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Elections in Catalonia: Neither Here Nor There

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Catalonia's President, Mr Artur Mas, called early elections half way through his term, after witnessing the largest demonstration ever in Barcelona on 11 September (Catalonia's National Day) behind a banner that read: *Catalonia, the next state in Europe*. The following day he received the demonstration's organisers at the presidential palace and solemnly declared: "I have heard the voice of the people". For the first time in recorded history, official opinion polls were showing a majority in favor of a yes vote in a referendum on self-determination. The following week, coming back from a previously scheduled interview with Mr Rajoy in Madrid where he received an anticipated negative answer to his demands of a Basque country-like financial arrangement for Catalonia, he was cheered by his faithful supporters at the palace door, in a *mise en scène* that further encouraged him to lead what his campaigners afterwards called "the will of the people". Cautiously choosing his words as usual, Mr Mas's justification for calling the elections was to gather express support for holding a popular consultation on Catalonia's "right to decide". His declared aim: a landslide majority to back a "strong government", poised to lead Catalonia's "national transition"... to independence, everybody read without hearing the word from his mouth.

To his supporters, this was a noble, generous, statesman-like and profoundly democratic move: he listened to the people and offered himself, transcending party boundaries, to lead the process towards Catalan statehood –a historical feat. To his critics, it was a dubious attempt to draw the voters' attention away from the harsh effects of his tough austerity policies, and re-direct social discontent towards the traditional, historical foe, Madrid –that is, the Spanish central government–, stirring the pre-existing and widely shared idea that sustained mistreatment by the state is the root cause of Catalonia's ills. Most probably, it was a mixture of both.

The background to all this has to do with the past and the present. It should be remembered that Catalan culture was actively repressed by the Francoist regime (schooling and public expression in the Catalan language were forbidden, although some publishing houses were actively printing books in vernacular and the language was kept very much alive in the private domain). General Franco never forgave Catalonia for standing on the side of the Second Republic to the very last days of the Spanish Civil War. The complex local politics of the time, read as an anticipated lost battle against fascism, were famously captured by George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. As for the present, to the demolishing effects of the crisis for both the economy and the social mood should be added the political culture of the ruling conservative People's Party (PP), contrary to a culturally-diverse definition of Spain –a reality which the 1978 Constitution tried to accommodate through the creation of the Autonomous Communities and a pseudo-federal structure of the Spanish state.

This centralist ideological stand of the PP is responsible, notably, for its appeal to the Constitutional Court against an amended Catalan Statute of Autonomy which had been approved both by Catalan citizens in a referendum and by the Spanish Congress (2006), for its refusal to reform the obsolete structure and financing of the “State of the Autonomies”, and for a number of policy measures taken by the Rajoy government which short-circuit and erode devolved powers and de-prioritize investment in infrastructures.

Mas raised the stakes. His centre-right nationalist coalition, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), had always been faithfully autonomist, open to pacts with the central government –and was thus regarded by Spanish Conservatives and Socialists alike, as the reliable partner in Catalonia. Further, Mas’s austerity policies (which started to be administered a full year before Rajoy’s) were only approved in the Catalan Parliament thanks to the support of Rajoy’s party. Mas’s move was a clear departure from received wisdom, never before had a CiU leader advocated such a break. Although he was particularly careful not to mention the word “independence”, his claim for “tools of statehood” to achieve “national plenitude” as the means to solve Catalonia’s problems resonated profoundly in Catalan and Spanish Politics. He also declared that he will leave office as soon as that “national plenitude” was achieved –interpreted by many as winning a yes vote in a referendum in favor of self-determination-, trying to raise his statesmans’ profile in order to gather as many votes as possible.

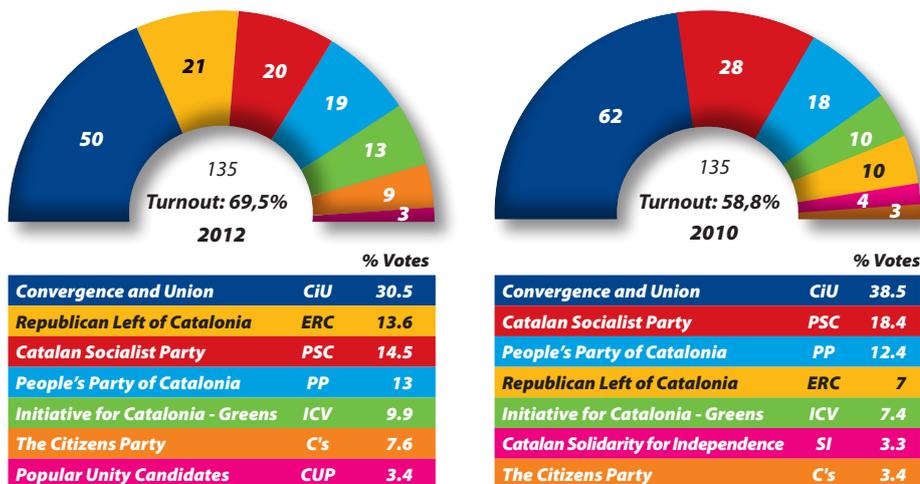
It is arguable that President Mas’s strategists were hoping for a one-issue election. The terms in which it was called did in fact prompt a line-up (for/against a popular consultation) of the political forces competing at the elections, but Catalanist sentiment, encompassing a wide majority of the voters, expressed itself at the polls in a different direction from Mas’s hopes: several parties (some of them considered up to then to be minor parties) embodied Catalonia’s political diversity and cashed in the votes in favor of the right to exercise self-determination. They did not flock to the leader. And there was no landslide majority.

The unionist/ non-unionist dialectic was a particularly hot issue in Madrid. Rajoy’s government could not help but show reactions which seemed chosen examples of what not to do when a partner announces he/she is feeling unhappy and is thinking of leaving – even though authoritative sources such as the *Financial Times* were advising them to get down to solving, without delay, the most outstanding problems (basically, the fiscal balance) with the richest region in Spain.

The PP’s unnerved reaction to Catalan disaffection showed that the concept of a culturally homogeneous state is very much alive in the ruling party in Spain and is an important component of its political baggage. Accusations were hurled in both directions (Madrid/ Barcelona) and the conservative press in Madrid contributed with explosive (though, by and large, unproven) corruption revelations involving the CiU leadership. Clearly, the prospects of a –this time real– danger of disintegration of Spanish unity set in motion the deep state.

At the same time, the Socialist PSOE, the main opposition party in Spain, did not help much. While its political culture is obviously not tinged with Francoist reflexes, it owes much to another strong centralist tradition, that of French Jacobinism. Today, finding itself in the midst of the worst economic crisis since the restoration of democracy in Spain, the PSOE sort-of sided with the unionist perspective, half-heartedly pointing to a poorly defined federal future, while stating that they “do not share” their Catalan peers’ stand in favor of the “right to decide”. Apart from setting up a re-furbished version of old federalism, the Catalan Socialists (PSC) have also their own internal tensions between “catalanists” and “unionists”, which already resulted into some senior militants leaving the party to found an alternative.

Results of the Catalan Elections



Source: Central Electoral Commission.
Produced by CIDOB

All of this, however, did not prevent the Catalan opposition parties (although, admittedly, it made it somewhat harder for them) to highlight CiU's (mis)management of the crisis, expose the conservative nationalists' economic recipes, and express their rejection of Troika-prescribed debt-reduction measures. The undermined credibility of politicians from the "system parties", together with their involvement in a variety of corruption scandals and their indulgent silk-glove treatment of bailed-out bankers helped them achieve an interesting score at the elections.

President Mas's shot backfired completely: CiU got an –still impressive– 1.1 million votes (but 100.000 less than in the last elections in 2010, its lowest mark since 1980) and 50 seats in the Catalan Parliament (12 down), a completely unexpected result that makes governance much harder than before. There are now three parties that could deliver a parliamentary majority to a CiU-led coalition: Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), the historical centre-left but radically independentist party which came in second, with 495.000 votes and 21 seats (11 up); the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC), which lost 50.000 votes (hitting its lowest level ever) and came in third with 20 seats (8 down); and the PP, which actually increased its votes by 80.000 and won 19 seats (1 up). None of them showed, at first, any signs of being interested in term-long coalition pact, at any rate not at an affordable price.

Serious talks with ERC were finally undertaken, nonetheless, and ended up in a broad agreement – even though ERC's conditions were a fixed date for the self-determination referendum and a more compassionate approach to austerity economics implying heavier taxes for the more affluent, two conditions that were not so easy to endorse by the conservative relative majority. Instead of joining the government in a permanent coalition, ERC prefers to give its support to a Mas led CiU government from the opposition benches. With unemployment up to 22,56% in the third quarter of 2012, and a public debt piling up to 45 billion euros, for Mr Oriol Junqueras, ERC's leader, holding to the institutionalised position of Head of the Opposition in parliament is a much more comfortable position than to face the difficult times ahead as a vice-president or "counselor in chief" in a coalition government. It is by no means the scenario Mr Mas anticipated and an agreement with ERC causes further internal tensions in his coalition party, but it has turned out to be his only plausible chance to survive. Yes, he has been appointed President by the new parliament, but most probably instability will be the name of the game.

The Spanish government's spin doctors were quick to spread their own interpretation of the election results: Mr Mas's blunder meant the end of Catalan national challenge to Spain's sacred union. Foreign Minister José Manuel García-Margallo, particularly active and outspoken throughout the crisis, went so far as to dismiss them offhandedly: "Well, we thought it was terminal cancer, it seems it was only pneumonia" –in any case, the results were not something anyone with political responsibilities would want to celebrate much, at least for the following two very important reasons.

First, the Catalan elections confirmed a worrying trend for the two main Spanish parties, PP and PSOE: popular vote is down for both in all three "historical regions" (Galicia, Basque Country and Catalonia), showing mounting voter disaffection with the "system parties", whose policies they feel are practically indistinguishable. This is an ominous warning in a country where the mobilisations of the Indignados since the spring of 2011, supported by 70% of the population according to the polls, have been exposing the "PPSOE regime", and where all three regional elections have witnessed the rise of "minor" parties, particularly on the left.

Second, the rise of nationalist forces in all three regions and the large "sovereigntist" majorities in both Basque Country (48 out of 75 seats) and Catalonia (87 out of 135 seats) poses a major political problem to the Spanish executive: the current structure of the Spanish state is being increasingly questioned. This is a serious matter, one that would require legitimacy and consensus –both faltering or absent at present— and avoidance of flag-waving demagoguery. A question for which procrastination will not do as an answer.

It is an established fact that the "State of the Autonomies" model defined in the 1978 Constitution has become obsolete and it is not working anymore. Almost everybody agrees it needs urgent reform. The pseudo-federal political/ administrative structure of the Spanish state needs to be revised, and this means that the Constitution, if it is to prevail as the legitimate legal umbrella to all Spanish territories, has to be amended. This is a difficult prospect for both main parties, PP and PSOE, which seem to shy away from the task, frightened of becoming hostages to their most reactionary internal factions and a very active, unfriendly press. But it is nothing that cannot be done with some sensible thinking on all parts. Or is it too much to ask for in Spanish politics?

The Catalan elections could have opened a window of opportunity for a constitutional reform, a courageous reform to accommodate and better integrate the increasingly assertive Spanish nations. Unfortunately, taking into account how deep the emotions and irrational feelings associated with nationalisms are, the historical opportunity of re-setting a consensual political framework might well have been missed, yet again. If, as seems likely, this window of opportunity is not taken seriously, the chances to prevent painful secession processes will be lost. If this is finally the case, the current Catalan political crisis, which negatively adds up to the already five year old deep economic, financial and increasingly social crises, will further deteriorate the Iberian peninsula's backbone, and will push Spain into a no-through institutional road –some call it a cliff.