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Power of the streets

Spain's left-wing populists are pulling in different directions. Will they ever find their place on the political map?

Since launching in 2014, the populist left-wing movement Podemos has gone on to become Spain's third-largest political party in both the national and regional parliaments.

From two to four

Opinions show that Spanish people care about three issues in particular – unemployment (53%), corruption (13%) and the state of politics and political parties (8%). With youth unemployment still stuck stubbornly above 40 percent, many of Spain's citizens are barely scraping by. Disillusionment with the traditional People's Party (PP) on the centre-right and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) on the centre-left has enabled two new movements to grow and flourish – the liberal Ciudadanos and, in particular, Podemos.

Since the 80s, Spain's social democrats and conservatives have taken turns to govern. Mariano Rajoy's PP is still in power, but the elections of December 2015 and June 2016 saw a marked shift from a two-horse race to four. While the liberals would be content with a slice of the political pie on the right, the parties on the left are fighting for nothing less than political dominance. In Spain, right-wing populists are nowhere to be seen.

Political deadlock

The two new parties are trying to find their place, while the two old parties oscillated last year between infighting, lethargy and waiting for things to get better by themselves. After failed attempts to forge a social democrat–liberal coalition, or a left-wing alliance headed by the PSOE, the conservative PP finally managed to push through a minority cabinet in October.

At its party conference in February, the PP celebrated its leader Mariano Rajoy, despite wanting to get rid of him after the disastrous elections in December 2015. With a combination of guile, stubbornness and tenacity, in October he forced the PSOE to allow him to form a PP minority government "in the interest of the country".

The social democrats, meanwhile, have been practising harakiri – suicide by disembowelment – for months. The party's general secretary Pedro Sánchez, who has since resigned, was against supporting Rajoy and instead favoured a left-wing alternative. The influential regional presidents, however, point blank refused to work with Podemos and believed allowing the PP to form a government was the lesser evil. Against this socialist infighting, Ciudadanos is hoping to establish itself as a liberal alternative to the PP and the PSOE.

An extra-parliamentary social movement

The power struggle within Podemos was finally settled at the party conference in February, when delegates voted overwhelmingly in favour of the existing general secretary, Pablo Iglesias. In future, his supporters will make up two-thirds of the party's governing body, the 62-strong Citizens' Council. The "Pablistas" want Podemos to retain its character as an extra-parliamentary social movement. They say politics should be worked out in "the streets". Their engagement with ordinary people could end up turning Podemos into Spain's most powerful political force.

An opposite stream within Podemos, led by Íñigo Errejón, head of the parliamentary party, believes the movement must professionalise and establish itself within the political institutional order. Errejón says the party needs to remain open and find a broad electoral base, instead of positioning itself exclusively to the left of the social democrats.

Strategic and ideological balancing acts

Podemos sees itself as a new type of party that does not fit the old categories. But contradictions and divisions are emerging in the routine course of politics, and more are sure to appear in future.

The moderates reject the label of left-wing populism. But they are closely involved in left-wing populist organisations and debates in Europe and Latin America. They certainly fit the definitions of populism developed by the late Ernesto Laclau, the intellectual grandfather of left-wing populism. In Laclau's theory, democratic demands form a "chain of

equivalence" that leads to a collective progressive will being formulated that aims to create "a people" opposed to the ruling caste or elite. In contrast to right-wing populism, immigrants are specifically not excluded; instead, a different, clear-cut opponent is defined in the guise of the political and economic forces of globalised neoliberalism. In this respect, the inclusive Left takes a clearly distinctive position from exclusionary right-wing populism.

On the one hand, Podemos defines itself against social democracy, but on the other hand it sees itself as continuing the same tradition – as a new, truer custodian of the social democratic values and policies that the traditional parties have abandoned. This was another reason why Iglesias was so inflexible in coalition talks with the PSOE in autumn of last year: he regards himself as a leading pole of opposition.

Podemos sees itself as something new that transcends the right–left schema, but it joined the left-wing grouping in the European Parliament. In the the run-up to last June's it formed an electoral pact with ex-communists of the United Left (IU). This alliance with the IU may well prove to be neither electorally beneficial nor ideologically sustainable in the longer term. The IU is too disreputable for middle-class Podemos voters, while Podemos' styling of itself as a grassroots movement is anathema to IU functionaries.

It also remains to be seen whether Podemos will be able to maintain its pragmatic agreements and coalitions at regional level when it has an ideological, hard-left leadership at national level; the regions want concrete, viable policies rather than critiques of the system. As it makes inroads into all the different parliaments, wins mayoral elections and supports PSOE regional presidents, voters and the media are gradually coming to see Podemos as part of the political system itself.

Stabilising the social democrats

There is no prospect of the PSOE vanishing from the political stage (unlike, say, PASOK in Greece), even if the latest voter intention polls place them significantly behind Podemos, at 19% to the latter's almost 22%. Members are due to elect a new general secretary in May, and in June a new leadership is set to take over from the transitional executive formed after the resignation of Sanchez, meaning the party will be able to act effectively again. The PSOE parliamentary party should be able to restore its image by making life difficult for the conservative minority government.

This endeavour is far from hopeless: just as Podemos has flourished off

the back of the crisis and disappointment with mainstream parties, it could lose support again if things start to look more positive. Errejón's strategy would have been to consolidate a party positioned in the centre left that recognisably stands for something and lays claim to a place in the country's political spectrum, rather than being dependent on the wave of protest that is currently at its high point. This strategic positioning would have posed a far greater threat for the social democrats in the medium term. Instead, with a new leadership they can now point to the unpredictability of Podemos and gradually win back their traditional place as Spain's leading force of opposition.



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