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Spanish State

Tthe new government and the challenges for Unidos Podemos

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The triumph of the motion of no confidence presented to Spain's parliament by the Pedro Sánchez, leader of the Spanish Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español – PSOE) on June 1, 2018 and the ousting of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy of the Partido Popular (PP) is undoubtedly good news. It has been received as such by a large majority of Spanish society. A new political scenario is thus opened up, filled with unknowns and without any great illusions about the new government which will now be formed. At the very least, a stage of brutal attacks on basic rights and liberties on all fronts is over.

On May 24, 2018, by chance a day after the approval of the budget proposed by the governing PP in the Congress of Deputies, the National Court finally ruled on the Gürtel corruption network. It found in 28 crimes of prevarication, 24 of bribery, 26 of money laundering and 20 of tax evasion, and handed down long sentences against a significant number of people linked to the PP, such as the former treasurer Luis Bárcenas, the entrepreneur Francisco Correa, the former mayors of Majadahonda and of Pozuelo de Alarcón, as well as the former PP organisational secretary in Galicia.

The judgement recognises what has already been obvious for a long time: that over the years, Correa's companies and the PP had woven together "a genuine and effective system of institutional corruption through mechanisms of manipulation of public procurement at the level of the central state and autonomous and local communities through its close and continuous relationship with influential militants of the said party"

This devastating sentence left no doubt, including for the centre right Ciudadanos party, of the criminal character of the PP and the responsibility of Rajoy as president of the latter. The decision by Pedro Sánchez to present a motion of no confidence appeared as an initiative without hope of success but which was necessary to respond to the need for simple democratic hygiene, demanding that the most corrupt party in Europe leave government.

Finally, despite uncertainty right until the last minute over whether Rajoy would resign, the Basque PNV party decided to vote for the motion, in exchange for respecting an austerity budget which had just been approved as well as the absence of early general elections. These votes allowed the motion to obtain an absolute majority.

There is no need to stress the different interventions in the debate, but it is interesting to note that once the result was announced, Pedro Sánchez, who seemed to have practically vanished from the scene except for his role as part of the bloc which imposed article 155 in Catalonia, emerged strengthened without however being able to hide his dizziness before the huge challenges faces now.

The big loser on the other hand is Ciudadanos' leader, Albert Rivera, with 32 deputies in the legislature, blinded by the polls which presented him as the winner the next general elections. He has had to endure frustration, at least until the municipal and autonomous elections of 2019. His Spanish ultra-nationalist project, seasoned with a pro-EU neoliberalism of the Macron type, cannot sustain itself so easily in opposition, at least outside of Catalonia.

Unidos Podemos appeared as the firmest defender of the motion of no-confidence and thus shared in the success, to the point of proposing to govern alongside the Socialists, As for the Catalan nationalist parties, ERC and PDeCAT, as well as the Basque left nationalist coalition Bildu, they connected with the desire to eject the PP. This allows them now to force Pedro Sánchez into a bilateral dialogue to stop the judicialization of the conflict, knowing that on this front the PSOE leader, subject to the close surveillance of the party barons and old guard, can only promise fine words.

The PP, on the contrary, is baffled, faced with a new scenario which it did not expect, and enters a new stage of refoundation which will probably be again directed by Rajoy. Certainly the PP is not the UCD [Union of the Democratic Centre, a formation resulting from the Francoist party, together with parts of the state apparatus to which other forces were added, which under the leadership of Adolfo Suárez "steered" the transition before disappearing in the early 1980s]. There is no reason to expect a decomposition in the short term, but this could begin following the first elections due, in Andalusia in March 2019, in the event that Ciudadanos gets more votes than them.

In any event, from now on, constrained by the competition with Ciudadanos, its process of refoundation and construction of a new leadership will be accompanied by a vehement opposition to the new government, notwithstanding truces to allow a common defence of the state and particularly Spanish unity in the face of separatism. The two formations, PP and Ciudadanos, will be egged on by the media opposed to Catalan and Basque independence, ready for a dirty war if necessary to give no respite to Sánchez.

What can we expect from the new government? And from Podemos? The outline of the program so far seems to focus on modest but urgent measures, many of them vetoed by the PP government, such as those related to the Gag Law, the universalization of health care or the renovation of the management of the radio and television network. However, its announcement of a social rescue does not seem able to go very far due to its commitment to respect the austerity budgets which the same PSOE had tried to amend in their entirety. As for its willingness to dialogue with the Catalan independence movement, this would imply, in addition to initiating the de-judicialization of the conflict, ending the economic control of the government of the Generalitat, something that also seems absent from their plans.

Thus, it is possible that we find ourselves with a new version of what has been proposed as a model by the Socialist parliamentary spokesperson, Margarita Robles: the stage of the governments presided over by Rodríguez Zapatero, between 2004 and 2011. In short, to compensate for the limited room for manoeuvre at the socio-economic level, given the commitments – harsher now than at that time – to the European Stability Plan and on the question of the national-territorial fracture –also very aggravated since then – between 2004 and 2011–with emblematic measures in the field of liberties and social welfare that will help them face the upcoming electoral battles with some recovery of their credibility before a part of the electorate that has abandoned them in recent years.

If, in addition, this government is under pressure from the powerful lobbies inside and outside – the bosses and the banks who are already demanding that it does not bring in major reforms, especially in relation to employment law, and that it does not introduce new taxes –and because of the hostility of PP and Ciudadanos to any gesture of detente with the Catalan independence movement, appealing to mobilization in the street as they did with Rodríguez Zapatero, Pablo Iglesias is right when he argues that Pedro Sánchez is going to form a weak government.

The problem is that the best way of dealing with this reactionary bloc, is not to offer to be part of that government, as Pablo Iglesias has already hastily done. On the contrary, Unidos Podemos (UP) should reaffirm itself as the political force that, in parliament and together with the social movements, is willing to reach agreements as far as possible with the PSOE from outside the government, as is the case in Portugal, and, form an alternative bloc firmly determined to respond to the attacks of the right and simultaneously, to force Pedro Sánchez to go beyond moderately regenerationist and social-liberal measures. [1]

That would be the most appropriate tactic because, as the Podemos leader himself said in his first speech in parliament, we are not only faced with the need to overcome the stage of a corrupt PP or a mere crisis of political representation. We are still confronted with a triple crisis – institutional, socio-economic and national-territorial – which, in spite of the reflux suffered in recent times and the blockade of the Catalan situation, continues to keep open the crisis of the regime, of which the Socialists have been a fundamental pillar. Even Juan Luis Cebrián recently

appealed for the avoidance of the “shipwreck of the State”. For that reason, it does not make sense to limit ourselves to seeking a new consensus (idealizing again that reached in the Transition) for a mere regeneration of this regime, but rather must continue to maintain the horizon of constituent rupture that is at the origin of the foundation of Podemos.

UP cannot become a simple contributor to a partial re-composition of this regime, which would also be reinforced by a PSOE that, in addition to having its own long history of corruption, is far from emulating the example of trends such as that represented by Jeremy Corbyn in Great Britain. As proposed in the Anticapitalista communique, UP’s task should be to contribute to creating the conditions for a new cycle of mobilizations, following the example of movements such as those of women and pensioners, thus aspiring to overflow the frameworks of austerity, the murder of liberty [2] and recentralization that, we fear, will continue to prevail in this new political stage.

That should be the best way to prepare the next electoral battles, promoting parallel participatory –and non-plebiscitary– processes for the construction of Popular Unity candidacies, following the example of the agreements reached between Podemos and IU in Andalusia.

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[1] Where “everything that has changed since 2015 as the result of pressure from Bloco and the Portuguese Communist Party”, but where “the issue of banks, as well as that of debt and the European Union, could not be part of the agreement” (see Alda Sousa and Adriano Campos, “La experiencia del Bloco de Esquerda. Conquistas y conflictos”, Viento Sur n.º 157, April 2018, p. 5-14.

[2] Let us mention only the recent judgment against the young people of Altsasu [following an altercation in a bar with civil guards; sentences of several years in prison were pronounced] as well as the existence of political prisoners and exiles.