

Political turmoil in Spain following Catalan election

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Thursday's election in Catalonia threatens to entrench still further the division between separatist and pro-Spanish unity sentiment in the region, destabilising Spain and the European Union.

The Catalan nationalist parties—Together for Catalonia (JxCat), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and the Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP)—won a narrow majority of 70 seats in the 135-seat Catalan parliament, two fewer than in the previous election in 2015.

Their ability to form a coalition government by January 23 and hold an investiture vote by February 8 is placed in question by the inability of eight of the elected deputies to attend the parliament.

Five have fled abroad to avoid arrest following the invocation of Article 155 of Spain's Constitution by the right-wing Popular Party government of Mariano Rajoy in Madrid. They include deposed Catalan Premier Carles Puigdemont of JxCat, which is the largest separatist party after the election. Three others are political prisoners, languishing in jail, including deposed regional Vice-Premier Oriol Junqueras. This could leave the separatists six votes short of the necessary 68-vote majority.

For the first time, a pro-Spanish unity party, Ciutadans (Citizens), known as Ciudadanos in the rest of Spain, won the greatest number of votes, but fell short of the numbers needed to form a government. It and the other anti-separatist parties—the Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC) and the Popular Party (PPC)—won a combined total of 57 seats.

Catalonia en Comú (CeC)—the Catalan branch of the Podemos party, which claimed to be neutral between Spanish and Catalan nationalism, but which opposed the separatists' call for unilateral independence—won eight seats.

Article 155 was invoked by Rajoy, with the full backing of Citizens and the Socialist Party of Spain (PSOE), to suspend the Catalan government, arrest its leaders and impose Thursday's election in the hope of obtaining a pro-Spanish unity majority. This plan has backfired.

Speaking in Brussels, Puigdemont declared, "The Rajoy recipe has failed... The 155 has clearly lost the plebiscite." He ended by calling on Rajoy to take part in negotiations "without preconditions," while making yet another futile appeal to the European Union to intervene—despite it having supported Rajoy's crackdown through its insistence that the issue was an internal matter for Spain.

"We are proud that this is an issue that arouses the interest of the European institutions," Puigdemont declared. "I do not ask the European Commission to change its position, only to listen to the whole world, to listen to us in the same way that it listens to the Spanish government."

ERC General Secretary Marta Rovira also made an appeal for a negotiated resolution, tying calls for a government "in favour of the Republic as soon as possible" to the statement, "If Rajoy is a democrat, he has to assume this democratic mandate—one that accepts the electoral results. It is time for politics, dialogue and negotiation."

Rajoy will no doubt be under pressure to consider negotiations from some quarters, given the setback he has suffered. Rajoy's Catalan PPC is now a rump in the Catalan Congress, after an unprecedented collapse in support from 11 to 3 seats. Just 184,108 people, or 4.2 percent of the electorate, voted for a party hated by workers, whether supportive of separatism or not, especially for the brutal police crackdown during the October 1 Catalan independence referendum.

However, there is no indication of a climbdown on his part. The line taken has been to cite the fact that the separatists' overall share of the vote declined and that its reduced majority depends on rural seats with a smaller electorate than urban areas won by their political opponents.

Asked about Puigdemont's offer, Rajoy replied that the only person he [Rajoy] should sit down with is Inés Arrimadas, leader of Ciutadans, "who is the one who has won the elections."

"Catalonia is not monolithic, it is plural," he added. Only after insisting that the separatists did not speak for Catalonia did he suggest a new era "based on dialogue, not on confrontation...always within the framework of the law."

This was reinforced by references to the "judicial position" of some of the candidates elected, who, he insisted, must also be subject to the law. Rajoy has made repeated threats to invoke Article 155 and suspend the Catalan government if it dares to raise the independence issue again. More nationalists face being rounded up and thrown into jail for their activities leading up to the declaration of independence, including Rovira, former PDeCat (now JxCat) leader Artur Mas, Anna Gabriel (CUP) and Mireia Boyá (CUP).

The dramatic headway made by Citizens, a right-wing party that won 37 seats compared with just three in 2006, including in Spanish-speaking working-class areas, is a devastating indictment of the PSC and Podemos/CeC-Podem, which could make no significant appeal to any section of the working class, let alone advance a perspective for class unity.

The Socialist Party is as associated with Article 155 as the PP.

The fate of CeC, whose vote share fell by 2.5 percent, is primarily a response to its failure to organize any opposition to the PP's dictatorial policies either in Catalonia or the rest of Spain. Prior to the election, its spokesman, Xavier Domènech, made a show of advocating unity, not of the working class, but of different bourgeois forces in the form of a three-way coalition made up of the pro-independence ERC, the CeC and the Socialists.

"We are the key, so that people don't have to choose between one bloc or another," he boasted. "We are not going to play Russian roulette with our country..."

No one believes such a manoeuvre offers a genuine alternative.

Following the election, Domènech complained, "From these results I do not take any joy. They show a detriment of the progressive forces in favour of the right, which must lead to a deep reflection within the forces of the left." The reflections of such political bankrupts will produce nothing of value.

CUP leader Carles Riera had seen his party's vote almost halved, as voters rejected the most bellicose advocates of separatism. He combined expressions of disappointment with declarations that nothing had fundamentally changed: "Our pressure [on the larger separatist parties] has decreased with the loss of seats, but we will continue to exercise force in the negotiation. It is not a question of returning to autonomy, but of returning to the republic."

Riera said the CUP "will enforce" its goal of "building the republic unilaterally" since CUP "continues to have the key."

Elsa Artadi (JxCAT) replied that with "more than 2 million independentist votes, we have never had so many independence votes." She added, "We have to talk to the CUP, but we have a clear mandate."

The Catalan elections have not resolved the crisis engulfing Spain because only a fresh turn by the working class offers a way forward. An effective struggle against the PP government and its agenda of austerity, militarism and state repression requires a unified struggle by workers in Catalonia and throughout Spain on the basis of a revolutionary, socialist and internationalist perspective.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted on the day of the elections, "Against all attempts to pit Spanish and Catalan-speaking workers against each other, it is necessary to advance the struggle for power by the working class, the expropriation of the financial aristocracy, and the building of a workers' state in Spain as part of the United Socialist States of Europe."



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