

# Spain suspends Catalan independence law, escalating conflict with separatists

Alejandro Lopez  
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Spain's Constitutional Court announced the suspension of the "transition" to independence law passed by Catalonia's regional parliament last Friday. This comes after roughly 1 million people marched in Barcelona last Monday on Catalonia's national day, and less than three weeks before the Catalan independence referendum scheduled for October 1.

The transition law was passed by the bourgeois separatist parties in the Catalan parliament, the Together for Yes coalition composed of the Catalan European Democratic Party (PdeCAT), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and the Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP). It lays the basis for a constitution after a declaration of independence, if the "yes" vote carries in the referendum.

With the Catalan independence referendum and Madrid's legal and police campaign to stop it, a profound crisis has erupted in the Spanish state system as it emerged from the post-1978 Transition to parliamentary democracy. It is fueling the breakdown of the European Union (EU) exemplified by Britain's vote to leave the EU last year. After a decade of deep austerity and mass unemployment across Europe since the 2008 Wall Street crash, the ruling elite in Spain is violently divided.

The Popular Party (PP) government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, whose political heritage extends to the pre-1978 fascist regime of Francisco Franco, is determined to take a hard line with the Catalan nationalists. The PP is under no illusion as to the class character of the Together for Yes coalition, whose constituent parties have supported or led pro-austerity governments in Catalonia.

Amid escalating social anger across Europe, however, the PP sees any initiative that might inadvertently trigger political opposition in the working class—in a

region that was a center of opposition to Franco during the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War—as a mortal threat. Despite warnings from the international press and from sections of the Spanish ruling class that it should negotiate a settlement with the Catalan separatists, the PP is pressing ahead with aggressive measures that threaten to provoke armed conflict inside the state machine.

Sections of the PP now propose to invoke article 155 of the Constitution, which would suspend the Catalan government and impose direct rule from Madrid. On Tuesday, PP parliamentary group spokesperson Rafael Hernando pointed out that article 155 "is a constitutional provision that is always on the table," and Justice Minister Rafael Catalá said that "it is a tool that can be applied."

Attorney General José Manuel Maza has ordered the four chief prosecutors in the Catalan provinces to investigate the 712 mayors who have expressed support for the referendum. This is three-quarters of the total number of mayors in Catalonia. If they do not appear before the Prosecutor's Office voluntarily, Maza warned, police will be ordered to arrest them. The CUP has said its mayors will disobey the courts.

State prosecutors have also ordered the National Police, the paramilitary Civil Guards and the Catalan regional police to seize any material helping to prepare or hold the "illegal self-determination referendum, including ballot boxes, printed matter and computer equipment". Printing companies have been raided in the search for ballot papers, and hundreds of additional policemen dispatched to the region.

Meetings held in support of the referendum have also been targeted, including one organized for September 17 in Madrid by *Madrileños por el Derecho a Decidir* ("Madrid residents who support the right to decide"),

which has been banned. The judge responsible claimed that it is “not possible for an event that is openly against the Constitution and the resolutions of the Constitutional Court to be helped by a municipality that, as has been expressed, also has a duty to uphold the law.”

Despite the threats from Madrid, the Catalan separatists are pressing ahead with the referendum, setting the Spanish and Catalan bourgeoisies on a collision course in a conflict that is rapidly spiraling out of control.

The Catalan regional government under premier Carles Puigdemont (PDeCAT) refuses to back down, stating that “faced with judicial proceedings and threats” it “is more determined than ever” to hold the referendum. The campaign was launched Thursday night in Tarragona under the slogans “Hello New Country”, “Hello Republic”. “Hello Europe” and “Hello World”. The separatist parties have petitioned the Speaker, Carme Forcadell (ERC), to suspend the regional parliament during the campaign.

Concern is growing in the ruling class in Spain and internationally that the conflict between Madrid and Barcelona is sparking a crisis that could rapidly engulf Spain and the EU. Most are blaming PP Prime Minister Rajoy for his intransigence, arguing that Rajoy’s PP should be able to work out a deal with the Catalan nationalists.

The Spanish employers organisation, CEOE, has warned that whilst it supports the rule of law and “all actions” the government might take to enforce it, the “social co-existence and economic prosperity” of Spain are at stake. The CEOE declared that a political solution to the crisis had to be reached “with the greatest possible urgency.”

The *Financial Times*, under the heading “Time is running out for a Catalan compromise”, accused Rajoy of being “inflexible” and called on the Spanish government to see the referendum “as a political problem to resolve rather than sedition to be crushed”. It expressed its distaste for the “unedifying” scene of “Spanish security forces trying to hunt down illicit ballot boxes and voting slips”, comparing it to the “pageantry of civic protest” of the Catalan nationalists.

The referendum is not broadly popular among workers. While most polls show opposition to Madrid’s crackdown against the referendum, which 70

percent of Spaniards would like to see proceed, support for separation in Catalonia is also low, at 30 to 40 percent. Support for separation in Catalonia seems to be rising due to popular anger at Madrid’s crackdown, however.

The critical issue in this explosive situation is the independent political intervention of the working class in opposition to both the ruling elite in Madrid and the bourgeois separatists in Catalonia. Neither the division of Spain by the emergence of a new bourgeois state in Catalonia, nor the growth of a repressive police apparatus centered in Madrid, offer anything to workers.

The petty bourgeois “left” forces have devoted considerable resources to promoting a referendum led by bourgeois, pro-austerity and pro-NATO parties as a radical step forward. The Pabloite Anticapitalistas have described the referendum as a “political revolution” that, according to their leader Jaime Pastor, could “help democratize Spain, helping to stop the authoritarian tendencies of the regime.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Catalan separatists’ support for austerity and their indifference to the imperialist war drive unfolding in the Middle East, or indeed to anything occurring outside their region’s borders, is ultimately no less reactionary than Madrid’s policies.

They speak for sections of the Catalan ruling class who—conscious of that while Catalonia accounts for only 16 percent of Spain’s population, it represents a fifth of economic output and a quarter of Spain’s exports—are seeking a larger share of the profits. Angry that their taxes fund social spending in Spain’s other, poorer regions, they hope that by using Catalonia’s wealth, they could cut better deals for themselves on the world market if their region was autonomous or independent. They have proven themselves to be bitterly hostile to the working class.



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