

Inching towards Independence? The Game of Cat and Mouse between Catalonia and Spain

Written by Glen Duerr

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GLEN DUERR, DEC 6 2015

Tectonic Shifts in Catalan Politics

On September 27, 2015, the citizens of Catalonia, an economically powerful region in Spain's northeast corner, once again went to the polls in a snap regional election—the third in the last five years. At issue, in some respects, was the very place of Catalonia within Spain, and whether or not the region will become an independent state, despite Madrid's insistence that the territorial integrity of Spain is nonnegotiable. The lead-up to the election shifted the tectonic plates of Catalan politics with pro-independence parties forming a surprising cross-party coalition of both left and right wing political parties in an attempt to consolidate the pro-independence vote. Challenging the pro-independence parties were regional derivatives of the two main traditional parties of Spain such as Partit Popular de Catalüna and Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya, as well upstart parties such as Ciutadans/Ciudadanos who have gained ground in Spanish politics during the economic crisis. All of these parties differ in political opinion, but all oppose the pro-independence movement in favor of the status quo in Spain.

The first major shift occurred on June 17 when the longstanding, and long-ruling, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU) center-right coalition partners, *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (CDC) and *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* (UDC), parted ways. The leader of pro-autonomy, but not independence UDC, Josep Duran, could no longer support the acceleration towards independence desired by Catalan and CDC President, Artur Mas. Although seemingly abrupt, the relationship between CDC and UDC had been fraying for the last several years with CDC formally adopting the policy platform of Catalan independence, whilst UDC's leadership never moved beyond support for greater Catalan autonomy within the framework of the Spanish state. UDC now joins the other parties listed above in opposing outright independence for Catalonia.

The second major shift then occurred when the newly free CDC joined together with *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), Catalonia's leftist and traditional flagbearer for independence. The two parties now form the biggest blocs in a new political grouping, *Junts Pel Sí* (Together for Yes), a coalition that seeks to unify all pro-independence votes in the region.

Catalonia's September 2015 Parliamentary Election

The September 2015 election was held less than three years after the last Catalan regional election in November 2012. To add to matters, this was the third election in five years—the prior election took place in November 2010. In both cases, the ruling CiU won the elections, although Mas emerged weakened in 2012 after falling from 62 seats in 2010 down to 50—neither of which were enough to obtain a rare electoral majority in Catalonia's 135 seat parliament.

The elections in 2012 and 2015 both comprise part of a strategy in an elaborate game of “cat and mouse” between Madrid and Barcelona. In essence, with CDC's support for *de jure* independence, Mas has maneuvered his government into an opportunity for crisis with the Spanish government under Partido Popular Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, who is devoutly opposed to Catalan independence.

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The new strategy comes as the latest round of the game wherein the pro-independence Catalan government under Mas agitates for sovereignty only to be checked by Madrid at every turn with annual large, one-million plus person rallies buttressing Mas's position. Although there is a long history of support for independence dating back centuries, for all intents and purposes, the game started in 2009 in the small town of Arenys de Munt when an unofficial referendum was held town-by-town in Catalonia to poll people on the question of independence. It ended in 2011 in Barcelona with a total participation of over 20 percent in the city, and a sizeable minority portion Catalonia's approximately 7.5 million population. Of course, this unofficial referendum was rebuffed and largely ignored in Madrid.

Mas then called a snap regional election in 2012 to obtain a mandate to push for independence. Here, as noted above, Mas was weakened, but still remained in power, and determined to push towards sovereignty. In tandem with the Scottish independence referendum of September 18, 2014, the Catalan government called for a two-question "consultation" to be held on November 9, 2014. In total, 2.3 million participated in the consultation, which was deemed illegal by the Spanish government prior to the vote. Almost 81 percent voted in favor of the Sí-Sí (yes-yes) option wherein Catalonia would not only become a State, but that State should be independent. A little more than 10 percent of voters supported the first option—becoming a State within Spain—but not an independent country. Another 5 percent of voters either voted no, with the rest incomplete or spoiled ballots.

Rajoy and members of Partido Popular reacted with anger towards the Catalan government for attempting to illegally hold an unconstitutional referendum for which a range of charges were set against Mas by the attorney general. The opposition socialist party reacted less vociferously, but also rejected the consultation, and did not endorse the idea of federalism as a solution. Since November, the impasse between Madrid and Barcelona, Rajoy and Mas, has only deepened.

In the midst of field research in June 2014 wherein I conducted elite interviews with members of CDC and ERC, the idea of "cat and mouse" became apparent as the strategy for obtaining Catalan independence. Although CDC and ERC differ significantly on strategy and political opinion, the two parties are united in agitating for independence, and increasing pressure on Madrid.

The snap election on September 27 was the latest episode in the attempt to add pressure on Rajoy to allow for a fully binding independence referendum—the Spanish equivalent of the Edinburgh Agreement outlining the rules of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. The dream outcome, though, for Mas is to force Rajoy in to negotiating, which could lead independence for Catalonia much like the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992.

Prior to the Catalan election, there were three major options for Junts Pel Sí: (a) win a majority of the seats in the Catalan parliament, (b) a majority of the votes, or (c) neither. As it turned out, Junts Pel Sí won the election with the most seats, but not a majority of the votes; in total, 62 of the 139 available seats, and almost 40 percent of the vote. It was enough to govern Catalonia, but not with a majority.

Then, on November 9, the governing Junts Pel Sí coalition held a vote in parliament on the status of Catalonia. Together with another pro-independence political party, Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP), 72 members of the Catalan chamber voted in support of secession to 63 opposed. The announcement coincided with a plan for Catalonia to become a fully independent state in 2017, sparking yet another secession related crisis in Spain. As expected, the Rajoy's government has checked this announcement, arguing, once again, that it is unconstitutional.

What Now?

But, increasingly, the status of Catalonia is unknown. The BBC, for example, has asked the question as to whether a government in Western Europe could unilaterally leave without a referendum? There is no easy answer to this question, but pressure has been mounting for several years; for example, in November 2014, the Economist magazine called for the Spanish government to let Catalans vote on the issue of independence.

Added to the complications here is another election forthcoming in Spain. On December 20, national parliamentary

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elections will be held. Although Rajoy's party is still ahead in the polls, Spanish elections can be unpredictable as evidenced by the shock result in 2004 when the opposition, Partido Socialista Obrero Español (social democrats) defeated the governing Partido Popular. What is plausible here, if polls remain constant, is that Rajoy will continue to govern in the aftermath of the election, but that supporters of Catalan independence overwhelmingly vote for pro-Catalan independence parties. In this way, both groups will attempt to claim a mandate.

This scenario presents a period of serious concern over the future of Catalonia and Spain. What is for certain, though, is that the political theatre will be in full measure late this year in Madrid and Barcelona with a cat chasing a mouse, and that same mouse trying to outsmart the cat.

About the author:

Glen Duerr is Assistant Professor of International Studies at Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio, USA. He is the author of *Secessionism and the European Union: The Future of Flanders, Scotland, and Catalonia*, which was published by Lexington Books in October 2015. He has published several journal articles and book chapters on the subjects of nationalism and secession. You can follow him on twitter: @glenduerr.