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Spanish State/Catalonia

A coup by the state

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV514 - November 2017 -

Publication date: Saturday 4 November 2017

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The continuing crisis over Catalonia reached a new stage late last week when the Spanish state fired its president and top security officials and dismissed its parliament, setting December 21 as a date for new elections. The hard-line move to impose direct rule over the autonomous region followed a declaration of independence by the Catalan parliament, after President Carles Puigdemont's offer for negotiations to reach some accommodation with the Spanish state was rejected out of hand by conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

On October 1, an estimated 90 percent of people of those voting in a referendum held in Catalonia—which lies on Mediterranean coast, south of France—cast their ballots for independence. This was despite the Spanish state declaring the vote illegal and heavy-handed police repression to stop the referendum. On October 3, unions and pro-independence political parties carried out a general strike in Barcelona and across Catalonia to show their defiance of the repression of the Rajoy government. Mobilizations continued through late last week, putting pressure on Puigdemont when it looked like he would seek a deal rather than allow the parliament to vote on independence.

Pablo Iglesias, leader of the left-wing Podemos party, opposed the Catalan parliament's "declaration of independence, not just because it is illegal, but because it is illegitimate." Podemos was alone among the major parties in Spain in defending the October 1 referendum in Catalonia, and Iglesias also said he opposed Rajoy's implementation of direct rule, using Article 155 of the constitution that allows the Spanish state to strip powers of autonomy.

Author and activist Josep María Antentas, who is based in Barcelona, wrote the following article in mid-October, before the showdown last weekend. The article was published in Spanish at Viento Sur and was translated into English by Todd Chretien.

1. A coup from inside the state. This is the simplest way to explain the array of measures taken by the conservative Popular Party (PP) government of Mariano Rajoy—with support from the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the right-wing populist Citizens party (Ciudadanos). These were made public October 20 and go to the Spanish Senate for approval on October 27.

Perhaps more critical than Rajoy's uncertain application of Article 155—which gives the central government the authority to intervene if an autonomous region is "seriously prejudicing the general interests of Spain"—is the de facto suspension of Catalonia's self-government using Article 155 as a pretext. The lack of precedent in Article 155's use, together with this moment's climate of institutional exceptionality, allows the Spanish government to make not only authoritarian and anti-democratic decisions, but ones of dubious constitutionality as well.

The state power is violating its own norms by resorting to force and creating an extraordinary political situation. It is opening all the security spigots at its disposal to defend its position during these difficult times and is changing the rules of the game in the name of defending those same rules. Using today's exceptional circumstances as an excuse, the state is taking measures that themselves suppose a subversion of the previous order, even as it continues to use that order to justify and legitimize its actions, with the aim of altering the political and social dynamics at play in Catalonia.

All this in order to establish a *new normal*, with contours more favorable to the Spanish state. We are witnessing a frontal attack on democracy, in the name of democracy. The state hopes to develop a new democratic normalcy, one where everything passes through acceptable channels, but only after it has reestablished an order to its liking during

a contentious period.

All this, far from representing an anomaly, provides a clear example of the nature of capitalist law and the state in general, and of the Spanish political regime of 1978 in particular. The state's behavior ought to dismantle any and all fetishistic and foolish illusions in the law, in legality and the institutions to which we have become so accustomed in times of normalcy.

Without a doubt, over the past few weeks, we have all been exposed to an advanced seminar and practical laboratory course in state theory, driving us toward an accelerated, strategic maturation of a movement whose common sense avoided any vision of a clash with the state; until now, the movement for democracy and self-determination in Catalonia dreamed of a pleasant disconnection from the Spanish state.

2. **The new** PSOE's brief adventure. The *new* PSOE's flight under the direction of party leader Pedro Sánchez—who appeared for a time to lean to the left—has been short. Very short—both in duration and distance.

His victory in the PSOE's primary elections last May against both the party's apparatus and the combined power of mainstream media and financial industry was, without doubt, unprecedented. Yet if his triumph expressed a genuinely important dynamic at the grassroots, a rebellion from below that demonstrated the magnitude of the party's crisis, then Sánchez himself was always an imposter. He reinvented himself as a knight in shining armor who would defend the party's rank and file. He adopted left-wing values to opportunistically channel internal discontent to win his seat as the party's general secretary, even as Sánchez's team never planned to break with social-liberalism.

At the same time, his inner circle took advantage—because of their unexpected victory in the primaries—of a certain relative autonomy from Spain's economic and media powers and the state apparatus, which allowed it to hint at a future alliance with the left-wing Podemos party. They did so in the expectation that their rhetorical tilt to the left would curtail the political space within which Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias would be able to maneuver.

Nevertheless, before the Catalan crisis, Sánchez bowed before the "logic of the state"—the very same state that is obsessed with short-term, immediate interests; that embodies Spain's political-financial elite in general, and its most right-wing faction in particular; that is unable to think of a viable state project based on a stable constitutional compromise.

The Spanish state is driven by a logic that insures it will tackle the Catalan crisis in an authoritarian way. Worse, it will use the crisis to temporarily strengthen nationalist cohesion—Castilians versus Catalans—to fill in cracks in the regime's pillars, without addressing any of the causes that have weakened it in the first place. It hardly even seems capable of adopting the sort of wisdom offered by Italian novelist Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, one of whose characters once famously suggested, "Unless we ourselves take a hand now, they'll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

In fact, the PSOE has subordinated itself to a reactionary bloc, with no prospects for controlling it. It's possible that this has permitted Sánchez to safeguard himself in this way from the media and financial pressure he would have suffered if he showed the slightest hesitation in going along, but tranquility in the short term can become a problem in the long run.

Acting as a *statesman* when one directs neither the process, nor the times, nor anything at all, does not usually bring excessively positive returns. Neither does trying to strong-arm the right while playing their own game.

3. Podemos' democratic solitude. Faced with the closing of ranks by the PP-PSOE-Ciudadanos bloc, all the powers of the state up to and including the King, and big finance and the main media conglomerates, Unidos Podemos [as the electoral alliance between Izquierda Unida and Podemos is known] navigates a countercurrent, expressing the solitary democratic position. Undoubtedly, this position has its limits, and it is not free of contradictions and errors (in particular, the tepidness displayed before the October 1 referendum), yet the policy of Unidos Podemos represents at least a dignified and unique democratic exception in the Spanish political landscape.

The internal dynamics of the party illuminate, however, a point that must be kept in mind: its intermediate, regional, and local structures (with the exception of the Catalan leadership) appear to be less able to resist political pressure, adapting to the dominant Spanish nationalism, than the central nucleus of direction, with Pablo Iglesias at its head.

This is the most important example of the failure Podemos' organizational and political model. The organizational failure sprang from the party's verticalism, centralism and authoritarianism that, right from the start, marginalized many of the best cadres and silenced critical voices, while promoting opportunists without principles or qualities beyond their loyalty to the central leadership in the local and regional structures. The political failure sprang from its focus on electoralism and short-term tactical considerations along with the centrality of communications management—we might say "image."

All this downplayed program and principles, and led to the neglect of training party cadres and political organizers, except in technical or communicative matters. Neither the party's activists nor its intermediate leaders received much political education on the national question or how this related to the regime's crisis beyond generic proclamations about support for a multinational state—that is, a Spanish state based on respect for limited autonomy for those regions with nationalist aspirations. And even these generalizations lacked concrete analysis or a strong foundation in historical and theoretical traditions.

As the situation grew more intense, precipitated by the Catalan crisis, many middle leaders and local party circles found themselves politically disarmed and unable to follow the line or actively defend it in public. The superficiality of Podemos' electoral-communicative politics, although executed courageously by the leadership, thus clashed with the complexities of real politics.

4. Implications. It is impossible to predict how the October rupture will play out, but we can state that, come what may, its impact will be felt far beyond Catalonia.

Undoubtedly, the attack on Catalan institutions declared by Rajoy constitutes an unprecedented use of repression. If the Spanish state is victorious, this will have serious implications for its overall political model and, in a more indirect manner, for other European countries. The state's triumph will broaden the *possibilities* for power and what is officially *tolerable* within the European context, of what can be *done* in specific instances.

In response to future crises, it will point the way toward a new authoritarian turn and will greatly facilitate the implosion of democratic institutions, which are being thrown up in the air all over the continent, especially in southern Europe along the Mediterranean periphery. If the Catalan October is resolved by means of repression and authoritarianism, then further crises, no matter their nature, will be dispatched in the same way.

5. The unknown dimensions. In the Catalan context, the challenges of the moment are clear.

First, we must put forward our own positive agenda that goes beyond a defense of Catalan institutions—one that proposes concrete objectives for a Catalan Republic and Catalan constitutive political process.

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Second, the political and social bloc that won the referendum on October 1 and then launched the general strike and mass protests on October 3 must be maintained. This includes the independence movement, the broader democratic sector that favors a rupture with the Spanish state and, if possible, the Catalunya en Comú party, which must decide if it will merely continue participating in the struggle against repression and in defense of democracy, or if it will attempt to define and push forward constitutive roadmap.

Third, it is necessary to reinforce the political bloc that opposes an endless *procedural* strategy for independence in favor of an open rupture—one based on pressure and mass action from below. Only such a bloc can present a unified policy to the Catalan government as well as influential mass, nationalist formations like the Catalan National Congress and the Barcelona-based Omnium cultural-political organization.

October 30, 2017

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