

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS - 13TH OCTOBER 2015



By Kevin Bruton

This Update begins with 27th September, the date of Elections to the Regional Parliament in Cataluña. With the highest turnout in modern history of 77.4%, the pro-independence grouping Junts pel Sí (Together for Yes) were seeking an overwhelming affirmation of their wish to push forward with their project of breaking away from Spain. How did they do?

There are 135 seats in the Catalan Parliament and, therefore, 68 is necessary for an overall majority. Junts pel Sí won 62 seats while the closest single party was Ciudadanos, an anti-Independence party, with 25. The Catalan socialists were third with 16 seats, while PP won 11. However, in terms of the popular vote, the vote for pro-independence parties was 47.8% while the vote for parties against independence was 52.2%. It is worth recalling that the current head of the Regional Government in Cataluña, Artur Mas, has been saying for months that the election was a plebiscite on independence.

Hence, the newspaper headlines on 28th September, the day following the elections, make interesting reading. “El País” said “The pro-independence lobby win the elections but lose their plebiscite”. The banner headline of “El Mundo” was “The majority of Catalans say ‘no’ to Independence”. The two big regional newspapers in the Valencia Region read as follows: “Las Provincias” - “The majority of Catalans vote against independence”; and “Levante” - “Independence slows down.” The Editorial in “El País” the same day had as its headline “Derrota y Victoria” or “Defeat and Victory”.

The formation which included Podemos won 11 seats and this occasioned an article by Artur Mas in “The Guardian” newspaper on 5th October in which he claimed a popular victory for the “Yes” campaign based upon the dubious proposition of counting Podemos voters as “don’t knows”.

Forming a new Regional Government in Cataluña looks like being a long drawn-out affair, since Mas is trying to seduce a pro-independence party called CUP which won 11 seats. CUP stands for “Candidatura de Unidad Popular” or “Candidates for Popular Unity”. CUP is a strange phenomenon since it is pro-independence but anti-EU, anti-NATO, anti-capitalism, anti-austerity but also, crucially anti-Mas. CUP will not, or say they will not, accept any new government with Mas at its head. This saga will run and run.

Most eyes in Spain now are on the forthcoming General Election. The PP Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, was heavily criticised for announcing the date of this, not in the usual formal announcement from the Moncloa Palace (Spain’s equivalent of 10 Downing Street) but in a rare televisión interview on 1st October. The date, 20th December, was and is also heavily criticised for its proximity to the usual end-of-year festivities. PSOE, the Spanish Socialist Party opposition, wanted the General Election earlier for two reasons. Firstly, they wanted the 2016 Budget for Spain to be decided by the next government (the Budget is currently still going through the parliamentary cycle). Secondly, they are concerned about the continued instability in Cataluña in the wake of the Catalan Elections.

Following the Catalan Elections, Rajoy made his first public appearance on 3rd October and warned of coalitions and “amateur politicians” in Spain. He said that Pedro Sánchez, the Socialist Party leader, was a “radical” and that PP was prevented from governing in more town councils because “PSOE made pacts with extremists”. By ‘extremists’, of course, he means Podemos or other community/civic groups such as in Madrid and Barcelona which have

entered into alliance with PSOE since the 24th May Regional and Local Elections and have removed PP from power. Rajoy will have taken heart, however, from the General Election result in Portugal on 4th October which gave the centre-right coalition of Pedro Passos Coelho 41% of the votes (as against 31.6% for Portugal's Socialist Party) after four years of austerity measures.

In a radio interview with Cadena Cope on 6th October, Spain's Socialist leader, Pedro Sánchez, obviously anticipating no overall majority in the General Election, stated that he would not be prime minister at any price and that he will only enter into agreements with other parties if PSOE is the most voted party and that, in any case, he will not be deterred from a socialist programme. At a rally in Burgos on 11th October, Sánchez pledged five big reforms to sweep away the debris of PP in government: educational reform, labour reform, tax reform, stability and constitutional reform.

How do the main parties stand with the electorate vis-à-vis the General Election of 20th December? The latest indicator of voting intention came out on 11th October in "El País" with their Metroscopia opinion poll. In this poll there is a technical draw between PP and PSOE with both at 23.5%. The big shock is the rise of Ciudadanos with 21.5% while Podemos at 14% has dropped eight percentage points since April of this year.

Ciudadanos, of course, was second in the Catalan elections. It is useful to recall that Ciudadanos was started in Cataluña seven years ago by their leader, now 37 years of age, the charismatic and media-friendly Albert Rivera, as Ciutadans, an anti-independence party within Cataluña. It only branched out into a national party as Ciudadanos in 2015 and performed well at the local and regional elections on 24th May. Now it is in alliance with other parties in many towns in Spain. A CIS government poll analysis conducted in late May/early June but only published on 7th October showed that on 24th May half of all Ciudadanos voters had previously supported PP. Ciudadanos props up the PP regional Government in the Madrid Region and is obviously targetting PP voters. But, in the recent Catalan elections, many Socialist Party voters in the "cinturón rojo" or "red belt" (ie the working class urban areas surrounding Barcelona) apparently turned to Ciudadanos. Both main parties, therefore, PP and PSOE, are fighting to regain votes from Ciudadanos while PSOE is also seeking to win back votes from Podemos..

12th October, a national holiday, was the "Fiesta del Pilar" and the "Día de la Hispanidad" - the day of 'Spanishness' when Spain celebrates links with Spanish-speaking America, South Central and North. The PM Rajoy had a one-page article in "El País" on 12th October while King Felipe VI viewed a 3,400-strong military parade and fly-past in Madrid. Not everyone, though, was happy to attend the parade and the subsequent reception. Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos, turned down the invitation and said "My presence is more useful in the defence of rights and social justice". The Mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, (from an anti-evictions background) said on Twitter on the Hispanic links with Spanish America that Spain's history in that continent was shameful and that "Spain is commemorating a genocide and with a military parade that costs 800,000€". The Mayor of Cádiz, José María González, from a community background, also posted on Twitter "We never 'discovered' America. We massacred and subjugated a continent and its cultures in the name of God".

On the economy, the official unemployment rate in September went up, as is always the case after the summer, this time by 26,087. The European Commission thinks that Spain will not fulfil its deficit targets for 2015 and 2016 and wants Spain to amend its 2016 budget. There is increasing trade between Spain and Cuba. Last year Cuba approved a law on foreign investment - the "Ley de Inversión Extranjera" - designed to encourage more foreign entrepreneurs to Cuba. Seat is to build an assembly plant in Cuba and Roca is planning to

build a factory there. Currently, Spain's investment in Cuba amounts to one billion euros a year, third only after Venezuela and China.

In the meantime, numerous corruption cases continue in the courts. In the ERE scandal in Andalucía, several hundred people face prosecution and there are over 200 legal cases against some of them. This means that some people facing accusations at an average, say, of 15 days per case, could spend the next ten years in various courtrooms. The Caso Nóos involving the King's sister Cristina starts in the courts in Palma de Mallorca on 11th January 2016. She faces 4 years in prison for corruption, although the present writer will be astonished if this ever comes to pass.

The biggest issue for the left, however, is why in recent years so many Spaniards continue to vote for corrupt parties and corrupt politicians. This Update concludes with an apposite cartoon from the 10th October edition of "El País" which may be of interest to any language learners who are reading this Update. The cartoon's heading was "Irregular conjugations: the verb 'to corrupt'". It depicted a teacher chalking on the blackboard:

I corrupt you

You (sing) allow yourself to be corrupted

He/She/it suspects but cannot prove it

We throw up our hands in horror

You (plu) become indignant

They vote for us!