
By RAPHAEL MINDER    MAY 29, 2014

MADRID — In the wake of Barack Obama’s first presidential election, few slogans became as popular, or arguably overused, as “Yes, We Can.” But since its shattering electoral debut on Sunday, a three-month-old party that adapted the slogan in Spanish — Podemos — might as well consider a name change, to We Did.

What it did was to shake the foundations of Spanish politics in the balloting for the European Parliament on Sunday, denying the governing conservative Popular Party and the opposition Socialists a majority of votes for the first time since the country’s return to democracy 35 years ago.

Now the challenge for Podemos — anti-establishment, anti-austerity and heavily youth- and Internet based — is to show that it is more than a flash-in-the-pan outlet for protest, avoiding a fate similar perhaps to Beppe Grillo of Italy, who after months of rallying the angry and disaffected was soundly beaten by the governing party in the same election.

Given the deep unpopularity of Spain’s mainstream politicians, the endemic corruption exposed by the financial crisis and the pain felt by the 26 percent of the work force still unemployed despite hints of recovery, politicians and analysts are taking the threat posed by Podemos seriously.

“The real surprise is not the success of Podemos, but the fact that it has
taken so long for any alternative party to tap into the disappointment and frustration with the failure of the two traditional big parties to provide answers to the problems of a lost generation,” said Thomas Bernd Stehling, the director for Spain and Portugal of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which is based in Germany and has links to the administration of Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Podemos was set up with limited funding and registered as a party only in March. But on Sunday it still managed to win almost 8 percent of the Spanish vote, gaining five seats in the European Parliament, the fourth-largest representation from Spain.

The party and its media-savvy, pony-tailed leader, Pablo Iglesias, 35, did so by rallying a significant portion of the youth-led movement that briefly took over downtown Madrid three years ago and acted as a precursor to Occupy Wall Street, but eventually fizzled after the Popular Party won an absolute majority in a general election in late 2011.

Given his success in drawing back together at least parts of that fragmented movement, Mr. Iglesias said in a phone interview that Sunday’s vote was “the start and not the end” for Podemos.

“We weren’t born to be an anecdotal incident, but instead to govern and remove the big parties that have shown they are part of the problem and not the solution,” he said. “Their policies of making cuts and submitting to what the European Central Bank and lenders want has been shown not to work here, nor in Greece, nor anywhere else.”

He added: “Europe’s institutional structure has turned the south into a periphery that provides cheap labor and serves the rich of the north. It is a structure that condemns us to poverty and dependency.”

It was an analysis befitting a professor of political science, which he is, and a former Communist Party youth member who was named after Pablo Iglesias, the 19th-century father of Spanish socialism.

But Mr. Iglesias, who has taught at Complutense University of Madrid since 2008, has also striven to use his academic credentials to speak for the entire anti-establishment electorate — not only its left wing — notably by becoming a regular face on television talk shows, including conservative ones.

“I’ve always been from the left, but our problems cannot be explained in terms of left-right ideology, but in terms of fighting the privileged that are
abusing the majority of citizens below them,” Mr. Iglesias said.

For the fledgling party’s supporters, that is part of its appeal. “Podemos is a left-wing party with its arms opened to everybody who has big hopes of change,” said Juan Serrano-Alonso Villalobos, an airline pilot, who started following Mr. Iglesias through his television appearances. He said he made a 100 euro (about $136) donation to help set up the new party, responding to an Internet funding appeal. Altogether, Podemos gathered about €130,000, or $176,000, to finance its European Parliament campaign.

Even if the European elections carry little weight among Spaniards, Mr. Serrano-Alonso Villalobos said he was convinced that Podemos “can go very far and will also force other parties to change their structures.” Although he has never met Mr. Iglesias, he described him as “clean, honest and capable of communicating simple and clear ideas in a country that has a real absence of leadership.”

Before the vote, Podemos organized itself in about 400 so-called circles, or assembly points, formed around either a neighborhood or a specific sector, like a student association. Early studies of Sunday’s returns showed that Podemos had most support among voters 45 to 60. But in addition, a quarter of Podemos voters were under 30. Podemos also had its strongest support in large cities, led by Madrid, where it won 11 percent of the vote.

Mr. Iglesias said that if the party had had more time to prepare its campaign, “our result would have been even better.”

The challenge will be putting together a real party agenda, however. For now, the party’s 36-page campaign program reads like a wish list, with little detail about how it could be financed at a time when Spain is still struggling under a heavy debt burden.

Among its economic demands, Podemos wants to prevent profitable companies from firing people, introduce a 35-hour workweek, redistribute wages more fairly and guarantee gender equality, as well as to abolish private hospitals to return to a fully state-controlled health care system.

Mr. Iglesias said he also wants Spain to restructure its debt with international lenders.

“This happened in exceptional circumstances in places like Russia, Ecuador and Argentina, with good results for the citizens,” he said.

Writing this week in the Spanish newspaper El Mundo, Jorge de Esteban,
the president of the publication’s editorial board, argued that Mr. Iglesias “managed to squeeze the most from his obvious oratory and photogenic skills, with an image that reminds one of Errol Flynn as Robin Hood and with goals that I presume are similar to this legendary character.”

Vicente Palacio, assistant director at Fundación Alternativas, a political think tank, said that Podemos could have “very beneficial effects in terms of regenerating the Spanish democratic system.”

The risk, he said, is that the party’s message “gets handled badly and drifts toward populism and demagogy, as has happened in the case of Beppe Grillo and his Five Star Movement in Italy.”

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