

Defenders of imperialist “human rights” hail Spanish government’s crackdown in Catalonia

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The brutal crackdown on Sunday’s Catalan independence referendum by the Spanish state has deeply shocked millions of people all over the world.

The government of one of the world’s leading “democracies” has sent in armed police, hailed by fascist demonstrators, to savagely beat and arrest anyone who dared to exercise their fundamental right to vote. Barcelona, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, has been transformed overnight into a war zone.

In the midst of this bloodbath, the United States and the European Union have leapt to the defence of the Spanish government. The columnists of the leading newspapers, who specialize in crying rivers over human rights abuses by governments the US seeks to overturn, have praised the Spanish government as a model of democracy and constitutional rule.

Typical is a column entitled “Damage to Catalonia” published Tuesday in the *New York Times* by Roger Cohen, who has for decades made it his business to sell wars to the American population.

Cohen declares that the government of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy “was right on the basics. The Catalan referendum was a reckless sham.” He adds, “The referendum was illegitimate, having been suspended by Spain’s constitutional court.”

Cohen concludes with an idiotic and pompous ode to the European Union worthy of Polonius: “In European sovereignty, not in more national flags, lies the bright future of every European of good will.”

Catalans are depicted as supporters of a “disruption-at-any-cost” upheaval, directed against “the postwar liberal order in Europe... embodied in the European Union and by the presence of the United States as an offsetting power in Europe,” which “over the past four decades has ushered Spain, and Catalonia within it, to a degree of prosperity

and democratic stability unimaginable at Franco’s death.”

Such, no doubt, is the view from Cohen’s five-star hotel room, from which he makes his grand pronouncements about democracy and human rights.

But Spain is a country where unemployment now stands at 17.8 percent and at 38.6 percent for those under 25, and where half of all households have incomes below the official poverty level after years of austerity measures dictated jointly by Brussels and the International Monetary Fund.

The hypocrisy of the *New York Times* is supplemented by outright lying on the part of the *Washington Post*, which portrays the Catalan referendum result as the product of Russian scheming against the European Union.

Images of “Spanish riot police firing rubber bullets and swinging truncheons at would-be voters in Catalonia on Sunday handed the region’s leaders the perfect story line,” the *Post* complains, when the political crisis in Spain is in fact the product of “a reckless and irresponsible drive by Catalan nationalists to create an independent republic in violation of the law...”

The *Post* goes on to cite both the European Commission and President Trump as authoritative voices opposing separatism, as against “separatist-ruled Scotland, the pariah government of Venezuela and Russia’s intelligence and propaganda apparatus,” which, it claims, has “mobilised its media outlets and social media bots in support of the separatists” to divide and weaken “the democratic West.”

The US media is, as always, a vehicle for crude pro-imperialist propaganda. But the same essential line is repeated by the British *Financial Times*. Rajoy’s repression is unfortunate, it editorialises, because it “risks giving credence to the separatists’ arguments that modern Spain has not shaken off its authoritarian past.” But any

declaration of independence would be “an irresponsible action devoid of legal validity and political legitimacy” that would deservedly “encounter a frosty response from Spain’s European and US allies.”

One must suffer from acute political amnesia before accepting such debased moralising about respect for sovereignty and the rule of law. The only thing determining the line taken by the gentlemen of the press is the interests of their own ruling elites.

Time and time again, the same publications, the same journalists, have proclaimed the absolute right of separatist forces to break away from their parent state whenever this has advanced the predatory aims of the major powers.

Self-determination for minorities of every description, religious or ethnic, provided the ideological justification for the carve-up of Yugoslavia, the wars against Iraq, Libya and Syria, and every effort to encroach on the territories of the former Soviet Union since the recognition of Georgia in 1991.

Throughout the 1990s, Cohen wrote innumerable articles denouncing NATO for not acting more aggressively against Serbia and the Yugoslav central government in Belgrade in defence of the separatist movements in Bosnia and Kosovo, declaring in 2008 that “Milosevic’s quashing of Kosovo’s autonomy was central to his conversion of Yugoslavia into ‘Serboslavia’...”

Cohen’s columns helped promote the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, leading to the deaths of countless thousands of people. In his typically stupid and dishonest fashion, Cohen makes no effort to reconcile his support for Kosovar separatists and Islamist “rebels” in Syria, in the name of defending “human rights” against Slobodan Milošević and Bashar Al-Assad, with his fervent praise of Rajoy’s crackdown.

Such efforts to justify Madrid’s repression have the gravest implications.

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, et al are declaring illegitimate not only Catalan separatism, but all opposition to the existing capitalist order. And the unspoken target of the defence of the “rule of law” is the working class—not just in Catalonia and Spain, but throughout the continent.

And if the states and institutions that have imposed this savage assault are declared to be sacrosanct, then all forms of social and political opposition must be dealt with as ruthlessly as the Catalan referendum—including by military repression.

The embrace of Rajoy’s crackdown on the part of the EU and the Trump administration is entirely in line with the drive toward authoritarianism, state violence and the suppression of democratic rights by governments around the world.

This threat is very real in Spain.

On Monday, Justice Minister Rafael Catala warned that the government would invoke Article 155 if the Catalan parliament declared independence. “The Article 155 is there. We will use the entire force of the law,” he warned.

Article 155 suspends regional government if “an autonomous community were not to fulfil the duties imposed upon it under the Constitution or other laws...” Its imposition would only be made possible by sending in the army.

The threat was underscored by yesterday’s extraordinary intervention by King Felipe VI, who delivered a speech denouncing the Catalan government for having “placed themselves outside the law and democracy” and proclaiming the “responsibility of the legitimate powers of the state to ensure the constitutional order.”

The International Committee of the Fourth International opposes the politics of Catalan nationalism from the left. But the struggle against nationalism, including national separatism, is a political struggle that requires convincing the working class of the need to fight for international unity, and to rally the youth and progressive sections of the middle class around it.

That fight must unfold on the basis of uncompromising opposition to the violence unleashed by the government in Madrid and sanctioned by the imperialist European Union.



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