

Spain: Regional Catalan president calls early elections

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Catalan regional President Artur Mas, leader of the ruling Convergence and Unity party (CiU), has announced regional elections for September 27 this year and declared them “a plebiscite” on Catalan independence.

The elections were due to be held in late 2016, but Mas decided to call them early under pressure from the CiU’s current coalition partner and second largest party in the Catalan parliament, the Catalan Republican Left (ERC).

Negotiations have been dragging on for months between the CiU and ERC since the unofficial referendum held last November. (See: Catalan independence poll mobilises core nationalist vote)

Eighty percent of the nearly 2.3 million who voted backed secession, but turnout was little more than 37 percent. Since then, polls show support for secession has declined by around 4 percentage points. For the first time in two years those saying no to independence (45.3 percent) are higher than yes (44.5 percent)—an indication that the hold on those mobilised in favour of independence as a protest against Madrid’s austerity measures is now wearing down.

Mas originally planned to hold the snap elections in March on the condition that the ERC joined CiU in a pro-independence unity slate. This was a bid by CiU to remain in power, which has seen its support slump from 32.5 percent in the 2012 elections to 14 percent now.

The ERC, which is polling 17 percent, demanded immediate elections and opposed a single slate, aware that an alliance with the party that has imposed savage austerity in Catalonia and become embroiled in corruption scandals could lead to disaster.

The ERC is also conscious that there does not exist a majority in favour of independence and calculates that a

single pro-independence slate would not secure full control of the Catalan parliament. By running separately, CiU and ERC could then join forces afterwards.

According to Catalan pollsters, Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió, taking into account an electoral system that favours the more separatist rural vote over the urban vote, the pro-separatists would win a majority in the September election. Of the 135 seats available, CiU and ERC could end up with around 35 seats each and the “nationalist left” Candidatura d’Unitat Popular (CUP) eight seats.

In the end, the ERC compromised with CiU in a deal to hold elections in September without a single slate in exchange for the ERC supporting the 2015 budget, which ERC leader Oriol Junqueres had previously lambasted as “anti-social” and “unjust”.

The budget agreement is further proof that the separatist project is an instrument of the ruling class to divide the working class and pave the way for the creation of a Catalan mini-state that would function as a low-tax, cheap-labour, pro-NATO and pro-European Union platform for the benefit of the banks and transnational corporations.

The 2015 budget, currently being negotiated in the regional parliament, will impose further austerity in a region that has already seen nearly 16 percent of cuts since 2010, equivalent to nearly €8 billion. Currently there is a €2.5 billion shortfall in the region and cuts of a similar figure are likely if the ruling Popular Party (PP) government in Madrid, which is vehemently opposed to secession, does not bail the government out.

The ERC’s support for CiU is not a recent event. Since 2012, it has covered for the CiU as it became embroiled in corruption scandals, imposed austerity measures and exonerated the police in brutality cases.

Twice in 2013, the ERC stepped in to prevent the head of the regional police, Manel Prat, from explaining in parliament the brutal actions of the police against protestors. They have prevented parliamentary enquiries into CiU's corruption cases and have even stopped talking about corruption in parliament.

Following the announcement of early elections the Greens and former Stalinists of the Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds-Esquerra Unida i Alternativa (ICV-EUiA) criticised the ERC for "saving a government that has failed in social terms" and renouncing the building of "a left alternative" with the ICV. However, Catalan workers have already experienced such a "left alternative" in June 2010, when the "Coalition of Progress" involving the ERC, the ICV-EUiA and PSC (the Catalan sister party of the PSOE) formed a government and imposed cuts totalling €1.6 billion.

CUP leader David Fernández also denounced the budget proposals because "they don't respond to the real social needs and urgencies, but to the dictates of the troika against the southern countries in Europe." These are cynical statements coming from a leader who infamously hugged Mas on the day of the unofficial referendum, and whose party supported Mas's "road map to independence".

A major concern of the separatists is the rise of the pseudo-left party Podemos ("We can"), which calls for a new federal system but would accept the results of any referendum on independence for Catalonia and the Basque Country. Juan Carlos Monedero, a Podemos founder and executive committee member, said, "We don't want anybody to leave Spain. But the guarantee against a breakup of Spain is to give the different regions with their own distinct identity the right to choose. That way they stay in the federation because they want to, not because you force them."

Both the ERC and CiU hope that the rise of Podemos will be thwarted after Syriza, which has a similar programme to Podemos, comes to power in the January 25 elections in Greece and gets into difficulties. As Salvador Sostres said for the daily *El Mundo*, "Both CiU and Esquerra [ERC] understand it would be best if Syriza wins in Greece, which will give the catastrophists time to remind us what a disaster Podemos will be."

For seven years the working class has attempted to fight against austerity, unemployment and wage cuts

through mass demonstrations, factory occupations and strikes. This opposition has been strangled by the PSOE, United Left and the CCOO and UGT trade unions with the aid of the pseudo-left.

This led to growing support for Catalan nationalism, and recently Podemos. On the one side, the Catalan separatists, responsible for savage austerity, foment the myth that a Catalan state would represent a genuine means to alleviate social inequality.

According to Junqueras, the September election will be "the definitive" referendum on independence from Spain leading to "a socially fairer country," "equal opportunities" and "a clean country".

On the other side Podemos promises to reverse cuts while reassuring the ruling elite that it will not mount a genuine challenge to its interests. Founded last January by Stalinists and the Pabloite Anti-capitalist Left (IA) on a vaguely reformist programme, it has rapidly shifted to the right, seeking to reassure the financial institutions, the military, and the church that its pro-capitalist economic programme "guarantees political stability generating the maximum security and confidence in the management that will be undertaken." Recent polls suggest the party is the third political force in Spain and threatens to overtake the PSOE.



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