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CATALAN INDEPENDENCE

# Catalan independence: the long fight to keep Spain whole

Madrid's response to the Catalan vote adds to a list of lost chances for peace

Paul Preston

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King Felipe, with Queen Letizia, has tarnished his position  
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For General Franco, there were two Spains: the “authentic” and the “anti-Spain”, the

victors and the vanquished in the civil war.

After Franco's death on November 20, 1975, Juan Carlos was proclaimed "King of all Spaniards", a phrase thereafter adopted as his mantra and now abandoned by his son.

Last Sunday, nearly 900 Catalans were injured as the Spanish police and civil guard employed brute force to stop millions voting in an unconstitutional referendum on independence.

I have since spoken to several Catalans who were beaten, including several who had intended to vote to remain in Spain. Many are changing their minds after 10,000 police were sent to Catalonia from other parts of Spain where resentment of Catalans is palpable.

The firing of rubber bullets, the smashing up of polling stations and the violence against women and old people evoked memories of the Franco dictatorship.

Claims by the prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, echoed by Juan Carlos's son King Felipe, that these violations of human rights were “proportionate”, have marked a return to the past.

Felipe was expected to appeal for calm and dialogue but, instead, ignoring the violence, he condemned one side of the conflict. In doing so, he has tarnished his position as a neutral head of state. Similarly, the EU's support for Rajoy has served to poison the atmosphere.

The events of last weekend have confirmed a pattern of the past 100 years — of which Rajoy seems unaware — whereby Catalan separatism feeds off Madrid's centralist intransigence. With a deep sense of separate identity, built on a different language, a rich culture of literature, architecture and music, many

Catalans aspire to greater political recognition and fiscal autonomy.

Intransigence from Madrid tips nationalism into separatism. For instance, the ruthlessly anti-Catalan policy of the dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera from 1923 to 1930 led to the huge electoral success in April 1931 of the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (Republican Left of Catalonia) and the subsequent autonomy statute of September 1932.

One of the objectives of the military rising of July 1936, within its declared intention of eliminating “without scruple or hesitation those who do not think as we do”, was the eradication of Catalan independence.

The honour of leading Franco's victory parade in Barcelona, the Catalan capital, was given to Navarrese troops, according to a British military observer, "not because they have fought better, but because they hate better — that is to say, when the object of this hate is Catalonia or a Catalan". One officer told a Portuguese journalist that the only solution to the "Catalan problem" was "kill the Catalans. It's just a question of time."

Under Franco, hundreds of thousands were exiled and many thousands held in concentration camps. The language and culture were repressed. All vestiges of independence were erased, a process symbolised by the fate of the former Catalan president Lluís Companys. He was arrested by the Gestapo in France in August 1940 and handed over to the Spanish police. For five weeks, he was tortured. Accused of military

rebellion, he was sentenced to death, shot and turned into a martyr for the Catalan cause.

Inevitably, the dictatorship increased Catalanist feeling. Demonstrations in Catalonia were crucial in persuading Francoists to participate in the negotiations which underlay the transition to democracy.

The first democratic elections in June 1977 saw 75% of the vote in Catalonia cast for parties seeking the reinstatement of the 1932 statute. Catalonia, along with the Basque country and Galicia, was granted a statute of autonomy in 1979, although the effect of this was diluted by the concession of autonomy to 17 regions in July 1981, of which 13 had no tradition of nationalism.

In 2005, when support for Catalan independence stood at just 13.6%, a revised autonomy statute was drafted. Agreed in the Catalan parliament, after lengthy debates, it was approved in the Madrid Cortes in 2006 but fiercely criticised by the Spanish right-wing media. Catalan products were boycotted.

A challenge by the right-wing Popular Party (PP) saw the text referred to the extremely conservative constitutional tribunal. After a

four-year delay, which frustrated and inflamed independence sentiment, its judgment in June 2010 revoked articles concerning fiscal parity and added references to the “indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation”. It was a slap in the face for the moderates who had hoped for a mutually beneficial arrangement with Spain.

By then, thanks also to austerity policies in response to the economic crisis, support for independence was hovering around 40%.

Shortly after the PP was voted into power in 2011, the centre-right Democratic Convergence of Catalonia party, pushed by young radical nationalists, called an independence referendum. Madrid permitted a consultative poll on independence in November 2014, which seemed to be a victory for the nationalists only because of the abstention of those opposing independence.

Tensions intensified as the Catalan elections in 2015 saw a new nationalist coalition government under Carles Puigdemont announce a definitive referendum on independence. Rather than take the opportunity offered by the likelihood of a “no” vote to offer to discuss some movement

towards the 2005 autonomy text, the PP government chose to ignore the aspirations of millions of Catalans and declared that it would prevent independence by any means.

In the present stand-off, a unilateral declaration of independence would be rash. Even if Madrid did not respond with violence, a Catalan state would face immense difficulties in integrating into the EU.

Equally, that Madrid should have risked the economic lunacy of alienating one of the country's wealthiest regions is a triumph of ideology over a sense of history. There is electoral capital to be made in parts of Spain from anti-Catalanism but, in the long-term, it can only damage Spain.

The present situation could easily have been avoided. Rajoy, in the knowledge of the strength of anti-independence feeling (which he may have squandered), while insisting that the constitution does not permit a referendum on autonomy, could have suggested that a consultative procedure, if it got a certain majority, could open the way to serious talks about the original 2005 autonomy statute.

Now, Rajoy has left himself with the prospect



of invoking the suspension of regional autonomy. That would mean using the army, arresting Puigdemont and members of the Catalan cabinet as well as untold numbers of functionaries.

It would also see millions of people on the streets in solidarity in Catalonia and elsewhere, especially the Basque country. At that point, the scale of violations of human rights would make it difficult for the EU to go on saying that this is just an internal matter for Spain.

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