

The outgoing right-wing coalition comes out ahead in the general elections in Portugal but fails to win the absolute majority

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Results

Abstract:

The coalition *Portugal a frente* (Forward Portugal) led by Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho, bringing together his party, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the People's Party (PP) led by Paulo Portas, easily pulled ahead in the general elections that took place on 4th October in Portugal. The two parties won 38.44% of the vote and 104 seats (4 less than in the previous general elections on 5th June 2011) in the Assembly of the Republic, the only chamber in the Portuguese parliament.

The Socialist Party (PS), the main opposition party led since September 2014 by former Mayor of the capital, Lisbon, Antonio Costa won 32.38% of the vote and 85 seats (+ 11).

These two parties are followed by Joao Semedo and Catarina Martins' Left Bloc (BE) which won 10.22% of the vote and 19 seats (+ 11) and which for the first time drew ahead of the United Democratic Coalition (CDU), the alliance of the Communist

Party (PCP), the Ecologist-Green Party (PEV), led by Jeronimo de Sousa, which won 8.27% of the vote and 17 seats (+ 1). The parties on the far left achieved a much higher score than forecast by the pre-electoral polls.

Turnout was 2.8 points less than that recorded in the previous general election on 5th June 2011: 55.23%.

General election results of 4th October 2015 in Portugal

Turnout : 55,23%

| Political Parties | No of votes won | % of votes won | No of seats |
|--|-----------------|----------------|-------------|
| Social Democratic Party-People's Party (PSD-PP) | 2 060 192 | 38,44 | 104 |
| Socialist Party (PS) | 1 740 300 | 32,38 | 85 |
| Left Bloc (BE) | 549 153 | 10,22 | 19 |
| United Democratic Coalition (CDU) | 444 319 | 8,27 | 17 |
| PAN | 74 656 | 1,39 | 1 |

Source : Electoral Commission <http://www.legislativas2015.pt/resultados/>

VICTORY FOR THE OUTGOING RIGHT COALITION

"The right won back some of the votes from the centre and it succeeded in passing the message that the return to office of the socialists would lead the country to bankruptcy as in 2011," analysed Antonio Costa Pinto, a political expert at the University of Lisbon, some days before the election. Indeed Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho repeated during the electoral campaign: *"The Portuguese must continue to give me their confidence so that we can complete financial consolidation and with this, concentrate on policy. If people vote for the left there will be a Greek situation and the chaos that goes with it,"* assimilating the Socialist Party with the Greek Radical Left Coalition (SYRIZA) and forecasting the return of the Troika (International Monetary Fund - IMF-European Commission and the European Central Bank) to the country. *"If we continue on the path followed to date we shall not need another rescue plan,"* maintained the outgoing head of government. The Troika officially left Portugal on 17th May 2014.

The improvement in the economic situation and notably the reduction of unemployment seems to have convinced the Portuguese that they should choose the path of continuity. The lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Portuguese and the high abstention rate that resulted also explains the high score achieved by the right-wing coalition.

SOCIALIST FAILURE

The Socialists' campaign focused on criticism of the austerity policy undertaken by the outgoing Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho, and the promise of a great deal, without really saying how they intended to finance their commitments, in a country which is still experiencing major financial difficulties. *"You went beyond the Troika's demands and you have implemented a poverty policy,"* maintained Antonio Costa, who said he wanted to "turn the page on austerity". *"It was the wrong strategy because the elections are always won in the centre,"* said José Antonio Passos Palmeira, a political expert from the University of Minho.

During the electoral campaign the socialist leader did moderate his discourse however, maintaining that he would honour Portugal's commitments and that he would continue the policy to reduce the deficit, if he came to office after the election. *"We have to turn the page on austerity without breaking the European Union's rules,"* he said. But this approach which at times veered to the left and then to the centre did not have the desired effect, i.e. rallying those who were discontented with the outgoing right-wing coalition to his party. The Portuguese have undoubtedly not forgotten that the socialists were the first to introduce austerity measures when they were in office between 2005 and 2011.

Finally the socialist leader also had to distinguish himself from the party's former leader Prime Minister (2005-2011) José Socrates, under prosecution (with six other people) for corruption, money laundering and tax fraud. Antonio Costa was minister for José Socrates' government's internal administration between 2005 and 2007.

A MINORITY RIGHT-WING GOVERNMENT

The outgoing right-wing coalition won in the ballot without managing to win the absolute majority in Parliament however. *"Forward Portugal achieved a major victory. We are going to honour our commitments in support of recovery and our openness to dialogue,"* declared Marco Antonio Costa, Deputy Chair of the PSD when the first results were announced. *"If the results are confirmed we think no candidate will win the majority during these elections,"* stressed the campaign director of socialist leader, Duarte Cordeiro.

Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho immediately highlighted that *"more than 70% of the parliament is made up of political movements that are attached to our membership of the European Union and the single currency."* *"The main party in Parliament comprises parties that do not reject the international plans, the parties on the left of the left are not the same as Greece or Spain. We cannot transform a defeat in the ballot into a*

kind of victory," said his partner, the leader of the People's Party, Paulo Portas.

"The drama would be in a middle-of-the-road result. We need either a clear conservative majority or a wide victory by the socialists and the Left Bloc so that our country will not be just drifting along but moving towards a specific goal," declared journalist Paulo Chitas the day before the election. The right-wing will therefore be a minority in parliament but an alliance between the Socialist Party and the radical left to block their path is very unlikely, if not impossible. Both parties differ over vital issues, notably on the restructuring of the debt and the euro.

There remains the hypothesis of a grand coalition between the right and the left. Both parties have ruled this out even though Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho has always said he was open to dialogue with all parties represented in parliament. For his part, Antonio Costa said that a grand coalition was only imaginable if there was *"an extreme situation like a Martian invasion."*

We seem therefore be moving towards the formation of a minority right-wing government. *"The right-*

wing cannot continue to govern as if nothing has happened," declared Antonio Costa, also indicating that his party *"would not prevent"* nor comprise a *"negative majority"*. One minority government only – led by socialist Antonio Guterres (1995-1999), has completed its mandate since Portugal's return to democracy in 1974.

If there is deadlock the decision will lie in the hands of the President of Republic Anibal Cavaco Silva (PSD). The Portuguese Constitution leaves him free to choose without having to appoint the leader of the party that came out ahead in the general elections as Prime Minister. *"Portugal cannot afford to add political disputes to its economic and social problems,"* declared the head of State during the electoral campaign.

The lack of any clear political majority complicates Portugal's situation that is still fragile. It should be noted that it will not be possible to call the Portuguese back to ballot before June next year. The Constitution indeed prohibits the dissolution of parliament within the six months preceding or following a presidential election and this has been planned for January 2016.

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