

Rethinking secession: why Spain and Catalonia should not take stability for granted

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*The Catalan elections on 27 September have raised further questions about Catalonia and Spain's future. **Ranj Alaaldin** argues that Spain and Catalonia should draw lessons from the experiences of secession movements in other parts of the world. He writes that while Catalonia may have legitimate grievances over its treatment by the Spanish government, in the current climate separation is likely to bring a host of problems that Spain, Catalonia and Europe are ill-equipped to confront.*



Catalonia's independence movement secured a majority of seats in the regional parliament on 27 September, but fell short of winning an outright majority of the vote. The result strengthened the case for a referendum, which Madrid has for long rejected, but weakened the case for independence: after years of campaigning and mobilising Catalans, the pro-independence camp is still unable to secure half the regional vote.

The path to independence will remain a long, contentious and indeed controversial one. But what lessons can Spain draw from other secessionist movements around the world? The primary lesson is that secession, whether it takes place in Europe, the Middle East or Africa, in industrialised democratic countries or war-torn developing countries, tends to bring more problems than it solves.

Rethinking secession

The circumstances in which secession takes place warrants more appreciation than its actual merits. In theory, secession can help alleviate conflict and allow divided communities to peacefully co-exist. In practice, however, vested political or economic interests may sometimes drive secession or, alternatively, ideologies that have little connection to realities on the ground and that, ultimately, do more to divide than unite.

Partition has often come either during or after armed struggle, particularly during the era of decolonisation. In some instances, secession may be argued as being inevitable and indeed necessary, especially in war-torn regions like the Balkans or the Middle East. Indeed, in these instances and others the question may only be whether secession will be peaceful or violent – the latter is often the case.

All of this is relevant to Catalonia's drive for independence because of the circumstances in which secession is being advocated, both in Spain but also in Europe. Tensions are yet to transform into armed conflict, and violent instability is unlikely in the near future. Furthermore, Catalonia is not in a position where partition is necessary as a preventative move aimed at forestalling some devastating crisis in the future, particularly since the current nationalist wave was triggered by the financial crisis and the austerity measures that followed.



Hotel Catalonia Barcelona Plaza, located in Plaza España, Barcelona

The case for negotiations, rather than secession, becomes stronger on this basis. Of course, it might be maintained that Spain is no Iraq or Sudan and that, just because their experiences have been messy, this does not mean Spain will be subjected to the same misfortunes. In other words, that partition can be peaceful and orderly. But looks can be deceiving.

The Scottish referendum was widely celebrated for being a civil affair. It showed that pragmatism can dominate ahead of sentiment; that a healthy and constructive debate can take place. However, like countries that went through secession amidst conflict or turmoil, the debate in Spain is unfolding amidst toxic circumstances. Previous experiences show that this provides a weak and dangerous basis on which to either pursue or suppress secession.

Historically, Spain and Catalonia have a history of violent confrontation. The country is yet to fully [recover](#) from the era of Franco's dictatorship. Catalan cultural and linguistic rights were suppressed under the former dictatorship and whilst many Catalans believe discrimination still persists, [others reject this](#) and argue Catalonia's situation today is far from that of a territory subdued to a colonial power "and its citizens enjoy the same rights and opportunities as those in the rest of Spain".

Both sides of the debate accuse one another of fuelling [animosities](#). Catalan leaders have spoken of "Catalanising" Catalonian society. Officials in Madrid have aimed to make Catalan school children "[more Spanish](#)". Madrid has even gone as far as [threatening](#) the use of force, warning that the armed forces may intervene in the event Catalonia unilaterally declares independence.

Essentially, Spain's history of dictatorship and civil war remains entrenched in the collective memory of its people and, not surprisingly, forms a central part of the divide between those that advocate secession and those that reject it. In this climate, moderates are sidelined and, sometimes, silenced.

History matters, not least a divisive history, as it allows movement leaders to mobilise and push moderation to the side. It creates a "them and us" framework that has for long been recognised as crucial for the formation of any movement, nationalist or otherwise. It creates a sense of collective identity that allows movements to acquire supporters, even if they do not strongly subscribe to the movement's underlying objectives.

Radicals and insurgent groups, from ISIS in Iraq and Syria to far-right political parties, thrive on historical grievances. They revoke, manipulate and instrumentalise this history with destructive consequences. Spain is no stranger to this. The Basque separatist group ETA has violently fought the Spanish state for more than four decades, causing [hundreds of deaths](#). Catalonia had a Marxist and separatist terrorist group known as Terra Lliure, which had little support among Catalans and gave up its arms in the 1990s.

This is not to say that conflict or violent instability will take place but that the conditions for this are there and can be revitalised. It is all too easy to assume that a nation has moved on from the past and civil conflict; that it has matured politically and socially. But it was this thinking that led to complacency in Europe and allowed for far-right and extremist groups to rise in prominence. If the events since the economic crisis and the growing antipathy toward refugees prove anything, it is that powerful and mobilising forces like religion and nationalism can sideline the champions of progressivism and peaceful democratic processes.

It may be argued that Spain's established institutions and democratic system will prevent disputes from descending into violent instability. The rule of law and strong institutions are widely recognised as being crucial for such purposes, particularly in the aftermath of war and conflict zones.

However, when considered against the way that social movements work, the debate surrounding the significance of institutions and the viability of the rule of law misses the point: secessionists around the world often make such claims central to their contestation, as Catalans do in relation to what Brookings [describes](#) as Spain's mediocre performance on the rule of law. This also helps to deflect focus away from corruption and governance problems in Catalonia.

What is quite telling about the debate in Spain on Catalan independence is the near-absent discussion of security and defence. Officials and movement leaders assume they will gain automatic membership of the EU, but do not articulate a foreign policy or how Catalonia would confront defence and security issues. In light of the serious challenges facing the EU, the divisions that have erupted as a result of the economic and refugee crisis, the resurgence of Russia and the threat of terrorism, this may be problematic.

It is somewhat ironic that, whilst the financial crisis prompted the current nationalist wave, the economic crisis and the problems it has created across Europe may in fact undermine the push for Catalan independence. Isolationism will be seen as a regressive move as European leaders attempt to argue for closer integration as being fundamental to having a prosperous and secure future, now more than ever before as the world grapples with crisis after crisis. Catalonia may have legitimate grievances but in the existing climate, for which both Spain and Catalonia are to blame, separation will bring a host of problems that Spain, and indeed Europe, is ill-equipped to confront.

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Ranj Alaaldin is a doctoral researcher at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he focuses on Iraq and sectarian conflict in the Middle East. He previously specialised in the law of armed conflict and the use of force and has conducted research in the Middle East and North Africa, including extensive fieldwork in Iraq, Libya, Egypt and Jordan. He has published with the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, the Guardian, Independent and other print and online publications.



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