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Spain's Socialists May Have Destroyed for Years the Chances of a Left-Wing Government

The party's leaders would rather see continued right-wing rule than form a progressive coalition with Podemos.

By Bécquer Seguín and Sebastiaan Faber
November 4, 2016

On October 29, four months after the most recent parliamentary elections, the Spanish parliament voted to reelect Mariano Rajoy, head of the conservative Partido Popular (PP), as the country's prime minister. Rajoy's minority government, sworn in today, is poised to continue a politics of austerity and privatization that, at its peak, left more than one in four Spaniards jobless. And it is thanks to the center-left Socialist party (PSOE), Spain's second-biggest party, that he will get the opportunity. While two smaller parties—Ciudadanos, a young right-wing party, and Coalición Canaria, the longtime ruling regional party of the Canary Islands—supported Rajoy, the key votes were abstentions. Four-fifths of the PSOE's deputies followed a party mandate to abstain, despite the fact that the party had campaigned on the promise to push Rajoy out. The other fifth kept its word, voting "no" in open defiance of their own party's most recent conservative turn. The result: For the first time in Spain's democracy, a prime minister has been elected with the help of the primary opposition party. Instead of a "grand coalition" between the center right and the center left, as Europe has seen in Germany or the Netherlands, the Socialist party appears to have self-destructed in order to pave the way for a continuation of conservative rule.

The Socialists' divided vote stated the obvious: The party's institutional fabric is tearing at the seams. The thread that once tied together the rank and file and the party elite—which includes many, such as former Prime Minister Felipe González, who helped orchestrate the country's transition to democracy after the death of dictator Francisco Franco—is quickly coming undone. The decision to let Rajoy continue was spun by Socialist leaders as a necessary sacrifice for the sake of ending a 315-day political deadlock. After two general elections, Spain's fragmented parliament had been unable to forge a governing coalition. A failure to elect a prime minister last weekend would have automatically triggered the third election in thirteen months, an option that would have gone against the wishes of two-thirds of Spaniards.

In early October, then PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez, who had vowed to vote against Rajoy, was effectively forced to resign as a result of party elites' increasingly favorable view of abstention. A cabal of party heavyweights with deep ties to the country's corporate and media establishment selected a managing committee to take over the party reins and, last week, that committee asked its parliamentarians to abstain, despite pleas from numerous representatives of Catalonia and other regions. The committee's reasons for choosing abstention were largely unstated but clear enough. After obtaining the party's worst-ever result in December and losing even more votes in June, a third election would only have accelerated the PSOE's decline. But there was a more likely motive: In the eyes of the Socialist chieftains, forming a progressive coalition to end conservative rule in Spain would have been more dangerous to the party's future. Such a coalition would have included Podemos, which allied with the longstanding United Left for the June elections to form Unidos Podemos ("United We Can"), and smaller parties from Catalonia and the Basque Country that favor increased self-rule or even independence—options anathema to a party leadership and to a good part of the rank and file, particularly in the central and southern parts of the country where "the unity of Spain" is as sacred as it is for the right.

According to a Metroscopia poll, more Socialist voters opposed than supported prolonging a government by the PP. Yet a majority of the same voters, according to the poll, thought that abstaining was in the best interest of the party. Many of the party's voters feel a deep unease with the Socialists' main rival on the left, Podemos, Spain's two-year-old anti-austerity party, which the Socialists fear might soon overtake them. Some even preferred letting Rajoy's conservative party govern before allying with coalition that included Podemos. Even so, the managing committee never asked the party's member base directly whether it supported an abstention. Such consultations, they said, erode representative politics with plebiscite, a dangerous tendency they associate with Venezuela and, by extension, Podemos.

But the conservatism of the PSOE's elites goes beyond a desire to preserve the party and the country. What their support of Rajoy is really trying to preserve—possibly at the expense of the party itself—is what has come to be known as "the regime of 1978": a two-party political system based on clientelism, the collusion of political and corporate interests, and a forgetting of the country's fascist past. "The defenestration of Sánchez was the cowardly reaction of a party elite totally opposed to change of any kind," says Noelia Adánez, a writer and radio commentator. "The Socialist leadership categorically refuses to accept the end of the two-party system, the exhaustion of the social-democratic project, and the need for ideological renewal."
In his opposition to the party elites, the ousted Sánchez has curiously emerged as an anti-establishment figure for the disaffected left wing of the Socialist party, despite his textbook rise

as a member of the party establishment. Hours before the investiture vote last week, he called a press conference and dramatically renounced his seat in Parliament, while vowing to run in the party's next primaries. The next day, in a long, televised interview with the journalist Jordi Évole that was viewed by 3.5 million Spaniards, a clearly shaken Sánchez moved into confessional mode: He had been wrong to dismiss Podemos as populist, he said, and had been directly pressured by the media and corporate leadership—specifically, *El País* and the CEO of telecommunications giant Telefónica—to steer clear of any progressive coalition with Podemos.

Rajoy's new cabinet confirms his intention to stay the course. Tellingly, his VP and ministers of finance, economy, and employment remain unchanged. Among the half-dozen cabinet members who have been replaced is Jorge Fernández Díaz, the interior minister and member of Opus Dei who earlier this year was revealed to have conspired with the head of Catalonia's anti-fraud office to fabricate scandals against the leadership of the two major pro-independence Catalan parties.

The PP's prolongation in power is a stinging defeat for Spain's progressives, who had hoped to lead the European Union away from the austerity policies that have brought anemic economic growth, increased income inequality, and privatization of public services. "Isn't it embarrassing to be republicans but also monarchists, socialists but also neoliberals, workers but also members of the board of directors, of the left but also giving power to the right?" Gabriel Rufián, a young parliamentary member from Esquerra Republicana, a Catalan pro-independence party, rhetorically asked the PSOE in the moments before the vote. (The seven deputies of the PSOE's Catalan federation, the PSC, rebelled *en bloc*, along with eight others, to the irritation of the national party leadership, which has threatened to sanction those who broke the voting discipline.) Rufián, whose rousing speech was the most noteworthy of the weekend, labeled the PSOE with surnames of "Iscariot" and "S.A." (the Spanish equivalent of "Inc.") before turning to thank Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias and other members of the Unidos Podemos coalition: "You were right, the two-party system has died."

The crisis in the PSOE may eventually benefit Podemos, its main rival on the left. But, for now, the only beneficiary is Rajoy's PP. "As long as Podemos and the Socialist Party are unable to reach an understanding, Spain will be ruled by the right," Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, a political scientist at the Carlos III University in Madrid, told us last weekend. "It is absurd to think that in four years one of the two will be able to displace the other and garner enough support to oust the PP from government." His prediction seems indisputable. Both parties currently divide the progressive vote more or less right down the middle, mostly along generational and regional lines. And they have only managed to forge coalitions at municipal and state levels. Nationally, they behave more like spouses in a bitter legal dispute than potential suitors.

Guillem Martínez, a journalist based in Barcelona, is even more pessimistic. "It may be decades before Spain has a left-wing government," he says. "It seems that in Spain and Catalonia people vote their identity, regardless of the economic, social, or democratic project behind that identity. The only variable that may cause some kind of electoral shift is the seriousness of the crisis—or its more than likely intensification."

"Don't be scared," Ciudadanos leader Albert Rivera told Rajoy during his parliamentary speech last week. "If you meet the demands of Ciudadanos, this will go well." But the threat rang hollow. A young party that largely represents the neoliberal right, Ciudadanos is slowly but surely reintegrating into the conservative PP. Its support of Rajoy is largely seen as a desperate attempt to cling to power. Both Ciudadanos and the PSOE claim they will not just roll over, and have promised to use their presence in Congress to keep the conservatives in check. Commentators on the right, especially figures such as Francisco Marhuenda—a Spanish version of Charles Krauthammer—have suggested that it is an illusion to think that Ciudadanos and the Socialists will be able to govern from Parliament just because Rajoy does not hold a majority. Both parties' toothlessness last weekend appears to prove that point well in advance of the start of the parliamentary session.

Rajoy, for his part, showed no pity for the humiliated Socialists. He warded off any talk of concessions or changes in course. "Don't try to impose upon me what I cannot accept," he said to the Parliament, using his characteristic brand of circular reasoning. Several hours later, he offered a window into his thought process to reporters outside Congress. "Although we have less support than in 2011, a majority of Spaniards continues to trust the Partido Popular." (Only 33 percent of Spaniards voted for the PP in the June elections, down from 44 percent in 2011.) Meanwhile, bureaucrats in Brussels can breathe a sigh of relief: Spain will not oppose the deep additional budget cuts—to the tune of €5.5 billion, or more than $6 billion—that the European Union is calling for.

Elsewhere in Madrid, thousands of people protested Rajoy's investiture by marching to Puerta del Sol, the plaza made internationally famous when the *indignados* movement occupied it for months during the summer of 2011. "Ante el golpe de la mafia, ¡democracia!" ("To confront the mafia's coup, democracy!"), they chanted, directing their ire at PSOE leaders Felipe González and Susana Díaz, Andalusia's Socialist leader and likely successor to Sánchez as head of the party. The protests, which also revived the *indignados* chant, "¡No nos representan!" ("They don't represent us!"), were held in defiance of the Ley Mordaza ("gag law"), which limits the right to assemble and was passed by the PP against unanimous opposition in 2015. The protests, Adánez says, "staged the existence of two political cultures and, put in simple terms, resumed the antagonism between those who think that, in democracy, politics is done in the Congress and those who think that the Congress is a space for debate that complements other, much more horizontal and accessible spaces."

The PSOE's implosion and its likely submission to the PP present an opportunity for Podemos to assume the mantle of the opposition. Yet the young party has faced its own challenges. Confronted with the inability to achieve more than a quarter of the national vote, the leadership has engaged in prickly public disagreements over tactics and strategy. These are compounded by internal power struggles that have pitted close friends and party founders Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón against each other. Although Podemos points to the conflicts as evidence of healthy debate, they have not helped stem the growing disenchantment among party members, whose assembly-like Circles increasingly operate at a remove from the party's leadership structure.

More ominous for the possibility of a broad progressive government in Spain is the seemingly unbridgeable abyss between Podemos and the Socialists—not just at among the leadership but also at the level of rank and file. During the two recent electoral campaigns and the attempts to

form coalition governments, Iglesias—whose parents named him after the PSOE's 19th-century founder—spoke about the Socialists in terms so critical and disdainful that they struck many as offensive. "Iglesias has oscillated between repudiating Spanish socialism in favor of supposedly more left-wing positions, and vindicating social democracy and the Socialists' achievements in civil rights," says Adánez. "But rather than sparking sympathy among the Socialist base, he has only fueled distrust."

"After the December elections, Podemos should have adopted a less confrontational attitude with the PSOE," says Sánchez-Cuenca. "Iglesias's provocations actually helped unite the PSOE rank and file around the idea that a government with Podemos wasn't going anywhere," he adds. "It is true that the members of both the PSOE and Podemos are very critical of each other. The voters, however, present a different story. Polls actually show considerable support for a PSOE-Podemos coalition. I believe the differences in political culture between the two parties could be overcome as long as they agree that the priority is to defeat the PP rather than focus on their relative position within the left." Martínez, the journalist, agrees. "They are two separate and mutually exclusive cultures, fated to come close to one another. Podemos is discovering institutionalization; the PSOE, its de-institutionalization," he told us. "It's possible that these coincide at some point."

Although Rajoy's will be a minority government, he is retaking the country's helm with the comfort of knowing that the largest opposition party is in shambles. That it is Rajoy's PP, and not the PSOE, that is currently embroiled in two major corruption trials makes the Socialist crisis all the more ironic. The Gürtel case and Rato case, whose trials' live broadcasts act as something of a soundtrack for Spain's current economic crisis, have confirmed suspicions of widespread illegal financing in the PP through kickbacks from major infrastructural projects. Five of the party's six former treasurers, including its first treasurer, who served from 1982 to 1987, have been charged with crimes involving corruption schemes.

Rajoy's first major test will be in several weeks, when he will propose a budget that meets the €5.5 billion in cuts that Brussels demands. He will then face a looming pension crisis, which will need to be resolved before the national fund runs out in January. Rajoy's new legislature will, in principle, last four years. Should he encounter an obstructionist Congress, which may happen over these or other issues, including his so-called "labor reform" bill, he may decide to dissolve Parliament at any time after May and call for new elections—a prospect, for now, more threatening to the PSOE and Ciudadanos than to the PP. "Given the division among the left," says Adánez, "in a Europe still dominated by neoliberalism, with a leader like Rajoy, the PP only stands to win."

But broader challenges, more historical and ideological, await. Catalan President Carles Puigdemont and other leaders in Catalonia have promised a referendum on independence by September 2017. At a memorial for the former Catalan President Lluís Companys, who was executed by Francoists 76 years ago, Puigdemont declared, "there are no courts or legislations that will go against the will of the Catalan people," before adding, "if it is clear and manifest." (Former Catalan President Artur Mas is currently facing a 10-year ban from public office for holding a non-official referendum on independence in 2014, a case viewed by many on the left as Madrid's retaliatory overreach.) "The PP will never accept the idea of a Catalan nation that clashes with [Spain's] pre-constitutional national unity," Martínez told us. "Will a more modest offer from the PP, outlined but never specified, be enough for Catalans? I'm inclined to say that it will be for its parties, but not for the majority of its citizens."

The conservatives will also have to endure the further erosion of the two-party system. Demographics are not on their side. More than one of every three PP voters is over the age of 65 and, among Spaniards between the ages of 18 and 34, they are the least popular party. Party loyalty has helped the conservatives weather this most recent storm, but the PP doesn't appear to have reconsidered its strategy of eking out electoral victories and preserving the party's sacred cows, now implicated in systemic corruption. Its mirror image—both ideologically and demographically—is Podemos. In the time before the next general election, Martínez says, "Podemos should take advantage of the opportunity to decide whether it wants to be a vertical leftist party, which competes with the PSOE, or one closer to the *indignados* movement, which competes with the PP."