Spain’s Constitutional Court suspends Catalan independence referendum

Paul Mitchell
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Spain's Constitutional Court has suspended the Catalan independence referendum planned for November 9. All activities connected with its preparation have been banned until further notice. Director of Public Prosecutions Eduardo Torres Dulce has warned that anyone who persists faces criminal charges of contempt and sedition.

On Monday, the 12 judges of the Constitutional Court, sitting in an urgent extraordinary session, unanimously agreed to an appeal lodged by Spain’s Popular Party government against the referendum, which had been signed into law two days earlier by Artur Mas, regional president and leader of the ruling party in Catalonia, Convergence and Union (CiU). As the court deliberated for just one hour, Mas was presenting a 1,300-page white paper detailing Catalonia’s “national transition” towards independence.

The judges ruled that the referendum “as well as the remaining preparative acts for the calling of said consultation or any others linked to it” were suspended and that both sides have 20 days to present their arguments regarding the appeal. The suspension can be extended by a maximum of five months, after which the court must decide whether to ban the referendum or allow it to proceed.

Following the court decision, Mas criticised the “supersonic speed” with which the court had acted and warned that blocking the referendum could lead to “extremism” and violence. He declared, “I will not change course… I will not back down from our determination to allow the Catalan people to decide their future.”

Catalan government spokesman Francesc Homs insisted, “Nothing changed yesterday and the determination of the government is to push forward, and we will be doing things in accordance with our commitments.”

He stated that the regional government would be legally challenging the suspension and calling for the PP’s appeal to be withdrawn. A steering committee has been set up to discuss what to do next. However, he explained that the government was halting preparations for the referendum because of concerns over public servants facing possible legal action for defying the court. “As a precautionary matter, we can’t put public servants and individuals against the ropes,” Homs said, insisting that the suspension was “temporary and precautionary”.

As a result, the distribution of more than 10,000 ballot boxes and six million voting papers has been halted, the referendum “9-N: you decide” advertising campaign has been pulled and a message on the recently launched Catalan government referendum web site states that it has been suspended as “a precautionary measure” and is not being updated.

On Wednesday, in his first appearance in parliament since the court’s decision, Mas insisted that there would still be a vote on referendum, although he made no mention of the planned November 9 date. He was censured by deputies from the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), which is in a parliamentary alliance with the CiU, and from the fake-left Popular Unity Candidates (CUP) for having cancelled the referendum campaign, who demanded to know when it would be restarted. CUP deputy Quim Arrufat declared, “This is not the right attitude… People have to be disobedient, but so does the Catalan executive.”

CUP called for demonstrations against the court decision, but these have been only attracted a few hundred, mainly CUP members and supporters, carrying banners reading, “Disobey in the name of the

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referendum, in the name of independence."

A small camp organised by CUP in central Barcelona was broken up by Catalan riot police in the early hours of Friday morning.

The CUP activities did not receive the backing of the ERC or the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), which organised a rally of several thousand in Barcelona's Sant Jaume Square, home to City Hall and the regional government, and smaller ones elsewhere. The ANC has organised mass demonstrations on Catalan National Day—September 11—over the last couple of years. Several Catalan nationalist political leaders joined the protests, including ERC leader Oriol Junqueras, who reined back on his recent calls for civil disobedience if the referendum was suspended. ANC leader Carme Forcadell declared, "All the conditions have been met. The campaign has been temporarily suspended, but not the referendum."

After the court decision, PP Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy brushed aside calls for a new federal structure by the opposition Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), which opposes Catalan independence, saying reforming the constitution was "not a priority" for his government. Rajoy criticised the PSOE for trying to "keep the Catalan nationalists happy" and that "these days" there was no chance of getting the sort of all-party agreement that made the 1978 Constitution possible.

An editorial in the pro-PSOE daily, *El Pais*, declared that Rajoy "had no choice but to block the challenge" from Mas's "pro-independence offensive." It added that "flouting the law is unacceptable in every way, beginning with the Constitution," but Rajoy "must now provide credible alternatives to the independence drive…. At this momentous crossroads for Spain, Rajoy should recover the political initiative and admit that something is afoot when hundreds of thousands of Catalans keep demonstrating in favor of independence and ask to be allowed to vote to clearly express their position. Although it is true that Catalonia is a region just like all the others, it is no small matter to Spain that there should be a problem in a dynamic area that generates nearly 20 percent of the country's wealth."

As *El Pais* makes clear, this is a struggle between two factions of the bourgeoisie over the region's resources. All along, the aim of the Catalan ruling class has been to transform Catalonia into a low-tax, cheap-labour platform for the benefit of the banks and transnational corporations. The corporations in Catalonia also want to end the subsidies its tax revenues provide to the poorer regions of Spain. Like their co-thinkers in Scotland, the pseudo-left in Catalonia attempt to give a progressive fig-leaf to this reactionary nationalist movement. In Scotland, they act as foot soldiers for the Scottish National Party; in Catalonia for the CiU and its ally, the ERC.

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