

## The unilateral vote

Referendums are in the news, with tensions mounting in Spain and West Asia over regional votes in [Catalonia](#) and [Iraqi Kurdistan](#), respectively. Both in their own ways are a caution on how such instruments of direct democracy need to be used with care.

A referendum is, no doubt, a powerful tool to deepen participation and reflect public opinion in a democracy. But when, how and for what reasons referendums should be held need to be carefully laid out so as to ensure their legitimacy. As the Brexit referendum proved last year, these instruments can reduce layered issues such as the membership of a single market into a vote on the narrower subject of immigration. When referendums are used as blunt instruments to decide upon complicated issues such as independence or secession, there needs to be an additional stress on mechanisms: questions framed for the vote, legitimacy of the institution calling for the vote and so on.

Some of the well-known referendums on independence that were held in recent years include the ones in Scotland in 2014, South Sudan in 2011 and Quebec (Canada) in 1995. The first two were outcomes of agreements with the Central governments in the U.K. and Sudan, respectively. The Quebec vote was the outcome of a provincial decision, which however resulted in failure for secessionists. The two referendums in Iraq's only autonomous region, of Kurdistan (held on September 25) and in the Catalonia autonomous province in Spain (to be held on October 1) follow the Quebec model — without the stamp of approval or an agreement with national government in Iraq and Spain, respectively.

The question of legitimacy of referendums is important and it is automatically provided if the Centre concedes this mechanism on such issues. Central acquiescence to the process of a referendum to decide or infer opinions on sovereignty also allows for a true campaign on both sides of the yes/no positions in the referendum. This is not the case with the Catalanian and the Kurdish referendums, which means that a “yes” outcome would not necessarily push the envelope in the direction of secession in a peaceful manner.

Legitimacy apart, on the face of it, there is a common thread in these two referendums. The rulers of Iraqi Kurdistan sought the non-binding referendum as a step towards independence from “Arab” Iraq. The dominant parties in Catalonia also have a similar aim — framing the binding yes/no vote for independence as a decisive step towards the formation of a new republic, independent of Madrid. But the similarities end there — in the tactics used by these pro-secession forces from the nation-states of Iraq and Spain.

Iraqi Kurdistan is just one of four Kurd majority areas, the other three being in Syria, Turkey and Iran. Kurds were denied a homeland of their own after the break-up of the Ottoman Empire and various movements seeking autonomy and independence in the four countries have been brutally repressed over the years.

In Iraq, Kurds were repressed during Ba'ath rule. After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, they managed to get a better deal in the new regime and enhanced their autonomy following Baghdad's entanglement in the civil war against the Islamic State (IS).

Kurds are an important partner for Baghdad in the fight against the IS, with the U.S. also treating the Peshmerga forces as an ally. With a weakened Baghdad dependent upon Shiite militias and Iran's proxy forces in the long civil war, Kurds have used the situation to enhance the territory under their control.

The move by the Iraqi Kurds towards independence is being viewed with alarm by the Turkish and Iranian regimes. Turkey has in the past treated Kurdish demands for minority rights such as recognition of their language, let alone autonomy, as secessionist. Following concessions towards minority rights in the early 2000s under the AKP regime of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a long-running battle against insurgents led by forces such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) eased, but hostilities were renewed recently by the Erdoğan-led regime.

Iran is also fighting a minor insurgency in the mountains of its northern region led by another affiliate of the PKK, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) and has recently closed its eastern borders in the light of the referendum held in Iraqi Kurdistan.

In short, any moves for independence of “south Kurdistan” in Iraq have geopolitical ramifications and are severely opposed by Turkey and Iran in particular, as well as the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, which remains tactically silent on the matter for now. The referendum in Iraq cannot be seen in isolation from the other battles which are being fought by Kurds in neighbouring countries and which could complicate matters such as the still unfinished civil war against the IS in Syria and Iraq, regardless of how legitimate the historical claims of the Kurds for a separate homeland are.

[Catalonia's referendum](#) does not suffer from these complications. Catalans were also subject to similar centralisation and unitary principles during Franco's rule in Spain as Kurds were in Turkey, being unable to speak their language in public. But this was a fate suffered by other minorities in Spain as well, the Basques for example.

Unlike the Basque region where movements for decentralisation, autonomy and even independence took a violent turn with a raging insurgency led by the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), the Catalan demands were through the democratic route. This gained significance in the post-Franco transformation of Spain, with a degree of autonomy guaranteed to its many nationalities such as the Basque region, Galicia and Catalonia apart from other autonomous communities in a process of devolution regulated by the Spanish Constitution of 1978.

While the recognition of “nationalities” such as the Catalan one in Spain has decisively moved the country away from the centralised and unitary nation-state under Franco, there have been demands for a truer federalisation and greater devolution of power, especially in Catalonia lately. This has expressed itself as a movement for independence in the past decade as an array of political parties from the Left to the Right have asked for a separate nation-state due to the distinctiveness of the Catalan identity and notions of economic injustice. Secessionists point out that while Catalonia is the richest province, it gives more to Spain than it gets from the government in Madrid.

The real reasons for the demands of independence lie in the vagaries of Spain's economy which have affected Catalonia as well. Catalan nationalists from both the Left and the Right have used independence as the way to answer raging problems such as unemployment instead of pursuing reforms and measures that will relieve Catalonia (and indeed Spain) of these issues.

The October 1 referendum itself is problematic — it asks participants if they prefer independence through a yes/no vote and choices such as greater federalisation are not provided on the ballot. In any case, parties supporting the “no” option (and endorsed mostly by non-Catalan long-time residents of the region) are boycotting the referendum. Yet, the Catalan government is pushing the referendum as a binding step towards independence.

In sum, the issues at stake in Iraqi Kurdistan and Catalonia in Spain are vastly different. Kurdish claims of independence might be legitimate due to the repression faced by Kurds in their respective sovereignties and the parcelling of the Kurdish homeland into regions across those

sovereignties. But a push for independence in this milieu is fraught with new tensions rising out of geopolitics. The Catalan case for independence is lesser as the real problem in Catalonia is related to economic issues, which are shared by the rest of Spain as well.

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