalists and trade union and social movement activists. Members of IA, which is the Spanish affiliate of the Fourth International, were largely responsible for the Podemos proposal and name, as well as for an initial draft of “Mover Ficha”, as became clear when an internal IA bulletin ended up in the public domain.

“Mover Ficha” and Podemos embodied a convergence of the radical left outside IU, bringing together the supporters of Iglesias—a student of anti-capitalist social movements and supporter of the revolutionary processes in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador—IA and unaligned activists from 15M and the movements of social and trade union resistance.

For IA, one key driver of the convergence was opposition to IU’s governmental alliance with the PSOE in Andalusia, even though IU is not mentioned by name in “Mover Ficha”. According to IA leader Raúl Camargo, cited in the January 21 *El Diario*: “IU will have to decide, and we as an organisation have differences with them, above all because of what is happening in Andalusia through their alliance with the PSOE. We believe you have to be clear about austerity, and not apply it even because of ‘legal imperative’.”

The convergence that produced Podemos was the move that needed to happen if the indignado movement was not to wear itself out in endless rounds of struggle against government attacks, indispensable though this social resistance is. In effect, it has helped the movement through to a necessary new phase, lifting resistance “on the streets” to the level of openly political conflict, as opponent reactions to its success have so vividly testified. [3]

However, the June 8 clash in Madrid also showed that Podemos embraces varying conceptions of how the platform should actually build citizen empowerment, how its decisions should be made, and what should be the role of its circles in that process—especially considering the practice of decision-making by internet vote that has been its main method to date.

More fundamentally, there’s a debate about what sort of political animal Podemos should become. Everyone is happy to agree that the new force is not going to reproduce “the old methods” of “the old parties”, but what precise form should the still amorphous political protoplasm take?

Part of the problem springs from the way Podemos states its goal—to replace “the political caste” with the “real democracy” of citizens. This formula reflects the influence of 15M concepts: indeed Podemos is in essence a transposition of 15M—with all its heterogeneity—into the political sphere.

For some Podemos spokespeople, like Pablo Iglesias himself, this conception goes with insisting that “the debate is not between left and right, but between dictatorship and democracy. Consequently the key to success is not the unity of the left understood as unity of acronyms but popular unity.” [4]

According to Podemos election campaign coordinator Iñigo Errejón, speaking to a June 14 Madrid meeting of representatives of circles from across the Spanish state, “the caste feels completely comfortable with the left-right axis, but not with the citizen-oligarchy discussion.”

This sort of formula thus produces another basic schema of interpretation for reading politics in the Spanish state: in addition to the left versus right axis and the nationalities versus “Madrid” axis we now have “the caste” versus “the people” axis. (Political opponents have not been slow in attacking this concept, with Andalusia PSOE premier Susanna Diaz ironising that she “belonged to a caste of plumbers”.)

It’s little surprise that some Podemos supporters take the formula to mean that Podemos should not see itself as a party at all, but as the beginning of a process of “the people” taking the fate of the nation out of the hands of “the politicians”, using internet voting to reveal the majority will.

Role of Podemos circles?

Some of the debates now traversing Podemos were foreshadowed in the reactions to a February 9 contribution to web-based daily *Público* entitled “All Power to the Circles”, by IA member Miguel Urban, initially responsible for organisation and later to become number seven on the Podemos list for the European elections.

Urban stressed the critical role of local circles in building Podemos as a real force: “The bigger Podemos’s circles are and the more they distance themselves from fetishising the word “left” in order to create a message of emancipation built through revolt from below, the closer we will be to having a tool capable not of ‘making a move’ but of smashing the rigged chessboard on which we are forced to play.

“For Podemos to make sense, for its method and process to be useful, for it to be a tool of social transformation and not just another acronym, for it to build the unity of the oppressed [5], the circles must be spaces of natural and effective connection for the oppressed to use in order to conquer and exercise precisely that we have been deprived of—the possibility of deciding about our lives.”

Urban’s contribution attracted criticism from many of the trends that cohabit in Podemos. For one contributor, achieving real democracy was “not a matter of creating circles with new powers...well-intentioned but artificial, behind the backs of the citizenry, of real society, and condemned to time-honoured failure. The real question is the political participation of real social sectors...which directly elect real delegates that effectively represent them in order to carry out a real exercise of democracy.”

Urban’s piece also elicited the inevitable wise “Marxist” commentary in which he was reminded that “citizens” was a bourgeois-liberal category, that “self-organisation” is an anarchist concept, that empowerment of “all citizens” means empowerment of the 20% who are doing OK out of the crisis, and that abandonment of the distinction between left and right puts Podemos in the same political

space as UPyD.

Such crude critique would have had no impact on the core Podemos team around Iglesias, which is consciously applying the experiences of Latin American revolutionary processes in the context of the Spanish state. As outlined by commentator Pascual Serrano, in a May 28 article in *El Diario* entitled 'What Podemos (fortunately) learned from Venezuela' [6]:

"[T]he leaders of Podemos... know, that as with [the popular neighbourhoods of] Caracas, thousands, millions of people do not believe in the system, they do not mobilise, but they are in a position to stand up if they see a hope. That is why Pablo Iglesias showed no indication of triumph with five MEPs and a million votes. His discourse, in contrast to that of the traditional left, is maximalist. It does not talk about winning two or three more percentage points in the vote or doubling the results. Like Chávez, Podemos talks about winning, about razing to the ground, about bringing down the system..."

"In the same way, the ambiguity of Podemos's discourse, which is as sensational for some as it is irritating for others, is also a lesson learned from the Bolivarian process. Chávez made it to the presidency of Venezuela with the electoral promise of a 'third way', something no-one knew what it was. It was only a few years later that he dared to speak of socialism, socialism of the 21st century, and no-one knew what that was either."

This approach of removing as many barriers to people's active participation in the real process of building Podemos is certainly necessary in the Spanish state, where traditional political "vocab" leaves millions indifferent or hostile. In the words of Julio Anguita, former IU coordinator and spokesperson for the Civic Front (major force behind the Marches for Dignity): "You have to use a language that is not that of the left when we speak to each other."

A parallel complement to Podemos from the enemy camp came from *The Salmon-coloured Blog*, a business affairs site, which analysed its election campaign as an optimal exercise in product launch, client targeting and market niche occupation—worthy of study in an MBA course!

Notwithstanding the success achieved with this approach, it already produced some tension between the Iglesias leadership and other Podemos activists, including IA, before May 25.

One concern was the role in Podemos given to the maverick politician and political consultant Jorge Verstrynge, ex-leader of the post-francoist Popular Alliance and variously PSOE member, adviser to the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and the Venezuelan military, and exponent of a massive program of deportation of migrants from Spain.

Another was the decision, taken by election campaign team to incorporate a portrait sketch of Pablo Iglesias into the official Podemos ballot paper logo, on the grounds that Iglesias had much greater visibility than the name Podemos.

A third was the removal from the final Podemos election program of any specific support for the November 9 consultation in Catalonia, even though Iglesias continued to speak out for the Catalan right to decide.

The incessantly churning Spanish social networks have not been slow to comment on such choices, with Iglesias being tagged as "the little Napoleon", and much worse. More soberly, many have pointed out that internet-driven decision-making in "new" party-movements can cohabit with "all power to the charismatic leader", as in Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. There the leadership (basically Grillo?) decides what the options for voting by internet are, after which "the membership decides democratically". For the recent decision as to which European parliamentary group the Five

Star movement's MEPs should join, Grillo offered his members the "choice" of Europe of Freedom and Democracy (chairman Nigel Farage of the xenophobic United Kingdom Independence Party), the European Conservatives and Reformists group (dominated by the British Tories) or No Grouping.

Juan Carlos Monedero's attempt at red-baiting IA in the June 8 Madrid meeting went down poorly, and provoked many supporters, at the meeting itself and over the networks, to comment that it revealed just how much careful discussion would be needed to thrash out Podemos's structures and methods of operation. According to IA leader Jaime Pastor in a June 13 comment for the website *Cuartopoder*, "We are in a new stage where we have to look for a hybrid space, which mixes internal forms of decision-making with forms of participation via social networks, email lists etc."

For Iñigo Errejón: "These are the problems inherent in creating a party in a completely democratic manner...We have to look for mechanisms that try to avoid the risk of us ending up looking more inwards than outwards...On the other hand, we have to look for counterweights that allow citizen participation in a way that avoids the feeling that Podemos only calls for participation in votes on already decided proposals."

In a June 20 interview on the *La Mula* web site, Peruvian Pepe Mujía, the one immigrant candidate on Podemos's ticket, commented: "The discussion is about getting agreement on the key issues and instruments needed to unite all these people [flooding into Podemos]. That, while always maintaining our framework of geographically based circles with their own power and autonomy—given that they are the main leg supporting the project. Since full autonomy exists, each region can decide for itself and we will go together to the autumn gathering and decide what the mechanism will be at a national level."

Thus, the debate continues, even as Iglesias's proposed organising team was elected with 86% support over an alternative list (and with over 50,000 participating in the vote).

And now?

It is hard to avoid the interpretation that the closed list proposal for organising Podemos's founding convention was in part aimed at cutting back the influence of IA, which refused to participate in it. Hopefully, however, that experience will not impede the vitally necessary pre-assembly discussion.

Among the questions that demand answers—as concrete programmatic content, not theory—is what a "Bolivarian" strategy of mobilising popular majorities means in an imperialist country like Spain, which conducts, for example, a vile anti-refugee policy as a member of the European Union.

Another, perhaps the most important, is alliance policy. Sending the PSOE hulk to join its Greek brother Pasok in a watery grave depends critically on millions of wavering and doubtful people seeing a concrete alternative for government. If this does not happen in time, as seems to be the case in Portugal where the idea of "left government" involving the Left Bloc and Communist Party has not got far beyond the state of hopeful abstraction, the social democracy will revive as lesser evil, as is happening today.

Podemos will also have to fill in many holes in its program. In particular, it will have to spell out, as IU has, how it will fund what is still basically a wish-list of "those below".

In short, Podemos will face critical questions that can't be solved from a "people v. politicians" formula. Critical will be the concrete basis for unity with IU and left-nationalist, left-regionalist and green forces. This is particularly pressing in the Spanish state because of the disproportionality in

the rigged national Spanish electoral system, which only starts to disappear after a party wins 20% of the vote. (That score wins 18% of seats, while 15% wins 10.3% of seats and 10% of the vote just 5.1% of seats.)

The consolidation of Podemos as a revolutionary-democratic movement against austerity with rigorously democratic functioning and the convergence of its advance with that of a reformed IU will surely determine the fate of the anti-capitalist struggle in the Spanish state.

Dick Nichols

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3931>

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Footnotes

[1] In the Spanish State voting is by pre-printed ballot paper, placed on a table at the entrance to the polling station. Party supporters are needed to ensure these do not run out, and that rival candidacies don't "disappear" them into the nearest garbage bin.

[2] The June Gesop poll revealed that PSC voters "want more leftward policies".

[3] A similar process, "Let's Take Barcelona", was launched on June 26 for next year's municipal elections in the Catalán capital. Its central initiating figure is Ada Colau, formerly spokesperson of the Mortgage Victims Platform (PAH).

[4] Interview in El Estrella Digital, February 20.

[5] "The oppressed" here translates the Spanish "Los/las de abajo", literally "those below". Depending on context the term gets translated in a number of ways, including as "the underdogs".

[6] Available in English translation at <http://hiredknives.wordpress.com/2014/05/29/what-podemos-fortunately-learned-from-venezuela/>.