

UPDATE ON SPANISH POLITICS – 14TH April 2015

By Kevin Bruton



2015 is a huge election year in Spain. A General Election is due in November this year; Cataluña will hold an election on 27th September; and, on 24th May, there will be local elections all across the country as well as elections in 13 of Spain's 17 Regional Parliaments. There has, however, already been one important election this year in Spain viz. on 22nd March in Spain's biggest Region, Andalucía. The consequences of this election form the main part of this Update.

It is worth noting that the outgoing government in Andalucía was an alliance of the Spanish Socialist Party, PSOE, led by Susana Díaz, and the communists of Izquierda Unida. Díaz decided, for reasons best known to herself, to put an end to the alliance and call elections in the interests of "greater stability". The magic figure of 55 seats for an overall majority was never going to happen with the rise of the anti-establishment party Podemos and the sudden emergence at national level of Ciudadanos, the neo-liberal centre-right party which emerged from the chrysalis of a Catalan anti-independence party, Ciutadans.

In the end, the Socialists attained 47 seats, exactly the same as before. The right-wing party of central government, PP, previously with 50 seats, was reduced to 33 seats, losing a third of its seats and a third of its popular vote which went down from 41% to 27%. And, of course, the two new parties, untested previously in domestic elections of this magnitude, erupted on to the political scene. Thus, Podemos picked up 15 seats (although this total was 6 or 7 fewer than opinion polls had suggested) and Ciudadanos, from nowhere, won 9 seats. Susana Díaz, the Socialist leader, trumpeted the result as a great victory (although of course 47 seats was the same as before) primarily because of the huge defeat for PP.

Since 22nd March, Díaz has been in discussion with other regional party leaders to seek enough support to vote her in as President of the Region. This is not proving easy since Podemos and Ciudadanos are demanding that Díaz's two predecessors as regional heads, fellow Socialists, José Antonio Griñán and Manuel Chaves, should resign their seats over the ERE's corruption case, ongoing in the courts, in which previous administrations and trades unions in Andalucía are alleged to have creamed off millions of euros from EU subsidies.

The aftermath of the Andalucían elections is having a significant impact on the major parties in the run-up to the 24th May Regional and Local Elections and the Autumn General Election. This is primarily because the Andalucían Election has demonstrated that the two-party system which has dominated Spain's emerging democracy since the post-Franco transition has, almost certainly, gone.

The Spanish Socialists, under their new national leader, Pedro Sánchez (only elected last July) held a huge conference on 12th April in which Sánchez, for the first time in public, had the support of the former charismatic leader of the party, Felipe González, the man who led the Socialist Party out of the shadows of clandestine activity under Franco and into the first decades of democracy and who was himself Prime Minister of Spain from 1982 to 1996. González, still with a huge level of support within the Socialist movement, admitted that he had not voted for Sánchez but now called on all Socialists to unite behind their new leader. For the 24th May Elections, Sánchez plans a decentralised campaign in support of Socialist candidates. He will travel Spain several times in an Election Bus, which debuted on 12th April and which carries the inscription on its side "Kilometres of Socialism". In the last two weeks of campaigning, Pedro Sánchez will be its principal denizen as he campaigns nationwide.

There is much to play for because, currently, of Spain's 17 Regions, PSOE only has power in two – Andalucía and Asturias in the north, famous for its coal-mining traditions and the Workers' Revolt of 1934. Now PSOE hopes to throw PP out of its important power bases in the Madrid Region and in the Valencia Region, although it will probably take an alliance with smaller parties to do so.

The appalling results in Andalucía (50 seats down to 33) have led to internal ructions within PP and much criticism of the leadership within the Party, virtually for the first time in 4 years.

The national leader and Prime Minister, Mariano Rajoy, has always led the Party like a medieval fiefdom and predictably puts the PP losses down to a "failure of communication". There has, however, been internecine warfare at the top level within PP in recent weeks and a number of critical comments and articles in the media by PP post-holders.

In an attempt to assuage the criticism, Rajoy called for PP's biggest organ, the National Council of PP leaders across the country, 600 in total, to meet on 7th April, their first meeting in two years. Rajoy's constant theme was, predictably, the improvements his government claims to have effected on the macro economy. In his 45-minute speech, Rajoy used the word "better" 28 times. Thus, his team have jumped on the idea with which Ronald Reagan finished his famous TV debate with Jimmy Carter on 28th October 1980 - "Are you better off than you were 4 years ago?". Rajoy framed his question in exactly the same way - "¿Está España mejor o peor que en 2012?" or "Is Spain better or worse off than in 2012?" Unfortunately for Rajoy, the facts do not support him. Even in terms of the suspect official unemployment figures, unemployment is 9000 above the 4,442,359 figure registered at year-end 2011. And, of course, everyone knows that 90% of the jobs created in the past year or so are part-time, temporary or zero-hours contracts. The total number of unemployed who receive no benefit at all, at 55.7%, is the highest since 2001. Public debt and foreign debt have increased under Rajoy. Most of all, opinion polls consistently show that Spaniards feel and are worse off.

Rajoy, in his speech, and, again, predictably, only used the word "corruption" once. Corruption cases, of course, continue . . . and continue . . . and continue . . . in the courts. PP is now openly accused as a Party of having an illegal "B" fund financed by companies seeking public contracts which, it is known, paid for PP election campaigns. In the Nóos case involving the new King's brother-in-law, Iñaki Urdangarín, and his wife, Cristina, the King's sister, the former business partner of Urdangarín, Diego Torres, has furnished the justice system with bucket-loads of evidence which purport to show that the Royal Family knew every detail of the illegal syphoning off of millions of euros of public money.

The dual justice system in Spain still works well - one for the rich, one for the poor! Three young women, aged 16, 18 and 21, perhaps by naiveté or stupidity, were persuaded by a stranger in Madrid city centre to go into El Corte Inglés, Spain's top department store, and purchase goods with a stolen credit card and female ID. They did so, spending 837€ in half an hour. They have just been sentenced to 2 years 4 months and 14 days in prison.

Opinion polls recently on national voting intentions still put PSOE, PP and Podemos variously in the low 20 percentage point category, with Ciudadanos below. The communists have suffered from the rise of Podemos, losing 7 of their 12 seats in Andalucía. Meanwhile, UPyD, a small centre party with 5 MPs in the national Parliament, is disintegrating, having failed to win one seat in Andalucía. Many members are defecting, at the moment of writing, to Ciudadanos.

As always, the leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias, is in boyant form. In a TV interview on 10th April, he stated that PP was the main adversary of Podemos. Earlier that day, the Governor of the Bank of Spain, Luís Linde, had made the disgraceful comment that "Austerity is patriotism" and Iglesias correctly reminded the interviewer that "patriotism is defending ordinary people", with one in four in Spain officially below the poverty line. Iglesias used the term "austericide" ie. death by austerity, to describe what neo-liberal policies are doing to Europe. In a direct allusion to the TV series "Game of Thrones" (with Series 5 starting on 12th April) Iglesias warned PP about its collapsing vote by saying, in English, "Winter is coming, Señor Rajoy!".

An opinion poll published in "El País" newspaper on 6th April revealed the voting intentions of young people in Spain. In the 18-to-35 age group, 26% say they support Podemos while 15% support Ciudadanos, 11% PSOE and 10% PP. The figures clearly show support for the new parties. The question remains, however, as to how many young people will vote at all. A different poll shows that in the 18-to-24 age group only 13% plan to vote in the General Election!

To finish on a lighter note, a cartoon recently in "El Mundo" newspaper showed two employees in a bookshop. One is emptying boxes of books and the other is stacking them on shelves. The first employee says to the second, "Where do I put a book about a political leader who resigns because of a scandal in his party?". The other replies, "If it's about Watergate put it in History. If it's about Spain put it in Science Fiction!".