

Podemos (Spanish State): Looking for Lost Momentum

Monday 5 October 2015, by [ANTENTAS Josep Maria](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2015).

With its poll numbers slipping, Podemos is searching for ways to recapture this spring's energy..

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A few months before the general elections, and on the eve of the Catalan election set for September 27, Podemos faces strategic challenges as well as all the forces of political and social change. After a year of irrational exuberance over some polling results, it seems that bipartisanship has held up better than expected, drawing energy from unexpected sources.

For weeks now, all electoral polls show a downward trend for Podemos. The vicious circle of electoral logic grinds on relentlessly. If the idea that the conservative Popular Party (PP) may win gains traction, it could catalyze a demobilizing chain reaction; and if a vote for the Socialist Party (PSOE) is seen as a defense against the PP, this may portend lethal consequences for Podemos.

The party, led by Pablo Iglesias, has arrived at a delicate moment. It stands at the threshold of achieving results which could decisively condition Spanish politics. If not, its election results may condemn it to being (merely) a significant opposition force, one lacking destabilizing potential.

Because of the electoral system's structure, a small change in the percentage of votes received makes a huge difference in terms of the number of parliamentary seats allocated. This difference could spell the collapse of the two-party system, or allow it to stagger on despite everything. Once again, we are so close and yet so far.

We are at a turning point, facing two choices: resign ourselves to the fact that the general elections will end up being anticlimactic, a disappointing outcome to the process which began after the European elections of May 25, 2014.

Or, we can make a decisive turn and find a way to shake things up. Two debates intermingle in this anxiety-filled moment. How can we build "popular unity?" And how can we confront domestic and international financial power in light of what has happened in Greece?

The Choices

What does this much-touted "popular unity" mean? A catch-all idea, it runs the risk of becoming fetishized. In fact, both terms of the expression lend themselves to every imaginable mystification

and every conceivable doctrinaire prescription. In the current discussions in the Spanish left and popular movements “popular unity” is conjugated in three different ways.

The first is as a rhetorical expression to denote self-referential party building, but one which includes opening its electoral lists to independents, as with the Popular Unity Candidates (Candidatura d’Unitat Popular, CUP) in Catalonia (CUP is an anti-capitalist and independentist party that in 2012 got 3 percent of votes and for the first time three MPs in the Catalan Parliament, after important local electoral successes during the 2000s).

The second is as an alliance of political apparatuses from above, as United Left (Izquierda Unida, IU – a coalition dominated by the Spanish Communist Party that since 1978 has been the main force at the left of social democracy, with results ranging from 4 percent to 10 percent) proclaims, and as the Catalonia Yes We Can (Catalunya Sí que es Pot) campaign was constructed (Catalunya sí que es Pot is the recent coalition created in Catalonia between Podemos and the green party of eurocommunist origins, Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds, and Esquerra Unida i Alternativa, de Catalan branch of IU). Both of these options have been embraced by Podemos, which leans toward one or the other depending on the context and place.

The third involves the desire to create a participatory and pluralistic popular movement, in which the tension between the logic of the apparatus and that of unity from below favor the latter, and in which the political machines are put at the service of creating an open movement.

In some cases, the preparation of lists for primary elections has mobilized participation from below, despite remaining within a competitive logic. This was the case with Madrid Now (Ahora Madrid), the activist slate that won the mayorship of Madrid on May 24 with Manuela Carmena, a progressive judge, at the top of the ticket.

In others, the process of drawing up the lists is not at the center of the project, which instead revolves around the strong movement-based orientations and practices of those initiating the campaign, determined as they are to build a genuine mass people’s movement.

This was the case with Barcelona en Comú, the slate headed by Ada Colau — the former spokesperson of the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (Plataforma de Afectados por las Hipotecas-PAH) — which has governed Barcelona since last May. There is no finished model of how to proceed or generalizable way to replicate these examples. But there are experiences, out of this diversity, that point in this direction.

This is the spirit of Barcelona en Comú, of the Mareas Atlánticas (a set of local slates which achieved important successes in several cities in Galicia), of the proposals of Procés Constituent (a Catalan sociopolitical movement that has not directly stood in elections but supported some local lists, led by the Benedictine nun Teresa Forcades, who is recognized for her activism against the pharmaceutical multinationals, and Arcadi Oliveres, an economist associated with social movements in Catalonia).

But the debate over “popular unity” goes beyond discussions over how to build it, taking up questions of strategic objectives, definitions of “winning,” and the process of social change itself. Neither superficial electoralism, nor aimless resistance is sufficient; what is key is the dialectical link between self-organization and mobilization on the one hand, and electoral and institutional work on the other.

So, “popular unity” to what ends? It must be to break up the current order of things by opening self-sustaining, national constituent processes (we talk of “constituent processes” in plural, as a process of popular change in a state comprising different nations, as Spain cannot be conceived from a

centralist point of view) and the implementation of anti-austerity plans.

“Constituent processes” and “anti-austerity plans” are elastic concepts that can be interpreted in various ways; yet, in their totality, they point to a rupture built on the willingness to construct political majorities that address real needs and not abstract proclamations.

However, in order to prepare for future challenges, it is increasingly necessary to deepen our strategic clarifications and articulate more precisely the tasks and programmatic objectives of “popular” governments. These goals must not be understood as mere suggestions, which may or may not be complied with, as Carmona, the mayor of Madrid, unfortunately stated recently.

The Greek Example

The chances of a break with austerity in the Spanish state are today reflected in a Greek mirror, although the images there are not as neat or pristine as we would have liked. The Greek situation is undoing any illusion of easy and easygoing social transformation, deconstructing the simplistic and linear schema so popular in the early days of Podemos: vote for us = quick electoral victory = political change. The path, it turns out, is rather rockier. And that is what lays ahead.

There are two possible readings of Tsipras’s surrender to the troika. The first is that you cannot change things. The second is that half measures don’t work. One leads to paralysis and discouragement, the other forces one to draw unavoidable strategic conclusions.

The Syriza crisis marked the first major internal differentiation within the anti-austerity movement since the outbreak of the crisis. The Tsipras fiasco lays out the inconsistencies of neo-reformist approaches which hope to square an impossible circle. You cannot beat the hooligans of austerity without causing a stir. There are times when it is necessary to choose.

But the fact is, the troika and the financial powers that be have already chosen for you. It is impossible to bring the austerity bulldozer to a halt without pulling out all the stops. Naively seeking to cut a deal with the very forces who seek to impose their will on you will not work!

Tsipras’s logic, and that of his supporters in the ranks of the European left, appeals to the lesser evil and to so-called responsibility. No rupture is possible. That can only lead to the abyss. No structural change is possible. So we must only consider the endgame.

Actually, this is the most irresponsible of all strategies. Nothing is more reckless than to raise expectations and then not meet them out of cowardice and timidity. Nothing is more foolish than to hope for concessions from the troika, especially when those powers know they do not face the threat of a real break.

In order to win reforms, it is necessary to put the question of a rupture into play. This has always been the case throughout history, and it is even more true in the times we live in today. Not having a Plan B effectively means not having a Plan A.

The situation does not allow for half-measures or superficial solutions. The radical solution, in the sense of going to the root of the problem, now seems inescapable. The challenge of “trying to be as radical as reality itself,” to use Lenin’s well-known expression, now presents itself with unusual force.

However, we are in a complex and contradictory context. Today’s repoliticization comes after

decades of depoliticization. The resumption of self-organization cannot easily overcome the historical breakdown of traditional political and workplace forms. Great social unrest is paired with a low level of political consciousness, while social radicalization is still confined to a capitalist-consumerist horizon.

Expectations for real change are undermined by decades of setbacks and the absence of concrete alternatives, and the effervescence of social struggle runs parallel to low levels of stable organization and a general weakness of the Left.

All this favors the crystallization of alternative political projects proposing inconsistent and desultory change, and of strategic inconsistencies that appear once when the moment of truth arrives. Hence the current impasse.

Therefore, the Podemos leadership's support of Tsipras must be understood as a strategic mistake, revealing a short-term tactical focus which offers no solutions. Tsipras's victory on September 20 may provide the fictitious impression that Podemos is "with" the winners. But make no mistake. His victory this fall has little to do with Syriza's January 25 victory. Instead, Tsipras will have no option other than to implement the policy of the troika, backed by the Greek financial and economic elites.

In fact, supporting Syriza now risks associating Podemos with a failed and defeated project, one which only deepens the Iberian strategic impasses. Any single measure adopted by the new Tsipras government will be a true torpedo to Podemos's credibility and to the credibility of the idea of political and social change itself. Not only in Greece, but also in the Spanish state.

It is difficult to sell hope in Spain by endorsing those who have buried it in Greece. And it is impossible to criticize the cuts carried out by Spanish President Mariano Rajoy or Catalan President Artur Mas at the same time as justifying those made by Tsipras.

Given this scenario, it is not a question of adapting to the capitulationists who permanently adopt the slogan "No, we can't" (no se puede) as their strategic horizon, nor can we be content with sterile, auto-proclamatory calls for resistance. Now is the time to fight for the majority, to offer an alternative path to the no future of grungy austerity.

This means articulating a radical project and a spirit of convergence, a willingness to lead a rupture, and a willingness to get our hands dirty in order to deal with difficult contradictions.

Only sectarians confuse radicalism with isolation, cynicism, and permanent programmatic differentiation. Only those who are afraid to seriously tackle the adventure of changing society will confuse the will of the majority, unity, and political confluence, with the danger of political adaptation to the narrow margins of the possible.

Towards Rupture

Reality's reflection has turned out to be more complex, tortuous, and stubbornly material than expected. It is less schematic, linear, media-oriented, and discursive than the leadership of Podemos theorized. The political struggle is more convoluted than the populist hypothesis they suggested, both in its strict Laclau-ian variant and in its more general meanings.

Building a popular majority is not as linear as Podemos believed it to be and the political struggle is broader than its communicative dimension. The electoral strategy alone may stall if it is not merged into the construction of a real and rooted popular movement, and party politics without movement

politics may quickly run out of gas.

Podemos leaders witnessed the limits of their formula last May 24, when simultaneous municipal and regional elections took place. In that round, Podemos stood independently in regional elections and joined with grassroots and popular coalitions at the municipal level. In the regional elections, Podemos's results came below those of PSOE and they scored lower than those obtained by the grassroots and popular coalition municipal candidates, which won in several major cities.

Faced with this situation, the party leaders' orientation has been to try to expand Podemos's electoral lists to include other groups and independent candidates, proposing that they run for election under the Podemos brand, supplemented by some sort of additional name or designation.

The specific formula proposed by Iglesias is "Podemos" followed by a hyphen and then a name to be determined (i.e. Podemos-People's list . . .) that show that the Podemos list includes people and groups going beyond Podemos but under its' hegemony.

Alongside this proposal, there is an effort to expand Podemos's electoral reach, while avoiding entering into electoral coalitions at the national level with other leftist forces such as the United Left and grassroots and popular candidates like those adopted in local elections.

In parallel, Podemos has attempted to build electoral coalitions in those nations or regions of the Spanish state where there are progressive forces working at the nationalist or regional level, and where Podemos generally has weaker roots.

Thus, Podemos tried to establish agreements with Iniciativa-Verds in Catalunya (an environmental-political force with roots in the Euro-communist tradition which won thirteen deputies and 10 percent of votes in 2012 in Catalonia, but which experienced a severe decline in its electoral expectations because of the emergence of Podemos), Compromís in the Valencia Nation (an environmental and pro-Catalan regional force which won 18 percent of the vote and nineteen deputies in the May 24 elections, and which currently governs the autonomous region of Valencia in coalition with the Spanish Socialist Party, PSOE), Más in the Balearic Islands (an environmental and pro-Catalan regional force which won 13.8 percent of the vote and six seats on May 24, and which currently governs the autonomous community of the Balearic Islands in coalition with PSOE) and Mareas of Galicia (a group of grassroots municipal candidates, primarily organized by left currents of the Galician independence movement and who received uneven support from Podemos in the elections of May 24).

This approach is, however, too fragmented to solve the tougher dilemma, and it is focused strictly on the logic of the apparatus. In fact, this timid solution cannot resolve the deeper problem: the impossibility of Podemos winning the general election.

A bigger jolt is needed. A change of pace to stop the downward slide. Now is not the time to fly on autopilot or cruise along behind a sluggish diesel engine. What we need is a souped-up race car. We need quick reflexes. All organizations age, and in today's world of fast food, of the instantaneous and the spurious, they grow old even faster.

The processes of birth, consolidation, and restructuring do not pass in orderly fashion from one phase to the next, but are in a state of constant turmoil. This means we must know how to navigate turbulent waters and crosscurrents, even more so during a moment of crisis when, as we remember from *Hamlet*, "time is out of joint."

Thinking that things are going along fine "*a la Kautsky*" (even if along an accelerated and hurried version of his perspective) is the dullest of strategic mistakes. It is worse than adventurism. Hence,

it is time to wake up, to act like a real “gearbox,” to use Daniel Bensaid’s expression, and change rhythm. To draw new players onto the field and change the pattern and pace of the game.

And this means invoking a sense of “popular unity” based on building convergences from below, using the May 24 municipal electoral successes as our starting point. It means rejecting agreements between party apparatuses as well as self-proclaimed certainties.

Thinking strategically today requires an open mind in order to understand such varied and apparently contradictory situations as the hope represented by Jeremy Corbyn in Britain (so unexpectedly reborn in the heart of the ancient Labour Party), or the necessity of breaking from Syriza and the need to support Popular Unity in Greece, or the struggle for participatory confluences and popular unities from below within the Spanish state.

Through all these various processes, which take shape in disparate (and even crazy!) forms, we must, however, be ready to provoke a rupture with this unbearable economic and political order. And to accomplish this, strategic innovation is just as important as firmness of principle and incorruptibility of will.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 9.30.15:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/09/podemos-populism-popular-unity-pp-psoe-austerity-syriza-iglesias/>

* Translated for Jacobin by Todd Chretien in partnership with Socialist Worker.

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