

INTERVIEW

Portugal's parliamentary elections: Why did the left gain?

Thursday 8 October 2015, by [CHRETIEN Todd](#), [PRINCIPE Catarina](#), [RUSSELL Dan](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2015).

On October 4, Bloco de Esquerda (the Left Bloc) received its best-ever result in Portugal's parliamentary elections, winning more than 500,000 votes, or 10.2 percent. This raises Bloco to the third-largest party in parliament. Adding in the Portuguese Communist Party—which received 8.3 percent of the vote—the left got nearly 20 percent of the vote, running against the politics of austerity and neoliberalism.

This result comes only two weeks after Greek elections, in which Alexis Tsipras' SYRIZA won another resounding victory, despite having accepted a third austerity Memorandum—meanwhile, the anti-austerity coalition Popular Unity initiated by former SYRIZA members who opposed the Memorandum failed to enter parliament, falling just short of the 3 percent threshold. These results provide an important context for an ongoing discussion among the international left regarding strategy and tactics for revolutionaries today. Catarina Principe, a member of the Left Bloc, was interviewed by Todd Chretien and Dan Russell about the election results last weekend, the character of the party, and the historical context for both.

Todd Chretien and Dan Russell — IN 1974, a left-leaning faction of the military overthrew the so-called New State (Estado Novo) fascist dictatorship that had reigned since the 1930s. The coup touched off what came to be known as the “Carnation Revolution,” an upheaval that lasted more than two years and shook Portuguese society to its roots. Can you explain how the legacy of these events affects Bloco and politics in general in Portugal?

Catarina Principe — IN THE early days of the revolution, the Communist Party was the central force, and it did support the popular movement to some extent, but it also attempted to block certain aspects of it. After the fall of the dictatorship in 1974, something like 37 new parties were formed, but none of them was capable of becoming a strong majoritarian force within the working class and within the revolutionary process.

So in that sense, Bloco did learn that in order to have some sort of political influence in the landscape we are facing today, we had to distance ourselves from the concept of small revolutionary organizations. We had to build a broad party that was capable of incorporating different parts of the left and different ideological trends. So the left learned from the ups and downs—and particularly the downs—of the Portuguese revolution.

We also had to come to terms with the fact that many of the young cadres who were developed

during the revolutionary process didn't know how to deal with reformism. In one sense, the revolutionary left dismissed reformism as simply another mask of capitalism, and the left underestimated reformism's capacity to absorb sections of the working class.

The left wasn't experienced in how to deal with reformism in the trade unions, in the workplaces and during elections. So it was very difficult for the left to deal with the positions put forward by the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista, known by the initials PS), our national version of social democracy.

CAN YOU talk about Bloco's formation and how it is organized on the local and national level today?

BLOCO WAS formed by three main parties in 1999, as well as many other people who weren't part of any specific organization. These included the Trotskyist Fourth International group called the Socialist Revolutionary Party (PSR, by its initials in Portuguese); a group originating in the Maoist tradition called the Democratic and Popular Union (UDP); and an organization from the Eurocommunist tradition named Politics XXI (Política XXI).

Today, most of Bloco's membership has never been a part of any of these three organizations, so we actually managed to build a party with a much broader membership, and we have succeeded in bringing together an important section of the left wing of Portuguese society into a single organization.

Today, Bloco is a membership organization, and we currently have approximately 12,000 members. It's important to point out that the population of Portugal is around 10 million people, so this is a significant number for a left-wing party. We have local branches, regional branches and a national leadership. And we have national working groups in areas such as trade unions and labor, the environment, and students and public education, at both the high school and university level.

When Bloco formed, the three parties became political associations, meaning that they became currents within Bloco. The internal distribution is different today, and there has been some restructuring over the last year. Until a couple of years ago, we described the role of the three different currents within the Bloco as "shared hegemony." This meant that in the early days, each of the three currents took up different areas of work where they had historically developed stronger roots.

For example, the PSR took up the issues concerning oppression, such as feminist, LGBTQ and antiracist organizing, as well as questions associated with precarious labor. The UDP, which was the biggest of the three, took up questions in the trade unions, as they had more members in the unions. And Politics XXI took up many of the issues dealing with internationalism.

However, things have changed in the last years, so these divisions no longer exist in the way they did. There's been a lot of restructuring, including the dissolution of the PSR into a broader tendency, together with parts of Politics XXI and many so-called "independents"; and another broader tendency composed of the UDP, as well as many people who weren't organized in a tendency before. The internal reorganization is still happening at the moment.

WHAT WERE the main issues in the election campaign? Was Bloco's electoral success an effect of it being perceived as an effective force fighting around these questions before election day?

FOR AT least the last four years, the central question in Portuguese politics has been austerity.

Bloco, as one of the few anti-austerity parties, has centered both its activity over the previous years and its immediate electoral program on this question.

What does this mean? Very specifically, it means unemployment, precarity and the dismantling of the social state—that is, budget cuts, school and hospital closures, and the unsustainability of the Social Security system.

Plus, critically, the issue of migration. In recent years, Portugal has witnessed the biggest migratory flux in its history, even bigger than the migration during the 1960s during the dictatorship. In terms of numbers, in the last two to three years, more than half a million people have left the country—again, out of a population of just around 10 million. So this is a very large number of people who have left.

On the other hand, because we cannot talk about austerity without talking about the question of the debt, Bloco also centered this problem in our political activity over the last several years. For example, we have organized many public forums which explain the relationship between austerity and the debt, the absolute necessity of restructuring it, of cutting the debt, of lowering interest rates, etc.

I also think it's very important to mention an issue that was central to this campaign, which is the relationship to the European Union and the euro currency.

Prior to this campaign, Bloco had a sort of wobbly position on the question of the EU and the euro. In many ways, it was a very similar position to the one taken by SYRIZA. But given what has recently happened to SYRIZA, with them being forced into a situation of signing the third Memorandum and recognizing that their aim was not to break with the European elite and its institutions, Bloco has realized it must refine its position.

During the campaign, political forces hostile to us attempted to paint Bloco as irresponsible, saying that Bloco could not govern because of what happened to SYRIZA. Our opponents said, "Look at SYRIZA, there is no other option besides austerity."

Despite this, Bloco was capable of shifting this narrative. We were afraid that the SYRIZA effect would be very negative for us, but it actually turned out to be minimal. This was because Bloco succeeded in shifting responsibility for what happened in Greece onto the European elites, while at the same time strengthening our critique of the European Union and the euro. For the first time, Bloco said publicly that if we need to leave the eurozone in order to end austerity and regain sovereignty, we will do this.

"No more sacrifices for the euro" was an important message for us during this campaign. In my opinion, this is a very positive political shift, and it definitely opened space for a euro-critical left, in a way that we didn't have before (since the CP was always euro-skeptical). It also contradicts the narrative that said the left cannot grow if it has a euro-critical perspective. In fact, we were able to shift to a more euro-critical perspective and still get the best results we've ever had in the elections.

THE RIGHT-wing coalition Portugal First (Portugal à Frente, PaF by its initials)—made up of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and Popular Party (CDS-PP), the two right-wing parties that governed Portugal during the last four years and applied austerity measures—won a plurality in elections, though they failed to gain a majority. Does this mean that conservatives will form a minority government and if so, what are the implications?

ACCORDING TO the Portuguese constitution, it is possible to form a minority government. And as you said, the conservative party, which was already running in coalition with the smaller CDS-PP—which, by way of comparison, has a lot in common with the Christian Democratic Union in Germany—doesn't have an absolute majority in parliament.

Nonetheless, the constitution allows a minority government if it can secure pledges from other parties to provide it with enough votes to sustain its policies. However, both the Communist Party and Bloco, which together make up almost 20 percent of parliament, have already publicly stated that we will not pledge our support. So this means the ball is in the court of the PS.

As expected, our PS—our liberalized, traditional social democracy—will almost certainly pledge its parliamentary support so that the conservatives can form a minority, right-wing government. This isn't a surprise because if you look at their electoral programs, they are basically very similar.

Even worse, the PS will not only permit the formation of this conservative government, but they are very likely to support its central austerity proposals. This means that the PS is on the route to compromising themselves to voting favorably in parliament on all central measures of the right-wing program, like the \$674 million cut in pensions that was already promised to Brussels, or the state budget.

So once again, the PS has proven that it is really no alternative at all, even as it conducted a scare-mongering campaign, claiming that a vote for Bloco or the Communists was actually a vote for the right. But as much as the PS pushed this line during the last two weeks of the elections, they still lost badly.

In opposition to the PS's likely support for the conservatives, both Bloco and the Communist Party have offered to discuss the possibility of forming a majority government with the PS in order to end austerity. This would be possible, as these three parties actually have a majority of parliament seats between them. However, this is merely a tactical move, because both Bloco and the Communist Party know that the conditions we would demand for such a government of the left will be rejected by the PS.

So this is a tactical move, but it's an important tactical move and a correct one because it pushes the PS to clarify its position: Is it willing to end austerity or not? It has been saying that it opposes austerity, but this will be exposed as not true if it supports a government of the right, which is what it will do for now.

There is another problem. There is a presidential election set for January, but the constitution states that the sitting president may not dissolve parliament and call for new elections within six months of the end of his term. Further, a new parliament may not be dissolved within the first six months of its mandate. So this will force the PS to make a decision. Our position is that there will be no government of the left because the PS will not accept our anti-austerity conditions for such an agreement, such as ending wage cuts, defending pensions and restructuring the debt.

GIVEN THE likelihood of a right-wing government, where will Bloco focus its energies in order to build opposition to the impending cuts?

THAT'S A very good question. Although Bloco's 10 percent in the elections represents the biggest victory in our history, it doesn't mean that we don't face difficult problems.

For the last couple years, our labor and social movements have basically been nonexistent. Despite harsh austerity measures, we have had very few resistance movements or moments of contestation. At the same time, we are very dependent on our electoral outcomes and, we might say, the good will

of the mainstream media to make us popular.

The fact that Bloco received an amazing vote this time doesn't mean that this can't be followed by a sharp fall in our vote in the next election, as happened between 2009 and 2011, when we lost more than half our vote. This means, and I'm just giving you my opinion, that there are some very concrete things that must be done immediately. I'll mention four.

First, we have to strengthen the labor movement. This means rethinking our strategy for organizing precarious workers. We have tried this over the last years, and we have had some successes, but not as many as we hoped for. And we have to carry out arguments within what is left of the trade unions with parts of the Communist Party, which remains very influential there—especially about the question of reorganizing the labor movement in a circumstance where unemployment is very high, precarity is massive, and union membership has dropped to just around 20 percent.

Second, an important area for us is defending the social state. For instance, we must be more active in defense of public schools and hospitals, and social security in particular. We have to expand our work and include community and locally based structures and organizations. For example, there are instances of groups in small villages, trying to save their local hospital.

Third, we must map out all the experiences and structures of direct solidarity, such as people forming cooperatives. This hasn't happened as much as it has in Greece, but it has happened to a certain degree. We have to bring these efforts into contact with one another.

Fourth, we must build campaigns that question the very roots of the European project. For instance, we could consider campaigns that guarantee citizenship to all immigrants, or we could demand a common, European-wide minimum wage. These are things that are, in theory, possible, but are impossible to achieve within the current European Union structures, which are based on inequality. So I would say these are like non-reformist reforms—in other words, reforms that ought to be possible, but which will actually question the very foundations of the European Union and the euro zone.

This means, and I've argued this before, we must still work within the framework of the European Union because this is the real framework we find ourselves in today. Yet at the same time, we have to try to start thinking outside of these limits. This means we will have to build stronger links with social movements around Europe.

These are the tasks facing us today. They are not simple, but hopefully we'll manage to make some progress.

ONE FINAL question: In the United States, we are accustomed to politicians being corrupt, self-serving corporate creatures with no responsibility to their base. Could you briefly describe the sort of people who will represent Bloco in parliament and their relationship to the party and social movements?

THE FIRST thing to say is that we weren't expecting to elect so many people! Having said that, Bloco intentionally composed its parliamentary list heterogeneously, with lots of people from different movements and different experiences. So Bloco's parliamentary group is going to see something like an 80 percent changeover. Meaning that 80 percent of our new MPs are new—they've never been MPs before.

For example, we have elected Luís Monteiro, a 22 year old who will be the youngest MP. He was a very strong high school activist and is now an important figure in the university student movement.

At the same time, we have elected a 69-year-old woman, Domicília Costa, who used to be a housewife. She has been at the center of organizing for tenants' rights (and now also for pensioners' rights) for the last 40 years in Gaia, the biggest suburb of Porto. So this is just an example of how very different people, with a wide array of experience of social mobilization have been elected to parliament.

This has been our tradition, although it has not always been the most successful method in practice. We always try to compose our lists and our parliamentary group, by default, to include a wide variety of experience, regions, genders, ages and so on.

We don't see parliament as an end in itself, but as a bullhorn for the movements. Particularly now, although it's a parliamentary group with a lot of unknown people who never expected in their lives to be MPs. I hope that exactly because of this, we can try to build a more organic relationship between the movements that these people are part of and their work in parliament.

P.S.

* "Why did the left gain in Portugal?". Socialist Worker, October 8, 2015:
<http://socialistworker.org/2015/10/08/why-did-the-left-gain-in-portugal>