Catalan secession crisis: Alongside Rajoy, Trump calls for a united Spain

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Following a meeting with Spain's Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy at the White House Monday, US President Donald Trump spoke about the Catalan independence vote taking place on October 1.

He declared his support for a united Spain. "Spain is a great country and it should remain united. We are dealing with a great, great country and it should remain united."

Turning to Rajoy's suppression of the planned referendum, Trump added, "I've been watching that unfold, but it's actually been unfolding for centuries and I think that nobody knows if they are gonna have a vote. The President [Rajoy] would say they are not going to have a vote. But I think that the people would be very much opposed to that.

"I think the people of Catalonia have been talking about this for a long time. But I bet you if you had accurate numbers and accurate polling, you'd find that they love their country, they love Spain, and they wouldn't leave. So I'm just for a united Spain."

Trump's comment followed existing US policy, which has been to politely criticise Rajoy and his right-wing Popular Party (PP) government for their intransigence with respect to Catalonia, while defending the unity of Spain as a key NATO and European Union member state.

This is a bipartisan position. Back in July, the *New York Times* suggested the referendum be allowed to go ahead declaring, "The best outcome for Spain would be to permit the referendum, and for Catalan voters to reject independence—as voters in Quebec and Scotland have done."

The break-up of Spain would have great geo-political repercussions.

The American ruling elite, like its European counterparts, are concerned the tensions between Madrid and Barcelona are provoking an explosive situation against the backdrop of endemic unemployment, widespread poverty and increasing social inequality.

Following the meeting with Trump, Rajoy declared, "The decision of unilaterally declaring independence doesn't depend on me. It's a decision that can't be taken by the Parliament of Catalonia. I honestly think it is a mistake."

Rajoy declared that there were "no ballots, no people at the polling stations, no electoral committee," omitting the fact it is his government that has ordered the police to prevent all these. He concluded with the plea, "What would make sense in a situation such as this is to go back to common sense and put an end to this whole story. The only thing it's doing is generating division, tensions, and it's not contributing in any way to the situation of the citizens. So I want this to be resolved as soon as possible. And I want us to go into a new stage where the rule of law, dialogue, and common sense will prevail."

No one at the White House press conference questioned Rajoy's version of events, which hides a level of repression in Catalonia not seen since the days of the Francoist dictatorship. Were such actions to occur in China, Russia, Iran or Turkey, they would be eliciting daily denunciations from Western politicians and headlines emblazoned across the front pages. It is almost impossible to find any comments on Catalonia from European leaders, other than to stress that it is an "internal matter" for Spain.

While Rajoy was in Washington, Catalonia's High Court ordered the regional police, Mossos d'Esquadra, to seal off polling stations, seize "ballot boxes, computers, ballot papers and election documents and propaganda" and prevent access by election officials. Anyone attempting to cross police lines must be warned they face arrest and prosecution. If the Mossos d'Esquadra are seen to be failing in their duty, thousands of extra police and Civil Guards have been brought in from other regions to replace them.

Catalonia's High Court is considering charges of

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disobedience and misuse of public funds—punishable with up to eight years imprisonment—against the Catalan cabinet led by President Carles Puigdemont of the PDeCAT (Catalan European Democratic Party), the larger party in the ruling "Together for Yes" coalition.

The High Court in Madrid is investigating charges of sedition that could result in prison sentences up to 15 years against those protesting police raids and arrests last week. Investigations are continuing against more than 700 Catalan mayors who support the referendum. The media has been warned not to broadcast referendum campaign advertisements, websites have been shut down and the region's finances taken over by Madrid.

Puigdemont has called the PP's action a "totalitarian" crackdown. However, on Monday he appeared to backtrack on pledges to declare independence should the "Yes" win a majority (whatever the turnout) saying he would seek a transitional period for negotiations with Spain and the European Union.

"Of course. We are committed to implementing the outcome, and if it is Catalonia's will to be an independent country, Catalonia will begin its journey as an independent country. But above all, we want this process to be negotiated, agreed to, especially with Spain. It will be essential, on October 2, for the Spanish state to want to agree on how to handle this transition," Puigdemont explained.

PDeCAT parliamentary spokesman, Carles Campuzano, was more forceful—declaring a declaration of independence "does not appear" in the PDeCAT's programme, and that it is "absolutely ruled out" regardless of the result on October 1.

These statements were opposed by Joan Tardà, of the ERC (Catalan Republican Left), who tweeted that "the first and last word" on independence belongs to the Catalan Congress and government.

Spain's main pseudo-left party, Podemos, on Monday proposed an alternative route out of the major political crisis. Podemos, which is desperate to prove its suitability for rule to Spain's ruling elite, has attempted to mediate in the Catalan secession crisis. Congress deputy, Noelia Vera, from Podemos Andalusia, said the party "does not share [support] a unilateral declaration of independence," adding that "it is also a mistake to storm printing presses and seize ballot papers—all that does is add fuel to the fire."

Podemos party organization secretary Pablo Echenique declared, "The first step towards a referendum like Quebec's or Scotland's is to oust Rajoy from office."

The most strident nationalist and pro-independence party, which masquerades as "left," the CUP (Popular Unity Candidacy), criticised such statements. The CUP has kept the PDeCAT/ERC "Together for Yes" coalition in power since the 2015 regional election, when it failed to gain an overall majority. CUP deputy Mireia Boya insisted that October 1 was not simply "a mobilization against the PP, nor a participatory process," but "a referendum on self-determination and if we win the yes we proclaim independence. We have no other way out."

The CUP has called on the Mossos d'Esquadra to disobey orders and break the locks on the polling stations. It has called for mass demonstrations on Sunday, which most commentators believe will take place.

On Tuesday, CC.OO union representatives of the Barcelona Fire Service said they were prepared to "act as a security cordon in order to ensure the peaceful development" during voting. On Thursday, fire-fighters marched in uniform, defying orders, through the streets of Barcelona. The CC.OO, together with other unions and students, have set up street stalls explaining the voting process and location of polling stations to passers-by.

According to *El Confidencial*, coaches have been chartered from other parts of Spain to transport extreme right-wingers including the fascist Falange and National Democracy to demonstrate in Barcelona on October 1. "Dangerous" elements of the Front National from the south of France are also being mobilised.

The stage is set for a bitter confrontation that raises the danger of an eruption of civil war.

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