

Spain's historic motion of no-confidence: how can we understand the ousting of seemingly indestructible Mariano Rajoy, in just 72 hours?

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Cristina Flesher Fominaya 1 June 2018 (2018-06-01T23:11:04+01:00)

Electoral considerations aside, for now, many of those who fought so hard for this day to come will take comfort from being able to oust the PP from power. **Español**

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10:31 AM - 1 Jun 2018

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Screen shot: From Íñigo Errejón's tweet: Goodbye Rajoy. Goodbye PP. Although the emotionally vertiginous nature of Spain's sudden change of government can lead to hyperbole, today's motion of no-confidence that has resulted in the immediate change of government in Spain is historic, and its impact potentially game changing.

In terms of Spanish politics it is only the fourth motion of no-confidence that has been put to a vote in democracy, and the first to prosper. It is also the first time that the person taking on the presidency of the government, Pedro Sánchez of the PSOE, is not currently a member of Parliament.

Sánchez's path to the presidency has been remarkable, worthy in fact of a film treatment in itself. Faced with the possibility (some would say impossibility) of forming a government in 2016, Sanchez missed his historic moment then, and his fortunes declined rapidly afterward. Ousted from the leadership of his party by an internal coup, he abandoned his seat in parliament and took to the road, traversing the towns of Spain, building a grassroots base of support and connecting with his electorate.

His endeavors paid off when the PSOE militants defied the party leadership to vote him in as party leader in May 2017. Yet no poll would have predicted an electoral path to the presidency of the Spanish government. Instead it was the right-wing Spanish nationalist party Ciudadanos that held the top spot in the Gabinet d'Estudis Socials i Opinió Pública (GESOP)'s April 2018 survey, with 28.7% of the vote, followed by the PP, who would drop to 21%, the PSOE with 20,5% and finally coalition Unidos Podemos with 18. But his fortunes changed radically in the past week, when a sudden motion of no-confidence was presented with lightning speed by the PSOE without consulting beforehand with any other parties, catapulting Sánchez into the presidency.

Corruption, corruption, corruption

The trigger? The “Gürtel sentence” which is just the first ruling in a much wider political corruption scheme that is one of the most important in Spain's democratic history, and which sentenced 29 of the 37 accused to a total of 351 years in prison.

The ruling condemned the Popular Party for benefiting from systematic institutional corruption and confirmed judicially for the first time the existence of the party's “B fund”, through which the party made illegal pay offs to party members.

The evidence was detailed in the infamous “Bárcenas papers,” documentation provided by the Popular Party's former treasurer who has been sentenced to 33 years in prison, and which details the names and payouts of the funds, including a certain “M.Rajoy”. The almost 1700 page ruling describes a complex and vast system of institutional corruption, illicit enrichment and influence trafficking.

The ruling is the most severe of the many cases that have been brought forward, some of which have yet to be ruled upon, including the Púnica case and the Lezo case. When the case was opened by Judge Baltasar Garzón in 2009, Mariano Rajoy declared, “This is not a plot of the PP, it is a plot against the PP”, a position he has maintained until the present. At the time of his declaration he was surrounded by leading lights in the party such as Francisco Camps (ex-President of Valencia), ex-Minister of Health Ana Mato, and ex-Mayor of Madrid Esperanza Aguirre, all either directly or indirectly implicated in corruption. The Gürtel ruling contested the PP's narrative that these were isolated cases that had nothing to do with the party as whole.

Yet the Popular Party has been seemingly indestructible, weathering scandal after scandal, and still garnering the most votes in recent elections. Corruption alone, therefore, did not bring them down. Corruption alone, therefore, did not bring them down.

While the exact calculations that led the PSOE to present the motion so suddenly now are unknown, the shift in position of the PNV, the conservative Basque nationalist party whose crucial 5 votes swung the motion in Sánchez' favour, and the support of the remaining parties that made up the 180 votes in favour, owes much to the work of social movements and progressive political parties who have prepared the terrain and worked toward a shift in the zeitgeist from an apathetic acceptance of corruption as politics as usual to a “Sí se puede, hay que echarlos!” (Yes we can! We must throw them out!) standpoint.

The long afterlife of social movements

Sánchez' discourse during the motion of no-confidence debate drew heavily on narratives and tropes that Podemos, and other parties and coalitions such as Ahora Madrid, Barcelona en Comú and Compromís have been articulating ceaselessly over the past several years.

The discourses in turn reflect the key demands of the Indignados 15-M movement that took to the squares and streets and Spain in 2011 to demand “Real Democracy Now!” and an end to austerity politics. Those movements in turn made possible the emergence of the above mentioned parties and electoral coalitions, and would have been impossible without the support and collaboration of the movements, not only in terms of the programmatic messages and demands they articulated but in terms of the organizational forms that structured them. The emergence of the above mentioned parties and electoral coalitions... would have been impossible without the support and collaboration of the movements.

While Podemos adopted a relatively more classical party form, the “municipalist movements for change” as they are known in Spain maintained a closer commitment to the grassroots autonomous traditions from which they emerged, and in their ability to actually govern some of Spain's largest cities including Madrid and Barcelona, have been able to prove that they can govern effectively.

Podemos for their part have played a crucial role in keeping the pressure on the PP government and the parties that have maintained them in power until now by expressing the outrage felt by millions of Spaniards in light of the seemingly endless corruption scandals that have emerged and continue to unfold, and which have implicated not just individual members of the Popular Party, but, in the judicial ruling of the Gürtel trial that triggered the motion of no-confidence, the Popular Party itself.

In the wake of this ruling, Podemos and political leaders such as Ada Colau Bollano, Mayor of Barcelona, have called for a defence of the dignity of the institution of democracy as a core motivator for parties of different ideological orientations to join together:

“Corruption weakens our institutions. It isn't just serious because public funds are robbed, which are needed for healthcare, education [...] for pensions which is an urgent topic of debate right now, [...] if we allow corruption to be met with impunity, for corruption to become embedded in our institutions, we are devaluing them, we are delegitimizing them, we are sending a message to the public that this is just business as usual, [...] that democratic institutions can be used for a political party to enrich itself with what belongs to everyone. We cannot allow that from a democratic point of view. All of the corruption scandals of the PP would be enough in other consolidated European democracies for everyone to resign, and for there to be serious consequences. We cannot allow this permanent state of corruption to be normalized and therefore this motion of no -confidence is very important. Political parties must set aside [electoral considerations] and join in this motion.”



Ada Colau 
@AdaColau

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No podemos permitir que la corrupción se instale en nuestras instituciones. La **#mocióndecensura** es un imperativo ético. Nos jugamos la democracia, las libertades, los derechos sociales... Es el momento de echar a Rajoy y al Partido Popular.

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Screenshot: From Ada Colau's twitter feed.

This narrative was largely adopted by Sánchez in his discourse, along with the promise of a progressive agenda that also echoes the key challenges or crises that Podemos' Pablo Iglesias and other representatives of Unidos Podemos articulated during the debate (and has been articulating since its inception).

This institutional political activism has been an echo of the continuous mass mobilization on the streets of Spain, which has included in recent months alone, sustained protests by tens of thousands of pensioners in hundreds of protests across Spain for decent pensions; the mass outrage against patriarchal justice over the judicial sentence that did not consider a brutal gang rape of a young woman (which was planned, video recorded and then celebrated by the perpetrators) to be rape, a ruling that led Judge Baltasar Garzón to write publicly about why he felt the judge's ruling was not the kind of justice "we need for democracy"; mass feminist mobilizations and occupations against gendered violence; and the marches against precarity, among many others.

Sánchez' recognition of the need to overturn the most problematic aspects of the notorious Ley Mordaza also reflects a key demand by human rights and pro-Democracy activists in Spain, which has recently seen a rapper sentenced to 3 years in prison for his lyrics, and a punk singer fined for yelling the Spanish equivalent of "Fuck the police!" at a concert. The fact that he has been shouting the same kinds of things at his concerts over the past

several decades but is only now being fined for it, is also an indicator of the increasingly restrictive environment in which critique is silenced but the judicial penalties for fraud and corruption have been systematically softened.

The presentation of the motion of no-confidence came in the fifth week of protest by public radio and television employees demanding the democratic regeneration of the RTVE executive. The protest consists of all reporters on air dressing in black each Friday, in mourning for the lack of democratic freedom of press.

Complex afterlives and a possible dialogue

Despite the declaration of “failure” of the movements of the squares, in the face of the many reversals of fortune experienced by these movements following the emptying of the squares, what today’s events show is that the effects of movements cannot be measured in straight lines or binaries: their afterlives are complex and multi-directional, unexpected and sometimes unintentional.

Their effects are not just short-term political gains or losses but include more widespread cultural and political shifts that can take many years to bear fruit. Even then, their gains can be reversed and are never fixed or final.

The road ahead for Sánchez in any event is extremely challenging. With only 84 PSOE seats in parliament he will need to negotiate alliances with a range of political forces in order to govern. His biggest challenge, undoubtedly, will be the management of the situation in Cataluña, where another government has just been formed under the presidency of Quim Torra, and where the period of national rule over the autonomous parliament of Cataluña invoked under the never before applied Article 155 of the Spanish constitution, which allows for the assumption of control over the autonomous parliaments by the national government in cases where a clear threat to the general interests of Spain exists, will soon end.

Despite the challenges, the feeling is that “at least now there is the possibility to engage in a dialogue, if no guarantee people will actually listen to each other” as Esquerra República de Catalunya (ERC) congressman Joan Tardá put it.

One year ago Podemos also brought forth a motion of no-confidence, arguing forcefully that “another government was possible” and that the proven corruption of the Popular Party was reason enough for them to be ousted from government. At that time, they failed to gain the support of enough members of parliament for that motion to prosper, but their words were prophetic. What would have been unimaginable just a few years ago has today become a reality. What would have been unimaginable just a few years ago has today become a reality.

Today, when the president of the parliament read the results of the vote in favour of the ousting of the Popular Party and the immediate assumption of power by the PSOE’S Pedro Sánchez, applause rang out along with the chants of *Sí se puede!* (Yes we can) from the ranks of Unidos Podemos. When Ada Colau, who was witnessing the vote from the gallery,

left the parliament building, she was met by the crowd outside with chants of “Sí Se Puede!”, a spontaneous recognition of the role that she and others have played in arriving at this historic moment.

If Sánchez is the miraculous victor today, a politician “who has died and been resurrected more times than Jesus” (as the pundits say), this historic moment would not have been possible without the social movements and progressive parties that have prepared the way.

Time to walk

In the short term many issues are unresolved, such as who will form government with the PSOE and which political priorities the PSOE will be able to get through parliament with a minority of seats. The PSOE, a party that was imploding, is now in government, and the PP will be a hostile and tough opposition.

As for Ciudadanos, as a party who has campaigned strongly on an anti-corruption agenda the fact they were the only major party to vote *against* the motion leaves their political future uncertain. They may be able to “devour their father” by presenting themselves as the less tainted inheritors of the PP, or else their failure to make good on their commitment against corruption in the motion of no-confidence based entirely on the corruption of the PP may cost them dearly.

Podemos’ future is also unclear, although the current scenario favours them somewhat. They may be able to participate in the passage of the 40 odd measures that have been blocked by the PP in this legislature, while still acting as an opposition party in cases where they disagree or seek to differentiate themselves from the PSOE.

Electoral considerations aside, for now, many of those who fought so hard for this day to come will take comfort from being able to oust the PP from power, a sentiment captured by Podemos’ Íñigo Errejón’s tweet: *Goodbye Rajoy. Goodbye PP. Your disdain, your impunity, your arrogance, your ransacking, your patrimonial use of the institutions, your policies that favour the privileged and are cruel to working people. Now it’s time to walk.*



Íñigo Errejón ✓
@ierrejon

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Adiós Rajoy. Adiós PP. Tus desprecios, tu impunidad, tu soberbia, tu saqueo, tu uso patrimonial de las instituciones, tu política entreguista con los privilegiados y cruel con la gente trabajadora. Ahora a caminar

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Screenshot: Íñigo Errejón's tweet: Goodbye Rajoy. Goodbye PP.

About the author

Cristina Flesher Fominaya (PhD, Sociology, University of California, Berkeley) is Reader in Social Politics and Media at Loughborough University, UK and was Senior Marie Curie Fellow at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth from 2013-2015. She is a founding editor of the global social movements journal *Interface* and an editor of the journal *Social Movement Studies*. She is also founder of the Council for European Studies Social Movement Research Network. Her book "Social Movements and Globalization: How Protests, Occupations and Uprisings are Changing the World" is available from Palgrave Macmillan, and her latest book is *Resisting Austerity: Collective Action in Europe in the wake of the global financial crisis* (Routledge 2018). Her Twitter: @CfFominaya

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