

Catalan government in turmoil over Spain's suppression of autonomy

Paul Mitchell
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On Saturday, three weeks after the crackdown on the October 1 Catalan independence referendum, Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy invoked Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution to suspend Catalan autonomy.

The action drew 450,000 people to a protest demonstration in Barcelona later in the day—a sign that the anti-democratic measures to be imposed under Article 155 will provoke a violent confrontation with the Catalan population.

The unprecedented measures allow the Spanish Popular Party (PP) government to sack Catalan Premier Carles Puigdemont and his ministers, assume the right to call regional elections, and take control of Catalonia's economic institutions, the regional *Mossos d'Esquadra* police force and Catalan public media. Plans have been finalised to send in Civil Guards and troops to establish a de facto police-military occupation.

This Friday, Rajoy's measures will be put to the Spanish Senate, where the PP has an absolute majority, for approval. They have the support of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and Citizens Party, as well as the European Union and the Trump administration.

In the face of the PP onslaught, the Catalan regional bourgeoisie is in turmoil. In an attempt to prevent the response to Rajoy erupting outside of official channels, it has pursued a policy of appealing to the PP and PSOE for dialogue and to the Spanish judiciary and the EU to intervene. On Monday, the European Commission reiterated that its attitude to Catalonia had not changed. "The position is well known," a Commission spokesman declared. "We've always said we respect the constitutional and legal arrangement of Spain."

Also on Monday, Catalonia's parliament indicated that it will hold a full session on Thursday morning to

lay out its response to Madrid. Catalan Republican Left (ERC) spokesman Sergi Sabrià accused the PP, PSOE and Citizens of "squandering" the "opportunity for dialogue" afforded by Puigdemont's suspension of a declaration of independence last week. He said the best answer "to Article 155 and the coup d'état" is to declare independence.

The petty-bourgeois secessionist Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP) party is demanding that independence be declared immediately, threatening "massive civil disobedience" otherwise.

Catalonia's minister of foreign affairs, Raul Romeva, told the BBC that Catalan institutions would respond with defiance. He said, referring to the region's population: "It is not a personal decision. ... It is a 7 million-person decision."

He continued: "I have no doubt that all civil servants in Catalonia will keep following the instructions provided by the elected and legitimate institutions that we have right now in place."

Albert Donaire, a spokesman for a section of the regional police force called the "*Mossos* for Independence," urged the regional government to declare a Catalan republic before Article 155 takes effect and the Spanish Interior Ministry takes control of the *Mossos*. The *Mossos* will remain "loyal to the [Catalan] parliament and government," Donaire said.

A student strike has been called for October 26 by the "Universities for the Republic" group to demand the "immediate" release of imprisoned Catalan activists Jordi Sànchez and Jordi Cuixart.

The invocation of Article 155 has caused a crisis in the PSOE's Catalan section, the Socialists' Party of Catalonia (PSC). In its heyday in the 1990s, the PSC held 52 of the 135 seats in the Catalan parliament and polled around 38 percent. In the last election in 2015,

however, the number of PSC deputies slumped to 16 on 13 percent of the vote, largely due to anger over austerity measures it imposed as part of a regional coalition government.

The PSC is divided over the PSOE's support for Article 155. PSC leader Miguel Iceta has rejected calls from within the party to oppose "frontally" the imposition of article 155. Instead, he met with Puigdemont, pressuring him to call new elections and claiming this would halt the dissolution of the government and the holding of forced elections. "We turn to President Puigdemont with a double option: to call elections based on the current legality or to use the process of a hearing in the Senate to offer a dialogue. This is our position," Iceta explained.

However, the Catalan Republican Left (ERC) is calling for more municipalities to break their coalition arrangements with the PSC. ERC deputy Gabriel Rufian said, "You cannot govern with those who participate in the savagery of the state. We have to end the municipal pacts with PSC/PSOE."

On Sunday, a communiqué signed by seven current and former leaders of the PSC rejected the "abusive and absolute" application of Article 155, saying that with the Spanish PSOE's support for the PP's hardline policy, the PSC "can already bid farewell to building an alternative majority government for many years."

Joan Majó, PSC co-founder and ex-industry minister under PSOE Prime Minister Felipe González (1982-1986), resigned, saying that without aligning himself with the Catalan independence movement, he has "increasingly disagreed with" many of the policies of the PSC "regarding the relationship between Catalonia and the State."

PSC support for Article 155 has also caused problems for Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau, who relies on the PSC to keep her Barcelona en Comú coalition in power. Seeking to deflect criticism over her close relations with the PSC, Colau said she was "worried" by the "drift" of PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez. The deputy mayor, Jaume Asens, promised that BComú will undertake to analyse "the implications of the application of Article 155."

The application of article 155 has also been threatened in the Basque country. The former minister of health and regional PP party president, Alfonso Alonso, has warned that the region has "all the

ingredients" to end up in "the same situation" as Catalonia. He declared that it was his party's responsibility to "prevent" these "ingredients" from becoming mixed.

Alonso was speaking during celebrations to mark 40 years of "democracy" in Spain and the sixth anniversary of the moment when the Basque terrorist organisation ETA "recognised its defeat" and abandoned its weapons.

During his speech, Alonso declared that, as in Catalonia, so also in the Basque country "nationalism is in power," referring to the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). There are "radical forces that still justify violent positions," he continued, alluding to EH Bildu (a reincarnation of the ETA political wing Batasuna." He added that "the Podemos populists are the third force," and the platform Gure Esku Dago is an "incipient" Basque National Assembly.

The general coordinator of EH Bildu, Arnaldo Otegi, declared that "the authoritarian drift of the state" in relation to Catalonia "will certainly reach" the Basque Country. He called for an "urgent political responsibility exercise" to defend "national and democratic unity" among the parties opposed to the application of Article 155.



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