Hundreds of thousands march in Catalonia as Madrid aims to block independence referendum

Paul Mitchell
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Around 1 million people demonstrated in Barcelona yesterday on Catalonia's national day or Diada, according to local police, ahead of a Catalan independence referendum scheduled for October 1. *El País*, a Madrid paper opposed to Catalan independence, estimated the number of marchers at a half million. Marchers shouted slogans, waved pro-independence "estelada" flags and carried banners in support of the referendum.

The march came amid a rapidly escalating crisis of the Spanish political establishment caused by the announcement of the independence referendum. The march was called by the separatist Catalan National Assembly (ANC) to ask Catalan regional President Carles Puigdemont to defy the Spanish Constitutional Court rulings and proceed with the October 1 referendum. Whilst the Catalan population is overwhelmingly in support of having a vote, polls suggest they are divided about splitting from Spain, with a plurality still opposing separation.

By all accounts, the march was smaller than a previous pro-independence demonstration of 1.8 million people in Catalonia in 2014.

The separatists are acting recklessly and provocatively advancing the reactionary referendum. Ahead of the demonstration, on Friday, 71 separatist MPs in the Catalan Parliament, from the governing, pro-austerity Junts Pel Sí ("Together For Yes") coalition—the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT)—and the pseudo-left Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) passed a "Legal Transition & Foundational Law Of the [Catalan] Republic" bill outlining the independence process.

If the "yes" vote wins on October 1, the separatists are pledging to declare independence within 48 hours, regardless of the turnout. The ERC and CUP plan to call street protests if the referendum does not go ahead. The Catalan secessionists have passed an anti-democratic measure allowing laws to be approved after a single reading in the regional parliament, so independence legislation can be fast-tracked with little or no debate.

All sides saw yesterday's demonstration as a test of the strength and appeal of the pro-independence campaign. ANC President Jordi Sànchez said, "If we're not able to mobilize a maximum number of people on September 11, October 1 will be weakened."

After the demonstration, Sànchez said that all Catalans should declare themselves in "contempt before all courts which only look for the unity of their homeland" in reference to Spain's Constitutional Court, which has declared the referendum illegal and ordered 1,000 Catalan government members, mayors and officials to stop preparations for it under threat of criminal prosecution. He labeled as "cowards" mayors who refused to provide polling booths for the referendum.

The referendum is opposed by the Popular Party (PP) government in Madrid, the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Party) and Citizens party, all of whom have called their supporters in Catalan to boycott the vote, a move which may strengthen the odds of its passage. PP Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has warned that though the Spanish state might appear slow to react, "appearances should not deceive us." "There will be no self-determination referendum," he declared.

Citizens party leader Albert Rivera has accused Puigdemont and pro-independence parties of "staking a blow to democracy, a coup like the one that this country experienced in October 1934," referring to the proclamation of a Catalan Republic by President Lluís Companys after Spanish President Lerroux invited members of the fascist CEDA (Spanish Coalition of the Autonomous Right) into his government.

Increasingly, leading figures on the right and in the social democracy are warning they will use violence to block the referendum.

Retired General Manuel Fernández-Monzón Altolaguirre, who held a number of positions in the Franco regime

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including head of the Counter-espionage Service, also praised Lerroux for suppressing the Catalan Republic, declaring: “The current situation in Catalonia should be considered an act of high treason that would necessitate the application of a state of war.” He called for the arrest of all the leaders of the Catalan Parliament. “The independence of Catalonia is not going to occur. What I do not know is whether it will be impeded in a bad way or not,” he warned.

Similarly, Josep Borell, former PSOE minister and former president of the European Parliament, described the passing of the secessionist laws and the referendum by the Catalan parliament as a coup, adding, “We are getting to a situation of physical violence.”

Juan Luís Cebrian, director of the pro-PSOE *El País*, wrote an opinion piece in the newspaper, saying that those wanting to change the rules outside of the democratic channels “are predisposed to violence.”

Spain’s Director of Public Prosecutions José Manuel Maza has announced criminal charges of “contempt, abuse of authority and misuse of public funds” against all the members of the Catalan government. He has also ordered police to investigate those organising the referendum and seize materials being prepared for the vote. Printing companies have been raided to search for ballot papers, and one printer criminally charged for allegedly helping prepare the vote.

The Rajoy government hopes its threats will split the Catalan bourgeoisie and weaken the referendum. Madrid has thus far stated publicly that it wants to avoid invoking the so-called “nuclear option”—article 155 of the constitution—which would effectively revoke Catalan autonomy and place the region under the military control of the Spanish government, for fear of the degree of social opposition this would engender.

But last week, Spain’s Ministry of Interior started to reinforce state buildings in Catalonia with police from the anti-riot Intervention Units. The Civil Guard has been instructed to prepare to move to Catalonia within an hour and reinforce the Reserve and Security Group (GRS4), based in Barcelona. The GRS was created by former PSOE Prime Minister Jose Zapatero dedicated to “the restoration of public order in large mass demonstrations.” There are conflicting reports as to what the Catalan police—the Mossos d’Esquadra—will do in case of physical conflict.

Sections of the ruling elite in Europe and the US fear that a confrontation between Barcelona and Madrid could spark a crisis that will engulf Spain, dragging down the fourth largest economy of the eurozone and a key European Union and NATO member state. It risks inflaming the explosive military situation in Europe, amid a stand-off between NATO and Russia, and growing class tensions in Spain and across Europe after a decade of deep austerity.

On Thursday, European Parliament President Antonio Tajani said Catalonia must obey the Spanish Constitution and said that if Catalonia secedes, it will be out of the European Union. Credit rating agency Moody’s also warned that independence would harm the ratings of Spain and Catalonia. It hoped and predicted that “Catalonia will continue to be part of Spain,” and said it was up to Madrid to satisfy some of Catalonia’s main demands, such as budget reforms, to stem the crisis.

Behind all the talk of Catalan independence are the right-wing policies of the nationalists who rule the region and have imposed intense austerity on its working class. Funding for education, health care and other social expenditure have been slashed, and poverty has risen in one of Spain’s richest regions.

The pro-separatist factions within the Catalan bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois CUP are promoting nationalism in order to prevent a united struggle of the working class in Catalonia with their brothers and sisters across Spain and Europe. It offers nothing to the working class. A Catalan Republic, were it to be established, would function as a low-tax, cheap-labour platform for the benefit of the banks and transnational corporations.

Catalan independence has also caused a crisis in the Podemos party. Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias has attempted to side-step the referendum, saying it should be delayed until after Podemos, the separatist parties and the PSOE build a “new progressive government” in Spain and Catalonia that removes the PP from government. At the same time, the Podemos-backed mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, has said that the city council will “do everything possible” to enable Barcelona citizens to vote in the referendum.

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