

# The Political Labyrinth and the Crossroads of the Left in the Spanish State

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**On 28 May 2023 Spain's right-wing Partido Popular (People's Party - PP) made great progress in terms of territorial institutional power in the municipal elections and in some of the regional parliaments of the so-called Autonomous Communities, to the detriment of the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party - PSOE). This led to the formation of local and regional coalition governments between the PP and the far-right Vox. The fear of a repeat of this situation at the level of the entire Spanish state partially mobilized the disoriented left-wing vote in support of the PSOE in the July 23 elections for the Spanish parliament. In other words, it was fear, not illusion, about a political project that made it possible to put the brakes on the right-wing advance**

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After these state-level elections, it was possible to confirm the existence of a precarious and catastrophic institutional tie between the reactionary bloc of the Spanish ultra-nationalist right and the self-styled "progressive" bloc composed of the alliance of the PSOE with Sumar, the name under which a conglomerate of diverse political figures and groups located slightly to the left of the socialist party is grouped. It should be noted however that the balance of institutional weight has tipped in favour of the reactionary PP which obtained an absolute majority in the Senate and was the most popular list in Congress, but without enough votes in the Chamber of Deputies to be able to form a government, so its leader Alberto Núñez Feijóo failed in his attempt to be named president of the government by parliament despite the support of the party far-right Vox.

Both elections show that, in some way, there is a return to the two-party formula (albeit incomplete) that has presided over the Spanish political system since the beginning of the post-Franco transition and the years of the reform regime that emerged after the social and constitutional pacts in 1978. The elections took place in the context of a profound demobilisation and passivity of the mass movement, particularly the trade unions, and a "demonisation" of many organisations of the social movements around the Sánchez government without real independence in the face of the PSOE's policy of compassionate neoliberalism and option for "green growth." The political left, for the most part, is only aware of its institutional positioning and has given up on promoting popular organization and mobilization.

In a context of inflation and loss of purchasing power of the working class and record profits in companies in the textile sector (due to the increase in their transnational businesses) and banks (thanks to the rise in interest rates) and enormous profits for energy companies (despite the crisis associated with the war in Ukraine), the reformist left, whose weight is decisive, is not organizing social resistance to the high cost of living and for wage increases and the anti-capitalists are too weak to do so. This social situation is accompanied by the endemic problem of access to housing

(owned or rented) and by the progressive deterioration of public health and education to the benefit of the expansion of the private sector in both cases. Meanwhile the effects of the failure and repression of the Catalan nationalist democratic movement are still lingering. This failure is shown in the almost total absence of mobilizations in favour of amnesty in Catalonia.

All this has generated an increase in social unrest, but unrest and street occupations are increasingly being channelled by right-wing and ultra-right-wing populist, neoliberal and reactionary currents representing a Spanish nationalism close to the neo-Francoist anti-democratic discourse. It is no coincidence that Vox's youth is called *Revuelta*.

## **The reactionary bloc**

The reactionary bloc had already in the previous legislature adopted an increasingly Trumpist discourse against Sánchez's coalition government, which it described as illegal and illegitimate. In an absolutely hyperbolic way, they branded it as unconstitutional, when it is a fact that the 1978 Constitution - the product of the pact between Francoists and major left-wing parties - has had as its main supporter precisely the socialist party, guarantor of the regime and the stability of the monarchy.

Currently the great issue of confrontation for the Spanish right is - as in the recent past it was the "Basque question" - the "Catalan question," especially after the referendum of 1 October 2017 in Catalonia. The members of the Vox-PP tandem represent different tones of authoritarian neoliberalism and in both cases their great hallmark is the defence of an exclusionary, homogenizing and punitive Spanish nationalism.

The discourse is not new, as they inherited it from their Francoist origins, what is new is that the extreme right forces compete with each other to hegemonize that electoral field and both have fed a social polarization that permeates broad sectors of society in a transversal way, affecting significant numbers of working people. Along the way, they have found an echo and support in an important part of the old guard and the traditional Socialist electorate. The identity of the PP and Vox is built - while concealing the agenda of their economic and social proposals - around the identity and imaginary of "the Spanish" as opposed to Catalonia and the Basque Country.

That is the reason why when Pedro Sánchez (secretary general of the PSOE), after the failure of the PP leader, presented his candidacy to form a coalition government and, in addition to a sweetened catalogue of previously unfulfilled social proposals, agreed with the Catalan nationalist parties Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Junts the amnesty for prisoners and defendants in the events of 1 October 2017 and then in 2019.

The amnesty is inadmissible for the Spanish right, which has launched a general and continuous mobilization against the measure. An offensive that has the active collaboration of the judicial system inherited from the Franco regime (school of "lawfare") and other bodies of civil servants absolutely unrelated to the issue, as well as pronouncements from the Spanish Confederation of Business Organizations. And what is also dangerous, they have the sympathy of broad sections in the army, police forces and the media.

The arguments of these sectors are as exaggerated as they are fallacious when judging the "concessions" made by the PSOE to the nationalist parties that they characterise as a "coup d'état" similar to that attempted in February 1981, "dictatorship", "abolition of the rule of law". In their ideological coating of their criticisms, they assimilate amnesty or other measures of relationship between the central state and the Communities as an attack on the "equality of all Spaniards,"

ignoring that their liberticidal and austerity policies, wherever they are applied, are the ones that are reinforcing the real inequality that pre-exists in capitalist class society. Their arguments support two previous ideas: "Spain is breaking up" and "illegitimate government."

They don't respond to the truth; they are mere fake news. Nor do they correspond to the real content of the Socialist Party's agreements with the nationalist parties, but they have generated a parallel truth that drives a "civil war" political climate. But beware, the arguments of the right hide less "patriotic" purposes: they are preparing a new reactionary cycle against the rights of the working class, the political and civil rights of the popular classes and new attacks against feminism, migrants and LGTBI, as we have already seen in one of the regions they govern: Madrid.

The PP has promoted significant mass mobilizations, but above all the leaders of Vox have supported forms of radical street struggle with the active presence of Nazi and fascist organizations before the headquarters of the socialist party. Perfectly prepared and organized actions that included calls from the leader of Vox, Santiago Abascal, for the police disobedience so that they do not act against the demonstrators. And the institutional left is absent from the streets, calling for order and citizens' peace: the worst of scenarios.

How can we characterize this situation generated by the PP and Vox? As stated in the statement from *Anticapitalistas* "Before the investiture old and new problems" of last 14 November: "Despite the inflammatory rhetoric of the right, a change of regime or a fascist coup is not on the table, as certain sectors seem to insinuate. Rather, the right assumes a strategy of erosion based on setting the agenda around an exacerbated Spanishism, which hides the real problems suffered by the working class, while the judicial-police party radicalizes the authoritarian turn of the state apparatuses."

### **End of cycle and the new government**

On the side of the "progressive" bloc, we can see the electoral setback in the general elections as well as in the local and regional elections of the political organizations that emerged after the movement of the rebels of 15 M, as is the case with Podemos. And it is becoming increasingly clear that Sánchez has achieved a renewed strengthening of the neoliberal social pole in the context of the Spanish left.

Podemos and Izquierda Unida (IU) are experiencing a process of internal crisis and loss of affiliation that is very significant. Their political irrelevance after the change of cycle is palpable, as is the failure of their option to govern at all costs despite the manifest hegemony of the PSOE in the previous coalition government. This party imposed its agenda both on internal political issues such as the end of the repressive legislation of the social movement and freedom of expression ("Gag Law") or the inhumane policy against migration, as well as on most social issues (the anti-worker employment reform of the previous governments has not been repealed) and foreign policy (abandonment of the Saharawi people in the former Spanish colony whose territory was annexed by Morocco).

The new formula of regroupment to the left of the PSOE, Sumar, headed by Yolanda Díaz is only going to aggravate the crisis due to its character as an opportunist companion of the Socialist party and for the moment it is not supposing a "resurrection" of the left-wing space, but is an expression of its weakness and its inability to organize democratic parties with transformative programs. Sumar is a conglomerate of parties and individuals in which, given that there is no leadership elected by those who support it, decisions are taken in a caudillo manner by its leader and a small team appointed by her, whether it is a question of programmatic issues such as the preparation of

electoral lists or the appointment of its “quota” of ministers.

We are facing a government of continuity. Of the 22 ministers, 5 correspond to Sumar and the rest to the Socialist Party. The representatives of Podemos have been evicted from it. In other words, we are facing a re-edition of a government based on compassionate neoliberalism and nothing points to it breaking with the economic policy of the European Union when the austerity rules are restored.

Social issues that directly affect the living conditions of the working class have been totally absent from this investiture debate. Sumar has given its support to the PSOE, putting on the table a series of generic issues linked to social dialogue with employers. The important thing for Sumar is to continue maintaining its presence in the ministries, even at the cost of lying about the scope of the “employment reform” carried out by the Ministry of Employment in the hands of Yolanda Díaz or the non-repeal of the Gag Law, issues in which all those who were part of the first coalition government were complicit. The great absentee in the second coalition government, Podemos, has not made a self-critical assessment of its time in the previous executive cabinet and we have been able to verify that his confrontation with Sumar does not lie in differences of project or program as much as with its loss of leadership in the field of the post-15 M left.

This government has support for Sánchez’s investiture as president of the cabinet from other left-wing forces, specifically the nationalist Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG) and Bildu, a Basque pro-independence organisation. Both formations, immersed in a policy of programmatic moderation and homologation as possible government parties in the coming regional elections in Galicia and the Basque Community, will very possibly remain loyal allies of the government in the main decisions, particularly the budgetary ones.

In addition, Sánchez has had the support of the two Catalan pro-independence parties ERC and Junts, both forces that compete for the same electorate in Catalonia. The first is a formation linked to the interests of the Catalan petty bourgeoisie, the second directly a party behind which the interests of a part of the traditional Catalan bourgeoisie are hidden. The latter formation, Junts, is experiencing a major internal crisis and trouble with part of its social base due to the document signed on 9 November with the Socialist party in which they express agreements and differences, but little practical translation into immediate real politics that surpass the agreements already reached a few days earlier by ERC that substantiate specific issues: amnesty, transfer of powers, fiscal measures and so on.

He also had the support for the investiture of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), a force linked to the interests of the industrial business community of the Basque Country. Likewise, the only deputy of a very opportunist regionalist party from the Canary Islands, Coalición Canaria, has voted in favour of the investiture. In these cases, Sánchez has made several promises of government actions in favour of the territories in which these parties operate or of the transfer of competences from the central state to the Autonomous Communities in the management of infrastructures or taxes.

But the difference in votes in parliament between the bloc that supports Sánchez’s investiture and those of the reactionary bloc is very narrow. On the other hand, support for the investiture does not imply guaranteed support for the set of government decisions, laws or draft state budgets. This marks the beginning of an institutional period of high instability both in the Senate (with a reactionary majority) and in Parliament, as well as in the relations between the central government and several of the regional governments and many of the country’s city councils. This, together with the surely hostile actions of a large part of the judicial magistracy and other powers of the state and the inevitable mobilization and street activity of the right, constitute a complicated horizon for governability.

At the heart of the investiture pact is the amnesty for all those who suffered reprisals around the mobilizations and proclamations of 1 October 2017, those of 2019 in Catalonia, which affects 50 judicial processes, 3,500 reprisals, 44 imprisoned and 6 exiled. At the moment we do not know if the amnesty will be applied to others repressed for political reasons other than those of the Catalan process, I fear not. On the other hand, and despite the right-wing propaganda, a new referendum on national self-determination in Catalonia is not assured. On the contrary, any move in this direction is linked to strict compliance with the 1978 Constitution, which is the same as refusing to hold a referendum.

Once again, in the Spanish labyrinth, class contradictions and positions and identities around the national question are intertwined. The best way to confront the reactionary right and pro-business progressivism is to generate a dynamic of autonomous mobilization, which lays the foundations for a reconstruction of an independent political field from the working class and the oppressed. The ongoing experience of solidarity with Palestine shows the usefulness of “doing without waiting” that has connected with a significant part of the majority of left-wing people and forced Sánchez to go beyond what he planned to do.

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