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Catalonia

Independence movement resists, but without clarifying strategy

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The Catalan regional elections of December 21, 2017 (21-D) confirmed again the absolute majority of pro-independence forces in the *Parlament*. This meant the political defeat of article 155, despite the fact that this article and its consequences are still in effect. On the other hand, the “unionist” bloc which defends article 155 became stronger and more aggressive. Ciudadanos (C’s) won the largest number of votes and deputies, and became the hegemonic force in this bloc. The pro-independence majority in terms of votes and seats legitimizes the struggle for the Catalan Republic and the result of the referendum of 1 October. However, the lack of strategic clarity continues. October 27 showed that the strategy of the pro-independence majority was useless. But no step has been taken towards a re-examination of this orientation. And some of the proposals currently put forward go in a worrying direction.

The pro-independence majority in the *Parlament* (JuntsxCat, represented by Carles Puigdemont, the ERC, represented by Oriol Junqueras, and the Popular Unity Candidacy-CUP) was again validated, despite the loss of 2 seats (70 instead of 72). The percentage remained practically the same (47.49 compared to 47.74% in 2015) in a situation of extraordinarily high participation (nearly 82%). And the number of votes this December 21 has increased slightly compared to the referendum of October 1 and that of September 27, 2014 convened by Artur Mas (respectively 2,063,361 votes against 2,044,038 and 1,897,274), but in a context in which a higher number of valid votes (245,000) were registered compared to September 27.

The balance of power within the pro-independence bloc has been changed noticeably, but not fundamentally. Puigdemont’s candidacy managed to maintain its leadership, thanks to greater autonomy from the PDeCat [Catalan European Democratic Party]. The ERC [Catalan Republican Left] almost matched JuntsxCat’s results, but failed to surpass them, as predicted by most polls – that would have meant that the moderate left would have a majority within the pro-independence bloc and probably led to the presidency of Oriol Junqueras. But the most important change was the decline of CUP’s anti-capitalist candidacy which lost more than 140,000 votes and 6 MPs. This implies that it will be much less decisive than before in its ability to condition the politics of the pro-independence bloc and the election of the president.

Catalunya en Comú-Podem (a coalition of five formations: Catalunya en Comú, Podem, Barcelona en Comú, Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds and Esquerra Unida i Alternativa), which should continue to be characterised as a left-wing and pro-sovereignty force despite its electoral campaign, lost nearly 43,000 votes and 3 deputies. It obtained 323,695 votes and 8 deputies, less than the Catalunya Sí- Que es Pot coalition in 2015 (366,494 votes and 11 deputies) and the ICV/EUiA (Initiative for Green Catalonia - United and Alternative Left) in 2012 (359,705 votes and 13 deputies).

The unionist parties and supporters of Article 155 could not prevent the victory of the pro-independence movement. Nevertheless, they managed to be very close to their previous results in votes (174,000 less) and in percentage terms (4% less); the difference in seats is greater (13). This means that Catalonia is divided into two big blocs: a pro-independence bloc, with a shared influence between the neoliberal centre and the moderate left; and another “unionist” bloc, defending the anti-democratic article 155 and hegemonized by the neoliberal right. The pro-rupture left is very much a minority within the independence bloc and Catalunya en Comú-Podem cannot be included in either bloc.

C’s is the broadly hegemonic force of the unionist bloc supporting Article 155: it increased its votes by 367,000 and gained 12 seats over the 2015 elections; and its results were particularly good in Barcelonés (the administrative region of which Barcelona is the centre), Vallés (the region of which Caldas de Montbui is the historic capital), and

Tarragonés (the region of the province of Tarragona). In all the areas that had been the red belt of the Catalan Socialist Party and the ICV until 2015, C's orange dominates. A very important part of C's increase comes from the collapse of the PP, which lost 164,000 votes and 8 deputies. Most importantly, C's has succeeded in mobilizing a traditionally abstentionist vote. Without a doubt, the defeat of the PP, the party with the fewest votes and the fewest seats, is good news and this bill will probably be paid by Rajoy, since he was unable to defeat the independence bloc and has destroyed his party in Catalonia.

In addition, he reinforced the party that contests his hegemony at the level of the Spanish state. Miquel Iceta (first secretary of the Catalan Socialist Party) placed Ramón Espadaler (former secretary of the Democratic Union of Catalonia and the current Convergence and Union-CiU) in third position on the PSC list as well as candidates from Catalan Civil Society or the Third Way. He tried to present himself as the proponent of an acceptable article 155. Thus, he claimed that he would ask for amnesty for political prisoners, but he retreated when the union bloc attacked him. The results of all these manoeuvres were modest: he increased his score by 80,000 votes and one deputy.

In short, the results of December 21 should allow the choice of a separatist government and the presidency of Puigdemont as head of the most popular pro-independence list. The ERC has already made this their proposal. But it will be necessary to see how the difficulties resulting from Puigdemont's exile and the accusations issued by the Supreme Court, which continues to widen the list of those prosecuted for rebellion by including Artur Mas, Marta Pascal, Marta Rovira, Anna Gabriel and Neus Lloveras will be overcome.

In fact, the most urgent task after the elections continues to be the effective withdrawal of article 155 and all its consequences, in particular the release of political prisoners, the return of the exiles and the lifting of the trials. The yellow ribbon campaign symbolizing these demands must take on a new momentum.

Second, we must specify how to move forward in the conquest of the independent Catalan Republic. The elections of December 21 have once again clearly highlighted the main problem: how to greatly exceed the two million votes, how to increase social support for the republic, especially in the cities in Barcelonés, Vallés, and Tarragonés and so on. The election campaign failed to answer this question and, on the contrary, sowed serious doubts about the validity of unilateral actions. The discussion of what has failed and what needs to be rectified in the strategy of majority separatism remains unresolved. But it is more necessary than ever to avoid improvised headlong rushes or unjustified setbacks.

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