

# Catalonia: between elections and radicalization of protests

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The political landscape in Catalonia has fluctuated profoundly in recent weeks. Amid the upsurge of the pandemic, the streets of Barcelona and major cities have seen electoral apathy and a subsequent radicalization of protests against the arrest of rapper Pablo Hasél.

The last few years have been marked by a strong mobilization of Catalan society, with the October 1, 2017 plebiscite being the high point of the struggle for independence. As part of this process, the reaction of the central government – now formed by the coalition of the traditional PSOE with Unidos Podemos – has been no less: a wave of persecutions, arrests and trials against 2850 leaders and activists who advocate independence.

General elections were held in Catalonia on Sunday (14/2), against a backdrop of conflict with the central government of the Spanish state. The backdrop to the call for new elections was an operation by the Madrid government to take advantage of the media offensive around former Health Minister Salvador Illia, now a candidate for the Socialists, and impose a majority not aligned with the sovereigntists.

The elections were marked by the arbitrariness of the High Court of Justice of Catalonia – even against the position of the government of the Generalitat and epidemiologists, who did not recommend marking the ballot. The result was one of the highest abstentions in history, with a turnout of 25%, lower than in the previous 2017 elections.

Electoral apathy gave way to social anger in the following weeks. The arrest of Pablo Hasél on Feb. 16, storming the university in Lleida, “ignited” not only Catalonia, but the Spanish state. The rapper’s “crime”: singing verses critical of the King and the police. In the last fortnight of February, demonstrations took place almost daily, with thousands of people taking to the streets in radicalized demonstrations in favor of Hasél’s freedom.

### **The elections reinforced the pro-independence camp**

In these atypical elections, there was an evident strengthening of the political expressions linked to the struggle for the independence of Catalonia. Both in number of deputies (74 out of 135, including Republican Left of Catalonia – ERC, Together for Catalonia, JxCat and the CUP) and in absolute number of votes, independence won an unprecedented electoral majority. Of course, it is still an electoral majority by a narrow margin, but in a unique condition to promote new paths for the new political map. The PSC was the most voted party, having the same 33 deputies as ERC, but not being part of the government formula, which must settle for the 74 of the sovereigntist majority.

The two popular coordinates to the Catalans, the national-democratic and the social, lean to the Left in the polls. With the division of the more traditional center-right sovereigntism, ERC became the leading party of the pro-independence camp, attracting to its pole the radical left nucleated in the CUP. In the “social” field, the stagnation of the “Comunes” formula, with Unidos Podemos and Colau’s coalition, shows a quick experience with Iglesias’ party, turned into a minority partner in the PSOE’s central government.

The mutation of the Spanish electorate has translated into a crushing defeat of the historic right: the votes of Ciudadanos have gone to PSC and VOX. In an unprecedented migration, the

bench that adds right and extreme right, with PP and C's on one side and VOX on the other, falls from 40 to just 20 deputies.

The pandemic could not paralyze the fight for independence, despite bets from Madrid that a more "conservative" profile would lead to a tiny vote for pro-independence parties, which would be a setback to the democratic struggle for self-determination. However, the result was the opposite. Even in unfavorable conditions, with thousands of prisoners and outlaws, the resistance of the democratic struggle is an impulse for the peoples of the world as a whole, for example, the struggle of Scotland, which after Brexit puts a new plebiscite for independence back on the agenda. And especially in the Spanish State, on this path, the confrontation with the 1978 regime remains in force and is reinforced.

### **Vox and the CUP: polarization gains strength in the street and in the Parliament**

The expression of the organic crisis of the Spanish State replicates elements that appear in other national realities. One of them -and surely the most worrying- is the rise of extreme right-wing forces. The Catalan elections confirmed this trend. The openly pro-Franco VOX party entered Parliament for the first time, with 7.6% of the votes and 11 deputies. Recently, in the Portuguese elections, the "novelty" was the extreme right-wing Chega party. Despite Trump's defeat in the United States, semi-fascist parties and currents have gained strength in countries where they were previously marginal. VOX in Spain is an example of this reality.

The other facet of this polarization was the growth of the radical anti-capitalist left, grouped in the CUP (Popular Unity Candidacy), which defends a program of rupture, combining the sovereignty struggle with an anti-capitalist strategy. With a social base linked to the young people who staged the democratic rebellion of 2017, the CUP grew,

doubling its representation in Parliament with nine deputies and 7% of the votes.

As mentioned above, the alliance “Em Comum Podemos” has kept its project stagnant, retaining eight seats in Parliament but losing support, which has frustrated a part of its electorate, which saw hope in Iglesias’ expression after 15-M. The accommodated participation as a minority partner in the central government has generated frustrations and ruptures, inside and outside Unidos Podemos. The overcoming of its weight as a parliamentary bench, by the CUP, is encouraging news, which indicates that an important part of the youth is willing to radicalize, even with all the campaign against the “anti-systems” promoted by the center-left and the moderate left.

The week of clashes, which left the streets and ended in political debates – both on TV and in Parliament – about who wanted to criminalize the activists or who demanded the responsibility of the repressive forces in the Hasel case, divided the waters. Polarization again: on the one hand, VOX proposing an iron fist; on the other, the CUP, bravely supporting the street protests.

**A struggle that will continue – the fight for Hasél’s freedom is part of the struggle against Spanish authoritarianism**

This is fifteen days of continuous protests against Hasél’s imprisonment. A democratic movement with confrontational characteristics: against the police, the state and, above all, the 1978 regime. Elements that already existed in previous uprisings have appeared, in defense of the result of the plebiscite, in the so-called CDR (Committees for the Defense of the Republic). The struggle of the youth demonstrates the malaise, aggravated by the pandemic.

The essential contradictions of the 1978 regime (monarchy, bipartisanship and supposed national unity) are in question.

The dynamics of the democratic struggle find echoes in other processes that put in check the current European design. Hence the need for a program that manages to unite the democratic tasks with the “social” tasks of all the people.

One of the lessons, in the face of such an emblematic scenario (irruption of the extreme right and debates on the strategy of the left), should be to abstain from participating in bourgeois governments and in the class conciliation . Podemos arrives at the back door of power losing any capacity to be an emancipatory alternative, as demanded by the streets of the movement of the “indignados”. The good news of the CUP and the radicalized mood of the youth in struggle indicate a way forward. We must stand in solidarity with Hasél and his struggle for freedom. This is the struggle against the Spanish state and its regime, which tries to disguise its retrograde and medieval element: the rejection of the basic form of the Republic.