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Portugal

Presidential Elections : Victory for the media-austerity candidate

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV492 - January 2016 -

Publication date: Tuesday 26 January 2016

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This week's presidential election represented a defeat for the left, as Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, TV's most known commentator for the past ten years in the country, was elected President of the Republic. The Socialist Party, divided in two faction candidates (pro-left and pro-right, that is, for and against the current Socialist Party Government, supported in Parliament by the left), summed up 27,8%. The Communist Party's backed candidate didn't go beyond 3,95%, while the Left Bloc's backed candidate, the MEP Marisa Matias, achieved a 10,1% result, coming up third and achieving its best presidential result ever.

The new Portuguese President of the Republic is the right-wing backed Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, professor of Law, eminent TV commentator and previous leader of the Social-Democratic Party (right-wing liberal conservatives previously in government). He is a figure directly linked to the previous dictatorship – he is stepson of Marcelo Caetano (who took over after the dictator Salazar died) and son of the minister for the colonies. He is known for his unconventional friendly personae, after 10 years of weekly political comment on Sunday night. His candidacy was supported by the two pro-austerity parties who formed the previous government, under the troika intervention. He won with 52% of the vote. The voter turnout was 48.84%, the worst first mandate turnout in Portuguese presidential elections ever, making Marcelo the president elected with the least votes ever. The impact of media, namely TV, on the election was paramount, with the candidate having a stroll in the park with little to no scrutiny and a campaign based on him being followed by reporters on his everyday chores.

The left candidates were unable to prevent this widely known public figure from winning in the first round. The Socialist Party didn't openly support any candidate, as its former president Maria de Belém went against the actual leadership of prime-minister António Costa, who were going to support an independent, Sampaio da Nóvoa, former dean of the University of Lisbon. As such, the party split between a more left-wing leaned faction (supporting Sampaio da Nóvoa) and a right-wing faction, that opposes the Government parliamentary agreement with the left-wing parties, by which the Socialist Party is in power (which supported Maria de Belém). In the end, the actual leadership of the Socialist Party lost the election but won the internal strife, as Sampaio da Nóvoa obtained 22.9% of the vote and Maria de Belém didn't go beyond 4.24%. The opposition to the governmental solution inside the Socialist Party was widely defeated.

The Communist Party had announced its presidential candidate immediately after the legislative election where it had been surpassed by the Left Bloc (it had 8.25% vs 10.19% from Bloco), as a way to ascertain its identity and its independence, as at that moment the possibility of a government supported in Parliament by the left (Communist Party, Left Bloc and the Greens) was gaining momentum. Edgar Silva, known activist for social causes in Madeira was chosen, but the election went sour. Unable to detach itself from jargon and relying heavily on party logistics, the candidate ended with only 3.95%, the worst result ever for a Communist backed presidential candidate. These results will have impact inside the party, which is still trying to adjust to the new reality of the government and the rise of the Left Bloc. Stern orthodoxy will face the new reality with outcomes yet to be known.

Finally the Left Bloc was, inside the left, the most relevant result as the 39-year-old MEP Marisa Matias won 10.1% of the vote, which amounts, to some degree, to a stabilization of the party's electorate (it was a close result to the Left Bloc's previous election). Matias was an impressive candidate in relevant debates (namely the final one, between all candidates, where she was able to crush PS candidate Maria de Belém's support of lifetime subventions for MPs), bringing important issues to the campaign, namely the need to stop austerity and challenge the EU and its treaties, and opposing the latest bailout of bankrupt bank BANIF. Her popular background and friendliness in the streets and rallies was also an important aspect to this result. She was the Left Bloc's supported candidate who achieved its best result ever (previously it had had 3% in 2001, 5.3% in 2006, and a multi-party backed candidate in 2011), and the

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woman candidate to achieve the best presidential vote yet, with 479 thousand votes.

The general result is bad as the reliability of the new President of the Republic to support an anti-austerity government is low. It is expect that in the first times, he will keep a neutral position, but with expected confrontations with the European Commission and the European Central Bank, the situation is now worse for the Portuguese governmental solution externally. Despite this, internal dissent inside the Socialist Party will definitely lower and the pressure from a more solid Left Bloc may also have good impacts. Social mobilization will be needed in short term, as the austerity advocates have now placed one of their key players in the presidency.