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Spanish State

Ciudadanos – the false change

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“We need a kind of Podemos of the right, more geared to private initiative” said Josep Oliu, the president of the Spanish state’s fourth largest banking group, Banco Sabadell, on June 25, 2014, a month after the blazing irruption of Podemos in the European elections. Done and dusted. Here it is. Just in time. To avoid catastrophe. To either buttress bipartisanship or ensure that after its demise everything will stay (more or less) as now.

Ciudadanos is the relay the system needs when its traditional instruments of domination and political representation are no longer useful. It is the guarantee that the decline of the PP and PSOE does not create a political vacuum that can be filled exclusively by Podemos. The function of Albert Rivera’s party is both to facilitate the possibility of an unexpected last-minute support for bi-partisanship, and to ensure that in the event of irreversible collapse, the end of the PP-PSOE alternation is not accompanied by a political rupture and to make possible an orderly transition to a post-bipartisan system where everything remains intact. A new “exemplary” transition, reminiscent of the first one and its intrepid and consensual statesmen, which is precisely what is now collapsing, is what Rivera seems to promise. An exit from the tunnel of crisis by the “centre”. Or by the right.

The tranquil change promised by Rivera is in reality non-existent change, change without content. Change whose real substance evaporates into the black hole of unfulfilled promises. Change that leaves everything the same, which feeds on the illusion of change without risk, the fallacy of a positive future for the majority which comes without disturbing those at the top and incurring their wrath. It embodies a superficial, epidermal, regeneration whose sole depth is the lightness of its intentions. It sells a hope empty of content, its formula being the classic combination of promises of renewal and moderation. Proposals of transformation and regeneration but within norms that in reality do not leave room for anything different, beyond the individualistic wishful thinking of a centrist electorate for an economic and social scenario more favourable to their aspirations, to give themselves and the system a second chance. Its advance comes against a background of de-politicization after decades of devastation and social dismantling, the advance of neo-liberalism and consumerism, and the political-cultural decomposition of the left in all its facets.

Ciudadanos promises a democratic regeneration disconnected from any change in economic policy, delinked from the political, economic and social crisis. It isolates the discrediting of the party system from the economic and social model, with the hollow promise of democratic regeneration, de facto reduced to a mere replacement of elites, accompanied by a conventional neoliberal economic policy (dotted with isolated social promises which are unreal within a neoliberal schema), and a last-ditch defence of the unity of Spain from a party of Catalan origin. All wrapped up in telegenic renewal and modernity. Regenerationism peppered with a hard-line Spanish centralism and economic orthodoxy is the best news that the Ibex 35 could receive. The best since the Podemos nightmare began.

Rivera is an upstart in Spanish politics but not in politics in general. His party began its journey in Catalonia in 2006, breaking into the Parliament with 3% of the vote and 3 deputies, who were re-elected in 2010 after overcoming a difficult first few years marked by internal dissension and lack of cohesion, and it increased its representation to 9 deputies in 2012 with 7.58% of the votes. In its early days it emerged as a party whose main distinguishing feature was opposition to Catalan nationalism, coupled with a “regenerationist” rhetoric against the traditional parties and an innovative style. Sponsored by a handful of anti-nationalist Catalan intellectuals, many of them close to the PSOE and the PSC, it avoided labelling on the left-right spectrum as much as it could, growing initially to a good extent among the anti-nationalist Catalan Socialist electorate, although boosted by the more conservative media, who saw the new party as a battering ram against the rising tide of Catalanism and separatism. Its recent electoral growth in Catalonia is attributable to former PP voters disillusioned with cuts and corruption. And it is precisely among the “centrist” voters of the PP that they plan to base their electoral expansion in their leap into Spanish politics.

Ciudadanos can be to the PP and UPyD what Podemos has been to the PSOE and IU.

Despite its apparent centre-left origins and attempts to escape any ideological label, in the Catalan parliament it has had a conservative profile, although avoiding stridency except in its visceral opposition to Catalan nationalism, and cultivating a “centrist” image suitable for all audiences. Aspects of its voting record show the actual content of its alleged project of regeneration: in 2014 it voted against the establishment of a tax levied on bank deposits and increased inheritance tax, and it abstained on the proposal to create a standard on the emission of polluting gases, as well as on the law on business opening hours restricting the ultra-neoliberal proposal of the Spanish government, and a motion calling for the withdrawal of the reactionary draft bill on abortion of Minister Gallardón. Not forgetting, of course, its infamous proposal in April 2013 favouring the withdrawal of the European health insurance card to undocumented immigrants, a proposition which however was not presented in person in parliament by Rivera, always willing to cultivate an image of moderation and balance. Guided by its new key adviser Luis Garicano, a neoliberal economist from the London School of Economics (LSE), its recent economic recipes to exit the crisis, including the central proposal of a single contract, also point to a clear pro-market and pro-business vision. Few surprises await us in Rivera’s tranquil change.

We live in a period of intense political volatility, marked by a partisan identification and “fluid” electoral behaviour (to use the expression of Zygmunt Bauman), in which the old electoral loyalties dissolve but the new are not yet solidified. We don't know if the current bipartisanship will move towards a four party system, or the relative weight that the PP, PSOE, Podemos and Ciudadanos will have in the new dispensation. For sure there will be complicated forms of governance in which all parties may become trapped in a tangle of dodgy policies of pacts and alliances. And, for this reason, Ciudadanos will experience in the medium term a growing tension between reasons of party, which would push against any short term agreement with the PP and PSOE (unless its leaders are very myopic and are happy with a junior institutional role) and reasons of state (as well as “reasons of Troika”) that can lead it to facilitate governance arrangements after the regional elections of May 24 and the forthcoming general elections.

The crisis of bipartisanship is unquestionable and the political situation remains unusually open, creating real possibilities of rupture, but whose realization is far from assured. The risk is to ward off a four party system, which, while complicating the forms of domination and political control, does not entail the necessary uncontrolled implosion of the current political system that can open a constituent dynamic and instead passes to a long political-institutional agony that could lead eventually to a self-reform from above, given the weakness of popular self-organization from below.