

Catalonia and Spain: Will the referendum on independence go ahead?

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/08/01/catalonia-and-spain-will-the-referendum-on-independence-go-ahead/

01/08/2017

The Catalan government has indicated it still intends to hold a referendum on independence on 1 October despite the Spanish government's insistence that the vote will not take place. **Sebastian Balfour** writes that nothing could be more unpredictable than the outcome of the current impasse, as an almost unstoppable force, the Catalan movement for independence, is about to clash head on with an almost immovable object in the shape of the Spanish state.



Credit: [Assemblea.cat](https://www.assemblea.cat) (CC BY-NC-2.0)

The Catalan government or Govern is committed to holding a unilateral referendum on independence on 1 October, in defiance of the Spanish state. The process of independence envisaged is often referred to as 'ruptura' as if it involved a clean break or a 'disconnection', like pulling the plug of an electric cable. But to a greater degree than, for example, the relations between Britain and the EU, Catalonia is enmeshed with Spain and has been so, more or less continuously, since it was forcibly integrated into the Bourbon Spanish kingdom from 1714. So a more appropriate metaphor than disconnection would be disentanglement. The problem is that it takes two to *disentango* and the state under the minority conservative government of Mariano Rajoy is doing its utmost to block any initiatives towards independence.

Relations between the Govern and the Spanish government are something of a cat and mouse game. As the Catalan government prepares for the referendum, Madrid tightens its noose of restrictions to halt the process. The spokesman for the Govern airily describes Madrid's efforts as a 'siege by land, sea and air'. Until recently, the Rajoy government was deploying soft power, conscious no doubt that any use of coercion would strengthen popular support for independence in Catalonia. This may be an outcome desired by the secessionist movement because it

has not won over a majority of Catalans to its cause, least of all big business.

But the central government is now flexing its muscles. Its latest measure is to deploy its control of the Liquidity Fund (a central fund designed in 2012 to help the autonomous governments of Spain meet their debts) to try to ensure the Government cannot budget for the costs of the referendum. It is insisting that the Government submit a weekly account of expenditure to certify that no money has been earmarked for the referendum. This follows the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal that the clause in the Catalan budget of March 2017 setting money aside for the administration of the referendum was unconstitutional. Another strong-arm measure it is using is to bring in for police questioning on potential charges of sedition those Catalan politicians most closely identified with the administration of the planned referendum.

For its part, the Government has drafted two laws, the Law of Referendum (*Ilei del referèndum d'autodeterminació vinculant sobre la independència de Catalunya*) and the Law of Transition (*Ilei de transitorietat jurídica*) defining the process of rupture. It has used its slender majority in the Catalan parliament to get approval for a reform of parliamentary regulations whereby the two laws can be put to the assembly in one sitting without amendments and passed with a simple majority, in contrast to reforms to the Catalan Statute of autonomy which require a two-thirds majority. In addition, it has brought forward the calendar for parliamentary sessions from 1 September to 16 August. The acceleration of measures reflects the limited time-scale left before the consecrated date of 1 October. But it could be seen also as an attempt to keep one step ahead of the Spanish government, which has also fast-tracked its procedures to get the two laws and the new regulation declared illegal by the Constitutional Tribunal.

The Government is also seeking to socialise the costs of an illegal referendum. The earlier, non-binding consultation on independence, held on 9 November 2014, despite being blocked by the Spanish courts, resulted in the prosecution of the then President Artur Mas and other ministers, and the continuing threat of individual financial sanctions. With this precedent in mind, every MP who supports independence has put his or her signature to the draft of the Referendum Law. The Government has also taken action to ensure that its team of ministers are fully committed to the process of independence. Eight functionaries, including the head of the Catalans' own police force, the *Mossos d'Esquadra*, were replaced and one sacked in July, on the grounds, presumably, that they had doubts about the referendum.

But the problem that probably most concerns the independence movement in Catalonia is that they do not seem to have the full backing of Catalans for independence. An [opinion poll](#) carried out in June by the Generalitat's own centre CEO found that 39% of Catalans would vote for independence on 1 October and 23.5% against with 18.1% abstaining. But in answer to the question 'Do you want Catalonia to be an independent state?' 41.1% said yes and 49.4% said no.

Yet a far higher proportion of supporters of independence are likely to vote than opponents. This was the case of the 9 November 2014 non-binding consultation when only just under 38% of the electorate took part of whom over 80% voted for independence. The referendum law does not stipulate a minimum number of votes for it to be passed so a simple majority in favour of independence, however small the turn-out, would in theory trigger a unilateral declaration of independence.

If the independence movement has defined a road map for unilateral disconnection, it has no coherent programme for independence. This is partly because it involves too many incognitos, not least the response of the Spanish state. The Government makes the overt assumption that it can remain a member of the EU. Yet the response of EU leaders such as the President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, has not been encouraging. If an independent Catalonia finds itself outside the EU, any application to join would require the consent of all member states and the opposition of Spain would be sufficient to block admission. In any case, there appears to be little interest in Europe for the cause of Catalan independence.

Another reason for the lack of a programmatic coherence is the ideological contradictions within the Together for Yes coalition in power in the Government. It is made up of the Catalanist centre-right and centre-left united mainly by

their strategy for independence and it relies for its parliamentary majority on an anti-capitalist nationalist party opposed to the elites supporting the Catalanist centre-right.

The strength of the independence movement, on the other hand, rests on its rank and file organisations, made up of Catalanist institutions and voluntary associations, who have been able to mobilise millions of Catalans around the politics of identity, marked by a narrative of national victimisation. The event which proved fundamental to the cause was the judgment in 2010 by the conservative-dominated Spanish Constitutional Tribunal that the new Catalan Statute of Autonomy approved in both the Spanish and Catalan parliaments four years earlier was unconstitutional in some of its clauses, in particular the Preamble which defined Catalonia as a nation. The result is that major social issues of corruption, austerity, economic crisis, and youth unemployment affecting both Spain and Catalonia tend instead to be refracted through a nationalist lens. Yet the uncomfortable fact is that members of the Catalan elites have been caught up in corruption scandals and their political representatives in power have been involved in applying policies of austerity.

The increasing polarisation between independence or unity, the right of referendum versus the 'rule of law' has led to a reductionist public discourse in which the more nuanced accounts of the problems of Spanish democracy and social injustice are increasingly marginalised. The schism tends to ignore the diverse and multi-layered nature of Catalan society. It side-lines the social and economic grievances towards the Spanish state and government of many more Catalans than are prepared to support independence.

An example of this more complex approach is that of the new Catalan left, *Catalunya en Comú*, one of whose prominent leaders is the Mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau. Along with *Unidos Podemos*, they support the right of a legal referendum without supporting independence itself on the grounds that the problems are ones rooted in social class not national identity and are therefore shared across Spanish society. One of their predictions is that the 1 October referendum, if it takes place at all, will have as little constitutional impact as the consultation of 9 November 2014.

Yet nothing could be more unpredictable than the outcome of the present impasse in Spain. An almost unstoppable force, the Catalan movement for independence, is about to clash head on with an almost immovable object, the Spanish state. The *Diada*, the Catalan national day of 11 September, may well see the biggest mobilisation of pro-independence forces ever, whilst the Rajoy government will seek to tread a narrow path between obstruction and intervention to avoid creating 'martyrs'. Whatever the outcome, the historic dilemma of Catalonia's relations with Spain will remain high on the political agenda for the foreseeable future.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

Sebastian Balfour – LSE

Sebastian Balfour is Emeritus Professor of Contemporary Spanish Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

