

Catalonia: Hundreds of thousands protest for release of prisoners

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Police figures show 315,000 protesters took to the streets, while organizers state that attendance is at 750,000.

Nearly six months to the day have passed since the imprisonment of the grassroots pro-independence activists Jordi Cuixart and Jordi Sànchez, the last presidential candidate. They were arrested by the Spanish police for their roles in the independence roadmap of Catalonia. To mark the occasion, a platform made up of various organizations in favor of Catalan state called for a march to take place on April 15, in the heart of Barcelona. Police figures claim that 315,000 were in attendance, while organizers count around 750,000 protesters.

Those in prison or abroad

Since the incarceration of Cuixart and Sànchez, other members of the pro-independence movement have been detained and sentenced to preventive incarceration. These include the deposed vice-president Oriol Junqueras, and Jordi Turull, who was briefly a candidate for presidency before his second arrest. Other Catalan leaders held in custody include additional dismissed cabinet members Joaquim Forn, Josep Rull, Raül Romeva, and Dolors Bassa, as well as former parliament speaker Carme Forcadell.

Meanwhile, other members of pro-independence parties, such as the deposed president Carles Puigdemont himself, Anna Gabriel, Marta Rovira, Meritxell Serret, Lluís Puig, Clara Ponsatí and Toni Comín are abroad, as they've stated they fear that they will not receive a fair trial in Spanish courts should they return. The April 15 protest is also to demand they be able to return home.

"We want them home"

According to two of the bodies behind the protest, Òmnium Cultural and the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), there are already more than 900 coaches that brought pro-independence supporters to the Catalan capital on Sunday. Demonstrators marched under the motto 'For rights and freedoms, for democracy and cohesion, we want them home.' The starting point was Plaça Espanya, a busy hub in the Catalan capital. Protesters then headed down Paral·lel Avenue in the direction of the sea.

The platform behind Sunday's march goes by the name of l'Espai Democràcia i Convivència (the Space for Democracy and Co-existence), and is formed by a number of groups, aside from pro-independence Òmnium and ANC. These include trade unions, parents' associations, actors' associations, youth groups and more. Among the trade unions are CCOO (the Workers' Commission) and UGT (the General Union of Workers,) the main ones in the country.

Major protests

Since the first imprisonments were made, many mass demonstrations have been called, drawing thousands of pro-independence supporters to the Catalan capital on a regular basis. On March 11, 45,000 people took to the streets demanding the release of jailed Catalan leaders, and then again, after Puigdemont was arrested, thousands protested in Barcelona and beyond.

In December last year, pro-independence supporters even arrived as far as Brussels to get their voices heard, where 45,000 people marched through the Belgian capital's streets, according to local police. One of the more notable demonstrations took place in November last year, when 750,000 people filled Marina Avenue in Barcelona.

Aside from recent protests called in response to the ongoing political situation in the country, Òmnium and ANC are the organizations behind the annual mass march that takes place every September 11 in Catalonia. It falls on the day when the country lost its independence to Spain in the 1714 War of Succession against the Spanish army. Last year, one million people gathered in Barcelona to show their support for an independent Catalan state, according to police figures.

Prison as prevention

Before their incarcerations, Cuixart and Sànchez were presidents of Òmnium and ANC respectively. Now Sànchez is the presidential candidate for Junts per Catalunya (JxCat), the candidacy of deposed president Carles Puigdemont. His investiture debate was set for Friday, around one month after the first attempt to swear him in as president of Catalonia. But a judge blocked it. Both Cuixart and Sànchez face charges of rebellion, which can carry a prison sentence of up to 30 years.

High spirits

Singing and chanting in the streets carried on after the protest had officially come to an end. The crowds were in high spirits, with many people wearing yellow t-shirts as a sign of solidarity with jailed Catalan leaders. The 'estelada', the pro-independence Catalan flag, could be seen all the way along the route of the march, and even beyond in the side streets of the capital, where many protesters also congregated.

'Us volem a casa', or we want you home, was the main motto of the demonstration, as people took to the streets in force to demand the release of Catalan officials.

"Spain is infringing our fundamental rights, it's infringing the rights of the people that are in jail, and the Spanish government and Spanish judiciary is infringing the rights of all the people who voted for pro-independence forces," said Hector Lopez Bofill, one protester attending Sunday's march.

"We are here once again to say that we want democracy," said Goretta Salvat Usach, another pro-independence demonstrator.

For Martí Puig, the protest was a show of support for "freedom of speech" and "the right to decide our future."

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