

Spanish State: Podemos's Divisions Are Finally Coming to a Head

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Last week, the Spanish left was rocked by news of a split in Podemos. Íñigo Errejón, co-founder and strategist behind the organisation's spectacular rise in 2015, announced he will be running for the presidency of the Madrid region on a new platform in the coming elections.

Contents

- [Contradictions of the post-ind](#)
- [Three families](#)
- [The battle of Madrid](#)

Errejon has justified his move by pointing to a recent electoral disappointment in Andalusia, in which Podemos stagnated and a new far-right party, Vox, made a significant, unexpected breakthrough. Podemos has grown old too quickly, Errejón argues, and a new political instrument is urgently needed to resist the return of Spain's old ghosts. But in reality this is the chronicle of a split foretold – the culmination of tensions that have riddled the party since its inception.

Contradictions of the post-indignados left.

In May 2011, a series of mass anti-austerity protests (*los indignados*) turned the squares of Spain into a large recruitment ground for a new wave of grassroots activism. For all its plurality, this activism was defined by an overarching ethic of direct democracy – values that were repeatedly hailed against representative politics and their elitist bent. However, as years passed, it became evident to many that the conservative government would simply continue passing harsh austerity measures and punitive anti-protest laws until it faced electoral consequences for its actions. In March 2014, Podemos emerged from this impasse, offering a platform to those radicals who sought a more pragmatic way of organising.

The new organisation was an alliance between grassroots activists, accustomed to a high degree of autonomy and internal democracy, and a group of political scientists who were eager to construct an 'electoral war machine' along populist lines. The result was by far the most open and democratic political party in the country, yet one with an unresolved tension between a leadership that understood itself to be the cadre of a media party, and those who expected a more decentralised and participatory organisation. Though evident since the party's inception, this conflict could be put on hold as long as Podemos was successful. And indeed, as early as December 2015 Podemos stood at the gates of government.

This would be the high watermark of Podemos's success, however. Unable to form a coalition government with their PSOE (Socialist party) rivals, Podemos forced the country into a re-election in June 2016, hoping to finally surpass the centre-left party in votes. To do so, Podemos joined forces

with the old eurocommunist party, Izquierda Unida (United Left), and got ready to 'storm the heavens', as party leader Pablo Iglesias put it. But rather than broadening its electoral base, this hubris cost Podemos more than a million votes and allowed the conservatives to stay in power. That night a civil war began in Podemos.

Three families.

In the struggles and purges that ensued, it became evident that Podemos was divided into at least three broad factions.

The leftmost faction is that of the anticapitalistas, who are closest to the original grassroots ethic of the *indignados* years. Electorally, this tendency favours a more combative discourse and a clear distance from the centrism of PSOE.

Against this approach, we have the followers of Íñigo Errejón, a talented academic and politician who epitomises the 'electoral war machine' idea. Inspired by the Latin American 'pink tide', Errejón insists on the need for a softer discourse that can galvanise a broad constituency: i.e. 'the many' rather than 'the left'. He has long advocated for a 'virtuous competition' with PSOE with an eye on forming coalitions with the Socialists in the future as the only realistic way of taking power.

The third faction is that headed by Pablo Iglesias himself, who in the past has defined a balance between the other two with a 'Bonapartist' style of rule: banking on his charisma, he tends to steamroll through internal disputes by posing referendums to the membership while threatening to resign if he loses.

At the party's first congress (Vistalegre I), Iglesias and Errejón formed a common front against the perceived puritanism of the anticapitalistas in order to create a more hierarchical party structure. However, this unity broke down in the midst of Podemos's alliance with Izquierda Unida, a failed strategy that was spearheaded by Iglesias himself. For Errejón and others, Podemos had abandoned the cross-ideological populism that had made the party so appealing only to situate itself on the side of an old, burnt-out left. As months passed, the skirmishes between pablistas and errejonistas escalated until the second party congress in February 2017 (Vistalegre II), in which the latter effectively mounted a leadership challenge against the former.

The *pablista* faction won and Errejón was ousted from his position as party spokesperson, disappearing from view for months. In exchange, he was appeased with the prospect of being the party's primary candidate for the Madrid regional elections of 2019.

The battle of Madrid.

Podemos scored one of its biggest victories with the conquest of the Madrid city council in 2015. There, the party ran as part of a broader coalition of grassroots activists (Ahora Madrid) that was headed at the last minute by an independent figurehead: the former communist lawyer Manuela Carmena. Her style of government, closer to social-democracy, repeatedly clashed with the grassroots energy of Ahora Madrid, a movement that was largely foreign to her. In the coming years, she gradually sidelined these activists and surrounded herself with *errejonistas* who were more in tune with her political vision.

In late 2018, Carmena and her *errejonista* allies decided to jettison the strictures of Ahora Madrid and ran without them under a new political brand: Más Madrid. Facing a frontal challenge to

Podemos's internal democracy, the party forced the *errejonista* rebels out but ultimately decided not to wage war against the popular Carmena and declined to field any candidates of their own against her.

At a regional level, the Podemos membership ratified Errejón's candidacy in 2018. His ostracism to the capital's political landscape was not a bad deal: Madrid is the stronghold of the *errejonista* faction and therefore offers the best opportunity to put his ideas into practice. However, in the coming year he clashed with Iglesias's leadership once again, as the latter tried to define the parameters of Errejón's campaign.

The war finally broke out last week, when Iglesias informed Errejón that the number two on his list would be an Izquierda Unida candidate. At this point, Errejón announced that he would be running under Carmena's Más Madrid brand in order to situate himself outside of party control. Iglesias was swift to announce that Errejón was now out of the party and that Podemos would be fielding candidates against him.

Both the *pablistas* and *anticapitalistas* accuse Errejón of wanting to circumvent membership constraints in order to satisfy his personal ambitions. Errejón, in return, reminds them that he was elected by the party membership in Madrid to design a project that has been repeatedly punctuated by top-down interference. Moreover, he cites the advance of the far-right in the Andalusian regional elections last month (where Podemos ran a campaign dominated by *anticapitalistas* and Izquierda Unida) as evidence that the party urgently needs a new approach.

So far, the split has not been replicated by Errejón supporters across the country – his move coming as a surprise even to them. But this uncertainty extends to Madrid itself, where it remains unclear how many of his supporters, if any, will be joining him on the new platform. The only thing certain at the minute is that the Madrilenian left will be standing divided against the onslaught of the far right.

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