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The Spanish Left vs. the rise of authoritarianism

Only a united Left, combining the best elements of social democracy and the green movement, can counter the threat to Spanish democracy from the Right

Spain's current PSOE-Unidas Podemos government is arguably the most progressive in the history of Spanish democracy. The government has been able to recover and establish a social safety net that, while not perfect, is life-saving for many families. It has faced unforeseen problems like the Covid-19 pandemic with a health system weakened by the conservative Popular Party's austerity policies. And recently, European funds have allowed the government to approve one of the most expansive and progressive budgets in history.

Ever since the new government was formed, however, Spain has also seen the resurgence of an authoritarian Right dead set on bringing it down. In particular, the Right has used two inflammatory strategies. Firstly, as has been the case in the past, it has described the government as 'Frankenstein' for being open to dialogue and to reach agreements with the nationalist parties. Secondly, it has used traditional 'red scare' tactics, inflating the threat coming from a government formed with the 'communists' of Unidas Podemos.

These concerns are often exaggerated. We should bear in mind that Unidas Podemos has opted for a social-democratic political project for years already. In fact, the governing agreement between the PSOE and Unidas Podemos includes many of the progressive policies elements that both parties share like the expansion of the social safety net. But while the best antidote to counter the spread of authoritarianism may be the strengthening of the welfare state, Spain has not been immune to the far-right populist wave which continues to plague Europe.

Spain's rising authoritarianism

For a long time, the Right's drift towards authoritarianism stood in contrast with the received wisdom that Spain wasn't suffering from an

authoritarian wave. Until recently, figures and facts could be found to support this claim. But that was misleading given the fact that far-right voters used to opt for the conservative Popular Party (PP) before the recent surge of the far-right party Vox.

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To understand what happened, we need to go back to the surprising result of the Andalusian elections at the end of 2018. Back then, experts failed to predict that Vox would achieve such an extraordinary result in a historically socialist region such as Andalusia. In the end, the liberal Ciudadanos party had to choose the kind of government that they wanted for the region. Shockingly, they decided to support a new administration in which Vox would be key to guaranteeing governability.

That was the beginning of the end for Ciudadanos: a liberal party agreeing with the extreme right was a contradiction that couldn't last long. While the strategy worked at the beginning and Ciudadanos achieved a great result in the general elections of April 2019, the success led the party's then-president, Albert Rivera, to think that he could repeat that strategy and shift Ciudadanos even further to the right with the goal of surpassing the PP.

The collapse of the centre

Predictably, Rivera's strategy turned into a big failure and led to the virtual disappearance of Spain's one liberal-centrist party in the elections in November 2019. From that day onwards, the political dynamic in Spain shifted, with PP now trying to compete with Vox on the ground of the far right. For instance, the PP adopted a similar rhetoric about 'the enemies of Spain' – alluding to the pro-independence parties – and implementing a confrontational strategy with Pedro Sánchez in many issues like the health crisis or the immigration policy.

Isabel Díaz Ayuso, one of the most influential PP politicians and president of the Community of Madrid, is a perfect example of that. She used the pandemic to criticise the central government by partially imitating Vox's rhetoric. It invoked the 'freedom of the people of Madrid' while refusing to take the necessary measures to prevent being one of the regions hardest hit by the pandemic. At the same time, Vox tried to up the game by describing the Spanish government as 'criminal'.

Then, on 4 May, Ayuso called early elections in Madrid, with her red-

scare campaign slogan 'socialism or freedom'. Vox again tried to raise the bar and distinguish itself from the PP, carrying out a campaign of hatred towards immigrants. For instance, the far-right party decided to put up openly racist posters in the Madrid Underground.

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In the end, Ayuso landed an impressive victory – with several consequences for Spanish politics. The most important one is that it accelerates the disappearance of Ciudadanos. Moreover, there is no doubt that the three left parties that took part in the elections (PSOE, Más Madrid and Unidas Podemos) suffered a crushing defeat, raising questions whether the left will be able to retain power in the future general elections of 2023.

Lessons for the Left

In this context, the Left must depend on itself. For that to happen, the PSOE must stop making political calculations and underestimate the Right. Before the Madrid election, for instance, the PSOE committed an unforced error by presenting a motion of censure in the Murcia region that sought to remove the PP from power and reduce its dependence on Unidas Podemos. But the censure failed as the PP 'convinced' three deputies from Ciudadanos to vote against it.

Moreover, the PSOE needs to understand the popularity of left-wing policies at a time of big economic crisis. In that context, it's not only important to increase social spending, but to intervene in the market to face the oligopolistic structure of the Spanish economy.

The other left-wing parties should avoid further fragmentation at all costs. In recent years, the Spanish Left has fallen into a vicious circle of continuous division, motivated by a lack of historic understanding, excess of ambition and internal processes that are not sufficiently democratic, transparent and accountable. The radical Left in particular is currently split into two main parties: Unidas Podemos and Más País (or Más Madrid in Madrid region). In the best case scenario, former UP leader Pablo Iglesias' recent decision to leave politics could encourage both parties to rethink what's the best strategy going forward, as it's important to ensure that votes are not wasted in Spain's electoral system.

Two other important lessons have to be learned: The first has to do with strategy. Although understandable considering Vox's racist and pro-Franco messages, invoking Antifa slogans does not work for an electoral

Left. Instead, as the Madrid elections showed, using a more constructive discourse focusing on environmental aspects has electoral potential. With this strategy, Más Madrid could even surpass the PSOE for the first time.

This opens up new possibilities. The government could resist the authoritarian wave by combining the best features of social democracy and green movement. We can only hope the broader Left makes good use of the opportunity.



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