

Battlelines set for Catalonia's election showdown - What is at stake?

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About 1 million people protest in Barcelona on November 11 to demand freedom for the political prisoners.

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The December 21 election in Catalonia will not only decide if pro-independence forces can return to administer this region of the Spanish state: it will also decide if the Spanish state's own underlying crisis of legitimacy intensifies or starts to fade.

In essence, the election will be a plebiscite on the central Spanish government's takeover of the Catalan government under article 155 of the Spanish constitution and whether a majority think Catalonia has a right to decide its relation to the Spanish state.

The beheading of Catalonia's elected government by the Spanish state's People's Party (PP) government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy was voted by the Spanish senate on October 27. That day, the Catalan parliament declared independence following the 90% vote in favour at the October 1 referendum.

If the election, called by Rajoy as part of the article 155 intervention, returns a majority to the parties supporting the "155 bloc" of the PP, Citizens and the Party of Socialists of Catalonia (PSC), then Spanish unionism will score a very big win.

It will have somewhere found the 200,000 to 250,000 extra votes needed to overtake the combined vote from 2015 of the three pro-independence tickets: Together For Catalonia (led by exiled president Carles Puigdemont), the centre-left Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), and the anti-capitalist People's Unity List (CUP).

Achieving that goal will require taking the already record-high voter participation rate of 75.95% from 2015 to more than 80%.

Regardless of what government coalition emerges from such a result, it would be a setback for the independence movement. The Catalan Republic, already robbed of state resources by the Rajoy coup, would be reduced to a mere aspiration with a long to-do list for the indefinite future.

For its part, the PP would use such a result to insist no "territorial reform" — which it promised to get the social democratic Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) to support its Catalan intervention — was actually needed.

Rather, Rajoy's party would be freed to better fight on its right wing, against the ultra-centralists of Citizens that preaches an even harsher war on "nationalism".

But if the pro-independence forces repeat the majority won in 2015, the illegitimacy of the Rajoy government's article 155 operation will become undeniable. As the 2015 elections were presented as a "plebiscite" on whether to support a referendum on independence, a repeat majority would give fresh legitimacy to the stance of the pro-independence forces.

In that situation, even the European powers that have so far backed the Spanish government would find it hard to keep supporting Madrid. If the pro-independence parties win a majority of outright votes as well as seats, it would prove even harder.

Starting point

With so much at stake, it is not surprising that the main spokesperson for the unionist case in a "regional" election campaign is Rajoy — backed by a scrum of ministers and a Spanish media already on a war footing.

Although the campaign does not officially start until December 6, Rajoy has already made his first campaign visit to Catalonia. He told a November 12 PP meeting to announce candidates that he had exhausted all avenues before invoking article 155.

The Spanish PM added: "We want to recover the Catalonia of everyone in democracy and freedom, and we'll be able to achieve it if the silent majority turns its voice into vote. That silent and silenced majority has come out onto the street in recent weeks and shown the world its desire for harmony and social cohesion."

However, if the hundreds of thousands of unionists ("constitutionalists" in their own eyes) who marched against Catalan independence in Barcelona on October 8 and 29 are largely people who already vote for unionist parties, Rajoy's problem is not solved.

That is because his "silent and silenced majority" is actually a minority.

In the 2015 elections, the unionist vote was 39.11% against the pro-independence vote of 47.8%. The remaining 13.09% was spread between Catalonia Yes We Can (which includes pro- and anti-independence positions and won 8.94%), parties that didn't win seats and informal votes.

Moreover, the past two months of polling show, at most, only a slight swing in favour of unionism.

On average, the seven surveys taken since September 15 have the pro-independence parties falling from the 72 seats they won in 2015 to 67 seats (one short of a majority). The average results have unionist parties' total rising from 52 to 55.

The balance is held by Catalunya en Comu (CeC, Catalonia Together), successor to the 2015 ticket Catalonia Of Course We Can (CSQEP), which increases from 11 seats to 13.

Compared to 2015, the position of the parties that recognise a Catalan right to decide (the pro-sovereignty bloc that opposes the Rajoy government's intervention) worsens little compared to the article 155 bloc — from 83-52 to 80-55.

Fear campaign from hell

The core unionist strategy to break this impasse is the mother of all fear campaigns. It aims primarily at the only available pool of voters large enough to make the difference — the million-plus sector that usually don't vote in Catalan elections.

They will be bombarded with the message that a vote for the pro-independence parties or the CeC will bring economic disaster, job losses, the destruction of social welfare and entrenched discrimination against Spanish-speakers.

It will be repeated that the 1800 firms that have shifted their headquarters out of the region since early September will not return until "normality" is achieved under a unionist government. Otherwise, an "uncertain political outlook" will also put off foreign investment and tourists.

PP spokespeople have also made it clear that, even if the pro-independence forces win on December 21, the article 155 intervention will remain in place. The purse strings will be pulled from Madrid, with the Catalan parliament reduced to a talk shop. The agenda of "reforming" Catalan education and public media will proceed.

The nastiest aspect will be the Big Lie that, with the independence forces in charge, Catalonia's Spanish-speaking neighbourhoods will become second-class citizens cut off from the Spanish homeland.

Without such lies, unionism has only one half-credible — but still basically untrue — line of attack: that the independence movement's 18-month "road map" to independence was unattainable and seeking to meet it meant the needs of ordinary citizens had to be sacrificed.

The pro-independence camp faces the elections with eight Catalan ministers in preventive detention without bail under National High Court orders, and Puigdemont and four other ministers in exile in Belgium awaiting an extradition hearing.

At the same time, Jordi Sanchez and Jordi Cuixart, presidents of the main Catalan mass pro-independence associations, the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and Omnium Cultural, have been in detention without bail for more than a month.

The members of the Catalan parliament's speakership panel who allowed the independence vote to go ahead are presently free on bail that ranges from €150,000 for speaker Carme Forcadell to €25,000 for the other three members.

Their case was heard by the Supreme Court. As of November 16, there were several media reports that Supreme Court judge Pablo Llarena will take over all cases to do with the alleged "rebellion", "sedition" and "misappropriations of public funds" with which the jailed and bailed Catalan officeholders have been charged.

The aim is to get them released before their ongoing imprisonment — condemned by Amnesty International and 100 Spanish legal academics — does serious damage to the unionist campaign. Some could become especially embarrassing in the case of those detained who are candidates for December 21.

The million-strong November 11 demonstration in Barcelona in support of the Catalan political prisoners would only have increased the pressure on Spain's "independent judiciary" to find a way to neutralise this situation.

Pro-independence tickets

Despite pressure to construct a single broad pro-independence list for December 21, the pro-independence forces will be running three tickets. Two of these, those of the ERC and the CUP, will repeat their recipe of recent elections of having their party list augmented by minor parties and sympathetic independents.

By contrast, Puigdemont's ticket Together for Catalonia will not basically be a PDECat list at all, but a "president's ticket" made up by as many prominent figures from the independence movement as possible. Puigdemont's biggest "catch" to date is Jordi Sanchez, who will resign as ANC president to take up the number two position on the Together For Catalonia ticket for Barcelona.

The underlying cause of the failure to create a single ticket is the leftward shift in Catalan society in recent years alongside the rise of the independence movement. This has been particularly marked over the past two years of the Puigdemont government.

The main reflection in politics has been the displacement of PDECat by ERC as the leading pro-independence party. Recent polls show the ERC winning up to three times as many seats as its more conservative ally and rival.

It is not clear, given the big social differences within the independence camp, that a single ticket would necessarily win more votes than separate tickets — providing the struggle for hegemony within the pro-independence forces is kept within limits.

All three forces are aware of this danger. It is likely they will all present themselves as separate members of a common front.

Such a front's five-point program would be: rejection of the article 155 intervention; recovery of Catalan institutions; release of the political prisoners; withdrawal of the 12,000 Civil Guards and Spanish National Police in Catalonia; and the launching of a constituent process for the Catalan Republic.

Other wars

In the midst of the war to the death between unionism and the independence forces, Catalunya en Comu (CeC) faces a difficult task in increasing the 9% vote won by its predecessor, CQSEP, in 2015.

Polls show support for it increasing only slightly. This is despite CeC having the added support of Barcelona en Comu (BeC) and Barcelona mayor Ada Colau, and despite being led by Xavier Domènech, previously leader of the largest Catalan force in the Spanish parliament, En Comu Podem.

CeC's problem is that its line of "overcoming the dynamic of blocs" in the name of social struggle risks of alienating one or the other side in the struggle over Catalan national rights.

The dilemma showed last week when BeC held a membership ballot on whether it should continue its ruling alliance with the unionist PSC in Barcelona Council. The membership voted 54%-46% to break with the PSC, leading to PSC claims that Colau was now aligning BeC with the independence forces.

Yet, at the same time, the independence forces criticised Colau for refusing to recognise the October

27 declaration of independence, with the mayor insisting that only a referendum negotiated with the Spanish state would be valid.

Another struggle is that between the PSC, which is losing control of major towns as a result of its support for Rajoy's intervention, and Citizens over which is the more resolute opponent of independence.

As it loses the very last remnants of its "Catalanism", the PSC — once hegemonic on the left — is being reduced to hunting for votes in the darkest places. The most deplorable example is its deal with the homosexual-bashing UDC to put former UDC leader Ramon Espalader at number three on the PSC's Barcelona ticket.

Such tussles, however, are sideshows compared to the clash between the unionist and pro-independence camps. On the outcome of that war hangs the immediate future for democracy and social justice in Catalonia — and the Spanish state as a whole.

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P.S.

* <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/battlelines-set-catalonias-election-showdown>

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