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Portugal

The Breakthrough for the Left Bloc

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In the elections that were held on February 20th, Portugal turned left. For the first time in thirty years of democracy, the Socialist Party (PS), with 45 per cent of the vote, has an absolute majority in Parliament. However, this electoral advance did not take place at the expense of the parties to its left: the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), though still far from its results of 1999, managed to slow down its irreversible electoral decline and the Left Bloc (BE, Bloco de Esquerda) made an unprecedented breakthrough, going from 3 to 8 MPs.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/bloco1.gif>]

The Bloc is also the only party to come out of the elections with a parliamentary group where there is parity between men and women, four men and four women. [1]

The rejection of the Right attained catastrophic proportions: the Social Democratic Party (PSD) got no more than 28.7 per cent and the Popular Party (PP), an ultra-conservative party that supported the preceding government, went down to 7.3 per cent. Three years of policies that violently attacked workers' rights and the right to a job, leading to a sharp rise in poverty and a regression towards retrograde values, all this being reinforced by the mistake of nominating Santana Lopes to head the government, explain these results. Public opinion provoked the collapse of the coalition and also the collapse of the leaderships of the parties involved in it.

It was the policies of austerity, of creating job insecurity and of undermining public services, of criminalizing abortion and of war that were routed. It was the policy of indifference in the face of unemployment that lost. On February 20th, 2005, the Portuguese people demanded change.

Collapse of the Right

The legislative elections of 20th February 2005 did not take place in a context of political normality. When the Right only won 33 per cent of the votes in the 2004 European elections [2], the then Prime Minister, Durao Barroso, who claimed at the time to have understood the significance of the vote of the Portuguese people, decided to flee his responsibilities and took off in the direction of the presidency of the European Commission. As he left, he sought to avoid the legislative elections being brought forward, and he obtained guarantees to that effect from the President of the Republic, the Socialist Jorge Sampaio. In spite of the opinion of the majority of the population, the President then refused to call elections and allowed Barroso to hand over to his party's number two, the Mayor of Lisbon, Pedro Santana Lopes. This "monarchic" method, which the people disapproved of, and the populist profile, as well as the lack of political consistency, of the new Prime Minister were enough to reinforce the demand for new elections.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/FranciscoLoucaInacioRosa01.jpg>]

The left Bloc's best known leader, Francisco Louca

The six months of Santana Lopes's government were punctuated by a succession of gaffes and incidents. Believing that exposure to the media would guarantee him a legitimacy that no one accorded him, the new Prime Minister presented on a daily basis on television proposals that were followed - without exception - by denials from the ministry concerned. Sullied by the scandal of the reopening of the schools after the summer holidays (which took place, for the first time ever, a month late) and characterised by an absolute necessity for editorial control of communication (going so far as to deny a short news item claiming that the Prime Minister had taken a siesta after a debate), this government plunged in the opinion polls and even lost the support of the elite of Lopes's own party, which began to criticise him in the press.

The control of communication, exercised in a way that was clumsily obvious, became a target for relentless criticism. The government underwent some changes: the Prime Minister kept some of his “old friends” away from the corridors of power and one of them, feeling offended, resigned. The government's lack of credibility had become so great that faced with this “downfall” the PP tried to avoid the demise that was being predicted by all the polls last year. Faced with this obvious incapacity of the right-wing coalition to conduct government business, the President of the Republic judged that fresh elections could be called.

However, in the conflict around the calling or not of new elections, the PS also lost its leader, Ferro Rodrigues, who resigned when his friend Sampaio nominated Santana Lopes after Durao Barroso's departure. The congress of the PS then chose José Socrates to be General secretary. Socrates chose to position his party in the centre. Furthermore, the new Socialist leader and now Prime Minister abandoned the Socialist Party's promise to repeal the Labour Code that had been adopted by the Right.

“Say something left, say something civic”

This celebrated challenge by the Italian filmmaker Nanni Moretti to Massimo d'Alema (leader of the Democratic Left in Italy) best sums up the centrist positioning adopted by the Socialists in order to win an absolute majority. While avoiding, as far as humanly possible, all the questions that were asked during the election campaign, the PS's strategy was to use popular discontent and the government's insensitivity to social questions to win over right-wing electors disappointed by the lack of credibility of Santana Lopes. Without committing themselves, in order not to risk losing a single potential elector, the Socialists were happy to wait for power to be served up to them on a plate. The Socialist Party abandoned the main political preoccupations of the Left and appealed for a “useful vote”, without even engaging a real political discussion.

The Bloc decided to confront this appeal by centring its campaign around two fundamental arguments. The first argument - “a Left you can trust” - concerned the Left Bloc and its concrete experience as a parliamentary group that had fought unrelentingly against the policies of privatization and destruction of public services that the Right was conducting. Because while the PS was spending its time opposing its own leaders, it was the Bloc's parliamentary group that showed itself to be capable, by a real resistance to neo-liberal aggressiveness, of best representing the social movements that were fighting back. It earned trust thanks to a struggle that was respected by the social Left.

The second argument consisted of putting forward political proposals that were contradictory with those of the PS; left-wing voters could then choose between two distinct policies, all the more so as the Bloc has always provided clear answers as far as its programme is concerned. The presentation of 10 priorities for the first 100 days made it possible to centre the electoral campaign on precise questions [3] for the first 100 days of a government committed to breaking from neo-liberal policies.

That was the case concerning jobs, professional training and qualifications, the revision of the Stability Pact, the reconstruction of the National Health Service, the legalisation of abortion, the legalisation of immigrants, measures against concentration in the media and reform of the judicial system. During the 40 days that the campaign lasted, these proposals were able to be discussed. More than 300 national union leaders and members of workers' commissions approved the measures proposed, demonstrating by so doing a change in the relationship of forces within the workers' movement.

These two reasons explain why the Right chose the Bloc as one of its main political opponents. In the first place, being accustomed to the weakness of the traditional opposition, it has never forgiven the Bloc for the role that it has played in the social movement against the war. In particular, the Right hasn't forgotten a poster of the Bloc that

became one of the icons of this resistance. This poster showed a “family photo” of Bush, Blair, Aznar and Barroso, during the summit of the Azores that decided on the war, with the phrase “They are lying, they are losing”. For the first time, the party in power devoted its television time and even its posters to denouncing a party that only had three MPs. In meetings and in the televised debates, the central argument of Santana Lopes's discourse consisted of denouncing a possible secret agreement between the Bloc and the Socialist Party, accusing the PS of handing the country over to “the radical Left that is against the European Union”.

The Right at a Loss

This strategic disorientation was the dominant feature of the campaign of the PSD, which chose to centre on the personalisation of its leader, something that had never happened before in Portuguese politics. The PSD was convinced that its leader, one of the main personalities in the columns of the women's magazines, was invincible. So the whole campaign was conducted around this “warrior child”! In the first stages of the electoral campaign, the PSD chose to “play the victim” faced with the decision of the President of the Republic; later, having become conscious of its threatening defeat, the party began to spread rumours and sordid insinuations about the supposed homosexuality of José Socrates. The PSD tried to exploit conservative family values, imitating in an uncritical way the Bush recipe and applying it to a country that wanted more than anything else to know what were the answers of the political parties to the grave social crisis. Finally, Santana changed direction by trying to take advantage of the emotion provoked among Catholic electors by the death of Sister Lucia, one of “those who saw” the vision at Fatima.

Faced with the debacle of the PSD's campaign, the Popular Party tried to distance itself from the dead weight of the government, by presenting itself as the guarantee of the stability of the Right. It believed that it could take advantage of the fall of the PSD to increase its vote to 10 per cent or even more. The drop in its electoral representation showed that it has no future.

The “Little Paulo of the fairgrounds” (that is how its leader Paulo Portas was known in the past) who devoted his electoral campaigns to saying that the Guaranteed Minimum Income was an “encouragement to laziness”, while at the same time playing on xenophobic attitudes towards Gypsy citizens, used to get more votes than the “Little Paulo” of today, who used his position in the state (he was Minister of Defence) to assert himself. The PP has no future and Paulo Portas resigned the day after the election saying that “in a democratic country we cannot accept that the Christian Democracy is overtaken by a Trotskyist party”.

The PCP: sectarian and opportunist at the same time

Having begun the electoral campaign with a new leader whose Stalinist ideas were not known to the Portuguese people, the Communist Party (PCP) got a good reception from the people and from the press. His working-class past and the fact that he had to abandon the only televised debate where all the leaders of the political parties were present, because of an acute loss of voice, enabled him to win a kind of popular sympathy that the PCP hadn't experienced for a long time.

During the campaign, the press spoke every day of the “dangers” that could materialize if the policies of a minority Socialist government depended on the vote of the MPs of the Bloc. So it did everything possible to stop the growth of the Bloc, considering it to be the main danger in these elections. That did not stop the hostility of the PCP towards the Bloc, which it designated, along with the Right, as the main enemy.

Although the Bloc had always stated that it didn't want a coalition with a minority PS government, being ready to vote only for proposals that accorded with its own, the PCP used the election campaign to say that the Bloc was going to give the Socialist Party a blank cheque. But at the same time the PCP announced that it was ready to form a government with the Socialist Party. In the last days of the campaign, the PCP even disqualified the Bloc's electors. This sectarianism provoked fragmentation on the left and clashed with the feelings of the PCP's electors.

The Bloc, a movement that is socially established

Although the whole of the Left made an electoral leap forward, the Bloc's leap was bigger than that of any other party, going from 150,000 to 365,000 votes. In most of the 22 electoral constituencies, the Bloc became the fourth political force: it came ahead of the Communist Party in Madeira, the Azores, Aveiro, Braganza, Guarda, Lenia, Oporto, Viana do Castelo and Viseu; and ahead of the Popular Party in Beja, Evora, Lisbon, Portalegre and Setubal. In Faro and Coimbra, it is the third party, just after the PS and the PSD. In 70 per cent of the towns and cities in the country, the Bloc is in fourth position and in more than 10 per cent of them it is the third political force. It obtained its best results in Entroncamento (12.8 per cent), Marinha Grande (11.5 per cent) and Setubal (11.5 per cent), towns that occupy a symbolic place in the Portuguese workers' movement, and where the industrial labour force still has a certain weight in the social composition of the electorate.

The electoral results illustrate for us the development of a tendency that was already foreshadowed in the last European elections, and confirm that the vote for the Bloc is no longer limited to certain towns of the big metropolitan zones, but is more evenly spread out across the whole country. In the zones with less than 5,000 electors, the Bloc won nearly 230,000 votes and an average of 8.5 per cent, whereas for the zones of more than 5,000 electors, the result was nearly 140,000 votes and an average of 5.7 per cent. This represents a radical change in comparison to the 2002 elections, when 60 per cent of the votes won by the Bloc came from zones of more than 5,000 electors.

On top of the vote in the big urban centres, the Bloc won many votes in towns in the majority of districts and autonomous regions, not to mention the rise in its vote in the rural and semi-rural zones. In every district there are towns where the vote for the Bloc doubled or tripled, not only in places where the service sector predominates, but also in those where industry still has an important weight.

The vote for the Bloc was characterized by the diversity of its popular audience, giving the lie to the systematic denigration of it by certain political journalists who have presented it, ever since it was founded, as a passing fashion of young urban elites, without social roots. The analysis of the results in the different constituencies indicates in any case the youthful profile of its voters. The percentage is often higher than 20 per cent among the youngest electors. However, given the increase in the number of the Bloc's electors, we can note a certain disparity between the oldest and the youngest voters. This new capacity to attract different sectors of the electorate is enabling the Bloc to develop a broader socio-cultural representativity.

Apparently, one idea seems to be being confirmed: no party owns the votes of its electors. The Bloc, with its popular profile, is today in a stronger position to confront the blackmail of the "useful vote" that has traditionally been used by the PS.

Build a socialist alternative

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The PS benefited from the appeal for stability that it made and from the position in the centre that it took up. That is why it received the support of both many important economic groups, supporters of privatisations, and of vast popular sectors who want to preserve social conquests. So its electoral base is heterogeneous and contradictory. The policy of its government will not represent a break with the model of liberal economy. The elections have created a mood of expectation. The PS is occupying the centre all on its own.

But the electoral results confirm that there is an enormous hope for change. The PS won an absolute majority, but the Left had a historic result, winning nearly two thirds of the seats in Parliament. The Left Bloc interprets these results as the expression of a desire for a break with the right-wing neo-liberal government, which was a partisan of privatisation and of the dismantling of the quality of public services.

The composition of the new Socialist government confirmed the worst expectations, in particular concerning the continuity of liberal policies. In several domains the government's decisions are still unknown, because there are no electoral commitments. The Ministers of the Economy and of Finances are liberal technocrats. We will have to closely examine the government's actions in order to know what its political orientations are.

Loyal to its electoral commitments, the Bloc will present to the Assembly of the Republic the main proposals that it made during the electoral campaign:

First of all, those which concern the revision of the Labour Code, by proposing new laws (without opposing the appointment of a working commission to establish a systematisation of labour legislation as a whole, so as to obtain the repeal of the code imposed by the former minister Bagao Felix).

The question of the decriminalisation of abortion represents for the Bloc the touchstone, because of its importance for democracy, of respect for human rights, and indeed of its symbolic character in Portuguese society. The hesitations of the new majority and the tendency to adjourn this question are giving the Right a new lease of life and represent an inadmissible punishment for woman. It's a waste of time!

Time is also being lost when measures are not brought forward against unemployment and against the poor quality of public services. Everything indicates that this government's "honeymoon" period will be time lost for urgent social questions.

The Left Bloc must also assert itself and increase its strength outside Parliament. As one of the forces of the modern socialist Left, it has to reconsider again its characteristics as a party/movement, with more roots, more representative from a social point of view, attentive to what is happening in public life. That is why the central theme chosen for the debates of the Fourth National Convention of the Bloc, which will be held in May, is: "The Bloc as a socialist alternative for the country". The trust that the electors have shown us subjects us to a much more demanding scrutiny, and forces us to respond more effectively to the social implantation of our party.

The results of the last elections have modified the party's profile: now the Bloc is a national party, young but also having penetrated older age groups, popular and no longer confined to the urban middle classes. The new forms of organization of the Bloc will have to reflect this new reality. The Bloc must link up with all the non-capitalist Lefts, and in the first place with those on the European scene. The network type of functioning of the parties of the alternative Left that belong to old and new social movements is a condition for the emergence of new modalities of action that are original and attractive; it also represents a way of exchanging emancipatory experiences where collective objectives intersect with personal and subjective fulfilment.

In Europe, in particular, we have to fight with renewed energy against the European constitutional treaty, but also against the directives that are proposing crippling 65-hour working weeks and that present flexibility in the

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deregulation of workplace relations as the only road to competitiveness.

The new political context is stimulating, and is allowing a new movement of participation in social life on the part of all the networks of social intervention. All the potential to put forward demands, in particular concerning unemployment and poverty, which was stifled by the power of the right, can now be expressed. Our commitment is exclusively to social struggle: social struggle is the only way to win victories against a government that has an absolute majority.

A PS government does not have a tranquillising effect on social struggles. On the contrary, the fight against this government gives a democratic dimension to the conflict. Faced with the present conjuncture, the fight to defend and widen the intervention of the state in social security, in health and in education will be the expression of antagonism to Socrates's rhetoric. The task of the Bloc in the coming years will be demanding, but also exciting. It will have to be capable of giving a voice to this discontent and of building the socialist opposition which will be able to refound the space to the left of the government Left.

[1] International Viewpoint n° 364, February 2005, published a dossier on the Left Bloc's electoral campaign - see ["The meaning of our electoral success"](#).

[2] See International Viewpoint 360/61, Autumn, 2004 ["Left Bloc elects first European deputy"](#).

[3] IVP 364 published the 10 priorities of the Left Bloc - see ["Socialist Party Set for Election Comeback?"](#).