

Spain: A Country With No Government

By Martín Caparrós

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MADRID — On Jan. 2, 1492, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon — known as the Catholic Monarchs — occupied Granada, completing their conquest of Moorish Spain. Ever since, Spain has always had a government — and occasionally two, when Napoleon invaded in 1808, and during the 1936 to 1939 civil war that split it. But never during those more than five centuries was it ever without any. That is, until Dec. 20 last year, when elections failed to give any party the majority needed to form a government and all attempts at a coalition failed.

For those of us accustomed to more direct suffrage, it is not easy to understand how democratic representation works in Spain. A Spaniard votes for “diputados,” who elect the prime minister. With a parliamentary majority, the winning party proclaims its leader; without a majority, it needs to negotiate. This means that a voter may end up supporting positions he normally never would. Nowadays, for example, voting for the Socialist Party can mean a leftist coalition between the Socialists and Podemos, the anti-establishment party, or a center-right one among the Socialists, the center right Ciudadanos and Partido Popular; a vote for Ciudadanos may yield a right-wing alliance with the P.P. or a centrist one with the Socialists. In the parliamentary system the vote is a blank check But Spanish politicians cannot manage to rule even with that.

Elections had to be repeated; the second attempt, on June 26, ended with very similar results, hence the continuing uncertainty. Negotiations carry on, without much hope. For exactly 253 days Spain has been unable to elect a new government and, as time goes by, more people wonder if it really is that serious.

Obviously, a provisional, “caretaker” government is in place; but it has limitations. For instance, it cannot appoint new ministers. From its original 13-member cabinet, 10 are left: Its minister of development is heading Congress, the minister of health is now a candidate for the local Parliament in the Basque Country, and the minister of industry is busy explaining his Panamanian bank accounts. The caretaker government has no authority to approve next year’s budget, a basic tool for governing that should be in place this October; experts are poring over legal texts in search of a line that suggests authority. The government takes advantage, however, of the (most likely unconstitutional) opinion that acting government ministers are not subjected to parliamentary control. It has been nine months since Parliament enacted any laws: Its members are too busy campaigning and negotiating.

These days, the “meanwhile” government manages everyday matters, and not particularly well. In a situation that lacks clear legal status, no one wants to be in charge of important decisions, affairs are delayed and decisions are never made. The embassies in Washington, Moscow and Rome are among the 44 in the hands of diplomats who should have been replaced but can't be by a caretaker government. Examples abound.

In everyday life, a country without government looks dangerously similar to another with one. There are those who praise the strength of the state for that, and many who wonder if governments are so necessary and seem uninterested in any attempt to form one. News coverage of these efforts does not get a significant readership.

There are, nonetheless, a few who show their worries about a country without a functioning government. José Antonio Álvarez, C.E.O. of Santander, Spain's largest bank, stated a few days ago that lack of government “hasn't been noticed so far, but things can change if this goes on.” For now, the economy stays on course: Spain's credit rating is strong, and the stock market is weathering Brexit better than others in Europe. In a world where finances are ruled from international centers, local governments seem to become less and less important. A majority of Spaniards are fed up with their politicians. Polls show that politicians are perceived as corrupt, selfish and increasingly incapable of solving the problems they should be concerned with. The idea is not new: It took shape mainly in the 2011 occupation of Madrid's Puerta del Sol, its main square, by the “Indignados” movement. Later, the idea was at the root of two new political parties, Podemos, supposedly the political left's renovator, and Ciudadanos, the counterpart of Podemos. Months of haggling and chatter have stripped away their aura of novelty; they became just two more parties, as entangled as any in the poker game of politics. If there is, after all, a third round of elections, forecasts signal historic levels of abstention and a radical rejection of a generation of politicians under suspicion. But they stick to their guns, apparently unable to understand the extent of the threat.

Perhaps they are not fully to blame: The system seems broken. Parliamentary democracy worked efficiently for 35 years, in a bipartisan system with the Socialists and the Popular Party alternating in power. Now that four parties share the bulk of the vote, they are forced to negotiate, but they seem not to know how. Which may be good and bad: They do not betray much of their mandate, they don't get to govern.

Lack of government is seen at times as a terrible menace, at others as a harmless situation. It will be useful if it manages to show that, in order to survive, the system must change. Otherwise, it will keep on being the butt of everyone's jokes — and the space where antipolitics will manage to establish new venues.

Until now, the Spanish difference was that discontent had not yielded a right-wing,

xenophobic and racist populism like the ones growing in many other countries; rather, it gave rise to two new parties to revitalize the democratic game. They are not doing it, and now anything can happen.

This week Mariano Rajoy will try to be reinstated as a fully functional prime minister: His options are not clear. If he fails, his party will probably call for new elections to be held on Dec. 25. Among sea bream and nougat, cava and hangovers, the hope that the Christ Child or Santa will finally bring a government is an overstated mockery. Mr. Rajoy's "populares" are convinced that a low turnout in that cartoonish third election will favor them, and they are betting on it; as if the system's discredit still had room to grow without cracking. In my neighborhood, we call that spitting upward, and even an idiot knows better.

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