

Madrid's talks with Catalan premier collapse as Spain threatens military rule

By Alejandro López
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A last-ditch attempt by Catalan regional premier Carles Puigdemont yesterday failed to halt Madrid's moves to invoke Article 155, dissolve Puigdemont's government and install an unelected, military-backed regime in Catalonia after the October 1 Catalan independence referendum.

As the Spanish Senate began its two-day debate on approval of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's proposed measures against Catalonia, it was announced yesterday morning that Puigdemont would call snap elections in Catalonia to forestall a Catalan declaration of independence. This followed a seven-hour meeting of Catalan officials, lawmakers and politicians the previous night held to formulate a common position on Article 155. Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) politicians had indicated that the calling of Catalan elections might lead them to drop their support for Article 155.

Leaving a Catalan government meeting yesterday, lawmaker Eduardo Reyes told the media that Puigdemont would call snap elections. Soon after, Jordi Cuminal and Albert Batalla, two lawmakers of Puigdemont's Catalan European Democratic Party (PDeCAT), resigned in protest at the decision. Batalla tweeted, "I respect the decision, but I do not share it at all," while Cuminal tweeted, "I do not share the decision of elections."

PDeCAT allies similarly expressed their disapproval. The Executive of the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), PDeCAT's coalition partner, said that if Puigdemont called snap elections, they would leave the Catalan government.

The pro-independence Popular Unity party (CUP) of lawmaker Carles Riera said, "We believe that the only possible scenario is to make an effective declaration of independence, because this is what the people have asked for. Failure to do so is disloyalty to the people."

As tens of thousands of university and high school students took to the streets to protest Article 155 and demand the freedom of the two arrested separatist leaders, Jordi Sanchez of the Catalan National Assembly and Jordi Cuixart of Òmnium Cultural, Puigdemont announced and then repeatedly rescheduled a public address. Many youth gathered in Plaça Sant Jaume, the seat of the Catalan government, chanting slogans denouncing Puigdemont's "treachery".

Finally, at 5 p.m., Puigdemont appeared in the government palace and read a short statement ruling out snap elections. He said, "I have no guarantee that would justify, today, calling legislative elections". He said that he had been willing to call elections "in a normal manner," but this was impossible: while he had explored all possibilities for dialogue, he had "not received a responsible answer from the Popular Party," the ruling party of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

Puigdemont did not say what "guarantees" he would have needed to receive in order to call elections. However, *El Confidencial* cited Catalan government sources as saying, "The two requests made by Puigdemont were limited to securing the release of the President of the ANC and of the Òmnium Cultural—Jordi Sànchez and Jordi Cuixart—and to be guaranteed that 155 would not be applied and that, therefore, there would be no suspension of Catalonia's self-government".

According to the same source, Madrid only offered to suspend the implementation of 155, even though the Senate would continue the debate, design and vote on enforcing Article 155 and taking over the Catalan government. Separatist leaders Cuixart and Sánchez would remain in prison.

With the two-day debates in both the Catalan parliament and the Senate finishing today, the political situation in Spain is explosive, and the danger of a bloody military crackdown in Catalonia is very great. In the Senate, Article 155 is expected to pass. In the Catalan parliament, the ruling Catalan nationalist coalition might make a unilateral declaration on independence ahead of the Senate approval of Article 155.

An increasingly predominant factor in Madrid's drive towards military intervention in Catalonia, endorsed by the European Union (EU), is the fear the Catalan independence referendum and the clash between the Catalan population and the police on October 1 has undermined the authority of the Spanish police and capitalist state.

El País explains that "European political chiefs are clearer than ever ... that Catalonia will be the forerunner of a divisive movement, one that runs against the efforts of unification that have guaranteed social well-being and peace in Europe after the end of World War II."

El Español branded the Catalan crisis a threat to "social peace," saying that "the problem is, that however much [Catalan nationalists] invoke the peaceful nature of their protests, the state should not stand idle, the social divide already exists, and the instinctive nature of propaganda and victimhood can unleash situations of tension and violence." In this situation, the daily calls on the government to be ready to "manage all scenarios."

It concluded that if such a situation arises, "the government's priority must be to protect property and persons" rather than worry about being labeled "authoritarian."

The ruling class is watching with increasing fear and outrage as student protests grow and ever broader sections of workers including firemen, teachers, Catalan public media workers and other civil servants make public statements declaring their opposition to Article 155. This underlies the statements of the Spanish press denouncing the threats to "social peace" emerging from Catalonia. They also fear that mass opposition could rapidly escape the control of bourgeois parties like the PDeCAT, the CUP, ERC, and separatist groups like Òmnium Cultural and the ANC.

After a decade of deep economic and social crisis in

Spain and across Europe since the 2008 Wall Street crash, the European ruling elite is terrified of a new mass eruption of protest and opposition to the militarism, austerity and the authoritarianism of the financial aristocracy.

The class gulf between the super-rich who dominate society and the masses of ever more impoverished workers they exploit is reaching explosive dimensions. As the conflict between Barcelona and Madrid reached new heights, a report of the consultancy firm PwC said that the total wealth of the Spanish billionaires increased by 10 percent in 2016, reaching \$124.7 billion from \$113.2 billion the years before. This wealth is shared between 25 people.

This is why Rajoy is gambling on an attempt to radically restructure class relations in Spain, imposing military rule in Catalonia and potentially a national state of emergency and promoting Spanish nationalism to shift official politics far to the right.

Similarly, the EU is backing Rajoy and the invocation of Article 155, as the major European powers all seek to carry out a similar turn to the right and to promote the EU on the world stage as a unified imperialist bloc rivaling US imperialism or rising Asian powers like China or India.

EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker told Portuguese television, "In Catalonia, we are not dealing with a human rights problem because the Catalan citizens ... are not being oppressed by Spain." He added that for the EU, "the biggest threat is nationalism. There is an urgent need to do everything possible so that Europe has power and the nationalism is a poison that prevents Europe from acting together to play an important role in world issues."

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