

# No Man's Land

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On 28 May, elections were held in all Spanish municipalities and most autonomous communities. The results registered a turn to the right, with the Partido Popular (PP) picking up 7 million votes at local level and the Francoist Vox party more than doubling its share compared to 2019. The alliance between these two parties, already operating in Castilla-León, will now be extended to the Valencian Community and most likely to the Balearic Islands, Aragón and Cantabria. By contrast, the parties of the coalition government, the Socialist Party (PSOE) and Unidas Podemos, performed disastrously. The first lost six regions to the PP, while the second was ousted from all regional parliaments. Podemos's local power was eradicated, with the loss of Barcelona, Cádiz and Valencia certifying the death of the 'municipalist wave' against austerity. Overall, left parties saw their vote share fall by 655,000: a 23% decline. The only ones that managed to increase their tallies were nationalist outfits: EH Bildu in the Basque Country and BNG in Galicia.

The governing coalition had several legislative victories since it was formed in 2020. It passed what it described as the 'most progressive budget in Spanish history'; implemented a 20% increase in the minimum wage; imposed a cap on the price of gas that effectively contained inflation; and expanded waged employment, which surpassed 20 million workers for the first time since 2008. Yet its popularity has been steadily declining, partly because these measures have had little impact on Spain's overall economic situation. The coalition continues to operate within the structural limits set by

Brussels: keeping public investment to a minimum, while deploying Next Generation EU funds for flashy ‘modernization’ projects which do nothing to revive the country’s atrophied industrial base. With the PSOE and PP both adhering to this orthodox approach, the latter has sought to distinguish itself by launching a paranoid cultural offensive. Meanwhile, Unidas Podemos has seen its main policy ambitions frustrated by a watered-down housing law that skirts any confrontation with real estate capital. Politically, it finds itself in no man’s land, without coherent arguments to defend the administration in which it serves.

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has now called for snap elections to be held on 23 July, in a last-ditch attempt to reverse the downward trajectory of his government. Currently topping the polls is the PP, fronted by the former Galician president Alberto Núñez Feijóo, whose four consecutive majorities in the regional assembly propelled him to national leadership in 2022. Feijóo is often described as a ‘safe pair of hands’, and the days when his party’s corruption scandals flooded the news cycle seem to be gone for good. Its recent election campaign presented Spain as an ungovernable country and Sánchez as complicit in the chaos – stoking public anger over squatters and the ETA, even though the latter was dissolved more than five years ago. This ploy was remarkably effective. In Andalusia, once the PSOE’s foremost stronghold, the PP and Vox increased their combined votes by an astonishing 43% in the local elections, and the PSOE lost in all but one of the major cities. In the Madrilenian regional elections, the PP won another absolute majority in the assembly and a 20% swing in the city council.

Some of the PP’s success is owed to the decline of Ciudadanos – the party often described as a ‘right-wing Podemos’ whose supporters have been switching to the PP in droves. But Feijóo also capitalized on popular opposition to what has become known as ‘Sanchismo’: a phenomenon concocted by the right-wing press, which presents the Prime Minister as a capricious, proto-Bolivarian leader with a limitless thirst for power, eager to strike deals with Basque and Catalan separatists who want to ‘break up Spain’. Even more effective has been the right’s relentless culture war, taking aim at the

legislation introduced by Irene Montero's Equalities Ministry (including stricter laws around sexual consent and reforms that make it easier to change one's gender without a medical diagnosis). Spain's insurgent feminist movement, having gained ground in the 2010s, is now the object of a ferocious backlash – led by the PP and Vox, and amplified over the airwaves.

With its electoral relevance considerably diminished since 2019, and its internal culture beset by fierce political struggles, Podemos was desperate to retain its regional and local power bases. This was partly because it needed to be in a position of strength when negotiating with Sumar, the electoral platform led by Labour Minister Yolanda Díaz, which aims to supplant Unidas Podemos and bring together the entirety of the left. Yet the party suffered historic defeats in two key constituencies. In Madrid, the city where the *indignados* erupted and where Podemos itself was founded, it disappeared from the Assembly, picking up only 4.7% of the votes. In Barcelona, the incumbent mayor Ada Colau, who was elected in 2015 to challenge the city's broken rentier model, was beaten by the reactionary nationalist Xabier Trias. In both cases, the elections were framed as a national referendum on Sánchez. The left's only hope was to cut through that impression and shift the focus back onto local issues; yet it was hobbled by Podemos's organizational incapacity and distance from community activism. It proved unable to stave off low participation rates and a prevailing sense of political disenchantment.

In the wake of these losses, the PSOE's electoral war machine has gone into overdrive, while Podemos's is showing signs of fatal exhaustion. The party's radicalism appears to have abated. It is viewed with apathy and distrust by most of the left-leaning electorate. Four years in government, which largely involved the management of 'pandemic Keynesianism', have failed to consolidate its social bases. In fact, its single-minded electoralism has had the opposite effect. A minimal presence within civil society, not to speak of social movements, has turned the party into little more than a bureaucratic committee whose only power lies in its cabinet positions. The initial strategy of reconciling an exiguous grassroots membership with a broad appeal to depoliticized voters has run aground. A semblance of

life is still maintained by Podemos's residual media apparatus, comprised of social media networks and Pablo Iglesias's new broadcasting channel, *Canal Red*, yet this has been insufficient to counter sustained attacks from mainstream outlets.

Most believe that it is now time for Díaz to take Podemos's place and govern alongside the social democrats, insofar as the dream of securing a *sorpasso* – or 'overtaking' of the PSOE – is out of reach. In early June, Podemos was forced to strike a deal with Sumar, agreeing to fight the next elections under its umbrella rather than that of Unidas Podemos. This was a painful step, since it spells the end of the left-populist party as we know it. The leadership has realized that if it wants to preserve the electoral space it carved out in the 2010s, it must *de facto* dissolve itself within a new political structure populated by many of its factional opponents (most notably the Communist Party, and those who defected from Podemos to set up the rival electoral vehicle Más País).

Sumar, however, has been unable to transcend the structural problems that afflicted its predecessor. The absence of a strong rank-and-file membership renders it reliant on media visibility, which means that Díaz's personal appeal is one of its only electoral assets (her face will be printed on the upcoming general election ballots, just as Pablo Iglesias's was). Still, there are a number of significant differences between the two organizations. While Iglesias's rhetorical style was confrontational, Díaz's is softer. Whereas he excoriated the Troika and Spanish business tycoons, her tone is openly conciliatory. He has struck a less conformist note on NATO, while she has followed Sánchez in pronouncing her unflinching commitment to the military alliance.

Although Podemos failed to preserve the mass politics of the *indignados*, this was always its explicit aim. Díaz, however, has a view of political representation that is overtly technocratic. She has touted the Next Generation EU scheme as a unique opportunity to extend state-led environmental planning. As Labour Minister, she engaged in extensive negotiations with trade unions and employer confederations to pass various pieces of progressive legislation,

returning to the corporatist tradition that Mariano Rajoy all but dismantled a decade ago. Her project is a kind of labourism that strives to improve conditions through tripartite agreements rather than workplace struggles. Whether this will advance further than Podemos's populist strategy remains to be seen. But it is clear that the extent of Sumar's political ambition is to act as the PSOE's junior partner. For the time being, transformative projects are off the cards.

Feijóo is expected to win the most votes in the upcoming elections, restoring the PP to a position it has not held since 2016. But his chances of forming a government are compromised by his belligerent nationalism, which makes it impossible for Basque and Catalan parties to support his administration. This holds out the possibility, however slight, that a variant of the current coalition could remain in power. Yet the outlook is not especially bright for whoever sits in the Moncloa Palace. Although Sánchez claims that the Spanish economy is 'going like a motorcycle', and GDP is expected to grow by 2% in 2023 and 2024, specialization in low-end services and tourism, plus declining industrial productivity and pressure for more military spending, places clear constraints on what the next government is likely to achieve. Brussels has demanded that Spain limits spending increases to 2.6% in 2024, in line with a Europe-wide return to austerity in the wake of the pandemic. This means that, even if the PSOE and the left somehow manage to stay in office, it will be an uphill battle to offset the effects of low wages and out-of-control rents. The Economy Minister, Nadia Calviño, has raised the possibility of partnering with other EU members to reform the fiscal rules of the Stability and Growth Pact; but gaining the assent of the Commission won't be easy, and may be contingent upon further budget cuts. There is also considerable hostility to Sánchez within the PSOE, whose right-wing flank will attempt to block any deviation from neoliberal spending policies.

In the absence of meaningful social investment, Spain's 'entrepreneurial state' has struggled to reconcile the imperatives of accumulation and legitimacy. This has opened the door to a hardline conservatism that abjures any progressive intervention in the economy and blames its ailments on external culprits: Russia, the

ETA, criminals, separatists, etc. The infrastructure for an authoritarian turn under the PP and Vox is already in place. The police have mobilized against the current government, mounting a successful campaign in defence of the 2015 'Gag Law', which drastically restricts freedom of speech and assembly. The judiciary have scuppered a PSOE initiative to make the courts more democratic, and continue to engage in lawfare against social movements. The media is already in league with the right, and promises to act as loyal retainer for a PP-led government.

The most prominent figures on the left, meanwhile, have failed to provide any self-critical account of how the cycle that began with the anti-austerity 15-M movement has concluded in this way. Instead, they are busy downgrading their political ambitions and completing the process of institutional rebranding after the defeat of Podemos. As it stands, Sumar's ideological orientation and democratic structures are inhospitable to any kind of militancy. Its strategy is simply to keep the PP out of power and prop up the PSOE. If the Spanish left is to reject this defeatist approach and forge a new electoral project, it must find political avenues beyond the populism of Iglesias and the corporatism of Díaz. At present this seems like a doubtful prospect. But we can be certain that if radical politics is excluded from the institutional realm, it will take place outside it.

*Read on: Ekaitz Cancela & Pedro M. Rey-Araújo, 'Lessons of the Podemos Experiment', NLR 138.*