

Catalans defy Madrid on independence vote

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A referendum on Catalonia's independence from Spain was organised for 1 October. The Spanish government have been determined to stop it taking place, seizing ballot papers, arresting politicians, and fining officials, in a bid to halt what they view as an illegal vote. Supporters of the referendum say this is a violation of their right to self-determination, guaranteed under the UN Charter.

Last week, Spanish officials went so far as to take control of policing in the autonomous state, citing the need for better co-ordination. This move by Madrid will most likely simply solidify the belief held by many Catalans, that national authorities interfere too much with what happens in the region.

The lengths to which Madrid have gone to halt the referendum are "beyond the limits of a respectable democracy" according to the regional President, Carles Puigdemont. Puigdemont and others involved with the organisation of the referendum have drawn comparisons between actions by the current government and that of Franco, with the regional President claiming that their attempts to hold a peaceful vote were being treated more severely than "the worst years of the Eta era". The principle of self-determination seems a strong argument in favour of the referendum; however, the Spanish government argue that the vote is illegal as it's not provided for in the country's constitution.

While the majority of Catalans believe the referendum should go ahead, support for actual independence is evenly split. The reasoning of the supporters of Catalan independence bears much similarity with other separatist campaigns. Catalan separatists argue that the region is contributing more to Spain than they are given back, and that Catalan identity is not respected in Spain. Crucially, there are a significant number who feel more Catalan than Spanish, or not Spanish at all.

The issue of identity is hard to reconcile through negotiations; the path that the Spanish government has gone down – that of attempting to suppress a democratic vote in Catalonia – escalates the issue. There has been little to no dialogue between the government in Madrid and supporters of independence. The Spanish government's refusal to consider the question of Catalan independence acts to strengthen the separatist argument that the national government is apparently indifferent to the region's concerns.

The demonstrations in Catalan in protest at the Spanish government's actions have thus far been peaceful. With the Spanish government's continued suppression of the Catalan referendum, the mood may well turn violent.

From a British perspective, comparisons can be drawn between the Catalan referendum and the votes on Scottish independence and Brexit. Supporters of Catalan independence would point to the Scottish referendum as a model of what they would wish to emulate. In contrast, the outcome of the British vote on EU has perhaps acted as a cautionary tale for Spain. Brexit has been divisive for the UK, and damaging for the economy in the aftermath of the result. If the vote for Catalan independence was successful, then Spain could suffer a similar fate.

Madrid's fear of a Brexit-style outcome may be understandable, but their quashing of the right to self-determination is not. A referendum can act as a bulwark against extremism. Madrid can best prevent Catalan independence by laying out their argument in an open referendum. A fair and legally binding referendum, although incredibly risky for Madrid, is the surest way to prevent violence.

The difference between the Brexit and Scottish referendums was that in one, the arguments were emotive, and in the other, they were logical. Scots were won over by practical arguments, and this is how to persuade Catalonia to remain in Spain. Madrid, by banning a referendum and acting aggressively to halt it, are providing separatists with emotive material which will further divide Catalans.

The Spanish government appear to be acting in an authoritarian manner over the referendum, and this will surely turn more Catalans against them. Regardless of the result of the vote, unless Madrid drastically change their approach to Catalonia, they will be long plagued by questions over the region and democracy in Spain.



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