

Surge in Portugal's Left Bloc Puts Socialist Party on the Spot

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Will Portugal finally see the end of austerity as administered for four years by the right-wing coalition (known as Portugal Ahead) composed of the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) and Democratic and Social Centre-People's Party (CDS-PP)?

In the country's [legislative October 4 elections](#) this governing alliance, running for the first time as a single ticket called Portugal Ahead (except on the Azores), won the elections, but with only 38.4 per cent of the vote (down from 50.4 per cent at the 2011 national election). Of the 5.4 million Portuguese who voted, 739,000 turned their back on the outgoing government, leaving it with only 107 seats in the 230-seat parliament (down 25). As a result, the PSD-CSD alliance, which boasted during the election campaign of being the most reliable tool of the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund), could even lose government.

Some of the votes lost to the right would have joined the ranks of the 4.27 million abstaining (an increase of 238,000 in a country of 9.68 million voters): this 44.1 per cent abstention rate was the highest since the 1974 Carnation Revolution overthrew the dictatorship of António Salazar and his successor Marcelo Caetano.

A lot would have gone to the Socialist Party (PS), which governed the country from 2005 until 2011. However, the total PS vote increased by only 4.3 per cent, from 28 per cent to 32.3 per cent (180,000 votes extra), giving it 86 seats (12 more). The PS even failed to beat Portugal Ahead in Lisbon, where PS leader António Costa was mayor before becoming PS leader earlier this year.

The Two Major Parties

This result showed that, despite Costa's woolly anti-austerity rhetoric, the party is still distrusted among many voters for bringing the austerity of the Troika into Portugal in 2011.

The PS also failed to shake off its image as the party of the political caste, an image reinforced by the arrest of José Sócrates, the former prime minister, on corruption charges at the end of last year. As a result, while the PS won many votes from Portugal Ahead, it also lost many to abstention and to its left.

Due to Portugal Ahead's losses and the PS's very partial recovery, Portugal's "parties of government" achieved their worst joint result since 1985 (70.7 per cent). At the same time, the parties to their left – principally the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) and the Left Bloc (BE) – won their highest ever score (18.4 per cent). Overall, the broadly defined parties of the left, including the PS and smaller forces that failed to win seats, won over 55 per cent of

the vote.

Within the left, very few of the lost PS vote went to United Democratic Coalition (CDU), the coalition of the PCP and the Green Ecological Party (PEV). It scored only 4000 more votes than in 2011, going from 7.9% to 8.3% (16 to 17 seats) because of the fall in participation.

Some disillusioned PS voters would also have supported People Animals Nature (PAN), which entered the parliament for the first time with 1.4 per cent and one seat.

Left Bloc: The Vote

The big winner from popular disgust with Portugal Ahead and distrust of the PS was the Left Bloc, the radical coalition which began life in 1999 as an electoral alliance of three parties coming from Trotskyist, Maoist and dissident PCP backgrounds. The Left Bloc vote nearly doubled, from 5.2% to 10.2% (289,000 voters to 551,000), giving it 19 seats (11 more), its best ever result. The Bloc is now the third force in the Portuguese parliament.

The radical party-movement boosted its representation in the main urban areas and regions alike, including for the first time on the tax-haven island of Madeira. It now has MPs from ten of Portugal's 20 electoral districts, doubling its result in 2011 and surpassing its previous best result (2009) by three seats.

In terms of seats, the Bloc's biggest gains were in the northern coastal city of Oporto (from 2 to 5) and the capital Lisbon (from 3 to 5). It doubled its representation in Setubal (from 1 to 2) and recovered all other seats it had lost in the 2011 election.

The two high-water marks of the Bloc's advance were Oporto and Madeira, where it built on its gains in winning two seats in the March election to the regional parliament. It was from these two regions that the Bloc's three extra seats compared to its 2009 result came.

This Left Bloc's surge came as a shock because in polls during the year it averaged only 4.2 per cent. Even during the two weeks of the formal election campaign its poll rating averaged only 6.8 per cent, with higher scores only coming in the final week of campaigning. The Left Bloc was alone of the four major tickets in scoring higher than poll predictions. The result may well have surprised Bloc members themselves. In a July 30 interview with the French left weekly *Regards*, long-standing leader Fernando Rosas said "we hope to get 5 per cent of the vote."

The result is even more surprising given the crisis at the Left Bloc's Ninth National Convention in November last year: this saw the radical party-movement split in half over leadership and tactics toward the PS. To have hauled itself out of that crisis and poll ratings as low as 3.5 per cent to a score of over 10 per cent less than a year later is a remarkable achievement.

At the same time, none of various splits that the Left Bloc has suffered over the past five years, most importantly *Livre*, which advocated unconditional participation by the left in a PS government, had any success at this election.

Another failure was the Movement for the Earth, which could only manage 0.4% after scoring 7.1% in the May 2014 European elections.

Left Bloc: The Campaign

To achieve its gains the Left Bloc ran an aggressive campaign against the conservative government (“a government more German than the German government itself”) and featuring an appeal against resignation and a call for people to “[make a difference!](#)” (the campaign slogan).

In an October 5 article on the Spanish web site *Publico* Bloc MP Jorge Costa and leader Adriano Campos explained the reasons for the radical force’s success,

“The Left Bloc’s result reveals the strengthening of an anti-austerity camp that has been able to absorb the greater part of the votes lost by the right, as well as mobilising the support of many people unhappy with the PS. The firmness of our proposal to reverse the cuts imposed by the pro-Troika parties allowed the Left Bloc to strengthen its position and advance among the class that lives from work: we can see this clearly in the vote achieved on the outskirts of Lisbon (11%), Oporto (13%) and Setubal (13%).

“The confrontation pushed by Left Bloc spokesperson Catarina Martins exposed the PS’s freezing of pensions and earned the support of a part of the pensioners and of people who depend on social security payments to avoid falling into extreme poverty.

“By confronting head-on the consequences of a clash with a European Union dominated by Merkel and thus opening a serious and coherent discussion on the question of the euro, the Left Bloc re-won popular confidence in a socialist alternative that breaks with the powers-that-be.”

The argument against the Bloc by the outgoing prime minister and Portugal Ahead leader Pedro Passos Coelho – that the acceptance of the third memorandum conditions imposed on the Greek SYRIZA government by the Troika proved that “there is no alternative” to austerity – fell flat in the face of the Left Bloc’s position on the issue. Fernando Rosas explained it in his *Regards* interview:

“We have publicly drawn our conclusions from this episode [of Greece’s acceptance of the memorandum]: firstly, that it is impossible to carry out an anti-austerity policy in the framework of the euro. Secondly, the Eurozone is a sort of dictatorship that prevents European countries from making democratic choices. We want to renegotiate the debt and, if necessary, we would be prepared to exit the euro.

“We will not make Tsipras’s mistake of getting into negotiations without a Plan B. But we don’t want to publicly criticise SYRIZA. Our official position is that we must be ready to leave the euro if negotiations over the debt come to nothing. Our position has to be presented in a very pedagogical fashion because the Portuguese are very attached to Europe and the euro.

“Thus, we don’t say: ‘Our program is to leave the euro.’ Rather we say: ‘Our program is to renegotiate the debt’. If that doesn’t work, we have to be prepared to leave the euro.”

Rosas further explained:

“[The dictatorship of] Salazarism meant misery and oppression for the Portuguese people. Here Europe is very much associated with democracy. This association between Europe and democracy means we have to be very prudent.

“[Former Bloc spokesperson] Francisco Louçã, who is an economist, is working on this

scenario: we are in the process of developing studies on the issue.”

The Bloc also stood out for the leadership of women in its campaign. Besides Martens, the only woman leader of Portugal’s major parties, the Left Bloc’s message was forcefully carried by economist and MP Mariana Mortágua, well-known in Portugal for relentless questioning of Banco do Espírito Santo executives over the collapse of the bank and for exposing an attempt of the conservative government to restore life-time pensions for MPs via the small print of the national budget.

What Government?

Portugal is now in the midst of a complex game of negotiations over which party or parties will form government. No early solution is likely in which the PS is racked with differences over what it really wants and all parties are manoeuvring to make their rivals pay the highest political price for failure.

For the PDS-CDS, failure would be the formation of a left coalition government or a PS minority government supported from outside by the PCP and/or the Left Bloc. For the right of the PS, failure would be a left PS minority government too vulnerable to support from its left.

The possible scenarios are:

- A repeat of the PDS-CDS alliance as minority government. This would require the PS to at least abstain on a motion of opposition from the Left Bloc and/or PCP-PEV.
- A German-style “grand coalition” between the PDS-CDS and PS. This would require a comprehensive written program for government between the partners.
- A minority PS government. This would require a minimum agreement with the Left Bloc and PCP-PEV, with at least one supporting it and the other abstaining against the opposition of the PDS-CDS.
- Some sort of left government, including the PS and one or both of the Left Bloc and PCP-PEV. If only a two-party agreement, the party not participating would have to agree to at least abstain on its formation.

A major variable in the game is the attitude of the conservative Portuguese president Cavaco Silva, who can be expected to put maximum pressure on the PS to come to terms with the PDS-CDS.

In their *Público* interview Costa and Campos described the prospect:

“Everything indicates that the President of the Republic will allow the formation of a minority government of the right, which will need the abstention of the PS to approve its basic axes (government program, budgets). This scenario will produce a deep crisis in the PS, which is wedded to the pro-austerity policies of the European socialists and with António Costa announcing the calling of a special congress [in March 2016, after the presidential elections].”

Costa is partially hostage to his demand in the final stages of the election campaign for the Left Bloc and PCP to join the SP in a broad anti-Portugal Ahead alliance. What would be the basic points of agreement for such an coalition?

For the Left Bloc the bottom line for any agreement with the PS is action on jobs, wages and pensions, including cuts to an income tax surcharge. After discussions with the PS on October 11 Catarina Martins said that agreement was possible, an assessment shared by Costa himself, who said that “the conditions exist that would allow this agreement to take place.”

At the same time, however, the PS leader made clear that the PS would abstain on the formation of a PDS-CDS minority government if it had no governmental alternative to offer. In this way he is pressuring the Left Bloc and PCP to demand as little as possible if they want to see a PS or left-coalition government.

Both the Left Bloc and PCP are intent on getting rid of the right-wing government, with the PCP prepared to vote for a PS government even without any agreement on a joint program with the PCP itself. The negotiating position of the Left Bloc does not require the PS to make any commitment to pursue debt restructuring – its position is for a European conference on the debt.

PCP secretary Jerónimo de Sousa told an October 17 mass meeting in Lisbon that “one thing is certain: nothing is stopping the PS from forming government and starting work...Even in a scenario where the PS insists on its own program and it would not be possible to find a convergence on a government program – which in fact would not be easy – not even then can it be concluded that the solution is a PSD-CDS government.

“The problem is in knowing whether the PS will choose between giving backing and support to the formation of a PSD-CDS government or whether it will take the initiative to form a government which has the conditions for its inauguration and operation guaranteed.

“What really counts and determines the solution of the problem of forming governments are the majorities that form in the Assembly of the Republic and give support to a government, not the party that has the most votes.”

As for the PSD-CDS, it has indicated that it prepared to accept a number of the points in the PS election program in exchange for PS support. The PS counterattack was to demand more information on the state of government finances, provoking in turn an attack from the PDS-CDS to the effect that Costa was “generating alarm over the present situation and future prospects of the country.”

Alarm Bells Among the Elites

Costa’s comments after meeting with the Left Bloc and PCP have set off alarm bells within the Portuguese and European establishment and within the PS right wing itself. Former prime minister and European Commission president José Manuel Durao Barroso said: “I know one thing. Socialist voters didn’t vote PS so that it would form a government with the PCP and the Left Bloc.”

José Luís Carneiro, PS Oporto federation president, said: “The proposals in the PS’s electoral program that a majority of the PSD-CDS is prepared to accept...show that it is possible to guarantee the international commitments of the Portuguese state and marry intelligent and sustained competitiveness with social justice.”

On October 14, Francisco Assis, a PS MP in the European Parliament opted for a minority government of the right as the way out of the PS’s conundrum: “The best solution for the PS

and the country is that it takes on the leadership of the opposition in the national assembly.”

By contrast, former presidential candidate Manuel Alegre said: “At this moment a government of the PS, PCP and Left Bloc is what guarantees stability and is the alternative that has a parliamentary majority,” adding that a left government “is a democratic solution.”

As this article is being finished, the debate over who should form government in Portugal has broken out at European levels, with Joseph Daul, the president of the European People’s Party (representing most mainstream conservative forces in the European Parliament) saying that “the sacrifices of the Portuguese people cannot be put at risk by a government composed of parties with anti-European Union and anti-NATO positions.”

The thought of ‘losing Portugal’, even to a moderate left coalition that questions austerity and puts the question of debt negotiation on the table, has “Brussels” worried. It had appeared, with the humiliation and taming of the SYRIZA government, that things were going reasonably well for the European establishment – even though it confronts a very testing challenge in Catalonia and with the Spanish December 20 elections.

The possible destruction of its very reliable pillar of support in Portugal is an outcome it could really do without – especially as it would lift morale across the left in the Spanish state and strengthen the feeling that the days of the most right-wing enforcers of austerity are numbered. •

Dick Nichols is *Green Left Weekly*’s European correspondent, based in Barcelona. This article first appeared on [Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#) website.

Appendix: Excerpt from post-election speech by Catarina Martins (October 4)

“(…) The Left Bloc had today its best result ever. We had more votes, more mandates, more strength than ever.

We understand the people’s vote and we take on board the responsibility that was given to us.

We were the vote of trust for workers, young and retired people. I thank that trust of more than half a million voters and I tell you all: the Bloc will keep and honour its word.

That’s why I am here to talk to you about the future.

The right-wing coalition is certainly the most voted candidacy, but they shouldn’t celebrate when they have lost 30 MPs and more than half a million of votes. Together, PSD and CDS don’t have enough votes to privatize social security or to cut pensions. A new majority Passos Coelho and [CDS leader] Paulo Portas government was rejected by democracy and nothing of what they will say will cover up the defeat.

If the President, either because of party affiliation [PSD] or lack of attention to the vote, invites that government, you all should know that the Left Bloc will honour its words and – this is our mandate – reject in parliament the governmental program which means making Portugal poorer.

The voters didn't choose austerity and sacrifice; the voters said that austerity and sacrifice were already enough. The majority wanted a change and they have a right to that change.

We will now wait for the answer of the other left-wing parties because our responsibility is huge...

Portugal needs an emergency plan that brings resources together. It needs to heal the wounds of poverty, it needs investment, it needs to increase the minimum wage, it needs to end the threat of pension cuts.

Portugal needs the peace and the certainty that we are doing our best against financial blackmail, because our debt needs to be restructured in order to have public health, education and stability for the pensioners.

We will have hard days and years. A lot will be said about political crisis, power games and tricks. But the Left Bloc never forgets what's truly essential: the social crisis, people's lives and difficulties, one child out of three living in poverty, one million unemployed, and more than one million pensioners who live on less than ten euros a day to pay the rent, food and taking care of themselves. These are the problems that concern our country. I want to give you my solemn guarantee: the Bloc will not give up on Portugal, will not give up on those who work here or have worked here before. We need to be firm, have a clear head and pay all attention to the essential thing: and the essential thing is employment.

Portugal will lose if our economy is not fixed in order to create jobs.

Portugal will win if it embraces democracy and reaffirms responsibility." •

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