

Article 155 in Catalonia: Spain's new laws turn peaceful protesters into terrorists

Sunday 3 June 2018, by [BERNAT Ignasi](#), [WHYTE David](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2018).

Ignasi Bernat and David Whyte report that Spanish central government has introduced new police powers to crack down on radical movements in Catalonia.

Over the past two weeks, Catalonia has witnessed the arrests and court summons of 128 political activists, signalling a major escalation of the use of the Spanish state's imposition of article 155 powers that it used to impose direct rule. You will not have seen this reported in the international press, since most of the recent arrests are not of well known politicians or internationally recognised campaigners. They are ordinary people, criminalised for participating in peacefully protests and strikes. And they remain defiant.

Tamara Carrasoco, from Barcelona, a CDR member accused of terrorism told us "I would do exactly the same things again. I was not using violence. I will only use methods that respect all people in order to seek change."

Most of those arrested are accused of public order offences for peaceful protests during a one day general strike last November that blocked motorways and occupied railway stations. Those arrests signal a growing concern that all forms of protest are being outlawed in Catalonia. There are already a number of people under investigation for involvement in the protests against the arrest of former Catalan President Carles Puigdemont last March.

In order to criminalise peaceful protest, the Spanish state has stretched the definition of 'crime' to the limits of credibility. It's even gone so far as to invent a new crime: 'hate crimes against the police'. Firefighters have been accused of such supposed hate crimes for marching in protest at a hotel in which police were barracked. And teachers have been accused of hate crimes for daring to discuss the issue of police violence in classrooms full of children who witnessed the scenes of the 1st October referendum.

This new wave of repression focuses on ordinary people rather than the figure heads of the movement. This is part of a very deliberate strategy that is intended to spread fear across a self-determined movement. The imprisonment of the main leaders of the movement - such as Jordi Cuixart and Jordi Sánchez - was the first stage in this strategy. The second stage is the persecution of anonymous activists based in the communities. In many ways, this represents a new kind of repression. The main targets now are the Committees to Defend the Republic (CDRs).

The CDRs are a network of community-based grassroots organisations that co-ordinate political action in support of political prisoners, and against the imposition of section 155 which would see the Spanish central government take direct control of Catalonia. They grew out of the mass movement that emerged to defend the polling stations against the Spanish National Police last Autumn. The CDRs have also been involved in exploring how a new Catalonia can develop social and economic alternatives to the austerity policies imposed by Rajoy's government.

In other words, they present all kinds of dangers to the Spanish oligarchy, headed by Rajoy's Partido Popular government. This is why Spanish nationalist politicians, the judiciary and the media are all working hard to paint the CDRs as the new public enemy. Xavier Albiol, the leader of PP in Catalunya has condemned the CDRs for their use of 'social violence' to encourage the Attorney General's round up of ordinary activists.

One CDR member has already been accused of 'rebellion' and 'terrorism' in front of a special court in Madrid set up to deal with terrorism. This new strategy moves effortlessly between the point that CDR's are accused of violence to the point that they can be condemned as terrorists. The advantage for the state is firstly that tougher sentences can be applied, but much more importantly, it allows the struggle for self-determination to be de-politicised, and reduced to a problem that cannot be negotiated or compromised with.

Since the referendum last October, the CDRs have come represent the empowerment and the self-organisation of local communities. They have emerged as a new method of social organising that has real power. This is why the Spanish government is now moving fast to intimidate anyone involved in this community-based resistance. Community criminalisation has always been part of Spain's strategy to counter the self-determination movement. When the article 155 was applied a new police unit was created specifically to deal with the CDRs.

There is a broader lesson here about the political conjuncture in Catalonia right now. A new Catalan government has just been sworn in. Of course, the imposition of article 155 means that the government will not be recognised by Spain. Yet there is a very clear disjuncture emerging. As some seeks to challenge the Spanish government through the formal, sanctioned political channels of the Catalanian parliament and the Generalitat, this is making no difference to the repression on the streets. The independence parties are unable, and some are unwilling, to do anything to protect against ordinary activists being rounded up by the state.

At the same time, the fact that the repression is intensifying in the communities tells us a great deal about the strengths and weaknesses of the independence movement. The Spanish state knows that its strengths are in the struggles going on outside the institutions of 'big' politics. In Catalonia right now there are a number of trade union and grassroots campaigns that are building a more general resistance to the state. Those include the migrants' struggles [1] for recognition and the right to remain pensioners' struggles [2], hotel workers [3], and fruit pickers [4] demands for basic rights

The radical challenge to the Spanish state at this moment of institutional impasse is outside the institutions. The CDRs and radical pro-independence left in Catalonia can only be strengthened by joining forces with those movements and struggles that are confronting the violence of fortress Europe, the violence of austerity and are demanding decent working conditions. It is in those struggles that a real popular unity can resist the escalating police repression that will now be turned against all activists whether they support independence or not.

Ignasi Bernat and David Whyte

P.S.

* Red Pepper, June 1, 2018:

<https://www.redpepper.org.uk/spains-new-laws-turn-peaceful-protesters-into-terrorists/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.lavanguardia.com/local/barcelona/20180527/443884577177/unas-1200-personas-s-e-manifiestan-en-barcelona-en-protesta-por-el-racismo-institucional.html>

[2] <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/economia/20180317/la-marea-pensionista-toma-el-centro-de-barcelona-6696868>

[3] https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/politica/Rajoy-compromete-camareras-Moncloa-enfermedades_0_747176256.html

[4] <https://www.diarijornada.coop/economia/20180518/manca-dallotjaments-precarietat-laboral-als-temporers-fruita-lleida>