

After the Portuguese parliamentary election: quicksand in the center and an emboldened left

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Although it may have come as a surprise elsewhere, the Portuguese center-right ultraliberal government, which went “far beyond the troika” has won a relative majority in last week’s general election. With 36.8% of the vote and 1.994 million votes, the previous governmental coalition (PSD and CDS) was the winner. In second place came the Socialist Party, with 32.4% and 1.746 million votes. The biggest surprise and strongest rise was the Left Bloc, which had 10.2% of the vote with 551 000 votes, followed by the Communist Party, with 8.3% and 446 000 votes. When compared to the previous 2011 election, the right-wing parties lost more than 700 000 votes, the Socialist Party (PS) had 160 000 more, the Left Bloc (BE) rose by 260 000 and the Communist Party (PCP) by 3400 votes.

The PS, which has for the last forty years been running the country with the Social-Democrats (PSD) and the conservatives (CDS) suffered a massive shock, although the polls in previous weeks clearly predicted this outcome. Not seen as an alternative to the rightwing’s austerity, it had a disastrous campaign after its best-known leader, previous prime-minister José Sócrates, was arrested for corruption. It now faces its greatest dilemma: turning right and approving a right-wing government or turning left and opening a whole new scenario, never seen in Portuguese politics: a PS government supported in Parliament by left-wing parties (BE and PCP, which now amount to 18.5%, one million votes).

The President of the Republic, former prime-minister (1985-95), Cavaco Silva, had previously stated, far exceeding his mandate, that he would not empower a relative majority and an unstable government. Well, once more it seems he has lied. Two days after the election, after meeting with only his own party (PSD), Silva told the country he had asked Passos Coelho (former prime-minister and head of the winning coalition) to form a stable government, in which there couldn’t be parties that didn’t assume “international and historical treaties and agreements”, as well as “the grand strategical options” adopted for the last 40 years: that is, NATO, European Union, the Euro, the EU’s Budgetary Treaty and the future TTIP. This option clearly meant to exclude BE and PCP from any governmental solution. Nonetheless, it was to the left that António Costa, leader of PS, first turned.

The PS-PCP meeting, the day after the President of the Republic laid out his “rules” as to who could be in government, came as a shock: the communists said that they would support a PS government and could even eventually be a part of that government. The communists clearly felt the pressure from being overtaken once again by the Left Bloc and gave a historic sign of the political possibilities of participating in a broader coalition. During the campaign, in the debate with PS leader, BE’s spokeswoman Catarina Martins laid down conditions for talks on a left agreement, telling the PS to retreat on three points of its program: no freezing on current pensions, no welfare reform with cuts on future pensions and no flexibilization of labour laws. On the election evening speech, Martins had also been clear: “The Left Bloc will do everything to prevent the right wing coalition forming a government. We now await for the response of the other parties”. PCP spoke afterwards and supported this idea. The final decision would be in the hands of the PS.

After the support of PCP, the Socialists started talking about good chances of forming a left-wing government. This put the right-wing coalition and all pundits in a terrified frenzy. From calling it a coup to anti-democratic, everything has been said. Waving the banner of the red scare, and of the Portuguese revolutionary period, news and opinion columns have shown how the simple prospect of a discontinuity to extreme austerity opens the gate of generalized hostility from the mainstream media. From the EU, through Wolfgang Schäuble, cheered the right-wing coalition's meager victory as a sign of support of the Portuguese for more austerity measures, came Durão Barroso's claim that a government supported by far-left parties would face a major backlash from the markets.

After a frustrating meeting of the coalition (PSD-CDS) with PS, Costa went to meet Catarina Martins in BE's headquarters. A meeting which kept possibilities open. The Left Bloc spokeswoman declared that "the Passos (PSD) and Portas (CDS) government is over". The fall in the stock markets, the day after, was presented as a consequence of this meeting and declarations.

A second meeting of PS with the coalition turned out to be another frustrating assembly, with the right-wing parties offering to support 20 of the PS's election program measures, and PS demanding at least another 20 (to which the right-wing said they were willing to negotiate everything). At this moment, PS apparently tends to a left-wing solution, although there is turmoil inside the PS's ranks, with senior leaders both supporting and opposing a left-wing solution. António Costa has now promised to take the left-wing solution to a party referendum. The right-wing parties have now accepted the idea they're losing ground and rely heavily on a President of the Republic's veto. Passos Coelho announced, after a second meeting with the PS, that there will be no further meetings.

The possibility of a Socialist Party government supported in Parliament by the Left Bloc and the Communist Party is now a credible one. The devil, of course, is in the details. It is clear that the PS will not assume any anti-capitalist stance, it will not accept defiance of the EU's austerity regime and will have important difficulties in implementing some of the agreements it is making with BE and PCP, if they manage to reach an agreement. The left-wing parties are fighting to ensure a stop to austerity in the short term and some recovery in labour income - and stopping the "further than the troika" coalition from returning to power. They are also exploiting all the possibilities of forcing the PS to choose a path between PASOK and Labour, pulling it to the left and exposing a lot of PS members and leaders as de facto right-wing representatives.

The President may veto a left-wing solution and insist on naming Passos Coelho as Prime Minister, against the majority of Parliament (SP+LB+CP = 53% of Parliament), forcing PS to oppose the budget and possibility of presenting a no confidence vote together with the BE and the PCP, which would lead to a fall of government. The question is: in January, there will be presidential elections and this president cannot dissolve the parliament and call another election. Also, any incumbent president will not be able to dissolve parliament and call for another election in the first 6 months of mandate. That means the current parliament will stay for at least 9 months. Another possibility is Cavaco Silva naming the previous government to stay in power, managing without a budget, that is, without being able to implement any new measures.

The next days will be of turmoil. PS is split, and the pressure created over a viable solution is mounting. PS is already saying that, if it can't reach an agreement to the left, it will not stop the right from taking power. The contradictions in this whole process expose the nature of PS. Should it choose not to make a turn to the left (that is, not accepting a minimum program to halt austerity and restore parts of all that has been taken from the people in the last years) it faces a melting into PSD, leaving an important space for the growth of left-wing parties, specially the Left Bloc. If they move to the left, a whole new set of possibilities emerges. We are quite sure they are aware of the crossroads they're in. Perhaps some disarray in the EU, with Angela Merkel and François Hollande

going in front of the European Parliament to plead for the future of the EU in front of all its crisis has emboldened parts of PS's leaders to make a move beyond austerity. All signs from the Portuguese bourgeoisie were that there should be a government between PS and PSD. Now that the political center is shattered, the left needs to push and make sure that the middle ground is just quicksand. If PS chooses neutrality, it will end neutrally.

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P.S.

* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4258>