

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 9th June 2015

By Kevin Bruton



In Spain, on 24th May, there was, of course, a double election. In Spain's Regional Parliamentary System of 17 Regions, all with their own directly elected parliaments, 13 Regions held elections on 24th May, ie all except the four which, for modern historical reasons, are out of sync. These are Cataluña, Galicia, the Basque Country (the three historic nations of Spain, all with their own languages) and Andalucía, which held elections on 22nd March this year.

In addition, on 24th May, there were Local or Municipal elections across the entirety of Spain, with 8122 councils in total being elected, ranging from big cities such as Madrid and Barcelona with millions of voters, down to small 'pueblos' with electorates of only several hundred. A total of 67,640 'concejales' or councillors were voted in by an electorate of over 35 million.

The first unarguable conclusion from the overall results is, as all predicted, that the two-party system which has dominated the Transition from Franco's death in November 1975 to the 'democracy' enjoyed now by Spain is, for the moment, and, probably for the future, DEAD. The governing party PP and the principal opposition party PSOE, the Spanish Socialists, have effectively gone down from garnering over 80% of all votes cast to just over 50% now.

As widely predicted, the fracturing of this two-party hegemony of power was headed by Podemos, the anti-establishment party led by Pablo Iglesias, risen from the ashes of the 15 May street movements of 2011 and from the Politics Department of the Complutense University in Madrid. Also, the neo-liberal right-wing party, Ciudadanos, also gained huge support among the electorate. Ciudadanos is the new national party which has ballooned out from the anti-independence party Ciutadans in Cataluña and is led by another media-savvy politician, Albert Rivera.

Other political forces also emerged on 24th May, as will be shown. An aggregate picture however, putting Regional and Local Elections together shows PP having one of its worst results ever, dropping over 11 percentage points of popular support (38% down to 27%) but also PSOE experiencing one of its worst overall results since democracy (28% down to 25%), both, of course, because of lack of trust in the traditional parties accompanied by the rise of the new parties.

It is important to separate out the results in the Regions from the Local results but, in both cases, space will only allow highlighting the major developments. Before 24th May, PP had overall majorities in 11 of the 13 Regions. The election result saw them lose this majority in all of these Regions. Since, also, the new parties, Podemos and Ciudadanos, stood mostly only in the Regions under their own names, then, clearly, the Regional results are, probably, a more significant indication of what may happen in the General Election due in November this year.

The front pages of the Spanish newspapers on 25th May, therefore, make interesting reading. Spain's biggest-selling national daily, "El País" (if one excludes sports dailies) had as its headline "El desplome de PP provoca un vuelco a favor de la izquierda" or "The collapse of PP provokes an upturn in favour of the left". Spain's second biggest national daily, "El Mundo", blazoned the headline "Cambio político a costa del PP" or "Political change at the cost of PP". The top-selling regional newspaper in the Valencia Region, "Las Provincias", headlined its front page with "Giro radical a la izquierda" or "Radical shift to the left". A selective analysis of the Regional results needs to begin with Madrid. Here PP lost overall control of the Region and can only govern if it does a deal with Ciudadanos. PP lost a third of its seats in the Region going down from 72 seats to 48, PSOE gained one seat rising from 36 to 37 but Podemos and Ciudadanos gained 27 seats and 17 seats respectively. Unfortunately, the right-wing

combination of PP and Ciudadanos produces 65 seats in total, only one seat more than the left-wing parties of PSOE and Podemos combined.

In the Valencia Region, mired in PP corruption like Madrid, PP went down from 55 seats to 31 but PSOE also went down from 33 seats to 23. Podemos and Ciudadanos both won 13 seats while Compromís (essentially nationalists) won 19 seats. With PP losing its overall majority in the Valencia Region, there is certain to be an anti-PP coalition government, with the only argument being whether the Socialist leader, Ximo Puig, or the leader of Compromís, Mónica Oltra, will be President.

Turning to the Local elections, it is worth emphasising the results in the two big cities of Barcelona and Madrid. In Barcelona, a party set up very recently, Barcelona en Comú, by the anti-evictions campaigner Ada Colau won 11 seats, one more than the previously ruling nationalists of CiU who won 10. The other parties won 30 seats between them. As was stated in previous Updates, at local level generally Podemos and Ciudadanos either did not stand under their own name or coalesced with other previously known groupings. In the city of Barcelona, Ada Colau should become mayor. She has led the anti-evictions street protests and has totally condemned the corruption of the ruling nationalist party. She constantly points out that the banks in Barcelona are holding 80,000 flats empty while evicting people elsewhere.

In the city of Madrid, the Thatcherite Esperanza Aguirre of PP should not become mayor. With 57 council seats in total, PP went down from 31 to 21, PSOE also went down from 15 to 9 while Ciudadanos won 7 seats. The greatest success, however, was for another woman who came out of a community grouping. Her group is called Ahora Madrid and it won 20 seats, just one short of PP. The woman's name is Manuela Carmena, an examining magistrate, who will be mayor if she allies with the Socialist Party (this will give the alliance 29 seats out of 57) and, like Ada Colau in Barcelona, she says she has no political aspirations beyond her own community in her own city.

In the city of Valencia, the PP mayor Rita Barberá, after 24 years in office, should be able to look forward to retirement. With 33 councillors in total in the city of Valencia, PP is down to 10, the Socialists only have 5, Compromís has 9, Ciudadanos 6 and Valencia en Comú (which includes Podemos) has 3. All kinds of possibilities exist for pacts or alliances but none of them will leave Rita Barberá in power.

A word of warning is necessary on pacts or coalitions or alliances between parties. On 22nd March this year, there was a Regional Election in Andalucía with no overall majority but with the Socialists by far the biggest party. At the time of writing, 79 days later, there is still no new Regional Government in Andalucía although this is likely to be resolved within the next few days. 'Only' 16 days after the 24th May elections the different parties continue to negotiate and the media continues to speculate about possible alignments. There are, however, several important points to make in the aftermath of the elections.

Within PP there have been numerous calls from within his own party for the Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, either to resign or not to stand in the General Election in November this year. 12 PP ex-mayors in the Valencia Region have called for him to go, along with the PP head of Castilla-León Region. An opinion poll in "El País" on 8th June revealed that 50% of PP voters want Rajoy to go. Other PP regional heads have said that they will resign after the General Election. So far this has been true in Valencia, Aragón, and the Balearics.

Pedro Sánchez, PSOE leader, has met both Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos, and Albert Rivera, leader of Ciudadanos, in the past week. Despite numerous statements to the media by all three leaders it is likely that in the end they will have to leave it to regional or local party leaders to decide which alliances to support.

The suicidal nature of PSOE comes to the fore again almost immediately. Sánchez was only elected party leader in July last year but now faces primary elections on 26th July to choose a PSOE candidate to fight the General Election in November. In case one might think this bicephalous lunacy may not come to pass, one PSOE candidate from Seville, Sergio Cebolla,

has already put his name forward. He will, however, struggle to obtain the support of the required 9,500 PSOE members for his name to go forward.

As parties continue working out their sudokus of pacts and alliances, the first opinion poll since the elections asking voters who they would vote for if there were a general election now, was published in "El País" on 7th June. The results show little difference from pre-24th May opinion polls and they are as follows: PP 24.5%, PSOE 23%, Podemos 21.5%, Ciudadanos 13%. The drop for Ciudadanos from 19% to 13% is the only significant change.

While this Update has concentrated almost exclusively on Elections, a devastating report on poverty in Spain was published in the first week of June by, astonishingly, the Foundation of the La Caixa Bank. Previous Updates have summarised earlier reports on poverty in Spain although these have usually been from the OECD or UNICEF or Caritas. It is sickeningly ironic that La Caixa Bank (one of the perpetrators of the crisis) states that one in three children in Spain is living in poverty and that, in Europe, Spain is second only to Rumania. A school psychologist, Antonio Cuevas, was interviewed about this in the "Levante" newspaper of 8th June. He reports the frequency of children passing out from hunger in class, says also that some of these children have parents working in extreme poverty and concludes that the situation is worse than after the Spanish Civil War during the infamous "años de hambre" or "years of hunger".

This Update will finish will finish by going back briefly to electoral politics. A few days ago, "El Mundo" newspaper published a cartoon which depicts the Prime Minister Rajoy looking mesmerised and in a series of captions he is wondering: "What else can happen after the corruption scandals?"; "What else can go wrong after losing overall majorities across the country?"; and "What more can happen after so many calls from within my party for me to resign?". Then an aide comes in and says: "More bad news, sir. Sepp Blatter wants to join PP!"