

Jailing of separatist leaders sparks protest demonstrations in Catalonia

Alejandro López and Paul Mitchell**18 October 2017**

On Monday evening, Spain's High Court ordered the jailing without bail of the leaders of the largest separatist organisations in Catalonia—Jordi Sànchez of the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and Jordi Cuixart of Òmnium Cultural.

The two leaders are being held pending investigation of trumped-up sedition charges. They are accused of orchestrating demonstrations on September 20 and 21 in which protesters allegedly attempted to prevent police raids on organisations and the arrest of officials associated with the October 1 Catalan independence referendum. Sedition carries a maximum sentence of 15 years imprisonment.

The High Court ruling and arrest of Sànchez and Cuixart mark the first jailings of political prisoners since the end of the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco.

The imprisonment of the two separatist leaders sparked protests across Catalonia. On Monday night, thousands marched, banging pots and pans. On Tuesday, thousands more took to the streets of Barcelona in a midday work stoppage. A further demonstration was held later that evening.

Òmnium spokesperson Marcel Mauri told the demonstrators, "Not even the Franco regime dared to send the presidents of Òmnium and ANC to prison, so from today we will go out onto the streets to demand the freeing of political prisoners and democracy." On Tuesday, both organisations called for a demonstration to be held this coming Saturday to demand the liberation of the two leaders.

The High Court ruling is an indication of the dictatorial measures the Spanish Popular Party (PP) government is prepared to carry out, paving the way for the imposition of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, which Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy plans to invoke on Thursday. Invocation of the article will suspend the Catalan regional government and place the region under direct rule from

Madrid. Article 155 could be invoked in conjunction with Article 116, establishing the legal framework for the declaration of a state of siege, involving the suspension of democratic rights and imposition of police-military rule.

In her ruling, Judge Carmen Lamela said the events in September "did not constitute an isolated, casual or peacefully convened civic protest against police actions carried out on a judge's orders." She continued: "On the contrary, the activities already described were part of a complex strategy in which Jordi Cuixart and Jordi Sànchez have been involved for a long time as part of a roadmap designed to bring about Catalan independence."

Lamela's ruling flies in the face of numerous reports and videos that show Cuixart and Sánchez intervening in the demonstration to call for peaceful protest against the arrest of 14 Catalan government officials. It was only after the two men had left that isolated instances of small-scale violence took place, amounting to the vandalizing of several Civil Guard vehicles.

In the same court where the separatists were sentenced to imprisonment, the head of the Catalan regional Mossos d'Esquadra police, Josep Lluís Trapero—also under investigation for sedition for failing to control the September 20-21 protests—was, for all practical purposes, put on parole while he awaits sentencing. He was forced to surrender his passport, remain in Spain and report to the court every two weeks.

The Prosecutor's Office of the High Court, viewing Lamela's restrictions on Trapero as too lenient, is seeking ways to jail him by appealing his release order. The office is requesting that the sedition investigation be extended to October 1, the day of the secessionist referendum. To that end, Civil Guards have searched regional government offices in Reus (Tarragona) for evidence that the Mossos failed to follow orders to seize ballot boxes and electoral material on the day of the referendum.

Spain's judiciary has made clear that these are only the

initial stages of a wholesale jailing of separatists. On Tuesday, the Constitutional Court unanimously ruled that the referendum law passed by the Catalan parliament on September 6 is unconstitutional and devoid of any binding legal force, and that the Catalan parliament had placed itself “outside the law.”

The ruling opens the way for the prosecution of everyone who was either involved in organizing the October 1 referendum, or “failed to prevent” it. This would include Catalan Premier Carles Puigdemont, members of his government, mayors, councillors, officials and other individuals who participated in the referendum preparations.

The bourgeois press is not only hailing the imprisonment of the separatists, it is baying for more ruthless measures. Isabel San Sebastián, writing for the conservative daily ABC, said, “Puigdemont and his right-hand man, Trapero, have to pay dearly for the damage caused by their betrayal. They and a few more. From [Carme] Forcadell, speaker of the regional parliament in open rebellion against the legal order ... to [Vice-Premier Oriol] Junqueras and [Regional Minister Raül] Romeva, responsible for the financing and promotion [of] this coup, up to the 78 signatories of this ‘declaration of independence,’ signed in flagrant violation of the current Constitution.

“All must respond for their actions before Justice, better sooner than later. The public prosecutors must charge and the courts must judge, regardless of political considerations. The penal code marks the way forward in the articles on rebellion, sedition, embezzlement of public funds and incitement of hatred. We must act without contemplation.”

San Sebastián reflects the growing view within the ruling class that the best way of suppressing the drive to secession is to send the separatists to jail. Members of the PP have already spoken about banning parties and programmes that promote secession, drastically changing the Catalan education system, and dissolving the Mossos.

That these measures could spark mass opposition is viewed as an opportunity by sections of the ruling class, which would have a pretext to deploy the military under a state of emergency, as spelled out in Article 116. Such a response has been widely discussed in recent weeks in the press. This would mean repression not only of the Catalan masses, but also the working class in the rest of the country. The Spanish army has already drawn up plans for Operation Cota de Malla (Chain Mail), in which it will back police and Civil Guard operations in Catalonia.

Other sections of the ruling elite, a minority, are more cautious, raising concerns about protests getting out of control. Barcelona-based *La Vanguardia* warned that the arrest of the separatist leaders “is very bad news.” It continued: “Such tension can now be easily transferred from the institutional offices and courts to the streets, where the possibilities of an uncontrollable situation will multiply.”

What is clear is that the reactionary measures of the PP government, supported by the Citizens Party and the Socialist Party (PSOE), and by all sections of the state, will not stop even if Catalan Premier Puigdemont backs down from the secessionist project, as he has been ordered to do as of Thursday.

After a quarter-century of escalating austerity and imperialist war, the mechanisms through which the ruling class has previously sought to regulate social tensions and contain class conflict in Spain and elsewhere in Europe have broken down. Spain is now heading back to the era of authoritarian forms of rule that dominated a great part of its history during the 20th century.

The European Union and the heads of other European governments offer no alternative to this drive to authoritarian rule. Rather, they are continuing to make clear that they support Rajoy’s repression because they share the same aim of suppressing social opposition to war, militarism and austerity.

On Tuesday, the European Commission refused to comment on the imprisonment of the separatist leaders, asserting once again that the Catalonia crisis is “an internal matter” concerning the “internal legal and constitutional order of Spain.”



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