

The Catalan crisis owes much to the actions of self-interested politicians on both sides



It is far from clear how relations between Catalonia and Spain will develop following the chaotic scenes that accompanied Sunday's referendum on independence. [Mariana S. Mendes](#) argues that the stand-off between Catalonia and Madrid now ranks as the greatest political crisis in Spanish democratic history, and that both sides must take responsibility for negotiating a workable solution.



Part of the 'Tractorada' column of tractors that entered Barcelona to show support for Catalan independence prior to the referendum, Credit: [Ratko Jagodic \(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

The events of the last few days in Catalonia confirm that the Spanish central government and the pro-independence movement in Catalonia were always on a collision course, with no intention of avoiding a major clash. The stand-off between the two has created the greatest political crisis in Spanish democratic history and, despite legitimate complaints about the way the Spanish government has acted, no side is devoid of responsibility.

The brutal response by police forces on Sunday was yet another exercise in self-harm by Mariano Rajoy's executive. This time, however, the damage might prove fatal. Despite obvious signs that police repression would only serve to advance the separatist cause, the Spanish government behaved like a bull in a china shop. If pro-independence groups had until now relied on the alleged undemocratic and repressive nature of the Spanish state to further their claims, Sunday's actions handed them evidence for their position on a silver platter.

The events will only serve to boost anti-Spain sentiment in Catalonia and make a negotiated solution even more unlikely. Judging by the official declarations on the immediate aftermath of the referendum, Rajoy and the leader of the Catalan regional government, Carles Puigdemont, remain unwilling to alleviate the tensions. The former's assertion that the rule of law had prevailed and that no referendum had taken place, and the latter's validation of the result, show they both continue to live in parallel universes, having long forgotten about the duties they are obliged to undertake as the leaders of representative institutions.

A lack of statesmanship on both sides

The trouble for Spanish democracy is that neither the ruling conservative authorities in Madrid, nor the pro-independence bloc in Catalonia, have shown the statesmanship required to avoid a political crisis. The principles that are said to have made the Spanish transition to democracy successful – negotiation, compromise, accommodation – are now nowhere to be seen. Both parties have been speaking exclusively to their own constituencies, disregarding the duty of representative institutions to take everyone's concerns into consideration.

Rajoy, who has long ignored or contemptuously overlooked the recent pro-independence surge in Catalonia, hides permanently behind the veil of the law. His government's hollow overemphasis on the illegality of the referendum – easily met by the criticism that legality and legitimacy do not always go hand in hand – reached a new low on Sunday when the PM opted to endorse the actions taken by police, while failing to acknowledge the more than 800 people who were injured.

The pro-independence bloc, on the other hand, bet all its cards on social mobilisation and civil disobedience. But if the means can be considered legitimate, the motivations behind them are arguably less so. Its vehement insistence on Sunday's referendum – knowing in advance that it would not meet the required criteria for a due electoral process – was a result of its obstinate attempt to further the independence agenda at whatever cost and to put the Spanish state between a rock and a hard place.

The referendum was a win-win strategy for the pro-independence bloc. If the central government did not act, it would have been the equivalent of accepting the realisation of the referendum, with the results always likely to come out in favour of independence in a campaign where only the "yes" option existed. However, if it did act to prevent the vote from taking place – as Rajoy had promised – clashes would ensue and the pro-independence case would be further strengthened, something that Catalan government representatives certainly expected and perhaps even wished for.

The assertion that Catalonia has now won the argument and gained the right to establish an independent state – based on the results of a referendum where there were no minimal procedural guarantees – confirms Puigdemont's intention of going ahead with his independence plan no matter what. In the same manner that Catalonia has long been forgotten about by the conservative central government (which has few supporters in the region), Puigdemont does not wish to look beyond the 48% of Catalans that voted for a pro-independence agenda in the 2015 regional elections. All doors are now open for Madrid to apply Article 155, officially suspending Catalonia's autonomy and unleashing further turmoil.

A (still) questionable case for independence

Despite the heavy-handed reaction of the police and the stupefying response of Rajoy's government, independence is still a radical and irreversible solution to a problem that can be addressed through more proportionate means. The timing of the Catalan independence surge suggests that what is behind it are not long-held historical and identity-based cleavages, but rather the unwillingness of the ruling party to renegotiate the Statute of Autonomy, as well as the economic and political crisis that Spain went through over the last decade.

Austerity policies, high-profile corruption scandals, and the subsequent anger towards governmental institutions – and the conservative ruling party in particular – were in Catalonia framed through nationalist lenses. Identity-based cleavages, long held in Catalonia but never automatically translated into widespread anti-Spanish sentiment, hardened as a result. Though dissatisfaction with corruption and inflexibility in the central government has serious objective grounds, this was further accentuated by regional political elites that found in nationalism a convenient scapegoat for their own failings. Its simplistic messages mirrored the "taking back control" narrative heard elsewhere, but rather than migrants or the EU, the enemy was now the Spanish state, responsible for plundering Catalonia's economic resources and constraining its cultural development.

If this perspective can be criticised on various grounds – not least because of the marginalisation of those capable of dual allegiance (to Spain and Catalonia) and the striking lack of solidarity in a movement where left-wing forces are strong – the good news for Spain is that political representatives with goodwill and capacity to negotiate could do much to appease the situation. The last forty years have proved that multilevel governance in a multinational state is a viable political project, as long as possible tensions are managed with good-faith. Unfortunately, this is precisely what has been missing in the last few years, and Spain's territorial integrity and democratic health now appear to be dependent on the unlikely prospect that Rajoy will open his eyes to the crisis he has on his hands.

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