

Spain seeks rebellion charges against Catalans for complaining of police violence

By Alejandro López
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Spain's Public Prosecution Office and Solicitor General are pursuing charges for rebellion against 36 voters in the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. Their supposed crime is to have complained about police violence.

The Public Prosecutor (Attorney General) and Solicitor General are both political appointments by the Socialist Party (PSOE) government, installed last June with the help of the pseudo-left Podemos party. They are appealing for the overturn of a judicial decision rejecting a petition from the Unified Police Union (SUP) calling for the prosecution of those “opposing with force or with their own body the authority of the police.”

Since 2017, the SUP, known for its far-right connections and calls for police-state measures to suppress social opposition, has been demanding action against those who took part in “sit-ins” at polling stations.

On October 1, 2017 the Catalan regional government, with the support of separatist organisations and parties, organized a referendum on whether the rich north-eastern region should separate from Spain. The Popular Party (PP) government, with the full support of the PSOE, reacted with force. Catalan autonomy was suspended, the Constitutional Court outlawed the referendum and hundreds of separatist mayors were threatened with prosecution. The Madrid-based media launched a frenzied chauvinist and Spanish nationalist campaign to defend the repression that followed.

The police attempted to prevent the referendum from taking place, arresting Catalan government officials, closing websites, seizing millions of posters and leaflets, and searching print shops and newspapers. Countless videos showed police smashing their way into polling stations and using truncheons and tear gas on peaceful voters and activists attempting to protect the ballot boxes. The level of police violence, which left over 1,000 voters injured, was such that Popular Party (PP) minister Íñigo Méndez de Vigo was forced to apologise on TV.

In the Orwellian atmosphere being stoked up by the ruling class in the run up to the April 28 general election, it is the victims of police brutality that are being accused of being aggressors while the police receive the uniform sympathy of the media and politicians.

In dictatorial language those accused are warned, “When a citizen observes that the police want to enter a place in the exercise of their functions, they know that their legal obligation is to clear the way without raising other issues. To prevent the step is unlawful.”

The “responsibility” for their injuries is “entirely attributable” to the Catalan government authorities for organising the referendum and not to the police officers, because “knowing that voting was prohibited, they cheated by making them [the voters] believe that it was their right to prevent police action.”

The appeal for the rebellion charges to proceed against the 36 voters for merely complaining of police violence is unprecedented in its implications for democratic rights. It takes place as 12 leading Catalan politicians and activists are being tried under rebellion and sedition charges for staging the referendum, which carry a sentence of 25 years in prison.

Two weeks ago, police officers appeared in court claiming that they confronted violent demonstrations during the referendum campaign—claims that were parroted by the Solicitor General, Public Prosecution Office and the far-right Vox party. Civil Guard officers claimed in court to have faced a climate of overwhelming violence, which after cross-examination came down to little more than demonstrators having “faces of hate,” calling them fascists and occasionally being spat at or thrown carnations!

One police officer described how he faced an “impassable [human] wall” of people sitting on the ground, lining arms. “They were recording us and one said, ‘Everyone quiet, don’t say anything.’”

“It’s stayed with me how they looked at me,” he continued, feigning dismay.

The head of the Spanish National Police in Catalonia, Manuel Quintela, complained of having confronted a “pre-revolutionary atmosphere” during the “sit-ins” at the polling stations. “There were music parties, pyjama parties, and night-time hot chocolate parties,” he explained.

To limit cross-examination by the defence about these absurd accounts, Judge Manuel Marchena, who has well-known ties to the PP, banned the broadcasting of publicly available video footage that clearly contradicts the police claims of their facing violence.

The unrelenting judicial actions arise in a context where the issue of Catalan independence has been made central to the upcoming general election, burying any questions of poverty, mass unemployment, inequality or the threat of war under a torrent of Spanish—and Catalan—nationalism and chauvinism. Mass abstention is expected, with over half the youth below 25 not expected to vote.

A year and a half after the outbreak of the Catalan crisis, as the WSWS warned, the anti-Catalan campaign has proved to be an attempt by the ruling class to shift politics to the right to counter mounting social anger after a decade of austerity. The campaign is, in the final analysis, aimed at building a police-state regime whose central target is the rising militancy and strikes in the working class.

Objectively this faces powerful working-class opposition, but finds no political expression through the existing parties.

The PSOE is trying to outdo the three right-wing parties, the PP, Citizens and Vox, which are calling for secessionist parties to be banned (Vox also calls for the outlawing of Marxist parties) and for Catalan regional autonomy to be suspended. Earlier this month, acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who backed the PP’s repression in October 2017, repeated that he would have no hesitation in re-imposing direct rule from Madrid using article 155 of the Constitution. Article 155, he declared, was “a perfectly legitimate instrument.”

Sánchez attacked the PSOE’s Catalan branch leader, Miquel Iceta, who said that a political solution through a referendum could be a possibility—a statement that sparked a public outcry by politicians and the media. He stressed that his government maintains control over the Catalan government’s finances, justified with claims of “political uncertainty.” He supported the recent

anti-democratic resolutions of the Spanish Electoral Board ordering the Catalan government to remove symbols of solidarity with the jailed and exiled separatist leaders from public buildings. It has also banned Catalan TV and radio networks from using expressions such as “political prisoners” and “exiles.”

If the PSOE is able to lead in the polls (30 percent, compared to PP on 22 percent, Citizens on 15 percent, Podemos on 12 percent and Vox on 10 percent) and continue with its right-wing agenda, it is above all due to the absence of a genuine alternative to the right-wing. Podemos, which is continuing to promote a PSOE-Podemos government, plays a central role in preventing the emergence of a genuine socialist opposition.

On Sunday, Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias said during an electoral meeting that the solution to the Catalan crisis was dialogue between Barcelona and Madrid and that “the only way to guarantee that there is a left government [with the PSOE] is if Unidas Podemos [the Podemos-United Left alliance] is part of the government.”

The claim that supporting Podemos (and making Iglesias a minister) will ensure that the PSOE does not shift further to the right is a fraud. In eight months in power, the Podemos-backed PSOE government has been virtually indistinguishable from the former PP government. It has not only pursued a repressive law-and-order solution in Catalonia, but also continued the pro-austerity, anti-immigrant and militarist and imperialist policies of its predecessor. As Podemos-backed En Comú Podem [In Common We Can] leader Jaume Asens admitted, the PSOE treats with contempt Iglesias’ pleas, stating, “If they had the chance, they would choose Citizens” in a coalition.

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