

Political Chaos in Spain

Historical Origins: The Depoliticization that Emerged following the Franco Dictatorship

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Spain's political establishment is currently in a state of disarray with the country's politicians struggling to form a government, as none of the parties were able to obtain a parliamentary majority in the recent National Election that was held on December 20th. After the votes were tallied, it emerged that the People's Party[1] (Partido Popular, PP) obtained 28.7% of the vote, the Socialist Workers Party[2] (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE) became the main opposition with 22.0%, the left-wing Podemos[3] ("We Can") party received 20.7%, and the centre-right Ciudadanos[4] ("Citizens") obtained 13.9%. In the House of Parliament, these results translated into 123 seats for the PP, 90 for the PSOE, 69 for Podemos, and 40 for Ciudadanos; the remaining 14.7% voted for various smaller parties. Although the PP won, these results represent a significant defeat for the party, as it lost the parliamentary majority that it held prior to the elections.

On the surface, these results may not appear to be particularly remarkable, given that the PP has experienced a number of electoral losses and setbacks in the past. However, they are significant on account of the fact that these votes were not picked up by its traditional rival, as the PSOE realized its worst election results since 1979. Instead, Spain's two dominant parties suffered losses on account of unprecedented gains made by two alternative parties that have emerged as potential contenders, the aforementioned Ciudadanos and Podemos.

These exceptional results in the National Election could signify the impending end of the duopoly that has characterized the Spanish political arena since the transition to democracy with the ratification of the Spanish constitution via referendum on December 6, 1978[5]. Over the nearly four decades that followed, Spanish voters were effectively limited to choosing between two dominant parties: the right-wing PP and the left-wing PSOE. Although some smaller political parties did emerge since 1982, they were essentially non-factors with no hope of achieving any meaningful influence through elections.

The current inability to form a government is due to a number of factors related to party ideology and the underlying numbers after the election results. First of all, the PP and PSOE are traditional rivals and the notion of them forming a coalition is a non-starter. Alternatively, prior to the election, there was some speculation that Ciudadanos could ally itself with the PP to lead the country. However, Ciudadanos performed poorly relative to its pre-election polling figures and did not win enough seats to establish a parliamentary majority with the PP. The only remaining viable option would be an alliance between Podemos and PSOE (other smaller parties would also need to be included), as both carry the

label of being a left-wing party.

In fact, PSOE has reached out to Podemos and proposed the formation of a coalition that would constitute a parliamentary majority. However, a key obstacle to such a partnership is that Podemos presents itself as a genuine left-wing party that espouses socialism and democracy, and is well-known for strongly opposing austerity measures in no uncertain terms[6]. Meanwhile, past experience has demonstrated that, in practice, it is not fundamentally different from the PP when in power. Another impediment to this alliance is that PSOE insists that Podemos stops supporting the idea of a referendum on independence in Catalonia as a precondition. This is very unlikely, as Podemos recognizes the diversity of identity within Spain and, as such, its objective is to attain popular sovereignty with everyone united. Thus, while Podemos does not necessarily support the idea of Catalonia separating from Spain, it recognizes the right of the Catalanian people to hold a referendum on the matter. They openly advocated this position even at the risk of losing votes during the election campaign.

Unlike Podemos, Ciudadanos does not represent a true ideological alternative to the status quo, as it is not substantially different from either the left-wing PSOE or the right-wing PP. All three of these parties are perceived as very business-oriented[RF1]. Over the nearly four decades of rule by the PSOE and PP, both traditional parties have clearly shown themselves to be very business friendly, as bankers and the business elite played key roles in shaping the agendas of both governments during the process of democratizing Spain and modernizing its economy. Podemos' economic program conflicts with those of the PP, PSOE, and Ciudadanos, which amount to little more than the further implementation of neo-liberal economic policies.

The outcome of recent National Election demonstrated that more than 35% of Spanish voters are ready to move on from merely being resigned to choosing between the two traditionally dominant parties. However, the fact that just over half of the Spanish electorate continued to support the PP and PSOE shows that the Spanish population has a short memory. These individuals do not seem to understand that their current economic and social predicament, characterized by rising poverty levels, the highest rate of youth unemployment in Europe (more than 49%), and public debt exceeding \$1 trillion, are largely outcomes of policies implemented by successive PP and PSOE governments. Furthermore, members of both the PP and PSOE have been embroiled in similar corruption scandals[7] during their reigns. Nevertheless, a majority of the Spanish electorate allowed themselves to be manipulated into voting against their interests by the media and promises made during the election campaign.

The current instability in Spain's political arena, culminating in the inability to form a ruling coalition government, has undeniable historical origins. Spanish society has effectively been depoliticised since 1939, when Franco established his dictatorial regime and proclaimed himself chief (or El Caudillo) and head of state (Jefe del Estado) after securing victory in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). His official ruling party, the Falangistas, promoted a conservative, authoritarian, anti-communist and ultra-nationalist[8] agenda aimed at achieving a united national identity. This was partly attributable to Franco's belief that the democratic regime that ruled Spain in 1931, before the onset of the Civil War, was responsible for engendering chaos and instability, which resulted in the quasi-destruction of the nation. As such, his goal was to eliminate the supporters of leftist parties and the democratic system by terrifying the civil population. During his dictatorship, Franco used all of the tools available to him to limit the participation of Spanish citizens in the political

arena and restrain freedom within the individual sphere.

Franco deemed it illegal to support any political party other than the Falangistas and those citizens that did not conform to his authoritarian rules and ideology faced the threat of direct violence. Thus, communist and socialist organizations were marginalized and individual adherents to these principles were severely oppressed, with many facing public humiliation, medical experimentation, exile, imprisonment, forced labour, or the possibility of being sent to the concentration camps that were established throughout the country. It is estimated that nearly half-a-million people were cruelly executed during Franco's reign, including liberals, socialists, communists, anarchists, Protestants, atheists, intellectuals, etc.

Franco's direct control over society through a variety of means including violence and executions in cases of disobedience, anti-democratic and anti-political propaganda, and manipulation through the media, resulted in the emergence of a largely depoliticised society. In fact, it could be argued that citizens of Spain eventually came to distrust anything related to politics. The results of the recent National Election demonstrate that, even though Franco's regime came to an end approximately 40 years ago, the depoliticization it created remain deeply ingrained in the Spanish populace. [RF2]

The cruelty of the Franco regime lasted four decades, only ending with his death on November 20, 1975. Subsequently, Spain focused its attention on establishing closer ties with Europe, with the ultimate objective of gaining official membership in the European Community (EC). King Juan Carlos I [9] believed that obtaining EC membership would require making significant reforms to the Spanish political system, including the establishment of democracy [10], and modernizing the economy. [RF3] In addition to Franco's systematic depoliticization, Spanish society was also a victim of the methodological depoliticization associated with modernizing the economy, with the PP and the PSOE playing major roles. Over the nearly four decades, the political arena has become the playground of interest groups, powerful corporations, and bureaucrats where these actors often end up influencing the choices available to the electorate. As a result, an increasing share of the population has become disinterested in politics and no longer place any trust in political discourse or election campaigns. The depoliticization of Spanish society for almost eight decades is likely a key factor behind the state of disarray that has emerged, with the country's politicians proving incapable of forming a government since December 20th.

If the relevant parties in question are unable to form a ruling government by January 13th, then King Felipe VI will select Spain's next Prime Minister. However, if the parliament does not approve his selection through a vote of confidence, then another National Election will be held two months later. Complicating matters for King Felipe VI is the fact that all three opposition parties have already announced that under no circumstances would they support the reappointment of Mariano Rajoy, leader of the PP, as Prime Minister. Thus, it appears as though Spain could very likely be holding new elections, which would be a historic moment, as the country has never failed to establish a parliament following the conclusion of national elections.

Notes:

[1] The People's Alliance (Alianza Popular, AP) was a conservative right-wing party originally founded by Manuel Fraga in 1976. Previously, Fraga served as a Minister in the Franco regime. AP acted as

the major opposition party in the 1980s. It was officially re-named the People's Party in 1989.

[2]PSOE was founded by Pablo Iglesias in 1879. It was originally based on Marxist ideals, but over time it transitioned into a social-democrat party.

[3] Since being officially established on January 17, 2014, Podemos has been able to unify people from all age groups and diverse political viewpoints, including those belonging to various movements like anti-globalisation, anti-neoliberalism, anti-austerity, anti-corruption, environmentalists, socialists, and other activists. Podemos is well-known for its defense of justice and equality, its anti-globalisation discourses, and its opposition to austerity measures. Podemos is led by 37 year old Pablo Manuel Iglesias Turrión. Prior to entering into politics, he was a tenured professor of political science at the Complutense University of Madrid. His academic record is very impressive as he holds a degree in law and political science, a Master in Humanities, a Master of Arts in Communication, and a PH.D. He also studied a number of other disciplines including cinema, acting, and psychoanalysis. Before entering the political arena, Iglesias was well-known for hosting a round-table debate show on the internet called La Tuerka (The Screw). In fact, he became quite popular and gained a reputation as a strong debater while hosting La Tuerka, as well as his appearances as a guest on other political talk shows.

[4] Ciudadanos was originally founded in Catalonia in July 2006. It has always been led by Albert Rivera, a 36 year old former lawyer who is well-known for posing nude in a campaign poster during the 2006 elections for the Parliament of Catalonia. Since its inception, Ciudadanos has espoused mixed ideologies of post-nationalism, liberalism and social democracy, in addition to being well-known for its anti-immigrant and anti-abortion agenda. Furthermore, the leader of the Ciudadanos, Albert Rivera openly accepts the principles of neo-liberalism and advocates for the application of neo-liberal economic policies, which were extensively promoted and implemented by both of Spain's traditional parties when they were in power.

[5] Since the transition from the Franco dictatorship to democracy, Spain has been led exclusively by successive PSOE (1982-1996 and 2004-2011) and PP (1996-2004 and 2011-present) governments.

[6] Furthermore, Podemos' leader, Pablo Iglesias, has frequently criticized the EU and identified it as a contributing factor to many of the economic and social problems that exist in Spain, as well as a number of other debtor countries. Nonetheless, while he argues that Spain needs to re-acquire some of the sovereignty that it has given up in exchange for EU membership, he simultaneously acknowledges that outright withdrawal is not a viable option .

[7]The Gürtel case is one of the biggest corruption scandals in recent Spanish history. It implicated officers from the People's Party in a number of corrupt practices including bribery, money laundering, and tax evasion.

[8] However, Franco ended up constructing an artificial national identity that completely disregarded Spain's linguistic, historical, political and cultural diversity. For example, his regime suppressed all languages other than Castilian Spanish, including Catalan, Galician, and Basque. He also sought to develop a national Spaniard cultural identity by promoting flamenco dancing, traditional music, and bull fighting.

[9] In 1947, Franco announced that Spain was to become a monarchy without a throne. Subsequently, in 1969, he declared that Prince Juan Carlos, son of Juan of Bourbon, was to be his successor as the legitimate successor of the monarchy. On November 22, 1975, two days after the death of Francisco Franco, Juan Carlos was officially declared King of Spain by the Spanish Cortes; he

remained King until 2014. He played a prominent role in Spain's transition to democracy along with a number of other politicians. Through these efforts, a new constitution was ratified via referendum on December 6th, 1978, having largely been drafted by seven specific members of the Spanish Parliament who came to be known as the "Fathers of the constitution" (los Padres de la Constitución). The new constitution declared Spain a parliamentary monarchy with King Juan Carlos I remaining as Head of State, though without any actual authority to rule the country.

[10] There is no consensus on a precise timeline with respect to the transition to democracy in Spain. Some of the commonly accepted dates marking this transition include: the establishment of the Spanish Constitution in 1978; the unsuccessful coup d'état attempt on February 23, 1981; and, the triumph of PSOE in the election held on October 28, 1982

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