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Catalan nationalists win narrow majority in crisis elections

Late last night, Catalan nationalist parties were set to win a narrow majority of 70 seats in the 135-seat Catalan parliament, in special elections the Spanish government called amid the crisis unleashed by the October 1 Catalan independence referendum.

Together for Catalonia (JxCat) had won 34 seats, the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) 32, and the Candidatures of Popular Unity (CUP) 4 seats. In the anti-separatist camp, the Citizens party won 36 seats, the Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC) 17, and the Popular Party (PP) 3. Catalonia en Comú (CeC)—the Catalan branch of the Podemos party, which claimed to be neutral between Spanish and Catalan nationalism—won 8 seats. Voter turnout was high, at 82 percent.

This result puts paid to hopes in the Spanish ruling elite that elections would allow them to rapidly resolve the standoff between the Spanish and Catalan regional governments. Instead, the conflict between Madrid and Barcelona is set to continue and escalate, amid deep political uncertainty.

The PP government of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy called the election as part of its repressive strategy in Catalonia, which is backed by the European Union (EU). On October 1, backed by Citizens and the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), it organized a brutal crackdown on peaceful voters in the independence referendum organized by the Catalan separatist parties. It then invoked Article 155 of the Spanish constitution to suspend the Catalan government and called yesterday's elections in the hope of obtaining a pro-PP majority.

In the event, however, Rajoy's strategy backfired. Despite the PP's threats and its jailing of many Catalan nationalist politicians, the Catalan nationalists retained their majority. The PP, traditionally weak in Catalonia, suffered a humiliating collapse of its vote.

Already last night, recriminations were appearing in the pro-PP press. In an article in the right-wing newspaper ABC titled "Elections for this?" columnist Curri Valenzuela declared, "Mariano Rajoy made a mistake in calling elections as quickly as possible."

The precise outcome in the Catalan parliament remains unclear. Eight of the 70 Catalan nationalist deputies to be elected cannot physically go to the parliament. Five have fled abroad to avoid Spanish arrest warrants (deposed Catalan regional premier Carles Puigdemont, Clara Ponsatí, Toni Comín, Lluís Puig and Meritxell Serret); three (deposed regional vice-premier Oriol Junqueras, Jordi Sanchez, and Joaquin Forn) have been jailed. This would leave the Catalan nationalists six votes short of the necessary 68-vote majority. These individuals could give up their seats to lower-ranking JxCat or ERC members to obtain the necessary parliament majority. However, Puigdemont might also seek to return to Catalonia and demand his reinstatement, citing the victory of the Catalan nationalist forces, among which his party was the top vote getter.

The PP's initial response was to signal that it is preparing stepped-up repression. Yesterday, Rajoy repeated his threats to again invoke Article 155 and suspend the Catalan government if it did not obey Madrid, declaring, "Obey the law, or else you already know what will happen."

The *Guardia Civil* announced new accusations before the Supreme Court against more Catalan nationalists, including Marta Rovira (the leader of the ERC while Junqueras is in jail) and CUP spokeswoman Anna Gabriel. They also laid the grounds for new accusations against more Catalan nationalists, by denouncing a peaceful protest called on the Diada national day as an act of treason.

The *Guardia Civil* alleged that the protests promoted "a dangerous germ of a sense of rejection or even hatred of the Spanish state and the institutions supporting it. ... In these citizens' protests, there were calls for implementing a permanent strategy of deliberately planned disobedience."

During the election campaign, PP officials dispensed with the pretense that these are independent investigations by the judicial branch of government. In fact, the PP is using it to settle accounts with its opponents, as PP Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Saenz de Santamaría told a rally in Girona: "Who has left ERC and the PDECat leaderless after decapitating both parties? Mariano Rajoy and the PP. Who put an end to the law being

flouted? Mariano Rajoy and the PP. ... So, who deserves the votes to continue liquidating separatism? Mariano Rajoy and the PP.”

Voters delivered a rebuke not only to the PP, however, but also to the coalition of Catalan nationalist parties. The results of the Catalan elections, while humiliating for the PP, did not signify majority support for the Catalan nationalists’ reactionary program of building an independent capitalist Catalan Republic oriented to the EU and hostile to Spain—a program which traditionally faces broad opposition among urban workers in Catalonia.

The Catalan nationalists failed to win a majority of the popular vote, or to substantially increase their vote. The Citizens party received the most votes (25.36 percent), followed by JxCat at 21.68 percent and the ERC at 21.4 percent. Together with the CUP’s 4.45 percent, this signifies that the Catalan separatist parties collectively obtained only 47.53 percent of the vote.

They obtained a majority in the regional parliament, however, as an unintended consequence of the gerrymandering of electoral districts by the Spanish fascist regime during the Transition to parliamentary democracy in the late 1970s. This gerrymandering favored rural districts over urban ones that, at that time, voted for social-democratic or Communist Party candidates. Since then, however, this has turned into an advantage for the Catalan nationalists, whose electoral support is now concentrated in rural areas.

Separatist forces only won 44 and 49.5 percent of the votes in Catalonia’s two main urban districts, Barcelona and Tarragona. However, they won 63.7 percent in Girona and 64.2 percent in Lleida.

In another indication of weariness among voters for forces that try to dress up the Catalan separatist program in “revolutionary” colors, the vote for the CUP fell drastically, from 8.2 percent in 2015 to 4.45 percent this year. The number of CUP deputies fell from 10 to 4.

The traditionally anti-separatist “red belt” around Barcelona—the working-class suburbs that historically voted for the social democrats or the Communist Party in the period immediately after the Transition—voted not for the PSC or Podemos, but for the Citizens party. Citizens, a right-wing party with close ties to the PP, nevertheless ran a campaign criticizing the PP and proclaiming that it wanted a more rational and less aggressive strategy to resolve the crisis. Citizens was able to increase its score from 25 to 37 seats.

The election was also a significant setback for the petty-bourgeois party Podemos and its Catalan branch, CeC, which fell from 11 to 8 seats. This represents a response by the voters for the failure of Podemos, despite the millions of votes it received in recent

national elections, to organize any opposition whatsoever to the PP's dictatorial policies, as well as opposition to Podemos's support for austerity.

The Podemos-backed mayor of Madrid, Manuela Carmena, recently passed millions in budget cuts to comply with austerity demands by Spain's Ministry of Finance. Podemos General Secretary Pablo Iglesias defended the cuts, saying it is "logical" that the cities have to "comply with the law," because "there is a spending rule." He added, "The City Council of Madrid is an example of good management and will continue to be so."