

The Portuguese socialists due to stay in office after the general elections on 6th October next

PORTUGAL, A EUROPEAN EXCEPTION?

In December 2018 Portugal's President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa announced that the next general elections would take place on 6th October 2019. According to the country's constitution these must be organised between 14th September and 14th October of the year in which the legislature ends.

Portugal is one of the rare EU Member States to be led by a socialist, Antonio Costa (PS), head of government since 2015. According to the polls the country is due to retain its status as the European exception after the general election. A question remains however: the socialists are due to come out ahead on 6th October, but will they be able to win an absolute majority of 230 seats in the Republic's Assembly?

Antonio Costa has already indicated that he would not govern in a coalition with the parties on the radical left, i.e. the Left Bloc (BE) and the Unitarian Democratic Coalition (CDU), two parties which have supported his government, without taking part in it over the last four years.

Although they did not come out ahead in the last election that took place in Portugal in 2015, the socialists took office. They won the local elections of 1st October 2017 taking 160 of Portugal's 308 town halls; 98 went to the main opposition party on the right, the Social Democratic Party (PSD), led by the former mayor of Porto, (2002-2013) Rui Rio, and 24 went to the Social Democratic Centre/People's Party (CDS/PP), led by Assunção Cristas.

The Socialist Party also won the European elections on 26th May last with 33.38% of the vote, its highest result ever in this type of election; 21.94% went to the Social Democratic Party, which, conversely, achieved its worst score ever in a European election. The Left Bloc won 9.82% of the vote, the Unitarian Democratic Coalition 6.88% and the Social Democratic Centre/People's Party, 6.19%. Turnout however was extremely low: 30.73%.

The opposition party (PSD), the leadership of which went to Rui Rio on 13th January 2018, is experiencing some difficulties and is extremely divided.

Another Portuguese exception is that for the time being, there are no populist or extremist parties in the country. With each election the Portuguese electorate takes refuge rather more in abstention – the rate of which runs high – rather than in protest. "Abstention is becoming a structural feature of Portuguese society, undoubtedly due to a political offer which remains surprisingly unchanged," indicated political expert Antonio Pinto.

According to the most recent poll by Multilados, the Socialist Party is due to win 35.50% of the vote in the elections on 6th October. It is due to draw ahead of the Social Democratic Party, which is forecast to win 20.40% of the vote. The Left Bloc is due to win 14.70%; the Unitarian Democratic Coalition 5.60% and finally the Social Democratic Centre/People's Party, 3.30%.

THE RESULTS OF THIS LEGISLATURE

Outgoing Prime Minister Antonio Costa is standing for re-election and is using his results to back his bid for office. Indeed, against all expectations, over the last four years, the socialist has proven all forecasts wrong and he has succeeded in balancing Portugal's public accounts, whilst alleviating the austerity policy undertaken by Pedro Passos Coelho's (PSD) previous government (2011-2015). As proof, the budgetary deficit, which rose to 11% of the GDP in 2010, now lies at 0.5%, i.e. the lowest rate in 40 years. The Portuguese authorities are counting on a budgetary surplus in 2023, which would be a first since 1974.

Whilst respecting budgetary discipline, as set out in the stability plan, Antonio Costa's government has managed to reduce tax pressure on the middle classes and increase the smallest retirement pensions, which has led to a rise in consumption and therefore a return to growth, which totalled 1.9% last year. A similar rate is expected in 2019. Moreover, Portugal is attracting new investors. Finally, unemployment, which totalled 17% at the height of the crisis, has fallen to 6.7% (June 2019).

"If we had continued our predecessors' austerity policy we would have continued to have an unemployment rate beyond 12%, we would have been sanctioned by the EU and would not have reduced our budgetary deficit," declared outgoing Prime Minister Costa, addressing the right-wing opposition. "If we had tried to renegotiate our debt we would not have won back our international credibility and we would be paying interests that would destroy both our capacity to revive growth, our capacity to invest in public services and even of having a public investment programme of 10 billion €" he maintained, addressing this time the radical left.

Mr Costa pointed to the fact that his government has been able to increase investments in the healthcare sector to a total of 1.6 billion €, and at the same time reduce the public debt by 2 billion €.

"It is the Socialist Party that has enabled the guarantee of stability between rising incomes and the reduction of the budgetary deficit, between high economic growth and the recovery of our international credibility, between the easing of tax pressure and the reduction of the debt. Only a left-wing majority, which has good relations with the President of the Republic has been able to achieve this," indicated Antonio Costa, as he warned his fellow countrymen, encouraging them not to lose sight of their goals and vote for the socialists, so that they can avoid the situation in which Spain now finds itself, with Pedro Sanchez (Socialist Workers' Party) trying to form a government since the last elections on 28th April. In the event of a socialist failure the Spanish will have to return to ballot (for the fourth time in under four years), to elect a new parliament.

If his party wins the general election on 6th October next Mr Costa should be able to continue his political work. The outgoing Prime Minister would undoubtedly be obliged to implement structural reforms to modernise certain sectors of the Portuguese economy, notably the civil service and the banks.

The Social Democratic Party criticises the socialists for not having made in depth reforms during this term in office. The parties on the radical left for their part, regret that Costa's government has failed to reduce inequalities.

THE PORTUGUESE POLITICAL SYSTEM

There is only one house in the Portuguese parliament. The Assembly of the Republic comprises 230 members, elected every four years by a proportional system within 22 multi-member constituencies. The country comprises 18 metropolitan constituencies and 2 autonomous regions - Madeira and the Azores which each form one constituency. In addition to this Portuguese living abroad are divided into two constituencies: the first includes those living in Europe, the second those living elsewhere in the world.

The lists of candidates are blocked hence voters cannot express their preferences on the list for which they are voting.

After the election seats are distributed according to the d'Hondt method.

6 political parties are represented in the present Assembly:

- the Social Democratic Party (PSD), a party created in 1974 and led since 2018 by Rui Rio, who stood in the last general elections on 4th October 2015 in coalition with the Social Democratic Centre/People's Party (CDS/PP), the Christian Democratic Party created in 1974 and led by Assunção Cristas, under the name of Portugal moving forward together, the two parties have 107 seats;
- the Socialist Party (PS), founded in 1973, led by outgoing Prime Minister Antonio Costa has 86 MPs;

– the Left Bloc (BE), a radical left-wing party founded in 1999 whose spokesperson is Catarina Martins – it has 19 seats;

– the Unitarian Democratic Coalition (CDU), alliance of the Communist Party (PCP), created in 1921, the Ecologist Party-The Greens (PEV), founded in 1982 and the Democratic Intervention (ID). Led by Jeronimo de Sousa, it has 17 seats;

– People-Animals-Nature (PAN), a party that defends animal rights and nature, founded in 2009 is led by André Lourenço e Silva, with 1 seat.

The Portuguese also elect their President by direct universal suffrage every five years. The present head of State is Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, former leader of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) (1996-1999), was elected with 52% of the vote on 24th January 2016 in the first round of voting.

Reminder of the general election results of 4th October 2015 in Portugal

Turnout : 55,86%

Political parties	Number of votes obtained	Percentage of votes cast collected	Number of seats
Coalition Portugal forward (Social Democratic Party- Social Democratic Centre/ People's Party, PSD-CDS/PP)	1 993 921	36.86	107
Socialist Party (PS)	1 747 685	32.31	86
Left Bloc (BE)	550 892	10.19	19
Unitarian Democratic Coalition (CDU)	445 980	8.25	17
People-Animals-Nature (PAN)	75 140	1.39	1
Others	311 738	5.76	0

Source : <https://www.eleicoes.mai.gov.pt/legislativas2015>

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