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2022 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN PORTUGAL: THE SEDUCTIVENESS OF SOCIALISM?

Posted on 21 Febbraio 2022 by [Catarina Santos Botelho](#)

The Preamble of the Portuguese Constitution states the following: “the Constituent Assembly affirms the Portuguese people’s decision to (...) ensure the primacy of a democratic state based on the rule of law and open up a path towards a socialist society”. If, on the one hand, it is true that this Preamble portrays an historical and symbolic revolutionary experience, on the other hand, one can wonder if a mythical seductiveness of the socialist [utopia](#) has endured until today.

The parliamentary elections of January 30th 2022 proved that, at times, what is expected (analysts had [predicted a tie](#) between the two main political parties) does not happen: the Socialist Party [won with an unexpected outright majority](#).

Before I delve into what was projected, I will briefly explain what the political scenario looked like before the elections.

In the 2019 legislative elections, political fragmentation was [evident](#). The centre-left socialists (PS) won the elections. The communists (PCP) and the green party, as well as the social democrats (PSD) and the right popular party (CDS-PP), lost a considerable number of votes. The ‘People, Animals and Nature Party’ (PAN) had an excellent result, and two new right-wing

parties (the radical right 'CHEGA' and the liberals 'Iniciativa Liberal') entered the Portuguese parliament, as well as new left-wing party "LIVRE". After a second 'contraption' (a post-electoral alliance known as 'geringonça') failed, PS decided that it would rule as a minority government and seek support from PCP, BE, and PAN when necessary.

However, 2019 and the following years were difficult years worldwide, and Portugal was not an exception to this trend. The Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictive measures subsequently implemented hindered a promising economic growth, creating an unprecedented social and sanitary crisis and amplifying the Portuguese democratic system's [structural fragilities](#). As a result, the country, ranked as a "full democracy" by the Democratic Index in 2019, downgraded to a "[flawed democracy](#)" in 2020 and 2021.

EU recovery funds spending programme became a priority in the national political debate. Unpredictably, or not, left allies' support gradually deteriorated. In December 2021, after Parliament rejected the proposed state budget for 2022, the President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, decided to dissolve the Parliament and schedule general elections. From a constitutional perspective, the dissolution was not mandatory, although it was transparently foreseen by the President of the Republic in case of the State budget being rejected. The Portuguese Constitution allows a wide margin of presidential discretion when dissolving the Parliament (article 172 of the Constitution). As in every former dissolution, the decision to dissolve is often times politically criticised. In this recent case, some argued that scheduling elections would not solve the [political impasse](#).

So where does this leave us? In tune with the results from the previous general elections, and in line with other European countries (such as Spain or Ireland), political fragmentation was expected. At first glance, opinion polls indicated the ruling minority Socialist Party (PS) to be the top favourite to win the elections, but later the centre-right social democrats (PSD) significantly reduced PS's advantage. Clearly, then, a close contest between PS and PSD was expected.

In stark contrast to these prospects, though, PS [won the elections](#) with an absolute majority (PS got 119 of the 230 seats in Parliament), against

PSD's 73, whereas BE, PCP, and PAN lost numerous seats. Moreover, and quite astonishingly, one of the oldest Portuguese parties since the transition to democracy in 1976, the right popular party CDS-PP, [lost all of its seats](#). Notwithstanding the new parties that remarkably grew in Parliament – the radical right CHEGA and the liberals IL –, the Portuguese political system continues to stand as bipartisan (70% of the electorate voted for the two central parties: PS and PSD). [CHEGA ascension](#) might be problematic from a political point of view, as some parties have already warned that they will apply [cordon sanitaire](#) techniques. This introduces the important question of whether cordon sanitaires are truly [effective](#) at hindering the electoral success of populist parties.

Political scientists and other political experts have been debating these results. In the middle of a pandemic crisis, should we interpret these outcomes as a “[rally-around-the-flag](#)” syndrome or rather as a “[leader effect](#)”? Could one meaningfully claim that people chose stability over the unknown – that is to say, over not knowing how other political forces would govern under a pandemic? Does the pandemic herald a paradigm shift in thinking about politics?

Questions keep multiplying: Will the populist CHEGA and the liberals IL live up to the [expectations](#) of their electorates? Is it rational to merely lament the advent of populism? Will the [social democrats](#) thoroughly [reflect](#) upon these results, survive this blow, and [grow stronger](#)? Will the [same](#) happen to PCP, BE and PAN? Will the right spectrum be [reconfigured](#)? More importantly, will an absolute majority allow structural reforms that have long been [awaited](#) or will it promote a [quasi-authoritarianism](#)? Though some academics duly bristle at the notion of an absolute majority equalling [absolute power](#), one cannot underestimate the more challenging equilibrium of checks and balances. Under these circumstances, one of the most important functions that the [President of the Republic](#), the opposition, the courts (in particular, the Portuguese [Constitutional Court](#)), the [Ombudsperson](#), and the Civic Society can play is to be acutely vigilant.