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Portugal

Francisco Louçã's presidential campaign

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On March 9, Anibal Cavaco Silva replaced Jorge Sampaio as Portugal's president. It's the first time in 30 years of democracy in Portugal that the right wing parties have succeeded in having their candidate elected to this post. On January 22, Cavaco Silva was elected fifth president of the Republic by a narrow margin in the first round (50.6 %, a lead of only 30,000 votes).

Yet a year ago, at the general elections of February 2005, the Socialist Party had for the first time won an absolute majority in Parliament, capitalising on the hopes for change which followed the debacle of the right wing government. Since then, the new prime minister José Sócrates has simply followed the neoliberal policies of his right wing predecessors in government: an increased age of retirement, the reduction of the real wages of civil servants for the eight consecutive year, the complete privatisation of the energy sector, continued declining investment and increased inequalities in income distribution.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Left_Bloc_rally23.jpg]

That is why the Socialist Party suffered a humiliating defeat in the municipal elections of October 9 last year. The four biggest town halls in the country - Lisbon, Sintra, Vila Nova Gaia and Porto - remain governed by a right wing coalition. For the Socialist Party, this result was worse than that of 2001, which was difficult to believe... and to predict.

The presidential campaign took place then in a scenario where the voters were disillusioned by governmental policies. At the same time, the media crowned Cavaco Silva in advance, as if there was no need for elections to declare him victor! The right has regrouped around him. [1] The PS split into a quarrel of fraternal enemies between Mario Soares (80 years old, former prime minister, president of the Republic between 1986 and 1996) and Manuel Alegre (former socialist leader, vice-president of the Parliament). Finally the Communist Party (PCP) presented its secretary general, Jerónimo de Sousa.

An open candidacy

In these elections organised by the politicians of the past, the best-known leader of the Left Bloc, Francisco Louçã, was the candidate of renewal. Since the beginning, his candidacy has been clear, having as its goal combating the "soft consensus" and the policy of social and political deterioration pursued by the government. In announcing his candidacy, Francisco had said, "this will be the most difficult election of my life". He was completely right. It was about presenting an alternative for the next 10-15 years, which meant presenting choices on the basic questions: jobs, social security, public services, reform of justice, European policy, parity between men and women, defence of the environment and so on. "The first objective of my candidacy is to create a universal and just system of social protection; it is this determination which will allow us to respond to the country's most urgent question, namely unemployment which now affects half a million men and women. But I also want to present alternatives for long term social protection because the system that exists today is neither universal, nor just, nor defensible".

Under Portuguese law, each candidacy only becomes legal after a request to the Constitutional Tribunal made by at least 7,500 voters (accompanied by certificate of registration on the electoral register!). Between early November and early December, more than 12,000 people had signed in support of the candidacy of Francisco Louçã.

A National Commission of Support for his candidacy was created: it was very open, plural and representative of several sectors, well beyond the activists of the Bloc. An "old" singer like Sérgio Godinho, new fado singers like MÃ-sia and Camané, singers in well known bands - Miguel Guedes (Blind Zero) and Messias (Mercado Negro), writers like Luisa Costa Gomes and José Luis Peixoto, intellectuals like Boaventura Sousa Santos and Claudio Torres, editors, cultural figures like Zélia Afonso (widow of the singer José Afonso), trade unionists in the civil service and in commerce, members of several workplace workers' commissions (Volkswagen, Banque Santander Totta, among others), activists in social movements (anti-racist, feminist, LGBT), which show how this candidacy was "rooted" in a plurality of left sectors who desire a more profound, more radical change embodied in the proposals of a candidacy which has the courage and the determination to break with neoliberalism.

... present everywhere

Francisco Louçã covered at least 48,000 km by car, accompanied by a team which included at the minimum his campaign director, press attaché and "site team": a journalist, a photographer and a filmmaker. For a country of 560 km x 280 km, that is equivalent to making several circuits of Portugal. From mid-December to the end of the campaign, Francisco was also accompanied by the European deputy Miguel Portas, other deputies in the National Parliament - Luis Fazenda, João Teixeira Lopes, Alda Macedo, Fernando Rosas - and the national agent, José Manuel Pureza.

The Internet site (active from 17/10/05 to 26/1/2006) allowed contact with the voters. Francisco Louçã himself responded to the 1,228 mails that were sent to him for the site. He did this while travelling, in the small truck in which he travelled with his team.

The 96 videos of the site included debates with the other candidates, television interviews, times of television broadcasts and reports on the campaign initiatives. A campaign journal (a kind of blog) included news of activities and commentaries on the campaign of other candidates.

Francisco Louçã criss-crossed the country. He met the fishers of Algarve and Matosinhos, visited high-tech factories (Auto-Europa and others), met workers in struggle, visited hospitals, faculties, institutes of scientific research, immigrant communities, and prisons. Whether discussing social security, the future of stem cell research, the rights of immigrants, the need to change the labour code, the defence of public services or the importance of the exchange of syringes inside prisons, Francisco had clear, courageous proposals which defied the conservatism of society.

The "arruadas" (little street walkabouts, normally preceded by music, where propaganda is distributed) were always a success: whether in the town centres or in the markets, there were always men and women of all ages who wished to speak to Francisco, either to recount an experience or a personal problem, or give information on an illegality and an injustice, nearly always also to congratulate him for his courage as deputy and to say that if he had not been candidate, they would not have known who to vote for.

Against Cavaco Silva...

One of the summits of the presidential campaign was undoubtedly the televised debate between Cavaco Silva and Francisco Louçã. In the preceding debates and interviews, Cavaco Silva had always succeeded in avoiding replying to questions, seeking shelter in vagueness and abstraction. With Francisco he really had to speak and say what he

thought. Apart from his ignorance of the most recent studies on social security, he revealed himself to be very conservative. He tried not to say anything about gay marriage ("this is not a very important problem"). He said that his detractors accused him of not taking into account women's questions, but that his wife had never complained to him! Concerning immigration, he expressed fear: "if all the immigrants suddenly wanted to have Portuguese nationality, we would risk being in a minority", he said.

Cavaco Silva was elected by a slender margin in the first round. Abstention was moderate (37.4%). Manuel Alegre received 20.7% of the vote. Mário Soares, ex-prime minister and ex-president of the Republic, the official candidate of the Socialist Party, suffered a heavy defeat, only gaining 14% of the vote. All the votes received by Mário Soares and Manuel Alegre were lower by 10% than the number of votes received by the Socialist Party a year ago. The Communist Party vote held up well for the second time: 8.6% was the result of a campaign in defence of the Communist fortress, which proved very effective in its goal of maintaining a vote based on identification with the CP.

Francisco Louçã scored 5.3% of the vote, a little less than the score of the Left Bloc in the parliamentary elections of 2005 (6.3%). Given the difficulty of the political situation provoked by the division of the left, it was a good result which shows that a significant part of the electorate wants a left alternative which can mobilise in the coming years. Immediately after the elections, some commentators who wanted to denigrate the Bloc by insisting on the volatile, inconsistent character of its vote, claimed that nearly half the votes of the Bloc in 2005 had been transferred to Manuel Alegre. But to this presumption there is also the other side of the coin: if it was true, the conclusion would be then that among those who voted Francisco, many had never voted for the Bloc before!

...the best ally of Sócrates

Cavaco Silva owes his victory to the Socialist Party. In reality, it is the irresponsibility and defeatism of the Socialist Party leadership and the Sócrates government which are primarily responsible for the defeat of the left. From the beginning, with their hesitations, their delay in presenting a candidate and their final choice: in fact neither Mário Soares nor Manuel Alegre were first choices, but the fourth or fifth choice of a PS whose secretary general and prime minister have willingly accepted cohabitation with Cavaco.

Moreover, the government did not shy away from approving highly unpopular measures in the midst of the electoral campaign: increases in the price of petrol and public transport, the closure of health centres, laws instituting the temporary character of first jobs in the civil service. It is as if candidate Soares did not exist or as if the victory of Cavaco Silva was inevitable, not to say welcome. It is true that the two Socialist candidates were different, but they were obliged to play the same political role during the campaign, that is, each day they had to explain the positions and strategic or tactical choices of the government.

Manuel Alegre, a member of the PS since forever, was annoyed at not being the choice of Sócrates and made inflammatory speeches against the political parties (!) and their apparatuses, defending an active citizenship. He avoided criticising the government, missed the parliamentary session which voted for the 2006 budget, and remained vague on numerous questions.

Nonetheless it should be said that many left voters wanted to punish Sócrates and gave an opportunity to Alegre to go into the second round, while overtaking Soares. . . And if it is true that the million votes for Alegre were very heterogeneous, it is nonetheless also true that a significant number of these voters were certainly closer to the Left Bloc than the policies of the Sócrates government. But contrary to the stated intentions, this million votes will not lead to the creation of a stable or organised civic movement. Still less, to the creation of the new political party of which some seem to dream.

With the election of Cavaco Silva the right gains a reference for its recomposition, having been capable of polarising a significant section of centrist voters who had given victory to Sócrates in 2005. In his first speech to parliament Cavaco Silva vindicated those such as Francisco Louçã who had said during the electoral campaign that Cavaco Silva would show a very clear convergence with the policy of the Socialist government. The Prime Minister José Sócrates has himself stressed the affinity of the viewpoints expressed in the speech with the actions of the government. The first anniversary of the government is marked by the slogan of institutional stability.

The convergence of the Sócrates-Cavaco Silva discourse at the economic level will have still other consequences: the prime minister's agenda will turn to right. Reforms on citizenship rights (divorce, abortion, gay marriage), much more moderate than those put forward by Zapatero but capable of at least opening fractures with the Catholic hierarchy, will be forgotten.

The Central Bloc at the highest level of the state has immediately won the confidence of high finance and the bankers, with the announcement of significant moves on the part of the economic groups: an takeover of Telecom and a banking concentration through the takeover of the Banco Portugues de Investimento.

Building an alternative

The commentary by Francisco Louçã was clear: the more active social policies will be put on the back burner, the coming years will be marked by the strengthening of right wing policies. He also criticised the total absence of references to international politics: "on the eve of a probable armed conflict, the new president has not a single word to say on Iraq or the possibility of war with Iran."

It is henceforth more than necessary to build a left political alternative which fights for full employment and a tenable social security and against the privatisation of public services. The socialist opposition that the Bloc represents has an immense responsibility. The desire of the PS and of the PSD to change the electoral system by introducing single member constituencies imposes a tenacious struggle: the dislocation of the proportional system excludes plurality, reduces political representation to two parties and excludes women from political life, which runs counter to the needs of democracy

The country has nearly half a million unemployed and 20% of the population is poor. The Bloc is preparing a march for jobs in the first fortnight of September.

Whether it is about war, public services, justice, or parity, Francisco Louçã has advanced proposals that will not be quickly forgotten in the years to come.

[1] Anibal Cavaco Silva was prime minister between 1985 and 1995, and then a candidate in the presidential election of 1996, beaten by Jorge Sampaio (PS).