Portugal: Deadly forest fires

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Between Sunday and late Tuesday afternoon, more than 71,000 hectares burned in Portugal, compared to 22,500 hectares previously, including the 5,000 hectares of the Madeira fires. In just three days, what was supposed to be a quiet year in terms of burned areas has become the fourth-worst year of the last decade. The figures are published by *Público* , but the newspaper warns that they are based on satellite images and therefore may be excessive. But even if we do not take into account 15 per cent of the burned area, this year’s figures are only exceeded by those of 2016, 2017 and 2022.

In the north and centre of the country, the fires have spread due to weather conditions considered to be the most severe, particularly the easterly wind with strong gusts. On Wednesday, the National Emergency and Civil Protection Authority (INEM) counted five deaths and 118 injured , including ten in serious condition, stressing that the number of deaths was transmitted to it by the INEM and does not include the two civilians who died of a sudden illness. The maximum risk of fire affected 50 municipalities on Wednesday and the government decided to extend the state of alert until Thursday.

More than 100 active fires

On Wednesday morning, there were more than 100 active fires, with restarts and wind changes during the night, which made the situation in Águeda “uncontrollable” and approached urban centres. The firefighters who fought the Albergaria a-Velha fire , which has entered the resolution phase, are also fighting these fires. During the night, the Castro Daire fire progressed towards Arouca , reaching the Paiva footbridges and confining several villages, after people with reduced mobility had been evacuated. In Covilhã, the night was spent fighting a fire in a pine forest area in Gibraltar that had escaped the Serra da Estrela fire two years ago.

Very complicated traffic

Several fires are also raging in the Porto district and some villages have evacuated their inhabitants . In Mangualde and São Pedro do Sul, it is reported that homes and businesses have been destroyed by fire. By late morning, Civil Protection reported 142 fires, 58 of which were in the final stages, with more than 5,500 agents on the ground, accompanied by 1,700 land resources and 37 air resources.

At the same time, the government reported that rail traffic on the Douro line between Marco de Canaveses and Régua and on the Vouga line had been interrupted, with several trains suspended. The A43 motorway between Gondomar and the A41 and the A41 between Medas and Aguiar de Sousa were also closed on Wednesday morning, as was the A25 between Albergaria and Reigoso (Viseu), as well as several national roads.

Bloco de Esquerda

Monday 27th September 2024

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Bloco de Esquerda is a radical left political party in Portugal formed in 2000 as a coalition of the formerly Maoist UDP; Politica XX1, a current that had left the Communist Party; and the PSR, Portuguese section of the Fourth International. Today it is a recognised political party with elected representatives in the national and European parliaments.

Portugal Election – Far Right Surges

First results

Party	% 2024	% 2022	% 2019
PS (Socialist Party)	28.6 77	41.68 120 seats	36.4
AD (Democratic Alliance: ,PSD/CDS/PPM Centre Right)	29.49 79	27.8 77 seats	27.8
Chega (Enough:neo-fascist)	18.06 48	7.15 12 seats	1.3
Initiativa Liberal (pro business)	5.08 8	4.98 8 seats	1.3
Bloco Esquerda (radical left)	4.46 5	4.46 5 seats	9.5
CDU (PCP:Communist) +green front)	3.3 4	4.39 6 seats	6.3
CDS (right-wing)	n/a in AD	1.61	4.2
PAN (animal rights)	1.93 1	1.53 1 seat	3.3
Livre (Free, green pro-EC)	3.26 4	1.28 I seat	1.1

Chega *[Enough!]*, the far-right party led by ex-TV football pundit Andre Ventura, was the big winner of the night, increasing its votes by over ten points but quadrupling its seats to 48. It now competes as the third major party, way ahead of the rest of the field. The biggest loser is the PS *[Socialist Party]* which led the last two governments; it lost 13% of its vote and 43 seats. On the other hand, due mostly to the rise of Chega, the mainstream right of centre alliance, the AD (Democratic Alliance), which had been the main parliamentary opposition, only edged up by barely two points, with just two more seats. Even this small advantage could be altered once the overseas votes are counted. The pro-business, neo-liberal IL (Liberal Initiative) held on to its 8 seats.

To the left of the PS Livre (Free) a pro-European Greenish party nearly tripled its vote and went from one to four seats. The radical left Bloco Esquerda held on to exactly its last score and keeps its 5 MPs. However the PCP (Communist) lost a percentage point and two seats.

Government

Soon after the first projections, when the AD advantage was bigger, the PS representative accepted that the AD should form the government and they would go into opposition. The margin is wafer-thin although the previous governing party has clearly lost the most support. It is likely that the President will ask the AD to try and form a government.

Luis Montenegro has ruled out a government coalition with Chega even though the numbers are there. He has said that “no means no”, and has dubbed Ventura’s views as “xenophobic, racist, populist and excessively demagogic.” Probably the neo-liberal IL would join an AD government but their seats do not take the AD past 116 required. A lot depends on the PS sticking to its early position, already signposted in the campaign, that it would allow a minority AD government to be established. In that eventuality PS abstentions would mean AD would not require Chega votes to form a government. Given the final figures the PS could demand some political concessions or red lines from an AD government and perhaps anticipate new elections at some point. Certainly if the PS were not to be accommodating then the AD could change its position on an alliance with Chega.



Andre Ventura Photo: Esquerda net

The Right

Chega, with a fifth of the seats, now has a substantial political and material basis for further growth. Ventura has consistently says he wants to form a government with the AD. Unlike in Italy there was no pre-election coalition between his party and the AD. Ventura repeatedly declares he is not neo-fascist or far right. He originally was an activist in the PSD, the main party of the AD. His main campaign slogan was to "*Clean up Portugal*." He railed against the two party caste that has ruled Portugal for 50 years since the end of the dictatorship.

The Costa government fell because of corruption in his leadership group. It has been prevalent for many years. I remember going on a tennis holiday in the Algarve and discovered that the huge hotel and golf complex development there had involved bribes and kickbacks for politicians. So a campaign centred on kicking out the corrupt caste has proved effective.

Ventura outlined a whole raft of new laws and actions to weed out corruption – seizing assets, defining a new crime of illicit enrichment. AD failed to capitalise on the PS government failure to deal with low wages, declining health

services and soaring housing cross because it was seen as a co-manager of a corrupt system. The previous right-led government had carried out hard austerity policies. Chega appears to have taken votes from both the AD and the PS.

The other part of Ventura's clean-up is his racist offensive against immigrants and the Roma community. He proposes restricting immigration and creating a new crime of illegal residence. Over recent decades Portugal has gone from a country of net emigration to net immigration. Around 13% of the population come from migrant backgrounds. 70% of the population identify as White.

Chega also defends what it calls the traditional family and attacks women and LBGTQ+ rights.

If you combine this reality with the problems of inequality and austerity and the inadequate response of any governments to deal with these issues then you can see how Chega is able to blame migrants for the cost of living crisis or lack of housing. Chega's big advance has taken place under the second PS government which has not continued some of the progressive policies it enacted during his first government when the radical left parties, the Bloco and the PCP had enabled its formation on condition it carried out such a programme.

Today being excluded from government could provide the conditions for Chega to further grow. An AD government permitted to govern by the PS would provide further confirmation of its claim that the two party system is a stitch up against the people. If there were to be a more formal programmatic agreement that could create an even greater opening. The AD might still want Chega votes to pass legislation if the PS opposes specific laws. Ventura has said he has contacts with PSD people and one tactic will be to step up pressure on their MPs to be more open to an agreement with Chega. We are seeing this scenario of far right parties pulling mainstream right parties to more extreme positions or

working to create internal splits elsewhere in Europe.

Chega has important financial supporters. During the campaign the Civic Front exposed how it relied more on unnamed private backers than the official state funds for political parties. The Chega surge is part of the general rise of the far right or neo fascists in Europe and globally. This “creeping fascism” is pulling the mainstream right-of-centre parties to more extreme policies too. Already, leaders of Vox, the Spanish state neo-fascists and other far right leaders in Europe are sending in their congratulations to Ventura.

Bloco

The Bloco campaign focussed on putting forward radical measures on wages, health and housing as well as defending migrants, women and LGBTQ+ rights and calling on solidarity with Palestine. Unlike the PCP it has managed to maintain its electoral support and five seats. It also campaigned to stop the rise of Chega and a right wing government by proposing a new left wing agreement similar to the first Costa government. where it would give limited external support without taking ministerial posts. Clearly the failure to increase its support and the PS defeat meant this option is off the table. In this respect, the left as a whole has been pushed back in these elections.

In her first reaction to the results, Bloco leader Joana Mortágua, who was re-elected in Setúbal, said that they “confirm a shift to the right”, as a result of a “negative assessment, which we share, of how a PS government with an absolute majority delivered.” As for the Bloco’s result, by keeping the parliamentary group and increasing the vote compared to 2022, “it’s a sign that there’s confidence in the Bloco for whatever the political situation: whether it’s to form a majority or to be a determined and fierce opposition to the right.”

Livre (Free) a pro-European party with green credentials was the winner among the left-of-centre parties, tripling its vote and going from one to four MPs. Perhaps it is one reason why the Bloco did not succeed in significantly increasing its vote. It wins votes in the big urban areas and among similar demographics as the Bloco.

Austerity

Portugal remains one of the poorest and unequal countries in Europe, it is 24th in the Social Justice index in the EU. It has the world's fourth highest number of citizens over 65 years, 21.8% of the population. Recent governments have not protected the living standards of senior citizens. Rental costs have soared for ordinary people. One factor is the uncontrolled promotion of tourism means an explosion of Airbnb lets in cities like Lisbon and Porto which increases rental values. The gains of a national health service set up after the revolution 50 years ago have been very much eroded.

Now that even the social liberal left are out of power, defending social gains and the living standards of working people will need increased mobilisations in the workplaces and communities. increased polarisation and instability could increase rather than decrease with these election results.

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Bloco promises to be “the most combative opposition to the right”

In her election night statement, Mariana Mortágua emphasized that despite the turn to the right in the electoral results, the Bloco managed to resist, maintaining its mandates and with more votes than in 2022.
The Left Bloc coordinator’s reaction to the results of the legislative elections came at a time when “the parliamentary situation is still not entirely clear”, given the close result between the PS and PSD that could be altered by the emigration votes.

Mariana Mortágua said that the shift to the right resulting from this Sunday’s elections “is a reflection of the failure of two years of disastrous politics by the PS’s absolute majority”.

LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS RESULT IN A SHIFT TO THE RIGHT

But despite this shift, she emphasized that “the Bloc resisted and increased its votes by around 30,000. It stood firm in these elections, we kept all our seats”. And it is with this strength that “we will be part of any solution that removes the right from government,” she continued.

In this election, the Bloc re-elected two MPs in Lisbon (Mariana Mortágua and Fabian Figueiredo) and Porto (Marisa Matias and José Soeiro) and re-elected Joana Mortágua in Setúbal.

“I want the people of the left to know that they will have in the Bloc the most combative opposition to the right,” said the Bloc coordinator, promising to contribute to “building an alternative to the left to defend our people”.

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Main photo: https://www.bloco.org/

Portugal: Behind the elections and the future for militancy

On 30 January elections Portuguese legislative elections took place for the parliament. The ruling Socialist Party (PS) won a convincing majority of seats while the main radical party the Left Bloc, known in Portuguese as "Bloco", suffered a severe setback. Bloco is a radical broad left and ecosocialist party that includes the supporters of the Fourth International in Portugal with whom ecosocialist.scot is linked. Below we publish an original article specially written by an activist in Bloco for ecosocialist.scot reflecting on the result and the challenges it poses for radical militancy.

What happened by the end of January was to be expected. The Socialist Party (PS) created an artificial crisis that put Bloco in check. However, the artificialness of the crisis did not make it any less real in the way it was perceived, especially when facing a right wing that brings back the ghosts of the most recent past – Troika – and of the most distant past – fascism. The strategy of eroding the government

that had been the Bloco's strategy was not enough to open space for an alternative narrative to the PS's "stability", nor to disarm the right wing. Fear shifted Bloco and CDU (the coalition of Communist and Green parties) votes to the PS. We should not antagonize it, let's understand it.

The absolute majority of the PS has two effects: on the one hand, it allows PS to assert itself as the battlefront to the increasingly extreme right; on the other hand, the centrality of Parliament to which we have become used to will be overshadowed, making it difficult for Bloco to capitalize on the media presence that Parliament has guaranteed it. With these two effects, the PS has initiated the process of cannibalizing the left, in an attempt to occupy all of its space. This cannibalization entails future threats. In an electoral scenario of a few weeks, the quick response and the call for stability were an easy tool in the hands of the PS. However, in the long run, the strategy of a PS with absolute majority will not tackle the rise of the right. It may even aggravate it by failing to match the policy pursued with the demands, or needs, of the country.

In response to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Fernando Rosas wrote, in the newspaper Público, that the left had to oppose the Troika's labour laws, "the maintenance of the severe needs that put the SNS (Portuguese NHS) at risk due to the privatisation attempt, or the low salaries and pensions", just some of the specific problems that move us. From now on, it is important to rethink our form of action facing a difficult task: to overcome the politics of fear, without underestimating it, and to sow hope for a future, trying to be the engines of re-establishing democratic responsiveness. But we will not do this easily. Despite the parliamentarisation of politics, due to the shift of the institutional political axis to Parliament during the Geringonça [1], we have committed ourselves to fighting on the street which is an important political and strategic conviction, part of our DNA – let us

remember the historic 2019 Feminist Strike. Nevertheless, the institutional design that came out of the January elections makes the organization of the social movement even more crucial, and without militancy, there is no organization.

What kind of militancy do we need?

We are talking about what some political scientists call the "militant with a purpose", and not just a member or someone that socially navigates the spaces of militancy. This militant may be driven by a strong ideological commitment, or by specific goals, driven by specific fights. These are not mutually exclusive. The latter can lead to the former, the former can give meaning to the latter, integrating it into a set of demands capable of rewriting the meaning of words that we have used but that, in many cases, have been emptied of meaning: "public", "solidarity", "democracy", "justice", "freedom", "equality". (Look at the Portuguese liberal party's "freedom").

Nearly 50 years after the Revolution [of 1974], it has been proven that the survival of the meaning that gave words their meaning is not eternal, but it is possible to give that meaning back to them by organising specific fights, articulating them, arranging them under those same endangered meanings. Let's look at [the outcomes of the recent elections in] Chile: Boric would not have won if, in 2019, a popular movement had not been generated contesting the increase in the price of public transport that made clear the Chilean government's disregard for the outskirts of the big cities, serving as a starting point for other claims; if this movement had not been joined by a strong feminist movement around the right to abortion; if all these fights had not culminated in the need for a new Constitution, the (re)launching pad for the Chilean left.

Let us keep this in mind: a bus ticket helped prove the need

for a new political and social pact.

The 2022 [Portuguese] legislative elections call for a serious reorganisation process that must necessarily include rethinking militancy, establishing a serious relationship with the social movement, and becoming independent of the media and social networks.

Only deep roots prevent the tree from falling with the wind.

Article written by Mafalda Escada, translated by Patrícia Felício, and published with grateful thanks from ecosocialist.scot.

Note: [1] The *geringonça*, or 'contraption', was the name given to the political situation that emerged from the 2015 legislative elections, in which no party had a majority.

See also:

Socialist" Party wins but defeat for left in Portuguese elections, by Dave Kellaway
https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7507

On the Portuguese elections and the Left Bloc result
https://www.esquerda.net/en/artigo/portuguese-elections-and-left-bloc-result/79284

Brief outcome of the Portuguese 30th of January general elections
https://www.esquerda.net/en/artigo/brief-outcome-portuguese-30th-january-general-elections/79285

Left Bloc website articles in English
https://www.esquerda.net/english