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Spanish State

Back to the Streets

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It has been a dramatic few weeks in Spanish politics. Days after Easter, the former head of the Madrid regional government, Ignacio González, was arrested on corruption charges. This in turn led to a major internal crisis in the ruling Popular Party (PP) which saw the resignation of the party's historic leader in the Spanish capital Esperanza Aguirre.

A polarizing figure, who was seen as the “Spanish Thatcher,” Aguirre's position as head of the PP on the Madrid council was no longer tenable. With the regional party she had headed for over a decade already caught up in an investigation into illegal campaign financing, the arrest of her former right-hand man Gonzalez was the final straw.

Meanwhile, Mariano Rajoy, the country's Prime Minister, has now been called as a witness in one of the largest corruption cases in recent Spanish history, the so-called Gurtel plot, which has seen a number of key former PP officials charged, including the party's former treasurer Luis Bárcenas.

In this context Unidos Podemos has chosen to take the exceptional step of bringing a motion of censure against Rajoy's government, only the third such motion since Spain's transition to democracy. While it has little chance of passing in parliament given the centre-left Socialist Party's (PSOE) opposition, it has robbed PSOE of the political initiative in a week in which they are holding internal leadership elections.

The PSOE leadership race is largely seen as a choice between former leader Pedro Sánchez and the establishment-backed Susana Díaz. Since his enforced resignation in November Sánchez has turned to the left, adopting Podemos' proposals in a range of areas, while Díaz, who was instrumental in his ousting, has clung to the political center.

To ensure the focus remains firmly on the motion of censure, Podemos has called for a massive mobilization of their supporters in Madrid's historic Puerta del Sol on Saturday [20 May]. It is planned as a show of strength and aims to put PSOE on the defensive. As party leader Pablo Iglesias recently put it “we are hoping for a certain level of coherency from PSOE. The motion of censure is an ethical imperative” aimed against “the most corrupt party in Europe.”

This is also the first test of Podemos' new strategic line after the party's recent congress. Iglesias' victory over his former deputy leader Álex Guler has allowed him to pursue a more conflictual and left-wing direction, focusing on polarizing the political space along populist lines and seeking closer ties with social movements.

In this interview, Jaime Pastor and Brais Fernandez, the editors of *Viento Sur* magazine and leading members of the Anticapitalista wing of Podemos, talk with Eoghan Gilmartin about this new strategic path and the implications of PSOE's leadership race.

Eoghan Gilmartin: Can you explain Podemos' decision to bring a motion of censure against the PP government in terms of the party's wider strategy post-Vistalegre II? In particular how it relates to Podemos'

turn towards civil society and its attempt to become a more activist-based formation.

Brais Fernández First, the question of the motion of censure. Corruption within the Spanish state and political class is out of control. In terms of its breadth and the elite's sense of impunity it is incomparable to any other European country. There is a new case almost every day and it is impossible to keep track of all the names and cases.

These scandals have taken their toll on the parties of the political regime but without generating much active social contestation. Within Podemos we have tried to respond to the struggle against corruption not simply through the mechanisms of the state but also by reaching out to other "disruptive forces" in the social field (such as movements and unions). In this sense the initiative is positive and tactically very bold. It is true that it has no chance of winning in the parliament but it opens up a new line of conflict that is quite interesting.

Then there is the debate over how to view this motion strategically. We tend to be good at audacious tactical manoeuvres. In this case, we have positioned ourselves in an antagonistic manner to the regime, but strategically we tend to fall back on "democratic regeneration". We don't question the institutions â€" Podemos' line is that we have to sanitize and renew them. In contrast, 15M proposed a constituent strategy â€" new institutions for new times and the need for deeper social transformations.

And so we have at the same time both the positive strengths and limitations of the Podemos' leadership. Both capable of launching good communicative attacks at a tactical level, positioning themselves effectively in public debates, but with a rather limited strategy.

Jaime Pastor We are being confronted with systemic corruption that has primarily effected the PP but Rajoy has taken advantage of previous scandals involving PSOE to say "you are implicated too!" The tactical line of Pablo Iglesias works well here, offering Podemos as the only alternative and displacing the PSOE who have found themselves stranded in the current debate.

It has also been effective because Rajoy's discourse is centred around growth and exiting the crisis. Iglesias is insisting on the direct relationship between this structural corruption and the policies of austerity and privatization. The case of Madrid is exemplary, the privatization of (water utility company) Canal Isabel II led to widespread abuses.

Eoghan Gilmartin: Has there been a genuine turn towards the social field in Podemos?

Jaime Pastor The chance of Podemos being in government hasn't passed but it has been pushed back. In this sense the turn to the social is about converting a weakness into a virtue. We need to return to the street so as to recover our strength and to build new alliances with other forces. Those holding institutional positions have to be at the service of social movements, continuing to put themselves forward as an alternative government but also combining this with social activism.

There is a debate about how Podemos should position itself in relation to the movements. The idea is to find a way of coming together with other organizations to keep this window of opportunity for a political alternative open.

Brais Fernández Since the Congress, Podemos' discourse is more left-wing. There was a period, during which Ã±igo Errejón held greater internal weight, when the party's discourse was totally centred on the question of governing and institutional regeneration. This has changed. For us, and Pablo himself recognizes this, Podemos is now organized in terms of a strategy, which you could call eurocommunist, that combines being a party of struggle

and protest with being a party of government. And this involves dealing with the tension between these two elements.

One important thing for understanding where Podemos is right now is its relations with the social movements. The post-15M (indignados) activist culture, which is very extensive in large cities such as Madrid, has lacked channels of communication with the party. Podemos has confined itself to the sphere of representation with its own initiatives. Parallel to that the movements such as (the anti-eviction) PAH has sometimes been in clear conflict with the party. There is a tension here, which has yet to be constituted as a creative tension. The question now is how to combine the institutional struggle with struggles of the movements to create a synthesis.

Eoghan Gilmartin: An example of the limits to Errejón's strategy can be seen in the Madrid municipal government where Ahora Madrid (the Podemos-led coalition) has struggled to implement its program without mobilized support from civil society. But is the kind of sustained popular mobilization you envisage possible in today's atomized societies?

Jaime Pastor The problem is that Podemos emerged when 15-M protest wave was exhausted, so the interest in an institutional route came to the fore. At Vistalegre I (the party's founding congress) Podemos bet on electoral politics leaving aside key dilemmas which would later re-emerge.

But when the party fell short of winning the last elections, those in the Errejónista camp claimed that the crisis in the Spanish political regime had come to an end, that all that was needed was to challenge Rajoy's government, while aiding the rehabilitation of the PSOE. We (the Anticapitalistas) accept that the rhythm has slowed but see it more in terms of an opportunity: before we advanced rapidly from above, now the opportunity is to concentrate on a war of position from below so as to reconstruct the network of social platforms and counter-powers.

In the case of Pablo Iglesias, he tries to strike a balance between the previous institutional strategy and what we demand. The great challenge for Podemos is thus on the one hand to return to the social, while avoiding the cooption of our forces in the municipal institutions. All this depends on conflict, on the capacity to generate social conflict to create a more favorable balance of forces. Being in government is very difficult when you don't possess hegemony in the socio-political field.

Brais Fernández Clearly mobilization is important but it is not sufficient. Instead, the question of organization is key: how do we organize more permanent structures in the neighborhoods, rather than intermittent surges.

Eoghan Gilmartin: Errejón is a student of Chantal Mouffe, who talks a lot about "agonism," a political theory that sees conflict as so fundamental to politics that it breaks from the idea of a material basis to the superstructure. Is this not at odds with Errejón's present trajectory?

Jaime Pastor Yes, Álvaro's most recent article is worrying because it implicitly criticizes Pablo Iglesias for pursuing a more polarizing line.

Brais Fernández Looking at this in terms of consensus or rupture, Álvaro is much more inclined towards seeking consensus with particular sectors of the regime so as to advance his positions. Clearly, hegemony always involves being able to integrate the other. But the integration means that there is a revolutionary and class core that is capable of articulating a series of alliances with other sectors and classes. The key, and this is the difference between a constituent rupture and a regeneration (of the existing order), is not yielding on what is fundamental.

In order to continue being flexible while not yielding on the essentials of the project, you have to extend the

experiences of struggle and conflict. This is what allows you to win over sectors tied to the regime. One positive example, still incipient, is how the motion of censure has allowed the CCOO union to side with Podemos and not their traditional allies in the PSOE. This does not mean it has become revolutionary overnight but it does show how through conflict you can reach people that would traditionally position themselves with the Socialists.

Eoghan Gilmartin: Podemos' discourse has articulated the crisis in the Spanish political regime in terms that highlight the role of corruption. Before they spoke of "la casta" and now of "la trama" (most commonly translated as "the plot" but here more specifically the dominant network of influence and power). By identifying their enemy in this way, they tried to link the social crisis and the injustice of austerity to the corruption scandals and the popular anger they generated. But is there a risk here? And what do you see as the difference between the idea of la casta and la trama.

Jaime Pastor Ultimately la trama refers to the financial-real-estate oligarchy but in the end it is Blackrock and the American investment funds that have the most weight. I would prefer to speak about a bloc of power, an oligarchic bloc because the word trama gives the idea of a conspiracy. However la trama goes further than la casta because it speaks of the corrupters, not just the corrupted and gestures to the relations between finance and politics.

Brais Fernández Since 15-M we have approached the theme of oligarchies in a similar way to that of political Marxism over the past 150 years, by emphasizing the relationship between political power and the economy. There is nothing new in this, to say there is a network of power connecting capital and the state. The term casta was very useful for articulating an antagonistic vision of Spanish politics divided into two camps. There is always a risk that we read it in terms of bad politicians and businessmen, which allows us also to see other honest CEOs who can form part of the new historic bloc aiming to renew Spain.

Eoghan Gilmartin: How do you view the role of the PSOE in the regime crisis?

Jaime Pastor PSOE is the weakest pillar of the regime.

Brais Fernández The PSOE have completely lost their youth vote. They are now the party of the passive classes. They win votes in the south, primarily in Andalucía and then amongst older people who still see PSOE as the party which after the (post-Franco) transition had slightly improved their living conditions.

Throughout the crisis the Socialists have lost the capacity to integrate large sections of the subaltern classes. In my opinion they are not going to recover this capacity. As Perry Anderson explained about the collapse in Communist support in southern Europe in the 1980s, what you have is a new generation seeking out new political representation. Young people have no link whatsoever with the PSOE, no sense of identification with it.

Eoghan Gilmartin: A few days ago there was an article in El País with the headline: "Corbyn, Hamon and Sanchez: The Abyss" about the threat of the radicalization in the PSOE. What do you think of the reinvention of Pedro Sánchez as a radical?

Brais Fernández Pedro Sánchez is a direct creation of the PSOE machine and so in this sense is more similar to Hamon than Corbyn. He has no links to the labour movement or the anti-war movement. I don't believe there has been any such transformation, maybe he has changed his tactical orientation.

In the end the crisis within the party is down to the fact that the PSOE finds itself at a juncture in which it has to choose. Does it want to return to government? If so, it has to reach an agreement with Podemos. Or does it want to

defend the immediate interests of the regime? Then it has to support the tripartite alliance with Ciudadanos and the Popular Party.

If Sanchez wins, it could create the opportunity for an alternative government to the PP, not in the short term but in the medium term. This would be a new challenge for Podemos. Strategically, it would be a bad deal, particularly if the government is led by PSOE. However, in historic terms it could produce a new situation with a new balance forces as you can see in Portugal.

Jaime Pastor Portugal is somewhat different from Spain. As there is enough of a gap (in terms of votes) between the Socialists and the (left-wing) Bloco and Communists, the Socialists don't fear them as rivals. PSOE is in a state of denial, it refuses to recognize the new scenario and still thinks it can be hegemonic on the left.

But if it wants to be a party of government again, it has no other path than to seek an alliance with Podemos. However, it will be pressured by the corporate media and others to moderate Podemos and to displace Pablo Iglesias. The object is to destroy Pablo. For the elites he is the main enemy. In contrast, Añejo has a more moderate image.

With a Sánchez victory, a more firmly anti-Rajoy PSOE would be more credible. But with what policies? In terms of the type of program he would defend, he is nothing like Corbyn. He is much more moderate and represents more a return to third-way social-liberalism with some more investment and easing of austerity.

Brais Fernández If Sánchez wins, the policies of the PSOE are not going to change radically in the short term but hopefully in the next elections it will allow them to have a more open perspective towards governing than would be offered under Susana Díaz. She has talked time and again about recuperating the PSOE's former electoral strength, but this is just a crass illusion. The PSOE has been completely fractured by tactical disputes and which are going to be difficult to heal. In practice under Díaz they would face the same dilemma as under Sánchez.

I consider myself a Marxist revolutionary but I have to hope she loses. Even though I reject what Sánchez stands for politically, the coup against him was a disgrace in which all the economic and mediatic powers conspired.

Eoghan Gilmartin: How do you see the situation in Catalonia?

Jaime Pastor Since 2010 there has been a scenario of two trains heading towards an inevitable collision. It's another point in the political system where there is the potential for a catastrophic impasse as there is a build up of frustration over the denial of the referendum. The political elites of Catalonia have pushed so far with their demand for a referendum the risk is they won't be able to retreat. Rajoy's strategy is to avoid an open confrontation while putting off dealing with the issue.

The nationalists have never focused on the social question and so have never been able to extend their bloc, which mainly comes from the urban and rural middle-classes. There is more support for independence outside of Barcelona than in the city. This is the problem for En Comú Podem (Podemos' affiliate in Catalonia) – given the type of support, it does not want to take a firmer stand against the central government.

Brais Fernández There is a big difference here from the case of Scotland. The Spanish political elites are never going to bet on a democratic defeat of the independence movement (via a referendum). It goes against their political DNA. The constitution guarantees the unity of Spain by the army. The other main difference is the social base of the independence movement, which is the middle classes. The only way for them to resolve the issue would be through

disobedience and ultimately open confrontation with the Spanish state. This is not going happen. Esquerra Republicana and the Democratic Party (the main independence parties, centre-left and right) are not going to organize a social insurrection against the Spanish state.

Source : [Jacobin](#).

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