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Portuguese presidential election

Why the Left Bloc is standing

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In January 2006 Portugal goes to the polls to elect a new president. Our comrade Francisco Louçã is the candidate of the Left Bloc, which with eight parliamentary deputies in this small country, and almost nightly TV coverage, has become a significant political force. Here Francisco explains the meaning of his candidature.

What are the major political themes of your presidential campaign?

The economical crisis, the crisis of the Portuguese governing elite and its failure in recent years have deepened this country's problems. It is now the fifth year that Portugal's economic performance has been worse than the EU average. The poorest are the first ones to suffer the consequences of these disastrous economical policies that governments have imposed for years, and in this campaign the right-wing candidate, Cavaco Silva, is one of the leaders of this bourgeoisie.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/chicomaniestolaunch.jpg>]

My campaign presents clear proposals: to save the social security pension system and prevent retirement pensions from being gambled at the Stock Exchange casino; to swivel economic policy towards developing full employment; to guarantee citizenship rights to every person that works here and the right to nationality to everyone that was born here - in the name of a 'cosmopolitan' policy that respects difference.

We will also campaign to stop the crime against democratic representation - this means fighting to defeat the electoral law proposed by the two main parties, that imposes one-candidate electoral circles to take away the access to parliamentary action from other, especially minority, parties.

Can you explain the significance of the recent debate over the salaries of public sector workers?

Well, the public sector workers' salary is determinant as an indicator for all other wages. We have now some 700,000 workers in the public sector. They've seen their wages devalued for eight consecutive years. And now, the government proposes a wage rise similar to the predicted inflation rate and eventually below its real level.

On the other hand, the government attacks public workers rights as "privileges". In the past we saw this populist argument only from the former right-wing parties' governments, now it's the official Socialist Party's discourse.

But at the same time, the head administrators of public sector enterprises nominated by the government earn wages and benefits in kind that are well above their European partners. This is an absolute scandal! As a result of this shameless policy, Portuguese wages will remain the lowest in the inner 15 countries of the EU and this implies the decrease of the quality of many public services.

You can't win the election, of course. Wouldn't it be better to have a united left voice - in other words to support the Communist Party campaign? How do you answer the accusation of being splitters?

Any candidate must have 50% plus one vote to win the election at the first round. There's only one right-wing candidate, who is leading the polls since a year ago with a large advantage. If he gets that score, he'll win against

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one, two or ten candidates. This means the left-wing candidates must get as many votes they can to lower the levels of abstentions, forcing a second round.

We also know that there is not a left-wing candidate with sufficient power to polarise the election on the first round and no one that we can be trust to represent our point of view.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/campaign_meting.jpg]

The Socialist Party presents two candidates fighting each other (the former president Mário Soares and the MP Manuel Alegre), and both the Communist Party and the Left Bloc support their own candidates. They all bring their ideas to the debate and will confront them in the electoral campaign, and that's natural in democracy.

I strongly believe that a candidate to an election should never quit. If he wants to quit, why did he present himself in the first place? Furthermore, the CP candidate is for the moment, even if that may not happen at the time of the election, in last position in the polls .

To what extent will abortion be an important issue in this election?

It will certainly be an issue. The Socialist Party has agreed to postpone the referendum about the criminalisation of abortion until late 2006 or 2007. We said many times that it's urgent to solve that issue in 2005. The referendum would be the best way to defeat the archaism of the right-wingers politics that are in favour of a law that can send women in jail for 3 years.

Both the President and the Constitutional Court, for technical reasons, have rejected a referendum this year. So, now the Parliament has all the responsibility and also the political majority to do it. The Socialist Party already said that it will stop that process and wait another year or more for the referendum.

What explains the relative electoral success of the Left Bloc in the past period? What impact does the Bloc's presence in the national parliament have?

That electoral success shows that there was a strong need for a new political voice in the Portuguese left, a voice that breaks the monopoly of that political area by the two historical organisations, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party.

Since the Left Bloc elected eight MP's in 1999, it's determination combined with a clear, sharp and direct political discourse and with concrete proposals to change people's lives, all along with bringing new issues to the political agenda (domestic violence, drugs policy, gay and lesbian rights, media monopolisation, etc.) proved to be an effective way of building a strong change in the way of doing politics.

The electoral results are the consequence of that work. Of course now the Left Bloc has grown and it's a different organisation, more structured nation-wide and less directly dependent of the parliamentary action led by our eight MP's.

Is Portugal undergoing the same immigration 'crisis' as the Spanish state?

Unlike the Spanish state, Portugal is not a main gateway for the entrance of immigrants. Having one of the lowest salary average of Europe, there is little attraction for a immigration on a large scale. Nevertheless, the government

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makes it difficult for an immigrant to acquire the basic rights of citizenship, like health service or social security.

In absence of a work contract, immigrants cannot legalise their situation, so they are heavily exploited by some bosses paying less and giving no working rights. The Left Bloc has defended the regularisation of immigrants working in Portugal to stop that human right's violations. We also defend the right to be a Portuguese national for people that were born in Portuguese soil.

In the last local elections you had more than 300 people elected to the multiple instances of Portuguese local government. Isn't it a burden to have so many comrades burdened with these responsibilities?

It's surely a big responsibility for all the elected ones and for the local organisations. And it's a big step for the construction of the Left Bloc and it's ability to listen to the people's problems and difficulties on a local basis. We aim to improve democracy in the local administration, fighting corruption and abuse of power, and that's what our voters expect from us.

Except for one municipality, led by a left-wing independent mayor that we've invited to be our representative for the second consecutive term, each and everyone who is elected by the Left Bloc does not have local government responsibilities, our task is to be an effective and militant opposition.

How will you judge whether the electoral campaign has been a success?

I will judge it by it's the ability to influence the political debate and to help break this rotten political consensus where Portugal lives. It will be successful if my message can present a mobilising alternative for an important part of the left-wing electorate.

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