

Catalonia is facing a deeply uncertain future – whether inside or outside of Spain

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Following elections in Catalonia on 27 September, negotiations have taken place between the main pro-independence coalition, Together for Yes, and a smaller party, Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP), with a view to forming the next Catalan government. Sebastian Balfour writes that regardless of the outcome of these negotiations, Catalonia is now moving into uncharted territory, with Together for Yes committed to a unilateral process of disconnection from Spain against the wishes of a hostile Spanish state.



Catalonia is about to embark on an extraordinary adventure. The government that emerges from the autonomous elections of 27 September will be committed to initiating an 18-month unilateral process of disconnection from Spain. By any standards this is a leap in the dark, a measure of the desperation (some might say, determination) felt by many Catalans from different parties, classes and ideologies as a result of the failure of Madrid to recognise their grievances.

The complications it may give rise to regarding membership of the EU and the euro, international relations, debt, tax, banks, diplomacy, defence and so on are multiple. To add to the uncertainties, the configuration of politics in Spain is likely to change substantially after the general elections of 20 December in ways few can predict.

The Catalan elections of 27 September

The independence movement had cast the autonomous (regional) elections as plebiscitary elections intended to determine the relationship between Catalonia and Spain. Two of the three major parties in Catalonia, [Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya](#) (CDC) and [Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya](#) (ERC), had agreed on a single slate, [Junts pel Sí](#) (Together for Yes), without clarifying what programme they might adopt beyond independence, partly because they occupy different ends of the ideological spectrum.

By any definition, a plebiscite, like a referendum, asks voters to choose between two options of constitutional importance. In these elections a vote for a party or a combination of parties had been framed by the independence parties as a vote for or against independence. Without the constitutional right to hold a referendum, the Catalan government used the autonomous elections, as it had used a 'popular consultation' in November 2014 (declared unlawful by the Constitutional Tribunal), to rally nationalist opinion and demonstrate to the rest of Spain that Catalans wanted to form their own state.

In the event Junts pel Sí won 62 of the 135 seats in the Catalan parliament and 39.57 per cent of the votes. Together with the 10 seats won by the small anti-capitalist, separatist party, [Candidatura d'Unitat Popular](#) (CUP), which stood independently, they won a majority of 72 seats but only 47.8 per cent of votes. Any plebiscite or referendum needs a majority of votes, whereas an election is customarily won through a majority of seats. On the basis of this procedural ambiguity, Junts pel Sí claim that the separatist parties have a popular mandate to prepare Catalonia for independence.

Yet the CUP had always insisted that this mandate should be on the basis of a majority of votes. Since they hold a balance of power in the parliament, the CUP will seek to exact a price for parliamentary support of, or inclusion in, a new government, including a demand that the present President and leader of the CDC, Artur Mas, responsible for applying privatisation and austerity measures in Catalonia, should not stand as head of government. Already riven by programmatic differences of their own, the two parties of Junts pel Sí will have to negotiate these demands in

order to form a new administration.

Arraigned against the independence movement in the elections were parties representing very different political and cultural constituencies. The most surprising result was that of the relatively new party of the centre-right, [Ciutadans](#) (or Citizens, Ciudadanos in Spain) which gained 25 seats or 17.91 per cent of the votes, making it the main opposition party in the new Catalan *Parlament*. Ciutadans clearly won over disenchanted voters of the centre and centre-right, including many from the Catalan branch of the [Popular Party](#), whose result was its second worst ever, 8.5 per cent.

It almost certainly absorbed moderate votes from the CDC after Mas had hitched the party wagon to separatism. Catalanist conservatism had always been ambiguous over its relationship with Spain, using Catalanism as a bargaining tool to extract greater autonomy from the Spanish state. Ciutadans also overtook the [Catalan Socialist Party](#) (PSC), whose vote of 16 seats or 12.72 per cent, nevertheless, held up

better than expected in the opinion polls. Clearly hurt by the polarisation of the electoral campaign around the issue of identity, the left slate, [Catalunya Sí que es Pot](#) (Catalonia Yes it Can), which includes [Podemos](#) and campaigns around the politics of class over identity, scored only 8.93 per cent of votes, even though it supports the right of self-determination.

The voter turnout of 77 per cent was unprecedented, higher than ever recorded in the Catalan autonomous elections, both among constituencies that had previously favoured independence and those that had not. In Barcelona's so-called 'red belt' (cinturón rojo), where successive generations of Spanish immigrants have moved to and where the sense of dual nationality is strongest, many more voters turned up than before. Here, Ciutadans appears to have made inroads into the traditional Socialist vote.

The relatively high level of voter turnout was a consequence of the intense degree of polarisation in the electoral campaign. As in the Scottish referendum, national parties of right and left, backed by an array of heavyweight politicians, bankers and business leaders, combined in an attempt to persuade Catalans to vote to stay in Spain. Institutions such as Spanish banks and employers' organisations (including the Catalan Foment and the Círculo de la Economía) painted a dire picture of an independent Catalonia. The Spanish government made increasingly strident warnings of the effects of independence on Catalonia and Spain. In 2012 an army colonel had even issued veiled threats of military intervention.

For its part, the independence movement mobilised the politics of identity above all, defined not so much in ethnic or linguistic terms but in terms of citizenship, a form of civic nationalism. It sought to channel social grievances into the politics of nation rather than class. And its campaign for independence has seized the imagination of millions.

It has been able to launch ingeniously choreographed rallies and demonstrations larger than any seen in Europe in recent years. The campaign was joined by many voluntary organisations deploying sophisticated tools of marketing and social media in the hands of young professionals working for free and raising money through crowd funding. Its central message was a narrative of national victimisation by the conservative government of Spain through constitutional blockage and redistribution of wealth from Catalonia to the rest of Spain.

Catalan identity and the Spanish state



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In any case, a historical narrative of cultural and institutional difference with Spain plays an important role in the identity of many Catalans. The precedents for autonomy and independence go back to the Middle Ages, when Catalonia was an intrinsic part of the Crown of Aragon, which was joined to the Crown of Castille in 1492 to form a united kingdom of Spain.

Until 1714, Catalonia enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from the Spanish monarchy. Its support for the Habsburg monarchy in the Spanish War of Succession led the victorious Bourbon dynasty to strip the region of its rights and integrate it into a centralised Spain. Under the Spanish Republic of 1931-9, Catalonia regained its autonomy only to be subjugated brutally for almost 40 years by the Franco Dictatorship. Catalan autonomy was restored in 1978 in the new democracy, but the relations between Madrid and Catalonia began to sour as a result of comparative grievances, in particular the greater contribution Catalonia claims it makes to the rest of Spain through mechanisms of redistribution.

Perhaps the most important grievance in recent years has been the relative failure of attempts by the Catalan government to deepen the process of autonomy through the renegotiation of its Statute of Autonomy. Negotiations with the Socialist Zapatero government led to a new Statute in 2006, which declared Catalonia to be a nation and awarded new powers to the institutions of Catalan autonomy.

The Statute was approved in both the Catalan parliament and the Spanish parliament, as well as in a referendum in Catalonia. The conservative Popular Party (PP) challenged a number of its clauses and the Constitutional Tribunal ruled in 2010 that these were unconstitutional, in particular the reference to Catalonia as a nation. The first massive demonstration for independence took place shortly afterwards in 2012.

Probably more than any other factor, this refusal of the Spanish state to contemplate any change in the relationship of Catalonia to Spain lies at the heart of the intensification of the movement for independence. The Popular Party government has failed to respond to the challenge posed by Catalonia. Nor has it made much attempt to woo the Catalan nationalists through an appeal to a common heritage, to a shared identity, as Gordon Brown did for Scotland for instance. For the well-known *El País* journalist also opposed to Catalan independence, Iñaki Gabilondo, this inaction amounts to the greatest failure of Spanish democracy since 1977.

Far from seeking some sort of accommodation with Catalan nationalism, the Spanish state since 2010 has set out to block its initiatives. Its latest move is to charge Artur Mas and two of his ministers with 'disobedience' and 'embezzlement' after the Catalan government went ahead with a Catalan-wide consultation about independence on 9 November 2014 despite its suspension by the Constitutional Tribunal.

Other grievances focus on the neo-liberal policies of austerity imposed on Spain by Madrid, in particular by the PP government since 2011 and the corruption scandals that have enveloped PP politicians. The fact that successive CDC governments have also been mired in corruption scandals and were responsible for privatisations and severe cuts in social services has only slightly dented nationalist claims that Catalans can run their own affairs better. By identifying themselves with a message of nationalist renewal and populist calls for 'liberty', the CDC and Mas himself have retained some of the legitimacy they would have lost among Catalanists.

What these words actually mean in policy terms has not been fully spelt out nor have the benefits and costs of independence. Yet at the same time, the CDC has alienated moderate nationalist opinion. The federation it belonged to, *Convergència i Unió*, had already split over the issue of separatism but its ex-partner [Unió Democràtica de Catalunya](#) emerged from the elections without a single seat, having probably lost many of its voters, as had the CDC, to *Ciutadans*.

An uncertain future

The new government of Catalonia may also face difficult choices following the general elections of 20 December. From these may emerge a Spanish-wide coalition government more responsive to Catalan claims. This might adopt

the much-touted 'Third Way' policy of engaging in negotiations to deepen the process of devolution for Catalonia by constitutional amendment, to give it, for example, the same tax-raising rights as the Basque Country. It might even attempt to change the Constitution to allow a referendum, a demand supported by Podemos. The recent fragmentation of the party system in Spain is such that it is hazardous at this stage to predict what sort of coalition government might be formed and to what extent it might impinge on Catalan politics.

Equally uncertain is what road map the independentistas might follow leading to and after a unilateral declaration of independence promised in 18 months. Both the Spanish Constitution and the EU Treaty refer unambiguously to the territorial integrity of each member state so that a unilateral process of independence would lead to exit both from Spain and from the EU. It is clear also that there is little support for Catalan independence from European institutions and political leaders.

Jean-Claude Juncker reiterated the European Commission's position it had adopted over Scotland that should it secede, Catalonia would no longer be part of the EU or the euro and would need to re-apply. Without referring to Catalonia directly, Merkel, like Obama and Cameron, stressed the importance of a united Spain. For the German Chancellor in particular, the success of a southern European country like Spain in achieving GDP growth of 1.7 per cent in 2014 after years of negative growth is probably more important than the claims of a region that is hardly an important player on the international stage.

Nor is there any historical precedent for Catalan secession. The UN Charter and subsequent UN declarations envisage support for independence only in decolonisation processes, or cases of foreign occupation and among communities suffering discrimination or the abuse of human rights, a claim that Catalans could hardly make on the international stage.

The political situation in Catalonia continues to be dynamic and uncertain. Bargaining between the separatist parties is taking place through institutional negotiations and public statements and counter-statements. Mas is clearly keen to continue leading the movement for independence, but concessions will need to be made to keep the CUP on board and he may be the propitiatory victim of them.

Beyond the immediate issue of the new Catalan government, there is a broader question that needs to be answered. What concrete measures of disconnection from Spain will a separatist government start to take faced by a so far hostile Spanish state and a largely indifferent Europe?

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