

Spanish court bars Catalan regional premier from holding public office

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Last week, Spain's Supreme Court upheld an 18-month ban from public office and a €30,000 fine imposed on right-wing Catalan regional premier Quim Torra after the Catalan High Court convicted him of disobedience charges last December.

The decision was widely anticipated. According to the 133-page ruling, Torra disobeyed the Central Electoral Body (CEB) in an "intractable and stubborn" manner, by putting up a banner on a Catalan government building that read "Free political prisoners." He then refused to take it down after being requested to do so by the CEB.

For the second time in three years, an elected Catalan premier has been ousted on bogus grounds by concerted efforts of the Spanish political establishment, the courts and the police. In October 2017, the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government of Mariano Rajoy had removed Carles Puigdemont and the entire Catalan government from office, with the support of the Socialist Party (PSOE) and Podemos. It used article 155 of the Constitution, claiming Puigdemont had violated the law by holding a Catalan independence referendum.

Regardless of who holds power in Madrid—whether the PP or, as now, the PSOE and the "left populist" Podemos party—the ruling class pursues the same agenda. It uses the Catalan national question to shift politics to the right, build a police state, and promote far-right forces. In this, it must be said, the bankruptcy and reactionary role of Catalan nationalism only helps Madrid in this campaign.

The Supreme Court dismissed an appeal by Torra's lawyer, based on the argument that a person can only be deprived of public office and political participation after committing a serious crime. It also ruled that it is itself an "impartial court," even when many of the Supreme Court judges sitting in the case had sat on the

Catalan referendum leaders' trial.

In this trial, it sentenced nine Catalan political leaders to between nine and 13 years in prison for charges of sedition and misuse of public funds. Torra's banner, "free the political prisoners," tried to appeal to widespread anger in Catalonia over the dictatorial policies of the Spanish central government, backed by the European Union (EU).

The main architects of this repression have been the PSOE and Podemos. The PSOE, its ministers and Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez have supported the Supreme Court's decision, demanding Torra call for new elections in the region. They described his removal from office as "opening a new period for Catalonia."

Podemos has virtually remained silent, except for the Podemos spokesperson in parliament, Jaume Asens. He absolved Podemos, claiming this was part of a right-wing operation, calling the decision "absurd" and that the resulting "unjust" sentence is but one of many "more unjust sentences" of a judiciary "kidnapped by the right."

Podemos' position was exposed in the Basque regional parliament, however, when the Basque nationalist parties PNV and Bildu attempted to get the "left populists" to back a joint statement defending Torra. The document called on the Spanish state to "stop criminalizing legitimate political demands and respect the exercise of fundamental rights and basic freedoms." However, Podemos refused to sign.

In fact, Podemos participated in the anti-Catalan campaign from the beginning. It supported the show trial of Catalan secessionist leaders and then called on the Spanish people to accept their sentencing to lengthy prison terms for organising peaceful protests. They supported the brutal police crackdown on mass protests against the show trial last year, which left hundreds

injured.

Last year, Podemos leader and current Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias pledged “full loyalty” to the PSOE on all state questions, including state repression in Catalonia. Once the Catalan leaders were handed their draconian sentences, and as the streets of major cities in Catalonia filled with tens of thousands of demonstrators, Iglesias said: “Everyone must abide by the law and accept the verdict.”

Torra pointedly noted the role of the PSOE-Podemos government after his removal from office, asking: “Where are the airs of democracy and justice that were supposed to come from the most progressive left-wing government in history?”

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is unequivocally hostile to Catalan nationalism and the Catalan regional government. This institution was inserted into the Spanish political system during the Transition to parliamentary democracy following the death of fascist dictator general Francisco Franco in 1975. It was part of the sordid deal done between the Francoites and the Stalinists, social democrats and Catalan nationalists to block a socialist revolution by the working class.

The pro-capitalist, bourgeois-separatist agenda of the Catalan nationalists aims to divide workers across Spain on national lines. Their support for NATO, the European Union and the implementation of austerity underlines their hostility to the working class. Indeed, Torra, while he worked as a right-wing journalist before becoming premier, wrote pieces in defence of Catalan nationalist death squads which killed militant workers in the 1930s.

The removal of elected figures like Torra must nonetheless be opposed. This brazen violation of democratic principles is part of a broader anti-Catalan campaign that strengthens a police apparatus aimed above all at the working class. This is the manifestation in Spain of a drive by capitalist governments internationally towards police-state rule against an upsurge of the class struggle, and that has only intensified after the outbreak of the pandemic.

The Catalan nationalists cannot and will not oppose this repression, as they fear the working class more than they do a police state in Madrid.

Torra’s own Together for Catalonia (JxCat) and the Catalan Republican Left (ERC), the party of the new

caretaker regional premier, Pere Aragonès, have de facto accepted the ruling against Torra. They will call elections for February 2021. Torra will also try to appeal to the EU, which has already backed Madrid’s anti-Catalan campaign.

Protests broke out last week, gathering around 1,000 people in Barcelona, far from the hundreds of thousands in the past years. A few bins were burnt and pigs’ heads thrown at the police.

The Catalan nationalists decided not to call mass protests. The pseudo-left Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP) have been key to this demobilisation. A CUP lawmaker in parliament appealed for a new “strategic agreement” with the main Catalan bourgeois parties, offering them a “national and political agreement” to build a new unity of secessionist forces to “force the state to accept a democratic resolution.”

In fact, they fear anything tapping into social anger that could erupt outside of their control—like Podemos itself, which recently cancelled demonstrations it had called amid mounting protests against the right-wing Madrid regional government’s herd immunity policy.

The CUP itself advances a completely demoralized line. One former CUP lawmaker, Benet Salellas, told *El Confidencial* it is hard to “assess the situation in this context” of COVID-19, “but I think we are facing a change in the cycle due to the perception that the mobilisations are having very little impact on the state.”



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