

Spain's Podemos' Irresistible Rise

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Rarely has a political party become so popular so quickly. Driven by the economic and political crisis gripping Spain, Podemos ("we can" in English), the country's anti-austerity leftist party, is topping opinion polls only 15 months after its formation, 11 months since taking five seats in the European Parliament, and fresh from winning 15 seats in the Andalusian provincial parliament during elections this March. Were a national election to be held in Spain today, Podemos, with its impressive 350,000 members, would almost certainly form the government.

That test, however, will have to wait until November, though many look to the recent victory of the Syriza party in Greece as a foreshadowing of what's to come for Podemos. Spain's economy is the fourth largest in the euro zone. A victory for the anti-establishment left there, even more so than in Greece, would present a serious challenge to the neoliberal austerity policies imposed on the continent by the European Union, its central bank and commission.

According to a recent poll, had the Spanish national election been held on March 30, Podemos would have taken first place with 22% of the popular vote. It would not have been a landslide: in second place was the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) with 20%, then the ruling right-wing Partido Popular (PP) at 19%, and finally 18% for the new right-wing Ciudadanos party. Since 1982, Spain has been ruled alternately by the PSOE and PP, both of them firmly neoliberal, with the former socialist in name only.

The Spanish elite, including the banks and upper-middle class, exercises power in both the main parties thereby consolidating rule by a corrupt oligarchy. The country has been run by this group for 40 years, since the death of the fascist dictator General Francisco Franco. Both the PSOE and PP have been enmeshed in corruption scandals reaching up to the prime minister in the case of the PP, and due to such machinations Spain's biggest corporations hardly pay any taxes.

Podemos has pledged to break the stranglehold on Spain of what it calls "the Caste," restructure the public debt, establish true participatory democracy, make corporations pay taxes, and end the austerity regime imposed on the country by the EU and the two establishment parties since the 2007 economic crisis. Unemployment in Spain stands at an all-time high of 26%, but it has skyrocketed for youth, reaching 56% in 2013.

The PP government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has subjected Spain to the largest cuts in public spending since 1978, dismantling an already underfunded welfare state and increasing poverty to the point that 44% of families are now in an economically precarious position. More than 400,000 families have been evicted from their homes (2014 saw nearly 100 foreclosures carried out per day). Highly regressive labour reforms that make it easier

for employers to fire workers have resulted in a 10% drop in wages. Spanish public debt reached 100% of GDP in late 2014 exceeding \$1 trillion.

Jaime Pastor, a professor of political science at Spain's Public Open University and member of the Autonomous Citizen Council of Podemos in Madrid, told me the popularity of Podemos stems from the fact that its leaders, and especially Secretary General Pablo Iglesias, have created a new discourse that is very critical of the elite "and therefore have won the sympathy of many people, following the eruption of the 15M movement" [also known as 'the Indignados' social movement which rose in 2007 in reaction to the poverty created by official austerity measures]. "Podemos is not anti-capitalist, but it is against the current regime and the austerity policies of the EU," said Pastor.

Despite an impressive showing in the recent Greek elections, Syriza is struggling with a belligerent EU on a mutually acceptable package of reforms in exchange for bailout money to ease the economic crisis. Podemos, if elected, would face a similar situation, and like Syriza the party has no intention of leaving the euro zone. "It will be very hard to end austerity measures inside the EU," said Pastor, "but the Spanish economy is bigger than Greece and that can lead to some divisions inside the EU. A Podemos government that wants to make the EU restructure Spanish debt will need an alliance with the Syriza government in Greece and will also need to mobilize the Spanish people in a major way and encourage their self-organization."

Cristina Flesher Fominaya, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and author of the book *Social Movements and Globalization: How Protests, Occupations and Uprisings are Changing the World*, is also following the rise of Podemos. She told me the party represents "a historic opportunity to break the hold of a two-party system and to try to regenerate Spanish democracy." Podemos is doing this "by offering an alternative political party model...that is not beholden to private capitalist interests but is instead crowdfunded through small donations [and] that seeks to maintain contact with social movements and with grassroots party activists," she said. The party is also offering a change to voters with respect to transparency and accountability in how decisions are made, including party financing.

Podemos' major accomplishment has been to transform the 15M movement into an amazingly popular political party in a very short time—something the North American Occupy movement failed to achieve. Party leadership was very important in this respect. Iglesias, Iñigo Errejón (campaign director) and Juan Carlos Monedero are "very media savvy, charismatic, and committed, and they also have a lot of political credibility within Spanish social movements," explained Fominaya. "They have important organizing and communication knowledge from years of social movement organizing."

Iglesias frequently appears on political talk shows where a mass audience can watch him calmly take on his main critics. This has broadened the appeal and credibility of Podemos beyond traditional left-wing circles. In fact, the party claims to be neither left nor right, but against "the Caste," a strategy that is all the more successful for how utterly discredited the "mainstream socialism" (essentially neoliberalism) of the PSOE has been.

"Socialist and social democratic parties in Europe have destroyed the rich socialist tradition. These parties have made the label 'socialist' meaningless by compromising with neoliberalism," said Carles Muntaner, a professor of nursing and public health at the

University of Toronto, in a recent conversation. The Spanish-Catalonian travels frequently to Spain where he works with the Indignados movement. “In this sense the Podemos strategy of downplaying the socialist label is a good one.”

However, there may be limits to this strategy. Podemos has shifted toward the political centre under the dominance of a small, some say too controlling party leadership. This arguably detracts from its appeal, especially on the left, since the party’s popularity stems from the fact it is perceived to be a radical progressive alternative to the establishment parties. It will also not be enough to shout down “the Caste” come election time, given the rising popularity of Ciudadanos, a kind of right-wing version of Podemos that is also positioning itself as an *antidote* to the establishment parties.

According to Luke Stobart, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Hertfordshire and founder of the Podemos circle in London, England, Podemos has retreated from a radical economic program to a Keynesian one. “Iglesias and company have gone from talking of ‘turning over the [political] chessboard’ to attempting to occupy ‘the centre of the political chessboard’—a revealing symbolic shift,” Stobart wrote on Left Flank, an Australian political blog. “Likewise, Iglesias and supporters have suggested that Podemos has already stopped being a ‘citizens’ movement’ and become a ‘party.’”

Iglesias repeatedly emphasizes the “efficiency” of Podemos’ economic program, likening it to social democracy or even Christian democracy as practised in the 1980s, which Stobart called “a strategy based fundamentally on saving capitalism from its inbuilt excesses (as Keynes intended) rather than overcoming capitalism as a system.”

Podemos’ partial retreat from radicalism has included the repudiation by its leaders of the influence of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution on the party. Monedero, Podemos’ 52-year-old spokesperson, received \$500,000 from the Chavez government for his political advice, money that helped start the new party. The citizen circles Podemos set up across Spain were inspired by the Bolivarian circles and communal councils that ensured grassroots public participation in the Venezuelan Revolution and therefore its massive popularity and success.

These connections are glommed onto by the right-wing political establishment and media in Spain to justify exaggerated claims that Podemos is a puppet of the Venezuelan regime. Instead of defending Chavez, Iglesias and his group have distanced themselves from both him and the current government of Nicolás Maduro, saying they have nothing to do with Venezuela—a country they once held up as doing more than all others to help fix underdevelopment in the Global South.

“Rather than standing with Venezuela, they treat it in a neocolonial and paternalistic manner which I find reprehensible,” said Muntaner. “No amount of need for political support in Spain can justify such attitudes. With these kinds of opportunistic leaders, and in spite of having an excellent team of advisors, I am very skeptical about Podemos being able to bring about substantial change in Spain.”

In spite of its shortcomings, there is no doubt that in a short time Podemos has fundamentally transformed the Spanish political landscape. It has destroyed the three-decade-old corrupt two-party neoliberal ruling model, involved hundreds of thousands of mainly young people in politics again, giving them renewed hope, and put Spain’s elite on

the defensive. That is very good for a year's work. Now it is up to the party's grassroots members to ensure that Podemos lives up to its radical promise.

Asad Ismi is international affairs correspondent for the CCPA Monitor and the author of the radio documentary *Capitalism is the Crisis* which has been aired on 42 radio stations in the U.S., Canada and Europe reaching about 33 million people. For his publications visit www.asadismi.ws.

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