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Catalonia – What is Going on; and Why?



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The present situation in Catalonia is confused. The Catalan Government believes that, in a referendum on 1 October, the Catalan people agreed to declare independence from Spain. However, on 10 October the Catalan Government suspended further action in this direction and called for dialogue with the Spanish Government. The next day Madrid gave Barcelona 5 days to confirm whether they had issued a Unilateral Declaration of Independence or not. If so, Madrid would trigger an article of the Spanish Constitution allowing them to suspend the autonomous status of Catalonia and dismiss the Catalan Government. The Catalan Government has responded, without clarifying the situation.

It is unclear how this impasse will be resolved. Each side is threatening use of its “nuclear” weapon – for the Catalans a UDI, for Spain suspension of autonomy – knowing full well that actual use would only worsen a conflict which has deep roots and huge political implications for Catalonia, Spain and, potentially, the EU.

The proximate roots of the present conflict can be traced back to 2010. However, the frictions between Catalonia and the rest of Spain have much deeper social and historical roots. These lead back through the Franco era to the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939, all the way to the fall of Barcelona to the Bourbon forces at the end of the War of Spanish Succession in 1714.

For much of the past 3 centuries, there have been tensions between the centralising, and Royal, political traditions of Castilian-led Spain, and the more decentralising, and latterly republican, traditions of some Spanish regions, Catalonia in particular. In the 1930s, Catalonia was the centre of Republicanism in Spain, leading to great brutality in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War and during the succeeding Franco era. Catalan identity and language was severely repressed.

When Franco's death led to the democratic 1978 Constitution, there was great hope that Spain would evolve into a more devolved polity, allowing Catalonia to develop in ways considered more in keeping with its distinct culture and society, and hence allowing it to be more comfortable as a leading part of the Spanish nation. Things did move in this direction, but then in 2010 things began to go badly wrong. The Spanish Constitutional Court emasculated a new Statute of Autonomy in Catalonia, giving impetus to the long-running independence movement in Catalonia, at a time when austerity was fuelling resentment at the large fiscal transfers Catalonia makes to the rest of Spain.

The majority right of centre party in Catalonia was forced to ride the wave of a growing popular movement which generated very large support for self-determination (over 80% in most polls), and substantial support for independence (sometimes above 50%). It could not allow itself to be outflanked by the independence-supporting Opposition. So, from late 2012 successive Catalan Governments attempted to find a way to have a vote on the region's political future, if possible with Madrid's acquiescence, on the Scottish model. Eventually, the political dynamics forced the current Catalan Government to press ahead with a referendum and an independence process, whether Madrid approved or not – leading to the present impasse.

Throughout, the right of centre Government in Madrid has taken the view that all attempts by the Catalan Government to have such a vote are illegal, and that the unauthorised referenda which have taken place are therefore illegitimate. Pushed by nationalistic forces inside and outside the ruling party, they have stuck resolutely to the position that under the 1978 Constitution sovereignty resides in the Spanish people as a whole, and so a region has no right to determine its own political future. This position has been upheld by the (somewhat politicised) Constitutional Court. Madrid has therefore refused to engage with the Catalan issue politically, rebutted all attempts at dialogue or mediation, prosecuted Catalan Ministers for holding votes, and eventually been led to use force to try to disrupt the 1 October referendum in Catalonia.

Like other secessionist movements, the Catalan conflict is fundamentally about the relationship between perceived identities and political structures. The Catalans are proud of their distinct cultural, social and political identity. A significant percentage of the population does not believe that this identity can be properly expressed within the existing political structures in Spain. The Spanish Government believes that Spanish identity trumps regional identity, and that this hierarchy is properly represented in the existing constitutional settlement.

If the current impasse is to be resolved peacefully, there has to be dialogue between Barcelona and Madrid – mediated by a third party or not. This will involve the Catalans accepting discussion of ways in which their identity might be expressed within a revised constitution, not just how to implement independence; and the Spanish accepting that they have a political problem in Catalonia, not just a legal one, and the need to look for political means of resolving the conflict, including through amending the Constitution.

If dialogue is not engaged, the prognosis is bad for Catalonia and for Spain. A UDI followed by suspension of Catalan autonomy could easily lead to a downward spiral of increasing violence and serious economic dislocation – which will eventually force the Catalans and the Spanish to sit down together.

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