

Tensions rise in Spain over Catalan independence referendum

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Tensions between the central government in Madrid and Catalan separatist forces and the regional government in Barcelona are escalating, one week after Spain's Constitutional Court suspended the Catalan independence referendum planned for November 9. The conflict has triggered Spain's biggest constitutional crisis since the transition from Francoism to bourgeois democracy, after the death of Spain's fascist dictator in 1975.

On September 25, Artur Mas, regional president and leader of the ruling party in Catalonia, Convergence and Union (CiU), signed the decree approved by the Catalan parliament enabling the region to hold a non-binding referendum on independence. The next day, Spain's right-wing Popular Party (PP) government called the State Council advisory body to present an appeal to the Constitutional Court (CC). The body unanimously passed two resolutions supporting the government's appeal. Last Monday, the CC decided in less than two hours to suspend the referendum and prohibit all activities connected with its preparation, until it reaches a decision.

Director of Public Prosecutions Eduardo Torres Dulce warned that anyone who persists faces criminal charges of contempt and sedition. After 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."

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said, "The law and dialogue, these are the ways out of the situation in Catalonia ... no one is above the law ... I want us to stay together."

The Interior Ministry dispatched between 400 and

450 riot police from Spain's National Police to Catalonia to "strengthen the security of state buildings in case there are incidents" due to the "social and political climate," the United Police Trade Union (SUP) reported.

Last week, both regional and national police collaborated in dispersing pro-independence protesters who tried to camp outside the delegation of the Spanish government in Barcelona. However, any attempt by Madrid to unilaterally deploy units without Barcelona's consent would be illegal.

Barcelona went one step further on its collision course with Madrid when it initiated an unofficial disobedience campaign against the CC's decision. On Thursday, the Catalan parliament elected a seven-member electoral body to organize the referendum in Catalonia. However, the Control Commission is authorized by the law that was suspended by the CC. The Catalan parliament ignored this, arguing that its members could be elected as it did not challenge the court's suspension.

Alicia Sanchez-Camacho, the leader of the PP in Catalonia, announced that Madrid would appeal the creation of the commission. "Mas has lost his sense of responsibility, his sense of state and his common sense," she said.

On the same day, the Mas government came under furious criticism by 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 cancelling the referendum campaign. They demanded that the regional government restore direct preparations and the institutional campaign for November's vote.

On Friday, Mas met with the representatives of the pro-referendum parties including ERC, CUP, and the

Catalan Green Initiative-United Alternative Left (ICV-EUiA). After seven hours, the representatives agreed to maintain the referendum call, though they did not publicly explain how they would guarantee that the referendum would proceed.

ICV-EUiA leader Joan Herrera admitted to Eldiario.org that there were “tensions,” but emphasised that there was also “unity” and they had agreed to “formulas to circumvent the obstacles”—that is, the CC’s decision. It remains unclear what these methods are.

One of the meeting’s first results was that advertising for the referendum, suspended on Wednesday after the CC’s decision, was resumed.

On Saturday, around 800 mayors throughout Catalonia gave support to the referendum in Barcelona, in an event prior to the official reception by Mas. Since 2010, 920 of the 947 municipalities have passed resolutions defending a referendum on independence.

A political crisis is unfolding, where a miscalculation by any of the bourgeois factions can lead to conflict between Madrid and Barcelona with unknown consequences. While powerful forces in Madrid oppose Catalan independence, the Catalan regional government cannot simply back down after setting in motion the independence process.

In September, according to pro-independence sources, over 1.8 million people marched demanding independence. The Catalan National Assembly (ANC) has mobilized 8,000 volunteers to travel around Catalonia to carry out a mass door-to-door survey to ask about the “citizens’ priorities in case of secession.” Support for the referendum is nearly 70.8 percent amongst Catalans, while 22.9 percent would oppose it, according to a Centre of Opinion Studies (CEO) poll.

This takes place amid deepening poverty and unemployment caused by austerity policies worked out and imposed by authorities in Madrid, Barcelona, and the European Union (EU). Spain currently has 27 percent unemployment, 20 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and wages have been cut by an average of 7 percent.

The repeated attempts by the working class to resist austerity measures from local, regional and the central governments have been channelled behind empty, one-day protests by the unions. Mass disillusionment with such events has provided fertile ground for the growth

of nationalism in Catalonia, in an attempt to provide a reactionary outlet for deep social and political discontent.

In Catalonia, the ruling CiU party has been a fixture of the post-Franco era, making agreements with both PP and PSOE governments. In 2010, it started promoting separatism to distract from its austerity measures, while seeking concessions from Madrid that have not come.

In Madrid, the PP and the main opposition Socialist Party (PSOE) agreed that the referendum will not take place. While the PSOE has long issued pro-forma proposals for a federal reform of the constitution, the PP has made clear that it will not make any concessions. Rajoy attacked the PSOE’s call for a constitutional reform as “fuel for separatists ... this is not the time to create slogans or pull a rabbit out of a hat. It is the time to act with great caution.”

Officials in Madrid and Catalan parties hostile to the referendum, including the regional Catalan sections of the PP and the PSOE, have expressed concern that Mas will call snap elections in the region and make them a plebiscite on separation.

Matias Alonso, general secretary of the Citizens Party, declared that the Plan B of the separatists is to “call plebiscitary elections, in which the victory of the secessionists would mean a unilateral declaration of independence... I am worried of the persistence to take us on the Kosovo road.”



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