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Spain

# PSOE: A new generation in command?

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**On July 23rd, 2000, the 35th Federal Congress of Spain's Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) came to an end. Four candidates had contested the post of general secretary of the party: José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, José Bono, Matilde Fernández y Rosa Díez. José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero won the election with the votes of 414 delegates (41.69%) as against 405 votes (40.79%) for José Bono. Matilde Fernández obtained 109 votes (10.98%) and Rosa Díez 65 (6.55%).**

The first thing that comes to mind after the congress is that the worst was avoided. However, it is also useful to highlight the appearance of certain ideological themes in the speeches and proposals of the new leadership.

For many delegates, if Bono had won the race to become general secretary of the party, it would have meant the reproduction of the worst sectarianism which had been amply displayed by the movement of so-called renovators in the guise of half-digested populism. On the eve of the congress, his defeat seemed unlikely. Yet he was beaten because of the votes of different sectors of the left who preferred to opt for "the lesser evil".

After José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was elected general secretary, the other candidates disappeared from the scene and the media's fire was concentrated on the personality of this young man (aged 40) who appeared as the representative of a new generation, the "leader of the new times" in the words of a headline in the newspaper *El Socialista*. This victory of the unknown was hailed by the media which stressed a renewal of the leadership, with the disappearance of the members of the generation of the Suresnes congress (the PSOE congress held in 1974 in France, at which Felipe González was elected general secretary). There has even been reference to a "new Suresnes", which should be nuanced in order to properly understand the situation.

Some have died (Rubial, Carmen García Bloise), others have left the leadership of the party, like Enrique Mugica in 1994 or Felipe González, Alfonso Guerra and Txiqui Benegas in 1997. It is true that on the eve of the congress, speculation flew as to the election of González to the presidency of the party. Zapatero, curiously, was the warmest partisan of this proposal. González finally renounced it, which contributed to giving the image of the beginning of a new era.

The real problem concerns the intermediary generation, the group of leaders who were not present at Suresnes but who since the 1980s have occupied positions of power in the government and autonomous communities. Natural heirs of González, they appeared all set to succeed him. The opportunity presented itself in June 1997. Certainly, they had the qualities required, a great deal of political experience. But as a result of the internal quarrels of the leading group, erratic decision-making and, finally, the result of the elections, they had to renounce their goal. The resignation of Joaquín Almunia as general secretary of the PSOE following the general election defeat of March 2000 marked the retreat of that generation of leaders who had tried to survive by supporting the candidature of Bono.

The big winners from this congress are the likes of Laguina, Ciscar or Rubalcaba who supported Bono or again those, like Eguíagaray and other who supported Rosa Díez. It is a generation which is still very young to abandon political life, but this congress has forced them to quit the front stage.

They are palpably of the same generation as those who take the leadership today. If there is a significant difference of age between Zapatero and González, this is not the case between Rubalcaba and Alvaro Cuesta.

The difference is rather that the victors have only ever occupied political posts of the second rank. Deputies, provincial cadres, cabinet chiefs in different ministries, they had little to lose and knew how to seize their opportunity. If Bono won, he would call on some of them to organise the parliamentary group. If he lost, it would only be a stage in their path towards power. For Bono, on the contrary, it was a defeat with heavy consequences. Still, the losers are not going to disappear definitively. In Germany Schroeder was beaten by Sharping and one is today chancellor, the other minister of defence. A generation with such a long political experience will not disappear simply because it has experienced a defeat in a congress.

The new leadership fits into the project of Felipe Gonzalez and identifies with the ideological references which run through the documents of the so-called renovator sector. This sector had initially supported a veritable democratisation of the party and greater transparency in its management. At this time Joaquin Leguina, paraphrasing Flores de Arcais, spoke of taking democracy seriously and building a habitable party.

That came into conflict with a very rigid apparatus culture, but many militants and sectors of public opinion certainly welcomed it. Among the renovators there is also a project close to the theses of Carlos Solchaga, defender of a basic welfare state, critical of the demands of the trade unions and partisan of an opening towards the postulates of economic neo-liberalism.

Solchaga was the first significant leader who came out for the new leadership and one of the new leading cadres is Jordi Sevilla, who has defended a number of his theses in his books and articles.

Rereading the resolution approved at the congress and certain documents of the "New Road" one is struck by the importance accorded to the urban middle class layers. For the editors of these documents, the PSOE has distanced itself from these latter, which is fatal at the electoral level - particularly since they are considered to constitute the majority of society. The document is not very clear on this subject: do these classes form the majority of society or are they decisive in gaining an electoral majority? Whatever, much time is devoted to analysing the discontent, malaise and frustrations of these social sectors.

On several occasions, the accent is put on the change which has taken place in the developed societies. From subjects, we have become citizens, and from citizens we have become taxpayers and consumers. The text is marked by a concern to respond to the fiscal lassitude of the middle classes and by the necessity of preserving the quality of public services in health and education to keep the universality of the welfare state.

From the point of view of sociological analysis, there is something here which is undeniable. The right to education and the right to health are guaranteed, but citizens are demanding greater attention in the health centres and a higher quality in the public educational system, in the absence of which they turn towards the private sector. If the quality of public services does not improve while the tax burden remains high, the urban middle classes opt out. This is the nature of popular capitalism and the two thirds society with its difficulties in financing universalist programmes and solidarity based policies. The nightmare of the political leaders who seek to win a majority in the elections is having to increase taxes. That is why in one of his first declarations to the press, Zapatero stressed that he did not expect to increase the tax burden and he mocked those who thought that this was necessary if the left wishes to guarantee the coverage of public expenditure (*El Pais*, September 10, 2000).

The problem emerges when one wishes to increase expenditure in the area of infrastructure, guarantee the quality of teaching, assure the integration of immigrants, implement a national hydrological plan, improve health services, combat tax fraud and differentiate between the self-employed, the middle classes and big property owners. All this is necessary, but this society, where the urban middle classes are not the majority, sees a rapid growth of social exclusion and marginalisation, and faces the problem of alliances between the middle classes, the dispossessed and the working class.

The documents of the "New Road" speak little of the working class and the dispossessed, yet this is a real problem and in a world ruled by the values of popular capitalism, the middle classes find it difficult to display altruism, universalism and solidarity. Nothing is simple but it is necessary in order to guarantee a welfare state. The "New Road" maintains an optimistic, positive, creative, discourse, hails the new technologies and the positive effects of globalisation, while remaining silent on the destruction of jobs or the development of social exclusion.

The left of the PSOE chose to block the greater evil incarnated by the other candidature, marked by sectarianism and an authoritarian populism. It can no longer accept the recourse to a traditionalist Catholicism or a rancid Spanish centralism. Federalism, secularism, feminism and youth were on the side of Zapatero. The left knew perfectly well that Zapatero's project was deeply marked by social neo-liberalism, closer to that of Blair than of Jospin. It was amply shown before the congress and nothing has emerged to dent this appreciation.

The results of the last elections played in favour of the theses of the "Third Way" and weakened the partisans of a plural left. The right recorded a crushing victory, the left was hit by the defection of its electorate, a part of the electorate of the PSOE fleeing to the PP. The more moderate sectors saw this as confirming the danger of any alliance with the United Left. Almunia had never really believed in this perspective in any case. Everything was done hastily and there was no time to mobilise the social base of the left. Most of the new leaders think that this radicalisation brought nothing good, neither in the discontented sectors of the IU nor in the moderate electorate of the PSOE. Both the left and the centre have been lost. It is necessary to regain the centrist voter and this explains the accent put on the hegemonic character of the middle classes.

The new leadership wants to end the quarrels and internal debates and begin to speak with a single voice. That responds to the expectations of many citizens who are tired of divisions which are often incomprehensible and seem reduced to personal squabbles. This was often enough the reality, but not always. Beyond labels, clans, tribes and families, Spanish socialism is not outside of the debates which traverse European socialism. This debate opposes those who try to defend what they can of the welfare state without burdening the middle classes and those who are committed to the exacerbation of the contradictions between the rights guaranteed by the Constitution and the demands of the economic markets, between the promises of democracy and the autonomy of the financial markets. Lafontaine exposed it perfectly in his recent book and it is very much the current situation.

However, to develop this debate, so that the neo-liberal centrist drift does not have the last word, it is necessary that the perspective of a plural left remains the project of the IU beyond its congress and that the trade unions emerge from their apathy. If the unions do not recover their capacity of mobilisation and political initiative, the left in the PSOE has no perspective. PSOE members are tired of the years of corruption and top level squabbling. They want to win or at least recover their self esteem. For pluralism to progress, it is not just the left minority in the ranks of the PSOE that needs strengthening, but also the trade union and political forces outside the party.