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Portugal

Local elections sharpen defeat for the right

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In the local elections on 1 October Portugal's ruling Socialist Party won 38 per cent of the votes. The major rightwing opposition party, the PSD only won 16 per cent and lost control of 8 cities. Abstention was 45 per cent. [1]

Despite the predominance of local factors in the choice of the vote, there is of course a national reading of the electoral results of 1 October: for the first time in 32 years, the ruling party won the municipal elections.

The Portuguese last saw the ruling party win the municipal elections in 1985. The victory of the Socialist Party in 2017, with a gain of 10 municipalities, means it is currently running 159 of the 308 municipalities in the country.

The Socialist Party in Progress

These elections are the first since the 2015 legislative elections, when the PS arrived behind the coalition of the PSD-CDS right. But it was able to form a government with support of the Parliament of the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the Left Bloc. The right-wing PSD-CDS parties, responsible for implementing the austerity policies of the troika, hoped that the electorate would defeat the ruling coalition. Following the electoral defeat for the right, the leader of the PSD and former Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho announced his immediate withdrawal from political life. [2]

Although the Left has increased its percentage in votes and elected representatives in these elections, not all parties have benefited in the same way. In fact, only the PS managed to win new municipalities. The PCP has lost 10 municipalities, almost all of them to the PS - notably in Alentejo, the historic bastion of the PCP - and the Left Bloc still does not control any.

Positive results for the Left Bloc

For the Left Bloc, the result was positive although it remains modest. It increased in votes (+ 50,000) and the number of municipal councilors increased from 100 to 125, the number of parish [*freguesia*] councillors from 138 to 213 and the number of deputy mayors from 8 to 12.

The central thrusts of the Left Bloc campaign, based on local struggles, were transparency, defence of territories and protection of the environment, strengthening of social services and public services, and the end of precariousness for municipal service officers.

While acknowledging the important work still needed to develop its local presence, Catarina Martins, Bloc coordinator, highlighted the election for the first time of a candidate of the Left Bloc, Ricardo Robles, to the municipal executive of Lisbon. [3]

The current political situation of the city of Lisbon is the same as in 2007. The mayor, Fernando Medina, needs the support of the Left Bloc councillor to have a majority in the Municipal Assembly. Throughout the campaign, Ricardo

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Robles laid down the conditions for Lisbon to be able to implement the same agreement as at the national level: a moderate rent housing programme, construction of dozens of municipal crèches, an increase in the budget for schools, development of public transport. The outcome of the negotiations that will take place in the coming weeks may lead, if there is agreement, to the post of deputy mayor for the Left Bloc. [4]

PS:

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[1] Francisco Louçã, historic leader of the Left Bloc, noted “the fall in abstention is a good sign, but it is still too high and there are always many crocodile tears. The electoral rolls have not been updated, which overestimates abstention, and the political system has not been able to create the confidence and mobilization that democracy requires.”

[2] “The PSD vote has fallen and the PS has gained. In Lisbon and Porto, the PSD was at about 10%, while the PS strengthened its municipal majority. For PSD leader Passos Coelho it is a difficult challenge, because he chose the candidates.” F.L.

[3] “The Left Bloc increased its vote, winning where it most needed to win, with the election of additional councillors in Lisbon and other cities where it will be crucial to win local majorities. It should be noted that in Lisbon it took risks with a little-known candidate who proved to be confident and mobilizing. If there is a lesson to be learned for the party, it is that it is strengthened by openness and renewal.” F.L.

[4] “Fernando Medina, the PS candidate in Lisbon, must get along with the left, despite winning comfortably, and the negotiations will be difficult. The PCP will have to make alliances on the left in several municipalities. And the Left Bloc must organize systematic work with local governments, because from now on the majority is at stake in many town halls. If, in general, the PS-BE-PCP majority confluence is strengthened because of the defeat of the right, it is also true that it will have a lot of work, which will require a lot of negotiations and create tensions. It's life, as a former prime minister said, and that's how it is.” F.L.