

Q&A with Torreblanca on Podemos

The remarkable and indisputable success of radical new party Podemos has caused an earthquake in Spanish politics. Bipartisanship may well be over in the country, giving way to a completely new political system. But who is exactly is Podemos? Where does it come from? And where does it want to go? It is these questions that political commentator, academic and award-winning journalist José Ignacio Torreblanca has sought to answer.



Having closely followed and reported on the phenomenon over the past year, Torreblanca has released **Asaltar Los Cielos**, a book that examines the ideology upon which Podemos is based, the popular demand it responds to, and the strategies it employs.

The following is taken from a conversation with Torreblanca on Podemos held by the Circle of Foreign Correspondents in Madrid on 24 April 2015.

Q: How do you write a book on a party that is ambiguity institutionalised?

This indefinability of Podemos is perhaps what I find most interesting about them and what prompted me to write the book. There simply isn't enough space in newspaper columns to explore the party in all its ambiguity and the book allowed me to do so.

Their lack of definition is intentional, it is a strategy. They are purposefully unclear about their programme because they aim to change the conversation, to reconfigure the political agenda by inserting wholly new themes into it. Theorist Ernesto Laclau, a Podemos favourite, defines politics as the struggle for control through the conquest of "floating signifiers", words or concepts that represent a collection of social demands. Once a party owns these concepts, their politics are deemed logical and unquestionable for they are, for example, fighting for 'democracy'. Podemos, in appropriating 'democracy' amongst other floating signifiers, removes itself from a market in which it is a political option among others, but instead creates a market where it is the only option. As such, it need not answer any questions.

Q: Has Podemos missed its moment? Will Ciudadanos now leap ahead?

Had the general elections taken place last November, Podemos would have achieved similar results to those they enjoyed at the European elections, using the same anti-establishment campaign.

The ambiguity of Podemos has allowed its supporters to place the party in different positions along the ideological spectrum. Half of Podemos's supporters think the party very leftist and others think it centrist which enabled it to garner a huge amount of support. However, a great deal of this support is being eroded by Ciudadanos, unquestionably a party that occupies the centre of the political spectrum and that has a very believable national project.

The success of Ciudadanos can be understood in terms of 'the little brother effect'. The younger brother is able to take advantage of the older brother, in this case Podemos, having had to fight with their parents to get what he wants. Podemos has fought to open the door which Ciudadanos has now been able to stroll through.

If Podemos does not win the general elections, it will seriously undermine its future chances as it has framed its entire campaign in terms of 'now or never'. The leaders have frequently stressed that this is a unique moment in Spanish history, where there is a small window of opportunity to revolutionise the system. It will be very difficult for them to explain away why they have come third or fourth in the elections.

Q: If they do get to power, what credibility do they have as politicians, what is their executive capacity?

If they get to power it will be because they have learnt to make credible statements as opposed to the cynical ones we hear from them. It's hard to know what they will look like in government as, in direct reversal of what parties tend to promise, they argue that if they get to power it is because a constitutional change has already happened, not that they will then effect one after attaining power.

What we do know right now is that the leaders of Podemos are one hundred per cent specialised in political philosophy and zero per cent in public policy such as water, sanitation...etc.

Q: What is Podemos's relationship with the media like?

In terms of social media, Podemos has been hugely successful in using it to create a big constituency. It has benefitted from the extremist nature of social

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media: while most of society tends to be centrist with a few extremists occupying the fringes, on platforms such as Twitter, extremists are much more vocal than centrists which has a radicalising effect on the debate. The 'hyper leadership' of Pablo Iglesias online is truly unrivalled, with his number of followers on Twitter far outstripping those of current Prime Minister Rajoy.

Q: What are the similarities between the Venezuelan and Spanish situation?

Venezuela is hugely important for Podemos as it offers an example of the left not waiting until the conditions were right for a revolution, but instead seizing an opportunity. Many purists on the left stress that for a successful revolution, one must wait for the right conditions. Podemos argues, and the case of Chavez supports this, that even when the conditions don't exist, if there is a leader, a social fracture, and a means of inserting oneself, it is possible for a revolution to take place. Pablo Iglesias criticised Spain's United Left party for not recognising this and failing to capitalise upon the opportunity presented by the 15-M movement and the anti-establishment sentiment rife in Spain following the crisis.

Podemos has adopted two worrying lines of thought from Venezuela. Firstly, the ethics of exceptionalism which posits that for good people to win the political fight, exceptional means are required (see Pablo Iglesias references to Game of Thrones). Secondly, an antidemocratic winner takes all approach in which winning an election is understood to legitimise all ensuing government activities however radical, such as changing the entire political system.

Podemos has overlooked the fact that the situation of the two countries is hugely different. Spain cannot realise the redistributive politics entertained by Podemos, so closely aligned to those of Venezuela, as it simply does not have petrol. No country in Europe can hope to introduce such politics or economics.

Q: How do you compare Podemos to Syriza?

Iglesias has far more control over Podemos than Tsipras has over Syriza. There is no double militancy in Podemos, no double loyalties or organic structure, it is a party whose leader clearly stated in a party assembly in October 2014 that he wants all the power. For example, when party member Pablo Echenique attempted to mount a leadership campaign, he was forced to throw in the towel.

Podemos has the capacity to be a lot more flexible than Syriza as its ideology is very supple. Podemos can bend a lot further than Syriza according to cir-

cumstances without internally breaking.

Another profound difference between the two parties is that Syriza's anti-Troika narrative, one in which southern Europe must be freed from northern Europe. This tale cannot be spun by Podemos as Spaniards don't blame Germany for their sufferings, they blame their own institutions, and as you can see in opinion polls here, Merkel does quite well.

Q: What are your predictions for the end of the year? What will happen in Spain? Is there a risk of a Podemos on the extreme right?

It is extremely hard to know as there are many factors that make for unpredictable results: the established parties could react to the new competition with dynamism and the new parties could make errors. Indeed, you could almost describe Ciudadanos and Podemos as a virus, with the capacity to kill a person or make them stronger. Then there's the fact that people often adjust their votes according to poll results.

Spain does not currently provide fertile ground for extreme right wing rhetoric. The notion of a Catholic exclusionary nation is over, and the country now lacks the minimum requirements for a xenophobic party, people who would subscribe to anti-immigration policies for example.

Q: Would they do a coalition with others?

There is no culture of pacts in Spain, and as it currently stands, everyone has their orange, blue, and other respective lines drawn very firmly in the sand. It is more likely to be a short legislature.

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