

# Move to Spanish military rule in Catalonia exposes bankruptcy of Podemos

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Madrid's invocation of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution to impose an unelected, authoritarian regime on Catalonia has exposed the bankruptcy of the Podemos party.

Podemos is a populist party founded in 2014 by Stalinist professors, including its general secretary Pablo Iglesias, and members of the petty-bourgeois *Anticapitalistas* movement. It initially pledged to end the European Union austerity that is devastating the Spanish population, "regenerate Spanish democracy," and fight the old ruling "caste," consisting of the Popular Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE). Such rhetoric helped get it elected to local office in cities across Spain, including Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Cadiz, Zaragoza and Santiago de Compostela.

In the last national election, as Iglesias often points out, Podemos received 5 million votes. What has it done to mobilise this support against the gravest threat of military rule in Spain and Europe since the end of Francisco Franco's fascist dictatorship in 1978? The answer is: nothing.

Podemos has signalled at every step since the brutal police crackdown on the October 1 Catalan independence referendum that it will not oppose a turn to military dictatorship. It is focused on disarming the working class. Podemos held back-channel talks with the European Union-PP-PSOE "caste" it claims to be fighting and issued a few impotent public appeals addressed to them, even as both Madrid and the EU moved rapidly to return to the authoritarian policies of the Francoite era.

At the end of September, before the October 1 secessionist referendum, Podemos set up a so-called Assembly of Coexistence. Its task was to draft a manifesto urging the PP to "initiate dialogue [with the Catalan separatists], cease exceptional measures and respect democratic principles, so that Catalans can express themselves."

Madrid ignored the manifesto, predictably, and went ahead with its violent repression of the referendum. It arrested 14 Catalan government officials, seized millions of posters, ballots and leaflets, closed over 144 websites, searched print shops and newspapers, banned meetings on self-determination, and threatened over 700 mayors with prosecution for supporting the referendum.

When the referendum was finally held on October 1 due to a mass mobilization of the Catalan population, the PP sent 16,000 Civil Guards and national police to assault peaceful protesters trying to defend the polling stations and trying to vote, leaving over 800 people injured.

After the crackdown, which stunned millions of people around the world, many of whom watched videos of jackbooted police thugs assaulting peaceful voters and beating elderly women bloody, Podemos went into overdrive to promote illusions that the EU and the PSOE would somehow restrain Rajoy.

Its five European MPs sent the European Commission a letter the day after the crackdown, calling on the EU to intervene in Spain to "avoid the institutional deterioration of a member state incapable of managing a political problem without violence and repression."

Even as the ink was drying on this letter, Brussels was busy working

with Rajoy to justify new crackdowns and authoritarian measures. The European Commission, backed by London, Paris and Berlin, all declared their public support for the PP government. The European Commission boasted that Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Rajoy were in daily contact.

As the PP drew up military plans to intervene in Catalonia and held talks with the PSOE to invoke Article 155, Podemos kept insisting that these very same forces could be convinced to stop the crackdown. Over and over, it claimed that political organisations that were feverishly preparing mass repression could be persuaded to completely change course with a few text messages, preferably delivered via Twitter, politely asking them to stop.

In response to King Felipe VI's ominous address on October 3—branding Catalonia an outlaw region of Spain, denouncing the referendum and demanding that the Spanish state seize control of the region—Podemos leader Íñigo Errejón simply wrote: "The king lost the opportunity to be part of the solution. There was neither a call for dialogue nor a proposition. It leaves me worried."

On October 6, Podemos Secretary for Organisation Pablo Echenique insisted that Rajoy and Catalan regional premier Carles Puigdemont should meet "and agree on one point: a mediation team that could start a dialogue."

When Puigdemont suspended the declaration of Catalan independence in a speech on October 10 and called for dialogue with Madrid, Iglesias asked Rajoy "not to suspend rights" in Catalonia. He informed Rajoy that this would be a "historical error."

Such impotent pleas only emboldened Rajoy and the far-right to intensify the repression. The following day, in a bellicose and threatening speech to the Spanish Congress, Rajoy declared that he would invoke Article 155.

Iglesias delivered a cowardly and cynical reply in the Congress in the name of Podemos. He said his task was not to oppose Rajoy. He told Rajoy, "Today is not a day for polemics. I want to reflect with you. Your group represents 7.9 million Spaniards ... You have received PSOE and Citizens support, and I congratulate you." Iglesias repeated that Rajoy should be "responsible" and place himself "at the forefront of negotiations" with Puigdemont.

The record of Podemos is yet another bitter lesson in the role of "post-Marxist" populist parties of the affluent middle class. They have proven to be completely hostile to the working class and to democratic rights. The Greek ally of Podemos, Syriza, took power in 2015 pledging to end austerity, only to totally betray its election promises and impose yet another EU austerity package on the Greek people. Now Podemos, having promised "democratic regeneration," is aligning itself with the Spanish bourgeoisie's moves to return to authoritarian rule.

Podemos did not capitulate because it was impossible to fight. Forty years after the Francoite regime collapsed amid mass struggles of the working class, there is deep opposition among workers in Spain and

across Europe to a return to dictatorship. The bloody 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War and the victory of Franco's fascist regime with military aid from Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, are not and cannot be forgotten. As hundreds of thousands of people marched in protests in Catalonia, Podemos had no lack of opportunities or resources to appeal to this opposition, but it chose not to.

This highlights the unbridgeable political and class gulf separating the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and Trotskyism from the petty-bourgeois populism of Podemos, theoretically rooted in a postmodernist rejection of Marxism by affluent layers of the middle class.

The ICFI called for a common struggle of Catalan and Spanish workers, and the entire European working class, against the danger of military rule by Madrid backed by the EU. It opposed Madrid's repression in Catalonia. Without backing Catalan nationalist calls for a separate Catalan capitalist state, which would aim to join the EU and the militarist NATO alliance, it insisted that the main danger was the return to authoritarian rule by Madrid and the EU. The way forward amid the collapse of Spanish and European bourgeois democracy, it stressed, was the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class against capitalism, war and authoritarian rule, and for socialism.

Podemos, on the other hand, is a bourgeois party that bases itself fundamentally on the same class axis as the PP: the defence of the political authority and territorial integrity of the Spanish capitalist state. This is why, in the final analysis, it has not fought for a policy separate from that of Rajoy. This is the content of the letter sent by Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias to the Podemos membership yesterday, amid reports that Podemos members are worried that its failure to more overtly attack the Catalan nationalists may lose it votes.

In the letter, Iglesias expresses concern that Felipe VI and the PP are not respecting the set-up created by the 1978 Transition from fascist to parliamentary rule. In the 1970s, the Francoite regime reacted to mass struggles in the working class by integrating the PSOE and the Stalinist Spanish Communist Party (PCE) into the fascist ruling elite, in exchange for strangling a working class revolution. But today, Iglesias complains, the ruling class is not giving Podemos or the Catalan bourgeois nationalists their share of the spoils.

He writes, "The monarchic bloc has the means of coercion it needs to carry out its plans. However, unlike what occurred 40 years ago, it lacks the political capacity for integration to make Spain a viable political and territorial reality in the medium to long term." Iglesias repeatedly states his frustration with the fact that his competitors have "mobilised their entire arsenal to prevent us from entering into the national government."

Asking, "Why we oppose the invoking of Article 155," Iglesias replies that "it will blow up one of the crucial deals of the Transition [the restoration of a republican institution like the Catalan Generalitat, recognised by the 1978 Constitution, was one of the bases of the broad social support for the constitution in Catalonia] ... Viceroy Rajoy wants to rule Catalonia, but he will meet resistance that he will be able to deal with only with repression and more jailings."

Podemos is well aware of the potential for both military dictatorship and mass popular opposition. Referring to Article 116 of the Spanish Constitution, which would create a state of siege suspending basic democratic rights in Spain, Iglesias writes: "Today, the path of 155 in Catalonia, which could well transform itself into the path of 116 if the government encounters citizens' resistance, could also lead to a reactionary offensive from the leading forces of the state."

Even faced with the danger of dictatorship, however, Iglesias insists that opposition be channelled within the existing state machine. He issues a pious wish that an "agreed referendum" be held on Catalan autonomy, with the support of both the Catalan regional government and Madrid. He attacks any appeal to traditions in the working class of opposition to

Francoism and Franco's overthrow of the Second Republic. He writes, "Spain has a democratic reserve of incalculable value, a Republican spirit that must quit being nostalgic in relation to symbols of the 20th century."

The arguments of Iglesias do not arm Spanish working people for militant opposition to the PP and the threat of military dictatorship. They trace out a path to capitulation. The "solution" that Podemos wants the Spanish government to adopt—agreeing to a referendum with Barcelona—is one that Madrid long ago rejected. Nor is the impotent policy Podemos has followed until now likely to convince Madrid to change course.

Remarkably, even as the post-Francoite regime in Madrid returns to its Francoite roots, Iglesias insists that workers not connect their struggles to the revolutionary traditions of the working class in the 20th century, as in the October 1917 Revolution and the Spanish Civil War.

Workers have no reason to obey Iglesias' command to bow to the 1978 Constitution. Its articles, which lay dormant for 40 years after being agreed upon by the fascists, the PSOE and Iglesias' own forebears in the PCE, are now paving the way for a return to dictatorship and raising the danger of a bloodbath by the Spanish army in Catalonia.

In the final analysis, the significance of the letter issued by Iglesias is, above all, what it says about Podemos itself. This party, which presented itself as a challenger to the political establishment and a champion of "democratic regeneration," is, in fact, part of the post-Transition set-up. The foundations of its policy, as Iglesias has outlined, are that reactionary deal that was based on the suppression of the working class through the combined action of fascism, social democracy and Stalinism and their petty-bourgeois allies like the Pabloite *Anticapitalistas*.

There will be powerful opposition in the working class in Spain and across Europe to this turn to dictatorship, of which mass protests now taking place in Barcelona are only an initial indication.

The critical question is the revolutionary perspective on which the working class can truly fight. A central lesson of the struggle thus far is that absolutely no confidence can be given to Podemos, a petty-bourgeois tool of the Spanish ruling class masquerading as a "radical left" party.

Its record has richly confirmed the analysis the ICFI made of Podemos at its foundation, warning: "Podemos (We Can), the new party led by academic and TV presenter Pablo Iglesias and initiated by the Anticapitalist Left (Izquierda Anticapitalista, IA), seeks above all to politically disarm the working class."



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