

Spain's crackdown on the Catalan secessionist referendum: Podemos looks for its "Syriza moment"

By Alejandro López
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As the day of the Catalan independence referendum approaches, October 1, the Spanish pseudo-left party Podemos has stepped up efforts to present itself as the party most capable of resolving the secession crisis without sparking social opposition.

Podemos sees the crisis as a "Syriza moment" in its efforts to join a bourgeois government and save Spanish capitalism precisely at the point the ruling elite's fear of mass protest and social revolution has reached new heights.

On Sunday, Podemos held an "Assembly of Coexistence" in Zaragoza to discuss and draft a manifesto urging the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government to "initiate dialogue [with the Catalan separatists], cease exceptional measures and respect the democratic principles, so that Catalans can express themselves." Podemos was "defending democracy against the Popular Party," party leader Pablo Iglesias declared.

The PP government, backed by the Socialist Party (PSOE) and Citizens, has initiated the largest security operation since the end of the fascist regime of General Francisco Franco in 1978 in an attempt to prevent the referendum. Police have raided offices, seized ballot papers and posters, closed down websites and arrested Catalan officials. Thousands of extra police are being dispatched to the region.

These repressive measures have sparked protests in Barcelona and throughout Catalonia. As anti-secessionist Lluís Bassets warned in his daily opinion piece for *El País*, "There is a week left [for the referendum] and the omens could not be worse. The worst is yet to come. [...] The judicial machine is under way and there is no doubt that it will overwhelm everything that it finds in its path. Uncontrollable street mobilisations have only just begun and can lead to a general strike. Both dynamics converge

in a poisonous concept of our history [...] that now takes shape with the masses on the street: sedition."

The Assembly of Coexistence was attended by mayors, regional and national parliamentarians and spokespersons of 10 political parties: the Stalinist-led United Left (IU), the Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT), the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and the five parties linked to Podemos (Equo, Mès, Compromís, En Comú Podem, En Marea).

The manifesto signed by the participants calls on the "the Government to talk with the Generalitat [Catalan regional government] and all political actors to seek democratic solutions to the conflict in Catalonia, solutions that allow Catalan citizens to decide their future in a referendum agreed with the State."

It adds that the Spanish government should "cease its policy of exceptionality and repression, since this policy threatens the fundamental freedoms that constitute democracy. The government should not prevent Catalan citizens from expressing themselves on October 1 as they see fit."

The manifesto deliberately omits any endorsement of the results of the referendum if it finally goes ahead. This is because Catalan leaders have threatened to declare independence if the majority of voters, regardless of the turnout, support independence. Podemos' position, which opposes separatism and staunchly defends the unity of the Spanish state and its geopolitical interests worldwide, is that the referendum is a "mobilization" and is not legally binding as its authors maintain.

The central theme of the conference was an appeal to the PSOE to stop backing the PP's repression for fear this will strengthen the separatists and undermine Spain.

Barcelona mayor Ada Colau urged PSOE general

secretary Pedro Sánchez and his party to support a negotiated referendum instead of “allying themselves with a bunkerised PP.”

Antonio Maíllo for the United Left said that “the PSOE should decide if they want to join the reactionary bloc or the bloc in favour of fraternity.”

Iglesias declared, “We need a Socialist Party that finds its own path, far away from the reactionary and authoritarian one of the PP. Comrade [PSOE leader Pedro] Sánchez, don’t fall into the trap of a common front with the PP. That is the route to the destruction of democracy and Spain as a collective project.”

Iglesias’s ludicrous plea to “comrade” Sánchez is aimed at stoking illusions in the PSOE, around which Podemos has built its hopes of coming to power through a so-called “Government of Change.” Sánchez, who was ousted as general secretary last October for refusing to abstain in the congressional vote to allow the PP to form a new government, was re-elected earlier this year. During his campaign, Sánchez, who has no programmatic differences with those who plotted against him, promoted himself as a born-again party dissident who should have done more to reach an agreement with Podemos.

Podemos is virtually indistinguishable from the PSOE in terms of its pro-capitalist programme and its imperialist foreign policy. Since its foundation three years ago, it has assiduously promoted itself as a party capable of serving the bourgeoisie. It has modelled itself on Syriza in Greece, which was swept into office in 2015 on a wave of working-class militancy based on its pledge to oppose European Union dictated austerity policies. Once in office, Syriza betrayed its anti-austerity mandate and rammed through a far more draconian program of cuts and privatisations than had been attempted by even its right-wing predecessors.

Podemos has already shown in practice that it is following the same path. In the local administrations it controls or backs, the party has imposed austerity, broken strikes and supported police measures against migrants. Last month, Podemos joined a regional coalition government with the PSOE in Castilla la Mancha in order to pass the budget. It is seen as a template for a national agreement.

Podemos’ appeal aims to create a PSOE-Podemos “left government” that would be in a better position to stabilize Spain once the PP government discredits itself further through its police-state measures. Such a possibility exists if both the PSOE and Podemos, backed by the nationalists and separatists, remove the minority PP government

through a no-confidence vote in parliament.

The PSOE has so far rebuffed Iglesias’ moves. It is one of the main parties of the post-Franco era, refounded in the 1970s under Felipe González. During the past four decades, the PSOE has implemented militarist and free-market policies. It is the party that has taken the main decisions for Spain’s ruling class, including leading Spain into the European Union, NATO and the euro currency, and implemented the first attacks against the working class following the 2008 crash through labour and pension reforms, deindustrialization policies, privatisation and crackdowns on democratic rights.

Not surprisingly, the PSOE has so far aligned itself with the PP to prevent Spain losing a fifth of its economic output and a quarter of its exports to the Catalan nationalists.

However, this could change given that Podemos’ perspective has support in significant sections of the international media who speak for factions of the various ruling elites. Like Podemos, most are blaming the Spanish government for intransigence, arguing that Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy’s PP should be able to work out a deal with the Catalan nationalists.

Last Friday’s *Guardian* editorial accused Rajoy of being “oblivious to public sentiment in Catalonia,” warning that “If nothing is done to work towards a compromise, a political train wreck threatens in the EU’s largest southern member state.” It concluded by calling on Madrid and Barcelona “to start a dialogue.”

The *New York Times* followed suit, warning, “As the referendum date nears, Mr. Rajoy, who leads a minority government, finds himself under increasing pressure in Madrid to explain how the conflict over possible Catalan secession spun out of control.”

In Germany, *Der Tagesspiegel* ran a headline reading, “Madrid fuels the conflict with the Catalans.”

Such positions reflect rising concern among the ruling classes internationally that the conflict between Madrid and Barcelona will spark a crisis that could rapidly engulf Spain, the euro zone’s fourth-largest economy and a key NATO member, and the whole EU.

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