

Catalonia: Plan for a republic or imaginary republic? - What really happened and present strategic dilemma

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“There is little doubt that we are facing a triple strategic dilemma as complex as it is inescapable. The question is whether it is also as unresolvable as it is decisive.”

1. Without a plan. This sums up the Catalan government’s strategy after the proclamation of the Catalan Republic on October 27.

Let’s review: the Catalan government was elected on September 27, 2015, with an unrealistic perspective based on “disconnecting” from the Spanish state through the approval of a succession of laws and the creation of “state structures” within a period of 18 months. Confronted with the absurdity of this timeframe, in great measure thanks to the insistence of the left-wing, pro-independence Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) party, the Catalan government announced in September 2016 that it would hold a referendum on independence before the end of 2017.

Thus, without ever recognizing it, the government changed course from the attitude it had adopted in the fall 2014 when it refused to try to carry out the November 9 referendum on independence that has been declared illegal by Supreme Court, instead opting for a nonbinding citizens’ consultation. After a long detour, the government returned to the idea of a vote as a solution—the referendum.

As the date approached, the executive office of Catalan President Carles Puigdemont carried out preparations, although they were never convinced the referendum would really come to pass, and they expected that their actions would be abruptly halted by the intervention of the Spanish state at any time. For Puigdemont, then, it was a matter riding the wave for as long as possible. But in the end, he ended up going much farther than he ever imagined he might—or was prepared to venture.

2. No turning back. The logistical success of the October 1 referendum, despite the seizure of ballots by the Spanish police, was real. However, the referendum took place not because of detailed planning by the Puigdemont administration or the leadership of the National Catalan Assembly (ANC), but because of the dynamic of self-organization from below—including people occupying and defending voting stations—that exploded after the wave of repression unleashed by the Spanish state on September 20 that only accelerated as the referendum got closer.

Both the Catalan government and the ANC were content to keep voting stations open and distribute ballot boxes and voting papers. They assumed the Spanish police would prevent a vote—their objective was to get photo ops of long lines of citizens waiting at voting stations that had been closed by force. Things turned out very differently, as we all know. The referendum took place and indignation over repression pushed forward a mass mobilization on October 3.

Then began a series of political vacillations on the part of the Catalan government, which never foresaw this potential scenario nor knew how to deal with the escalating confrontations that might

erupt if, one way or the other, it proclaimed a Catalan Republic. Neither did it have any strategy for allying with political forces that mobilized on October 1 and 3, and did not necessarily support independence, but nonetheless would support a break with the Spanish state in the wake of its repressive actions.

After Puigdemont's badly staged "suspension" of the declaration of independence on October 10, and a failed attempt to promise elections if the Spanish government withdrew the application of article 155, on October 26, the Catalan president was forced to proclaim a Catalan Republic without any real plan of what to do next in order to transform the declaration into something more than symbolism.

3. Irresponsible responsibility. Managing time and space is critical for any political or social movement. Since October 3, the Catalan government and the ANC have managed both variables badly. They have allowed the initial momentum to become tangled in a secretive and poorly communicated policy that has upset and disoriented many of their supporters, leaving the long-awaited proclamation of the Republic somewhat cold. Then they renounced any institutional gesture that conveyed a real will to defend the proclamation or, above all, to mobilize in the streets or occupy symbolic and strategic spaces.

Since October 27, there has been an absolute vacuum and an absence of direction. Puigdemont and his cabinet paint an image of resignation and lack of will power—they seem to be following a playbook of what not to do. The history of popular movements is replete with similar situations in which moderate political and social leaderships are incapable of coherently directing the movement they lead, leading at decisive moments to discontent within their own base and, in the end, giving an opening to reaction that organizes itself under the banner of prudence. We can call this policy "irresponsible responsibility."

4. A chance to break with the "process"? The proclamation of the Republic without a strategic plan to make it effective is, in a certain sense, the political culmination of the official policy of pursuing an independence "process" from 2010 onwards—that is, the policy of permanently playing for time and postponing any confrontation. However, the road to October 1, after the government committed to a referendum in September 2016, only came about owing to the exhaustion of the process. And October 1 tended toward confrontation with the Spanish state, denying the essence of the process itself.

The confrontation resulted from dynamics put in motion by the independence process and was managed by those who supported it, yet the conflict only occurred due to the overwhelming pressure of those who never supported the process to begin with. All this culminated in a series of actions all out of line with the policy of the so-called independence process, including the proclamation of the Republic, in a manner (paradoxically) completely in keeping with the habits of the process—that is, employing entirely symbolic and empty gesture.

5. Reasons. The source of the limits shown by the Catalan government at the moment of truth must be sought in its nature, class composition and political culture.

The Catalan European Democratic Party [PDeCAT, led by Puigdemont and controlling the most seats in the Catalan parliament] is a neoliberal party that was pushed down the road to independence only because it had no alternative. Many of its cadre have come to support independence only recently, while others, like Puigdemont, have always done so. But it is a party of order, with a conservative social base. It has no affinity for ruptures and abrupt changes—it is pragmatic and gradualist by nature, linked to major economic interests (although big capital remains suspicious because of its independence leanings) and vulnerable to pressures from it. It distrusts of popular mobilization.

The Republican Left of Catalonia [ERC, a left-wing party that ran on a joint slate with the PDeCAT in the 2015 elections], on the other hand, perfectly embodies a synthesis between a genuine pro-independence conviction and a political culture little disposed to struggle. It is gradualist, with a progressive, middle-class base that, except in some sectors linked to education, has largely remained outside the great social mobilizations of recent years for causes not directly linked to independence. As they say, it lacks punch.

During these decisive weeks, all strategic conceptions and political visions, and the social bases that support the Catalan government and sustain the independence process, have been put to a decisive stress test that exposed their shortcomings (the only exception has been CUP, which is backed by an important minority of the population). These limits, however, were perfectly visible from the beginning to those willing to notice.

6. Ambiguities. The events of September and October have revealed the ambiguity of the Catalan's government's attitude to popular mobilization. Its incompetent management of its social base's expectations, and those of the movement, between October 3 and 27 is nothing more than a reflection how it conceives of politics, trapped within institutional maneuvers and lacking any ability to direct a mass movement. Beyond government, September 20 and its aftermath clearly demonstrated the strategic impasses of the ANC as well as the Omnium [a highly influential Catalan cultural organization], even if the latter played a secondary role and was, in many way, more audacious than others.

Since its inception in 2012, the independence process has been an unprecedented mass movement under the social leadership of the ANC. But its conception of organization has been vertical and controlled from above, more in keeping with a culture of representation and delegation than to self-organization. Between September 20 and the events of October 1 and 3, the movement overflowed these limits (although only partially and we should not exaggerate). This caught the government and the ANC (as well as Omnium) off guard, generating fear and apprehension among these forces that they might lose of control of the situation.

In view of the leadership vacuum shown by the Catalan government after September 27, a secondary limitation of the ANC appeared: its subordination to the majority separatist parties (that is, those to its right politically) and its inability to assume a leadership role independently of them.

The ANC's policy as of 2012 was to pressure the Catalan government to move forward, but without ever challenging or disturbing it. The ANC merely pleaded meekly to then-President Artur Mas to carry out the November 9, 2014, referendum after it was banned by the Constitutional Court. Moreover, it accepted a proposal to convert the elections of September 27, 2015 elections into a consultative plebiscite and the illusory roadmap toward a future "disconnection" from the Spanish state. This was a road map in which the initiative was increasingly in the hands of the government, with the ANC playing a decreasingly determining role.

7. A coup in practice. The call for elections in Catalonia by Rajoy after having dissolved the Catalan government makes the real correlation of forces plain to see. More than a duality of powers, what has existed in Catalonia in the last two months is a duality of legitimacy. Rajoy regained the initiative by calling for elections, showing that the legality of the Spanish state is still in effect and pushing the independence movement down a defensive path.

This demonstration of force on the part of the Spanish government also contains, however, a sign of relative weakness: It was unable to enforce an absolute, long-term suspension of Catalan autonomy with the aim of dismantling its fundamental pillars (public media, educational, etc.). This option was impossible not only because of the great difficulties in containing its impact, but also, most probably,

due to pressure from European authorities that, most likely, pressed for a less damaging outcome, more in keeping with their official hypocrisy.

Rajoy has bought time with the elections. He has succeeded in determining the tempo and has quashed any question about who controls Catalonia. Yet this does not necessarily imply that he has managed to defeat the independence movement in a deeper sense, since the electoral calendar may well once again deliver a parliamentary majority in favor of independence.

8. Offensive repudiationism. The polarization driven by the acceleration of the independence process in September and October has favored, in the short term, conservative forces in the Spanish state, causing a closing of the ranks behind the pro-regime bloc and the entire state apparatus under hegemony of the most conservative sectors. The restoration of Spanish authority in Catalonia is a kind of offensive denialism.

“Repudiation” because it cannot offer a reform from above that at least partially integrates the demands of those who today have been left out of the political framework of the 1978, post-Franco political and social arrangement (principally, the social base of Podemos and the Catalan independence movement), nor can it generate a new distribution of political and institutional power. Neither can it offer a new form of economic and social integration for the bulk of the middle classes, skilled workers and precarious youth.

“Offensive,” though, because it is very aggressive and authoritarian, happily taking advantage of the Catalan crisis to recentralize the entire structure of the Spanish state and isolate Podemos. But the very logic of this offensive repudiationism, in the medium term, will deepen the underlying factors that have created a crisis in the 1978 political framework.

9. Bifurcated futures. The main complicating factor of Catalan politics is that that the May 15 movement of mass occupations in 2011 and its subsequent ripples, on the one hand, and the independence process, on the other, have led to divergent expectations, although there are clear similarities.

These bifurcated horizons, in a broader sense, express the complexity of the relationship between the social and the national question in Catalan politics and society. And, on a more concrete level, this problem can be seen in the lack of alliance between pro-independence forces and those who defend Catalonia’s right to self-determination within a federal Spanish framework. This failure continues despite Rajoy’s repressive actions where the denial of the exercise of this right could open doors for common action.

The independence movement’s basic political shortcoming was to dissociate its objective of winning its own state from elucidating a concrete anti-austerity and pro-democracy policy for such a state. Obsessed with not losing support from conservative Catalan forces all along the way, the promoters of the independence movement lacked, from the start, a solid analysis of Catalan social structure. They were indifferent to building an alliance with the kind of social sectors that every project for change needs, and they failed to involve, or even approach, the social base of significant social movements and political forces on the left that did not see their primary objective as independence—perhaps only thinking that sooner or later these would become convinced of the need for independence or at least adapt to it.

Demanding a Catalan Republic in such a way that it could potentially end in independence or in a federation with the Spanish state, clearly articulating a constituent process for such a Catalan Republic, and proposing an emergency plan for resolving ordinary Catalans’ most pressing concerns (like unemployment, education, etc.) would have been three elements for overcoming the

contradictions emanating from the bifurcated expectations between the May 15 movement [also known as the Indignados movement] and the independence process.

If overcoming these divisions is difficult, then it is surprising how the main actors of Catalan politics have devoted so little strategic attention to this problem over these five years. Attempting to do so would have implied operating both within and outside of the independence process—no doubt a difficult task, but one that left should have embraced as its own.

10. Division on the left. Within the independence movement, the CUP, of course, has represented a vision that goes far beyond the “pure and simple” independence movement, defending a program that not only linked nationalist and social issues, but also posed an openly anti-capitalist option, in favor of a rupture with the status quo.

Thus, the CUP represented a countertendency to the growing institutionalization of most of the “forces of change” emerged in 2014 and 2015. But it became too focused on its (honest and sincere) role as the guarantor that the independence process would fight all the way to a conclusion, and this meant that it did not have an aggressive policy of discussions with and implantation among the left and its social base, which tended to operate outside the independence process.

For its part, the left outside the independence movement, such as Catalonia en Comú, adopted a passive, wait-and-see policy. It pointed out the many real problems associated with the official independence proposal, among them the emptiness of the idea of independence" as a panacea, the difficulty of bringing the independence project to fruition, the polarization of identities it might generate and the downplaying of other issues and conflicts in favor of the national question's omnipresence. But Catalonia en Comú's lack of real involvement in the process prevented it from intervening in the aforementioned questions.

Its policy represents a kind of paradoxical passivity, in which the contradictions and negative aspects of a situation serve to justify a passive policy, exacerbating the consequences of those same negative aspects. This infernal spiral of passivity is a self-fulfilling prophecy and, in a certain way, reflects a kind of strategic nostalgia for a nonexistent reality in which neither the independence process nor the national question were present.

11. Scenarios. The road to the December 21 elections is still difficult to foresee. The imprisonment of members of the Catalan government, as well as those in effective exile in Brussels, shows that the elections are not going to be held, for better or for worse, in a normal context. Yet this is precisely the key to the situation. We must not accept the dynamics imposed by Rajoy as normal.

The blows struck against the Catalan government come in the wake of a vacuum and crisis of leadership. The message recorded from Brussels on November 2 by Puigdemont criticizing the arrests only highlights the Catalan government's incapacity: he condemned the repression, but merely offered a generic call for mobilization without any concrete proposals or goals.

The first reactions after the arrests (protests outside the parliament and in the central squares of several municipalities) seem likely to be followed by a daylong strike on November 8 and a mass demonstration on the November 11. It is still early to gauge these actions' magnitude, but with half the government arrested and the other lacking any political initiative, both the ANC and Omnium, as well as other pro-independence political forces and those opposing the Spanish state's repression, must take a leadership role and set a clear agenda for mobilizing, framed in a strategic perspective that makes sense. Electoral preparations will not help us concentrate on these tasks.

If there is a political agenda defined from above, the dynamics from below, driven by the

Committees of Defense of the Republic (CDR), could become important. The CDRs can play, as they did between September 20 and October 3, a role in overflowing the official structures. However, they do not seem to have the strength to unleash their own perspective of struggle from below if slogans and demands are not issued from above that at least push in this direction—yet quite to the contrary, we can see symptoms of paralysis and bewilderment.

12. Electoral perspectives. It is difficult to predict election results, although it is possible the outcome may be similar to what happened in 2015. No doubt, the independence movement has won support as a result of the repression, but the Catalan government's zigzags between October 1 and 27 and its subsequent paralysis have baffled part of its social base.

On the other hand, the pro-Spanish bloc inside Catalonia has managed, for the first time in five years, to emerge as a social force, demonstrating its weight in the streets with the October 21 march of tens of thousands of people. It has finally found an objective for which to fight. In this situation, the capacity to mobilize supporters will count for more than sympathies tending in one direction or the other. This, in fact, is a weak point for the independence forces. And this is why the December 21 campaign must be understood in relation to, and linked to, extra-electoral mobilizations (or their absence).

13. Unilateralism and fraternity. The opposition between a unilateral path (accumulating forces for the rupture from within Catalonia) and the option of building a political majority for change in the Spanish state as a whole has been one of the great strategic problems of Catalan and Spanish politics. In reality, unilateralism and fraternity should be seen as complementary. Without a unilateral pro-independence movement (and/or a referendum), no Spanish political forces would have arisen to defend the right to self-determination for Catalonia or to speak in favor of a negotiated resolution.

Unidos Podemos [as the alliance between the Podemos party and the United Left coalition led by the Communist Party is known] now supports such a resolution in response to the political reality created inside Catalonia by the movement. On the other hand, the perspective for a unilateral rupture—like the one proposed by the independence forces—irrespective of what happens outside of Catalonia is lacking because it doesn't take the overall political crisis in the Spanish state into account, forgetting that the Catalan independence movement can only hope to succeed because of this crisis.

Rather than seeing this as a strategic counterposition between two antagonistic approaches, the challenge is to find a strategic point where they can merge, based on a complex center-periphery dialectic. This implies linking, without liquidating, the pro-independence project with those forces that look to an internal rupture of the 1978 regime throughout the Spanish state. In a scenario where the pro-independence confrontation in Catalonia is being used by the conservative Popular Party and the entire state apparatus to close ranks and shift discourse to the right, this is a decisive issue. Seeking alliances and winning sympathy outside of Catalonia is, if not the main one, one of the great challenges for the Catalan independence movement—and of those who, without necessarily supporting independence, defend the movement's democratic challenge to the state.

There are three keys to accomplishing this: explicitly linking the defense of the Catalan Republic to the hope for a sister Spanish Republic in the future; not delinking hopes for independence from a possible future confederation between the rest of the Spanish state and Catalonia; and, in the immediate term, connecting independence to anti-austerity policies that can arouse sympathies from within the Spanish popular classes. Unfortunately, today, these proposals remain entirely absent from the strategic agenda of the independence movement's political leadership.

14. Another plebiscite? The independence movement has not yet defined its approach to the elections called by Rajoy for December 21. It may be facing a new sort of consultative plebiscite on independence as on September 27, 2015. Then, the argument went that winning a majority for independence in elections considered legitimate by independence opponents, the Spanish state and the European Union would put the Rajoy government in a very complex situation.

There is an element of truth in this argument. But, at the same time, it presents several problems. The first is that a seemingly endless debate centered around “Yes” or “No” for independence tends to divide the political and social bloc that was created during October 1 and 3, when forces beyond the independence movement joined in, including sectors of the democratic-rupturist left. Some of these forces may now vote for pro-independence parties such as CUP or ERC. But others will support forces that defend the right to self-determination, but not independence, such as the Catalonia in Comú party.

The second problem is that it is not clear—in a race where people are voting for political parties and not only on the question of independence—that pro-independence forces will secure 50 percent of the votes (for instance, they obtained 47.7 percent in 2015). In any case, accepting the framework of a plebiscite pushes the movement into seeking a technical majority, which may be only a limited victory.

The third problem is that the next steps after a possible victory of the independence movement are not clear. Saying December 21 will “validate” the declaration of independence on October 27 sounds good, but does not propose any real action plan for the day after.

15. Constituent hypothesis. Undoubtedly the December 21 election will have, whether it is promoted or not, a plebiscitary aspect, meaning people will see the elections as a de facto referendum on independence, as is to be expected. At the same time, a basic defensive element will be in play: the rejection of Article 155 and the demand for the freedom to organize along with amnesty for all those arrested and prosecuted.

The question is how to simultaneously set out a positive project, which includes a pro-democratic and anti-repressive dimension, as well as a plan for institutional resistance after December 21, but one that also goes beyond these components in order to establish alliances between the independence bloc and sectors that support Catalonia’s right to decide, but not necessarily independence, such as Catalunya en Comú.

That is where the constituent hypothesis comes in—that is, a process that intentionally brings forces into dialogue and action as they create their own vision for radically restructuring the Catalan and Spanish state system/s. In one sense, the best possible development might be for all democratic forces opposed to Ciudadanos, the PP and the [neoliberal] Catalan Socialist Party bloc to establish some kind of agreement that, beyond basic anti-repression demands, would imply a constituent road map for a Catalan Republic whose horizon is compatible with either independence or a federal/confederation proposal. In sum, a constituent process can bring together forces to fight in unity for a break with the Spanish regime, while leaving the specifics of the outcome open.

Of course, we should note that a constituent framework is not without problems. The most important challenge is reaching an agreement between the independence bloc and Catalonia en Comú which does not now exist. The second problem is that, in the absence of a real political break inside the Catalan state institutions, proposals become merely rhetorical or symbolic institutional and social initiatives.

Although it remains fragile and uncertain, the constituent hypothesis—as a point of confluence

between federalists/confederationists and independents remains the great unexplored potential for Catalan politics. For it to make sense, of course, it must champion urgent and tangible social measures that can broaden the social base of the democratic forces opposed to the reactionary bloc, inside and outside of Catalonia. Anti-repressive defensive struggles and common positive perspective are difficult to articulate in the midst of today's difficult juncture—realities that can hardly be wished away if we want to build alliances on a sound footing.

16. Dilemmas. How should we conceive of our work: defensive battles against repression and Article 155, the struggle for a Catalan Republic, or a self-satisfied process in defense of an imaginary Republic? Should we counterpoise independence to defending the right to decide or the potential for a common, future rupture? Is this an exclusively Catalan battle, should it be subordinated to politics in the Spanish state as a whole, or is it possible to articulate a center-periphery dialectic?

There is little doubt that we are facing a triple strategic dilemma as complex as it is inescapable. The question is whether it is also as unresolvable as it is decisive.

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P.S.

* This article first appeared at [Viento Sur](https://www.vientosur.net/) and was translated into English by Todd Chretien for socialistworker.org on the title "Catalonia after the declaration of the republic".