

Spain: Catalan election threatens further instability

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Election results on November 16 in Catalonia and the horse-trading required in order to establish a coalition government have exacerbated the already troubled relationship between the Spanish government and its autonomous regions. The pro-independence Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC-Catalan Republican Left) saw its share of the vote rise to 16.47 percent, almost doubling the number of seats it holds from 12 in 1999 to 23.

The ERC emerged from the election as the key player in any coalition within the regional parliament, the Generalitat. ERC leader Josep Lluís Carod-Rovira warned the other parties not to take their support for granted, while a party spokesman said that everything was “up in the air”. The ERC finally agreed on a coalition with the Partit Socialista de Catalunya (PSC-Catalan Socialist Party), the sister party of the social democratic Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE-Spanish Socialist Workers Party), and the Iniciativa per Catalunya-Verdada/Esquerra Unida i Alternativa (ICV-EUiA-Initiative for Catalonia-Greens/United and Alternative Left), a coalition of radicals, Greens and Stalinists. This ended 23 years of control of the Generalitat by the moderate nationalist party Convergència i Unió (CiU-Convergence and Union).

The CiU, which had headed the regional government since the elections of 1999, lost 10 of its 56 seats in the 135-seat assembly. Although the party finished first, it had no clear majority as its share of the vote dropped from 37.7 percent to 30.93 percent.

The PSC, under Pasqual Maragall, was the other major party in the region. It also lost 10 seats and is now reduced to 42 seats. Its share of the vote dropped sharply, from 37.85 percent to 31.17 percent. Nationally the PSOE has been a loyal supporter of the ruling Partido Popular (PP-Popular Party) government.

The PP made some limited gains, taking 15 seats. Although up on the 12 they held in 1999 (their share of the vote rising from 9.51 percent to 11.87 percent), this was still below the 17 they held before 1999 and they were not able to hold the balance of power in the region as they did previously.

The other major gains were made by the ICV-EUiA, which gained nine seats with 7.3 percent of the vote. In 1999 the Iniciativa per Catalunya standing alone won three seats. The Izquierda Unida (IU-United Left), the Communist Party's election coalition at the time, was in disarray and stood two competing slates. It won no seats.

Turnout was slightly improved on 1999, but was still only just over half the electorate. Catalonia, along with the Basque region, has the greatest regional autonomous powers. The upturn in the PP vote is therefore significant. PP Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar has been adamant in his opposition to any extension of regional autonomy and has promised to put this opposition at the heart of his campaign in the

general election next spring.

As it was neither the CiU nor the PSC had the 68 seats required to form a government. The emergence of the ERC as power broker indicates a polarisation of the region's politics.

The CiU under Jordi Pujol (who stepped down as party leader before this election in favour of his chosen successor Artur Mas) had headed the regional government since the adoption of the Constitution of 1978, which replaced the regime of General Franco and recognised 17 autonomous regions. The party has been losing support because of its key role in defending the PP government nationally. Prior to Aznar's election it also supported the PSOE government of 1993-96. Concerns had been expressed in Madrid that Mas lacked his predecessor's ability to restrain the pro-independence section of Catalan nationalists.

In 1999, when the CiU lost its absolute majority in the Generalitat, Pujol cut a deal with the PP. In return for their support he promised not to reform the regional statutes in the direction of independence. He formed a coalition government with the PP, thereby keeping the ERC at bay. (The CiU did, though, make concessions in the direction of the ERC, such as setting up a regional Institute of Cultural Industries).

Although the increase in the PP's vote in Catalonia suggests the development of a right-wing opposition to regionalism, the government has risked alienating ever larger sections of the national population in pursuit of its agenda. Aznar's support for the US-led invasion of Iraq was opposed by some 91 percent of the population. Carod-Rovira demagogically seized on opposition to the PP (and, by extension, to those parties which had supported it) by demanding that the CiU not do any more deals with them. Instead he called for a “government of national unity”.

In response to Carod-Rovira's post-election cry of “Long live free Catalonia!” and his statement that “We want the strongest pro-Catalan government possible”, Mariano Rajoy, leader of the PP, urged the CiU “not to turn radical in their attempt to form a government” and called on them to ally themselves with the PSC in order to block any pro-independence movement.

Both the CiU and the PSC attempt to diffuse the ERC's secessionism by speaking of negotiating greater freedom from Madrid. They have similar tactics of seeking to negotiate larger subsidies from Madrid.

A week before the elections, for example, the Generalitat launched a campaign aimed at immigrants into the region. The regional government is seeking to integrate immigrants through the everyday use of Catalan rather than Spanish. Catalan lessons are free to immigrants, while they have to pay for Spanish lessons. Staff in businesses displaying posters for the CAT-campaign, as it became known, were instructed to speak Catalan with all customers wherever

they came from.

Earlier this year, when proposals for greater freedom for the Basque region again raised the spectre of secession from Madrid, the CiU outlined a similar “free association” plan. This would have entailed increasing direct tax-raising powers, direct representation to the European Union and obligatory knowledge of the Catalan language. Attempting to woo the ERC into a coalition, Mas promised that the CiU would negotiate an improved statute of autonomy with Madrid if they backed them.

The PP denounced the free association plan as “electioneering”. So too did the PSOE, which has been the most loyal defender of the government in its opposition to any extension of Basque autonomy, although it has adopted a different stance in Catalonia. The PSC was working on proposals similar to the CiU’s. It has often argued for extended home-rule within the framework of the Spanish state, a position supported by the PSOE.

Faced with the Basque proposals PP Prime Minister José Maria Aznar argued that any extension of autonomy would only lend succour to the separatist terrorists of ETA. It was under the flag of the “war against terror” that Aznar made his promise to concentrate the general election campaign next spring on opposition to regional autonomy.

The emergence of the ERC as a power-broker in Catalonia and their coalition with the PSC and ICV-EUiA has undermined Aznar’s capacity to make good on that promise. Aznar has depended on moderate nationalists for support. However the coalition has also caused problems within the ERC. A regional party official in Sabadell resigned in protest at the “Spanish pact” done with the PSC. He spoke in terms that suggested that a deal with the CiU would have been the lesser evil. Such a dispute is indicative of the tactical differences that drove the election.

Catalonia is the wealthiest of Spain’s regions, providing around 20 percent of the national gross domestic product. Since the introduction of the euro, the industrial areas of northern Spain have profited from the rationalisation of European production by multinational companies. With production costs low (hourly costs were estimated by one French company as being a quarter to one-third lower in Spain than France) some 3,000 foreign companies have now been attracted into northern Spain. In the first two years after the introduction of the euro, Catalonia saw its direct trade with other European countries increase dramatically. Imports rose by 20 percent and exports by 30 percent.

A glimpse at the Generalitat’s *Invest in Catalonia* web site suggests why. The regional government is proud of its orientation to business and boasts of its desire to negotiate directly with global investors. Amongst the selling points it offers to investors, apart from Catalonia as a gateway to markets in Latin America, is a minimum wage set annually by statute. The fixed minimum for permanent staff is under €16 a day, or roughly €460 per month. For temporary or casual workers, the fixed minimum is just under €22 per day. This brings into perspective recent efforts to increase the number of permanent workers.

Catalonia provides a clear example of the emergence of regional movements seeking to take responsibility for the exploitation of their regional working class as the coherence of established nation-states is undermined by the development of globally-organised production carried out by huge transnational corporations. Carod-Rovira has been quite explicit in his complaints that affluent industrial Catalonia is financing the poor agricultural regions of southern Spain through

taxation. While he sees changing the tax formulae as a short-term answer, he argues that the only way to protect the interests of the regional bourgeoisie is to break away completely.

It is for this reason that the nationalists had been looking hopefully towards the proposed constitution of the European Union. Although it is unlikely that the Constitution will support any regionalist developments, direct representation to the EU is seen (as it is in the Basque region) as facilitating the activities of the regional bourgeoisie. This would mean strengthening their grip on the governmental apparatus of the region, enabling them to impose wage rates and working conditions to their advantage.

Businessmen in the French Catalan region already eye the lower production costs in Spanish Catalonia enviously, while Spanish Catalan nationalists see links with the French territory as enabling them to negotiate more effectively with the EU. The Generalitat’s Investment Promotion Agency sees the development of transport links, along with the euro, as the way to develop a European region outside of the existing state borders. Beatrice Carrère, head of department for cross-border development at the Chamber of Commerce in Perpignan, spells out both the desirability of this for the regional bourgeoisie and its implications:

“There is a real will to work together, but the main obstacle for us is administrative. Solving this would mean more political decentralisation in France.”

Maintaining poor wages and conditions in Spanish Catalonia would, in this context, provide a means to destroy conditions on the other side of the border.

The election results will intensify the pressures facing workers in the region. The Aznar government has indicated its intentions of riding roughshod over the population in order to implement its agenda. The decline in the vote for the PSC and CiU represents a growing disenchantment with the failure of the so-called opposition parties to put forward any perspective for the mass of working people in the country. In the absence of a socialist perspective to unite Catalan workers with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Spain, France and throughout Europe, such a rejection of politics can leave the working people of the region at the mercy of a predatory and increasingly assertive regional bourgeoisie.



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