

Unless Catalan parties can work together, there is a danger that Catalonia could soon become ungovernable.

by Blog Admin

The issue of independence has received widespread attention in the aftermath of Sunday's elections to the Catalan Parliament; however Catalonia is also facing significant economic problems. Montserrat Guibernau argues that pro-independence parties may be reluctant to enter into a coalition with the incumbent CiU due to the risk of being blamed for unpopular spending cuts. Nevertheless, the seriousness of the economic, social and political situation means that parties from all sides of the political spectrum should co-operate to protect the welfare of all citizens living in the region.



The pro-independence parties have won the Catalan election. They have obtained 71 seats out of a total of 135 in the Catalan Parliament. However, the result is far lower than initially predicted and weakens the leadership of Artur Mas. His Convergence and Union party (CiU), has won the Catalan election by obtaining 50 seats, having received 30.68 per cent of the vote, corresponding to 1,112,341 votes. However, CiU has lost 12 seats. In this election, the biggest winner is the Catalan Republican Left (ERC) – a party in favour of independence, which has moved from having 10 seats to 21, thus obtaining 13.68 per cent of the vote equivalent to 496,292 votes. It looks as if many traditional CiU supporters have decided to vote ERC instead, under the idea that they would be much more efficient in leading the process towards Catalan independence. The CiU also appears to have paid the toll of being in government at a time when harsh economic measures have been applied to the Catalans.

In spite of having won the election, CiU has obtained a bad result and Artur Mas does not have the clear majority he sought to obtain. Three key factors have contributed to alter the election forecast by generating a complex situation in the Catalan Parliament. First, participation reached a record 69.56 per cent – over 10 points above that registered in the last election (58.78 per cent). Second, the Spanish government has been much more pro-active than in previous regional elections by launching an effective campaign highlighting the perils of secession and arguing against the political parties defending the sovereignty option. Third, repeatedly Article 2 of the Constitution has been invoked to remind people that 'the Constitution is based upon the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation' while Article 8 has been cited to remind citizens that 'the Army's mission is to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain'.

A further distinctive feature of this election has been the end of the traditional voting pattern initiated in the early stages of the Spanish transition to democracy, one that would generally confer an electoral victory to Catalan nationalists in regional elections – primarily due to the abstention of a large section of the Barcelona Metropolitan area. (It encompasses citizens originating from other parts of Spain who migrated to Catalonia in the 1950s and 1960s). In contrast, the Metropolitan area turnout tends to be higher in general elections. At this stage, it is important to stress that Catalans have always granted victory to the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE)



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in all general electoral contests since democracy was restored in 1977.

The governability of Catalonia has been seriously affected by the electoral results; CiU needs the support of other political forces to rule and, so far, no political party – nor the Socialists, or the Republicans – seems prepared to strike a deal with Mas. They know that an eventual participation in a coalition government would make them co-responsible for further cuts that are in the pipeline. The moment Spain formally applies for a bailout will result in a situation in which dependence on the EU would rise even further, thus taking away, to a considerable degree, significant aspects of Spanish sovereignty. This has the potential to generate further instability, and the governability of Catalonia could become a major issue unless the current situation is satisfactorily sorted out. If Catalonia becomes impossible to manage, two possible outcomes might be contemplated: new elections to the Catalan Parliament and even the decision of Spain to take over and ‘suspend’ Catalan autonomy. These are extremely serious measures.

This explains why now, in Catalonia, it is much more comfortable to be in opposition than in government. Oriol Junqueras, ERC leader, has offered to support the government regarding measures oriented towards the development of a pro-independence strategy. But, even if this were to be the case, how far and for how long could Catalonia be governed in this manner? A government has to rule looking after all citizens. Social welfare is paramount. A possible way out would be to create a government including key representatives of the main political parties as a response to an exceptional situation both in social and economic terms, but also in political terms. Catalonia cannot continue accumulating an annual deficit of 8.5 per cent of its GDP, regardless of who is in government both in Madrid and Barcelona.

It is also paramount to acknowledge that, although Catalonia has a majority in favour of independence – 57.73 per cent – a significant sector of the electorate – 35 per cent – stands against it. Their position has the support of the main Spanish political parties; the conservative Popular Party (PP) and the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), which have the majority in the Spanish Congress. While, as it stands, the strength of the pro-independence sector would be tested by their ability to offer a viable way forward which is capable of integrating different sensibilities within the already divided independence movement. However, the seriousness of the current economic, social and political situation calls for responsibility, a furthering of democracy and dialogue as the way forward.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Montserrat Guibernau – Queen Mary, University of London

Montserrat Guibernau is Professor of Politics at Queen Mary, University of London. Her most recent publications are *For a Cosmopolitan Catalanism* (Angle, 2009), *The Identity of Nations* (Polity Press, 2007), *Catalan Nationalism* (Routledge, 2004), *Nations without States* (Polity, 1999) and *The Ethnicity Reader* (Polity, 2010). She is Co-editor of *Nations and Nationalism*, and *Política y Sociedad*, and a member of the Scientific Committee of the Canadian Research Chair in Quebec and Canadian Studies (UQAM).



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