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Catalonia

Three central issues facing the Catalan independence movement

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In Catalonia, the two most important news items of the first week of March have been (1) Carles Puigdemont's withdrawal of his nomination for President of the autonomous region's government in order to propose Jordi Sànchez as a candidate for the presidency of the Generalitat and (2) the refusal of the CUP to support Sànchez. [1] The investiture therefore remains bogged down.

Puigdemont's step back is a factual recognition that the relationship of forces is lacking to make him president and establish the Republic. And the alternative solution proposed by JuntsxCat and ERC [2] was to combine an autonomous government headed by Sànchez with a Council of the Republic situated in Brussels.

This solution needed at least two votes in favor from the CUP if Sànchez was to be elected in the second round (assuming that the Constitutional Court did not prevent it). [3] But the anti-capitalists are only willing to abstain, because they do not want to support an autonomous government. They want the Republic proclaimed on October 27 to become effective and the transitional laws to be implemented.

The position of the CUP is not an absolute impediment to Sànchez's investiture "because it is still possible to negotiate and because Puigdemont and Comen [4] could renounce their oath as deputies and make way for two substitutes" but it is an indicator of the differences within the independentist movement. These differences are not limited to the parties, as the ANC has decided to call a demonstration on March 11 [5] to demand the new government "obey the mandate of October 1 and implement the Transitional Act and institutions of the Republic."

This is not a discussion about individuals, therefore, but about basic political orientations. Vicent Partal has summed it up [6] as a "great background debate that is masked by the negotiations: do we need to move straight to building the republic or if it is necessary to first look to build whatever can be managed in the framework of regional government, accepting, therefore, the rules imposed by the *coup d'état* of the central government in Madrid. [6].

I too think the substantive debate is being concealed and that to make it visible, three central issues should be addressed: what has failed, where we really are now and what strategic direction is needed to advance towards the Republic. If this debate were to be held, I believe that the dilemma posed by Partal would be revealed as simplistic.

Three necessary debates

In my opinion we must begin by analyzing what really happened on October 1 and in the days that followed.

We have known for a long time that the fundamental factor in the success of the October 1 referendum vote was the people who wanted to have a referendum, whatever the outcome, and that not all of these people were pro-independence. We also know that the government did not plan either the occupation or the defense of the polling stations. And we have also seen confirmed (by new statements before Judge Llarena) that the government planned to stop the October 1 vote at noon, but we still do not know who was favorable and who, fortunately, resisted.

We also know that the government celebrated the outcome of the referendum, but had doubts about what to do with the victory; the general strike of October 3 was not a government initiative either, although it favored it. A week later,

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the combination of indecision, divergences and the fear of being overwhelmed by the movement led the government to tighten the brakes so as not to lose control.

In a long and interesting interview in RAC-1, Puigdemont said he made a mistake on October 10 when he proclaimed the Republic and left it suspended a few seconds later because he relied on promises of state dialogue. Now he believes that the Republic could have been proclaimed and “the position defended.” This seems to me the beginning of an interesting reflection, but it is incomplete because you have to go a step further and say how you could have defended the position. This is a fundamental point if you do not want to repeat the same mistake in the future.

Taking into account what everyone now knows about the reaction of the Spanish State (and that could be foreseen prior to October 1), it is clear that a declaration of independence and the implementation of the transitional legislation would not have sufficed, because these are only words and papers. Nor would it have been enough to ask the Mossos [the Catalan police] to protect the government and the Parliament because, in the (uncertain) assumption that they would have obeyed massively, they were too small a force against which the State could mobilize (without using the army).

What was needed to effectively defend the Republic was not only more votes in favor, but a peaceful and massive uprising of the population, beyond the more than two million people who voted on October 1, and in the Spanish state a movement of solidarity against the repression of the peoples. But it never occurred to the government to prepare something like that and, if it had been improvised at the last moment, it is not clear that it would have succeeded because its entire policy before October 1 did not facilitate but hindered a democratic uprising of this scope – both because of its economic policy contrary to the interests of the popular classes (for example, the most recent budgets), as well as its lack of democratic radicalism (for example, breaking the promise to start the participatory phase of the constituent process prior to the referendum).

In the days before and after the October 1 referendum, many people believed that a democratic revolution was beginning, but it seems clear that it was not the intention of the government to do anything like that. It sought only a demonstration of controlled force that would allow it to negotiate with the State. with the support of the European institutions. The King, Rajoy and the State apparatus had a better assessment of the situation, acting more quickly and more forcefully: with the implementation of article 155, the Spanish mobilizations and the police and judicial force.

In the aforementioned interview with RAC-1, Puigdemont acknowledges that on October 27 the relation of forces did not exist to make the Republic effective. Now we can suspect with foundation that there was never that intention. The one who has said it most clearly has been [former Catalan president] Artur Mas in statements before Judge Llarena: according to him all the deputies who voted the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) – presumably this refers to the deputies of JuntsxCat and ERC, because the deputy of the CUP Mireia Boya has said explicitly otherwise – “knew that there was no real means [to implement it].”

And as proof that it was a purely symbolic “parliamentary action,” the former president stressed to the judge of the Supreme Court that after this UDI the government of the Generalitat did not meet to make any decision. “In the world of politics there is a symbolic and aesthetic component. Often an argument is exaggerated or inflated in order to make a good impression on the public. Is this a deception or an exaggeration? It can be.” We also know now that the dispersion of the government was not the result of any previously designed and agreed plan.

Why are all the shortcomings and mistakes not analyzed courageously? Wouldn't that be the best guarantee that they would not be repeated?

Nor is there a desire that the situation created on October 27 be acknowledged clearly. When the RAC-1 interviewers ask Puigdemont if the Republic is real, he answers with a riddle: it is in the minds of many Catalans; it is from an institutional point of view because it was declared in Parliament and has been validated in two elections; but there are no Republic structures.

The reality is that we only have a symbolic declaration of a Republic and that the abandonment of the government and of the institutions in the face of article 155 decreed by the adversary signified an important defeat. The dignity of non-surrender, defended both from prison and from Brussels, does not eliminate this defeat. The electoral victory of December 21, however much it once again demonstrates the will of the majority of the people of Catalonia and the undemocratic character of the State, is not enough to compensate for the defeat of October 27. This can only be overcome with a massive mobilization that forces the freeing of the prisoners, the return of the exiles and the elimination of all the consequences of article 155, and that is situated in a framework of struggle for more democracy and more social rights for the whole of the people of Catalonia, whether independentist or not, in the struggle for the Republic, without renouncing disobedience and unilateral measures when necessary to secure these demands.

Neither autonomism nor direct implementation of the Republic

Neither JuntxsCat nor ERC are promoting such an orientation. Their proposal places the fight for the freedom of the prisoners, the return of the exiles and the withdrawal of 155 in the framework of the normalization of an autonomous government combined with international pressure from the [exiled] Council of the Republic, hoping that in the future the conditions will improve for negotiating with the State (Puigdemont recognizes that his exile can last for years). This is not a realistic path for achieving the Catalan Republic, because none of the deficiencies that were revealed before and after October 1 are being corrected.

But this criticism does not mean that we can “move straight to building the republic” as claimed by Vicent Partal in the article I quoted, and by the CUP or the leadership of the ANC. In order to move forward, we must realistically acknowledge what the current situation is, and what is the point of departure. We must accept that this point is not the activation of the laws of transition, nor even the restitution of the legitimate president and government.

We must open the discussion on a path to the Republic that avoids the false starts of autonomism and proceeding directly to a republic “admitting that we have a problem and that there are disagreements, but avoiding condemnations. Ideas have already begun to emerge in this regard and it is appropriate to think about them, even if one does not agree with them. I will mention two.

Roger PalÀ has written: “The independence movement is at a crossroads: either continue feeding the theories of wishful thinking, or make some decisions based on pragmatism. There is no indication that the Republic proclaimed in October can be implemented imminently, that it exists beyond the legitimate longings of hundreds of thousands of people. ... From a rational point of view, recovering self-government “even if it is under the interventionist pressure of an unbridled PP [Spanish premier Rajoy’s People’s Party] “can be the necessary starting point to recover forces and rearm with ideas.”

The other quote, more controversial, is Joan TardÀ’s: “However, the independence movement will only succeed if it understands that it must accumulate forces (“we are not enough,” we have repeated many times) ... republicanism must converge with the political forces that also defend the binding referendum, led by Xavier Domènech, [7] and must open channels of frank dialogue ... with the Catalan socialism of the PSC, [8] of a Miquel Iceta who has to decide whether to stick to or lend credence to the regression in rights and freedoms.”

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I do not believe that it is possible to open avenues of dialogue with the leaders of the PSC while they continue to defend article 155, although dialogue is possible with the PSC base. But it is evident that “we are not enough” and that means convergence in action with the Commons is essential in the fight against article 155, the defense of democracy and social demands, or the promotion of the debate on the constituent assembly (as Jaume López recently recalled).

In my opinion, it can be accepted that the effective government that can be had immediately is of an autonomous nature, provided that, at the same time, the struggle to defend the economic, social, democratic and cultural needs of the population with the aim of winning the Republic is set in motion. What is decisive, in my view, is to promote a plan of struggle of the movements and social entities, not to await what the government will say but to put demands on it, to promote disobedience and unilateralism when necessary, to aim for a mobilization that is more massive, autonomous and self-organized than October 1, with a national, democratic and social content, and that actively works as of now to win active solidarity from the peoples of the Spanish State (on the basis of opposition to the monarchical regime and the defense of the republic) and from Europe. It seems difficult and certainly it is, but we have already found that sometimes things that are presented as easy “like the passage to independence as “from one law to another” are the most unreal.

[Life on the left](#)

March 6, 2018

[1] CUP, the Popular Unity Candidacy, an anticapitalist party. At least two of its four deputies in the Catalan parliament must vote with the two larger pro-independence parties to maintain a pro-Republic majority. Sà nchez is the main leader of the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), the largest pro-independence social movement, and was elected to the parliament on December 21 on the Junts per Catalunya ticket although he is not a member of the PDeCAT, the party behind the JuntsxCat.

[2] ERC, the Republican Left of Catalonia, the oldest pro-independence party in Catalonia.

[3] On March 9, Supreme Court justice Pablo Llarena turned down Jordi Sà nchez’s request to attend the Catalan parliament’s plenary session, where he was to be elected president.

[4] Antoni ComÀ-n, former Health minister in the Generalitat, now in exile in Belgium.

[5] The March 11 demonstration was the first in years not called jointly with Àmnium Cultural, the other large pro-independence social movement, though Àmnium vice-president [Marcel Mauri was prominent in the front row](#)

[6] [Que s’acabe aquest trist espectacle de la investidura. An English translation, “Stop this sad investiture spectacle,” can be found here](#)

[7] Podemos leader in Catalonia and leader of the CatECP in the Catalan parliament, aka “the Commons.”

[8] PSC, Socialists’ party of Catalonia, led by Miquel Iceta.