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Spain's' Regional Elections: Galicia and the Basque Country show very little surprise

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Two regional elections took place on 21 October. Both were early elections and their importance was manifold: they happened in two of Spain's "historic regions", which carry more political weight than other autonomous communities and where nationalist feeling is strong and widespread --precisely at a time when territorial tensions in Spain are reaching an all-time high over Catalonia's demand of a referendum on self-determination (Catalonia, the third "historic region", is having its own early elections on 25 November).

The elections were also to be a test for Mariano Rajoy's stern austerity measures, ten months after the general elections which took him to power with an overall Popular Party (PP) majority, and with the country now deep into recession and afflicted by the highest unemployment rate in Europe. They were also a test for the two main political parties in Spain, the PP and the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español: PSOE).

On a first approach, the results showed a PP victory in Galicia (increasing its overall majority of one seat to four) and a Basque Nationalist Party (centre-right) victory in the Basque Country (by a 6-seat lead over Bildu, the left-nationalist coalition). Both had been predicted by most opinion polls. The PP got 45% of the vote and 41 seats in Galicia, and its leader, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, shall stay on as President. The PNV got 34% of the vote and 27 seats in the Basque Country, and its leader, Íñigo Urkullu, shall be the next President, replacing Patxi López (Socialist).

Rajoy's spin doctors were quick to spread the idea that the results in Galicia showed the voters' support for the government's austerity measures which are daily challenged in the streets. But the PP lost, in fact, 135.000 votes in Galicia (out of a total of 1.4 million) as compared to 2009. Its victory at the 2012 elections is to be explained, to a large extent, by the free fall of the Socialists --up to now, "the main opposition party"--whose continuing drainage of popular support resulted in the loss of 230.000 votes and seven seats. To this should be added an important "technical" factor: the Spanish electoral system favors big parties and coalitions, but the opposition to the PP in Galicia went to the polls divided (under four different labels).

The results in Galicia benefit the PP in two ways: first, it stays in power there (and it can only be in power in Galicia with an absolute majority, since none of the

other parties in parliament would lend it their support), and second and perhaps more importantly, the results have stopped mounting criticism of Rajoy's leadership within the party (and even pre-empted, according to some, an incipient coup against him by its right wing). What the elections in Galicia have confirmed is not a majority support in the country for Rajoy's cuts and slashes, but the support for Rajoy of a majority within the PP.

To the loss of popular support for the victorious governing party is to be added the even greater loss of the beaten "main opposition party". Most observers attribute the continuing downward trend of the Socialists to their identification with José-Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's mismanagement of the economy at the onset of the crisis. It is arguable, however, that the causes for the PSOE's decline are more profound and disturbing: they have to do with the current existential crisis of Social-democracy –in Spain as in Europe--, once it has espoused the neoliberal creed and remains faithful to its dogmas. Voters simply cannot see the difference between policies which are, in fact, the same –the same rightist policies, practiced by both Socialists and Conservatives.

Significantly, the success story at the elections in Galicia was a brand-new left-nationalist red-green coalition –the Galician Left Alternative, known as the "Galician Syriza"--, which got 200.000 votes (14%) and nine seats in parliament. The other success was for the nationalist forces (Galician Left Alternative and Galician Nationalist Block), with 24% of the popular vote, which overtook the Socialist Party (20%).

Much the same applies to the Basque Country, where PSOE and PP, united in an uneasy anti-nationalist coalition in government, have now come third and fourth at the elections, losing 123.000 votes between the two (out of a total of 1.1 million). Even the Basque Nationalist Party, which won the elections, lost some popular support (16.000 votes) as a result of the nationalist left entering the official political scene (it was banned from running at the previous elections by the Spanish tribunals on charges of connivance with ETA) with a very loud bang: 270.000 votes, 21 seats, second party in parliament. This means a major political problem landing on Rajoy's lap: the nationalist majority in the Basque parliament is now nearly two-to-one (48 out of 75 seats). And this is a problem that will tend to gather more weight in the near future, namely after the forthcoming elections in Catalonia, where it is widely expected that nationalists will increase their representation in parliament too.

Spain is not quite afflicted by the Greek syndrome yet, but still: the two main parties (the "System's parties") are both losing popular support –notably the Socialists--, and leftist/nationalist coalitions are starting to emerge. The crumbling down of the Socialist Party is what keeps the PP afloat –for the time being. But this is by no means a stable situation, nor one that can last long. The erosion of popular support for Rajoy's government is the fastest of any government in Spain since the death of Franco (1975). To some, the tendencies surfacing at present indicate that we are going through a transition period that will eventually lead us to –at the very least– a new party system. But also, should this movement gain momentum and be able to jeopardize the current establishment, the time will come to give birth to a new electoral law allowing open ballot lists and a fairer translation of popular votes into parliamentary seats, a dismantling of the quota system through which the two main parties have monopolized public and civil institutions alike. Also and constitutional amendments aimed at increasing citizens' participation in deciding about their future should come along. Plus, of course, a cleaning up of corruption, tax evasion and unethical banking and business practices. But whether this is wishful thinking or not, whether Spain will end up with some degree of democratic regeneration or, to the contrary, with a steady decline of democratic quality is still, right now, a matter for debate and speculation.