
SPAIN'S KING FELIPE VI URGES CATALAN LEADERS TO AVOID NEW CONFRONTATION

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Days after Catalonia's separatist parties were voted back into power, Spain's King Felipe VI has urged political restraint. Catalan leaders, who are either in jail or exile, will likely struggle to form a new government.

Spain's King Felipe VI used his traditional Christmas Eve speech on Sunday to call on Catalonia's leaders not to make a new independence bid, as the region makes tentative plans to recover its suspended autonomy following Thursday's election.

In a televised address, the Spanish monarch admitted that 2017 for Spain had been "a difficult year." But he called on Catalonia's leaders to "face the problem that affects all Catalans, respecting their diversity and thinking responsibly in the common good."

Democracy 'holding up'

"The way forward cannot once again lead to confrontation or exclusion that, as we now know, only generates discord, uncertainty, anguish," the 49-year-old king said before insisting that democracy in Spain was still in good shape.

Spain's Rajoy ignores call to meet with Catalan separatists

His tone in Sunday's speech was more diplomatic, having previously called Catalonia's separatist leaders "disloyal" after they declared independence from Madrid following an illegal October 1 referendum that saw voters choose self-rule.

That move led Spain's Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to suspend the regional parliament, sack the government, strip Catalonia of its autonomy, and call a snap election.

The king's message was broadcast three days after Catalonia's regional vote, which resulted in separatist parties being voted back into power, leaving the independence issue firmly on the table.

The three pro-secessionist parties won 70 of the 135 seats in the regional parliament; however the pro-unionist Citizens party took 36 seats, becoming the largest party overall.

Call for unity

Following the result, the king called for the "harmonious coexistence at the heart of Catalan society, in all its diversity" to be restored "so that ideas don't divide or separate families and friends."

A day earlier, Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont, who is in exile in Belgium, called on Rajoy to hold talks in Brussels or any other European location □ other than Spain, where he faces arrest. The request was rejected by Madrid.

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Other regional leaders are also in exile or in jail, which is likely to bring challenges in forming a new government.

The Catalan crisis is Spain's worst since the end of the Franco dictatorship in 1975, which saw months of protests and a brutal police crackdown as Madrid attempted to retake control.

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