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Spanish State

Changing the playing field, going on the offensive: the experience of six months of Podemos

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“Podemos was not born to play a testimonial role. We were born to go all out and we are going to go all out”

Pablo Iglesias, 25 May 2014. Election night.

Podemos' results in the recent elections to the European Parliament were, without a doubt, spectacular: close to 1,250,000 votes (8%) and 5 MEPs, making it the fourth political force in the Spanish state, and all of this accomplished in only 129 days. However, these numbers represent just a first step on a difficult road fraught with challenges to achieve the objectives initially posed. The success or failure of a project that began in the public arena on Friday, 17 January 2014, in the neighbourhood of Lavapiés in Madrid will depend on the capacity of those who make up Podemos to respond to the challenges of the future, the manoeuvres of the dominant political and economic caste and the changing social and political situation.

Podemos emerged as a call, in the form of a manifesto, to “Make a move: turn indignation into political change” [1], but also to “change the playing field on which they want us to play” in the words of MEP Teresa Rodríguez. [2] The main success of the campaign carried out by Podemos in these months has been to shift the political axis away from a confrontation between left and right, in which the dominant parties were comfortably settled, to a confrontation between the “people” and the “caste”. The emergence of this new political axis would have been impossible without some of the slogans that were central in prior mobilizations: “somos los de abajo y vamos a por los de arriba”(literally “we are those on the bottom and we are coming for those on the top”) popularized in the movement of the *indignados*, and “we are the 99%”, which came from the Occupy movement in the United States. At the same time, it represents a new, more developed way to place class struggle at the centre of politics. But this is not a class struggle where the sides are sociologically and programmatically predefined, but rather a process where the construction of a collective social consciousness is the result of social and political action, of individual's experiences in their particular life context. Finally, the change in the axis of political confrontation has allowed Podemos to present itself not as an alternative to the pre-existing left, but as an option for change confronting the political system itself: the two-party system- which the conservative Popular Party and the social democratic PSOE have built over the past decades; the pacts of the Transition- which have dominated the Spanish political system since 1978 - and more generally, politics understood as a system of agreements made between economic and political elites.

In the last three years, the majority of the Spanish population has responded to austerity policies and to the context of social emergency in which they have been living, first in the form of the “Indignados” movement, and after, through multiple social movements, such as the anti-eviction movement [Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH)]. [3], worker and user assemblies in defence of public services such as education and healthcare, or more recently, the so-called Marches for Dignity. [4] This period of mobilizations, together with the failure of austerity policies, is resulting in a crisis of neoliberal hegemony, which is spreading throughout a large part of Europe. In the specific context of the Spanish state this is taking the form of a crisis in the political regime constructed through the pacts made during Spain's Transition to democracy in 1977-1978. There are three main manifestations of this crisis: the development of conflicts between Spain's different nationalities and the central state, the difficulty in resolving the problems caused by debt within the framework of the European Union and the Euro, and the discrediting of the political parties which have formed part of the government. [5]

In the window of opportunity opened by this crisis in hegemony, the challenge for Podemos is to transform this social majority against the dominant politics, which sympathizes with the PAH, the “Indignados” and the Marches for Dignity, into a political majority in favor of a constituent change that can confront the austerity policies which dominate in the European Union and the Spanish state. To achieve this, in the past electoral campaign Podemos

relied on three elements, which to a large extent clash with the common practices of the pre-existing left, but which also reveal some of the initial weaknesses of the project:

1) The presence in the mass media of a leading figure, Pablo Iglesias- spokesperson and head of the electoral list-, able to reach the majority who are socialized through television. The centrality of a media figure in a project that has as its objective popular empowerment, has been assessed on repeated occasions, even by Pablo Iglesias himself, as an initial weakness of the project, which will have to be overcome as it develops.

2) The design of a discourse focused on responding to the problems that the majority of the population considers central in the country -political corruption, the problems derived from the economic crisis, and those related to the political system and politicians-, relegating to a secondary position other issues, which should be of no less importance in the Podemos program.

3) The construction of a structure of popular participation at the local level, the "Circles", not based on principles of political-ideological affinity, but on agreements of the bare minimums in the face of a situation of social emergency, which have the virtue of having included thousands of persons disenchanted with the current dominant forms of politics, but which at the same time, face the challenge of being efficient work tools without losing their diversity.

At present, Podemos is building a social consciousness that aims to reach the majority; this social consciousness has grown rapidly since the elections but has yet to attain its full potential. The main challenge we face in the near future is to turn that social consciousness into political consciousness, into agreements regarding how we must articulate and organize the political change for which Podemos was born. The minimal consensus which defines that common social consciousness is based on the core elements developed in the electoral campaign's discourse, which has also functioned as the basis for the political articulation of the Circles. However, the challenge facing Podemos goes far beyond campaign slogans. Some answers may be inferred from the political program, while many others will have to be created anew. The challenge, in this respect, is to be able to define a political strategy for the coming period which is not based on the ideological homogenization of the project, but on open and plural debate with the social majority that has already expressed its repudiation of austerity policies.

On this point, the activity of the Circles is key in at least two ways. On the one hand, the strength of the Circles is the only real brake on the always dangerous autonomization of public representatives with regard to those they represent, and they must be always alert to avoid decision-making being carried out by a small group of political elites. On the other hand, the Circles are the tool that ensures that debates take place at the local level, so that they reach the broader citizenry and are not restricted to members or to the always weaker mechanisms of online participation. Whether or not Podemos' initial weaknesses can be overcome is going to depend, again, on the capacity of the Circles to develop their own participatory dynamics, local spokespersons firmly controlled by the citizenry, and strong spaces of socialization. Such weaknesses, shared in part by all of the left, include: the dependence on high profile media figures and the typical logics of 'entertainment politics', in order to construct a political project that can bring together a social majority to break with the dominant political system and austerity policies.

[1] VV.AA. (2014) [Make a move: turn indignation into political change](#).

[2] "Teresa Rodriguez. We have to challenge them in their spheres of power: institutions" 17 January 2014, [vÃ-deo](#).

[3] For an explanation of what the PAH is, in English, I recommend this article by Carlos Delclos "[Victims no longer: Spain's anti-eviction movement](#)".

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[4] For more information about social movements in the Spanish state, I recommend this recent article by Jaime Pastor: ["Three Years of Indignation", 21 212014.](#)

[5] Jaime Pastor; "Regime crisis and (im)possible refoundation", in Fernández, Joseba and Urban, Miguel (eds.) "Regime Crisis and constituent processes", *Viento Sur* 128, pp. 17-26, [online](#).