

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 12 JULY 2016

By Kevin Bruton



This Update must begin with Spain's General Election of 26th June, more than six months after the General Election of 20th December 2015 produced no party with an overall majority and six long months of fruitless deliberations, deals and political dithering. The bare results of 26th June are as follows: PP won 137 seats in the Spanish Parliament, a gain of 14 over the previous December; PSOE won 85 seats, a loss of 5; Unidos Podemos (ie Podemos and the Communist Party) secured 71 seats, the same as before; and Ciudadanos won 32 seats, a loss of 8. Again, therefore, no party achieved an overall majority – in a Parliament of 350 seats in total, 176 is the necessary target. Again, the PP of Rajoy was the most voted party with an increase of 14 seats but is still 39 short of an overall majority. The turnout on 26th June was 69.84% compared with 73.2% last December. Most opinion polls had forecast that the abstention rate would be higher.

It is worth recording the front page headlines of four newspapers on 27th June in order to give a flavour of how the result was received by the Spanish media. "El País" had "PP grows in strength and the left-wing loses ground". "El Mundo" had "Spaniards give Rajoy another opportunity". "Las Provincias", the main regional newspaper in the Valencia Region, stated "Spain rewards Rajoy with a solid victory for PP". "Levante", the second regional paper in Valencia, affirmed "PP increases its advantage and PSOE avoids being beaten into second place by Podemos". The present writer will attempt to analyse the election result by looking at each party in turn and will attempt to reach some conclusions with the help of an opinion poll published in "El País" on 11th July.

With an increase of 14 seats PP did better than opinion polls predicted despite doing nothing in the six months previously to attempt to deliver stable government in Spain. PP now face three options in their endeavours to invest Rajoy as Prime Minister. First, they continue to talk up a Grand Coalition with PSOE à la German CDU/SPD and, as this Update has affirmed repeatedly, this will never happen because it would be political suicide for the Socialists. Second, PP could seek to form a government with Ciudadanos, their closest ideological potential partner. This would give them 169 seats in total which means talking to tiny parties such as the Canary Islands MPs and Basque nationalists – both currently very antipathetic to Rajoy. Third, they could form a minority government but only if PSOE abstains when PP try to invest Rajoy as Prime Minister. More on this later.

PSOE on 26th June obtained the worst result in their modern history. Their low point of 85 seats compares, for example, with the high point of 202 seats at the 1982 General Election which brought Felipe González to power. In every one of Spain's 17 Regions, PP obtained more seats than PSOE including, for the first time, in Andalucía, the Socialists' strongest region. PSOE, however, did beat Podemos into second place, a result not predicted by any opinion poll in the weeks prior to 26th June. After a week of contacts with regional PSOE leaders, and a Federal Committee Meeting on 9th July, the Socialist Party leader Pedro Sánchez was able to extract a unanimous and definitive NO to PP in a first investiture vote. However, will PSOE find themselves forced to abstain eventually and allow PP to govern in minority? Most of the

national press including the centre-left “El País” is clamouring for Sánchez’s party to do just that.

The combination of Podemos and the Communists under the banner Unidos Podemos did not work. The total of 71 seats was the same as before but represented a drop of 1.2 million in the popular vote. It is worth remembering that the Communist Party alone (which won 2 seats last December) reached a high point of 23 seats in the General Election of 1979 and still had 11 seats in 2011. Podemos has ordered an internal enquiry as to why they fared so badly this time when all opinion polls prior to 26th June put Podemos into second place behind PP. Their leader, Pablo Iglesias, remains convinced that Podemos will break through in the future but internal divisions between himself and his number two, Iñigo Errejón, have not helped. The never-ending summer break in Spain means that Podemos will not have a conference to discuss all these issues until October. The internal blame game within Podemos may well intensify before then. A cartoon in “El Mundo” on 1st July summed this up very well. It showed one drawing headed “Game of Thrones” with a sheaf of swords at rest and next to it another drawing headed “Game of Podemos”, with knives flying in all directions.

The centre-right party Ciudadanos won 32 seats, a loss of 8 on December. Their aim now appears to be to influence the programme of the next, presumably PP, government. They have ten main policy points they want any incoming government to take on board – most of these are anti-corruption measures. Their previous veto on Rajoy remaining as leader may no longer operate with their reduced position.

It is possible now to venture some brief overall conclusions. PP and Podemos had for some time been trying to squeeze the centre ground vote of PSOE and Ciudadanos (in Spain they call this “la pinza”) and drive voters to the right (PP) or the left (Podemos). One half of this worked, ie PP gained 14 seats while PSOE and Ciudadanos lost 13 seats between them. However, Podemos did not gain. A comparison may be made with the British General Election of May 2015. Many voters in the end voted for stability and security, the “devil you know”, or the conservative option and put to one side any fears or worries about jobs, austerity or, in Spain’s case, corruption.

The General Election verdict of 26th June seems particularly harsh on PSOE and Ciudadanos who, from March onwards this year, produced a convincing, progressive, reformist and detailed programme for change which Podemos spent only a couple of hours discussing before rejecting. Now, with a total of 178 seats (PSOE plus Ciudadanos plus Unidos Podemos) the “change” parties are weaker than before 26th June when they had 201 seats. The present writer believes that a golden opportunity has been lost and that the right-wing PP have been gifted more years in government.

The opinion poll published in “El País” on 11th July is helpful in an analysis of the General Election result. 73% of people polled think PSOE should abstain to allow PP to govern in minority. This includes 7 out of 10 who voted for PSOE and even 50% of voters who supported Unidos Podemos. 88% of those polled would vote the same way again while 89% want some kind of agreement to form a government rather than a third General Election. Thus there is huge pressure on PSOE to abstain. It is the present writer’s view that PSOE will vote NO in the first investiture vote for Rajoy to be Prime Minister but in a second investiture vote will probably

abstain. Most on the left, in any case, prefer PSOE and Podemos to go into opposition. One fascinating point from the opinion poll is that 14% said they were influenced by Brexit. If this were true this represents 3.2 million votes and it is not difficult to conclude that Brexit assisted a conservative and anti-populist, ie a PP vote and might in itself have produced the General Election result.

There is continuing shock and horror in Spain at the Brexit result. The media coverage has been intensive and extensive and continues to be so. On 25th June, "El Mundo"'s front page headline read "United Kingdom becomes an island again" and on that day the newspaper devoted 23 pages to Brexit! On 27th June, the day after the Spanish General Election, "El País" still devoted 6 pages to Brexit. The media coverage has focussed on the potential break-up of the European Union, the economic consequences for Spain which already have been disastrous (Banks, Stock Markets) and the internal divisions in the Conservative and Labour Parties. The shock has been accompanied by disbelief and by sadness. One Spanish commentator remarked that he could not believe that an educated, civilised society such as Britain could vote this way. Another commented that it is like a chemist prescribing aspirins to actually cause a headache.

Last year, 100,000 Spaniards emigrated to find work, 20,000 more than did so in 2014. Almost half a million Spaniards have emigrated since 2008. Spaniards' first choice of destination in 2015 was the UK – 12,263 emigrated there (France, Germany and the US are next on the list). The Spanish in the UK are worried by increasing xenophobia. Spanish TV showed in early July an incident on a Manchester tram where three Spaniards talking amongst themselves were subjected to youths chanting xenophobic and racist abuse. As a final comment on Brexit, the present writer, a proud Welshman but an international socialist, applauds the prophetic cartoon in "El País" on 23rd May. This shows a person sitting on a brick wall waving a flag which shows an identical brick wall while the caption reads "Todas las banderas representan muros" or "All flags represent walls".

As a first post-script, with reference to the Chilcot report, when Blair and Bush met 13 years ago in the Azores to plot the invasion of Iraq they met with the Spanish Prime Minister Aznar of PP. Rajoy at the time was Deputy Prime Minister. Now, Rajoy, when asked about Chilcot, says the report is too long to read and that he does not have time to do so and, in any case, it all happened 13 years ago. This is, of course, a complete and abject abdication of responsibility by someone who aspires to form a new government within weeks.

As a second post-script, the current bull-running feria in Pamplona, made famous by Hemmingway and which attracts tens of thousands of visitors, has caused problems this year with the sexual harassment of women. On a much less serious note, the town council in Pamplona has decided to do something about the appalling habit of people urinating against walls and buildings. They have sprayed the walls with a urine repellent so effective that it causes the offending effluent (or so they claim) to splash back on to the guilty person. In "El País" the writer Fernando Savater said there should be a "vote repellent" so that the offensive vote causes problems only for the guilty voter and not for everyone else!