

The Podemos Phenomenon: Spain's Best Hope for Democracy

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The captivating rise of Spain's new left-leaning party Podemos has captured the world's attention by emphasizing participative democracy. The formerly fractured Spanish left, in the past marred by petty infighting in Spain, coalesced from grassroots protests over austerity measures and gained steam in 2011. Working with the Anti-Capitalist Left activist base, Podemos began in 2014 by starting local public meetings, called citizen circles, to organize; using the web to organize, poll, and debate issues; and heavily promoting anti-austerity measures and poverty reduction. Young adults especially have been swept up in the Podemos' rise, as unemployment for youths stands at anywhere from 30-50% by region.

Last month, anti-poverty activist Ada Colau gained the most seats to become Barcelona's mayor with backing from Podemos. Podemos-backed Manuela Carmena came in a strong second in Madrid's mayoral election as well. A coalition with Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE) may secure both ladies' spots. Now all eyes turn to the general election slated for December. At center stage as leader of Podemos is Pablo Iglesias, former college professor and TV host.

The ideology of Podemos was incubated during the May 2011 protests in Madrid centered on the skyrocketing unemployment and austerity measures employed by the Zapatero-led government. Spain's protests erupted nationwide and were centered in the Puerta del Sol square in Madrid, led by social networks and citizen assemblies. Protesters were dubbed Indignados ("the outraged", or "the angry ones"), for their rejection of Spain's increasingly corrupt two-party system and the "austericide" measures strangling the economy and vitality of the nation. Spreading throughout the country, it is estimated that about 6.5-8 million participated. Protests have continued under the Rajoy regime. (1)

After the protests, Podemos formed from a coterie of radical professors from Madrid's Complutense University. The most notable are Iglesias, political theorist and the face of the movement; Jesús Montero, former communist and political organizer, and Iñigo Errejón, university lecturer and campaign strategist. Beginning to channel citizens' hopes, despair, and anger over poor economic conditions, Iglesias' TV programs, La Tuerka and also Fort Apache, became hits and launched him into the national spotlight.

Debating conservatives on national broadcasts pushed Iglesias into the stratosphere in Spain, with bona-fide rock-star status, which he backs up: Iglesias accepts only quarter of his salary as a member of the European parliament. He flies coach on all his trips. He routinely rips Rajoy and his cadre of corrupt officials. He lives in a graffitied neighborhood in Madrid, has credentials as a respected academic, and visits with famous theorist Chantal Mouffe.

Iglesias and Podemos certainly have their critics and detractors, however. Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has blasted the party recently, calling them “incompetent populists”. Some have questioned Iglesias’ decision to run Fort Apache, as it was produced by an Iranian state-run TV company. Others frown upon members’ past consulting work with the Venezuelan government. And co-founding member Juan Carlos Monedero has recently quit the party, commenting that Podemos needs to “go back to its origins”. (2)

Despite the backlash, there is no doubt that Podemos represents the best hope for the future in Spain. Monedero still claims they are “the most decent force in Spanish politics”. Iglesias has shown citizens who the ruling People’s Party (PP) and the rival Socialists’ Workers Party (PSOE) really are: la casta (the caste), the establishment, corrupt leaders and officials who do nothing as nearly 6 million people are out of work and 2 million households have no net income. (3) The party is also aware of their limitations in an integrated EU economy: this is why they have called on the help of friends like Greece’s Syriza to fight the EU technocracy, ECB, and IMF. No doubt, Podemos would be wise to send feelers to Italy’s PM Matteo Renzi and Ireland’s Sinn Fein party to ally the periphery, mainly southern Europe, against the unjust policies of Brussels.

Iglesias has shown moderation and fairness in nearly every aspect of Podemos’ agenda. He supports Spain’s membership in the EU, but only under fair laws and loan agreements. He wants benefits and social programs expanded, but he is not calling for nationalization of entire industries. Podemos supports sharing more power with the autonomous regions of the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia, and even states that the party would allow a Catalan referendum, which the PP and PSOE oppose. (4)

Podemos is more than a vehicle to bring to life the hopes and dreams of Spaniards alone. As political theorists, leaders of Podemos cannot be accused of intellectual laziness. By employing a narrative of anti-elite rhetoric within a framework of social justice, they have created a message appealing to citizens of the whole nation. By linking digital democracy, through social media, with participative elements, such as meetings to combat poverty, lobby for public health initiatives, the arts, and more, Podemos has provided a contemporary deliberative democratic blueprint for the world.

The party has helped lay ground for democracy with revolutionary potential, but not within a traditional, left/right framework. Though favoring a moderate social democracy, Iglesias and the leadership deny that they are partisans. Iglesias explained the left/right divide succinctly at a rally in Barcelona: “Power doesn’t fear the left, only the people”. (5) At its core, Podemos is attempting to challenge the power structure, and deliver democracy to the masses, even if it means deviating from its anti-capitalist, leftist origins.

By moving towards the center, and consolidating power mostly between Iglesias and Errejón, Podemos risked alienating its activist base. These are undoubtedly the reasons for Monedero’s resignation from the party. Charisma and charm will only take you so far, and pandering towards the middle will only work up to a point. Besides, the populist, new center-right party Ciudadanos is also mining the center for votes with this strategy.

Podemos should continue to act as a movement led by activists, and evade the traps of capitulation and compromise that mainstream parties fall into. Breaking the two-party stranglehold of the PP and PSOE has been impressive. By concentrating on poverty reduction, debt restructuring, ending austerity, and listening to its citizen circles, Podemos

and Iglesias can win wider support, unity, and solidarity. If focus can be kept on their grassroots campaigns, Spain will begin to see what a true, albeit messy, participative democracy looks like.

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Notes:

- 1) <http://www.rtve.es/noticias/20110806/mas-seis-millones-espanoles-han-participado--movimiento-15m/452598.shtml>
- 2) http://elpais.com/elpais/2015/04/30/inenglish/1430403454_148415.html
- 3) <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/10/31/podemosradical-party-turning-spanish-politics-head--279018.html>
- 4) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/kate-shea-baird/podemos-cat-among--pigeons-in-catalonia>
- 5) http://elpais.com/elpais/2015/02/02/inenglish/1422900233_612344.html

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