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Iceland

The constitutional referendum: natural resources are a national heritage

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With a turn-out of 48.9 per cent, the Icelandic electorate approved on October 20, 2012, by 66.3 per cent of the votes cast, the outline of the new draft constitution. This is an indication that the Icelandic Parliament, which must adopt the constitution, will have to take into account. In addition to this general question, voters had to decide on five additional questions in the debate around the project:

1. Should natural resources which are not privately-owned be declared to be part of the national heritage (and therefore not privatizable)? Yes by 82.9 per cent.
2. Should the new constitution establish a national religion? Yes by 57.1 per cent.
3. Should independent candidatures (not on party lists) be facilitated for the election of the Parliament? Yes by 78.4 per cent.
4. Should the votes of all the regions of the country have equal weight (i.e. should the electoral districts be redrawn so as not to give an advantage to depopulated areas)? Yes by 66.5 per cent.
5. Should a certain percentage (the project mentions 10 per cent) of the population have the right to demand a referendum on a particular issue? Yes by 73.3 per cent.

The draft constitution was drawn up by a constituent council of 25 members, elected on November 27, 2010 in a vote where there were 523 candidates - "ordinary citizens" and not candidates of parties, whose legitimacy is widely contested. In this type of election it was well-known "personalities" who had the most votes – those elected were academics, journalists, doctors, business leaders and even a pastor, but no workers or fishermen!

This is the third referendum in Iceland since 2008. During the first two - in March 2010 and April 2011 - the population twice rejected reimbursing Britain and the Netherlands for the indemnities that these two countries paid to the shareholders of the Icelandic banks that went bankrupt (about 3.9 billion euros), considering that it was not up to it to pay for the losses of speculators. This was in spite of the pressure for such a settlement from nearly all Icelandic parties (including the Greens and the Social Democrats, elected after the financial collapse of 2008, precisely on the basis of not paying...). The level of participation was higher in these two referendums (62.7 per cent in 2010, 75.3 per cent in 2011) and the "no" to reimbursing the debt had a substantial majority on both occasions (93.2 per cent in 2010, 60 per cent in 2011). The fact that the Icelandic government (with the support of the opposition parties) signed an agreement after these votes for the reimbursement over 15 years of foreign "small savers" (but not hedge funds, banks, pension funds and insurance companies) and that the trial of the bankers and politicians who were considered to be responsible for the bankruptcy was dragging on, led a number of Icelanders to the conclusion that their vote was not useful... which explains the turn-out of less than 50 per cent and the fact that the vote was finally favourable to the establishment of a state religion.

But the fact that 82.9 of the voters decided that natural resources that are not yet privatized can no longer be so important. The resources involved are essentially fisheries, geothermal energy and hydraulic dams, as well as oil and gas, the offshore reserves of which (not yet exploited) seem to be significant.

After refusing to pay the illegitimate debt in 2010 and 2011, the Icelandic population has thus once again said no to a neoliberal society.