

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 13TH NOVEMBER 2012

by Kevin Bruton



Two Regions of Spain went to the polls on the 21st October, Galicia, in the north-west, and the Basque Country. It is worth recalling that all 17 of Spain's regions elect their own regional parliament; 13 are in sync, so to speak, and vote on the same day every four years (the last occasion was 22nd May 2011) while four regions are out of sync. Of these Andalucía voted in March of this year and, although a PP victory was expected, the election surprised most people in Spain by producing a Socialist Party/Communist Party Coalition. Cataluña has elections on 25th November but Galicia and the Basque Country voted on 21st October.

In the Basque Country, the result expected by all did indeed materialise. The ruling Basque Socialist Party, with a minority government, lost to the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) while a so-called 'radical' nationalist party, Bildu, gained a significant tranche of seats. As is the way in Spain, almost a month later, the new government has not taken up office but it looks as if the Basque Nationalist Party will attempt to govern alone in minority rather than in coalition with their fellow nationalists.

If the result in the Basque Country was an expectedly poor one for the Basque Socialist Party, the result for the Galician socialists was an unexpectedly disastrous one. The Region was previously held by PP with an overall majority of one seat over all other parties – 38 to 37. On 21st October, PP, in Galicia, although losing popular votes, increased their number of seats from 38 to 41 while the Galician Socialist Party dropped from 25 seats to 18. The consequences for PSOE nationally will be examined later in this update but the return of a PP regional government, in the midst of a deepening economic crisis and widespread public discontent, was, of course, a huge boost for PP nationally and for the Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, himself from Galicia. It is, though, no wonder that people do not trust politicians in Spain when, in the Galicia election campaign, the PP regional leader, Alberto Nuñez Feijóo, wishing to distance himself from unpopular national austerity measures, repeatedly told the regional electorate that their vote was NOT a plebiscite on central government policies but, immediately on being re-elected, told the press that the result was a ringing endorsement of central government cuts.

On 25th November, there are regional elections in Cataluña. Here, there is no doubt about the result. The Catalan Nationalist leader and head of the Regional Government, Artur Mas, riding a wave of nationalistic fervour and furore at Madrid, as so often in Cataluña's history, will win the election again. The only question is whether he will gain an overall majority. Two opinion polls on 8th November diverged: one gave him an overall majority, the other marginally did not.

While politicians apparently twiddle their thumbs, ordinary Spaniards, usually passive victims of government policies, are becoming increasingly militant of late as they anxiously await the prospect of a full government bail-out. On 7th November, the European Commission produced economic forecasts for all 27 EU countries which are totally at odds with Spanish Government predictions. Briefly, for example, the Commission believes Spanish GDP will fall by 1.4% in 2013, three times the estimate of Central Government. The Commission also predicts that, in 2014, Spain will have the biggest increase in public deficit of all 27 EU countries, a deficit predicted to worsen by 6.4%. (Interestingly the UK is second in this Table.) The European Commission's recipe of further austerity measures and cuts in public expenditure helps to explain why Spaniards are losing faith in the EU as well as in their own politicians. Brussels also predicts an astonishing further loss of half a million jobs in Spain next year. The official unemployment figures for October show unemployment, at nearly 26%, rising in October again by 128,242 and reaching a total of 4,833,521.

At the moment of writing, the PP Government's budget for 2013 is beginning its trajectory through Parliament. Hopes that there may be no further cuts may be dashed when, apparently, of 3,600 amendments to the Budget tabled by opposition parties, the Government, with its overall majority, says it is only prepared to accept 6! Of more immediate concern to many Spaniards is the increasing number of home evictions as a result of the economic crisis. In the past four years, 400,000 Spanish families or individuals have been evicted from their homes; recently, this has averaged 500 per day. Protests by the group STOP DESAHUCIOS (Stop evictions) have been going on for months but reached a head on 9th November when there was a second suicide within a week. A 53-year-old woman, Amaia Egaña, threw herself off the balcony of her fourth-floor flat in Barakaldo in the Basque Country. Thousands protested that evening on the streets of Barakaldo and elsewhere in Spain.

Since then, the European Court of Justice has condemned Spanish legislation on evictions. And, on 12th November, in a rare and panicky gesture of rapprochement with the Opposition, PP sat down for six hours with PSOE to thrash out new legislation on evictions. At the moment of writing, talks are continuing with proposals set to go to the Cabinet on 16th November. Already, however, two Banks in the Basque Country have suspended evictions and the Spanish Banking Association has called for a two-year moratorium, but only in 'extreme cases'. Spain's Police Federation also say they will support any police officer, if necessary in the courts, who refuses to enforce an eviction.

As the country appears to disintegrate further, the Spanish Socialist Party also appears to be falling apart. An appalling result in Galicia has given rise to increasing criticism of the PSOE leader, Rubalcaba, although, to date, this has been covert rather than overt. The latest opinion polls for the Catalan elections also suggest very poor support for the Catalan Socialist Party. Already some regional leaders, for example Tomás Gómez, head of the Socialist Party in the Madrid Region, are talking about primary elections à la française to choose the candidate for the next general election, although this will probably not take place until 2015. Also, Carme Chacón, beaten to the leadership of PSOE in January this year by a handful of votes, and quiescent since, is suddenly back with a bang. On 31st October, two leading daily newspapers featured major interviews with Chacón and, the same day, she appeared on the morning TV programme, the 'Programa de Ana Rosa', one of the most watched TV shows in Spain.

On 14th November there will be a General Strike in Spain, in line with Portugal and with stoppages in 23 countries across the EU. This is the second General Strike in 2012 (the earlier date was 29th March) and it will be massively supported as millions of Spaniards join the Trades Unions' call for an end to austerity measures and a referendum on government policies. A full report will follow in next month's Update. However, the General Strike is only a wider manifestation of daily public protest, anger and frustration with what is happening in Spain and with what many see as the dismemberment of the welfare state largely built up by the PSOE government after October 1982. Protests are daily and increasing. For instance, on 31st October, there were attacks on Zara and Apple shops in Barcelona. The Metro and local train services have been on strike in the same city every other day in the past month. On 11th November, there were demonstrations against health cuts in Cataluña and against hospital privatisations in Madrid. There are regular demonstrations against education cuts and privatisation. And, on 8th November, in the Valencia Region 100 firefighters attacked Diputación (Provincial Government) offices in Alicante protesting against cuts.

Also in the Valencia Region, chemists are taking indefinite action against the Regional Government which has not paid them for five and a half months. The response of PP regional leaders is, as usual, to solicit private enterprise and destroy the environment. On 31st October, under the auspices of the Regional Government, Craig Stenke, executive director of the Canadian firm R2 Energy, spoke to the mayors of 40 local councils in the provincial government offices in Castellón to outline a plan to extract gas and oil by 'fracking'

over an area in the Valencia Region amounting to 400,000 acres. With PP running Castellón Province like a private fiefdom the worst may be expected.

It was, however, gratifying to see PP receive a 'bloody nose' a week ago at the hands of Spain's 'Supreme Court', the Tribunal Constitucional. One of the progressive measures the PSOE government of Zapatero carried out in 2005 was to legalise gay marriage, a move supported, then as now, by most Spaniards in opinion polls. PP members voted against in Parliament and, when they lost, appealed to Spain's top Court to reverse the legislation. After an unaccountable 7-year delay, the Court recently upheld the Law which means that the 22,000 couples who have taken advantage of legislation and the thousands now contemplating marriage can rest content at last. And there is nothing PP can do about it!