European Elections monitor

Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa is the main favourite in the presidential election taking place on 24th January in Portugal

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Analysis

Abstract:

9.7 million Portuguese are being called to ballot on 24th January next to appoint the successor to Anibal Cavaco Silva (Social Democratic Party PSD), President of the Portuguese Republic since 9th March 2006. Article 123 of the Constitution prohibits the outgoing Head of State from standing for a third consecutive mandate. This presidential election is of special importance in a country that is only just recovering from a serious economic and political crisis.

If none of the 10 candidates running wins the absolute majority in the first round of voting on 24th January, a second round will be organised on 14th February.

THE PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE

The President of the Portuguese Republic is elected every five years by direct universal suffrage. Anyone who wants to run for the supreme office must be at least 35 years old and has to have collated the signature of a minimum of 7,500 voters, which then have to be validated by the Constitutional Court.

The function of Head of State is many honorary. A moral authority, the President of the Republic, enjoys two main powers: he appoints the Prime Minister (recently we witnessed the importance of this) and he can also dissolve parliament (article 172 of the Constitution) 6 months after he has entered office; a dissolution which automatically leads to general elections.

The President of the Republic is the head of the armies, whose chief-of-staff he appoints. On the government's proposal he appoints the ambassadors. He can declare a state of emergency or siege, and even war in the event of a real or imminent attack. He signs the laws and decrees approved by parliament over which he enjoys the right of veto. On the government's or parliament's proposal he can decide the organisation of a referendum.

10 people are officially running for the supreme office in Portugal which is a record number for the country:

– Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, former Social Democratic Party leader (1996-1999), supported by the PSD and the People's Party, former Parliamentary Affairs Minister (1982-1983), Professor in Law;

– Maria de Belem, former Socialist Party leader (2011-2014), former Minister for Equality (1999-2000) and Health (1995-1999). She is standing as an independent candidate;

– Antonio de Sampaio da Novoa, supported by LIVRE/ Tempo de Avançar (L/TDA) and the Communist Workers' Party (PCTP/MRPP), former rector of the University of Lisbon (2006-2013), professor of psychology and educational science;

– Edgar Silva (Communist Party, PCP), MP in the Legislative Assembly of Madeira;

– Marisa Matias (Left Bloc, BE), MEP;

– Paulo de Morais, independent, former Mayor of Porto (2002-2005);

– Henrique Neto (PS), former MP;

– Candido Ferreira, independent;

– Jorge Sequeira, independent, teacher/researcher and psychologist;

– Vitorino Silva, better known under the name of Tino de Rans, independent.

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THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN PORTUGAL

The right-wing forces came out ahead in the general elections on 4th October 2015 but they did not win an absolute majority: the coalition *Portugal a frente* (Forwards Portugal), led by outgoing Prime Minister Pedro Passos Coelho, which rallies the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the People's Party (PP), won 36.86% of the vote and 102 of the 230 seats in the Assembly of the Republic, the only chamber of parliament. Anibal Cavaco Silva, President of the Republic renewed the mandate of Pedro Passos Coelho on 23rd October. On 10th November a vote of no-confidence brought down the minority government he had formed (123 votes against 107).

On 23rd November Anibal Cavaco Silva presented the Socialist leader Antonio Costa 6 conditions before appointing him Prime Minister: that he must ask Parliament for a vote of confidence, that the 2016 budget be adopted, that he respects the commitments resulting from Portugal's participation in the euro zone, the up-keep of the country in NATO, the guarantee that the country's financial stability be protected likewise the role of the Social Consultation Council. On 24th November Antonio Costa was asked to form a new government. The Socialist leader won the support (without participation) of the parties on the far left: the Unified Democratic Coalition (CDU) and the Left Bloc (BE). The government he formed won parliament's approval on 3rd December, 122 votes in support, 107 against and 1 abstention. The three left-wing parties came to agreement on several points: the end of retirement pension freezes, the progressive increase of the minimum wage and also the respect of the European budgetary framework. The socialist government is still weak however.

According to the most recent survey by Eurosondagem undertaken between 16th and 21st December, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa might win in the first round of voting – an almost traditional occurrence in the presidential election in Portugal – with 52.50% of the vote. Far behind him comes Maria de Belem, who is due to win 18.10% of the vote and Antonio de Sampaio da Novoa, who is due to win 16.90% of the vote. All other candidates are due to win under 5% of the vote.
Victory by Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa would be bad news for the Prime Minister. For the time being the right-wing candidate is vague about the relations he might entertain with the socialist government. Although the President of the Republic can dissolve parliament after six months in office, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa has said that he is "*against having general elections every six months.*"
For their part, supporters on the left and notably the socialists, seem divided between Maria de Belem and Antonio de Sampaio da Novoa. The Socialist Party has also said that it will support none of the candidates before the second round.

The presidential election is always a question of personality in Portugal. Voters often opt more for a candidate rather than a political party even though, paradoxically the heads of State are always major figures within their own political party.
The next head of State will be the 7th since the Carnation Revolution in April 1974. He will officially enter office at the end of March.

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