

The socialists might come out ahead in the parliamentary elections on 28th April in Spain but will they succeed in retaining office?

On 15th February Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez (Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE) announced that there would be a snap election, fifteen months earlier than originally planned. This decision followed the rejection of the country's budget by the Congress of Deputies, the Spanish lower house (Cortes Generales), two days before.

191 MPs voted against the Finance Bill 2019: (the People's Party), the Republican Left of Catalonia-Catalonia Yes (ERC-CatSi), Convergence and Union of Catalonia (CiU), Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT), Foro Asturias and the Canary Coalition-Canary Nationalist Party (CC)); 158 MPs (from the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), from the Podemos Unidos and the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV-EAJ)) voted in support of the budget and one MP abstained.

The next parliamentary elections will take place in a tense situation since on 12th February the trial will start at the Spanish Supreme Court of twelve Catalan independence leaders who are accused of sedition, rebellion and embezzlement for having organised a referendum on the independence of Catalonia on 1st October 2017 and for having unilaterally declared the independence of Catalonia, which was anti-constitutional.

Pedro Sanchez had however managed to reduce tension somewhat with a few measures including the repeal of the use of article 155 of the Constitution, which allows the suspension of the autonomy of Catalonia, the increase in public investments in the region and incentives to businesses which chose to retain their HQ in Catalonia (more than 4000 have left the region since October 2017) and the strengthening of the Catalan language in the media and State schools.

The resumption of dialogue again between the Spanish and Catalan institutions and a major increase in public investments in Catalonia planned in the draft budget were not enough to convince the Republican Left of Catalonia-Catalonia Yes and the

European Catalan Democratic Party, which asked for the organisation of a referendum on self-rule in Catalonia (which is totally banned by the Spanish Constitution) and clemency in the process of the twelve independence leaders (the latter risk between 7 and 25 years in prison), in exchange for their vote in support of the Finance Bill.

"Pedro Sanchez believed that it would be possible to get out of the rut by playing on the secessionists' pragmatism and by using the leverage of improved financing for the region," wrote Enric Juliana, journalist at the Catalan daily La Vanguardia. The Catalans preferred to say "no" to central power and to rapprochement with Madrid. "The cost of a moderate change was too high for the separatists who were afraid of being accused of betrayal on the part of their base if they support Pedro Sanchez," explained Antonio Barroso of Teneo. "Pedro Sanchez, who was accused by the right for months of making concessions to the separatists and of endangering Spain's unity now intends to profit from the situation. If his government falls, it will precisely because it did not give way," analyses Pablo Simon political expert of the University Carlos 3 in Madrid. Indeed the socialists in office succeeded in making

no concessions to the separatists as the right feared and succeeded in opening up dialogue with the separatists, which the others deemed unthinkable. "The parties on the right and the secessionists want the same thing: a Catalonia living in confrontation and a Spain living in confrontation. They fear dialogue," stressed Pedro Sanchez.

36 million Spaniards are being called to ballot. The electoral campaign will start on 12th April next and end on 26th of the same month. It is the fourth time in four years that the electorate has been convened to a parliamentary vote in Spain.

The Spanish political landscape has been disrupted over the last few years. The two-party system that has structured the country since its return to democracy in 1975 now seems to be part of the past. Madrid has now entered into the strategy of alliances for the formation of a government. The appearance of new parties has fragmented the political arena considerably. On 28th April next the new parliament might well be host to a record number of parties. This fragmentation prevented the formation of a government majority after the last parliamentary elections on 20th December 2015, forcing the Spanish to return to ballot in June 2016. The election on 28th April next might again lead to a divided parliament making Spain ungovernable.

The country is also facing a serious crisis in Catalonia where for the last few year secessionist tendencies have emerged. The region has occupied the political limelight over the last few months and has challenged Spain's unity, which has been an extremely difficult situation for central power in Madrid to manage.

On 1st October 2017, the Catalan government organised a (illegal) referendum on the region's independence. Ten days later, the region's leader Carles Puigdemont (PDeCAT) proclaimed to the Catalan parliament that according to the results (90.18% of the electorate had voted "yes" to the question "Do you want Catalonia to be an independent State and a republic?", turnout however

is said only to have been 42.38%), "Catalonia has won the right to be an independent State". The pro-independence MPs signed a declaration that recognised the "Catalan Republic as an independent, sovereign State, based on social and democratic law." On 27th October Catalonia started "constituent process" to separate from Spain. The then Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy (PP) dismissed the Catalan government and convened new regional elections on 21st December. On 30th October 2017 Carles Puigdemont fled to Belgium to escape the Spanish judicial system.

According to the latest poll undertaken between 24th and 27th March by Demoscopia for the newspaper OK Diario, the Social Workers Party is due to come out ahead in the parliamentary election on 28th April next with 27.7% of the vote. The People's party is due to win 21%, Ciudadanos (C's), a centrist party led by Alberto Rivera, is due to win 16,9% of the vote; Podemos, 13.4% and Vox, a populist right-wing party led by Santiago Abascal, 11.2%.

CAN THE SOCIALISTS RETAIN OFFICE?

Pedro Sanchez came to office on 1st June 2018 after a vote 180 votes against 169, a no-confidence motion against the Mariano Rajoy government, that was under challenge in a widespread corruption scandal called Gürtel (belt in German, a play on words on the name of Francisco Correa, the main culprit in the affair). MPs of the People's Party were said to have received bribes from 1999 to 2005 in exchange for their signature of government contracts in several of Spain's regions.

On 24th May 2018 29 of the 37 accused, former leaders of the People's Party (including Luis Barcena, who was the party's treasurer for a long time, sentenced to 33 years in prison and ordered to reimburse 44 million euro), and entrepreneurs were sentenced to a total of 351 years in prison. The network's leader, Francisco Correa will for his part have to spend 51 years behind bars. The court also challenged the Mariano Rajoy's credibility. "With this sentence, the People's Party has been

disqualified as a whole for its criminal nature. It has been proven that corruption was part of its DNA," declared Lucia Mendez, a political analyst.

The first vote of no confidence launched by Pedro Sanchez was the first approved since the entry into force of the Spanish Constitution in 1978. Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy was overthrown by a minority rival: the Socialist Workers' Party has 85 seats out of the 350 in the Congress of Deputies. Pedro Sanchez's party was supported by Unidos Podemos and the Basque Nationalist Party in overthrowing Mariano Rajoy's government.

During his short mandate the Pedro Sanchez has taken three major steps: the re-evaluation of pensions, an increase in the minimum wage of 22% (hence this rose from 740 to 900 euro) and the increase in civil servants' wages. Pedro Sanchez's government, the most feminised in Spain's entire history (11 women and 6 men) also approved many measures to counter violence against women).

The draft budget that was rejected on 15th February last was the most generous offered in many years: it provided for a rise in public spending of more than 5 billion euro and included measures like a 60% increase in aid to dependent people, more financing for healthcare and education, free medicines for pensioners in difficulty and an extension of paternity leave.

The socialists who have chosen the slogan « La Espana que quieres » (The Spain you love) in the election on 28th April next want to focus the campaign debate on social issues. "The decision to be taken by Spain on 28th April has never been as clear: either it turns to the future, or it will regress, it is about moving forward or backwards. The choice is between a Spain which is widening rights and freedoms or one which will slash social and political acquis, which will impede and turn backwards and regress by 40 years," summarised Pedro Sanchez. Amongst the 110 measures in the socialist programme feature the end of wage inequality between men and women, the fight to

counter homophobia, the regulation of euthanasia and the creation of a minimum wage for households without income in order to counter child poverty.

"Today Pedro Sanchez is nothing like the man who came to office in June 2018 thanks to the surprise confidence vote against conservative Mariano Rajoy. His experience in office, although brief, has helped him emerge as the driver of major change that will reward the middle classes after their effort in the crisis years, with a range of redistributive policies, whilst opting for dialogue with Catalonia," indicated political expert Pablo Simon. The outgoing Prime Minister's wager in organising the snap election is wise in that it allows him to minimise the sanction vote against the government, which would just have risen with time.

The socialists are also using the exhumation of dictator Francisco Franco (1892-1975)[1] to prevent the electoral campaign from just focusing on the issue of Catalonia. This battle is also helping the Socialist Workers Party position itself on the left, thereby pushing Ciudadanos towards the right. Alberto Rivera's party abstained from the vote on the exhumation of Franco, deeming that this was not urgent, declaring that it preferred to look to the future rather than the past. The PSOE hopes to attract Ciudadanos's centrist voters, who have been disappointed by its rapprochement with the right in Andalusia (see below).

The PSOE is standing as the choice of reason against the right, which in its opinion, is increasingly extremist. "There are many reasons to believe that the Socialist Workers' Party will win. The question remains about whether it will be able to form a majority or rather whether a majority might be formed against it. The outcome of the vote will define the centre of gravity for the new majority. Around 300,000 voters will make the difference between a Pyrrhic victory for the socialists and the formation of a socialist government," indicated Juan Rodriguez Teruel, a lecturer in political science at the University of Valencia.

[1] The historical remembrance bill was modified on 24th August 2018 to give the right of victims who fell in the Civil War (1936-1939) the right to be buried in the *valle de los caidos* and justify the exhumation of the dictator Francisco Franco who is buried there.

Podemos is struggling, with its leader, Pablo Iglesias under challenge and the party's former number 2, Inigo Errejon, running alone (he is standing in the regional elections organised on the same day as the European elections on 26th May next in Madrid). Other party leaders who disagree with Pablo Iglesias, have also taken a step back or they have been removed from the party's leadership.

"Podemos's electorate seems demotivated and demobilised," declared Pablo Fernandez Vazquez, a lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania). "Voters who opted for them in 2015 and 2016 no longer see them as a novelty but as an established party. There is a certain amount of disillusion, notably because the Socialist Workers' Party which came to office in June 2018, particularly thanks to the vote of Podemos which supported the no-confidence vote that it launched against conservative Mariano Rajoy, has edged into its territory on the left, whether this has been in claiming as its own the benefits of the measures drawn up with Pablo Iglesias or of the 22% leap in the minimum wage or by winning the feminist movement, which is very strong in Spain," stressed Ernesto Pascual, lecturer in law and political science at the Open University of Catalonia in Barcelona.

POTENTIAL AMBUSH ON THE RIGHT

On 21st July 2018 the People's Party elected a new leader in the shape of Pablo Casado. The 38-year-old hopes to position the party more to the right than his predecessor Mariano Rajoy. He accused Pedro Sanchez of having tried to engage dialogue with the secessionist government of Catalonia, saying that "intolerable concessions" have been made by the socialist Prime Minister to the separatists. "We are going to decide whether Spain should continue to be held hostage by the parties which want to destroy it or whether the People's Party can succeed in concluding agreements with other political forces to stop the separatist challenge," declared Casado. The PP is standing as the only one that can guarantee the country's unity and also the only one capable of

preventing a coalition that will unite the PSOE and Podemos.

Just like the People's Party, Ciudadanos aims to make the defence of Spain's unity the central feature of its electoral campaign. The two parties are advocating a new guardianship of Catalonia (the first was approved by the Senate on 27th October 2017). This measure is allowed under article 155 of the Spanish Constitution which provides for the suspension of the region's autonomy.

Ciudadanos, which is positioned to the right of the political scale approved a measure on 18th February last indicating that it would not join forces with the PSOE after the parliamentary elections on 28th April. "Ciudadanos will never govern with Pedro Sanchez" declared the party's leader, Alberto Rivera, who did not however rule out forming an alliance with another socialist leader.

More to the right, Vox (voice in Latin), a party founded in 2013 based on a split from the People's Party and led by Santiago Abascal stands as the main party defending Spain's unity. Its leader is standing as the saviour of Spain, as the "Reconquista". "You are here to defend your home country, to defend your freedom, because Vox is just a tool at Spain's service. Spain will not stop as long as it has not recovered its former glory, its dignity and its future," repeats Santiago Abascal.

The populist party selected revisionist Fernando Paz[2] to lead its list in the province of Albacete, but the latter finally withdrew his candidature. Agustin Rosety Fernandez de Castro, former brigadier general in the navy and Alberto Asarta, former commander of the UN's forces in Lebanon (Finul), both signatories in July of a manifesto which defended "the military figure of General Francisco Franco, today vilified to an inconceivable level" will be leading the Vox lists in these elections.

"For Vox it is not about building a programme but to accumulate the protest vote of those tired of the People's Party," stressed journalist Antonio

[2] He maintains that during the Second World War the Jews did not die in gas chambers and were not exterminated by the Nazis but that they were murdered by the local populations of Eastern Europe or that they were victims of typhus and sickness due to their poor detention conditions.

Maestre. "They are trying to attract attention and are succeeding notably with the type of profile of the candidates they are choosing. This is a strategy followed by parties on the far right. The more scandalous the proposition, the more it creates response in the media and on the left. This enables them to define a territory more easily," maintains Pablo Simon.

On 2nd December, Vox, led by Francisco Serrano Castro, became the first far right party to win seats in a regional parliament since the end of the dictatorship (1975). Indeed, the party won 10.96% of the vote and took 12 of the 109 seats in the regional parliament of Andalusia in the regional elections, which led to the first political alternation in the Sevilla government since the region's autonomy in 1982. After the election the People's Party formed a coalition with Ciudadanos and concluded an investiture agreement with Vox. The latter is planning amongst other measures, the expulsion of 50,000 illegal immigrants, who according to the populist party, are living in the region and also the repeal of the conjugal violence bill. On 16th January 2019 Juan Manuel Moreno (PP) was appointed leader of the regional government of Andalusia. Reappointed at national level this regional alliance could possibly enable the right to return to power after the parliamentary elections on 28th April next."

THE SPANISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Spanish Parliament (Cortes generales) is bicameral. It comprises the Senate (upper house) and the Congress of Deputies (lower house). The latter has 348 MPs elected at least every four years by a proportional multi-member vote (according to the d'Hondt system with blocked, closed lists) in 48 of the 50 Spanish provincial constituencies – Ceuta and Melilla vote by a simple majority vote – each appoint at least 2 MPs (only one for Ceuta and Melilla). The remaining seats are distributed amongst the provinces according to their population. The biggest constituencies are Madrid (37 seats), Barcelona (32), Valencia (15), Sevilla and Alicante

(12), Malaga (11) and Murcia (10). A list has to win at least 3% of the vote to be represented in the Congress of Deputies.

The Senate has 208 members elected from open lists (provincial senators) and 56 representatives appointed by 17 autonomous communities (community senators). Each of the 50 provinces elects 4 provincial senators by a majority vote no matter how many inhabitants there are, except for Ceuta and Melilla who appoint two and the Balearic and Canary Islands, whose bigger islands (Grand Canaria, Mallorca and Tenerife) elect three and each of the smaller islands (Ibiza-Formentera, Minorca, Fuerteventura, Gomero, Hierro, Lanzarote and Palma), 1. Moreover each autonomous community appoints (by proportional vote) a community senator plus an additional one for every million inhabitants. This system favours the least populated regions in the kingdom. In all the upper house has 264 members. The senatorial elections take place on the same day as those for the Congress of Deputies.

Nine political parties are represented in the present Congress of Deputies. These are as follows:

- the People's Party (PP), created in 1977 and led by Pablo Casado since 21st July 2018, has 137 seats;
- the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), founded in 1879 and led by outgoing Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has 85 MPs;
- Unidos Podemos, alliance of 12 movements including Podemos led by Pablo Iglesias, the United Left (IU) and Equo, established for the elections of 26th June 2016 has 71 seats;
- Ciudadanos (C's), a centrist party created in 2006, led by Alberto Rivera, with 32 MPs;
- the Republican Left of Catalonia-Catalonia Yes (ERC-CatSí), a Catalan secessionist two party alliance, the first led by Oriol Junqueras and the second Alfred Bosch, with 9 seats;
- Convergence and union of Catalonia (CiU), a secessionist party created in 1978 and led by Artur Mas, which became the European Catalan Democratic Party on 8th July 2016 (PDeCAT), led by David Bonvehí, with 8 seats;

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- the Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ/PNV), founded in 1984 and led by Andoni Ortuzar, with 5 seats;
- Euskal Herria Bildu (Reunite the Basque Country), an alliance of four Basque movements whose spokesperson Maddalen, has two seats;
- the Canary Coalition-the Canary Nationalist Party (CC-PNC), an alliance of a regionalist right-wing party led by Claudina Morales and a regionalist party led by Juan Manuel Gracia Ramos, has one seat.

The People's Party also holds a majority in the Senate: it won 151 seats in the last elections on 26th June 2016. The Socialist Workers' Party won 63 Senators' seats; Unidos Podemos, 23 and the Republican Left of Catalonia-Catalonia Yes (ERC-CatSi), 12.

Reminder of the results of the parliamentary elections on 26th June 2016 in Spain

Turnout : 66.45%

Political Parties	No votes won	% of votes won	No of seats
People's Party (PP)	7 941 236	33.01	137
Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	5 443 846	22.63	85
Unidos Podemos	5 087 538	21.15	71
Ciudadanos (C's)	3 141 570	13.06	32
Republican Left of Catalonia-Catalonia Yes (ERC-CatSi)	639 652	2.66	9
Convergence & union of Catalonia (CiU)	483 488	2.01	8
Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ/PNV)	287 014	1.19	5
Euskal Herria Bildu	184 713	0.77	2
Canary Coalition-Canary Nationalist Party (CC-PNC)	78 253	0.33	1
Others	766 445	3.19	0

Sénate

Political Parties	No of seats
People's Party (PP)	151
Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE)	63
Unidos Podemos	23
Republican Left of Catalonia-Catalonia Yes (ERC-CatSí)	12
Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ/PNV)	6
Convergence and Union of Catalonia (CiU)	4
Ciudadanos (C's)	3
Canary Coalition-Canary Nationalist Party (CC-PNC)	2
Euskal Herria Bildu	1
Gomera Socialist Group (ASG)	1

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