

INTERVIEW

Spanish State & Catalan standoff: Podemos Under Pressure

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With the Catalan standoff emboldening the Spanish right, can Podemos revive its populist alternative to the status quo?

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Since the proclamation of a Catalan republic on October 27, the independence movement in Catalonia has been on the retreat. Hours after the parliamentary vote on independence, the right-wing Spanish government of the Partido Popular (PP) moved to impose direct rule and took control of Catalan institutions in the days that followed.

This setback opened up a debate among pro-independence forces over how to proceed [1]. Given the evident *force majeure* of the Spanish state, Catalan Premier Carles Puigdemont's center-right Partit Demòcrata Català and its center-left coalition partner Esquerra Republicana have both distanced themselves from the unilateral approach to independence. Instead, they will participate in fresh elections this month aiming for "bilateral negotiations with the [Spanish] State and the EU".

In the rest of Spain a wave of nationalist sentiment has seen a clear shift to the right, with some polls showing the PP and Ciudadanos, the two main right-wing parties, winning an absolute majority if general elections were held today. Podemos, the only major Spanish party to vote against suspending Catalan autonomy, has found it difficult to operate in a climate dominated by the national question. Defending an alternative federal model for the country that would recognize the right to decide, they have repeatedly been painted as "traitors" and close allies of the independence movement by much of the Spanish media.

In the following dialogue Jorge Moruno, Podemos's former head of discourse, and Brais Fernández, editor of *Viento Sur* and activist with the Anticapitalista wing of the party, talk to *Jacobin's* Eoghan Gilmartin about the strategic failures of the independence movement and how the Spanish left can regain momentum after months on the back foot.

Catalonia in Crisis

Eoghan Gilmartin (EG)

How do you view the current situation in Catalonia after the imposition of direct rule from Madrid and the arrest of members of the Catalan government?

Jorge Moruno (JM)

It remains acute. The Catalan crisis is a fundamentally political one and cannot be resolved judicially or through the detention of political leaders. With the imposition of direct rule, Spain might have won as a state but it has failed as a nation. Indeed at the origin of this crisis is the historical failure to construct a form of political coexistence in Spain that could aggregate the national differences and political wills into a more universal imagined community.

In Podemos we have always said that the only solution is through the ballot box, offering Catalans the choice in a negotiated referendum to either remain as part of a new plurinational Spanish state or to pursue an independent Catalan republic.

Brais Fernández (BF)

The response from the Spanish government has been very authoritarian, showing once again the inability of the political class to resolve the Catalan question democratically. They have been unable to generate a new constitutional consensus that could incorporate demands from Spain's peripheral nationalities.

At the same time the pro-independence parties' strategy based around a "process of disconnection" from the Spanish state has also failed. The idea that through a series of parliamentary declarations and one-off mobilizations Catalonia was going to secede from Spain underestimated both the coercive powers of the Spanish state and the lengths to which it would go to maintain Catalonia as part of its territory. The regional elections in December look likely to result in a further impasse. The pro-independence parties might maintain their slim majority of seats but they don't, as yet, have the capacity to advance their historic objectives.

JM

Yes, it is clear the unilateral path to independence has failed on its own terms, i.e. the Catalan government's inability to exercise sovereign force. Sovereignty is not declared but rather exercised through one's dominion over a given territory and population, and in the final instance through one's monopoly of violence. This was never going to be possible in the case of Catalonia.

Traditionally a unilateral secession requires either the support of more powerful nations or the ability to confront the state through armed conflict. Obviously the second option was never considered but the Catalan government has also failed to win international support. There was a belief among many *independentistas* that because Catalans spoke French, Italian and English and were culturally European, the EU would somehow be more sympathetic towards their claims. That's not how politics works. Germany was thinking about Bavaria and France about Corsica and they saw nothing to gain from backing the Catalans.

This only leaves the option of securing a negotiated referendum with the state you belong to, which entails joining other forces whose objectives might differ from yours but who agree on a method for resolving the conflict. Catalonia can only exercise its right to decide if the independence movement works with forces of change in the Spanish state. The idea of a unilateral referendum that takes place in defiance of the state is impossible.

BF

I disagree that a unilateral referendum is impossible. Faced with an anti-democratic blockade from the state, the Catalan people had to look for alternative ways of exercising their right to self-determination. In this sense the referendum on October 1st was legitimate. It succeeded in centering debate not only on the question of independence but on democracy and the Catalans' right to decide.

After this, the question is how you manage the situation politically. Do you use it to try to improve

the balance of forces in your favor, opening up a series of new alliances across the Spanish state based on the need for a democratic rupture and a constituent process? Or, alternatively, do you use it to push ahead towards a declaration of independence without any concrete plan of how to realize a republic?

For me the crisis in Catalonia was an opportunity to accelerate a wider crisis of the state that would weaken the Spanish ruling classes. Obviously, this has not happened and the independence movement has been temporarily defeated, but the process also contains many lessons on how to go forward.

In this respect the independence movement has to confront its lack of organization amongst the subaltern classes. We have seen the mobilization of precariatized middle classes as well certain sectors of the working class since October 1st but they have no control over the process. It is managed from above by the political elites. Having been pushed by popular mobilizations to go farther than they would have liked, these centrist politicians then don't know how to confront a clampdown by the Spanish state.

JM

It is true for a moment on October 1st the independence movement managed to overcome its own limitations, moving from an identitarian idea of the Catalans as "a people" to a democratic sense of "we the people". The vote succeeded as a form of popular mobilization, incorporating many who didn't support independence but believed in the right to decide. But it should not be understood as a referendum capable of giving the Catalan government a mandate for independence. And from the moment it was interpreted as such, the possibility of building upon this mobilization to construct a broader majoritarian bloc closed.

Also the idea that this unilateral path could have become a political opportunity for the forces of change in Spain omits at least two important points: the existing balance of forces in Spain and the feeling of national belonging among Spaniards. The pursuit of independence was not going to create a positive synergy with the rest of the country.

EG

What was the purpose then of the Catalan parliament's declaration of independence? It was clear in the days leading up to the vote Puigdemont did not want to proceed with it and was looking for a way to back down.

BF

It was a symbolic declaration aimed at securing a dignified outcome for the pro-independence parties in the face of their incapacity to construct a real Catalan republic. The predominantly institutional process of separation has failed and so I don't think we should focus too much on the declaration. It only plays into the Spanish right's narrative of rebellion and sedition. The challenge for the independence movement is a strategic one: do you continue to concentrate on the parliamentary route or do you accept a more autonomist framework based around more militant social organizations such as the Committees in Defence of the Republic (CDRs).

EG

These are the new assembly-based groups that organized a wave of direct actions during the recent general strike.

BF

Yes, for me the CDRs represent a step beyond the superficial participatory structures of the existing independence organizations. Though at an early stage, they are much more rooted in the social

terrain and daily life of the Catalan people and have the capacity to attract sectors of the Left which until now have not identified with the independence process.

JM

The declaration was a fake. They didn't even go so far as to remove the Spanish flag from institutional buildings. This desire to see the republic made symbolically real but then having it later shown to be a fraud could produce real frustration going forward. Also with their unilateral approach to independence discredited, what are the demands of pro-independence parties going to be? A negotiated referendum? It is not clear.

In this sense there is a possible opening for Catalunya En Comú-Podem [the alliance between Barcelona mayor Ada Colau's en Comú and Podemos in Catalonia]. While not easy in the current climate, as we move forward it needs to begin reframing the debate underlining how there are only two ways to vote. On one side are those who want to continue in the current cycle of confrontation, who are in fact united by a belief that Spain cannot change, and on the other those willing to bet on a way out of this cycle through the idea of a new plurinational state.

Where Next for Podemos?

EG

You said earlier that at the root of the crisis is the failed construction of Spain as a nation. What is Podemos's alternative plurinational idea of Spain and what conditions would be needed to secure it?

JM

Like all identities, the elites' conception of Spain needs an Other to oppose itself and project as a threat. For the dominant sense of Spanish identity that Other is the Spanish people in its diversity. Unable to build a nation that can integrate these existing differences, it is an idea of Spain that can only define itself by being able to point to part of the population as an internal enemy, with anyone who questions the socio-economic and territorial order seen as part of this anti-Spain.

By contrast, Podemos sees Spain as a project to be constructed, we aim for a new country where nobody wants to leave because nobody is forced to stay. This federalized Spain would require the reordering of the states's institutional and constitutional architecture so that there is no conflict between being Spanish and belonging to another national community existing in the state. It would be a polycentric Spain where not everything passes through Madrid, and where Madrid is converted into a federal district along the path to a less unitary state. Ultimately a plurinational Spain has to do with reinventing Spain's own identity so that it ceases to be a weapon used to attack other Spaniards.

BF

In Spain two crises have flared up time and again: the social and the national. But they have tended to erupt in distinct moments and find separate social expression. For example, in 1934 you had both the failed social revolution centered in the mining region of Asturias and the proclamation of the Catalan Republic, which the anarchist CNT refused to throw its organizational weight behind. In the current conjuncture you first had the *Indignados* movement and then later the push for Catalan independence.

The dilemma is that a plurinational state can only be constructed if there is a political subject capable of assuming both crises. What alliance of classes has the capacity to resolve the Spanish state's historical problems?

EG

This summer, after Pedro Sánchez's re-election as PSOE leader, political debate focused on the possibility of a government of the left between the Socialist Party and Podemos. The Catalan crisis has shown both the need for such an alternative and the incapacity of the PSOE to confront the historic problems at the root of Spain's regime crisis. How do you see the current position of the Spanish left?

JM

The re-election of Pedro Sánchez was the latest iteration of 15-M with his victory secured by the rebellion of Socialists against their party hierarchy. But clearly a lot has happened since and the Catalan crisis has reconfigured the political agenda. The polarization around Catalonia has allowed the PP to engage in a hegemonic operation forcing the Socialists into a subordinate position within a bloc of pro-constitutional forces. In the current climate you are either an independentista or you back Spanish unity in its existing form and PSOE has made it clear they will stand behind Spain.

With emotions polarized along identitarian lines, there is no space for an intermediary position. This is clearly difficult for us, we are receiving attacks from all sides. The idea of an internal enemy, the anti-Spain, is not only being applied to Catalonia. It is everyone who does not share this particularly narrow idea of the country. When we say that the Catalan people have the right to vote in a referendum, the response is "what do you mean, are you not Spanish?"

EG

And how should Podemos approach relations with PSOE after Sánchez backed Rajoy's imposition of direct rule?

JM

The key to relations between the two parties is who is capable of taking the initiative. Our discourse cannot be centered around denouncing the failures and betrayals of the Socialist Party. This can bring you so far but at a certain point you have to be able to offer people a clear project, a vision of the country you want to construct. If you can do that, you can force others to respond. When Podemos was born it created a transversal bloc of support by being able to tap into the new common sense existing in post-crisis Spain. We articulated how just defending basic human rights such as housing and public health care put you in opposition to the elites.

Hegemony requires this ability to incorporate a plurality of sectors and differences within a common framework. How can we recuperate this capacity? Well, first, the current cycle centered on Catalonia will have to pass.

BF

In theory PSOE's swing back towards the establishment bloc should be an opportunity for Podemos to recover a politics clearly polarized against the regime as a whole. However, the national question is the point on which the regime is strongest and so the current reordering of the political field is taking place along lines which are much less favorable to us.

In approaching relations with PSOE more generally, we have to remember Podemos emerged as the representatives of a broad sway of Spanish society in the context of the 15M movement. In taking up the *Indignados* challenge to the existing order, we advanced rapidly in the first two years but then reached a limit. This opened up a debate over the need to enter into a pact with PSOE in order to govern in the short to medium term.

But this implies a change in the terms through which we position ourselves politically. If the problem beforehand was the political regime as a whole, now we frame it in terms of defeating Mariano Rajoy

and the right-wing. We end up returning to the old parliamentary logic of left against right while marginalizing the “populist” opposition between those above and those below, which in my opinion has a much more radical potential.

The other key question is where we see politics centered: in the institutions or in the squares and wider social field. I’d prefer for the party to bet on a longer-term strategy and not be conditioned to such a degree by short-term considerations. It would be better to see Podemos in the opposition organizing extra-parliamentary structures. Given the current relation of forces, an openness to joining a PSOE-led government risks leading to integration, with the party being forced to abandon those elements which threaten the system in order to enter office.

JM

In Podemos we often draw an opposition between *governismo* and polarization, i.e. between those who are open to forming a government with the Socialists and those who believe we should stay in opposition until PSOE pasokifies. But this debate is misleading. The value and meaning of a tactic does not derive from the tactic itself, but the correlations of forces existing in a given conjuncture. If the strategic objective is to secure progressive change for the social majority, then to enter a government or not is a tactical consideration that should be decided according to the circumstances.

BF

Podemos needs to concentrate on strategic considerations, but at the same time we also clearly have to respond to the demand from much of Spanish society to get rid of the current government. In theory this would involve enabling the PSOE to govern in minority while we remained in opposition. But even this seems difficult right now as it would only be possible numerically with the support of Basque and Catalan nationalists. We have to acknowledge that the opening which the re-election of Pedro Sánchez represented has closed again.

EG

The PP has gone on the offensive after suspending Catalan autonomy and is pursuing further forms of recentralization, such as their move to take control of the finances of Madrid’s left-wing city council. How far are they hoping to go with this?

JM

The PP believes it is their moment. From their perspective the crisis is an opportunity to recentralize power while renewing the regime with themselves at the head. With the Spanish economy remaining in a precarious position propped up by stimulus from the European Central Bank and low petroleum prices, they are aiming to normalize aggression beyond Catalonia.

BF

Yes, the PP is using the national crisis to force through a wider shift to the right on other questions. This is what is happening with the city council in Madrid which has a massive surplus and, despite its many limitations, has shown it can govern without corruption while also improving public services. The PP wants to liquidate these achievements. Having taken the city councils in elections two years ago, we on the left now need to learn how to defend them.

Interview by Eoghan Gilmartin

P.S.

* Jacobin. 12.09.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/12/podemos-under-pressure>

* ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brais Fernandez is on the editorial board of Viento Sur and an activist in the Anticapitalista wing of Podemos.

Jorge Moruno is a sociologist and the former head of discourse for Podemos. He is now an elected member of the party's governing council.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Eoghan Gilmartin is a writer, translator and Jacobin contributor based in Madrid. He is also a member of Podemos.

Footnotes

[1] http://www.lasexta.com/noticias/nacional/la-cup-no-renuncia-a-la-via-unilateral-y-avisa-de-que-no-es-un-capricho-de-cuatro-locos_201711225a15ac120cf2f56e3eb157d5.html