

# Catalonia thinks about going single

A tax revolt in the prosperous Spanish region has become a powerful secessionist movement that's challenging the government

by María-Paz López

**I**t was impressive, especially if seen from the sky in the helicopter feed endlessly rebroadcast by regional media. On 11 September 2013 hundreds of thousands of Catalans calling for secession from Spain held hands in a 480 kilometer human chain running from the Pyrenees to the south of the region.

The massive demonstration took place on the Catalan national holiday, *la Diada*, which commemorates the fall of Barcelona to Bourbon troops in 1714 during the War of Spanish Succession. As is usual for separatist events, the chain was formed at 5:14 pm, that is, at 17.14 hrs military time.

The challenge to the Spanish central government, like others of its kind, was drenched in patriotic symbolism and national emotions. Since 2014 marks the third centennial of the historic Catalan defeat, it is seen by promoters as a mystical 'year of grace' in which to celebrate a referendum to secede from Spain.

Regional President Artur Mas, of the nationalist conservative coalition *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), presses for the secessionist '*consulta*', hard-pressed himself by the leftist nationalists of *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), the second party in the Region.

The ERC insists on holding the vote in 2014, not only to capitalize on the emotional mood of the 300th anniversary of 1714, but also to mirror the Scottish referendum for secession from the United Kingdom, to be held in September.



Madrid, of course, is not amused. The central government of prime minister Mariano Rajoy, leader of conservative *Partido Popular* (PP), insists that the referendum would violate the Spanish Constitution, which states that the national sovereignty belongs to the Spanish people as a whole.

The central Government also cites a 'silent majority' of Catalans who do not parade in the streets for independence. Recent polls show in fact that nearly 40% consider themselves both



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Spanish and Catalan, while only 29% feel exclusively Catalan.

But through a year of discontent, Rajoy's cabinet has remained largely silent on the topic, secretly hoping that it would disappear in the infighting between CiU and ERC. Polls now suggest though that 80% of the 7.5 million Catalan population back a secessionist referendum.

Strong public support for the consulta is the greatest success so far of the 'independentistes' and particularly of the *Assemblea Nacional*

*Catalana* (ANC), the association that organized the human chain. Through intense online activism and a massive presence in local media, they have hammered home their message on a daily basis, leaving little room for opposing views. Most regional media, especially the public television TV3, have openly embraced the secessionist cause.

As a result, being an 'independentista' is definitely trendy, especially among the young, whereas unionists tend to keep their heads down. In an article appearing in *El País*, novelist Javier Cercas cited historian Pierre Vilar, saying that what is going on is: "a sort of 'unanimism,' the illusion of unanimity caused by the fear of expressing dissidence."

Even the use of the official yellow-and-red-striped Catalan flag has been nearly swept away by the unofficial 'estelada' the independentista banner with stripes and a star displayed in windows and hung from balconies.

Secessionists refer to Spain as a separate country and rarely mention it by name, calling it '*l'Estat espanyol*' (the Spanish state) and speaking of '*espoli fiscal*' (tax plundering) to convey an alleged systematic economic mistreatment of Catalonia by Madrid.

Beyond sentiment then, there is money on the table. Secessionism turned mainstream only at the end of 2011, after Mr. Mas failed to convince Rajoy that Catalonia should be granted a special fiscal status to reduce its contribution to the national tax system, which redistributes revenues to less wealthy regions. Catalonia accounts for almost a fifth of Spain's economic output and secessionists argue that it would do better on its own.

Business sees it in a different light. While smaller operators tend to support secession, larger firms favor political negotiation, with some viewing independence as an economic disaster. The European Union for its part has made it clear that an independent Catalonia –



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like an independent Scotland – would automatically lose EU membership.

If truth is the first casualty of war, when it comes to the tax debate figures are at least seriously wounded. Data differ according to who is doing the counting. Official public tax figures, released in 2008 and based on 2005 returns, show Catalonia paying in between 10.9 and 14.9 billion euros more than it received, making it Spain's second most 'generous' region. But the Balearic Islands scored first, with Madrid and Valencia third and fourth, demonstrating above all that regions with the highest income per capita are the ones who pay the most.

Beyond fiscal policy, other awkward moves by the Rajoy Government have fueled the se-

cessionist trend. A law seeking to give more room to the Spanish language in Catalan schools has collided with regional linguistic pride, a key issue for nationalists.

At this point though, it hardly matters how the controversy began. 'Independentisme' has permeated Catalan society and cannot be ignored. Political parties supporting secession have made followers who believe that their goal is not only possible but imminent. Popular frustration if it does not take place may become another obstacle for the Catalan future. **E**

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**E** The unofficial flag of the independentist movement, the estelada, with stripes and star, has almost sidelined the official Catalan one with red and yellow stripes.