

Spanish state: How and why the Rajoy government fell - What are the Prospects?

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On June 1, the Spanish government of the ruling People's Party (PP) of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy fell to a no-confidence motion brought against it in the 350-seat Spanish congress by the opposition Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), led by its federal secretary Pedro Sánchez.

The vote was 180 to 169 with one abstention. This result installed Sánchez as the new prime minister of Spain. It was the first time since a multiparty-system replaced the Francisco Franco dictatorship 40 years ago that a no-confidence motion has succeeded.

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Key to the final result was the decision of the conservative Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), governing the Basque Autonomous Community (Euskadi), to support the PSOE motion. Without its five votes the motion would have been lost because an absolute majority of 176 was needed for its adoption. Previously, the two Catalan nationalist parties with a presence in the Congress — the centre-left Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and the conservative nationalist Catalan European Democratic Party (PDECat) — had flagged their support.

The breakdown of the vote was: in favour, PSOE (84), Unidos Podemos and associated alliances in Galicia and Catalonia (67), ERC (9), PDECat (8), PNV (5), the Valencian regionalist force Compromís (4), the Basque left-nationalist alliance Bildu (2) and the Canary Islands regionalist grouping New Canaries (1).

Against were all the forces of the right: the PP (134), Citizens (32), the Union of the People of Navarra (2) and Forum Asturias (1), with the Canary Coalition the only abstention.

For the first time since the Rajoy government was formed on November 4, 2016, this parliamentary majority—the PSOE, Unidos Podemos and the alliances associated with it, plus the four Catalan and Basque nationalist parties—united in a decisive vote. Up until his removal, Rajoy had managed to survive by dividing and ruling this unstable bloc—chiefly by enlisting the PSOE against the Catalan right to self-determination and in favour of the repression of the October 1 Catalan referendum and the legal persecution of the Catalan leaders responsible for it.

The most recent example of Rajoy's success in keeping the opposition parties divided had come only

nine days earlier, on May 22, when he seduced the PNV into supporting his government's 2018 budget and into breaking its promise not to do so while Catalan self-rule remained suspended under article 155 of the Spanish Constitution.

The price of that seduction of the PNV was an increase in pension rates, their indexing to the consumer price index, a €540 million boost to infrastructure funding for Euskadi and a promise to conduct discussions with the new Catalan government led by president Quim Torra.

The Gürtel scandal bombshell

On May 24, Rajoy was wearing an expression of satisfaction in the Spanish congress. After the passing of his budget, Spain's prime minister seemed to be facing two more years in office during which to hopefully counter the rise of the more-patriotic-than-thou Citizens and to wear down the Catalan independence challenge.

Less than 24 hours later the look on Rajoy's face had turned into one of high irritation marked by flashes of panic. On the afternoon of his budget victory, the judges of the National High Court had released their decision in the Gürtel corruption case and by the next day the PSOE had lodged its no-confidence motion, based on the argument that the PP's involvement in that corruption made it unfit to rule any longer. The congress's speakership panel, with a PP and Citizens' majority, immediately voted for the motion to be heard as quickly as possible, hoping in this way to give the PSOE minimum time to organise support.

The judges 1687-page ruling found not only that an organised conspiracy to have public contracts awarded in exchange for payments to the Gürtel network existed—resulting in sentences of up to 51 years jail for its ringleaders—but that the network had been organised to benefit the PP. It stated: “the criminal activity ... produced quantifiable economic benefits for the People's Party, consistent with the illegal financing of its activities and of various political events ... that would otherwise have had to be funded from its own economic resources.”

The judgment called the operation “an authentic and efficient system of institutional corruption via mechanisms for manipulating central, regional and local public contracting via a close and continuing relationship with influential members of the PP”. It had as its key protagonist former party treasurer Luís Bárcenas, who not only funnelled payments from businesses winning contracts from PP-run administrations into party coffers via an alternative set of books; he also channelled millions into his and his wife's private accounts in Switzerland.

The judgment found former Rajoy government minister for health Ana Mato guilty of financial gain from the network of corruption and noted that Rajoy's own evidence before the court (“I knew nothing”) was not credible.

A dissenting judgment by leading judge Angel Hurtado, who had tried unsuccessfully to prevent Rajoy from giving evidence in the case, questioned whether the network had been set up to help the PP. He argued “the real beneficiaries were those who really benefited from the sums that [conspiracy head] Francisco Correa handed out.”

The PP said it would appeal against the decision, following its usual line of defence of painting those involved in the Gürtel network as a few long forgotten and now irrelevant rotten apples. However, its by now insolvable problem was that, after scores of instances of “individual” rottenness over the past two decades, the vast majority of Spanish citizens just didn't believe the fiction any more. The Gürtel decision brought conclusive damning confirmation that the PP really has been a “conspiracy

to defraud the public purse”, as prosecutors in Valencia called it in their separate indictment of the party’s Valencian branch.

The May 22 preventive detention on charges of bribery and money laundering of Eduardo Zaplana (former premier of the Valencian Country, former Spanish labour minister and former spokesperson for the 1996-2004 PP government of prime minister José María Aznar) only reinforced this reaction.

An inevitable no-confidence motion

An early indication of the impact of the Gürtel decision came in the May 27 SocioMetric poll, which showed the PP as now the last of Spain’s four main parties with a score of 16.8%, half what it received in the 2016 Spanish general elections, and behind Citizens (28.5%), the PSOE (20.3%) and Unidos Podemos and its allies (19.3%). Early raw data from the next Metroscopia poll, taken while the no-confidence motion was being debated, indicated that only one in ten of those interviewed would vote PP at the next election, the biggest fall in support for a party of the right since the now extinct Union of the Democratic Centre disappeared in the early 1980s.

Given the intensity of public outrage, the PSOE leadership had no choice but to move a no-confidence motion against Rajoy and do so as quickly as possible. Sánchez had three irresistible motives for acting in blitzkrieg fashion to propose himself as an alternative prime minister to Rajoy.

First, Unidos Podemos had been calling on Sánchez for over a year to move against the minority Rajoy administration, promising to support any PSOE no-confidence motion. In that time the gap between the PSOE and its more radical rival for hegemony over the all-Spanish left had been slowly closing. If the PSOE had continued its inaction, its irrelevance in the struggle against PP corruption would have been confirmed and it would have been left naked before Unidos Podemos attacks on its effective complicity with Rajoy. Second, if the PSOE hadn’t acted immediately, Citizens’ leader Albert Rivera—sensing that the moment was arriving for it to supplant the PP as the lead party of the right—would have tried to strike with his own proposal for a no-confidence motion to trigger immediate elections. However, this would have been difficult for Citizens because a no-confidence motion has to be supported by a minimum of 10% of the Congress (35 members) and Citizens has only 32.

Nonetheless, if Citizens had been able to win the necessary extra support it would have had the initiative in the struggle between the broadly defined right and left in the Congress at a moment when the combined all-Spanish right vote has been exceeding the combined left vote in polling, because of the wave of Spanish nationalist fervour stirred up by the Catalan independence struggle.

An early indicator of Citizens’ plans was Rivera’s May 9 decision to withdraw support for the Rajoy government because it had decided not to appeal to the Spanish Constitutional Court against the Catalan parliament’s speakership panel’s decision to allow exiled Catalan president Carles Puigdemont and health minister Toni Comín to delegate their votes as MPs in the Catalan parliament.

That decision gave the forces supporting Catalan independence the numbers with which to elect Quim Torra as Catalan president after the Constitutional Court ruled against suspending Puigdemont’s and Comín’s right of delegation while it was hearing Citizens’ own appeal against the speakership panel’s decision.

Citizens’s criticism of Rajoy was based on the custom of the Constitutional Court to provisionally suspend the application of any law, regulation or ruling whenever the Spanish government is the

appellant.

According to Rivera, the Rajoy government had “looked the other way” while the Catalan parliament went ahead with electing a pro-independence president with Puigdemont’s and Comín’s votes. He said on May 9: “If I were president I would try every last opportunity to stop a fugitive from justice from having a vote.”

Third, the no-confidence motion gave Sánchez a weapon with which to settle unfinished scores with his internal opposition, in particular the PSOE’s regional premiers (“the barons”). They found it impossible to publicly oppose a no-confidence motion against PP corruption, even while wanting it to fail because its chances of success would depend on support from suspect Basque and Catalan nationalist forces. The motion would, if successful, result in the formation of what former PSOE leader Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba had in 2016 dubbed a “Frankenstein government”—a minority PSOE administration vulnerable to the demands of “populists” and “separatists”. The most the PSOE barons felt able to demand from Sánchez at the May 28 meeting of the party’s Federal Political Committee that unanimously supported the no-confidence motion was that he not negotiate with these parties to win their support.

However, this unanimous vote didn’t prevent the PSOE’s most Spanish-unionist voices from having their say. On May 28, former PSOE premier of Extremadura Juan Carlos Rodríguez Ibarra told SER radio “pro-independence movements worry me much more than the robberies of the PP.”

Whatever the result, what worries me a great deal is that the more or less worked-out strategy of the state against Catalan secessionism will have been dismantled. If Pedro Sánchez wins, it will be very difficult for the PP to collaborate with him in applying this strategy; and if Pedro Sánchez loses, it will be very hard for Rajoy to trust him when it comes to working out a new strategy.

Another PSOE luminary, former deputy prime minister Alfonso Guerra went further. On the same day, in what sounded like a crude attempt to provoke the PDECat into not supporting the Sánchez motion, he called Catalan president Torra a “Nazi”.

Everyone hides and nobody says what they think. Now we have a president of the Catalan government who talks exactly like a Nazi, but no, we say he’s a supremacist so he doesn’t get annoyed. He’s a Nazi. If three years ago they had told us that the Catalan president would be a Nazi we wouldn’t have believed it, but now we just accept it as a matter of course.

However, these were the bleatings of the PSOE’s has-beens. The unanimous support of PSOE Federal Political Committee reflected the enthusiasm that Sánchez’s initiative was generating in the party’s ranks, in contrast to its cold reception from PSOE grandees like Rubalcaba and former prime ministers Felipe González and José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero.

This membership had seen precious little of the Sánchez they had restored to leadership of the party a year previously in a mobilisation that defeated the barons’ candidate, Andalusian premier Susana Díaz. Since then, with Spanish politics almost completely dominated by the Catalan struggle for self-determination, their champion had effectively been reduced to a fifth wheel on Rajoy’s war machine against the Catalan independence movement.

Citizens cornered

Sánchez’s vulnerable flank was the dependence of his motion on the votes of PDECat and ERC. This was particularly the case given that in the fortnight before the Gürtel verdict he had still been on a

campaign of shameless bashing of Torra as a “xenophobe”, “racist”, “supremacist” and “the Le Pen of Spain”.

With a view to drawing Citizens into the PSOE camp or to abstaining and leaving the PP completely isolated—thereby eliminating dependence on “the nationalists”—PSOE organisational secretary José Luís Ábalos said that his party was prepared to negotiate a date for early elections that an incoming PSOE government would have to face.

Citizens, however, was completely opposed to the formation of any PSOE government: that would upset its whole game plan (and that of the Spanish establishment) of keeping the PP in government and bleeding it to death with attacks from its right. Citizens would only support the PSOE no-confidence motion if it was an “instrumental” motion for calling immediate elections, with a PSOE administration restricted to a purely caretaker role and headed not by Sánchez but by some respectable PSOE luminary (Josep Borrell, crusading opponent of Catalan independence, was one name floated).

According to Citizens’s spokesperson José Manuel Villegas: “We are prepared to meet with the PSOE and talk about giving the Spanish a voice if Rajoy digs in [refuses to resign as prime minister] and insists on prolonging the agony.” The PSOE’s refusal to accept these conditions—which would have pitched it into early elections without any chance to adopt measures to win easy popularity—left Citizens with no choice but to vote with the PP while attacking the PSOE as afraid to face the people.

How PDECat and ERC support was won

By May 28, the PSOE no-confidence motion had won the immediate support of the leaderships of Unidos Podemos—later formalised in the Podemos case by a membership ballot in which 99% gave their backing—followed by that of Compromís, thereby leaving the success of the initiative in the hands of PDECat, the ERC and the PNV. However, initial reaction to Sánchez’s initiative from within the Catalan independence camp ranged from hostility to making demands on the PSOE leader that would be impossible for him to meet.

In Catalonia, the anti-capitalist People’s Unity List (CUP) led the opposition with spokesperson and Catalan parliament MP Natàlia Sánchez saying that supporting the no-confidence motion would make people “accomplices in the destruction of rights and in the scheme of authoritarianism”. Catalan National Congress president Elisenda Paluzie stated: “When we pass from one prime minister who enacted article 155 and has repressed to another who denies the right to self-determination and has come out in support of repression, we don’t see any difference.” Together for Catalonia (JxCat) spokesperson Eduard Pujol asked: “What do we Catalans win with Sánchez?”

Torra’s initial response was to demand that Sánchez undertake to free the Catalan political prisoners and endorse the right to self-determination, while previous president Carles Puigdemont thought the PDECat should abstain (ensuring the motion would fail). By contrast, the PDECat MPs in the Spanish congress were anxious for the motion to succeed, on the grounds of a moral duty to oppose PP corruption and because “anything would be better than Rajoy”. Their only condition for giving Sánchez their support was that the motion not be backed by Citizens.

The initial response of ERC figures was similar: Gabriel Rufian, joint ERC spokesperson in the Congress, said Sánchez should ask for forgiveness for supporting the decapitation of Catalan self-rule under article 155 and visit jailed ERC leader Oriol Junqueras in prison. However, the tone and approach of the ERC MPs in Madrid rapidly changed as they confronted the key issue: did they want their vote on the no-confidence motion, whether against or abstention, to keep the hated Rajoy in

office? By late May 28, lead ERC MP Joan Tardà, for whom “a people-hating party just has to be thrown out”, was advising the PSOE negotiators how they could best persuade the waverers in the camp of Catalan MPs (chiefly by eliminating all potentially provocative references to the Catalan situation from Sánchez’s Congress speech). Rufian’s position had changed to: “Throwing thieves and jailers out of the Moncloa [the Spanish prime minister’s residence] isn’t an option, it’s an obligation.”

The final alignment of the Catalan independence camp behind the motion came on March 29, at a videoconference between PDECat coordinator Marta Pascal, Torra and Puigdemont. At it a PSOE offer to establish normal relations with the Torra government and open a dialogue, along with an undertaking to revisit Catalan laws blocked by the Constitutional Court on appeal from the Rajoy government, was enough to convince Catalonia’s former and actual presidents to support the no-confidence motion.

Bending the PNV

Now the only remaining obstacle to the motion’s achieving the absolute majority it needed was the PNV, whose upper echelons (government in Euskadi, MPs in Madrid) were inclining towards abstention, not the least because they had just helped Rajoy get his 2018 budget adopted, winning juicy gains for Basque infrastructure spending in the process. Their justification for abstention was that the motion offered the Basques nothing in the way of greater self-government and, according to leader Antoni Ortuzar, was “poorly cooked”.

The PNV was then subjected to an intense pressure campaign from the forces now supporting the motion, starting with Unidos Podemos. Leader Pablo Iglesias announced that if the PSOE’s motion failed, Unidos Podemos would immediately move an “instrumental” no-confidence motion to bring on immediate elections, a motion bound to get the support (willing) of Citizens and (reluctant but unavoidable) of the PSOE. In that way, the PNV’s greatest fear—that of early elections—would be realised. These would see left pro-independence (abertzale) candidates lambast it as a supporter of the hated PP and, more scary still, raise the possibility of Citizens, declared enemy of Euskadi and Nafarroa’s preferential taxation system, becoming lead party in a right-wing Spanish government.

The abertzale forces, whose Madrid MPs had initially reacted with scepticism to Sánchez’s motion, soon changed to supporters and added their own pressure to the PNV. On May 30, Arnaldo Otegi, the general coordinator of EH Bildu, calling for all Basque and Catalan forces to act in coordinated fashion, told public Radio Euskadi that “it would be an act of poetic justice if we Basque and Catalan nationalists were to throw Rajoy out of government”. He added that the left nationalist coalition would not disappoint the people because it had “a fundamental connection with the popular majority of this country, which reckons that the PP government shouldn’t be supported for one minute more.”

Calling on the PNV to “correct last week’s position of supporting a corrupt government” and to abandon the politics of horse-trading and filibuster, the EH Bildu leader also warned against having illusions in Sánchez, calling his censure motion “the tip of the iceberg of a huge political crisis and a state of affairs where [the Spanish establishment] is betting on a counterreform of the Spanish state.” He added:

If Sánchez wanted to lead an alternative that would democratise the state, he would have to return to the narrative that he used to regain the position of secretary-general. Unfortunately we’ve seen a Sánchez who has abandoned that narrative, who has supported 155, even a Sánchez who proposes changes to the Criminal Code so as to jail supporters of independence.

Along with these sources of pressure—and that of the Catalan parties who were by now implicitly threatening to ostracise the PNV if it continued to support the PP—came guarantees from the PSOE that the PNV was seeking: that the Rajoy budget with its goodies for Euskadi would remain and that an incoming PSOE government would abide by Spain's economic obligations to Europe, chiefly the commitment to meet European Commission-prescribed deficit reduction targets.

A counter-offer from the PP was enticing: it would lend the ruling party in Euskadi an MP to guarantee that the PNV and its partner in government, the PSOE, enjoyed a 38-seat permanent majority in the 75-seat Basque parliament, thereby liberating the PNV from having to do deals with the difficult EH Bildu and/or Elkarrin Podemos.

It took the PNV executive five hours of discussion on May 31, held as the debate on the censure motion had already started in Madrid, to reach its final decision to vote in favour of the no-confidence motion. Its stated reasons for the decision were “the seriousness of the sentence in the Gürtel case”, “the breakdown in the stability achieved with the adoption of the Budget” (due to Citizens' withdrawal of collaboration with the PP) and the opposition of all three opposition parties to the continuation of the Rajoy government—“to which must be added the desires of the representatives of the Catalan nationalist parties”.

With that decision, the Rajoy government was doomed. Rajoy refused his government's last escape route—his own resignation—because taking it would have been to admit wrongdoing and would not have avoided either the formation of a minority PSOE government or an early encounter with the voters in very unfavourable circumstances. The prime minister took refuge from the humiliation of it all by abandoning the Congress on the afternoon of May 31 and hiding away with his innermost circle in a nearby restaurant while debate on the no-confidence motion continued in his absence (and with the handbag of deputy prime minister Soraya Saenz de Santamaria occupying his seat). At the same time 1300 PP appointees started the search for new jobs. They included those PP media officers who had been “spinning” journalists for years and were now asking them if they knew of anything that might be going in the trade.

Prospects

The Spanish establishment, intent on keeping Rajoy in power until a transfer to Citizens could take place has suffered a serious defeat. All the mainstream Madrid media campaigned to keep Rajoy in office, including a paper like *El Mundo* that dedicated large resources to uncovering the PP's corruption scandals.

Now this establishment—media, monarchy, judiciary, economic and bureaucratic elites—faces the nightmare against which it campaigned, that of a minority PSOE government dependent on “populists” and “separatists”. In the words of the May 31 editorial of *El Mundo* that called, like Citizens, for immediate elections to avoid this outcome:

The economic, political and territorial consequences of such an amalgam—with reason baptised a “Frankenstein government”, a project that already gave rise to Sánchez's removal as general secretary—are predictable. A majority that is depended day by day on the far left and separatism would doom the economic recovery, entrench political instability and provide cover for the relaunch of the coup in Catalonia once article 155 is lifted.

What is to be expected from a minority Sánchez government that has promised very little beyond the restoration of “democratic hygiene” in place of the PP sewer? Easiest, and popular, will be the full or partial repeal of the most repressive and anti-social measures: the “gag act” which has been used to

jail rap artists for “insulting the King”, the depenalisation of euthanasia, removal of restrictions on access to public health for undocumented migrants, depoliticisation of public media management and abolition of fees for using the legal system.

It will also be surprising if a Sánchez government does not move on introducing a law to attack wage inequality, given that this was one of the motor forces of this year’s vast International Women’s Day marches that Sánchez himself said “changed Spain”. Another measure that only the Francoist far right would oppose is the strengthening of the law on “historical memory”. Sánchez might even move to close down the obscene megalith “The Valley of the Fallen”, where Franco’s tomb can be visited to this day.

These are the easy bits. The incoming government might allow itself some concessions towards Catalonia and the Basque Country (such as moving prisoners to jails near home) but it will take Sánchez rapidly rising levels of political courage to move much further. The key test will be how far he is prepared to reverse not just his own Spanish-patriotic rhetoric of the last period but the whole course of central government policy against Catalonia since the last PSOE government acquiesced in the 2010 Constitutional Court decision against the 2006 Catalan Statute of Autonomy. Nobody in Catalonia expects Sánchez and the PSOE to embrace the right of the Catalans to a Scottish-style independence referendum, but there is still a lot that could be done—including the negotiation of an improved Statute and new financing arrangements—that would improve relations with the state.

Sánchez will also face these challenges in the face of a PP that is livid about its dethroning and burning for revenge: already, in order to cut back the funding promised to the treacherous PNV, it is threatening to use its Senate majority to amend its own budget. The PP will also continue to use the right’s ongoing majority on the Congress speakership panel to sabotage the initiatives of the new government.

In its sabotage it will be backed by the Madrid media cavern, which is already yelling about Sánchez’s “secret agenda”, and by some PSOE barons, one of whom—Aragon premier Javier Lambán—told the June 3 Haraldo de Aragón, that “if there’s more political paralysis, Sánchez will have to call elections.”

The fact that the new PSOE government will be a weak and exposed administration also poses critical questions for Unidos Podemos. One temptation, already acceded to by Iglesias, is to offer to form a joint government with the PSOE. This orientation runs the risk of making Unidos Podemos co-responsible for retrograde policies that the PSOE won’t abandon, especially in regards to not taxing the rich and big business and abiding by obligations to meet European Commission spending limits.

A more fruitful approach, as already flagged by the Podemos tendency Anticapitalists, would be to adopt the “Portuguese approach” of that country’s Left Bloc and Communist Party: to support all progressive initiatives of the ruling socialists while fighting for other progressive measures that they are avoiding and mobilising the people in support of them—all the time while defending the government from the attacks of the right.

This strategic debate will be had out in Unidos Podemos and the alliances with which it works over coming weeks. In the meantime, however, we should celebrate the downfall of Europe’s most corrupt government and the humiliation of its backers at the hands of a coalition that had no choice but to give effective voice to the people’s disgust with the state’s political sewer.

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P.S.

* June 5, 2018 — Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal:

<http://links.org.au/spain-how-why-mariano-rajoy-fell>

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