

## Brinkmanship in Spain: on Catalan conflict

The [Catalan conflict continues to deteriorate](#) with every passing day. In the aftermath of the referendum on October 1, both the Spanish and Catalan governments have continued to adopt a hard line. This has made it impossible for a productive dialogue to emerge, which could have steered the situation towards a resolution. At the same time, the Spanish king has also not taken control of the situation. In a televised address after the events of October 1, King Felipe VI merely condemned the Catalans for their 'illegal' actions and urged them to cease and desist.

The Catalan Parliament is to now meet over the coming days to respond to the Spanish government's unprecedented and recent decision to impose direct rule. Meanwhile, speculation mounts that the Catalan regional president, Carles Puigdemont, is planning to press ahead with a unilateral declaration of independence. He has accused the Spanish government of "slamming the door on his appeals for dialogue to resolve the country's worst political crisis since its return to democracy 40 years ago".

In the absence of any productive dialogue, threats and flashes of extremism have found their way into the discourse. The Catalan government went ahead with the 'illegal' referendum on October 1, with complete disregard for Spanish legal norms. The Spanish government retaliated with the use of force. The Spanish constitutional court has also banned parliamentary activity in Catalonia.

Spain could invoke Article 155 of the Constitution, which allows for direct rule to be imposed in a crisis in any of the country's autonomous regions and effectively allows the Spanish government to forcibly take control of Catalonia's administrative bodies. Stuck in the middle of these extremist positions, the peaceful and quiet life of Catalonia is in peril. The highly politicised situation has seen neighbours turn on neighbours and friendships destroyed.

All you need to know about Catalonia's independence referendum

The political escalation of the situation has made Catalan society more polarised. While a large and highly public section of the population demands independence, a potentially equivalent but subdued section wishes to remain within Spain. In recent days, the latter group has found greater representation in the public sphere, with people sporting combined flags and flag posters at bus stops across Barcelona. The referendum saw 90% of the 2.26 million Catalans vote in favour of independence. The region has an estimated 5.3 million voters. Officials said 770,000 votes were lost due to disruption after polling stations were raided by Spanish police. Reports also suggest that a large number of the pro-Spain population of Catalonia could take to the streets. This polarisation of Catalan society does not bode well for peace and quiet.

Violence between pro-independence and anti-independence groups is highly uncharacteristic of the laid-back and peaceful Catalan lifestyle. Its emergence underlies the fact that the conflict is extremely serious and must be resolved quickly.

The impact on Catalan society doesn't stop there. Already, there has been a drop in the demand for apartments and hotels in Barcelona. Sabadell and Caixa, two of Spain's biggest banks, are shifting out of Barcelona. The Spanish government has also facilitated similar moves by allowing companies to expedite shifting out of Catalonia without having to consult shareholders first. If Catalonia does manage to gain independence, it would not bode well for its economy. It would have to set up new, independent institutions of governance to control air traffic, immigration, diplomatic relations and a new currency. It would risk losing European Union (EU) membership, and isolating the Catalan economy. Questions have also been raised regarding Catalonia's share of Spain's national debt. Political independence would come with a huge economic cost. Are the

people of Catalonia willing to accept these consequences for independence?

Historically, the [conflict between the Catalans and the Castilians](#) can be traced back to 1714, when Catalonia was first incorporated into the Spanish Empire by King Philip V. Generalissimo Francisco Franco's Fascist regime in the 20th century reopened this conflict. The clear motivation of Franco's regime – and his Spanish nationalistic agenda – was the elimination of everything Catalan. He banned public use of the language, education in Catalan and even the use of Catalan names. These totalitarian restrictions were combined with use of force and imprisonment. This has left a lasting feeling of otherness in the Catalans. The memory of Franco is fresh in their minds.

The Spanish government's recent activities — arresting Catalan ministers and police violence at voting stations — encourage parallels drawn with Franco. On the streets of Barcelona, young adults believe that the rights their grandparents fought for have been lost again to the Spanish.

Pro-independence Catalans point out that the referendum was authorised by a Bill in the democratically elected Catalan Parliament. The demands they invoke — democracy and the right to vote — are cornerstones of the modern political regime. However, the referendum is also in direct conflict with the Spanish Constitution, which expressly prohibits secession. The Parliamentary Bill has been suspended by the constitutional court and the referendum declared illegal.

Regardless of the situation, the law is paramount and holds precedence over everything else. Any demand for independence must come from within the structure of the law, and not beyond it. Therefore, as it stands, the Catalan referendum is a violation of the rule of law and democratic principles.

But these are courtroom arguments and hold no merit when compared to the feeling of persecution among Catalans. In the past, the Spanish government has glossed over Catalan demands for greater autonomy. The complexities of the Catalan revolution are not lost on a student of politics. Both sides believe their conduct is correct, when in fact they can just as easily be perceived to be wrong in their actions. The EU has distanced itself from the situation, calling it an internal conflict. Yet, this is the first time in history that a revolution has begun in an established liberal democracy where citizens enjoy a comparatively high degree of personal rights and freedoms. This highlights the peculiar nature of the conflict and the reasons for discontentment among the people.

International mediation by the EU seems the most plausible non-violent solution. It is the only solution capable of bringing both sides to the table and having a rational dialogue of demands and counter-demands. The Spanish King could also perform this role, but has chosen not to. Regardless of the potential costs, pro-independence Catalans will go to any end for their demand of a state of their own and will not stop before they have some measure of success. A solution must be found before the situation descends into mass violence.

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