

Have we really seen the last of Pablo Iglesias?

Pablo Iglesias, the leader and founder of Podemos, announced his resignation from politics following the Madrid regional elections on 4 May. Iván Llamazares assesses the impact Iglesias has had on Spanish politics during his short career and asks whether we have really seen the last of him as a political actor.

On 4 May, a few hours after the Madrid polls closed, Pablo Iglesias, leader and founder of Podemos announced that he was leaving all his political responsibilities. His resignation led to a multitude of analyses written by sympathisers, rivals, and open enemies. Beyond these diverging interpretations, there was perhaps a common agreement: the impact of Iglesias on Spanish politics went far beyond the percentage of votes attained by Podemos, the political party that he had contributed to founding in 2014, in the aftermath of the 15-M mobilisations that shook Spanish streets in 2011.

As the leader of Podemos, Iglesias had contributed to changing the vocabulary and the horizons of political debates. He was critical to the dramatic change of the Spanish party system in 2015, and then he played a decisive role in national political life, by either blocking the formation of a national government led by the Socialist Pedro Sánchez (in 2015 and April 2019) or by making it possible (in June 2018 and November 2019). After the 2019 elections Iglesias became Second Deputy Prime Minister of the first coalition government in the current democratic period. This government was also the first one to incorporate radical left leaders, overcoming the resistance of Socialist leaders and ignoring the dismissive remarks of political analysts.

It is simply impossible to produce an objective and synthetic appraisal of the impact of Iglesias's actions on Spanish politics. Analysts have focused on the internal effects of his personalist leadership style or on the disruptive and polarising character of his political discourse. But if we focus on the most important strategic decisions adopted by Podemos, we can identify two choices and moments that shaped, for better or for worse, the destinies of Podemos. Even if these choices were favoured by the internal constellations of powers that prevailed in his party, Iglesias had to have played a crucial if not decisive role in both of them.

The first one refers to the abandonment in 2016 of a transversal populist strategy in favour of a classical radical left platform. Externally, this change of strategy involved increasing coordination with the post-communist United Left coalition. Internally, it entailed the defeat, ostracisation, and eventual split from the party of the most ardent and articulate proponent of a populist strategy, Íñigo Errejón, former friend and companion of Iglesias, both in political struggles and university life.

This outcome led to the reenactment of a classical radical left discourse and to the narrowing of the support basis of Podemos, both among activists and voters. It is also paradoxical that Iglesias, who had occasionally mocked communist orthodoxy, ended up contesting the 2021 Madrid regional elections on a platform evoking the language and symbols of the Popular Front, an experience so dear to the Spanish communist tradition. His candidacy in the Madrid elections secured a reasonably good electoral result for Unidas Podemos, but it did not prevent the victory of the right nor the success of Errejón's party, which now surpassed not only Unidas Podemos but also the Socialist Party.

The second decisive choice concerned the 2017 Catalan crisis. From the very first moment Iglesias had emphasised the multinational character of Spain, a stubborn fact that most Spanish political leaders have tried to remove from the public debate, albeit without much success. In so doing Iglesias may have both reflected and accentuated a change of perspective among younger and more politically educated Spanish generations. However, the positions adopted by Podemos in the midst of the Catalan crisis touched upon a more critical and sensitive Spanish consensus, and they led the party to an electoral drop from which it never recovered.

In 2017, perhaps reflecting the views of some – but not all – of its Catalan leaders and associates, Podemos defended the legitimacy, as an act of political mobilisation, of the referendum organised by the Catalan government to achieve independence, in transgression of the Spanish Constitution and the Catalan statute of autonomy. In so doing Podemos preserved its alliance with its sovereigntist Catalan leaders in Catalonia, but it did so at the cost of triggering a plummeting of its electoral prospects in the vast majority of central Spain, with the exception of a few classical radical-left strongholds.

These two strategic choices have remained in place from the very moment they were adopted. Their electoral costs seem obvious. Institutionally, however, Podemos attained important successes in the past few years, beginning with the removal of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy in 2018 and ending with the formation of a coalition government with the Socialist Party in 2019, in both cases with the crucial support of Catalan and Basque independentists.

Throughout his short career as a political leader Iglesias showed a rare ability to become the centre of the political scenario by combining sharp political moves and strategic stubbornness. He always seemed to follow, consciously or inadvertently, Machiavelli's ideas about the importance of generating great expectations about oneself, keeping people's minds occupied thinking about the goals and prospects of new decisions and new undertakings.

Whatever the future holds for Podemos, it is very hard to dispute the fundamental role played by Iglesias in the Spanish political crisis that opened in 2011. It is also almost impossible to imagine that a leader who has played such an important and passionate role in Spanish political events will remain from now on totally absent from the national political scenario.

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