DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 17.11.2023 | Andrew Dowling

Once again, the Catalan question rocks Spain

The Spanish government begins its administration in a highly fractious political context. Many months of continued polarisation could follow

Starting in 2008 with the economic crisis, Spain has experienced a range of crises that operated at a range of levels: societal, institutional and territorial. The resulting political upheaval ruptured the once-stable two-party system in Spain and put the main institutions of the state under pressure. The Spanish monarchy, usually seen as comparatively anodyne, became increasingly politicised with the emergence of a strong movement calling for a republic.

We have also seen a judiciary frequently acting as a para-political actor, particularly since 2019, when a coalition of social democrats of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) was formed with the leftist *Podemos*. Measures, particularly those around progressive social policy, have been targeted by conservative judges. The current large-scale manifestations are the brain-child of the far-right party Vox, which has forced the mainstream centre-right People's Party (PP) to respond and harden its political messaging.

The Catalan question

Connected to and feeding on all of these developments has been an intense territorial crisis in Catalonia. This was particularly fractious between 2017 and 2019, at various points since, and has, once again this autumn, come to play an essential role in determining Spanish political developments. Since the Spanish right failed to achieve the electoral victory it had expected in July 2023, and it became evident that the PSOE-led coalition headed by Pedro Sánchez could return to power only through the votes of the Catalan independence parties, political tension has risen.

The Catalan question has remained central to the politics of democratic Spain since the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975. Comprising 20

per cent of the Spanish GDP, Catalonia is too important to be ignored. Catalan autonomy was restored in 1979 during the transition from the Franco dictatorship, and the first elections to its regional parliament took place in 1980. It seemed then that Catalonia was embarking on a new direction.

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For most of the period from 1980 to 2005, the Catalan question seemed to be resolvable within the contours of Spain's semi-federal autonomous system. It was the Basque Country and the violence associated with the separatist organisation ETA that attracted national and international concern. However, since 2010, as the Basque question receded, the Catalan question unexpectedly exploded back into consciousness. This was surprising because as late as 2005, fewer than 15 per cent of Catalans expressed support for the independence of the country, yet, within a few years, this support reached half of the Catalan population.

The turn to independence had its origins in the combination of political, economic and cultural factors which peaked in October 2017 with the attempted secession from Spain. Subsequent sentencing of sectors of the Catalan leadership in 2019 to long prison terms produced an explosion of social protest in Barcelona in the autumn of that year. It is here that we must situate the controversy around the amnesty law negotiated since September 2023 by the existing Spanish government and the forces of Catalan independence represented by the exiled leader Carles Puigdemont. The amnesty law includes all of those implicated in any activity in the independence struggle deemed to have broken Spanish law since 2012. It also includes police officers accused of using excessive force against these protests.

Spanish nationalism

However, we cannot comprehend these developments if we centre our focus on Catalonia alone. A central actor throughout is and has been Spanish nationalism. Many deny there is such a thing as Spanish nationalism (they claim the only nationalists in Spain are those of the Basque Country and Catalonia) and instead speak in proxy terms, referencing the Spanish Constitution of 1978 as embodying a natural and somehow eternal national essence. The Constitution transformed the territorial structure of Spain and was also a compromise between the fundamental tenets of Spanish nationalism and the claims of Basques and

Catalans.

The paradox is that Catalan independence is less likely today than at any time in the past 10 years, with the agreement and amnesty law representing a measure of de-escalation.

Spanish conservative nationalism remained weak until the 1990s and had few effective mechanisms to express its political concerns. This began to change, producing a resurgent and confident Spanish nationalism, in part brought up by the economic transformation of Spain and in particular of Madrid. This Spanish nationalism increasingly questioned the accumulation of concessions obtained by Basques and Catalans in the 1990s and sought to prevent any further devolution of powers to the regions. Spanish conservative nationalism also embarked on challenges to language policies in Catalonia and the Basque Country and sought to harmonise the educational curriculum, partly around areas such as history and geography, where it advocated the teaching of a shared Spanish national story. During the period of ETA violence, Basque nationalism was the central target of this discourse, but by the time of the economic crisis in 2008, the focus of Spanish nationalism became ever more centred on Catalonia.

Given its greater economic and demographic weight, the turn to independence in Catalonia was mostly met by incomprehension, if not outright hostility by the institutions of Spain. The events of 2017, in particular, and during the political cycle until 2019 also had a profound societal impact across Spain. Much of the Spanish media landscape and the country's political and legal authorities interpreted the Catalan events as an affront to the honour and integrity of Spain. Anger was also expressed at the framing of Spain internationally as a country of harsh police repression. By 2019, a newly emergent political force, Vox, had capitalised on the Spanish nationalist backlash and become a new and influential actor in the party system in Spain. The Spanish legal authorities, often acting as a parallel power structure, have been unending in their pursuit against apparent threats to Spanish unity.

A measure of de-escalation

All of these elements help us to understand why numerous demonstrations are taking place across Spain in opposition to the amnesty law, which is part of an agreement to form a new Spanish

government led by the PSOE. A conversative media space of daily newspapers, talk radio and regional TV stations have been vociferous in denouncing the measure that they deem a grubby deal by the PSOE to stay in power. Sánchez is accused of endangering national unity. Harsh criticism has also been forthcoming from organisations representing judges and police officers. These sectors of conservative Spain are the representatives of contemporary Spanish nationalism, which hold a unitary conception of the country. They have been seeking to demonise the PSOE-led government for a number of years, and the amnesty law for Catalan independentists seems to confirm all of their fears.

The paradox is that Catalan independence is less likely today than at any time in the past 10 years, with the agreement and amnesty law representing a measure of de-escalation. It is a begrudging acceptance by the political forces of Catalan secession that any route to future independence will have to be legal and constitutional. In reality, this means it is off the agenda for the foreseeable future. However, we live in a time of intense political emotions, and none is more charged in Spain than the question of national unity.

All of this signifies that the newly formed Spanish government begins its administration in a highly fractious political context. The unexpected electoral loss by Spanish conservatism in July 2023 and its inability to form a government means it will treat the new PSOE-led coalition as illegitimate from its inception. This government has only a narrow parliamentary majority, so we can expect to see disruption, both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary, to undermine it. We can thus anticipate many months, if not years of continued political polarisation in Spain.



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