

Whatever the result of the Catalan elections, both Catalonia and Spain are now entering uncharted territory

*Catalonia will hold parliamentary elections on 27 September, with the vote being framed by several Catalan parties as a de facto poll on Catalan independence. **Karlo Basta** writes that regardless of whether these parties gain a majority in the election, both Catalonia and Spain are now entering uncharted territory. He notes that unlike other independence movements, such as those in Canada and Scotland, there would be no consent from the Spanish government as to how secession could take place; yet the situation is also radically different from other cases of a territory declaring unilateral independence from a larger state due to the relative stability of the country and the absence of political violence.*



In the autumn of 2013, I spoke to a member of the *Yes Scotland* campaign about the then upcoming referendum on Scottish independence. At one point, I allowed myself the deliberate indiscretion of comparing the Scottish case to Catalonia, Quebec, and Slovenia. His reaction was immediate and forceful: ‘Scotland is different’.

This insistence on Scottish uniqueness had sound political logic behind it. Building symbolic bridges with other independence movements was risky. It could have antagonised Canada, Spain, and other countries whose recognition Scotland would need in case of a ‘yes’ vote. But as political analysis, the assessment was wrong. Scotland’s march to independence was in fundamental ways not as exceptional as was claimed. That evaluation is more appropriate to Catalonia and Spain today.

Catalonia and Spain: a special case

The political dynamic surrounding the Catalan nationalists’ push for independence is unprecedented. It is qualitatively different from the processes in other democratic, developed states with active independence movements. The central governments of Canada and the United Kingdom accepted secessionist referenda in Quebec and Scotland, whereas Madrid steadfastly refuses to concede on this point. In fact, consensual secession (with or without a referendum) took place in states that were both less developed and less institutionally stable than Spain is today (Czechoslovakia and Serbia-Montenegro come to mind).

The stubborn and mutually exclusive positions of the Spanish government and Catalan nationalists on the subject of the referendum produced the current possibility of unilateral secession. This puts Spain and Catalonia in a different category of countries, those with which few Catalans and Spaniards would like to identify. The main reason for this is that most attempts at unilateral secession result in at least some degree of violence.

But Spain – and Catalonia alongside it – is even more different from these cases than it is from Canada and the UK. For one thing, it is a solidly middle-class, wealthy society, despite the economic battering of the past seven years. For another, it is a democracy with a deeply internalised commitment to the rule of law, exceptions notwithstanding. Equally importantly, Spain is tightly integrated into the EU and NATO. These kinds of countries do not have a tendency of descending into widespread chaos during significant political crises.

Mapping the unknown

Guessing the future of complex processes is the equivalent of sailing with a poorly drafted map and an occasionally malfunctioning compass, even at the best of times. Given the singular character of the Catalan situation, forecasting is more problematic still. But, if *navigare necesse est*, few choices remain but to try.

If [Together for Yes](#) (*Junts pel Sí*), the coalition of Catalan parties standing for independence in the upcoming Catalan elections on 27 September, receives a majority mandate, the political outcome will depend on the strength of nerves in Madrid and Barcelona. Commitments of both sides point to some type of a political showdown. In these kinds of circumstances, it is difficult to distinguish between a bluff and serious intention: Will Madrid really suspend Catalonia's autonomy? If so, how will it implement this? If it doesn't, and it tries to annul the new laws in preparation for secession, will Catalonia really declare independence immediately? Who will be on the borders between Catalonia and France in that scenario? Again, stable democratic countries don't easily collapse into instability, but when two political wills start to clash over sinews of state power, unpredictable outcomes become more likely.

If Spain blinks first, but remains hostile to Catalonia's independence, it will be in a position to exercise significant leverage. The profound aversion of the international community to unilateral border changes is built into its DNA. This makes independence difficult to achieve even where key powers favour the seceding side. In the case of Kosovo, the sympathies of the US State Department did not prevent years of diplomatic wrangling, and even then, recognition remained far from universal. Unlike Serbia in the 2000s, Spain has a good international reputation and is a key member of the European Union and the Eurozone. If it wanted to, Madrid could make it very difficult for Catalonia to normalise its relations with the outside world, though this would be costly for Spain as well.

If *Junts pel Sí* does not manage a convincing majority, this kind of outcome could be counted as the equivalent of a near-miss in an independence referendum. What that would mean for Spanish and Catalan politics beyond 2015 would be equally uncertain. In hindsight, the 1995 Quebec referendum was a culmination of secessionist politics in that province. The sovereigntist sentiment gradually receded, and a repeated vote on the province's future status never became a politically relevant option. While it would be unwise to proclaim the death of Québécois separatism, it is certainly in deep hibernation.

But by 1995, Quebec had already won most of the substantive, if not symbolic, concessions that Catalonia is still pursuing. What is more, in some ways, the referendum was the swan song for an entire generation of Quebecer nationalists whose formative years corresponded with the surge of the secessionist movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Younger Quebecers do not share the grievances that led so many of their parents to support independence. In Catalonia, by comparison, the secessionists are only coming into their own. Some of the activists that pushed the [ERC](#) and [CDC](#) toward more openly secessionist positions, especially since 2006, are now entering their political prime. And their grievances, exacerbated by the prolonged economic crisis, are still very much alive.

In the short term – assuming *Junts pel Sí* falls short of a majority – the relationship between Spain and Catalonia will depend on the results of the Spanish election and the government that will form thereafter. In the long term, the failed divorce will likely give way to a very awkward marriage.



Protesters in support of Catalan independence carrying the effigy of Artur Mas, the President of the Generalitat of Catalonia

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