
CATALONIA ON UNCERTAIN FOOTING AS ELECTIONS RULED OUT

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Madrid was poised on Friday (27 October) to seize control of Catalonia after the regions secessionist leader opted not to call regional elections, which had been seen as a way to ease Spains worst political crisis in decades.

Carles Puigdemonts decision placed the region of 7.5 million people on an uncertain footing a day before lawmakers are due to approve measures to depose Catalonias leaders and take over its institutions, police, purse, and public broadcaster to stop an independence drive.

Under pressure from all sides, after thousands of independence supporters staged a protest in Barcelona, Puigdemont said he had been willing to call elections but received no guarantees from Madrid to make this possible.

In a televised address, looking weary, he instead passed the buck to the regional parliament, which met Thursday evening, to determine the consequences of Madrids looming power grab.

Separatist lawmakers hold an absolute majority in the Catalan parliament, and many expect that a vote on declaring independence may make its way to the floor on Friday.

The central government stood firm, insisting it was fulfilling a legal obligation, a democratic obligation and a political obligation, in its response to Catalonia holding an unlawful and unregulated independence referendum on October 1.

The main responsibility of a government, of any democratic government, is to respect the law and ensure it is respected, Deputy Prime Minister Soraya Saenz de Santamaria told senators in the Spanish capital after Puigdemonts speech.

Still time

In the Catalan legislature, opposition lawmakers pleaded with Puigdemont to find a solution to the standoff closely watched by a European Union wary of nationalist and secessionist sentiment, particularly after Britains dramatic decision to leave the bloc.

You still have time to return to legality and call elections, Ines Arrimadas, regional leader of the anti-independence Ciudadanos party, said in parliament.

Miquel Iceta, who heads up the Socialist party in Catalonia, insisted: You could go to the Senate tomorrow. I offer to accompany you. If you want to ask for and offer political dialogue, I will be at your side.

Separatists, however, called for a push to independence to honour the mandate of the Catalan people in the referendum on 1 October.

The Spanish senate, in which Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's Popular Party holds a majority, is scheduled to approve the power seizure on Friday.

This will effectively leave Puigdemont and his team out in the cold from Saturday, but is likely to anger many Catalans who, while divided on independence, treasure their autonomy.

Puigdemont warned such a move would escalate the crisis.

Catalan authorities had reported a 90% Yes vote in the independence poll.

But only about 43% percent of eligible voters – some 2.3 million – turned out, with many anti-secessionists staying away, and others prevented from voting by Spanish police.

Independence should be done

The mood in Barcelona on Thursday was mixed, as many wished for elections to ease the crisis, while others wanted independence now.

Were impatient to see the proclamation of the Catalan republic, Natalia Torres, 19, said at a pro-secession student rally in Barcelona.

Manuel Herrera, a 61-year-old parking attendant, however, would have preferred an election.

I want to stay in Spain so that more companies don't leave, he said, sitting on a scooter, smoking a cigarette, a coffee in hand.

Fears for Catalonia's economy have increased as uncertainty persists over the independence drive, with some 1,600 companies already having moved their legal headquarters out of the region.

Catalonia's business minister Santi Vila resigned Thursday in disagreement with Puigdemont's failure to call elections.

Resistance

Catalans are fiercely protective of their language, culture and autonomy – restored after the 1939-75 dictatorship of Francisco Franco.

Spain's Economy Minister Luis de Guindos acknowledged Thursday there could be resistance to officials sent from Madrid to administer Catalonia in the event of a takeover, and urged cooperation from civil servants.

Observers fear the standoff will spark unrest in the region, where industry bodies say tourist bookings are already on the decline.

Kaynak/Source: