

## UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 12TH JANUARY 2016



By Kevin Bruton

New Year in Spain 2016: the Government in Cataluña on the verge of declaring unilateral independence from Spain; the Spanish Government not yet in existence; the King's sister in the dock with her husband; the stockmarket at its lowest level in years and foreign investors seeking to move their money to other countries. Happy New Year, Spain! It remains to be seen whether, in the words of the song, "Things can only get better" in the remaining 350 days of the year. As Harold Wilson famously said "A week is a long time in politics" and the past five weeks since the last Update have seemed like five years.

The General Election of 20th December produced the result which was widely predicted and confirmed the end of the modern two-party rotation in government. Four parties are now in play. It is worth recalling that, in the Spanish Parliament of 350 seats, 176 seats are required to secure an overall majority. PP had this majority before 20th December but lost 63 seats to go down from 186 seats to 123. PP was still, however, the most voted party. The Spanish Socialist party, PSOE, lost 20 seats to go down from 110 seats to 90 but still remained the second most voted party. And, then, of course, the new parties enter Parliament.

The anti-establishment party, Podemos, gained 69 seats and the new neo-liberal party, Ciudadanos, won 40 seats. The headlines of Spain's two most important daily newspapers on 21st December reflected the seismic change in Spanish politics. "El País" declared that "La pérdida de la mayoría del PP abre espacio a los pactos" or "The loss of PP's majority opens up room for pacts". "El Mundo" reported "España tumba el bipartidismo y deja en el aire el gobierno" or "Spain brings down two-party politics and leaves the governance of Spain in the air".

In terms of the popular vote, PP lost one third of its vote vis-à-vis the previous General Election of 20th November 2011, going down from 45% to 29%, while PSOE went down from 29% to 22%. It was the worst result for PSOE since the first General Election on the basis of free universal suffrage in June 1977 following the death of Franco. Only in the regions of Andalucía and Extremadura (of the 17 regions in total in Spain) was PSOE the most voted party. And, in Madrid, PSOE was relegated to fourth place behind PP, Podemos and Ciudadanos. PSOE's popular vote of just over 22% was less than half of the 48% vote which gave PSOE a landslide victory in the General Election of 28th October 1982.

While some media headlines in Spain since the General Election have announced "Welcome to Italy", journalists and pundits have examined every possible and impossible way in which the parties might form a pact to govern the country. The 350 members of the new Parliament are sworn in on 13th January and only after this will King Felipe VI invite the leader of the most voted party, Mariano Rajoy of PP, to form a government. If Rajoy fails to obtain 176 votes in a motion to invest him as Prime Minister, a motion which WILL fail, he can then attempt to win a simple majority to invest him as PM. This too WILL fail and, then, Pedro Sánchez as leader of the second most voted party, PSOE, will be invited to try to form a government. Only if the

whole of this process fails which, at the moment, is more probable than possible will there then have to be a new General Election. This would probably be in late May or early June.

The numbers do not add up for any of the parties. With 176 (an overall majority in Parliament) the magic figure to aim for, PP with 123 seats can only amass 163 by adding on its closest potential political partner Ciudadanos with 40 seats. PSOE, with 90 seats and Podemos with 69 seats only make up 159 in total, again well short of 176. The dominating political colour of the past few weeks has been red, ie. the red lines which the four parties have been drawing up. PP wants PSOE and possibly Ciudadanos to form a grand coalition in the style of Germany's coalition between Merkel's CDU and the SPD. PSOE will vote against Rajoy's investiture and will not enter a grand coalition. Podemos state that any pact with PSOE has to be predicated upon an independence referendum in Cataluña. This is a red line which PSOE cannot and will not cross since it would mean political suicide in the rest of Spain. Ciudadanos say they would allow PP to govern despite the fact that PP cannot do so but will remain in any event in opposition.

As has been stated, the four parties all have their red lines, although it could reasonably be said that Spanish voters have sent out a clear message with their votes on 20th December, which is that parties must sit down, cross their red lines, form pacts and govern. Pedro Sánchez of PSOE is probably not wrong in believing that PP and Podemos, on the right and left of the political spectrum, both want new elections, thinking that PSOE's vote would be squeezed from both sides.

Sánchez has his own problems within PSOE with some regional Socialist leaders, including Susana Díaz from Andalucía, trying to force Sánchez into a corner and face a leadership challenge in the next month or so, almost certainly from Díaz. Sánchez went to Portugal on 7th January to talk to the Socialist PM, Antonio Costa, who, of course, formed a three-party left-wing government in November of last year. Sánchez speaks of forming a similar progressive coalition of parties for change in government in Spain but the maths mean he needs Podemos (who want a referendum in Cataluña which Sánchez cannot concede) and a number of small parties which must again include nationalist parties.

In Cataluña, Regional Elections took place on 27th September last year with no overall victor. The nationalist grouping of "Junts pel sí" under Artur Mas have spent a third of a year trying to persuade the small anti-Spain, anti-EU and anti-system party of CUP to support Mas so that he can again become president of the Generalitat, the regional government in Cataluña. This has been a total farce. At the end of December, CUP members held an assembly and voted on whether to support Mas. Incredibly, the vote was 1515 in favor and 1515 against! Subsequently CUP's national council voted against Mas. Finally, at the eleventh hour, just prior to a deadline which would have precipitated new elections in Cataluña (and the probable decimation of Mas's party) on 9th January, Mas withdrew his candidature and, the following day, the Catalan Parliament voted in the new leader of Cataluña, from Mas's party.

Carles Puig Demont is 53 years of age and has been Mayor of Girona since 2011. He studied Catalan Language and Literature at university, has worked as a journalist, speaks good English, French and Rumanian (his wife is Rumanian) and edited a daily Catalan publication in English called "Cataluña today". Despite these international credentials, he is, however, totally

committed to independence for Cataluña which, he says, he will declare unilaterally within 18 months. He ended his inaugural speech with the words “Visca Catalunya lliure” or “Long live free Cataluña”. Since, according to Spain’s democratic Constitution, no region can secede from Spain legally, then “El Mundo”’s Editorial on 11th January is probably fair: “Nuevo presidente – mismo viaje a la nada” or “New president – same journey into the void”. It is worth remembering as a footnote to Cataluña that, in the General Election of 20th December, 48% in Cataluña voted for pro-independence parties while 52% voted against.

The King’s sister, Cristina, appeared in court on 11th January in Palma de Mallorca, together with her husband, Iñaki Urdangarín and a dozen others, accused of embezzling 6.2 million euros of public monies. The trial is obviously in its early stages but will last until at least June. Cristina’s brother, King Felipe VI, made his second Christmas address to the nation on 24th December. In his speech, he appeared to make reference to Spain’s Franco era and also to appeal to Spain’s political parties to sort out the post-General Election chaos. In a translation by the present writer from the King’s words, Felipe said: “The breaking of the law , the imposition of one idea or one project by some Spaniards over the will of others has only led us to decay, impoverishment and isolation. It is an error of our past which we must not commit again.” In an apparent reference to the General Election, the King asked for “the exercise of politics based on dialogue and compromise”.

If the King’s televised Christmas speech is a minor aspect of Spain’s festive season, a bigger part is played, of course, by the “Reyes” or Three Kings processions which take place in towns all over Spain. This year’s event has precipitated a plethora of press articles, social media comments and TV coverage. The cities of Valencia and Madrid led the way. Valencia, with a left-wing council in power since May last year, held a “Cabalgata republicana” ie a republican “reyes” procession. This deliberately replicated a January 1937 “Reyes” procession for children fleeing from the Civil War to the city of Valencia. The 2016 version featured three queens who processed as Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In the city of Madrid, also in left-wing hands since May 2015, the “reyes” were dressed not in traditional garb but in colourful modernistic outfits more in keeping perhaps with Harry Potter wizardry or the new Star Wars film. The right-wing media and politicians have been up in arms ever since, much to the amusement of those of us on the left.

This Update will finish where it started, with the overall political situation in Spain. A cartoon in “El Mundo” on 11th January showed a map of south-western Europe with Spain missing. In place of the missing Spain is a note of the type one might see in a shop window saying “Gone out. Back in several months”!