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Portugal

Municipal elections open political crisis

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Contrary to the predictions of the polls, the Socialist Party (PS) suffered defeats in all the most important towns, including Lisbon and Porto, in the Portuguese municipal elections on December 16, 2001 while the Social Democratic Party (despite its name, a bourgeois party) won the majority of municipalities.

Socialist prime minister António Guterres resigned following the election results, and parliamentary elections will now be held on March 17, 2002.

Heading a minority government (115 socialist deputies against 115 for the opposition), Guterres had relied on the support of the right to push through his budget and had even bought off a Popular Party deputy with some benefits for his seat in the north of the country. This artificial majority accelerated the decline in prestige of this government and parliament. While tax reform was one of the key themes of the Socialist election campaign, practically nothing has been done in this area, while in social security and in health there has been no halt to the continued degradation of the public services and the interpenetration of public and private medicine.

PSD leader Durã̃o Barroso is renowned for his lack of charisma, ideas and political project. The PSD's victories are due above all to the electorate's desire for change but on the essential political questions the PS and PSD have never diverged.

Guterres was replaced as PS leader by Ferro Rodrigues. Initial hopes that this might represent a shift to the left have been dashed by Rodrigues himself; he says he is just as likely to make an agreement with the Popular Party (PP) as with the Communist Party (PCP).

The PCP continues to lose influence and historic bastions, and the more critical voices in the party are arguing for unity with the PS at the elections

At the beginning of January a petition signed by more than 500 members demanded a congress, the biggest movement of dissidence from the official line known up to now. The dissidents include most of the current parliamentary group and the overwhelming majority of the intellectuals as well as some local councillors and trade union functionaries

The Bloco de Esquerda (Left Bloc) was contesting these local elections for the first time. In Lisbon the pressure of the 'useful vote' for the PS-PC unitary list was strong but the Bloco did win 3.8% in the elections to the executive and 4.8% in the municipal Assembly vote, with 2 representatives elected. Across the country the Bloco ran in 70 out of 308 local elections averaging 2.92% in the municipal assemblies and 2.25% in the câmaras (respectively 79,000 and 61,000 votes).

If one compares the vote for the Bloco in the presidential elections of 2001 (3%, 129,000 votes) or the parliamentary elections of 1999 (2.5%, 131,000 votes) it shows that the Bloco's vote in the big urban centres is more resistant to the drift to the right than that of the PS or PCP.

In the draft election manifesto discussed by the Bloco leadership in January five key themes emerge: reform of the health system; drugs and drug addiction; tax reform; reform of public administration to bring greater democracy and transparency; reform of education.