

# Direct Spanish rule to continue if exiled Catalan leader tries to govern from Belgium

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Spain's Popular Party (PP) Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has threatened to extend central government control of Catalonia if former regional premier Carles Puigdemont is reinstalled and attempts to rule from Belgium, where he is in self-imposed exile.

The new Catalan parliament meets today for the first time since the December 21 election, which saw a narrow victory for a coalition of nationalist parties. They will attempt, over the coming days, to reinstall Puigdemont as regional premier and head of a new nationalist government.

Because Puigdemont faces arrest and imprisonment on sedition and rebellion charges should he return to Spain, officials from his Together for Catalonia (JxCat) electoral alliance have suggested a swearing-in ceremony via video link from Belgium, or that someone substitutes for him in the parliament chamber.

Rajoy's PP government, which has launched one repressive measure after another to prevent any renewal of the "independence" process, is determined to prevent this happening. Speaking at the PP National Committee on Monday, Rajoy warned that the government will appeal "immediately" to the Constitutional Court if there are attempts to swear in Puigdemont as premier while he remains in Belgium. The court would then extend the use of Article 155 of the Constitution, invoked to take control of Catalonia and depose Puigdemont's secessionist administration after the declaration of independence on October 26.

"There is no margin to be premier at a distance, neither by delegation nor by another type of trap," Rajoy declared, before repeating that article 155 "will remain in force until the next premier takes office."

PP government spokesperson Íñigo Méndez de Vigo added, "Puigdemont is a fugitive from Spanish justice, and Catalonia has to start worrying about its own

problems, not his personal ones."

He went on to boast, "Slowly and inexorably the application of article 155 is becoming visible. There's no possibility of carrying out politics outside of the law. Sooner or later the weight of reality falls: [former regional justice minister] Carles Mundó has left politics, Carme Forcadell doesn't want to be speaker, Neus Lloveras is leaving the Association of Municipalities [for Independence], Jordi Sànchez [leader of the separatist lobby group Catalan National Assembly] recognises that the October 1 referendum was illegal."

Rajoy's attempt to bar Puigdemont was given added weight by the Catalan parliament's own lawyers, who published a report this week rejecting his investiture via video link and declaring his attendance at the debate "essential." The report said an investiture debate requires the "direct and personal" participation of the candidate, otherwise they could not fulfil their "statutory and regulatory function." It cast doubt on the permissibility of a substitute, saying that parliamentary rules only allow one for reasons of maternity or paternity, illness or "permanent disability"—and that neither Puigdemont, nor the other seven deputies in Belgium or in prison, fulfil those criteria.

Unless the rules are changed or waived, Puigdemont and the other seven deputies will be unable to take their seats or appoint substitutes. As a result, the nationalist coalition will be short of a majority in the parliament—they have 70 seats in the 135-seat chamber—opening up the possibility of a minority pro-Spanish unity administration headed by the right-wing Citizens party and supported by the Catalan Popular Party (PPC) and the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC).

Rajoy and the PP have been encouraged in their anti-democratic repressive measures by the abject

capitulation of the nationalists. In a series of inquisition-type confessions, the separatist leaders in preventative detention, charged with sedition and rebellion, pledged in court that they will not support calls for the unilateral independence of Catalonia. Last Thursday, former regional interior chief Joaquim Forn and the leaders of the separatist lobby groups Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and Òmnium, Jordi Sànchez, and Jordi Cuixart, attended a closed-door hearing in Spain's Supreme Court.

Sànchez (JxCat) and Forn (Republican Left of Catalonia, ERC), elected in the December election, said they would only take their seats in the parliament if their parties did not take a unilateral path to independence.

Cuixart declared that any referendum on Catalan independence would be valid only if it was called by the Spanish government. Forn said he did not renounce Catalan independence as an objective, but reassured the court that the only possible path to achieve it would be through a reform of the Spanish Constitution. He also said he would refuse the post of regional interior police chief if he were asked again.

All three are in pre-trial custody for their role in the September 20-21 protests, in which two Civil Guard patrol cars were vandalized. They are being framed up—accused of instigating the violence and therefore guilty of rebellion, which could lead to jail sentences of up to 30 years, even though video footage clearly shows them calling for demonstrators to keep calm and disperse.

Supreme Court judge Pablo Llerena also considers that Forn fostered these “violent events” because “the forces [he controlled] charged with public order favoured [them] and didn't deploy any action.”

Despite the promises to abide by the constitution and pleas to be set free, on Friday, Llerena ruled that Forn and Sánchez, along with fellow prisoner Oriol Junqueras—former vice regional premier and Leader of the ERC—would not be able to attend the opening of the Catalan parliament, declaring that only “this judge can resolve this conflict of constitutional interests.”

Llerena's authoritarian judicial decision means that the argument made by those in the media, government and the judiciary that the jailed nationalists could be released if they accepted the law is a fraud.

Another victim of the PP's repression is Artur Mas,

former regional premier of Catalonia from 2010 to 2016. Last week he resigned from the Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT), the main party in the JxCat alliance, saying he wants to focus on the charges against him, including his alleged role in the October 1 referendum and the November 2014 consultative referendum. Last year, Mas was banned from holding public office for two years, and has had assets seized, including his home, for disobeying the Constitutional Court's ban on the 2014 referendum.

The Catalan nationalist movement does not represent the interests of workers in Catalonia, but factions of the Catalan bourgeoisie seeking a more direct role in the exploitation of the working class. Without endorsing the programme of the Catalan nationalists, workers in Spain and throughout Europe must politically oppose the campaign of repression spearheaded by the PP and backed by the PSOE and Citizens.

The decapitation of the Catalan leadership confirms the warnings made by the WSWs ahead of the December 21 elections that the Spanish government's imposition of snap elections in Catalonia would give “voters the ‘choice’ to elect whatever government they wish, so long as it is the one Madrid wants.”

The turn to authoritarian forms of rule in Spain is an urgent warning to the working class. The Spanish ruling class is using the Catalan crisis and the unpopularity of the reactionary secessionist project to impose massive attacks on democratic rights and further austerity.

Treasury Minister Cristóbal Montoro has already sent a letter to 10 regions, including Catalonia, warning them of the risk of breaking the expenditure rule this year and demanding immediate budgetary cuts to comply with European Union demands.



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