Podemos: Iglesias tames opposition and trims his programme

Christian Gebhardt Tue, 04/11/2014 - 09:35
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Podemos has become the new darling of the left, claiming to be 'doing politics differently?', but after its first conference Christian Gebhardt asks if it can live up to the hype

Podemos, the expression of what has been called 'the new politics' in Spain, has just held its first Citizens' Assembly; the opening of a month long process of deciding on the party's policies, constitution and candidates for next year's general and municipal elections. Addressing over 8,000 people in the Palacio Vistalegre, an indoor basketball arena in the centre of Madrid, Pablo Iglesias, the party's most prominent leader, declared,

'We are no longer a citizens' movement, we are a political force. We will not be content with how far we have got, to come second in the General Election; but we have come out to win and they are scared of us.?

He presented his 'ethical document?', which defined Podemos as 'a citizens' tool to end corruption?.

In the 25 May elections to the European Parliament, only two months after its foundation, Podemos gained 7.9 per cent of those voting, 1.25 million votes and 5 seats. The two biggest Spanish parties, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and Partido Popular (PP), together received less than 50 per cent of the vote, heavily down on the 81 per cent support they received in 2009. This indicates the severity of the disillusion with the 'old politics' which have dominated the country since the restoration of democracy after the Franco era in 1977.

According to the Metrosopia opinion poll, published in the newspaper El Pais on 2 November, Podemos would poll highest with 27.7 per cent, with PSOE second on 26.2 per cent while the currently governing party, the PP, has slumped to 20.7 per cent.

Podemos's growth is but one expression, if the most unexpected, of the turn to the left in the Spanish political scene. Another was the rise in the vote of Izquierda Unida (IU), whose joint list with the Greens and others, obtained 10.03 per cent with 1,575,308 votes, winning them 6 seats. In 2009, IU won 588,248 votes, 3.7 per cent and 2 seats.

The objective basis for this is the continuing economic crisis in Spain. The unemployment rate has been around 25 per cent since 2012 and is over 53.7 per cent for under-25s, and there is no sign of light at the end of the tunnel. Huge numbers lost their houses in the mortgage crisis and masses of young people have had to go abroad in search of work. The austerity measures, pressed for by the European Union and implemented by PSOE and PP governments alike, have thrown millions of Spanish people into long-term unemployment and poverty.

To this must be added the betrayal of their voters by the PSOE. In August of 2011, whilst still in
government, they colluded with Mariano Rajoy’s PP, then in opposition, to amend the Spanish Constitution to prohibit budgetary deficits, thereby ruling out counter-cyclical stimulus packages by any future government.

This prolonged economic crisis has led to waves of political struggles against what are now seen, especially by the young, as the two parties of a corrupt political establishment. This, in turn, has led to what many call a ‘crisis of democracy’, a recognition on a mass scale that democracy, as practiced in Spain and, indeed, across Europe, produces parties which offer no real alternative, no choice, at a time of enormous economic and social crisis.

Even when they explicitly promise ‘change’, like Socialist president François Hollande in France, once elected they press on with austerity in the same way as their conservative predecessors. In effect, the alternating two party parliamentary system itself seems to be saying to people what Britain’s Margaret Thatcher once said: vote for whoever you like, but ‘TINA’, there is no alternative.

The first signs of a real rejection of this system came three years ago. Under the slogan ‘¡Democracia Real YA!? (‘Real Democracy NOW!’) massive square occupations by young people took place all over Spain. The most famous were those in Madrid, in the Puerta del Sol, and in Barcelona, in the Plaça de Catalunya.

This new mass movement came to be known as the Indignados (‘outraged?’) or the 15-M movement (the protests began on 15 May). Specific movements against different aspects of the Great Recession emerged like the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) and the Movement for the Right to Housing. In the years that followed, however, although there were many marches (like the Marches for Dignity in early 2014) and attempted occupations, the social movements failed to shake the determination of the establishment parties to make cuts. The mass assemblies, the movements without leaders or spokespersons, remained without objective achievements.

It became clear to the participants that protest alone would not change things and neither would the temporary assemblies which anarchists and libertarians saw as being prefigurative of a new society. This impasse was not unique to Spain; all the Occupy movements failed either to make governments relent or to create any lasting expression of the new forms of democracy the participants talked about.

This dead end occurred because the mass of the participants or their ‘non-existent? leaders could not, or would not try to draw in the mass of unionised workers whose direct industrial action alone could have forced the politicians to make concessions. The marches by miners and other sectors did present opportunities but it is also true that the leaders of the main union federations, as in other countries, blocked an all out political strike to bring down the austerity governments.

So by Spring 2014, in Spain at least, things were ripe for a turn to politics (by which was meant elections), albeit these would have to be a ‘new? politics, a politics without ‘professionals?, without politicians, but not, as we will see, without leaders.

Intellectual roots of the ‘new politics? 

The people who have become the public face of Podemos were nearly all members of the faculty of Political Science and Sociology at the Complutense University of Madrid. Pablo Iglesias, Juan Carlos Monedero and Íñigo Errejon had already gained prominence via a local TV debate programme, ‘La Tuerka?, which went nationwide thanks to social media and the web. The youthful academic Iglesias, in particular, launched a hard-hitting counterattack on the PSOE and PP for their corruption, their promotion of social inequality, their cover-ups of banking fraud and bailouts, and their support for the IMF/ECB
austerity programme and all its devastating social consequences.

Iglesias deliberately relied on what he regarded as common sense arguments and everyday language that was not particularly associated with either the traditional Right or the Left. Evidently his motivation was Gramsci’s notion that bourgeois social hegemony is embodied in ‘common sense’, a ‘discourse’ which today makes the paying of the state debt by social and wage cuts seem normal, objectively necessary, neutral.

He soon gained a wide following. Most of the Complutense academics came from a left background (Iglesias joined the Young Communists when he was 14 and Monedero had been an advisor to Izquierda Unida), but most had also spent some time in Latin America observing and participating in the Bolivarian movement around figures like Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales and Rafael Correa. From them, they learned the practical power of a multi-class mobilisation of The People against The Oligarchy; a simple binary antagonism that the academics reproduced in their ‘Citizens versus The Caste’.

They also ‘learned’ that one traditional feature of Spanish libertarianism, clearly expressed in the 15M movements, had to be dumped: hostility to leaders. Íñigo Errejon expressed it thus, ‘We also challenged the leadership taboo. According to certain liberal ideas, but also those rooted in the left, a charismatic leader is incompatible with real democracy. For Podemos, the use of the media leadership of Pablo Iglesias was a condition sine qua non of the crystallisation of political hope that allowed the aggregation of dispersed forces, in a context of disarticulation of the popular camp.’

Clearly what these left academics learned in Latin America was the necessary complement of populism, caudillismo, the focus on a charismatic leader who relates directly to the masses and speaks for them. Populism sets out to mobilise the masses in huge, overwhelming numbers, not by means of party structures and a pyramid of representatives, but directly by a recognised leader or perhaps a few such leaders. It legitimises the leaders by their ‘popularity’, expressed in mass meetings, rallies and media coverage.

Hugo Chávez related this to power with his repeated elections and referenda, his huge mass assemblies, and his Bolivarian circles. The social media savvy Podemos has hit on the social media and the Internet as the means of doing this. Through them, its key leaders can exercise a sort of permanent plebiscite.

Both classical Chavismo and Podemos rely on the masses remaining atomised individuals, or small groupings, whilst the leaders have the privilege of publicly representing, developing and initiating policies, or choosing what to highlight amongst ideas that come from below. Other political groups or tendencies within the movement are then vulnerable to the accusation of factionalism, of not representing the people but only their own little groups. This is the demagogy, playing on the ignorance and flattering the prejudices of the atomised masses, which is inseparable from populism.

In Europe, open populist methods have generally been the preserve of the Right. In part, this is because the working class, the class that invented mass parties and forced the bourgeoisie to extend its class privileged democracy into universal suffrage, created a movement, whether trade union or party, based on cells or branches, in which conferences of their delegates decide policy and elect a collective leadership.

However, although such a structure allows for both the fullest involvement of party members in decision-making and the accountability of leaders, it by no means guarantees either.

Organisational structures alone could not prevent the official labour movement, Social Democracy and the major trade union federations from being totally incapable of articulating either working class resistance to
Fundamentally, this was because the political programmes of these parties accepted the continued existence of capitalism and saw capitalist prosperity, or at least stability, as the precondition for any reforms. Consequently, they accepted the need to implement austerity programmes even though it meant attacking the interests of their own supporters. As a result, when those supporters began to turn against their parties, many rejected not only the policies but also the traditions and organisational methods that had built them.

Although many of them come from an IU background, Iglesias and the team behind Podemos have capitalised on this by avoiding the language of socialism totally. Instead of references to class, and recognising the workers as the principal agency of change, they talk in terms of ¿the people? and ¿citizens?. They are equally vague on the question of who exactly is the enemy against whom the people are to be mustered.

By taking up the 15-M slogan ¿they do not represent us?, which was aimed against the ¿caste? of professional politicians, they have tried to develop methods which transcend those of official politics and, as they say repeatedly, left wing politics, too. They believe that in this way they can quickly and easily (by next year) win a parliamentary majority. Thus, in the Palacio Vistalegre, Iglesias could say, ¿We will tell them we want to occupy the centre; where a political majority exists which believes in decency?.

In reality, this is not some sophisticated ¿counter-hegemonic? strategy; indeed, it is not even new. Consciously or not, it is a surrender to the cult of the centre, the so-called ¿middle ground?, which means, in the end, the middle classes and middle layers.

The belief that ¿decent people? who used to vote for the right can be won over by avoiding the old terminology of right and left, of working class and capitalists, is, as the saying goes, either a snare or a delusion. It is a snare if it means Podemos limits its programme to what is acceptable to such voters. It is a delusion if Iglesias and company think that people won on such a basis will stick with a Podemos government when the going gets tough and the capitalists start to use all their economic power against it.

Indeed, it already looks more like the former. Where Iglesias had previously talked of cancelling the debt, the proposal backed at the Citizens? Assembly refers only to an ¿orderly restructuring? of it.

Bibiana Medialdea, the professor of economics charged with presenting the proposition on finance, spelt out the new position: ¿The objective isn?t to not pay the debt, but to return to a level of indebtedness and a sustainable approach which would allow for a recovery in the population?s welfare.?

The base units of Podemos

Learning from role played by Chávez?s ¿Bolivarian Circles?, the new movement has created a network of ¿círculos Podemos? in localities and institutions and for different sectors and social problems: circles of unemployment, disability, LGBT, feminism, pensioners, health, journalism, transport, ecology etc.

¿They are spaces to end fear, fragmentation and resignation, to build popular and citizens? unity, against the impoverishment and the sequestration of democracy. From the circles we defend common sense issues: we are citizens and have the right to have rights; to live without fear; to health care, education, retirement and social protection; to land and territory; to employment; culture; to develop ourselves as individuals and as peoples; so that no one lies to us; so that no one mistreats us; that no one loads us down with debts; so that no one robs us.?
Cristina Flesher Fominaya, author of the book Social Movements and Globalization (May 2014) describes the methodology of Podemos thus:

This communication has allowed for the basic axes of classical representation to be overflowed: the party form; the culture of militancy; the left/right axis; the intransitive conception of the relation between representatives and the represented; and an idea of political identity that depends upon the definition of a subject that is more or less given. Podemos has managed to play beyond each one of these axes, laying the basis for a triangular relation between citizen participation, social struggles and the expression of demands in institutions, which goes beyond representative democracy and allows for a profound transformation of political, economic and social life.

From the point of view of Iglesias and his ?Claro Que Podemos? (?it is clear that we can?) grouping within the Podemos leadership, this form of organisation has already paid off handsomely. In the on-line vote on organisational structures, their proposal to have a single General Secretary as the leader of the party gained an overwhelming majority with 80.7 per cent of those voting.

Their principal opponents, ?Sumando Podemos? (?together we can?) proposed a three-person secretariat and one of their leaders, Jesús Rodríguez, defined their objectives thus: ?we have the support of many people who want to maintain the plurality of the project. And there are many people who want a leadership with very diverse and plural counterweights?.

Iglesias made short shrift of that, declaring, ?The skies are not captured by consensus but by assault?. His second organisational proposal, also successful, was that no member could stand for election to the ?Citizens Council?, which is elected for two years as a leadership body between Assemblies, if they were also members of another organisation. This was aimed, very clearly, at the members of Izquierda Anticapitalista (IA) the Fourth International?s Spanish section.

Members of IA are not only central to Sumando Podemos, they also provided half of the signatories to the original appeal for the founding of Podemos and wrote the European election programme on which it did so well and on which two of their members, Teresa Rodríguez and Pablo Echenique, were elected as MEPs. Now, IA has paid the price for accommodating to Iglesias since the foundation of the party.

As early as June, Juan Carlos Monedero said: ?there are people conspiring to take control of Podemos and we don?t want that to happen.? But in the online vote 80.7 per cent of registered supporters voted for Iglesias?s single leader model, and 12 per cent per cent for Echenique?s three-person secretariat. It is indicative however that 40 per cent of the 200,000 registered members abstained.

Now, because of the ban on dual membership for candidates for the leading bodies, and also for public office, IA finds itself under the leadership?s cosh. It is ironic that they were accused of planning to take over Podemos when in fact this is exactly what Iglesias and Monedero have done, using the online vote and their celebrity status to railroad an atomised membership into an undemocratic ban. IA have been forced to submit, but as their statement makes clear they are far from happy with this.

?Although we do not agree with the ban on so-called ?double militancy?, we are going to abide by it. We believe that it poses a serious risk to pluralism within Podemos and is a totally ineffective way to avert the danger of the arrival of careerists in Podemos. The key to combating these phenomena is control from below, from the circles and the spaces of construction of popular unity, as well as the maximum freedom in debate and criticism. However, in spite of maintaining our opposition to the measure, we accept the decision taken by a large majority and, in accordance with it, no activist in Izquierda Anticapitalista will contest the elections of the State Citizen?s Council of Podemos.?
The authoritarian actions of the Iglesias faction bode ill for Podemos’s future and for its capacity to correct the errors that will surely multiply from the present leadership team in the coming year.

Is Podemos on the right path?

Podemos poses important questions for the groups of the far left. Is the ?new politics? advocated by the leaders of this young party a model for others to follow? Does it represent a real political alternative for the Spanish working class and youth in the struggle against the capitalist crisis and its consequences? Above all, what does it mean for the existing workers? movement and for the revolutionaries working within it?

These questions are especially important because Podemos developed out of a project founded by professional academics. Is it, therefore, just a project, designed by intellectuals for ?the masses? or does it have the potential to develop into a party of the masses, and that means, first and foremost, of the working class? Does it actually have connections to the working class?

Studies of the demographic of Podemos are thin on the ground as yet. In an article on the Open Democracy website ?Just who are Podemos?? Fernando Betancor, an American economist and Democrats Abroad activist who describes himself as ?an advocate of political and economic liberalism?, attempts to draw some conclusions from surveys of Podemos voters and those intending to vote for it. He concludes,

?In conjunction with some of the demographic information provided by voter intention surveys here, we might hypothesize that Podemos voters are middle-aged or younger, mostly urban, from wealthier than average backgrounds. They are not, on average, more likely to be unemployed or dispossessed, or economically marginalized. This doesn?t appear to be a group of proletarians ? certainly not the lumpen as Mr Iglesias has denigratingly referred to them in one interview ? but rather middle class people. And if they?re not unemployed and homeless, then they?re upset about other issues: corruption, political elitism, government unresponsiveness, perceived injustice.?

This should come as no surprise since the most prominent spokespersons of Podemos, as we have seen, go out of their way to avoid the language or the symbols of the working class movement. For them, all such references are the language of ?the caste? and so should be unceremoniously dumped in the rubbish bin.

Nor is it any surprise that Podemos? programme is not really any more radical than that of social democracy before its capitulation to neoliberalism. Its European election programme is clearly a left-reformist, minimum programme that does not go beyond demands like an audit of debt, a minimum income or the re-nationalisation of strategically important privatised parts of the economy and the nationalisation of the key industries. It promises to do away with tax havens, establish a guaranteed minimum income and lower the retirement age to 60. All good points, but certainly not an anticapitalist programme.

The fight for such demands certainly needs to be driven forward but the most important question is whether, and how, that can be connected to the fight for the transfer of power towards the working class.

To overcome the reformist illusions and to give the Spanish working class a class-independent programme, the different anticapitalist currents within Spain, either within Podemos or outside it (and inside is more sensible) should use the dynamism and flux around Podemos to fight to get the new party to transcend its populist and non-socialist narratives and take a revolutionary trajectory and a revolutionary programme.

This necessarily means escaping from the plebiscitary structures of the party; conferences with thousands of participants and a hundred thousand voting online may sound very democratic but they actually privilege
the recognised leaders, especially those with a high media profile. If, at the same time, pre-existing organised tendencies are disparaged or excluded, this will only make matters worse. Large mass conferences, as the Soviet bureaucracy discovered, are much more easy to manipulate. To give ordinary citizens who are not active within the party the same rights as those who are is not a superior form of democracy but, potentially at least, a weapon against it.

Undoubtedly, across Europe, the experience of new parties whose growth has created the possibility of winning governmental office has shown that any blind euphoria based on one election or opinion poll would be misplaced. The European elections, after all, do not raise the question of who will form an administration. In them, votes are primarily an expression either of loyalty to national parties or of protests against them or, indeed, against the direction of the ?European project as a whole?. National elections, by contrast, are all about who should actually govern.

The experience of Rifondazione Comunista in Italy in the last decade shows that any party that does not have a clear and independent class viewpoint will, at the end of the day, capitulate to the constitutional constraints of existing bourgeois society.

For Podemos, as for other parties such as Syriza in Greece, an election is likely to immediately pose the question of coalition. Iglesias has said that Podemos would not go into coalition with any party of ?the caste?. Since this includes not only the PSOE but also IU, there could only be two alternatives; the formation of a minority government to try to implement the party programme, or allowing other parties to form a coalition, either of right wing parties or a ?grand coalition? between the traditional mainstream left and right, the principal representatives of ?the caste?.

Clearly, a minority government would be opposed not only in parliament but by the banks, the international agencies such as the IMF and World Bank, all the major corporations and, of course, all the media. There would be an immediate flight of capital and turmoil on the stock exchanges. If it were not able to call on already organised extra-parliamentary forces to counter such attacks, not just by demonstrations but by seizure of property and imposition of workers? control, and if it had not previously ensured absolute internal unanimity, such a government would not last long.

At first sight, the Podemos strategy of excluding any coalition can appear radical, a determined rejection of all that the old parties of ?the caste? stand for. Iglesias makes it clear that his aim is for an immediate electoral victory, a majority government. The rejection, in advance, of any coalition, even with IU or anti-austerity elements within PSOE, is intended to convince those parties? voters to shift their allegiance to Podemos. However, since the Podemos programme is not qualitatively superior to that of IU, this intransigence is not principled but sectarian.

Moreover, when stripped of the rhetoric, what does all this amount to but the most naïve belief in parliamentary democracy? The underlying assumption of the Podemos leadership is that the crucial precondition for defeating ?the caste? and the system it defends is gaining a majority of seats in parliament. Yet, a majority Podemos government would face all the same enemies and hostility as a minority government. Even if it were able to hold itself together in the face of a whirlwind of opposition nationally and internationally, much good it would do to be able to win a vote in parliament if the money markets point blank refuse any credit either to the Spanish government or to Spanish banks and corporations.

In reality, as the ?flexibility? the Iglesias?Monedero team has shown over the question of refusing to pay the external debt makes clear, a Podemos government would rapidly climb down and limit policy to what was ?possible? and ?acceptable?. What is worse, no matter how many circles have been organised, if
they only have direct, top-down, links to the Podemos leadership, and no means of coordinating or
deciding policy between themselves, they will be unable to stop the leadership from making such a U-turn.

Nonetheless, although the Iglesias leadership has clearly consolidated itself through the Citizens?
Assembly and the online voting procedures, Podemos is still less than a year old and its final character is
not yet decisively settled. The parliamentary election on which Iglesias is staking everything is still more
than a year away and there will be no shortage of episodes and issues that could tarnish his laurels.
Standing aside from the formation of this party would mean a sectarian self-isolation from tens of
thousands of militants from social movements and parts of the working class vanguard, self-isolation from
the politically most advanced and dynamic part of the Spanish left.

A revolutionary action programme

In the coming year, as Rajoy and the PP government continue to force through austerity measures,
revolutionaries must focus their efforts on fighting, within Podemos, for a turn towards intervention into the
class struggle as opposed to a fixation on electoral prospects. They need to develop an anticapitalist action
programme against austerity that gives fighting answers to the most important questions faced by workers,
youth, women and minorities in Spain: a programme that will inspire solidarity and imitation right across the
European Union.

As well as specific demands on jobs, wages, housing and all the other fronts of the class struggle, such a
programme must emphasise the building of action committees in every company, school, university and
neighbourhood that organise the particular defensive actions. Podemos circles, especially the ones in
working class and popular areas or in workplaces, can play an important role in driving forward their
construction. Such action committees should come together as soon as possible on a national level so that
the movement as a whole can discuss and decide on a united strategy for the struggle. To move from the
defensive onto the offensive, the question of an unlimited political general strike should be put on the
agenda.

A general strike, however, inevitably raises the question of who rules and in whose interests. The ongoing
crisis of Spanish society shows the need for a governmental programme not only in the interests of the
working class but also the peasants. As well as reversing the austerity policies and renationalising
privatised industries, that programme must also deal with the unresolved national and democratic
questions (the right for self-determination, abolition of the monarchy, constituent assembly).

Any such programme would be impossible without the expropriation without compensation of the big
capitalists and the big landowners under workers? control and the reorganisation of the economy on the
basis of a democratic plan that relates to the whole society.

For that, what is needed is a workers? government that is based on the organs of struggle of the working
class, the peasants, the youth, the action committees, democratic councils, and organs of self-defence,
which can disarm the reaction and smash the bureaucratic state machine.

Podemos, if it break from its ambiguity as to whether it is a party of the left or of the centre, if it break from
its leaders? fear of identification with the working class if it is prepared to unite with all workers?
organisations, political and trade union that are willing to struggle against austerity.

It is around the struggle for such a strategy that revolutionaries should be organising within Podemos in
order to build a real alternative for the Spanish working class: a revolutionary workers? party.