With infighting now rife among the Spanish left, the formation of a minority conservative government looks increasingly likely

In late October, after more than 300 days with a caretaker government, two general elections and two failed investiture votes, it is expected that the conservative People’s party (PP), facilitated by the abstention of the Socialist party (Psoe), will form a minority government. Facing the prospects of a new conservative government, the left is going through a difficult situation marked by a deep crisis of the Psoe and growing divisions within Podemos.

Since the general elections held in December 2015, Spain has experienced the unprecedented political situation of
having a caretaker government for the past nine months. This situation has been partly the result of the end of the two-party system and the difficulty of the political forces to form a government in a context of high political fragmentation.

It was expected that the strong electoral appearance of two new parties, Podemos, a leftwing party, and Ciudadanos, a liberal party, would open up a new political period marked by agreements and coalition governments. This was a completely new scenario since coalition governments at the national level have never been a reality in Spain’s young democracy. Nevertheless, the lack of understanding of the Spanish political actors, well-represented in the failed attempt in March of Pedro Sánchez, then leader of Psoe, to become the country’s prime minister with the support of Ciudadanos and Podemos, quickly ended any expectations for a significant change in the way politics have been done in Spain.

The political deadlock resulted in a second general election on 26 June this year. The PP was the only party that increased its electoral support; however, it did not reach an absolute majority. The Spanish king asked the acting prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, to form a new government. Rajoy had the support of Ciudadanos during an investiture vote held between 30 August and 2 September, however, it was not enough to form a minority government. The PP trusted
that Psoe would end up abstaining in exchange for concessions. But Psoe’s leadership opposed a government led by a conservative party marked by numerous corruption scandals, tough social measures and budgetary cuts. Socialist MPs voted against the candidature of Rajoy, and Socialist leader Pedro Sánchez was called to lead a government with the support of Ciudadanos and Podemos. This alternative was not perceived as realistic, since this option had already been unsuccessful in March and both potential counterparts vetoed each other’s participation.

Closer to a minority PP government

Until about two weeks ago the general perception was that the Spanish deadlock would continue and that a third election was around the corner. However, recent developments within the Socialist party have led people to believe that the horizon seems to be much clearer now and that the PP will be successful in forming a minority government before the legal deadline to produce either a government or a new general election (31 October).

The factor that could largely explain the change of the political situation is the recent crisis suffered by Psoe. In late September, the poor electoral results in two regional elections (held in the Basque Country and in Galicia) triggered a latent internal fight related to differences in the strategy that should be followed with regards to the
formation of a new Spanish government. A faction headed by Sánchez – representing the point of view of the majority of party militants – was against allowing a PP government. Meanwhile another faction, led by the president of Andalusia, Susana Díaz, was in favour of avoiding a third general election and allowing the formation of a minority PP government. After a tense and open confrontation, Sánchez resigned as general secretary on the 1 October. Interim management, in the midst of a profound Socialist split, is considering abstaining in a new investiture vote that Rajoy will probably face in the last days of October. Nevertheless, there is significant political uncertainty since the final position of Psoe will be decided in the coming days.

**Hard times for the left?**

If the PP forms a government, its potential parliamentary weakness (with 137 of 350 seats) could be seen as an opportunity for the opposition. However, leftwing parties are going through serious difficulties. The evolution of Psoe is uncertain and some would argue that it could suffer a decline comparable to the Pasok in Greece. The crisis in which the party is immersed has brought to the surface its weak electoral situation that started six years ago when the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero had to take austerity measures as a response to the economic crisis. Psoe has not yet recovered from that difficult moment in its
history. In 2008, Psoe won the general election with more than 11m votes, as opposed to the approximately 5m won in the last general election. While the Socialist decline started before the appearance of Podemos, the new formation has resulted in tensions within the Psoe on its political strategy. These have centred around whether the party should adopt a more centrist profile or a more leftwing position. Podemos is also going through an internal debate between those who advocate for strong posturing and those who support moderation and a more mainstream discourse.

Moreover, the internal dynamics of the leftwing parties can be decisive in their struggle to be the benchmark for the leftist voters. So far the misunderstandings of these parties and their inability to form a coalition government have benefited the PP. It remains to be seen if, in the next legislature, division and confrontation on the left could become the main asset that would facilitate the conservative hegemony in Spain. Without a doubt, the left in Spain is putting the European left under another difficult test.

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