

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 10TH JUNE 2014

By Kevin Bruton



It has been the month of the two Mondays – the Monday after the Euro Elections, 26th May, when Spain's two main political parties went into free-fall and the following Monday, 2nd June, when King Juan Carlos abdicated after 38 years.

The first important point to make about the Euro Elections in Spain is that there was NO vote for the extreme right, unlike, of course, France, the UK, Greece and several EU countries. The big bombshell, however, although widely predicted by the polls, was the collapse in seats and in votes of the two main parties in Spain, the governing PP and the opposition Socialist Party, PSOE. On a turnout of 46%, one percentage point higher than in 2009, PP went down from 24 seats to 16 seats and PSOE from 23 seats to 14 seats. The fall in the popular vote for the two parties was even more dramatic. Between them, on 25th May, PP and PSOE captured 49% of all votes compared with 81% five years ago. Thus, all newspaper and media headlines on 26th May highlighted the huge decline of "bipartidismo", the two-party system. As predicted, the smaller parties improved their position, with Izquierda Unida (the communists) rising from 2 seats to 6 seats and the centre-right UPyD going up from 1 seat to 4 seats.

What no poll predicted was the spectacular eruption of the left-wing party Podemos ("We can"), which became the fourth most voted party overall and picked up 5 Euro seats. Podemos is a party which rises from the still burning embers of the 15-M and the Indignados movement, born in 2011/12 in the street camps of the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, replicated elsewhere in Spain. Podemos, unashamedly left-wing, only registered as a party on 11th March and, with a nation-wide budget of only 130,000€, has exploded on to the Spanish political scene. Via the social networks, word of mouth and persuasive appearances on TV and radio, Podemos has galvanised voters sick of what many see as the betrayal by the main parties and especially the Socialist Party. The leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, refers to PP and PSOE in derogatory fashion as "la casta política", the political caste who have sold off Spain to the highest bidder, whether this is the IMF, the EU or private companies. For Podemos both main parties are the problem, not the solution.

On 25th May, Podemos gained 2.4 million votes nationwide and in the Madrid Region came third behind PP and PSOE. Podemos has no executive committee, no membership cards or lists and the five Euro MPs will only take 1900€ a month salary instead of 8000€, the rest going to campaign funds. PP and the right-wing have demonised Podemos since the elections comparing them with Hitler's takeover in Germany. But Podemos' reply is persuasive – "The right-wing say 'Don't demonstrate – put up at elections'. We've done this and still we're slagged off" or "If the IMF wants to dictate economic policy in Spain, let them stand at elections!"

The consequences of the Euro Elections for Spain's Socialist Party have also been dramatic. On 26th May, the PSOE leader, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, announced what everyone knew, namely that at 23% the Party's results were the worst in modern history. Then began a saga which the present writer finds repugnant and arguably shameful. Rubalcaba announced that he would resign as leader, not immediately, however, but at a special congress of PSOE on 18th/19th July when delegates would choose a new leadership. It is worth recalling that not only did Rubalcaba not resign after a bad general election defeat in November 2011 but then he went on to defeat narrowly a much better and younger candidate, Carme Chacón, in a leadership contest in January 2012. In contrast, when Joaquín Almunia, as PSOE leader, lost the general election to PP in 2000 he resigned overnight.

Immediately following Rubalcaba's statement on 26th May, voices within PSOE questioned his decision. Carme Chacón, for example, said "We should hold open primaries as quickly as possible to elect a new leader. People are suffering. We need to open up to society and listen to the people. Rubalcaba is finding a pretext for not listening to the voice of the people".

After a week of such pressure, Rubalcaba conceded a half-way house – no open primaries but, instead of only delegates voting, all members of PSOE would vote on a 'one person, one vote' basis to elect a new leader in mid-July, followed by an extraordinary congress, now put back to the end of July.

PSOE's position prior to the Euro Elections was that open primaries where everyone can vote (following the example of France and Italy) would take place in November to elect a candidate to fight the next general election expected in November 2015. Now that there will be no imminent primaries to elect a leader, Chacón has stated that she will not stand in July. The latest attempt by Rubalcaba and the PSOE hierarchy to engineer the result they want, rather than what the people need, was to install their chosen candidate as the new leader. This person was Susana Díaz, the head of the PSOE Regional Government in Andalucía, the traditional PSOE powerbase. Díaz has only been in office 8 months but fits the bill of the party apparatchik that the old guard want as national leader. In the first week of June, for example, a number of attempts were made to suppress candidates who might stand against Díaz in July. However, on 10th June, Susana Díaz stated that she would not stand for the national leadership but would concentrate her efforts in Andalucía. This sorry PSOE saga is set to continue!

The King's abdication statement on 2nd June initially took everyone by surprise. The King said that he wanted to give fresh impetus to the monarchy and pass over to a new generation, his son Felipe, who would be better able to respond to Spain's new challenges. The decline in support for the monarchy has been well documented in recent years – the King's affairs, the Botswana elephant hunt, the financial scandals affecting his son-in-law and the numerous hip and other operations. Juan Carlos claimed that he made the decision to abdicate on his 76th birthday, 5th January of this year. This is most curious since in his Christmas address to the nation on "Nochebuena", or Christmas Eve, just 12 days before, he said "Kings do not abdicate, they die in office". In "El Mundo" newspaper on 8th June, the Editor's view is that the King decided in the early months of this year that he would go, discussed it with the PM Rajoy and Rubalcaba in March but only fixed the date at a meeting at the Zarzuela (Royal) Palace on 29th May (it is worth noting that this is AFTER the Euro Elections) with his son, Rajoy and Rubalcaba.

In view of the millions of people in Spain now calling for a referendum to decide between a monarchy or a republic, it is essential to examine the Constitutional position. Juan Carlos is grandson of Alfonso XIII who abdicated in 1931 with the advent of the Second Republic. Franco was Head of State until his death in 1975 but, in 1969, Franco nominated Juan Carlos as his successor after Juan Carlos had been tutored since childhood in the Franco household. Juan Carlos swore allegiance to Franco's National Movement (ie Fascism) and to the Fundamental Laws of Franco (ie the Fascist state apparatus). Two days after Franco's death on 20th November 1975, Juan Carlos became Head of State and King. The King's personal and praiseworthy role in facilitating the Transition to democracy is well known. The Transition culminated in a popular referendum on 6th December 1978 which overwhelmingly approved the Democratic Constitution which is the cornerstone of the modern Spanish State. The day after the referendum, Juan Carlos exclaimed "¡Me han hecho legal!" – "They've made me legal!).

Article 57.1 of the Constitution makes Spain a parliamentary monarchy with succession of the oldest male dependent on the monarch's demise. But Article 57.5 states that, in the case of abdication, the Spanish Parliament must pass an Organic Law to determine the succession. Hence parliament votes in this law on 11th June to allow Felipe to become King Felipe VI.

However, in the first week of June, there have been hundreds of thousands on the streets of every city in Spain clamouring for a referendum, with placards such as “Referendum now!” or “3rd Republic” or, more crudely “Los Borbones a los tiburones!” (“The Bourbons to the sharks!”). It is vitally important to state that those calling for a referéndum have a Constitutional basis for doing so. Article 57.5 states that there must be a law passed to facilitate the abdication and the succession but it does not state that MPs have to vote in favour of it. Also, Article 92.1 reads as follows: “Las decisiones políticas de especial trascendencia podrán ser sometidas a referéndum consultivo de todos los ciudadanos” or “Political decisions of special significance may be subject to a consultative referendum of all citizens”. Izquierda Unida, the communists, have called for Article 92 to be implemented and for MPs to vote against the law which allows the succession.

Unfortunately, the call for a referendum had no chance of prospering since PP and PSOE support the Law which effectively makes Felipe King. The situation within the Socialist Party is interesting in that the Party is historically a republican party and, of course, supported the Second Republic in the Civil War. Probably about 90% of Socialist Party members and supporters want a Third Republic and are totally at odds with Rubalcaba’s decision to support the succession. Rubalcaba’s stated reasons for doing so are that PSOE, in the aftermath of the Franco régime, formed part of the consensus that drew up the democratic Constitution and now cannot or will not break that consensus. In Spain’s closed party-list system it is virtually unknown to have a back-bench revolt such as happens in the UK. However, a small number of PSOE MPs who disagree with the leadership position have stated that they will vote against the Succession Law or will abstain. Some have requested that they be entitled to a free vote. For their pains these MPs are likely to be fined or in some way punished by the party.

Despite five amendments seeking a referendum, PP and PSOE votes will push through the Law and the King will formally abdicate on 18th June with Felipe being sworn in on 19th June. This will take place before the joint Houses of Parliament. There will be no coronation or religious service but there will be a military parade on 19th June, which is a public holiday in Madrid (Corpus Christi). The fallout between PSOE leaders and the Rank and file will only be greater if the party leadership agree to grant Juan Carlos, post-abdication, continued judicial immunity, as looks likely. Rajoy has been praising Rubalcaba’s leadership in the past week and the more he does so the more Podemos state that “PP and PSOE are the political caste (la casta) – choosing between them is like choosing between Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola”.

Monarchy or Republic? There have been many opinion polls in the last week. Felipe is popular, unlike Juan Carlos and this, of course, boosts the pro-monarchy vote. The present writer’s summary of five different opinion polls puts support for the monarchy at between 53% and 60% and support for a Republic between 35% and 40%. However, the people will not be allowed to decide and this in a country where two-thirds of the present population did not vote for the Constitution in 1978 and where the vast majority of people demonstrating in favour of a referendum are young people.

In the view of the present writer, the real reason for the King’s abdication – hence the 29th May meeting – is that the Euro Elections pushed him into it. What if PP and PSOE fail to win 50% of the vote again at the Regional and Local Elections in May 2015 or even at the General Election in November 2015? Would there then be a majority for the Republic in parliamentary votes? The scenario may be unlikely, although it is not impossible, but it is only at this juncture in time that the PP and PSOE leadership can stitch up the succession safely. As to how Juan Carlos will go down in the history books, it is worth recalling that when Henry Kissinger, on a visit to China in 1972, asked Chou En Lai about the impact of the French Revolution, Chou En Lai replied “It’s too soon to judge”.

A brief historical footnote may help assess Felipe VI's future prospects. His father, Juan Carlos, has just abdicated. His great-grandfather, Alfonso XIII, abdicated to bring in the Second Republic. Felipe's great-great-great-grandmother abdicated, to usher in the First Republic. Meanwhile, Felipe VI's immediate royal namesake, Felipe V, the first Bourbon on the throne of Spain, was a disastrous King who was responsible for the War of the Spanish Succession and the loss of Spanish territories in the Low Countries, Italy, Gibraltar, Minorca and elsewhere. Felipe V also suppressed numerous popular uprisings in Spain and, infamously, burnt to the ground Xàtiva in the Valencia Region in 1707. The municipal museum in Xàtiva has Felipe V's portrait hanging upside-down and the mayor was quoted as saying "We don't want Felipe V or Felipe VI!"