

Spain moves toward military rule in Catalonia

By Alex Lantier
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In a menacing speech to the Spanish Congress on Wednesday, Popular Party (PP) Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy stated that, in response to Catalan regional Premier Carles Puigdemont's speech affirming the October 1 independence referendum, he was preparing to invoke Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution. This provision allows Madrid to suspend the authority of the Catalan regional government and seize control of the region's finances and administration.

With the Spanish media discussing the invocation of Article 116 to impose a state of emergency or state of siege, it is clear that Rajoy is moving rapidly to establish military rule not only in Catalonia, but across all of Spain.

Army sources told *El País* Wednesday morning that they are preparing to move into Catalonia and crush any opposition from sections of the 17,000-strong Catalan regional police, the *Mossos d'Esquadra*, or civilians loyal to the Catalan nationalist parties. Under the attack plan, code-named *Cota de Malla* (Chain Mail), the army will back police and *Guardia Civil* operations in Catalonia. It will march significant forces into the region to support two units already there—a motorized infantry battalion in Barcelona and an armored battalion in Sant Climent Sescebes.

This plan has been in preparation for a considerable period of time, according to *El País*. It was nearly invoked by Rajoy after the August 17 terror attack in Barcelona.

Rajoy is acting with the full support of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and on the basis of clear signals from the Podemos party that it will not oppose moves towards military dictatorship.

In his own speech on Tuesday, Puigdemont suspended his declaration of independence in a desperate bid to open talks with Rajoy. But the Madrid political establishment is rapidly falling in line behind the government's hard-line rejection of talks and plans for mass repression.

Earlier on Wednesday, Rajoy made a brief public statement demanding that Puigdemont clarify whether Catalan independence had in fact been declared. In a letter to Barcelona, Rajoy said he was requesting clarification in order to prepare the invocation of Article 155. He gave Puigdemont until October 19 to reply.

PSOE General Secretary Pedro Sánchez, a self-styled "left"

within the party, hailed Rajoy's initial statement. "We agree with the premier's request for clarification, to clear up the swamp in which Premier Puigdemont has placed Catalan politics," Sánchez said. Asked whether this meant that Madrid was activating Article 155, he replied: "Of course, it is obvious that we are activating it."

Amid rumors of plans for a PP-PSOE government of national unity, Sánchez indicated that the PSOE would work with the PP on plans to rewrite the Spanish Constitution.

Speaking to the Congress at 4 pm on Wednesday, Rajoy launched a violent denunciation of Puigdemont and a full-throated defense of the Spanish police's brutal crackdown on Catalans peacefully seeking to cast votes in the October 1 referendum. Stating that Puigdemont's reply on October 19 would determine future events, Rajoy made clear that he would accept nothing less than total surrender from Puigdemont as the basis for opening talks.

"No result of this illegal and fraudulent [October 1] referendum can be taken as grounds for justifying any action, much less the independence of Catalonia," Rajoy said.

Rajoy felt compelled to refute accusations that he was refusing dialogue, insisting that since conflicts emerged in 2012 over European Union (EU) bank bailouts and austerity, he had negotiated continuously with Barcelona. He blamed the failure to reach a deal on the fact that the Catalan government "decided to throw themselves into the arms of the most anti-system and far-left party," by which he meant the petty-bourgeois nationalist Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP).

Denouncing the October 1 referendum as a "coup against our model of conviviality," he insisted that the PP response—a bloody police assault on polling places and thousands of voters across Catalonia that horrified people around the world—was "proportional." In a moment that captured the class content of the entire session of Congress, Rajoy's praise of the *Guardia Civil* crackdown evoked sustained and thunderous applause from the deputies.

Calling Puigdemont's position a "disloyal way of trying to declare independence," Rajoy indicated that if mediation began, it would be directed to his efforts to rewrite the Constitution. Citing the need for social peace, diversity and

Catalan sentiment as a “mestizo” identity, Rajoy brought his address to a close by hailing nationalist protests for Spanish unity that have been held in a number of Spanish cities. In several of these protests, fascist organizations, including the Falange of the late fascist dictator Francisco Franco, were active.

Rajoy also enjoys the full support of the major EU powers. After statements earlier this week by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in support of Rajoy, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel again backed Rajoy yesterday. Calling Puigdemont's independence declaration “irresponsible,” he said, “A solution can be found only on the basis of the rule of law and in the context of the Spanish Constitution.”

The statements of the Spanish army, Rajoy, the PSOE and the EU must be taken by the working class as an urgent warning. Plans for a return to authoritarian rule are well advanced, not only in Spain, but across Europe, where politicians support Rajoy because they are preparing similar measures in their own countries.

Workers must oppose plans for military rule and demand the withdrawal of troops and police from Catalonia, but this can be done only in revolutionary opposition to the entire ruling establishment, including its nominally “left” components.

While the immediate target of Rajoy's crackdown is Catalonia, the broader target is the working class of Spain and Europe. After a quarter century of escalating austerity and imperialist war since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, European capitalism is in an advanced state of collapse. A decade of deep austerity since the 2008 Wall Street crash has left large swathes of the continent's economy in tatters, tens of millions of workers unemployed, and social inequality at explosive and unsustainable levels.

Class tensions are reaching extreme levels incompatible with democratic forms of rule. France is under a two-year state of emergency while Germany has recently seen the election of its first fascist parliamentarians since the end of the Nazi regime. Now the Madrid establishment is rapidly and violently swinging behind Rajoy's weak minority government, confirming that while Franco is dead, the class forces that underlay his regime survived Spain's 1978 Transition to parliamentary democracy. They are again pressing for authoritarian rule.

The critical task is the political unification and mobilization of the Spanish and European working class in struggle against the rehabilitation of fascism and military dictatorship, and for socialism. This underscores the bankruptcy of the Catalan nationalist parties. They support the EU, have long overseen pro-austerity governments in Barcelona, and advance a pro-capitalist program of national separation that divides the working class.

Puigdemont's Democratic European Party of Catalonia (PdeCat) responded yesterday evening by dismissing Rajoy's

remarks and repeating that Catalonia had won the right to declare independence. Calling Madrid's invocation of Article 155 a “major error,” PdeCat spokesman Carles Campuzano asked Rajoy to accept Puigdemont's offer of talks. “Take this opportunity,” he said, “it may be the last chance we all have to reach a solution that is good for everyone.”

The response of the PSOE and Podemos parliamentary group leaders to Rajoy's speech shows that his crackdown faces no opposition in the political establishment. Their comments, amid a looming danger of military crackdown and a state of siege in Spain, constitute a historic marker of the bankruptcy of what for decades has passed for the Spanish “left.”

PSOE fraction leader Margarita Robles began by declaring herself in full agreement with Rajoy's speech and hailing the 1978 Constitution Rajoy is now using to tip Spain towards military rule. “We have always been a state party, a party of government, a party that fought for modernity for this country,” she said, adding, “We will continue our role as a state party defending the constitution.”

Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias showed that while Podemos may have received 5 million votes in the last election, it is incapable of mobilizing any opposition to the bourgeoisie and its dictatorial agenda. In a repugnant display of cowardice and cynicism, Iglesias engaged in a friendly chat with Rajoy. Even as the right-wing premier was preparing to send in the army to carry out a bloody crackdown in Catalonia, Iglesias treated him as a democrat, appealing to him to respect Spain's linguistic diversity.

Addressing Rajoy directly in the Congress, Iglesias said, “Today is not a day for polemics. I want to reflect with you. Your group represents 7.9 million Spaniards... You have received PSOE, Ciudadanos support and I congratulate you.”

While he criticized Rajoy for using the Catalan crisis “to defend your party banner,” Iglesias added, “You know you have to live with the pluri-nationality of the state.”

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