

The Catalan and Spanish crisis: A European perspective



The Catalan independence question remains one of the key issues on the agenda for Spain's new Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, as he completes his first month in office. [Sebastian Balfour](#) writes that Sánchez is likely to carry out a holding operation in the hope that support for his Socialists will grow ahead of the next general election, while the Catalan coalition government is bound by some of its parliamentary partners to continue pursuing independence.

It is perhaps an appropriate moment to reflect on the crisis in Spain and Catalonia, as new governments establish themselves in Madrid and Barcelona claiming to seek new ways of solving the Catalan dilemma.

It has been a momentous period since the 'illegal' October referendum, the unilateral declaration of independence and the imposition of direct rule from Madrid. Much of the debate has focused on the Catalan issue and has solidified into almost tribal identities, provoking rifts among friends, families and work colleagues. Yet causes and potential solutions are more complex and cross-cutting than can be gathered from the rhetoric on both sides. And the crisis is not merely about the relationship between two antagonistic national projects. It is part of a much broader process triggered by socio-economic crisis, austerity, and globalisation whose ramifications extend to Europe as a whole.

To begin with, the crisis has exposed and exacerbated structural faults in the functioning of the Spanish state. The most immediate problem is the architecture of the state. The territorial system of regional autonomy arising from the democratic settlement of 1978 was meant to balance diversity with solidarity. It was one in which some were more equal than others, and it soon gave rise to competition and comparative grievance. It was also seen as an affront to many Catalans and Basques because it diluted historical precedent as well as their sense of identity and cultural separateness.

Yet successive Spanish governments, in particular the Partido Popular government of 2011-18, sought to level off the distinctive powers enjoyed by the four 'historic' regions in order to carry out a discreet policy of re-centralisation. Since then, the sense of alienation among Catalan and Basque nationalists towards the Spanish state has deepened to the extent that several million Basque and Catalan citizens no longer feel part of Spain. Attempts by their respective autonomous governments to renegotiate a new status, as an associated nation or a nation within a multinational state, have been quashed by the legal apparatus of the Spanish state.

The actions of the judiciary have exposed another dysfunctional feature of the Spanish state, the increasing politicisation of the legal system. Since 2013, the Council of Europe has repeatedly drawn attention to the lack of impartiality of the justice system in Spain. In fact many of Spain's various judicial bodies are made up of judges chosen by political parties. The conservative bias was particularly clear in the ruling by the Constitutional Tribunal in 2010 that many articles of Catalonia's new democratically approved Statute of Autonomy were unconstitutional. Moreover, some of the criminal charges levelled at Catalan ex-ministers since October, such as sedition and rebellion, have no match in most legal systems elsewhere in Europe, hence the difficulty Spain has experienced in seeking to extradite Catalan politicians in exile.

The problem was intensified in the Catalan case by a sense of economic injustice. With only 16% of the Spanish population, Catalonia provides 21% of the national tax revenue. The region receives only 66% of the average of state funding across Spain and it has obtained a mere 8% of state investment in infrastructure. A popular view is that Catalonia is paying much more than its fair share towards the rest of Spain and that national policy under both Socialist and Conservative governments discriminated against the region.

An even more important cause of the rise of a powerful independence movement was the economic recession of 2008. The return to power of the conservatives in 2011 coincided with the emergence of the popular protest movement, the 15th of May movement, against the effects of the recession and the policies of austerity. Alongside these nationwide *indignados*, the Catalanist popular movement emerged, the *Assemblea Nacional Catalana*, calling for independence as the solution to both the crisis and the accumulated grievances of Catalans. While the 15 May movement appealed to class, the *Assemblea* appealed to identity, diverting socio-economic grievances into the politics of nationalism. Both movements built on the strong associational life in Catalonia where there were at least 48,000 associations of one kind or another in a region of 7.5 million people.

The *Assemblea* was particularly successful. With a small army of volunteers skilled in social media, it managed to capture the imagination of many Catalans. In any case identity is easier to mobilise than class, even more so if it is accompanied by a powerful historical narrative of victimisation. Behind this growth lay long-term structural factors such as the changing class structure in an economy that was fast de-industrialising so that the old industrial belt around the big cities like Barcelona was turning to service industries, many involving overseas immigrants. The process was therefore weakening the dual identities which these communities had once represented.

The balance of political power in Catalonia lay with the nationalist centre-right, which had dominated Catalan government in the new democracy for all but seven years. Independence had never been an explicit part of its agenda. But by 2012, driven perhaps by the fear of losing electoral support to these new movements and frustrated by the Constitutional Tribunal's reversal of key aspects of the new Statute for Catalan autonomy, the nationalist centre-right jumped on the bandwagon of the separatist cause.

By 2015 a separatist coalition had been formed bringing together a wide spectrum of political parties, from the anti-capitalist nationalist left to the nationalist centre-right, whose only common cause was independence. Hence no programme for an independent Catalonia has ever been fully articulated. Another of its contradictions was that some of the conservative nationalist elites associated with the coalition had been guilty of corruption and of policies of austerity and privatisation, key issues in the separatist platform. Although the pro-independence parties fell just short of a majority of votes in the regional elections of 2015, they won a majority of seats and formed the new government.

What followed was a cat and mouse game between the Catalan and Spanish governments leading to the attempted referendum on independence on 1 October 2017, ruled out as illegal by the Constitutional Tribunal and repressed with some violence by the police. The Catalan government followed this with a unilateral declaration of independence on 27 October which led to the intervention by the Spanish state and the remanding in custody without bail of many of its ministers and the self-imposed exile of others. The response of the government, police and judiciary revealed a residue of authoritarian reflexes among Spanish conservative elites, in particular in their application of a repressive constitutionalism in preference to conciliation and dialogue.

In the hope of having made its point that independence was impossible, the Spanish government held new elections in Catalonia on 21 December. The results revealed flaws in both the government's calculations and the Catalan independence movement's claim to represent all Catalans. The separatists won by only two seats. In terms of percentages, the 'remainders' scored the most votes, almost 51%, while the separatists won 47.5%. As in most electoral systems, the allocation of seats is not based simply on percentages. In Spain, the rural and small town votes count more, sometimes twice, than metropolitan votes. Catalan nationalism is very strong in the small municipalities and weaker in the metropolitan areas where dual identity is strong. This is predictable given that migrants from other parts of Spain have tended to settle in the cities where more work is available.

But this is not enough of an explanation. There are many born and bred in Catalonia with a strong Catalan identity who are against independence for political reasons, in particular the belief that the problem is not unity or independence but socio-economic and political. This is a plural and multi-layered society and it would be doing an injustice to refer to a collective Catalan voice. Yet the polarisation that has taken place in Spain over the last two years is such that these nuances or differences are lost in public discourse.

What has been happening in Spain is part of a process in Europe and elsewhere triggered by globalisation, economic crisis and austerity. Globalisation began a process in which many states no longer mediated decisively between national and international economies and were less in control of policy-making. Political and trade blocs like the EU provided a new broad framework of trade and governance in which old nation-states lost some authority. Also falling barriers to trade reduced the cost of being a small state and boosted interest in separatism. Thus the re-emergence or strengthening of sub-state nationalism in Europe in response to firstly, a weakening of state-based national identities, secondly the recession of 2007-8 which led to collective insecurity and the need for new boundaries of national identity, and finally to greater opportunities for the emergence of new nations within economic blocs such as the EU.

But this has been countered by the recent development of anti-globalisation ethnic nationalisms in Europe and beyond, a far cry from the civic, inclusive, nationalism of Catalonia. Moreover, the trust placed by the Catalan nationalists in the EU and its plan for multilevel governance through the Europe of the Regions was misplaced. Far from supporting Catalanist demands, the EU and several European states responded to events in Spain by declaring they were an internal matter, revealing their concern about the threat of sub-state nationalisms in Europe. As the ex-President of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, recently said, the Europe of the Regions 'is a failure'

There is another international parallel, the channelling of socio-economic and political grievances into the politics of identity and nation. This is a feature of populist nationalism everywhere. By appealing across social classes to national identity, it mobilises people against an 'Other', identified as the source of a range of problems. In the Catalan case, this Other was defined at first as simply Madrid or the Spanish state. This enabled an amorphous, even contradictory range of aspirations to be projected on to notions of independence, summed up in a slogan used frequently in the discourse, freedom, a much used or abused term everywhere. Then some of the rhetoric slipped into something darker, the Castilians or the Spanish as the Other, just as right-wing discourse in Spain descended into diatribes against the Catalans as an ethnicity.

With a new more conciliatory government in place in Madrid and with the restoration of the autonomous government in Barcelona, the prospects for the future relations between Spain and Catalonia are still unclear. The fracture between half of Catalonia and the rest of Spain now seems irreparable. In the absence of a majority in the Congress, the new Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, is likely to carry out a holding operation in the hope that support for the Socialists will grow in time for the new general elections due in 2020. In any case, he has made it clear all along that he is only interested in negotiating the terms of Catalonia's autonomy. In contrast, the Catalan coalition government is bound by some of its parliamentary partners to continue pursuing independence. Fissures are appearing between pragmatists and unilateralists. Expect much recourse to the politics of gesture on all sides. At least in the short and medium term, separatism remains a mirage.

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