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Spanish state

Dangerous liaisons: Can Podemos make a deal to govern Spain?

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On Tuesday afternoon, we received unexpected news about a potential deal, a pre-agreement, between Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) leader Pedro Sánchez and Unidas Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias to form a coalition government to last for a four-year term. After six months of inconclusive negotiations and a series of new elections in which both the PSOE and UP lost votes and parliamentary seats it is only natural that this accord would catch everyone off guard, especially given the right-ward turn Sánchez conducted throughout his whole campaign.

Reading the pre-agreement obliges us to consider it a declaration of intent, full of generalities and ambiguities except, coincidentally, when it comes to the two most important questions facing a potential government. One is related to Catalonia, where the text states in point 9: “Guarantee coexistence in Catalonia: the Government of Spain will prioritize guarantees of coexistence in Catalonia and the normalization of political life. To that end, dialogue in Catalonia will be normalized, seeking formulas for understanding and dialogue, strictly within constitutional limits. Moreover, the federal state’s guarantees of autonomy will be strengthened to ensure adequate provision of rights and services under its jurisdiction. We will guarantee equality among all Spaniards.”

As you can see, this paragraph adopts the thesis, not only of the PSOE but also of the conservative Partido Popular (PP) and the faltering populist right-wing party Cuidanos, that the Catalan issue is a conflict between Catalans and not a conflict between the majority of Catalans and the Spanish State. The pre-agreement also proposes to seek “formulas for understanding and dialogue, strictly within constitutional limits” to which they tack on the promise to “guarantee equality among all Spaniards.” This is a faulty argument which denies the national and cultural diversity existent within of the Spanish State. There is nothing about pluri-nationality or a willingness to reject the criminalization of the conflict and past repressive consequences that continue to this day.

The other argument that, despite its ambiguity, is made explicit is point 10, where – although it refers to “fiscal justice” (what?) – it accepts the limitations of EU budget discipline by using the euphemism of a “budget balance.” And, that “the evaluation and control of public spending is essential for the maintenance of a sustained and lasting welfare state.” In sum, neoliberal austerity restrictions are implicitly accepted without any mention of the repealing article 135 of the Constitution, whose amendment in September 2011 guaranteed constitutional obedience to the European debtocracy.

It is true that in the other points of the pre-agreement there is talk of “combating employment insecurity” (but not about the repeal of the last two joint neoliberal labor reforms passed by the PSOE and the PP), of “shielding of pensions,” of “housing as a right and not as merely a commodity” (what?), of the “fight against climate change” (although in point 1 there is talk of “consolidating growth”), of the “right to a dignified death,” of “Spain as a country of conscience and dignity,” of “feminist policies” and of “support for the abandoned regions of Spain...” But, as can be seen, none of this is concrete and there are striking absences and “forgotten” items. For instance, there is no mention at all of any change to the deadly migratory policies that have drowned tens of thousands in the Mediterranean, or the closure of the Immigration Detention Centers (CIEs) or the repeal of the gag laws, old and the new. All this stands in contrast to previously mentioned points 9 and 10 (covering Cataloni and the debt) that constitute the hard core of PSOE policy aimed at maintaining its hegemony in any potential new government. All of this notwithstanding, it remains to be seen if a PSOE-UP could win the necessary votes for securing the investiture of Sánchez as prime minister and the formation of a parliamentary government, even in a second round of voting which would require only a simple majority, meaning that some parties could abstain in the vote.

In view of the parliamentary arithmetic resulting from the last elections, all eyes are now on the Republican Left of

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Catalonia party (ERC) and its 13 parliamentary votes which has shown in recent times a willingness to dialogue with the PSOE, but which has so far not met with success. However, neither the continuity of a repressive Catalan policy, nor a potential call for new Catalan elections in spring, allows much room for maneuver for the ERC leadership as it finds itself in fierce competition with the pro-independence Junts per Catalunya (Together for Catalonia) and the left-wing, pro-independence Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), which are both predisposed to vote against the creation of any PSOE-centered government. The ERC's reaction, therefore, to this pre-agreement has been to demand the "creation of negotiations and dialogue between equals" at the state level where everything can be discussed, including recognition that the Catalan question is a conflict that must be resolved politically and not judicially, which implies, therefore, that Catalonia's right to self-determination can be put up for question. Of course, Pedro Sánchez – aside from some kind words – will never accept any of these demands, although we cannot rule out some rhetorical gestures towards papering things over in the coming weeks. Sánchez's ace in the hole will most likely be to accuse UP and the Catalan parties of siding with the PP, the far-right Vox and the right-populist Ciudadanos parties – a sort of parliamentary "lesser evilism" – if they don't play ball with the PSOE, this in hopes of securing their abstention, and therefore a potential narrow majority, in a final governmental investiture vote.

As for an agreement with the PP, which is the other potential investiture option for Sánchez and the PSOE – one that Spain's great economic powers and the deep state are pushing for – we should not be surprised by the conservative's angry reaction to the PSOE-UP pre-agreement. In fact, despite declarations from their leader rejecting any possibility of a pact with the PSOE, the PP was waiting for Sanchez to come begging so they could impose their own conditions on him in order to secure a PP parliamentary abstention (which might allow Sánchez to form a minority government) and thus avoid a new call for elections. Regarding Vox, we need not expand on their reaction which consisted of calling for a fight against the PSOE's alliance with communism and Bolivarianism, that is, what they see as taking the Venezuelan path.

Among people on the left, on the other hand, it is only logical that there is a sense of relief and of a realistic and modest hope for change, which is, after all, seen as putting the brakes on the threat posed by the rise of Vox and the potential for a pact between the PSOE and the PP. However, we continue to believe that neither a/ the nature of the PSOE as the dominant party in a potential governmental regime, nor b/ the deteriorating relationship of forces within the UP after the elections, permits us to hope that – in the event that a PSOE-UP government is formed – this will lead to any significant radical response towards the two main challenges facing such a regime: the democratic resolution of the Catalan-Spanish conflict and disobeying the dictates of authoritarian neoliberalism. Can we even imagine radical UP leader Pablo Iglesias as vice president co-existing alongside neoliberal economist and EU-darling Nadia Calviño as Minister of Economics and co-vice president?

We will, therefore, follow the possible details of this pre-agreement in the coming weeks, insisting for our part on the risks it poses to the UP as it is ever more subordinated to an Iglesias-centered, hyper-leadership and with an already greatly weakened party structure as it seeks to enter into an agreement with the PSOE. Even if its express goal is to counteract processes of transformism, that is, of adapting itself to neoliberal Spanish state structures, I fear this process is already underway and it may become difficult to reverse.

In any case, we must remember that it is one thing to form a government and it another thing to govern within the confines of a particular correlation of forces in the Congress of Deputies and the Senate and, above all, within the systemic constraints in which the legislature operates. Our task should be not to look on as spectators in the coming weeks and months, rather – as is already happening in Catalonia in the wake of the democratic Tsunami of mass action – to once again give centrality to confrontation, to struggles in the streets and in our workplaces, to demand a radical turn towards the left and towards democratization based on mobilization, self-organization, and popular empowerment in the face of a regime in permanent crisis.

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