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Spanish State

# Catalonia: After 9-N, where will it end?

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**After an agonizing and convoluted process, where the thin red line that separates comedy from tragedy was not always clear, finally, 9-N took place. Half way between a legitimate official consultation and an act of civil and institutional disobedience as the realization of the first version of the same would have represented, 9-N was finally as much a disobedient diversion that has eluded a surrender to the impositions of the state, as a direct institutional confrontation.**

At the same time an act of sovereignty and disobedience, 9-N marks a turning point in the cycle opened in 2012. The Spanish government has not been able to prevent the holding of a democratic and massive event, making clear its inability to actively confront a political challenge of more profound significance than what was initially expected. But at the same time, it was not an act of institutional and legal rupture from Catalonia that precipitated the events decisively, but a last minute improvisation that it has allowed a consultation that was not merely testimonial, but that does not open an unequivocal future scenario. The future is never written in advance, and even less so in this case. There are still many unexpected twists, and many detours for all parties to circumvent. Many paths but also many possibilities.

The results of 9-N, 2,305,290 million votes, show the strength of the civic and democratic impulsion behind the sovereignty movement. The participation was, without doubt, a success, in view of the institutional obstacles and the lack of formal recognition of the consultation. What was also clear was the consistency of the “si-si” bloc (1,861,753 votes), the voting option that today has most democratic potential, to constitute a clear and seamless break with the current institutional framework, and a consistent federalism from below that rests on the recognition of Catalonia as a sovereign political subject.

Separatism has become hegemonic, but without having an overwhelming absolute numerical electoral majority, but processes of change often do not start from absolute numerical majorities, but broad active minorities (or pluralities), around which a block of political and/or social transformation can be structured.

But in the logic of referendums the quantitative majority is key. Certainly an important part of Catalan society remains outside the sovereignty process. Both mistrust and indifference coexist, as does opposition to the same (in general passive with little will to mobilize, being expressed electorally in the support for Ciutadans and the PP, but which could be activated in the event of an officially recognized consultation). The lack of explicit social content of the sovereignty movement is the most important handicap in mobilizing those who regard it with suspicion. If the demand for independence was partnered with some basic emergency proposals to tackle the social crisis, things could be very different. Then the clash with the economic policy of Mas would be very clear.

He was forced in September 2012 to surf on a wave of pro-independence feeling that threatened to drown him. Inversely to the fears then awakened, Mas has not been able to capitalize on the process, and his electoral decline has been unstoppable since then. In these two years, the president has not controlled the process by putting forward his own agenda, although his privileged institutional position has allowed him to play with an advantage and seize on the strategic weaknesses of the ANC, focused on a policy of pressure on Mas, but without questioning his leadership.

And, when he seemed most cornered, the proposal of the “new 9-N” opened an unexpected track that has given him an unforeseen boost. This wrong-footed an ERC that was intent on pushing Mas into an open institutional confrontation, in which he would have moved with much care due to the nature of his social base and his party, or capitalize on an eventual capitulation before the state by Mas. There is no doubt that the success of 9-N clearly

reinforces the president politically, and that he will take advantage of this to try to force the ERC into a joint list or to retrieve his position in the polls and risk elections alone, or just to play for time if there is no other option.

With the legislature and the process begun in September 2012 having reached its culminating point, the call for elections seems to be the most logical exit to open a new post 9-N and ensure that the democratic aspirations expressed in the consultation are not frozen. We should, however, differentiate ourselves from Mas's claim to give a "plebiscite" (or "referendum") character to these elections, and postulate an alternative strategic proposition of "constituent elections". Although the term is very imprecise and is used with different meanings by a wide range of forces, it expresses, albeit in a generic intuitive manner, the willingness for a political process of democratic refoundation of Catalonia.

Rejecting the plebiscitary logic implies opposing a possible "national" unitary list. This is usually justified on the grounds, self-interested or naive depending on the case, that it is now time to leave behind the partisan interests. But the notion of a unitary list is precisely due to the partisan interests of a CDC that needs to avoid electoral defeat or, at best, a very precarious victory propelled by the personal success of Mas with 9-N. The proposed unitary list is, first and foremost, a takeover bid by the CDC over the ERC and, in the (unlikely) event that is accepted, a takeover bid towards the other forces.

Make no mistake: elections are not a consultation. They do not decide a single issue alone. They decide on models of society and proposed political alternatives. A possible government and parliamentary majority that emerged from a unitary "national" list would have to take decisions every day on health, education, public order, environment or transport.

Would this patriotic government cut health and education? Would it open commissions of inquiry in parliament on sensitive cases of corruption? It is impossible to support a candidate who is not clear on this. We are not all in the same boat. Catalan society is traversed by divisions and contradictions. In it there are the victims of cuts and cutters, the evicted and the evictors, the dismissed and the dismissers. A rhetoric of patriotic unity that subordinates the interests of the majority to the financial minority is worthless.

As a whole, the sovereignty movement expresses a great democratic potential. After the demand for independence, there is a strong democratic aspiration, which is common to all struggles today, to be able to decide and to be able to control your own destiny, at a time in which this appears bleak and dismal. In the absence of other alternatives, independence appears as a specific way out of the current crisis, a credible and tangible proposal of a possible future that does not appear diluted by a present of endless crisis.

The bulk of the middle and popular layers that defend independence do so because they think that they will live better, because it will be the starting point for building a country which is more just and solidarity-based and an option to wipe the slate clean. But, paradoxically, independence per se, as defined by the main actors in the sovereignty process guarantees none of this. In an independent Catalonia in the hands of the CiU or ERC, where the weight of the families and businesses that dominate the country remains intact, little will change. The construction of a Catalan Republic opens up possibilities, but does not guarantee their consummation. To do this it will be necessary to extend the logic of a sovereign democratic impulse to extend the right to decide to all areas. Something which is, of course, the opposite of Mas's project.

In reality, the potential for social change that the process opens can end up fading away if we do not articulate a broad political bloc of rupture that weighs decisively in Catalan politics, and promote the need to promote a democratic and constituent process from below (not from above and technocratic) which embodies another vision of Catalonia. Even without guarantees of success, the instability of the whole Catalan political system entails opportunities that, unfortunately, do not always arise and will not be repeated very often. Thinking and acting

strategically, in accordance with a moment as exceptional as the current one, becomes, then, the main challenge ahead of us.