

Past the point of no return

Despite Madrid's intransigence, Catalonia still wants its independence, writes Josep Maria Reniu

Pro-independence demonstrators shout slogans outside the Catalan parliament

Friday September 19 was a rare day in Catalonia. A significant proportion of Catalans had hoped for a victory of the Yes vote in the Scottish independence referendum. The result was not as expected, but the day still gave us good news. The Catalan parliament passed a law on consultations and citizen participation that has allowed the president of the Catalan government to call citizens to the polls on November 9 to vote on independence. This vote in parliament took place against a background of impasse between Catalonia and the Spanish government in Madrid, with potentially destabilizing effects.

Mariano Rajoy, the Spanish prime minister, refuses to allow Catalans to decide on our political future. He couches his argument in legal terms: the Spanish constitution does not allow the holding of a referendum in which one of the answers is independence for Catalonia or any other Spanish territory.

On the other side we find a level of popular mobilization since 2010 that has surpassed all expectations. Hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets demanding – in a festive way – the chance to exercise the most basic of democratic principles: to decide on the political future of Catalonia. Led by two associations, the Catalan National Assembly and Omnium Cultural, citizens filled the streets of Barcelona in 2012; formed a human chain of 257 miles crossing Catalonia in 2013, and this year formed an enormous human 'V' in the two main urban arteries of Barcelona.

The key question is why the Spanish government has consistently refused to allow a referendum. The answer from Madrid has always been the same: the unity of the Spanish nation is indissoluble and therefore such a referendum cannot be in accordance with the constitution. The real reason is a complete lack of political will to resolve the Catalan question.

Unlike what has happened in Britain, the Spanish government has shown a weak commitment to democracy, fearing the free expression of political opinions by the citizens of Catalonia. At no time has it been willing to explore alternative ways of resolving the conflict. This was proved beyond doubt in 2010 by the Spanish Constitutional Court's rejection of the statute of autonomy which Catalonia had approved in 2006.

This statute was a final attempt by moderate Catalan nationalists to improve relations with the rest of Spain. After the court's decision, both politicians and citizens understood there was no option left to find a new deal with the Spanish political elite. That explains why the



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alternatives promoted by the unionist campaign in Scotland are not feasible. The offer of a fiscal pact, more self-government or something similar would be out of place. Catalan society has passed the point of no return in this journey towards independence.

Since 2010, the number of citizens who declare themselves pro-independence has grown steadily in the polls to reach around 60 per cent. About 80 per cent of citizens – whether or not pro-independence – affirm their desire to cast a vote to decide the political future of Catalonia. This process is not due to the initiative of a single party – such as the SNP in Scotland – or a small part of society; it is a social movement that knows no boundaries of gender, age or social status, and transcends the left-right split. The agreement of December 12, 2013, on the date and question of the referendum was signed by parties ranging from the Christian Democrats to the alternative left.

The Catalan independence movement appeals to the basic principles of European societies: that is, to demand the exercise of real democracy. And that is why the Scottish referendum was seen by the majority of Catalans as an example of what should happen in Spain if we were living in a 'normal country'. The truth is that the Scots' No vote will not have a particularly negative impact on the Catalan process. It has shown the world that political problems should be resolved through political decisions. We believe that the strength of democracy will overcome all obstacles, as no law and no one can prevent the peaceful, constructive and democratic exercise of the will of the people.

Josep Maria Reniu is professor of Political Science at the University of Barcelona and a member of the National Transition Advisory Council

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