

## ***Crisis in Catalonia: The Independence Vote and Its Fallout***

By **RAPHAEL MINDER** SEPT. 26, 2017



Demonstrators throwing ballot papers in Barcelona, Spain. The city in northeast Spain is the capital of Catalonia, one of the nation's 17 autonomous regions. CreditEmilio Morenatti/Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain — Separatist lawmakers declared Catalonia's independence from Spain on Oct. 27, prompting the central government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to take administrative control of the region, oust Catalan leaders and schedule elections on Dec. 21.

The Constitutional Court ruled the declaration of independence null and void on Nov. 8. Separately, Spain's attorney general is seeking to prosecute 20 Catalan politicians for rebellion, sedition and the misuse of public funds over the independence referendum held on Oct. 1, even after it [had been declared illegal by the Spanish government and courts](#).

The region's defiance in staging the referendum [descended into chaos](#), with hundreds injured in clashes with the police, according to the Catalan authorities, in one of the gravest tests of Spain's democracy since the end of the Franco dictatorship in the 1970s.

Mr. Rajoy has fought off Catalan pressure before, including five years ago, when Spain's economic crisis, and Catalonia's tax contributions to poorer regions, bolstered the secessionist movement. But the current standoff with Catalan separatists is the most serious challenge he has faced to date.

What is Catalonia?

It's one of Spain's 17 autonomous regions, situated in the northeast and home to 7.5 million people. Catalonia accounts for almost one-fifth of Spain's

output, the equivalent of Portugal's economy, and has spearheaded Spain's economic development since the Industrial Revolution.

The regional capital, Barcelona, [hosted the Olympic Games in 1992](#) and has since been the [hub of Spain's thriving tourism industry](#), with more than eight million overnight visitors last year.

What are the origins of the secessionist conflict?



Demonstrators in Barcelona in 1936 protested Franco's attempt to overthrow the Spanish Republic. Catalonia's push for political autonomy was one of the reasons behind the Spanish Civil War. CreditAgence France-Presse — Getty Images

Catalonia has its own history, culture [and language](#), as do other parts of Spain. The region's national day commemorates the capture of Barcelona in 1714 by the troops of King Felipe V, the first Bourbon monarch of Spain, and the loss of autonomy that ensued. As the Romantic Movement swept across Europe in the 19th century, and as Catalonia confirmed its position as an industrial center, nationalism strengthened.

Catalonia's push for autonomy in the 1930s was one of the reasons behind [the Spanish Civil War](#), and the resulting Franco dictatorship crushed many civil liberties, suppressing the Catalan language. After [Franco's death in 1975](#), Spain's return to democracy was enshrined in a new Constitution, which created a decentralized but not formally federal state.

The resulting administrative structure of Spain gave Catalans a significant degree of political autonomy — but not enough, according to the region's current political leadership.

What happened on Oct. 1?



University students in Barcelona distributed information about the vote before the referendum, which the national government in Madrid had said was illegal. CreditEmilio Morenatti/Associated Press

Catalans voted in a referendum that had been declared illegal by the government in Madrid, with the support of Spain's judiciary, but that fulfilled a pledge by the coalition of separatist parties that has [governed Catalonia since 2015](#).

The referendum [descended into chaos and clashes](#). National police officers used rubber bullets and truncheons as they tried to shut down polling stations and seize ballot boxes.

The Catalan government said that [90 percent of voters in the referendum had supported independence](#). But the referendum was mostly boycotted by opponents of secessionism, so that more than [half of voters did not cast ballots](#). Madrid also said the vote did not use a valid census, and did not honor monitoring and recount guarantees.

Did Catalonia declare independence?





Carles Puigdemont, the leader of Catalonia, promised that the vote would go ahead as planned. He was fired after the region declared independence. Credit Emilio Morenatti/Associated Press

[Carles Puigdemont](#), Catalonia's leader, [sort of proclaimed independence](#) on Oct. 10, prompting Madrid to ask him to clarify if he had actually done so. Then the [Catalan Parliament officially voted for independence](#), passing a resolution on Oct. 27 to "create a Catalan republic as an independent state." The Constitutional Court ruled the declaration null and void.

Within an hour of the Parliament's vote, the Spanish Senate in Madrid voted to give Mr. Rajoy emergency powers, under [Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution](#), to end the drive toward secession. Mr. Rajoy [took control of Catalonia](#), firing Mr. Puigdemont and his cabinet, dissolving the Catalan Parliament and ordering that regional elections be held in December.

The Spanish attorney general said on Oct. 30 that Mr. Puigdemont and other top regional officials [should be prosecuted for rebellion](#). Some members of the regional government [were jailed pending trial](#); Mr. Puigdemont and others appeared in Belgium, saying they had traveled there [to guarantee themselves fair trials](#).

After a Spanish judge [issued an international arrest warrant](#) on Nov. 3 for Mr. Puigdemont and four former members of his cabinet, the five [turned themselves in to the Belgian police](#) on Nov. 5. They were released that night, but were prohibited from leaving Belgium without an investigative judge's permission.

As the case moves through the Belgian courts, Mr. Puigdemont could find himself still in Brussels when Catalonia holds regional elections in December. Other prominent Catalan politicians could run for office from a Madrid jail, pending trial.

How have people in Spain reacted?



Anti-separatist demonstrators in Barcelona waved the Spanish flag and expressed support for the national police. Credit David Ramos/Getty Images

The violence during the referendum gave many in the region the impression that the national police, dispatched from across the country, were becoming [a repressive force](#). A judge is investigating the clashes.

Since the contested vote, [hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets](#) of Barcelona, Madrid and other Spanish cities — either in favor of independence or against it. In some of the rallies, demonstrators have worn white and called for greater dialogue between the Catalan and Spanish governments. Protests on both sides of the separatist debate have continued, though less forcefully since the start of November.

What's likely to happen on Dec. 21?

Mr. Rajoy's decision to hold quick elections was intended to show that Madrid was committed to handing control back to Catalan politicians — but to ones, it hopes, who favor keeping the region in Spain. Now the independence movement is [showing signs of strain](#). The two main Catalan parties confirmed that they would not campaign together for independence ahead of the elections.

The latest opinion polls suggest that the results are too close to call. Catalonia's three main separatist parties are expected to win 66 of the 135 seats in the regional Parliament — which would a loss of six seats, and deprive them of the majority they have held since 2015 — according to a survey by GAD3 published by the newspaper La Vanguardia.

Would Catalonia prosper on its own?



A view of Barcelona's port. Economists disagree over whether independence would hurt Catalonia or would instead weaken the rest of Spain. Credit Samuel Aranda for The New York Times

Until the recent political turmoil, economists had generally agreed that Catalonia would be viable as an independent country, but they differed on the impact on jobs, barriers to trade and the spending needs of a new state.

An independent Catalonia would be a midsize European nation, with Barcelona as its capital. Economists disagree over whether withdrawal would hurt the region significantly, or instead weaken the rest of Spain. But they agree that there would be short-term economic costs as the two sides adjusted, even if the split took place on friendly terms.

Much would depend on the financial and political terms under which Catalonia left, including how Spain's debt burden would be apportioned and whether Madrid would impose economic sanctions on Catalonia.

The constitutional crisis is sowing jitters. Investors have been withdrawing funds and significantly raising the risk premium they demand for holding Spanish and Catalan debt. . In October, the government reduced its forecast for national economic growth in 2018 to 2.3 percent from 2.6 percent. Since the referendum, more than 2000 companies, including CaixaBank and Sabadell, have moved their legal headquarters outside Catalonia.

The corporate concerns also stem from the big question of whether Catalonia would be allowed to become a member state of the European Union and use the euro. That issue is complicated by the fact that the most radical Catalan separatist party wants nothing to do with the currency.

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