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Quebec

An Election Earthquake in Québec

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The political landscape in Québec changed radically last Monday for the first time since 1972. A radical left-wing party emerged as an unavoidable political force, a new right-wing populist party took power, and the old mainstream parties sustained historical defeats.

The Liberal Party of Québec—the main party of the capitalist class since 1867, in power for 84 of the past 151 years—received 25 percent of the vote, their all-time lowest result.

Parti Québécois (PQ), the only other party that has shared power with the Liberals in the past 50 years, was hit even harder. Not only did its share of the vote shrink to a meager 17 percent—also their all-time low—but it won only nine seats out of 125, ranking them fourth among parties in the National Assembly.

This defeat of traditional establishment parties is bittersweet. It expresses the true anger of the majority against austerity measures applied by both parties and the sorry state in which they left the public education system and health services.

The Rise of Right-Wing Populism

But most people in search of change decided to trust a new right-wing formation, the Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), led by former businessman and millionaire François Legault.

With 37 percent of the vote, in an election with the second-lowest turnout rate in a century, the CAQ has a weak mandate. The desire for change is obvious, but enthusiasm for the new party is low.

Still, thanks to Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system, the CAQ now holds an absolute majority of seats in the legislative assembly, and it is likely to unleash disastrous regressive measures.

The CAQ is a party with two dangerous features shared by both Donald Trump's Republican Party and Doug Ford's Conservatives in Ontario: it pushes Islamophobic and anti-immigrant lies and is eager to pursue neoliberal cuts and tax breaks for the rich.

Contrary to many new populist parties, the CAQ did not use these as wedge issues. They knew their popularity was less due to a mass support for their policies than a vote of protest against the establishment. They therefore ran a campaign as a centrist catchall party.

But many fear that once in power, they will attack immigrant rights and adopt Islamophobic policies to satisfy their right-wing base.

An Electoral Gain for the Left

On the other side of the spectrum, Québec Solidaire (QS), a broad-left party with radical roots, won some surprising victories.

Winning in 10 ridings, or districts, QS is now the largest left-wing party in the legislative assembly, passing its nationalist rival, the Parti Québécois. For the first time in its history, QS also managed to win seats outside of the Montréal region.

So while its share of the popular vote was still low at 15 percent, QS is in a good position to be the main catalyzer of left-wing opposition to the new government.

In this context, many observers viewed this election as the first in which the issue of independence wasn't the main dividing issue since the 1970s.

But it would be more precise to say that the issue of Québec's independence has been mostly pushed aside since the beginning of the 2000s. Support for sovereignty has been declining for the past 20 years, especially among the younger generations.

Parti Québécois, forced to confront this reality, has consistently avoided the question of independence during election campaigns. While it was still committed to this goal, the party realized that downplaying this issue was the best way to keep power.

PQ tried to keep its monopoly as the only alternative to the Liberals in order to capitalize on political discontent. This helped the party to maintain a left-wing veneer, and it took up the moderate demands of the labour movement, the student strikes and community group activism.

But at the same time, the nationalist strategists of the PQ were looking for new ways to increase support for Québec independence. They slowly turned toward Islamophobic rhetoric from 2007 onward, depicting immigration as the main threat to Québec's culture and values.

This strategy ultimately backfired in the most recent election. The PQ did manage to add to a conservative nationalist current in Québec, but this nationalism no longer requires independence. It was possible to propose a nationalist, xenophobic policy while maintaining the constitutional status quo—which is specifically what the CAQ proposed.

The switch from PQ to CAQ was therefore natural for many. Independence has not been a main question in elections for 20 years now. The most recent election, therefore, does not stand out in this regard, but rather marks the end of Québec politics being confined to a battle between two parties: the Liberals and PQ.

New Openings for the Activist Left?

Despite the bleak outcome of a right-wing party taking power, the most recent election will open paths forward for the left.

The low participation rate, the defeats for the two establishment parties and the weak mandate for CAQ are demonstrating a desire for change, mixed with cynicism. A majority of Québécois have the feeling that things need to change—that economic inequality and climate change are major threats of this century. But they don't yet see a way

forward. They are giving CAQ a chance, but they are likely to be disappointed.

If Québec Solidaire can tap in this disappointment, there is a real possibility for a radical left-wing government in the province after the next election in 2022.

This possibility is small, yet it exists, and it is both a curse and a blessing.

Québec Solidaire is a broad-left party, defending a reformist program strongly rooted in the anti-neoliberal, anti-austerity and anti-globalization social movements since the 2000s. Its leadership and parliamentary wing is composed of former organizers and activists from labour unions, the student movement, feminist organizations, and community and ecological groups.

But those origins and composition don't shield Québec Solidaire from the pressures of the electoral game. It will be very tempting for the leadership of the party to moderate its discourse and to accept the centrist liberal "common sense" also promoted by the media sphere in order to take a shortcut to mainstream respectability.

This pressure is always present in electoral politics, and QS has been mostly able to remain close to its original principles. But the opportunity for fast, short-term growth will increase this pressure tremendously.

Furthermore, if QS were to take power in four years' time, it isn't clear how ready the party would be to implement its program. Coming from a left that was accustomed to losing, there have been no real debates or reflections on what would happen if the party was to win office.

The Ecosocialist Network "a small Marxist group operating inside the party" tried to spark a conversation on the obstacles that any left-wing government encounters: resistance from the capitalist class, bad press, investor strikes and so on.

But those considerations are still marginal among the membership and the leadership. Without a solid plan, QS is likely to repeat the same kind of betrayals that many social-democratic parties commit after taking power.

In the meanwhile, the new right-wing government will probably unleash some of the most neoliberal and racist attacks in recent history. A barrage of social movements will be necessary to stem the worst of it.

It will be crucial to avoid the temptation of postponing resistance to the electoral arena. Only through direct struggles, anchored deeply in the communities, is it possible to achieve strong class consciousness on a mass scale.

The next years are likely to be eventful in Québec. Possibilities are opening up for the left, but there are also serious threats.

Socialists will have many tasks ahead: getting involved in social movements, organizing day-to-day direct resistance, fighting for internal democracy inside Québec Solidaire, keeping it true to its program and making sure QS has a plan if it takes power.

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