

Spanish PM Rajoy seeks to prevent Catalan nationalists from forming government

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The January 17 deadline for Catalonia to form a government is rapidly approaching, after a coalition of nationalist parties narrowly won the December 21 regional election called by the Popular Party government in Madrid.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has made clear that his response to the marginal victory of the Catalan nationalist bloc (70 seats in the 135-seat parliament) is to step up his government's anti-democratic attacks.

Following the election, Rajoy warned that any incoming regional government controlled by the separatists would have to "signal its political priorities within the law"—i.e., renounce any separatist agenda. Otherwise, he would re-impose Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, depose the regional government and take control again as he did after the previous secessionist administration declared independence on October 26.

Rajoy is seeking to make it difficult, if not impossible, for the separatist parties to form an administration by preventing former premier Carles Puigdemont, former vice-premier Oriol Junqueras and other former regional ministers, who were re-elected but remain in jail or exile, from taking their seats.

In an end-of-year address, Rajoy demanded that the Catalan parliament convene on January 17 and appoint a new regional premier within 10 days. "I hope that as soon as possible we will be able to have a Catalan government that is open to dialogue and able to relate to all Catalans, not just half of them," Rajoy declared.

This demand was designed to put pressure on the secessionist parties—Together for Catalonia (JxCat), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) and the Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP)—which failed to present a joint slate for the election, as they had

previously, and remain divided over strategy. They are also in conflict over which of the main candidates for regional premier—Puigdemont for JxCat or Junqueras for ERC—should take the post.

The Catalan nationalists are repeating their calls for "dialogue." Their main concern has always been to extract concessions from the central government, similar to those already granted to the Basque region, in order to continue developing Catalonia as a low-tax and low-wage investment platform for the major corporations and banks.

Rajoy, however, again refused dialogue, saying the nationalists were responsible for "the greatest attack on our Constitution" and the "only shadow generating instability for our economy." He declared Puigdemont's "attempt to be premier of a region while living overseas" to be "absurd."

The prime minister calculates that eight of the 70 nationalist deputies will be absent from the new parliament, leaving them six deputies short of a majority and therefore unable to form an administration by the deadline. Puigdemont, Clara Ponsati, Meritxell Serret, Toni Comín and Lluís Puig remain exiled in Brussels, where they fled after the imposition of Article 155, and Junqueras, Jordi Sánchez and Joaquim Forn languish in preventative detention on charges of sedition, rebellion and embezzlement.

To ensure they are unable to attend the new parliament, Rajoy's Popular Party (PP) has intensified its judicial persecution. On Friday, Junqueras' request for bail was denied by the Supreme Court for the second time. It rejected his promise to abide by Article 155 and his pledges to carry out politics on the basis of "dialogue, negotiation and pacts," which he said was backed up by his "moral, personal and Christian" convictions. Instead, the court ruled that there was a

“relevant risk” of Junqueras reoffending, and “no element” was present to show he “has the intention of abandoning the path he’s followed up until now.”

The ruling was also as a warning to Puigdemont and the others in Brussels of their fate should they venture back to Spain.

The Catalan nationalists are now having to decide whether to replace six of the former ministers in exile or prison with other candidates on the December 21 election slate—adding to their prospects of long-term incarceration. The alternative is to hand the region over to a Citizens party-led government.

Citizens, a right-wing party opposed to separatism, emerged as the single largest party in December with 37 seats and 25 percent of the vote. It was able to attract votes from the Catalan party allied to the PP, the People’s Party of Catalonia (PPC), and exploit the hostility of large sections of the Spanish-speaking working class in Catalonia to the reactionary programme of the secessionists.

Rajoy made it clear in his end-of-year message that all his attention is on Citizens leader Inés Arrimadas, “who is the one who has won the election.” Arrimadas has revealed that the PPC and the Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC) have approached her to lead an “alternative” government, and that she has the support of Catalonia’s largest employers’ organisation, the Confederation of Business Organizations and Companies of Catalonia.

On January 17, the first battle in the newly constituted parliament will be over the election of its speaker and speaker’s committee, who set the agenda, oversee proceedings and interpret the rules of the chamber. The speaker has the power to decide who to propose for investiture as regional premier, which is open to any one of the 135 elected deputies.

JxCat is putting forward Puigdemont as regional premier, saying his investiture can take place remotely and he can participate in parliamentary debates via a video link. Citizens, supported by the PPC and the PSC, is also trying to take control of the speaker post and the speaker’s committee to prevent the investiture of Puigdemont or Junqueras, arguing that they cannot work effectively in exile or from jail.

Should the secessionists be unable to secure a majority, the eight deputies of Podemos-backed Catalonia in Common (CeC), led by Barcelona Mayor

Ada Colau, which claims to be neutral between Spanish and Catalan nationalism, will have to decide which bloc to support.

According to *El Confidencial*, “sources of the central government, Citizens and the PSC agree, in considering the battle for the speaker of the parliament, that the vote of the eight deputies of Catalonia in Common is vital. On this depends the future of the Catalan government and to a large extent that of Spanish politics.”

Arrimadas has made it clear that past reservations about cooperation with Podemos can be set aside, declaring, “With the Commons [CeC] we would have to speak, clearly. ... Any party that can contribute to stop the madness that is happening in Catalonia—the flight of companies, the social fracture, the reduction of investments—obviously will be welcome.”

Arrimadas continued, “Are you asking me to form a government? Man, it is going to be very complicated. But conversations to be able to unblock this situation, to be able to govern the Generalitat, so that they abstain at least ... of course they must [take place] ... Now, what will the Commons do? They have said ... that they will vote no to my investiture, but, hey, we’ll see ...”

As of the time of this writing, CeC remains silent on Arrimadas’ offer. However, Podemos has no principles in its pursuit of power. In Madrid it recently passed an austerity municipal budget with the support of PP councillors.

The PP’s repression against the separatists continues elsewhere. Altogether, 19 elected candidates are either in prison, on bail or in exile. They face charges that carry up to 30 years in prison. The Supreme Court plans to issue writs against a further 11 people linked to the deposed Catalan government for their part in organising last October’s independence referendum, including Marta Rovira (temporary leader of the ERC), Josep Lluís Trapero (former head of the Catalan regional police, the Mossos d’Esquadra) and Anna Gabriel and Mireia Boyá (former deputies of the CUP).



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