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Portugal

Government defeat and high abstention in Portuguese municipal elections

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The September 29th municipal elections in Portugal gave another sign of popular opposition to the troika's austerity policies in Portugal. Only three weeks ahead of the presentation of the state Budget, that will bring more cuts in wages and retirement pensions above 600 euros, these local elections were a good opportunity for a strong rejection of the government parties. And that opportunity was seized, starting in the biggest cities – Porto, Gaia, Sintra, Coimbra – where the old PSD mayors were replaced by new ones from the Socialist Party or “independent” citizens’ lists in conflict with the ruling PSD. [1]

Despite its victory, the Socialist Party has lost 170.000 votes since the last municipal elections in 2009 and also the symbolic capitals of Alentejo province (Évora and Beja) and the 5th municipality in the country, Loures (Lisbon suburb), reconquered by the Communist Party. The PCP was the only party immune to the strong abstention that went up from 41% in 2009 to 47% last Sunday. The weight of mass emigration (mainly young people) is certainly an important explanation of this growth in abstention.

The Left Bloc failed its top objectives for this election: it was defeated by a 500 vote margin in Salvaterra de Magos (a small town where it had one mayor) and also in Lisbon, where the national coordinator did not get elected to the mayor's council (by only 52 votes). The Socialist Party had its biggest victory ever in the Portuguese capital (51%). Nationwide, the Bloc elected 8 city council members (one less than in 2009) and 100 assembly members (37 less than 2009) and was unable to resist the abstention boost and the polarization between PS and PSD in some cities or PS and PCP in others. [2]

Nevertheless, it had an important role on some citizens' lists in Coimbra or Braga and in a broad coalition in Funchal, that won the mayoral race and was determinant in defeating for the first time in 38 years the ruling authoritarian power of Alberto João Jardim in Madeira island.

On the electoral night, prime-minister Passos Coelho said that austerity will continue as planned, despite the historic defeat of his party. The next weeks will bring the protest back to the streets, with two big demonstrations set to October 19th and 26th, the first by the CGTP trade union in Lisbon and the other by the citizens' movement "Que se Lixe a Troika", in every big city.

With more austerity cuts and the troika's second bailout on the right wing's agenda after their electoral defeat, the political pressure will increase to bring down the government and have early elections in the next months.

[1] The PSD (Socialist Democratic Party is, notwithstanding its name, a rightwing party. The Socialist Party is the Socialist International party. The PCP is the Communist Party which remains one of the more Stalinist in Europe. – IVP

[2] in Portugal, people vote 3 times on separate bulletins. One for the executive mayoral council, composed by majority and opposition; another for the municipal parliament (assembly); and another for the "freguesia" (urban area/small city/village) assembly.