

Catalan nationalists struggle to form government

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Although the nationalists narrowly held on to their absolute majority in the Catalan parliament in the December 21 regional election, they have been unable to appoint a regional premier and form a new government. If a new premier is not invested before the January 31 deadline, a new election must take place.

The crisis centres on the ban on five nationalist deputies being able to vote in the regional parliament—including former regional premier Carles Puigdemont, leader of Together for Catalonia (JxCat). The five fled to Belgium after the Catalan Parliament declared independence in October, fearing arrest after Popular Party (PP) Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy invoked Article 155 of the Constitution giving Madrid the power to directly administer regions. Sedition and rebellion charges led to the imprisonment of three deputies, including vice-premier Oriol Junqueras (Republican Left of Catalonia, ERC).

Rajoy had hoped to install pro-Spanish unity parties in power on December 21, but it backfired. He has since threatened to extend the use of Article 155 if a new government resurrects the “independence process.”

Although Catalan parliamentary regulations allowed the three imprisoned deputies to nominate proxies able to vote, lawyers say the same privilege cannot be extended to the five in exile without the Speaker’s committee changing the rules. As a result the nationalist bloc is reduced to 65, instead of 70, deputies in the 135 seat regional Parliament - three seat short of an absolute majority.

Last week, the nationalists managed to get the ERC’s Roger Torrent elected as Speaker, a post with the power to decide who to propose for investiture as regional premier. However, he only obtained a simple majority on the second ballot - beating by just nine votes José María Espejo-Saavedra candidate of the right wing anti-independence Citizens party, which won the largest

number of seats in the election.

The vote for speaker would have been an exact draw, exacerbating the constitutional crisis even further, had it not been for the abstention of nine deputies—eight from the Podemos-backed Catalonia in Common (CeC) and an unknown “renegade” from the pro-Spanish unity bloc comprising Citizens, the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC) and Popular Party (PPC).

On Monday, Torrent announced that, following discussions with all the Catalan parties, Puigdemont was “the only candidate” he was putting forward as regional premier even though he was “aware of his personal and legal situation.” Torrent justified his decision saying that Puigdemont is endorsed by JxCat and the ERC and that the Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP), which has four deputies, recognised his “legitimacy.”

He had asked for a meeting with Rajoy “to sit down to analyse and talk about the anomalous situation in the Catalan Parliament,” in which the “political rights” of the eight nationalist MPs were being “infringed.”

JxCat has proposed that Puigdemont’s investiture and participation in parliamentary debates could take place via a video link. The decision on this and whether the five deputies can appoint proxies was postponed on Tuesday by the Speaker’s Committee. Pro-unity parties claimed it was deliberately being delayed to a date as close as possible to January 31 to prevent them appealing to the Constitutional Court.

Puigdemont asserted, during a debate on Catalonia at the University of Copenhagen on Tuesday, that he could form a new government, declaring, “We will not surrender to authoritarianism despite Madrid’s threats...It’s time to end their oppression and find a political solution for Catalonia.”

He demanded that the PP government take the necessary measures so that he can return to Catalonia “safely”, with “complete tranquility and total normality” in order to be

invested.

PP ministers declared that this was out of the question. Home Secretary Juan Ignacio Zoido vowed, “Justice will be done with Carles Puigdemont” and that Spanish security forces were “working on the problem.”

“Although there are a lot of country paths and you can get in by boat, in helicopter or in a microlight, we are working towards that not happening... so that Puigdemont can’t even get back in in the boot of a car,” he boasted.

PP government spokesperson Inigo Mendez de Vigo snapped, “He won’t be president” and would not be allowed to vote and rule via a video link from Belgium. If the situation remained stuck, a fresh regional election would be called in Catalonia. “This is not what we want but that’s what will happen if they (nationalists) act outside the law.”

Reports suggest the PP government will lodge an express appeal to the Constitutional Court should the Speaker’s Committee authorise a video link.

The PSC has also threatened an appeal to the Constitutional Court if Puigdemont is elected. Spokesperson Eva Granados declared, “Lawyers have unanimously stated that a tele-investiture cannot be produced... We cannot accept a debate with someone who has decided not to come to the investiture debate.”

Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias also insisted that Puigdemont cannot be premier saying “It does not seem sensible that someone from Brussels can be president of the Government of Catalonia.” Catalonia in Common would abstain in the vote for the “independentistas or constitutionalists... We are not going to support either one or the other.”

Podemos had sought a government agreement “between progressives”—ERC, PSC and themselves, he said.

Podemos is pursuing a case through the Constitutional Court to get the use of Article 155 illegalised.

Citizens leader Inés Arrimadas criticised Podemos bitterly for abstaining in the vote for Speaker and scuppering any chance of her party’s candidate, Espejo-Saavedra. She declared, “The only impediment to not having a premier is that the Podemos gentlemen have decided to side with the independence fighters.”

“There are still arithmetical options for the Parliament to be chaired by the party that has won the elections [i.e., Citizens],” she claimed.

The pro-unity forces may have little to fear. It seems behind the scenes there are moves to jettison Puigdemont. While Puigdemont was in Denmark, Supreme Court Judge Pablo Llarena appeared not to want to jeopardise

those moves. He turned down a request from the Public Prosecutor to reactivate an arrest warrant against Puigdemont, ruling that he preferred to wait until “a time when the constitutional order and the normal functioning of parliament are not affected” to issue a new warrant.

Former PSOE secretary general, Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, after declaring that “Puigdemont will not be president” because “the unilateral path has died and everyone knows it,” insisted that in reality none of the nationalist parties want to put at risk their narrow majority in a new election.

On Monday, when asked if the ERC will support the remote investiture of Puigdemont, ERC spokesperson, Sergi Sabrià, said the party would only take a final decision when JxCat reveals how it plans to carry it out. “So far there have been different opinions, and when everything is clear we can talk about certainties and not hypotheses,” Sabrià said.

ERC deputy spokesperson, Gabriel Rufián, went further, revealing that the party had a “plan B” for Junqueras to be put forward as candidate for the premiership.

The leadership of the CUP, which has a deciding vote with its four deputies, will discuss on Saturday whether to support Puigdemont based on whether he will resume the push for independence.

CUP deputy Natàlia Sànchez also complained on Tuesday that JxCat’s lack of “clear information” about how it is planning to invest Puigdemont did not help to “weave trust.” “Not having all the elements does not help make the decision,” she added.

Sànchez said support for Puigdemont depends on whether he will “deploy the Catalan republic or intends to carry out a political action for an autonomist [rather than independentist] legislature.” “All scenarios are open.”



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