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Poland

The choice of refusal

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Description:

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The right wing victory in Poland's parliamentary elections, held on September 25, 2005 [1] put an end to four years of government by the Democratic Left Alliance, [2] which had been characterized by growing pressure from neoliberal economic fundamentalism (liberalization of the Labour Code, the Hausner Plan, [3] reduction of company taxation, [4] plans to introduce a legal right to lock-outs), support for the US invasion of Iraq and a series of corruption scandals.



These elections however represent something more than a simple changeover of power in Poland. They have brought to light the scale of the social and political crisis in the country after 15 years of the restoration of capitalism. They have shown the growing potential of social protest, which has not found its expression in any of the parties present on the electoral scene nor even, more generally, within the framework of the system of institutionalized parties. If we take account of the fact that just less than 40% of those registered to vote did so, it can be said that the true victors in the parliamentary elections of 2005 were neither the conservatives of the Law and Justice party, [5] nor the neoliberal fundamentalists of the Civic Platform. [6] Perhaps in reality those who did not vote and thus demonstrated their will to reject the false alternatives produced by the Polish political class are the real victors.

Paradoxically the victory of the right does not at all reflect the real state of mind in Poland. Certainly, there is no doubt that the defeat of the post-Communist left was crushing and that it took considerable effort on the part of the SLD leaders to bring about such a fall in support for their party. It is necessary however to keep in mind that the PiS won not because it emphasized its rightist authoritarianism, but because at the last minute it decided to actively exploit the discourse of the left. The Kaczynski brothers thus succeeded in outflanking the smooth and not very concrete Donald Tusk, stating clearly their will to defend social rights, their opposition to the lowering of the taxes of the richest and the increase of VAT on food, medicine and other basic necessities, identifying themselves with the ethos of Solidarnosc through the imagery of the capital "S" [7] and the Christian democratic idea of social solidarity.

But the effectiveness of the social phraseology of the PiS and the high score registered by the clearly anti-neoliberal Samoobrona, [8] only represent the tip of the iceberg.

Taking account of the fact that the SLD won less than a quarter of its vote of 2001, the mood in the party would have to be morose. One might have expected that the social-democrats would be at least concerned by the perspective which looms before the great majority of citizens of the Third Republic, governed by the conservative and neoliberal coalition of the PiS and PO. But television showed the delighted faces of the SLD when they learned that their party had won nearly 11% of the votes, instead of the 7% predicted. This reaction bears witness to the fact that this formation: is incapable of learning anything whatsoever from its most stinging defeat. Even putting aside the fact that this supposedly renovated social-democracy had presented on its lists old warhorses thoroughly implicated in the "success" of the Miller team, [9] like Ryszard Kalisz, Jerzy Szmajdzinski or Krzysztof Janik, [10] it should be said that the joy shown by a defeat slightly smaller than had been predicted witnesses to the real centres of interest of the SLD politicians, not to mention their specific mentality. A vote of 11% guarantees the SLD leaders seats in the Diet for the next four years, but removes the left from any real influence on the orientations of the country. Knowing that this will have no practical effect, Olejniczak, Napieralski, [11] Szmajdzinski and Janik can defend the workers, the retired and those that they refer to in their neoliberal Newspeak as the weakest. They have already said so! The problem is that

they also make it clear that in reality this defence has a completely instrumental character, amounting to nothing other than political marketing and that they will abandon this left phraseology when they have a new chance to govern. It's sad, but all the celestial and terrestrial signs indicate that for them of the allegedly renewed SLD what was most important was getting back into the Diet for one more legislature. Their attitude is typical of an alienated political class. They have shown that politics for them is a parlour game and not the real confrontation of interests and aspirations of diverse social groups.

However, the most important thing about these elections was the fact that in practice they were boycotted. The rate of participation is highly revealing of the dominant ambience in Poland 25 years after the foundation of "Solidarnosc" and 15 years after the restoration of capitalism. 60% of those registered to vote didn't bother to do so, or nearly 6% more than during the previous parliamentary elections. This means that the two parties that won in reality only enjoyed the support of 20% of the electorate (six out of 30 million voters voted for them). The voters thus conferred on them a formal rather than a real legitimacy.

Contrary to the claims of some experts, who lament an alleged political immaturity or worse still, detect hidden aspirations on the part of Polish society to a strong state, a high rate of abstention can be the sign of the strengthening of an emancipatory potential. It is very probable that the 20 million people who didn't vote have in no way indicated their lack of interest in politics and democracy. On the contrary!

The abstainers have made a very political choice. However, this choice does not fit into the narrow framework of the political scene. We might dare to say that the majority of those registered have voted in their fashion in not going to the polling stations and in refusing to participate in a spectacle where the main actors, the decorations and the scenario itself are repetitive, rotten and compromised. Even if only half of the abstainers made this choice consciously - and that would be true of a good part of the former voters of the left, unconvinced neither by the pseudo-alternative of Borowski [\[12\]](#) nor by the pseudo-renewal of Olejniczak - that would already be a political fact of great import. A new force has thus manifested itself, which, sooner or later, will begin to seek more sovereign forms of articulation of its interests and its political aspirations.

For we have witnessed an immense rejection. Not only has the political class which appeared after 1989 been sanctioned, but also the form of capitalism that this class restored along the Vistula has been rejected. We can thus say that the electors-abstainers (what a postmodernist term!) have revealed the limits and particularities of formal democracy and, in doing so, have shaken its foundations. That does not mean that they have expressed authoritarian aspirations, as claimed by the frightened partisans of the system. It resembles more a protest against the democratic deficit, against the alienation of the political class and against the neoliberal consensus which unified all the main parliamentary forces in the area of economic strategy.

Employing a somewhat philosophical language, it could be said that in reality we are witnessing a massive rejection of the mirage of formal liberty offered to us by bourgeois democracy. That freedom authorizes us to choose only within a framework determined by the relationship of forces which characterizes capitalist society. The choice that we are allowed is among the neoliberal partisans of capitalism, the conservative partisans of capitalism and the socialist partisans of capitalism. The domination of capital over labour is in this framework the real foundation of pluralism, silently admitted. In the final instance this means that the parties come to resemble each other and the political spectrum is increasingly narrow.

This tendency can be less insupportable when social forces limit seriously the power of capital, as was the case not so long ago in Western Europe. Today this system still survives, even if it is increasingly decadent under the blows of globalization. In countries like Poland, things are much worse. The neoliberal offensive which has gathered force for 15 years, the pacification of the unions and workers' resistance has led to such an interpenetration of political and economic elites, that the democratic institutions appear increasingly to the citizens as a mere façade which hides the

dictatorship of finance capital.

It is in these conditions that the voters have chosen to reject this façade. They have said no to the ritual of formal democracy denuded of real social content and they have made the choice of real freedom. They have demanded a change in the rules of the game, a change in the principles of choice and the articulation of political forces. They have emphasized what everybody in Poland - except perhaps Donald Tusk - knows perfectly: because of the alienation of the political class and its distance from social life, decisions about who will be in the Diet do not depend on the social implantation of the candidates but on their access to resources to finance their electoral campaigns, i.e. their arrangements with capital. And it is not those who represent real social interests who enter the Diet but those who have the resources to get themselves elected; the Polish parliamentary system is founded on a mechanism of negative selection, which means that the whole political scene is not representative (that is, it only represents the interests of the privileged).

For several years independent economists have argued that in Poland we are in the process of restoring the model of peripheral capitalism and that this is accompanied by the reconstruction of unequal relations between the Polish economy and the centres of world capitalism in the EU and USA. The recent elections have indicated that this process of "peripheralization" also characterizes the political scene.

These elections have shown that, as in the classic countries of peripheral capitalism like Brazil or Venezuela, the entire Polish political class is compromised. The characteristic trait of the political systems of Latin America is that the difference between the conservatives and social liberals in no way challenges the corrupt character of the system. We are talking here, of course, of corruption with a capital "C", that is the dependence of the political class on capital and its subordination through the privatization of the system of finances and not of some individual cases of corruption, like those which have overshadowed the SLD and which constitute the favourite theme of the Kaczynski brothers. If the resemblance of the political scene in Poland to the dominant relations in Latin America constitutes in many ways a fact (and under globalization we should take such facts seriously), perhaps then is also on the other side of the ocean that we should seek inspiration to determine the issues in the current situation. Just as in Latin America, a true alternative to the current relationship of the dominant forces in Poland can only come from outside of the current parliamentary system, from the sphere of social movements and in particular from the mobilization and resistance of the workers.

The Polish left has no need today of games around the leadership of the parliamentary opposition. It needs to meet the challenge which the huge electoral rejection constitutes. Its task should be to furnish a political vector to this rejection. The abyss which separates the perspectives necessary for the realization of this task from the attitude adopted by Wojciech Olejniczak does not give rise to optimism. It means that the construction of the culture of democratic self-organization - which has always been, is and will be the foundation of a genuine left - remains a task to be accomplished. And one of a burning relevance.

We have taken this article from the weekly supplement "Impuls" number 56 of the Polish daily "Trybuna" of September 29, 2005.

[1] The elections were marked by a particularly low rate of participation: 40.57% of those registered actually voted, 39.05% cast a valid vote.

The results gave victory to the two parties of the right, Law and Justice (PiS, conservative), with 26.99% of votes cast and 155 seats in the Diet, and the Civic Platform (PO, ultra-neoliberal), 24.14% and 133 seats.

The far right Catholic formation, the League of Polish Families (LPR), won 7.97% and 34 seats. Note that of the two rural (peasant) parties, it was the more radical and the more forthright in its anti-neoliberal discourse, Samoobrona (Self-defence) which came first (11.41% and 56 seats), ahead of the Popular Party (PSL - 6.96% and 25 seats). The German minority reelected its two deputies, while only winning 0.29% of votes cast.

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The Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD), which had won 41% of the votes in 2001 and had governed since then, was particularly punished, only winning 11.31% of the votes and 55 seats.

Finally the Democratic Party, founded in February 2005 by the neoliberals of the former Union of Liberty, which groups historic leaders of the anti-bureaucratic opposition (like the former clandestine Solidarnosc leader, Wladyslaw Frasnyski, union expert Bronislaw Geremek and former prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki), and supported by the outgoing Prime Minister Marian Belka (ex-SLD), only won 2.45% of the vote (and no seats).

In the same way the Polish Social Democracy - a split from the SLD and the Union of Labour - created in March 2004, was eliminated with 3.89%. Thus the attempts of the political elites responsible for the capitalist restoration to find a second life have again foundered.

Note finally that in the first round of the presidential election (October 9, 2005) only 49.210 of those registered cast a valid vote.

[2] The Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD) emerged from the former dominant bureaucratic party - the Polish United Workers' Party.

[3] The Hausner Plan, named after Jerzy Hausner, minister of the economy and vice prime minister who resigned on March 31, 2005 to join the Democrat Party (when the polls predicted there was little chance of the SLD electing any deputies...) is an austerity plan adopted by the government of Leszek Miller (SLD) and implemented by the government of Marek Belka, for the years 2004-2007. It involves a significant reduction of state social expenditure, "restructuring" (i.e. partial privatization and/or liquidation) of the publicly owned railways and mines as well as public health, a reduction of subsidies and a reduced army budget. It should also lead to a reduction of jobs in administration. Finally it challenges the structure of social security, in particular help for the handicapped.

[4] In 2004 the government reduced company taxation from 27% to 19%.

[5] Law and Justice (PiS, Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc - the term "prawo" means both "right" and "law" in Polish) is led by the twins Jaroslaw and Lech Kaczynski, former advisors to Lech Walesa. This party, which holds power in Warsaw, began its campaign by a violently anti-Communist propaganda for a purge and ended it with a populist discourse, which allowed it to overtake the Civic Platform (PO).

[6] The Civic Platform (PO) is an ultra-neoliberal right wing party, whose campaign was centred on the need to reduce income tax and increase VAT, in particular for basic necessities which benefit from a lower rate, around the slogan of a "flat tax".

[7] "S" is known as the historic symbol of the "Solidarnosc" trade union.

[8] Samoobrona (Self-defence) is a new agrarian party which presented candidates for the first time at the parliamentary elections of 2001. It was initially a peasant organization - above all the middle peasantry, which became indebted in the course of the 1980s. It has organized numerous struggles, road blockades and so on, appearing as a radical opposition to neoliberal policies.

[9] Before becoming head of the government (2001-2004), Leszek Miller had formed a clique which seized the leadership of the SLD.

[10] Ryszard Kalisz was interior minister in the outgoing government. Jerzy Szmajdzinski was the minister of defence in the same government. Krzysztof Janik, ex-interior minister of the Miller government, resigned in January 2004 to become interim president of the SLD and candidate for this post; he was not elected in December 2004 and is currently head of the SLD parliamentary group.

[11] Wojciech Olejniczak, agriculture minister in the outgoing government, was elected on May 29, 2005 as president of the SLD. Grzegorz Napieralski is secretary general of the SLD.

[12] Marek Borowski, president of the Diet (SLD), former finance minister and vice prime minister (1993-1994), former chancellor under the Oleksy government (1995-1996), headed a group of leaders of the party who, in March 2004, left it to form the Polish Social Democracy. This social-liberal party won some European seats but was crushed at the parliamentary elections of September 2005.