

Repolitization of local governments and electoral reforms

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The last municipal election held in Spain in May 2015 proved, amongst other things, that local governments can themselves start the process of deep changes in the understanding of the idea of public authority. In addition, this new way of making politics in the local sphere is leading the way and settling in all the layers of the Spanish public administration. Let us take the examples of cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Zaragoza, as well as that of the region Galicia with the left-wing coalition En Marea and other well-known cases. The results obtained and their repercussion in the general election of 20 December confirmed that the local sphere is the best laboratory for operations that might be replicable at a broader scope.

Once again, local governments have proved that they do politics. The local sphere governs in a very real sense and not only administrates, as the recently approved Law 27/2013 on the Rationalization and Sustainability of the Local Administration (LRSAL) suggests. It is true that some of the dynamics promoted by the European troika tend to minimize politics at the local sphere, simplify structures and reduce the number of elected members and politicians. And of course rationalization and limitation of the possible excesses is convenient. However, the stubborn reality stands up to keep politics working at the local sphere and claim that this is the real political **government** of the community.

While politics is being recovered, any reformist program needs to seriously consider the long-emphasized reform of the local electoral system. Turncoats were once the center of attention. More recently, the Popular Party tried to prevent *contra vincitorem* pacts and even included this as a proposal in its electoral program for the last general election.

Other more permanent demands are also brought to the table. The most significant one addresses the problem in terms of **democratic legitimacy**, **improvement of political quality** and **strengthening of local governments**. For example, the deep reform of the local electoral system that took place in Italy in 1993 and implemented the direct election of mayors was motivated by the crisis of the traditional parties, which fell into disrepute in the context of the ‘tangentopoli’ scandals. The proposal for the **direct election of mayors** in Spain, made by the Socialist Party in 1998 and in perfect compliance with Art. 140 of the Constitution, could be a matter of debate again.

The legislative reform should set several improvement objectives at the same time, namely **legitimacy**, **representativeness** and **stability** of local governments. There are several methods, such as deciding upon direct election or indirect election (where the mayor is head of party list in council election), or upon a joint or separate election of mayor and council members, establishing a one-round or a two-round system, preferential voting or a majority bonus system or even voting by electoral districts (or other municipal divisions). Mechanisms of censure and confidence should obviously be implemented along with all these methods, and the need for recall mechanisms should also be analyzed. Finally, the distribution of competences amongst the mayor, the Governing Board and the Plenary must be coherent with the other elements of the local political system.

It has to be underlined that the local electoral reform needs to offer more than just one model, or variations of this model, which will then be chosen by either the autonomous communities or the municipalities according to their organizational autonomy and guaranteeing freedom and equality as fundamental rights.

In any case, any pact between political forces based on a general program of deep reforms for Spain needs to consider by all means the reform of the local electoral system.