

# Spain: Podemos and the Catalan independence process

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## Introduction

The rise of Podemos in the Spanish state — and of its counterpart Podem in Catalonia — has presented a new challenge to both the Catalan independence movement and to the traditional left in that subordinated national component of the Spanish state.

Pablo Iglesias and other Podemos leaders, while indicating sympathy for self-determination of Catalonia, do not support its independence.

A key issue now on the agenda in Catalonia is how to combine the social emancipatory perspective of Podem/Podemos with the ascendant popular support for sovereignty or independence as registered last November 9 in a referendum that was opposed by the central government in Madrid.

In the following article a leading participant in the revolutionary Marxist left in Catalonia, Josep Maria Antentas, suggests that the new context requires a recalibration of strategy of both the independence movement (which he supports) and the social layers primarily influenced by Podem/Podemos around a mutual strategy that combines support for self-determination of Catalonia and other national components of the existing state with a democratic and progressive social agenda.

This strategic orientation and alliance, if successful, would defeat the two-party centre-right governing coalition in Catalonia headed by Artur Mas's Liberal party CDC and the Catalan independence party ERC, which currently stands as an obstacle to the further progress of the independence movement. And the establishment of a progressive independent republic in Catalonia could help to smash the remaining pillars of the post-Francoist central state as constituted by the Regime of 1978, which restored the monarchy and has been dominated up to now by the neoliberal alternance in government of the right-wing People's Party (currently led by Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy) and the social-democratic Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), led by Pedro Sánchez.

Josep Maria Antentas suggests that the appropriate approach in the forthcoming Catalan elections, now scheduled for September 27, is to focus on pluralistic multiparty support for the constitution of a democratic and progressive Catalan Republic while leaving open the nature of the future relationship of this and other potential national republics with a possible reconstituted form of the Spanish state.

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The emergence of Podemos has politically awakened a section of the Catalan people that is, in its majority, outside of (which does not mean opposed to) the political and social imaginary of the independentist process and the image and representation that it has outlined of Catalonia, one that is less heterogeneous as far as national identities are concerned than it really is.

This Catalonia, in fact, has been losing its protagonistic character since the workers' movement broke up as a central political and social actor, to be replaced by other social movements with greater weight in the middle classes in the full meaning of the term. Suddenly there has appeared a more diverse Catalonia, which in some ways had already burst abruptly into the public squares in the course of the anti-austerity movement, providing a more complex image of what the country is, of its political system, and of the political alignments of its popular layers.

It was a Catalonia that has not been represented up to now (or which had been represented by forces in decline and unreported), led by an alternative and rising political instrument. And indirectly it has complicated even further the political strategy to be followed by the popular forces, which have a complex interaction between the social and the national and a complicated political architecture to devise as to which identities it refers.

A homogeneous people does not exist, nor does a linear "popular unity." There is a diverse and heterogeneous people, whose collective identity is under construction and which, in so far as its national identity and its relation with the independentist process are concerned, has diverse inclinations or feelings. It was this "people" who enthusiastically attended the meeting with Pablo Iglesias in the Vall d'Hebron in Barcelona last December 21, like those who participated in the massive actions in the neighborhoods and cities by Teresa Forcades [1] and Arcadio Oliveres [2], or those who identify with David Fernández. [3] This is definitely a people who cannot be reduced to monolithic representations of "popular unity."

An image of an overly homogenous "people," at the decisive moment, can lead to representing what is politically a minority of this people, taking the part for the whole without generating an attractive pole, a sufficiently powerful magnet to serve as the nodal point of a majoritarian bloc that allows a collective congregation around a coherent but plural project in its (self-)representations.

How are we to synthesize politically the popular bloc that today looks to divergent possible futures and that remains partially divided as to its identification with the independentist project? This synthesis, as complex as it is essential, difficult but full of potential, is the winning formula in Catalonia. It is the equation that can defeat Mas and, at the same time, maintain the sovereigntist challenge in order to deal a well-aimed and perhaps decisive blow to the regime that Rajoy and Pedro Sánchez hope to keep afloat.

On the contrary, the risk to be avoided, and which has no future, is one of a fracture of the Catalan popular layers at the base of the sovereigntist process that results in a dual situation with no way out: on the one hand, a minority alternative left (CUP, the sectors more to the left of ERC, etc.) within a sovereigntist bloc (with a political and electoral majority precariously united in everything else), led by CDC and the ERC leadership; on the other hand, a democratic and anti-austerity pole, represented by Podem [4], outside of the sovereigntist process and, despite its electoral relevance, without the capacity to have a political and electoral majority in Catalonia. That is the two-part losing formula, the formula that drives a bifurcated lethal spear into the heart of the strategy, provoking a political infarction with a tragic ending.

The synthesis perspective consists of defending after September 27 the realization of an act of effective sovereignty, both formal and substantive, by the Parliament of Catalonia, that breaks with the legality of the 1978 framework but without prefiguring the final result in so far as it refers to the

relations between Catalonia and the Spanish state. That is, the opening of a Catalan constituent process that lays the bases for a new institutional framework and a new Catalan Republic, whose relationship to the Spanish state is to be discussed at the end of that process.

Those within the popular and working classes who have an independentist horizon, and those who do not, can now come together around the need for an act of unilateral sovereignty and the proclamation of a distinct Republic, an act that would have a dual consequence. First, it would open the door to discussing what model of country we want, in Catalonia, and therefore to “decide everything,” precisely what Mas does not want. Second, it would pose an unprecedented institutional challenge to the legal framework of 1978 and the Rajoy government, and substantively take a further step forward along the path expressed on November 9.

The correlation of that focus must be to insert the opening of a Catalan constituent process within the perspective of initiating on a state-wide scale particular national and sovereign constituent processes, and feedback processes, to put an end to the Regime of 1978. A Catalan constituent process is neither subsidiary to nor dependent on one that is Spanish, nor is it something that ignores what is happening in the state as a whole. To the contrary, a strategic articulation of the various sovereignties is what can help to smash the pillars that are still standing of the battered post-Francoist political and institutional framework.

Podemos and the independentist process pose a challenge to each other. On the one hand, Podemos is forced to a dual challenge. In the first place, to build a national-popular project in the state as a whole, compatible with a plurinational conception of what is now the Spanish state, with the right to self-determination of the distinct nations that are its components, and in the absence of any hierarchical, political or symbolic relationship among them. This necessarily implies a clear defense of the right of the Catalan people to decide, the guarantee of a binding referendum if it comes to govern the state, and above all the acceptance of the right (which does not necessarily imply agreeing with the exercise that is made of it) of the people of Catalonia to decide unilaterally their future given the impossibility of doing so now in a legal referendum under a mutually agreed process.

Secondly, in Catalonia Podem has to construct its own project, which inevitably must root itself in Catalanismo and relate (in order to attract them) to a sector of the social bases in the independentist process, beginning with those of an ERC that is having growing difficulties in justifying to a portion of its electorate its permanent subordination to Mas. Between backing the independentist process and moving only outside of its confines there is space for a relevant force in Catalonia, but not for one that aspires to be the prop of a winning majority.

On the other hand, Podemos and Podem propose to the independentist process, and to their principal political and social protagonists, beginning with the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), the need to dialogue with an emerging political movement that crystallizes the discontent in a sense distinct from that of independentism. Podem galvanizes a social sector that is (at least partially) outside the independentist process (but that does not recognize itself in the Spain of Rajoy and Sánchez) and, at the same time, it speaks to sectors within that process that might swing away from it given the new possibilities of change offered by Podemos.

The new Catalan and Spanish political context forces a reposing of objectives and strategies for the independentist movement. The first and most important is to widen its popular social base, which is impossible without inserting an explicit social dimension in the movement, breaking with the strategic taboo that has led to doing precisely the contrary. The second is to be able to articulate a dialectical vision between a dynamic of accumulation of forces peculiar to Catalonia and the break at the state level from the institutional framework of the Regime of 1978, looking for mutual synergies

and support through the defence of sovereign constituent processes. Unfortunately, both tasks have shone by their absence in the debate of recent months, which has been ridiculously centred around the advisability or not of a single independentist list on September 27, starkly illustrating the strategic limits of the approach of the ANC and the independentist mainstream. Very big challenges on the one hand, but strategic small-mindedness on the other. A bad combination, for sure.

With elections having been called for next September 27, the challenge is to put together a successful popular bloc that breaks with the Mas-ERC coalition. One that puts another alternative on the table, that points to new possibilities. This means breaking from the political and discursive framework fixed by Mas (and the other central actors of Catalan politics), but without pretending to play yet some other game or to stand alongside them but rather to reformulate the debate on independence and sovereignty, carrying those concepts to the end, drawing on the democratic thread, extending them to cover all spheres and thus proposing a democratic and participatory Catalan constituent horizon as a framework for shared convergence of all the processes of change.

Right to decide? Of course, but on all subjects, beginning with economic policy. Independence and sovereignty? Yes of course, but then let us talk about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Plebiscitary elections? Why not. But on all issues, not only on independence. On Mas himself, on the cutbacks, on austerity, on corruption.

With that focus, the possible futures, now bifurcated, can begin to be convergent. And from that point on there is no reason to limit the scope of our dreams or our confidence in our options.

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\*<http://blogs.publico.es/dominiopublico/12899/podemos-y-el-proceso-independentista-catalan/>

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## Footnotes

[1] Teresa Forcades is a Catalan physician, Benedictine nun, and prominent social activist and supporter of Catalan independence.

[2] Arcadio Oliveres is an economist, Christian activist, advocate of degrowth, and co-founder, with Teresa Forcades, of a popular platform for the secession of Catalonia.

[3] David Fernández is a member of the Catalan parliament representing the alternative left and radical independence party Popular Unity Candidates (Candidatura d'Unitat Popular, CUP).

[4] Podem is the Catalan counterpart of Podemos.