Recent Spanish Elections: Old Wounds Consume All Logical Thought!

Most neutral observers of the Spanish political scene have the same reaction after looking at it for more than five minutes - “I give up”.

Not only is the country very divided, the explanations of its divisions fit into no category. But neither are they strong enough the form a category of their own, a "Spanish Scenario" – each new election, new government and new development are simply the calm before the next indecipherable mess.

The latest Spanish election, on November 10th, took place because the previous election, in April, had created a situation where the Prime Minister designate, Pedro Sanchez, wasn't confirmed in his post but the parties couldn't agree on any other candidate. Obviously therefore a clear mandate of some sort was needed.

However this time Spain followed the usual rule – if the politicians can't agree what to do, the public won't either, as someone called Theresa May might tell you.

The Socialists remained the largest party, but surprisingly lost three seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The party it failed to agree a coalition with in April, the left wing populist movement Podemos, lost seven. Therefore the two most obvious partners are further away from a majority now than they were in April, and the Socialists also lost control of
the Senate, in which they had held a majority.

The mainstream right wing People's Party, and Vox, the right wing counterpart to Podemos, made significant gains of over 4% of the vote each. But this actually harmed their cause, as the gains were made at the expense of the centrist Citizens Party, which practically disappeared.

Furthermore, both Vox and Podemos came into existence because their members couldn't stomach the People's Party and Socialists any more - the very things they agree with the older parties on are what also drive them apart, as each one seeks to be truer to their ideology than the other. So it is more difficult in practice to create coalitions between parties at the same end of the spectrum as it is between moderate parties of different shades, who can unite to keep the extremes out – provided they do a good job.

So what happened? The Socialists and Podemos, having lost ground at an election they caused by not being able to agree on a coalition for six months, have apparently agreed one practically overnight. Maybe the election result sobered them into coming up with something before it was too late for both of them. Or maybe neither party actually stands for anything anymore, and this is a dignified way of avoiding admitting it?

**Divided up the edges**

As the squeezing of the Citizens vote showed, despite its identification with the right, Spain is still effectively fighting its civil war. It is eighty years since Franco and his Nationalists displaced the leftist, but democratically elected, Republican government, so the war is not within the memory of any current Spanish voters. But it is still very much part of their identities—and the return of democracy after Franco's death has not gone far in healing the old divisions, but left them peeking out from beneath a normalised overlay.

It's the same everywhere – people tend to divide up into religious or secularist, patriotic or internationalist, top down or bottom up, law and order or personal license. But when Spain descended into war over these issues the conflict was so viscerally ideological that it became a proxy fight for people all over the world who felt strongly attached to one side or the other.

Most famously, the Spanish Civil War pitted Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union, with the Soviets, whose rulers had seized power, on the side of the democratically elected government and the Nazis, who had initially been elected, supporting the insurgent Nationalist. But the same forces compelled others into the conflict: for example, many residents of strongly socialist South Wales fought with the Republicans, as one of the reasons South Wales is socialist is its domination and economic exploitation by the wealthier, and foreign, English.

**For Whom The Bell Tolls**

The dead have been sleeping cold in Spain but today archaeologists are digging up mass graves of largely Republican victims of the civil war Spanish governments of different complexions have been slow to make these excavations official, but the Socialists in particular continue to make capital out of the existence of these long ignored burial sites. The right wing parties ask who is funding the excavations, and what the point is of dragging up old hatreds, even though they themselves would not be there without the democracy these victims were executed for allegedly supporting. This reminds one of Ernest Hemingway, when he wrote of the dead in Spanish soil.

Once the leftist parties were the political heirs of the Republicans, the rightist parties those who didn't want to be associated with the Franco dictatorship but sympathised with its general bent. But now there is a new fault line in Spain, as there is throughout Europe.

A significant number of voters have lost confidence in their political system and the parties they associate with it. The populist parties such as Podemos and Vox are increasingly taking the mantle of the "oppressed population", while the mainstream parties of the left as well as the right are the "dictatorship", imposing their increasingly irrelevant values on disregarded voters.

These Socialists are the same PSOE who became notorious during the 1980s as the "Champagne Socialists" - claiming to represent the workers, but always seeming to have the biggest houses and newest cars, a sort of extended Kennedy family. They ran the country for fifteen years, but ultimately drove their supporters to the right because they couldn't keep justifying every expenditure, and every failure, simply by calling themselves Socialists.

If there was ever a party Podemos would be formed to counter, it is this one, as many who call themselves socialists cavil at the idea of any form of middle class decadence. But suddenly Podemos has found common ground with its
rival, rather than trying to reform it from within – it has gone establishment, when the reason it exists is not to be.

Even if the Socialist-Podemos coalition goes ahead, it still will not command a majority. There is every possibility that yet another election will have to be held, at which both are likely to be punished for messing up another attempt at forming a government.

Such an election will play into the hands of Vox, the universal enemy, as the Spanish electorate might decide that if the parties which support the existing system can't agree, and the populist Podemos can't either, enough is enough. So this "coalition agreement" is as much a publicity stunt as practical politics – both sides are saying, "we agree because we have to pretend we do, but you know we don't really".

But without this coalition, who is offering what? Every party is on both sides of the civil war-era divide at once. If that divide were going to go away, it wouldn't still be here now. No one can satisfy even half of their supporters, and maybe they don't even want to try.

**Catalonia with nine lives**

The one card all the parties can play is national unity. Each one could, if it wanted, position itself as a defender of Spain against Catalan separatism, which has recently resulted in that region declaring its independence.

But each one has also found that this doesn't arouse the patriotism it should - because even those who oppose Catalan independence can identify equally well with the Catalans themselves.

The 1939-75 Franco dictatorship and subsequent return to largely leftist democracy have created two losers rather than two winners. The left still wants justice from the Franco years, the right objects to being blamed for the Franco years. Both therefore have sympathy with the downtrodden, and the Catalan cause has an obvious appeal to both.

Catalonia has always felt different, culturally and linguistically, from the rest of Spain. The architect Gaudi, who is responsible for the highly idiosyncratic buildings that makes Barcelona unique always insisted on speaking and writing in Catalan even though he had been educated in standard Spanish. At various periods Catalonia has been granted autonomy, only for this to be removed, reimposed but then dissipated in practice, as the Spanish body politic saw fit.

Both sides of the old divide feel this also applies to them. Spain belongs to the other side, or once did, and this has created all their woes now. The new divide between politicians and populists has put some on both sides more firmly in the Catalan camp, as the Catalan separatists are "the people" being trampled on by the Spanish politicians, or the Catalans themselves are being trampled on by separatist politicians imposing the wrong solution on them.

Catalonia also feels it puts more into the rest of Spain than it gets out, a common rallying cry of separatists from Lombardy to Katanga. Once again, the leftists claim they invented the modern democracy and were dispossessed of their due, while the rightists claim they did more for the country, or do now through business and administration, and should be given theirs. Politicians feel they hold the country together and are being unfairly blamed, populists feel power should be given back to the people from whom it theoretically derives.

Everyone is a Catalan it appears, though most are content to be so within Spain. The Spanish government has declared the two Catalan independence referenda illegal, and convicted those behind them of various abuses of power. Sending troops in to try and stop the most recent vote, though perfectly legal and constitutional, was bound to arouse some sympathy for the ordinary Catalans who were themselves obeying a law passed by their regional parliament by taking part in that vote.

The Catalan deputies in the new parliament are more likely to abstain than support the Socialist-Podemos coalition, despite being mostly leftist themselves. Like the Brexit Party MEPs who stood for election to the European Parliament and then turned their backs on the European anthem duriing the opening ceremony, they are only in the Spanish parliament to tell everyone else to leave them alone. Even then, the new deputies are not hell-bent on unilateral independence come what may, so they will face the same dynamic within their own region, with no apparent solution either way.

But Spain has no choice, under its constitution, but to resist any separatist movement, even if government members and supporters are sympathetic to it. The Catalan issue, like many others in the present Spanish political climate, not only divides people but leaves the politicians representing both all people and none.

This situation continues because everyone is used to it. But it doesn't lead the country anywhere, except into
interminable wrangling which leave it easy prey for a new proxy conflict, on any number of issues where Spaniards may find common cause with foreigners rather than their own countrymen.

Paella of prejudice

Spain isn't going to unite, but doesn't have the energy to split up either. All its divisions need all its other divisions to exist. It has often performed well economically in spite of these divisions, and this has enabled every side to claim a temporary victory. But when things don't go so well, fragmentation proceeds exponentially until no one remembers what cause they were originally supposed to be fighting for.

We are not yet at the point where even the Catalan separatists will fall for the first foreign offer with strings attached. But it can't be long before the populists of left and right find more kindred spirits outside Spain's borders rather than within it, while the mainstream left works with other established socialist parties and the right seeks friends in the IMF and any other international organisation which claims a monopoly of neoliberal global wisdom.

Spain is not the only divided country. Ask a Belgian or a Northern Irishman. But the divisions in other countries do not have the deep resonance outside their borders that Spain's do. Foreigners don't just settle in Spain in large numbers for the sun, but because they understand certain sections of the population more than they care to admit.

Spain keeps going by jogging along with all its inherent weaknesses. People are naturally divided, but don't want to fight over it. The question is how far Spain can keep itself quiet in an increasingly fractured and noisy world, full of forces striving to be part of divisions as clear as those of Spain. The time may already have passed when it can take the opportunity to lead, rather than be led on several paths simultaneously by those who want the same neuroses.

*Seth Ferris, investigative journalist and political scientist, expert on Middle Eastern affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*