

Unanswered Questions in Catalonia

- Opinion
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Judged as a pseudo-referendum, the results are inconclusive; Any push towards independence by a minority government would be very complicated

The Catalan regional election result has not clarified the independence issue, and, if anything, leaves us facing an uncertain future on several fronts.

Firstly, we don't know who will form the next government, or how. The plan of the Catalan president Artur Mas was to use this election as a shortcut for an independence referendum.

His broad nationalist coalition, formed by left- and right-wing parties that have been in government for the last 35 years, won the most votes, but their share has fallen to 39.5% from 44.4% in 2012.

Critically, the governing coalition led by Mas lost its majority of parliament -- and the ability to form a government -- as their seats have fallen from 62 to 52. In order to push the independence agenda, and even form a government, they now need the assistance of CUP, an ultra-radical and ultra-nationalist, fringe-left party that has said repeatedly that it would not accept Mas as president (as they associate him with austerity policies) and they seem unwilling to compromise. No other coalition seems feasible, and it's hard to see one that would be workable.

The CUP wants to leave not only Spain, but also the EU. They are against banks, against "the Troika" (which they mention all the time, whatever it means in the Spanish context) and they often seem to be against the laws of gravity.

It is almost impossible to see them working alongside a mainstream conservative politician like Mas. It would be like Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain getting into a coalition with the Sex Pistols. Highly unlikely! Though, to be fair, Catalan politics have been surreal for quite some time.

Assessed as a pseudo-referendum, the results are also inconclusive. Together, the pro-independence parties fell short of a majority, they got 47%, albeit with a majority of parliament as Catalan electoral law is skewed in favour of the vote in rural areas, where nationalism thrives.

Mas has said that he only needs a majority in parliament (not in votes) to go ahead, but that seems a hard sell politically and would be difficult to administer. He would need to pass a series of laws creating the structures of government necessary for independence (from an independent judiciary to a tax collection agency and so on).

These acts would be illegal under Spanish law, and it is expected that Madrid would retaliate against such moves, perhaps even cancelling regional autonomy. Moreover, many of the changes proposed would need qualified majorities under current Catalan laws. Thus, to push in this direction with a minority government would be very complicated.

On the pro-union side, there has been a radical change. The main opposition party is now Ciudadanos, a reformist party formed 10 years ago because it considered Spanish mainstream parties were excessively accommodating towards Catalan nationalism.

In a decade, the party has gone from nothing to become the second force in Catalonia, having eaten into the electoral base of both the mainstream conservatives and socialists. Ciudadanos is absolutely unwilling to compromise with the nationalists, and has already said it wants new elections, as the party does not see how Mas can form a government. It is not a protest party. It has grown throughout Spain and is pressing credibly for moderate political and economic reforms in the whole country.

Finally, there is the issue of how all this is going to end up. In my view, the situation will remain on hold until December, when the Spanish general elections will most likely take place. Mas will hope that the erosion of popularity of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy will produce a coalition government more inclined to compromise with the nationalists, and perhaps to provide political support in Madrid in exchange for a proper independence referendum in Catalonia.

Mas's problem is that Spanish politics is getting very complicated. Support for both the Socialists and Rajoy's centre-right PP are at historic lows, while two upstarts parties are gaining: Podemos to the left, and Ciudadanos in the centre.

Still, the result of the Catalan election is very bad for Rajoy (PP support fell dramatically) and for Podemos (which effectively had no traction), and was a fillip for the Socialists and, especially, Ciudadanos. If Ciudadanos becomes a key player at the national level in December, it will block any accommodation towards Catalan nationalism.

Overall, there are lots of uncertainties ahead, starting with how a government will be formed in Catalonia, and who is going to lead it.

Perhaps an interim nationalist government not lead by Mas and not pushing for any radical action until December is most likely in the short run. Then, after December, the future of the whole country might become a bit clearer.

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